



Bitten

DARK EROTIC STORIES EDITED BY
SUSIE BRIGHT

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SUSIE BRIGHT



CHRONICLE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO

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“I have cultivated my hysteria
with pleasure and terror.”

—*Charles Baudelaire*



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INTRODUCTION

GOTHIC STORIES ARE THE ROMANTIC ROOTS OF ECSTASY AND TRAGEDY.

They seek out magic in everyday life; they read the symbols instead of the fine print. The gothic storyteller doesn't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.

When I approached the authors in this collection for their original stories, I wrote a poem for inspiration.

This, I told them, is what I'm searching for:

Perverse fairy tales
Erotic spirits
Sexually compulsive haunts
The baroque savage
Bohemian, post-punk, Dark Wave,
an obsession
sacred taboos
a mystical view of the sexual body
Elizabethan, Victorian, Cajun, Latin, African, and Catholic tastes
Give me lugubrious passion, unrelieved thirsts,
the lushness of black, the velvet hammer
Noir effects
"A marked preference for dark colors and sentiments"
Sexy-spooky, ethereal carnality,
Daily horror as subversive social critique
The erotic arc of the unconscious,
The bawdy kitsch and cocky comedy of horror
Les Fleurs du Mal!

Whatever served as their erotic muse, our writers performed as if flames were licking their ink. I hope you'll enjoy their bent, and beautiful, instincts.

Susie Bright, Editor, All Saints Day, 2008

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THE DEVIL'S INVISIBLE SCISSORS

Sera Gamble

THE SOUL ISN'T A GLOWING ORB. It doesn't look like a halo. It has no wings. It doesn't live inside your heart. Everything you ever learned about the soul is wrong.

If you asked Gina to describe the human soul, she'd tell you to picture a cluster of shiny balloons bobbing in the air a couple of feet above your head, tethered to you by invisible strings. Except, the strings aren't strings, of course—they're lines of energy. Perhaps, if you're the type, you sometimes sense them. The bottom of each string, she'd tell you, is tied to your solar plexus.

To you or me, Gina looks like a slightly bored executive assistant with a naughty streak and a hidden sad story. She's the only woman in the bar wearing stockings, maybe the only woman in Los Angeles wearing stockings with a black seam up the back. Gina has on a silk blouse, sleeveless; pencil skirt, tight; black slingback shoes with scuffed points. Gina has cherub lips and "Black Dahlia" hair and slightly crooked teeth that make you trust her. Sometimes she finishes off the look with a baby gold cross, but that only really works on guys from the Midwest. Out here, it's all God-doubting sometime Buddhists from Protestant or Jewish families, thirsty only for big money or kind eyes, likely to pray only in the moments before they receive their test results.

Cool by Gina. Big-city boys are easier, though you'd think the opposite; you'd think their hard shell would prove tougher to penetrate. Truth is, they're usually farther from home, lonelier, smarting from some recent screwing-over of the professional or personal kind. You know how people say everyone in L.A. is fake? They're being dramatic. It's not that bad. Nevertheless, truth is, a man in a bar like this, a bar with expensive chairs and designer shot glasses, is surprised to find a woman like Gina really listening to him. Not sizing him up. Not glancing at the door. Not waiting for an opening in which to wedge her pointy leather toe so she can talk about herself.

Gina listens with a magical stillness, and the men's eyes go wide like the eyes of shy ten-year-olds. Their breathing changes, their posture. They lean close. Speak quieter, and—yes! She's still riveted! Smitten, they open their hearts.

You think that's a metaphor for vulnerability, and it is, but it is also a factually accurate description. A doorway they cannot see, and probably don't know exists, is hidden in their chests. By hidden, I mean invisible to regular eyes like yours or mine. If you asked Gina what the doors look like, she'd tell you each set is different. Some are fleshy, some more like antique wooden cabinets. Occasionally she sees a pair of doors that unfold like pterodactyl wings. She has no idea what any of this means, how the shape of your particular set of doors correlates to karma or genetics. Whatever; Gina doesn't dwell on the mysteries. She sits and listens and watches for the moment when the doors swing wide.

Now would be a good moment to tell you that Gina is not really an executive assistant. Gina is a demon.

Between Gina's breasts is a delicate silvery chain from which hangs a pair of razor-fine invisible scissors. She can feel their shape against her skin, their weight, their warmth. These scissors are the means by which she cuts the energy strings we were discussing earlier. The moment those doors in the chest of her victim swing open, she reaches for her scissors and threads her thumb and forefinger through their invisible loops. This action freezes time. All sound stops. All movement. For that moment, Gina alone moves in a world that is a sudden candid

photograph. She finds frozen time unnerving, the sensation not unlike having pillows pressed hard against both ears. So she works quickly. She reaches through the doors and hooks one sparkly string. Opens her scissors. Snip: one bright balloon, one grape off the cluster.

Tonight's victim is in his mid-forties and wears a three-thousand-dollar suit and two days of beard. He's drinking whiskey, neat, and picking at an appetizer of tomatoes and mozzarella. He looks miserable. Gina is thinking that it's almost too easy.

She rises from her barstool. Slowly adjusts her skirt, pulling it straight. When she looks up, Two-Day Beard looks away. Gina leans against the bar and unnecessarily asks the bartender to point the way to the ladies' room. He nods in the direction of the frosted-glass double doors. Gina takes her time crossing the room.

The doors are heavy. She remembers the last time she soul-cut a guy who had doors like these. He was tall, athletic. She hadn't needed to fuck him—she almost never needs to fuck any of them to get them to open up—but she indulged because he was so damn pretty. She took him to her apartment, to the guest bedroom. He'd been telling her a story from his childhood, something about the first time he played soccer, how his folks paid attention to him when he won. She'd had the fleeting thought that this guy needed therapy far more than he needed sex, and that if he'd had some therapy he wouldn't be in a strange woman's apartment, about to have a piece of his soul ripped from his body. She'd taken her time undressing him, lingering over each extravagantly muscled arm, the taut skin around his navel, ignoring the trembling frosted-glass doors over his chest that would fly open with the smallest kind word from her. She'd waited, carefully avoiding eye contact until he was inside her, making him work for it, pull her by the hair to kiss him, beg to be taken. And so it was fitting, really, that taking him is exactly what she did.

The corridor to the restrooms is long, lit by mod square sconces over recessed nooks bearing single orchids. Gina suddenly realizes she loathes this bar. The pretension of it, the reek of cash and sexual negotiation. The soullessness; often, literally. How many times has she chatted up a guy, pushed his buttons, lied her way into his confidence, watched

his doors shudder and give way—only to find his soul cluster already pruned bare, five or six straggler balloons bobbing up there where a fat bouquet should be? And the guy staring at her, thinking victory thoughts about the likelihood that he was about to get a blow job from the hottest chick in the bar, thinking also that she seemed classy, she seemed real, she seemed to really listen, and maybe this could go somewhere, maybe he could love her, maybe she could save him. Clueless to the fact that Gina was only the latest in a long line of demons who'd sidled up to him at the office, at the gym, on the beach. Friendly salesmen with too-good deals, boss types offering the mentorship Daddy never did, big-eyed girls. Soon he'd have nothing left, not one blue balloon. What then? Hell, Gina supposes; and before that, a swift downward spiral, a howling need for liquor, insomnia or nightmares, the desire to jerk the steering wheel into the center divider, sudden snap violence that makes the news.

It's not pretty, what Gina does. She knows. Sometimes she has a few beers with a demon friend and gasses on about how they sustain the balance of the universe by picking off the weak—but sober, she feels that's bullshit. Sober, she knows that she does what she does because that's what demons do. Demons toe the line. With good reason; Gina's boss is arctic, calculating, quiet, relentless, and above all—wildly successful. You don't maintain that level of success without an ability to exact swift retribution. In fact, it's the trait he's most known for in the world at large. As for Gina's personal relationship with her boss: she's only met him twice. She's happy about that. Taking assignments by text message suits her just fine.

Gina pushes open the first door on her right—but it's not the bathroom, it's a lounge cluttered with glasses and crumpled napkins from a private party earlier in the evening. The remains of a cake litter the table, a pile of gooey candles. Gina stares.

This might be a good moment to let you know that Gina was born just like you and me. She started out human. And today is her birthday.

Gina tries not to remember her birthday. She reasons that human birthdays are meaningless to a demon, despite the fact that she still has a human body to attend to, feed, moisturize, exfoliate, dress.

Gina exits the birthday lounge. Heads back into the bar. She didn't need to use the bathroom anyway. Just roping Two-Day Beard with her absence.

When Gina reenters the bar, Two-Day is right where she left him, nursing his drink, fussing with his napkin. Gina is thinking about how there's not a single bone of her that wants to soul-cut this guy. Usually, she perks up right before she goes to work on someone, because she's so good with her scissors now that it feels less like surgery and more like art. She enjoys the feeling of being a pro, of filling her quota, keeping her boss pleased and therefore distant.

You're probably wondering how a nice girl like Gina got to be a demon, and we'll get to that, but first let me tell you what's about to happen. Gina will plan to close the deal with Two-Day, but on her way back to the bar, she'll spot the man sitting in the corner. He will be wearing jeans and a worn Henley shirt, and he will be scrawling in a quad-ruled notebook. He'll have something amber over ice in a tumbler neglected near his elbow, and he'll be wearing an expression that dwells halfway between melancholy and determination.

Something about this man will arrest Gina in her steps. She'll realize she's seen him before, in this bar, in the same corner booth, writing. She'll notice his left-handedness, his boyish cheap haircut, the merest hint of a bruise under the left eye of his otherwise well-preserved face. She'll wonder how old he is—a wise thirty-two? A sheltered forty? She'll wonder what he's writing, if he's a writer or just one of those sad people who write a lot to try to expel a bit of their sadness. She'll wonder why he chose this pretentious place that doesn't deserve him, and then her thoughts will drop into the valley of her belly when she notices the biteability of his full lower lip.

When Gina catches herself thinking all these things, she'll tell herself she's just tired and distracted. It's not like the guy's that interesting, really; she's just having an off night.

That's when the man will look up at her, and when their eyes meet she will feel a fine tightening in her chest like a single hair-width thread squeezing the air from her lungs. And he will ever so slightly startle, because a moment of mutual recognition that intense always

feels physical, like touching a bare wire. Gina will see this happen with such clarity, it will feel as though she's slipped her fingers through the loops and frozen him there in the same second that battered, lonely, fierce part of him clocks its identical twin inside her.

Immediately, her rational mind, her superior demon mind, will begin to bellow a sharp command: Snap out of it! Whatever she imagines she's feeling, it's exhaustion, too many nights in a row of scissor work without a spa day, the annoying fact that it's her birthday. It has nothing to do with Melancholy over there in the worn-out shirt with the bar-brawl eye. He's nothing, he's human, he's a man.

As for Melancholy, he'll look confused and a little scared of his response. He'll look away. Gina will watch him debate looking up again for three ridiculously long seconds.

For the first time in Gina's demonic life, she will consider blowing off work—well, not blowing it off, she couldn't do that, so call it procrastinating—and instead cross the room to that booth and slide in and say . . . what would she say? She has no idea, she doesn't know how to socialize without an agenda. Flirting feels dirty to her, the foreplay to thievery; she just wants to get closer to him so she can get a better look. Just look; five minutes. Surely Two-Day will linger.

Melancholy will look up again. Cautious now, braced against whatever might transpire between his eyes and hers. Gina, whom we know to be thrown way off her game, will feel almost humanly shy. To cover this, she will start to smile, then think better of it. He will watch all this with curiosity and not look away. Gina will tell herself that she could just do this guy, and then Two-Day. If she went to the man in the corner now, it would be work; she would just be doing her job. But Gina can sense a soul ripe for scissoring, and she will feel with every cell that Melancholy would not be an easy take. Therefore, she has no business looking back at him. But she won't stop looking. He looks like he's spent a few birthdays alone.

Gina will go to this man. She will say the first thing to come to mind—*How did you bruise your eye?* And he'll smile, a little embarrassed, and he will answer, *Have you ever done something you knew was a bad idea, on purpose?*

But before we get to that, you should know how Gina came to be a demon. It helps explain a thing or two about what happens between her and Melancholy, whom she will eventually come to know as Matt William Robinson, professional ghostwriter, bearer of soul-deep sorrow, greatest fuck of her life.

Gina was an ordinary baby. She was an ordinary child. By ordinary, I mean human, but once we're in that general category, Gina was far from average. She was, from a very young age, a little too pretty.

Gina got boobs at twelve, and then the real trouble started. Men, and the lesser evil, boys. Their dopey gazes, their insinuating tones. None of them particularly interested Gina, in the same way no one lion would catch the fancy of a fresh young antelope. She grew bookish and quiet, and she took the long way home.

Eventually, a bad thing happened, as they do to more girls than you'd like to imagine. The bad thing happened on a weekend camping trip; Gina was sixteen by then and thought herself a black belt in fending off advances. But she'd mostly practiced on boys her age, and the camping trip was organized by men, fathers. She went into the woods with one of the dads, for tinder. She's never told anyone what happened, so I won't tell you either. It's what you're imagining, anyway.

They say the Devil has a way of knowing, and they're right. The Devil approached Gina the very next Monday as she walked home from school, alone, poorly hiding her despair, the ache still in her body, the permanent injury to her heart. She felt like dying. He stepped out of a black car parked at the corner. He was beautiful and frightening, like a movie Nazi. Perfect silver hair, smooth brow. He looked at once interested in Gina and completely detached.

What Gina knows now: she never stood a chance. Her boss exerts a kind of quiet persuasion as unfightable as gravity. All that talk about being given a choice at the crossroads is bullshit. The Devil has nothing if not perfect timing; he comes to you at the moment you most need to say yes.

He stood to the side of her path, as if to indicate she was free to walk by. But it was clear that he was there for her; he'd been waiting. So Gina asked: *Who are you?* A week ago, Gina might have run. But now she had little else to lose.

The Devil said, *I am here to help you.*
Help me what?
Take revenge.

Gina got in his car. The seats were soft white leather. He reached across her lap, never touching her, and opened the glove compartment. His hand was so pale and smooth as to appear glassy. It gave her an uneasy, insecty feeling in her stomach. He pulled out a tray lined with white satin. It was perfectly empty. Gina was puzzled. He watched her, waiting for an answer. She knew better, and she didn't care. She nodded yes.

When she looked down at the tray again, it held a pair of silver scissors.

Gina and Matt talk and drink straight whiskey for over an hour. His melancholy is loneliness, she realizes; that and the unfortunate ability to see people clearly. That talent, he tells her, gets him in a lot of trouble. Yes, she's drinking, she's having a bad day, but she also likes her new dangerous experiment, letting this Matt William Robinson in for a few minutes. Just to see what that's like. Before she gets right back to work.

When she'd slid into his booth, Gina had almost believed the line she told herself—that this man would be an extra-bonus soul-cut, that she could do him and then Two-Day, no problem. She's done it before. Once she did three in a night, all in this bar between the hours of 9:00 P.M. and 1:00 A.M., and when she got home the Devil had left roses at her door.

For the first time in her life, Gina feels how all those other men felt when she listened to them. Matt watches her talk with a steady gaze, eyes narrowing every time she shrugs, not letting her get away with anything. Not about where she came from, where she grew up, what she did for a living—she'd just have given him the same old lies. He wants to know how she feels about things. This bar, its bartender, the last book she read that he read as well. Even, at one point, Two-Day, who was laughing too loud and caught Matt's eye. He listens with a look that says *thank you*, that says *I want to know you*, that says *who the fuck are you, you amazing thing*. For his part, Matt's observations are wry, quick little BBs. He takes this bar about as seriously as Gina does. He

comes here to write because its self-seriousness amuses him, because he works better with a little noise and a drink or two, because the books he ghostwrites benefit from the place's vibe.

While Gina talks, she watches Matt's hands, large, slightly rough, a writer but a guy who does his own yard work maybe, builds things or fixes things, and part of her brain never stops noticing, thinking the wholesome, easy way he lives inside his limbs. In this city, men inhabit their heads and their dicks and everything in between is at worst ignored, and at best organized and disciplined in the way of window dressing.

There's Matt. Reaching across the table to adjust the wayward collar of Gina's silk blouse. He lets a finger graze her chin. He doesn't say anything, and what he is saying is that she is beautiful; and when is the last time a man treated Gina this way, as a genuine possibility? As a person with a life, a world that might be visited; as something more than the prettiest way to spend the next hour? How could Gina not take him into the lounge and fuck him immediately?

Gina is the one who says it out loud, acknowledges the fact that she and Matt are past conversation and into foreplay. He responds to her theory with a game grin and asks if she'd like to go somewhere with him. Gina looks at Two-Day, chatting now with a not-unattractive middle-aged woman. She can't leave this bar; she knows she can't leave this bar.

You might be wondering why Gina doesn't just scam, seeing as how she's already made the decision to play hooky on the soul-cut in favor of tasting the furiously compelling body of Matt. The reason is the scissors.

She tried to take them off once. Five years ago. She was flirting up an easy victim, his doors flew open like cheap plantation shutters, and when she looked up at his soul cluster all she saw was one red balloon. Just one. She'd never done that before, severed the last string of a guy's soul. She'd never been the one to pull the trigger.

Once it wasn't theoretical, Gina found she didn't like doing it at all. That guy was the only time she'd found herself clicking onto news sites later, dreading to see his mug shot. Then, one evening a week later, she was about to turn onto the freeway on-ramp when she noticed the unmoving snake of red taillights ahead. She stuck to city streets and,

when she turned on her radio, discovered the freeway closure was on account of a suicide.

She listened just long enough to ascertain the jumper was male, then slammed the “off” button and pulled over. She had the clear thought that Plantation Shutters—there was no doubt the jumper was he—was a weaselly little shit with a shallow life built on scrupulousness. When she’d come to the bar that night, he’d been aggressive and dangerously bored at first whiff, the type of guy who’d slip a girl a Roofie or leave a so-called friend coked-out and convulsing on the bathroom floor. He’d given his soul away, piece by piece by piece; every demon gave him a new chance to show a little discernment. He’d probably—he’d definitely—deserved to die.

Gina felt at once like the world was better without Plantation Shutters. And, at the same time, like the guy’s stink was unwashably on her.

Gina reached into her shirt and slipped the scissors out. The fine silver ball chain tickled her nape. She gently pulled the scissors, and the chain lengthened in a way that reminded her of a seat-belt harness. And then, for the first time since the day she’d put it on, she started to slip the chain up over her head.

The chain tightened quickly, decisively. Caught just under her neck, the scissors wedged between chin and clavicle. The fucker was not coming off. Gina’s a smart woman. She didn’t try twice.

To satisfy her curiosity, she allowed the chain to settle back to its normal length against her chest. Then grasped the scissors and slowly pulled out a little extra give. And stabbed herself in the chest as hard as she could.

You’re probably guessing she couldn’t even break skin, and you’re right. If you ever wondered if the phrase *a deal’s a deal* originated with situations like the one Gina was in: yup.

Gina never looked for loopholes before that day, but since then she’d kept up a constant test of her edges. Once she’s in the bar with an assignment, jetting’s out of the question. She crosses the threshold—the scissors blink awake and start to get warm. Then hot. Then get hotter until she can’t handle it and has to turn around. The time she made a

real attempt, she got blistered for her trouble. And her boss was waiting for her when she got home that night, in the pale and glassy flesh, to make conversation and never once mention that he didn't appreciate Gina's newfound delinquent tendencies. He didn't have to. She clicked into place like a toy soldier on a plastic peg. Gina the demon, like Gina the person, has always been a good girl.

So: if Gina wishes to have sex with Matt, she'll have to do it here, and quickly. Luckily, she remembers the empty birthday lounge.

Matt is delighted to find that the lounge door is possessed of a lock. He's smiling again, an endearing cowboy grin; he confesses that he hasn't done anything like this since college. As soon as she steps out of her shoes, he has her by the hair with both hands, and they are up against a wall.

Matt runs hot; she can feel his skin through both layers of their clothes. He's blond, he blushes easily, he's blushing now. She's disarmed by the sharpness of his gaze as he takes her in—there's that melancholy again, right before he looks away. He lowers his mouth to her neck. He's murmuring something into her hair, *Who the fuck are you, you amazing thing*. He is half-laughing in wonder as she unbuckles him and does battle with his zipper.

Matt does a fantastic job with Gina's many buttons, exposing her belly to the cool air of the lounge and then his too-warm hands, making a happy sound in his throat when he discovers that the bow between the cups of her bra is, in fact, a front clasp.

He tells her she tastes good; she tastes like wine and cool beach air at night and something else, he doesn't know what, he must further investigate, and this is the moment that the trouble begins.

What happens, unbeknownst to Gina, is that Two-Day and the not-unattractive middle-aged woman come to an understanding. Two-Day reaches for his wallet, stands, and makes his way to the front of the bar to settle her check.

Matt has won the fight with Gina's pencil skirt. She's giggling, liquored up, and terribly aroused and something like free. She has never wanted to see a penis in her life the way she wants to see Matt's now; she finally, finally gets it, and she is ordering him to take off his pants

in a voice that makes him laugh. That's when the invisible scissors begin to vibrate.

It is subtle at first, but Gina notices right away. It's a warning, and she knows it. *We should hurry*, she whispers to Matt, and he shrugs a whatever-you-want shrug and picks her up by the hips and lowers her onto the table. He sweeps aside the crumpled napkins and cake plates. He bites her earlobe and tells her *You say that now, but you're just going to want to do it again*. When she laughs, the scissors tingle harder, and suddenly that tingle feels not only manageable but good—like part of what is happening. She realizes this isn't going to be a problem. It is her birthday, and something wonderful is happening to her.

Matt stands at the edge of the table and pulls her against him by the legs. She wraps around him. He licks her nipple slowly. *Oh, I'm sorry, did you say I was supposed to hurry up?*

The rest of Gina's clothes have come off, even the anachronistic stockings. Matt's shirt is still on, mostly, and that feels protective, makes her feel slightly less naked in the lounge of a swanky bar with the indistinct shadows of waitstaff brushing by the other side of the frosted-glass door. His skin is even hotter now; she feels it with her thighs against his hips, almost uncomfortably so. But in a moment that is going to be the least of her problems because Two-Day just left the building.

Matt is saying *I don't have anything*, meaning, she supposes, a condom, and the idea that this matters boggles her. She starts to say *We'll just have to trust each other*, but she is cut off mid-sentence by the sudden searing pain of the invisible scissors. She gasps, and in that moment, Matt slides inside her with a shocked sound of pleasure. He starts to move again and Gina sits up, grabs him by the shoulders, rocks against him—it feels good, so good it is breaking through the burning. The pain intensifies, and it is all she can feel—and then the wet motion inside her takes over again; the two sensations tango with each other. Matt is moaning *you are amazing, you are amazing*, and he is pulling off his shirt so that more of him can touch more of her. He stares at her in frank-eyed awe that reads as sadness, as knowledge that this feels too good and will not last long enough.

Of course, Matt cannot see what is really happening, which is this: the scissors are red-hot and starting to sink into the flesh of Gina's

chest. The pain is becoming so wild that she can't see—she wonders if the scissors will sink all the way to her heart; in one short violent image she pictures that little red fist sliced in two; she begins to sob and she cannot stop.

But somehow, impossibly, her nervous system is a juggler, an acrobat, a magician, because she can still feel him in her, that solid good warmth, the movement getting rougher and more insistent and better and better. She fears she'll scream, so she holds her breath. She grips him harder. She can't stand this. Or: she can't stand this if she lets him go.

Gina gives in. She is a demon, but her body is still a human body, and nothing is more powerful to the human body than surrender. She unsteels herself from her resistance and rides every sensation, the searing invisible scissors, Matt's deep movements against the endings of her most exquisite nerves, his rough hands on either cheek, even his honey whiskey breath breaking over her as he presses his forehead into hers. Her body shakes. It shakes hard. She is in agony, and she is about to come.

Matt is whispering to her, she's shaking harder, the tears streaming, the scissors digging deeper. She wonders if this is meant to kill her; she is amazed that Matt is just a man and cannot see the truth of what is happening to her heart, has no idea that she is with him, but she is also in hell. That's when she realizes what Matt's saying, *It's okay, Gina, it's okay, it's all gonna be okay*. He pulls her against him, the white-hot scissors between them, and as the blades sink to touch her ribs, Gina's body shudders and Matt catches her shriek in his hand clamped tight over her mouth. *That's good, that's right, it's gonna be okay now*.

Gina's eyes fly open, and she sees that the doors in Matt's chest have flung wide, but they are neither wood nor glass nor flesh; they are made of light.

The pain is gone. Gina is lying on the banquet table. Matt is standing over her, naked, watching her. He is standing too still. He is waiting for her to understand.

What did you do? Gina asks.

Matt smiles sympathetically. He looks so ordinary. He looks like a regular man, damp and rumped from illicit sex.

Gina puts a hand to her chest. She sits bolt upright. *Give them back*.

You don't want them back.

If you don't give them back, he'll kill me.

Gina. I did you a favor.

Gina stares at Matt. She is thinking about what's in store for her. She goes numb at the thought.

Matt touches her cheek with his fingertips. She's forgotten how to move. He still looks beautiful to her. She decides to memorize his face, because she'll need a pretty memory soon. She says, *Wish me happy birthday.*

Matt looks surprised. *Happy birthday, Gorgeous.*

Gina looks away as Matt dresses. Her limbs are sore and heavy and warm. She's heard stories about this sort of thing—the kinds of stories you and I have heard, and probably, like Gina, dismissed as religious bullshit, but also some low-to-the-ground rumors with details she now realizes are legitimate. Even a thing or two about how she could get her scissors back. If she wanted to.

When she looks up, Matt is gone. She knows what's waiting for her when she gets home: the boss. Might as well get dressed and drive to Santa Monica to face her fate.

Except: the air in here, in this lounge. It smells like Matt's skin, his breath; it smells like his body and her body mixed and made liquid by heat, and also like good whiskey and like chocolate cake frosted with happy words. Somewhere in the air is the invisible smoke of the scissors burning her flesh and the invisible smoke of the candles blown out at the birthday party. The air is full of wishes. Some of them granted, maybe.

Gina leans back on her hands on the table and crosses her legs, still naked. The Devil can damn well come to her.



THE RESURRECTION ROSE

Anne Tourney

EVERY DAY MADAME FEEDS. She pierces Lucy's flesh at the wrist, thigh, sometimes over her left breast—yes, Madame even taps into Lucy's heart—and draws her daily sacrifice. Each feeding takes Lucy from death to restoration; she is born again and again in the shadow of a rose. No one but 'Madame de Mortoise' knows about her essential rituals. In Lucy's little town in the redwoods north of San Francisco, she is known only for her gift in growing flowers.

'Madame de Mortoise' is a rose.

It's an April morning. The woods around Lucy's house fill with cars long before she opens the nursery, and the customers park along the narrow roads and wait like lovers for her to open the gates. Lucy never lets the clientele rush her. In the greenhouse behind the tea rose arbor, something more urgent is waiting.

After her light breakfast, Lucy steps into her flip-flops and pads out into the garden. The other roses are a blur of transient blooms in fashionable colors. Contemporary blossoms with clever cultivar names: 'Miss Priss,' 'La Femme Nikita,' 'Shock Me.' But until she finishes her business in the greenhouse, none of the other flowers matter. By the time Lucy opens the greenhouse door, she is loosening the sash of her coral satin robe.

“I’m coming,” she murmurs. *’J’arrive, ma chère.’*

‘Madame de Mortoise’ is looking sullen today. The steam of her funk fills the little glass structure, its transparent panels carpeted with her vines. She has spread her leaves like hundreds of tiny hands to block the early light, and her dark red blossoms—never lovely in the best of circumstances—are curled as tight as truculent brown fists. No small sips will do when she’s in a mood like this; she will want to feed straight from Lucy’s heart.

“What’s the matter, Madame? Bad dreams last night?”

Lucy kneels at the root of the rose. She tosses back her sleep-tangled curls, gold laced with gray, and lets her robe fall open. She cups her breasts with her hands, letting the freckled flesh spill over her palms. Her breasts aren’t as firm as they once were, but she’s had more than her measure of youthful years. Thanks to ‘Madame de Mortoise,’ Lucy has had more time than any woman deserves.

“Did you dream of my lover Étienne Dordogne,” Lucy asks, “and his hot, dangerous blood? Poor Madame. You woke up to your sweet, tame Lucy, in another century. No wine of the French revolutionaries for you, *ma chère*. Those nights are long gone.”

Lucy leans forward. The rose’s branches rustle furiously as the roots stretch to meet her, one giant crimson thorn extended. Vines creep across Lucy’s skin; coarse leaves tease her belly and nipples as her robe drops away. The glossy blade of the thorn is as long as a hunting knife—black at the hilt, shifting to purple, then crimson, then pink, and finally a pale, pearlescent green. Lucy closes her eyes. The thorn plunges into the top of her breast. She moans as the shaft sinks deeper, little by little.

Madame’s voracious branches turn into a living cage, gripping Lucy by the waist, wrists, and ankles as she twists under the caress of the flowers and the thorn’s penetration. Lucy is a captive. Her thighs open, and the smaller thorns move in to tease her pussy lips. Blossoms bat against her lips and cheeks; the petals slap her like silken palms. What human lover could ever pierce her so?

The thorn pierces her heart. Lucy shudders, but the trembling stops as the thorn passes into the secret chambers. Her eyelids flutter. Her mouth falls open, and pearls of spit bead on her lower lip. She

remembers a deep kiss in the garden at Versailles, a school of nude bodies writhing like pale fish on pink satin, blood spilling into a silver chalice. Her breath deepens. Her blood pumps slowly, until her muscles reach a stasis approaching death.

Just before she topples into unconsciousness, a pulse begins to throb in the pit of Lucy's belly. Its rhythm drums through her blood. Her skin tingles. Hundreds of pinpricks spread from her core to her limbs, hardening her nipples and melting her pussy. The tension mounts until Lucy can't stand it anymore and begs for release.

"Take me, Madame," she groans. "Take what you need, and let me go."

The thorn shudders inside her. Madame is endlessly hungry; it's not enough for her thorns to take Lucy's lifeblood. The rose has to devour Lucy's pleasure as well, extracting a climax that leaves Lucy shaking and shattered in Madame's voracious arms. The rose parts the satin folds between her thighs, finds her clit, and taunts the pink bud to orgasm.

The thorn withdraws, tumescent. The shaft throbs with Lucy's life. A crimson bead drips from the tip, which is black now, like the root. No more pale green—this is not the Garden of Eden.

Lucy's head reels. The leaves of the rose curl with satisfaction; the flowers unfurl as nourishment rushes to the petals. Madame's branches withdraw, releasing Lucy back to ordinary life. Lying on the floor, panting, Lucy holds her hand over her heart as she floats back to reality. It feels like coming back from the dead, but that's to be expected: every feeding is a passion cycle. Today, for some reason, the rose was more famished than usual. Famished and angry.

Is Madame restless? Does she want a more exotic life, to seek out the sexual intrigue and decadence that used to stoke Lucy's libido long ago?

Lucy hopes not. She loves her cottage, nestled in the trees, with its rose gardens that descend across gentle green hills down to the cliffs that border the sea. These are years of serenity, something she craves.

But 'Madame de Mortoise' is dissatisfied. She is the only one who can lay a claim to Lucy's heart; still, she wants more. Madame misses the court life, with its political machinations as delicate as the workings of an evil clock. She misses the orgies—sexual and political—of blood. It's been too long since the rose tasted the wines of war in Lucy's veins.

Centuries ago, when Lucy and Madame's history was just beginning, there seemed to be no end to the ways they could feed from each other. Back then, the rose was a new plant, odd and unlovely, growing in a shadowed corner of the rosarian's shed, hidden away from the palace's formal gardens. It was the court rosarian who taught the girl about the flower's mysterious hungers, how this special rose was nourished not by water and earth, but from blood.

In the mornings, Lucy would run to the shed where the rose grew and let the flower suck from the tender spot below her pink-tipped breast, letting it taste the juices of Lucy's lust mingled with the sharp flavors from her adventures the night before.

But Lucy's desires have mellowed; nowadays she prefers order to excess, inner peace to passion.

"We've had plenty of excitement in our years together, Madame," Lucy grumbles as she climbs to her feet and prepares to face the twenty-first-century morning. "Don't we both deserve a restful life?"

"Your life is not your own," Madame reminds Lucy, speaking to her in the manner they've shared for over two centuries. "Remember, you *must* take care of my needs. Neither one of us will die alone."

Some of Lucy's customers might die if they don't get their own horticultural fix soon. Lucy should have opened the nursery gates fifteen minutes ago. She hurries back to the cottage as quickly as her dizziness will allow. In her own private garden, behind the stone wall that circles her fairy-tale house, she sees two strangers browsing through the sunrise-tinted blossoms of her 'Peace' rose. Lucy jerks her sash around her waist, lifts her chin, and approaches.

"How did you get in here? This area is private."

Unruffled, the strangers gaze at Lucy. They are as slim and elegant as deer in their tight black leggings and soft black leather jackets. A man and a woman, identically dressed, both wearing dark glasses even in the light of an April morning. Lucy feels like the intruder.

"Cute," the woman says, flicking one of the fat 'Peace' blossoms with her fingertips, "but common. I assume you have much more rare varieties."

Lucy bristles. "This is my personal garden. I plant what I like here."

With their yellow and pink hues and sensuous, abundant blossoms, the 'Peace' roses resemble Lucy's own body. Or at least the body she had many years ago.

The visitor smiles. Her lips form a thin crescent of scorn that reminds Lucy of a scythe.

A red scythe. Hasn't Lucy seen that mouth before? She remembers that mouth whispering, plotting, kissing, feasting on her body and the beautiful bodies of other young nobles.

"Do you sell any refreshments? Soda, tea?" asks the young man. "Even a glass of tap water would do."

His angelic face is chalky, lips puffy and pouting. He probably overworked his mouth, not to mention his liver, last night. His purple silk shirt, garishly loud among the delicate roses, is rumpled and marred with a dark stain, the collar unbuttoned to reveal a purple love bite on his ivory neck. The fly of his black trousers yawns open, revealing a flash of scarlet underwear. Still, he's oddly delectable; Lucy wonders whether she'd rather scold him to zip up his fly or invite him back to her bedroom to investigate the slight bulge under his red shorts. She notes he looks much younger than his companion, and that warms her to him.

"I'll make you some chamomile tea, if you like. With honey and lemon?"

"Sounds perfect."

The young man smiles. It transforms him from a pouting cherub into an archangel. Even with his dark glasses, he is impossibly beautiful.

"Don't bother with the tea," the woman says. "Charlot will survive; he's been hungover before. Besides, we won't be long. We just stopped by to have a peek at the 'Madame de Mortoise.'"

"What?"

Lucy's heart lurches.

"The 'Madame de Mortoise.' Rumor has it that you've got the only surviving plant."

"I . . . I've never heard of it."

"Please. You call yourself a 'rosarian,' and you've never heard of the 'Madame de Mortoise'?"

"No. I'm sorry. I assume it's an heirloom?"

The woman sighs. Her mouth droops in a moue of supreme boredom as she surveys the cozy garden, but her nostrils quiver, and her eyes, behind the shadowed lenses, rove back and forth. Lucy can feel her gaze through the black shades.

Words swim to the surface of Lucy's memory. She can hear a verse she hasn't thought of in ages, lines written for a woman whom Lucy hasn't seen in more than two hundred years. Marie, La Comtesse de Mortoise, was as famous for her erotic appetites as she was for her beauty, and there wasn't a man or woman at Versailles who hadn't been frozen—with longing, fear, or both—by her eyes:

*Behind her veil of ice
Lives a murderous curiosity—
Her eyes are restless mirrors
Of devouring luminosity*

Lucy forgets to breathe. Marie . . . is it you? How could it be you? Impossible.

