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“Scarring the Collective Unconscious Since 1989”



“BASTARDS & WHORES”

*A Wretched And Disgraceful Series of Novellas
By*

JOHN LINTON ROBERSON

VOL. 1

MATURE
AUDIENCES

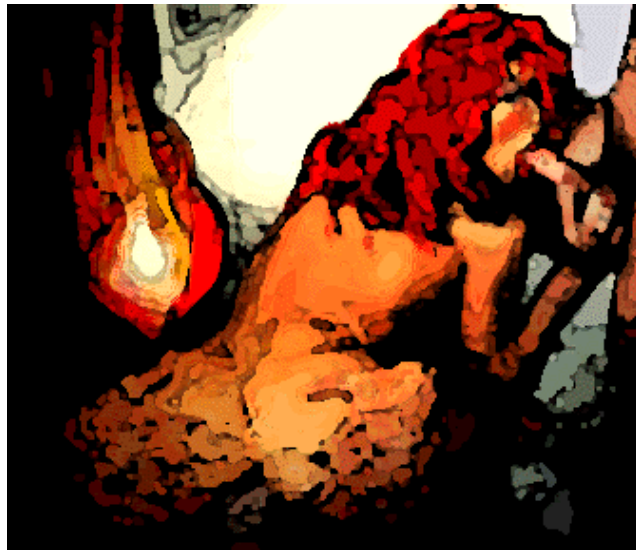
***DEDICATED TO MY DEAR WIFE KELLY PILLSBURY WITH ALL
MY LOVE.***



“Writers Speak A Stench.”
FRANZ KAFKA, DIARY 1911

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BOOK ONE.



NO MAN WITH A GOOD CAR NEEDS TO BE JUSTIFIED.

chapter one.

LET US GIVE THANKS FOR OUR MANY BLESSINGS

T was Thanksgiving morning, 1991, on Howard Street, and Chastity Barlow impatiently masturbated with the handle of her fattest paintbrush,

thankful for all Freud had taught her of symbols and sublimation. It would be the best she could manage till after her boyfriend embarrassed her in front of her parents, she saw from the time. She was hoping for a quick fucking from Rick to calm her nerves beforehand, but instead she would have to make do with the misuse of this tool of the noble discipline of abstract expressionism. But when Chastity was horny, aesthetics could go to hell.

She couldn't help feeling vaguely insulted. You'd have thought he'd be rushing back. Didn't he *like* to be wanted? It was a Chicago autumn, gray outside and pissing icicles. Surely he didn't go far to get the wine and cheese she'd forgotten to buy her parents last night. Surely he wasn't enjoying the walk. He had no umbrella. Of course, perhaps if she'd informed him of her nymphomaniac mood prior to rushing him into his clothes and out the door, that might've added an incentive, but they'd been going out since spring. He ought to have been able to tell by now. There would be no time soon.

No, no. He was back, much quicker than she'd expected. *Yes. Back in bed. Right here.* With her. *Right here.* "AAAhhh!...mm...ow." Once done with the trusty brush, she tossed the distasteful thing to the floor as if she'd never seen it in her life. The shaft was all covered in old, flaking pigment. How could she put that inside her? All kinds of diseases could be in the wood. Not to mention mites or chemicals, waiting to be set amok by the damp. Not to mention splinters.

But given what a penis was supposed to wreak upon you these days, upon a woman's status, her dignity, her immune system, and her precious self-esteem; if she was letting one of those inside her regularly, this paintbrush had certainly earned its chance at her more than said boyfriend had.

Jesus, why did she keep *thinking* about his...she knew her father and the Sisterhood alike would disapprove. Is this how men were with tits? Girls don't think like this. Well, girls like her stepmother, certainly. But not intelligent, independent ones. If she were stronger in herself, she'd need nothing whatsoever inside her, she knew that.

She would be enclosed and pure. She didn't need it but she liked it. She liked his. Why did she enjoy her brainwashing so, she wondered. Why did she want him back here coming like a flood down her thirsty throat? Why was she even thinking it that way? She knew it didn't feel remotely as nice as that sounded anyway.

Even in this punishing weather it didn't take a half an hour, and besides, he had a car. Of course, she'd rushed him out so suddenly he'd left his keys, but he would've been too cheap to waste a dime on gas for comfort's sake. *Thank god today was a special occasion*, she sighed.

She heard another shot a block away that calling the cops wouldn't help. Jimmy, the guilty middle-class Trotsky-fancying roommate, who thought himself the WASP authority on all that was African-American, had mentioned over beans one night the Bloods from L.A. were "colonizing." *How* he knew this was never explained.

She didn't care enough to ask. Her racist father would most likely give her shit about this neighborhood later, yes. For her own part, she just hated this place. She couldn't have cared less who lived around it. But nobody moves out when paying seventy dollars for a four-bedroom apartment, even if it did mean living with eight others, and sharing the tiniest bedroom with one of them. At least it had its own bathroom and a door to the kitchen, which was blocked by the bed. Which meant that every time Rick & she fucked or argued, or fucked *then* argued, or argued *while* fucking, the rest of the house was treated to quite the radio drama right in their own cozy kitchen; which they did, crowding about just behind about two inches of wood, audibly giggling, whispering, or even offering color commentary.

Rick's friends, all of whom he'd let into his previous apartment when they'd lost their respective leases and who'd followed here with him; all said nothing but the most contemptuous of shit behind his back. She hated them all but had the grace not to show it, especially since she could continue to memorize what they really thought, to report later to Rick, who honestly thought they all liked him, and trusted people on no more solid base than that. She told him once, but the fact they were even talking about him only boosted his rather flaccid ego.

But enough pestering and he'd come around. Things would be so nice if it was only the two of them. She was certain that was the only problem. But till then she'd smile and be nice. Living here, she was able to save most of the thousand dollars a month she'd told her parents, normally in Santa Cruz, that her rent cost. She'd already stashed away a smallish fortune, handy in case her parents found out they were living together. But they wouldn't. They wouldn't *ever*. Or Rick would pay.

You'd think the son of a bitch would've been more careful about being prompt today. This was all to impress them for his sake, so the ground would be prepared for later and far more taxing developments and revelations. She'd spent every hour, spare or not, for the past week making this place clean for their visit. The roommates loved it, and took advantage of this compulsive behavior to leave bigger messes throughout the house than inspiration had ever provided them before. Last night had been the first night he'd slept there in nearly four days. She hadn't even smoked in a week, which wasn't helping her tension any, but she couldn't let them smell it on her breath. Her parents would kill her.

So why had she been smoking one of Rick's right now? Only halfway through before she quickly put it out, but she knew no amount of brushing would expunge the

telltale tar crust from her throat, which her parents were sure to smell. She didn't even smoke very often. One a day, if that, something she'd never done before meeting Rick. Quite inconsiderately, he smoked in their alcove with a bathroom called their bedroom. He kept a fan blowing constantly, to air it out, but it was a tiny room and Chicago was freezing, so what good would this do with the window, and often the door, shut? It was that haze in the air, nestling in her sleeping lungs, that had given her this undeserved need for one of the evil things. No doubt it'd give her cancer too. Didn't he give a damn?

She didn't know why the cheating hadn't ended things right there. He had a shit job in a stationery store and, consequently, no money, though he certainly seemed to have plenty for pot and typing paper. She was sure he never really listened to her, and that his responses were just practiced; he was a writer and could probably guess all those reactions. He couldn't afford to take them anywhere and didn't want to leave the house much anyway, even when she begged, offering to pay, claiming always he "had too much to write," though she rarely saw him doing so. He couldn't dance, either.

She wondered if he'd stop smoking, if she stopped fucking till he did. But that'd fool no one; she knew full well that she wouldn't manage that strike more than six hours. Chastity, for all else, liked to fuck. And he was so thin, and hung, and had no idea why she wanted him. You didn't just throw the clean boys away nowadays.

Her parents had come all the way from California to meet this "Rick" they kept hearing tell of, because they could not stomach leaving her life alone. They were now waiting out in Lake Forest at her aunt's house, Thanksgiving dinner waiting too so Chastity could be made to feel guilty for the final unappetizing temperature of the dinner they eventually had to start without this lovely young couple that obviously had better things to do than to show on time.

Relatives, family friends, and all the people she needed to make happy for some reason she'd never been told exactly, never wanted to see again as long as she lived, and yet each of whom held some unspeakable hook in her future, were all waiting to see and judge them, and make their unfathomable decisions about her life from the assembled data. It was death to refuse to submit to the ritual altogether.

And ultimately, it was all about her cunt.

She liked that word. It sounded brutal, short, and filthy. She loved calling it that in front of her prissy postmod Art Institute classmates. The other words were. It was only an organ, like any other, perhaps with a pleasanter function and far greater interest to her than most, but Christ, it was just *part* of her. It wasn't her. Her "*Sex*"; her "*Pussy*", "*Kitty*", "*Vulva*", "*Twat*", "*Vagina*", whatever ---euphemisms. Too cute, or prissy, or medical. *Cunt*. Now that was straight to the point.

She especially liked calling it by such an ugly-sounding punch of a word because her father thought it was something precious that he owned. It was like keying his favorite BMW.

It wasn't enough that they held the half of the tuition the Art Institute grant didn't pay, but they did, over her head like the granite block over Shazam's head. Her dad thought the money entitled them to an indenture of her body. Did her father somehow think her hymen would grown back, given sufficient time?

If she lived with a boy, and they caught her, she lost that money and the allowance for living expenses of one thousand and fifty dollars they sent her every month, to ensure no work would interfere with her studies (and to pay a portion of the

rent eight times what she actually paid; she was glad they'd taught her to save). She'd actually taken one job in a rage against him, and intended to give him a speech about how she was now financially independent, didn't need his fucking money, and definitely didn't need any fucking school to tell her she was a good artist. But two days before being fired was nothing to really brag about, she ended up deciding. She'd taken jobs from time to time, none which lasted any longer than lunchtime, just as a secret "fuck you" to Dad, but she found that the part about not having to work appealed to her. And she wouldn't risk that, even over Rick, whom, yes, she loved. Christ knew why.

Over the summer, while Rick was carrying on his affair as she languished, bored, in Santa Cruz, her father noticed how much she brought him up in conversation and the way her eyes would brighten, and decided this must be stopped. Apropos of nothing, one day he said to her at dinner, "You know, if you move in with this guy when you go back, I'll cut you off like that." He even snapped his fingers, like it didn't count otherwise.

As she had just come down to dinner after crying her eyes out trying to get Rick to admit over the phone he'd been cheating on her (without success), exactly the way she'd vividly dreamt it last night, when she knew fully well he was lying--after that just about five minutes before, she really didn't know how to reply to Daddy. But neither did she want to show weakness in front of him by even letting on it had happened, nor did she have it in her to fight at all right now without jamming a fork in someone's brain. So she just bowed her head meekly and ate, and tried not to shake too much. She so wanted to shoot him in the kneecaps and, laughing as she kicked him about fifty times in the face, called him a fat blob of bearded puke and any other selection she could now read out of the diary she'd saved all this time. But Chastity did want to finish her education; otherwise she'd never get rid of him.

She tried not to think about Rick, so she could eat, but her father felt the need after every five minutes' tense silence to say something further. He goaded her, dictatorially laying down one strict rule after another en masse without resistance, like, "I'll cut you off if you end up pregnant," or such. Chastity said nothing.

To that particular one, though, her stepmom had coughed and said, "Mike, I don't think that's exactly possible." Her stepmother trusted her when she'd told her privately she was still a virgin down there, and wished Daddy would believe that. In point of fact she'd been penetrated twice before Rick, not counting her mouth, which had, by contrast, been of quite enthusiastically promiscuous use.

But they'd been pathetic couplings, one of five seconds, another of three; he was barely inside her before coming. But they were California boys. Rick was the first who'd really fucked her. She didn't want to lose him. She didn't want to think about it right then. But Daddy wouldn't stop fantasizing out loud. He acted daily disconcertingly like his friends who'd always leered over their rum glasses at her when they came over, ever since she was twelve. It seemed sometimes men his age, remembering the bouncy-breasted girls they never scored with even during the most promiscuous parts of the sixties, saw their daughters subconsciously—or less—as a potential second chance. Dad had a movie producer friend he'd known since 1965. It seemed every other movie this ponytailed fellow put out had a nude sex scene involving a teenage-looking actress with a face surprisingly like his own seventeen-year-old's.

Her father would never let her forget the June night when she was sixteen, and he caught her in the garage with poor, skinny, nervous Jason Mathis. And she would never

forget how neither Jason nor her father, whom she couldn't see, said a thing till Frank had come and she had swallowed. Jason was just lucky she was too upset to see the nail gun within easy reach through her tears. He was let out through the back. Daddy hit her before she even could get a drink of water and grounded her to her bedroom till the end of that summer. He couldn't stop mumbling "slut" under his breath when they passed in the hall.

He wasn't fair. Her grades were always excellent. She'd won a scholarship to the fucking Art Institute of Chicago. And he'd fucked her best friend the following summer! What right did he have to judge her on the basis of how wide or often she chose to spread her legs? He changed wives almost as often as condoms. He loved to fuck; so like father, like daughter. So what? But ah: she was a girl.

Come to think of it, Rick loved to fuck, too, and hadn't felt like waiting.

The stabbing thought ebbed, then flowed, then crashed in the front of her head just as she was swallowing her string beans. Chastity held back her gagging. She had to force the food into her stomach or they'd know something was wrong. She felt small, stupid, unimportant, replaceable.

Thank god she'd ignored all medical advice and worked on her tan that summer. Whatever she'd decide to do with Rick once she saw him again, he'd be sorry once he saw her. There was plenty of time to cry and smash things once dinner was over.

But regardless of the many ways of revenge she planned against him on the trip back, once she'd seen Rick beaming like no time had passed at her as she got off the plane, she couldn't help kissing him, nor holding him tight for five or more minutes. Later, she decided as they'd walked out. Somehow all her luggage ended up here and had just sort of stayed. Now what could she do? Move out on him but continue to date? Wouldn't that feel just like breaking up? What would stop him calling this whore back over one night after calling to tell Chastity he was tired? She might as well leave him entirely.

Not after going to so much trouble, she wouldn't.

She checked the time for the sixty-sixth time that minute. They'd most certainly be late, unless he somehow managed to return about ten minutes ago. No, she had to think positive, warm fuzzy thoughts like she'd heard somehow helped other women. Then everything today would go well. Things only went wrong when she let them. If she obsessively covered every possible detail of protection and propriety in front of her parents, there was no way they could catch her. And they thought they were so smart.

Thinking about sunsets, beaches, and meadows was doing nothing but remind her that her period was late. Fucking Oprah.

No, everything would go as planned, and if it didn't, Rick would be blamed. She'd already decided that much. It would be his fault they were late even if it had simply taken her too long to get dressed; which, she suddenly noticed, she wasn't yet. Why hadn't she thought to? Why hadn't she taken this opportunity to shower and all the rest of that shit? She still smelled of their violent fucking all night when he'd come home earlier than she'd asked him to, while she was still sleeping off the LSD. He'd started while she was still asleep, but she didn't mind. And it might be useful against him once she did, to remind him she'd never said yes.

But that'd only be in case of fire.

Right now she found herself wishing he'd get back early as possible for very different reasons than promptness. She couldn't go to her aunt's and face her family quaking in fear like this. It ought to have worn off by now, dammit. Every emotion seemed to jerk its own string on her joints. She wasn't seeing things; she never did. She wasn't going schizo, nor did she have the slightest desire to fly out a window. But everything seemed so painfully dramatic. She needed the endorphins of a good fucking to steady her, since there was no goddamn liquor in this stupid hippie house.

Why was it taking him so long? He had a car. She'd sent him out in this unmerciful rain precisely to hurry him up. If he was going so far for this long, he'd better bring back something good.



Chastity's parents had gotten to O'Hare Wednesday, a little earlier in the day than they'd promised they would. And first on their itinerary following the dropping off of their luggage at her aunt's house was a visitation and inspection of just what sort of dwelling they were, after all, dear, paying for.

They were suspicious for reasons other than that her daughter might be avoiding her studies by daily sucking some fellow's cock till it was dry and clean, though Christ knew, he would certainly go on about his suspicions, in those very words, ad nauseam. It wasn't that he was right. But he thought he had locks fastened to her every orifice. It frightened her how often he'd ranted about this, ever since she'd turned eight and he noticed her nipples standing up under her jumper in the sprinkler. She wondered sometimes if she'd have even known how to be such a "slut." had he not berated her about what she should not do in such specific, graphic detail all her life. Not to mention the naked women he photographed for a living, some of whom she was to call Mom.

He'd even tried to prevent her even coming to Chicago for school. Her father had grown up here; his first photographic job for *Courtesan* had been there, at what was their headquarters (and now processed the subscriptions hidden by a very ornate foyer), till he got big enough to work wherever he liked and to photograph his wives. Her mother had been the second. Barbi was the fifth, of five whole years now. But that was just because her father had gotten fatter and slower. Her father ranted constantly about what a rotten place she'd chosen to stay, constantly reminding her that California's was better. It rarely occurs to Californians that there is more to life than that.

Although there were, indeed, further reasons on her dad's part. He'd left Chicago, he'd harangued her often, because it had turned into "a city of niggers." A decent white woman, it seemed, could go nowhere without being raped. Why he hadn't accompanied any of these women in some attempt at their defense, since he seemed to care so about their welfare, didn't get discussed. Her neighborhood, in particular, had apparently been known gang territory for some time. Sort of a Chicago police tradition not to bother with it, really. "I know that exact neighborhood," he'd chortled when she gave him directions and the address, hoping she'd get it wrong and they'd get deeply lost. "They call that the Juneway Jungle. The people who live there call it that. Don't give me that fucking look."

"You can't see me."

"Just zip it, Chastity. You already gave me the directions."

He'd laughed over the phone while she nearly bit through her hand muffling herself. "Five or six niggers standin' out on the street corner at any given time, I bet."

"For Christ's sake, Dad, it's freezing, windy, and rainy out there. I don't think anyone's going to be hanging out on that corner."

"What the hell you think they wear those athletic parkas with the hoods for? Standing on the corner's all they do all day. You know, the way you or me watch TV? They can't let bad weather get in the way of their occupation." And boy, did Dad laugh. "You should carry a knife. Nothing they'd like better than to screw a pretty white California girl like you." Dad had photographed naked women far too often and long. There's such a thing as being too frank with your children.

"I'm sure it's a mess, knowing you. You probably should clean it before we come."

"Knowing me?"

"Don't get so defensive!" he'd chuckled. "We're your parents." Well, one of you. "Barbi and I remember what a pig you can be. Ain't that right, Barbi hon?"

"We're just having a little fun with you, hon," a somewhat tipsy Barbi replied to the speakerphone from, most likely, behind the bar on the other side of the living room. She then giggled at an inordinate length, an appalling frequency, and an absolutely unjustifiable pitch. Her father was very quiet, most likely stroking himself while watching Barbi's tits jiggle as she giggled, which he did whether anyone was watching or not. He had no business appointing anyone less than ten years older than herself her mother. Certainly not his latest fucktoy and free model.

Why did he torture his only child this way? Sooner or later he had to have figured his daughter would grow up and do all those naughty things the very magazine he worked for celebrated and profited from, about which it said constantly (though not to women) people feel no guilt and instead the purest and most liberal delight. He already presumed her a slut. Why force her to care? Why make her every waking hour a worrisome one? He knew. She knew he did. He always found out. Nothing could be hidden from her dad. Why this whole drawn-out fucking game? Immediately upon hanging up, it began in earnest. Her first task was to erase all evidence of said sluthood from the premises. She'd thought she'd have all today to do the job. She in fact had four hours. She'd planned to be careful and considerate with Rick's stuff. She hoped he wouldn't mind this forced change in priorities. It wasn't like he was being called upon to move it.

So she first rushed to Rick's—*no, ours—no, mine, fucking mine and never his, remember, stupid*—bedroom and took a long-awaited secret opportunity to strip every one of his fucking posters off the walls, as she'd asked him anyway. She hated anything on the walls, especially in such a small room, for reasons having to do with her vague misunderstanding of the psychoanalytic term "claustrophobia." Anyway, she hadn't been the one resisting when she'd told him to take them down.

Everything Rick had to go, his clothes, his sheets, his pillowcases, his typewriter, all his files, anything that carried his telltale packrat taint, anything with his fingerprints or scent from miserly repeated use. They knew nothing of Rick, his habits, or his style of dress; had seen no photos. But Chastity wouldn't have put a private detective past her father, certainly not past his income. She was sure he knew and was merely tightening the noose slowly for suspense. But she wasn't about to make it any easier for the fat fuckhead.

Some of his clothes he'd apparently had since high school. And not just in the bedroom. That spatula she saw on her way to the unnoticeable side storage room with the padlock out the back door, that the screen door hid as you exited; that was most definitely a guy's spatula.

True, they knew there were other guys, living there, with their girlfriends, except Paul and his revolving series of far younger boyfriends. Nevertheless, she must remember to throw it away on the way back in through the kitchen. Come to think of it, she'd have to go through all the cookware, see if there was anything particularly shoddy in those drawers. For the amount of money her parents were sending her, they certainly would be suspicious to see shoddy old cookware with searmarked handles, like Rick's. She kept forgetting there were six other roommates in the house to harmlessly blame. Oddly, her parents themselves never did.

Probably just to gall her all the more, they were fine with the moral turpitude of the house, so long as none of the fun being had was hers. Ironically, they suspected none of her roommates. She could have fucked any—well, almost any—other guy in the house and gotten away with it right under their noses, but not her own goddamn boyfriend. They'd even had pleasant chats with some on the phone, till she'd happened across this in the hall and ripped the phone from the roommate's hand. Particularly Paul, whose throat she'd personally sworn to cut if he gave anything away, was a favorite conversationalist, especially since he'd just slap her hand away till his talk was done. He liked her parents. They were good at appearing to like him. Paul was too happy at paying seventy dollars a month in rent to even discuss Chastity, though, no matter how many times they attempted to wheedle something out of the seemingly starstruck and gullible faggot. He'd giggle with her afterward, telling her the details. Well, he'd giggle. She'd shiver till he was done, no matter how many times he begged her not to worry. "Your father is an idiot. Idiots aren't as smart as me."

As she'd shoved Rick's stuff in one lump into the already cramped storage space, she realized that she would never be able to do all this in such a short time, and nobody in the house (though they were mostly away for the holidays anyway) knew how to fool her parents better than Paul, who was home, languishing in an enviably serene, drugged haze in bed with his latest golden-tousled boy. How he managed to find men shorter than himself—though always far less slight of build and tone than he—she often wondered.

This one was drooling, slack of lip and pretty of upturned nose, when she barged into the bedroom, flat on his face, too asleep for bombs to wake, or even Chastity's wayward hand stroking his irresistibly supple and tan ass. "Excuse me," Paul whispered, awake the whole time, "that's *mine*, missy."

Fortunately, priorities let her jump to an entirely different subject. "My parents are coming before *noon*."

"Wonderful! I can't wait to meet them!"

"I can! You promised to help me give the house a makeover!"

"Chastity, I've been smoking opium...I don't wanna get up..."

She yanked him out of bed and threw a bathrobe on his back. "*You fucking promised to help me, you selfish shit! Come one! Come on! They'll be here any second!*"

"I thought you said they were coming at—"

"You don't *know* them! They've got nothing *better* to do but *be early!*"

Paul had his fingers in his ears by now. The boy didn't stir. "All right all right all right...whatever it takes to shut you up," he sighed, and followed her down the hall. "I swear, you whine like a police siren. If this is what straight men have to put up with, I don't see why they keep bragging their lifestyle's the *shit*..."

"Come *on!*" she shouted from the bedroom, lunging forth once he was near with panic in her eyes.

"Misery loves company, I suppose."

She yanked him inside with no further ado, and he undertook the task of remaking the house in shades of the most stereotypical screaming effeminacy. Paul assumed her father, at least, would expect that, as he'd once said after talking quite pleasantly to Paul on the phone, "Yeah, he's, heh, a nice fella. But you know, if you waste away and die of AIDS 'cause you shared a sip of his Coke, don't expect *us* to pay the premiums." Paul would have made sure to offer her father a specially poured and flavored one when they arrived, but Chastity begged him to go out to breakfast or something till they left.

"Brunch," he corrected her, while covering everything too heavy to move aside in vast purple and emerald embroidered scarves, "and I have standards. What have you?" Begrudgingly she forked over more money. Whatever would make him stop bitching and focus.

