

HALF OFF
by Paul Watson
For and starring Sophie

Sophie wakes up with a start, memories, dreams and reality colliding as her hand goes to her throat, feeling the choker still there. "Well, fuck." She runs a finger over it, wondering if she should risk taking it off. She sighs remembering how well that went last time, looking at the letter still on her dresser. She sighs again and stumbles to the bathroom.

She sets the shower running and only then thinks about how she's going to deal with the choker. Getting it wet, will that do anything? The letter didn't say, but, it's not like she'd been told in advance not to take it off, was it? She takes a breath, unclasps the choker and quickly sets her head besides the sink, the smooth surface a little cold on the base of her neck. She watches her body step unsteadily into the shower, pulling the curtain around. She fumbles around the tiles for the taps, and then for the gel. Once she's found it, her hands pump down on the dispenser automatically. They then reach up to where her head should be and currently isn't.

Outside the shower, Sophie lets out another sigh of frustration and moves her hands down. Once they find her shoulders, it's easier and her hands are back on automatic, lathering her body in the shower stream.

Eventually, she steps out of the shower and turns her head so she can find the towel, although manoeuvring around is much harder when her vision is two feet lower and several feet back.

"Hmmmm. Steve was right about something. I do have a nice arse."

She grabs the towel on the second attempt and starts drying herself, only stopping when the fluffy material rubs over her neck stump when her eyes open wide and an involuntary gasp emerges from her lips. "What...the....FUCK...was that?" She reaches up, her fingers gently touching the flat surface, and sucks in her breath. "Well, that is something to explore. Later. For now, I'm clean. Time to get myself in one piece. Come here, body." her body beckons and Sophie can't help but laugh before she turns around and walks over to her head. She turns her head around to face the same way and lifts it up. One hand keeps it in place as the other fiddles to get the choker to latch. "A whole week of this." she mutters, "I am going to kill that bastard once I'm back together."

Her Sunday routine continues as normal after that: preparing for classes; waiting for Steve to call; grabbing snacks and pretending it counts as a full meal. Steve does call. Eventually. Two hours after he's supposed to. To cancel their plans. Apparently, work have booked him on a meeting first thing Monday so he's on the train up to Scotland. She won't see him until Wednesday now. She is perfectly calm and understanding over the phone, and even manages to return it to its cradle rather than introduce it forcefully to the wall.

After that, her Sunday plans go out the window as fast as the crisps come out of the packet. Sophie fingers her choker. "Well, can't do anything about repeatedly disappearing boyfriends. Been there, done that, got the crappy t-shirt and the cold shoulder to show for it. But...let's see what I can find on my other aggravation." She opens her laptop and starts googling. Videos pop up of various parts of his act, all professionally shot.

Somehow two hours pass as she scrolls through the clips, watching a variety of women decapitated, sawn in half, flattened as thin as paper or twisted up into a coiled rope of a person, and half a dozen other impossibilities that she's convinced from personal experience aren't done with camera trickery. She absently fingers the choker as she watches, wondering what some of those contortions would feel like, even as she gasps along with the audience and curses him for leaving her like this.

"Ok, Mr. Magician, so you're good, maybe very good, but that does not give you a right to leave me like this for shits and giggles." she gestures at her choker to illustrate the point, and returns to her preparation, assuming watching Jane Austen adaptations counts as preparation.

Next morning, the alarm pulls her out of sleep with its usual unpleasantness. She takes extra time getting ready, trying to find something she has that will cover up the choker, settling on one of her interview shirts, buttoning it up for the first time in years. She finds a skirt that doesn't clash too

hard, pulling it on before looking at the blinking clock, cursing loudly and snatching her bag to run for the bus.

The journey isn't especially hard, but Sophie can't relax into her reading like she normally does, as at every jolt in the road, or bump into another passenger, the thought flashes forward that the choker will spontaneously come undone and she'll lose her head.

