

CAREFUL, SHE BITES

So, what're you in for? Anorexia, bulimia? Oh c'mon, you got the look. Don't pretend you don't hear me.

You want to be a bitch, keep acting that way, but don't look to the staff to put me away. That's Fat Carey. He's retiring in two months and can't be bothered to fill out incident reports.

They're gonna eat you up and spit you out in group, you know. I'm sure you're familiar with that, huh? Eating and spitting?

I'm Jody. You got a name? Tell me your name or I'ma give you a nickname and you won't like it. Princess? Stretch? Bony?

Pleased to meet you, Ashley. Nice earrings.

Jesus, you don't need to recoil like I just burned you. I'm not going to *take* 'em. I mean, I could, but I'm not going to. You don't touch my shit, I won't touch yours. That's common decency.

They've got me down as defiant/oppositional—which is *bullshit*—but anyhow, I'm not a thief. Not earrings and people's personal stuff, anyhow. You ever shoplift anything?

Never *ever*?

Hah, I knew it! I bet you got caught, too, and mom and dad sent you to some b-hole headshrinker with a short beard and fuzzy sweaters? I bet they caught you the first time, didn't they? Some self-righteous middle-aged clerk hag, or a store detective, and you cried? Those are the ones who give a flip, some teenage dillhole register rooster doesn't care if he sees you pocket a lipstick. Those old bags and ex-cop jerks, they're the only ones. Yeah, it's not that uncommon.

Let me tell you how it goes: Girls who steal a couple times before getting caught, they stick with it, 'cause they know they can do it and it's a gamble, not a sure thing. Girls who get caught first time out—white girls anyhow—they guess they're going to get popped every time, so they find something else. Whatever they got going on, it finds another way to surface. Panic attacks, slutty acting out with some greasy classmate, uncontrolled drug shit or, yup, they go all pro-ana.

Anorexia Karennina, that could have been your nickname. Karennina for short. Huh? It's a Russian novel! Read a book sometime Ashley.

You figured out a hiding place yet? Sometimes I put stuff inside the frame of the bed, or you can undo a heating vent and put stuff up in there. Those earrings, let me guess, shoved in the spine of a hardback book? No one checks your books, they're going to go underwear drawer, bathroom, under the mattress. All the ticky-tack little kid hiding places.

I'd seriously be careful with those earrings. Places like this are full of sticky-fingered bitches, the all-girl facilities in particular. Like I said, the ones who didn't get caught right away keep doing it. There's girls who *never* get caught, they lose all respect for property and steal anything that isn't in a body cavity. They get sent here for running away or humping the math teacher and crime-spree the ward until they get out. Or until some black girl catches 'em and breaks their thieving little fingers.

What? That's not racist. All I'm saying is, there are different worlds for black girls and white girls, so they act differently. You can't expect everyone to give black folks the stink-eye all their whole lives without them being shaped by that.

That's why you watch your back around 'em.

###

Hey Ashley! Ashley! Ash! Sit down!

What's up? You're in the Rose Bedroom? Yeah, I'm a couple doors down in Yellow. You blocking your door at night? Not that it makes a lot of difference. If the staff wants a look at your goodies, they're getting one. Something goes missing, it's as likely as not some orderly. Especially if it's your frilly necessities. I've lost more bras and panties in places like this. There's at least one serious weirdo on staff at every ward. At *least* one. I mean, who else is going to gravitate towards working with messed-up teens? You think it's all saints and, like, kindly people?

Hm? Sure, they screen and do background checks. That thins out the herd, no doubt. Catches the freaks who are dumb enough to get caught or who just can't control themselves *at all*. But your standard garden-variety neurotic, got too much body hair and more issues with women than *Penthouse*? He can get the job and keep it as long as his eyeballing is deniable, and as long as he makes sure to swipe underthings from girls who already have a jacket for paranoia or compulsive lying. So watch yourself.

Well *I* don't know, maybe the pervert here is a chubby chaser who's going after my used towels instead of yours. You can't tell and you can't do anything about it, so there's no point worrying about it.