By all accounts, the glorious body of the Comtesse Marie de Mortoise had been separated from her head by the smooth, swift hand of the revolution's guillotine. How could a beheaded woman be standing here in Lucy's garden, looking as sexy as she had two centuries ago?

Does Marie remember Lucy when she was the young, heartbreakingly lovely Lucille d'Arlennes?

If Marie has seen anything familiar in the half-robed woman standing in front of her, she's hiding it well. Even if the countess had survived her execution, she might not remember Lucy among the hundreds of lovers who shared her bed. The boy with her is nothing but another of her dolls. He might as well be made of straw; once she's done with him he'll be no different from the princes who lost their birthright to her, or the poets who gave up their inner muses to devote their gifts to Marie.

"The 'Madame de Mortoise' is legendary. I'm amazed that you haven't heard of it."

"Believe me, I feel like an idiot." Lucy's laugh is weak.

“Quite an interesting story behind that rose,” the Countess goes on. “Madame de Mortoise was a courtesan at the court of Louis XVI. She was quite a politician, had many lovers at the court. But when she discovered that revolutionaries make better lovers than royals, her tastes changed. Some say she grew quite . . . voracious in her hungers, impossible to satisfy. Those same revolutionaries finally had her executed. A dark red rose was named after her, in honor of her beauty.”

“Perhaps the rose was named in honor of the Countess’s taste for revolutionary blood?” Lucy suggests. She tilts her head, waiting for the other woman’s reaction, but that face is as impassive as a porcelain mask under the dark glasses.

“Who knows?” The red scythe of a mouth rises in a facsimile of a smile. That ruthless, mocking curve of the lips is so familiar that it wipes away any trace of doubt in Lucy’s mind.

“It is true, Marie!” Lucy wants to shout. “Tell us how you and your friends used to dabble in murder! You played games with human lives the way others played with cards.”

“Tell her the other part of the legend,” Charlot says. “The juicy part.” His tongue flicks across his overblown lower lip.

“Madame de Mortoise did develop a predilection for the taste of blood, if you believe the old wives’ tales,” the countess says, in a tone so dismissive it could only veil a charade. “Soon she couldn’t get enough of it. She hired a band of bounty hunters to scour the streets of Paris, capturing revolutionaries and bringing them to her chambers. Once she’d taken her pleasure with them, she would stab them in the chest and drink directly from their hearts.”

“There’s more,” Charlot urges. “Tell her the rest.”

“The legend says that drinking blood gave her immortal life—”

“And whoever is pricked by one of the rose’s thorns becomes immortal, too!” Charlot bursts out.

Lucy smiles. “I’m afraid I don’t have anything nearly that exotic growing here. I can show you a few heirloom varieties, but nothing as old or as fascinating as this . . . ‘Madame de’ what?”

“Mortoise,” says the woman who was once a countess.

“Mortoise,” Lucy repeats, as if she’s never spoken the name before. “Well, I can’t offer you eternal life, but you’re welcome to look around. I’ll be opening the nursery in about five minutes. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to go inside and get dressed before my customers break down my gate.”

Lucy bustles away, praying that she looks like what she’s pretending to be: a middle-aged professional gardener, a charming woman with a head for business. Could Marie have glimpsed the lithe, golden-haired maiden under the plump, freckled shell? Out of all the hours of sensual pleasure she’d enjoyed in her many years, would she remember a handful of afternoons in Versailles?

* * *

Winter sunlight seeped through rose-colored sheets and glided across the snowy belly of Lucille d’Arlennes. It illuminated the sparse golden tendrils below. Her lover rolled his head between her thighs, letting his glossy hair brush her skin in cool caresses before the rougher treatment to come. He followed the same paths with his tongue, lapping and teasing, melting her pussy as he nipped and suckled at her dusky nipples. He painted her with his tongue from throat to thighs, stopping to pry open her moist lower lips.

“Have you ever felt the little death, chérie?” the man asked Lucy, glancing up from between her warm, white legs.

“I don’t ever want to die,” Lucille moaned. She lifted her bottom toward her lover’s mouth in a silent plea for him to go on. His tongue found a spot in her folds that Lucille had only ever touched herself, the kernel of sensation that gave her such delight when she stroked it with her fingers. But this tongue was so much more skilled than Lucy; this man’s tongue was a master of pleasure, while Lucy was just an amateur.

“We all have to surrender eventually, ma petite.”

A woman’s voice broke through Lucille’s haze. The girl gasped. She looked up to see the sheet lifted away, and the Countess de Mortoise gazing down upon them. Her cheeks, normally painted white as ivory, were tinged with the pink of an excited voyeuse. A woman with a heart of ice.

This man was not in love with Lucille. He belonged to the woman who hovered over them, Marie de Mortoise, whose appetite for watching her

partners tutor younger women was legendary. This was the first of countless times that the countess would feed off Lucille's pleasure, but today Lucille was still innocent enough to feel a rush of shame at being caught like this: nude, spread open like an oyster shell, hips rising to meet a climax that she couldn't stop or control.

"Go ahead. Give in," whispered Marie.

Lucille's skin began to hum. Her back arched. Her lover began to shake his head furiously, so that his tongue and lips created a blur of feeling in that warm place between her legs. When Lucille's swollen mouth opened to howl, Marie de Mortoise leaned over her and captured the sound with a hard kiss. As her lips met Lucille's, Marie's teeth clamped down on the younger woman's lower lip, hard enough to draw blood.

Lucille would have screamed, if her mouth hadn't been filled with Marie's greedy tongue. But the pain of that kiss startled Lucille to new heights. A glass butterfly between her legs lifted into the air and shattered into fragments of stained glass. Lucille wept at the miracle.

There were times when Marie stroked Lucille's golden hair after her orgasm and called her a spun-sugar angel; at other times, a scalding jealousy seized Marie's heart while she watched her lovers feasting off Lucille's young, succulent flesh. Marie's threats had rung through the hallways of the palace. "I'll stab her in the heart and drink from the wound!"

But instead of killing Lucille, Marie used her again and again. She gave the spun-sugar angel to lovers who had killed or stolen for her, and she found her own delight in watching Lucille's pleasure.

Finally, there came a day when the kisses and caresses weren't enough to feed Marie's hunger. She needed a stronger, darker liqueur. She wanted to see scarlet fluids splashed against white skin; she wanted to smell the reek of fear; she wanted to hear the throb of a dying heart.

* * *

Inside the cottage, Lucy peers out at the garden through the eyelets in a lace curtain. Marie and Charlot haven't left. They stand under one of the rose arbors talking to each other, glancing around the property. Marie's posture is as steely and proud as ever. Her sleek burgundy hair,

black velvet leggings, and black turtleneck sweater belong to the twenty-first century, but her lips are painted the same Chinese scarlet that she wore more than two hundred years ago.

As if she weren't busy enough, Lucy will have to keep a close eye on the greenhouse today. If those glittery eyes hadn't recognized her, then the delicate nostrils would have caught the scent of Madame's blooms.

Marie is here to reclaim the resurrection rose. Marie always gets what she wants.

* * *

The rosarian's hands were as hard as cowhide, toughened by thousands of rose thorn pricks. His palms were broad and black, like burnt earthen bowls, but when he held one of the rose blossoms, those palms became as gentle as porcelain teacups. The intimate secrets of all the king's roses were embedded in his fingers and his nostrils; he could identify any one of the flowers by its texture and scent. This was vital to his success because the rosarian was blind.

"How do you know that this is a saffron rose?" Lucille asked. "How can you tell that this one is the color of snow, and that one the color of water at twilight?"

"I wasn't always blind, little fool," he said. "Any rosarian who relies on his eyes alone is no good, especially to a king."

"What makes the fragrances different?"

"A hundred things. The earth they root in, for instance. The way they feed."

"How do your roses feed?"

"Ravenously. Without cease. They have to, or they wouldn't live past a generation. With the right nourishment, they can live forever."

"What do they eat, then?"

"See for yourself."

The rosarian reached for Lucille's hand. As his fingers clasped her smooth flesh, he rolled the ball of his thumb around in her palm, then stroked the silken pads at the base of her fingers. Back and forth, the skin of his thumb grated her sensitive hand in a coarse caress that made her giggle and blush.

"I can tell what color you are right now, mademoiselle," he said. "Your cheeks are the same bright pink as the rose that blooms in the east end of the king's garden, and your nipples are as tight as its buds in early spring."

The rosarian reached for one of those very buds and tweaked the nub hard through Lucille's gown. She yelped in pain, then sighed, as her nipple tingled between his viselike fingers. A starburst of desire radiated from her breast to her belly—she didn't want the old man, couldn't want someone so gnarled and stern and crusty, but she was blooming for him under her skirt, her hidden lips wet.

He held out her wrist to one of the plants. The leaves began to rustle, and a long thorn protruded through the foliage. Lucille gave another high-pitched laugh, thinking of what the growing shaft reminded her of. But her laughter stopped when the thorn pierced the transparent skin of her wrist. Instead of flowing freely, her blood disappeared into the thorn.

Lucille could not move. A whimper rose in her throat, but her lips wouldn't open to release it. Her heartbeat slowed to meet the rhythm of the rose's suckling. The rosarian gently backed her toward a wooden table crowded with his tools. How kind he is, she thought, as he leaned her against the hard surface, so that her slack body wouldn't drop to the floor. His hands foraged through her long skirt, lifting the brocade like a tent so he could kneel at her feet and press his sightless face against her damp golden pelt, lapping the juices that slicked her thighs. The scent of her own musk mingled with the spicy smell of the rose's leaves. The flower sucked at Lucille's wrist, and the rosarian sucked with equal hunger at the fruit between her legs. In her waking life, she never would've dreamed that the muddy old man could make her come, but in the spell woven by the vampire flower, Lucille dissolved into cries and shudders under his mouth.

The plant drank and drank, until Lucille thought it would drain her dry. The rose surged with new life. Its petals flushed with color, its stems straightened and lengthened. The incredible thorns grew long and sharp and gleaming, like ebony knives. When the rose was finished, it released Lucille. She swayed back and forth, her vision clouded by a red mist.

"What was that?" she gasped. Her eyelids floated open. The rosarian clambered to his feet with surprising agility, making her wonder if his lovemaking had been a dark fantasy woven by the flower. "The rose tried to kill me!"

"Not kill you. Share your life. You have youth and time in abundance. Feed some to the rose, and you'll be rewarded."

"How?"

The rosarian clamped his hand over Lucille's mouth. His skin smelled of earth, dung, crushed rose petals, and something else. His thighs, hard as wood, leaned against her. Feeling his cock through his muddy trousers, she knew she hadn't imagined coming under his greedy mouth. She'd never known he desired her that way; she thought he preferred the textures and fragrances of roses to anything the female body had to offer. Now she could feel proof she'd been wrong. She couldn't help imagining what his cock would look like, twisted and knobby, like a rose root. The thought made her titter, and he tightened his grip. Lucille cringed, whimpering against his dank hand as she tried to shrink away from him. But he bracketed her so firmly against the table she might as well have been paralyzed.

"You ask too many questions, little fool," he said, as tenderly as a lover. "If you give me some peace, I will consider creating a rose for you. She will be the palest gold, the darkest ivory, with a pink star at its heart. A blossom to match your face."

Behind the barrier of the old man's hand, Lucille squealed with joy.

"Ah, but I haven't promised you anything. Many rosarians name their flowers after beautiful ladies, for no other reason than to honor the faint blush on a cheek, or the softness of the hair. I don't take my flowers so lightly. The roses I breed are different from any other flowers on earth, and of the few I've grown, only a few have survived. You have to prove that you have the heart to keep your bond with the rose. Your beauty isn't enough to win you this honor; you have to be passionate and strong. Can you do that?"

Lucille nodded, batting her eyelids furiously to convey her promise.

The rosarian removed his hand from Lucille's mouth. He lowered his voice to a cracked whisper. "This bond will be much stronger than anything you've shared with your . . . lovers. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Lucille felt her cheeks redden. How did the old man know about her long afternoons in the room draped with satin?

"To make the rose your own, you will have to feed her daily—more often if she demands it. You will have to open your wrist to her, your thigh, even your throat. Wherever you feel a pulse, that's where she might ask to feed."

As the old man spoke, he touched Lucille's wrist, thigh, and throat. Wherever his fingers rested, her blood thrummed in response.

“What about my heart?” she asked. “Will the rose want my heart?”

The rosarian said nothing for a moment. He gazed at a point above Lucille’s head, with his silver, unseeing eyes.

“A rose that truly loves you may ask to feed from your heart. But don’t worry, little fool. The rose will never drain you. She’ll take enough blood to make you a weakened captive, but never so much that you can’t care for her.”

Lucille tipped her head and let her hip sway into the old man’s firm belly. “What if I gave you something else instead? Something very, very special?”

The rosarian shoved himself away from her and turned away with a grunt.

“Why should I go to all the pain and trouble of letting a flower feed off of me?” Lucille grumbled. “What would I get in return?”

“Eternal life,” the old man said.

“Hah! That’s not so grand. I’ll have eternal life if I say my prayers.”

The rosarian limped back to the corner of his shed, where he went back to fumbling with his pots. Lucille flounced out of the shed. The late afternoon sunlight and clean formal lines of the gardens were a relief after the moldy smells and lumpy shadows of the rosarian’s lair.

Eternal life. Who needed a promise like that? Lucille had no intention of doing anything as dull as dying. As her feet flew across the grass, she could already hear the strains of music floating from the palace.

But the next morning, and every morning thereafter, Lucille would go back to the rosarian’s shed to find the rose. Again and again, she would let the flower feed.

* * *

Lucy yawns and glances at the numbers on the face of her digital watch. It’s almost midnight, way past her bedtime, but she’s sworn she’ll stay awake till dawn to guard ‘Madame de Mortoise.’ Outside the greenhouse the gardens are ghostly, the rosebushes arching toward each other like dancers frozen in time. Lucy’s customers have long gone home, and her greenhouse is draped in mist. Lucy lies on a pallet of blankets at Madame’s feet, a thermos of black coffee by her side. A half circle of beeswax candles gives her enough light to see into the

shadowed hallways of the rose's foliage. Madame fills the entire structure. Lucy's blood has turned her into a cathedral.

"I've cared for you well, Madame. You've never been beautiful, but you've grown magnificent." Lucy fondles one of the rose's blooms. The blossoms remind her of shriveled monkey heads. "Marie was never beautiful, but so many men wanted her. She made me sick with envy. I was too young to understand."

Lucy reaches up and pulls down one of Madame's branches. She pokes her index finger with one of the thorns and lets Madame drink.

"You see, my blood is sweet. Marie's was bitter but powerful, like water from the River Styx. That's what her lovers wanted, a taste of oblivion. And cruelty. Don't ever forget Marie's cruelty."

* * *

Rain streamed down the palace windows. In the afternoon gloom the pink satin sheets looked tawdry, and Lucille's skin was wan. She lay trembling on the bed. Beside her lay the inert body of Étienne Dordogne. In death he was even more beautiful, his bloodless flesh as cold and creamy as the marble statues in the rose garden. His muscle-roped arms were splayed open to the sky; his cock lay along his belly, still hard and magnificent. Dark, damp hair curled like swathes of ink across his forehead, and his silver blue eyes were open wide to the ceiling, as if the ornate, gilded scrolls above his head held the messages of archangels.

Had the dying man seen angels as his two lovers slashed his throat? The gash they made yawned across his neck like a wailing red mouth, the only imperfection in a form that was flawlessly still.

"Wasn't he glorious, Lucille?" sighed Marie de Mortoise, sitting next to Lucille in the sheets. "Didn't our revolutionary taste delicious as he experienced his final death?"

Marie chuckled at her own pun. Étienne had experienced death in more ways than one that afternoon.

"I'm so happy that you were here with me, ma petite," Madame murmured, stroking Lucille's sweat-soaked curls. "It was a work of art, what we did here today. Don't you agree?"

Lucille turned her head sharply, choking back the vomit that rose in her throat.

The games had gotten darker, more dangerous, as the months passed. Marie de Mortoise grew bored with pimping Lucille; her tastes had turned wild and warped as she pushed their private orgies to heights that went way past the usual courtly decadence. Today, for the first time in Lucille's recent memory, Marie's icy mask had melted into ecstasy as she watched Étienne Dordogne die between Lucille's bare thighs.

Holding a silver chalice, Marie curled closer into Lucille's warm curves. If not for Marie, purring beside her like a well-fed cat, Lucille might have wondered if she were dead herself. Marie dipped a finger into the dark red fluid inside the cup, then painted Lucille's belly with strange symbols, her own secret alphabet of desire.

"You must drink, too, chérie. Don't be afraid."

Marie lifted the chalice to her own mouth. Her thin lips opened to receive the life wine. Then she held out the chalice to Lucille. Lucille pressed her lips together into a tight line as she tasted the bitter bile in her throat again.

"Come, come. Are you going to reject your lover's blood? You didn't reject him when he was here in your bed. This is the blood of the revolution—this was one of the men who would slaughter us like sheep if they had the chance. One sip, and your little rabbit heart will pound straight out of your chest."

Hot tears slicked Lucille's cheeks. She closed her eyes. The cold lip of the chalice was cutting into her soft mouth; still, she refused to drink. Marie spilled the blood down her chin and throat; she was screaming. She opened her eyes to see that her breasts were smeared with the life fluids of the man who had made love to her only minutes before.

"Look at me, Lucille," Marie ordered. "Look at the woman who loves you. I do love you, you know. When I saw you ride Dordogne, with your wild eyes and greedy mouth, I knew you were more than a protégée to me. And when you took the knife by the hilt and held it over his throat, I realized that you mean more to me than any of my lovers. I don't know what we are to each other, but I do know one thing."

"What?" The smell of Marie's desire, lingering on her skin, made Lucille's stomach turn. When her hand brushed across Lucille's cheek, the younger woman heaved.

“When we first began playing together, you were a vain, empty-headed little girl. Today you’ve become a woman, Lucille, and so much more. When you shared the knife with me, you became something close to immortal. You became mine.”

“No! You disgust me.”

Marie clutched Lucille’s cheeks and turned her face so that she couldn’t avoid meeting the countess’s eyes. Marie’s pupils were so dilated that the black edged out the surrounding color.

“You are culpable, too, Lucille. Never forget that.”

Marie smiled down at her lovely protégée. The crimson scythe had never looked so sharp.

“We are two of a kind now, ma petite. Two of a kind. You held the knife that cut his throat, chérie. I made the slice, but you held the knife.”

* * *

It’s 3:00 A.M., the rising time of restless spirits. In her greenhouse, Lucy stretches out on her pallet and rolls over on one elbow to pour another cup of coffee. She holds one of Madame’s blossoms against her face, inhaling its peculiar scent. Its perfume has never been anything like the fragrance of an ordinary rose. ‘Madame de Mortoise’ smells of earthy loam with a note of cloying decay, of clotted blood and ancient revelation. To some noses, her fragrance might seem foul, but thanks to Lucy, it is pure. The acrid stench of murder had been released from Madame’s vines long ago.

A cool draft wafts through the greenhouse. The clammy breeze clings to Lucy’s shoulders like ectoplasm. She shivers. A sudden creak in the glass door, the scratch of wood on packed earth, make the tendrils of hair on the back of her neck bristle.

“Little fool,” hisses a voice behind her. “You were always the little fool. Did you really think you could keep my rose forever?”

Lucy whirls around on the pallet. The beeswax candles sputter. Marie stands outside the ring of candlelight, her face half-hidden in the penumbra. Even in the darkness, Lucy can see those eyes glittering like wet pebbles behind a smooth clay mask.

Lucy sits on her hands to hide their shaking. “Madame is mine. She’s been with me for more than two hundred years. Who do you think feeds her? Not you, Marie.”

“Poor Lucille,” Marie sighs. “You always wanted a rose of your own. But in the end you weren’t enough of an inspiration to our court rosarian, were you? Face it. You were never worthy of a rose, Lucille. You longed for the glory of having a flower named for you. The rosarian would never have named a rose for such a vain, silly creature. Your soul isn’t big enough for eternal life.”

“I’ve survived so far,” Lucy says.

“Only because the rose is so strong. One day without her, and you’d shrivel and blacken like a scrap of tissue in a bonfire. You’re too stupid to live forever.”

“If I’m so stupid, how have I avoided *you* for so long?”

“Fear,” Marie says lightly. “You’re as fearful as a rabbit. That’s your only defense.”

That’s not true, Lucy thinks to herself. The rosarian must have known that Lucille, as silly as she was, with her bubbly giggle and bouncing ringlets, had a seed of strength inside. *La jeune Lucille* wasn’t strong enough to resist the sensual temptations that Marie offered, but Lucy has been able to survive the past two centuries without dying.

Marie reaches out to pluck one of the rose’s blossoms. Lucy can see her frowning in the brownish shadows. Marie would have expected a flower of spectacular symmetry and sensuous hue to be named after her, not this misshapen ball of blood red petals.

A blossom to match your face, *ma chère* Marie de Mortoise, Lucy thinks.

“You don’t even know how to care for a rose, Lucy. Look how she’s degenerated.”

“The blossoms have always looked like that. You wouldn’t know—you were being beheaded on the day she first bloomed. Don’t you remember?”

“Of course I remember.” Marie’s blade of a mouth twists with scorn. “No one forgets the guillotine, *chérie*.”

“I never thought you’d come back. You claimed that drinking the blood of rebels made you immortal, but I never believed you. I certainly never thought you’d come back from . . . that.”

Marie preens. “It was a miracle of manipulation, I have to admit. Arranged and paid for in advance. I made sure that my body and soul would find each other again. Not easy, when the head is separated from the body, but it can be done.”

“The rosarian was the only one who could offer the gift of immortality. You *paid* for that rose, didn’t you?”

“What if I did? The old man was only human. He couldn’t live on the horseshit that he fed his roses. I gave him a generous sum for that bloodthirsty flower of his. More than generous.”

“The rosarian wouldn’t have given up the name of a rose for any amount of money.”

Marie’s laugh is bitter. “Maybe not in peaceful times, when he could putter around in the gardens without worrying about losing his head. The rosarian was no fool. He knew that once the revolutionaries took the palace, they wouldn’t spare his neck, not after he’d been loyal to the kings for so many years. Believe me, the old man was happy to sell the fruits of his avocation when the heads began to roll in Paris. I paid his way back to whatever nook in hell he came from.”

“But the rosarian gave her to me. He hid the rose from you, Marie. He told *me* to take care of her.”

Lucy could still see the rosarian’s cracked, filthy fingers looming toward her in the shadows of his shed, offering the hungry rose that had fed from Lucille’s breast. Its roots had been balled in burlap, so that Lucy could transport the plant anywhere she wished. A single flower, like a lump of dried blood, burgeoned from a branch.

“Save her,” said the old man. “Be her salvation. I was forced to name her for a murderess to save my old hide, but if you care for her, if you turn inward to find whatever you have left that is pure, the rose will become pure, too.”

“Well, then. You’ve taken care of her, Lucille. Now I’ll take her back.”

“Impossible. You’ll never separate us.”

Marie lunges forward into the circle of candlelight, thrusting her face into Lucy's, the way her lovers used to press their tender mouths forward for a kiss. Lucy cringes. Marie's skin, without its layers of paint, is yellow and foul. Her eyelids have shrunk from the dry orbs; her lips have retracted from her teeth. She purses her liver-dark mouth, reeking of rot, and leans toward Lucy's cheek. Lucy recoils.

"What's the matter, Lucille? You no longer want to be kissed by your dear Marie? I need the rose. Without her, I won't live. I've already passed my time."

"How have you gone on for so long?"

"Through the generous self-sacrifice of young men like Charlot."

"You still murder them . . ."

"Of course I do. I don't have a choice. Until I get the rose back, I have to feed on the lives of others, just as the rose does."

Marie grips Lucy's arm with her skeletal hand. Her voice softens, takes on a note of its old seductive sweetness. "Listen. Do you remember Étienne Dordogne? Do you remember how we stole him from the streets, from his den of revolutionaries, and brought him to the palace? Magnificent, he was! Every inch of him flushed with honest blood. I can still hear the songs you sang when he kissed your breasts and touched you between your legs. He roared like a lion when he spent himself inside you, but he slept like a child. So innocent!"

Lucy buries her face in her hands. "Don't."

"But we couldn't leave him sleeping, could we? Not the dangerous Étienne Dordogne! He was a criminal, a revolutionary leader. A threat to all our pleasures. And besides, I was thirsty. We were both thirsty. You wanted to taste his wine, too, Lucille."

"I didn't. I never did."

"You held the knife, didn't you?"

"Because you forced me! You said you would kill me!"

"No, no. A long time has passed, but I still remember. You very much wanted to assist. You held the shaft of the knife, and I placed my hand over yours. Then I kissed your cheek, counted to three, and together we cut his throat."

Lucy sobs.

“Don’t cry. Étienne is long dead, and I was punished for the crime when the revolutionaries came into power. You, on the other hand, were spared. As my accomplice, you should have felt the blade, too, yet you were never brought to trial. No one knew you were in the bedroom with us. Why?”

“You never told,” Lucy whispers.

“That’s right!” Marie’s voice is thick with triumph. “I didn’t tell.”

“Why?”

“Because I knew I had eternal life and you didn’t. And because I loved you, little fool. I made a sacrifice for you.”

The word *love*, coming from Marie’s lips, freezes Lucy to the floor. She stares at the woman who was once a countess, at the wreck of her formerly lovely mask. Love. Is that the light that glistens in Marie’s joyless, hungry eyes? A flicker of some slumbering emotion that moved her heart long ago?

“How could you have loved me?” Lucy whispers. “You turned me into a murderer.”

“I turned you into what you truly were, Lucy. I freed you from the stupidity of your morality. I showed you ecstasy, and you rewarded me by taking the rose that was named for me.”

Marie tightens her grip on Lucy’s arm. Her dark eyes burn in her skull, like twin Stygian fires in a hollow lantern. She leans closer, close enough to kiss Lucy on the mouth.

“Look how long you’ve lived, thanks to me,” Marie says. “Consider what a charming life you have and compare that life to *this*.” With one bony finger Marie pulls down the collar of her turtleneck, revealing a choker of thick, silvery scars studded with knots of blue.

The jeers of the crowd. The march to the gallows. The whoosh of the blade.

On the day Marie de Mortoise was beheaded, Lucille had been on her knees, praying from dawn to dusk that her own neck would be spared. For three weeks she had slept on a heap of sacks in the rosarian’s hut, hiding from the revolutionaries who would surely come for her next. Étienne Dordogne had been a heroic leader, close to Danton.

Marie had sacrificed him for an hour's worth of pleasure. Lucille had held the knife.

Even in the heat of her childish prayers, Lucille had known in her heart that she was guilty. If the rosarian had seen something pure in Lucille, with his sightless eyes, the girl herself was still blind to it. Lucille didn't know why her life should be spared. She had prayed like a rabbit dangling from a wolf's jaws. She had promised to be pure, promised to be good, promised all the things that she had sworn to God when she was a five-year-old terrified of the dark.

Lucy remembers praying for Marie's soul, too. Was that what had saved her?

"Heirloom roses," Marie sighs, flinging Lucy's arm away. "That's how you've spent your gift of immortality, growing overpriced flowers. A pastime for bored suburbanites. The only plant you have of any value is this one." She caresses one of the saberlike thorns. "The life of this rose makes your other plants look as fleeting as mayflies."

"You don't have to tell me that."

"Then you know where the flower came from?"

Lucy nods. She remembers the old rosarian's story. Blood fell from the Savior's wounds as he hung on the cross, and in the dust below his feet the roses grew. The women weeping below him picked the flowers out of the dust. When Christ returned, the dead roses came to life, took root, and flourished. The 'Madame de Mortoise' was a descendant of those blossoms.

"These roses, little fool, hold the wine of resurrection," the rosarian had said. "With each drop of your blood, the sacrifice renews itself."

Marie gets up and begins to explore the greenhouse, stopping when her eyes light upon a pair of heavy pruning shears. She holds out the shears to Lucy.

"Cut the branches, Lucille. Give me the roots, and I'll go. Isn't it time to give me what I deserve?"

Hands trembling, Lucy takes the shears. She shouldn't be so afraid of death; she should be as brave as Marie was when she faced the guillotine. Marie might be wicked, but Lucy can't deny the truth. She can't

deny the way her heart briefly opened to Marie, like a pair of wings, when the older woman confessed her love. If there had been evil in the young Lucille, couldn't Marie have had a shard of purity buried in the well of her soul?

Lucy opens the shears. Marie's eyes sparkle in the candlelight.

"Yes. That's right. Chop away—you won't harm the rose. But wait. First let me have a taste. I'm weak, *chérie*. Not plump and lovely like you." Marie laughs. "Soon you'll be withered enough. Show me how the rose feeds."

"Give her your wrist," Lucy says dully.

"My wrist?" Marie says. "But a prick on the wrist wouldn't be enough. I need vitality."

"Then let her have your heart."

The word *heart* ignites a memory: Marie de Mortoise lying in naked splendor on a heap of satin pillows, her slender torso arching backward in a pale parabola, nipples peaking skyward as Lucille bent to suck her breast. Two hundred years later, Lucy hasn't forgotten the fragrance of Marie's perfumed skin . . . the smoothness of her fine ribs underneath the silk . . . and under all of it, the eager pounding of Marie's heart.

And Lucy remembers the simple thought that sprang up, unasked for, when her lips felt the rhythm of that longing pulse: *I love you, Marie.*

Now Marie lifts her sweater, revealing a cadaverous torso, a rib cage like the frame of a rotting boat. Her bare breasts are mere pockets of skin, with no succulent meat for the thorn to sink into. Yet when she leans forward, a thorn extends itself, rooting for a vein. Marie's eyes flutter in ecstasy as the spear punctures her skin. In the flickering shadows cast by the candles, her shrunken death mask is transformed into the beseeching visage of a *pietà*.

"Yes, yes," she breathes. "Quench me with life."

Her eyes roll back. Her lips open, exposing the soft brown maw inside. She pants in harsh gusts. The rose, used to Lucy's deep chest cavity and strong muscle, sends its thorn plunging inward with a single, greedy thrust. Marie gasps—a terrible, sucking sound. Her back arches, limbs dancing. *The little death.*

How well Lucy knows it. This is what she will miss: not her comfortable, contented existence, but this ritual of renewal with the rose.

Marie, impaled on the thorn, seizes, dances, then collapses, limp as a doll.

“Marie?”

Lucy stands up. She touches Marie’s shoulder as she once did as a girl. The body shudders once more. Then nothing.

The thorn retracts from Marie’s bony chest. Marie falls backward, lifeless. The rose that bears her name quakes in response to her tainted juices. Was the death-poison in Marie’s veins stronger than the life-blood in Lucy’s? The branches tremble; the thorns clatter like swords. A hail of blossoms falls. The glass panes of the greenhouse shatter as the vines thrash and flail. Lucy screams and covers her head with her arms against the rain of glass shards. A giant rumbling comes from the rose’s roots.

Silence.

Lucy waits.

She kneels and presses her mouth to the thick clump of roots at the base of the rose. If the rose dies along with the woman it was named for, this will be their final kiss.

Neither of us will die alone.

No rustle of leaves, no shifting of blossoms. The woody roots are cold to Lucy’s touch. From the depths of the blood black soil comes the faint thrum of the rose’s heart.



SMOKE AND ASHES

Shanna Germain

WE'VE BEEN IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE for six days. I'd tell you where I am, but I don't know for sure. About three hours and six gas stations of dirt roads away from any kind of town, on the shore of a big-ass lake. A big-ass, cold-ass lake.

It's almost our last night here—I'll be coming to you soon—and I'm tired and I'm lonely and I wish you were here. But you're not. You're somewhere else, and I'm here, surrounded by these boys.

Earlier, they built a bonfire right here on the beach. They loaded the wood higher and higher, until it was taller than my head—and I know I'm not that tall, but still. It's been burning for a good three hours, maybe more, flaring hot and high. If you were to take one of the paddleboats out to the dark opposite side of the lake, I bet you'd still be able to see it.

The fire's not big enough to keep the wind from coming off the lake, though. If it weren't for your jean jacket, I'd be frozen. I sit on a log with my face to the fire, trying to keep warm. I don't take up much space under the big sky, my hips slim against this makeshift bench, my thighs pale below the hem of a summer dress that now feels way too thin.

I have the boys around me—the ones you like, the ones you know, that you think of as big brothers for me. Watchdogs. I appreciate it, that trust. And that knowing—you know me so well that you know I need

watching after. Remember the time in Mexico when the wave knocked me down and I broke my ankle? Or the time I fell over a rock on the trail and had to have surgery on my knee? I'm not safe on water or land, and yet here I am, at the border of both, without you near to protect me.

I shiver inside my jacket. The boys take it to mean I'm cold. Connor stands up from the bench and unzips his red sweatshirt. Every movement is deliberate, controlled. Unlike Patrick's body with its rings and tats, Connor's is bare, unadorned with silver or ink. Only a simple black choker, tight around his neck. When he stands in front of me, his body is too lean to eclipse the fire, but it casts a shadow over me.

"Here," he says. It might be the only word he's ever said to me. And what did I tell you? These boys, they watch out for me.

"Thank you," I say. Connor sits back down—his eyes are so blue I can see them even in the firelight. He presses his leg against mine on the bench. It might be an accident. It might be the bottle of stout they're passing around, or the joint they passed around before that. It might just be Connor's leg pressed against mine. He knows what he's doing with his thigh—the tightness of it, the deliberate press.

On my left, Patrick holds out the jug of stout. His fingers are studded with rings—crossbones and skulls, dragons eating their own tails. His skin is pale, see-through as starlight, and dark tattoos cross his wrists. Is he the one you've chosen for me, I wonder? And I almost hope not, although I'd never contradict you—but he's too easy, too eager.

I take the heavy jug from him. The stout fills my mouth with its warm black honey. I lick the flavor from my teeth and lips and take another swig, feeling the boys' eyes on me. I am the only woman here, in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by a hundred, two hundred boys. Most of them are scattered around in the darkness—as hungry and ubiquitous as bats. I can hear them call across the open spaces to each other, their voices shrill with dark and drink. They don't even know what they're hunting for, away from the firelight. Except these few, the ones who flit to me like burnt-winged moths. The odds here make me both predator and prey. You know that's the way I like it.

I hand the jug back to the boys lined on the other log—three of them, the hoods of their sweatshirts pulled up to protect their necks

from the cold coming off the water. Jeremy is the first to reach out, gloved hands taking the jug without touching me. He's sweet like that, careful and innocent.

Connor flicks his lighter, silver and shined, and brings the end of his smoke alive.

"Can I bum one of those?" I ask.

He pulls the lit one from his mouth, holds it out to me. Tobacco mingles with wood smoke. The others watch the cigarette; they watch my hands and lips. Like children testing boundaries, we're all drawing lines around each other here—what is the end point?

I take the cig from Connor's fingers, careless, as though it's nothing, as though to show this isn't the edge of a boundary, it's not an arc, it's not even a point. My fingers slide against Connor's in the dark. I press the warm filter to my lips, inhale. The others drop their heads and light their own smokes, their palms protecting the fragile sparks from the wind.

Patrick's knee is touching mine now, too. Jeremy and the others sit across from us, leaning in. I am hemmed in by knees and eyes. My dress ripples at the edge of my thighs with each exhale.

The boys, they're circling, finding their territory on me.

I throw my smoke into the fire and the boys start on a new game—"fuck, marry, kill," it's called. The group picks three people for you, and you have to decide which one you would fuck, which one you would marry, and which one you would kill.

