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BUT NOW AM FOUND

Overnight, the population of the city doubled. But nobody new moved in.

When Iris woke, there were two other people in her bed, and she'd gone to sleep alone. She felt hot, sweaty, crowded, and alarmed; waking with someone next to her was not something she was used to, even in the still-unfamiliar svelte shape she'd worked so hard to achieve and maintain. She still didn't believe anyone could look at her first thing in the morning and feel friendly toward her, so she usually kept people from spending the night.

The blackout curtains she used because daylight disturbed her sleep were doing their job; the only light in the room came from her digital clock's red numbers.

The clock hadn't alarmed; it was only 6 A.M., and she wouldn't have to get ready

for work for half an hour yet. The warmth of other bodies had wakened her. She didn't know what to be afraid of yet: procrastinating team rapists? Tired thieves lying down on the job? Or Timothy, her new boyfriend, who had a key to the apartment and had never used it? Would he bring a friend? In a state of suspended fear and acute discomfort, she sat up and reached across one body for

the switch of the lamp on the bedside table.

Yellow light touched the pink quilt, which was humped in three places: a big hump between her and the light, her own legs, and a smaller hump on her right. There were two fuzzy heads on the pillows, one to either side of her, faces down

so all she saw was messy hair the mousebrown color of her own. Her sisters? But

she only had one sister, a redhead. She touched the head of the bigger lump, and

it turned over and she saw her own face, sleepy and broad, fat-cheeked, smiling

as it had never smiled in a mirror in all the years she had worn it. Its narrow

eyes opened, glinting green at her. "Hi," said the voice of her answering machine's message. "We came home."

"What?"

The little lump stirred now, rolled over, stuck skinny arms up to stretch. It, too, wore her face, only smaller. Not younger. Herself in miniature, and gaunt,

thinner than she had ever been; she had spent her childhood as a dumpling, going

from cute baby to distressingly plump child.

"We came home," repeated her fat self.

"From where?"

"From wherever things go when they're lost. We found our way home." Her fat self

sat up, the covers sliding down to reveal pale breasts with brown aureoles, stretch marks lacing the breasts like rivers of white lightning.

"This isn't your home," said Iris. "Get out of here! Go back where you came from."

"Don't you understand? That's why we're here." Fat Self held out arms whose undersides curved like crescents, and, cheeks dimpling eyes squinched shut in a delighted smile, hugged Iris. "We love you," she said.

"Leave me alone!" Iris screamed. She punched at the other woman, and her fist sank into a pillowing, welcoming belly. Fat Self giggled.

The little self was tugging at Iris's nightgown with fingers thin as claws. "Give me, give me," she said in a thread of voice.

"Give you what!" Iris struggled in the grip of Fat Self, who finally released her. She turned to look at the little self and saw eyes wide and full of pain.

"More me," said Little Self. It reached out and pinched at her sit-ups-flattened stomach. "More," it whispered. "More."

Its pinching was strong. It hurt. Iris slapped its hand away. Its too-wise eyes stared at her.

"Get out of here!" Iris yelled. She shoved at both of them. "Get away from me!"

Each one grabbed one of her wrists and held on. They were both strong. She tried to jerk away from them, but they didn't let go or even show a sign of strain. She thrashed with her legs. All she accomplished was a stirring of the covers. "Let go of me!"

"We let go of you once. We won't do it again," said Fat Self.

"Eat," said Little Self, and it and Fat Self worked together to get her out of bed and into the kitchen. Little Self tied her to a chair with clothesline, and Fat Self cooked pancakes. The kitchen smelled of sizzling butter, and flour marrying eggs and milk. Little Self got out the ice cream Iris had hidden in the tiny freezer compartment, the secret shame she couldn't resist, even though she had been dieting and exercising rigorously for five years. She still cheated some nights when the loneliness overwhelmed her. Mornings after those nights, she adjusted her exercise regimen to work off the extra calories.

Now Little Self was holding out a spoonful of chocolate mint. Iris heard her stomach growl. She opened her mouth.

Little Self fed her, gently, without spilling anything. They had just reached the bottom of the carton when Fat Self set a plate full of pancakes drowning in butter and Tim's syrup on the table in front of her, and sat down in the extra chair, which complained. Fat Self smiled and cut the pancakes into bite-sized wedges, then fed them to Iris. The pancakes were light and fluffy, and the

syrup

was so sweet, a taste she had been denying herself.

Iris remembered being very small. Urna, the maid, had fed her then, making the food swoop and fly before it came to rest in her mouth. "Little frog, little frog," whispered Urna, "here is your supper. Be very clever and catch it before it flies away!"

"Little frog, little frog," crooned Fat Self. And the food swirled in the air and then swooped into her mouth. She chewed, swallowed, and laughed, losing herself in the game of eating.

The alarm in the bedroom went off.

Iris tried to stand, but Little Self held the chair down. "Never mind," said Little Self, "You have other work to do today."