You going to eat that?

No, I don't *want* it, I want to know if you're going to eat it. You pull that shit here, starving yourself, they won't like it and neither will you. For one, they'll flag you as non-compliant and then you never get any slack about anything, ever. That's without the force-feeding, tube down the throat, all that nasty medical shit.

Me, I'm playing the good do-bee. That's the only way to get privileges and get out sooner. You can bet your scrawny ass that the docs and staff have favorites too. You want to be the main doctor's pet project, the one who makes him happy, gives him hope, makes him think it's possible to make progress and, I dunno, 'heal' or whatever. You get under that guy's wing, the nurses give you the benefit of the doubt and the orderlies don't mess with you. The other patients might still start something—half of 'em are crazy, you know—but you won't get in trouble for it. If you wind up having to start something with them, it's real easy to blame them for it, too. And if *I've* figured that out after being in and out of these places, you know, intermittently? You can bet the dirty nurse who's here all day professionally, he knows who's exposed.

So eat up, Ashes. Be a good girl. Share in group, but not without a little resistance. You tell it too easy, they figure you don't really care about hiding it. And you're not getting out until you give up something they think you want to keep. That's how psychiatry works.

Eat it all, even that nasty apple bake stuff. Hey, what about Ashes as a nickname? You like that one?

###

How long are they keeping you? Not sure? Hm, you're anorexic with no substance abuse issues... generally healthy? No hepatitis or, and you have to level with me about this, no AIDS or STIs or anything else? Well, because it matters! If you're *just anorexic*, that's ninety days *max* as long as you don't get snotty, and show progress, and weep for mom and dad. But if you're acting out and catching VD, that's a complication.

You're clean? You're *certain*? 'Cause their drug tests are pretty good and so are the blood tests.

Of course I *trust* you, Ashley. Christ, you're the only person in this whole shit-shack that I wouldn't shrug over getting hit by a train! But you gotta show me I can trust you by being straight.

So. Ninety days then. Probably closer to eighty. You've cried on the doctor's shoulder? I figured. Me, I got a longer, like, *backstory* so it's a lot more work for me to make the shrink think I'm having a big chest-heaving breakthrough. Yeah, and that's just what they *know* about. As far as they're concerned, this is my third time admitted.

The real number? Lessee, three in this state and Ohio... two more on the east coast, one involuntary commitment in Massachusetts and a grownup jail overnighter in upstate New York. That one was scary as balls too, but the charges got dropped. Straight up dodged a bullet on that one.

Anyhow, I figure I'll give them the spiel about how my dad felt me up and boo hoo ever since then I can't trust anyone and I secretly liked the attention and haven't been able to come as good as I did with my old Barbie electric toothbrush. What?

What did you say to me?

Hell *no* he didn't! My dad was *cool*. Ashes, I like you okay but if you start talking like that I am going to smack you senseless and rip your hair out, I don't care if it gets me sent to a lockdown ward! There was *not* any of that crap in my house! It was just a *story*. This girl Trisha in Cincinnati, I got it from her, toothbrush and all! You think I'm crazy like *that*? No!

GET YOUR GODDAMN HANDS OFF ME CAREY I DO *NOT* NEED NO TIMEOUT!

###

You're lucky, Ashes. You get out, mom and dad are going to pick you up in, what, the Windstar mini-van? Maybe you've got a nicer car, a BMW or an Audi? They get you and you cry and they cry and they drive home and stop by... by... what's the good ice cream around here, I don't even know. Ober-what? What kinda name is that? It sounds like something Nazis do to Jews.

Yeah, see, that's the smile. That's going to keep you in good shape if you're shy enough with it. You don't give that smile until it's the sun coming out after the rain, you'll wrap the psychiatrist around your finger and mom and dad too. So damn happy to see you eat something, weeping all over the Ober-dober-what. Backslide a little when life throws you static but straighten up and fly right and you'll be sitting pretty.