"C'mon, you have to play," Patrick says to me. He doesn't say, "Because you're the only girl." He doesn't say, "We want to know who you would fuck." He doesn't say, "We don't care who you'd kill." Which is a good thing, considering.

I inhale off my smoke, tobacco, and Connor on my tongue. I've had a dozen swigs of stout, so I can say yes. You know me; you know that I would say yes without the beer, but sometimes appearances are the only difference between prey and predator.

"Sure, okay," I say, as though I'm reluctant, as though I'm appeasing them.

"Right on!"

“Not real people, though,” I say. My choices would scatter them like deer. “No one here.”

Patrick looks to the others for approval. They shift in their seats—the game has lost some appeal—but nod. “Fine,” Patrick says.

We start to play. The boys go first, saving me for last. They pick female celebrities for each other. Famous names—you wouldn’t know them, but then you never paid attention to the culture of the moment. Big tits and bleach blonde hair and lips that promise some kind of redemption. They take their time, choose carefully, starting always with the fuck. You can see them choosing in their minds: “Who would I most want to fuck?” Then, “Who could I live with?” “Who, then, would I have to kill?”

They agree or disagree with each other. One would fuck the busty brunette, another would marry her.

“Jesus, you’d kill *her*?” one of the boys says, after Patrick’s chosen to assassinate some tall, long-legged model.

Patrick lifts the jug to his mouth, silver rings turning orange in the firelight. He passes the jug to Connor. “Well, I’d fuck her to death, likely . . .”

Only Connor sits quiet, lights me another smoke, and passes it to me. His fingers slide the length of mine, capture my fingers in the passing. In the dark, no one sees that time stops, just for a moment, to burn itself out.

Connor’s cigarette is still in my hand. I press the taste of his lips to my lips, let it sink into my tongue.

“Your turn,” Patrick says to me.

“I’m ready. Give it to me.”

The boys confer, lean together, and whisper. Connor’s whole body is now pressed against mine. I can feel every muscle, the press and release of his breath. I would lean back, maybe, but there is nowhere for me to go. He has closed the air between us, not a cell’s width of space.

“Here are your choices,” Patrick says, and I try to turn my attention back to him.

He gives me three women’s names. That’s what men do, I’ve noticed; they put the women together in the hopes of finding something they

think they want. It's as far as their fantasies will allow them to go. They expect this to be hard for me, that I'll giggle and blush.

The boys hem in closer, their hands at the jug, waiting for my answer. They'd be wolves if they had any teeth, but they've been raised properly. They'll only go so far without being asked, or without a bit more alcohol, a bit more of the dark.

Too bad, I think. It's a lost art, taking someone against their will. That's why I like you so much, isn't it? And why you like me. Why we fuck so well.

I choose easily. I don't tell them my trick: I don't consider who I want to fuck. I start with who I'd kill.

They're disappointed in my answers, my speed. I didn't give them the high, the little taste of pleasure that they'd hoped for.

The jug goes around, more cigarettes get lit and passed—each of mine tastes like whichever boy's mouth it started in. As the fire starts to soften, the edges of their faces fall into shadows, their eyes darken. Patrick presses on one side, Connor's never left the other. I swear I can feel his skin, even through his clothes. The seam of his jeans bites into my leg where the wind has pushed my skirt up.

"Let's do real people," Patrick says after a bit. He pushes, he cracks his knuckles under his rings, he licks the side of the jug while he watches me—he thinks this makes him the one, but he's not. I know that as sure as I know the moon is starting its slow descent. It's Connor, isn't it, with his blue-blues and his silent, smoky mouth? He's the one you want for me. For us.

"Let's," I say.

"Really?" Patrick's lips curl at the edges, and I think how well you know me. How I would have done it with this dragon-ringed boy, but he's not the one I would've wanted. You knew before I did.

"Really. Give me my choices."

I lean back and rest the side of my hand against Connor's thigh in the dark as though it is just another piece of wood. He doesn't move, doesn't make a sound, and I wonder if he knows that I've already chosen.

Patrick, of course, lays out the choices. "Me," his grin is almost yellow against the flames of the fire. "Jeremy. Connor."

Of course.

“Patrick, I’d fuck you,” I say. His grin widens, and he rushes for me. I let him. It’s true, I would fuck him in a second. He’d be aggressive in the way that well-behaved dom boys are. He’d work me up slow, make me wet before he turned hard. He’d let me lick his tattoos and bite the black dragon on his hip that he doesn’t know I know about. He’d hold me down without truly holding me down and use his hands, his shiny silver rings, at the curve of my ass. His cock—as long and lean as he is, as milky white—would slip into me, nearly fill me. I’d put my fingers to my clit because he wouldn’t be strong enough to stop me, and I’d come.

The boys lean forward, wait to hear. The fire licks my face, too, wanting answers. Only the moon and Connor stay quiet, hiding their faces against the dark.

“Jeremy, I’d have to marry you,” I say. I reach across the space and touch his knee with the hand that isn’t on Connor’s thigh. In the fire-light, his face doesn’t even fall. He is that sweet. The other boys pat his shoulder. No one wants to be the marrying type. It’s the kiss of death.

“We’d get to live together, though,” I say. “Think of that.” It almost makes him smile. If I could, I’d tell him how it would be. A big house, me waiting for him every evening. The kind of fucking that can only be called “making love.” Soft kisses and smooth sheets and his mouth, so wet and gentle, on my breasts, my belly, between my thighs. His hard pink cock that tastes of salted cream, the way I’d lick it for hours, making him come. And, later, how he’d slide inside me so slow that I’d tell him I loved him, and he’d believe it. And then he’d come with me wrapped around him, in that grateful, quiet way that nice boys do.

The fire jumps up and cracks the dark. Everyone looks at Connor.

“That just leaves you, man,” Patrick says to Connor. “Sorry, buddy, that’s harsh.”

Connor flicks his lighter, inhales smoke from the sky. Oh, the way he turns to me. Fucking blue-blues showing nothing and everything. The slow exhale. The slow smile, tooth by tooth.

“I’ll live,” he says, flicking his ash, and my skin comes alive, every inch, every cell, lighting up to burn against the cold.

In the dark, Connor grabs my wrist, hard, and moves my hand to press it down on his cock. The hard pulse of it throbs against my palm. Where I thought there was no room between us before, now there truly is none. His body presses the air from my lungs, makes me gasp. The cigarette in his mouth flares red, a hot contrast to the blue of his eyes.

I know this is how it will be: Soon, the moon above us will start to lay her body down in the bed of the sky. The fire will suck the last of its fuel and begin to die, to return to the cold dark that it came from. The boys will drink and smoke and drift away, the game over, on to something more promising, something they think still carries its dark secrets in a locked box.

But it will be Connor who gets my secret—our secret—won't it? Connor will pull me to the darkest corner of this place, the one where firelight and cigarette eyes cannot see. He'll throw me on the ground and push up my flimsy summer dress. He'll push my thighs open. I know what his cock looks like—the red pulse beat of it that I felt in my palm, the blood that will thump beneath its skin. I will beg to taste it, to wrap my lips and tongue around it, but he won't let me.

Instead, he'll fuck me. He will not ask. He will not get me wet and he will not be nice. He will take me and bend me and break me and tear me. But I won't scream.

As he begins to come, he will lift his head. He will tear the thin choker from his neck and bare his beating pulse. I will lift my mouth to that dark, quick throb, and he will give me what I want. What you want. What he wants.



THE LEGACY

Donna George Storey

DON CHOSE THE PERFECT MOMENT to tell us about the cunt book. The second pitcher of sangria was empty. So were the dinner plates, except for a few charred pieces of barbecued lake fish and slicks of vinaigrette shimmering in the light of the citronella candles.

We certainly needed a nudge to keep the fantasy going: that we'd invited Meg and Trevor over for their amusing rich kid ennui, not because they were the only other people with a summer cottage on this end of the lake. That I was here as lady of the manor instead of the semisecret girlfriend of my nearly divorced boss.

Don even gave his story a title of sorts. "Let me tell you," he said, "about Uncle Jacques' legacy."

Don called him "Uncle Jacques," but he was really his father's childhood friend, a second-generation Frenchman with Cardinal Richelieu's nose and pockets full of caramels for Don and his brothers. It was always an event when he came to dinner. Don's mother worked in the kitchen for hours making odd foreign dishes, beef wrapped in pastry or stews that made the boys tipsy from the vapors alone. Uncle Jacques was what they used to call a confirmed bachelor—though he wasn't gay, Don was very sure of that. His mother was always trying to fix him up with her unmarried friends: prim maiden ladies and pretty widows.

Around Uncle Jacques they giggled and touched their hair. But his mother's hopes always came to naught.

When Don went to Paris his junior year of college, his parents insisted he visit Uncle Jacques in the Languedoc, where he'd retired to his ancestral village. Don went for the free meal and stayed on for half a bottle of Sauternes—a golden liquid so sweet it made his mouth ache. Uncle Jacques was surprisingly easy to talk to for an old man. He admired Don's camera, a Nikon F2, and confessed his own interest in the art of photography. Don spouted some nonsense from an art course about the pursuit of ideal form and the challenge of conveying depth—and suddenly, there in his hands was a photo album, the old-fashioned kind with thick black pages and a cord at the binding. He thought at first he might be required to *ooh* and *ahh* over European landmarks, or worse yet, pictures of Uncle Jacques and his father as boys. But then he opened the book to the first page. What he saw took his breath away.

“What was it?” Meg was the first to bite.

“Art photos,” Don replied with unusual delicacy.

Trevor twisted his lips into an amiable prep school sneer. “He means pictures of naked women.”

“Or parts of them,” Don corrected. “In extreme close-up. I wouldn't have guessed what it was at first, except for the fingers, holding the outer lips wide.”

“It was a book of cunt pictures?” The sneer stretched into a cartoon leer.

“Yes. On one page,” Don said. “On the facing page was a formal portrait of a lady fully clothed. The kind you might see displayed on any mantelpiece. I'd guess from the hairstyles that some were from the forties and fifties. But others were recent, too. Girls my age.”

“How decadent,” Meg cooed. “Do you think he screwed them all?”

“I wondered that myself, but didn't have the nerve to ask. He did tell me that since he had no son of his own, he wanted to pass the book on to me one day if I thought I might have use for it.”

“Do you have it now?” Trevor's question had a hopeful lilt.

“Unfortunately not. Uncle Jacques must be over eighty, but he said in his last Christmas card he's feeling quite fit.”

“I don’t know if it was wise of him to make the offer,” Trevor said. “Now he’s got someone eager for him to die.”

“Who? You?” Meg asked with a grin.

I asked Don if he recognized any of the faces. One of those maiden ladies or pretty widows?

“Hell, maybe one of them was your mother,” Trevor laughed.

Don gave him an indulgent smile. “That I would have noticed. Frankly, I didn’t pay much attention to the faces. What struck me was how different the women . . .”

Meg’s Adirondack chair creaked. I saw Trevor’s hand settle over her thigh.

“How different they looked *down there*,” Don continued. “Far more variety than you find on lips on a face. One was nearly fleshless, a slit peeking from a thicket of curls. The next was plump and meaty, almost prehensile. And then a baroque extravaganza, folded and draped like swirls of rich cloth.” He leaned back in the lounge chair and closed his eyes. “It’s been thirty years, but I can still see those photographs.”

We all gazed into the darkness as if we could see it, too—a woman’s legs dropped open like butterfly wings and the secret, scarlet fruit within, suspended before our eyes in the summer night.

* * *

What was it that made me doubt him? The way he touched me between my legs as soon as we got into bed, murmuring satisfaction when he found me wet? Or—and this occurred to me as he cupped my breast and stroked the nipple with his thumb—was it the way that cunt book story put him so firmly back in charge, throwing Trevor off his game, making Meg squirm around on her little heart-shaped ass? He already knew my weakness for stories of his young, impressionable days—but surely he could do better than a libertine uncle who was, of all things, French?

I turned to face him. “Did your uncle really have a book like that?”

Without his glasses Don’s eyes looked smaller, the tender skin mapped with lines. He smiled.

“Do you really have an Uncle Jacques?”

His smile broadened. "Would I lie to you?"

He saved me from the answer with a kiss. In the year we'd been seeing each other, I'd become used to his evasions, about his wife, about his feelings for me. The price for sleeping with a man who was almost old enough to be my father. Or my uncle.

If the story was real, there was so much I wanted to know. Did he get hard in front of the old man? Did he masturbate later that night in the guest bedroom, vintage vulvas fluttering through his head? Which picture did he see first when he took his cock in his hand? Or when he came, biting back his groans so Uncle Jacques wouldn't hear?

But he'd never tell me these things. I knew that. Don's tongue was too clever, dancing lazily, darting in and out, feeding me a taste of the pleasures to come. Feeding me pictures, too, rising from the growing heat in my belly. Of a lady, lips glossed and softly parted, gazing heavenward as they always seemed to do in pictures back then. But down below she was hitching up her skirt, spreading her legs, half-teasing, half-shamed, to show her secret to that cool glass eye. She wanted it, even back then, when proper ladies didn't do such things. Or didn't tell. And I wanted it, too. I wanted it to be real.

I pulled away and lay back on the pillow. "Take my picture."

Don looked at me blankly.

"Take my picture. Down there. Will you do it?"

In the dim light it was hard to read the play of expression on his face. But then he said: "Yes. I'd love to."

* * *

The next morning we drove into town for the necessary supplies. The general store had only one roll of black-and-white film, verging on expiration. Don fretted that he needed an umbrella reflector to get the lighting right—impossible to find in that outpost of civilization—though we did score a remnant of black velvet, dusty, but on sale at half price.

It seemed to take him forever to place the chaise lounge at the right angle to the window and drape the velvet properly, set up the tripod

and take a light meter reading, while I waited in my beach robe rubbing my feet to keep them warm.

When he was finally ready, he gestured for me to undress and lie down. I shifted around to show off my best angles until I remembered it didn't matter where I placed my arms or if my breasts looked perky. I glanced down at my triangle of pubic hair, trimmed back for summer. Suddenly it embarrassed me, at once too lush and somehow inadequate. Through the light brown curls I could see the indentation, like a thumbprint, where the groove began.

"Did they all have their legs open?" I asked.

Don didn't seem to understand.

"The women in that book. I thought maybe some of them were shy and only let him get a glimpse."

We locked eyes for a moment. And then he did understand.

"Yes, I think there was one picture like that."

Click.

"Open your legs now, honey," he said gently. "We only have twenty-four shots on the roll."

The words slid deep into my belly, insistent as any cock. But when I started to spread my legs, my hips resisted, like rusty hinges. *Sit like a lady. Na, na, I can see your underwear.* Every childhood lesson about my body was tossed away in that first cool rush of air.

Click.

"A little wider."

I inched my knees to the edges of the chair. As if in sympathy, my mouth opened in a sigh.

Don fumbled with the tripod and moved in closer, crouching.

"Tilt up a bit."

Click.

A girlfriend in high school once told me to pretend the camera was my boyfriend. Look straight into the lens and whisper to yourself: *I love you, Mr. Camera.* Ashley was right, those pictures came out prettier. But what could a pussy do to be fetching? Pick up a dollar bill?

"Were any of those ladies . . ." I cleared my throat. "Were any of the ladies in the book touching themselves?"

I knew the answer before he said it.

“Yes, baby. Yes, they were.”

I had to do it then, of course, had to slide my hand down and put a tentative finger on my clit, plump as a ripe berry. My thighs jerked open wider, quivering.

Click.

I began to strum.

Click.

Then do things I never did when I was alone. Rubbing my lips together, then pulling them wide. Nipping my clit between two fingers when I pushed them together again.

Click.

“You’re nice and swollen now. Try to push your lips out more. So I can see the hole.” Don’s voice sounded hazy, as if he were calling to me from behind his office door.

I pushed.

“More. That’s a good girl.”

My flesh clicked, like the sound of a shutter closing.

“Beautiful.”

A gush of wetness trickled down my slit onto the velvet.

“Oh,” I cried involuntarily. “I’ve made a mess.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Don snapped. Then more kindly, “Show yourself to me. Show me how beautiful you are.”

I pushed wider, my muscles aching sweetly with the strain. I wanted to show him. Not just him, but old Uncle Jacques, and a thousand unknown eyes. Then I felt it, down there between my legs, pulsing, as if the very air had taken on substance. It was so real I thought it was Don, but he was still kneeling back at the tripod, hands on his camera. My finger found my clit again, jerking faster until I was practically clawing myself and sobbing with pleasure.

“Come for me, baby,” Don crooned. “I’ll catch it for you and keep it right here.”

A flurry of clicks, then the long, lazy purr of film rewinding.

For once he kept his promise.

Afterward, he came over and ran his fingers over the velvet beneath me. “You’ve made quite a puddle, haven’t you?”

“Sorry about that.”

He smiled and kissed my forehead. “Silly girl. You were terrific. May I make love to you now?” His tone was proper, almost Victorian, but there was no mistaking the hard-on in his jeans.

And so he took me there on the chair, pushing my knees up to my shoulders, eyes fixed at the place where our bodies joined and parted, using me the way a man uses a picture, for his pleasure alone.

* * *

We’d been back in the city a month when Don handed me a package wrapped in pink paper with a cream satin bow. It was a photo album of fine leather.

I knew the story, but was curious to see how it would unfold.

I wouldn’t exactly call myself “beautiful” down there. But I did see things I’d never noticed in a few furtive glimpses of myself in a hand mirror. How the cowl of my clitoris veered to the left. How the inner lips flared out in petals, one slightly thicker. Each page revealed ever deeper layers, another smooth inner mouth and beyond, the rugged muscles of my vagina. Watching myself change and swell brought it all back—the vegetal smell of lake water, the softness of the velvet on my bare skin. I felt my cheeks flush. Such a naughty girl I was, turned on by pictures of my own pussy. Then I heard a click. I looked up, surprise on my face. Don took a picture of that, too.

* * *

A year later, I ran into Meg at the gallery where I’d taken a job after Don and I broke up. I would have left it at hellos, but she insisted we go for drinks. She told me Don had come by himself to the lake that summer and that he seemed sad. Somehow that news didn’t make me feel as good as I thought it would.

On the third drink, she got to the confession. I was the only person in the world she could tell. At the lake, she and Trevor had an awful fight and she ran to Don for sympathy. They got roaring drunk and then she let him—well, actually, asked him—to take her picture. They didn't screw. Just pictures.

"You know," she said, "like that book he told us about."

"The cunt book? That was just some story Don made up."

"No, I saw it. That old uncle must have finally died."

"Were there pictures of lots of different women?"

She shrugged. "It just looked like a bunch of pussies. I was pretty drunk."

"Faces, too?"

Meg peered into my face. For a moment I was sure she knew, but then she shook her head.

Relief made me generous. After another martini, I admitted I'd done it, too, and Meg seemed glad not to be alone. We even joked about starting a club, Uncle Jacques' Crazy Cunts, membership always open.

We both left the bar happy. For the first time in months, I felt good about that sorry little dream of my time with Don.

I liked being part of a legacy.



THE UNFAMILIAR

Allison Lawless

WHEN SHE WAS TWENTY-TWO, Mariah learned the danger of reading aloud from books she found lying around her aunt's study. She didn't realize she was doing a summoning chant until it was too late.

After her boyfriend Jason dumped her the week before college graduation, Mariah wanted to hole up somewhere and figure out what to do with the rest of her life. She now had a four-year degree in journalism, a big student loan to repay, and no job applications out yet. Jason's defection had staggered her so much that all her plans had fallen to pieces.

Her aunt's house on the lake seemed like the perfect hideout. Far from everybody who might ask painful questions, close to a place she could swim every morning, and living with her aunt, which was about as close to living alone as Mariah wanted to get. Her aunt never asked questions and hardly ever talked.

Mostly Aunt Helen spent her time in her study with the door closed, talking on the phone—at least, that was what Mariah assumed at first.

To test this theory, Mariah lifted the hall phone off its cradle while Aunt Helen was talking in her study.

Dial tone.

Then there were those moments when other noises came from the study. Occasionally other voices. Aunt Helen always came out alone, though, and when Mariah peeked into the room afterward, there was never anyone else there.

So, okay, maybe Aunt Helen was crazy. So she talked to herself, sometimes in other voices. She was still the perfect companion for someone who wanted to brood.

"I'm going to meet with the gals tonight," Helen said on Thursday after Mariah had lived with her a week. Helen gave Mariah a strange look, sort of a pleading-but-don't-notice-me look.

After a week of living with Aunt Helen's silences in her presence and conversations when Mariah wasn't around, Mariah had grown adept at interpreting Aunt Helen's looks, but this one baffled her. She thought it through, decided Aunt Helen was afraid Mariah would ask to go with her. Mariah said, "I'll be fine here alone, if that's all right."

Aunt Helen smiled. So Mariah had guessed right. Whoever these gals were, Aunt Helen didn't want to introduce Mariah to them.

"I won't be home until after midnight," Aunt Helen said.

"Go," said Mariah. "Have a wonderful time. What will you be doing?"

Aunt Helen looked vague. "Oh, swapping recipes, probably. Playing cards. Sharing tips on how to take care of things. What we always do."

"Enjoy," said Mariah. "I'll stay here and relax. It's so nice to be able to relax, Aunt Helen. Thanks again for offering me sanctuary."

"You're welcome, sweetie, of course. Glad to do it. You're an excellent guest." Aunt Helen smiled again, her best befuddled smile. "Take care of yourself." She kissed Mariah's cheek, grabbed her oversized tapestry handbag, and headed out the door.

Mariah waved.

"Oh, and you could watch television in the living room," Helen said as she stood on the bottom porch step, "or sit on the porch swing—the fireflies are nice tonight—or take a little night swim if you're so inclined—the water's quite warm after sunset this time of year, though mosquitoes are a problem—that would be good. You could take a nap. Or fix yourself a snack in the kitchen."

What was this flood of words about? Mariah wondered.

“If you’re interested in a book to read, there are some exciting novels in my bedroom. Feel free to borrow them. Good night!” She vanished into the warm, gentle darkness.

Fireflies spangled the wisteria vine and drifted over the meadow grasses. The breeze rustled leaves in the oak trees beyond the driveway. Mariah waited to hear the start of Aunt Helen’s car engine, but it didn’t come. Maybe Aunt Helen was walking to her meeting with the gals. Without a flashlight. Well, she’d lived here for ages, longer than Mariah had been alive, and she probably knew the roads in the dark.

Mariah sat on the porch swing, set it rocking with her bare foot on the floorboards, and considered all of Aunt Helen’s suggestions. Aunt Helen had never tried to direct her activities before. What was that about? She’d catalogued an action for every room in the house . . . except the study.

If Aunt Helen had told Mariah to stay out of the study, Mariah would have been eaten alive with curiosity. Maybe Aunt Helen knew her well enough to know that.

She hadn’t specifically *said* Mariah wasn’t supposed to go in the study.

Mariah swung for a while. It really was a beautiful night. The moon rose over the trees, full and round, its light dimming the fireflies and silvering leaves, grass blades, floorboards, and Mariah’s toes. The air smelled of night-blooming jasmine, rank weeds, and lake water.

Aunt Helen didn’t want Mariah in her study. Aunt Helen was the perfect hostess. Mariah shouldn’t do anything to upset Aunt Helen.

And yet—what was in that study? Was Aunt Helen truly crazy? Or was she just practicing to be a cartoon voice actress? Maybe the house wasn’t as safe as Mariah thought it was. Maybe she should just check.

She swathed her hand in her skirt before reaching for the study doorknob. What if Aunt Helen somehow knew she had entered the study? Maybe not touching anything would disguise her trespass.

The study was dark, the windows blanketed in thick curtains. The only light in the room came from something round and glowing dimly blue on a high shelf. Still with her hand swathed in skirt, Mariah reached for the light switch beside the door and flipped it on.

After all, the study didn't look much different from other offices she had seen. A big desk—well, okay, she'd never seen a desk with a piece of tanned leather stretched across its top before—and lots of bookshelves, with battered, fat books stacked haphazardly across them. No book looked new or even as though it had been published in the last twenty years. On the high shelf with the thing that glowed in the dark, there were all kinds of small lumpy objects. Mariah took a step into the room. On the high shelf: statues and jars of things; the glowing thing turned out to be a crystal ball, which still emitted a faint blue light.

A counter beyond the desk, below the double, curtained windows, held open-ended jars full of sprays of dried plants. Some sticks, maybe. A couple held other things, some that looked like dried lizards.

A box on the leather-topped desk held a collection of colored chalks. Faint tracings on the leather showed that Aunt Helen had drawn on it in chalk before and maybe rubbed out the drawings afterward.

A fat calfskin-bound book tied with a leather thong sat on the edge of the desk.

Okay, you've looked, Mariah told herself. There was no phone on the desk. So obviously Aunt Helen had been talking to herself all those times Mariah couldn't quite make out her voice through the door. You've looked. You know she doesn't want you in here. You want to stay here the rest of the summer, rent free, before you have to figure out how to get a real job. Let's get out of here.

She walked across to the desk and, with her skirt-swathed hand, untied the thong binding the big stained brown book on the desk. She let the book fall open, found herself unsurprised when the page it opened to turned out to be written in spiky, old-fashioned handwriting and purple ink.

TO CALL FORTH THE ONE WHO WILL SATISFY YOU, said the heading at the top of the page. Then a bunch of nonsense words.

The one who would satisfy her. Hah. As if.

As if Jason hadn't always promised he'd stick with her the rest of her life, when he couldn't even stick with her past his own orgasm. Spurt and snore! She always had to take care of herself after he fell

asleep. But she had liked being able to sleep next to him afterward, liked waking up to find he had slipped out of the apartment to go to the Danish bakery to get pastries and coffee for them both. She had liked sharing the paper with him over their impromptu breakfast, and she had loved standing on the corner after her last class of the day, secure in the knowledge that he would swing by and pick her up every time, that they would plan their evening and night together.

All those things she loved doing, and he had said she was smothering him.

Whose ideas had all those things been? She thought they had negotiated. But maybe she had been shoving all her ideas onto Jason, making him feel trapped.

Or maybe he wasn't the person she had thought he was. Maybe he was just a prick.

She let her skirt fall around her thighs and pressed her bare hands down on the outer edges of the book to hold it open. Wouldn't it be fabulous if you could say a bunch of nonsense words and conjure up a truly satisfying someone?

Conjure.

Aunt Helen was off meeting with the gals to swap recipes and play cards.

Mariah took a good look at the dried plants, the strange things on the upper shelf, the leather-covered desk with its outlines of old chalk. Weren't the chalk shadows circles and letters in some other alphabet, and even a five-pointed star?

Maybe Aunt Helen really *was* a witch.

Did you have to be a witch to work magic?

Maybe it would be better if you did.

But maybe she should just say something and see what happened.

The one who would satisfy her.

Hah.

She leaned over the book, read the words to herself, then lifted her head and spoke them aloud.

Of course, nothing happened.

Maybe she had pronounced the words wrong. Or maybe this was all bullshit. Just a bunch of loony old ladies with no purpose in life getting together to pretend they had power.

Mariah studied the writing, saw that some words had accents. She spoke the words again, accenting the syllables as indicated. Yes, it sounded different this time. But it was no more effective.

She squinted at the title of the spell. **TO CALL FORTH THE ONE WHO WILL SATISFY YOU.** Below it in small, almost faded green letters was a legend: **REPEAT THRICE.**

What did she have to lose? She said the spell a third time.

Warmth bloomed at her back, and a smell like wood smoke drifted through the air. “What will you give me?” murmured a gentle voice in her ear, the breath of the words warming her cheek.

She turned and saw smoke coalesce. “What?” she said. Had she set the house on fire?

The smoke flowed and gathered into a human shape. A naked, muscular, male human shape. The skin color shifted from smoke gray to warm brown. The face took shape: he had a nicely defined jaw, sharp cheekbones, slanted amber eyes, and his lips looked luscious as he smiled at her. His hair was orange red. Flickers of flame rose from it, twisted into smoke in midair.

He held out warm brown hands to her. “What will you give me if I satisfy you?”

“What?” she said again. She blinked three times. Had she really seen a man appear out of smoke? Or was this some guy who’d been hiding in the study all along?

Sure, a naked guy hiding in her aunt’s study, just waiting for her to say some kooky spell out loud, when the odds were she wasn’t even going to come in here at all. Hah. As if.

He drifted closer without a sound. She glanced down. Maybe he didn’t produce footsteps because he was floating an inch or two above the floor. He moved without shifting his large, beautiful feet at all. Speaking of feet—well, speaking of size and shape—this guy had just gotten here and already he was happy to see her.

Her hands itched to reach out and caress him.

“Uh,” she said, “what do you want?”

“I want to share your satisfaction.”

“Uh,” she said, “how would that work?”

“If you’re happy, I’m happy.”

“Um. Sounds good to me.”

“Excellent.” He cupped her face in his hands. His touch was warm and smooth and gentle. He stroked his thumb slowly over her lips, slid it into her mouth, and she sucked on it, her top teeth moving across the ball of his thumb, her tongue stroking along the smooth square of his thumbnail. He tasted like heat and smoke and just a little like steak. Oh, how strange, how delightful, she thought, as he leaned forward and kissed her forehead, then each eyelid. Her hands reached of their own accord to close around his hot, silky shaft, and he moaned with pleasure.

He eased his thumb out of her mouth and touched his lips to hers. His mouth tasted like peppermint, sweet, so sweet, and burning. His tongue slipped into her mouth, snaked over her own tongue, stroked the insides of her cheeks. She sucked on his tongue, and it changed shape in her mouth to something broad that perfectly fit the space in her mouth, but left room for her to breathe. She moaned around it and sucked.

His hands had left her cheeks, slid down to cup her breasts. Or was that right? She also felt his arms embracing her, and something pulled her closer to him as she worked her hands up and down his shaft. She smelled something burning and looked down. Her clothes singed and dropped from her breasts and stomach as he moved his hands over her, but she felt warmth, not flame, at his touch.

He worked her nipples with some of his hands, sent exquisite streaks of pleasure through her that loosened heat and moisture in her lower self. Some of his hands massaged her head, and some, smoky and unbound by the constraints of human arm length, wrapped around her to wander over her back and buttocks. “Open for me,” he whispered, though how he could whisper with his tongue in her mouth, she couldn’t tell. But oh, she was ready for him to enter even deeper. She opened her legs—somehow, her feet no longer touched the ground—how could that be? But he held her in his arms, however many arms he had, and he wasn’t properly in touch with the floor either. She

opened her legs, and he nudged her knees farther apart. He took her hands in his, pulled them from his penis, massaged her fingers, and brought her hands up to press them against his chest. Her palms flattened against the hard nubs of his nipples.

The head of his magnificent penis pressed against her lower lips, and she strained to pull him into her, but he teased her, pushing in a little, then withdrawing. She arched and struggled, tried to push herself down onto him. She wanted him inside her, wanted to trap and hold him, but he was holding her in all his arms, all those skillful hands wandering over her, teasing here, tickling there, squeezing elsewhere. He held her just where he wanted her, his tongue still a hot wet presence in her mouth, tapping and flicking the roof of her mouth, his eyes wide and amber so close to her own, so beautiful. She struggled to swallow him and couldn't. She felt the sweat rise on her skin; his hands gloried in sliding over her. Finally she lay quiet in his embrace, and then he lowered her down onto him. He filled her perfectly, all the way, just the shape she wanted to pull inside her and hold forever—just there. She shivered and clenched around him. Now I have you, she thought, and I'm not letting go.

"Oh, yes," he murmured, and braced himself against something and thrust even deeper into her. Then he was pumping into her, and she was riding him, and riding the waves that swept over and through her, higher, higher, waves that sent her shuddering in wide red whorls of pleasure and delight, and he pinned her there, pulsing and throbbing, in the sphere of stars, fountains of hot red fire rising through her. He was in her and around her, his taste on her tongue, his heat against her skin, his many fingers tapping in time to her racing pulses as she exploded with joy.

"Oh, yes. Oh, yes."

It was unbearable, unbreakable. How could she stay here? How could she take another moment of this unutterable bliss?

He hugged her closer, and she shattered.

* * *

She woke on the floor of her aunt's study, still throbbing with the after-shocks of pleasure. Ashes sprinkled the floor around her, and her inside

passage itched and burned with pleasurable heat. She felt stretched and achy, but completely satisfied.

She pushed up on her elbows and gazed down at herself. Her skin was patterned with charcoal handprints. Her clothes had disappeared. Her mouth was full of sweet.

“But—” she said. “Oh, but—where are you? Who were you? Come back.”

The grandfather clock in the living room bonged. Mariah lay back and listened as it struck. Twelve strokes.

Twelve!

Aunt Helen had said she'd be back after midnight. Aunt Helen had tried, in her roundabout way, to make Mariah stay out of the study. Why? To deny her this pleasure so intense that everything else faded?

Mariah struggled to her feet. She staggered to the desk and stared down at the spell. TO CALL FORTH THE ONE WHO WILL SATISFY YOU. She needed a copy . . .

She glanced at the floor, saw ashes everywhere. Ashes! Ashes of her clothes? These handprints on her skin, would they wash off? Oh, she needed to clean up before Aunt Helen came home!

But she needed to copy that spell first. No, there was no time. If she could make it look as though she'd never been in the study, maybe she'd get another chance—

She closed the leather book and tied it up in its thong, then raced out of the room. She fetched a broom and dustpan and swept up the ashes and threw them in the kitchen trash can. Ashes of what? Her former clothes? Or their passion? Where had he gone? What was his name? She mopped the floor with damp paper towels.

After she was sure she had cleaned up all traces of her invasion, she closed the study door. Now for the shower. Oh, these strange powdery gray handprints all over her, evidence that something had touched her. Touched her everywhere, she thought, twisting to see her back in the mirror. Splayed-fingered handprints on her butt. Oh, yes, he had held her tight, whatever he had been. However many hands he had had . . . how was it that he had so many hands? Maybe he was some kind of Hindu god.

If she rolled in a white towel, would the handprints come off, leave her a map of their passion, proof that he had ever been there? Could she get his fingerprints and track him down? Ridiculous. She bet nothing with six or eight or ten arms would be in the criminal database. Not without at least a mention on the cover of the *National Enquirer*, which she'd studied every week at the supermarket, wondering about the depths journalism sometimes sank to.

With a story like hers, though, maybe she could make a deal with the *Enquirer*. She heard they paid well. What a start to her journalism career.

Forget it. Whatever had happened, she wanted to keep it to herself. She ran the shower good and hot and stepped under the stream of water.

The water hung in the air, and his face formed from it, crystal and clear, only the eyes colored, glowing amber above his clear smile. "Share happiness again?" he said, more and more of him forming around her as water poured from the showerhead.

"What's your name?" she whispered. His embrace felt different, wet, hot, all-encompassing, exciting.

He rubbed his cheek on hers. He felt smooth and wet and solid at the same time, an impossible slick texture that made the hair on the back of her neck prickle and rise. This time his shape was even less human than last time, flowing streams that ran up and down over her, everywhere, though nothing ran down the drain. He was as close to her as a hot bath, wrapped around her like a down quilt, but more active. Everywhere on her skin he pulsed and thrummed, submarine sounds more felt than heard, waking sweeps of pleasure that arrowed through her. She closed her eyes, drowning in the sensation of being touched everywhere by warm wet rapture.

"My name," he whispered in her ear.

"You went away," she said, panting between words, "and you didn't tell me who you were or how to find you."

"You want to find me?" The throbbing against her skin speeded up. Shudders of delight wracked her. She reached down to finger herself, but the water swelled against her clitoris, swelled and grew harder, pulsed in mind-altering rhythm.

“Mmm,” she moaned. She breathed high and hard and spread her legs apart, and he flowed into her.

