

VULTURES

Written by

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III

Story by

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WILLA (31), a stunning young woman clearly practiced in the art of "play-your-role," takes the drink and turns to look out at the crowd of socialites.

WILLA

Fuck me.

She downs the martini.

DONALD (55), a silver fox in sheep's clothing, comes up to the bar. He stands just a bit too close to Willa, leaning on the bar. His relaxed demeanor is unnerving.

DONALD

How's he doing?

Willa continues to stare at the mingling socialites. Donald turns as well.

DONALD (CONT'D)

I've always hated this part.

He gives a subtle motion to the bartender who immediately starts making a drink.

DONALD (CONT'D)

Having a gorgeous woman to be seen talking with tends to help that though.

He turns to her and flashes a wry smile. A LONG BEAT passes.

WILLA

He's nervous.

(eats the olive)

Who wouldn't be? It's not everyday you go from starving artist to one of them.

VERA (O.S.)

Congratulations Donald!

VERA (51), rich-LA, tipsy, and as vapid as you'd expect, approaches them, sloshing her drink. She kisses both Donald's cheeks, lacking any coordination.

VERA (CONT'D)

I must admit, I snuck a peek under the veil and his *vision*...

(gestures to the room)

The Collective is just going to eat *him up*! Yet again, we owe you more than we could possibly express.

DONALD
 (dryly)
 I do accept checks.

Vera laughs loudly while Donald flashes her the same wry smile. Willa rolls her eyes.

VERA
 That's what I love about you.
 Always on the hunt!

She pats Donald's shoulder, making her way back into the room.

WILLA
 Donald, if you have a second, I-

DONALD
 Now Willa, why don't you go check
 on the guest of honor.

Donald looks firmly at Willa. She grits her teeth and leaves him at the bar.

CUT TO:

4 **INT. SUITE BATHROOM - NIGHT** 4

Adam, still in front of the mirror, holds a pair of tweezers in front of his, now slightly reddened, left eye.

He takes a deep breath, and-

A loud KNOCKING comes from the other room startling him into dropping the tweezers.

He quickly tries to grab them but hits his head hard on the sink, stumbling and falling backwards.

A second KNOCKING comes as he lays, holding his head.

CUT TO:

5 **INT. HALLWAY - SAME TIME** 5

Willa stands impatiently in the hall. Finally she reaches for the door knob as Adam pulls the door open.

WILLA
 What the hell happened to you?

She pushes past him into the room.

CUT TO:

6

INT. SUITE BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

6

Opulent, pristine. The sink continues to run incessantly in the bathroom.

She sees his jacket on the back of a chair and picks it up.

WILLA

Everyone's waiting for you downstairs.

She crosses to him and begins to put the jacket on him.

ADAM

Stop.

He pulls himself out of the jacket and steps away from her.

ADAM (CONT'D)

I need to know. Why me? They could've picked anyone.

WILLA

It's a little late for that, Adam.

ADAM

Look, this matters to me. My *work* matters to me. And I need to know that it matters to them too.

A pointed BEAT of silence.

ADAM (CONT'D)

I'm not sure I want to do this.

She takes in his disheveled state for the first time.

WILLA

So, what? You're gonna leave?

Another pointed BEAT of silence.

WILLA (CONT'D)

The door's open...

ADAM

I just want to make sure that it's understood. I'm not sure—

WILLA

You don't get to decide what people think about your work. This is the business, the deal we all make. Fortunately for you, everyone loves it. So the only decision to be made is whether or not you'll get paid.

Adam fidgets with his eye, clearly uncomfortable.

ADAM

I just... you don't understand.

He finally can't take it anymore and starts digging in his eye again. Willa is visibly annoyed.

WILLA

(approaching Adam)

Well, what I *do understand* is you have a rare opportunity. One that many people would kill for.

She grabs his face and inspects his eye.

WILLA (CONT'D)

So if you just walk down there, have dinner, put blood on the page, you won't have to struggle anymore.

She forcibly lets go of his face.

ADAM

I shouldn't have to sign it in blood...