Know what you should do? Go goth. Once you're out, that is. Dress in black and big mascara and... fine, I get it, you know what goth is. You're so damn modern, Ashley. You can keep the Ashes nickname that way, and it'll keep your folks *constantly on edge*, dark suicidal imagery in your poems and music. Then when you want to make peace, you give it up and wear a pastel color, throw them the sun-break smile. You need forgiveness, or maybe a necklace to match those earrings? Ease up on the old black-an'-bleak. But then gloom it up again when you need a day off school, or just to keep them in line. Show 'em who's *boss*!

###

Over here Ashley. I got the table with the shade. What? Naw, I can't stand the sun. I'm a ginger, I burn if I get a reflection on me wrong.

Quick picking at it and just swallow it down, that nasty ol' meatloaf is nasty for everyone.

Vegetarian? Nah, you don't want to do that. I hear it makes you farty.

I'll tell you what, Dr. McMurtry's tougher to get around than I was hoping. You got him too, right? Great, now you're another shark in my tank, I gotta out-compete you for bestest patient. What? Just kidding Ashes, jeez! You gotta lighten up, hon. You'll be out of here way before me, so I'll have to jive

off him missing you. Tough girl chaser after the sweet wounded dove whose parents just put too much pressure on her.

Oh *do not* get uppity about how bad you have it back home! I'm sure your nuclear family make you do too much volleyball and cello lessons, but when I bounce out of here I'm going into the foster care system again. So escape from the ward is just stage one for ol' Jody. Then I gotta get into a new group home or some damn thing and figure out how to game *that* system, and if you think there's weirdos in places like this, hoo boy. Some foster parents are total cultist types, lock you in a closet full of mirrors and crucifixes like *Carrie*. For-true *Hills Have Eyes* inbreds, too. I mean, a few are okay and some are at least well-meaning, but honestly? I'm hoping I get someone cynical and realistic. The top foster parent I ever had was this crabby old lesbian who just wanted to cash checks and not be bothered. I moved out and didn't make any trouble, she got the monthly expenses and we both liked it just fine.

Hm? Oh, no, it couldn't last, of course not. That was right before I washed up here, actually. They probably won't send me back, I won't be that lucky. I mean, she hasn't been showing up to visit, now has she?

What am I in for? I told you, oppositional-defiant and borderline personality...

Oh, you want to know what I *did*.

Well, Ashley, I could tell you. I will tell you, if that's what you want, and I'll be honest, because I'm always straight with you. But you have to be sure you want to know, 'cause it's a pretty ugly story. I know you got your pain and your pressure but this wasn't... it wasn't cello lessons.

All right. So I'm here because I got picked up by the cops after I bit a guy.

The official story the cops have is that I was a foolish innocent girl who got cyber-stalked and then fought off her attacker and, in the process, bit his ear real hard. Hm? Well of *course* I drew blood Ashley, that's kind of *entirely the point*.

So he ran off screaming like a hurt bunny and the cops just happened to be in the area and they popped him, they popped me, and surprise surprise the guy's on an offender registry so they see no reason to ask further about what was going on. Slammer for him, no parents on record for me so... here I am.

Now, if you want, I can stop talking now and you can draw your own conclusions. The facts are, I met up with this pervy guy, the kind whose first question to a pimp is always, "What's the youngest girl you got?" I met that loser and there was trouble and I bit him and there were cops. That's the... the inarguables, right? That enough?

You sure?

Why did I meet up with him. Okay, you want to hear it, so you can't blame me for telling you.

I wanted to meet up with him because I'm a vampire.

###

Ashley. Ashes. Hey.

Hey! Bitch sit your ass down! Oh, don't start with the flinchy weak suburban girl act, no one's watching this time!

What the hell is wrong with you, Ashley! *I thought we were friends*.

Oh, I'm not going to bite *you* for Christ's sake! See, this is why I didn't want to tell you! I knew you couldn't handle it! *I knew!*

You probably think I'm crazy now, don't you? You think I'm a delusional paranoid schizophrenic. Well I'm not. I'm less crazy than you, hon, and my diet's healthier too. At least I eat *something*. Keep it down, too.

