

the skin we're in

by

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Tommy's eyes jolted open at his wailing bedside alarm clock. Dreamland melted, carried away by beads of sweat pooling in his damp, musty smelling sheets. The salty liquid against his skin felt like an ocean drowning him in torrents of the burdensome reality that he was, still, Tommy Langdon. And it was time for Tommy Langdon to wake up, pack, and get to the airport with his girlfriend. But he didn't even want to move.

You see, Tommy had a problem. He wanted to be somebody else, anybody else. His life wasn't going the direction he thought fit for a boy of his ilk and potential so many years ago. He should be on easy street by now, rich or famous or both. He shouldn't be hacking away at a nine to five taking it from a boss nearly his age. He did all the things they said to do; he played sports, stayed out of trouble, he went to college, he got a job. If he were somebody else, anybody else,

he could just leave old boring Tommy Langdon behind. Tommy did it right, but here he was in this tiny apartment regretting almost every decision he ever made.

Of course, that's not what he told his girlfriend. He told Amy they were going to Las Vegas to celebrate the three-year anniversary of their happy, happy relationship. What he didn't tell her, was that in Las Vegas he could throw on a suit and a new fedora, order a martini, and saunter up to the craps table like a suave man of mystery. He would look like a million bucks and ask the local talent to blow on his dice and he would throw those puppies across the felt and the whole table would cheer while stacks and stacks of chips were...

"Turn off that fucking alarm, Thomas!" Amy looked mostly dead and partly asleep. She hadn't washed off her makeup from the night before and the usual drunken midnight crying session made her face look like a Monet left out in the rain too long. She stared into Tommy's soul and he slowly reached over to press the snooze button atop the digital alarm clock's angry red face.

What was her problem? He hadn't been that drunk anyway, at least no drunker than she was. Just because she clings to his every word in the heat of stupid arguments and then decides to cry about every poor decision she ever made wasn't his fault. He was busy regretting his own decisions and didn't have time for hers. But it was, for sure, a recurring problem that Tommy could go without. He had enough on his plate already, enough of his own problems.

He sat up and twisted around to find his bare feet planted on the uneven, faux tile floor. His slippers, of course, were on the other side of the room and no doubt full of puppy piss. As if gifting Amy a new mutt wasn't validation enough of their loving relationship, she begged him to go to Las Vegas to take their relationship to the next level. He guessed she was also unhappy with things and needed a reboot, despite the fact they moved in together only a year ago. With

his luck, by the time they got back she'd be just as miserable and those piss slippers would wind up being the only thing he owned, out on his ass. But for those sweet days between take-off and landing he could leave all that behind and Tommy Langdon could shine on the Las Vegas strip in the skin of anybody he wanted to be.

He walked over to the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet hoping for pill sized relief from his hangover. Finding nothing but an empty condom box, a rolled up tube of toothpaste, and a single tampon Tommy rolled his eyes and shut the mirrored cabinet door. Amy's melting face appeared in the reflection directly behind him and almost made him jump right out of his skin.

"Jesus!" Tommy bent over the sink, overacting and being dramatic. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

"What time is the Uber coming?" Amy asked, reaching over his shoulder for the lone tampon in the cabinet. "I have to make a stop before we get on the plane."

She glanced *that* glance at him.

"Flight's at nine." Tommy left the bathroom and sulked toward the kitchen hoping at any moment for a hole to open up and swallow him. The pisser stared up at him wagging its tail, and Tommy hoped the same hole would take this little shit, too.

Amy's head popped out from the bathroom, "Well that doesn't fucking answer my question Thomas. What *time* is the Uber coming?"

He plunged his head into the refrigerator and reflected, the cold a brief respite from his headache. Tommy Langdon didn't want to have to worry about Uber anymore, or tampons, or pissing dogs. He strained his eyes and stared at the deepest parts of the refrigerator wondering

how far he could shove his body into its frigid depths. He almost couldn't hear Amy's voice during his arctic exploration.

"Oh, let me guess. You fucking didn't even schedule one? Well that's fucking perfect, Thomas. You do realize it's Manhattan and traffic is shit at this time in the morning? Shit! We'll be lucky if we even make it on time to the airport. And I am *not* missing this flight, Thomas. You are taking me to Vegas if I have to drag you kicking and screaming!" A brief pause gave Tommy one last chance to consider redemption, announce his incompetence and beg for forgiveness. It passed.

"I'll just fucking do it." She began moving about the apartment the way she did when Tommy made it clear he couldn't possibly do whatever it is she wanted done and made the decision to do it herself. His entire upper half was practically in the refrigerator, the pisser was enjoying the grapes that rolled out as Tommy knocked around various condiments and loose food articles trying to make room for his escape.