WILLA

It's a fucking metaphor, Adam.

She pushes the jacket into his chest with an audible "thump," and walks out the open door.

A BEAT as Adam considers the situation.

Defeated, he walks to the door, still holding the jacket. Opens it...

MATCH CUT TO:

7

INT. ADAM'S APARTMENT - DAY

7

LEAH (30), a confidently goofy woman with the spirit of an unapologetically badass Disney princess— moonlighting as a waitress, walks through the front door carrying a few to-go boxes.

Golden beams of sunlight shine in through the windows, bathing the room in a soft glow.

She sets her keys on the counter next to a stack of unopened bills. Her eyes hold on the stack for a BEAT as reality sinks in.

LEAH

Adam!

(yelling to him O.S.)

Please tell me you've eaten something today!

A BEAT.

ADAM (O.S.)

(something in mouth)

Yeah. Of course. Why wouldn't I have?

Leah walks around the corner to find Adam:

Pallet in one hand, thin paint brush in the other, a thicker brush between his teeth. He sits in front of an easeled 4x3 canvas, tank-top undershirt, rolled slacks, barefoot and glistening in the afternoon sunlight— hot in an accidentally sexy way. Leah bites her lip a little.

She struts over to him and emphatically sets the to-go containers down. Adam slowly takes the brush out his mouth and attempts to flash her a wry smile but is clearly barely containing laughter...

She sits on his lap trying also not to laugh and kisses him. She pulls away and admires the (still unseen) painting.

LEAH

(sarcastically)

Oooo baby... mama likey.

A BEAT of dead silence.

They both burst out in laughter and hold each other.

ADAM

Wow. Fuck me.

LEAH
So no—you haven't eaten anything?

ADAM
No—no I haven't. But that's why you
brought dinner... right?

She pointedly stands and grabs a to-go container, opening it and taking a huge bit.

LEAH
So is this one to keep or to sell?

ADAM
Do you think we can afford not to?

She stabs the food with the fork and hands it to him.

LEAH
What's the rule? If a piece really
means something to you, its
priceless.

ADAM
Don't do that. Don't quote my dad.
I'm trying to be realistic.

LEAH
So am I.

ADAM
Sure. But whats the other rule?
Don't get evicted.

His eyes flick back to the painting.

MATCH CUT TO:

8 **INT. BALLROOM - SECONDS LATER**

8

Adam's eye winces. He walks down the last few stairs, Willa several steps behind him. As he steps onto the landing, a FLOORBOARD CREAKS.

The room quiets. A socialite INHALES SHARPLY through his nose.

In unison, a somber clap arises, heralding the entrance of their new champion. Willa presses the small of Adam's back, urging him forward as socialites swarm him. But Vera gets there first.

VERA

Mr. Dempsey, we've been craving
your presence!

She grabs his hand and steps in close.

VERA (CONT'D)

A true genius such as yourself
wouldn't begrudge us the chance to
dote on you before the big
unveiling. Would you?

Another hand grabs his upper arm and pulls him away from her.

CLARENCE (62), a heavy-set, manicured gentleman stands in
front of him.

CLARENCE

I've been dying to meet you, dear
boy! We've been salivating for a
young artist with great taste for
quite some time. Tell us, what's
behind those eyes?

ADAM

Uhh...

Vera pulls Adam back towards her.

VERA

Now, now Clarence. You have to
share your food.

She holds fast to Adam.

CLARENCE

Wow Vera! The new nose
has...character.

He pulls Adam back towards him.

VERA

How dare—

NATALIA (O.S.)

(thick foreign accent)

I'm sure that young Mr. Dempsey has
no intention of fucking either of
you tonight.

They all turn to see NATALIA (65) sitting in a chair holding
a glass of blood red wine. Shrewd, gentile, and almost
certainly connected to organized crime, she stares directly
at Adam.

NATALIA (CONT'D)
 (thick foreign accent)
 But I *am* quite interested to know
 where the inspiration comes from.
 After all, you are the main course
 tonight.