Fortunately, her fears prove unfounded and she makes it to her school on time, and still in one piece, heading in to help prepare for the class. She gets one comment about when her interview is from Jane the administrator and the rest of the staff are so harried getting themselves ready they don't have time to notice.

The bell rings and she forgets about her 'condition'. Keeping thirty-four six-year olds focussed takes far too much concentration for her to worry about little things like decapitation.

This lasts through lunch where people are too intent on making sure they eat amidst the papers to pay too much attention. Natalie raises her eyebrows in question over the table, but Sophie shakes her head slightly to deflect her. That just causes her to take more interest, but she never directly asks so Sophie never has to directly lie.

She's alone for the afternoon. Mrs. Clarkson has to supervise another class in their P.E. session. And so, that is when Shawna puts her hand up to ask a question. Shawna is a nice child, but 'precocious', which means she sees more than adults think she does and asks questions they really don't want her to. "Miss Jones! Miss Jones!"

"Yes, Shawna. Do you need to..."

"No, no, Miss. Why is your neck hided? Did you get bited by a wam...a wamp...a wampire?"

Sophie's hands go to her neck. She colours. "N-no. I haven't been bitten by a vampire."

"Oh, oh. Is it a love bite, Miss?" Darren. Never the first to pipe up, but always the first to make it worse. Sophie's blush deepens.

"Chance would be a fine thing." she mutters, "No, Darren. It isn't a love bite, either. I haven't been bitten by anything." Dozens of hands spring up, questions about what she's hiding coming thick and fast, too many to answer even if she has any inclination to. She claps her hands, repeating it several times until everyone's settled down, and pulls out the craft materials to give them something else to focus on.

She avoids calamity for the rest of the day, hurrying home with an excuse and spending more time finding all of her interview shirts for the rest of the week. Which would be better if she had five such shirts rather than two. She rummages through her closet for a solution, pulling out several thin scarves, discarding the more colourful ones for some that could be considered work appropriate in the right light. That will last a bit longer, hopefully long enough for this not to be a problem. Of course, what she tells Steve hasn't really come to mind yet. "Hi, babe, I'm a headless freak." probably isn't going to cut it. And, as he's a guy, she'd better nix headless blowjobs right away, too.

Tuesday is in some ways easier and some harder: Easier as the children have accepted the new normal and are more interested in their lessons than her neck; harder because Nat has become interested and it's much harder to obfuscate and deflect from a friend who knows how you get out of answering things you don't want to. Which means she spends more effort avoiding her than is sensible for maintaining a supposedly close friendship, promising she'll make it up to her once she's back to normal. Only a few more days.

Wednesday, first of the scarf days and the day of Steve's return, so Sophie is more than a little stressed as she makes sure the choker is fully concealed, tying and retying the scarf in an attempt to make it look casual. The look Nat gives her over the pre-school coffee indicates she may not have been entirely successful, but she doesn't answer the unspoken question. Or the many, many spoken questions from the class.

She again ducks out as soon as she can, which isn't that soon, but she keeps herself too 'busy' to get interrogated, heading home, grabbing Steve's favourite curry on the way. Best to give him the surprise on a full stomach.

Steve doesn't seem to notice her scarf, or at least doesn't comment. At the table, the conversation is held up by his complaints about work, and the train service, and the government, and the weather, and the rest. Maybe not the best time to surprise him.

She goes through her marking as he slumps by the television. He heads to bed with a kiss on her cheek and a hand on her shoulder as she burns the late night oil, slipping in after he's asleep. Maybe she doesn't need to tell him? Only two days and she's back to normal and this whole thing can go away. Which is what she wants. Definitely.

Thursday. She wakes to find Steve already gone and grabs another scarf, taking less care this time as it's obvious that people will notice something regardless. Nat grabs her, literally, over lunch.

"Okay, Soph, what's going on?"

"With what?" she replies, not meeting her eyes.

"With avoiding me and..." she gestures at her neck, "You haven't been bitten by a vampire, have you?"