She'd ruthlessly cleared every bit of clutter from the bedroom. He took a gleefully malevolent delight in putting all his spare Judy Garland posters that Rick had pleaded with him not to hang in the halls all over Rick's walls, concentrating most especially near his desk. But Chastity screeched she never had any posters on her walls. "What about your art? I mean, they're paying tuition for you to learn something about it, aren't they?" It was still up, every one of her paintings, looking rather unevenly hung now with the surrounding posters ripped down, their white dust shadows marking their former presence no matter how many ways she shifted the paintings. There were only these four, and her parents didn't know about the sculpture incomplete she'd be working off next semester—assuming there was one. Exasperated, resigned, she hung her head, wiped her brow, didn't even look at him, pointed an open, resigned hand to the wall and said, "Put your fucking posters up."

He sprayed *Obsession for Men* into anything porous. "It's okay," he assured her, "no *straight* guy would be caught *dead* wearing this." Soon, the immaculately-made bed was Krassnered with stuffed animals with big round eyes Chastity would have loved to have melted with a lighter till the plastic ran down each cheek like a tear. But Paul stopped her. He'd also put up the poster we all know of the cat perpetually hanging on for dear life to some sort of chin-up bar. This bit of photographic jollity has, of course, brought hope and chuckles to millions, and millions to the owner torturing the cat in question. The cat, long since dead, is now merely relieved. She envied that cat.

He'd strewn *Cosmopolitan* all over the floor and the edge of the bed. Chastity scrambled in a panic to gather the magazines behind him. "Um...Chastity...What are you doing?" Paul stopped to inquire.

She couldn't tell him to shut up enough, it seemed. "They'll think I don't pick *up* after myself! They'll say I'm a *slob!*" He kept taking them out of her hands.

“No, no, c’mon!” He kept tossing them right back where they’d been, when she’d only be forced to pick them up again. “I’ll tell you what’ll make them suspicious,” Paul said. “A college student with a clean bedroom.”

Chastity gathered them again, laughing like the damned, keeping her back turned while he tried to take them back. “I wouldn’t go to extra effort because *they’re* coming? *Ha!* Seeing signs I’m still *scared shitless* of them is most of what got them on the fucking *plane!*” She needed a second. She smoked one of the cigarettes from Paul’s pocket.

“You don’t smoke,” he reminded her as he lit six sticks of grandmotherly lavender incense.

“I ever tell you...when I was ten, I spilled some Kool-Aid on the kitchen floor? A shiny, no-wax, no-stain, completely non-porous fucking artificial kitchen floor like most houses have. Okay? And I broke the glass on top of that. Dad comes in and he makes me get on my hands, and knees, and clean the whole floor, with a sponge and clear water. The whole floor, and he wouldn’t even let me sweep up the glass first.” She showed Paul the patches of Jackson Pollock scratches on her palms, knees, and wrists. The ones on her wrists were a little more numerous, and deeper.

“These are words for your therapist, dear. It’s not really the skill you got me out of bed for, this.” He threw the magazines up in the air and stopped her when she grabbed to catch them. “Let the mags fall where they may.”

“*Cosmofuckingpolitan?* At least pick something *I* would read.”

“I don’t read the things you read.”

“You *don’t* read.”

“That’s true. Now, Chastity, look at it like this. They see this magazine around, they assume you’re a brainwashed slave to fashion, men, looks, weight, and self-help. They look at you then and see you’ve become everything they always wanted in their daughter, for all your smart talk; right? But the thing is, you *don’t* read them.” That’s when the downstairs buzzer went off.

Her parents had bought the desk she’d said she really didn’t need. They’d arrived two hours earlier than they’d said. They’d brought the damn thing with them. “But you’re so *early*, I...” She shut the door and undid the chain to let them in. “I haven’t had time to sweep or anything.” To drop the grin was death.

Her father looked like The Thing, except with a beard and a vastly less presentable complexion, leathern from years of nude sunbathing nobody ever asked for along the liberal beaches of Santa Cruz. His choking cigar’s fumes wafted in Chastity’s face no matter how she evaded it. “I’m sure it looks like how we’d expect,” he said, bursting in ahead of Barbi. No, she wasn’t behind him. Had he left her someplace or other? He had his habits too.

But there instead came, from the floor below the two tall, skinny young black guys hauling the heavy-looking winestain wood desk up the three flights of stairs, a shrill, bubbly twitter of, “Hi, Chassy!” That would be the stepmother. She kept poking her head over the lower guy’s shoulder, trying to squeeze past. They looked ready to let it tumble down on her. Chastity hoped for an unfortunate sneeze. “Mike?” That was her father. “I’m stuck down here, honey!”

Mike, worried they might be leering at his lovely blonde wife, barked at them from the landing to go faster, in a grating, angry, impatient whine, as though it was the hardest part of the operation, and was of not even motivational assistance. They were

going as fast as they could, so as to get the money and get the hell away from this tub of pink lard as possible. He started waving them toward the front door, even though they had their backs turned to him.

“I don’t *need* a desk. I *have* a desk.”

“But it’s not as good as this one,” he said. “Come on, you—” Then Mike acted like he was guiding them in. They obligingly pretended to be blind and set it down on his toe. He yelped and they apologized, picking it up once he asked coherently and politely. Mike limped a few steps backward. Barbi ran in behind them and soon adhered to Mike’s side. “Met these fellas on the street. This one’s Frank, and the other’s, what, Leroy or something, right?”

“Um, no,” the younger man said, “it’s Stanford. Like the college,” politely as he could, wondering how long they’d have to stand here and pretend they liked these white assholes before they got paid.

“Huh. Imagine that. They got a good team, don’t they? Heh heh.”

Stanford smiled, shuffled, looked down at the floor. He gave the little nervous giggle assholes like Mike waited for. Wasn’t like it was the first time. Frank was looking at him, he knew, right now and thinking “Tom,” but after that vagrancy arrest for waiting for a bus, the cops were looking for just one more thing they could interpret plausibly as serious. This white guy was trying to get an excuse for something, and Stanford was sure not paying them was certainly part of that something.

“Stanford.” Mike scratched his beard, amused. “Huh. Could’ve sworn it was Leroy. Ah, well, honest mistake, huh? I bet it happens all the time.”

“Why would it happen ‘all the time?’”

Mike chuckled. “Okay, okay, simmer down, it’s no big deal...I mean, there’s a *lotta* white men around called *Mike*, too, and people call *me* ‘Mike’ all the time.” He patted Stanford on the shoulder. Frank kept mouthing “be cool” and rubbing his thumb and forefinger together, reminding him they’d hauled it up and no white man’s insults were going to keep them from their money. They’d piss off the black guys. They’d threaten the black guys if they were going to get so belligerent they’d have no choice but to call the cops. The black guys, who would then have to let cops judge between their word and that of a white family, would instead leave, and the white family would chuckle about it, and go out to a nice dinner with the money they saved. No, not a third time. Stanford kept his temper. “It’s like that song, you know? You remember that song?—

♫ *Bad, bad, Leroy Brown,*
Baddest man in the whole damn town—
Badder’n ol’ King Konggg--- ♫

Stanford couldn’t take more of his singing. “Yeah—yeah. I uh, know the song.”

“Well, you get it now?”

“Get, um,” Stanford scratched his nose and started eyeing the door.”...what?”

“That’s why I called you that. See?”

“My last name ain’t Brown.”

Mike chuckled. “Man, that Jim Croce could sing...wasn’t he black?”

“I...I don’t even know who he is, mister. Now, um, I—”

Mike sat down on the couch, eyeing him behind his cigar with a boss’ condescending suspicion. “So, um, why haven’t you taken that desk where we wanted it set down, huh Stanford? I’m sure even you don’t put your desk in the hall. Oh, wait, you

probably don't have a—" He laughed. "I'm terribly sorry, never mind." "So, honeybunch, where did you want this thing? Just tell them where to set it down." Stanford smiled, since there was a way this could now end.

"Um..." Why was she making her join in the ordering, like some prissy, spoiled Caucasian princess? "The, um, bedroom," she whispered. "I'll show you." Her way ahead was blocked, but as there was only one way you could go, she decided she might as well wait behind.

Stanford joined Frank at the desk. His back hurt and he was a little tired, but he imagined he was ripping the fat guy's head off and lifted up his end just fine. They raced it down the hall, the girl breathing down his neck for some reason.

She wanted to apologize quietly over his shoulder, and waited, following close behind, for a good moment to do so. She wanted to let the guy know she wasn't the racist shithead her dad was. But the good moment didn't come. Needing to see this stop on the inspection tour, her father had gotten up and was following not too far behind.

They got to the bedroom door in record time. "Um, in here. Go in ahead, I'll show you," muttered the fucking little princess, so they had to strain to hear. Soon the money. But white people liked to squeeze everything out of you for it. *Well*, Stanford often thought, *let them have their fucking laugh till their ozone goes*. The little princess had turned away. *Mighty fine ass*, thought Frank.

She kept her head down and tried not to look at them, pointing in an empty corner that had been filled with milk crates-full of some of Rick's books till yesterday, and she wasn't sure if she'd vacuumed away enough of their impression in the carpet. She didn't want to give him an obvious clue she was hiding something; that wasn't the game. The books were out on the back porch. The crates were out in the dumpster. She'd always hated them cluttering up the place, and told Rick so, and so she expected no trouble over it later. "Y-you want something to drink," Chastity asked awkwardly of the exhausted-looking black guys after they'd set it in place, at a right angle to the other desk, "or maybe a towel or, or something...?" They weren't even listening, but Mike ran between them anyway.

"Listen, honey, we've got to get these guys out of here. I'm paying by the half-hour, so no time here for chitchat and cookies." He reached for his wallet, backing up three steps, pushing Chastity behind him.

"But they could get pneumonia going out like that! They're, they're so sweaty..."

"Chastity, that's enough! Jesus! I don't think we want to hear that!" He turned back to Stanford, and asked with a polite grin, "So, what's it come to? Fifty, right? Okay." He laid the money in Stanford's hand, which he shook, squeezing the bills between the palms. "Now, have a happy Thanksgiving. Thanks again for your help. Couldn't've done it without you. Really."

Frank waited, then watched Stanford counting his money. "Um, that was s'posed to be fifty *apiece*, boss."

"Oh, I'm sorry. You must have misheard me." He started hustling them down the hall. Stanford didn't give a damn; his was already in his pocket and he couldn't help but snicker a little at Frank. At least he'd get himself a room tonight. That memory would sustain him through March. Maybe he'd let Frank stay tonight an hour.

But Frank stopped, and faced Mike at the doorway. He tried to keep a respectable distance, just his head and pointing finger in the doorway, too much to be closed on but

not invasive. Not threatening. Just firm. You could never give white people any excuse to fuck with you. Carefully loud, he said, “Now wait just a *second*, man! *Where’s mine?*”

Mike was puzzled. “Ask him. He went ahead and took it. I don’t understand, don’t you people share?”

“*You people?* Now, *listen*, I been listening to your out-of-town Cali cracker *bullshit* for—shit, I didn’t even look at my *watch!* Stanford, it’s been way more than—” Stanford had disappeared down the stairs. Frank looked at Mike, ready to cry. That was what he wanted. Didn’t make any difference now. “You, you promised, man...listen, I don’t, I just, I don’t want any—”

“What he has is yours. Both yours. He doesn’t want to split it, you can always shoot each other over it or however you people solve these things. I don’t really care.” Her father put his hand on that doorknob like he owned the place. “Now, happy—”

“*Dammit, man, it’s cold outside!*”

“So pawn the watch. Buy some crack. I understand it makes you people feel warm for awhile.” Mike abruptly shut the door to a crack. Frank pulled his hand away. “Don’t make me call the police. Happy Thanksgiving.” After slamming the door in Frank’s face, Frank understandably screaming Fucking white lying fucking Nazi motherfucker and variations thereon for a minute or two. Finally, he gave up, just muttering Fucking liar, running downstairs and off.

“Crazy greedy niggers,” Mike chuckled. “I swear. Should be grateful I paid ‘em anything. Not like I should have to.” He looked at his black Rolex diver’s watch. “Heh heh. Whole ninety minutes went by and they didn’t even notice.” He counted his remaining cash while Barbi gave Chastity a big hug. The saline in her new tits squished against Chastity’s neck. “How are you, honey...You look so good. You lost your tan, though. Was it...depressing?”

“*What?*”

Mike was a big man in every which way. His trophy wife Barbi was two inches taller than he. But her tits were far bigger than his, so he married her. She was indeed busty, and leggy, too; an aerobicized, tanned, plastiqued lifetime member of the SoCal Blonde Club, shrinkwrapped unseasonably in a low-cut, loose, sea-colored frock which was no doubt perfect at home yesterday, Rita Hayworth gloves and fuck-me pumps quite unsuitable to a family gathering. Her breasts didn’t so much bounce as break like waves on her chest. Mike liked to joke at dinner when Chastity was home that her chest made the walls jealous. Barbi had asked for the second operation soon after. She had to keep up with her aging, failing body, which he seemed to examine more closely every day.

His previous wife had been very nice. Chastity had liked her. But then there was that skiing accident, both her perfect waxed and dermabraded legs pulverized and taking so long about healing. A man’s life is short and hard and he has no choice but to seek comfort elsewhere when one woman fails him.

Chastity tried to understand his explanation. It had sounded less plausible when he’d first heard it about her mother a few wives back. But her mother had put on fifteen pounds and he’d started to notice the wrinkles, even through the best makeup jobs. He’d told her so many times but she didn’t seem to think it was important. And don’t think his colleagues hadn’t been snickering behind his back about his hag wife, and figuring they knew now why, unlike his first wife, she’d never modelled for him. A man can only let appearances slip for so long. And that had been the process of turnover ever since.

Indulge, exhibit, rinse, repeat. Barbi knew the entire history. She'd seen the photo album he kept of every woman he'd ever photographed, and slept with. He'd shown it to her the first time they'd made love; at least that's what she'd wanted to call it. So many beautiful women, whom she'd seen before, turning up everywhere—TV, magazines, movies, anywhere they'd fit. And now she was one of these goddesses of air.

It had started out as merely a shoot for a filler pictorial, *Girls of the Library*. Barbi had only done it because she needed the money. The government of the fine Golden State, in its inevitable wisdom, had lowered property taxes by a third. As only wealthy people own land in California, that meant a lot of champagne could be bought. As everyone knew, public schools already have too little discipline; you can't coddle them, nor libraries, which nobody even likes, with such meager measures as funds.

Her salary found itself amputated by twenty percent, her hours frozen to half a week's work, for three years, by law---unless, of course, she'd speed up the attrition by seeking employment elsewhere. But she didn't want to work anywhere else but a library. It was safe, to be among all the books. She was glad to help people to find books, but to, say, work in a bookstore or some such, and sell them...she enjoyed seeing them come back, and reading them, again and again. In two years she was halfway through them, pretending to be doing far more restacking and reshelving than was normally of much interest to the staff. Two more and she'd have read the whole library. But on her pay, her apartment suddenly became very expensive. She ate less, but she wasn't the thinnest girl anyway, she reasoned. Her stomach boiled and churned, and had started waking her with unquenchable burning and cramps all through her chest. She slept all day on her days off, or just didn't get out of bed. She could barely breathe some days. Her eyes were always sleepy, and makeup was starting to not do the job. Friends commented how good she looked.

Then, on the fourth day of her new schedule, three before she decided she'd saved enough to quit, she'd skipped lunch for the overtime so that she could at least decide whether to make the insurance payment or put gas in the car. That's how she happened to be there at the checkout desk when Mike Barlow introduced himself, wearing a Miami Vice ensemble in burgundy, a ponytail, aviator sunglasses and a camera around his neck. He explained the pictorial his magazine was doing, and she was the only female librarian, it seemed, in all of Berkeley with looks who was not a lesbian. "Two in the Arts & Music section chased me out with a stapler," he chuckled. "Never heard anyone curse so quietly. Shame, though. Why is it lesbians always have big tits?"

She would have expected someone from *Courtesan* to talk that way. It didn't offend her. She was the only librarian who let patrons know it was under the counter for checkout on request. She was quite sex-positive, or at least remembered being so last time she'd had it. She even knew his name from the magazine, which she read, as she read everything. Though surprised to see he was such a fat, bearded toad, he'd still photographed, nude, some of the most famous and gorgeous women in the world; she was flattered and a bit swoony, even once he listed the breakdown of pay. "Okay, so it's: seventy-five for cheesecake---"

"Um, meaning exactly?"

"A cute shot of you looking pretty, with clothes on. Maybe some cleavage and leg. And a hundred in lingerie." That sounded nice. Seductive, pretty. She could proudly show it to her co-workers, show them this glamorous creature they never talked to. But

then it was two hundred for tits, three hundred for full nudity from behind, with her striking a “‘rear readiness’ pose, if you know what I mean.” Meaning her ass was high in the air, her face in the pillow. She’d seen those in every pictorial in every other issue she’d seen. She could still handle that. With that money she could quit sooner, look for a new job. And then it was five hundred for full frontal, and six if she lay on her back and “spread those pretty tan legs wide. May I take some test shots to show my editors?”

She stepped from behind the desk without really deciding to do so, and let him. Maybe it was the hunger. Maybe it was the fatigue. Maybe it was the way this place she loved was fucking her over when she’d done all the right things that made her let him photograph her right there in front of the checkout desk with five patrons—two of them younger than 18, Three shots. One front, one back, and two bent over front and back. She undid a bit of her blouse, and he seemed to like it.

“Thanks,” he said, shaking her hand and getting ready to go.

“Is, is that all you need? I mean—do your editors have...enough material to work with?”

He smirked. He was obviously the sort that wore mirrored sunglasses merely to hide his leer. “At *this* stage. Oh, and your phone number. Have to tell you yea or nay *somehow*, right?” She gave it to him. Her brain felt pleasantly lighter all of a sudden. She barely twitched when he patted her on the ass. “Later, babe.” She knew she should have said something but she didn’t want to fuck this up.

That night she was told it would be Tuesday, and nobody raised much of a fuss when she called in sick that day. Throughout Mike kept making the same stupid joke that his lens was fogging. But she laughed each time, exactly the same way. She complained the lights were beginning to make her feel a bit like a pork roast. “Boys like to see a girl sweaty and tired,” Mike explained, and then told her to push her face deep into the satin pillow. He nudged her legs a bit further apart. “That’s it,” he said as the flash went off between her legs. It was all fine with her. She took his every direction. She made herself clay in the hands of an expert. She’d seen how impossibly, unattainably beautiful he’d made all those women look. Just seeing them had made her skip more than one meal.

She let him take any shot he wanted, in any pose he suggested. I’m going to be a masturbatory fantasy, she licked her lips and thought. She thought of her second boyfriend’s collection he thought he’d hidden, and how angry she’d been to think when he closed his eyes during sex, he might’ve been thinking of any number of these surgically augmented, airbrush-glossed, perfect impossible concubines.

I’ll be one of those. The one they measure real girls by. The one that always makes them come. The one they really love. Their first sight of a naked girl. Perhaps their only. Millions of men and boys thinking I’m a goddess for at least a few minutes a day. She wondered if it was wrong that this thought was making her wet.

After they were done, he asked her out to dinner, looking her straight into the tits. She said yes then, and ever afterward.

It was good there were so many shots; the art department turned out her subsequent *Courtesan* of the Month layout, with the new shot for the gatefold, far ahead of schedule. It was easy with two hundred shots from which to choose. By the time she was voted *Courtesan* of the Year overwhelmingly by her devoted men and boys, Mike had divorced his wife and begun managing Barbi’s newfound assets, starting with marrying her.

And even after she'd become a trivia question, he'd remained married to her. He often took out the scrapbook of the women whom he'd photographed; this was different than his portfolio. The sorts of shots in this book, some of her, were far more intimate in tone and pose than his commercial work. Some simply didn't make it into *Courtesan*. Some, though, were never submitted, though of course some magazines certainly would have taken these. The one thing they all had in common was that he'd both photographed and fucked each of these women. There were so very many. There were quite a few he'd photographed since they'd been married. About twenty, by her count.

She thought perhaps she might be too vanilla in bed. Just looking at them she could tell they were better than her. She could see in their eyes, in the way they spread her legs, that they knew more than she. They were the real thing. She didn't see the put-on she saw in her own. The girl in her pictures; that was Mike's creation. This was a girl to want. But she'd only been pretending to be one of those women. She'd tried so hard to agree with him so long, but the sheer accumulation of time was making her notice she was a person, and Mike wasn't interested in that in a woman. Those others; they were the real thing, she was sure, boiling his cock off inside their writhing, inhuman, narcotic flesh. She could never compete. Mike surely knew the difference. It was only a matter of time till her warranty was up, and the pre-nup somehow gave him her money as well as locked down his own, so divorce would only serve her ill. And Chastity needed a mother, or at least something that looked like one, in her home.

In the ample time she wasn't working and he wasn't coming home or bothering with explanations, she looked at, meditated on, the girl from her photos, while watching Mike's Tori Welles videos (she'd noticed he had personally taken eleven of her), keeping the sound down so as not to freak out Mike's sullen daughter. She memorized the pants and groans, the filthy beggings and guttural supplications. She rewrote herself. She remembered every detail of every night before her assumption to Olympus; her cat, a TV dinner, and Falcon Crest every Friday. Not that. Never that again.

She tried to be, for him alone—and after a million that should've been easy, shouldn't it?—that burnished slut goddess, the body that stained a million sheets, incarnate in flesh. She let her mind go limp and fill with what the girl in those photos would think, or not think if need be. Mouth and hips thirsty for him; panting, fidgety skin hungry for his use; voice an opium-like purr; all that, she maintained whenever he was in sight.

And it almost started to work. He came home, for a time, more than two nights a week. When Chastity wasn't in the room, he would push her to her knees or bend her over a table, using every available orifice. She let him. She had him. He wanted her. She was safe. He was hers, not those bitches'. Even if he was fucking them some of the time, she was in his head, she knew, all the time. She was the other woman, but the one he came home to.

But once, when she could see by his crossed eyes he was on the verge of orgasm, she tried to come with him by closing her eyes and talking filthy, thinking of cameras filming them, a coliseum watching them, everyone masturbating staring at her, envying him—and then he stopped. It was not unlike stopping extremely short of hitting a brick wall at 75 mph. “Wh-what's the matter?” She checked in the mirrored wall for wrinkles.

“I do the talking. *I'm* the guy, right?”

“Of course you are. I—”

“Shut *up*,” he suggested gently. So she did.

Barbi worked on her smile and giggle when alone; light, like a soufflé, wafting across her face just like her long limbs wafted about the room, light though large, sculptural and strong, measured dance steps, not walking; eyes always turned to the floor. Mike liked that look, but he said it was because it was sultry. Funny, Barbi had always thought you read what someone was thinking in their eyes. But Barbi found herself unhappy when she let things trouble her, so she tried instead just to lose herself in her part. It wasn't even so much work. It had said right on her data sheet that she'd wanted to be an actress. “Barbi” wasn't even her real name anyway. And the more you play the part, the more you become the part, and soon it's hardly acting at all, hardly an effort.

Apart from her silly negativity about the miscarriage after he'd punched her in the stomach, they'd been blissful now for almost six years. And it wasn't so bad, becoming as depthless as her photo. Now and then, he let her almost feel human.

It was with the autohypnosis of all these years and two Valiums Barbi cascaded decoratively around Chastity's front room like some bronze, Aryan ballerina nymph, as though there was a wind machine on her at all times. She was running her hand on everything just like in her *Courtesan* of the Year video. Her father had directed it in their den. She'd heard his instruction, repeatedly, to run her hands on everything as though it's my big, big cock, honey. Just as she did now. Had a slight snip to some dignity center in Barbi's brain been slipped into the bill for the tits? Chastity sometimes envied Barbi's plastic calm. It must be very soothing to have cool breezes blowing ear to ear all the day long.

“Really nice bedroom you got back there,” her father said. “Big comfy bed.”

What was that supposed to mean? “Uh, yeah, it's, uh, a good room for the desk. I can shut the door and, um, everything, to study. Which is what I do most of the time.”

“Good girl. We know how hard it is for you to think.” She kept her mouth shut because when she got angry she stammered, and then pointed and ranted. She couldn't shut up when she was angry. So if, after provoking her to a high enough pitch, her father suddenly asked her, “So, are you living with this fucking boyfriend of yours?” she'd think saying, “Yes” would show him good. She couldn't trust her temper. Best to smile and shut up. He'd be gone soon, out of sight till Christmas, and then a long time after that.