Adam's eye shoots pain. A long BEAT passes as Natalia doesn't break her gaze.

As if on cue, Donald all but materializes right behind Adam. His hand on the young man's shoulder.

DONALD
 (to socialites)
 Do you mind if I pull young Mr.
 Dempsey away for just a second?
 Excellent.

Without giving them even a second to respond, Donald fixes Adam's jacket and leads Adam by the shoulders away from the confused socialites.

CUT TO:

9

INT. BALLROOM - CONTINUOUS

9

Donald leads Adam over to the bar where he stands uncomfortably while Donald leans against it and gives the bartender another little wave.

DONALD
 Apologies, Adam. I meant to be here
 when you came down. No harm done
 though.

Donald claps Adam on his shoulder with false camaraderie. Adam's eye pangs, now slightly red.

ADAM
 I'm sorry about that. It's just
 selling this piece is a lot for me.
 You're sure this is the right thing
 to do?

DONALD
 The Collective is the best in the
 world. There is nowhere better.

Adam nods understanding, still bothered.

ADAM

I know. I've wanted this for so long, but now that I'm here I don't know that I can do it.

Donald raises an eyebrow.

DONALD

You can't do it?

A BEAT as Adam can't find the words.

DONALD (CONT'D)

Come with me.

CUT TO:

10 **INT. BOARDROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

10

Adam and Donald walk into a large, dim boardroom. A massive table fills the middle of the room with walls adorned with a hodgepodge of expensive paintings.

Donald closes the door behind them.

DONALD

Sit down.

Adam sits in one the chairs at the table while Donald moves to a bar at the far end of the room and begins preparing two Old Fashions.

ADAM

I'm sorry about this, Donald. It's just my Dad's voice keeps echoing in my head.

SMASH CUT TO:

11 **INT. PAINTER'S STUDIO - DAY**

11

A painter is shrouded in shadow, working diligently on his canvas. We slowly move around until the corner of it blocks his face.

BACK TO:

12 **INT. BOARDROOM - CONTINUOUS**

12

ADAM

He had this rule-

DONALD

I came across this painting once.

Adam watches him, confused. Donald measures out a shot of bourbon and pours it into a glass.

DONALD (CONT'D)

When I was still young. Still ignorant. It was a painting of birds in a lake—or some shit like that. But what caught my eye was the water. It was this shade of blue that... made me feel something. So what do I do? I find the artist to ask him how he did it. He might as well have been speaking Greek to me, but I hand him a blank check, right then. Told him he could name his price. Instead, this guy tells me a story. See in this story a vulture sees a swan swimming in a pond. So it hides in the shadows, trying just to get a glimpse of the gorgeous bird. When it does, its filled with envy. Of course it is. The vulture wanted this beauty... deserved this beauty. So it convinces itself, 'It must be the water. *That's* the source. *That's* why its beautiful.' So, the vulture leaves the alters where it survived off of bits of meat to swim in the pond everyday. Little did the vulture know he sacrificed his nature for his obsession and slowly died of starvation. And then, you know what this asshole did? He hands me back the check and tells me the painting isn't for sale. That moment changed my life, Adam.

Donald finishes making the drinks and walks over to Adam. He places one of the drinks on the table in front of him.

Instead of sitting, Donald continues to tower over Adam, his drink in hand, eyes shrouded completely in shadow.

DONALD (CONT'D)

You see, I realized something then. The swan doesn't exist. The swan is a dream. Something we can never really attain.

(MORE)

DONALD (CONT'D)

The truth...the honest to God truth, is that we are *all* vultures. The only difference is that some of us are smart enough to return to our true nature while the rest choose to starve.

He leans in close.

DONALD (CONT'D)

The dirty little secret Adam: a piece isn't priceless *just* because it means something to you. And blue is just another fucking color.

SMASH CUT TO:

13 INT. STUDIO - UNKNOWN

13

INSERT: VEILED PAINTING

Closer than before. Several red dots slowly begin to appear on it, as though bleeding through from the other side.