"That was funny when Shawna said it. But she's six."

"Sooooooo?"

Sophie looks around, and sighs at the complete and total lack of people to use as an excuse not to answer. "Fine." she undoes the scarf.

"Ooooooh, that's nice. Kinky. Steve get it for you?"

"No."

"Oh, really? Secret admirer? Must be someone special if you won't take it off."

"I can't."

"Very kinky."

"Not like that, you perv." she looks around again. "Ok, first off, if you make one single sound..."

"Silence. Got it." she zips her lips shut.

Sophie carefully undoes the choker and lifts her head off, placing it in her lap. Nat stares, her eyes wide, her jaw on the floor, stunned into silence, which Sophie thinks just shows how freaky this is. She tries to ignore the feel of the scarf on her neck stump, looking up at Nat. "So, now you know."

"You...your head...what...how...how are you doing that?"

Sophie returns her head to its rightful place, fiddling the collar back into place with by-now well-practised movements. "There was a magic show on Saturday. Steve and I were supposed to go but..."

"He cancelled again?"

"Anyway, I got suckered on stage and the magician put me into a guillotine. Like a real guillotine! And then he cut my head off!"

"You mean he pretended to cut it off?"

"No! What do you think you just saw? My bloody head was literally just in my lap! He really cut it off!"

"Nuh-uh. You learned a trick, maybe from this mysterious magician, is he cute? And have been waiting to give me a chance to be impressed all week. And I am. That was really convincing. I'd almost believe your head wasn't there."

"Yes, that's absolutely right. You've caught me. I'm definitely not wearing this choker because it's the only thing that's keeping my head on." she ties the scarf up. "Still, I'll be at his show on Saturday where he'll fix me and it won't matter. But know you know."

"Yeah, come on. I wasn't born yesterday. I know that's all smoke and mirrors."

"If you say so."

"So what's the real reason you're..."

One of many bells rings, sparing Sophie from answering.

Steve comes in late and drunk, works leaving do, so he doesn't pay her neck any attention. Only one more day and she's escaped all this nonsense.

Friday. She wakes up with Steve still snoring off last night. How can he sleep through the alarms?

As carefully as she's been all week she gets herself showered and heads out before Steve wakes up, the early bus more crowded, leaving her sandwiched between everyone, it seems.

Nat gives her grief about still wearing the scarf after she's already been fooled. Sophie spends extra time in the toilet, screaming into her arm. But the day goes fine...until Davina gives her a hug and her scarf gets caught in the girl's earring. Who gives young children earrings, anyway? And getting her out without too much screaming means Sophie has to take the scarf off.

"Is that what you've been hiding, Miss? It's pretty."

Sophie mumbles something unintelligible as she tries to unfasten her scarf from Davina's ear without ripping either.

"Why was you hiding it, Miss?"

"Hiding Aha!" she corrects as she finally gets the scarf loose.

Davina nods, "Why was you hiiiiding it, Miss?"

Sophie tries to find a way to answer the question, which is harder than you'd expect when a pair of large innocent eyes are inches from your face waiting an answer.

What the hell. She decides to go for a version of the truth. "I have to wear it or my head will fall off." She watches the eyes widen.

"F-f-fall off? But...you neeeeeed your head, Miss."

"That's why I have to wear it, but tomorrow, I'll be cured."

Davina takes in that information, "Like Snow White?"

"Sure."

"So you got to get kissed by a Prince and you'll be cured?"

"Not exact..." but Davina's stopped listening, squirming her way to the floor and racing back to her seat. Sophie sighs, retying her scarf as the class telegraph spreads what she just said, or at least something hopefully in the same continent as what she said, around the room in hushed whispers. Of course, when Mrs Clarkson leaves, the hands go up and the questions start.

"How did you get cursed, miss?"

"Was it an evil witch, miss?"

"Did it hurt, miss?"