Yeah, I know you've seen me walk by a cross and you've seen me eat fuckin' meatloaf and you've seen my reflection. There's all kinds of bullshit myths. I don't sparkle in the sunlight either. That doesn't mean it's not true. I mean, think about Jews and all the crazy stories people told about them, eating babies and poisoning wells and, and *conspiring*.

Now, if you told me a bunch of Jewish bankers were talking to each other and making things easy for one another, I'd believe that in a second. Not 'cause they're Jews or because I'm some kinda racist but because they're *people*. "Let's gang up and take advantage," that's human nature right there. You and me working over Dr. McMurtry, or your parents double-teaming you, it's how we do.

That's why it's important to know who you can trust, Ashley. Not to be too direct about it.

So I bite people and drink blood and that's what I'm about.

Hm? No, it's not some kind of *sex* thing. Thanks again Stephanie Meyer. No, it's just... if I get blood I don't get older. That's all. That's all there is too it. Not liking the sun, I don't even know if that's part of it or just, like I said, I burn easy.

Can you tell when you're one day older? I mean, did you get up today feeling two specific days older than you did on Wednesday? Right, it's imperceptible. You don't see it day by day, just month by month or year by year. Forest for the trees, kinda thing. Perspective.

If I get... um, maybe two tablespoons of blood a day, I don't get older, for that day. If I drank, like, a bathroom tumbler, that would keep me from aging for probably two weeks or so. Obviously, it's not exact. Nobody's been doing lab tests. Or if they have, they ain't publishing their results. I mean, if *you* were sitting on something that kept people from going grey and getting wrinkles and having lower-back pain, wouldn't you keep that to yourself?

Well *obviously* you'd tell people if you could make money off it, but it's... well it's complicated, isn't it? People are kind of *touchy* about having folks friggin' *drink their blood to live forever*. You think the holy Joe patrol that's spazzing out over gay marriage and abortion... I mean, imagine what they'd do if they found out drinking blood can make you Peter Pan?

You can't tell anyone about this Ashley. I mean, I shouldn't have to say that. I know I don't have to. But I kind of do. You let this out and... Jesus, it won't even be me making trouble for you. It'll be another month or so on your stay here. A month at least. You get 'delusional' on your jacket, that's a ticket to the mumbly pills and a ward where they pay attention. You want that? You want to shuffle around wiping your mouth and trying to remember how a toilet works? I'd hate to see you dragged out of here like that Ashley. That would be heartbreaking.

###

Yo. My session was a pretty deep waste, I gotta say. You threw me off my game, Ashes. McMurtry's giving me nothing, just the flat stare and the Freudian "Why do you think you said that, Jody?" routine. You didn't say anything to him, did you? Anything about how I maybe shouldn't be permitted to read *Dracula*?

Okay then.

I really don't want to talk about that, Ashley.

Ugh, *fine*. Wow girl, you got that whining sharpened to a razor edge. No wonder your pay-rents parked you here.

I'm twenty-six, by years. I know I look seventeen. My birth certificate says I'm seventeen. I bought it off some Mexican gangster in Chicago. For him, getting his blood sucked *was* a sex thing. He was gross.

Yes, I can get sick. I probably gave Hep-B to that dude I bit. I'm not sorry.

How many others are there? Not too goddamn many. Most people don't want to do it. I mean, folks like the idea of not aging but the price... well, the cannibalism taboo is pretty strong. I mean, what does it tell you that every culture says not to do this? No one passes a law against something unless people are *doing it*, know what I mean? So I guess there could be thousands of us out there. Millions, really. There aren't though.

The oldest vampire I ever met? My dad. He said he was ninety-seven and he looked like he was thirty. And before you start to doubt it, he looked thirty in the pictures where he's holding me as a baby, he looked thirty when I was in junior high, and he looked thirty when he was dead.