“Yeah...This is such a, wow, nice place. “ Spinning. Twirling. Touching. She was calling her father's eyes to everything in the damn room. “So pretty. I like the purple scarves.” She hadn't gotten a chance to cleanse this room, had she? With the cold sweat she had to nonchalantly pad off at the moment, it was hard to tell. “They look nice draped across the books.” The ones on the mantelpiece, from one wall to another, each of which had Rick's name, the day he bought the book, and the fact he'd bought it or stolen it from some particular store or library, in some particular city.

The other side of the room was so much more interesting, she thought. The part with the furniture and nothing of her boyfriend's in it. “Look. We've even got a couch. Why don't you both have a seat and I'll get you some refreshments. You'd like some refreshments?” She wondered what was in that kitchen besides condiments and lentils. They had to have something. “Anything you want.”

“Long as it's in a clean glass, I don't care,” Mike said, not sitting. Barbi sat in Paul's luxurious black leather chair, sighing, obviously comfortable. But no, her father

kept pacing about the perimeter of the books, looking out the window, glancing at a title or two, looking out the window again. “How you can stand this goddamn weather is beyond me.”

“A good education’s more important than the weather, though, don’t you think?” Chastity retorted.

“UC Santa Cruz is a good school.”

Chastity coughed. “Barbi? Did you want some water or anything?”

“Oh, no, hon, thanks,” Barbi giggled. “I’m watching my weight.”

Chastity quickly left the room. She had a quick, nervous glance in the bedroom and almost screamed when she saw what she had missed, and hopefully her father had too: In the bedroom, on the floor under the desk, which had been put there before her father entered the room, right? Rick’s underwear. Soiled, too. Her dad had entered behind her, hadn’t he? They hadn’t emptied the trash either, full of Rick’s disliked pages, each one of which had “? Rick Krassner” neurotically scribbled at the bottom, not only as though someone might pirate his precious work, but in addition that even a single page would be booty enough.

She ground the underwear and pages deep in the garbage with her fist, after putting as many Krassner pages on top as she could crumple in under thirty seconds. She pretended it was Rick’s stupid longboned face, smirking with those distracting dimples, telling her they’d never notice, that everything would be all right.

She went to the kitchen and scrubbed her hand in Comet. She still hadn’t heard her father’s elephantine pacing cease. Creak and creak went the floor back there in the biggest, most echoey room of the house, back and forth, echoing, just to annoy her. Her father could be rifling through one book after another, just so he could tell her precisely how many times he’d seen “Rick Krassner” in them. He’d never believe she’d borrow so many books. Not that she wouldn’t. She decided she’d better bring back something to drink. And some strychnine for herself.

He was still pacing about like a heffalump when she returned, holding forth at great volume on the million indignities heaped upon African-Americans throughout the long history of this nation, excoriating the injustice thereof, and preaching, as though touched by holy fire, the holy duty of all Americans from sea to shining sea to sacrifice their comfort, their station, their lives, if need be, to wipe out poverty and racism forever.

No, just kidding.

“I tell ya, Barbi, it’s a good thing they left when they did. I saw how those apes were eyeing Chastity.”

“Oh, I don’t really think they were—”

“That one couldn’t take his eyes off her ass. I watched.” As she entered with the tray of Kool-Aid, her father exhaled several gallons of cheap cigar smoke in her face. “Oh, sorry, hon.” He took the tray and set it down, while she had her coughing fit. He took his glass, as did Barbi. He took a sip without even bothering to thank her. She sat next to Barbi, gasping her lungs back to inflation, fireworks going off in her eyes from oxygen deprivation. She swallowed her glassful in one swallow. Mike went on. “Don’t blame you for coughing. I can still smell ‘em too. That black smell. Somewhere between fungus and sewage, I always thought. Funny, they were standing in the rain when we picked ‘em up. You’d think the rain’d wash that stink away. Just something about the color brown, I guess.” He chuckled. Oh, did he ever. “You might wanna spray your

bedroom with something, whatever you use after the fag's been walking around it or been in the kitchen. Bad enough we have to wait till we pass a filling station to use the restroom."

"Excuse me?" Chastity croaked.

"Well, you spray the place with something, right? You want AIDS? I don't. How would I explain that to my bosses, huh?"

"Paul does *not* have AIDS."

"He's a fag, isn't he?" Mike asked again.

"That doesn't mean anything! Why do I even have to be talking about--"

"He *is*, right?" he asked more suspiciously.

She almost giggled at his paranoia. "I wouldn't use that word, but—"

"He'd *better* be," Mike said, then continued: "So he's a fag."

"Yes..."

"So all I can say is this better not be his glass." Then, chuckling again with a refreshed throat, her dad sat down, finally, on Rick's favorite chair, and crushed it. The blue Kool-Aid spilled all over Mike, who quickly tried to wipe it off, not sure if he had any open wounds. Cockroaches scattered from the ragbag of stuffing, dust, and rotten boards, off to the safety of the walls. She ran and brought him a towel.

She'd asked Rick many times to remove that ratty chair. You had to dust yourself off after sitting in it. But Rick felt comfortable in no other chair so much as this. It had been the chair his father had killed himself in. This was the sort of emotionally sensitive issue Chastity knew would hurt Rick, or at least he could fairly claim she had done so, if she pushed him about how much she hated that stinking, diseased, festering overstuffed chair. And now it was gone. A great deal of her housekeeping issues were being resolved quite handily by this visit. She was just putting the blue-stained towel in the sink to soak. Her father threw her out so he could rinse the rest from his neck and arms. But his shirt was totally ruined, and she'd seen him fall on his ass. There was an up side to everything, she thought with a little glow.

"Jesus Christ!" He shouted when he came out. "I hope *my* money didn't buy that."

"Are you, uh, okay?"

"If you weren't my daughter, I could sue you," he chuckled in that sinister tone that made her queasy. He sat next to Barbi on the couch, and, pointing at her, "Guess this one's safe, seeing as her weight doesn't seem to have collapsed it."

Barbi suppressed a murderous urge, giggled, and patted her husband on the shoulder, saying, "You."

"Oh, well," she chuckled, throwing her hands up, genuinely happy about how it had all turned out. The truth of what happened would be an unimpeachable excuse to give Rick when he angrily complained how much he missed his chair. "It was just an old thing we found in an alleyway anyway." She dragged the debris to an obscure corner of the adjacent sun room, to be thrown in the dumpster by Rick later. "No trouble at all."

"With a thousand bucks a month from me, I don't expect you to be picking furniture out of the garbage!"

"Well, rent's a lot!" she lied. "A thousand dollars doesn't go so far in Chicago."

"Why? What are you doing besides studying? 'Nothing' is what every one of your letters says."

“I, uh—no. That’s not true. I have a boyfriend. You know that.”

“Okay, so you go out sometimes.” Though they never did. “Fine. So? Boyfriends pay. Doesn’t count. And what are you doing wasting my money living in niggertown for?”

“Will you please stop say--”

“City near as big as LA and this was the best you could find? Doesn’t look high rent to me. And school’s on the other side of town.”

“I like this place,” Chastity muttered.

“It’s just not a very safe neighborhood, hon,” Barbi helpfully added.

“It’s *nice* and *big* and *beautiful*, and, and the *people* who *live* around here have never done *anything* to us! *Not once!* They even say ‘hi’ to us on the street! And look how big these rooms are! Look at how high the ceilings are! Do you know how *much* it would cost if we were in a nicer neighborhood?”

“Well, it’s certainly a lovely place, Chassy. How much did you say you were paying here?” Barbi asked.

“Uh--Seven hundred.”

“I thought you said it was eight,” her father observed. “Didn’t you?”

“Did I?” Chastity tried to recall the arbitrary figure she’d given them, without thinking, three or four months ago.

“And how much do you pay out of that?” her father asked. “I mean, you’ve got roommates. I doubt you each pay—what was it, six hundred?”

“Eight hundred,” she hoped she recalled properly. “I pay one fourth.”

“But there’s two people in each room—except yours, of course,” he chuckled.

“They’re just boyfriends. They don’t pay.”

“How very modern. So. What are you doing with the rest of my money?”

“Food? Clothes? Other bills? What do you think I buy art materials with? Ohh...Would you like a beer?” She was sure she saw one in the back of the fridge. He nodded, and she went and got it. “It’s one of Paul’s, but I don’t think he’ll mind.”

He handed it back and wiped his hands hard on his pants. “That’s okay.”

“Uh...it isn’t open. His lips were never even on it, Dad...”

“His hands were. Better safe than sorry.” He let out a big foghorn fart. “Heh. Excuse me...Y’know, had a guy like that in my unit in ‘Nam. Saved my life three times. Really thought he had us fooled, always offering to ‘cover our rears.’ Then I saw that look he gave me in the foxhole. Heh. Never saw me put the barrel to his head.” He guzzled his beer. Chastity glared at him. “Hey, don’t give me that look. Probably a mercy killing, way things turned out. I mean, it was quicker than coughing and wheezing to death in a hospital bed ten years after he got home, right?” Then she thought of Paul, who she knew rarely used protection. She thought of him, dried out from coughing and seeing things, in that bed, and didn’t want to. “Don’t really have anything against ‘em.” He got up, patted Chastity on the shoulder, adding, “I mean, they might be perverts, but at least they won’t fuck my daughter.”

Chastity didn’t need one more reason to feel sick. “Please. Stop talking like that in my house.”

“*Who* pays?”



As soon as they left, it began to sleet, then hail, and then loose, wet but thick and white snow began to fall. Not noticing this through the window at her back, Chastity was on the phone immediately to her boyfriend's pot dealer. "Is he still there?"

"Well, he isn't supposed to come home yet, is he?" Zeke asked with a typically dumb chuckle. He gave Rick the phone, which was good. She hated him and a hippie wouldn't understand why she shouted at Rick now, "*Why aren't you at work?*"

"I took a sick day," Rick said in a wavy voice.

"*Another one? Don't you care if you're employed?*"

"I've been working there for two years. It's paid. They won't care anyway... Thanksgiving's tomorrow. Listen--Have your folks seen the place? Are they gone? Can I sleep in a bed now?"

"No. Stay."

"Christ, Chastity! How long am I going to have to stay out of my own house?"

"*I'm coming there.*"

"Huh?"

"I need to be someplace else right now."

The snow was in drifts by the time Chastity burst through the stupidly unlocked door, just as Zeke was sharing with Rick the first blue sunshine in Chicago in almost three years, and insisted on having some. She kissed Rick, gasping, dehydrating and long, while both had the blotters in their mouths.

As if the stink of patchouli she hadn't any choice but to breathe wasn't enough to put up with, Zeke ruined it by saying "Whoaa!" But the fact he was there meant nothing to her; she only paused her molestation when Rick asked her to, as politely and gracefully as he could. And she did, for about one minute, then was crawling all over him again. Zeke didn't seem to mind this going on in his living room, but that was exactly why Rick was bothered.

Chastity just laughed. "I'm, um, sorry." She'd given Rick a sensible peck on the lips, then laid the tip of her finger across them. "I just really missed you." She kept her mouth shut till she could decide what to do with it.

Just as the acid began to hit, two girls came over to buy some weed from Zeke. Chastity asked Rick, not exactly quietly, but not exactly accusingly either, if he wanted to fondle their asses. He replied uncomfortably, "Supposing you were dead or something, uh, I guess."

"What if I gave you permission?" Her hand ran up his thigh and rested on his crotch before she'd even noticed the fingers walk there. Anyone could've seen, had they been looking in that direction, rather than staring pensively at Zeke as he counted out their purchase."What if you and Zeke fucked them while I watched? Couple of cute, springy hippie girls. I'm sure they'd go for it," she said, then pictured it. "Mm."

"Will you keep your voice down?" he hissed. "They'll hear you."

"So?" she smirked, licking her lips. "I want them to."

"Look, will you *stop*? You've made your point. For *months* now. I don't *want* to sleep with anyone else and I *didn't*. Christ, *when* will you—"

"I *want* to watch," she said, licking his ear. "If you don't fuck them *I* will..." She giggled, and drew her legs tight like they might melt off if she didn't. "I'm sorry...heh. I get, uh, really horny when I fry. I've had a very stressful day, sweetie. Now I have to fuck someone, or I'll explode. Right in front of everyone." But she didn't.

Warm chemical tropic currents pulsed through her cunt. She sat on Rick's lap and couldn't stop herself grinding. He was good and stiff but trying very hard not to enjoy herself, so she'd stop. Why would you repress yourself while tripping? Why hold back when her parents weren't in sight? "Let's ask them." She meant it. Rick grew very afraid one might come over and say hello. The idea was starting to appeal to him, the more she repeated it in that enthusiastic growl. "C'mon. Don't bullshit *me*. What guy doesn't dream of that?"

But soon they left, and the only sound was R.E.M. jangling in the air, which was soupy with tobacco & pot smoke and incense so thick it was staining their clothes. Zeke refused to open the windows, for fear of his downstairs landlord's inquisitive nose.

She wanted to go outside, but it was freezing cold and surely everyone could see they were on a highly illegal substance against that iridescent, diamond snow blinding her through the deep tobacco tint of the window.

On hearing her unknowingly think all this out loud, Zeke had an idea. In exchange for remission of a rather extravagant hashish debt, Zeke had the key and lifetime use of the Jacuzzi rooms of a luxury apartment building only three blocks closer to the lake. Chastity jumped up and demanded they go right away. Rick, as usual, didn't want to move, and she could see his inward smirk at California girls and hot tubs. How he could so continually mock her home state without ever having been there never ceased to gall her. He believed every one of the negative stereotypes promulgated by the fucking media about Californian laziness, stupidity, and lack of taste or common sense, and snickered them at her often. True, the sources of the media stereotypes were in California, but you'd think he'd have at least been polite and only said that shit behind her back, being her goddamn boyfriend and all.

She couldn't take any more. "How dare you? You're lucky I'm still with you!" she screamed at Rick, a nanosecond afterward realizing he hadn't actually opened his mouth at all. But it certainly made him get up, put on his coat, and follow her out that door into the snow.

It wasn't that she was a Californian. She didn't go moist at the mere thought of a hot tub. No, what made her particularly sensitive to the icy draft between her legs as they ran down the street was the thought of the two young, naked men shortly to share the tub with her. Especially since, whether Rick would admit it or not, he'd fucked around on her, and fair is fair, especially since he'd see who it was with and what was done, which was more than he'd even ever admitted to her. He'd be dragged along, made to watch, then she'd do the same with him, and more, so Zeke could see who was still her selection. And it would be fun. And the big dazed smile on her face the next day at Thanksgiving dinner would definitely help it all go more easily.

Perhaps both at once, she contemplated on the way. She definitely didn't intend to give Zeke more than her mouth. That was different; her cunt was for Rick and her alone. It was personal. And she hated condoms, despite the pill's nauseas and the thirteen prescriptions that hadn't improved this problem. Rick was safe. Zeke was a Deadhead.

And how could Rick complain or prevent her from getting this, as she fucked him violently while watching another man come in her mouth, fucking, sucking, a writhy flesh engine between their cocks. She felt loose beyond loose, supple, hot, edgeless; wanting to fuck, to be a link in a thick chain of flesh, like a piston in a machine...She was glad she was on acid. Otherwise she'd be thinking sensibly and see how ridiculous

the thought was. Otherwise she might have been hearing her father whisper “Whore” in her head.

Well, okay, she thought, surprised at her smile, and that peculiar warm, languid purr between her legs. *If you say so*.

Rick had been raised more traditionally than she; he thought of oral sex as far more intimate than she did. It made him deliriously happy, if baffled, that she considered it only a little more intimate than a goodnight kiss. And he knew she always swallowed. So, seeing she could just as easily do that with any other man, maybe he'd feel as jealous, lost, and worthless for at least a second as she'd felt till she saw him at the airport, and remember just how badly he'd missed her, and wonder if he'd have to miss her forever after this. And once he was scared enough she would turn and push the stinking hippie aside to watch as she fucked Rick harder than he'd ever been fucked before, and she'd shout so many times that she loved him and only him till the very deaths of the gods themselves. And then, maybe, she'd finally come.

They rushed inside from the cold. Nobody said a thing as they took off their clothes, so as to look sophisticated about what they were all doubtless thinking. and the tub filled with bubbles and steam, and a few minutes later, water.

The tub was surprisingly large, in a room done up in nineteen-thirties checkerboard style, the sort of bath Lupe Velez might rather have died in. It was set in Roman-cut black marble, polished like a mirror, in which she could see her little tawny body reflected in every facet, and the wanting eyes of both men watching her, each thinking it was her that was being gotten.

She sprung in first, leaving her bone, ruby and emerald necklace around her neck, and sat so she could get a good look at both their cocks before they could hide them in the water. Rick's was longer. She wondered if they were comparing, as girls would their tits. She wondered if they were even a little curious, as girls could be sometimes. She was certainly curious to see if they would look as good fucking in real life as in her head.

She liked the dumb Roger Daltrey way Zeke was smiling. She envisioned him as the bottom already anyway. He was even too dumb to know why she was smirking back. She wanted to see his face rubbing, helpless, against the tile while Rick fucked him, while she sucked him. She had to try to stop licking her lips so continuously; that couldn't look very subtle.

Rick got in like lightning. much quicker than Zeke, who was still staring straight into her eyes as Rick positioned himself a territorial two inches next to her.

Zeke got in. Rick's hand immediately hid his respective valuables. What could he be afraid of? Is he afraid Zeke will notice his cock is bigger? His other arm, yes, felt nice when around her shoulders, but not right now. The muscles in her hips were starting to seize and hurt with impatience. She wondered if acid might make him agreeable if she just asked...No, no, original plan. *Priorities. Revenge first, pleasure later*.

They sat in a grade-school dance sort of silence for a while, Chastity's head filling with scores of increasingly unspeakable ideas. Chastity wanted to make the price of getting a piece of her to suck him. Deadheads could be talked into all sorts of things in the name of openness. She wanted to see that stupid hippie get on his knees in front of her brilliant boyfriend, take that already erect (she could see Rick hiding in his hands) cock of her boyfriend's in his stupid mouth, and suck it because that was his place in the order of things.

I couldn't be that cruel. I'd start sucking Zeke halfway through, before Rick came. It takes him a while. Or I could start sucking Zeke right now, just lean forward and slide it right down my throat right in front of him. That would do the trick all by itself.

And if Rick raised a fuss, she'd threaten to leave him, and then he'd stand up and do as he was told. After all, he'd have loved to see her do these things with a woman, would he not? Despite what he fucking said. He'd benefit from this lesson. After this, nothing would crack their love. Unless she should change her mind.

But Rick only sat there sulking unimaginationally, the stupid hippie kept leering at Chastity's breasts, or where they would have been, while she noticed she'd been masturbating, underwater, with both hands for quite some time. Rick at least looked as uncomfortable as she wanted to make him feel when she got him home, but now is not the time--- "This water is really too hot," Rick said instead of whatever he was really thinking.

All sat frozen just the same. She couldn't bring herself to swim across and do to Zeke all the filthy things she'd thought up. So she sighed, climbed on her boyfriend and fucked him right there, looking at the ceiling or back at Zeke, attempting to beckon him to take what she'd been too chickenshit to offer.

She arched her pumping ass backward in Zeke's face as blatantly as she could. She wanted to be full of cocks, transfixed on them. But the stupid hippie was happy to just sit there and watch. Of course, he'd taken 1500 mikes; god knew what Zeke was really seeing.

And it didn't even feel filthy.

Chastity told him all that she'd planned, later, after they dried off and rode the train home, and was a bit insulted at how lightly Rick took it. He laughed. "It's not funny! You really embarrassed me, you know. You have to learn to be more social."

"I can't *believe* you did that in front of him..."

"Why? Ashamed? Funny, you came anyway."

"You didn't really want to do *all that stuff*, now..."

"Why *not*? Why not do *anything*? Everything's going to die. And I'm still...why won't you just say it?"

"I *didn't*."

"What? Admit cheating on me?"

"Cheat on you in the *first* place."

Chastity, sitting straight, buried her face in her hands and spoke between her palms. Actually, she only thought so. Rick kept asking her for the next ten minutes why she was moving her lips without talking, but she was hallucinating that he'd shut up for once.

The more she feared her father, the more the white-hot need to fuck everyone overwhelmed her, to be the scandal he obviously enjoyed thinking she was. But she didn't feel safer walking down the street with Rick than she would have carrying five hundred in cash in her teeth strolling down the street with a blinking green neon sign on her back reading "Rape me." The occasion rarely arose, though; unfortunately she'd fallen in love with a man who did not understand fun could be had outside the house.

Truth be told, he wasn't much most defined as a "boyfriend." He spent little on her, only got her gifts around holidays or when she was angry but wouldn't tell him why. He never travelled. He wrote her no poems. He didn't even seem to care how she dressed,

or looked. He said she was beautiful, but perhaps any woman who slept with him became so in his mind. But he was a good fuck, beyond his accidental anatomical advantage. Sex with Rick was so pleurably logical. He knew sucking upon her clitoris, drawing it out between his lips, and licking with the very tip in successively faster upward strokes lighter than a feather for exactly seventeen minutes would bring her to the degree of wet necessary for her to enjoy fucking for more than ten minutes, before she went dry and needed more licking. He'd learnt to alternate.

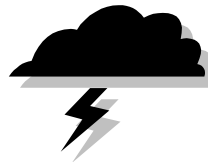
As he demonstrated when they got home. The house was empty, and they fucked in every room. She came upon the bathroom sink and he in the art room, her bent over the art table, begging her cunt to be smoothed and polished, smearing a charcoal drawing she wasn't too keen on anyway all to murky ruin.

Shame he'd never know what she'd had in mind for him today, had he gotten back ten minutes ago. Just to get properly calmed for the day's stress. And she'd liked the idea of standing before her father, of sitting next to him with Rick's come inside her. She fidgeted on the couch, considering the brush again but put it down, already afraid she had a splinter and wondering how she'd ever explain that to her gynecologist. She supposed she ought to start wearing something. Her best friend Jenifer would be arriving soon.

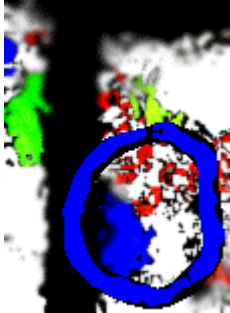
Chastity would have art on her mind later, but she was horny right now, and worse, the acid had barely worn off in her sleep. The room was still echoing in her eyes. She needed to burn the rest of it out to avoid an inconvenient psychotic episode in front of her father. She needed to explode. She supposed now they might have picked up something on their way out in the car. But he should have thought to point that out. He was so undependable. He meant well; he tried; but he failed. Rick Krassner failed at everything. Why exactly did she love him?

Nobody was home. She could scream to her heart's content, and as many times as she liked, "WHERE IS THAT ASSHOLE?"

And so she did. And now, she'd be facing the familial perils awaiting her with a croaky voice. Which only goes to show.



chapter two.

THE PATCHWORK CAR

**Only now, when well out of the store
and flinching in the freezing rain, did Rick**

begin to wake up, and realize she'd rushed him out the door so fast he'd forgotten his fucking cigarettes.. It was probably for the best. They'd have been soaked, like his skin; his heavy wool Russian Army coat was no defense against a freezing Chicago autumn rain like this. Only sublimating his fury at her was giving his legs the energy to walk straight right now; he couldn't even look up. When he did, a merciless cascade of icy pins pelted his face. As distraction, he thought of the hot shower she would have to let him take, if only because she'd have to let him shave, and otherwise look presentable. If they were late now, it was definitely her fault, and he didn't expect to hear any crap from her about it.

She'd woken him up by rolling him off the mattress onto the floor. Good thing that was only a fall of four inches. She made him dress and stumble outside without even a fucking shower (without which he could barely think in the morning). A jolt of nicotine would keep him from involuntarily pitching over on the sidewalk right now. Already he felt his eyes drifting shut as he walked down the street, and dreaming in spatters while walking. He fought it. Howard, even in bad weather, was no place for carelessness.

He wanted to go back to the store and buy a pack, but then he'd have to walk back out into this slush and rain. Besides, he'd spent all twenty dollars left in his wallet on the wine and cheese, safe and dry in its plastic bag, meant to impress her parents. Californians, claimed Chastity, were funny about such things, "and not ha-ha," and she urged him to be careful about what he bought. He'd barely had his eyes open when reaching for whatever was between ten and fifteen dollars on the shelf, and god only knew what sort of cheese he'd bought. Not that he was about to look inside to check. It might give him some insane compulsion to go back. And if she'd wanted it done right, why had she sent *him* out?