“My name,” he whispered again, then breathed a string of syllables into her ears. “Oh, my exquisite ocean of bliss, my delightful source of nourishment. Only say my name, and I will come for you anywhere, anytime. You taste so good.”

He was all around her, insistent, stroking and pressing and sucking her until she writhed in pleasure.

Later, she blinked back to herself to discover she sat on the floor of the shower, cold water pulsing down on her from the showerhead. She was so warm inside she thought water should turn to steam as it hit her. She felt so tired she could hardly stand up and shut off the shower.

Oh, God. He had told her his name, but it was so long and strange she couldn't remember it.

Not that she'd want to say it again tonight. She barely had the energy to dry off, brush her teeth, and collapse across her bed.

* * *

A timid knock sounded at her door. Mariah groaned and rolled over onto her back, then put her arm across her eyes to block the morning light.

The knock sounded again. “Mariah?” Aunt Helen asked. “Honey?”

Mariah groaned. She lifted her head, saw she was naked on top of her bed. “Just a minute,” she called, and her voice came out creaky. She struggled to her feet, staggered over to the closet, and pulled out a bathrobe. In the mirror on the closet door she stared at her image before she pulled on the gray terrycloth. She looked . . . clean. Very, very clean. No more handprints all over her body. She leaned closer, nose to nose with her image. There was a faint pattern on her skin: swirls, almost invisible against her tan, a little more obvious where her swimsuit covered her.

A tracing of river waves.

She shivered and pulled on the robe.

Mariah opened the door a crack. “Aunt Helen?”

“Are you all right?” Aunt Helen asked.

“Tired.”

“Ah.”

Mariah swallowed, worked up enough spit to speak. “Did you have a nice meeting with your friends?”

Aunt Helen blushed. “Yes. Dear, what did you do with yourself while I was gone?”

Mariah lowered her gaze. Aunt Helen was her host. Mariah had broken unspoken rules. If she told, would Aunt Helen kick her out? How could she confess to anybody what had happened? What *bad* happened, anyway? In the light of day, she was convinced it had all been a wildly erotic dream. Nothing like that could really happen, could it?

“Did you go into my study?”

Heat swept over Mariah’s face. Aunt Helen had been nothing but kind to her. Where were the easy lies of her adolescence, when she had told her parents she was studying at someone else’s house while she was really out riding in cars with her friends, smoking pot, drinking, exploring each other’s bodies?

She couldn’t lie like that anymore.

Mariah nodded.

“Oh, dear. I was afraid of that. Did you look in my big leather book?”

Mariah nodded.

“Did you—try anything you saw in there?”

Mariah nodded.

“Oh, dear,” said Aunt Helen. “Did it work?”

Mariah nodded again.

“Oh, dear. Oh, dear, oh dear. I had a feeling you would have a natural aptitude for the craft. Did you tidy up afterward?”

“I swept the floor. I thought I got it all up.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Did you send whatever you summoned back where it came from?”

“I—” Mariah shook her head. “I don’t know *what* I did, but I sure didn’t do that. I don’t know how.”

“Oh, dear.” Aunt Helen’s eyes sharpened. “I thought there was a smell of wild magic still around the house. Well, we’ll have to banish it. Who knows what it’s been up to since you set it loose? Do you remember the spell you used?”

“It was in another language,” Mariah whispered.

“Of course,” said Aunt Helen. “But there would have been a title, something to make you want to say it. Which one was it? ‘Come and Converse’? That’s a favorite of mine since the Bowens moved away. I’ve gotten quite in the habit of using that one. Silly, I know, when I’ve got you I could be talking with, but my friend who comes across the veil and I, we’ve had a long while to grow accustomed to each other’s company, and—oh, not that one? Did you do a summoning for fortune? Probably not, those accomplish a task and they’re over. You called something over from the other side, didn’t you? Come show me what you did.”

Mariah followed her aunt downstairs and into the study, where her aunt spoke softly to the big leather book as she untied it. Aunt Helen laid the leather thong open and stepped back. “Show me,” she said, her voice strict and unfamiliar.

Mariah put her hands on the book.

Tidy up. Put away your toys.

But he wasn’t a toy, was he?

If they put him away, would she ever see him again? Now that Aunt Helen knew Mariah was a snoop, would she ever leave the book out where Mariah could study it again? Copy the spell? What if she told Aunt Helen the wrong spell?

God, the sex. Cataclysmic, mind-blowing. Sure made her forget all her troubles. Her lower self twitched just thinking about it.

She sighed and flipped pages until she found the spell to call forth the Satisfying One. Could she memorize it with just a look? But Aunt Helen was watching, and the words were too strange. She laid the book flat and stepped back, her face hot.

“Oh, that one,” said Aunt Helen, whose face flushed, too. She turned the page and looked at what was written on the back. “But that’s self-limiting. One satisfaction per summoning, and then off it goes again, nice and neat.”

“There’s two pages?” Mariah asked.

“What?” Aunt Helen darted her a glance, then flipped back to the previous page, stared at the bottom. “You stopped *there*?”

Mariah nodded.

“Oh, dear,” Aunt Helen said. “So that’s been unfettered since last night? I wonder what kind of dreams my neighbors have been having. Oh, dear. We’d better tame it right away.”

Mariah’s robe tightened around her breasts, squeezed them gently, released, squeezed. The rough cloth rubbed back and forth over her nipples, raising tingles. The tail of the robe’s belt snaked inside, muscular and supple, and pressed at the groove between her legs. The whole robe came alive, the nubby material massaging her, immobilizing her with delight.

“You must unsay the spell,” Aunt Helen said.

The robe grew a hood, which draped itself over her head. “Say my name three times,” something whispered in her ear, “and I’ll stay with you forever.”

Her body purred and hummed and revved. Forever!

Wow!

So the opposite of Jason!

“Mariah? Mariah!” Aunt Helen said in her new strict voice.

Just this, joy forever? The rest of her life? Everything around her a potential partner? Hot, wet lips suckled at her left breast, then her right, shocks and shudders of delight.

“Tidy up. You can always summon it again,” Aunt Helen said.

Mariah staggered to the desk, trying not to notice that he was inside her again, fevered throbbing that sent her pulse racing.

“Read this aloud three times.” Aunt Helen pointed to the passage on the second page of the spell.

The hood dropped lower, tightened over her eyes. She reached up and pushed it back, held it back as it struggled to embrace her head again. She felt hot and shifty, close to shooting up into the sky. She read the rest of the spell aloud, even as he stroked and rubbed her. Read it again. Then a third time.

Her robe died.

Her body hummed, poised on the brink. Hummed. Stuttered. Staged down, itching and aching and irritated.

“Good,” said Aunt Helen. “Go back to bed. When you wake up, we’ll start formal training.”

Mariah stumbled twice on the stairs, crawled under her bedcovers with the robe still wrapped around her. “Tell me your name again next time,” she whispered, “and I’ll see what I can do.”



THE WITCH OF JEROME AVENUE

Tsaurah Litzky

YESTERDAY MORNING I went to art school at the Brooklyn Museum, but our teacher felt sick and sent us home. I was disappointed. I loved drawing the magical objects in the museum's collection, the kachina dolls and pharaoh's crowns.

It was my mother's idea that I go to art school. She signed me up when she saw me doodling in the margins of my school notebooks. She made me the pink brocade shoulder bag that I use to carry my art supplies.

When I got off the bus at our corner, I realized I could still catch the Saturday matinee with free popcorn at the Valentino Cinema on Avenue L. It was *East of Eden*, starring my heartthrob, James Dean. My mother and little brother Seymour weren't home. They were at a science fair at Utrecht High School, where my brother had won some kind of prize. His revolting interest in the earthworms he dug up from the swampy marshes near our house had paid off.

Maybe my father was home and would go to the movies with me. I loved going places with my handsome father. Women were always looking at him, and I wondered sometimes if they thought I was his date. When we'd go to the movies, he'd always buy two Hershey's bars with almonds—but give me the almonds from his, because he knew

how much I liked them. On the way home, he would ask my opinion of the movie. He told me I had a very smart, insightful mind.

Our gray Plymouth Fury was in the driveway, an encouraging sign. I went in the side door that led to our finished basement. I thought he'd be down there reading the newspapers in his big leather chair.

My father was in the basement, but he wasn't reading newspapers and he was not alone. He was leaning over the studio couch, his pants down to his thighs. What happened to his underwear? There was a woman beneath him and she wasn't wearing clothes. He was moving up and down on top of her and she was letting out silly little squeals like my brother's pet hamster, Eisenhower.

I knew exactly what they were doing. My parents had a book, *Love Without Fear*, they kept in the drawer of my father's bedside table. I used to read it when I was alone in the house. I knew all the position illustrations by heart.

The woman had such big boobs they spread out on either side of her like yeasty white dough. I could see my father's scrotum, pink as a chicken neck, bouncing up and down below his ass. He bent his head; started to kiss her chest. Her nipple was exposed, a sloppy brown stain like a coffee spill, but that didn't stop him from taking it into his mouth.

Then I saw her face. She had an ugly little snout for a nose, and bright orange lipstick smeared all over her mouth and chin. She looked like a clown. My father started pounding into her harder and harder. I stood on the bottom step, as if rooted, unable to tear my eyes away from the horrid scene. I felt a quickening between my legs where I was cleft. The tiny button that was there, which *Love Without Fear* called a clitoris, began to twitch. My insides were heaving and churning. I felt sick.

I made myself go back up the stairs and outside. A few doors down from our house a brand-new pink and white Oldsmobile was parked. I'd never seen it on our block before. I knew this was the evil chariot that had brought the clown to our house.

I ran down to Seaview Avenue, the border between the development of split-level houses where we lived and the fields beyond. I went out through the bulrushes into the swamps, way beyond Canarsie Pier, until I found the spot I was looking for. It was a deep dip in the sand

surrounded by rocks and tall reeds, a little distance from the Belt Parkway. I went there with Jerome Rothman three times to make out. I crouched between the rocks, crying and throwing up. After a while I went home.

The Oldsmobile was gone from its spot, and our car was gone, too. The door was locked so I let myself in with my key and went up to my bedroom. I lay down on my belly, unzipped my jeans, and put my fingers inside the crotch of my panties. This was the position I liked best when I wanted to comfort myself. I put three fingers into my slit; my mother liked to call it a lily. I pretended I was wearing a pharaoh's crown and Jerome Rothman was my body slave. He was rubbing baby oil all over me and between my legs. He saved my clitoris for last. After I came twice, I dozed off.

I heard my mother and brother talking downstairs. I found my mother in the kitchen washing dishes; my brother was watching the TV in the living room. When I told her what I saw in the basement, she staggered to the kitchen table and fell into one of the chairs, still holding the soapy sponge in her hand. She told me she loved me very much, and then she told me to go watch *The Amateur Hour* with my brother. That evening, my father didn't come home for supper.

In the middle of the night, terrible yelling woke me up. My mother and father were having a big fight. I put my thumbs in my ears and my pillow over my head, but I could still hear them.

The next morning my mother told me we were going on an adventure, a visit to my Aunt Zippy in the Bronx. She sent my brother to spend the day at his friend Bruce's house.

When we got on the train at Utica Avenue, my mother started to tell me about Aunt Zippy. I only knew her from weddings and bar mitzvahs. She was an old lady who wore velvet dresses and funny hats on special occasions. Even though she was bent over and had wrinkles on her face, the men buzzed around her. She danced every dance.

My mother told me that Aunt Zippy's full name was Zipporah. She was a witch, a real witch with potions and spells. She'd studied with the most famous witch in Lithuania, Hephzibah the Hebrew.

Aunt Zippy came to America long, long ago. On the day she arrived, she was standing on a street corner trying to hail a livery carriage. She

had the address of a Witches Association in Rego Park, Queens. A distinguished gentleman in an elegant carriage pulled by two snow white horses drove up and offered to take her anywhere she wanted to go. It was Diamond Jim Brady. He was captivated by her ravishing looks and brilliant wit and helped her set up shop on the top floor of the Woolworth building. She was quickly successful, drawing her customers from the cream of New York society. The Great Houdini came to drink champagne with her after his magical feats. Boss Tweed, with whom she had a passionate affair, was among her many admirers. Powerful men among her acquaintances helped her make some good investments in real estate.

Then she fell in love with a musician, a saxophone player named Slim Fats she met at a speakeasy. I knew what a speakeasy was because I had seen *The Public Enemy*. She soon found out Slim Fats was already deeply in love with someone else—his sister. All Aunt Zippy's spells and incantations were not strong enough to break that tie. When Slim Fats left her, she went out of her mind and was sick for a long time.

Eventually Aunt Zippy recovered, only to find she had lost her powers, as witches do when they fall in love. After she spent a miserable year of doing nothing but crossword puzzles, one of her powers came back, that of clairvoyance. She wanted to return to work right away and help women like her who had suffered disappointments in love.

She moved out of Manhattan to one of her properties, a tenement on Jerome Avenue high on top of a hill in the Bronx. Once again, Aunt Zippy took the top floor with its many windows, because a witch must be able to see the nighttime sky, the moon and the stars. A few phone calls was all it took, and soon she was back in business, women clients only.

Gradually, Aunt Zippy regained the ability to do simple spells, but she knew that never again could she change herself into a tiny fairy the size of a thumb or fly through the night riding one of the hounds of hell.

Two huge, battered stone lions stood guard at the door to Aunt Zippy's building. We ascended six flights of stairs to stand in front of a heavy steel door. The door was flung open before my mother had a chance to knock.

There was Aunt Zippy. She was wearing a tall, black pointy hat and a long, filmy red negligee. Beneath the flimsy fabric of her negligee I could make out the top of her low-cut black brassiere. Aunt Zippy had amazing cleavage.

“Darlings,” she cried out. As she stood on tiptoe to embrace my mother, who was only five foot two, I saw that Aunt Zippy’s eyes were yellow, smoldering like the eyes of the tigers in the zoo. She kissed me on both cheeks, then took my head in her hands.

“You resemble your mother,” she said, “but you have a beauty of your own. You have the face of a poet.” Did she know about the secret notebook I kept under my mattress already half-filled with poems?

A black dog the size of a collie—but without a collie’s pointed muzzle—stood behind her. I didn’t like dogs and drew back.

“He’s not a dog,” Aunt Zippy said, “he’s a cat, Morris, my longtime companion. He will never harm you.” She led us down a long hallway, lined with photos of her posing with many different women. There was a picture of Aunt Zippy seated with Greta Garbo on a park bench. Another picture showed Aunt Zippy drinking cocktails with Mae West at a long bar. There was also a photo of Aunt Zippy shaking hands with Golda Meir.

We entered a light, airy room with a high ceiling. Curtains of crystal beads hung in front of the high windows, sending shining reflections of sparkling light on the white walls. A modern white sofa stood in the center of the room, flanked by matching armchairs. The only testament to Aunt Zippy’s profession was a gleaming skull on top of the pine coffee table in front of the sofa. The contemporary décor surprised me.

“Just because I’m a witch,” Aunt Zippy said, “is no reason for me to succumb to conventional thinking about my vocation. I’ve already lived a hundred and ten years. Maybe I’ll live a hundred more. Why should I spend my time in some dismal dump filled with bats? As they say, it isn’t over until the fat lady sings.”

My mother giggled. “Right,” she said, smiling.

Aunt Zippy snapped her fingers and three glasses filled with ruby liquid materialized on the coffee table. She picked up one of the glasses and handed it to me.

“Enjoy this wine,” she said. “Your mother and I will be back shortly. My mother nodded at me encouragingly as she and Aunt Zippy each picked up a glass. They vanished through a door decorated with black roses that had appeared in a corner of the room.

Morris didn’t follow them. He spread out under the coffee table and regarded me lugubriously. I had never tasted wine before. I took a sniff. It smelled like raspberries and Vicks cough syrup. When I tasted it I found it had a much stronger zing. I closed my eyes and listened to Morris purr softly below me. He seemed to be humming the first few bars of “Earth Angel,” my favorite song.

Jerome Rothman and I danced to “Earth Angel” at the Sweet Sixteen party where we met. That was the first time I felt a boy’s bone grow hard and press against me through my clothes. He nuzzled my neck and stuck his tongue in my ear, another first. It was warm and wet, and I liked it.

“Sorry to disturb you,” Aunt Zippy said. “We need you to do something—pull a hair out of Morris’s tail? It won’t hurt him; he’s used to it. We need a hair from a black cat’s tail. Only a virgin can pull the hair out and you are the only virgin here, so it’s up to you.”

Already, I could refuse Aunt Zippy nothing. Morris swung his tail up on the couch next to me. I gingerly took a single long strand between my thumb and index finger and yanked. It slid out easily. I handed it to Aunt Zippy. “Thanks,” she said, and vanished again.

When my aunt and my mother came back into the room, my mother was wearing a small purple velvet pouch on a ribbon around her neck. I watched her tuck it beneath the collar of her blue polka-dot dress. “Oh, I need to go to the toilet,” she said. She turned and went back behind the rose door.

Aunt Zippy sat down beside me. She put her feet up on Morris as if he were a footstool. “First, I want to give you my phone number. Call me anytime,” she said. She handed me a white card with a number in gothic lettering. “Second, I want to tell you something. Your true love will have blue green eyes.” I was puzzled. Jerome Rothman’s eyes were a flat brown like a Hershey’s bar.

“But, but—” I started to object.

“No buts about it,” Aunt Zippy cut in. “Now, promise me you’ll remember what I told you.”

“I promise,” I said.

* * *

My father didn’t say anything to me about me telling my mother. For the next few days no one said much of anything around our house.

Wednesday afternoon Jerome Rothman sat down next to me on the bus ride home from our high school.

“How’s about we go to our spot today?” he asked. “I have a surprise for you. I know you’ll like it.”

I was feeling sad and maybe the surprise would cheer me up. He was unusually chivalrous walking through the swamp. He carried my book bag, something he never did before. When we got there, he even took off his Levi jacket and spread it out for me to sit on. Then he pulled something out of the back pocket of his pants, a red rubbery thing that he stuck on the middle finger of his hand. It had a lot of little spines all over it, like a caterpillar. The top was cut off and the tip of Jerome’s finger poked through.

“This is a French tickler,” he said. “I put it on my thing and then I put my thing inside you. You’ll love it.” He wiggled the tickler finger at me. It looked disgusting.

“If you let me do it, it’ll mean we’re going steady.” I noticed for the first time how small and squinty his eyes were, like the eyes of a pig. So far I had let him put a finger in me, only a finger. “I won’t come inside you,” he went on. “I promise.”

I heard Aunt Zippy’s voice talking in my head. “*Liar, liar, pants on fire,*” she said. I knew she was right.

“No, Jerome,” I told him. “No, I won’t do it, no way.”

His face got all tight and angry. “What have you been doing all this time, stringing me along?” He almost spit at me. “You little bitch, you will do it.”

He jumped on top of me, pushing my body down with an arm against my chest. “Bitch,” he repeated and slapped me across the face.

He slapped me again. I felt myself growing smaller and smaller, thinner and thinner, as I changed into one of those gray sand lizards that lived in the swamp. I slipped out from under his arm and scurried away through the reeds. He didn't try to follow me. As I approached Seaview Avenue, I found myself growing larger and larger, changing back into myself. When I got to our house, I stood outside to catch my breath. I was so lucky I had escaped.

A few days later I was sitting at the kitchen table doing my homework. I looked out the window and saw the red seltzer truck pull up and double-park. Mr. Fleishman, the seltzer man, was here for his weekly visit. My mother was in her sewing room in the basement. She let him in through the side door. When they came up into the kitchen, it was not fat Mr. Fleishman with his potbelly walking behind her, carrying the wooden box of seltzer and sodas on his shoulder. It was a slim, wiry man who looked like an older James Dean. He even had his hair slicked back in the same style. He put the box down on the floor and straightened up.

"I'm Fleishman's nephew Spike," he told us. "My uncle had to have a hernia operation so I'm filling in. Your usual? Three seltzers, three cream sodas?"

My mother nodded, and he put the bottles on the kitchen counter. Then he grinned at me. "You must have got your pretty face from your beautiful mother," he said.

"Stop with the fresh remarks," my mother told him.

"Just being truthful," he answered. "Say, did you grow up in Brooklyn?" he went on. "You sure don't have the accent."

To my surprise, she gave him a big smile. "I was raised in Manhattan," my mother said. "East Ninth Street and Avenue A."

"What a coincidence," he replied. "I grew up two blocks away." Within five minutes, I was exiled to the basement to finish my homework, and they were drinking coffee and eating my mother's raisin marble cake at the kitchen table. Before he left to complete his rounds, he gave us two complimentary bottles of cherry soda.

The next day when I came home from school, the seltzer truck was outside and Spike and my mother were in the backyard. They were on

their hands and knees in the little garden she had planted, their heads close together over the tomato plants. He was gone by the time my father got home.

The next night, my mother didn't make any dinner preparations because Spike arrived at five-thirty to take us out. We played two rounds of miniature golf on Ditmas Avenue. Seymour won both times. Then Spike took us to a fancy Chinese restaurant on Flatbush Avenue, all red and gold inside. The fortune in my fortune cookie said *Go with the flow*.

On the way back, Spike stopped at Carvel Custard and brought me and Seymour hot fudge sundaes. My mother said she couldn't eat another thing. We were sitting in the cab of the truck outside our house finishing our ice cream when my father came up the block. He was staggering from side to side like he was drunk. When he saw us, he ran up to the truck and yelled through the open window. "Get out of there; get out of there right now."

"Drive away," my mother told Spike, but he didn't start the engine. Instead, he got out and walked around the cab of the truck to face my father.

"She doesn't want to get out," he said calmly. "Why should she?"

"I'll knock your dirty block off," my father yelled at him, balling his big hands into fists. He was six inches taller than Spike at least and maybe thirty pounds heavier.

He swung a wide right at Spike's head and missed.

"You asked for it," Spike said. He crouched low, dancing from side to side on the balls of his feet. Then, with a lightning one-two punch, he socked my father in the chin.

My father fell back on the sidewalk all curled up like a baby. Spike climbed back in the truck, and we drove off. He turned up Seaview Avenue.

"Why don't you and the kids spend the night at my place, Ruthie?" he asked my mother.

We drove a few more blocks before she answered. "No," she said. "It's not right. I should try to work things out with him. He's my husband."

Spike sighed. When he let us out at our house, they kissed. Then Spike kissed my brother and me and drove away. My father was sitting in the kitchen with the lights out, his head in his hands. My mother told us to go upstairs and go to sleep.

Sometime in the night I heard the sound of bedsprings squeaking in my parents' bedroom. It was a sound I hadn't heard for a long time. I wondered if my mother was the one on top, riding him, but I didn't want to get up to see if maybe they had left the door open and I could get a peek.

* * *

Summer vacation, and my mother and father had fully reconciled. The bedsprings squeaked almost every night.

Mr. Fleishman was back on the seltzer truck. When I asked him about Spike, he said Spike was traveling. I hardly ever thought of Jerome Rothman because I didn't have to see him every day at school. By the end of the term, he was going steady with Vivian Smolar. Rumor had it she bleached the hair between her legs the same platinum color she dyed the hair on her head. I was sure she let him use the French tickler.

On my brother's eleventh birthday, my mother asked me to go with him to the pet store. She had so much sewing to do for her customers she couldn't take him. She was buying him his first big snake for his birthday. He could keep it in an aquarium under his bed. She gave me twenty dollars to spend.

The Jungle Pet Store on Rockaway Parkway had a cage of monkeys in one window and a cage of brightly colored tropical birds in the other. Our arrival occasioned so much cawing and squawking I almost expected a bare-chested Tarzan to be standing behind the counter. Instead, it was a tall, skinny guy in a white T-shirt, with short red hair and freckles. One step closer and I could see his eyes were blue green like the ocean at Coney Island. A big smile opened up inside me. We stood there looking at each other until Seymour pulled at my arm.

"My snake, my snake," he said. Seymour addressed the proprietor. "I want to see the snakes, sir."

“We have the best snakes in Brooklyn,” the guy said. “Come this way.” As he moved out from behind the counter, I noticed the big bulge between his legs under his tight jeans. He saw me looking, and I felt my face turning red. “And you don’t have to call me sir,” he added. “My name is Larry.”

He led us past a pen of puppies and a wall of tropical fish to a long, low tank at the back of the room.

“Wow,” said Seymour, looking down at the squirming, undulating mass. “What are the different kinds?”

“Those light green ones are your common variety garter snake,” Larry told him, “but we also have Montana black horn noses, domesticated South American anacondas, and one rare purple ribbon snake from Peru.”

“I’ll take the purple one; he’s the most special,” Seymour said.

“Good choice,” Larry told him. He leaned over and deftly grabbed the purple snake, putting one hand behind its head and the other in the middle of its back. He lifted the wiggling creature and carried it back to the counter, depositing it in a big plastic bag with little holes in it and knotting it at the top.

Seymour was so happy he jumped up and down. “That will be \$25.99,” Larry said. “I won’t charge you tax.”

“Uh oh,” I said. “My mother only gave me twenty dollars.”

“That’s okay,” he answered. “You can have the snake for twenty dollars. My father owns the store.”

“Thanks so much,” I told him. We looked at each other again. I felt my eyelashes curling.

He started to speak, stuttering, “Er, er, er . . .” His face turned red. Finally he got out the words. “Would you like to go out sometime?”

* * *

Larry and I dated all summer. It was like a dream. We talked about everything. He thought my poems were wonderful. He wanted to be a writer, too. His interest was science fiction. He wanted to write about intergalactic space travel and machines that can think. He said one day

there will be such things. He liked the movies as much as I did, and he liked taking long walks in the marshes.

I showed him the spot I went to with Jerome Rothman. Larry and I found our own spot, farther out along Jamaica Bay, near a clump of ailanthus trees.

We did a lot of things. We undressed each other and kissed everywhere. He sucked my nipples and I sucked his. He showed me how to do this, how to nurse and nibble there. His nipples tasted like salty peanuts and I couldn't get enough of them. He kissed between my legs, found my clitoris, and sucked it as he did my nipples. He pushed his tongue down inside me, flicking it in and out. He said he had the tongue of a snake.

I took his prick in my hand. That is what he taught me to call it. He said "prick" is not a dirty word and that the word "fuck" isn't dirty either. He liked it when I said *fuck me, fuck me*, and that is what he did between my legs with his tongue while I rubbed my fingers up and down on his prick until we both came.

We wanted to do more. We wanted to go all the way. Larry said we'd have to plan it on a Sunday when the pet store was closed, and we'd have the whole afternoon. We decided on the next Sunday.

I called Aunt Zippy and told her I was going to give my maidenhead to Larry Petchnick in a few days. I told her he was my true love with blue green eyes. She said she knew and it was about time. "Will it hurt very much?" I asked.

"Maybe," was her answer, "but sometimes pain is the gateway to the greatest pleasure. You will understand this more when you're older." Before I hung up she said, "Wear a blue ribbon in your hair and the day will be fair."

I said, "Thank you, Aunt Zippy," and hung up.

On Sunday, we walked to our special spot holding hands. Larry had the plaid blanket from his bed around his neck. I had a bright blue ribbon woven through the braid in my hair.

Larry had a Trojan in his jeans pocket so we would be safe—the same kind of condom my father kept in his bed-table drawer.

When we got to our spot, he put the blanket down. We undressed each other and then sat down.

I was scared. I knew that once I gave up my maidenhead, I would be grown up, a real woman. I couldn't go back to being a girl again. I would be crossing a great divide with a question mark on the other side. I wondered if I should break the silence between us by telling Larry I loved him. Before I could get the words out, he grabbed my arms and we joined in a kiss. He started to fuck my mouth with his tongue and I took his prick in my hand. What a big, purple prick my Larry had, so swollen it filled my palm.

I guided it between my legs as he lay on top of me. He licked my neck, my shoulder. He put his hand over my breasts, stroking, caressing. He was slow and tender at first but then he got rough, pulling my nipples, pinching them. I liked this even more, feeling waves of wanting spread out into every part of my body. His prick was so hot and heavy against my skin I thought it would break through. Larry put his hands on my breasts so that my nipples rested between his wedding ring fingers and his fuck-you fingers. Slowly he squeezed the fingers together and lifted his hand, pulling the rest of the tittie up, up, up. My body turned inside out and I became a giant pulsing vacuum, wanting him. I was delirious. My head thrashed from side to side and I heard myself say, *fuck me, fuck me*. I didn't want his tongue now. I had to have his prick.

"Yes, yes," Larry said, as he rose and got the condom from his jeans pocket. He sat cross-legged as he tore it open and slid it on, sheathing his prick in white. He kissed me again, a soft little kiss, my last kiss as a virgin.

I was lying on my back. I spread my legs for him; opened them wide into a *V*. Larry positioned himself above me, leaning himself on his elbows to spare me his full weight. I knew it was supposed to hurt, but I was not prepared for the sharp slice of pain as my maidenhead ripped open.

"Am I hurting you too much?" he asked. I found myself taking long, deep breaths.

"It's okay," I told him. He took it slow and soon it didn't hurt as much anymore. As he moved inside me, his pelvis rubbed against my mound; it was as if he was rubbing my clitoris, sending sweet thrills down. I got wetter and wetter, going with him, lifting my hips up,

pulling him deeper in. He was so deep inside me, I couldn't tell where he ended and I began. Then, it happened. The heat joining us grew and grew until we exploded and melted together. I felt the way a shooting star looks when it streaks across the sky.

I thought I would hear music, like in the romance novels my mother liked to read. I didn't hear any music, not even a violin. Larry was still inside me, but his prick was getting smaller. He kissed my eyes, pulled out of me, and rolled over on his back. He pulled the Trojan off and put it in the sand. With his T-shirt he gently wiped between my legs.

"Is there a lot of blood?" I asked.

"Nah," he answered, "hardly any." But when he put the shirt back on, there was a long, red stripe across his chest. "See," he told me, "I'm wearing your brand. Wanna go for pizza?"

"Sure," I said.

When I got home the family had already finished dinner. My mother was clearing the table.

"You hungry?" she asked.

"No," I told her. "I had pizza with Larry."

She took a good, long look at me. "All right," she said, but her expression changed. I couldn't read her.

That night I was too tired to watch *The Ed Sullivan Show* with my family. I climbed into bed and fell asleep right away. When I woke up the first rays of faint morning light were rising in the dark sky outside my window. I wanted to see the sky turn orange. I got up and stood in front of the window. When I looked down into our backyard I saw my mother kneeling barefoot in her nightgown, digging a hole next to the tomato plants. She took the purple pouch on the purple ribbon off over her neck and dropped it in. I watched her bury it, carefully tapping the earth down with both hands.



HISTORICAL INACCURACIES

Julia Talbot

“**WOW, THAT’S SOME WEAPON,**” I said, nodding at her cleavage. The bodice of her fake Renaissance gown pushed her tits up and up, until they overflowed, and between them sat a little knife, its sheath tucked down her front.

“It’s a letter opener,” she said, lifting it out, the flash of brass ruining the illusion. “The only real daggers I have are back at my place, and they’re shoes.”

“I like them either way.”

The beauty patch on her cheek was fake, too. Her breasts weren’t. I found that out lying on her couch; it was one of those reproduction velvet fainting lounges. She lay back with her arms over her head and pointed those breasts at me, the tops firm with large pink nipples, the undersides full and just this side of too heavy.

“I like reenactment,” she said, spreading her legs, showing me neatly trimmed blonde pubic hair.

“So what is this?” I asked her, thinking of her Italianate gown and my hose and doublet. “Paolo and Francesca?”

“No,” she replied. “This is fucking.”

“I like fucking, too.”

I cupped her breasts in my hands and lifted them, testing the weight. Her nipples tasted like salt and heat and maybe a little like the cotton chemise she'd worn under the gown. I loved the way she let her sounds out, hot and loud, lusty like the Renaissance wench she'd resembled when I met her.

My cock rubbed the inside of her thigh, and she laughed, reaching down to feel me, rubbing my dick like there was no tomorrow. "You don't need that codpiece, do you?" she asked, her thumb scraping the slit at the end of my cock.

"I like it anyway," I said. "These hose don't offer much protection."

She felt ripe and wet as I slid inside her, her skin damp with sweat as we tussled. She was right about the fucking. Nothing like historical déjà vu came from pushing into her over and over, my cock harder than her silly brass letter opener. When I came inside her, it was wholly new, and all about her.

I got to see those shoes a week later when she brought them to my place for some supper and striptease. Far more formidable than any false dagger, they raised her above me like some sort of goddess on a pedestal. Aphrodite in heels, a Greek myth for the modern age. They suited her far better than the cheap synthetic velvet of our last meeting, I told her, kneeling in front of her to worship properly.

"I left my half-shell at my condo," she replied, pushing me back toward my own bed with the ball of one vinyl-clad foot. The spiked heel left an imprint on my nude chest. "Besides," she added, "Greek and Roman really isn't my period."

"That's all right," I said, licking my lips as I took her ankle in my hand, her bare thigh rising above it like a feast of flesh. "Some weapons are timeless."

The rest of the words we might have shared flew out of my head as I rubbed my cheek against her boot. The vinyl felt cool and slick, but soon warmed from the heat of my skin. I could hardly bear to wait to rub other things against them, but when I made as if to rise, she pushed me back down.

"Is that all I get?" she demanded. "I want some licking, buddy."

God. I started at the base of the heel, working up along the back of the shaft of the boot, and I couldn't help but think of how phallic those words were. It wasn't like sucking cock; I had done that and liked it—but this was bigger, more.

She turned to straddle my head with her boots, one on either side, and bent to lick at my dick. Whichever way I turned I found red heaven, and when I looked up, her cunt glistened for me, sweet and wet. My mouth watered even as my hips pumped up desperately, my balls drawing up as she sucked me like a pro.

In the end, I gave her what she wanted. I licked. I started with the boot on my right side, craning my neck around to attach my mouth to the boot, moaning at the alien taste. Then I worked my way up and around, lifting head and shoulders off the bed to take one swipe at her pussy before turning my attention to the other shoe.

She groaned for me, her hips wiggling, her juices staining the insides of her thighs. She sucked me harder, her lips sealing around me air proof and watertight, making my belly hard as a board and my thighs like rock.

When I couldn't take any more of the boot worship, I grabbed her hips and yanked her down so I could slide my tongue inside her, the flavor so intense my eyes rolled in my head. We managed to rock and lick and suck a whole minute before she cried out around my cock, her body shaking above me like she was Venus rocking on a wave.

When I came, my ears rang and all I saw was static, everything graying out around the edges. Nothing I'd ever tried in historical reenactment ever felt like that.

Her stiletto stabbed right into my heart. Or at least my crotch.

"I love the boots," I said, stroking one with my sweaty palm, feeling my skin drag against it.

She laughed, rolling off me and kicking her heels high in the air. "Yeah?" she asked. "Cool. Wait until you see what I can do with swords."

My poor spent cock gave a twitch. "What's that a reenactment of?" I asked, thinking of lady pirates. "Anne Bonny?"

"No," she replied. "I don't really have the boots for that one. You'll like the strap-on, though."

That had me laughing out loud, a flush of pure lust rushing through me. I had a feeling I would like anything she threw at me, no matter how historically inaccurate it was.



CROSS-TOWN INCUBUS

E. R. Stewart

IT ONLY HAPPENED when she slept at Greg's.

He lived across town from Sara, so many times, as an evening got late, they'd end up at his place. It was closer to the lights, clubs, and fun of downtown.

They would tumble in, laughing, usually more than a little tipsy, and cuddle or gab until sleep overwhelmed them. Sara would very often climb into the little corner loft bed to go to sleep.

It was built into the corner and reached by a ladder, a triangular platform made of simple two-by-fours. Single-bed-sized, it had a child's mattress that fit her to a tee, and a coziness like no other bed she'd ever had. The bed was at the outer edge, with a small corner shelf built in.

