

MEMREE

JENN REESE

The birds stood thick together on the roof of Vee's house, like a carpet of mold on a piece of old, dark bread. Vee died this morning, but the white truck still hadn't come. The birds, they stood watch. Never singing, barely moving. Only their feathers ruffling in the dull shimmer of summer heat.

The dogs came, too. All shapes and sizes, some with collars but most without. The demons loved it when a Dead Girl died. They laughed and lolled their tongues and rolled in shit in the streets.

I sat on Vee's front stoop, listening to the sobs coming from inside the house and throwing stones at the dogs as they laughed. Vee's mother cried a lot. I cried, too, but not as much. Then again, it wasn't my fault that Vee was a Dead Girl.

The white truck rolled up in front of the house around dinner. No sirens. No need. The dogs scattered in front of the wheels then went off to cause mischief someplace else. They liked to trip old ladies in the street and gnaw on the bums under the bridge. They spread evil thoughts to the boys and the men and carried guns in their teeth like their bitches carried pups.

Demons, every last one.

I followed the men inside, quiet. What was I? Just a kid to them, another thing to ignore or else carry away in a big, black Ziploc. They didn't smile or even talk much to Vee's mom. They moved her aside like they were moving a plant and took Vee from the blood-soaked mattress.

Earlier, in the morning, I found Vee just like that on the bed. Laid out on the sheets with a bloody aura, all spreading from the place between her legs.

Dead Girls, they don't survive the change. The blood starts to come, and soon it doesn't stop. Not until it sucks all the fire out of a girl. Vee had a lot of fire,

judging from the amount of blood. More than I ever seen.

I wish I was one of them.

They started to zip Vee up in her body bag. I ran over, threw myself on her stiff body all angled wrong. My hand slipped between the edges of the zipper and I dropped a little scrap of paper on Vee's body before they pulled me off.

We stood in our circle in the dark parking lot—just eight Dead Girls and me—and talked about Vee. The birds came and joined us, another circle of small shapes just beyond ours. The Dead Girls heard them talking, offering their memories of Vee to our small fire. I heard nothing, not even from the halfway damned pigeons with the loud, ugly warbles.

“Vee clarifies,” Keisha said.

“Vee is a blend of mangoes and kiwi,” I added.

“Repeat Vee as necessary,” said Trude.

Tomorrow we'll take our labels—shampoo and conditioner, mostly, but some gels and mousses—and stick them all over town. Vee's been collecting them her whole life since she was seven, and the shoebox is full. We'll cut out the letter Vee from our stacks of magazines and newspapers, and we'll spread the word of Vee all-City.

Vee had long hair as shiny as Keisha's bike and as twisted as barbed wire. Everything got stuck in that mass. My bubblegum, Trude's fingers, feathers. Vee loved it.

“Vee was not tested on animals.”

My momma died two months ago, which is okay. She didn't take the orange pills when she was pregnant with me, and that's okay, too, I guess. I'd rather be a Dead Girl than what I am, just a girl. But it's better than being a boy, or a dog, and the Dead Girls treat me like one of them, as much as they can, anyway. They call me Memree, and I do what I can to live up to it. Someone should remember the Dead Girls, and not just from the messages they leave on benches and posters and lampposts.

I spend a lot of time thinking about my message. I'm not obsessed about my hair like Vee was, or cats, like Noshi. I guess I just want my message to be bigger somehow. Maybe people will see my words on the bus, or walking along the street at night, or behind a brick building. Maybe they'll read my words and, for a minute,

stop and think. Maybe they'll wonder who I was.

But it's stupid to think about it. I'm not a Dead Girl and I don't know when I'm going to die.

We split up, each with our bag of words and our gummy, white glue in bottles and cans and whatever we could find. I took my normal path up the hill, left at the 7-11, and straight for five blocks till the high school. Above me, big ugly sneakers dangled in pairs from almost every electrical wire. Wards to keep away the birds and their sharp eyes. Stupid, smelly boy-shoes. The Dead Girls don't like going here, don't like the silence of no birds, but it's no trouble for me.

It was early, the sun still sitting lazy near the earth. When I got near the high school, I heard the smack of a ball on the black tar and I walked to the back in order to watch.

A girl was shooting hoops alone, just her and some dirty brown ball and a set of matching sweats. I stood by the chain fence and pulled some scraps from my bag. Keeping one eye on her, I glued a decent-sized "V" to the fence post, and stuck "for damaged hair" right after it. I put the extra scraps back in my pocket and saw her looking at me, that smudged ball wedged under her too-long arm.

"Come here," she called. I stared. She looked tall as my dad, her hair pulled into some great puff of a ponytail behind her head.

"Come here, girl."

I smoothed the words of Vee's message until a little white ring of extra glue surrounded it. The others would come soon, in their cars and on their bikes, with their books and music and bright skirts and glittering teeth. They chattered like birds across the pavement, hopping from one cluster to the next, until that distant bell rang, and the school sucked them all inside.

She went back to her shooting and bouncing. I found the latch in the fence and stepped in, my shoes scuffling in the dirt and the dying grass. Inside. I looked back through the fence and the whole world was criss-crossed with metal links like a patchwork quilt my momma used to have, of browns and blues and cars and signs.

"Here," the girl said, holding out that ball on one huge hand towards me. "Take it."