He wouldn't have known good wine from lighter fluid, and he doubted a clerk at a wino's grocery off Howard would either. Was this just a Californian's presumption all right-thinking people knew about wine & cheese from birth, or were her parents to sample the inferior items, Chastity hoping homesickness would impel them home all the

sooner? Whatever the surrounding circumstances she planned, it was obvious he'd been sent for the items so she could blame him for the choice. Not to his face, but to her parents, as a convenience. No doubt she assumed they'd mock anything she brought. At least if he was the buyer, she could explain that he simply wasn't Californian, so what could one expect?

At least there would be a lot of booze about at this party, making them tipsy, friendly, astigmatic and drowsy. Her family drank like the first peasants in the Czar's cellar. He'd already met the aunt who was throwing this Thanksgiving reunion. She was an accountant, and worse, liked to talk about it. Well, actually, she didn't like to talk about anything; that was her only subject when she did.

Rick had been there twice before. On Easter there'd been a decent, if flavorless, broiled chicken dinner, and a great deal of Napa Valley Chardonnay. They'd retired to the living room, which, like the rest of the house, was a sterile, flat shade of white with a plain powder-blue carpet, with the quiet of a widow whose husband had done all the talking, a thick silence you could roll and wad in your fingers; words few, white against white, that sucked the blood right out of your brain trying to listen.

Rick didn't normally drink, and so was unprepared for the wine's conspiracy with the first filling meal he'd had in weeks. A moment of silence came where he assumed some response was expected. Older people liked affirmative responses, usually, so he stuck out his finger with a blank, non-threatening smile, and managed to say, "Well, I think you're—" before dozing off in mid-sentence.

Chastity just froze. It took her aunt twenty seconds to lean over and ask, "Uh...what is it that he thinks I am, honey? I must not be hearing so well?" When she whacked Rick awake, she asked that he repeat it, but he decided it wasn't really worth going into. They'd only been going out a few weeks, and had only made love the first time the Thursday before. He was terrified as they said their goodbyes from the car. He was mortified, sure now he'd only momentarily lucked out, to be involved with so beautiful a woman as this, sure she'd be completely silent all the way from Lake Forest to the city, then ask to be dropped off at her house and he'd never hear from her again. Which would only prove how right his last girlfriend had been to dump him only three months before.

Instead she spread a fishnetted leg of the shapeliest sort across the dashboard where he couldn't help but stare at it, and, giggling, nearly got them killed. She decided to distract his driving with fellatio once inside the city limits, especially when she saw how the suggestion terrified him and how strenuously he objected to it. But she didn't care if it was sensible; she wasn't driving. "It's a race. You get us home and parked, or I make you, mm...heh. You've come unzipped, sir." and then it would have been impolite for her to have said more, by most rules of etiquette. Of course he knew how dangerous it was, but it wasn't the sort of thing you told a girl to stop once she had a mind to do it. Thank god he'd come before getting off Lake Shore Drive. That was so irresponsible of her, he chided later. Couldn't she see he was drunk? And did he bother to think about that much longer?

Christ, he would never get this lucky again.

The more frightened she got of her family, the more she fucked him. Every time there was another of their vaguely foreboding and suspicious phone calls (which he wasn't allowed to answer, now that she lived there and he wasn't supposed to be, though

he did indeed answer it when she wasn't around), or a letter, she would pace around, worried, then turn when he asked what was wrong and commit some newly exhilarating obscene act upon his body. He had no idea why she liked fucking as much as she did, though he certainly didn't question her nymphomania so long as he benefitted. Certainly, everyone did to some degree or another, but she took an unusually active and almost theoretical interest in it, and seemed at times to be using him as an experimental subject. Once he'd remarked on this; she just giggled, took his cock in her hand and said, "Well, thank goodness I've so much material to work with." He thought it a sick irony this sort of compliment should make him so uncomfortable. Her comfort with it, her liking of every taste and feel of it, and her absolute lack of compunction about telling him so and why in clinical detail; why should this bother him? He had no idea and yet it did. Perhaps it seemed suspicious because every other woman these days seemed to speak only of the evil of the penis, and Chastity was merely trying to lull him into a sense of complacency before taking out the pruning shears from under the bed and paying him back for the oppression she let him inflict on her.

When he thought about it, slogging through the freezing rain was a small price to pay to keep her with him, as seemed almost everything demanded of him, when he thought of it enough. He didn't even mind her particularly odder quirks, like gasping how her father would kill her if he saw this right now every time she came. At least, he'd grown accustomed to tuning it out.

She seemed to have a rush of fear about her parents every other hour, the preparations of the past week having been particularly grueling. Her worries about whether she'd left his letters, with his return address, back in which drawer in California alone had resulted in bite marks that took quite awhile to heal, and forced him to sit in a most peculiar way for a couple of weeks, to the giggles of strangers in the park at lunchtime.

And only now did it occur to him: He had a car.

Why hadn't he driven to get this crap?

No, no; No matter. The fact that he'd done it on foot and consequently suffered such a miserable soaking would only prove further his degree of devotion. She couldn't possibly question his choice of wine and cheese *then*. Yes, that would be great solace when pneumonia drowned him over the next three weeks.

"Fucking, fucking rain! Fucking stupid fucking asshole fucking Chastity, goddamnit...! Urgh." She had to appreciate this. Just one more humiliation he'd put up with like a good boyfriend. The plastic grocery bags were heavy and had cut off circulation in his ungloved fingers. But *never mind*, he told himself, it would all be worth it; he would be rewarded in the end. Suffering assures reward. It made you a better person, anyway, even if it didn't. Or so those who caused it would tell you.

That was about when he noticed the car stopping on the street alongside him, and realized he'd noticed it following him the whole length of the street, to and from the door, though hadn't thought much on it till now when it was time to cross the intersection, and it looked to be blocking his path. It sat idling. He could smell its Auschwitz gout of exhaust from the sidewalk. The car was old, big, and seemed American generally, but each plate of the skin seemed to have come from different models and makes, of different colors, none fitting precisely, some overlapping, some even sloppily bolted and barred together. The windows looked not merely tinted, but smoked to full opacity. Fumes

streamed visibly from every seam in the chassis, and it had two-foot fins sharp as butcher knives. It was an angry-looking car indeed.

Well, the light was his; the car had to stay put, even if in this rain no cop could see its license plate unless he was a foot behind it, or what it did. He began to cross.

It revved as he approached its path. He stopped. It stopped. He began walking again. It revved again, harder, meaner. He stopped. He felt a sweat breaking. Jesus, what was this, *the Godfather*? Who'd want to kill him? What had he ever done to anyone, that he should be so scared as this? He crossed, and prepared to enter the alleyway which led, about a block or so, to the back entrance of his building. Nobody ran him over. What a paranoid fool he could be sometimes.

The Patchwork Car backed up, loudly.

He almost tripped walking toward the entrance. The car moved back a foot. He took another. It rolled another. Then he entered the alley, and the car began a rattling half a three-point turn. He wanted to just keep walking, but turned to look. Sure enough, the Patchwork Car was plugging up the entrance. It wheezed, rattled, looking like it was tense for some cue, like it might explode if it sat still too long, aimed like a waiting weapon at whatever was in his path, which included him. And Rick thought, *I don't care how paranoid I look. I should drop the bags and run right now, fast as I can.* He had always been fast, of necessity with the bullies of his childhood. He was nimble when he tried. Jump right on the hood and bound to the sidewalk, onto which the unwieldy piece of American junk could never follow him.

This Rick did not do, because unlike in the movies, Rick knew he'd fuck it up at the most crucial moment and be instantly killed, and if not that, injured so badly he'd wish for the rest of his crippled life he had been. He knew himself in a crisis. It wasn't incompetence or stupidity that made him always screw up exactly when he oughtn't; it was curiosity. Nothing's worth writing about if it goes well.

He was still staring at the car, wondering what to do, when it honked. He jumped a foot and a half into the air and almost slipped and fell on his ass when he came down. Who was inside? A friend playing a joke on him? *What friends?* "Ha," he waved hello, clinging to relief. *See, I know you too. Nice joke. A real knee-slapper.* The car revved impatiently and honked once more. Ah; it was no one he knew, just probably some asshole with a garage in this alleyway who wanted Rick to get out of his way. Rick breathed a truly relieved chuckle, waved again to show he understood and was sorry for being such a stupid, sad paranoid bastard as always. Such ego, really, to think anyone would consider him worthy of killing. So he turned and rushed his merry way home.

He suddenly found himself coughing on its fumes. It followed, *putta-putta-putta*, too close behind him, rumbling like some dinosaur's ghost spitting the poisons of its death at the living, its final revenge on the eggsucking mammals.

This guy was really being a prick about it. As though Rick didn't want to be out of his way and out of the rain as soon as possible. *Well; lousy car, but plenty of money to put it in a garage. I think you can wait. I've as much right to leisurely stroll through this alley as you have to drive through it, tasteless yuppie scum.* So he slowed down. Of course, he was soaking, freezing, and very late getting back, but there was no practicality to Rick when he had to make a point.

The car lurched forward three more feet. He jumped ahead an equal distance. And it kept lurching forward, every four steps he made. Finally Rick couldn't stand this

anymore. He hated these imperious pricks who thought themselves God Almighty just because their car could crush you. He'd had enough of this pest. He turned abruptly, slapped both palms flat upon the hood, and shouted at the black windshield, "*WHAT? Do you want to watch me run? WHAT?*" Good; that felt good. Assertive, firm, just like a real man, who'd lived in Chicago all his life, would've said it. Hopefully the driver was fooled as much as he. "Asshole!" He pounded his fist on the hood to punctuate, just so he'd know this was no wuss he was dealing with. "What if I had a *heart condition* or something?"

The car went silent. "*Thank you...*" and Rick proceeded on his way. Then one honk, then another, then a series, like a flock of bronchitic geese. It took off after him and didn't care how many dumpsters it hit. Rick proceeded to run like hell.

It rains all the time in Chicago, except when it snows. Chicago asphalt is the slick, black glop variety, which becomes frictionless with enough water. This was why Rick slipped more violently the faster he ran. He bounced his outstretched arm off the walls to keep himself vertical. He thought maybe now might be a good time to ask God for help, but in the religion of Rick's upbringing which he'd utterly abandoned till just this second, he had to bend his knees first. Which were, coincidentally, the first thing to hit the ground when he fell. But all he could yelp out was "*Shit!*" a few times.

Rick spun a bit as he fell. The car stopped an inch from his nose, the bumper nudging his shoulder. It waited for him to get up.

He purposely slipped a few times struggling up against the bumper, to buy some minutes, thinking if he had long enough, to squint tightly enough, he'd see someone indentifiable through that slick, streaming smoke-black windshield. No tint could be completely opaque. But he could barely see the end of his nose for the rain in his eyes. He hadn't noticed, either, that his glasses had slipped off.

Keeping the goods he'd bought protected off the ground, and therefore climbing to his feet with just the one hand, provided a good dumbfuck excuse to stumble again a couple more times plausibly, so he could judge how far down his back door was. But nearsighted as he was in the already impossible visibility, it could have been two or twenty for all he knew.

The car revved a bit, and jerked forward an inch to remind him it didn't have to wait. He couldn't see a plate from the front, nothing to tell the cops. He needed a face at least. But nothing. He took the deep breath one always heard was so crucial at moments like this. It made him no calmer.

Clutching the groceries tight to his chest he jumped up suddenly fast as hell, as the car roared to accelerating life behind him, dumpsters tearing bits of plate off its doors. It jerked forward as far as it could, when a straight path to him opened; mostly there were too many garbage cans to negotiate past. Thanks to his present blindness he tripped over a few himself, but sprang most awkwardly back into step with all the grace of panic. It kept speeding up threateningly, trying to make him overshoot his door; it wanted to shear off a leg or something for the trouble it'd already invested.

But then there it was, the iron-barred gateway to his back stairs with its cruel curved crown of spikes, and as usual the idiot garbagemen had left the dumpster at an angle, just in front. He leapt behind, and the car tore, *ke-ranngggg!!!* off the heavy steel tank, speeding off confused as Wile E. Coyote toward the opposite wall. With blades of firework sparks you could see even through the torrent and the screech of a thousand

fingernails on slate, it lost one of its fins and its muffler hung like a violently descended uterus and stopped several yards ahead, black slick smoke coughing from its every gouge and wound.

“*MEEP-FUCKING-MEEP!*” he ought not to have gloated at it, and especially not done that thing with his finger, because then it remembered it could back up, which it began to, straight toward the little corner that had been safe when the car was going in the previous direction.

The back window wasn't smoked. It was shadowy and he couldn't make out a face, but he could tell its driver had very long hair. Who did he know who had long hair? Nearly everyone but most of the women. The keys had to be in *this* pocket. They *must* be in one. “*Fuck. Fuck...*” But he got them and ducked behind the gate just in time, as the Patchwork Car ground itself against the bars he'd just been up against. The window buzzed down. This was it. Some gang had mistaken him for someone else and now he'd be shot for reasons no one, least of all he, would ever understand, all because of wine and cheese. Damn Chastity. This was all her fault. He'd haunt her, that's what he'd do. Let's see her have sex with someone after him *then*.

Through the crack emerged a woman's hand, with closely-trimmed nails painted burning violet, a profusion of gold and silver bracelets from various ancient deserty sorts of places, and the cuff of a leather sleeve; and it hurled a chunk of bluish-grey granite wrapped with typing paper and a red rubber band, which hit him in the elbow even though he could have been running up the stairs. Yet he'd stood there and watched all this instead.

It hurt worse in the cold and wet than it might've. He'd never broken a bone in his life. Would he recognize that sort of pain? Well, he'd know for sure once it popped through the skin. At least he still hadn't dropped the bottles.

It pulled forward, then backed up rapidly whence it had come, disappearing in the aerial flood, leaving a wake of poisonous petrol smoke choking the whole length of the alleyway.

He pulled the note off the rock, the rubber band snapping him in the eye:



It seemed familiar, as a movie cliché does. He crumpled it into the tiniest little ball he could and tossed it away. The rock, though, might make a good paperweight, and at least it and the probable green stick fracture would excuse his lateness. Too bad it hadn't run over a toe or two; then he could escape this day entirely. And Chastity would

have to stay home to attend to her injured boyfriend, and she'd escape it too. That'd keep them off her back and her on it.



So Rick finally made it up the stairs. Chastity threw open the door the second the landing creaked. She'd thought she'd heard a weasel rustling at the door, though she'd no idea they were so common in this part of the country. Rage was smeared all over her face. Rick couldn't help noticing she still was wearing nothing. She shut the door.

He set the pristine bottles safely on the kitchen table with no small pride while his numbing arm could still, shakily, grip. "How the *fuck* did *this cheese* get *squashed* like this?" was all she could say. He sat. It would be a few minutes. "You didn't get what I told you!"

"You didn't tell me exactly what to get."

"No, no I didn't! You're right! You stomped *out* first! *Cheap* wine. Of course. They'll just spit it right back in our faces! You *asshole!*"

"That's all they have around here."

"*You mean you didn't eve leave the neighborhood? You lazy fucking asshole! What the fuck took you so long? ASSHOLE! ASSHOLE!*"

"No, sweetheart, it's the *front* of me you're talking to. I do know it's hard to tell sometimes."

"You completely fucked up everything. Don't you interrupt me."

"I was half-asleep, Chastity. I haven't even had a shower yet. Speaking of which," he rose, "I'll be doing that now. I feel like I've been dipped in used gun oil." She stood in the doorway. It's odd how dangerous a beautiful naked woman can look. "Chastity, may I pass?"

"No you may not."

"Please?"

"*Why?*" she laughed. "Why bother? We're *late*." She threw up her hands with a resigned, delirious smirk, pacing around him. "We're late, we're late we're late we're late...haha. Who *cares* if you stink like a pig? We could do *no worse* now."

"No, we have to be there in *two hours*. We will easily make it. If you get out of my way."

"In *holiday traffic*? In *this weather*? No we won't. No we fucking won't."

"So call and cancel," he suggested. "I did hurt me arm, you know."

"*I don't care! Will you stop thinking only about yourself just a second? Just one? Where* are you going?"

"I said a shower," he said as he scuttled away from her toward the bathroom, "and by gum I *meant* a shower."

"Jenifer's going to be here any second."

"Then I'd get some clothes on."

"Why isn't she *here* yet?" she ranted, following him into the bathroom, shutting the door behind, seated on the toilet as he tried to doff his clothes. He'd just have to urinate in the shower, then. He sighed and brushed his teeth as she went on. "She should have been here already. She knew she was supposed to be. Everything's going *wrong*. Why isn't she *here* yet?"

“Sorry. That one was my doing too. I’ve been plotting to destroy this day ever since I met you.”

“Fucking *asshole!* Whose fault *should* it be, anyway? She *hates* you! *All* my friends do and it’s because I live with *you* that I don’t *see* them anymore!” He stepped in the shower. She ripped the shower curtain from him and started pummeling his wet, naked, skinny chest, crying her eyes out, screaming at him, “*You don’t do me any fucking good! Ever!*” For some reason he couldn’t help but laugh the harder she hit, even though it did in fact hurt, even when he slid down the wall and landed thud on his ass in the tub. What did more rain in his eyes matter at this point?

Of course he landed on his bruised arm. But the anaesthetic qualities of a beautiful young woman suddenly licking a beeline down one’s chest and taking one’s very vulnerable-feeling cock in her mouth with greatly violent force should not be underestimated. She took him there, on his back while the shower spattered them both, not giving a damn about the water washing away what little lubrication she could normally summon up. It ought to hurt, she decided. This was the worst time, the worst circumstances, to do this. There had to be something punitive in it or she couldn’t come. Rick, ever the gentleman and not a total fool, said not a word. She was so glad to be a woman. The girlfriend gets to use the boyfriend’s cock whenever she likes. He’s going to complain?

The fear sweated from her with every stroke and glide along him, as she forced him deeper and deeper in. She was weightless, nothing, everything, straw in a hurricane, burning sparks and cinders of wicker flying through the wind into everyone’s eyes. Or whatever she could imagine that made this seem magical, and not just humping; it wasn’t enough sex was fun---fun was mundane. Fun was a waste of time. It had to be justified. “I want your come soaking into me while I sit there, talking to my daddy...” she gasped between tiny yelps. “I want it seeping into my panties from my Pill-salted womb...inside my cunt Daddy thinks is *his*...and he’ll never know...*he’ll never know*...” Actually, Rick looked kind of nauseous. But she came anyway.

He didn’t. The doorbell buzzed too many times. Chastity dismounted the boy, ran to the hallway and pressed the intercom button. “*Hello? Who is it?*”

“*IT’S JENIFER! I’VE BEEN RINGING FOR THE PAST FIVE FUCKING MINUTES! I’M WET AND FREEZING! LET ME IN, YOU GODDAMN BITCH! LET ME IN!*”

Chastity, glaring at Rick, meekly apologized and pressed the UNLOCK button. “*Get your fucking clothes on NOW! SOMETHING NICE!*” She ran to the bathroom, splashed hot water on her stubbled armpits and sweaty crotch, and stuck a foamy toothbrush in her mouth. She had to get ladylike, fast. Loud stomps echoed from the stairwell.

Rick got his togs on without so much as the usual grumble of complaint, and fumbled around for wherever he’d put those spare glasses. She hadn’t even noticed he’d lost them, but didn’t ask, so distracted was she by his utter lack of whining at the interruption; no tales of blue balls and cancer this time. This was odd. He never shrank from argument, particularly when he knew he was wrong. It was a reflex of his she absolutely hated. But not a peep, not a whisper at being cheated of orgasm. Maybe he didn’t want her anymore. Maybe he finally realized how ugly she was, but was too polite to say. Maybe he never stopped seeing someone else. He seemed to be here all the time,

but she wasn't. Maybe it was Jenifer. She'd already fucked her dad. The enmity could be a front. How could anyone actually think Rick important enough to hate so very much?

She opened the door for Jenifer at the first knock and nearly asked her just how long she'd been fucking Rick, but thought better of it when she sloshed past her without a "hello" and almost slammed the door on Chastity's fingers. Then she turned and cornered her. "*What is the fucking IDEA I'm soaking wet and I'm cold and I've been waiting out there for FUCK knows how long—Where'd you go. Get back here—*" Jenifer followed Chastity's gargling to the bathroom. She spat a mouthful of toothpaste and tobacco grunge into the drain. "We're going to be *late* and you're *just now brushing your teeth?* Mike's not going to *like* that—"

"Don't call him that. It gives me the creeps."

"I *said* I was sorry you found out, didn't I? *Jesus*, way to hold a *grudge*. Where's that" *cough* "boyfriend" of yours?"

"Getting dressed."

Jenifer peeked around the corner to see, just as he was having trouble with his fly. "Um—hello?"

"Hello," she smirked, then went back to Chastity, who was now pulling on one of five dresses she'd readied on the couch for review. In her haste she ripped the sleeve. Four to go, and this had been her favorite. "Too bad," Jenifer said, sitting down. "I *liked* that dress. Jeez..." She examined her watch with irritating impatience. "How long can it take a grown man to get dressed? Only *faggots* linger over it."

"Because I told him I'd kill him if he didn't pick out something nice. He must have *something* in there..."

"*Jason*," her perfect boyfriend, "takes *ten minutes—*" thoughtfully extending all ten fingers in case Chastity was having trouble counting, "in the morning to fuck me, shower, brush his teeth, dress, *and* drive to the Loop."

"*Drive?* You live a block from the Merchandise Mart!"

"Well, he doesn't exactly drive...he just drives it across the street to the garage so his co-workers will see the car. Whatever. You know what I mean."

"I certainly do, and of course you're my best friend and I'm sad for your frustration. What about this one?"

"Mm. I dunno. Mike'll think you look like a whore in it."

"How the fuck would you know?"

"That was one of the ones he *gave* me." Chastity dropped it, instantly and carefully, at arm's length, as though it contained leprosy. "It's *not stained* or anything. Jeez, give me *some* credit..."

"Look," she waved. "I don't *care*. Okay? I don't," she pointed. "Just stop fucking calling *my dad* 'Mike.' *Okay?* 'Mr. Barlow.' 'Your dad.' '*Chastity's* dad.' That's what *you* call him. '*Kay?*'"

"Oh, *thanks*. This is what I get for being honest."

"I really *hate* honesty. It's so rude." She didn't even bother with the red.

"Why bother wasting our time waiting for the impossible?" Jenifer went on. "I've seen his wardrobe. And frankly I don't think he'd look good in *anything*."

"How *demure* you are today." In the end, it had to be one of them. The Puritan-collared navy blue. She'd look like a stewardess. Well, at least Rick would just stare and shut up all day.

“I’ve told you *many* times before, Chassy. Don’t take it so personally. He just is *very* much not *my type*. That’s all.”

“And your type is what?”

“Male, first off.”

“Fuck you.”

“And you’re *still* sure he’s not a fag?”

“I have sucked the dicks of *many* who turned out to be, Jenifer. I think I could tell by now. *Ahem*. Little help here?” The Puritan plain sheath draped tightly along her lithe body in muting modesty, chiseling smooth, hard waves from her soft, milky curves. “This dress makes Rick want to tear it off,” Chastity whispered, to Jenifer’s evident distaste from the jerk with which she zipped it up. It got stuck. “Makes me look like some schoolteacher of his, he says.”

“Well, um...it’s very nice fabric.”

“I *guess*. You keep running your fingers on it.”

“Don’t get any experimental ideas, you dyke.”

“Mm. I once fucked Rick wearing it.”

Jenifer bolted backward, and started compulsively wiping her palms and fingertips, repeatedly, on the abrasive fabric of the couch. “*Why* is it so important to you that I *picture* every detail of your *desperate, sad* sex life?”

Rick had been watching in the doorway and hadn’t noticed how loudly he’d been panting. Jenifer smelled the stink of his cigarette and turned suddenly around, hiding Chastity’s half-zipped figure behind her. “How long’ve you been *standing* there, you pervert? *Go away!*”

“She’s my girlfriend.”

“So you think you can violate her privacy *any* old time you like, that it? Like she’s your *pet*, your *goldfish* or something?” Then she looked him up and down and held back a sputter as Chastity gave herself a charley horse zipping herself back up. “Oh *god*,” Jenifer said on sight, “you’re not wearing *that*, are you?”

“Huh?” Had the fly broken open again? He’d have to fix it a *fourth* time? No. Everything was as it should’ve been, so far as he could tell. “What’s wrong with--”

“Jesus, some people shouldn’t be allowed to dress themselves,” Jenifer said.

What the fuck? “You look *fine*. Whatever. Now--”

“I, I really look *stupid*?” Rick asked.

“*No*,” Chastity replied. “*Look*, we don’t have *time* for--”

Only Jenifer nodded, of course, upon seeing which he immediately ran back to the bedroom, mumbling worriedly. Jenifer giggled and sputtered.

