

Black Gold.

Liv H. Scott

It's just your average night, knocking back a couple of beers, cutting the liver out of some poor sap who probably didn't need it any more than the guy we'd sell it to. Hey, at least we only took half the thing right? I read somewhere once that your liver can grow back, you know, if at least half is still there. So in reality, were doing the world a favor. Bringing half a magical regenerative liver to all the good boys and girls. Like Santa Claus.

I am doing the cutting, and two of the guys Paul had brought along with him are playing nurse. The other guy, their boss or what not, is lounging back on the spit-stained sofa against the far wall with Paul. Shooting the shit, or something, and every once in a while they look up or over and maybe Paul will come bring me a shot or two. He always knew I liked vodka.

I'd gotten into this business a little over a year ago. I'd flunked med school and been hopping around doing shit jobs at shithole bars when Paul, an old friend from high school, had found me and opened up the business proposition. I said no the first time. Black market organ dealing sounded like something from science fiction— or pulp TV. It sounded like a prison sentence, and I wasn't about that life. I said no the second time too, but the third time Paul came around was maybe a few months later. He'd said he'd lost his surgeon to a 'sudden development of conscious' and he really needed someone. I really needed the cash.

The first time I was completely sober and my hands still shook. I must have vomited up the entirety of my gas station lunch afterwards, which could have been from the egg salad but was probably nerves. Paul just clapped me on the back, told me I did good. He didn't seem bothered by any of it- then again he'd been a heavy drinker since fifteen. He's probably been around more puke than a daycare owner.

It's better when you're drunk. Numbed away just enough to take the edge off and your hands will shake anyway. Paul figured out the trick with the vodka sometime after that first time, and I knew I was in this for good.

"Don't get ash in the body," I huff over a shot of vodka, slamming the bloodstained glass back on the makeshift tool tray next to me. It's an old party platter someone found upstairs in the kitchen after one of Paul's friends jimmed the door for us to get in. Condemned houses make the best operating rooms.

They laugh at me, like maybe this is funny. I watch those ER true story horror shows though— you know when I'm pissing around my apartment trying to make ends meet between jobs. I know how badly a botched surgery can fuck you up. A glove or a cotton ball left behind and festering around in your guts. Hell even I'd sue, and I'm a pretty nice guy.

They picked me up at the local Chevron, and I'm sure I looked a dream all tucked into faded jeans with mustard from today's hot dog a la mode still ground into the denim, my hair as tamed as running my head under the faucet could get it. I'd never met these guys until tonight, and I'd say that they seemed like pretty nice fellows but one of the goons leaned out the rear window to wolf whistle

and cat call some other language at me when they pulled up. Their pricks. Russian, Paul says, and hey he would know right? They're his buddies. I'm just along to carve the turkey.

One of the gas station lights was flickering that bright green fluorescent light of the 21st century. The kind that makes everyone look a little like a pale corpse. It made me feel like I was in my labs again, doing observation. I couldn't have been happier when they swung open the door to that little silver Prius with the fender bender nicks.

"Get in," Paul had given me his half smile, nodding from the passenger seat.

Wedged between two men who stunk of cheap cologne, Paul had handed me a bologna and American cheese sandwich—that wrapper kind of cheese—and he'd introduced me. I don't remember their names, I'm not good with names. Hell I've got the memorization skills of a fruit fly, maybe that's why I flunked out of Med school.

"What is this an '11?" I asked around a mouthful of white bread. Paul still cuts the crusts off, I remember him doing that when we were in school together. What a kid.

"'07" the man had replied glancing into the rear view mirror at me. He had these pretty blue eyes, the kind of starlit blue that woman have in magazines and movies. You never really think of criminals as people, I mean shit in the movies they've always got hard black eyes or scars, or deep purple bags from too much crack cocaine and not enough sleep. This man has the prettiest eyes I've ever seen, and I'm thinking about them right now as I'm sewing up a suture in this suckers side.

"You get good gas mileage?" I'd asked, and they'd laughed, and I'd laughed.

I tie off the thread, wind it around my fingers and snap it. I might never have thought I'd end up here, but I always knew I was good for surgery. I've got the kind of gut that allows for it.

"Hey, Hey we've still got another one," one of the goons says as I'm snapping off my latex gloves. I hate the way they make my hand sweat, and stink like plastic ass for a week.