I put my glue down on the grass next to the black tar ground and took the ball in both hands. It was nubby and still smooth, wet where her hand had held it.

"Shoot it," she said.

Broken chains dangled from the hoop in another criss-cross of metal. The

wood board behind it looked battered and yellowed, with one great chunk ripped from the top right corner like some demon-dog as big as a bus had gnawed on it.

I threw the ball. It didn't even make it halfway up to that hoop or those hanging chains. It just thudded on the earth beyond and rolled to a stop. She jogged after it and picked it up.

"What's your name?" she said, walking back.

"Memree."

"Well, Memree, you got to aim a little higher than that this time, all right?"

I nodded and took the ball from her again. This time I threw it as high as I could. It tapped the rim of the hoop, tickled the chains, and plopped back down near my feet. I scrambled to pick it up before it rolled off the black.

"See? Much better, Memree. Try again."

But I didn't. I stared at her with her long stick arms and long stick legs, with her braces and her ponytail and her breasts. I put the ball back on the ground and it rolled to the side. I grabbed my jar of glue and ran back to the fence and the latch and the outside.

I heard the smack of the ball against the black tar and the jingle of it hitting the chains. "Yes!" she laughed, but not like a boy or a dog, and the smacking started again.

I walked around the whole school with my scraps, and then to the deli and the liquor store. Trashcans covered in old messages guarded the door: "Noshi loves the taste of tuna." "Look for Jill in hardcover by Christmas." "Anita gets your clothes extra white." Vee felt right at home with the other Dead Girls, her message wavy and wet from the fresh glue.

We huddled in the tight space behind Trude's garage. Trude's parents weren't home. They weren't ever home. But if they weren't off doing their drugs, Trude wouldn't be a Dead Girl, and we figured it was a good trade.

The circle formed. Keisha snapped a match to life and threw it in the trashcan between us all. Wood and paper cracked and hissed and the flames climbed high. The fire danced in Keisha's black eyes, and off her fat lip and the healing cut across her ear.

"Heat for our bodies," she said.

"Heat for our hearts," the rest of us said back.

Keisha held up a magazine picture of a woman crying. "This is justice," she

said, and she threw the picture into the fire. The edges curled and twisted as it danced, turning black the whole time.

We took turns offering our hopes to the fire. Marina threw in a feather for freedom and a new bike, Trude had been saving a book she found for smarts. The fire took them all. On my turn, I threw in half a pencil I found near the high school on my way home, but I don't know why. "For... memory," I said, and the Dead Girls answered, "Amen."

Then I took my place in the center of the circle, next to the wild fire and the heat. I closed my eyes and started with Leeza, some short freckled little thing who died last year. She never said no to an apple, she got bit once by the little brown piece-of-shit dog her parents kept. Some of the Dead Girls remembered Leeza, and they added their stories to the fire, offering up their laughter and their sadness.

My job is easy right now, since I haven't been with the Dead Girls so long, and not that many of them have died. But after a while, I'll be the only one who remembers, the only one who can tell the new Dead Girls what came before them. How much Vee loved her damn shiny hair, and how Anita washed her clothes every night in a basin of cold, soapy water while her mamma yelled at her to get inside.

I looked around the circle and stopped at Keisha, with her lumpy chest and scarred face. The birds talked to her more than anyone now, and I knew it would be days or weeks but not months before we walked our paths and plastered the city with little strips of paper and her name. She led the Dead Girls better than anyone, and I didn't know who had the voice and the heart to lead us after the fire fled her body.

I've been losing fire, just a little at a time, but I haven't told anyone. I can't tell my dad, even if he was home, and mamma's gone forever. I don't want to tell the Dead Girls. It's not a big deal, at least not yet.

I went to the high school a week later but the girl wasn't there. Just some demon of a dog sniffing around and pissing on everything, and a couple of his boys leaning against the wall and smoking their thin cigarettes. When the dog saw me, he grinned and all of his teeth glared white as glue.

I waited anyway, just outside the fence, and eventually the demon and his pups got bored and moved off, probably to the liquor store. She arrived not long after.

"Hey, Memree, how's it going?"

One of her long arms swung as she walked, the other held tight to her basketball. She tossed the ball onto the black ground and ran after it, her hair

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bobbing. Her hand reached it and she shoved at the earth, hard, dribbling towards the chain hoop.

“You coming in, or what?” she called.

I opened the fence door, shut it behind me to keep out the dogs, and scuffled to the court, kicking up dry earth as I went. She passed me the ball and I trapped it against my chest, between the new flesh starting to press out, to make breasts. I stared at the dangling chains and threw the ball high. It bounced off the chewed up backboard and fell at her feet.

“Good shot, girl, you’re getting better every time.”

She offered me the ball again but I shook my head and sank to my knees just off the black ground, watching. She ran around, all muscle and grace, and tossed that dirty ball of hers against the wood and into the hoop, jangling those chains.

She grinned at me a few times, called my name and told me about the shots she was throwing, all the while drops of sweat formed and dripped and fell from her face.

Someday.

I took the message box out of my bedroom that night. I took the little lines of words and colors and faces and I dumped them in the trash under the sink. I’m not “the perfect getaway” or “the number one cure for headaches.” I don’t know what I am. And soon, not in days or in weeks, I won’t belong with the Dead Girls and they won’t belong with me. And the sad thing is, they’ll be none of them that even remember.