Grapes are toxic for dogs, betcha didn't know that did ya pisser?

He guessed they were even.

Tommy stood brooding in his closet as Amy buzzed around him collecting this and packing that, holding up to the mirror mixed and matched tops, bottoms, and small slivers of fabric that could have been either. He could tell, for Amy, the outfit had to reflect the mood she was in or how she wanted to outwardly project her inner self. Fun and classy? Or maybe, for a night on the town, a little more revealing and risqué. And what about conservative intellectual for those coffee shop brunches? For Tommy, the clothes didn't reflect his mood; the clothes changed him into something different entirely. He didn't want the world to see Tommy Langdon dressed in business casual, he wanted to slip his skin and actually *become* a businessman

casually making his way through the day. If you only dressed the part, eventually you'd have to stop playing the part, and that was the worst part.

Once the dust settled and the bags were packed, the pisser barked as three hot pink semi-hard zip around suitcases were rolled up to the front door of their apartment. They didn't have to roll far.

"Alright," Amy said in that tone suggestive of a brief ceasefire. He saw her as a pirate ship on the open ocean waiting to plunder his treasure filled galleon at the slightest misstep, and here she was offering parlay; you buy me a dog and take me to Vegas and live with me in this Manhattan apartment and we can fuck and I'll put up with your shit.

Aye, matey.

"The Uber texted me and they're downstairs. I know things have been a little rough lately with your job and all but let's be adults and remember that we in fact actually have jobs, a place to live, a loving dog" – *eat those grapes you little pisser* – "and an overall happy life. Now give me a kiss Thomas and let's go. Vegas, BABY!" It was a valiant attempt.

Tommy Langdon frantically looked for that hole that never appeared in his kitchen that he wasn't able to disappear into. "Ok, Vegas baby," a deep breath. "Vegas!"

Tommy and Amy hugged and tongue kissed in front of the pisser and put on their best happy faces and fake smiles. He figured that performance should earn him at least one Oscar nod. Satisfied he was on track to be whoever he wanted to be if he could just get on that plane, the couple swung open the door to their apartment and prepared to ride the lightning into Sin City.

Five half painted crusty fingernails were all the bits of person Tommy could see holding the carbon copy sheet directly in his face as he opened the door from one shitty world into yet another.

“Do you know what the fuck this says, Langdon?” All one million cigarettes Miss Carlyle had ever smoked were talking in unison through this shell of a person.

“Yes, Miss Carlyle. I submitted the forms for the dog last week with the front desk and I’ll drop the pet deposit by when we get back from our vacation.” The words coming from Tommy’s mouth only seemed to magnetically attract the delinquency form closer and closer with each uttered syllable. He could smell the carbon, it was stale and reminded him of grade school.

“You’re not leaving that mutt here all alone while you’re gone, are you?” Miss Carlyle lowered the form just enough to peer over its top edge through spectacles thick enough to see through bullshit, or so she would tell Tommy from time to time. She looked worse than she sounded, and she sounded bad.

“We - ” Tommy involuntarily yielded the floor to Amy.

“Of course not, Miss Carlyle! My friend Amber will be here this very afternoon to watch over little Daisy. I’m so, so sorry that Thomas is so forgetful. I’ll make double and triple sure he gets that check right down to the front desk the second we get back.” If anyone was sorry, it was sure as shit Tommy Langdon. So, so sorry.

Miss Carlyle was unloaded and stowed back into the holster. “Fine. But I want this settled as soon as you get back.” She eyeballed Tommy and grimaced at the skin showing between Amy’s halter top and low-cut jeans. “You kids these days got no sense of responsibility and dignity. Look at that skin, girl. Have some respect. My daughter always had a good head on her shoulders, God rest her soul. She dated God-fearing, responsible men. God damn

responsibilities...” she faded out as Tommy imagined he was back in the kitchen, his head shoved further and further into the refrigerator, breaking through the back plane and into the arctic, coming face to face with an emperor penguin with a serious smoking habit who proceeded to peck his eyes out.

Suddenly they were streetside and instead of inside a refrigerator Tommy found himself hanging half out of the trunk of the smallest Uber car while he shoved their hideous luggage into its bowels. The rear passenger side window rolled down, “Thomas would you hurry up, we are going to miss the flight!”

