

## *The Aberrations* short story by Tracie Momie

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I'm floating in that weird space between being asleep and being awake. Foggy consciousness. It's dark and noises are all around me. The sound of machines whirring. Muffled voices. I take a deep breath and attempt to open my eyes but only darkness remains. Instead, I try moving my arms and legs, or any part of my body, but nothing is happening. At least I think nothing is happening until I hear,

“Keep her still.”

Then there's silence. My mind begins to stir and I slowly start piecing things together. There was an accident. *I was in an accident.* A car ran a red light. I lost control. I remember the sounds of metal crunching and glass shattering. Perhaps I was in a hospital. Maybe in surgery? I didn't know the extent of my injuries, hopefully they weren't severe. Although, living with a few injuries was better than the alternative. Or even the alternative's alternative.

I briefly wonder if Travis has been notified. Travis is my husband. He's an accountant. And I'm an English professor. We've been married eight years. No kids. Just the two of us. For eight *long* years. Don't get me wrong, I loved Travis—*love*, I love Travis. Sort of. Even though he's become predictable and somewhat self-absorbed. He wasn't always that way. Actually, that's a lie. He's the exact same as the day I met him. I'm the one who's changed. I no longer find his quirks endearing, his corny jokes funny or his lack of adventure reassuring. I feel like I'm suffocating in our marriage and the thought of spending another eight years married to him makes me want to put myself out of my misery. The car accident was a wake-up call. If I make it out of

this, I'm not going to take another day for granted. I'll divorce Travis and live out my remaining years a single, happy woman.

At some point, my mind decides to shut down, and thoughts of my marriage fade away as I'm swallowed once again by darkness and silence. I'm not sure how long I'm unconscious before the sound of Travis's voice wakes me.

"How long will she be asleep? Shouldn't you wake her?" he questioned. He sounds on the verge of hysteria.

I can't wait to be in my own place where I can sleep as long as I want, whenever I want. I blink a few times and this time when I open my eyes, the room is brighter, but everything is blurry. I realize I'm not wearing my glasses. The colors in the room are muted, almost grayscale but aren't most hospitals drab? I feel a prickly, tingling sensation throughout my body. But no pain.

"Opal? Opal, can you hear me?" It's Travis. He's leaning over my face blocking out the light.

I sigh or try to sigh but it gets caught in my throat. My mouth feels. . .*weird*. Like my tongue is too big or maybe too small for my mouth. I raise my hand to see if I can feel my skin. Maybe they used anesthesia, and it's starting to wear off. I run my fingers over the side of my face but even my fingers seem foreign. I rub the pad of my thumb over my nails, and they feel like claws. I bring my hands closer to my face and Travis moves away as I do this. My vision is still blurred however, I can make out the distinct dark curls of my fingers or what *should* be fingers.

I open my mouth to ask Travis for my glasses, but the only sound that comes out of my mouth loud and clear is,

“Who.”

At first, I’m confused. I try again,

“Whooo.” Now, I’m alarmed.

“Whooo!” No. No! This can’t be.

I bring my decrepit fingers to my face again and drag them from my nose to my chin. The skin feels normal or as normal as I can determine with these talons. But when I get to my eyes and then the top of my head is when I realize I’m not dreaming. There is thick muscly skin covered in something soft and furry.

“Opal, dear. It’s going to be okay. You’re alive. That’s all that matters,”

I hear Travis’s voice again. He’s using that condescending tone he uses when I complain about his shoes being left in the middle of the floor. That ‘you’re making a big deal out of nothing’ tone. Which lets me know this is a *very* big deal. I whip my head around and it turns on my neck, unnaturally, without the rest of my body. I spot a mirror on the wall. Pulling the blanket back, I throw my legs over the side of the bed.

“Doctor!” Travis yells, but I’m determined to make it to the mirror.

My legs give out as soon as my feet touch the cold vinyl flooring. I lay slumped on the floor before two strong arms gently lift me to my feet. I doubt it’s Travis. He has no upper body strength.

“Mrs. Lufkin, you shouldn’t be out of bed.” A soothing male voice chastises.

