

Meat City

& other stories

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Meat City (and Other Stories)
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Bad Girl

1.

"Sometimes the dead whisper," said Angie, her voice a choked whisper. "I see them." With tears flooding her eyes, she looked over the support group. She panned from one face to another, then another. The newest members, the ones still strung out, gave her nothing but hollow looks filled with their own pain. The ones that knew her, peers that had been in the Center for awhile, cried along with her.

"Angie, honey, you don't have to do this if you're not ready. . . ." said Victoria, the group's counselor. She had moved from her usual spot along the faded blue walls and drifted to Angie's side, placed a hand gently on her shoulder. "You still need time." Angie nodded. She thought she could do it, but when she had started to talk about her children, the pain was too great. There were still things that she couldn't face herself. How could she expect anyone else to understand? She couldn't tell them the truth.

"Trisha," Victoria said, "could you take her to her room?"

Trisha, a slender black woman who had been in the Center almost as long as Angie had, took her by the hand. Angie hurried out of the small and suddenly hot room, averting her eyes from everyone's gaze.

When they finally reached Angie's room, Trisha spoke. "You feeling okay?"

"Sure," Angie lied, wiping away tears with the back of her hand. She would never feel okay. Angie thought that checking herself into the Center to get clean and face her past would help her. She was wrong, and she'd never felt that more than now.

"You said that you see them . . . what did you mean by that?" Trisha asked.

"Nothing," Angie said. "Ramblings of an ex-addict, that's all."

"No such thing as an ex-addict," Trisha said. "Come on, we've known each other for near six months now. You trust me, don't you?"

Angie nodded and opened the door. She slipped inside and hesitated before inviting Trisha into the small room. "If I tell you, you're just going to think I'm nuts."

"You've never met my family. No matter how wacko you think you are, you don't have anything on them."

Angie tried to smile but couldn't find one.

"Okay, lay it on me," Angie said. "You might feel better once you let it out. We've all done things we aren't proud of, thought some crazy things. You're not alone."

"I see them sometimes. Just out of the corners of my eyes, but I know they're watching me." It was coming out and it felt like shit. She kept her head down so she didn't have to see Trisha's face. Her heart hammered and her vision blurred. She couldn't believe she was going to tell someone. God, she shouldn't say anything. Her mouth didn't listen to her head though. "I hear them too, whispering. I hear them more now that I'm clean."

"Who are you talking about?"

"My children," Angie said, looking up at Trisha.

Trisha smiled wide. "I don't think you're crazy, and that isn't anything to be scared of. It's just the spirits coming back to look at their momma, to watch over her."

"I don't like it," Angie said. "I can't stand it, it doesn't feel good, and it doesn't feel right. They shouldn't be here."
There was more. Angie could not tell Trisha about that though.
"Spirits can come back to watch the ones they love," Trisha said. "My grandmother told me that, and I believe that too."
Trisha wondered what happened if the dead didn't love though. "They tell me I'm a bad girl."
"No, they wouldn't -" Trisha began, but Angie cut her off.
"You don't know," Angie said.
"You checked yourself into this place to get help," Trisha said. "The only thing I did was show you the way here. You aren't bad; you were just mixed up with some bad stuff and now you're working to get better."
"No," Angie said.
"Look," Trisha said, pointing to a drawing on the wall. The drawing, done by a child's unsteady hand, contained a picture of a little girl and boy standing on a green hill beneath a yellow spiral sun. In the lower left hand corner there was a blue handprint. "Your kids did that for you, huh?"
"Yes," she said, swallowing her own self-loathing. "Samantha drew the picture and Kyle put his little hand print on it. It was for my birthday two years ago."
"You see," Trisha said, "they love you."
They are dead because of me, she thought. "I'm going to get some sleep."
"Okay sweetie, I'll see you later."

2.

Sleep would not come, she knew, no matter how long she stared at the white ceiling and counted. In each of the fifteen tiles was one-hundred and twenty-three tiny holes; they reminded her of needle tracks that once ran along her arms.
The dinner bell rang, but she stayed in bed beneath her gray wool blanket. At least in her room she didn't have to look at the others. Some of them shook because they needed a fix so badly, while others talked to themselves. All of them reminded her of what she was. Even the worst of them had never done anything half as bad as she had, of that she was certain.
She had been clean for almost six months. Not a drop of liquor or heroin-filled needle had come even close to her. Physically, she felt wonderful. Without the drug and booze to cloud her vision, she could remember the past though. The past was a place she could not bear.
She remembered her children; Samantha was six and Kyle had just turned four when they died. She had no idea where the father was; he vanished after Kyle's birth. That was about the time Angie remembered starting to drink heavily. Time was a blur then: fights with her parents, spending her money on booze and later heroin, and then her blazing ride to a self-annihilation. She had hated everything back then, hated herself, her parents, and even her children.
Then the offer that snatched her last bit of humanity came. Both of her children for a thousand dollars. She could not remember the face of the man that gave her the cash nor his name. None of it even seemed real at the time. Not that it mattered, because the only thing that she really remembered was that it kept her in drugs for a little while.
When the police came to tell her that her babies had been found with slit throats, floating face down in a stagnant pond, she panicked. She told

them that they someone took them but she was too strung out to report it. They never found the killer, and she'd had solid alibis of where she was. She couldn't even remember caring.