"Did your head really fall off, miss?"

Tumbling over each other, none waiting for a reply before asking their important question. Sophie sighs. There's only one way to keep them quiet now. She undoes the scarf. There's a moment of silence as the children all stare at the choker, which provides some verification of what Davina had told them. And then the questions start up again.

Sophie gets them quiet and then leans forward, lowering her voice, "Now, you have to promise not to tell your parents this. Grown-ups won't believe it." The children nod soberly. Grown-ups could be so stupid. "Cross your heart?" they all dutifully cross their hearts, sealing the pact of silence. And then she carefully undoes the collar and places her head on the desk beside her. The collective gasp nearly sucks all the air from the room. She smiles reassuringly. The questions babble out again and she realises she needs something to keep them quiet before someone comes in for the noise. And so, Headless Story Time begins, with Sophie's body kneeling to hold the book up to her head on the desk.

By the time the final bell rings, Sophie's more exhausted than usual, the children just the reverse, excitedly chattering about what happened with Miss Jones.

She reaches home to find a voicemail from Steve. Another weekend working. She sighs in disappointment and relief, dumps her bags, settles down and takes the collar off. Her head rests in her lap, her hands massaging the back of her head. "Mmmmmmm. I guess this thing has some perks." She crawls into bed late, resting her head on the pillow and letting her body find a comfortable position without shifting it, sleeping more soundly than she has all week.

Saturday. Sophie wakes up, her body lurching as her head opens its eyes. For a moment of confusion she screams before she remembers that she isn't actually dead. She grabs the choker, clasp it almost on autopilot. She spends the rest of the day trying to ignore the ticket burning a

hole in her purse without much success. "It'll all be over soon. Just go to the show, get put back to normal and never go back there again. Simple." She's told herself that all day. Somehow, she still isn't convinced.

That evening, she deliberately hasn't gotten dressed up. She's not going out, she's just going to get this fixed. That's all. So a plain t-shirt and jeans will do. It won't take long, after all. In and out.

Done.

She arrives at the theatre and is shown to her seat. Fine. She'll watch the show as there's no chance catching up to him now. But right afterwards...

At the end of the show, the finale, the spotlight swings straight to her. "Hey!" but the audience is cheering and the magician is looking suitably smug and self-satisfied on stage. She puts on her best scowl, balls up her fist and stomps up onto the stage.

"Ah, it's my favourite assistant."

The audience whoop.

"Teaching assistant. I'm not one of your..." she waves aimlessly at the others on the stage.

"And yet here you are. Again."

"I'm not here to take part! I only came here because you said you were going to get rid of this!" she indicates the choker.

"Did I? That doesn't sound like me at all." he flourishes his fingers and holds a letter in it, "Let's see... aftereffects...collar...decapitation...discuss your future... Nope. Nothing in here about restoring you. You must have misread it."

"What?! But...you...I...you have to! I can't..."

"Well, I could be persuaded..."

"If I 'just' 'volunteer' for you again?" she replies, making liberal use of finger quotes.

"Exactly. I'm glad you understand me so well. I'll even promise you won't lose your head this time."

"What will I lose?" she thinks back to the previous week, "Besides most of my clothes."

"That would be telling. You wouldn't want to disappoint the audience now, would you?"

The audience shout and cheer. Sophie glares at the magician, but his smile fails to ignite. "Fine."

"Sorry." he cups his hand to his ear, "I didn't quite catch that."

"Yes, you bloody did. I said 'fine', alright!"

"Perfect. But as I know you won't trust me, let's restore you first." he reaches out before she can stop him, unclasping the collar and whipping it away. She screams, her hands going to her ears to keep her head in place, only for her head to remain perfectly on her unbisected neck without assistance. "I did promise you wouldn't lose your head today, didn't I?"

"As if I could trust that!"

"That's harsh. True, but harsh. Still as you're here now..." he gestures towards the wheeled table and the box on top of it. A box with a thin slit right around the middle of it

"You're not going to change my clothes this time?"