“Who!” I screech and angle my head towards the mirror.

The person holding me mumbles a few words before releasing a resigned sigh and leads me to the mirror.

“Turn off the lights,” he instructs.

I want to complain that I won’t be able to see, but as soon as the lights go out, I can see perfectly. Better than when I wear my glasses. And it doesn’t even look dark. I come closer to the mirror and when my reflection is visible, I am frozen. I am mortified. I am furious. *I am a goddamn owl!*

Fifty years ago, a group of scientists with sick, twisted God complexes came up with a way to revive humans after death. I never believed in reincarnation where you die and come back as a butterfly or another person. However, the idea seemed plausible if it is to be believed we are all beings with a soul. But what these “doctors” devised was essentially soul snatching. Before a person crossed over to the great beyond *or beneath*, they discovered they had a short window in which to start a procedure that suspends and then stops the passing. The procedure involves turning the person into something ‘other’, but they keep the same soul, so technically they’re the same person with the same consciousness.

But you might also be part man, part vacuum cleaner or part child, part seal or part woman and part owl. The only way the process works is to fuse parts of your body to a dying animal or something electrical.

I wish I was kidding.

The caveat to the entire unnatural thing is you must sign a waiver saying you agree to what they call a *revivify procedure*, similar to organ donor designations. When you die they check your

identification against the database and determine if they can dismantle your body and turn you into an aberration or let you die in peace like nature intended.

I did *not* sign a waiver! I'd had this conversation ad nauseam with Travis and told him I was one thousand percent against it. He thought it would be a great way for us to be together forever, because it turns out it's a lot harder for an 'altered being' to die. The thought of being with Travis *forever* made me want to shove a rusted nail through my eyeball.

In the year 2148, we live in a society made up of humans, animals and altered beings. We've been living somewhat harmoniously for the past thirty years. I say *somewhat* because the majority of the altered beings have formed their own sub-society. Most people, like Travis, who thought it would be a romantic notion to be reunited with their spouse or child quickly realized their beloved was *not* the same. Sure, maybe they had the same sense of humor or still liked going for walks at night or reading books. But they also took on the characteristics of the things they were fused to.

So instead of snoring at night, now your wife ticks and beeps because she's part clock. Instead of complaining that your son Timmy leaves dirty socks everywhere, imagine having to clean up his droppings because he's part rat. Or what about the husband whose hand you can't even hold, because instead of fingers he has octopus tentacles.

Not to mention, before these procedures began, all we had was skin color, religion, class and sexuality to divide us. But altered beings brought out a whole new cluster of hate spewing groups who felt the 'others' should be eradicated. And those who were formerly racists or homophobic, now embraced people of color, members of the LGBTQIA community, and all religious sects. Why? Because at least the *blacks, gays, and Muslims* were human. Not like the

freaks of nature with donkey ears. How tragically ironic. It literally took the creation of another species for some people to realize other humans were *human*.

After I calm down and no longer try to maim Travis, who obviously signed me up for the procedure behind my back, the doctor explains what has happened. I was in a car accident. Huge laceration to my head affected my cerebral cortex leaving me brain dead before shutting down my organs one by one. All the bones in my hands were crushed because I'd held them up in a defensive posture when the car crashed. Fortunately, says the doctor, the rest of my body was fine which meant they only needed to do a partial fuse. He goes on to explain, *needlessly*, that I have inherited some of the Strigiformes—a fancy name for owls—characteristics and behaviors. My vision will be blurred in bright light. Colors will be muted, however in the dark I will have perfect vision. I have full range of motion in my neck, and I now have talons, but they've been dulled so I don't hurt myself. Oh, and I might crave bugs from time to time. *Great!*

I want to know about my voice. *Have I lost the ability to talk forever?* I bring my hand to my throat.

“Whoo?” I question.

The doctor gives me a piteous glance. “I've seen where some patients wake up after fusing and they've taken on the sounds of the bonded component instead of speaking words. A few regain their ability to speak within hours, some days or weeks. But there have been patients who don't ever regain the ability to speak.”

*This just keeps getting better.* I swivel my head and glare at Travis. He stares down at the floor.

