

AUNT CHLOE

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PEARLS

by Nalani Dowling

It would all be over tomorrow. Natasha's roommate, Brooklyn Brown, would come flitting in from South Beach, freshly bronzed and gushing about all the drinks she had had, bikinis she had worn, and guys she had met (and more than likely had gotten to know too well). Then her friends would bust through the door, and within five minutes Natasha's tranquil dorm room would become the unsuspecting host of an impromptu twerk-off. The dread was growing every minute.

Most of the students had gone home or to the beach for Spring Break, but not Natasha. While a vast array of brown breasts, thighs and bare chests had flown across her Instagram feed, she had stayed on campus and enjoyed the rare opportunity for what her mother called "self care"; some much needed alone time. Brooklyn was suffocating to live with. The girl was nice enough, but didn't appreciate what she had and *that's* what made Natasha angry. If Natasha had Brooklyn's resources, she wouldn't waste them on drunken trips to Miami. If she had her looks, she wouldn't spend her time with the dull men that Brooklyn kept wafting in her hemisphere. No. Brooklyn would leverage money and popularity to become student body president, and beauty to catch the eyes of her professors. It would be easy enough. Students and teachers alike hung on every pseudo-woke sentence that dripped from Brooklyn's Fenty-glossed lips. It was sickening to see true intellectuals bow so easily to a mere pretty face.

Freshly washed and changed into a clean pair of pajamas, Natasha squeaked down the hallway from the communal bathrooms, flip-flops on her feet and shower caddy in hand. As she strode into her room she chided herself for almost forgetting to return Brooklyn's body wash, conditioner and makeup bag. That would've been a messy thing to have to explain. The truth was that Natasha had been enjoying the use of Brooklyn's extensive inventory all week long: jaunting to the library in her expensive lace wigs, visiting coffee shops in her clothes and even testing out her lacy lingerie. She'd enjoyed getting all made up and gazing at herself in the slim mirror bolted to the back of their door. In those moments, she could imagine that she was beautiful, loved. and lusted after. It had been exhilarating, but now it was done.

Natasha was sleepy. She shoved the last of Brooklyn's items into their original spots, flipped off the lights, and collapsed into bed. She did her best to ignore how scratchy her comforter was compared to Brooklyn's.

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Heat. That was it. Heat. Searing and relentless, bearing down on her face and neck. Dear God, what could it be? Natasha sprung awake, drenched in her own sweat. Her hands reached out, fumbling for the switch on her bedside lamp when something...someone grabbed her wrist. She stopped breathing and sat, trembling in the dark silence before managing to choke out a pitiful:

“H-Hello?”

She flipped the light on and saw, standing before her, some kind of monster, bathed in the amber glow of her Ikea lantern and breathing burning air over her face. A curious hybrid between man and creature. He seemed to be not much older than Natasha, but his face had an ancient quality. A red-tinged glow emanated from his thin body and wild, matted hair, and his eyes were blank bowls of white. When Natasha screamed, sobbing and grabbing her arm back, he jeered.

“Women. So easy to frighten.” The creature smirked and leaned in closer to Natasha, forcing her to back away from him into the tight corner of her bed. His gaunt face became serious. “I don't have much time, so I'll be brief. My name is Desiderare. If you help me, I will help you.” Natasha swallowed and built up a morsel of false courage.

“Help you?! Don't be ridiculous. This is a terrible nightmare, and I'll forget all about you when I wake up in the morning.” With that, she flipped around in the bed, pulling the covers over her head and pretending not to notice the steaming presence lurking beside her. “Besides,” she sputtered from under the comforter, “I don't want anything, and I do just fine on my own.” Desiderare yanked the blankets and sheets off with unprecedented force, and Natasha felt exposed on a now bare mattress.

“Whose pajamas?”

“Excuse me?”

“I said whose pajamas are you wearing?” Natasha looked down at the silky peach pajama set she had donned and scrunched her lips with indignation. They too, belonged to Brooklyn, but the girl hardly wore them and would never notice they were missing. They'd get better use in Natasha's wardrobe.

“They're mine.”

“Ah-ah-ah. Liar.” He cocked his head and blinked his empty eyes. “I’ve lived here an entire year, trapped in these cinder block walls. I’ve watched your every coming and going, you and that enchanting woman.”

“You mean...Brooklyn?” Of course, Natasha balked internally. It figures that even a supernatural being would be inexplicably captivated by her roommate.