"Why --" Iris began, but as soon as she opened her mouth, Fat Self fed her. She turned her head away and swallowed. "Why don't you eat for yourself?" she managed to say before another mouthful of pancakes attacked.

"We can't," said Fat Self. "That's not what we are."

"What are you?" whispered Iris.

Fat Self giggled and fed her pancakes until she couldn't eat any more.

Iris felt tired and sleepy after breakfast, so full she could hardly move. Little Self untied her, and both selves escorted her back to the bedroom, where she fell across the bed. The last thing she heard before spiraling down into deep sleep was Fat Self on the phone, telling someone she was too sick to come to work today.

When she woke, she felt bloated and ill. The clock told her it was one in the afternoon. She struggled up and opened the curtains to look out at a blast furnace day, sun baking the pale wall of the building across from hers. The street nine stories below shimmered with heat. She fell back onto the bed, her hands on her swollen stomach. She had been so careful to eat small meals, her stomach couldn't deal with big ones. Had that morning's breakfast been a dream?

Rationalization for a binge? She went into the bathroom to throw up, and was on the floor, leaning over the toilet, when a hand closed over her mouth. "Not that way," said Little Self. "It has to go through you so I can get it."

"What?" Sweat beaded on Iris's forehead.

"Put it on, then work it off. That's the only way I can grow."

Her stomach churned. She vomited before Little Self could stop her, and sat back, breathing deeply, stomach acids etching her tongue and throat.

"All right," said Little Self, "I guess we're doing this wrong. You need to build back up to it a little at a time." Little Self went and got a glass of water and gave it to Iris. She rinsed out her mouth and spat into the toilet. Little Self flushed it.

When she woke later, one of them had gone shopping, and there were all her favorite foods in the house again, junk she had learned to stay away from and despise: Cheetos and Twinkies, ice cream and devilsfood cake, potato chips and licorice whips, and all the breads -- sourdough, hearth rye, raisin bread -- and real dairy butter to go on top, and raspberry preserves. The whole house smelled delicious with the buttery cooking scents of childhood foods, the ones that took revenge on you for eating them by huddling under the skin, moving in like houseguests who refused to leave.

Fat Self fixed her a salad, and she felt comforted by it; surely a salad could feed them nothing. Maybe it even canceled out some of the destruction they were practicing. She tried to hold onto that thought while they were forcing her to eat the deep-fat-fried chicken with the skin still on, crackly and spicy.

Iris closed her teeth against invasion. Fat Self stroked her cheek and murmured, "Little frog, little frog," and Iris felt her mouth open. The eating was hypnotic. She felt confusion as she ate, one part of her enjoying the experience as if she were young and being cared for, another part of her protesting every bite, screaming in horror at what this forced feeding was doing to her carefully established control, and another, more primitive part full of a hunger so deep that even this excess could not fill it.

This time when they finished feeding her she felt only a little bloated. The two selves escorted her into the living room and turned on the television. After half an hour of some inane rerun, Fat Self took Iris's arm and led her over to the Exercycle. With deep relief, Iris started cycling. Little Self adjusted the tension on the bike so that it was harder to pedal than Iris was used to, but she pushed and pumped till the sweat soaked through her nightgown and rolled down her face. Here was something she could control.

When at last she stopped, her arms and legs aching with fatigue, her seat almost as sore as it had been the first time she used the bike, Fat Self drew her into the bathroom and gave her a bath, soaping and sponging and rinsing her with strong, gentle hands. Iris was too tired to help. The warm water relaxed her. With her eyes closed, she could imagine she was a little girl again and Mother was taking care of her. She fell asleep before the bath was over.

They never let her leave the house. She didn't understand how they were handling her job. It seemed that one or the other of them must be going to work, because there was enough money for rent and groceries. Usually when Iris was awake both of them were home, but she realized, even though they had taken away the clock, that they had shifted her schedule so that she slept during the day; maybe while she slept one of her other selves answered the phones, screened the

applicants,  
and filed all the papers generated by Charisma, Incorporated. Somebody must be doing it.

She was relieved it was no longer her. \* \* \*

Little Self grew steadily bigger. Her cheeks rounded, and flesh showed on her bones. The day came when Iris woke to discover twin Fat Self cooking dinner for her -- Stroganoff lush with sour cream, potatoes holding lakes of butter, salad clothed in ranch dressing, and cherry cobbler for dessert. Iris sat at the table with selves on either side. "Haven't I done enough for you now?" she asked. "Can't I get back to eating the way I want, living the way I want?"

They patted her shoulder. She took this as acquiescence and pushed her plate away, but one shook her head, making a tsk tsk tsk sound, and the other went to the drawer and got out the clothesline, showing it to her.

Iris's throat tightened. She took a gulp of wine to loosen it and dug into her dinner. Both selves beamed at her. She could no longer tell them apart.

In the morning there was a new scrawny starved self in the bed with the rest of them, and it was crying.

Overnight, the population of the city expanded. Trails of crumbs led the lost home.