"Relax, I'm just going to pee," I toss the gloves in the trash and watch as one of the goons knocks the other with bloody gloved knuckles and garbles something out in Russian. He's got these gigantic eyebrows, I mean monkey like eyebrows. Ape eyebrows. I haven't heard him speak a lick of English since we got here.

"Shto on skazal?" He asks in that thick accent Russians always seem to have, real Russians not the film industry butchered ones for commie comedy.

"He wants to take a piss," the other Russian calls back to Paul and his friend. "Pishu. On hochu pisheet,"

"Didn't know I needed permission," I reply, and maybe the words are slurred a little bit, maybe I'm a little tipsy but this thick Russian with brown hair combed over and shoulders that are a little too thin for the rest of his hulking body just raises his eyebrows at me.

"Horosho, we'll take over from here," the other man, their boss, says, I glance to Paul and roll my eyes.

The stairs to the basement are rickety, the whole place is unfinished. It's what you'd call a fixer upper if the yellow plastic keep out signs weren't stuck everywhere on the outside. Sometimes the condemned house we work in aren't shit holes— actually, most of the times they aren't. Paul prefers not to work in a dump. I prefer not to work in a dump. I guess this is paradise compared to zee mother land though.

The bathroom on the first floor has something green and suspiciously furry growing in the grout on the tiled floor. I take the next set of stairs up to the second. I got a plantar wart once in college. I was on a camping trip, and didn't wear any shoes in the showers. I was painting salicylic acid on my foot for weeks. I'm not particularly in the mood to relive that memory. Of course I'm wearing shoes, but I'd rather pee in peace and mild grime than in a suburban jungle infestation.

Apparently I'm not the only one, cause five cigarette butts float in the toilet. Pall Mall's. You can tell by the little label just before the brown paper filter. Just what the Russian's are smoking downstairs. They must have gone ahead and relieved themselves before we started, while Paul and I set up the ping pong-cum-operating table and their Russian boss-man guy got out the tools of the trade. He'd come from money, his family was in black gold, or so Paul had explained.

"Like oil?" I'd asked. I hadn't thought there was much oil drilling in Russia, but then again I'd never paid much mind to the country except for Bond films and the old red scare posters in our history book, right on the pages Paul and I kept a play boy hidden during class.

"No, like caviar." Paul had said, shrugging and throwing the sheet over the table. "It's like this thing in Russia, black caviar is black gold. I don't know. He had to flee the country or something, I don't know. Money must have dried up."

"Yeah," I'd stared at the tall man with his inky black hair and crystalline eyes. He held a scalpel up to the light. "Where'd you meet these guys anyway?"

"Nick met him, at a club," Paul had said pulling two beers from the 24 pack on the floor. He handed me one.

"You think that table is gonna hold?" I had asked. Nick was the guy who cut for Paul before, and got out because he got in some relationship with some pansy do-gooder.

"Ah, yeah, it's sturdy." Paul had popped the cap on his beer.

I swivel the faucet on the sink first, checking for water before rinsing my hands. I heard once that everyone's a little bit allergic to latex. Like it's an innate part of being human, but we just don't notice it unless you get it in the real sensitive skin. Inner elbows, knees, lower belly, your balls. I dated this girl for a while who told me that, she had a rash broken out just above her pubes. Said it was from a band aid she'd put on to keep her jeans from rubbing against an ingrown hair. She could have been full of shit, but I'm not taking a risk. The last thing I need is a latex rash on a man's best friend.

There's a towel set out, but it smells musty and is god knows how old. I wipe my hands on my jeans and pop my fly. That girl I dated, the one with the band aid rash, she had a kidney transplant as a kid. Both hers failed and her sister gave her one. She had the little scar on her side and everything, let me touch it. It sounds fucked up, but maybe that's why I'm doing this. 'Cause not everyone's got a big sister who will give you a kidney, or half a liver, or even chump change. Some don't even have siblings.

I can hear the Russian's laughing over something downstairs and I watch the cigarette butts bob in the water when ripples mar the surface from the movement of the house. Paul and I like to work out of dump motels, or all those houses they stopped up because of the economy— but this isn't the first real condemned house I've been in, and my apartment is shitty enough for me to have decent sea legs.

"What kind of people are they anyway?" I'd asked the morning Paul had called me up to say we got a job.

