

My Body is a Cage

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My Body is a Cage

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Summary

"Jesus. Rorschach's a girl." The story of Wanda Kovacs.

i.

Rorschach's mask is taken away. All the way back to the police station, the police officers laugh and mock. They complain about the smell, the broken bottle of Nostalgia aftershave that fills the police car like a living being. They laugh about the freckles, the dirty hair, the face only a mother could love, the bruises already forming and filling in on Rorschach's cheeks and chin. Their fists drive into thin ribs, their boots bring 'whoof's of pain out of Rorschach's mouth as they kick. They laugh as Rorschach screams when they pull the clothes away.

They stop laughing when they cut off the dirty ace bandage wrapped tight around the chest. The room is deadly quiet when they get the pants off and see Rorschach bare and naked.

"Jesus." One of them says, as Rorschach stands there, shivering and furious, trying to cover the shame of it all with two inadequate hands, "Rorschach's a girl."

ii.

Wanda Kovacs is going to the store. She is ten years old and wearing a pink dress that she does not care for. Her shoes are from the Salvation Army and they are a size too small, pinching her feet with every step. She's got to run errands for mother, something Wanda would rather do than sit around the apartment, listening to the sounds the men make.

She's looking down at the pavement and she doesn't see the boys until they step out in front of her. Wanda knows them the way every kid always knows the bullies on the block. Usually they leave her alone because there are easier targets, but today they've got that look in their eye that says their usual targets won't be good enough.

"I'm talking to you runt." The one says.

"Yeah, what's a matter? you deaf or something?" The other says, biting into some fruit.

"I... I have to get something from the store for my mother..." Wanda feels her voice give way.

The first boy is wearing a purple jacket and a sneer, lit cigarette in the corner of his mouth, "Ha ha ha. I got something I could give your momma."

"Sure. Why not? Everybody else does, way I hear it." The other's in a green sweater, baseball cap that she's sure he stole from one of the other kids on the street.

"Is that right kid? Is your mom a whore?" The word is coarse and ugly, the boy's sneer gets bigger.

"Sure she is. She's gonna fix us up with her mother. Or maybe she wants a piece of us first."

"Let me by! I have to go to to-" Green-sweater smashes the fruit in between Wanda's eyes. It's partly rotten and it splatters, running down her face, down her pink dress. She blinks and tries to get it out of her eyes. It burns.

"You don't have to go no place, whore."

"Ehhahaha! look at her!"

All the adults stand around, ignoring what's going on, looking away or pretending to be reading their newspapers. They find anything to occupy their attention, anything to let them ignore the block bullies and the dirty girl in the faded pink dress with rotten fruit on her face.

"Look at her? Smell her! Like fish!"

"Probably got cooties. Probably got diseases."

"Got any diseases whore?"

The words blur as Wanda gets her eyes open, the juice still running down her face. The boy in the purple coat calls her a whore with a cigarette clutched between his teeth, doesn't even stop Wanda as she grabs onto his coat.

"Oughtta give the little bitch an examination! Okay whore, get your dress up, we gonna give you an examination-" Green-sweater says, and his eyes go big as he realizes what Wanda's doing, "Hey Richie, watch her, she's-"

"Huh?" Richie says too late as Wanda grabs onto his cigarette, "You little bitc-"

His scream is more than satisfying as Wanda plunges the lit cigarette into his eye. There's resistance for a moment, and then it slips in, and Richie squeals harder. Wanda lets go of his jacket, letting him fall forward as his hands go to his face, and she throws herself at green-sweater, knocking them both down. A box of oranges tumbles with them, and finally the adults notice.

"Get her offa me!" The boy screams, calling for god as Wanda gets one hand in his hair, one hand on the side of his mouth, and her teeth deep into his cheek, biting hard enough to break the skin and sever a chunk of flesh the size of a quarter. The adults grab onto her, yanking, pulling her away with the flesh tumbling out of her teeth and landing on the sidewalk. She isn't listening to them anymore, not listening to them calling her a wild dog, not listening to them blaming her mother.

Her eyes stay fixed on the boy, rotten juice drying on her skin and the coppery taste of blood in her mouth.

iii.

Rorschach's body is a collection of scars and bruises. She hides them all under long sleeves, coats with high collars and gloves. The face is harder to disguise and she gets used to looks

from strangers who find their eyes drawn to the purple bruises on her cheek and forehead, black eyes that impair her vision. Once in a while someone will approach her and offer her help, tell her the name of a women's shelter or offer to take her to the cops. They are far and few between in New York, and she treats them with a kindness she doesn't show anyone else these days.

The bruises all heal eventually, turning yellow underneath her skin and finally disappearing completely. The scars remain much longer, thin bloodless lines of tissue that are white, whiter than even her own skin. There are knife wounds on her torso, and there's the perfectly round scar on her thigh from a .25 calibre bullet that took her off the streets for a whole month while she waited for it to heal.

She's had broken bones, twisted ankles, but these don't leave the same marks. They heal after time and leave no sign they were ever there, except for pain in her joints now and again, and a reduced flexibility. But part of that is also getting old. The only broken bone that others see is her nose, which has never healed quite right. Her toes break so often that she barely notices, except when her right foot doesn't heal properly and her index toe keeps smashing against the top of her boot. She breaks it again and sets it properly this time.

The only time she goes to the hospital, the only time since her birth, is when her period stops for three months and Wanda panics, thinking up the worst scenarios in her head. She's 28 and the doctor can't find a damn thing wrong with her, except that she's underweight and that she's not pregnant. She suffers through the shame of sitting on the cold table in a gown that barely covers her, all the time bitterly regretting paying money for the visit. She reads all she can and, in the end, she solves the problem herself. It's stress, the result of not sleeping more than three or four hours a night for nearly three years, excluding Sundays. Her period starts again soon after she figures it out, and when it stops a few years later, this time for good, she doesn't even notice it except as a relief because it means she won't have to spend money on pads.

She does not look in the mirror and she does not touch her body, but once in a while, she does stop to stare at all the marks on her skin, fingertips brushing over the scars and fading freckles. Her history is mapped on her body in a way that cannot be taken off, and she is sometimes very glad of this.

iv.

They put her in Bayview Correctional Facility. It's only medium security, but it's a women's prison, and there aren't any grounds, which means they can keep her in a cell 24/7 if they wish to.

She feels naked without her mask and her bandages, the lifts in her boots and the trenchcoat that hid the rest of her. The other women scream at her from their cells. She's at the top of the prison and their voices rise up to her, carrying all the names and slurs they can think.

These women aren't here because of Rorschach. These women are whores, drug users, guilty of manslaughter at worst. Rorschach does not get involved with prostitutes. They are an ugly

grey area, an open wound in her past that sets her teeth on edge. Their pimps are easier picking, guilty in a way she can tangibly understand. The women here know of Rorschach, and some of them have even seen her walking down the street or skulking down alleyways, but they aren't here because of her.