Tommy slammed the trunk and looked out into the buzzing streets of Manhattan, trying to notice every person that passed. They passed by in cars, on bikes, and in busses. They wore sunglasses and had smeared lipstick and pushed their baby carriages. They honked taxi horns and washed windows. Did they see Tommy Langdon? Or did they just see some irresponsible young millennial with more debt than sense who flew to Vegas on a whim with their bitchy pirate girlfriend they wouldn’t in a million years have imagined shacking up with the ugly likes of him? What was the difference? Well, he saw them. What he saw was anyone but Tommy Langdon. And that’s who he really wanted to be.

“THOMAS! Quit fucking around!” *Coming, dear.*

Tickets. Running. Bags. Closer and closer to a week outside the skin of Tommy Langdon. More running. Now the security checkpoint.

“Sir, please remove your shoes,” the TSA agent wasn’t armed but would have shot Tommy Langdon dead right there had he not complied and removed his loafers. His big toe protruded through the hole worn in the tip of his right sock. He felt crumbs on his skin and the

little tickle of the world's cheapest carpet, stampeded over at the airport by millions of people a year. He stood for a moment and made a fist with his toes.

Amy glanced down at his protruding big toe and hung her head in shame, covering her face lest the world realize she was emotionally tethered to such a Neanderthal. She had a law degree, for Christ's sake. She wished the world would just gobble this man up and spit out someone more her style. She clinched her teeth and spoke through them, "Thomas. Fucking. Lets. Go. The plane is boarding!"

Tommy hoped that meant that as you stepped onto the plane they smacked you in the face with a board and knocked you into the body of someone else, anyone else. He would pretend that's what boarding meant.

He watched as his shoes and carry-on bag were ushered into the x-ray machine for the little man behind the screen to judge Tommy Langdon's travel item choices. Tommy bet he was praying for a bottle of water or strangely shaped contraband to add excitement to his otherwise excruciatingly mundane day. Tommy, though, was clean and good to go through security unmolested. Nothing worth getting excited over hidden on the inside here that wasn't clear as day on the outside of Tommy Langdon.

More running. Running past gates to anywhere else, to everyone else. Closer and closer to a new Tommy Langdon, if at least for only a week.

"Delayed," he said, reading the flight update on the monitor monster.

"You're fucking lucky Thomas, we would've missed this flight. C'mon I need a drink."

Of course she needed a drink; can't have a midnight sympathy cry fest unless she's drunk. Tommy can't pretend to give a shit unless he's drunk.

“What are you drinkin, friend?” Now there was somebody Tommy could be. An olive-skinned, muscle-bound bar tender with good looks and a smooth tongue. His name was probably Rico or something equally as cool. *Keep em coming, Rico*. They had time for two rounds before boarding.

Tommy blinked at the DING-DONG of the flight attendant’s call alert. Amy gave him a frustrated look as she shifted to get comfortable again; she hated the early morning flights. After a brief internal argument with himself, he decided transitioning her from frustrated to down-right annoyed was worth the dirty look because the overpriced gin and tonics from the crowded airport bar were sneaking up on his bladder.

“I have to go,” he leaned in and whispered. A low growl fit for the wilderness was his only response as Amy threw off the seat belt, exaggerating for effect. The metal end smacked a child acrobatting into the aisle and evoked the high-pitched scream all the other passengers were hoping to avoid the second a two-year-old boarded. Amy was standing with hips cocked and face scrunched, parents were consoling their child, the flight attendant’s trek from the galley was interrupted.

Perfect, all I have to do is pee.

He looked down and shimmied his way through the fuselage feeling every judging look at the commotion he created. They were all judging Tommy Langdon. Still worth it; his bladder was pounding. He passed single parent in yoga pants and business suit guy busy on a laptop. He squeezed past overweight man with the second lap belt and head bobbing teenager with earbuds listening to who knows what. Of course there was a line at the lavatory, why wouldn’t there be? All of life’s little inconveniences crammed into a metal tube sailing six miles high and five hundred miles an hour, with terrible carpet.

Finally, his turn. Tommy closed the door and let his eyes adjust to the bright lavatory light, a stark contrast from the dim main cabin. He wasn't quite sure what to think of the tall, naked figure standing behind him in the mirror. It resembled a man. Moments ago, passing a person this shape and size on the street would have seemed perfectly normal. You've probably seen him a thousand times. He's sitting next to you on the airplane to visit your family in Arizona. He's at the baseball game you promised your nephew you would take him to. He serves you food, he cuts your hair. He watches you, and you watch him. You're looking for idiosyncrasies to judge; clothes to envy; looks and chiseled jaw lines to imagine in the throes of passion. You're hoping he doesn't knick the paint on your new Cadillac as he rides by on a Harley or holds up the line at the Department of Motor Vehicles. You pass him. You let him pass you and then scowl at him when he squeezes through the yellow light at the intersection by the Wal-Mart. But here and now, in the lavatory six miles up, the black-eyed stare towering over his reflection created a fear old Tommy had never thought possible. There went the gin and tonics, a warm exodus pooling up on the lavatory floor.