The doctor continues, “But the good news is—you can obviously understand me. So intellectually, your brain is still able to process, which is great! We can provide you with a text to speech reader until your speech returns. That way you can communicate with your husband.”

Was he serious? I never wanted to speak to Travis again! Lucky for him these talons were no longer deadly.

I’m released from the hospital after a week and sent to a rehabilitation center for three additional weeks. My speech never returns. The best I can do is change the inflections in my voice. The day I’m set to be released from the rehab center, a woman who is half woman, half monkey approaches me.

It’s quite jarring to look at her. The round part of her face is clearly primate—leathery with a round snout connected to her long protruding mouth. Her eyes are forward facing, deep set and all dark brown pupils. No sclera. But the rest of her head looks normal. A stylish haircut with blonde highlights frames her primate face. One of her arms hangs lower than the other and when I look down to where her hand should be, there’s a shock of red fur around what looks more like a paw than a hand.

“Hi, my name is Yasmine,” she smiles before a sound that’s a cross between a grunt and a squeak erupts from her mouth.

I startle slightly and point at my name tag.

“Opal. Like the stone? I like that. Your speech hasn’t returned?” Another soft squeak follows her question.

I shake my head and try to keep it from swiveling around.

“It took me a few months to stop screeching all the time,” she chuckles.

That gives me little hope.

“I wanted to invite you to join a group session for newly altered beings. After you leave here it will probably be a little scary and challenging to re-enter society. Sometimes it helps to be around others who know exactly how you feel. And who can answer questions to guide you in this new life, and new body.” She motions to my owl head. I don’t reply and she doesn’t pressure. Just tells me when and where they meet.

A week later, I decide to join the meeting after being at home with Travis constantly hovering and apologizing.

“Opal, I know this isn’t the most ideal situation, but we’re still together. That’s the important thing.” He insists.

I move around him getting dressed. I can still fit all of my clothes, but manipulating the buttons and zippers with talons is tricky, yet I’ve learned to master it. Sort of. After I do the last button on my shirt, Travis blocks my path.

“Are you going somewhere?” His voice is panicked.

I stare at him in a way that I’ve learned frightens him just a little, and he steps back.

“Why won’t you talk to me?” he asks frustrated.

My head turns on my neck and I growl lowly. “Whooo.”

He gulps and reaches for the text to speech tablet. “You can use this, but you won’t even try.”

I attempt to snatch the device but the talons can’t grip it, so it falls to the floor. Travis quickly retrieves it and holds it for me as I type.

The robotic voice of the device reads what I’ve typed, “I’m a ducking owl!”

I apparently hit the ‘D’ key instead of ‘F’. Travis’s brows pucker in confusion before he realizes what I meant. He’s about to say something, but I start pecking away again. After almost a minute the device voices my words.

“I told you over and over I didn’t want this, if something should happen to me. But as usual, you do what you want and what you think is best. I will never, ever forgive you for this. You should have let me die!”

Her good-natured, monotone voice doesn’t pack the punch I intended, but it still manages to get the job done because Travis looks totally distraught.

“I just—I love you so much and the thought of living without you was unbearable.” He says as his voice catches.

I return to the keyboard in his limp grasp and type out a final sentence.

“And living with you—like this—is unbearable for me.”

I turn and leave the house to meet the group at the location Yasmine gave me.

“Opal! You made it,” she greets me with an enthusiastic screech.

I nod and glance around the room. There are about ten of us in attendance.

We sit in a circle in the middle of the room and Yasmine explains that tonight's meeting is just a gripe session. We get to complain and yell (or bellow and hoot) about our circumstance instead of pretending to feel thankful we're alive.

"I saw Jack today. With his new wife," Yasmine starts. Turns out Yasmine had been married and she and her husband signed up for the revivify procedures. Jack thought he'd end up with a beautiful mermaid after Yasmine's skiing accident. He couldn't deal with the screeching monkey woman who wrapped herself around him just wanting to be held. He left her at the hospital and invoked his rescission rights.