They are assigning her a psychologist. They are discussing if she will continue to be held at Bayview or if they will take the risk and move her upstate to Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. There's even some discussion of transferring her to one of the maximum security men's prisons within the city and keeping her in isolation. They are discussing if they should release photos of Rorschach with those dark bruises still on her face. The police were rough on her before they found out there was a woman under the mask. Some of them got more vicious when they found out exactly what was under the shapeless suit. Neither of these explanations will make the bruises look any better.

The guard outside her cell keeps looking at her in a way that Rorschach understands. He hates her and he wants her to know. And he has the keys to her cell. She's heard him whisper dyke under his breath, looking for some reaction and getting nothing. Will he be content with slurs and barbed taunts, or will he try force a reaction with fists and spit?

Rorschach waits, face as blank as she can make it, fists and feet ready.

v.

Her sign says THE END IS NIGH. It came to her one night, after a particularly nasty fight that left her with three broken toes and a shallow knife wound. She ignored the toes, patched up the knife wound the best she could with her limited resources, and watched the dawn rise over New York, the light sending all the scum back into the shadows.

For a moment, she could imagine the world after the end. The empty streets. The bodies, disintegrated in an instant by the nuclear warhead. Shadows forever burnt on the walls and the steady click of Geiger counters. Like God himself reaching down to set the world on fire with his hatred for each and every single human being. There would be no more Americans and no more Soviets, no good or evil, just ashes and dust.

The newspaper man was holding her copy of the New Frontiersman, as he always did, and she stuffed it in her coat pocket. The knife wound sent a little stab of pain through her with each step she took. She had to walk twenty blocks to find a store with pasteboard and markers. It was more expensive than she could afford, but she paid the price and resolved to make the rest of what she had last longer. There was always food in the dumpsters behind grocery stores, always loose change dropped down grates and left on sidewalks.

In her apartment, with the sound of squalling children down the hall and her landlady yelling much like her mother used to, Rorschach carefully draws out her phrase. She takes care to make the letters straight as machine-printed ones and colours them in as thick and black as she can. THE END IS NIGH in three-inch letters.

She opens her window and sticks her head outside, sucking in lungfuls of rotten city air. It almost tastes fresh after an hour of breathing whatever's found in the permanent marker. Mrs. Shairp bangs on the door and demands to know what's going on. Rorschach ignores her. Rent isn't due for another week and she's in no mood to listen to complaints about hygiene. There are no rats yet, no cockroaches yet, so why bother focusing energy on useless things?

She takes the sign out the next day and marches along the streets.

vi.

Daniel doesn't know. Daniel never sees her without her mask on, without the ace bandages. Her voice is nearly perfect by the time they run into each other on the rooftops of New York, rough and gravelly. Her throat hurts all the time, but it's a small price to pay for respect. She knows who he is, the newest Nite Owl with gadgets and goggles and a reputation and a nemesis. Rorschach has been doing this for less than a year when they meet up and make plans to work together.

She knows him, his real name. His real face. Their third year of working together, their first in Crimebusters, Nite Owl is hurt badly when a mobster shoots him. Rorschach doesn't kill him then, though later, after the girl and the dogs, she'll seek him out again and this time, she'll make sure he won't be shooting anyone else. But before all that, there's just Rorschach helping Nite Owl back to the Owlship, keeping her hand pressed against the bullet wound to slow the bleeding.

Nite Owl pilots all the way back, only collapsing once they're safely inside his basement. She drags him out of Archie and drops him on one of the tables. The first aid kit is easily found, and she gets his costume off of him. She debates for a moment about the mask and decides to leave it, and the cape it's attached to. There are some things you don't do, and you do not take off someone's mask, not even if they trust you with their life. Not even if it would make this easier.

She doesn't have any medical training, but she's gotten books from the library, fighting to read along and understand, and she's got knowledge from having sewn up her own wounds. She doesn't have money for anything, and certainly not for hospital visits. Nite Owl does, but she can't risk taking him there without giving away both his and her identities. So she does her best not to kill the only friend she has in the entire world. They're both lucky and the bullet has only cracked his rib instead of missing and slamming straight into his lungs.

This is the first time she's been in his lair. She looks around and finds some food in the bottom of a cupboard. Dan has a dozen cans of stew and Wanda eats it cold, not willing to risk exploring for a stove and leaving Nite Owl alone for too long. She sits on a chair, spoon scraping away at the metal can, mask rolled up on the bridge of her nose but not off, just in case there are security cameras.

He wakes up after three hours. She's by his side in a moment, mask down in place, "Nite Owl."

"Jesus." He mutters, "What happened."

"You were shot. It's not bad. Just a broken rib and a shallow wound." She helps him sit up so he can see he's back in his lair. His hands touch the bandage over his chest. She would have wrapped him up in ace bandages too, but the cloak was in the way. He looks at her, eyes still hidden by goggles.

"Rorschach." He says. His hands go to his mask. "It would have been easier if you took this off."

She shrugs. "The job got done anyway." Wanda turns away, gathers up the first aid, putting it back into the tin as best she could, "Just look after it-" Wanda stops as she turns around.

The cowl is off and she's seeing Nite Owl's face for the first time. He's got brown hair, just like she imagined he would, and his face is so open and honest without the cowl and goggles. It's the face of a good man.

"Daniel." He says, and holds out a hand, "My name's Daniel Dreiberg."

She pauses. And then slowly takes his hand, shaking it like they've done so many times before. "Daniel." She says, and the name fits him perfectly

"Thank you." He says, and squeezes tight.

She does not unmask for him. Not even after that. They work together for nearly 10 years, and through it all, she never pulls off her mask. 1975 marks the kidnapping case and the moment when Wanda Kovacs becomes the mask and Rorschach the real face. If she could regret anything, this might be the thing she'd choose to regret.

But she can't. So she doesn't.

vii.

There were always men in the apartment, as far back as she can remember, though they are only background players for most of it, faces in the fog that come and go. Only Wanda and her mother are permanent. Wanda doesn't remember much about it, only snippets. She remembers clothes from the Salvation Army, and leftovers meant to last a whole week, and the landlord, a fat man with pink cheeks, standing outside their door and always yelling about the rent being late.

Wanda stays in her room like she's told, hearing the creak of the people walking into the apartment and the low rumble of men's voices. They exist outside of Wanda's tiny world, big ships passing by and barely taking any note of the little girl with unruly curls and a dress that's seen better days. There are a few who take note of her. Some talk to her in a tone she will later come to recognize as pity. One man slips her a whole five dollars and ruffles her hair. Wanda keeps it under her bedframe, pulling it out every now and again to smooth her hands over it, trying to decide what she'll buy.

There are some other men who notice her, and Wanda doesn't look at them. They call her darling or sweetheart, and their hands rest on her shoulders and back a little too long. Wanda hides under her bed when they come around. But still, she doesn't truly understand what's going on.

One night she wakes up when she has to pee, and she can hear her mother making noises. It sounds like she's hurting, the way Mrs. Lov did when she slipped down the stairs last winter and broke her hip. And even though she's supposed to stay in her room, Wanda creeps down the hall towards the open room, towards the dark shadows moving against the wall.

