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## Dead Inside

by Victoria Cooper

As she came to, her mouth filled with the taste of blood. She could not remember why she was unable to move, but the voice came close, just like before. It was so close; she could feel his warmth on the side of her neck.

“Would you like to share your story with me?”

Each word slipped from his mouth and slid down deep inside her, lying curled beneath her breastbone. The words stayed there, waiting, wanting, watching. What would she do?

She tried to move her hands to regain space away from the voice, but she knew it was pointless. Thoughts made her head ache but still she tried to think, to put them in order that could make sense of the pain.

“Why don’t we start with your name?”

His breath was acid sharp by her cheek now. So close she thought she could hear his heart beating over her own. The familiarity of the question jabbed and despite the blindfold she screwed her eyes tighter shut.

She shrank away from him and he gave a small effeminate giggle.

“I won’t hurt you.”

She felt him stroke her hair and his breath quicken.

“You can tell me your name, can’t you?”

She would play dead like the Rangers had told them at school for bear safety. Then he would stop. Please, just stop.

She remembered earlier, how the mist had risen above her father’s scowling face in their old fishing boat on the lake. She thought about the peanut butter sandwich he had unwrapped for her like she was still a kid.

She saw every line on his face set in concentration, as he raised the dripping oars from the still waters and lowered them back in again. The rustling of his oilskin jacket, the only sound above the dawn call of the blue-winged teal cackling for its mate. But then there was after.

The deafening noise that had winded them both, but left her watching pink sneakers soak up her father’s blood in the keel of the boat. She sat cradling his head and saw the oars drift away; struck dumb.

But now the voice moved closer still, until he was almost upon her, and as he said the next five words, she felt herself drift away like the oars; away from the safety of the boat.

“Do you want to live?”