Barely audible, DISTORTED WHISPERS fade in underneath.

BACK TO:

14 INT. BOARDROOM - CONTINUOUS

14

Donald clinks his drink with Adam's. He stands and waits for Adam to drink.

Adam's eye twitches again and his hand instinctively muddles his tear duct. He hesitates—then takes a large gulp from his glass. Donald smiles wryly.

DONALD

Congratulations on your big night, son. Time to be the fucking vulture.

He sets his drink on the table without taking a sip and strides out the door, leaving it wide open.

A BEAT while Adam sits, frozen. Slowly, he lowers his glass and sets it on the table next to Donald's: One full, one empty.

CUT TO:

15 **INT. BALLROOM - MINUTES LATER**

15

Adam steps back into the room, except this time no one seems to notice. He takes in the dozen or so socialites, dressed in black tie, sipping expensive liquor, clustered in small groups.

As he watches, the hubbub of conversation and laughter begins to change into something harsher. Rustling, scratching, screeching begins to rise. Adam's pulse quickens.

His breath shortens. He winces again as pain shoots from his eye. The distorted sounds begin to envelop the room. He can't seem to move his feet.

Out of the cacophony, a menacing, barely audible whisper comes for him.

THE VULTURES (V.O.)
(indistinct)
Fáte ton kýkno. Tróte tróte fáte.

[*Director's Note: The Vultures' voice is an amalgamation of the voices of all the people who are pulling at Adam: Donald, Willa, Vera, Clarence, Natalia, Leah, and his own. The same voice is the one distorted in the veiled painting inserts.]

He finally manages to tear himself away.

CUT TO:

16 **INT. GALLERY ANNEX - MOMENTS LATER**

16

Adam bursts into the gallery, taking calming breaths. It's dark except for a few sky lights and windows throwing beams of moonlight eerily about the room. Paintings hang on the walls, hidden in shadow.

As his breathing steadies, he sits on one of the benches, head in his hands.

A BEAT.

With shaking hands, he pulls his phone out of his pocket.

ADAM
Call Leah.

It rings once (on speaker), then answers.

LEAH (V.O.)
Hey! How's it going?

ADAM

It's... a lot. I wish you were here.

LEAH (V.O.)

Yeah, me too. I hate that I'm missing it, but I promise I'll be there tomorrow for the unveiling.

A BEAT of silence.

LEAH (V.O.)

Everything ok?

ADAM

I don't know, I kind of feel like I'm— Maybe this isn't— Do you think I'd be crazy to walk away?

As if on queue, a resonant metal DING rings out softly from the far end the alley. Adam looks up, trying to locate its source.

LEAH (V.O.)

I don't know. I'm not there, so I don't know what it's like in the room. But what I do know, is that you've been working for this your whole life, babe. I know what it has cost you. I know how hard you've worked.

Another, louder DING rings out. He looks up again. What the fuck is that?

LEAH (V.O.)

(suddenly cold)

But somehow, even now, you're finding a way to put *another* choice on me...

Adam freezes. Slowly turns back at his phone. This is his deepest fear.

LEAH (V.O.)

Do I think you'd be crazy to walk away? I think you *are* crazy, Adam. And sometimes that's amazing. You're brilliant in ways that I wish I could be... but I'm so tired. So fucking tired of this game. I'm tired of making excuses to my friends and family. Tired of supporting us, emotionally.

(MORE)

LEAH (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 Financially. And you know what's
 even crazier... that I want to do
 all of that. But what I *can't* do is
 keep making *all* the decisions. I
 can't do it anymore. I can't be
 here to watch you act like a child
 who's too afraid of failure to try
 and too afraid of success to take
 it. Do I think you're crazy to walk
 away? I don't fucking know, Adam.
 So how about this. How about you
 start by telling *me* what *you* want
 or hang up the phone until you can
 man up enough to actually have this
 conversation...

A BEAT while she waits.

LEAH (V.O.)
Well...

Destroyed, Adam slowly moves his thumb and presses 'End
 Call.'

A BEAT of silence. DING...