There's a man in there with mother, a man with a shirt but no pants, and he's got his arms around mother. They're doing something with their bodies that makes Wanda feel frightened to the core. Mother's saying things, making noises, "oh yes. oh you're hurting me. oh yes." Wanda stops in the doorway and stares at them. There's sweat on the man's face.

He turns and sees her, "What? Hey! Hey, what is that?"

Mother turns her head. She looks scared, "Oh god."

"You didn't tell me you had no kids around here!"

"It... it's my daughter. Look, really, it doesn't matter, let's-" Mother reaches for the man's shoulder and he shrugs her off. Wanda's frozen in the door, staring at them.

"Ahh, who needs it... kids creeping round everywhere. I get enough of this crap at home."

"Oh, baby, please listen. She'd kinda backwards. Please don't get mad."

"I said forget it. Here's five bucks. It's more'n you're worth. Outta my way retard."

The man shoves Wanda to the side as he walks out and she stumbles back into mother's arms. Mother is soft, but her voice is shrill and angry, "Five bucks? You bastard! You lousy bastard! Don't you dare walk out on me! Don't you dare!"

He leaves and the door shuts with a heavy sound. Wanda looks up at mother, trembling as she sees the look on her face. "M-mom." She says, "Mom, I'm sorry, I, I thought he was hurting you. I thought-"

"You little shit!" The slap turns her head to the side, sending a shock of pain all down her right cheek. Mother starts yelling, "You know what you just cost me, you ugly little bitch? I shoulda listened to everybody else! I shoulda had the abortion!"

Wanda screams, her mother's fists bunching up in her nightshirt. Her hand goes to her face, feeling the red throb of her cheek. She's crying and she can't stop. She doesn't understand the word abortion, but she understands the sentiment. Wanda has to pee so bad, her insides cramping up with terror and fear, but she knows if she wets herself, mother will just be angrier and she manages to hold it in while her mother screams at her.

The next day she pulls the five dollar bill out from under her mattress and throws it in the trash.

viii.

It's a Sunday and it's cold, cold as it gets in New York. Her apartment doesn't have heating and she huddles under blankets she's scrounged from dumpsters. Her hair hasn't been washed in a week, and the greasy curls hang down in her face. She's going to have to cut it again soon, but she's out of soap and there's four more days until payday.

She's already made her way through today's New Frontiersman, marking the pages in black pen with little notes and reminders to herself to look up certain people, to investigate further. It makes her feel calm to read the New Frontiersman, to know there are other people in the world who know as well as she that it is going straight to hell. If her father is still alive, Wanda is certain he must read the New Frontiersman as well.

Wanda pays her taxes, works down at the garment factory, and as such, the city of New York sees fit to make public library cards free to those who pull their weight. This is a blessing because if they charged, Wanda would never be able to afford these books. She's learned how to treat her own injuries from the library, studying medical textbooks for hours and fighting through the dense text to come to an understanding. From books she discovers new ways to disable attackers, she understands how to terrorize evil men, how to become a better detective, a better hero.

She's got a stack of books from the library, mostly non-fiction and instructional books, but the one she's reading is the only one she's chosen out of pleasure. By the cold light of day, curled in her chair, covered in blankets that barely put a dent in the chill, she pours over Joseph Conrad's words and submerses herself in a world of jungles, stolen ivory, and the man named Kurtz who lives a life that is brutish and horrible but free.

The book can't block out the sounds of the apartment. The landlady's children are screaming again, wailing like they're being murdered. The pipes creak and click as water is cycled through to keep them from freezing. The creaking of the stairs and the sound of someone crying from downstairs. Wanda hears them all as she reads, her gloves catching the pages two or three at a time as she turns them. New York continues to exist with or without her participation.

Tonight, she'll put her mask and her suit on and she'll take to the rooftops. But until then, she loses herself in a world she has only ever seen in photographs.

ix.

The first psychiatrist is a fat black man. He's soft spoken and well fed, and it sets Rorschach's teeth on edge. Her face is swollen and bruised, her expression passive as Dr. Long shows her inkblot cards. He's a fool and an idiot, showing her the very cards that make up her face and expecting her to slip up. She answers as she's expected: butterfly, flower, angel, vase. Dr. Long scribbling them down and she can hear the wheels turning in his head, his plans to use her.

The next psychiatrist is a woman, pinched face, short hair. Probably a lesbian, Rorschach thinks with disdain. The woman talks to Rorschach about sexism, discrimination. Makes a lot of noise about the bruises on her face. Then come the questions, about her gender, about her costume. Dr. Tyler implies that perhaps Wanda Kovacs was sexually assaulted and this is her way of taking control. She puts a hand on Rorschach's shoulder and Rorschach breaks Dr. Tyler's index and middle finger. That's the last of her.

She can't leave the cell. The guards remain outside night and day, just in case she somehow figures a way through solid steel. She passes the time by lying on her bunk or by doing her usual exercises. Most of them never look at her. There's one, this blond asshole who reminds her of the bully with the green sweater, who always seems to be looking at her. His little beady eyes watching her as she does her push-ups, whispering dyke under his breath when the other guards can't hear. Rorschach ignores him, focusing on the burn in her muscles. When she wasn't looking, she got old, and now the things her body used to do without complaint are being challenged. She's shrunk a little in the past few years, two inches gone from her height in the blink of an eye. And her elbows ache when it rains. But she's still in good enough shape to protect herself.

Dr. Long returns and brings his cards with him. He asks her about her reaction to Dr. Tyler. Rorschach answers with the same stock answers, doesn't blink when Dr. Long tells her they're working out a transfer to send her to Bedford. She's going to have to get out of here before she ends up there. Dr. Long calls her Wanda. He doesn't understand. Her file is filled with many things, but it doesn't know about the kidnapping. It doesn't know that Wanda Kovacs is gone and only Rorschach is left.

Women yell at Rorschach from across the way. Some of them pass by on their way to the roof to smoke, giving her looks that are malicious or salacious or both at once. Her face stays blank as they throw out insults and cat-calls to her. She will not let herself give them the pleasure of a reaction. They're whores and KT-heads, not good women at all. There are no good women here. No good men either.

Rorschach is used to being alone. That doesn't disturb her. But being without her face does.

x.

Daniel builds her a grappling gun. She's always coveted the idea of one, but there's no way she could ever build, much less afford, one. She understands the body, but mechanics still slip through her fingers no matter how hard she puts her mind to the task. Nite Owl understands them in a way that she wishes she could. He's built himself a ship that's both plane and submarine, and his assortment of gadgets both fascinating and awe inspiring. He reminds her of Thomas Edison, a good man, a brilliant man, and a good American. The grappling gun is a gift that she feels no guilt taking because it's a good gift, a useful gift.

The first night she uses it, she nearly falls to her death twice. The first time, she loses her footing on one of the slick new towers and falls away from the ledge, dangling seven stories above the ground. She's very glad she'd got her gloves on, since the jerk is hard enough to chew up her gloves. Thinking about what it would do to her palms is enough to make a chill run up her spine. The second time, the rope and the rain betray her both, soaking the rope until her gloves slip and she slides down two stories, picking up speed. But this building is one of brick, and she shoves her feet down, catching the bricks and slamming her body forward, into the brick. She pulls a shredded glove off with her teeth and climbs the rest of the way down with one bare palm.