It had one drawer, too, also triangular-shaped.

They called it the loft bed, and she loved sleeping there. It was snug. It was always warm enough, unlike most of his apartment. And it was fun, like being a kid again, to look out over the apartment nine feet above the floor.

There was another, more private reason she enjoyed it so much, too. The orgasms were incredible up there.

She would climb up, sometimes so dizzy and giggly-drunk that she would almost fall, and then she'd crouch on her knees and pull off her shirt and bra—if she wore one.

Once topless, she'd spin and lie down on her back and shimmy out of her jeans and panties. She'd learned that her panties would be shredded if she kept them on.

Sometimes she left her socks on, but that was drunken distraction, not preference. She'd stuff her clothes into the drawer and set her jewelry on the shelf. Nude, she'd slip under the covers. A sheet and a light blanket were all she ever needed, or wanted, up there.

The pillow was old-fashioned down, and the sheets, five-hundred-thread count, brought from her mother's house from her old childhood bed. They felt wonderful on her bare skin. Her nipples would stiffen, and she'd grow warm inside.

Stretched out in the dark, she'd think about what was going to happen. She'd get wet quickly, and touch herself in eagerness.

It always waited until her eyelids grew heavy. When Sara could barely stay awake, she'd feel the first soft touch between her legs. Always soft but also bold. It was like a finger, or a tongue, parting her labia, savoring her. She'd smile in the dark and turn her head to gaze at the patterns of light and shadow dancing across the ceiling, so close, reflected from the street three stories below.

She caught a faint scent of roses. She spread her legs a little, anticipating what was soon to fill her; that incredible hotness, that body-pinning weight, that spectacularly thick, long probing . . .

Something clamped down on one of her breasts. It felt like a hand, but there was nothing there. Nothing she could see; a night-light she brought up as an experiment proved that. It would knead at her, like a man pawing, and then it would slide hard nails down her body, leaving welts, sending shivers through her.

It gripped her ass and lifted her pelvis, and the first thrust, quick and commanding, was so sweet and so good that she often orgasmed right then.

First orgasms did not count with this lover, though. She knew this and tried to ride it out, resisting the sensations that cascaded through her. It would thrust into her and not withdraw right away, and a weight would come down on her, She would feel a tongue on her neck or hot breath in her ear.

It never whispered anything but her name, over and over.

There were times when it lifted her legs up, as if it had elbows braced under her knees. Rolling her back, it would expose her and move its penetration from her pussy to her ass. Sometimes it alternated with each quick thrust. Sometimes it filled both at the same time, an incredible feeling that made her gasp.

Other times her body was spun in the air, flipped over, and she would feel teeth biting into her shoulder, down her spine, all over her ass and thighs. Fucked from behind, her pussy would quiver and drip, ecstasy shooting through her from the illuminated nerve endings.

A long, slow lick from clit to anus was not unheard of, and the weight on top of her, pressing her face and breasts into the mattress, would prelude a deep, slow reaming. Other times it was closer to rape. She always had dozens of orgasms.

She loved sleeping up there.

Trouble was, she wasn't all that keen on Greg.

Oh, he was nice enough, with his hesitant jokes and silly references to *Star Wars*. He focused on her when they were out, perhaps guessing he was lucky to have the likes of her, petite and pretty against his dump and frump.

She'd met him at a party and, lonely that night, accepted his invitation to a movie on the condition they go immediately. He'd agreed, and it had been fun. She'd given him what she at first thought was a mercy fuck—then realized, to her own surprise, that she liked him. He was smart, kind of funny, and managed—sometimes just barely—to be attentive without being puppy doggy.

She had spotted his loft bed that first night, of course, but hadn't explored it until a second visit, much later at night, when she showed up bedraggled by rain, needing a place to crash. She'd been let down by a couple with whom she'd had three-way sex; they'd used her and dumped her off, laughing at how timid she'd been going down on the other girl.

He knew none of that, of course, but had been welcoming, if blitzed by sleepiness. He let her in, hugged her, and promptly fell asleep on the couch.

To be polite, she let him be and climbed up to investigate the loft. It looked inviting.

That night, it happened.

Despite being drained from the threesome, her body held reserves of enjoyment and pleasure beyond her experience.

That first time, when she felt herself being made love to, she'd kept her eyes closed for a long while, thinking it was Greg. When she opened her eyes and realized she couldn't see who or what was doing her, it scared her.

She remembered Barbara Hershey in that *Entropy* movie. That had been brutal and terrifying. But this was . . . wonderful.

She lay back and enjoyed it. Next morning she asked Greg about the bed. "Oh," he said, "it came with the apartment. I slept up there once and didn't much like it. Kept feeling like I was going to fall out, y'know?"

After that, Sara slept over often, and although she helped Greg spurt his dollops of seed in many places, they never made love in the loft. She always made sure that she climbed that ladder after they were done for the evening.

That high corner captivated her. She would find herself thinking about it at odd times during the day. It affected her studies and her part-time job at the bookstore, her visits home with her parents, and even her bath time, when she preferred to meditate the way she'd learned at a Buddhist temple.

She couldn't get rid of Greg, though, and lose the bed, and her delicious invisible lover. For a few weeks she drifted.

* * *

One afternoon, Greg announced that he was moving out of the apartment.

They were tossing a Frisbee in the park. A few of their friends had thrown a picnic. It was casual, with couples sneaking off into the forest for quickies. Sara had already given two hand jobs to healthy-looking

young men who'd dared ask and a blow job to Greg, who'd dribbled on her sweatshirt by pulling out too soon. She bitched at him.

"Fine. Well, I'm moving away, anyway."

"Where are you going?" she asked, her body getting a chill.

"Back to school in Michigan; it's a lot cheaper and, well, my grades aren't exactly top drawer."

She tried to talk him out of it, but his parents were behind the move. Once she knew that, she understood how solid a railroad he was riding. Greg's parents ruled him.

Sara insisted on coming home with him that night, even though she had to blow off a study date with her roomie.

He shocked her by saying, "No, I think I need some alone time."

She showed up anyway, about midnight.

He was cranky and didn't want to let her in, but she cajoled him, promising a special treat. To Greg, that meant he could give her a facial, or maybe a spanking.

Rolling her eyes, she climbed the stairs and entered the apartment, only to find his parents there, staring at the TV and sharing a cold pizza.

It was civil but led nowhere.

Greg's mother was a shrew and his father was a bland, chunky guy who seemed to stare at her crotch a bit too much, through his greasy glasses.

Sara twice choked down proclamations of love. She just couldn't lie that big.

As for Greg, he remained cold and depressed. No fun at all. The TV babbled mindlessly and the night became the next day.

Sara was just about to say something about hitting the sack when Greg's mother got up, waved goodnight without a word, and climbed the ladder to the loft bed.

Sara opened her mouth, then closed it.

Then she said, "Guess I should go."

It struck her, as she walked back to the dorms, that she should just take over the apartment. Live there, pay Greg's rent, and have the loft, and its inhabitant, to herself.

Money was the problem.

She simply didn't earn enough and, even if she sold blow jobs and sex at the frats, she couldn't be sure of making the rent. Greg's parents had helped him out.

She got back and found her roomie, Jane, still up, sipping Pepsi and squinting into a biology text. "You look like shit," she said as a greeting. "What's wrong?"

Sara decided, finally, to tell someone about the bed.

Turned out Jane knew about such things. "It's an incubus," she said. "Men are visited by a succubus."

"Figures," Sara said, smirking and pursing her lips.

"Yeah, but 'in's' better. What you need to do is look in that shelf for its talisman. It'll be something weird, like a stone with a symbol on it, or a piece of wood wrapped in wool or hair."

"Oh, ick. *Blair Witch* stuff, huh?"

"Like that, sort of. Yeah."

Great, Sara thought. "So what do I do when I find it?"

"You keep it. And the incubus should follow it, and you, home."

Now, that sounded perfect to Sara.

She helped Greg pack out.

They made love standing up in the shower, while his parents went to see a show.

Sara refused to get sentimental and told him she had to do something before they left the place behind. She climbed the ladder one last time, carrying a small crowbar.

She started by lifting the mattress. There was nothing under it but the two-by-fours. No hidey-hole.

Next she checked the shelf. It wouldn't come out; it was built into the corner. Removing the drawer, she felt behind it and sighed. Nothing.

Then her hand felt a raised edge in the back, on the bottom. She pried it up and in the small compartment found a statue about the size of her thumb. It was dark brown like polished mahogany and carved to resemble a crude male form with a huge phallus.

She smiled, kissed it, and put it into her jeans pocket.

At once she felt a stirring in her pussy. She'd better get home, fast.

She almost didn't make it. Invisible hands plucked at her clothes; claws shredded the crotch of her panties even as she climbed the steps to the dorm.

Jane was there, but by the time she entered their dorm room, Sara couldn't stand it anymore. "Jane," she said. "I found it, it's real. Oh my god, help me!"

Jane dropped her book, ran across the room, locked the door, then tore off her own clothes.

It was the strangest threesome ever.

Sara's breasts compressed, as if being squeezed. So did her lips. Her body flattened, as if a weight lay on her. When the weight moved, so did Sara, and the bed. Jane watched as Sara's labia were parted, opened as if something were being thrust into her, over and over, in hard fast rhythms followed by long, slow probing.

Jane's knees went weak. It was too intense to resist. Oh god, another woman's nipple on her tongue; it dizzied her, and unable to resist, she fell onto her friend.

Except that she could not make them touch body-to-body. Something intervened. Her breasts and belly pressed against something warm, almost hot, but it wasn't Sara. It felt like skin made of smoke and smelled of citrus and ginger and autumnal leaves. As she pressed her full weight down, Sara moaned, and Jane realized there were several inches of empty air between them now. She had sandwiched an invisible lover.

Jane could barely breathe. Something stroked her labia from beneath. She thought it was Sara's finger, until she saw her friend's hands clenched into fists of ecstasy. It was so thick. Without thought, she straddled it, and it slid into her without resistance, finding her already lubricious, halfway to losing herself in a shuddery orgasm.

So thick, so long . . . so good . . .

It was as if there were two penises for them, two throbbing, eager erections, one curved downward to be inside Sara, the other reaching up to explore inside Jane. It writhed inside both of them.

Jane held onto Sara's shoulders and watched her roommate's face smile with pleasure, frown with concentration, and go blank with final release.

Jane rode the incubus hard, bouncing up and down. Each time her weight pressed in, it drove the invisible cock into Sara's greedy, wide-open pussy. The incubus matched their level of excitement and brought them into sync. It carried Jane, and Sara, to the brink of a shared orgasm where neither could tell when one left off and the other began.

When the invisible lover between them vanished, a smoke fading to scent and then to memory, the two women lay embraced, their sweat glowing, too exhausted to speak. Jane kissed Sara on the lips before nuzzling into her friend's neck and shoulder and going back to sleep. When they awoke, Sara whispered, "It's ours, now."



THE ROOKERY

Jess Wells

THE BIRDS IN THE ROOKERY know when royal sex is being had. They puff out their chests, molt violently, and dig their talons into the perch posts. The dust and mites fill the air to choking. Even when hooded, if there's sex going on, the hawks are agitated. The falcons burst into screeching—not a sound you want to hear indoors ringing off stone walls.

Unless you're my father, Grand Falconer. The head of the hunt team and an honored man in the Duke's employ, he revels in the screeching and mayhem as clues to a puzzle he is determined to crack. He sits at the right hand of the Duke, on par with his Secretary of State and his chief diplomat. My father's leather is imported from Spain, and he owns four pairs of boots. But since my mother's death decades ago, he paces like the birds, drinking mead, standing hours into the night with his hands folded over the head of a walking stick that is pressed into the side of his balls. He surveys his birds and imagines wet cunt and sweat. The servants sweep up the feathers in the morning.

You can't blame him or the rest of us on the hunt team for trying to make sense of the sexual mayhem. The birds are our plow horses, our arrows. We are hunters for the Duke's lodge, and our job is to tend the hawks and falcons—no easy task—and it's much like being devoted to the fine dance of pampering and mastery that is sex with women. The

birds are temperamental, fragile, ferocious, required. If we feed them too much, they will not hunt—so their hunger must be orchestrated. We have brothers across the hall who tend the hunting dogs, close companions to the bird. You send the dog out to find the game; the dog goes on point, you unleash the bird, it hovers in a triangle above the dog—and on your command, the dog flushes, the game rises, the hawk dives down to snatch the prey. There's no mercy. Your part is to intercept the bird before it devours too much of what it has caught and leaves none for the table. You feed it bits of rabbit to distract it. And the hunter, for his part, returns with blood on his glove, a sated bird, proud dog, vanquished game. You look powerful, but it's the hunger of the bird, the nose of the dog.

When the Duke is here, the birds even hunt differently. They soar higher and dive as if performing. They overshoot the target and then loop back as if teasing. When they land on their prey, you have to run harder than any other day because the birds are relentless to satisfy themselves.

My father and I were the only ones who knew of the connection between the birds and the women. The falconry team believed it was just general chaos when the Duke and his entourage arrived four times a year for the hunt. They thought the birds must be smelling the perfume, or the improvement in dinner fare, or the sound of decorations unboxed. My father taught me privately that the royal Falcon, prized by the Duke, was attuned to the pleasure of the Duchess, and that each of the ladies-in-waiting had a corresponding bird that signaled her readiness to be bedded. It paid to know this, he instructed, since the Duke and Duchess always traveled with more women than men and some of us in a higher station could find ourselves the cause of a bird's distress. Best to know which lady was available, as soon as possible.

In building his system, my father sent servants into the hallways to listen at doors, paid the chambermaids for information, and finally grew bold enough to offer the guests a ceremonial display of the birds, where the ladies were asked to “inspect the hunt team” by walking past each of the hooded birds in display on the grounds. The Duke, thinking it grand, allowed the ceremony anytime a new woman joined his entourage. I kept careful notes, and my father directed our activities with them.

In the last few years we've cut a fine pair, a team: my father is broad shouldered and dark, trim and fit for a man of his years, and he is fond of elegance and silver. I have my mother's coloring, a wheat-stalk of a man, my father's height, with blond hair that I keep long—bound with leather straps down my back. We have hawkeyes in common, though, set the same, dark and piercing. When we stand together our eyes sweep the scene in unison. My father would approach the newly arrived grand dame of the entourage while I slid up beside a lesser lady-in-waiting. We kept our birds on opposite ends of the rookery to prevent them from setting off the entire flock.

When the Duke wasn't in residence, my father would travel to other towns to balls and feast days. He would return with the smell of women on his doublet and gloves, and his own bird—a goshawk with a splendid wingspan who had broken through cages on three occasions when my father was fucking. She had been losing her mind all evening and would require my father to softly talk her into settling down for the night.

But in the last year, all that changed. Others thought my father's walking stick was an affectation, but I knew that it hid a bad knee sprain that wouldn't heal. My father rarely hunts with us now, just inspects the operation and trains me in court etiquette, buying me stitched shoes and sending me alone to court events. He's growing thick through the middle from inactivity—and two months ago at dinner with the Duke, I caught my father digging in his back teeth in pain. Now when I return to our rooms, he's either fully dressed and pacing, or doubled over a soup bowl with a shawl like a broken old man.

Last week he changed our sexual teamwork as well, sending me out to call on a fine woman, then swooping into my private meeting, overdressed, bowing with great drama, and sending me away. I sat all night glowering at the histrionics of his bird, and when he appeared before daylight, I was so drunk I could barely lift my head above my tankard. I am already twenty-eight years old, far older than my father was when he became Grand Falconer. I've been second in command a long time. This clearly wasn't teamwork.

"So I've become your bird dog, have I?" I snarled at him. "Sending me out to flush the quarry?"

He threw his gloves on the table and took over my tankard. “The Duke is having the legs of your chair cut down so you don’t tower over him.” He set the tankard down. “You can afford to be generous.”

But I didn’t feel generous. In the last few months, my father had come home from a tryst with a limp. He had called off a rendezvous because of indigestion. When he was being rebuffed (for the first time in his life, perhaps), he blustered and swore and finally went out for the tavern whores in town. His conquests were desperate and pathetic.

* * *

That was the spring when I saw Brigit de Pitanne at banquet. Courtiers said that her family was Italian, that she had just come of age and joined the Duke’s entourage in its last swing through Paris. She had jet-black hair, dark eyes, olive skin. She was buttery and young, heavy enough to be healthy without signs of excess. She dressed simply, a respectable girl, but one who was so young, flushed, flawless, that she had no idea of her own allure. She ate her dinner as a girl would—to eat—not as a woman would—to entice. I cautiously watched her grandmother in too many layers of threadbare clothes, her aunt, nervous and demanding. Young Brigit was as oblivious as a bauble at her family’s wrist.

I don’t make a habit of younger women. “Never the fawn,” my father would say. I’m fond of the homely lady-in-waiting who is happy for attention, the matron who has resigned herself to a sexless middle age, the widow whose sense of propriety prolongs the seduction.

And in each case, the secrecy of the tryst was fêted like our precious child, receiving as much attention as we gave each other.

But I’m a hunter, and my father’s son, and therefore more interested in the chase than the quarry. I’ve been accused by my fellow hunters of being too fond of the power involved in these affairs, but perhaps those critics should become farmers. For a hunter, it’s the tension before the release. It is the nature of the male animal who is built like arrow and bow in one. Sex is not the steady, unimpeded flow of an old creek. It is the dam and the sluice gates. And with my lovers—well treated, each of them—it was the moment they shut the sluice that I remember best.

When the Widow d'Anju slid away from me along the garden wall, I heard her gown scrape against the brick and the smell of moss stayed in my nostrils every time we made love. What I remember about the Matron Simone is the rosemary in the kitchen when she first sent me away. The innocence of young women is its own refusal: the way they let cake cling to their over-full lips, the way they run like children without knowing that their breasts are bouncing the minds of every man nearby.

I approached Brigit in the garden as she was tending to her two unruly cousins. Like a little girl, she didn't back up or stiffen. I walked right up and bent to kiss her hand. She met my eyes with astonishment, then regarded her hand as if there had been honey on it—remembered herself, gathered the children up, curtsied, and hurried back to her apartments. She didn't ask my name.

The chase was on.

What happened next I blame on my hawk, a bird so closely attuned to me that the serfs tending the birds during banquets could tell if I was drunk by the way she behaved. The day I first approached Brigit, I came back into the rookery expecting my bird to be pacing and screeching. The winter I plowed the Widow d'Anju, she molted so severely that her breast was nearly bare. My serf administered to the bird obsessively and regarded me as if I were cheating on my wife. That day I slapped my gloves on the table and turned to the hawk to share the fire in me. The birds around her were screeching over the exploits of others (where was my father, I wondered?) and one had already broken its perch. But my peregrine was oddly quiet. I felt betrayed, snubbed even.

That's when I made my erroneous conclusion: her quietude proved that this woman was to be my wife. The bird's serenity foretold a peaceful marriage, didn't it? The hunt was over, the bird at rest. Brigit wasn't a widow with complications, or a woman much older than me with grown children. She wasn't of such high station that a match was out of the question. In asking about her, I had learned that her grandfather had been court astrologer and physician, her uncle a court scribe. Similar to my family, hers was valued for its knowledge and skill. So for the first time, I thought about marriage. In Brigit perhaps I had found someone of my own.

I didn't expect to be overcome with a wave of relief, to suddenly have my hunter's hunger turn to possessiveness. My bird, my Brigit, both precious and fragile. I ran my hands down my hawk's cage. My father came up behind me and regarded the bird with curiosity as well.

"Requesting permission to marry, sir," I said, and my father jerked his head back in surprise, then turned back to my hawk.

"Here's proof it's the wrong choice." He took his seat at the table.

"No, proof it's the perfect decision," I blurted. I seized on the logic of it. We weren't sure why the birds went mad when we bedded women, but maybe it was jealousy. If so, my bird's peace meant that this woman belonged in the family.

My father, however, would hear none of it. "Whoever she is, she's not right for you, son." He paced in front of the cage, checked the bird's droppings, questioned the serfs on her water ration. I described Brigit's family, her beauty and youth.

"You're going to give it all up, for one woman?" He paced the room, and his limp seemed more pronounced. "Well, I suppose you wouldn't have to be true."

"Of course I'd be true to my wife."

My father redoubled his protests. I saw that it wasn't my attachment to Brigit, but his own failing libido that frightened him. If the women wouldn't have him and I married, what would his life look like? I wouldn't seduce at his side, I wouldn't turn over my ladies to him, he couldn't even vicariously enjoy my exploits. He would be the old man under the shawl slurping broth.

There was something about my father's unease that pleased me. I hadn't minded in the past when he had been privy to my activities by reading my hawk. But now it seemed intrusive, a little sadistic to cackle over the bird's distress. The privacy of this new life appealed to me.

But my father's concern also gave me the itch. I went into the kitchens where the bakery girls were setting up yeast for the morning bread and found Marie, who would have me on occasion if the mood struck her, or if she hoped to marry up by conceiving my child. She would only take my cock standing up in the wood-drying alcove behind the ovens where the flames made the walls gold. I suspected that there

was usually an audience, some servant boy who pledged love and got off on the display. Marie gripped me deep inside her, and as I sweated in the baking heat her muslin skirts billowed little clouds of flour. Her cleavage tasted like butter—and whenever the Duke was in residence, of nutmeg.

As I passed the rookery on my way to bed, my hawk screeched and rattled her cage.

In the morning I began my pursuit of Brigit. I did it with a slaked thirst that I thought was important for clarity. I saw her in the far gardens and I was flooded with desires I hadn't expected. I coveted her firm breasts pressed into my back every night, to wake up with my shaft hard and her wet thigh slung over my hip. I wanted to drive into her half-asleep in the middle of the night without saying a word, for her to pour hot water into my bath and reach through the suds to my balls. Not the hunt, but the feast afterward. I wanted the sexual gluttony of marriage.

The Duke's garden is a long strip leading at the end to a gate to the forest. But it is poorly laid out with a flower bed barrier down the middle. Brigit paced with wide steps, holding the sides of her gown above the grass. I realized I was on the wrong side, so I broke through the rose bushes, tearing my hands in the process. Brigit's aunt was sitting on a bench lost in contemplation.

"You've made me lose count, sire," she said. There was no innocent surprise on her face, no childish awe, and the transformation took me aback.

"Count of what?"

"The garden. Know you the length of this garden?"

"Long enough for a fine stroll."

"In numbers, that is," she said.

"Numbers? No."

"Then I shall have to begin again. Aunt . . ."

"Yes, yes," the woman said, waving her hand. "It must be accurate."

Brigit turned to the lodge and motioned me to join her. "You are the son of the Grand Falconer."

"I am." I kept up her brisk pace. "What are you doing with these . . . measurements?"

Brigit looked at me as if she had been caught stealing. "They're for . . . well, just for . . . silly women's drawings . . . but I like them to be . . . mathematically accurate."

“Mathematically?” No one in court knew mathematics. Even the Duke only knew numbers when it came to money. And very basic transactions at that.

She looked around to see if we had been overheard. “You have my secret now,” she said, childlike again, as we reached the lodge wall and she pressed her heels against it, palms and back flat against its stone. She smiled like a coquette. “Will you keep it safe?”

A woman with more academic training than the Duke? That was dangerous. Only strange people from the Arab world or the Far East showed the court things involving mathematics, and they were regarded with suspicion. The young daughter of an Earl who knew five languages and was intent on studying medicine was forced into a nunnery when she corrected the Bishop’s German under her breath.

I was even hungrier than before and I drank in the smell of her skin. “As I will all things you give me.” I turned over her hand and kissed her wrist before departing.

It was the night of a small costume ball for the Duchess. Masks brought out impropriety, and the birds were already reacting. Women concealed their age, everyone was questionable, and the small crowd was augmented by the middling-born who were suddenly emboldened by the opportunity to mingle.

Where was Brigit, this luscious girl-woman with a secret and the puzzle that drove heat into my balls? I found her by the soup caldron and I seized her elbow without thinking of the company surrounding her. She squealed, then stepped into me—but her grandmother, the widow with the layers of mismatched clothing, drew forward. I bowed to the old woman, but Brigit defied her and pulled me over to the window. I countered by escorting her out of the room and down the hall.

I slipped my hand behind her head, expecting her to protest that I was mussing her hair, but she leaned into my kiss. She was clumsy at kissing, and that reassured me, so I ran my hand up her bodice to her breasts until she started panting and pulled away, giving me startled eyes. That was all it took. I lunged for her; I devoured her mouth until her knees bent. I cupped her buttocks and pulled her up against my loins until the swelling of my erection made her whimper. I had never

had a virgin. I had never kissed lips that childlike and full. For once I was not in control but falling into the well of it.

“Sweet child,” I said, and she covered my mouth with hers again. We ran hand in hand down the long halls to my apartments and flung ourselves on the bed. She unlaced the top of her dress to show me her breasts, as if she couldn’t believe they were there. When she straddled me, I could tell that this gesture—as much for a horse as a man—was all she knew. I rolled her over and began our first night of gluttony.

But she surprised me. She met me hand to hand. She didn’t lie there like a frightened virgin and yet she didn’t come at me with schooled and empty techniques. She held me with strength, not clinging to me, or even hungry, but with a clear, animal nature.

I watched her face an inch away from mine as she put her hand on her first cock, listened to the surprise in her throat. She moved her fingers up my long, ridged shaft. The tips of her fingers registered the heat of the velvet skin on the head of my dick. I watched her float away, but she returned, seeing me. Seeing the man. Her clear brown eyes made me see her. I traced her jaw with my fingers, touched the corners of her eyes with my thumbs. Her presence made me present, made me see how the widows and I had made love to nothing but the secret of each other.

“My hunter,” she said, tangling her fingers in my hair. I laid her back, watching her face as I had never bothered to with the others.

Every inch of penetration was a surprise to her. I moaned from her hot grip and surrendered to my rhythm until we were covered with sweat, and I saw her first orgasm shoot through her body to brighten her eyes. I shuddered and came.

Her hair floated like seaweed across my pillow, and her chatter was so bright that I wanted to hear it from the mouths of our children, to be peppered with it as an old man, lying in the post-coital fog. I adored her, I realized, as she sat up in bed, my bachelor linens unworthy of her clean flesh.

“Be my wife,” I asked her, unthinking. She consented immediately.

And yet as Brigit bounced on the bed, my balls went as cold and limp as roe-sack. I am a hunter, it drives me—and now the hunting is over? My father’s words came back to me. Brigit was ready to make

love again, but all the parts of me shrank from her. I took her hand from my cheek, kissed her palm, and got out of bed.

“Soon, my love,” I faltered. “Thwart the gossips . . .”

We dressed and returned to the party, where no woman stirred me. Beautiful cleavage and delicate ankles twirled in front of me, but I was listless.

The next morning as we gathered for the hunt, my hawk rode me out to the hunting grounds as if stuffed. Her passivity made me nervous, and when it came time to launch her, she flapped upward and then returned to hop on the grass a pace ahead of me.

My father became unhinged and jammed his walking stick into the ground.

“What have you done to her?”

Three times I launched her and each time she refused to hunt.

I tried one of my team’s birds, and when launched she soared above us and then had to be coaxed down from a tree. It wasn’t the birds, it was me. At the end of the day I returned empty-handed with my stomach in a knot.

“That woman will do the same to you,” Father said. He gripped my elbow as I was pouring mead in our rooms. “That’s why you watch the falcon. That girl will suck the hunter nature out of you.”

I’m not proud of the ensuing week. But a man faces a primal fear when both monogamy and the loss of his livelihood stare him down. I feasted like the starving wretch who can be forgiven bad table manners. I fucked Marie the next morning—and though my chest was covered with flour and my back with sweat, I strode out to the forest and paid for the services of the woodcutter’s daughters, both of them. We had sex so loud and long, it sounded like the lowing cattle in the stall beside us. I rode into town and was serviced at the public baths, rode on to the next village and found the service girl there.

The rookery serfs said that my hawk had to spend all day hooded and that she was so unnerved that she would only sleep on the bottom of her cage with her claws deep in the face of a hare. My second in command took her out while I was gone, and she bagged twice as much game as any other bird in the party.

Clearly, my father was right, and the prospect of marrying Brigit was going to rob both of us of our raptor instincts.

News of our betrothal had preceded my return. As I walked from the rookery to the de Pitannes' rooms, women showered me with well-wishes and men who had heard of my bird's rebellion regarded me with troubled eyes.

I had not sent advance word of my intention to visit, so Brigit's grandmother was shouting her insistence that Brigit hide her drawings. Brigit lit up when she saw me and motioned me over, pushing her grandmother back so I could look at what was laid out on the table.

I nodded respectfully to the old woman. Brigit's drawing covered the entire surface, with a crock of water and one of quills holding down the far corners. She had the facade of the Duke's lodge, the back wall, and the length of the garden, each drawn precisely and with the measurements and square footage as well. It was exquisite, with beautiful detail. I had never seen a woman do work like that. Her face flushed as she laid out another drawing from a wide leather tube in which a dozen large parchments were stored. It was an architectural drawing of the Duke de Berry's westernmost castle.

"I try to get her to paint flowers, m'lord," her grandmother said and then took to fixing Brigit's hair, which was loose on her shoulders. "Please don't talk about her to the others."

Here was a happy secret instead of a shameful one. Not weakness of character or violation of decency, but a brain that was stronger and sharper than most. My love for her doubled, and I wanted to protect her, not protect our secret.

"Madame de Pitanne," I said, dropping to my knees. "I've come to discuss the specifics of marriage."

* * *

When I returned to the rookery, my falcon sat nonplussed on her perch. My father was staring into a tankard and barely looked up as I flopped into my chair.

“You’ll marry, then,” he said.

I shook my hands in exasperation at my falcon’s cage and snapped at it with my glove just to get a rise out of the placid bird. “You were right. When I have her, the birds won’t hunt. And I can’t live without hunting. Maybe we should cook you!” I shouted at the bird.

My father slammed his fist down. “You are the sixth generation of falconers. Everything we have is from the birds.”

It seemed unfair to me that I should be denied a wife and an heir, all for the pheasant on the Duke’s table. Was it my lot in life to skulk around other men’s widows so I could put rabbit on a dinner plate?

In the following days, the situation grew worse. No bird would hunt with me, and the ladies of the lodge held no appeal. I was betrothed, and useless. I was happy around Brigit as the lodge made ready for the wedding, but during the day I hung to the back of the hunt team, less useful than a serf. The entire team grew sullen.

On the morning of the seventh day, two days before the wedding, we assembled for the hunt and my father appeared behind us, fully dressed. He seldom joined us for the long walk, but this morning he was sporting his best hunting doublet and his old elbow-high bird glove. He walked as if approaching the Duke. I, my five falconers, and the six dog-masters stood in respectful confusion. Horse hooves rang on the cobblestones. The birds—all but mine—paced nervously on their perches despite their hoods.

The Master of the Hunt and his team who hunted the big game—wild boar, deer, elk, sometimes bear, a far more dangerous task than ours—rode to a line in front of us. The scars on their faces and arms glistened in the morning sun. They outweighed us by fifty pounds apiece. They wore their knives lashed to their chests, with spears and bows on either side of their saddles.

A stable boy trotted up with a riderless horse, an unruly mare already foaming with her own ill will.

“Gentlemen,” my father said ceremoniously. “I have seen this twice in my life and heard of it just once in my father’s. My son has been invited to spend his life with the Master of the Hunt. To give up the

bird for the sword. Though it breaks our line of six generations with the falcons, I release him of his duties and encourage him to go to his new life. He has served us exceptionally well . . .”

My falconry team whispered their objections. There was only an opening on the Master of the Hunt’s team because the previous hunter had been gored and died of an infection. Two of his other hunters were now crippled, old beyond their years. Falconry required fitness and intelligent handling of the birds, but these men were known to dismount and fight an injured pig with their knives, to face down a bear. It was a life of long rides, complex schemes of entrapment, and infrequent kills. Their lives relied on a horse, nearly as dumb as a bird, but capable of killing you in an instant. And look at the horse they’ve chosen: half-mad, witlessly tugging at the reins.

I grabbed my father’s forearm, and he smiled into my surprised face. “Every hunter has a certain nature,” he said. “You spent half of yours with the birds and half in bed. A fine-enough life until you were blessed with someone for whom you would change hunting into protection.” He rubbed my head. “But you see, the birds won’t tolerate receiving the total of your hunter’s nature. They’re too fragile and they’ve abandoned you. So it’s time to move to bigger game. Up the stakes, my son. Give up the rabbit to fight the boar, and marry.”

“But what about you? And our lineage?”

“The birds have abandoned you, but the women have abandoned me—so I’ll resume here. Give me a grandson to train, and we shall see what the birds make of him.”

My body had already made the decision for me. My chest came forward and my falcon danced on her perch. I would descend from second to the Grand Falconer to the newest, least skilled member of the hunt squad.

I bowed to my fine falconry team, saluted the men of the hunt, and moved to the horse on the end.

“They’ve done you no favors with this one, sire,” the stable boy said as I stuck my foot into his hands for a mount. “She’s headstrong. And she bites.”

My mind shifted, on task again.



HALF-CROWN DOXY

Cate Robertson

WITH EMILIE AND THE GIRLS packed off to her mother's in Geneva for Easter, he can—at last—allow himself a little night sport. With no constraints.

Barmaids are his preference. Cleaner than streetwalkers, barmaids can afford to be pickier but are still greedy enough to serve his more outrageous demands, if it means more coin.

He smiles to himself in anticipation as he takes his supper in the corner booth at the Crown, a noisy public house in a dank lane close by the Tower. Tall and stout, a gentleman to his manicured fingertips, he watches the buxom, dark-haired Nancy pull his pint.

When she plunks the foaming flagon on the board, he touches her forearm and speaks *sotto voce*.

“Care to make a little extra silver tonight, my pet?”

She giggles nervously but doesn't pull away. He rubs the underside of her wrist with his thumb and watches the blush suffuse her cheeks.

“Yes, that would be nice, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Is there anything sweeter than a grateful young whore? She can't be more than twenty. Courteous even in his affairs *du nuit*, he broaches terms.

“Half a crown, sir . . . All night, sir, yes, dusk to dawn . . . Anything you wants . . . Yes, sir, anything.”

He draws the riding crop from under his arm. “This, angel?” The sudden spark of fear in her gray eyes amuses him. She sets her jaw so prettily. He can’t wait to hear her beg.

“That don’t scare me—what girl ain’t been thrashed, sir?”

What a delight. He can hardly bear to conjure up the prospects. She listens to his instructions, nodding. Not only compliant, she attends carefully. A quick study. She is perfection.

“Yes, sir, half ten we close up . . . Yes, I will, sir . . .”

He folds a coin into her palm, downs his ale, and leaves, his mind swimming with soft creamy thighs and red-nippled tits, his cock already stiff in his tailored trousers.

* * *

Nancy hands the coin he’d given her to the cabbie, who smirks when she names her destination: “The Phoenix, back entrance.”

As the horse clip-clops smartly down the gaslit Strand, up to the Circus, and along Oxford Street, she remembers what Meg said about the Phoenix. Secret club in Mayfair where the top toffs kept their fancy-women. Meg claimed she saw the Prince of Wales himself there. Bloody big deal! What did that matter?

Here’s what mattered: double pay if she stayed the night and obeyed his commands. But not a farthing if she refused him anything.

He knew girls. He knew she couldn’t turn down a bet.

The cab winds through the mansion’d maze of Mayfair streets and squares, then halts in a lane. There is the red door. She knocks, is admitted, given directions. His door is ajar, meaning: Enter.

She shuts it with a click behind her. Scent of steam, lavender water. Her nostrils flare.