All old Tommy could do was watch in frozen, abject fear. The figure began to shrink and change. After a few moments it was the same size and shape as old Tommy, broad shoulders and a right ear slightly lower than the left. The figure slowly reached up and dug its fingernails under the skin of its chin, pulling and wrenching. Old Tommy was surprised he noticed there was no blood, only an opaque slimy red interior. The skin peeled away in striated flesh ribbons. To get a better grip, the figure in the mirror behind old Tommy clenched a fistful of its face and tore it away like an excited toddler on Christmas. It peeled away the scalp and neck and made its way down to the shoulders, slithering out of its skin like the sexy preamble to a one-night stand. Old Tommy watched the whole thing. Then, its jaw dislocated and extended down to its chest

exposing its cavernous innards. It picked up the warm lump of discarded flesh and ate it, swallowed it whole in only a few bites.

Old Tommy gathered what he could of his senses, or at least a faint reactionary desperation, and made for the door latch. The now skinless freak snatched his arm with an inhuman strength and bent old Tommy's wrist back to the elbow with a satisfying crunch. Before the scream could make it out of old Tommy's throat the figure slammed its fist between the open gaping mandibles. With both hands it used old Tommy's lips as leverage to skillfully filet back skin and face, not stopping there. Struggling frantically and slipping in his own pool of urine, old Tommy passed out while the stranger went to work removing his skin, but careful not to tear it.

New Tommy stretched and squirmed into his new Tommy suit, old Tommy a pile of limp, bloody muscle and bone crumpled in a ball on top of the commode. He situated the neck skin just right and helped himself to old Tommy's designer jeans and vintage pullover, grimacing at the hole in the right sock. New Tommy stared a moment at the piled carcass, and opened his jaws as wide as before and gobbled up every bit. Old Tommy's eyeballs ejected a yellow puss as New Tommy mushed them between his back molars. He chewed and swallowed, washed his hands, and patted up the piss and blood with handfuls of paper towels. He shook his head at the uncomfortable pressure change when he flushed it all down.

The DING-DONG of the flight attendant's bell went off again, "Ladies and gentlemen please take your seats and keep your seatbelts securely fastened, the Captain has turned on the seatbelt sign and expects mild turbulence ahead. Thank you!"

The announcement prompted a final swallow and the lavatory door opened as it had a thousand times before. New Tommy strutted out and made his way back to his seat. Teenager head was still bobbing, the bigger gentleman's seatbelt still stretched, business suit still typing,

yoga pants still asleep, toddler wiping its eyes amid a yawn. Amy rolled her eyes and begrudgingly stood up to let her traveling companion back into the window seat.

“How’d it go in there?” she asked with that tone.

“I’m like a new man,” he said, peppy and bright. New Tommy leaned in and gave Amy a peck on the cheek. She smelled nice, she looked nice. So nice, in fact, New Tommy gently clutched her chin and coaxed her towards him to plant a full lipped kiss right where it goes. What a catch.

“What’s got you all hot and bothered?” Amy wasn’t buying it.

“Nothing baby, it’s just a new me.” New Tommy took his seat. Old Tommy Langdon was a thing of the past. Vegas, baby. Vegas.

Amy didn’t buy it and felt she had suffered enough. Maybe a week in Vegas would finally convince her this guy was just wrong for her. He was so dramatic, so wishy washy and indecisive. And what was all the complaining for? She was sure this was just another stunt to salvage a good time in Sin City and it would be right back to the same old Tommy Langdon when they got back, no matter how different he acted this week. Although, she wouldn’t mind a few extra kisses on the cheek and endearing looks. After all, he did bring a couple of suits and could clean up nice if he tried. But that was always Tommy’s problem, he never tried as hard as he could and then whined when he never got anywhere. Nothing a good bottle of wine and a late-night cry couldn’t solve.

The turbulence lulled her to sleep. She woke up to the thud of landing gear slamming into the McCarran International tarmac. Tommy leaned in and gave her hand a satisfying squeeze, “We made it baby girl! Let’s paint this town red.”

Was she still dreaming? *What the fuck is that, paint this town red?*

Ok, who is this character and what did they do with Tommy? Amy was one more off-beat remark from running as far as she could from this farce of a man. When they got back they were gonna have a serious talk.