“She walks with an unmatched grace and beauty. I’ve watched you take her things for yourself all week. You mimic her, dress like her...you *want* her as badly as I do.”

“NO! Absolutely not! I was just having some fun.”

Desiderare spit out a slow, mocking chuckle. “What if you could have even more fun?” Natasha was curious. What exactly could this, this *thing* be about to propose?

“I will grant you one copy of anything Brooklyn owns, materially or physically.”

“Anything?”

“Yes. Any specific and singular item. All I want in return is something small.” Natasha’s curiosity morphed into a formidable hunger. She was already compiling a mental list of all the goodies she wanted for her own, the figure she would have. Her greed emboldened her and she slid to the edge of her bed, meeting Desiderare face to face.

“Well spit it out, beast. What is it you want from me?!”

Surprised by Natasha’s newfound courage, the creature continued.

“Your teeth.” He broke into a wide smile and his own teeth glistened in the artificial light. He had far too many of them. What could he want hers for?

“My...my teeth?”

“Just four of them, taken from the back of your mouth. Four teeth for anything you want. You’ll hardly notice they’re gone, and no one else will either. It’s a small price to ask for such a generous reward.”

Natasha contemplated for a moment. Four teeth. Two from the top, two the bottom. Was that really all? She needed to have her wisdom teeth removed anyway. This would work out beautifully...but what was it she wanted? Brooklyn’s lipstick collection? No! That would be a waste for an opportunity like this! Natasha continued to stew over what she would request, and she could tell Desiderare was growing impatient.

“Well? Do we have a deal?”

She had it! She knew what she wanted. That diamond bracelet Brooklyn got from her rich father. She was always flaunting that thing, she wore it almost every day. How delicious it would be to have one of her own. That would certainly show Brooklyn that, she wasn't nearly as special, as precious, as she and everyone else thought she was.

"We have a deal."

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At first, the bracelet had been worth it. Natasha's classmates gushed at the opulent bauble. She told everyone it was a gift from a boyfriend back home. When Brooklyn saw Natasha bearing the weighty gems, she accused her of stealing the bracelet. Brooklyn and her posse confronted her in the cafeteria, creating a dramatic display for all to see.

"Stop lying Natasha. That's a one-of-a-kind, custom design. It's my bracelet and everyone knows it!"

Natasha only laughed in her face later that day, when her roommate found her own bracelet exactly where she had left it before spring break. Brooklyn had been terribly embarrassed and apologized profusely, but this only made Natasha resent her more. She knew Brooklyn thought she was pathetic. Now, Natasha ached for something else. Something more to show the whole school that she was just as good—no—better, than Brooklyn.

The next night Brooklyn and her friends got ready for a party in the dorm room. They took shots and tried on outfits while Natasha sat on her bed pretending to read an econ textbook. One of Brooklyn's groupies, Nneka, grabbed a fistful of Brooklyn's flat ironed hair in her hand.

"Ugh, it's not fair you hoe! How is your natural hair this long and thick?" Brooklyn offered a self-satisfied smile.

"I guess I've just been doing a lot of protective styling. And moisture is key!" She flipped her bangs.

"That's bs, just acknowledge you have good genes and call it a day." The girls gathered their purses.

"We all have good genes Nneka, everyone in this room has a healthy head of hair."

"Ha! Almost everyone." Nneka glanced at Natasha's dry, tiny ponytail and the girls burst out laughing as they walked out the door. Natasha heard Brooklyn let out a lackluster "be nice guys," between laughs.

When it became clear that Brooklyn would not return that night, Natasha checked to ensure the bedroom door was locked and padded over to Brooklyn's bed. She flopped onto the girl's

fluffy pink bedspread and sighed into the pillow. With her tongue, Natasha felt the holes where her wisdom teeth had been. The removal process had been virtually painless. Desiderare had put her to sleep, and she'd awoken the next day with four fewer teeth. It was so simple. She only wished she had the opportunity again. Natasha knew exactly what she would ask for. Then, as if having read her mind, the creature appeared beside her.

“Were you not satisfied with your jewelry?”

“I was hoping you'd return. You look...well.” Natasha noted that his once sunken cheeks had filled out a bit since their last encounter and he somehow looked more human. “I love the bracelet, but I want something else now.”

“The price is the same.” The creature sat down on Brooklyn's empty chair and began examining various items on her desk. He lifted an elegant perfume bottle and glared at his hard reflection in the glass.

“Yes I know, and I don't care.”