But even with this, she can't stop smiling to herself. The gun is perfect. She breaks into Anthony Salerno's office right under his underlings' noses and finds the proof she needs to connect him with a dozen bodies fished out of the East River. She takes them and leaves them at the police station in her usual drop-off location. They don't like her much (and the feeling is more than mutual), but if they've got the right information, then it'll be easier to get a conviction when she eventually drops Salerno off, hog-tied and indignant.

She knows the way to Nite Owl's place and she heads there a few hours before dawn to thank him. Daniel just smiles at her tightly constrained praise, knowing by now that a single sentence from Wanda means more than a page from anyone else. She tells him about the rope and he looks almost guilty, "I should have tested for rain, I didn't even think-"

"It's fine." She interrupts him. "Let's switch to manila."

"I tried manila, it broke during the stress-testing." Daniel pulls his goggles and cowl off as he takes the gun away from her and opens it up, extracting the soaked rope. "The same thing happened with the polyester. Nylon held up best for carrying weight."

Wanda hrmms, staring at the wet coil that nearly dropped her a dozen stories. "Other options?"

"Well... there's polypropylene, it's water resistant. But it's a lot weaker than the nylon and polyester. Though, maybe we could coat the nylon? If I switched to a double-braid, then-" Daniel thinks, tapping one glove against his chin.

Wanda watches him and enjoys the warmth of the Nite Owl's lair. She doesn't begrudge his inheritance, though sometimes she can't help but reflect on how life would be easier if she had access to the funds that the Nite Owl does. But Daniel is not stingy, and if he notices sugar cubes or cans of food missing after her visits, he says nothing.

"I'm going to try something, but it's going to take me a few days. Is that alright?"

"Of course." She will miss the gun, even though she's only had it for six hours. "Leave a message in the usual place when you're finished."

"Sure." Daniel says, distracted now as the cogs in his brain start turning, picking up the rope and pulling out a knife, cutting off one end, "The usual spot."

It takes four days. Rorschach spends her time thinking about the gun while she works. Sewing is mindless work, giving her plenty of time to plan what she'll do next when she gets it back. The criminals require more thinking, more planning, but the gun remains in the back of her mind everytime she sees a ledge just out of reach, or a guarded fire escape. The sign finally shows up in the personal ads in the back of the New Frontiersman, Dan's usual message.

She shows up in his lair just past sundown. He's waiting for her, already in costume and smiling. The gun's sitting on a workbench and she takes it. It's heavier than before, but from the smile on Daniel's face, she knows this is a good sort of heavy, "I think I fixed it." He says.

Wanda turns the gun in her hand, looking at the sharp hooks on the grappling end. And under the mask, she grins, "Let's test it."

xi.

Wanda leaves the city for the first time in her life on a rickety bus with grating on the windows and half a dozen other children, most older than her. She misses the city intensely, and is unable to sleep well for the first month at the Lillian Charlton Home for Problem Children (or the Charlton Home as everyone comes to call it). She misses the buildings and the sound of the city, and she hates sharing space with so many other girls and boys.

The girls dormitory has bars on the windows and all the girls are older than Wanda. Some of them are dirty girls, like Wanda's mother, and they roll up their uniform skirts and yell at the boys when they pass by on the way to gym or boxing. Some of the other girls seem nice and Wanda can't figure out why they're here, not until she catches Suzie and Lily kissing in the stairwell. Some of the girls try bullying Wanda, pushing her around when the teachers and dorm monitors aren't looking. This all ends when Wanda breaks Dorthy's nose after Dorthy yanks out a tuft of Wanda's hair. The girls stay away after that, unwilling to risk getting their faces messed up. Nobody tells when the teachers ask who broke Dorthy's nose and Dorthy says she just fell into the wall, and Wanda quickly figures out that you never, ever snitch, even if you catch someone doing something disgusting, like Suzie and Lily.

The first few months are the roughest. But then the girls back off and start picking on the easier targets and Wanda finally gets used to the quiet at night. The classes are hard but rewarding. If you do your work like you're told, things go fine. Nobody smacks your hand with a ruler and nobody makes you stand in the corner, not unless you've been bad. And nobody here calls Wanda's mom a whore or teases her about her dad being gone. Everybody's just as messed up.

Wanda still doesn't have any friends, but she doesn't need or want friends. These are all dirty girls, not good women at all. They're tramps and whores and lesbians and Wanda doesn't fit in with them at all. The school has plenty of places for a girl with no friends to go. There's the library and the gym, and there's the cement tables in the courtyard and, if you're good at climbing like Wanda, then there's always the rooftop. She keeps her diary up there, shoved under a loose roof tile where the other girls can't get at it. Wanda makes up her own version of shorthand so they can't read her writings if they do manage to find it.

It isn't all that bad, considering. She doesn't even miss home after the third month. And she never misses her mother.

xii.

The sirens start and Rorschach knows this is not a drill. She sits up on her bunk and then gets to her feet. She can't see outside, but she knows that whatever's out there is coming for her. Hopefully Daniel. But it wouldn't shock her to find a mob outside the prison. None of the prisoners are out of their cells at this time of the night, and she can see the faces on the other side of the room looking around, trying to figure out what's happening. The blond guard and the other, a tall dark-haired man, have a brief conversation.

The dark-haired guard leaves, heading down the stairs towards the main office and she knows this is as close to a chance as she's going to get. She approaches the bars and pulls her overshirt off, watching as blondie turn to look at her. He's got his sneer on, the same look he gave her when he called Rorschach a dyke. "Back up." He says. She doesn't. "Get the fuck back." He repeats.

Rorschach stays where she is. She's got her shirt off, sleeves in her hand. Her skin's goosebumping, the thin sleeveless shirt underneath isn't enough to keep the cold out and she knows her nipples are showing through by the way he keeps staring at her chest. That's alright. She's setting a trap and she needs to bait it with whatever she's got, even if it makes her stomach roll.

The guard glances down the hall, towards the sounds of shouting, and then he makes his move. He opens the door and step inside quickly. He's a foot taller than her, but he's got a hundred pounds extra weight and she knows he's used to using his weight to get what he wants. She's got speed and experience. Rorschach's taken on bigger thugs in tighter quarters. He grins at her, "You should have stayed where you were."

"Fat chance." She hits a nerve and he comes at her, planning on trapping her in the corner. Rorschach ducks to the side, careful kick smashing one ankle. The guard staggers as the ankle gives out and she doesn't waste time, bringing the shirt over his head and around his neck. She yanks tight and shoves him forward, palms and head smashing into the cement wall. He collapses and takes her sink with him, the cheap porcelain smashing on the floor. Rorschach gets one foot in the center of his back, pressing hard while she yanks the shirt back. He makes gasping squealing noises as she keeps pressing harder, harder, cutting off his breath. He struggles to get up and she yanks back, harder. His neck snaps.