“Let’s just get our bags, O.K.?” she said. Tommy didn’t even react to the tone; she squinted and led the way off the plane.

Deplane. Foot traffic. Avoid the buzzing golf carts in the terminal. Now for the luggage. Wait, back up. How odd, Amy thought; *she* was following *him* through the crowd, and it was parting quite nicely as he confidently strode forward with his squared shoulders and head held high. Where had Tommy gotten this newfound confidence? How much had he had to drink on the plane?

After staring at the carousel go around seven times with the same, single unclaimed bag Amy called it. “That’s what we get for being late, Thomas. Our luggage is still in New York. Great start to the trip, hon,” she quipped. A roll of the eyes should put a nice point on it, this was par for the course any time this idiot tried to do something nice for her.

“It’ll be fine, Amy girl. Let’s just taxi out to the strip and have a nice dinner and then check back tonight. Vegas, baby!” New Tommy’s eyes twinkled.

Tommy’s eyes never twinkled.

“Ok you fucking weirdo. Just get a cab and I’ll be right back, I need the bathroom. I swear to God if they lose our luggage I’m going to freak. And there better not be some pervert going through my underwear...UGH.” A little cold water on the face should cure this mind trip.

The bathroom nearest the carrousel was taped off and under renovation, a poorly constructed arrow pointed the direction of another one down the hall. It was a dark hall, and Amy saw no one coming or going and felt a tingle of apprehension and looked back to make sure

Tommy was still there. New Tommy smiled a big smile and, moving only his wrist, waved from the spot she left him.

Get a grip Amy, she thought. It's only a week and you can be anybody and put up with anybody you want for just a week.

She stormed down the hall and turned abruptly into the bathroom at a sharp right angle to make sure prying eyes got the message she was choosing to be alone so deal with it. The lights were off and she stopped a half step in. She glanced around and jumped up and down waving her arms assuming the light sensor was motion activated, and she was right. Mostly right. Two more steps in and the light flickered and went out again. It was on long enough for her to note where the corner of the white tile wall opened up to the sink area and decided she could make it. Two more steps in, another flicker, and she could see no one at the sinks and the mirrors reflected all empty stalls. Another flicker of the lights and Amy made it to the sink.

Dark again. No one was here, so she thought about belting the most liberating scream as a release and she might feel an ounce better. No one was here, so no one would hear. She chose the high road and remained calm, considered the trip was only a week and then she could take a serious look at Tommy's sad and poor-me life. A deep breath, a long release. And another flicker of the lights.

This time, a figure was behind her. Same height as her, same general shape. The lights flickered so fast that Amy wasn't sure *what* she saw in the mirror. Startled, she spun around and searched the darkness. She waited, sure another flicker of the lights would reveal her imagination was getting the best of her. But there was nothing.

She searched her purse for her cell phone and fumbled with it trying to turn on the flashlight, something she internally acknowledged she should have done a few minutes prior to

what was shaping up to be a fairly terrifying quick trip to the bathroom. She suddenly remembered every story she ever heard about women being attacked in empty big city bathrooms. *Not today motherfucker*, she thought

She dropped her phone and it landed with a thud on the tile. She started down slowly, bending at the knees, and extended her hand in the pitch-black darkness. It found a fleshy mound that felt like wet, rough leather, warm and moist.

The lights flickered again and revealed her phone between two bright red, sinewy legs. The lights stayed on long enough for her to pan over and see a body-sized pile of skin in her hand, her right thumb poking through what must have been an eye hole, a realization that made her gag. It was now time to scream, and old Amy did scream.

She was right, no one heard her.

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New Amy bobbed out of the bathroom with a final tug at her midriff, getting it just right. Her purse was slung over her shoulder and she was ready to receive Vegas in all its splendor. She passed the luggage carousel and emerged near the taxi lane. New Amy locked eyes with New Tommy. She slowed, flirtatiously cocked her chin to the right and the slightest twinkle escaped her eye. New Amy moved her hips a little more than necessary as she sidled up to New Tommy. She bumped his hip with hers, grasped his hand, and pecked him on the cheek. All sassy like.

“Hey Tommy boy,” a wink.

“Hey Amy girl,” wink returned.

The two climbed into their taxi, off to the strip. Vegas, baby. Vegas.

They drove by people coming and going, some staying and many just visiting. Their cab wasn't any different than any other cab you've seen. The occupants no different than any other loving couple, cozy as clams in their own skin. Just like us, as comfortable as ever in the skin we're in.

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