The room—a bedroom—is luxuriously carpeted and furnished. He himself, robed in navy silk, is sitting on a couch near the foot of the bed, with his slippers extended toward a small but merry fire.

Beside him on a low table is a lacquered box, trimmed in gold. Open. She cannot see its contents.

He glances up at her.

“Come in, Nancy. Hang up your cloak and come here. You remember the terms? You agree to them?”

She nods.

“Good. Undress and bathe yourself.”

The washbasin, steaming in a corner, is situated so that he can watch her from behind. She pays particular attention to her cunt and crack. She wants him to know she’s a clean girl.

When she turns, he is standing, his robe well-tented. He motions her to kneel and lets his robe slide, a silken puddle on the floor. His furred belly speaks of appetites indulged with gusto. He is thick, upcurved like a scimitar, a lordly purple head in a ruched collar of foreskin.

She doesn’t have to wait for instructions.

She sucks her cheeks to gather a pool of spit that flows out on her tongue as she laps and flicks. After a few minutes, he says, “Lie on your back on the bed. Head over the side. Open your mouth.”

The bed is high, brass-railed, dressed in white linens.

When he fills her throat, she gags for a moment until she remembers how to relax her jaw and breathe in concert with his thrusts. It’s like a dance. Still, it’s punishing. The back of her neck cramps with every shove. Her scalp aches where his fingers are knotted in her hair. She moans, a strangled wordless song, and every swing and flop of his pouch fills her nostrils with his musk.

She feels him spurt, hot, deep in her chest. Grateful for his proffered handkerchief, she wipes her tears and accepts the small tumbler of whisky he pours for her.

She replaces the tumbler and remounts the bed. Sitting back on her heels, she reaches out to stroke his beard. Once sable, now badger. On his elbow, he studies her.

“I am an old man.”

“No, sir, you’re not. You’re right handsome, sir.”

Sweet, shameless tart. Look at her, sturdy white thighs spread wide, her soft belly deep-dimpled with her navel and rounding into the delicious shadow of her black bush. Her melon-sized tits make his mouth water.

On her lip glimmers the last of the whisky. He pulls her mouth down to his. She opens like a baby bird, her little tongue gallantly fencing his thrusts.

Groping glorious handfuls of her, he pinches her nipples until she breaks off the kiss with a cry. He reaches behind and grabs a cheek, squeezing and raking with his cruel nails.

“Oh sir, please don’t! That hurts!”

He chuckles and repeats for the other cheek. Her playful slap misses his hand.

He plunges his two middle fingers into her mouth, then into her crevice, pumping his palm against her plump mound.

“Oh my glory, sir!” Her eyes roll back as she clenches hard around him. Damn, but she’s good for the blood: he’s stiff as a board again.

Pulled onto his lap, she surges downward to take his shaft and he includes a surprise: his middle finger, up her behind, so tight, so silken he grates his teeth. She gasps and gyrates, her arms flailing, her teeth gnawing his shoulders.

He bears her backwards, plowing into her until his seed spews and his coultter jars, shuddering, to a halt between her enveloping thighs.

* * *

“What’s in the box, sir?” Between kisses. Looking down at him. Fingering his limp cock with a wicked grin.

“Treasures. For you, little doxy.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh please may I see, sir?”

He fetches it, lifts off the lid to reveal drawers and compartments, intricately layered and arrayed.

From one, he takes out black leather straps, padded and studded with rings and clips. He buckles one around her neck. Her face falls. There’s the tug in the groin.

“Give me your wrists . . . Your ankles . . . The belt goes . . . here.”

He clips the wristbands to loops at the sides of the belt, rendering her hands useless. Her shoulders are forced back, her lovely tits forward.

“I have just the crowning touch for these two beauties.”

“Sir—?”

Nipple clamps of forged iron, shaped like dragon's heads and sprung with a forbidding pinch.

"No, sir, please!"

He tweaks each nipple viciously to erect it, then applies the tiny jaws. For each one, she wails but she doesn't twist away. She knows what's good for her.

He rummages for the chains: short chains from anklets to belt to keep her legs bent frog-like. Prevent her from kicking out. Keep her docile and accessible if she rolls away. And last of all—

"Look." From a bottom compartment, he extricates a dry segmented tuber. "Tell me what this is."

"It's ginger, sir."

He cuts off a thick finger, pares it, shapes it. Like a long fat finger. Her jaw drops in horror.

"Oh please, sir. Not that. Oh sir, it hurts! Please don't, sir. I beg you." She begs so prettily: her tortured breasts heaving, her wide gray eyes glittering with tears.

Damn if she hasn't got him rock-hard again. Well, let her see what a Priapus she's made of him, the juicy little cockwhore!

"Kneel. With your face in the pillows." She obeys, moaning and whimpering. Uplifting her gorgeous arse. He breathes a prayer of thanks: these are the Elysian fields.

He chains her neck to the bed rail. Spreads her pink cheeks and chuckles at her rosebud, pursed so tight. Time to open up, precious sweetness.

He slips the ginger finger in to the hilt and rubs his hands together to heat up his palms. It won't be long before the fun begins.

* * *

She writhes in agony as the ginger works its fiery magic. He's been told its effect is aphrodisiac.

It certainly is so for him.

Her terrified whimpers—"Sweet Jesus. Sir, help me, please!"—build to a wail that hums over his scalp like an electric shock and makes his teeth clench.

He begins the spanking with a calculated rhythm and punitive force, relishing the full swing of his arm, the blaze of her flesh against his palm, her panic. Her naked defenselessness.

Racked with sobs, she sags into the pillow. Her cheeks are livid with his fingerprints. Proud proof of his hand over her! He grabs the crop and swoops it against the bed. Just to let her know what's next.

"Please, sir, no!" she pleads. He is obdurate. At moments like this, he rejoices in his hardness, his adamant heart and rigid cock. He marks her with thick welts of ownership, his lip lifting in a snarl with every stripe the crop raises on her flesh.

She is moaning, incoherent. "No, no, no." Beautiful bitch. How valiantly she struggles under his arm. How she fights the lash!

Then, how she sinks and falls.

Poor weak flesh. Oh, poor sweet child!

His arm drops. This is the moment he craves: the moment his heart softens. When she transforms him from a monster of cruelty to a champion of mercy.

The moment he saves her.

He flings the crop aside, crawls between her trembling thighs, and draws her dripping cunt down over his face. He laps and sucks noisily, thirsty as a baby on the tit, smacking his lips, soothing and pleasuring her until her groans turn to growls.

"Oh sir, oh fuck yes. Fuck."

Oh darling, yes. Fuck. Come. Sweet filthy whore. Come, slut.

He frees her hands, plucks off the clamps, and holds on. With his head in the vise of her thighs, he but feels her screams through her body—through the rosy meat roiling in his open jaws. Oh, bliss, to be so buffeted at the eye of such a storm! And her hot little pearl pump-pump-pumping on his tongue.

* * *

He folds his pretty battered thing to his chest, kisses her tears away, croons to her, and rocks her while her sobs trail out to wrenching gasps.

Yes, it's power.

Not worldly power. By virtue of his position, he commands power. In his world, he is king with servants and lackeys to do his bidding without question. Where's the challenge in that? In extracting submission from those whose role is to submit? Bah!

He wants elemental power. The power that goes back to Genesis: man shall have dominion. Man, not woman. He assays this theorem with lash and cock. His proof is indisputable.

He turns her upon her knees and bulls her deep and hard, while she spends helplessly, again and again, beneath him.

Quod. Erat. Demonstrandum.

* * *

She wakes in his bearish embrace, bursting to piss and too sore to move. Straddled over the chamber pot, she winces at the scald.

She crawls back in under his arm. Drowsy, he pulls her hips close and rubs his nose in her hair. "Look what you do to me, you bitch."

She knows what he's sniffing for, but with her raw flesh and the lingering sting of ginger, she can't bear to think of it. Then again, it's good to hold back something for future considerations. He is a gentleman after all: she will appeal forthrightly to his gentlemanliness. She turns to him apologetically.

"Oh sir, your vigor has undone me. May I pleasure you with my mouth, sir?"

He chuckles. "Fucked you senseless, have I, my lascivious pet? Now how will you have me?"

She mounds and pats the pillows. He reclines like an Oriental potentate.

"Draw your knees up, please, sir. Hold them wide."

He obeys with a quizzical smile.

The sight of his long sword, rampant, and his generous purse stirs the ache of lust in her cunt. But the object of her quest is a far more outrageous treasure: a deluge of half-crowns.

She bends and inhales his scent: a gamy blend of spunk and cunt. She works his cock first to bring him to the point of no return, when he will refuse nothing in his drive for release.

After substantial sucking and stroking, she coaxes his pouch into her mouth, tumbling the slack freight tenderly on her tongue, first one side, then the other.

“Have a care, mistress!” he whispers.

“Shh, sir.” She laps, soft-tongued. He sighs. Loosens. She anoints his shaft again, builds his rhythm with her hand and mouth. Lost in his bliss, he doesn’t protest when she presses a spit-slicked finger to his grundle, or when she slips it lower, then deeper.

But he moans when she eases it into his silken tunnel: oscillation, rotation. His face contorts and his hips respond. She’s got him gasping on the hook now.

“Whore,” he whispers. “Would you fuck my arse!”

“Yes, sir, I would. Raise your hips higher, sir.”

He obeys and she delves deeper. “Filthy whore!” A prayer of petition, groaned.

She knows he’s close when his shaft flesh surges in her grip: time to reel him in.

In a fluid move, she withdraws her finger and presses her mouth to his fundament. Her tongue, curled into a tube, thrusts boldly in and out through the little flesh-door, slurping. She doesn’t mind the taste, like acrid cider. Meg says, what don’t kill you makes you stronger.

He writhes and grinds down into her face, his fingers snarled in her hair. “Bitch, oh filthy brazen shameless bitch!” It’s a hallelujah. He spends in thick gouts up his lovely great belly.

He blinks at her in astonishment. She swipes her wrist across her mouth and gives him a faux innocent smile.

“What a wild little wanton you are!” He pulls her close. “I shall rain down half-crowns on you, my pretty treasure.”

She wraps her arms around his bulk and breathes a little prayer of thanks to God, for giving her tits and a cunt and the brains to use them profitably in the service of generous gentlemen!



PANDORA'S OTHER BOX

Greg Boyd

Never can I pass without a shudder through
those gates of ivory or horn that separate us
from the invisible world.

—*Gérard de Nerval, Aurélia*

WRAPPED IN A DARK WOOL OVERCOAT, I wander along the narrow cobblestone streets of a foreign city, where the crooked upper stories of the buildings lean over me like a thick canopy of branches in a fairytale forest. It's twilight on a winter's day, and I've taken a wrong turn while searching for a subway station buried somewhere beneath the spider web of surface streets. The path I've taken has curved away from the river, winding up a steep hill. I admit that I am lost. To make matters worse, I've left my tourist map back at the hotel.

Single again, after years of marriage, I'm looking for adventure and it's the last night of my trip. I wonder what my colleagues at the International Folklore Conference would think if they knew I'd declined their dinner invitation to seek out strip clubs and sex boutiques, to window-shop the girls working the rainy neon night. No doubt I should have taken a cab. Taxi drivers always know where to go.

Along the darkening street, doors are shut tight against the cold weather. The windows are unlit. I pass a tailor's shop with a bare cloth and wire mannequin bust behind a large pane of streaked glass. The mere suggestion of a naked bosom makes me horny. I hurry forward, but the steepness of the hill and the chill in the air take my breath away, so I stop for a moment beneath the awning of a storefront. The window displays a pyramid of antique poison bottles with cracked and yellowed paper labels, and three stuffed rats with noses, feet, and tails the shocking color of coral.

It's raining harder now. I push my hand against the bottom of my pocket and cradle my cold penis as the wind slaps my face and penetrates the wet wool of my coat. I peer again into the window stuffed haphazardly with antiques and *objets d'art*. An old bicycle with a giant front wheel and a high seat catches my eye. Surrounding the bicycle are bronze and silver coins with imperial faces, a set of cobalt blue glassware, a framed lithograph of a hypnotic odalisque, a small wooden chest with an inlaid top depicting a trumpeting elephant, a carnelian intaglio of Medusa, a stack of old books with raised and rounded spines, a pair of high-heeled Victorian lace-up boots, a faded silk kimono with a red and black dragon motif, a Napoleonic shako, a medieval falconer tapestry, and a small bronze Aphrodite figurine. Though I can't decipher any of the other signs on the street, I see that the wooden shingle hanging from the wrought-iron post over the door reads in English, CURIOSITY SHOP.

On the street behind me a car hisses past, spraying water from the gutter onto my legs and soaking my feet. Through the shop window I detect the warm glow of electric lights. I see there's a small handwritten note that reads *Browsers Welcome*. I shake out my hat and enter, rubbing my hands together. A bell tinkles as I shut the door behind me. I'm surprised that no one greets me.

Inside, a suit of chain mail stands guard next to a marble Eros. An antique soda machine rests on a Byzantine floor mosaic next to a brass clepsydra. On a circular rack at the far end of the room, wedding dresses with tiny waists and yellowing lace await a second chance. I note that each item has a card stock label affixed to it with a piece of

string. Though there are no prices, the tags contain brief descriptions penned in precise but tiny orthography. *Gentleman's leather wig stand. Sterling silver nipple clamp.*

The shop smells of incense and freshly baked bread. I wonder if someone lives upstairs. I unbutton my coat and pass through a doorway into the adjacent room, which smells in turn of cinnamon and vanilla, ginger and saffron. Among the crowd of masterful paintings that cover the walls, I discover a colorful Japanese woodcut of a samurai stuffing his enormous cock inside a plump courtesan's hairy snatch. Nearby, a stuffed grizzly rears up over a scale model of a flying machine from Leonardo's notebook and the pitted Roman spearhead that pierced the side of the crucified Christ. A thick layer of dust covers everything.

Surrounded by fringe, beads, and crystal, I'm reading the label on a vial of rare Tonkin musk and running my hand through an ancient wig made of lustrous human hair smelling of olibanum and myrrh, when I'm startled by a voice behind me. I turn to find a woman with the classical features, proportions, and posture of a statue carved of white marble. Her sapphire eyes sparkle behind rectangular lenses set in a heavy frame. Magnificent breasts with puffy nipples stretch her tight turtleneck sweater. "Can I help you find something?" she asks, in accented English. A strand of chestnut brown hair has come loose from her chignon and fallen onto her long neck. Her perfume makes me dizzy.

I realize I'm staring at her breasts and look quickly away, my eyes drifting to the opposite end of the room, where I see a giant model of a man dressed in a white suit and a rakish, long-billed driving cap. "Actually, I'm wondering if you could tell me a little about the item in the corner."

"The Automatic Man," she smiles. "A recent acquisition from America. It turned up in an old barn last year, and my representative there bought it at auction. It's a battery-operated mechanical being created in the late 1890s by Louis Philip Perew, an inventor from Tonawanda, New York. It stands seven feet tall, wears size thirteen shoes, and is made of painted aluminum over a rigid metal frame. The original canvas duck clothing is in remarkably good shape, don't you

agree?" She bends over slightly to show me, which seems impossible in the pencil skirt she's poured into. But nothing deters her.

"It's designed to walk at a brisk pace," she says. "The robot originally pulled a small wagon-carriage attached to its hands by a chain. It can also roll its eyes and speak a short recorded message from an internal phonograph."

"What does it say?"

"I'm going to walk from New York to San Francisco."

"Fascinating."

"But not exactly to your tastes, I see."

"Not exactly," I laugh. "But I'm quite sure there's something here that I absolutely must have." I lick my lips and look into her eyes.

She smiles again, Sphinx-like. "Perhaps I can help. There's a particular curiosity that I suspect you will find most beguiling. Would you like to see it?" Already she's moving toward the doorway.

"Yes, of course," I say, following her past a giant butterfly pinned to the wall and into the next room. Her high heels click noisily on the polished hardwood floors as she leads me through a maze of small rooms crowded with mysterious objects. I keep my eyes fixed on her tight, round ass, as it wiggles beneath the short wool skirt. I imagine licking the perfume from behind her ears as I touch myself through the pocket of my coat.

At the end of a hallway, she stops before a door marked PRIVATE. As she searches for the key to the lock, I pretend to admire an oversized cartography of lost continents spread open on a mahogany tabletop. She leads me down a set of narrow stairs to the basement. My heart is racing. Amid a chaotic profusion of as yet uncatalogued objects, she gestures for me to sit in an empire chair next to the skeleton of an upright *Parasaurolophus* and a metro sign with leafy lampposts and bulbs like curved flowers.

She reaches up to undo the chignon and shake out her hair. My legs are trembling. She stands directly in front of me, between my thighs, and places her hands on my shoulders.

"Now sit still and stay perfectly silent," she says. I look up at her and try to speak, but she puts her finger against my lips and shakes

her head. She's looking down at me and standing so close that I can feel the heat from her body. She bends forward and curls the fingers of both her hands under the hem of her herringbone-pattern skirt.

Sitting before her in the chair, eye level with her waist, I watch her slide the gray wool slowly up her marble white thighs. She uncovers the garters hooked to the dark stripe of nylon at the top of her stockings. The hem of the skirt is like the curtain of a theater, slowly revealing as it rises, the double feature of her inner thighs. A moment later she stands before me with the skirt bunched up at her waist, her secret unveiled. She is not wearing panties.

Framed by the black lace garter belt, her sex is marvelous, intoxicating, alluring. It is Gustave Courbet's painting *L'Origine du Monde* come to life. I shake my head and pinch myself. One moment I am wandering cold and wet in the rain, and the next I am surrendering all sense of logic and time to the contemplation of an exquisite pair of creased and folded labia minora, gateway to further mysteries. My breath quickens with the moist heat and the musky smell of arousal only inches from my face.

"Come closer," she says. "I want to tell you a secret."

I lean forward, so that my nose touches the soft skin of her pubis. Suddenly I realize her vagina is whispering to me. "But first, give me a kiss," it says.

I don't hesitate. Spreading the fleshy lips with my fingers, I slide my tongue the length of her damp opening, and then press against her, pushing inside. I kiss and lick the bare skin at the top of each thigh and circle the tip of my tongue around the hood of her clitoris. I drool onto my fingers and rub saliva onto her labia, making her still wetter. "That's nice," the vulva says. "Now let me feel your fingers."

When I place my index finger at the fleshy opening, she sucks it inside immediately. By now she is very wet. One by one, I feed her more, rubbing above with my thumb, until it slips inside as well. She lifts her sweater above her breasts and pinches her large nipples, sighing and moaning as I stir the pot, which comes quickly to a boil. She grabs my elbow and pulls until half my forearm disappears. The lights in the basement pulse and get brighter when she pushes roughly back

against me, shouting Elizabethan obscenities and crying out as her muscles contract.

I bounce around on the seat of the chair like water on a hot griddle. The zipper of my trousers claws at the head of my erection. She presses a fat nipple between my lips, teasing me. She pulls my hand out and bends over to unbuckle my belt. Without a word, she frees my cock and slips it into the relief of her mouth. I grab the back of her head with one hand, pulling her deeper. With the other hand I grip the wooden arm of the chair, my mouth in full scream.

Then things get really strange.

As the blood pulses through my engorged organ, the tight skin expands outward, nerves quivering along every inch of my body. My heart pounds at the center of my cock. My legs, my hands, even my head swell with sensation and push out to rub against the wet warmth of her mouth, as though I'm nothing more than a giant phallus. She has shrunk me down to the size of a samurai cock, transformed me into a throbbing hot dildo. I gasp as she picks me up off the cushion of the chair and squeezes me in her hand.

Her warm tongue washes my face and tickles my torso. She sits down with her legs spread wide, knees draped over the arms of the chair. I watch her unfold the opening of her cunt with her fingers and align me with her sweet-talking lips. "Give me all your love," she says. "Let me wrap myself around you." Teasing herself, she pushes me in, up to my neck.

I'm afraid I won't be able to breathe, that I will drown or suffocate. But as I glide past the soft creases and travel farther into her wet grasp, I give myself up. I am her toy: she uses me roughly, slapping my face against her clit, holding me by the ankles and plunging me rapidly in and out until my head spins. "Stab, thou happy dagger," she hisses, sucking in her breath. Moaning, crying out, cursing, she bucks her hips wildly. "Deeper, thou ruttish common-kissing codpiece!" Her muscles contract and spasm around me, and I explode with pleasure.

When I regain consciousness, I find myself inside a wire birdcage modeled after the Taj Mahal. It hangs from a hook in the ceiling of a room upstairs, the one with the grizzly bear and Aladdin's magic lamp.

Sitting on a little wooden perch, I chirp for a moment and shake out my wings. On the wall behind me is an unknown painting by Van Gogh of a caged bird in a yellow and blue bedroom. The tag tells me the artist painted it in Arles and offered it in trade to a prostitute who kept a canary in her room above the bar with the red walls, hanging lamps, and the billiard table he immortalized in *Night Café*. On the top shelf of the bookcase next to me stands a tiny carved limestone figurine with the shape and features of the Woman of Willendorf.

I shift my weight from one foot to the other and pivot my head from side to side. I let myself drop and glide toward the floor of the cage, then fly effortlessly up to another perch. Meanwhile, I can hear the woman humming contentedly in the next room. *I'm pregnant*, she tells me telepathically. *I'm making up some new labels*. I notice that she's filled the water dropper and scattered a thick carpet of seeds on the floor. I also see that she's left the door to the cage wide open. *Wonderful*, I sing back to her through my little beak.

We both know that I'm not going anywhere.



TWINS

Ed Falco

“IT WAS LATE, BUT I WASN’T SLEEPING. I was in bed, just lying there. My house is beautiful . . . well, lovely is probably a better word. It’s small and tastefully decorated. The furnishings are largely antiques, and the atmosphere is rustic—but the paintings on the walls are all Cézanne and Matisse, my favorites. Of course, reproductions. I’m not rich. I live alone. I’ve always lived alone.

“The only problem with the house is the noise at night, the incessant creaking and moaning, the way wind gets in the cracks and moans like someone in agony. I can’t sleep for all the noise, but if I’m honest with myself, I never could sleep. I just turned forty. No. Not even as a child.”

Zelda turns her attention momentarily away from the poorly maintained road that winds through the hills between Benwood and Sutton, towns with a total population of under five hundred. It’s raining, and the only sound in the car is the soft, incessant metronome of windshield wipers. She pulls her fingers through the graying and matted fall of her hair, and she looks alongside her, to the passenger seat.

“There was a noise, I may have dozed off, it’s possible, I don’t know. There was a sound of some kind, and I went out into the hallway. I looked down the stairs, over the banister, and there was a light on in the kitchen. She was always quiet, Annie. I always was taken by it, her being

so quiet. I don't remember hearing anyone come in, and it's impossible to take two steps in that house without a floorboard creaking, so I would have heard if someone came in, but I heard a noise, and the lights, and I was thinking I may have dozed off and someone might be in the house.

"I had told her I never wanted to see her again, and it had been a long time, a few years, so this time I thought maybe it was something different, someone in the house, but I hadn't heard anyone come in and I would have heard.

"Did I say we were twins? We were twins. If anyone saw us together they couldn't help noticing. She's beautiful. We're identical twins, but she always knew how to do her hair just perfect, and makeup and all that. She has a talent. We look the same, but we're not. Annie was always as she is, and then people said I talked enough for a dozen kids."

Zelda looks alongside her. "I guess that's still true. I guess I do talk a lot, but it's always made me feel better. No matter what's going on if I let myself talk talk talk pretty soon it's better. But, anyway, Annie's difficult to explain. I mean, not in terms of looks—just look at me, that's how she looks—but there was always something different about her, not just that she was quieter, but something in her eyes. I think she's smarter than me, and, in a way, more beautiful, even though, actually, physically, we look the same. It's a quality she has like silence, like she's silence walking, still and calm and especially beautiful. I guess I've always, really, admired her—loved her. I guess it's only fair to say it. I know the things that happened in the past should never have happened, but there's no use kidding myself, I wanted to, and, anyway, I'm who I am now and Annie's who she is."

For a while, Zelda is quiet, her attention on the rain-soaked road, where tree limbs weighted down with water and beaten by hard rain droop so low they threaten to block the way. She slows the car to a crawl, and her expression darkens.

"We were eleven," she says, her eyes locked on the road, "or maybe twelve. I still don't like talking about all this, but maybe it's the best thing now. We must have been twelve because I had already been changing for a while, growing up. Anyway, there was a full moon because I could see clearly in the room even though the lights were

out. I remember I had been looking out the window at the stars when she came in and I pretended to be asleep, but I watched her while she undressed. She took off her clothes the same, but instead of leaving her panties on and putting on her pajamas, she took off her panties too and lay down on the bed. When she lay down she looked over at me to make sure I was sleeping, but I had my head hidden in the crook of my arm and my eyes open just enough so I could look out through my eyelashes. But, anyway, it was odd because I guess I knew what she was doing, but I didn't really know.

"We used to play dolls. We used to play house. Day and night we played together, but that night was the first time it was different and somehow I knew it, knew it all, though I didn't know I knew a thing. I was quiet and I watched as she touched herself soft with one hand on her breast and the other pushing between her legs, inside her. I watched her for a long time, till her breath and her body and her hands started going faster.

"Then I said *Annie*, and I remember how angry she looked when she stopped and glared at me through the shadows. But if it had been angry alone, I think I would have been angry too, because I remember feeling scared, though I didn't know why. She looked hurt, as she looks just before she begins to cry. I went and sat next to her, and she put her head in my lap and she did cry.

"We lived in one of the oldest houses in Providence, then. Mom taught at the college. The house was an old Victorian, with gables and closed-off and locked rooms, and sometimes we heard people walking in the attic clear as you can hear me speaking right now. When I sat alongside Annie that night, I can still remember how she looked then with sweat moistening her back, and all her muscles and skin hard and shining in the light from the windows. I touched her back to comfort her, stroking down her spine and not stopping at her waist but stroking her thighs with my fingers, my palms touching the softer skin, and I felt it in my heart beating fast when she stopped sobbing and her breathing changed again.

"I remember touching the back of her calf, high, by the fold of skin close to the dark hair and heat and wetness at the center, and how her

body went tight fast, but I don't remember thinking, just my hand reaching and touching—and that's the thing about it, about what happens between me and Annie. I'm doing whatever it is, but it's just exactly like she's willing me to do it somehow that's, I don't know, it's difficult to explain, but it's always as if I'm doing it and I want to do it, but it's as if she's somehow making me know what it is I want to do.

"I touched her there and she looked up and asked me if I ever did it, and I said no, and she said she hadn't either, that this was the first time. I asked her how she knew what to do and she said someone had told her to touch herself there and there and she pointed.

"I remember when she pointed, how the nipples on her breasts stood up long like little fingers and I could feel them growing too beneath the top of my pajamas and rubbing against the cotton.

"When I asked her how it felt she said she couldn't explain it, but it was like something warm and urgent growing. I said, *Is it here where you touch*, touching her there, and her breath changed again and she said *yes* and the *yes* was breathy.

"I touched her there more and watched her breasts, her body, like a string pulled tight. I kept watching her nipples, the way they jutted out so long, the way they made me feel, and I reached up under the cotton to feel myself and they were long, too, and I remember being surprised because they felt so fat, and a little scared because it was like there was suddenly a new part of my body.

"When I unbuttoned the top of my pajamas and was looking down at them and with my other hand touching them, Annie shuddered like a sudden chill and I saw her watching me, the way I was touching.

"Then we took off my bottoms and panties and she did it for me, and then it was, I think, the first time that I ever really saw it, or, at least, that the seeing of it made me feel that way, that we looked so exactly the same—like there were two of me, or two of her, lying there on the bed like that touching, like one of us was an image in a mirror.

"The feeling was like I'm the only one who could tell the difference, who could know for sure that I'm me, and not the same person as her, and then even my knowing gets confused. It was that feeling, and then I shuddered like Annie, the way Annie does."

Zelda turns again to the passenger seat, and her voice is softer, throatier. Outside the rain is still coming down hard, but there are open fields on both sides of the car, and she can see the road more clearly in the beams of the headlights.

“It’s terrible,” she says, “the things we did.” She says this flatly, a statement of fact, and then is quiet a long time before she goes on. “That’s the least of it,” she says. “That was just the first time. The things we’ve done with each other . . . If this is too troubling, I could stop. I could stop right here. I don’t have to go on.”

Again she pauses. The car is crawling along the empty road, going a few miles per hour. On either side of the blacktop, fencing is wrapped in weeds. Rain slams into the pitted roadway and splashes up in a crazy dance.

“She was in the kitchen,” she says. “I didn’t hear her come in. I was awake because I couldn’t sleep. I heard a noise and when I went out into the hallway and looked down over the banister, I saw a light in the kitchen. I must have known. I said *Annie* and then she was there, in the kitchen. She was looking in the fridge, just as if she might have been sleeping in another room and had awakened hungry in the night.

“I said her name again when I saw her and I heard in my own voice a mixture of sadness and relief, a mixture of happiness and regret, and it was the sound of my own voice that made me step back and take my coat from the hall tree, and then I held the coat folded over my arm by the front door and watched her a moment longer.

“She was wearing a nightgown that I could see through. I thought for a moment she might say something, but she’s always been so quiet. It was hard to stop looking at her. She’s like the silence in a dark room at night. I can always feel she’s there first. It’s been like that since I was a child, and we played tea party in the big house while Mom was shut up in her study working on some book or another, and Annie and I would play tea party or dress up back then when we were children, before.

“I must have felt her even before the noise, which was probably why I lay awake in the first place, but it had been years and probably I didn’t want to let myself know what I knew all along. I could feel it. I had been getting along well. I had been starting to feel like I might, without

her, I might . . . There's a man in town who works at the library. We talked the day before and I could tell he was interested. I'd been thinking about him. So. I might have known. I probably did know.

"Sometimes she puts things inside me. Sometimes she—" Zelda touches the back of the passenger seat. She runs her hand along the fabric gently, a caress. "The things she makes me do to her," she whispers. "The things she makes me want to do to her," she says, and then she closes her eyes a moment.

The car is hardly moving. Her foot is off the gas pedal, and the car is rolling along the road, toward her house, where a dim yellowish light is clear against the windows of the front door. The light is so dim, she knows it must be the light from the refrigerator, and she imagines Annie still standing there, where she left her, one hand holding the open refrigerator door, her body shining out from under her gown, that look on her face, that hungry look as Zelda backed away and then went out the front door.

She imagines that Annie hasn't moved. What can time mean to her? What can a few hours driving around in the rain matter?

Zelda pulls into the driveway and gets out of the car in the rain and then the light disappears from the front door and she's standing alone in the sudden darkness. She waits a moment as her eyes adjust. She was soaked as soon as she stepped out of the car, so that doesn't matter. She follows the familiar brick path to her porch.

Once she's inside the house, inside the front door, she waits, water puddling at her feet. A light comes on in her bedroom, the door swings open, and then Annie is standing at the top of the stairs. She looks annoyed. She looks angry. She's upset because Zelda has kept her waiting, but Zelda thinks, *What can time mean to you, Annie?*

Annie is quiet. She's like silence in a woman's body, in Zelda's body. Behind Annie, the door to Zelda's bedroom closes and then the house is dark again and Annie has disappeared, but Zelda knows where she is. She knows where she's waiting. Zelda takes off her sopping clothes and hangs them on the hall tree. She climbs the stairs.



MASTER SARAH

Patrice Suncircle

MASTER SARAH WAS BORN HERE, just south of Cape Cod, on the wild Atlantic, but she had spent nearly half her life in Argentina. I moved here the year after her return. Sarah was as much a recluse as I was. Maybe my noticing this was why I found myself walking past her house every day. I'd stop to sit on her top step and wander in my own thoughts.

One day she leaned in her doorway to study me. In one hand, hanging by her side, she held a sculptor's scalpel, moving it from knuckle to knuckle. Her hands were beautiful. There was white dust on them.

By the third visit to her rooms, I knew that I wanted her. I also knew that there was no way to get to her except through her work. So I began to learn to wait.

"How can they bear to stay still beneath the touch of your hands, Sarah?"

I couldn't help but say it, as I watched her moving her hands across the cold marble breasts and shoulders of her exquisite women, her sculpted creations.

"You're a genius. Who was your teacher?"

Sarah traced her finger down one marble thigh. She didn't turn her gaze from the statue.

I waited. It was one of the first lessons I'd learned from her. To have the patience of a hunter.

"Once, when I was ten," she said, "an angel came into my room and danced for me. She didn't have a stitch on. I told my uncle this, and he told me to hush.

"Since neither he nor anyone else wanted to hear about this, when she visited me I began to draw her.

"I was wise enough to hide my pictures. They were childish drawings, but sometimes now when I take them out and look at them, I'm reminded of what happened when I turned eighteen."

She glanced at me and then looked around her sprawling room.

"Somewhere in those crude drawings, somewhere in the clay and the marble here, is the perfect woman. She is always under my hands—and she always just manages to elude me."

Sarah turned and looked at me fully. "She was perfect. She had wings."

"The angel," I said.

"The woman whose flesh I seek," Sarah said.

She held my gaze until I smiled and looked away.

Sarah let me watch her. She gave me wine and lemonade and cocoa to keep me. Sometimes she talked about the old paintings on the walls of that house. They were done by her great-grandmother and her aunts and her uncle.

Artists have walked Sarah's ancestral floors since the mating of freedmen and indentured servants. Since the First World War and the Harlem Renaissance.

"You might say that my hands search for her," Sarah said to me one day. "They know every inch of her body and they will recognize her."

"What happened when you were eighteen? Did she come?"

"Yes," Sarah said.

She moved her hand back to the cheek of the beauty that she was nearly finished with. I could almost feel the touch of that hand.

She smiled and spoke in a whisper. "You know, anatomy classes and studying the masters can only begin to teach what the touch can tell you. They can't teach you at all what a moan or a cry can.

"I want to mold the taste of her flesh. I want to mold the scent."

“And you remember it all?” I spoke as softly.

“Uh huh.

“Up where the dunes run out and where it gets hilly is a no-man’s-land. My cousins and I used to play there. You could find a place there to play any kind of game. Touching games, fighting games, dissecting games when we’d find some injured creature. Sometimes we would stop in the middle of a game, too scared to go on.

“They grew up and stopped going there, but I didn’t.

“One morning I found an angel there. She was wounded and broken, but still as beautiful as the ones who had danced for me. I didn’t appreciate all of that beauty as a child. Now I recognized the work of a Supreme Master, sleek and contoured . . .” Sarah held out her palms, but she lowered them before I could reach back. “Skin black as ebony and not a flaw, smooth as black ivory. A full mouth curved as a bow. Hands can describe—words can’t.

“She lay waiting for me in a place as solitary as my childhood room.”

Sarah stood close to me now, and I smelled the faint jasmine scent of her hair oil. Through her wide hazel brown eyes I caught a glimpse of the beauty she searched for.

“Her great black wings moved with the slightest touch of the wind, and they looked soft as down. They had to be touched.

“I remember the heat of the sun on my shoulders. I felt a drop of sweat crawl from beneath my breast. If it fell on the lips of this angel, would she wake? I moved toward her . . . I say *her*, although this beauty had a prick. But she had breasts round as my own and there was so much of the woman about her. Without any thoughts of what I was going to do, I knelt beside her.

“And, my friend,” Sarah said in a voice that sent a warm tremor through me, “it was then that she opened her eyes and they were as wide and gray as the dawn. I could not move. So I spoke. I said to her, ‘How far did you fall? Are you in pain? I’ve been told by some women that my hands can heal.’

“I dragged my fingers up her arm and across her shoulder until I touched her wing. I let her feathers caress my hand.