He looks up again. It's definitely coming from somewhere
 deeper in the gallery.

He stands and walks towards it. Slowly, he peers around a
 corner, revealing:

An old HOMELES MAN (70's), matted hair and beard, tattered
 clothing, holding a METAL CUP. His wild hair hides his face.
 He's sitting on a bench, staring at a painting that's
 completely masked in shadow.

AESOP JESUS
 Funny what the mind of an artist
 can conjure. I always did love this
 one.

Adam stares for a BEAT, at a loss for words.

AESOP JESUS (CONT'D)
 You know what you and a four story
 apartment have in common?

ADAM
 (baffled)
 What?

AESOP JESUS
 You stare too damn much.

He bursts out laughing. The raspy cackle of a heavy smoker and turns to Adam. Much to Adam's horror, his eyes are completely covered with bandages stained with dried blood. The man looks like a WWI casualty—horrifying and pitiful.

AESOP JESUS (CONT'D)
Difficult to look at, isn't it?

ADAM
Oh, I didn't mean to...

AESOP JESUS
Offend? Isn't the challenge the nature of art? Beauty, horror. A means to end.

ADAM
(awkward)
How did you—

AESOP JESUS
You can ask the question, son.

A BEAT.

ADAM
I don't understand.

Aesop chuckles, knowingly. Adam sits next to him, intentionally leaving space between.

AESOP JESUS
I know. But life is funny that way, huh? If we already had the understanding, we wouldn't ever have to ask the question. So ask.

There's a BEAT. Adam goes to speak but stops himself. Something visibly compels him, beyond his belief. Despite his best effort, nothing but truth remains:

ADAM
What should I do?

AESOP JESUS
Better. But how should I know? I'm just an old man sitting alone, begging for my next meal.

Adam sighs in frustration and moves to stand up.

ADAM

Do you have any idea who I am? Who I'm about to become? I can't believe I'm in here talking to a fucking bum when on the other side of those walls I'm a contract away from everything I've ever wanted. Sign on the dotted line and I don't have to worry anymore. About anything. I've sweat for this. I've bled for this. Christ, I *deserve* this. So don't for a second pretend like you know what it's like to be in my position!

AESOP JESUS

No, no, no. The real question. Ask the real question.

ADAM

What do you want?!?

A long BEAT as Adam breathes heavily. Aesop stares ahead.

AESOP JESUS

There it is.

Suddenly, almost faster than possible, Aesop stands and is in Adam's face.

AESOP JESUS (CONT'D)

What do you want, Adam? What do you *really* want? Because I'm willing to bet it has something to do with why you're still in here talking to a "fucking bum."

SMASH CUT TO:

19 **INT. PAINTER'S STUDIO - DAY**

19

We move around the edge of the canvas. The face of Aesop, healthy and happy, turns with a wry smile and winks.

BACK TO:

20 **INT. GALLERY ANNEX - CONTINUOUS**

20

Aesop cuts him off by holding out and JANGLING the cup. Adam, as if coming out of a trance, reaches for his wallet. He puts a few BILLS into the cup and turns to walk away.

DONALD (O.S.)
Ah, here he is!

Donald, at the head of a long, ornate dining table, stands and extends his hand towards Adam.

The socialites sitting at the table all stand without looking at Adam. Every chair is filled except for the one at the foot and one other. Willa stands at the edge of the room.

DONALD (CONT'D)
Ladies and gentlemen, the man of
the hour!

They all clap. Donald motions for quiet and they stop. He gestures to the empty chair at the foot of the table.

DONALD (CONT'D)
Adam?

Adam slowly walks to the chair. As he sits, Willa approaches and puts a CONTRACT and a PEN in front of him. The socialites continue to stare straight ahead.

A barely audible chanting begins to fade in.

THE VULTURES (V.O.)
Fáte ton kýkno. Tróte tróte
fáte.

DONALD (CONT'D)
You have vision, my boy. A
born talent so many dream of.
Our world is filled with a
sea of mediocrity, starving
us until we can find someone
with true substance. Someone
we can invite to our table.
Adam, today we offer you what
everyone is searching for:
metamorphosis.