"What kind of people are they? What kind of question is that? Like, what they do in their spare time? Shit if I know, look they're business connections. They're in the business of collecting donations, just like you and me." Paul had taken a moment of silence then, like he was waiting for me to talk or maybe just breathe. "You ain't going soft on me? Are you? Shit. You know you're the best surgeon I've ever worked with. You can't go soft on me—not yet—not until after this one job. Just this one."

"I'm not going soft on you," I said, tapping a finger against the tchotchke turtle bobble heads my mother liked to send me. She thought they were cute, made of shells.

Paul had sighed over the phone, loud and annoyingly dramatic.

"Look, you worried about their character? Don't be. They're in it for the business. Why're you in it?" Paul said.

"I'm in it to help people, I guess,"

I'm starring down into the grimy porcelain bowl, glaring down the individual cigarette butts and willing myself to pee. I can tell it's gonna be a long leak because it's harder to piss these days, even when vodka goes straight through you. There's a muffled knocking sound, and I think maybe someone's at the front door.

Someone told me once to listen to those fake waterfall or rain storm noises, that that would help me. I didn't. I'm not sure where you even get something to play those noises. Maybe there's an app for that. There's another knock, and one of the Russians calls something out. I jiggle a little bit, try to loosen up and get the fluids flowing.

Paul slams the door open and surges in to dump ice in the tub from a bucket.

"You see the mold in the other bathroom?" Paul whistles as he slips out the door again. I give a chuckle, and listen to his footsteps mingle with the muffled sounds of voices. Paul comes back up in a few minutes with another bucketful.

"Vova's at the door, apparently some cops saw the car treads out front," he dumps the bucket and throws a face at me before slipping away. This time when he comes back he has handfuls of blood soaked towels and what I assume are the organs we just cut.

"Great thing the stairs open up to the back of the house isn't it?"

I get something, but it's just a false start.

"It's a great floor plan. I like it. Might start looking at houses with the girl you know," Paul bends over the tub to start laying them out on the ice. Paper towels all wadded up under them.

"Oh, yeah? You still with her?" I ask, staring at the bobbing cigarettes.

"Three years," Paul says.

I whistle.

"You still choosing to do the whole single thing?" he asks.

"I don't think anyone chooses to be single." I reply.

"Sure, business woman and gals in politics do," he says.

"You know there is this one girl," I pause as the muffled voices get louder. Paul keeps laying out the different organs like a sushi display. "I think I might call her up after this,"

"She smart?" Paul asks, straightening up and throwing me a questioning look.

I don't have time to answer because he's already disappearing out the door again. He brings up another bucket of ice, but this time he doesn't dump it all down. He takes handfuls out and carefully lays them around the red kidneys, and dark livers, and a lung. I don't remember cutting out the lung. When he's all done, Paul comes over and stands at my shoulder. We look at the tub, and then we look into the bowl. I'm still trying to work through pissing. I'm only 30. It shouldn't be this hard to piss.

"Vova?" I ask.

"Yeah, It's short for Vladimir," Paul tilts his head, I get a bit of a stream going and aim at one of the cigarette butts.

"Vladimir," I snort. "That's ironic."

"Is it?" Paul hums. "Don't make any Dracula jokes. He's touchy."

"He cut out a man's lung." I state, Paul shrugs. "You can't live without a lung."

"He used to help out with one of those Red Cross blood donor things. Pretty good with a knife, for not being a surgeon." Paul gives a crooked smile, claps me on the shoulder. "Not as good as you."

"Are you sure I can't make a Dracula joke?" I ask, sinking one of the butts completely.

Beneath us, on the second floor the sharp snapping sound of a gun goes off twice. There's the heavy sound of two bodies falling on the old wood floor, and the murmur of thick foreign words. Paul's hand rests on my shoulder for a second, we breathe in and out for a moment. Paul squeezes my shoulder and then his hand slips away.

"Well, I guess we gotta get those organs out quick. You know, before the blood stops completely." He says.

"Be down in a sec, gotta wash my hands," I tuck myself back up and glance to the tub full of organs. The lung looks like a misshapen rectangle someone beat out of piece of red meat. It glistens wetly up on its bed of ice, like a fresh fish at an open market. Like the only caviar I've ever seen, wet and sticky looking in a little dish. I guess people need lungs too, not just livers and kidneys... I guess I might actually call that girl up.