Water leaks out of the broken sink, spraying everywhere. She abandons the shirt, unwilling to fight to get it out from under him. His keys are still in the door and she snatches them. She runs down the hall, past cells. In each one, women start yelling the moment they see her passing, calling for the guards who are busy elsewhere.

Rorschach heads to the roof exit and finds the door locked. The third key gets it open and she runs up the stairs. Half-way up, she finds a guard hiding, waiting to ambush whoever's on the roof. She can hear the howl of Archie's screechers. Been years since she heard them, but she

never forgets that sound. She jumps, landing feet-first on the guard's head. He's unconscious, but not dead. Rorschach takes his gun and digs through his pockets for something to block her ears. There's a balled up tissue, not perfect but it'll have to do. She rips it in half and stuffs each ear up. Then she heads up to the roof.

The door's smashed in before she can pull it open. Rorschach points the gun ahead of her, but doesn't fire. Silk Spectre is standing there, stopping in her tracks as she sees Rorschach. They take two seconds to evaluate the situation, and then the bang of the door at the bottom of the stairs gets them both moving.

"DAN!" Silk Spectre yells and heads back onto the roof. Rorschach follows. There are guards lying on the concrete out here. Most of them seem to be alive, just unconscious. The screechers are painful but Rorschach can deal. Daniel's on the other side of the pavement, dealing with a guard who seems unaffected by the sound. He knocks the guard out and looks towards them. He pulls something out of his jacket, Archie's remote, and shuts the sound off. Rorschach knocks the tissue out of her ears, running after Miss Juspezyk as they head towards the owl ship. Dan's in first, Juspezyk right after him and finally Rorschach, climbing on as it begins to drift away. There's gunfire from the base of the building, and guards piling on the roof, just in time to watch Archie's engines kick on and fly away.

She stays with her head out of Archie's roof, watching the prison fade away as they escape into the night.

xiii.

Wanda Kovacs walks an ideological tightrope that slowly gets increasingly higher and higher with each step she takes.

Wanda believes women have a duty to be good mothers and good wives. Women should be thoughtful, intelligent, and their utmost loyalty should be to their families. What the world lacks are good woman, strong women, women who don't do drugs and women who don't sleep around and woman who believe in marriage.

Wanda never kisses a boy. She is an ugly girl, a blessing in disguise one of her teachers said. Wanda doesn't wear make-up and Wanda doesn't do more to her hair than wash it with a bar of soap. There are a few boys who approach her over the years, a few who do so out of some sort of pity and compassion, a few who do so because they believe she's an easy target. Both kind are just as likely to call her a dyke and a frigid bitch when she rejects them as bluntly as possible.

The New Frontiersman laments about the state of the world, printing blurry charts listing divorce statistics and letters to the editor calling for men to sew A's to their cheating wife's clothing. They talk about women entering the workforce, women demanding jobs that aren't theirs, women prying into men's business. Wanda reads these and agrees with them, and she does not see that they are talking about her.

She does not long to be a boy, but often she thinks of how much easier life would be if she was. The women at the garment shop try to set her up with young men, they talk to her about how she needs to hook herself a man who can pay her bills and give her children. They talk about their own babies and grandbabies, swapping stories about what they've gotten into. Wanda does not hate children. But she cannot think of anything more disgusting, more repulsive or more degrading than the act of sex and pregnancy.

The bra burners, the hippies, and all those middle-class women with nothing better to do than stir up trouble and squeal maddeningly about society. Wanda hates each and every one of them, hates what they choose to be. The hippies are a parasite on society, fat bloated ticks who want to suck and suck on the American way of life until they reduce it to bones. They don't believe in a honest day's pay for an honest day's work. And the housewives, those pampered little bitches who married and now resent their men and resent their children and turn their backs on them to demand applause and attention for a job that is their duty, not their privilege.

She protects women. The prostitutes are left alone while she dangles their pimps from the top of buildings, making them squirm and promise to get the hell off of her streets. She breaks rapists' arms and legs and leaves them to wallow in the garbage, saving woman after woman from their advances. Even those in short skirts and low tops are saved, nevermind if Wanda believes they were asking for it or not. Gang members, drug dealers, murderers and paedophiles, all mostly men, all within her reach. She fights men and frees women and does not consider herself to be part of either side.

She is sometimes glad she is a girl. The physical urges are often uncomfortable and degrading, but they would be so much worse if she were male. Bleeding can be hidden. Other things cannot. Her identity is all the safer. She has passed by Daniel on the street without her mask and he hasn't looked her way, not even once. No one suspects her.

She sometimes wishes she was a boy. She tries not to think about her paradoxical beliefs, but she can't help it. Her mother is always there, most hated monster and loving protector. She could have had the abortion. She could have abandoned Wanda in a dumpster with the rest of the trash. But she didn't. She loved her in her own, flawed way. And every time she passes by a prostitute, there are two thoughts fighting in her head: 'slut' and 'mother?'.

Wanda is going to do this until her body gives out, or until she dies. She will not marry. She will not have children. She will not be a good woman. But she will be a good man. Like her father. Like Truman.

The heights grow dizzying. And when Wanda disappears, leaving only Rorschach behind to fill an empty body, it's a relief.

xiv.

'73 is her best year. The best year for Rorschach and the best year for Wanda Kovacs. The kidnapping is three years away and Blaire Roche is alive and well. John David Keene is newly elected to the Senate, but he hasn't begun to think of costumed adventurers as a threat

that need to be stopped. The minimum wage goes up, the weather is warm, and Dr. Manhattan has the Reds scared out of their left-winged minds. She's got \$500 stashed around New York in coffee cans, behind loose bricks, though the majority of it is inside her mattress.

Anthony Salerno gets 20 years, and Phil Lombardo gets 30, and suddenly the mob's on the run. They send hitmen out looking for Rorschach, but they're all looking for a man that has no face. She takes them out one by one, leaving them tied to fire hydrants as a message. There's a void to be filled, and undoubtedly there will be more scum washing in soon to take the places of those left, but for now, there's a momentary peace. Some nights, she doesn't even see a criminal to arrest. They're few and far between, but she still takes note.

Even Daniel voices it once, smiling at her as he says, "We've got them on the run." She hurms back, but he knows that she's pleased. They've got their routine down to an artform, quick back-and-forth in the personals every week as they pick out meeting places and report urgent findings. They know each other's intentions and have their signals down-pat, quick gestures that indicate who should take the lead, what they're going to go after first. They take down a dozen skinheads in the meatpacking district and barely break a sweat.

Wanda's good mood doesn't go unnoticed by Mrs. Shairp who smiles when the rent comes in on time and invites her over for coffee. But Wanda's seen the strange men that come around her landlady's apartment at night and she looks so much like Wanda's own mother that she turns it down without a second thought. The supervisor at the shop comments about how much nicer Wanda looks with longer hair. Wanda stares in the mirror, looking at the hair that's grown below her chin when she wasn't looking. She leaves it there all summer, only cutting it when it finally starts getting to be a pain to stuff into her mask.