“There was no breeze in that little depression, just the still, hot air. The nearest sound I could hear was the thump of the breakers in the distance. I pulled off my blouse. I wore no brassiere, and the warm air bathed me.”

Sarah’s smile became delicious. “Then I straddled her. Out there alone with someone I wanted—and with no one looking—what I did came as natural as breathing. I lowered myself and pressed my mouth against her throat. I held my mouth there as the sweet breaths went in and out, and the rhythm of her blood pumping caressed my lips. I licked up, over her chin and to the corners of her mouth. I covered her mouth, kissed her.

“I pushed my tongue through her parted lips and licked across her tongue and underneath its plumpness.”

Sarah raised an eyebrow. “I see you swallow, my friend.” Then she nodded slowly. “Though you can’t imagine the sweetness. I licked the nectar off her lips and sucked her, nursed on her tongue, drinking her breaths. I moved my leg between hers, and a sharp sweet tingle blossomed down there.

“Who can remember lovemaking when you’re so entirely in it, but I do.”

Sarah knew what her words were doing to me. I nearly reached to touch her hair. But I resisted.

I watched her lips as she resumed her tale, and it was as if I could taste her words.

Then she reached out and curled my fingers into her own, and though it was Master Sarah who spoke, it was as if I remembered her story as well as she did.

“I kissed her half-closed lids,” said Sarah, “and as I did I felt another hand move down my back and press harder into me. My hair fell across our faces, brushing them and draping out the sun. I kissed her again.

“I kissed her shoulders and went again to that long, damp throat, the place where an angel’s song grows. She did not taste of salt as you would, but something like a burst of yellow blossoms or aromatic smoke. I squeezed her breasts together and worked the nipples with

my thumb and rubbed my face in them. Where we met below I felt her erection lengthen.

“I reached to unzip my pants. They came off, and my naked and wet cunt began to rhythmically and easily coat her penis with my juices. It pushed and sprang against me seeking, while sharp-taloned nails held me from behind. The stings from those talons made me wetter.

“She sucked at my breath now, and her hands were everywhere on my back, her prick a rod. Then I felt the wings. I felt their size, and they brushed me like a breeze from the middle of May, only softer. Each wing stroke a counterpoint to the joint rubbing against me, urging me to open to her.

“It’s my hands that remember. Her scent is on them and will never leave. I smell it when I touch the clay or rest my hands on the stone. Every wing touch brushes me, my legs, my behind, and all through my hair and the down on my cheek. When I moved onto her face, her tongue entered me like a serpent. Found places inside me only God’s hand had touched before. Slipped out and across my clit and sucked and sucked at my bud while I rocked.

“Before I came, I needed to taste her again and I moved down her body, and I felt like warm water. My mouth opened in a gasp, and I took her to the base where soft hair tickled my lips, my nose.

“For long moments, there was just the quiet of the hot afternoon, and her long drawn-out breaths answering to my tongue massaging the underside of her cock. Every tongue stroke, every suck, I absorbed. Forever.

“I slowly pulled my mouth off her organ and looked up past her breasts and into her eyes holding the light of Heaven. She was real, as real as her wings expanding like a blooming night.

“She turned me over and covered me with those wings and entered me from behind. I was a virgin there. She took my face between her hands and turned my head to her and caught my scream in her mouth. She stayed in me for hours.

“At least until I became a genius,” Sarah said, and her little mocking smile returned me to our autumn evening. Her studio drew back her gaze from the long-ago summer’s day.

“When I feel her under my hands again,” she went on, “then I’ll know I’ve created my perfect woman.

“I do remember that after we were through and her wounds from the fall were healed, as her wings bore her home, she allowed me to look fully into her face. To see her, or his, true beauty. It was a challenge.”

Sarah gave me both her hands to hold. That last sunfall of the day spilled over marble headless torsos, solitary hands, armless shoulders. A bowl held a rounded breast with a nipple like a cream dark berry. It smelled of raw stone and wet clay, sweat, and a little of the sea.



LAY ME OUT SOFTLY

Francesca Lia Block

GIRL

ONCE, WHEN SHE WAS YOUNGER, and not yet called Jade, Girl wandered in out of the bright white desert sun, into the dark grotto her father, Caleb, had built to contain the mineral spring that lurked under the desert floor, and, when her eyes adjusted to the change, she saw—floating in the water with its mild stench of sulfur and chlorine—there Girl saw the three heads.

“Take us out,” moaned the three heads. “Lay us out softly. Comb our hair.”

Girl froze. The heads had greenish skin, bloated features, filmy eyes, and tresses tangled with slime.

“Lay us out softly,” the three heads moaned.

Girl backed away and closed her eyes. When she opened them, the heads were gone.

The desert was hot and blinding by day. At night it turned cold and darker than most cities, since all the lights in that town were small and low. The grid of spas was laid out at the foot of the hills that were brown much of the year, and sometimes white with snow. It was strange to be standing under a bright blue sky, in the heat of the desert

sun, and to see the white mountains, defiant in the distance behind a shimmering scrim of light. They had so much integrity, Girl used to think. They were so fucking fearless. If she were a mountain, her snow would have melted with just the knowledge of all that heat below.

Girl's parents had moved here when she was three years old, and bought the Princess spa. It was a cluster of low bungalows covered in orange and pale red bougainvillea and surrounded by rough, squat palm trees. Girl's father, Caleb, had built the grotto himself, out of quarry rock. The old pools were still there, an aquamarine rectangle and kidney bean half surrounded by glass. But if you went behind the door marked PRIVATE and took some stairs down—your footsteps echoing on the slick steps, your hands sliding along the slimy handrail—you would find the grotto, dark and dank and secret. No one but Girl had ever seen the heads there.

It was not long after the heads appeared in the grotto that Girl saw the man whom she had lost in two previous lifetimes and whom she had been born into this lifetime seeking. It was almost as if the heads had brought him to her and, just as quickly, taken him away.

* * *

She had been allowed to walk to the store and decided to stop at the diner for a milkshake. Caleb and Clarissa did not like for her to be gone long so she hurried inside, the air-conditioning making her spine and nape prickle. She was flushed, and as usual her dark hair, long then, as Caleb insisted, with too-long bangs, was in her face. She wore a demure plaid sundress that her mother had made for her and rubber flip-flops. Her limbs looked too long and thin, like the legs of a fawn. Her skin was tan. The sun seemed to flash her brown every time she stepped out in it, like meat in a pan. She sat at the counter and ordered a vanilla milkshake in a silver tumbler beaded with the sweat of cold.

The man was sitting on a stool one seat away from her. She kept staring at his profile. He had dark hair under a baseball cap and acne scars on his pale cheeks. He wore a black cotton T-shirt, jeans, and black high-top sneakers. He had a camera with him. She took all this in not because she was someone who always observed the details

around her, although this was true, but because there was something about him that struck her as painfully familiar. Painfully because it made her chest hurt to look at him. It made her feel as if she couldn't breathe properly, and then she had the sensation of leaving her body, of lifting up out of her thirteen-year-old body and hovering, looking down on them from the ceiling of the diner, just above the whirring metal fans. From up there she wanted to control the situation, to make the girl in the badly sewn sundress with the puffed sleeves turn to the young man and say, "There you are! Why did it take you so long?" and for the man to say, "I've been trying to get here. Are you ready yet?"

The Girl watching from the ceiling wanted to make the girl below nod and stand and walk out of the diner with him, get into his pickup truck (she was sure he had a truck), and drive out of the desert, past the little spas, past the hotels and gas stations, past the windmills and the billboards advertising retirement communities, golf courses, and strip clubs. It didn't matter where they were going. Nothing mattered except that he had found her again, sooner than she had ever dared to hope, and now they were leaving together.

* * *

But of course, they were not leaving together.

The man looked over at Girl. He had large, dark eyes and thick eyebrows that met in the middle. He had a full mouth, a mouth of promises, and it smiled at her. Then he got up from the counter—he was taller than she'd realized, almost unnaturally tall, with huge hands and feet—took some money out of his shabby leather wallet, left it beside his empty soda glass and half-eaten burger, and walked out the door, his head bent slightly, his shoulders hunched, making him appear shorter and smaller than he really was, and shy.

She almost followed him. But then Girl remembered who she was. She was a thirteen-year-old desert rat without a real name who had seen three heads in her father's grotto. Perhaps, like her parents, she was mentally ill. Didn't the heads prove that? And besides, the man had not recognized her. If what she believed to be true was true, wouldn't

he have known it also? Still, the loss she felt was real. And so was the strange, seemingly unfounded sense of relief; at least, if only for a moment, she had found him again.

John Grayson did know what Girl knew. He knew it in the first moment he turned his head and saw her walk in the door of the diner in a blast of brightness and dust. But he had no way to understand, or even to accept, what he knew. All his mind could absorb at the moment was that he had wandered into a desert diner on his way back home to the city and that there on the stool beside him was a girl with thick dark bangs hanging into her sad green eyes, long thin sun-browned arms and legs and something about her that made him want to drive away very fast and never look back. If the three heads had been able to reveal themselves to him, they would have bobbed up from dark water, blinked their filmy eyes, and said, “John Grayson, have you not learned anything yet, in these two lifetimes? Why do you rush away? Now is your chance. Time runs out.”

But the three heads were not able to reveal themselves to John Grayson because he refused to believe in almost anything, let alone three talking decapitated heads, and so he got into his pickup truck (she was right about the truck—she saw this as she watched through the window, watched him drive away in a cloud of dust) and left her there.

It would be five years before they found each other again. And the heads wondered, *How much have you changed?*

* * *

Days before Clarissa died, she called Girl to her bedside.

“Reach under my pillow,” Clarissa rasped through dry lips.

Girl slipped her hand with its birdlike bones under Clarissa’s head. There she found the wooden doll with a painted face and a wig of real hair.

“Keep her with you. Hide her from your father,” Clarissa said. “One day she will help you.”

Girl put the doll on the table next to her when she copied the pictures out of her mother’s art books. She imagined that the doll guided her hand to make such accurate copies of the bony, sad-eyed men and

women in the books. Girl put the doll in her apron pocket when she did her chores. She imagined that the little doll gave her strength. Sometimes she imagined that there was less to do in the morning than there had seemed the night before, as if the doll had done some work in the night. But it could also have been Girl's desire that made it seem that way. Desire and the imagination are powerful things.

But they were not powerful enough to help Girl when the three boys came to the spa that day, a year after her mother's death. Or maybe desire worked more than one way. There was the conscious desire for the things you wanted—like escape, like John Grayson. And the unconscious desire to be hurt in some way, to obliterate the part that wanted what you might never have.

Girl knew the boys from school: Alby Short, Jeff J., and Jeff K. They were a year ahead of her. Once they'd whistled at her in the hall, jostling her—and when she turned to look, they made puking faces and laughed. The days were getting hotter, and school was out; they were bored, they were high. Girl was cleaning in her cutoffs and flip-flops, her hot hair tied back in a ponytail. The boys were the only customers at the Princess Spa that day. They splashed each other and cackled. Whenever she walked by they whistled and cackled more.

Alby Short yelled, "Hey, Girl!"

She stopped what she was doing and looked at him.

"Is that really your name?"

"Is your name really Short or do they just call you that?"

She had no idea what made her bold on the rare occasions she was; maybe the doll in her apron pocket? Was it boldness or something else?

"Fuck you," Alby grunted.

"I think the girl needs a little talking to," Jeff said. She wasn't sure which Jeff it was.

"I'll show you how short I am," Alby said.

Girl turned and started toward the office. Caleb was out that day. She didn't know when he'd be back.

The boys got out of the pool and hung towels around their necks, put on their sneakers.

They followed her; one of the Jeffs blocked the door.

“I heard there’s some kind of secret building here,” Alby said.

“Yeah, we want to see it.”

“I can’t show it to you. It’s for private parties.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what we had in mind,” Alby Short said, nodding to the Jeffs. “Fuckin’ do it!”

The Jeffs grabbed Girl and pinned her arms back. One slapped a prune hand over her mouth.

Alby took a ring of keys from Girl’s pocket. As he did, the wooden doll fell on the cement and rolled away.

“Which one?”

Girl tried to bite at the hand on her mouth.

“Well, we’ll just have to try them all.”

The boys forced her to the entrance to the grotto that was marked Private, and Alby tried a few keys before one fit. The Jeffs pushed her down the slippery stairs to the side of the pool. The rotten egg smell she knew so well smacked her in the face and made her gag for the first time.

The Jeffs pushed her down on the rock floor as Alby unzipped his pants, took out his dick, as he called it, and shoved it in her mouth.

They left her there, in a pool of vomit, as her eyes searched the empty water.

She got up, washed her face, and cleaned everything with her head held back so as not to drip more blood on the floor. When Caleb got home, she told him she had fallen because she was even more afraid of what he might do to her if he found out than of what had occurred. For days, her eyes kept searching the water, looking for the heads.

A few years later, just before Girl changed her name and left the desert for good, she searched for them one more time, but they did not appear.

* * *

JADE AND JOHN

John Grayson saw Jade first, lit up on stage with a long, dark wig swinging to her waist. She had on a red satin cheongsam slit to her

hip and new stiletto heels that she still couldn't move that well in. Her eyes were made up like a cat's under the bangs of the wig, and her lips shone. The men couldn't see she was trembling; she had learned to hide it pretty well. Bell had been giving her lessons, and if she just lost herself in the music, she did okay.

John Grayson saw her ass and her legs and her hair and her small breasts under the tight dress. He saw her huge green eyes and full mouth. She made him hard right away. But he felt something more than desire and more than the maudlin longing to take her home and care for her. What he felt was recognition. He knew things. The way she leaned forward when she talked to you, gazing intently at your face, what her voice sounded like, how she smelled, the way her hip bones would feel in his hands. And, like that time in the desert, he wanted to turn and leave, but this time he couldn't. He wasn't as strong anymore. Looking at all that death had made him less immune to life than he thought.

He sat down near the stage and ordered a beer. She was taking off the dress now. It fell away easily when she plucked apart the Velcro closures. Underneath she wore a red bra and G-string. She looked vulnerable this close; he wondered what her voice sounded like. And he could tell she'd noticed him, or maybe she was just good at making the men feel seen, but she didn't seem that sophisticated. There was something awkward about her that he liked. Like a fawn. Up this close he could tell her thighs were shaking. But she was fierce, too; she was someone who had survived something.

Jade saw John Grayson when he sat at the edge of the stage watching her as if there was no one else there. She didn't know right away if he was the man she'd seen in the desert five years ago, but the feeling in her chest was the same. Warmth spreading through her heart and into every vein. She moved closer to him. Bell was always telling her to get closer to the edge, but she was usually scared she'd fall. She forgot about that. She moved closer to the man in the cap and danced for him. She turned her back and unhooked her bra, turned around with her hands holding the cups and let her breasts fall out, tossing the bra aside and lifting her hands above her head. She crouched down so she could see his face better. She'd been looking for that face for years, maybe longer than

years. His eyes drifted down her body, then looked back into her eyes, then back down as she spread herself open for him, so close he could smell her perfume and sweat. She parted her lips and leaned even closer, seeing the shadow of scars on his cheeks, the stubble on his chin. It was him. He was close enough that he could have reached out and touched her trembling leg. Her calves strained from the stress of her shoes. Her ankles wobbled slightly. She tilted her head, looking at him. Other men were noticing. It was the first time she'd really danced like she meant it. The lights made a purple aura around her. John Grayson had a hard-on, and it wouldn't let him run away.

After the second show, she came out in her jeans and without the wig. Her hair was damp with sweat, slicked back so her eyes looked even bigger, even with all the makeup scrubbed off. You could see the freckles across her nose. There was something boyish about her; it was hard to imagine her up on stage in the G-string. He was still in the same seat, hunched over. She cocked her head toward the door, and he got up and followed her.

In the lot she stopped and turned to him. The security guard was watching.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“My name's John. Grayson.”

“Hi, John Grayson. I'm Jade. Do you come here a lot?”

“First time,” he said. “Sort of. I had to do some work here.”

“I just started working.”

They stood and just looked at each other. The guard hitched his pants up and started over.

“I'm not supposed to talk to the customers,” she said. “Meet me at the bar across the street.”

* * *

It was a small room with hardly any space for the band in the corner. A string of Christmas lights hung over the bar. When she walked in, he was already at a table. It was brighter here than at the Tinderbox, and

his hat was off; she saw his acne scars, the dark circles under his eyes. She slid into the seat and threw her bag over the side.

“Hey,” she said. “What’s up?”

“Can I get you a drink?”

“Beer. What you have. Please.”

He went to the bar and brought it back to her.

“You don’t look old enough to drink.”

“I’ve got ID.”

“Can I ask you something?” he said.

“Yeah.”

“How do you know I’m someone you should be having a drink with?” he asked.

“I know.”

“How?”

“Your eyes.”

“What about them?”

“I just know.”

He nodded and took a swig of beer. “It’s not safe for you girls right now. You should be more careful.”

“Okay, you want to know? I recognized you.”

John Grayson looked up from his beer. He had a strange, somnolent expression on his face. Jade’s hands stroked her bottle. She crossed and uncrossed her legs. She was wet, and it wasn’t from the heat.

“I saw you once before,” she said. “When I was a kid. Or, anyway, you look like this guy.”

“I have that kind of face,” he said.

“No you don’t.”

“So you trust me because you think you saw me before?”

“I did see you before. Why are you so worried about me?”

“I’m a forensic photographer.”

Jade shivered and rubbed her arms.

“Are you cold?” he asked. “Do you want my jacket?” He had one of those brushed-cotton zip-up ones. Dark blue. It looked soft.

“No, thanks. It’s just . . . that’s creepy. And why—”

“It’s a living.” He scowled a little now.

“No, I mean, it’s cool. It’s just not the best pickup line. I mean, if that’s what you were trying to do. I don’t get why you told me that then.”

“I recorded what happened to those girls at your club. My friend Washington’s the detective on it. It’s the most brutal thing I’ve ever . . . I came out tonight because I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I hope they find that fuck . . .”

Jade said, “John Grayson, I think you have been looking too long at death.”

John Grayson looked up at her. In that moment the sleepwalker expression was gone.

She followed him to his apartment. Before they left she had used his cell phone to call Bell from the bar to say she was going out, might be back really late. Bell questioned her for a long time, but Jade kept saying, “It’s okay. I promise. I know him. He’s cool. Really. You’ll tell Shadow I’m okay, right?”

“Be back with the car by morning. And be safe.”

He was much more nervous than she was. As they walked in, he said, “I hope you don’t do this too often. I mean, it’s not safe around here.”

“I’ve never done *it* before.”

They both looked away shyly.

“I trust you, okay?” she said. “Don’t you get that?”

“I don’t quite get why. Besides that you think you saw me once five years ago.”

“Not just saw you,” Jade said.

His apartment was sparsely furnished with wood floors and blank white walls. She sat on the mattress that served as a bed and couch, and he offered her a drink. They had another beer. Jade held hers up, and they clinked the cold bottles together.

“You’re a good dancer,” John Grayson said.

“Not really. I kind of suck actually.”

“I didn’t think so. I couldn’t take my eyes off of you.”

“Of course not. You recognize me,” Jade said.

“What’s all this with the ‘recognize’?”

“Do you believe in the past?”

“I don’t think about it much.”

“Like when you see someone and you are just sure.”

He didn’t answer her.

“Or . . . you have a dream or read about something and it feels too real to not have happened.”

John Grayson’s eyes darted away a little, up and to the right. He knew what she was talking about. He had dreamed about his mother’s death before it happened. He had seen the sunny kitchen, the baby crying in her cradle, the black flash of the gun.

“I had a dream once,” Jade said. “But it didn’t seem like a dream. It was really weird. It was right before the time when I saw you. It was about these three heads floating in our pool. They wanted me to take them out of the water and comb their hair.” She could see the three heads in her mind, bobbing up from the surface, so vivid, completely real.

“Did you do it?”

“No. But I wish I did. They needed me.”

He paused, scanning her face. Her nose was bent slightly as if it had been broken. She had a small crescent-shaped scar on her cheek he hadn’t noticed before.

“Tell me something else about you. Like where you come from and why you left.”

“I come from the desert and I left because my dad was fucked up and wanted to marry me.”

John Grayson shook his head. He wanted to touch her hand. It was so small that he could have covered it entirely with his own.

“What about you?”

“I come from the East Coast and I left because everything was fucked up.”

“How?”

“If I could talk about it I wouldn’t be so fucked up maybe.”

She leaned closer. She smelled sweet, but not like perfume. He gulped down the last sip of beer.

“You have such a great face,” she said. “I bet all the women tell you.”

John Grayson lowered his eyes. He mumbled something. Jade thought she heard the word “hate.”

“What?”

“I have scars. It makes sense that someone with scars wouldn’t like their face.”

Jade said, “You’re really beautiful.”

“No,” said John Grayson. “You are really, really beautiful.”

Jade said, “Actually, John Grayson, I’m a freak. Born of freaks. Owned by a freak. Or, once was owned by a freak.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” he said. “But I want to.”

He hadn’t meant to kiss her. He wanted to protect her. Protect her and run away simultaneously. She put her arms around him and kissed his cheek, and he turned his face so that their lips brushed. It wasn’t that shocking kind of feeling they both expected. More like a huge sigh of relief spreading through them. Like your cold, naked body falling into a soft, warm bed, under covers, into arms. The place that you knew you needed but you were afraid to even imagine for fear that it would never come.

Her knees and spine went weak. She nestled down and curled into a little ball, in his big arms, all of her fitting there so easily. Her hand was on his chest and her hip balanced on his groin. She could feel him hard through his jeans and the pounding of his heart. Her hands reached up inside his T-shirt, flickering across his chest and abdomen, the heat of his skin almost burning. Her hair brushed his lips. She turned, unrolling herself on top of him. The metal of his belt buckle clanged against hers. She pulled the end of the belt, pulled it off. She unbuttoned his jeans. His cock was so hard, straining against his briefs. She took it out gently, and he sighed, softly, almost like a girl, and she thought, *Once I was the boy and you were the girl*. He leaned back and she took him in her mouth, gliding over his shaft, her hands cupping him below. He tasted so good to her, and her throat relaxed and opened wider and wider. He sighed again. “You’re so good.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” she said, stopping, gazing up at him. “I’m just . . . I’m just wanting you so much. It makes it easy.” She went back to him again. It was all she wanted, to consume him like this, to feel him come for her. All her pleasure was in her mouth, just waiting for him to release. He got harder, moving against her lips. His free hand went to his face, his throat. He sighed. “Is it okay if I come?”

She nodded so slightly, but he felt it. He said, "Are you sure? Inside?" She moaned, pressing up, the space between her legs opening like her throat. His hands went to her hair, grabbing it gently, and pulling her face down more. She tightened and then relaxed into his hand, and he sighed and came in her mouth. It didn't startle her. It slid so smoothly. Like some kind of elixir. Her hand reached up, and he took it and pressed her wrist to his lips as if he were telling secrets to her blood.

"You don't believe in magic, do you, John Grayson?"

"No," he said, kissing her hair. "But I don't really believe in much."

* * *

The next time, John Grayson picked her up in front of the apartment and drove her to a tiny Japanese restaurant that Ben Washington had told him about. Ben had said it was a great prelude to getting laid, but John hadn't taken a girl out in so long that he'd almost forgotten the recommendation.

She had on jeans, and her face was scrubbed clean of makeup like the first time they'd gone to the bar. But now she wore light pink lip-gloss and the high red shoes she'd danced in.

He wanted to kiss her mouth so badly. As soon as he'd smelled her up close the whole night rushed back to him like a dream you remember when you see the face of a person who was in it.

She said, "Where are we going? I'm starved!"

The restaurant had two white cloth banners hanging over the door and statues of fat cats above the sushi bar. The waitress led them to a tiny private room with a booth. John Grayson had to stoop to fit inside, and his knees touched the bottom of the table. There was a watercolor of a butterfly on the wall.

"I love it here," said Jade. "It's like a playhouse." She was trying not to laugh at him crunched into the booth.

"Oh, great. As long as I don't crack a hole in the ceiling when I stand up."

"You look cute," she said. "Like my own private giant."

It was impossible to create much space between their bodies. They both knew they'd better not touch in this small space or they'd be kissing again, harder this time, their hands down each other's pants with only a thin curtain to separate them from the rest of the crowded restaurant.

The waitress brought them miso soup, shrimp spring rolls, sizzling rice cakes with mushroom sauce, lobster sushi rolls, lotus root, pumpkin and spinach with sesame. John watched Jade eat, hungrily. He could tell she was trying to go slow, but it was hard for her.

"I'm such a pig," she said. "Sorry."

"No. It's good. You need it after all that dancing."

"It's been kind of slim since my mom died."

"What happened?" he asked her.

"She died when I was thirteen. We owned a spa, and business kept getting worse. When I turned eighteen my dad freaked out and I had to leave."

"How'd you end up dancing?"

"My friend Bell got me the job. I needed any work I could get."

"I don't like the idea of you working there after what happened to those girls."

"It's not that bad. They have better security now. And I have to take care of Shadow."

"Who's that? Your pet?"

She laughed. "No, but he'd think that was funny. He's a boy I met when I got to the city. He's the best." Jade took a small sketch out of her wallet and handed it to John Grayson. "He won't let me take his picture," she said. "He's afraid someone will see it and send him back to a foster home. He's a little sensitive. His life's been really hard."

"Did you do this?"

"Yeah," she said. "I'm an *artiste*. Didn't you know?"

"It's really good."

"Why thank you, John Grayson. Maybe I'll draw you sometime."

"Only if I can take your picture." He surprised himself by saying it. He never thought of using his camera for anything but work anymore. But he could see how he would photograph her, up so close she looked

more like a flower than a girl, or wearing his shirt and nothing else, her legs draped across his bed.

The waitress brought them a green tea ice cream parfait with whipped cream and nuts on top and an apple pastry that she caramelized at the table with a blast of blue gas flame. The flame also scorched a sprig of rosemary on the side, and the whole booth smelled like sweet, green pine smoke.

“Rosemary for remembrance,” he said.

“That’s appropriate. I remember you.”

“It means dew of the sea.”

“How pretty. With the burning, it smells so sexy.”

“I thought that was you.”

She laughed. “Lucky we didn’t have pizza.”

“What?”

“I heard that the smell of cheese pizza is one of the biggest erotic stimulants for men.” She wasn’t looking at him. Her eyes and mouth focused on the spoonful of pale green ice cream she was eating. “I mean, I think we are going to tear each other apart with just dew of the sea.”

“I think maybe you’re right,” he said.

* * *

When they got to the car he said, “Do you want me to take you home now?” He was thinking about how she hadn’t come for him the first time, how he wanted to make her come so badly, more than anything else at that moment. She shook her head, staring at him. “What do you want to do?” “What do you want to do?” “Do you want to go out?” She shook her head. “Do you want to come home with me and tell me a bedtime story?” She nodded, and fell against him, laughing, fell against his broad chest and sharp hip bones. His heartbeat was so strong she thought she could hear it, but maybe it was her own, echoing in her ears. Then she pulled away again, and he let her into the car.

At his apartment they grabbed each other as soon as the door closed behind them. She wrapped one leg around his hip and he cradled her calf on his forearm. She slid her wetness up over the fly of his jeans. She

nuzzled him like an animal, grabbing at his hair. His giant hands hoisted her up onto his hips, and he carried her to the bed. He laid her down softly and pressed a button on the stereo.

“Is this your ‘make-out mix?’” she asked when she heard the first chords of an old song she loved.

“Let’s do some living, after we die . . .”

“It just happened to be in there,” he said.

“What are we going to do?” she asked. “While that not-a-make-out mix plays?”

“What do you want to do?”

“I want to make you come with my hands.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“What can I do for you?”

“You can let me make you come in my hands. That’s what I want.”

He looked into her eyes. His irises and pupils were so big and deep they gave her vertigo.

He said, “I want to make you come. Three times in a row. Once from the outside and once from the inside and once from both at the same time. And then I’ll come.”

“I want you to. Some day. Not yet, though. And I want you to make me cry.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes. I want you to make me cry with joy. I want you to pound the tears out of me until we are both soaking wet like we’ve been swimming.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You can’t hurt me, John Grayson,” she said. “You’ve already done that. Just like I hurt you. It’s time for us to get it right.”

Jade passed out on top of John Grayson. She slept deeply, her muscles relaxing so much it was like they were trying to melt into his. John Grayson had no such peace. After a couple of hours he pushed her body off and grabbed the pillow, punching it with his fists in his sleep. Jade half-woke to see him pummeling the bedding; she reached out and stroked his bare shoulder, at the indentation of muscle, and he moaned and pulled the quilt over his face. In the morning neither of them spoke

of it. With the sunlight through the window they were just relieved to wake to each other's faces. He pulled her back onto him, and she felt him hard already.

"Sorry," he said.

"No sorries."

"Can't I do anything for you? I want . . ."

She pulled the covers over them, wriggled down his body into a dark cave, and put him in her mouth again.

She stopped for a moment and rested her cheek on his hip. "My God, I've missed you for ages, John Grayson," she said.

They got up and showered together, soaping and rinsing each other's bodies, hands sliding over the curves, the flat, hard surfaces, though she still wouldn't let him touch her between her legs. He seemed even bigger to her, standing there in the old-fashioned tub under the showerhead, and she seemed more fragile to him. She came just to his armpit. The hair on his body was black against white skin. His muscles were hard and defined, bunched with tension. She was almost entirely shaved, lithe, and only a little darker than he was; she tanned easily, but since she'd left the desert she hadn't been out in the sun much. She closed her eyes and let the water hit him first, then trickle onto her, lengthening her eyelashes into black points like fake ones. He poured shampoo in his palm and lathered her small head, making her hair stand up. She laughed. She said, "Don't you read the magazines? Don't you know you shouldn't shampoo a woman's head unless you plan on spending a lot more time with her?"

"I am not afraid," John Grayson said. "Do I look like someone who gets scared?"

Jade didn't want to tell him the truth; he did. She had already seen him run away from her at least once.

She got out first and held the towel for him.

"You need bigger towels," she said, trying to wrap him up in it the way Clarissa used to do when she was little. She dried him off and tied it around his hips.

"They work for drying off. I don't usually get bundled up," he said. He took the towel she had around her neck and held her in it.

She reached up and kissed his wet lips. His hair was ruffled like a little boy's.

"Careful," he said. "I might get aroused again."

"I am not afraid." It wasn't really the truth. As much as she wanted him, Jade didn't know how much longer she could keep him out. And she knew she wasn't ready for that yet. Because once he did, that would be it. She'd never be able to let him go again. "Do I look like someone who gets afraid? But first we've got to fortify you."

She put on her jeans and one of his white T-shirts and went into the kitchen. It was clean but badly equipped. The refrigerator was almost empty and so was the cupboard.

"What do you eat?" she asked him.

"Snacks, mostly."

"What, like cold cereal?" It was about all she could find.

"Yes. Cold cereal is my favorite. The more sugary the better. Without milk. And crackers and stuff. Those little cheeses with the laughing cows on them. And beer."

"Wow. At least the cheese has laughing cows."

But there wasn't even cheese so they walked to the farmers' market. There were bushels of cut ranunculus, freesia, sunflowers, and roses in buckets of water and stands selling purple cabbages and bright yellow gourds displayed like flowers themselves. Maybe it's just me, Jade thought. Everything looked more beautiful. They walked along past the little tented stands and bought eggs and butter, and asparagus and potatoes, a cantaloupe, berries, and a baguette.

When they came to the yellow roses, Jade stopped.

"Take us home. Arrange us in water. Bury your face in us." The voices were fragile and blowzy, as if unused to speech.

"Did you hear that?" Jade asked John Grayson.

"What?"

"The roses? Never mind."

"I think we need some roses," John Grayson said.

They carried everything home, and she cooked the omelets. They ate in the kitchen nook he almost never used. She dangled her legs over his lap, and he ran his fingers along her calves.

“What?” she said. He was staring.

“I’m thinking that I want to take your picture.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Only the dead ones.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry. That was sick. I just haven’t wanted to use my camera for anything except work.”

“That’s nice of you,” she said. “But I look freakish in pictures. You can see my freakish nature.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“And I promised Shadow that I’d take him to a matinee, and all those magazines tell you that you should always leave the man wanting more.”

She got up and kissed his mouth. Their lips were slick with butter, and there were raspberry seeds caught between their teeth.

His hands rummaged around her hips, slipped up inside the T-shirt along the sides of her waist.

“Let me photograph you.”

“Do you want your shirt back?” she asked, starting to lift it over her belly.

His hands reached up and lightly grazed the underside of her breasts. “No. I want you to wear it until it stands up by itself and then bring it back to me.”

“Only if you keep these.” She pulled away and went to her backpack, took out the underpants from the night before, and tossed them to him. He bunched the lace in his fingers.

“Take me home now, John Grayson, before I overstay my welcome.”

* * *

When he got back to his apartment, John Grayson took his camera out like a long unused appendage. It felt different in his hands after he had touched Jade all night. The camera felt heavier, his fingers lighter. He walked over to the bed. The sheets were still rumpled with the impression of her body. The afternoon sunlight throbbed into the room, onto the sheets, the bare wood floors, through the pink bougainvillea that

half-blocked the window so that the air glowed. John Grayson put on the music they'd listened to the night before and got the roses she'd bought out of their vase by the bed—she'd put them there before she left and only took one home for Shadow. He shook the water off the bottom of the stems and tossed the roses onto the mattress. Then John Grayson took pictures of the bed, imagining Jade was lying there in it, among the roses, with wet hair slicked back away from her face and her longing eyes. When he was done he put the roses back in the vase, but he never heard them thank him.

* * *

A few days later he took the actual pictures of Jade with the roses. She usually hated pictures of herself. She felt as if her face revealed all the reasons she had been treated the way she had. Her eyes were just like Caleb's—huge, brutally green, and quite mad. Her lips, full like Clarissa's, had unknowingly seduced him. Not to mention her long, sinewy limbs, muscled since she was a little girl from all the labor she had done.

But when John Grayson photographed her, Jade saw instead what he had seen. There was no madness in her eyes and no violence in her lips. The angles and light he used softened the line of her nose. Her body was soft and calm, not angry, not bargaining. She was a beautiful, melancholy young girl reclining on her boyfriend's bed. Was John Grayson her boyfriend? In one picture she wore his one white dress shirt, unbuttoned over her naked body. In one picture she wore his white undershirt and her jeans. In one picture she was naked with roses, red ones this time, that they'd bought at the farmers' market that morning. She had put them over her breasts and between her legs, and there was what looked like a wreath of them on her head.

The night before, they'd gone out for pizza and seen a movie. The pizza place was tiny, and they sat at one of the sidewalk tables watching people walk by and devouring their floppy slices. They made jokes about the arousing power of the pizza smell and laughed at nothing.

The movie was a ghost story, and she kept grabbing his biceps and trying not to scream. She pressed her head into his armpit, and he

grabbed her as if he'd been waiting for her to do this all night, sitting there waiting for her to do just this.

When they finally got to the bed he asked, "How can I make you come?" She looked away from him. "What's wrong? Where did you go?" "Nowhere," she said. He held her face and made her look into his eyes. She could feel tears starting and she knew she couldn't let him see her cry. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's okay. I just don't want you to shut down. I'm here," she said. She stared back at him. "I'm right here." "How can I make you come? I don't have to be inside you. Show me the way you do it when I'm not here." Jade's hand drifted down between her legs. She curled her fingers and rubbed herself gently. "You show me, too," she said. He took his cock in his hand and stroked it, slow, then faster to match her rhythm. "Come on my belly," she said. He said, "Tell me when you're going to." "Now," she said, throwing her head back, and he sped up his motions and spilled over her, just as she clenched in waves beneath him.