“*Rick! Get back here! You need to go down and start the---ohh!*” She turned to slap the shit out of Jenifer but instead, “What was wrong with what he was wearing?”

“There’s *always* something. But now he’s changing, so I don’t have a chance to find exactly what it *is*, now do I?” she giggled, and started styling Chastity’s hair in a way she knew Rick didn’t like. “You know what you should do? Shave it. That’d look *so cool*.”

“Your hair’s longer than mine!”

“On *you*. Not on me, I said. It’d look cool on *you*.”

“Only if he really fucks up today.”

“Mm. It’s so creepy, the way he stares through those *glasses* of his...guys with glasses are so slimy and scary. You just know they’ve spent years in their rooms working out a plan to take their lonely ugliness out on the world, while masturbating to pictures of Mr. Spock.” She lit a cigarette, giggling clouds of smoke in Chastity’s face.

“*Thanks. I had just about washed out the smell of his smoke. Thanks so much.*”

“Sorry.” Not that she then put it out.

“I thought you were quitting.”

“I *am* quitting. I’ve been quitting for five years now. Will you let me grow at my own pace?...Jesus, now I’m really creeped out. Probably took a good gaze at my ass too. Probably back there jacking off at the thought now.”

“Jenifer, you’re *insane*, right? He’s my *boyfriend*, you know! We fuck *all the time!*”

“Don’t make me picture that or I’ll have to hit you.”

“We were fucking *right as you arrived.*”

“*That’s what I got fucking soaked for?*”

“You deserved it! You’re a frustrated bitch and you’re *really* getting on my nerves and he’s *my boyfriend* and *I love him*, and if you were my friend you’d *respect* that and be *polite* to him the way I don’t twist a corkscrew into *your* cokehead yuppie closet-case boyfriend’s *balls* every time he fucking *flirts* with me or cops a *feel* and thinks I don’t notice, *okay? OKAY? STOP BEING A BITCH!*”

“I’m just an honest person, Chastity. If you can’t handle that, I’m sorry,” Jenifer replied softly, blowing more smoke in Chastity’s face. Rick came back, *sure* a plain navy blue suit, white shirt, and red tie would satisfy the most Republican of relatives. But all Jenifer could do the instant he walked into the room was break out into a withering spray of giggles. He ran exasperated back to the bedroom and slammed the door before Chastity could follow. Jenifer was giving herself a hernia laughing, for real now.

“*You can fucking stay here,*” Chastity decided. “You can fucking take the *train* home. In fact---” she said, firm with anger, tossing Jenifer’s wet coat in her face, “you’d better, up, just go now, I guess. ‘Kay?”

Jenifer tossed the coat aside to continue drying. “*You didn’t invite me, Chastity. Mike and Barbi did.*”

Rick didn’t care what she thought as he stomped defiantly toward the living room. Chastity had no time for objections now anyway, provided he was wearing pants. “*Look,*” he declared, “I think this will be *perfectly good*. I’m not changing my fucking clothes again and *that’s tha—*”

“*I said it was fine!*” Chastity said. “Will you stop *holding us up?*”

And northward to Lake Forest they drove. Somewhere past Evanston the oil light glowed red and stayed that way. Chastity asked what that indicated. He laughed. “Don’t worry, it’s okay,” he said. “It’s been doing that all week.”



The drive wasn’t so very terrible considering the rain had frosted the old, ragged wipers immobile. His head was down low; he could only see through the bottom fifth of the windshield. From there up, nothing but unscrapable arcs of white. He swerved hard

to avoid the passing roar of a car/ “*Your headlights!*” Chastity shrieked. “*Turn on your headlights!*”

“I can’t.” He squinted at the tail-lights of the car ahead. The glare fuzzed out what was left of his visibility. He could only follow the red glowing globs and hope they were going the right way.

“*What? Why the hell can’t you?*”

“There’s, um, some sort of short. I’ll have the money to get it fixed next week. Don’t worry.”

“*We’re coming back after dark.*”

“Chastity, please. I need to *concentrate. Oops!*” Rick swerved left into the middlemost lane. Chastity shrieked again. The oil light began to blink. But the shock shut her up for almost two whole minutes.

“You could get pulled over,” she hissed with short breath, “or the car could crash and kill us all, or someone could crash into us.”

“Then you should have had your parents pick us up,” he replied. “I’ve gotten very good at driving without headlights. Don’t worry about me.”

“I don’t think *you’re* her concern at the moment, asshole,” Jenifer interjected. “Hey, are you insured?”

“No,” he replied. “Is that any of your business?”

Then, where the power of horses should have been churning under the hood, came only a slow, sickening, deadly grind like sand and jelly, the engine going putrescent. The car decelerated.

“What,” Rick mumbled, his jaw going slack. “*What?*” The car ran now only on momentum, weight, and slope. At least he could still steer. “Shit,” he declared, “shit, shit...do, do either of you smell anything burning?...”

“*No!*” yelled both.

“*Wh...why are we slowing down?...*”

“*You think I can HELP THAT?*”

“*We don’t have time to slow down! Speed up!*”

35

“The harder I push the pedal...”

29

“*—oh, great, just fucking great, thank you God!*”

24

“I have to, I’ve gotta pull over...oh fucking hell---”

23

“*Then don’t talk, do it!*”

21

“That’s not helping.” Behind them, the angry honking began. He couldn’t shift to the right, to the shoulder. Nobody wanted him in their way, but nobody was letting him in, and his speed kept dropping like a rock. Then it didn’t.

24

“Hey,” Rick gasped in relief, ready to thank God for whatever was appropriate, “wait.”

27

“We’re, we’re going *faster.*”

30

“See? I *told* you there was nothing to worry about!”

35

And to vindicate his gloating, he stomped loudly on the gas pedal with a foot of the thuddingest lead.

19

The needle dropped like a hanged man’s cock.

“*Chastity!*”

Chastity folded her arms. “I’m not talking to you.”

17

“*Open your window! Look behind!*”

15

“Are you *crazy*? It’s fucking raining ice out there! Like *hell* I--”

“I can’t *see anything! Do it, dammit! SHIT!*” Rick swerved right, blind, hoping the sudden lack of glare through the back window meant anything. A bit of honking, but nothing he couldn’t ignore. He thus never had to know about the careful of perfect suburban blonde children whose equally upstanding blonde, mustached father managed to slam on the brakes just in time, only to be rear-ended and careen over the railing in flames. “Idiot shoulda never bought that Pinto from me,” his brother would cry in his beer after the funeral. “Got what he deserved. *Bwerrp...*” But they were a mile on by then.



Rick’s own brakes were all that had prevented them doing the same. The cold had started freezing the rain on the asphalt glassy and frictionless. He had just managed to hydroplane to a slow halt on the shoulder with only the slightest tap of his bumper on the rail bringing them to a stop. The car was still grinding down, a string or two of smoke drifting from the AC vents, which smelled like oil burnt on toast. Steam, and something thicker, rose through the seams around the hood. Rick’s fingers gripped the wheel, knuckles white for just a few seconds more, till he was settled. And Chastity wouldn’t stop slapping him.

Fear of burning her precious artist’s fingers on the cigarette he lit fended her blows off temporarily. “Shit,” he muttered, eyes pale and wide, “shit, we almost *died*.”

“No fucking kidding,” Jennifer said.

Rick sucked on the cigarette as desperately as a baby pig at a teat. He didn’t need oxygen. He’d beaten death. He wanted Chastity to reach over and grab his hand, tight, right then, very much. He looked if she was. Her arms were crossed like ropes cutting across her chest. She was doing her best imitation of the frost. But her cough made her break character.

“Open a window,” Jennifer joined in on cue. “Are you trying to *choke* us?”

“I thought you *hated* the rain.”

“Not if it hits *you* in the face,” Chastity muttered. “*Open it!*”

Rick’s hair soaked to the skull the instant he rolled it down, and doused his cigarette. Jennifer lit one of her own, giggling, he noticed as he sputtered the arctic

raindrops from his upper lip. “What about *her*?” he asked angrily, rolling the window back up.

“*She’s my friend!* She can do whatever the fuck she wants, so *shut up!*”

Jenifer smirked, happy to have been here to witness the occasion she’d cast so many spells for these last six months. She’d known this relationship would never work. They were both Aquarians, and as if that weren’t already poison, Rick was a ridiculous nerd who blathered on about politics, and books, and lots of other things Jenifer had never cared about and never would. But men always talked about something you had to tune out. But now Chastity, when she wasn’t being graphic and gross about her so-called sex life, was repeating the latest news tidbit or historical fact Rick had told her in his endless stream of monologue. One day over a root beer float she’d told Jenifer, “I gave him head while he read *Das Kapital* out loud,” she’d giggled while licking whipped cream off her straw. Jenifer thought she’d vomit but Chastity just went right on. “It was *my idea*...He didn’t get very *far*, of course. Heh.” She drew up her legs and held them tight to her chest. “*Mmm*. I love listening to him rattle off all the *facts* in his head...” It was fine and well for her to humor her stupid, pretentious boyfriend in private, but now she was starting to think she liked it and that was unacceptable.

He was poor, too. Not like Jenifer’s own boyfriend, who didn’t even ask sex of her. Rick *had* to work, a lot, for a little; how would this boy ever support Chastity’s art? Would *she* have to give that up, and work, perhaps to support him, and ruin her dreams for *this* twit? Worse, he thought himself a writer, and had Chastity bragging when he wasn’t even in the room how famous he’d be someday, though she hadn’t actually read a single thing he’d written; he didn’t let anyone read unfinished work. On the basis of the mere descriptions Chastity had been told, she’d take this belief in him to heart, because Chastity was a romantic sort, given to one extreme of a decision or the other. She’d give up her own right to fame and fortune to ensure his. Jenifer could hear the possibility in Chastity’s lachrymose tone when she’d once mentioned it in passing while drunk. Jenifer could see him now, sitting home, eating chips, smoking pot she’d buy for him and saying he was in deep contemplation if she asked for a hand with the groceries, not setting a single word to paper but able to bullshit off a few misty ideas. Both would end up dying in starving obscurity. Nobody emotionally stable read anymore; nobody went to museums. Fame nowadays had to be foraged and gobbled where you could get it before you were twenty-five. The parents’ deck of credit wouldn’t last forever.

Mike trusted Jenifer to watch over Chastity in his absence, but she could only do so much to nudge her away from danger. She was glad they were fighting, all due to Rick’s being a dumbshit and entirely not blameable on Jenifer’s interference. Now she could simply enjoy the show, and salt the earth against regrowth later.

“You fucking *idiot!* You had a *whole lifetime* to get your car checked before my parents came, and you *have* to let it break down *now*?”

“I, I think I should have a look under the hood.”

“Why bother?” Chastity laughed. “Would you even know what you were looking at anyway?”

“There’s smoke. There’s a funny smell. The car might explode.”

“Good. They’d *accept* that.”

Rick meekly opened the door and took a furtive step on the slippery pavement. “I’ll just be a minute.”

“*Fine! Shut the door, fuckhead!*” He slammed it, in fact. And no, he didn’t know what he was to look for, but anything truly dangerous should’ve been apparent even to his mechanically illiterate eyes.

“Stupid fucking asshole...” Chastity mumbled repeatedly.

“He said it himself, y’know. He almost got us killed,” Jenifer reminded her.

“I *know*...” Chastity looked at her watch. “We’re late. That’s all I’ll hear. ‘Hello, I’m Mike Barlow, and this is my daughter. She was late.’ All day long he’ll make cute little references to it. Damn Rick. Damn him to death.”

I’m doing my best, Jenifer thought as she patted Chastity’s shoulder with some fingers, hopefully rubbing the pentacle around her neck with the others.

Rick returned looking so pale you could almost see your reflection in him. His fingers shook. Rick sucked on the barely-lit, soggy cigarette as desperately as a baby pig at a teat. When Chastity screamed enough at him he remembered to shut the door. “Well?” Chastity asked. “Bet you don’t know what’s wrong, right? Or who to call. *Or* what to do. Right? Huh? Just go ahead and *tell* me...and I asked you not to fucking smoke in here, didn’t I?”

“It was my car. I’ll smoke in it if I like.”

“Was?...look, stop trying to be literary. What the fuck is going on?”

“I looked at the engine,” he began.

“*So?* What do you want, a *biscuit?*---”

Rick took a strong, slow drag which dried and rendered to ash half the length of the cigarette. “It burned to death.”

“What?”

“It’s smoking and there’s black crusts of what, of what smells like *oil* coming out of everything and it’s all sizzling and smoking and too hot to touch. That detailed enough for you?”

“What, do you mean it’s going to *explode* or something?”

“I dunno. We could get out and watch, but then you’d get all wet.”

“Well? What are you going to fucking do? Huh? *What kind of boyfriend knows nothing about cars? CHRIST!*”

“Chastity, can you, uh, just shut *up* for a moment?”

“Don’t you dare.”

“I’m, um, not taking this too well myself...It’s, you know, it’s *my*---”

She slapped him, hard and seriously this time, right across the cheek. “*Don’t you fucking DARE tell me to shut up! Not after THIS! NOT EVER!*” She took a deep breath and tried to be sensible, since nobody else seemed equipped. “We need to call them,” Chastity said. “We need to *call* them and *tell* them.”

“Shit, Chastity, I don’t even know where we *are* right now.”

“You’ve got *feet!* You’re supposed to be so fucking smart, you *find* someplace, ask someone there where it *is*, and then *call* my parents and repeat back whatever the nice stranger tells you. *Do something!*”

“Just *give* me a moment, all right?” Was he going to cry? There must be some minimal definition of what a man was. Did he even come up that far? There were genetically defective women with cocks bigger than his, after all.

“Why, so you can sit here, and *mope*, and embarrass me?”

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Jenifer said. “Just act like I’m not even here.”

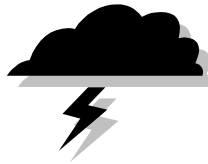
“Look, Chastity, um, it’s *my car*. *My car* that *I* bought outright with my own fucking money! *My car*. I drove all the way across the country, and back, and back again to here in it. I’ve had it for years and *now it’s really fucking dead, all right? All right? Will you PLEASE fucking forgive me for being a mite frazzled by all these recent developments?*” She slapped him again.

“*FUCK YOU, YOU BABY!*” was Chastity’s furious, nauseated reply. “*You fucking CHILD! You’re going out there while we sit here and you’re going to call my parents, and explain. And apologize.*” She yanked his door handle and kicked it open, writing down the pertinent phone and pager numbers on a napkin among the filthy debris on his dashboard. “Put this where it won’t get wet. Somewhere away from your groin, I suggest.”

“So, me, alone.”

“*Yes! You, alone!* Rick, are you a fucking *man* or *not*? We’re two helpless girls stranded in the middle of nowhere! *Fucking protect us!* Christ! There was a time when you didn’t have to explain this kind of shit!” Before she had to wade through his probably lengthy reply, she kicked him out and slammed the door, locking it. She’d slipped the keys out of the ignition when he’d been checking the engine. He pounded a bit on the window and shouted a minute or two till he realized his only chance of shelter lay in doing as she said, and he disappeared into the grey storm.

“Bet he would’ve wanted me to pitch in for the tow truck, too.”



chapter three.

A CONFERENCE OF SUITS**WO cars nearly hit Rick as he crossed the highway, but his glasses were frosted**

up too thick for him to notice. Long landfill hills alien to the Midwest, built by homesick Eastern engineers, made of cheap soil, tailings, and wads of tall, dead grass, turned to half-done gelatin. The light at the crossing turned green with his first step to the curb, and spitefully stayed that way for an obviously mistaken length of time. It rained colder and heavier every second he waited there.

O Lord, why must thou piss on me?

The cold wind jumped from drop to drop soaking through his coat, right inside to weld his skin to his shirt. His nipples burned and felt like they'd wear right off. Russian army coat, he considered with contempt. No wonder they always torched their cities and ran.

Soon he was muddy to the knees. He couldn't see five feet ahead, nor could any of these eyebrowless suburbanites see him from their dining rooms as he darted across their fenced-off yards, and call the police screaming "GANG!"

There were guard dogs posted in each yard, but sleeping in mud inspires little loyalty. One backyard was guarded by a three-year-old Doberman, who lay there alone and depressed on the wet concrete patio, shivering in his thin fur, without even the comfort of his tail, which they'd clipped, to wrap around himself. He was watching, just inside the glass, his owner and his family, warm and laughing, eating and dropping food on the floor, and throwing it away. They'd been playing with him before the rain started. He saw Rick running across his owner's property. The dog made no sound; he wished he could talk. He'd have told Rick to heave rocks at the windows.

The light was on his side this time, but the oncoming BMW didn't seem to agree. However, it missed, its driver cursing the luck as it sped off. Soon he saw a sign that read MOTEL in flashing pink flamingo neon. He had to piss like a racehorse, and the cold water seeping continuously down his trousers didn't help a bit.

Once through the entrance he was greeted by the shrunken, high-pitched desk clerk whose tag called him Quigley. He was wearing heavy black aviator frames far too

big and round for his little face, the sort of garish, flowery, floppy bow tie a clown might wear, representing Quigley's stab at looking festive.

"Where's the washroom?" Rick demanded.

The clerk attempted to speak after a long wheezing fit from smiling too hard. "Happy Thanksgiving, sir."

"Hi. Look, I just need to--"

"You just sign in, and I'll have the valet park your car in our private garage."

"No, I don't have a--I mean--look, where's the bathroom? I really need to use it."

"All our rooms have bathrooms. I can have someone help you with your bags."

"I have no bags. Is there a bathroom *out here*?"

"Why should there be?" the clerk tittered. "*This* isn't a room. This is the front desk."

Rick noticed a door open down the hall, an empty room a maid had been cleaning.

"There's one in that room over there."

"Of course there is, sir," Quigley replied, "that's a *room*. All our rooms have bathrooms."

"Good."

Quigley readied the credit-carbon machine, giving it two quick ka-chunks. "Now will you be paying with--" But when he looked up, Rick had already stomped down the hall. "*Hey! No inspection of rooms prior to payment!*"

The bathroom was conveniently just inside the door. He shut the door behind him. As he relieved himself, he remembered: *Phone. You need to use the phone too.*

He zipped up and opened the door, staunch and ready to take charge and deal with this calamity, straight-backed like a man.

A red-headed, very obese manager, with a pubic-looking mustache, twice Rick's height and at least four times his width, stood in his way all directions but behind. "Uh," Rick stuttered respectfully, "hiya."

"H'lo," said the behemoth. His tag called him Leroy. And he stayed right where he was, so Rick had to as well.

"Um, okay if I, y'know, get past?"

"You saying I'm too fat to get past, sir?"

"What? N-no, I--"

"That's very hurtful."

"But—I didn't say--"

"You know, I'm the manager here, so I think *I'll* be saying what was and wasn't said, hmm? You were very rude to Quigley just now."

"Uh, well, maybe I was, but--"

"You think it's *right* to be rude to the desk clerk?"

"There, there he is!" Quigley squeaked, hiding behind the manager. "That's the one what made me cry. And I only offered to get his baggage."

"Quigley's a sensitive boy. But you probably enjoy upsetting those sort, don't you? Remembering the days when you took away their lunch money and you were King of the Playground...strange how things all turn around, eh?"

"*What?* Look, I'm sorry. I just needed to go."

"Oh, yes, you certainly do. Allow me to help you." He wrapped a thick Illinois sausage arm across Rick's shoulders, and walked forward as a tank might if it had feet,

forcing him along, back down the hall. “These bathroom are freshly sanitized, cleansed and powdered spring-time fresh, every *single* day.” He wagged his overpacked finger in Rick’s face. “*Not meant* for layabouts like you with nothing *better* to do than walk about in the *mud* and *pee* in unsuspecting public places.

“No. Nice try, but we have guests. Guests who pay *us* a living wage to provide them with all the comfort and sterility of their very own beautiful homes, and to protect their hygiene. And look at that *hair*, down to your shoulders. *Dripping*.” His own hair was shaven Prussian to a millimeter of Mr. Clean. “Now, *that* can’t be very clean, can it? You probably haven’t the money for a haircut, isn’t that right?” he chortled. “But even on *Thanksgiving Day*, that’s still *your* problem.” Behind, ten paces, followed a still-shivering, but quietly giggling Quigley, periodically uttering a tiny peep. ‘You might very well have dangerous infections. We can’t be letting people like you into our facilities. It would be a betrayal of our trust.’

“What are you *talking* about? Now look. My car broke down on the highway--”

“You said you didn’t have a car,” Quigley reminded him.

“Not *here*! It *broke down*! That’s why I’m--Look, people are expecting us. I’ve got two girls waiting outside in--”

“Sir, this is the heartland. Don’t think you can bribe us with your prostitutes.”

He grabbed Rick by the collar and dragged him to the door. Rick weighed less than a hundred and forty, despite his height, so he was easy to drag. He swung open the rainfrosted door: the cold wet wind slapped Rick across the face.

“*Wait, goddammit!* I only wanted to use the phone!”

“Probably for one of those phone sex lines. That’s how you call them, you know. Through the phone.” Quigley suggested.

“Or perhaps your *drug dealer*, eh? *Ho ho!* Well, anyway, back into the rain you go,” said the manager as he heaved Rick out the door, and locked it tight till he was sure the hobo had really gone. The real guests would know where the buzzer was.

He walked back to Quigley’s desk, hands still wet from the little vagrant’s rancid coat. Quigley was still shaking. Leroy tried to calm him. Couldn’t have him soiling his trousers like last time.

“It’s all right, Quigley, m’boy. You don’t have to quiver like that. He’s gone.” Leroy almost gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder, but remembered where his hands had been. He’d touched the hobo. “Mm. Rag, please.” Quigley removed the sterile, white cloth from its individual plastic wrap. Leroy wiped his hands nice and clean, then used four more just to be sure the foreign germs were really dead. The scraping echoed through the empty pastel halls. But He could still see the infection crawling and slithering all over his skin, multiplying corrosively just out of spite, giggling at his stupid, powerless little rag. “Windex.” He sprayed and wiped five more times.



“And we’re still sitting here and shivering like retards.”

Chastity turned and snarled. “Shut *up*, Jenifer! Just shut up!” She hadn’t since Rick had left the car. “Can you see *shit* through this fucking rain? *I* sure can’t!”

“No. I can’t. I wouldn’t have to try if not for your fucking boyfriend, of course.”

“He--he could be coming up the road right now for all you know!”

“You *know* he’s not.”

Chastity turned away and clasped every muscle tight against her bones folding her arms across her chest in the most hostile grip she could muster, which Jenifer couldn’t see. She wished hard for him to have the psychic, perfect timing to come along right now, just like in a movie, just so Jenifer would look stupid and keep her mouth shut, because she grew more convincing by the second.

“I don’t know why you defend that geek. I really don’t. I mean, it isn’t like he’s a good fuck or anything.”

“He *is*.”

Jenifer laughed “Give me a break. *Look* at him!” She opened her third pack of smokes. Chastity wished she’d let up. They had to keep the windows up till the storm abated, which it wouldn’t. The air was foul and clotted. “Well, this never would’ve happened if it had been Jason who took us like I suggested. He’d have fitted in and Jason’s rich. He would’ve called on his cell-phone and we’d have been towed fifty minutes ago.”

“*I’m sick of hearing about Jason!* You don’t even *love* him! Your parents give you all the money and *everything* you want no matter *who* you fuck! And you *don’t even need it* because you’ve got your *rich fucking boyfriend* who, *oh!* Also gives you anything you want. Which, I guess, makes up for his fucking you about four times a year.”

“My parents reward me because I choose right. We’ll both graduate, and we’ll get married, and he’ll take over his dad’s business, and I’ll be a wife and mommy with maids. All I’ll have to do is smile and act friendly at social occasions and fuck him as often as the law requires. I mean, I like art an’ all, but I can do that too. I won’t have to try to find a *job* with that useless degree. I’ll have friends who’ll tell me how pretty my paintings are between talk of fashion and jewelry we can *buy* if we want.”

“You’re a whore.”

“So? I thought you once said it should be legalized. Rick, on the other hand, *is* a loser and you’re going to starve with him.”

“*Rick’s* going to be a famous *writer* and *I’m* going to be a famous *artist!* Okay? People have *done* it, you know! Georgia O’Keefe and Alfred Stieglitz! Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo! Tell you what, you’re right--in fact, why don’t I just fuck Jason when we get back and steal him off you? After you’ve spent so much time selling me on him and all. I won’t feel any guiltier than if I’d gotten a scholarship instead of you or outbid you in an auction. Then I’ll live happily ever after, right?”