As with all good things, she never realizes it until it's passed and gone. The winter comes and '74 starts and things slowly get worse. She chops her hair short, her landlady's prostitution becomes more obvious, the new supervisor at the garment workshop hates Wanda for reasons unspecified, the first beginnings of the Topknots start showing up and she and Daniel work separately for most of the year as he focuses on smuggling down at the docks and she tries to keep KT-28 out of her neighborhood. She misses him most of all, misses showing up in his lair unannounced and fighting with him by her side. She thinks that she'll make an effort to work with him again next year.

But she never does.

xv.

Wanda Kovacs embeds a meat cleaver in a dog's head and closes her eyes as the blood sprays on her. Rorschach opens her eyes and pulls the cleaver out with blood and brains still on the blade. The other dog whines, ears falling flat against its skull. Rorschach brings the blade down on that dog's head, same as the first. It's easy. Rorschach waits until dark. Rorschach chains the man to the heater. Rorschach sets the building on fire and watches it burn to ash and charcoal. Rorschach returns home and sleeps with the mask on for the first time.

Rorschach stops going to her job. It's unnecessary anymore. The world is gone to hell. The legions of the damned walk the streets, prostituting themselves for a dollar and turning their faces away from the helpless and the poor. What use is a job? What use is money? There's cash in the mattress to cover rent for a while. Wanda isn't around anymore to go to work. So she doesn't go and leaves her last paycheck to collect dust at the garment workshop.

She goes out every night. She stops washing and stops bathing. This whole city stinks like death and shit and Rorschach no longer cares. It gives birth to rapists, murderers, drug-pushers, monsters in the form of humans. She kills them easily, snapped necks and strangled purple faces and pools of blood. Rorschach leaves the bodies where they drop, in alleyways and dumpsters, on fire escapes and bars and under the docks.

The dishes don't get washed. She stops heating her food on the portable stove and eats it cold. When her clothes start to get stiff, she soaks them in the sink, water going grey almost instantly. She stops taking the bandages off, even forgetting about the pain they cause her after a while. Her hair gets tangled and she cuts it off with a knife. She breaks the mirror in her bathroom one night and never bothers replacing it.

She forgets about the rest of the world, doesn't even buy a newspaper for two months. Every night, she goes out into the world and kills the scum and vermin. Every day, she sleeps and eats whatever's left in the house. She can't sleep sometimes, and she starts writing her thoughts out, spewing out an incoherent mess of hate and bile. Later, she will refine this, but now it's nothing but notes and half-digested conspiracy theories that surface and cling together in her mind.

Two months, and finally Daniel comes looking for her. He finds her out late one night, fighting on a rooftop with a rapist. She caught him in the alley and chased him up the stairwell, up to the roof. His knife is gone, thrown (poorly) at Rorschach and now he's been reduced to begging, promises that he will change his ways, that the next time will be different.

Nite Owl calls her name. Rorschach hears him but doesn't turn around. She's got the rapist cornered, no escape for him with nothing but a five-story plunge behind him. He swings his fist, she ducks and sweeps her foot, catching him and dumping him off balance. Daniel calls her again and she continues to ignore him, stepping onto the edge of the roof as the sound of a body hitting pavement echos up towards her. The rapist is in a pool of blood that's slowly growing larger, face contorted in his death throes. Very satisfying.

She finally turns to face him. Rorschach can't see his eyes behind the goggles, but she can read his face all the same. "Jesus." He says. "Rorschach? Are you okay?"

"Fine." She lies, and neither of them believe it.

xvi.

The first meeting of Crimebusters goes badly. Manhattan is fascinating to see in person, though he seems more fixated on the newest iteration of the Silk Spectre, a girl barely 16 who

seems to be wearing as little as possible. Wanda despises her from the get-go and has no use for a teenager who thinks running around in her underwear is going to get anything accomplished. The feeling appears to be mutual since the Silk Spectre has nothing to say to Rorschach. The Comedian is charismatic, Ozymandias makes her suspicious, Captain Metropolis is underwhelming and a disappointment, and only Nite Owl manages to convince Rorschach that this group is worth seeing through, even if it reeks of publicity stunt.

Still, she goes back for the second meeting, this one led by Nite Owl instead of Captain Metropolis. They discuss strategies (and by this he means that Nite Owl and Rorschach discuss ideas with Ozymandias while the Comedian continues to read a newspaper and Silk Spectre and Dr Manhattan continue to look at one another in a way that makes Rorschach's skin crawl) and then split into teams. Rorschach is teamed with the Comedian while Ozymandias goes with Nite Owl. Unsurprisingly, Manhattan and Silk Spectre seem fine with this.

Rorschach and the Comedian patrol the streets. She's content with staying quiet and listening to the Comedian's stories. He's a soldier, and while she's too old to pretend her father ever fought with him, she can't help but think that her father would be like him. The Comedian is blunt and crude, but he's funny and she likes him almost immediately.

They end up in the Flying Dragons territory. Rorschach knows she's being tested and she's more than happy to give her best performance. In the red light she strikes fast and hard, breaking bones and noses. Beside her, the Comedian takes them out with the butt of his gun. He's a real warrior, and it makes Rorschach fight harder, faster, just to keep pace. By the time they're done, the men are either unconscious or fleeing into the night.

The Comedian smacks her on the back, a friendly motion that is followed by him relighting his cigar, "Good show kid. You're feisty for a runt."

"Pretty spry for an old guy." She shoots back. He grins bigger and shoulders his gun as they head out of Chinatown.

They don't patrol together too often. The Comedian prefers to go off on his own and there are more than a few times when the government comes calling with some mission and the Comedian disappears for weeks on end. Nite Owl isn't always understanding or approving of these actions, but Rorschach thinks he's jealous. Comedian is a real American hero, a patriot who serves only his country.

Other patrols don't go so well. Ozymandias is both talented and intelligent, but he is Rorschach's polar opposite when it comes to political and social matters. She often suspects he is sympathetic with the communists, if not outright in favour of them, and that his lack of interest in women is likely the sign of a deviant sex life. They fight well together, but ideologically they're unable to have a conversation without sparking off a fight. Ozymandias is infuriatingly calm and Rorschach often has to remove herself before she wraps her hands around his neck and strangles him.

Silk Spectre and Rorschach patrol a grand total of ten times during the entire history of Crimebusters and only when they cannot be paired with anyone else. She's shrill and pushy, a woman devoid of any decency or shame. Everyone knows she's seeing Dr. Manhattan and

when Janey Slater leaves him, Rorschach adds 'homebreaker' to the list of sins she applies to the tightly-clad woman. Their mutual hate of each other is enough to convince Daniel to split them up unless he has no choice. They never come to blows, but only because Rorschach does not hit women unless provoked, and she has a feeling Silk Spectre would go straight for her mask.

Dr. Manhattan is competent, but unsettling. He experiences time in a manner that is unnatural, and often speaks of events before they happen. And he knows that Rorschach is a girl, underneath the suit and the coat and the bandages. He never calls her by female pronouns, but she knows he knows. Still, he's fascinating. At the Charlton Home, her favourite subject, besides literature, was the twice-a-week religious education class. Manhattan is the nearest thing to proof that God exists, or perhaps, that God does not exist and that the world is an accident. Wanda is not certain if she likes either possibility, but they both fascinate her in the way that the book of Revelations always did.