“Very well then. What is it you want?”

“Her hair. Her mane of long, corkscrew curls. I don't care that everyone will think its fake, I just want it.” Desiderare smirked and placed the bottle down.

“If that's what you want, who am I to get in the way?” And with those words, Natasha blacked out once more.

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It was addicting. Anytime Natasha had a night alone, she would rendezvous with Desiderare, and make an exchange. She tried to stop herself, but she couldn't help it. It seemed Brooklyn was always rubbing her life in Natasha's face. A new purse here, a good grade there. It was infuriating. Natasha was even jealous of Desiderare's love for Brooklyn, as each time they met he looked more human, and more handsome. She was falling for him, but she wasn't the one he wanted.

A month later, Brooklyn was gone on a weekend trip home, and Natasha was in front of the mirror, inspecting her latest “reward” from the night before: a tiny waistline. She stood in her underwear, hands on hips and rotating, examining her new figure from all possible angles. She looked amazing, but her compacted ribs felt like they were squeezing the life from her organs. This was the most drastic physical trait she'd requested and the pain was excruciating. Natasha began to wonder how Desiderare had achieved these results. She coughed from tightened lungs and gasped suddenly at the reflection of her face. To her horror, she realized that she had no teeth left in her mouth. How had she not noticed this before? She'd gotten so used to using closed-mouthed smiles to hide the gaping omissions in her once pearly grin, but

this had all happened so quickly. No, Desiderare must have lied to her, taking more than four teeth every time he came.

Natasha's gums were swollen and raw. Hot tears streamed down her face. How dare he do this to her? She tore away from the mirror and leapt into bed, cocooning herself in her new comforter. She wouldn't go anywhere today. How could she show her face looking like this? Natasha spent the day stalking Brooklyn on instagram, watching her galavant around her Chicago penthouse home. She cried until she fell asleep and awoke in the middle of the night. She was alone.

"Desiderare!" She cried out with a toothless lisp.

"You beast, come and see what you've done to me, you monster!" But she was met only with silence, and continued her wailing, coughing, and wheezing. Her head began spinning and she tried to stand. Shaky legs brought her to the ground and she choked up a spray of blood onto the floor, before blacking out.

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Natasha awoke groggy and disoriented in a sterile, white room. The hospital... what had happened? She felt a dull ache in her torso and peered at the dozens of tubes pumping her with fluids. A flash of pink in the corner of the room caught her eye.

"Nat, oh my God!" Brooklyn sat by the hospital bed in a bright pink, cropped turtleneck. Natasha eyed the waist she had envied so much. The waist that had crushed her. "Your parents just stepped out for dinner, I'll let them know you're awake. You've been unconscious for two weeks you know!"

Natasha said nothing in response and turned her head, preferring to stare at the blank wall than at her roommate.

"You don't know how worried we all were! I came back from my trip and you were passed out with all your teeth gone, I thought you were dead! If I hadn't met Desi I would've had such a hard time getting you to the hospital." Suddenly another person joined the one-sided conversation.

"You're such a good friend Brooklyn. That's one of the things I love most about you, your compassion for others." That voice. It sounded so familiar.

"Aw, you're so sweet babe, thanks for the coffee!" Natasha whipped her head around to see Brooklyn embracing another boy-toy. She was disgusted. Even now, Brooklyn managed to make everything about her. "Oh how rude of me! Nat, let me introduce you to my new boyfriend, Desi."

The young man turned around and Natasha instantly recognized the face of Desiderare, now a full human. His eyes leered at Natasha and he flashed a knowing smile.

“Nice to meet you Nat, I’ve heard so much about you!” He extended a hand for her to shake. Natasha sat silent and trembling. She wanted to spit in his palm. “I hope you recover quickly.”

“Desi is the best boyfriend ever, he helped me watch over you, and look! He even bought me this gorgeous necklace!” Brooklyn reached into her collar and pulled out a gleaming string. “Isn’t it stunning?”

Natasha’s eyes widened at the beaded strand. There were exactly 32 pearls.

Growing up on the colorful and expressive island of Bermuda, **Nalani Dowling** was inspired from a young age to develop her imagination. She drew portraits of classmates, wrote stories, and directed music videos with her cousins. She was encouraged to continue artistic engagement from childhood through her graduation from Spelman College, where she majored in studio art with a minor in creative writing. Nalani currently works at the High Museum of Art, where she researches the intersections of picture books and the Civil Rights movement.