Jenifer sighed, and examined her violet nails. “*I’m* just saying you can do better than that fucking closet-case.”

“*Jason’s* a fucking closet case. *And* a cokehead.”

“At least he can afford to recover. And he’s never cheated on me.”

“THAT’S NONE OF YOUR FUCKING BUSINESS! RICK’S SMART! HE KNOWS HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, ART, EVERYTHING! WHAT DOES JASON KNOW?”

“His money will still never run out. What does he *need* to know?”

Chastity’s cheeks burned purple. She faced away from Jenifer again. No sense letting her read her face. “Hey,” Jenifer said, “I just had a thought.”

“Surprise, surprise.”

“Didn’t you tell me all Rick’s credit cards were cancelled?”

“Yeah?”

“How’ll he pay for the *towing*? Did he bring a hundred in cash?”

“No, of course he didn’t.”

“Did *you*?” Jenifer giggled.

Chastity knew Rick didn’t even have a hundred right now in his bank account. And neither did she, which was why she was so frightened of the impending rotten impression with her folks. And Jenifer wasn’t helping. Friends are supposed to help. “*He wouldn’t make me do that! He’s from the South! He’s a GENTLEMAN! YOU SHUT UP ABOUT HIM!*” She was beginning to wonder which member of Chastity’s family Jenifer really considered the friend.

“Get that finger out of my face.”

“IT WAS AN ACCIDENT! *GOT IT? IT COULD’VE HAPPENED TO ANYBODY, EVEN IF THEY WERE RICH! I LOVE HIM! HE’S MY BOYFRIEND! STOP TALKING SHIT ABOUT HIM!*”

“Men are supposed to have money, Chastity. That’s what they’re there for.”

Chastity turned to the windshield again. “Shut up,” she muttered, and coughed. “Just shut up.”



Across the street were neon lights even cheaper and tackier than the motel’s. He leapt across the lanes while he saw no headlights, and landed smack dab into yet another muddy puddle, just when he’d walked most of the water from his shoes. “Dammit, dammit, dammit...” Forward he sloshed. Nice dry store nestled safely in warm, dry glass. The doors behind him hissed shut on the rain.

The store was the sterile wet dream of the anal-retentive. There was no dust, no noise, the air itself bleached and fluorescent, humming. The shelves were fully stocked with every nutrient-devoid foodstuff America made, wrapped neatly, individually, redundantly, with preservative half-lives measured in decades, that needed little restocking. It rarely spoiled, this Hostess-spawn; too few nutrients to interest the bacteria..

Behind three-inch-thick glass sat a short, skinny, potbellied clerk with a mustache that looked drawn on with blue Bic. His apron was maroon and his lime-green shirt had been half-price at K-Mart. He was oblivious to all except Captain Picard on his tiny TV. It would have been his graduation present, but they ended up giving it to him anyway. He thanked god for it. Otherwise this job would’ve made him put a shotgun in his mouth a year ago. But every time he felt the urge come on now, he tuned to THE ROBERT TILTON SHOW, and soon he wouldn’t be thinking about anything in particular.

“Hello?...*Hello?*” Rick rapped on the glass. The clerk jumped, froze, wrinkled his nose, and smirked, hands scratching each other.

“What d’you want? Wanna rob the place?” He started laughing like a mouthful of squirrels. “Bulletproof glass! Time-locks! I’d like to see you try! Ha ha ha! They’ll see you on the tape just a few hours from now!”

Rick took a breath. “But *you’d* still be *dead*, wouldn’t you?” But the clerk only crossed his arms and smirked with raised nose behind his superior window technology.

Perhaps he could have stopped wrinkling and twitching his nose, but you'd never have known it. Rick removed his glasses and tried to laugh, as he rubbed the bridge of his nose really, really hard. "Just a joke," he explained patiently. "I'm not here to rob you. I just wanted to use your phone. My car broke down on the highway, and I--"

"There's a phone at the motel 'cross the street."

"They just threw me out of there."

"Now why would they do *that*, I wonder! Huh!"

Rick took a deep breath. "You know, I don't *know* why! Look--"

"Well, there's no phone. No phone here."

"What's that an inch from your left hand?"

"They only let us use that in emergencies."

"My car broke down! I'm stranded! I think that counts!"

"We're not a garage. Just gas and snacks. Do you want gas or a snack?"

"For Christ's sake, I only want to use the phone. I'm not going to rape you. "Now the clerk was very scared. *No joking. Kidding. Kidding. I'm sorry. Look, man--I'll make this really simple. How 'bout if you pick up the phone and make the call for me? Then I'll be gone and you can go back to the Borg.*" He picked something off the shelf, and slapped it down on the counter. "Here. I'll buy a Twinkie! Will that help?" It occurred to Rick he didn't exactly know, now, where the car was.

"No. It's policy. No phone calls."

"Then why's the damn thing *there*?"

"In *case of emergency.*"

"What if I *were* a crazy killer? What if I *had* come in here to kill you? You wouldn't be able to call for help?"

"I'd lock up the store once you were gone and drive myself to the hospital, dropping off the night deposit along the way. Policy. But that doesn't matter, because nothing--" he boasted, rapping again on the inside of his aquarium, "--can get through my *glass.*"

"You wouldn't call the cops?"

"If you broke the window or took money I could. We're only supposed to call the police in case of damage or loss of corporate property." Tired of this waste of talk with an obvious non-customer, he switched off the intercom. Rick couldn't waste any more time; he got the message quickly. He kicked over a display of Twinkies on his way out. The clerk didn't hear or see any of it. Picard was pointing at something. Rick stomped a few of the golden sponge cake like banana slugs, ejaculating sticky creamy filling all Pollock on the floor.

The clerk didn't care. "*I've got the glass, motherfucker.*" He gave him the finger. Rick slammed the door *Let him. Fuckhead.*

The window shattered, and fell in huge chunks of foggy rubble. Three minutes later, in came someone with a gun. He was not, as it happened, able to drive himself to the hospital, being somewhat less resourceful than the company had taken him for. The last thing he saw was a Klingon.



Back into the rain Rick went. He saw a faint violet glow in the distance, sneezed, and pressed on toward it. Awful lot of places open on Thanksgiving, and he hadn't been thrown out of all of them yet.

Up close, the sign was green plus violet, fronting a long, flat building that could have contained several supermarkets. It was called THINGS & STUFF. Inside, it had everything one could be expected to want on display in vast and redundant variety, a "TRIBUTE TO AMERICA, OUR UNIVERSE OF CHOICE," as a banner above declared in garish primaries. It was new, this branch, and only staffed as yet by four smiling sales associates, two off without pay today, another of whom performed all the tasks of a manager, and even consented to be called one, nobly, without a manager's corresponding benefits or salary. The five executive directors at this location found this the most financially efficient way of doing things. They hired employees on a six-month training wage, half minimum, and at the end of the six they'd either be fired, or else promoted to another training wage, and after that again. The titles made the staff feel an importance mere money could not, of course, give them, or so they were reminded often.

The taller of the two laying in wait behind the counters nearest the entrance latched onto Rick the minute he entered; his mission, to make Rick find what he wanted. "Can I *help* you, sir?" He put his hand on Rick's shoulder as though he was some long-lost friend from college short-term memory loss had made him forget. Rick curled his lip and twitched it off, remembering all he could about being polite. It was so hard to do without the accent. Just keeping his mouth shut seemed to do it for the time being. "Is there something in particular you were looking for?"

"Hi. Yeah. I just need a phone--" With a generous smile the clerk immediately swept Rick to aisle 9, twenty yards down the carpet. Rick went a bit dizzy.

"Here you go, sir!" Yes, true enough; a wall bigger than Rick's entire apartment, holding phones of every shape, size, shade and style, hundreds upon hundreds.

Who would *need* most of these? "No," Rick muttered. "I meant--"

"Now, what *sort* of phone were you looking for, sir?"

"I don't *need* to *buy* a phone. I need--"

"Sir, you just said you wanted 'a phone..' " And to prove it he pulled the tiny tape recorder from his pocket, and played back Rick, indeed, saying those very words. Rick felt a sickening wave of nostalgia for the monopoly, when there were so many fewer choices for stupid bastards like this to show you. "I'm sure with such a selection you're just having trouble deciding which one you want. But if you buy nine, the tenth one is half-price."

"Oh, good Lord! *I'm not a fucking customer! I'M A HUMAN BEING, DAMMIT!*"

"Nonsense. Everyone that walks in is a customer."

"Look, I'm from Chicago. Okay? I'm stranded."

Oh. The salesperson backed away a first step. He'd come from the city. *Look at his long and straggly hair.* He'd read about this sort in Parade.

The city guy wore an awfully roomy coat. Why buy anything when everything could fit underneath? What else could he intend in this nice, clean store priced for civilized people, out here in the suburbs, on a holiday when they were understaffed?

He couldn't see a gun under the coat, but that'd be the idea, wouldn't it? He kept smiling at the stranger and racked his brain for the company policy.

“Herding me around like a fucking *sheep*...” Rick said, rubbing his eyes. “Ought to be ashamed of yourself.” Profanity. And there was a little old lady in the store. Children, too. This man had to be stopped. “Sir, if you’re going to use that kind of language I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t--I’ve been walking in the rain for, I don’t know *how* long, and I don’t even know where I am...” On drugs, too. “Oh, god, what *time* is it?” No watch. Probably jobless; *who would employ someone with such unruly, dripping hair, anyway?*

“Uh--” The salesperson cast a furtive look over Rick’s shoulder for someone big enough to handle this junkie. “Clocks are in Aisle ‘2.’”

Rick noticed; he’d been mouthing something. “What are you doing? What’s behind--” and he really ought to have turned, not asked. Three security guards, more fat than muscle though that made no difference in density nor gravity, fell upon him. One struck him in the stomach, another in the back, and the third applied the taser (\$’50 ON SPECIAL that week, PERFECT FOR POCKET OR PURSE) to his throat. That wasn’t proper procedure, but they weren’t cops. Anyway, it worked.

Seven hundred vibrations jerked hard through every muscle in his body. He fell to his knees in classic martyr posture, and the last thing he saw was the sunlight and clear sky through the front window, many yards off.

When had it stopped raining?

“Oh, god, she’ll *kill* me--” The floor might have driven bones of his nose into his brain, but there were many athletic God-fearing arms to catch him. The salesperson watched them drag him safely out back. “I knew he couldn’t be a customer,” he sniffed proudly, drawing himself to the full 6 feet of his high school football glory, “customers don’t look like that.”

He straightened his tie and was damn proud to do so. This was what he’d been born for. Now thanks to him, a pleasurable shopping experience was assured for all, as was the right of every American.

He felt like a guardian of civilization. He had a sacred duty to those who paid his paycheck, which, yes, was small now, but it would grow and blossom with enough fertilizer piled on. Someday, he knew, he’d be manager.

His friendly hand extended before him, he went to greet a *real* customer. Her back was to him.

“Hello!” he bellowed. She jumped. “How may I help you?”

“I...I have a heart condition.” She fumbled in her purse for her pills. He tried to back away and hoped her eyesight wasn’t good enough to recognize him, but she grabbed his tie for support and wouldn’t let go.



Rick awoke bungeed to a chair, in a dark back room supplied with a microwave oven, a refrigerator big enough for two pops and a sandwich, and three hard plastic chairs which induced numbness in the legs after three minutes. Rick sat in one of those now. This was, of course, where the employees took their breaks. The walls were a forest of exposed, spurting, steaming plumbing and frayed asbestos insulation, one dirty 40-watt bulb in the room. “I need a smoke,” Rick said reflexively.

“Smoking is not allowed in the building,” someone behind him said, smacking their gum.

“Can I go outside then?”

“Certainly not. If it’s good enough for our employees, it’s good enough for you.”

“Your employees can’t leave the store?”

“We give them permission. Sometimes eight or nine hours at a time. Too *much* time off makes other pastures look greener, if you follow my meaning. People are only weak, after all. Hm. Bob,” he snapped his fingers, “make a note. Salaried staff. Cubicles with beds. Ask legal.”

“I think that’s a full mast, Ray.”

Rick found himself sitting in the center of a conference of suits. All five executive officers surrounded him, simultaneously scratching their chins, bowed arms behind their backs. All five paced round and around with their identical haircuts, identical Armani, and just the right glop of mousse apiece. He couldn’t tell them apart and wondered how *they* managed it. If it mattered. Clearly, this was *a team*. The seminars pointed the way. They tamed the murderous, raging, envious, competitive beast within everyone of their hearts; they had drummed and held the talking stick, and now they knew the pecking order of the pack.

The Eighties were dead. The company was all and the one was naught; otherwise they could be independent and eat from dumpsters. Their lives began and ended with this store. Why else were they paid salaries, rather than by the hour? At first only Ray stayed at the store all the time. But then the others, one by one, started noticing how much more work he appeared to be doing and all the productivity bonuses he got, and how all the mail that came in from HQ was now addressed “ATTN: RAY.” One by one they brought in the cots and watched each other like hawks.

“Hmm,” Ray intoned, scratching his chin. The rest followed, like a wave. “All right, people,” he clapped. “Let’s get with the program” They rustled in their blazers for pen and pad. He paused, and looked at his watch; so did they, and then they pulled out their Parker Duofold pens like an ad for office products directed by Busby Berkeley. Everyone bought from the store with their employee discounts. It increased their profits, and therefore their bonuses. The points tapped the paper and began scribbling in shorthand. The secretary was a needless luxury, and certainly whatever any lipsticked gumsmacking tart with damaged hair could do, they could do better.

“I haven’t had a dry cigarette for hours,” Rick complained.

“You really need a cigarette, eh?” Ray laughed.

“I’m getting a migraine...yes.”

“Yes?--”

“Yes! And why am I tied up?”

“For your own good. Now, if we *sold* cigarettes here at THINGS N’ STUFF, you’d buy *those*? Cigarettes, *that’s* the sort of thing you buy.”

“I, I *guess* so...” They made a note of it, in unison. “What are you doing?”

“Just taking a survey. You don’t *really* mind. Now--”

“I don’t have time. I have to make a call. Please.”

“But you didn’t want to buy anything. That means we have failed you as a consumer. We have to have your input if we’re to make this your store.”

“What are you doing open on Thanksgiving anyway?”

“A competitive business ignores holidays. Now, what don’t you like about our store?”

“I don’t care about your store.” They gasped.

Ray stuck a flyer in Rick’s face. “Tell me you don’t care *now!*”

“I don’t care now.”

“But--but *look* at all these fantastic bargains!”

“All cost more than I have. Please let me go.”

“Nonsense. We’ve got your wallet.”

“What? Give me that!”

“Twenty dollars and two credit cards in here. *More* than enough buying power at *our* store. You know how much it costs us just to keep all the lights running? Too much to tolerate browsers. Jobs and lives depend on this store. You come on our property without buying, well, that can only be called *trespassing*, correct?”

“Men. Note his cold sweat.”

“He wants to buy,” Bob said, “but he’s afraid.”

“A common anxiety in hard economic times,” suggested Tom.

“He just needs some encouragement,” Ray concluded, “some *human* warmth. Don’t you?”

“Get your fucking hand off my shoulder,” Rick muttered.

Ray dangled the twenty in Rick’s face. “Now...instead of thinking, ‘How can I keep this *all to myself*,’ why not think, ‘*What could this buy?*’ Think carefully...” His knuckle bumped into Bob’s nose. “Bob. Stop licking your lips and back away from the money, please.” Bob snapped out of it. He’d nearly grabbed the bill with his teeth. “I thought we’d covered this at the seminar.”

“I’m terribly sorry, Ray...” he said, trying to stop the sudden, odd, painful twitching of his neck. Just the sight of that crinkled green crosshatched with gray, waving before him like the handkerchief of Zelda Fitzgerald, a siren summoning him to barbarism and wreckage. He’d have gladly ripped out Ray’s throat with his teeth a moment before. This wasn’t good. “It’s this damn greed. It’s so *hard to kick*.” Bob admitted, head hung low in deference to the pack leader. He’d offered blood to the sharks. They gathered closer, now, to feed.

“Weak link in the chain,” said Steve.

“Blockage in the plumbing,” said Mark.

“Perhaps we were a little hasty throwing that trainee in jail after that thousand went missing,” said Tom.

“No! Lies, all of it! I’ve got a gold Amex and a platinum debit card! I never touch cash! *Feh!* Dirty, disgusting, *filthy* stuff, only good for dumping in a bank and *forgetting* about! *Ptui!*” They backed him towards the corner, all stroking their chins and going *Hmmm*, and made appropriate notations. “No, don’t...Ray,” he pleaded, “you’re a pal...can’t this criticism session be, you know, off the record?”

“I’m sorry, Bob, but that’s not the tenet of ‘The One-Look Executive.’ “ Ray paced around, considering all points of view, then waved them away altogether. “No, no, greed is good. We all must remember that. We cannot, in our newfound sensitivity, as ‘THE CORPORATION THAT RESEMBLES HUMANITY,’ forget the old bedrock traditions and values that helped us digest this continent. But so *petty*, Bob!” Ray laughed. “It’s just a twenty.” The rest laughed at Bob too. Bob took it like an employee.

It amazed Rick how much slack he got in the bungee cords just by sitting up straight for a change. They'd slipped right off. He could get away right now while they bickered and snarled among themselves, but he had to fuck it up.

And like Chastity, he favored the oral method. "I'm, um, going now," he'd had no reason whatsoever to say. Then again, he did need his wallet. The credit cards had long since been maxxed out and cancelled because he'd never thought it was something you had to. Wasn't that the point of the card, avoiding that? But there was the principle of the thing. But mainly, it was the twenty. Ray sniffed, and shoved Rick back into his seat. "When spoken to," he scolded. Back to Bob, like a wolf with a wounded leg, the pack all around him and no food in days. This was supposed to be a feast day, after all. Even Ray felt the growl close in. There Bob stood, slapping himself quiet, shivering in ostracism.

Rick got up again. "I'm really going." Ray had him back in the seat before the plastic lost a degree of his body heat.

"Guys, c'mon! Remember--remember our stress management classes together! The ergonomics workshop! The Arican desert meditations! Please! We did a video and everything!"

But counting to ten and breathing attentively didn't change that the blood spurting through the arteries in Bob's throat would be mighty refreshing to Ray.

The drumming filled his head. Instincts jumped their rails. The barbarian, unchained from his labor wheel, was slashing his way out through Ray's skin, wanting suddenly to eat Bob, eat him whole. Bob gritted his teeth. He had no choice.

"Boesky," he whispered. The rest fell to their knees with whimpering migraines. Ray's head snapped back. Circuits broke in his head. He gurgled and twitched, and spittle shot from his tongue.

His brain was flooded and drowned with a softly roaring blue foamy waterfall in a peaceful flowery forest full of singing starlings and sparrows, on a perfect, placid, ocean-skied April Sunday afternoon. It hit like a bomb.

Those subliminal tapes had been worth every penny. Now, if he could just stop vomiting on his suit. It didn't matter if it felt good. He melted back into the gestalt. The Beast was morphined to sleep and the Machine burned to life again.

"Give me back my wallet," Rick demanded.

"No," Ray replied, stuffing it back in his breast pocket.

All his ID, money real and imagined, everything essential to him. Ultraviolence shuddered in Rick's head, the sweet excuse for vicarious revenge against everyone he'd never punched back.

In his head: Him jumping. Lunging at the thieving straight-backed prep school bully, who deserved death. Reaching down his throat; pulling out squiggling heart and lungs, leaving them spitting on his face, walking off to Wagner. But that would be a man's action, regardless of how sick. His father told him many times he was no man, and Tania told him he'd have made a good lesbian if not for an offensive appendage.

"Give it here!" The bastard. Even from here he could smell the stink of oat bran on the suit's breath.

"Why? If you don't want to buy anything, what use could it possibly be to you? Perhaps we should donate the thing to some homeless crackbabies. They could boil the horsehide and pretend they're eating meat for a week." Everyone knew that joke was damn funny except Rick. What was *with* this guy, Ray wondered. "Bob, stand him up.

“I can stand up on my own.” Bob pushed Rick back down. “HEY!” Then he stood Rick up again. Ray started slapping Rick’s chest with the wallet.

“You come into our store with perverse intent, without any plan of buying anything whatsoever. Like you’re too good, like you don’t *need* anything. But you *do*, you smug little bohemian son of a bitch. You’re not *that* thin. There’s *something* you need here, and *we’re* going to find out what it is!”

“I’m going to call the cops on you first chance I get, you psychotic capitalist pigs!”

Bob grabbed Rick’s right arm and twisted it into Rick’s shoulder blade. “We don’t take kindly to frivolous litigation,” he said, and pushed Rick’s elbow up. He yelped like you probably would.

“Al!”

“We know how to deal with shoplifters,” Bob said.

“*What?*” Bob pushed it higher. *“Al! Listen! I don’t want anything here! I just came in to make a phone call!”*

“Then why are your clothes so old?” asked one.

“Why are your sneakers so worn and cheap?” asked another.

“What do you think you’ll accomplish by this statement?” asked another.

“Why the weird-looking long coat?”

“IT’S COLD! WHY DO YOU *THINK?*”

“Why don’t you wear a parka like everyone *else?* This has a Russian label.”

“It’s a *Russian coat.*”

“*Hm,*” they all muttered.

“What’s wrong with us, hm?” Ray inquired indignantly. “Is what we offer not *enough?* Isn’t everything easy to find? Doesn’t our Muzak soothe your nerves, you *bastard?* *Answer me!*” He gave Rick a slap or two across the face with the wallet. “Tell me! My god, man, don’t you to be a demographic? Don’t you *want* to have a *say* in the world around you? Look at this Salad Shooter! On sale this week at only seventeen-ninety-five! You’d still be able to get candy at the checkout! *A goddamn bargain, you bastard!*”

“For *Christ’s sake*, I don’t *need* it! *Let me go!*”

“Do you have one?”

“*No.*”

“Then *why don’t you need it?*” they insisted.

“Obviously *everyone* needs one,” Ray said. “And your not having one, probably not being able to afford one...well, you’d be desperate. Who’d blame you.” Ray snapped his fingers. “And such a *spacious coat.*”

“Plenty of space in that coat of yours,” Bob added, and thrust it in the inside pocket. “Can someone call the cops on this shoplifter?” he chuckled. “We’ll hold him here.”

“*What—Please. My girlfriend is stranded out on the road...I don’t have time. Please. I just want to call a tow-truck. Please.*”

“The *customer’s* always right. *Customers* get to use the phones. But you’re still *not* a customer. So that must mean you’re always *wrong.* Of course,” Ray said, “if you *buy* the item in question, you *become* a customer, and then everything will be wonderful

again. But, if you don't, you're a *shoplifter*. Simple, isn't it? See," Ray stressed to Rick, "there are five of us and we're dressed for sincerity. And my brother's chief of police."

"Bullshit. You're crazy. You stuffed that in my pocket."

"No, I didn't." The rest concurred with a shake of the heads. "And neither did Bob."

"How are you going to prove it? *How? Videotape?* I never *took* anything! You didn't *see* me take anything!"

"And that is, of course, a tribute to your skill. But we'll all *say* we saw it. And we did, didn't we, boys?"

"He had a very sly look on his face," said one.

"Thought he could get one by us," said the other. "But we taught him."

"*And you think the cops will believe that?*"

"Oh--By all means, let's call the authorities and let this be settled by professionals. We are only humble retailers." They marched him out down the main aisle of the store.

Ray couldn't have been more disappointed in America. You kill off the foreigners, the homeless, and the radicals for your children, to build a better tomorrow, and what does it get you? They fall into these adolescent ideas that property and wealth are wrong. But all that had been said a generation before, that became the captains of the empire. They sold the endless feed of toys and bought everyone. These were people with a sense of responsibility as consumers of the United States of America. Even their granny glasses and floods were bought on sale. They'd bought whatever fad they'd been sold since the Davy Crockett cap, like clockwork, completing the great assembly line that is this nation. Sure, they burned buildings, they threw bottles at the White House, they did that. But they bought. What else could matter?

But these, their flannel-wearing, fashion-disdaining, absolutely unambitious children—so miserable, so morose, and not buying *anything*. What did they want? Nothing stuck. Nothing worked. Every fad fizzled. Nobody bought.

It wasn't fair. The Bear was chained, eating its own diseased guts, snarling in a whimpery tone, hiding in a dank corner painted with the sweet smell of its own piss. Empire was now, and they were its heirs, the Order of Forbes. They had to remain vigilant, blotting out the starved, beheaded, pink, wriggling notions of collectivism wherever they slithered into a little light. Everything was simpler and happier back when there was only one brand name, when you could tell the customer to buy, give him a good stick up the backside and make him leave the store smiling. They'd dreamt of this since high school.