Yeah, we can die. He got cancer from smoking, so... not quite the glamorous immortality you're imagining. It's pretty much 'drink blood, stop clock.' No turning into a bat or being bulletproof or other video game nonsense.

Though, I mean, that's enough. Isn't it? Not getting older, turning all saggy and diabetic and gassy? Hell with that.

No, my dad didn't 'turn me' like you're thinking. You don't have to get 'turned,' one vampire doesn't make another. I made myself one.

Anyone can do it.

###

You sure about this, Ashes? It's not a safe thing to know. I'll tell you if you ask, 'cause we're honest with each other. I'm not... I mean, I'm not sure I want to tell you even if you want to know. I'm not sure it would be good for you?

Oh ho! That's the first time I've seen you *mad!* There's a little pepper in there after all. So. I'll put that in my diary, 'Ashley gets pissed if you think you know what's best for her more than she does.' Heh.

So you want to know how to do it. Yeah, I don't blame you. Living forever, Christianity's gotten two thousand years out of that promise and for them it's not even the real thing, just "after you *die* you won't really be dead." Which doesn't even make sense.

Well I'll tell you but you have to do something for me first.

I think you know what it is. I mean, you can't feel it when you get *one* day older, but Ashes old friend, it's been almost a month since that old freak's sour-tasting earlobe.

You down for that? I won't take too much. Naw, I'll drain you into a cup, you won't get exposed to any of the hairy ol' germs I'm hosting. Oh, no, not *now*. C'mon, be smart.

Tomorrow night's Thursday, and the night minder is Miss Polanski. You can hear her snore at the desk when she drops off, usually around 11:30 or so. She has an alarm she sets for midnight and one, but half the time she sleeps through it. So when you hear her snoring after 11:00, get yourself in the bathroom across from the library.

Who's your roommate? Cinthia? Bummer, but she'll play ball and stay quiet for a couple pudding cups. I'm lucky, Shirelle's on depression meds, heavy duty stuff. She slept through a tornado siren once, she won't interfere.

I'll meet you in that bathroom then. I've got a safety pin and some matches. We'll wash the pin with the antibacterial stuff in there, sterilize it with the match, drain you into one of those paper cups. I'll

make the incision up by your armpit—big vein up there, no one will see the bandaid and if they do, you can say that crazy electric razor of yours grabbed a hair while you were getting your pits all satiny smooth.

There. *That's* the plan. That's the price. You give me what I need and I'll tell you how it all works. If you're sure.

Are you?

###

Hey. Be cool Ashley. Awesome. I didn't think you'd be here, honestly. You're full of surprises.

You get the cup, I'm scrubbing this up. Here, move over, let me get by that fan before I light this... don't want anyone smelling the match and barging in.

Here, I'll run this under water so it won't be hot. Great. Slip off your shirt. Okay. Your pulse is really going fast, huh?

Shh!

Yeah, well I'm *sorry* but I gotta widen this if I'm going to get any kind of decent flow. Be cool Ashley. You're doing great. Just... yeah. Yeah! You hold the cup. No, wait, I'll hold it, can you kinda pinch your arm? Like, squeeze the vein, keep it flowing. There you go.

Hey, Ashley, breathe! Breathe normally. It's just a little Dixie cup, not one of those bigass pint bags from the bloodmobile. You could donate, like, ten of these and be okay to drive home after cookies and juice.

Right. While we wait for that to fill, I'll keep my end of the bargain. I'll tell you how to live forever.

It's actually really simple. All you have to do is kill somebody and drink all the blood that's in them.

What?

Holy shit Ashley, you believed I was a vampire, believed it enough to go through *all this*, and it never occurred to you that I might have killed somebody? It was just one time.

As a matter of fact, I *do* think one guy is better than five or ten or fifty. There are probably vampire serial killers out there who kill truck stop hookers the way you tear into a bag of Fritos... well, not the way *you* do, the way I would. Hell, maybe most of the serial killers out there are vampires. But anyhow, once you finish that off—and you don't have to do it all at once, you can drain the guy and add a little vinegar to keep it from clotting—once you finish that, the... the process gets activated, like. Blood in, age off.