After, he wrapped them up in the covers and they lay like that, very still, as if they could stop time that way.

"I wish you would quit that place," he said.

"Why? You don't want men looking at me?"

"I want you to be safe."

"I have a good luck charm." She got up and showed him the wooden doll that she still carried with her wherever she went.

"It hasn't always helped me," she said, "but at least I'm still here."

And Jade told John Grayson about the desert where she was called Girl, about the death of her mother, about the three boys in the grotto, and about the ring her father had given to her, wanting her to be his bride. And John listened and told her about how his mother had killed herself and his baby sister, shot at him, missing by just a few inches, that since then he had been able to see only the dead things and how now that he had found Jade again he understood what he had been seeking for the last five years and what it was like to see again, see someone who was alive, and to feel that way himself.

THE THREE HEADS

When John Grayson walked under the bright yellow caution tape his skin was clammy and his limbs felt so heavy and numb he could barely move them. Like he'd transformed into a giant. Not again. How the fuck could this be happening again? Ben was standing along the wash with a couple of officers. The water was shallow, brackish and strewn with trash. Weeds grew out of the cement. The storm drains built into the cement siding looked like open coffins.

The girl who had been hauled out of the water onto the bank was not Jade; that was all John could think of at first. The girl was not Jade; she was bigger and taller. Then he was able to take in the rest of what he was seeing. Like the two other Tinderbox strippers who'd been killed before, this one's head had been severed from her neck. It was gone. Without a head a dead body looked less human, more like a thing.

John Grayson held himself steady as he unzipped his bag and took out his camera. It struck him that this work was most likely killing him. And now he actually cared a little that it was. That was the difference.

He powered on his camera, and the shot of his bed strewn with roses appeared. The yellow roses tossed across the sheets. He snapped a shot to advance the image. He hoped no one would notice his hands were shaking.

* * *

Jade did not see the Tinderbox man. He had grabbed her from behind in the parking lot and thrown something over her head. He had put her in his car and driven her somewhere without saying a word. He threw her down the stairs into the dark. It smelled like bad eggs.

She found that she was bruised but otherwise unhurt. She stood shakily and looked around. It was some kind of a basement with no windows and only the one door. It was locked. There was nothing in the room except a large industrial refrigerator that hummed at her.

Jade took the wooden doll out of the lining of her sweatshirt where she had made a secret pocket for it when she left the desert. The doll

said, in a rough voice, unused to speech, “Open the cold thing and look inside.”

Jade went over to the refrigerator and opened it. The door stuck at first so she pulled harder, and it finally gave with a soft sucking sound. Inside, Jade saw the three heads.

“Take us out. Lay us out softly. Comb our hair.”

This time, Jade did not back away. She took off her sweatshirt and laid it on the ground. She reached into the icy box, lifted the first head out tenderly, and laid it out. Then she did the same with the second. And the third. They were cold and clammy, heavy and pale. She did not turn away from them.

By dawn, although she had no idea it was dawn, she had sung every lullaby she knew ten times, combed out a hundred tangles, and wiped away a hundred tears. The little wooden doll sat beside her in the dark, watching.

John Grayson called Jade, but there was no answer, so he called again and finally, he went over to her apartment. Shadow answered the door. He was a small boy with dark hair. He gazed up at John Grayson through ridiculously long eyelashes.

“She’s not here,” Shadow said. “Will you go find her?”

John Grayson knelt down beside Shadow. “I’ll try,” he said. He laid out his palm and Shadow slid his across it, the tiny hand and the hand of a giant.

* * *

A black bird was circling above Jade’s apartment. As John Grayson got to his truck the bird, cawing and flapping in a frenzied way, landed on the hood. It stared at him with one shiny bead of an eye.

“I will lead you to her,” a voice said, raw and unused to speech. John Grayson got in his truck and followed the bird through the city as if he believed in such things. But having met Jade again, having felt her body, John Grayson was no longer so determined not to believe in them.

The bird landed in front of what appeared to be an abandoned house, five miles from the Tinderbox.

“Here she waits,” said the voice. Then the bird flew away.

No lights were on. John Grayson took a small flashlight from his pocket and pushed open a side door. Trash was piled everywhere. There was a stench of garbage.

“I hang on the wall. I will open the door,” a voice said. It was a different voice, high, thin and metallic, though it, too, sounded unused to speech.

John Grayson shone his flashlight around the room. Once. Twice. The third time it glinted on metal. A small skeleton key hung by a door.

John Grayson took the key off its hook and placed it in the lock. It turned. He took the key out of the lock and saw that there was something wet and dark on his hands. He wiped his hands on his jeans and put the key into his pocket.

There was a staircase leading down and John Grayson followed it into the darkness. At the bottom was a room and in the room was a woman. She was singing in a very soft voice and there was something on the floor beside her.

He called her name.

She got up and stumbled toward him. He engulfed her in his arms.

“How did you find me?” she said.

“The way we have always,” John Grayson answered. “But this time we won’t let go.”

John Grayson helped Jade put the three heads gently back into the icebox, and then they left that house and called Ben Washington.

After everything was finished, Jade and John Grayson went home and washed each other clean and then Jade opened her body to him so thoroughly that it was hard for either of them to tell themselves apart.

And what of the three heads?

The three heads opened their eyes, tossed their smooth hair, and sighed ever so softly.

“At last,” they whispered. “At last.”

Then they closed their eyes for the last time and sunk back beneath the surface forever.



GET THEE BEHIND ME, SATAN

Ernie Conrick

MRS. PEGGY MORGANTHALER was in the middle of explaining the value of the senator's universal health-care plan to her husband, Nick, over a dinner of brown rice and bean curd when he looked her straight in the eye and said in a loud voice, "Instead of expressing your opinions about politics, why don't you just open your mouth and I'll shove my cock down your throat?"

This was highly unusual for Mr. Morgenthaler, who, in eleven years of marriage, had never made a similar request. The Morgenthalers' sex lives were remarkably polite; lovemaking usually consisted of a few kisses, a perfunctory squeeze of her breast, followed by three to thirteen minutes of intercourse in the missionary position, culminating in ejaculation and sleep.

They never laughed or talked during sex. The only sound was the slapping of his body against hers, a repeated, hollow splat as his middle-aged gut walloped the pasty white flesh of her thighs like the sound of a baker slamming wet bread dough onto a floury cutting board. Nick hated this sound; it was an embarrassing, auditory encapsulation of everything that was wrong with their marriage.

As he sat at dinner this night, he imagined what would happen afterward in bed, Peggy with her eyes closed waiting for it to end, Nick

imagining being somewhere else with a different lover, that slapping sound ticking out the seconds until the charade was over. Unable to bear the thought, Nick tried to express exactly what he wanted. He didn't want to hear about the upcoming presidential election or the necessity of a single-payer system. Instead, he wanted to forgo their usual dinnertime rituals and have a sudden, impolite sexual encounter that ended with the fertilization of Mrs. Morgenthauer's esophagus.

Nick's forthrightness went unappreciated. Peggy met his suggestion with baffled silence; her facial expression turned stony before she arose from the table, retreated to the bedroom, and locked the door. Realizing that something had gone horribly wrong, Nick followed behind her expressing his apologies. He stood at the door, knocking softly and asking for her forgiveness.

He could hear her sobbing softly from the other side of the door. As he stood there knocking, he remembered a verse he had once seen on the wall of a Manhattan diner.

*As you ramble on through life, brother,
Wherever be your goal,
Keep your eye upon the doughnut,
And not upon the hole.*

Too many people spent far too much of their life thinking about the doughnut hole, mused Nick. They thought too much about what did not exist, rather than the actualities. If only they would spend their time considering what the world really held for them, what they could see and touch and change—the doughnut—they would all be happier. Nick feared he had become a pathetic dreamer, a sexual pervert obsessed with strange bedroom maneuvers that no woman in her right mind would engage in. He was focused on the hole, on her hole, on his own hole, on hole qua hole, on hole in the abstract. He thought constantly about what was beyond his grasp, on holes with giant poles and holes with holes and poles with poles. But was a life of vanilla sex in the missionary position really that bad? They had a good marriage in other ways. Why couldn't he live with that?

Feeling utterly defeated, Nick put on his coat and walked up the west side of Manhattan. He liked this part of the city, with its patches of cobblestone peeking out from under the asphalt and nineteenth-century warehouses-turned-condos, some still professing their original utilitarian purposes between the second- and third-floor windows in large white letters. COFFEE and TEA read one building; WHALEBONE said another.

He crossed Canal and Houston and found himself on the corner of Christopher Street and Westside Highway, by Badlands 24-Hour Video Palace. He watched a patron with a hood pulled over his face open the door and duck inside. The man's shame was oddly exciting, like catching an eleven-year-old in the bathroom with his pubescent fist in his hand. Nick walked quickly up the street away from the store and even managed to reach little West 12th Street before he turned around.

When he returned to Badlands again he stopped. He thought about what he would find inside, the rows of video booths in the backroom, the wide-screen TVs with hundreds of channels, the hollow-eyed men lurking in the gloom. Next he imagined Peggy, the closed door, the doughnut, the hole, her hole, his hole, and the Badlands glory holes.

The issue decided, he stalked quickly across the street and through the door. The interior flickered in the uneven glow of cheap fluorescent bulbs set in a water-stained drop ceiling. Badlands always had an incredible smell; it was as if an Indian village—walls covered in drying cow dung, coal dust, rivers of human excrement—had somehow inflicted its odor on this corner of Greenwich Village. At the far end of Badlands was a darkened door marked by a pink and aqua-blue neon sign reading PEEPSHOW. Beyond the sign's unsteady light, Nick could see a dim corridor and he could hear a female shriek—the soundtrack to a porn film—sounding at even intervals like an echo in a dark wood.

Behind the counter a short Mexican man sold a massive dong to a red-faced customer. The Mexican removed it from the package and turned it on its end, giving the molded plastic scrotum a playful tug.

“What a monster, eh?” said the Mexican. “Your wife like this one, right, boss?”

Nick bought a bottle of Iron Horse poppers and scanned the magazine rack. Until the last minute, he always imagined he would come

to his senses and walk away. This overconfidence in his self-restraint never ceased, even as he wandered closer to the dark door, the neon sign, and the blaring shrieks, even as the shadows in the backroom turned their featureless faces toward him in a silent welcome. The devil knows his own.

The dark door swallowed him. Nick settled into an empty booth, feeding a twenty-dollar bill into the slot, sitting back in the plastic chair and unbuttoning his coat.

In the world of cheap thrills, video booths are a bargain. You don't need to buy a ten-dollar beer and a forty-dollar lap dance—as at most New York strip clubs—or cruise the streets for a working girl. The Badlands Video Palace, like all places of its kind, has a row of phone-booth-sized cubicles equipped with video monitors showing a countless progression of X-rated fanfare. Each booth has a glory hole or two leading to adjacent booths from which patrons can flail their excited organs for their neighbors to service. A patron may even open a window between booths by pressing a button, providing a view of the next booth's occupant.

Each time the screen dropped, Nick found a portrait of desperation, a masterpiece of loneliness, spitefulness, and arrogance. He remembered each of their faces and could recall them at will. He'd invented their histories, his gallery of perverts. One was a handsome junkie with faraway eyes, his scarred forearms hidden under a waffle-iron shirt. He lived in East New York, Nick thought, at his mother's place; they lacked hot water for six months because he spent the heating bill on his fix. Nick imagined another round, solid face belonged to a family man who once loved his wife before the children arrived with their flus and mumps. Now he only removed the shackles of his family responsibility momentarily in the Badlands.

Then there was the haunted look of a man Nick took to be a teacher in love with the golden-haired boy in the third row of his grammar school class. The man's visage was haunted by a sense of ethics that would not leave him alone. He would live out his life in a state of frustrated self-control, never transgressing the rules of the school, never touching his beautiful student inappropriately at any time. He would

hide his lust until he was numb and dead inside, until the machinery of his own desire no longer functioned, until even a passing sexual thought elicited an almost unbearable fit of self-loathing. The world would never appreciate the tortures of these pervert-saints, and Nick wanted to offer their lost souls momentary succor.

Nick watched a pair of junkie-thin girls sucking off a hairy, fat man on his private screen. He pressed the small brown vial of Iron Horse to his nose and inhaled the pungent fumes. A popper rush set his heart pounding, and the sight of the elephantine cock and peroxide blondes on the screen before him—oral and anal penetrations in close-up, semen seeping from painted lips—took on an indescribable beauty, as if nothing were more profound than the sliding of oiled organs to the accompaniment of looped instrumental samples. With enough poppers and porn, Nick entered a timeless space where he had no wife, no deadlines, no bills, no health problems—just cocks and cum and holes.

A circumcised four-inch dick, with a head that curved arrogantly toward the ceiling, popped forcefully through Nick's glory hole. The little guy seemed unaware of his diminutive size. He was confident beyond his abilities and surviving on pure aggression. How could he resist such a sociopath, Nick wondered, as he knelt down to offer his mouth to this thrusting Napoleon. Feeling Nick's lips on its shaft, the hyper prick thrust in and out for about thirty seconds, then receded into its hole. A few seconds later, its head reappeared and threw a half-dozen drops of cum toward Nick, who watched the semen fall to the floor in the unsteady light of the video monitor.

Pearls before swine, he mused, as he bent his face to the floor to lick the cum off the ground. The popper rush dissipated while Nick was thus engaged, and he propped himself up against the wall and tried to catch his breath. He noticed that his pants and shirt were stained with white streaks. How would he sneak this past Peggy? With that thought, the illusion shattered and he felt a pang of self-hatred. That he had ended up on the floor of the Badlands Video Palace with his face in a pool of ejaculate was bad enough. Now he had to go back home.

I, he declared to himself, would sell my soul to the devil if Peggy could be the filthy whore I crave.

A new cock, fat, black, and uncircumcised—like a humpback whale mid-dive—arced through the glory hole. Nick had never seen such a creature, a massive, glistening purple organ lolling from side to side. As he watched, the tapered tip curled upward, rising forty-five degrees and pointing directly at Nick, as if its one tiny black eye could perceive him.

Nick raised himself up so that he was eye to eye with the noble beast. He closed his eyes and took it deep down his throat. As it filled his mouth and stretched his epiglottis, he felt his gut warm, as if he had just sat next to a fireplace on a cold winter day. A roaring sounded in his ears, and vertigo washed over him until he could no longer feel the floor beneath him.

He gagged and tried to pull away, but the cock pressed him, growing so large, so quickly, that it threw his head backward and forced its way into his esophagus. Even then, it didn't slow down but filled his throat and chest as it reached toward his stomach, then coursing through his large and small intestine, at each turn causing Nick excruciating pain. After following the maze of Nick's gastrointestinal tract, the cock protruded from his anus, curled around his lap, and came to rest on his left anklebone.

Nick was soaked in sweat. He was no longer in the Badlands Video Palace, but somewhere outside where a warm, stale wind blew. The cock that impaled him was attached to a strange-looking man, naked and chubby with an ample gut that bulged like a massive mound of earth before Nick's face. Above this lay two large brown nipples and a broad, powerful chest. The man's expression was chiseled as if made from stone; his black hair sprang away from his head in tight kinks. At the center of his deep-set eyes two rusty-red points burned like twin bonfires viewed from a great distance. Beyond his face, Nick saw the nighttime sky, the Milky Way, tiny spots of matter burning in a glittering and twinkling void.

The strange man considered him for a moment, his heavy, bushy brows knitting in concentration. Then, his thick lips parted and he spoke in a high-pitched, almost squeaky voice. Nick could not make out the words—they seemed to be in a language that he did not know—but they had a cadence and rhythm that suggested poetry. The baffling recitation continued for a minute or two, and then the strange man

curled the corners of his mouth upward in what might have been a smile or a snarl and spoke softly in English:

Moloch answers for the Hole,
 Without which doughnut has no soul,
 While all-that-is is missing there,
 Do not mistake the hole for air,
 Hole is all we hope to be,
 Each man's possibility.

As he spoke, Nick felt the man's cock receding through his body, up his anus, through his intestines and stomach, his esophagus, and his mouth. The sensation gagged him, and he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he was back in the Badlands Video Palace alone and fully clothed. His entire body, inside and out, was burning with a raw, itching sensation, as if the cock that had impaled him had scraped his innards and left them scratched and bruised.

The video monitor in front of him was blinking a warning light, indicating that he had only a few more seconds before his credit ran out. On the screen before him a busty woman took three massive Nubian cocks in her pussy, ass, and mouth. She sat atop one lover, a second sat on top of her, and a third crouched by her head offering his organ to her open mouth. Despite all of her lovers' proddings, she looked straight at the camera with utmost confidence and a hint of disdain; she looked like an odalisque surrendering to the embrace of an ebony octopus.

As Nick watched the girl's cheeks pucker inward, he remembered that Peggy's face underwent similar contortions on the rare occasions she gave him head. The camera angle changed to show her heart-shaped ass and pussy stuffed with thick black pipe, panning to a close-up until all that appeared on the screen were the points of penetration. The woman's pale white body was reduced to two small patches connected by her perineum—the flesh between the anus and the vagina—and she looked like a Caucasian bowtie, pinched in the center by descending and ascending dark rods. Around the points of penetration the men's legs, testicles, and buttocks jiggled in an endless swirl of chocolate brown and plum black.

As Nick's eyes locked on this thin strip of flesh, the black men's cocks pressed this delicate piece of pale anatomy to the width of a pencil. The woman screamed in an artless falsetto. The cocks relaxed again for a moment, and her perineum fattened to a half-inch before, with renewed vigor, her lovers jammed their fat tools into her in a simultaneous poke, and the line between vagina and anus contracted to the width of a single thread.

The screen went dark. Nick sat for a moment and suffered a series of dry heaves. When he had collected himself, he left quickly and raced home. In his living room, he found Peggy, as demure as ever, sitting by the window with a cup of mint tea reading a recipe for chicken Kiev in the "Homes" section of the newspaper.

"Is there something wrong?" she asked.

Nick sat down. It must have all been a dream, a delusion brought on by too many poppers and too much porn. He excused himself and went to the toilet, washed his face with cold water, and looked at himself in the mirror. A pair of bloodshot eyes looked back at him. On his lip he found a small abrasion, as if he had smoked a roach too close to the end and burned himself.

That night they had the same old vanilla sex, cunnilingus followed by the missionary position. Then, as he listened to the sad slapping of his belly against her thighs, Peggy's hand moved slowly down her torso to her own vulva. He had always asked her to touch herself while he made love to her, but she categorically refused. Now her manicured forefinger traced a tight circle around her clit and her head tilted backward in sexual bliss. A little cry came out.

She surprised Nick a second time by speaking, something she rarely did during sex.

"Slam it," she said in a soft whisper. "Slam it 'til it hurts."

* * *

From that moment their sex life changed in all respects. Peggy began to assert herself in bed, moving Nick from position to position as if he were a prop in her own personal blue film. She stripped in front of open windows and answered the door for deliverymen wearing nothing but a towel.

Each day was a new, nasty adventure. On Monday, they watched *Interracial Bang Boat 7* together, which Peggy had ordered online on her own volition. On Tuesday, Nick strapped her ass until it turned blue with his leather belt. On Wednesday, he violated her with a carrot stick in the kitchen and then fed it to her in a salad. On Thursday, he stuffed a massive anal dildo into her posterior and led her around the apartment on a dog chain. On Friday, she did the same to him, adding so many chains and locks that he looked like a perverted ghost of Marley. By Saturday she had sucked, drilled, slammed, and squeezed every last drop of life out of Nick, and he suggested a one-night hiatus and a game of Scrabble.

Peggy's lust grew faster than Nick could find ways of satiating it. She was constantly on the edge of orgasm but rarely achieved it. Nick was awakened at night by her incessant masturbation; she would rub her clitoris until it turned flaming red, sometimes augmenting her onanism with clothes pins fastened to her nipples and roach clips screwed to her vaginal lips.

With her rising libido came an obsession with her appearance. She ate less and took up cycling, which left her fifteen pounds below her usual weight. Her body tightened, and she accentuated the changes with revealing clothes and six-inch heels. Her large, brown eyes were made even larger by the liberal application of eyeliner, and her mouth was permanently stuck in a pouty expression, like a little girl awaiting her parents' punishment.

Her cunt became a bottomless maw, devouring every imaginable sex toy Nick bought for her, no matter how massive or cruel. The Medieval Invader was vanquished in a single night while the Anal Torture Kit only slowed her down for a few hours. Peggy's cunt found all the new hardware puerile and expressed its complete disdain by spitting out a pair of Ben-Wah balls one evening with a dismissive *pfiff! pfiff!* The orbs flew a good three feet, landed on the hardwood floor with a metallic thud, and rolled under the desk leaving shiny parallel trails of Peggy's vaginal fluid like wagon ruts filled with rainwater.

One night at dinner, Peggy brought up politics. Far from being bored by the subject, Nick was grateful. He noted that her political views

had changed; she now ridiculed the senator's health plan as entirely unworkable. Moreover, she wondered aloud whether poor people really deserved medical care in the first place. Shouldn't they get a job first and then worry about their health?

She next made a toast to total victory in Iraq before looking Nick straight in the eye and saying, "But instead of expressing my opinions about politics, why don't I just open my mouth and let you shove your cock down my throat?"

Nick looked down at his plate in silence. He could no longer get it up.

Over the next few weeks, Peggy's behavior became erratic.

Whereas previously she was careful about her money, she now spent lavishly on new shoes and jewelry. Upon checking the balance in their bank account, Nick realized that they did not have enough to pay the rent. He tried to confront her about the problem, but she paid no attention to him. As he spoke at length about the cost of fuel and food and their limited ability to buy either in acceptable quantities if Peggy did not curb her spending, she watched him with a blank stare. Standing up while Nick was in mid-sentence, she put on her coat, mumbled something about walking the dog—their dog had died several years previously—and left the apartment. She left a large wet stain in the place where she'd just been sitting. Nick lowered his face to examine it closely and concluded that Peggy had complemented her financial looseness with actual incontinence.

That night during sex, Peggy inserted her hand into Nick's anus. He thought it was a mistake at first and brushed her hand away. She insistently returned it to its original position, however, and her fingertips tapped and tickled him between his buttocks until he squirmed. She drilled her forefinger into his anus, then curved it upward, jiggled it, added a few more digits, and repeated. Soon he was bending over for her daily.

Along with his anal sphincter, whole new worlds of sexual possibility opened up for Nick. He had never fit comfortably inside the confines of heterosexual monogamy and had always secretly wished that he would have a partner who was similarly skeptical about its value. In Peggy's newfound openness, he saw an opportunity to explore the New York nightlife in a way that he had never done before.

Peggy, however, had different ideas. His attempts to interest her in swinger clubs, online hookups, and the Polyamory Society had little success. Membership with most swinger clubs involved too many rules, Peggy complained. She likened online services to playing a video game, and the Polyamory movement to drinking nonalcoholic beer—the distasteful part of cheating remained—but the fun was gone.

Peggy's only interest was in old-fashioned adultery. She began spending less time at home and was often out late with an unspecified group of "friends." The phone rang in the middle of the night and she would leap up to answer it, running to the bathroom for a hushed conversation that lasted for hours. She began to take vacations with old school friends Nick had never heard of before. After this came family reunions Nick was not invited to and extended business conferences in unnamed locations.

Nick lost track of Peggy completely. Months passed by without any communication from her at all. He would've filed for divorce but wasn't sure where to send the papers. And if she never had to sign the papers, never had to come face to face with his discouragement and disapproval, then what, he wondered, was the point?

Sometime later, on a rainy Wednesday morning in the middle of the summer, Nick lay on the sofa watching Ruth Righteous bake an almond meringue dacquoise on *The Aggressive Gourmet*. Ms. Righteous had just finished saying that she considered dacquoise more than just a dessert—it was, she claimed, "a promise that something wonderful was about to happen"—when Nick heard a knock at the door. Answering it, he found Peggy with three tall African men whom she introduced as her business associates. Nick invited them in and made them all lunch, hoping to pull Peggy aside to discuss dividing their assets.

Peggy complained that the kitchen was a mess. "Christalmighty," she complained, "at least throw your empties out, darling."

"Peggy," Nick began, "I think we need to talk . . ."

But Peggy had no time. Her business associates called for more wine.

"Hurry up with the food, my friend," said one. "We are hungry."

"Come all the way from Africa and nothing to eat," scoffed the tallest one. "What is this dung?"

After dinner Peggy announced an ad hoc business meeting in the bedroom to which Nick was not invited. Peggy closed the door behind them, rolling her eyes at the pathetic expression on her husband's face.

Nick washed the dishes in a rage. He imagined he could hear Peggy shriek. He raced to the bedroom door before realizing it was a shriek of laughter. He turned back to the kitchen. He finished the load of dishes, then dried and stacked them silently.

By 1:30 he had cleaned everything. He went to the bedroom door but heard nothing. He knocked softly but nobody answered. At 2:30 they were still in there. Nick had to satisfy his curiosity. He walked to the door and knocked again, louder this time, and then, hearing no answer, he shoved the door inward.

Peggy was sprawled on top of the three naked African men, every orifice stuffed. She looked like an odalisque surrendering to the embrace of an ebony octopus. Her face held an expression that said, "May I not lie here and take cock in my mouth, ass, and pussy in front of my husband whom I haven't written to in six months; is that so bad?"

The men, titillated by Nick's presence, fucked Peggy harder than ever. The thin strip of white flesh between the anus and the vagina began to flatten, contracting under the unrelenting assault.

"Take it, woman!" the hungry one declared. "You are not done yet!" and he stuffed his cock deeper into her cunt.

Nick saw the flesh between her anus and vagina shrink to the width of a single thread.

"Stop!" he cried.

"What are you saying, my friend?" asked another of Peggy's lovers. "She loves it."

"The holes!" said Nick, stepping forward with arms outstretched. "The holes!"

The three Africans laughed in unison. "Yes!" they said. "We like the holes, too!" and they all gave a sharp pelvic thrust just to drive the point home.

The threadlike strip of white flesh between Peggy's ass and vagina quivered like an untuned piano wire. Peggy's limbs became unglued. The three Africans were caught off guard by her implosion and found

themselves tangled in a confused pile, their limbs and cocks hopelessly entwined.

Peggy's orifices had merged into a single, sucking Hole with an existence independent of her body. The free-floating anal Abyss hung in the middle of the room, as cum, shit, Peggy's bits, and the three tall African men all orbited around it, succumbing to its irrepressible force of gravity as it drew their cocks, asses, and limbs into a tightly compacted sphere coalescing around Peggy's potent genital Gehenna.

The three Africans yelled in English, exhorted in French, and howled in Swahili as their muscular arms and legs strained to separate themselves from the Hole. They looked to Nick for help, but Nick held on to the door frame for dear life. He freed one hand and reached for the cell phone in his pants pocket, intending to call 911 and report that his wife had exploded, that her cunt and asshole had collapsed into a point of absolute gravity, and that all of human society was in danger of being swallowed as a result.

Before he could do so, however, his hand lost its grip on the door frame and he tumbled headfirst into the center of Peggy's nasty Hole. His limbs flailed in the air as he vainly tried to extract himself. He screamed, but even his words fell into the Hole. A few seconds later, Nick himself disappeared entirely, accompanied by a soft flushing noise.

He awoke still lying on the sofa. Ruth Righteous was removing an almond meringue dacquoise from the oven and smiling at the TV camera. There was no sign of Peggy, the Hole, or the African visitors. The clock by his head read 10 A.M. Nick lay for a moment and stared at the ceiling and then stood up and looked out the window onto the street twelve stories below. Delivery trucks were pulling up to the curb with crates of apples and meat. At the Punjabi Deli, people were snapping up the latest edition of the *New York Times* for news of the senator's nation-rocking sex scandal. Up and down the street, students were walking in groups toward summer school, practicing their profanity, and on the asphalt near the alley, one young child drew a hopscotch game in pale blue chalk.

Nick felt unhinged. Although he did not miss Peggy, he realized that the banality of matrimony—the dull nightly rituals, the joyless

dinners, the pointless anniversary celebrations—had knit him together psychologically. It seemed impossible that he would fall in love again. Life stretched before him like endless drudgery. The tragedy of existence, he mused, is not that it lasts too short a time but that it lasts too long.

At that moment, he heard a rasping noise behind him. Turning around he saw the strange man from Badlands Video Palace standing in the doorway. Even more massive than Nick remembered him, the man's bulging belly hung down over his now-withered penis. His eyes still smoldered and his large brown nipples hung off his heavy breasts. He was speaking in his indecipherable language, the words rising and falling in mesmerizing inflection. Nick took a step backward.

The strange man moved toward him, speaking to him in his raspy chant, his eyes burning into Nick's. Nick's arms and legs felt leaden and he was unable to speak or resist.

"Turn around," said the man in English.

Nick turned toward the window.

The strange man unlatched the window and pushed it gently open. Nick felt two large hands on his back, touching him gently at first, then heavier and heavier until they were propelling Nick forward, through the window, into the air, and down to the sidewalk twelve stories below. His last thought before he hit the pavement was of almond meringue dacquoise. Something wonderful, he reflected with a sudden rush of *joie de vivre*, was about to happen.



ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

FRANCESCA LIA BLOCK is the award-winning author of many works of fiction, including *Nymph*, *Dangerous Angels*, *Quakeland*, *Blood Roses*, and the upcoming vampire novel, *Pretty Dead*. She lives in Los Angeles with her children. Visit her on MySpace (francescalia) for poetry, pictures, and a growing community of kindreds.

GREG BOYD tells stories and makes pictures. His latest book is a multi-media fictional biography titled *The Nambuli Papers*, and his novella, *The Widow*, is part of Susie Bright's novella series *Three the Hard Way*.

ERNIE CONRICK is a freelance writer living in New York City. When he isn't imagining unspeakable acts, he writes weighty tomes about Asian politics and lectures at local colleges. His erotic fiction can be found in *Best American Erotica* 2000 and 2002.

ED FALCO's most recent books are *Sabbath Night in the Church of the Piranha: New and Selected Stories*, *Wolf Point*, a novel, and *In the Park of Culture*, a collection of short fiction. His short-story collection, *Acid*, won the 1995 Richard Sullivan Prize from the University of Notre Dame and was a finalist for the Patterson Prize. His stories have been published widely in journals, including the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Playboy*, and *TriQuarterly*, and collected in *Best American Short Stories*, *Best American Erotica*, *Pushcart Prize*, and several other anthologies, including *Blue Cathedral: Short Fiction for the New Millennium*. Falco is an early innovator in the field of digital writing; his literary and experimental hypertexts are taught in universities internationally. Ed Falco lives in Blacksburg, Virginia, where he directs Virginia Tech's MFA program and edits the *New River*, an online journal of digital writing.

SERA GAMBLE spends much of her day writing, thinking about writing, reading what she just wrote, revising what she just read, and driving around Los Angeles with the music blaring as a meditative writing exercise. To find out more, please visit www.seragamble.com.

SHANNA GERMAIN likes to write about things that go bump in the night—thus horror and erotica are her favorite genres. Her work has appeared in places like *Absinthe Literary Review*, *Best American Erotica*, *Best Bondage Erotica*, *Best Gay Romance*, *Best Lesbian Erotica*, and *X: The Erotic Treasury*. Visit her online at ShannaGermain.com. She plays “fuck, marry, kill” far more often than she’d like to admit.

ALLISON LAWLESS has published work in erotic markets. She has an extensive fantasy career under another name and lives in the Pacific Northwest. She has many imaginary friends.

TSAURAH LITZKY continues to write erotica to celebrate the body’s resurrecting fires. She believes in oral ecstasy in all forms and that the only true democracy must be based on mutuality of pleasure. Tsaurah’s erotic stories have appeared in nearly seventy publications, including *Best American Erotica*, *Dirty Girls*, *Sex for America*, *Best New International Erotica*, *Politically Incorrect*, *Penthouse*, and *Blacklisted Journalist*. Tsaurah’s erotic novella, *The Motion of the Ocean*, was published as part of *Three the Hard Way*, a triad of erotic novellas edited by Susie Bright. Tsaurah is a member of the creative writing department at the New School in Manhattan where she has been teaching erotic writing for eleven years. She is also a poet and playwright. Currently, she is compiling a collection of her erotic short stories titled *The River of No Regrets*.

Known by her real name for her successful series of children’s books, **CATE ROBERTSON** enjoys the challenge of writing literary smut. Her erotica has appeared online at CleanSheets, ScarletLetters, and FishnetMag, and in anthologies such as *Naked Erotica*, *Naughty Stories from A to Z; Vol. 4*, *Slave to Love*, *Got a Minute?* and *Best Women’s Erotica 2006*. Originally from Canada, Cate recently moved to the United Kingdom, where she hopes to publish her first novel any day now.

E. R. STEWART's short stories have been published in *Best American Erotica*, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *The Ultimate Witch*, *Codominium: Revolt on War World*, *Scared Naked*, *Cold Flesh*, *Poe's Progeny*, *Jigsaw Nation*, *Hell's Hangmen*, *Love & Sacrifice*, *Barren Worlds*, *Ruins Metropolis*, *A Time To . . .*, *Tales of Moreauvia*, and *Of Princes and Beauties*; Kendall/Hunt's *Pegasus* textbooks; and the magazines *Future Orbits*, *All Possible Worlds*, *Pangaia*, *Talebones*, *Aboriginal SF*, and *Marian Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy*. Stewart has written two erotic novels—*Alaya's Assignments* and *Properly Whipped*—and has a third, *False Compare*, forthcoming. He currently lives in the American Midwest, where he is researching and writing a novel of ancient sins, modern lies, and eternal truths.

DONNA GEORGE STOREY taught English in Japan and Japanese in the United States and has finally found the work of her dreams writing erotica. Her dirty stories have appeared in over seventy journals and anthologies including *X: An Erotic Treasury*, *Dirty Girls*, *Best American Erotica 2006*, and several volumes of *Mammoth Book of Best New Erotica* and *Best Women's Erotica*. She's written an even dirtier novel, *Amorous Woman*, a semiautobiographical tale of an American's steamy love affair with Japan. Read more of her work at DonnaGeorgeStory.com.

PATRICE SUNCIRCLE lives in Oakland, California, and writes about pretty women. She grew up in West Tennessee and so she also writes about Black Indians and Southern Magick. And sometimes vampires. By the time you're reading this bio, she should have finished her novel. It's about a pretty woman named Mildred who lives, loves, and hunts in the city of Belle Orleans, the Venice of North America.

JULIA TALBOT has been assimilated by Texas, where there is hot and cold running rodeo, cowboys, and smoked brisket. A full-time author, Julia has been published by Torquere Press, Suspect Thoughts, and Pretty Things Press, and has an upcoming novel with the new Bareback Angels press. Visit Julia at <http://thegates.net/juliatalbot>.

ANNE TOURNEY has been writing erotic fiction since the early 1990s, when her first published short story was included in *Best American Erotica 1994*. Since then she has published short fiction in numerous periodicals and anthologies, including *Best Women's Erotica*, *Best Fetish Erotica*, and *Mammoth Book of Best New Erotica*. She also writes dark fantasy and loves to explore the twisted byways of human sexuality, both in her fiction and in her personal life. Anne's alter ego, *Alaine Hood*, has written erotic novels for Black Lace. Anne also writes sexy contemporary romance for Virgin Books.

JESS WELLS is the author of thirteen volumes of work, including the historical novel *The Mandrake Broom*, available at Mandrakebroom.com. She is a four-time finalist for the Lambda Literary Award and a recent recipient of a San Francisco Arts Commission Grant for Literature. Her first novel, *AfterShocks*, has been republished internationally and was reissued as a Triangle Classic by InsightOut Books. Her novel *The Price of Passion* is available at Firebrandbooks.com, and her work is included in more than two dozen anthologies.

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