Seize the day. Ayn told them. Ayn wouldn't have laughed at their acne. This had to stop, and re-educating one at a time was better than none.

"Now, you have a choice. You can browse through this store till you find something you can't live without, and buy it at a generous every-day discount. Or--I don't know, Bob; do you think Cook County Jail serves turkey on Thanksgiving?"

"Wouldn't know." He smiled at Rick. "Never been there. I hear the cooks come in the food, though."

"But I--I can't afford anything! You don't understand! I'm *broke!* I barely make enough to *feed* myself! I can't waste the little I've got on *crap!*"

They all looked at him as Puritans might an admitted witch. “Do *not* insult merchandise. You’re in America.” Ray pushed him down the aisle. When Rick stopped, Ray pushed him ahead again. Rick stumbled loopily like a clown. They all loved a clown, because everyone agrees clowns are supposed to be funny. This stumbled and fell and hurt themselves and got up, and were happy because it made them laugh, and that felt good, to remember they still could. When Ray was younger his mother hired a clown called Pogo to perform at his birthday party, and it was the best one ever. Pogo even let him play with his puppet. He’d called it Mister Squirty.

Sam, the smiling sales associate, shot a disdainful look at Rick, then ignored him. He’d convinced the little old lady, who as it turned out merely had gas, and was also blind, of the necessity in every person’s home of these strange plastic coasters he called CDs. Seemed a bit steep, but she had so many glasses and not very long to live.

He’d also mentioned he could have her sent to a home.

There the items languished on the counter, mark-ups ripe, juicy, ready to burst, ready to be rung up. the stripe of her Visa, no answer came.

Once this little gray box had been a magical friend that gave them money for the asking or reason for confiscation. Now it smiled silent like a demon. Nothing, no matter how many times they tried, or battered it. The manager called it in, but only heard this: “*Gobble-gobble-gobble! We’re off for Thanksgiving! If you’re calling, you must not be! But if you leave your name & number, we’ll be sure to save some turkey and dressing for you! Happy holidays!*”

“I want to *pay!*” the little old lady squawked.

“Yes, we’re trying to—”

“Want to pay an’ an’ *go!*” Ray strode right over and asked whatever could be wrong. “I want to pay,” she croaked.

Ray shook her hand. Her wilted, weathered skin hung in rags “Of course you do, ma’am. Everybody does.” All she did all day was listen to her stories and never leave her house, till today. She knew they had her now; something terrible would happen if she didn’t buy. As long as she was out, she had to do as they liked. She wanted to finish paying her penalty for coming in, and never leave home again. “Why can’t this good lady pay?”

“Machine’s down,” said the manager. “And there’s no one to call it in to.”

“Well, then, I suppose you’ll have to write down the number and expiration date and call it in tomorrow.”

“But--but we won’t have the *time* tomorrow! It’ll be the day after *Thanksgiving*. Place’ll be packed! I’

“Tomorrow?” shrieked the little old lady. “Ohh, gosh, I’m not coming back tomorrow!”

“Won’t be a moment, ma’am,” Ray promised her.

“Stop touching me, young man!”

“But—” the manager whistered to Ray, “but she’ll walk out of here and what if it turns out it’s *declined*? It’ll come out of my check again! I gotta make my rent this month!”

So Ray did it himself. “Bag the items, Sam,” he said.

Then the blind old lady’s eyes snapped wide open and she snatched her card back. “You’re writing down my *number!*” He tried to explain, but she’d have none of it. He

would give her credit card number to the Antichrist. That was what Jimmy Saunders had warned about any other use of the card but donations to his ministry. What had she been thinking? “I know what you’re up to! You’ll all burn in hell! Just see!” Out she marched, leaving her items right there on the counter, unpaid for. Then she slipped in a puddle and broke her chin. No one heard or saw.

Up went the manager’s job, poof! in gray, wrinkled smoke. Ray tore the name-badge from his breast, leaving a hole the size of a half-dollar, and handed it to an overjoyed Sam. “Hi,” said Ray. “*Your* new name is No One.” He snapped his fingers and the security guards dragged him down the long, long main aisles to the exit, his chin skidding on the unwaxed floor.

The suits congratulated one another on their fine handling of the situation, and decided the occasion called for a fifteen-percent raise for all five of them. “Hurrah!” they shouted. “Let’s make it twenty- five!”

Sam was overjoyed. “Me too?” They glared at him like he’d called Ray’s dead mother a whore. Sam went off to dust something.

Rick had heard everything. He wanted revenge. Chastity was waiting still, hating him more every second, and at this point he had someone to blame. Ruined holidays are never forgotten.

Her relatives were probably sure by now that he’d killed them both and then himself. They read mysteries by the boxful out there in the suburbs. He had to escape, and go back to the car, assuming they’d even stayed put once the sun came out. He couldn’t call anyone, like he’d promised; the paper with the numbers was just soggy lint now. At least he could still get it towed. They could call from the garage, and then by the time her dad showed up all would be fixed and pleasant.

But he had to get her a present, or else forever she’d hate Thanksgiving, and him for ruining it. He couldn’t let her leave him. He’d never afford the rent then. He had to buy something to get out.

They wouldn’t know his credit cards were no good till tomorrow, and they’d never find him anyway. They wanted him to buy something so bad? *Okay.*

“Scuse me?” He clapped. Bob rushed right over. “I’d like to see this ring.”

“You--you want the *diamond ring*? But, sir, it’s *very exp--*”

“It’s for a very special young lady.”

“But sir, you obviously couldn’t--”

“Shut *up*, Sam,” Ray blurted quickly.

Rick smiled. “That’s right, Sam. Shut up. In fact, I don’t even want to examine it. It probably shines even brighter up close. It’s fine. I’m in a hurry. Wrap it up. I’ll pay with--” He slapped his long-since cancelled credit card on the counter. “—*this*, please.”

Bob argued this was a thousand dollars, and he’d be gone before they could verify it. Ray replied it was a thousand dollars, and if he didn’t want to be homeless like the last manager, so he’d better shut up.

“Isn’t spending titanic sums of cash what these cards are *for*? I mean, if you don’t want me to *buy* anything--”

They laughed. Good joke! Ray told Bob he’d better ring it up, so he did. As he drew the carbon across the card he winced. Rick smiled the biggest smile.

“You know, though...you’ve been so rude to me, I think I’m entitled to a discount.”

“A what?”

“Half-price.”

“WHAT?”

“Half-price or I don’t buy.”

“Half-price, Sam,” Ray relented. *Two* big sales failed because of employee attitude. The owners would watch the tapes after the holidays, and see them failing with every customer. It’d ruin their mood, and Ray would be made a toilet-cleaner. This was no time to think. “Ring it up,” he said. “If it doesn’t go through, you pay the other half.”

“WHAT?” Sam howled.

“We pay you enough to afford it, unless you’re spending the money on *drugs* or something. Think next time before you argue.” So Bob rung it up, and bagged it, without another word, and Rick finished off with a forgery of his dead father’s signature and a fake phone number.

The transaction was soon complete. Rick had his sweetie’s sparkly ring. “Thank you. Now--can I use the phone?”

“Pardon me?”

“Only customers can use the phone, right? So I just bought something. *Can I use the phone?*”

“Uh--they only take incoming calls. Sorry. Happy Thanksgiving, now. Drive safely.”

“*You still won’t let me?*” Rick slammed the bag on the counter. “Fuck you! I’m returning this! You can tear up that carbon and stick it up your ass!”

“We don’t accept returns. Thank you.”

“You fucking *bastard*.”

“SECURITY!”

They made sure his purchase was firmly gripped in his hand before tossing him out the door.

He’d never flown before today, but was growing no fonder of the experience on the second try. His butt skidded through his trousers across the asphalt. At least his wallet cushioned half. “Have a nice day!”

SLAM!

He felt a tap on his shoulder, and found himself gaping at a woman in head to toe skintight fetish leather gear, mask and all. The zippers were open at the eyes and mouth. She was hermetically sealed in skin; the only way in was a single zipper from throat to crotch..

Suddenly she grabbed Rick and kissed him hard; her tongue was as long and thick as John Holmes’ cock and he gagged. It tickled his epiglottis till he thought he’d vomit or suffocate. Behind her, spewing great gouts of poison gas from the trunk, idled the Patchwork Car, from this morning.

She struck him in the head with a small blackjack.

Dizziness; then out of his mouth came the whisper, “Rosebud,” for no reason at all. She stuffed him in the trunk, careful to leave the lid wide open, and drove at a very dangerous speed down the road.



chapter four.

STUTTER

Rick awoke in a monoxide daze with the lid of the trunk clattering, *boom boom clank*

above him, held in place, in theory, by a poorly-tied length of frayed hay twine. Where were the cops now, to pull this criminal over for this unsecured trunk? Probably stayed home; the roads were far too dangerous today. The exhaust was giving him a real skullcracker of a headache. (Or maybe that had been the blackjack.) Like a thousand eggshells had broken between brain and brainpan, shards pressing like Ginsu into the softer and more delicate of his lobes. Lucky he hadn't fallen out while he was unconscious. His abductor hadn't tied him down, apparently relying on unconsciousness alone. Or, failing that, at least the fear of tumbling to one's death from a vehicle moving at, as near as he could figure from the speed and splatter of the mud in his face, at least five miles per hour over any speed limit he'd ever heard of.

Suddenly he noticed his pants were open.

But the ring; the fraudulently-acquired ring. Yes, his trusty stubborn fingers hadn't let go of the bag. In fact, his abductor had tied it on, and the circulation was reaching a critical low. He ripped it loose, but still held on, in the other hand where he could feel it digging painfully and unambiguously into his palm. He'd only have to show it to Chastity and she couldn't scream. He'd even promise to marry her if necessary. *Right in front of Jenifer*; he savored the image of Jenifer's final humiliation, rolling it around in his head, for he knew there was no chance in hell Jenifer would ever actually let him *see* it.

But before the girlfriend could be snowed, there was the abductor to consider. But it couldn't be so hard to get away. They had to stop sometime, and had only clubbed him from behind. It couldn't be so difficult to kill a person, whomever it was. The human body was so easily wrecked just by accident; surely a person wasn't difficult to kill on purpose, even if he'd never done it before. The abductor had a neck that could be snapped like any other. And he was tall, and stronger than most knew; he just didn't make a show of it. Easy. *Just wait till this car stops. C'mon back and see how I'm doing*

The car skidded, and stopped suddenly, and Rick nearly wet his pants. He also noticed, now that he looked, that there was no tire iron or anything else potentially lethal in the trunk with him, save the exhaust filling all the air the mud did not. Perhaps if all the rest he'd planned failed, pleading for his life as pitifully as he could might work. He'd obviously never hurt this person, seeing as he'd never hurt anyone in his life; it can't be so difficult to talk someone out of something they have no reason to do.

He saw the bulge of tits in the bodylength leather. He couldn't hit a woman. The leathergirl slammed the door, ran around to the trunk and yanked him out to his feet, her mouth, with its obscene tongue that seemed a little familiar, now zipped tight. He made not one sound. They were back on 88, where he'd left the dead car and the angry women. All that was left was a puddle of steaming grease.

"What the hell?"

Then she turned him to see a pay phone not fifty yards away the whole time, but that he couldn't have seen in the rain.

"Wh--Where--" He whirled around slowly, looking in every direction available, as though they might have slid off the road into a ditch or field nearby.

"Where did they go? Oh Jesus--Where...?"

She knocked him out again, tossed him back in the trunk, making sure to put the ring he'd dropped back in his hand, and peeled further away. She tried to stop herself laughing. He might hear, and it would spoil the effect.



The junkyard was stocked thick in piles of dead rotting cars and various parts thereof for miles; fenced in behind the ugly little glass service station. Chastity couldn't take her eyes off that beautiful field of rust. This was why she'd come to the Midwest, the birthplace and burial ground of industry, of her love, metal, twisted and corroded; all the art supplies she could want. She had an acetylene torch at home. She hadn't welded much sculpture the past few months because of the unexplained cut in her allowance, and scrap prices going up and all. She'd been forced to paint, but all she could do was life. She'd painted Rick more times than she cared to forget.

She could paint okay. But it was flat, and it was fabric, oils--girl stuff, she thought. She didn't really want to make art. It was only what she called her experiments, to justify them. What she wanted was to make killer machines, and only art would consider that socially acceptable. Her life was flesh. Her art was melting and bending hard and cold metal, springs, cogs, and any other junk, and sculpting it into God.

All this scrap barbwired away, going to waste in oily rot. It made her sick, this waste. She trembled tight between her legs, trying not to turn around to see her *actual* problems.

She'd made the call, once the phone had come into view. After her silent dad had picked them up, Jenifer was left at Aunt Glinda's while Chastity made her dad go back out looking for Rick. Right now she was getting drunk with Chastity's family, relaxed, laughing and joking because she had nothing to be upset about, bragging about her perfect Jason who was too sick to attend, showing pictures and making a good impression first. Chastity was glad Jason was sick. Maybe he'd die and Jenifer would shut up about him.

Across the street the Patchwork Car burnt rubber to a halt, spat Rick onto the pavement, and sped off eighty miles an hour, vomiting a cloud of monoxide in its wake. Rick on his ass on the pavement again, read the new note rubber-banded to his sleeve:



He tossed the gibberish away. Across the street he caught sight of a mortified Chastity at the garage, next to a 100-gallon water heater of a man who looked like Hemingway just before the shotgun. Daughter and Dad posed before his car hanging limp on a tow truck hook. The mechanics caught a big one.

But The Ring. That would erase this horror. He still had it, by God. How could he do better than to propose right in front of her father? For a moment his insecurity, obviously, told him perhaps he should think about such a serious step, him being only twenty-two and any number of other, equally valid cons, doubts which came in an instantaneous, confusing flurry the instant he let the first one cross his mind; but he dismissed them all with three deep breaths from his diaphragm, like Tania had once taught him. Reconsidering was the first step to inertia. He should've known. He'd been reconsidering his whole life. But he wasn't that cringing, acne scab-ridden little teenage worm anymore; he wasn't even called "*Fletcher*" anymore. Now was the moment to be brash, courageous, and foolishly romantic. Then she couldn't yell at him. Besides, the length of the engagement could be negotiated later.

Chastity watched him get his probably-stoned ass up from the road and stagger across the busy thoroughfare. If he got hit and ended up in a hospital or grave, nobody would give her shit about him anymore. Unfortunately, he made it. Of course the first thing he did was hug her, before even looking at any angry expression with which she might be warning him away.

"Chastity." He hugged her like a retard. "Thank *God* you're all right!"

"You don't believe in God," she snarled. He hugged her again as though he'd done it wrong the first time, simply not getting it. The icy, withering, quiet voice, the one she used as the last step before the yell. "Stop touching me in front of my dad." She

walked away fast, panic shooting up her skirt. He was the plague. He followed, shoving some diamond ring in her face. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s an engagement ring,” he stuttered. “For, for you.”

“Oh. Like this is supposed to impress me. Like this’ll make me go all bubbly, coo and melt, right?”

“No, I--”

“Glass. This,” she said, careful that her father was well away, facing away, “is *glass*. You’re too *cheap* and *poor* to buy a real one. You think I’m *stupid*?”

“It’s real, Chastity,” he implored, excited. A smile like that salesman he’d seen. A big one. People instantly trusted big smiles. She’d have to believe he was sincere if he was smiling for once. “Really real!”

“I wouldn’t care if it *was*! You think I’m some dumb *bitch*? *You think that?* HUH?” She tossed it into the street, laughing as much as she could rip from her stomach. It rolled away. He ran after it, but no use; it was swallowed by the sewers forever. What a cheap, insulting, theatrical gesture. Like anything he could do could make up for this anyway. Along was coming her father; she could hear his chortle approach.

“Tsk.” She wrapped her arms tight around her chest and walked away to fume alone. Let *Daddy* kill him. What had she ever been thinking anyway? Rick looked just as anemic, useless and faggy as Mike had pictured him. It was so clear now that Dad was around. Was she blind or something?

He was still calling after her, lying lamely. “*Someone kidnapped me!*” He really oughtn’t to even try, she thought. He looks so obvious. Just like the one about how he hadn’t cheated with *that bitch last summer*. If she’d only left him then she’d not be embarrassed before her dad now.

“You must be Rick,” the large, frightening father said. Rick tried to shake hands like his dad had taught him, but to no avail. Mike’s grip broke bones. A handshake, his dad had always chastised him, was proof of masculinity. “Yours,” he’d said, “is proof of something else entirely.” But what did Dad know? That was the backward South. This wasn’t there. Men didn’t care about that crap elsewhere. It was an empty social gesture here, nothing more.

The little faggot had a clammy, limp palm. Never mind, Mike figured; he could always wash it later. “Mechanic says your car’s dead as a doornail.”

“What?”

And on cue, along came the mechanic to join the huddle around Rick. Once the pack smelt blood it had no choice but to gather. “I’m Joe. You the owner?” he asked Rick, who nodded. “Yeah...You’re the type.” Mike nodded. “Japanese cars don’t break down like this. What the hell’d you *do* to it?”

“I *drove* it. Is that not what they’re for?”

“I’ll bet. You fuckers buy this foreign shit, put people like my brother in Detroit out of work and don’t even *maintain* the things!” Joe spat. “You got insurance?”

“It...um, lapsed...Funniest thing, heh, just, you know, got by me. You know how that is.”

“Huh. No, no, I *respect* cars,” Joe said. “Looka that!” The motor was fried charcoal-black. Thick crusts of oil snaked around every part like hardened lava. To clean it you’d need a pick-axe. The engine was destroyed. Rick couldn’t stop coughing at the stink.

“Better get this towed off my lot by Monday.” He slammed the hood down. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

“What’ll you do if--if I don’t? Can’t you give me a little time to think?”

“What’s to think? Off my lot by Monday evening. Four whole days. Just because it’s a holiday, mind.”

“But--but I--Please.” He could never afford that, certainly not so quick. Perhaps begging would help. He followed Joe. He tapped on his shoulder. Joe turned with disgust.

“What the hell you touching me for?” He laid his cigar gently atop a gasoline can. “Didn’t even *haveta* work today.” He belted Rick in the chin, then the stomach, then kicked him into a wall. “Off. My lot. *Sunday*. Or else.” He left Rick there coughing a bit of blood, picked up his cigar, and back inside he went with a slam, locking the door, back to his feast of Cheetos and Old Style, and helmets & balls on the tube. Soon after, he dozed off. He dreamt of pork.

Chastity ran over to help Rick, but stopped cold when her father spoke up. “Guy hit me like that, “ Mike snorted, “I’d at least *try* to fight back.”

“He’s a pacifist!” *coward* “He’s a deeply moral” *could never protect me, like my father thinks I need, and now Dad saw* “and spiritual guy!”

“Know what we used to do to pacifists in’ Nam?” She paid no attention. “Set fire to ‘em,” he snorted. She had to pretend she found that at least a little funny. He hadn’t paid next semester’s tuition yet.

Rick got up drooling for breath like a colicky dog. He couldn’t stop coughing. Maybe he’d broken a rib, or a few. Maybe it would stab him in the lung, and he’d die, and then they’d give a shit. Some phlegm came up from the incendiary explosions in his chest. He didn’t look. He hoped it wasn’t red.

Only one sure way to stop a cough; he lit a cigarette. His body wanted the nicotine badly enough by now to quiet the cough reflex at the merest sniff of the stuff. There was a stream of gasoline running from under his car to just a foot from his feet, and past, thick with every inflammable color of the rainbow. *If I fuck this cigarette into that puddle*, he thought, *every problem I ever had will be over*. But that damn voice of doubt squeaked in his head, *Explosions never solved anything*. So he just smoked it instead.

“Need any help, son?” Mike sounded very sincere.

“Yeah, uh, I mean...Well...uh...”

Chastity panicked. She couldn’t tell him to say, *No, that’s okay, thanks*. Because Rick was poor. He really *needed* help, particularly now. He was gullible enough to think her father was being more than polite. And from the look on his face he was just about as ready as could be to let her father know just how poor her boyfriend was.

“Well, seeing as you’re nearly a member of the family, maybe I can help a little.” He put his arm around Rick’s shoulders. Chastity was afraid to breathe. *Rick better not, he’d better say no, say no, say no you fucker--*

But gullible Rick chomped right down on the bait. “Could you? But it’s so m--” Chastity wanted to die.

“Tut, tut. We’ll talk about this tomorrow. Now, let’s go eat.” He went to warm up the motor. Rick dug out his personal property from his former car. Chastity came along.

“You don’t say anything back,” she hissed behind his ear, “‘cause we don’t have much time and I don’t want him to hear, but, uh, you’d better not take any of my dad’s fucking money, and you owe him sixty-five dollars for the tow, and, uh, you’d

better pay it back or I'll fucking break up with you, asshole. That's all." She joined her dad.

Rick slammed down the hatch hard as he could. "Fuck it." He bashed on the door, and they unlocked it. He ran in, slapping the keys right on the mechanic's desk; he jolted awake with a confused grunt. "Here. Car's yours!" Rick threw all the papers that had been in the glove compartment on the desk. He signed them all. "Take the fucker. All nice and legal. Chop it up for parts or whatever you were going to do once I couldn't afford to tow it."

"Hey! I ain't buyin' some broken-down piece of shit!"

"It's free, *fuckhead*. Merry Christmas. Ho fucking ho." Rick saw on the desk a framed photo of a teenage girl. "I realize she's too attractive but... This *your* daughter?"

"Yeah?"

"May she grow up a fine, tall, pregnant junkie." *SLAM!*

Her dad's car had already gone a few feet, but stopped to let him in the back. "Work out a deal with him?" Mike asked.

"Um, yeah."

"See? Things always turn out well if a man's *assertive*."

And so, in silence, they rode into the plump, drunken bosom of Chastity's family.



Aunt Glinda was far different before her husband died of cirrhosis two years before, but now had irrevocably settled on the personality of a goldfish. Thin lips paralyzed in a tepid smile, a house kept in immaculate white silence; presumably God had widowed her in vengeance for bad housekeeping. Forever after, the home would be kept brittle and pure. Why should she feel comfortable when he was dead? Even the ashtrays had snuffers to keep the glass unburnt. She emptied them with every butt.

The main room was clogged with smoke, bellies, booze and bleach. Rick smelled only the rum; he knew the smell very well. When he was four his father left a glass of what he thought was Coke on the butcher's block in the kitchen, and Rick asked for a sip. His dad said sure. He thought it was very humorous the way Rick gagged and spat it all back up.

He had to talk to her first. He found a room nobody was in. She said nothing. He shut the door, thinking that now they were alone, a hug, a kiss, a gesture would thaw the wet wall of ice. A bit of pleading, he couldn't live without her and so forth; his muscles twisted into sailor's knots and would crush his bones if he breathed too hard.

"What the fuck did you shut that door for?" she demanded.

Say the *wrong* thing. "I don't see why *you're* so upset. You're not the one who just lost a nine thousand-dollar car."

"Don't light that cigarette. I won't kiss you anymore if you smoke."

"Like you would anyway now."

"It'll kill you."

"You'd *mind*?"

There was a turquoise-tiled bathroom right in that room, just like their own at home. She snatched the cancerstick from his hand, tossed it into the toilet bowl, and

flushed twice. “They know I don’t smoke. Now he knows what your brand smells like. *Shit!* I rearranged the whole fucking house and it still smells like *you!*”

“They don’t know. “

“*They do!* God *damn* you, they *know!* I know them, you *don’t!* They know, they do they, they always fucking *DO!* *I can’t lie! I suck at it! SUCK!* He *can always tell!* He just *waits* till I forget some of the details of my lie, and then he *pounces!* You fucker! I’m trapped and you don’t even care! You don’t understand! Jenifer was tearing you down all the way here!”

“Thanks for defending me. “

“Defending? What’s to defend? Took *me* a *minute* to see the phone. “

“After the rain lifted..”

“It was *right* there on the road. You could’ve *tried* to look for it. Would’ve ended up a lot less walking in the mud.”

“I don’t care what that bitch says about me. I’ve heard everything she’s said behind my back.”

“She’s still got my father’s ear.”

“You’re *so worried* about what he’ll think of me and then you bring *her* along. Good planning, hon.”

“I had to. He’s always called her the daughter he never had. Although since he *fucked* her, I’m not sure what to think of that.”

“He what?...”

“Till I caught them on the couch. *God,* it was *so gross...*”

“Well, that’s California, I guess. What can you expect of a place where they make dogs millionaires and hire therapists to help them cope with it?”