Speaking of which, I think we've got a full cup. Here, cover up the hole. Bottoms up!

Ugh.

Oh, you want all the details about how I did it and everything? Jesus, that's a pretty personal question, Ashley. Yeah, I know we're friends and we're honest with each other, but still.

Got another cup in you for me?

All right then. So... my dad didn't die of cancer.

Well I never said he did. No, I didn't. I didn't *lie* to you. I told you he got cancer and I told you he died and, fine, I let you draw the line between them. It might as *well* have killed him, really. He was super sick. He didn't want to go through all the chemo and radiation and talking through one of those creepy voice box machines. Plus, you get the big C and you're seeing doctors all the time. They'd for sure notice the non-aging thing, and he probably had a good collection of blood-borne pathogens going on.

So he... he told me how to do it and said I should and said I'd stay young and pretty. Oh fuck you Ashley, those were his words not mine. You didn't *have* to say anything, I saw that look. I know I'm not... anyhow. We did it in the basement, he cut down two legs on a table so it would slant, got a new tarp and made a kind of funnel into a bucket.

Maybe clench your fist and unclench it? I think you're starting to scab over. You're dripping instead of drizzling, if you know what I mean.

I'm not *stalling*, what more do you need to know? He had this kind of bolt gun thing with a spike. All I had to do was push the button. He was strapped down but he'd had a few drinks and some pills so he barely struggled. The bucket had the vinegar. When he stopped dripping, I put that in the basement fridge.

The body? We had a deep freeze. It was still there when the bank foreclosed.

Crap, it's almost three o'clock! I better chug and charge. You fine to bandage all this up? Awesome. Thanks Ashes. You're the best.

###

Who's...?

Ashes! How the hell...? Okay, yeah I'll lower my voice and leave the lights off. That's smart, that's... what are you doing out and around at night? How'd you get in here?

Holy shit, how did you get McMurtry's master key?

No.

No *way*. That's some heist-level shit right there, Ashes, that's *awesome*. Man, he's gonna notice come morning, but...

Escape? Jesus, you should have consulted me before taking the key! There's still the ID card door thing and cameras, it's... I don't know how far we'd get.

The window on the landing? There's no way in hell I could fit through that, you'd barely make...

Oh. I get it.

Yeah, no, that's cool, you go. If I could go without you, I'm sure you'd, like, be all right with it. I'll miss you, but don't write me. They read our mail, that's the first way they'd hunt for you.

Well, if you're going to go rogue, we should get a leg on or whatever. You have somewhere to go and a way to get there? 'Cause when they catch a runner, it's game over, it's... okay, yeah, I get it. I do.

You want me to boost you out, or did you just come here to... huh?

Where'd you get a boxcutter? Oh, the key to the sharps drawer was with the master, duh. Keep that close, the road is full of perverts and...

What?

Wait, *no* Ashley that's not how it *works*. I *explained* to you. You don't just drink from a vampire and turn into one you have to kill someone all the way and... and...

I know it wouldn't work that way because it, that's *not how it works!*

Stay back. You know if I yell, you're not getting out of here. Out of your room at night with a stolen key and a blade? That's your ticket to a secure psych fac... *get back* I said!

Violent wards are worse than prison, girl... jail, they gotta give you a sentence and let you go, but when you're committed, you stay 'til the doctor is done. That's what you're gonna get if you take one step closer with that thing and you can *forget* about a boost out the window...

Jesus! Okay, no, I'll help, just... just put it down!

We could, we could go bleed Hyacinth! She's just next door, we could do it together, we could blame her room mate! You don't need *my* blood, it won't do it, it won't keep you young!
I'm warning you Ashley *step the fuck back*, you think you can... OW!
AAAAGH, NURSE, HELP! HELP ME I'M CUT! HELP ME! HELP!

#

“Goddamn Jody, I didn't think you were ever going to shut up.”