Trisha found her not long after and convinced her to come to the Center, a place where she could deal with her problems, check in and out when she wanted, and they even helped her find a part time job to help her on the road to self-sufficiency. It took some convincing, but she finally went. It was a different kind of rehab but it had worked for quite a few people. It cleaned her up, certainly. She was ready for that. At least she thought she was ready. Being clean untied painful memories and let them claw their way to her mind's surface. All that anyone in Center knew about her children was that they died in an accident.

"One hundred-eighteen," she whispered to the holes on the ceiling. "One hundred-nineteen. . . ."

3.

Angie had not even realized that she was tired, much less tired enough to have fallen asleep. The room was dark, lit only by the orange streetlight that filtered in through the windows.

She squinted through the gloom so she could read the dull green numbers on her digital alarm clock. It was well after eleven, already long past lights out.

A growl followed by a sharp pinch in her stomach reminded her that she had missed dinner. Mrs. Nguyen, the residential cook, did not like anyone messing up her kitchen after hours. Still, she could head down to the lobby and grab a candy bar and a soda to hold her until morning.

The building was silent, except for the almost imperceptible hum of the candy and soda machines in the lobby. Angie slid coin after coin into the machine, which ate them greedily. She pushed the bright button marked Orange.

"I like grape soda," a voice, a tiny waif of a voice, said.

Angie spun around, her eyes wide like a deer that knows it's caught in the sights of a hunter's rifle.

Trisha's slender form blocked the hallway. "I said I knew I'd catch you down here."

"You said you liked grape soda."

"I hate grape," said Trisha.

Angie shook her head. "I guess I heard wrong. Still waking up."

She knew what she had heard. She also knew Trisha hadn't said it. The voice had sounded like Kyle.

"Well, I saved you a plate of dinner. Meatloaf and mashed potatoes, Mrs. Nguyen's version of M&Ms."

4.

Two days later Angie got a good look at her dead son's face in the mirror. She had just finished showering, stepped out into the steam-filled room and saw, only for a second, her boy's face, same dark eyes and blond hair, the crooked nose; there was a dark line at his neck where a knife had sliced him open. Then it was gone.

5.

"I think I'm going crazy," she told Trisha later that afternoon. "It's not right that I see them like this. I don't know why it's happening." She did know. They were coming back to remind her, to torment her for the rest of her days. She knew she deserved it.

"Why do you think they want to hurt you?"

Angie shrugged.

"Out with it, girl."

Breathing deeply, regretting the words as they left her mouth, she began.

"My children didn't die in a car accident"

There, in the solarium, it came out, most of it in muted whispers and sobs. When she was finally done, she looked into Trisha's eyes for comfort, but there was none. Only hatred resided in the woman's dark orbs.

"I can't believe you did that to your babies," were the only words to come out of her mouth. She stood and walked briskly away.

6.

"Mommy, wake up." It was her daughter this time, tearing Angie from an uneasy sleep into a waking nightmare. When she finally dared open her eyes, her daughter was not there.

Outside a cold rain had started; she could hear it beat against the roof, could feel the chill seep in through the tiny cracks in the floor. The chill seemed to creep along the floor and up the bed sheet to her body, where it entered her pores and froze her veins. They were aching dully, and she knew more pain would be coming. This was the first time in a long time that she wanted heroin. It could make things better, even if it was just for a little while.

"And it takes away the memories," she whispered to the darkness.

"Be a good girl, Mommy," Kyle's phantom voice commanded.

Angie covered her ears, afraid to listen, however sound the advice might be. She stood and dressed and then, paying no more attention to the small voices that pleaded with her to stay, walked away.

7.

Finding a dealer on East San Diego streets was easy, even in the rain. Convincing him to trade the dope for a gold necklace and a blowjob was not. Eventually he relented, tired of her hounding him, and gave it to her. It wasn't a lot, but it might be enough to take her away from reality, at least for a while.

8.

"Angie, honey," Trisha said, pushing open the door to her room. "We should talk about what you told me. I . . ." Trisha stood silent in the room, staring at the mess on the floor.

Angie was there, naked on the cold bare floor. Her eyes were wide open, glazed over and dead. A syringe jutted out of her arm. On her stomach was a drawing of a boy and girl on a hill, a nearly exact replica of the one that hung on her wall, except that here the spiral sun was crimson and the clouds were dripping red. A tiny bloodied handprint decorated Angie's bare hipbone.

"Mommy was a bad girl," a voice whispered in Trisha's ear. She could feel small, cold hands tugging at her flower print dress. "Are you a bad girl, too?"