He looks her up and down. "No, you'll do fine like this. If you want me to, I can..."

"No! I mean, no, that's fine. Don't want to trouble you."

"It's no..."

"It's fine!"

"Sure?"

"It's! Fine!"

"Ok. If you say so." He escorts her over to the table, his hand on her back.

Sophie looks over the box. Red with gold trim. Much friendlier looking than the guillotine, but it's obviously to saw someone, like her, in half. "That looks exactly my size." she says suspiciously.

"It should be." he opens the lids to reveal the interior looks just as small as the exterior promised with no hint of fake feet. To be fair, she wasn't really expecting them after last week, but it still offends the rational part of her mind that they're not there. "Why don't you try it out?"

She glares daggers through him but clambers onto the table and shifts herself along the box. It fits far too perfectly. She starts to comment but he's gone, stocks snapping into place tight around her ankles. "Hey!"

“We haven't got all night, Sophie. Just lean back, hands by your head.”

She does and the other stocks slam down. She tries to move, but the cushioned openings are just short of constricting her blood supply so she doesn't get very far. There are two more bangs in quick succession as the magician slams the lids closed.

Sophie takes a deep breath to start yelling and finds just how little room there is inside as she comes into contact with the lid. The magician produces the saw, a monstrous thing that needs two people to use, full of gleamingly sharp teeth.

“No! Way! No fucking way!” the box shakes as Sophie tries to escape to no avail.

The magician smiles down at her. “Way.” Two assistants take up the saw, settling it into the tiny gap between boxes and onto Sophie's waist.

“Eeep.” She goes very still, feeling the tips of the teeth poking into her. And then it moves as the assistants start the stroke. Sophie screams as the tiny points tear through her. There's a pause at the end of the stroke when the pain reverses into pure gooey pleasure but, as she's just sinking into it, the next stroke starts and the teeth bite again. And so the cycle continues: Biting pain to toe-curling pleasure to pain to pleasure, each time the saw getting deeper and deeper into her.

Her screams turn to a long howl of pleasure and pain as the teeth tear through her spine and then it's over, the saw carefully withdrawn, a lack of blood unnoticed by the barely sensate person in the box, sweat beading on her forehead. She blinks, coming back into awareness, as the magician clangs two square metal blades over the box. “No.” she whimpers hoarsely, but he either doesn't hear or doesn't listen, jamming the blades in. She feels the smooth metal rubbing against the insides of her waist, feeling as sensitive as her formerly severed neck stump but the cold blades nowhere near as stimulating as her fingers.

She continues to weakly protest as the latches in the middle of the table are undone; the magician flings his arms out; the assistant at each end pulls; and the two halves of Sophie roll in opposite directions across the stage. The magician steps through the gap between her to the audience's applause. Sophie's biting commentary is lost as she's spun around and around to show her division off. The magician opens door panels in the sides to let the audience see that there appears to still be a divided lady in the box but only Sophie is fully convinced. He stops the second spinning with Sophie heels over head, staring up at the soles of her shoes as they wiggle in protest or something else that she really doesn't want to think about right now.

She's wheeled off the stage and into the audience so they can check she's real. This proves rather easier said than done as Sophie is very real and very certain that touching her is not part of the process. Slipping into teacher voice proves just as effective on adults as recalcitrant children. Or maybe it's the increasingly intricate descriptions of what she'll do to anyone touching her when she finally gets out of the box that does it. Who can say?

Anyway, after some validation, she's wheeled back onto the stage and the magician stands over her halves. She glares up at him. He smiles annoyingly in response and pulls the blades out. Sophie almost bruises her shins and wrists as her body reacts to that, so much so that she doesn't notice the thick belt around her waist until she sits up and it digs in. She feels it, looks up.

“Let me guess, I'll find a ticket for next week and you won't restore me before then?”

The magician beams at her as he leads her into a bow.