The Crimebusters do their part to help the city. Rorschach is never quite certain if a group of their size actually does accomplish anything besides serving as a springboard for Ozymandias' dreams of building an empire off of whoring out his image, or perhaps giving the Keene Act a reason to be so supported. But the crime rates are a little lower in New York while they're active, and the streets seem almost clean sometimes.

The act passes. And everyone hangs up their costumes, even Daniel. Rorschach never forgives him for that.

xvii.

Millions.

That's the word she can't get her mind around. Millions. New York. Millions dead. Millions.

The newsvendor. Her landlady and the children. The cops. The diners. The rich and the poor. All dead. Every human Rorschach has seen over the years is dead. Gone. Millions.

She's crying. Rorschach never cries, never. Wanda cried when she was young. Wanda cried a few times as an adult. But Rorschach has never cried. The tears come anyway, streaking down her face underneath the mask. The monitors announce death tolls and show footage and she has to turn away.

Adrian is talking about his utopia, like he hasn't just slaughtered millions with the push of a button. He's talking about a compromise. Their lives for the secret. Jon goes along and right behind him is Laurie, agreeing to sacrifice the truth to protect themselves.

They saved nothing. They saved no one. Millions dead and those left alive are insane. And Adrian wants them to be part of this.

"Okay. Okay, count me in. We say nothing." Daniel brings his hand to his mouth, wiping at it like he can scrape away the aftertaste of what he's just said.

"Joking, of course." Rorschach's voice is barely level. Dan turns to face her and she can't look at him. She turns her back on him and walks toward the door.

"Rorschach? Rorschach, wait! Where are you going? This is too big to be hard assed about! We have to compromise!"

"No." She says, pushing through the doors, "Not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise."

She finds her way outside. The cold smashes against her as she walks towards the scooters in the snow, hands stuffed in her pockets. She's still pins and needles from the last journey, but she doesn't care. She has to get away. She has to tell the world.

Rorschach's turning the battery powered machine on when she hears a voice behind her. "Where are you going?"

Jon. She doesn't face him. "Back to the owlship. Back to America. Evil must be punished. People must be told."

She ducks her head down into the collar of her jacket, shoulders hunched up. And Jon simply says, "Rorschach. You know I can't let you do that."

Rorschach turns to face him, the superman with his arm outstretched. She knows what he can do with that hand, what he's going to do with that hand. She's seen the blood, the bodies turned unrecognizable. And it doesn't matter. She can't live like this anymore. Not in this world.

"Huhhh. Of course. Must protect Veidt's new utopia. One more body amongst foundations makes little different." She gets her hands under the mask, peeling it off. There's no one around to see her weakness, and her voice cracks. "Well? What are you waiting for? Do it."

Jon just stares at her with those blank eyes. He knows the future, and knows it's unchangeable, but still he speaks once last time. "Rorschach."

The tears cold and freezing to her face. This isn't how she thought she'd die. Not on the other end of the world. Not in the cold and the dark. The failure is too great to bear, the blood of millions rising up to swallow her whole. Wanda Kovacs stands in front of the American superman, mask clenched in her fist. "DO IT!" She screams.

There's pain. And then there's darkness.

xviii.

Wanda is four and she hates her mother and she hates the apartment they live in, and more than anything, she hates the men who come to the door at all hours. Her mother does disgusting things to them for money and she doesn't want to hear the sounds anymore. Her mother never notices when Wanda leaves, so she just does.

This is how she meets Mr. Adam who lives one floor down and two doors over. She's sitting in the hall with her knees up to her chest, listening to the music coming out of the radio. They don't have a radio at home, so she comes downstairs to listen. And she's so intent on listening that she doesn't notice anything until the door opens. Wanda scrambles to her feet, planning on running away. But Mr. Adam says, "Stay where you are. Where the hell's your parents?"

Wanda only stays because she has no doubt that he can catch her, even if he is old. So she says, "Mom's upstairs with a man."

Mr. Adam takes a good hard look at Wanda, "You the Kovacs girl? Yeah. You've got your daddy's hair."

"You knew my dad?" She says, and she can't hide how excited she is, "He's gone to fight! He's a spy for Mr. Truman!"

He laughs like she's made a joke. "I knew Charlie. Not well, but I knew him."

Wanda is a shy and sullen child. She hides under her bed and doesn't play with other children, and she sometimes throws rocks at the alley cats, but the thought of learning about her father is enough to make her clutch at Mr. Adam's pants and look up at him, begging, "Will you tell me about him?"

He invites her in and tells her stories that Wanda later decides were probably just invention on the part of Mr. Adam. His apartment is nice and tidy, and he's got a radio that plays music. He even lets her have sugar cubes from the bowl on his table which is more than anybody's ever done. She crunches them happily while listening to Adam tell stories. He's a soldier, fought in World War One against the Krauts, and he used to be a carpenter and build things until his back started to give out, and then he got a desk job and did that until he retired. He's got kids who live out of the state and a dead wife that's buried across town in the Marble Cemetery up on 1st street.

While Wanda's mother turns tricks to put food on the table and clothes on Wanda's back, the little girl goes downstairs and kills time with Mr. Adam. He lets her listen to the radio plays with him, stuff like The Shadow and the Minutemen, and even Dead Man's Chest, which was all about pirates. He's got stacks of papers on his table and he teaches her to read since they've both got nothing better to do. "Better you get a proper education than get your head stuffed full of lies." He says, and Wanda learns how to read from The Patriot, stumbling over words like 'zionist', 'cephalic', and 'conspiracy'. She sits on Mr. Adam's lap and slowly learns the words while he smokes a pipe and encourages her, or corrects her pronunciation.

These are the good days, and like with everything good in Wanda's life, it comes to a short and unexpected ending. One day, she goes to see Mr. Adam and instead finds a woman and a man standing in the apartment, talking in hushed tones. She knows the woman from the photos in Adam's house, she's his daughter, and when Wanda excitedly asks if they've come to visit, the woman just looks at the man like she doesn't know what to say. The man puts a hand on her shoulder and calls her kiddo and tells her that Mr. Adam got sick last night and now he's in the hospital. He's going to an old folks home and they're moving his stuff. Wanda is nearly five but even she knows they're lying to her. Adam isn't going to a home. He's going to the cemetery with his wife.

There are no more sugar cubes for a long time. No more radio shows either. When she's 17, she goes down to Marble Garden's cemetery and tries to find his headstone. She never does and he becomes an uncertainty, someone who may have only existed in her mind. But even if she made him up, she knows he was a good man. Like her father. Like President Truman.

xix.

Miss Juspeczyk is gone to Mars with Jon, Daniel's identity has been exposed to the police and Rorschach is a wanted woman. But at least she has her costume back, even if the confrontation with her landlady was distasteful and ultimately dissatisfying.