A BEAT as Adam looks down at the contract.

The chanting grows. His eye shoots pain again. He can't take it. He grabs the pen and signs.

Willa takes the contract as Adam looks up at Donald. His eye now blood red.

Donald smiles devilishly.

Suddenly, all the socialites grab their FORKS and KNIVES from the table in unison, holding them up as waiters come out and set covered dishes in front of them - all except for Adam and Donald.

INSERT: VEILED PAINTING

A streak of red hits the veil.

BACK TO:

28 **INT. DINING ROOM - CONTINUOUS** 28

Adam's white shirt now has a bloody streak on it.

Another, bloodier slice.

FLASH TO:

29 **INT. STUDIO - UNKNOWN** 29

INSERT: VEILED PAINTING

Another, thicker streak hits the veil.

BACK TO:

30 **INT. DINING ROOM - CONTINUOUS** 30

Another streak is across Adam's chest.

A chomping, oozing bite.

FLASH TO:

31 **INT. STUDIO - UNKNOWN** 31

INSERT: VEILED PAINTING

A surge of red seeps into the middle of the veil as blood bubbles out from the sides.

BACK TO:

32 **INT. DINING ROOM - CONTINUOUS** 32

Willla approaches.

A slice.

A convulsion.

She stands behind Adam and puts her hand on his shoulder.
Leans in.

WILLA

This will only hurt a little.

Suddenly, she grabs his head and yanks it back. Using two of her fingernails, she grabs at his tear duct and slowly pulls out a LONG, BLACK FEATHER. Adam screams.

The two waiters move in front of him, completely blocking him. He screams again as they begin to dig and pull at his face. He struggles and twitches, then goes quiet.

The waiters step away. Willa drops Adam's body onto the table. THUD. As if on queue, the socialites all stop eating.

Donald, sitting patiently, stands and looks to the entrance again.

DONALD

Won't you come join us, Adam?

Stepping into the doorway, pressed tuxedo, gelled hair, and perfectly manicured is Adam. But Adam the socialite.

The others all turn towards him in unison.

He enters the room and sits in the empty chair. Blankly turns to the body lying on the table. It's lifeless face turned towards at him, staring. But where the eyes should be, there are only two empty sockets.

The two waiters re-enter and each place a dish in front of Donald and Socialite Adam. The cover is pulled off of Adam's, revealing:

A BLOOD RED EYE and the BLACK FEATHER.

FLASH TO:

33

INT. STUDIO - UNKNOWN

33

INSERT: VEILED PAINTING

Blood runs onto the floor, pooling viscously. We slowly begin to move up. The wall is stained and coated as trails of blood flow down it.

A small SQUISH and CLINK.

BACK TO:

But the METAL CUP remains, sitting innocently on the bench with Adam's dollars in it - along with a large, tattered, white feather.

Adam is face to face with his painting on the wall, covered in a clean, white veil.

LEAH (O.S.)
Adam? Adam, are you there? *Is everything ok?* Please answer me!

Slowly, he steps up to the painting and reaches up to it. He grabs ahold of it. Yanks.

LEAH (V.O.)
Adam! This isn't funny! What's going on?!?

POV - PAINTING: ADAM STARES AT HIS WORK.

Behind him, the door to the gallery opens revealing Willa as we hear the VEIL FALL TO THE GROUND.

WILLA
There you are! Everyone's waiting for you in the dining room. You coming?

His breathing quickens. His pulse rises. He stares at his painting. Willa over one shoulder. The gallery entrance over the other.

He turns and looks right at us, both eyes white. The faintest of twitches starts in his left eye.

CUT TO BLACK.

Adam?	WILLA (CONT'D)	Adam?	LEAH (V.O.)
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INSERT TITLE CARD: VULTURES

END CREDITS:

WIND WHISPERS softly through a hollow space.

THE VULTURES
(distant)
Fáte ton kýkno. Tróte tróte fáte.