Rescission rights allows the person who would be responsible for the altered being three days to decide if they feel they can handle the responsibility or if they want to waive their rights and sever the relationship. So essentially, if your newly fused loved one is too much of an oddity for you to handle, you can walk away and they are released into the state's work program where they will be integrated back into society on their own. *Ain't life grand?*

I tune out the rest of Yasmine's chatter and screeching as I focus on the other altered beings in the room. There is a man with a partial basset hound face, a woman whose entire right side is made of wires and metal, another man covered in scales, and a teenage boy with a turkey beak and waddle. I still can't believe Travis subjected me to this life.

My focus returns to Yasmine, but she is no longer talking. She's pointing to the teenage turkey boy. I look at him and he shyly lowers his head to the tablet in his lap. From this vantage point—with his head lowered—you can't tell he has any type of fusing. He looks completely normal. He spends about two minutes typing at an alarming speed on the device. Everyone is quiet, save

for the occasional grunt, hiss or squeak, until he's done. Once he's finished, he holds up the device, but doesn't make eye contact with anyone. The automated voice on the tablet comes across loud and clear.

“Hi. My name is Ian. I used to be an all-star athlete and high achieving student. My parents, teachers, and friends all worshipped me. I hated every moment of my life. I felt I had to be perfect to keep their love and acceptance. That if I showed any flaws or weakness, they would abandon me. I started hanging out with this kid in one of the underprivileged zones of the state. I acted like we were friends, but took my frustrations out on him whenever I needed to blow off steam. I'd scream and yell at him and call him horrible names. Things I really felt about myself. One day after I'd let my team down failing to score a goal, I went over to this kid's neighborhood and led him out to a deserted area and punched him in the face. I wanted to fight, but he wouldn't fight. That made me angrier. I kicked him while he lay on the ground screaming. I felt awful about what I'd done and a few days later I went over to apologize, but he wasn't around. I started walking back home and heard someone call my name. I recognized the kid's voice, so I turned around. He hit me in the face with a bat with nails hammered into it. Severed my nose, lower jaw and vocal chords.”

My eyes widen and I gasp. Everyone in the room appears stunned. Ian starts typing again and we all wait breathlessly for the rest of his story. A minute later he holds up the device again.

“When I woke up after the procedure and saw myself, I couldn't stop laughing. But it was more a series of yelps and clucks. My parents were devastated and even though they took me home and claimed they still loved me, I could see the disappointment in their eyes. I was cut from the team and lost friends. It was even suggested that I be moved to classes with other altered kids,

so that I wouldn't become a distraction. And after all that has happened to me, I'm just so grateful. Not because I'm alive, but because I can actually live without expectations or fear of messing up. This beak and waddle are pretty much confirmation that I'm already messed up. But now I can try different things and fail or say no or gobble and flail without anyone batting an eye because the bar is already so low. Regardless of how mediocre or fantastic I am, it won't really matter to anyone but me. I've already lost everything, so I'm no longer afraid. And I've never felt so free or alive."

What appears to be a smile erupts on his face and he lets out a loud succession of gobbles before he opens his beak and squawks, "I'm free."

No one responds to Ian at first, I think since most of us are adults we have slightly different feelings about our predicament. It wasn't a state of freedom for me, but more dependence on a man who had betrayed me. *How could I be free without my voice?* I was a professor who could no longer lecture. I couldn't even advocate on my own behalf without the help of a stupid electronic device. I was suddenly extremely annoyed by Ian's youth and naiveté.

"*Whooo. . .*you hadn't even started to live! This isn't freedom! *Whoooo...this is* damnation. Living as an unnatural, man-made aberration! *Whoooo...dependent on people who* pity you. How can you think you're free?"

I noticed all eyes were on me. Yasmine started screeching loudly.

"Opal! Your voice! Your voice is back!"

*That was me?*

“*Whooo...it is? Oh my God, it is!*” I declared bringing my hand to my neck. It felt like something had been dislodged in my throat. I began crying but the feathers around my eyes absorbed the tears before they could fall. I felt lighter and unrestricted like I could float or fly around the room.

I gave Ian an apologetic glance.

He simply smiled and squawked, “*Now, you’re free.*”