They reach the docs as the sun is beginning to come up, light first lengthening the shadows and then banishing them altogether. Archie surfaces with the press of a button, and Rorschach climbs down the hatch and into the belly of Archie, costume clutched to her chest. Daniel follows, shutting the hatch tight and sinking the owlship back into the river. The daylight disappears as the water closes overtop of them, and it becomes night again.

They rest on the bottom of the river. And Daniel turns his seat around to look at Rorschach. With his goggles on, his eyes are impossible to read, but she knows him well enough to expect what comes next. "Wanda Kovacs?"

"Rorschach." She corrects him.

"Rorschach. I never realized-" He says and stops suddenly as if sensing that what he's about to say may be a bad idea. They are standing at the edge of a conversation that Rorschach does not want to have.

"Weren't supposed to." There's no place to change in the owlship. She's cold and she holds the costume against her chest, hiding her breasts from Daniel.

The only sound is that of the river around them and the nearly silent engine. Daniel reaches up, pulling off his goggles and hood. Age has not been kind to either of them, but even with the weight and lines on his face, he looks almost exactly like she remembers. She supposes this is meant to be a gesture but it does nothing to put her at ease.

"I'm not going to judge you, okay? It's... surprising. I really didn't see... it coming." He steps around the words, making his way through a minefield where a single misstep could leave him bleeding on the floor. "But it's. It doesn't change anything."

It's a lie. Of course it's a lie. This changes everything. Now the world knows Rorschach's name and face. She can already hear the snide remarks in her head. Some people called Rorschach a faggot and a fascist. Some people called Wanda Kovacs a dyke and a frigid bitch. But none of them called her both. Now they do. And Daniel will change too. Good men protect women from the dangers of the world. And if he tries to protect her, Rorschach will have to snap his fingers one by one until he realizes she is not a woman.

Daniel takes her silence as an excuse to keep talking, "We're still partners. Being transgender doesn't-

"No!" She snaps at him. Daniel recoils back. Rorschach gets control over her voice again, clarifies, "Homosexual deviants. Not one of them."

"Sorry." And Daniel finally drops it. "Look, I'm tired. We should both sleep."

"Work to be done." She reminds him, but Daniel shakes her words off, getting up and heading past her.

"We can't go back up until it's dark, and I need the rest. The problem's still going to be here in a few hours." He slides open a panel and pulls out a pair of army cots, quickly snapping them open and setting them up. "I can set the computer to search for- what was it again?"

"Dimensional Developments."

"Okay, I'll tell the computer to find anything it can on Dimensional Developments. That's going to take a few hours anyway." Daniel returns to the computer, bringing up a search screen and entering the name.

"Wasting time." She says, but she's too tired to really press the point. Rorschach hasn't slept in prison and her body is too stressed, too tired to keep standing. She needs sleep, like it or not.

Daniel shrugs his cloak off, leaving it lying on the chair at the front. He dims the lights and lies down on the cot. Rorschach sits on hers. Daniel's eyes are closed. He looks better than the last time she saw him sleeping. He must have missed this. Archie. The costume. Now that it's back, she can see Daniel coming back as well.

After a few minutes, Daniel sighs, eyes still closed, "Go to sleep."

Rorschach lies on the ground. The sub floor is less cold than she expected. She puts her costume under her head, cheek pressed against the latex mask. Dan's breathing goes slow and finally Rorschach sleeps, face and mask together.

xx.

Wanda Kovacs goes to work like she always does in an old woollen coat and with a scarf wrapped around her neck. It's March and the snow is gone, and Wanda feels irritated and tired. There were a couple of idiots screaming at each other in the alleyway last night. She can't even remember what the fight was about, only that she couldn't sleep after they'd stopped.

There's a new man working at the newsstand, tall and balding and loud. Wanda has her money in hand to buy the New Frontiersman, as she always does at this time in the morning, when she spots the front page of the Gazette.

She knows that name. Kitty Genovese. Pretty girl, prissy girl, ordered a dress that she didn't want in the end. Wanda's got the fabric in a chest in her room, fascinating fabric that swirls and changes but never mixes. She takes a Gazette instead, even though she can't stand their politics, and scans the front cover.

"Can you believe that?" The vendor says, turning away from one customer to talk to her, "What's the world coming to these days? Buncha people just stand back and watch that happen? If my Rosa, god bless her soul, if my Rosa was still here, she'd say-"

The vendor's voice becomes a slow drone as Wanda's eyes fly across the paper. Kitty Genovese. Stabbed, sexually assaulted and finally left to die while thirty-eight people watched. Thirty-eight human beings who stood by and did nothing as a woman cried out for help. Thirty-eight people who watched a man leave and then return to finish the job he'd left uncompleted.

"-downright shame. No decency among people." The vendor says as Wanda looks up. She sets the paper down on the newsstand and walks away, "Hey! This ain't a library!"

She barely makes it through her shift. Wanda can't stop thinking about Kitty Genovese. Some of the girls talk about her at lunch. Wanda barely manages to eat her tuna sandwich and she has to leave her machine about an hour afterward to throw up. It's not the body that gets her heaving, but the thought of all those blank faces watching.

There are times she's worked late, putting in extra overtime to cover rent, and gone home in the dark. And more than once, someone's followed her. Sometimes for a block or two as they go the same way as her. But there have been times when men have followed her for blocks and blocks. Once a man yelled for her to slow down. Most of the time, they don't say anything. She's faster than they are, even if her legs are shorter, and she always wears flats so she can run. She hasn't thought about what would happen if someone caught her, but in the back of her mind, she's always been sure someone would help her. If she screamed, someone would come. But the newspaper's made it clear to her. No one would come. Their blank faces would crowd their glass windows and watch as she screamed for help, the way they watched Kitty scream for help.

At the end of her shift, she heads home and locks the door securely behind her. Wanda goes to her closet and finds the trunk with the cloth and her scissors. She isn't even sure what she's planning on until she wraps the material around her face. Wanda can still see through it, though the world's colour leeches out and everything becomes a little more stark. She measures and marks out a pattern, scissors sitting on her portable stove, hot and ready for when she needs to make her careful cuts. She gets three masks out of the material, and all of them still swirl and change even in their smaller forms.

There's a suit in the back of her closet, purple pinstripes that were unwanted at the garment workshop and came home with Wanda one night. It's a little big on her, but that's fine, she can hem the pants and pull the jacket in a little. She pulls on the mask and looks in the cracked mirror in her bathroom.

A stranger looks back, face slowly swirling and changing. It's not quite right, but there's something to this that feels right. Wanda's never really thought about fighting crime. She's

seen the headlines about them, Dr. Manhattan and the Comedian and the Nite Owl. But she's never given this a thought. Until now. Until Kitty Genovese and her unwanted dress and her cries for help. She took gymnastics at the Charlton Home, and while they wouldn't let her into the boxing class with the boys, she'd watched them and practiced the moves later at night. She could do this. Be a hero for a city filled with those who would idly stand by. A city full of blank faces and no decency.

The mirror finally shows her a face she can bear to look at.

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