“*Don’t you tell Mom!* And you better pay him back every cent for that tow. It’s a test. Every fucking cent, or he’ll *never* shut up about it!” She pummeled his chest. “*You don’t care! He’ll rip up my check! My fucking check! That’s all I’ve got! YOU can’t support me! I can’t depend on you!...*”

He stepped back. He had to have a smoke, fuck whatever she said. She let the baby have his bottle. Maybe he’d fucking listen now. Rick knew heart complaints ran in his family. That was why he smoked, to hasten the day of arrest. His chest hurt from her fists. He wondered if that was anything like how the start of a stroke felt.

Her arms were aching and exhausted. “You *want* me to stay with you, don’t you?..” Her tone was so low, he wasn’t sure he was meant to answer.

“Yes--Why?”

“I could get a *full state scholarship* in *California.* Then I wouldn’t need to even leave home. He reminds me of this often. Got me?” She fell backfirst on her aunt’s bed. “*God!* I’ve been miserable planning all this for months, I thought I wouldn’t have to worry after *toda,* ‘*after today we’re in the clear,*’ I thought, yeah, heh, and *you fucked everything up!* And it was all so *I* could stay with *you,* and you, you *don’t even care!*”

He tried to walk out, his ears still full of poison. She couldn’t let him out fuming like that. Rick could not keep a burr under his butt for very long without complaining to everyone nearby about it. He’d drink and something stupid would spill out. His face was beet red. He was boiling over like a child. He had to be made to think things were all right, till they got safely home. They couldn’t break up here. Not in front of *them.* Even if she decided to do so the minute they got home tonight, she wouldn’t tell her dad till

February at the least. She pushed his back flat into the door and tried to remember the Look, the one that made him drop everything he was thinking. The one she had when she *wanted* to fuck him. He had to be made manageable before they left, and she had some stress to get out of her system. It wasn't that the danger of it turned her on. That was a cliché. She did nothing normal unless her parents were watching. She suddenly couldn't stop thinking that they were.

"If you say one word, or move one muscle, I stop." With a forced smirk, as though he could distinguish at a time like this, she undid his belt and fly with her teeth and fell to her knees. "You'd better appreciate this." He went paralytic. In a blink his will was broken right down to the valences. He wouldn't move now if she'd pulled out a pair of gelding shears.

His pants fell down to his ankles and she drew his briefs down to his mismatched socks. Dead and quiet. She liked him this way. It seemed appropriate to his cadaver frame. She spoke a few pornographic purrs regarding size and flavor.

And so she set to making him forget every word she'd just said.



"The nerve."

Sip.

"Of that."

Sip. "Bitch." Gargle.

That finished Jenifer's third Scotch & Water since she'd been here, and she couldn't think of a single reason she shouldn't have more once she remembered how to get up from this very comfortable bed full of coats. They just left her all by herself, not even through the door five minutes and they'd already gone off to fuck somewhere, no doubt, probably in the very next room. Didn't even say hi to her, didn't even notice she'd followed them here.

Too many people, too much noise. That'd be Chastity's excuse. She lay back on the wet coats and could swear she saw tartans dancing on the ceiling. Disgusting, that Chastity. *Fucking nympho*. Just next door, with only a plank of wood between Chastity and her family, which she was most likely doing it up against. That whore. She probably didn't even lock it.

Jenifer wondered if she ought to give the wall a listen with her empty glass. No, she had too much class. After all, she wasn't the one fucking right now at such a family time. She'd always thought she'd been meant to be Mike's daughter.

The coat immediately underneath her was particularly mildewy and rank; olive drab, thick wool, with stupid pins with stupid sayings all over the breast. Of course, Rick's would smell worst of all. God, yuck, she'd been lying on it? Now she *had* to get up.

Whoosh! the room swung by. But she stayed standing; swaying but still erect. She noticed she'd knocked Rick's coat on the floor, and just as she was about to jump up and down on it, when she noticed his wallet had fallen out, quite clearly, on the floor.

She picked it up, and thought a few thoughts. Like an answered prayer, there was his license plain as day, his picture, signature, and the address in Chicago where he wasn't supposed to live; there naked in official laminated typescript for any to see.

But how would she get it back to the coat in time? Suppose he checked for it. Rick seemed the type who'd scream like a little spoiled girl till it was found. She *could* say she'd found it, just lying there on the floor. If she didn't pick it up right then, someone might steal it, and what kind of a friend would she be then?

She remembered helping Chastity burn all his letters, her address book, her diaries, and everything else with his return address in Santa Cruz, down on the nude beach at midnight, two days before they got on the plane back to Chicago, before she left the state and her bedroom could be scoured. "I thought you said you didn't *want* to move in with him anyway," Jenifer had said to her. "Thought he *fucked around* on you."

"Shut up and hold the gascan steady," was all Chastity had replied, to all her advice, all her attempts to get her back on track. Never listened, not once. "And she was supposed to move in with me," she muttered. The planets willed this license into Jenifer's hand. She was nothing, merely the heavens' tool. What could she do? Saturn had seen it all. Chastity must be taught a lesson.

A furtive look, this way, then that, despite nobody looking. She slipped the license into her stocking and stuffed the wallet back in his coat, tossing it in a corner like she'd planned to do. No, no, she had to put it back. Otherwise he could say she knocked it loose. Though, come to think of it, how would she get the license back without the wallet? She hated being this drunk. "Like he needs a driver's license now," she chuckled aloud. *He might write a check.* "No...He's *always broke.*" But what could he do? Like she gave a stinking damn what that fucking closet case thought of her anyway. But still, just to avoid complications, it was best to take the whole wallet and put the coat right back. That wouldn't have been so difficult to figure if she'd been sober.

She steadied herself in the doorway, trying to recall how to walk. There was Mike outside with Barbi, mingling. Jenifer put her glass down. How had she done all that with one hand? Put it down, though; wouldn't do to break it. That's it. *Deep breath and go.* She stumbled before she knew it right into Mike's fat, hairy back. He turned around, ready to kill. "Oops, it's only me..." She gave out with a quick, chaste but flirty giggle, humming the first few bars of *If I Only Had A Brain*, then another giggle, then, "y'know?" Mike laughed back and everything was normal.

He pointed to her empty hand. "What, no drink, young lady? I'll fix that! Excuse us, Barbi."

"Oh, you two have fun. I'm plenty busy."

As they fell into the crowd away from Barbi's sight, Mike had a quick squeeze of Jenifer's ass. "Gained a couple, huh?" She tried to control her giggling. She didn't really feel like doing so now, but once she got started she found it difficult to stop. Still had the wallet. Got the license out. Too perfect. It only reminded her: God himself chose her for this. *He did not mean Chastity to be with that twit.* Chastity would thank her later. "Mike, I've got something to show you."



Once the blur in the blood goes flat, all sex looks silly. They brushed the tangled hair from their eyes, away from each other. Chastity didn't like to watch him drool. She excused herself to the bathroom to wash the come from her chin.

Rick lay limp and smiling, feeling like he did on the mornings he had no work to rush to. He'd stay in bed as long as he could, drifting into a half-sleep haze in his warm,

soft, two-inch-thick womb of blankets, eyelids cracking, closing, cracking, and shutting again, attention floating in languid suspension of time and sense, sometimes till three p.m. some weekends. It may seem silly to feel this ecstatic over a blowjob, but only if one has never had one, or the equivalent if appropriate. His every bone had gone warm gelatin. He saw no reason not to stay right there on the floor. For one brief moment he had attained the most comfortable position lying down any man ever had.

Then someone stepped on him.

Chastity was glad she'd taken off her blouse and kept her eyes shut. Men weren't supposed to have orgasms as explosive as his. Although they were at least masculine in the incredibly embarrassing expressions into which coming swirled his face. She always had to look away to avoid laughing and scarring him for life, or whatever happened when you did that to a guy. These days, she mostly had him take her from behind. She respected that, to men, coming was very serious business and not to be tittered at, at least not till you're drunk, later, with your girlfriends.

She filled her cupped hands with water and washed her face clean, then dried it, then repeated this procedure twice. She never could understand a minute afterward how she'd liked it so much at the time. *Dry. Wash again; you might have missed a pore.*

He'd better fucking behave now.

"Your lipstick's smeared," Jenifer said, behind her.

Chastity whirled, face of hellfire. "The door was shut. Fucking shut. Get out. We'll be out in a bit. Respect our fucking *privacy*, Jenifer. *God.*" It made Chastity uneasy how Jenifer just smirked and tossed Chastity her makeup, and seemed in no rush to take anything Chastity said seriously.

"I think there's some mouthwash in the medicine cabinet, too," Jenifer sneered.

"Yeah? How would *you* know? This is *my* aunt's house!" There was.

"She has me over sometimes."

"She *what?*"

"She gets lonely, and she tells me you've been busy."

There was lipstick. Chastity used it. "If I ignore you, Jenifer, you'll go away."

As Jenifer walked past Rick she laughed at his trousers and underwear, still down around his ankles, and the lipstick allover his cock. He had the stupidest sleepy grin on his face. It was very comical. She snapped her fingers in his ear and startled him back to the world. "Yep, just as small as I ever thought."

"And just how much had you been wondering?" Chastity said. But Jenifer had already slammed the door behind her, no doubt to talk to her father. No doubt she'd been talking about something with her father all this time.

No use in worrying; couldn't afford to lose the time. Jenifer was saying some shit to someone at this very minute. "For Christ's sake, Rick, pull your trousers up. " As he puzzled that out she put on her makeup. Makeup, pregnancy tests--seems rabbits always die for women's sins. She resented complicitous guilt forced on her by industry, and in such a petty way. But right now she needed to look better than good, and right now mascara that didn't run was well worth any number of rabbits' lives. People would tolerate her falling apart in every other conceivable way, long as she looked good. She thanked God she was a girl. Nobody asked her anything serious that could break past her skin. Nobody minds when a girl is quiet, or better yet, paints her mouth shut. "There."

All Rick's ache had pulled back tight around him. His bones were too long for his skin. His ankles hurt from standing. "Don't you groan," she said. "I let you come. I even *swallowed. After everything you did.* So you do what *I* say the rest of the day, got me? You follow my lead, you keep your mouth shut, you *say* what I *prompt* you to say, and you do *not let them get you alone.* And don't you *dare* talk back to me now. I have taken away every last reason you have to bitch."

"I don't know," Rick said. "What's so terrible about me?"

"There's nothing terrible about you. It's just that the only thing *we need* is for them to *like* you in a bland kind of way. That's all. The best thing would be for them to come away with *no impression of you at all.*"

"The same thing would happen if they got to know me."

She held him. "I had a dream last night," she said. "I was painting you writing, in a beautiful house with a lake in back and a white picket fence in front, out in the middle of Wyoming or somewhere. And we had two children and nobody bothered us. It was just us, like a little village of our own. It's other people. It's other people who want to destroy us. We don't have anything. If we don't fool them they'll crush us. *They don't need to know us.*" She kissed him.

"You taste like Listerine," he said.

"Kills sperm on contact," she snickered.

Given that he'd have little else to do, Rick resolved, in the course of this supposedly festive day, to at least smoke enough cigarettes to give emphysema to an Amish village and drink till he couldn't think, so he could say nothing of any importance. Which presented a problem, as her parents hadn't come all the way from California to meet him. Chastity excused her self to get a drink. "I don't see either of them around. *Stay right here.* I'll be back." He felt like he'd been left in a shopping center while his mother went to try on shoes.

She'd be back soon, wouldn't she? "Look at me when I'm talking to you, son," Mike chortled. Rick laughed along. Mike pulverized his hand again. Behind his back Rick worked the fingers, trying to reintroduce circulation. "This is Chastity's stepmother, Barbi."

Rick almost shrieked. He immediately knew that bronze tan and the perk of the hip, that her breasts were precisely 38D, and that there were thirty-four perfect teeth in that ear-to-ear, friendly mouth. Her turn-ons were Vonnegut, puppies, and sex in sand dunes, turnoffs rude people and book mutilation. He knew her pubic hair was black, regardless what bleach you saw. He knew what she looked like spreadeagled on her stomach, nude in a pool, floating on an inflatable raft against a cheap Egyptian backdrop. *No. No, it couldn't be that Barbi.*

But he knew all this about her on sight, knew it for certain, and was terrified to realize from where. Every time his loneliness had made him suicidal, like just last week for instance, he'd masturbated to that magazine instead of slitting his wrists, hundreds of times, four times in one day alone. She'd done him on her back and his, on all fours, with her wrists trussed far above her head, her moist pink hips always twisting in anticipation, every orifice he could find begging for his come. Chastity had asked him many times what his sexual fantasies were. He told her had none. But now there she was in three dimensions and it was Chastity's mother. Now that he couldn't stop his eyes running up and down her, he wished he'd worn more restraining pants.

He shook with that hand, too. The very hand that had so many times played the part of her vagina. “So good to meet you. I’ve really enjoyed jerking off to your centerfold.”

“Why, thank you, that’s always so nice to hear.”

“Do you know which one I liked the best? The one where your face is plowed into the pillow, your ass is really high in the air, and your tits hang down like...like udders on some really sexy cow.”

“I’m so flattered. Hearing that makes my work all worthwhile.”

No. Maybe not. God, though, her skin was just as soft as he’d imagined. Must have been no airbrushing at all. Human beings don’t have skin that looks printed. Why would his leg not stop jittering and jolting like a dog’s?

“Pleasure to meet you,” Barbi said, for what sounded like the third time. He snapped out of it. *Think of her as your 90-year-old maiden aunt Glynis.* “Chastity had told him they didn’t sleep in the same room anymore. He didn’t want this goddess? He felt cockier. *This impotent aged bearded hog...I’m scared of this? Chastity’s even more so? They seem perfectly friendly, nice people. She’s so fucking paranoid.* For some reason Barbi was staring at his hair.

“Is that a wig?”

“...I’m sorry?”

“Your hair. That’s a wig, right? I would *kill* for that color. You can’t get that from a bottle,” she sighed. “Only human hair will do.”

“It’s human hair, all right. It’s mine.”

“Aw, c’mon! Don’t be so *defensive*. In this day and age, if you want to wear a wig I certainly wouldn’t think less of you. But I’m from California,” Barbi giggled. “Anyway, I think it looks *good* on you.”

She gave it a good yank. Rick yelped. Chastity noticed and saw everyone notice too. “Oh,” Barbi giggled again, flushed in the cheeks. “I’m so sorry. You just used so much hairspray it *looks* like a wig.”

Rick kept the grin on. He was raised a Southern gentleman. Death before rudeness. So he smiled at her funny joke.

“Must have taken you along time to grow such a luxurious head of hair,” Mike said. “What does your boss think? Or don’t you have one?”

“My boss doesn’t care.”

“You look just like those dickheads who called me a babykiller when I got back from’ Nam. Nothing personal.”

“Oh? My dad was there too. He was a lieutenant.”

“I was a sergeant. Had my own unit. Some of ‘em even made it back.”

“Mike even got some medals, didn’t you, honey?”

“Three purple hearts.” Fifteen minutes summarized: Shot twice in the Tet Offensive, once in the buttock, another in the back of his thigh. Most of his unit died. Luckily, he managed to rescue the cook.

“My dad got two. And the Congressional Medal of Honor. His finger got slashed off by friendly shrapnel. Refused morphine till all his men were pulled out.”

“Which finger?” like this would trip him up in his lie.

Rick stuck his middle finger from his fist with a charming smile. “Don’t take it the wrong way.”

“My,” Barbi chirped. “That must have made Rush Hour very difficult.” “How long was he in country?”

“A year.”

Mike chuckled with relief. “That’s *nothing*,” he pfft’d. “I was there six.”

“Gosh,” said Rick. “You must have liked it.”

“I did, I did. Best time I ever had in my life.” Mike swigged his rum and smacked his lips. “You know what I hate? These crybabies who moan on and on about the ‘trauma’ they suffered. And all those fucking *movies*, excuse my French...just *whine* and *whine*, and go begging to the government for money out of *my* pocket. Shit, look at me. *I* was there. I saw heavier shit than anyone else. I killed babies and women in defense of my country and I’m not ashamed to say so. And now I have a successful business and a beautiful wife, and a daughter! What’s there to feel *guilty* about?”

“Absolutely, dear.” His wife gave him an obedient peck on the cheek for his compliment; he was well pleased. He wrapped his arm across her ass and mashed her groin to his hip. She giggled when squeezed, like a dog’s toy. “So what does your father do now?”

“Decompose.”



“Look at this,” Jenifer insisted .

“Get away. I still think you’re a bitch.” She tried to find a fresh bottle of vodka. She wanted to get drunk as fast as she could before rejoining Rick and her folks.

“No, really, look.” It was a business card, a square inch bigger than others. On the front, embossed in red Times Roman, it read:

LEARY, DOHRN, LITTLE & ASSOCIATES

(The red circle was printed on.)

SERVICING CORPORATE LAW SINCE 1979.

Below was their Chicago address, in Lake Front Towers. After followed a list of the thirty cities internationally in which they had branch offices, even one in Nome.

“Nice shade of ivory. So what?”

” “No, no. Look at the *back*.” Chastity flipped it over. In red felt-tip it read:

A photograph of a yellow sticky note with handwritten text in red ink. The text reads: "I dig your vibes—", "CALL ME... Ron", and "555-2303".

I dig your vibes—
CALL ME... Ron
555-2303

Chastity poured herself a vodka and water. “This is creepy. “ She sipped. “Who gave you this?”

“The tall hunk over there, in the Armani.”

“Where? You don’t mean the dork with the ponytail?”

“Isn’t he *built* for an old guy? His shoulders must be broader than your dad’s whole waist.”

“I hate beards. If Rick grew a beard I’d leave him.”

“Your dad’s got a beard.”

“Yes, well, *I’ve* never *fucked* him, you’ll notice.”

“Fuck off!” Jenifer hissed. “It was only *one time* and *I was drunk!* You swore you wouldn’t mention that in public!”

“So, what’d he say? ‘I’d like to fuck you; here’s my card?’”

“Well, he put his hand on my ass first.”

“Ah. It’s so refreshing to see a guy who starts slow and subtle.”

“I *liked* it. Won’t make me *pregnant*. Besides, why else would I be wearing tight leather pants if I hadn’t wanted someone to do that? Maybe I’d have said something if I wasn’t so drunk, but it felt nice so I didn’t think. He’s got a great smile. Must go to the dentist twenty times a year...” she sighed. “Then he hands me this card and says, ‘I’m worth ten million. Think about it.’ And then he blew me a kiss and walked away. I swear I nearly passed out then and there.”

“How would Jason feel if you were saying this to him?”

“Who?... I think he’d respect my reasons. I got him a business card.”

“That’s so fucking sleazy, Jenifer. He’s old enough to be your dad.”

“Did I take him *up* on it? Jason’ll live longer anyway. God...money gets me so *hot*. I’m sorry, it does. Think what he’s *got*...” Chastity handed her back the card. “I think you’d better keep it. Might come in handy.”

“I’m taken. “

“Look,” she whispered. “He’s looking over here. He knows we’re talking about him.”

“What do I fucking care?”

“He’s looking at *you*.”

“Shut up!” Chastity whirled his back to him, but that just gave him an uninterrupted staring at her ass. *Goddamn it, women’s bodies were designed for our humiliation.*

“Chastity, he’s loaded and he’s got a thing for young chicks. You look like you’re barely past puberty. Besides, if you fuck him good enough, I’m sure he’ll shave off the beard,” Jenifer giggled.

“Take the card. “

“No, put it in your purse or something. Never know when you might need a job or something.”

“A job?” Chastity laughed. “I’ve never needed a job in my life.”

“Well. ..life goes on and things change...”



How Mike could drink nine glasses of rum and remain standing baffled Rick. That body fat was like a colony of sponges; it could be three days' interrogation before Mike went splat on his face. "How old are you anyway, boy?"

"Twenty-three."

"Young. Your whole future ahead. You *got* a future, boy?"

"Um. ..doesn't everyone?"

"I just want to know what you have planned. Chastity tells me you write?" "Uh, yes."

"I don't read myself," Mike laughed. "I watch ESPN. But, you know, when she told me you were a writer, why I went right out to a bookstore to see just what this whole game was about. Asked for something by Rick Fletcher. But the damndest thing!--they checked all the way through their computer and they'd never even *heard* of you!"

"Um, well, I'm not really published *yet--I--*"

"Really. You know, I was really bowled over by *just how many books* were in that place. *New ones!* You'd think just about anybody could get published." Jovially he elbowed the wind from Rick's ribcage. "So what, my little *girl* paying the rent? Heh, heh, that's sweet."

"No! I have a job. I work at Abbott's. Up in Evanston. It's an office supply store. I can give you *phone numbers* if you like--"

"You're, what, an assistant manager or something?"

"No, a sales associate."

"A what?"

"A, um, well, I guess they *used* to call it a clerk."

"Hm." Mike took a sip, not taking his jaundiced eye off Rick.

"Uh, well...pays the bills and gives me time to write. That's good enough for me."

"Right now."

"Yes."

"Not once you marry my daughter."

"Um--yes."

"And you move in together."

"Uh--" *Oh, that's right, he doesn't know.* "Yeah." Mike was watching Rick's face carefully. But Rick didn't flinch from his impregnable bland closed-mouth grin.

"Well, we've all got to have our hobbies, I guess. Till we get too busy with our responsibilities."

"It's not a hobby."

"Does it pay?"

"Not yet, but you have to *write* something before it's published, you see--"

"So what sort of life you have planned for my daughter?"

"She plans her *own* life. Excuse me. I need to go to the bathroom."

"The *hell* she plans her own life. Wasn't for my money she'd be working in a McDonald's in Salinas," he said, giving Rick a jolly whack on the back. "That girl couldn't plan to *breathe*. See, way *I* figured it, Chastity could be happy learning to make her little doodles and paperweights, but a lotta rich boys go to those schools. *Jenifer* found one. Nice fella. So, I figured, at least she could marry someone rich enough to take up the *slack*. Poor doesn't marry poor. You know what poor plus poor equals?"

"I really have to go, Mr. Barlow. I'll only be a minute."

“Sure, sure. Why buy a cow when milk is free, right?”

He was drunk. He was talking shit. It was some test of Rick’s sense of humor. But he would stay neutral. He’d give that fat bastard nothing interesting to remember once he sobered up for which Chastity might make him pay later. And there was certainly no reason to tell Chastity a single thing her father had said.

“*Poor plus poor equals FUCKING poor!*” Mike called after him, roaring with hearty, rum-basted laughter. “Words of *wisdom*, son! Words to *live by!*”



“He saw,” Jenifer whispered. “Did you hear me? Look! Oh god, he’s coming this way--”

The big dork with the ponytail was squeezing toward them through the crowd. Jenifer turned away, redcheeked like a high school dance coquette at the football captain’s leer.

Chastity didn’t even turn. “I don’t want to hear about it.” She drank aggressively. She saw her father sat alone now sucking down his eleventh rum. What had he and Rick been talking about? And why was Jenifer popping up to distract her every time her father took Rick aside to talk? What had that idiot given away so far? *Well, he can’t hide in the fucking bathroom forever...*

The power of alcohol to make one forgetful of worries has always been, of course, vastly exaggerated.

“God, he’s so impatient. He must really want me.”

Jenifer bit her lip and giggled, making sure the old lech could see her face. “God, I shouldn’t, I really shouldn’t. But...Jason’s sick and, and he isn’t expecting me back any special time...I told him I might stay here the weekend. Think I should?”

“Oh, I wholeheartedly approve of anything that hurts Jason. Other than that I couldn’t give less of a shit. See you in a few.” She separated from Jenifer. Jenifer followed her down the table. “*What?*...Jenifer, look. You’re drunk, and you’re trying to act *slutty*, and you’re *boring* me to *tears*. I need to calm down.”

“He’s got a scary look in his eyes,” Jenifer boasted.

“You’re *not* being *helpful*.”

“Maybe, maybe it could be a good connection for Jason?”

“Leave me alone.”

“I can’t stop thinking of what his *car* must be like...Mm--*got* to be a black 280 ZX. My hard, supple Armani superman--” she giggled giddily.

Then there he was, right beside her. But before her words (which had almost been “Do me”) could escape her lips, the son of a bitch tapped *Chastity’s* shoulder.

Christ, though Chastity, *look at all those sleazy rings*.

“What’s your sign?” he asked.

“‘NOT A THROUGH STREET’?”



It took Rick a few minutes to let the piss out. But he managed. On his way out of the bathroom he ran into Barbi's big, soft breasts. "Excuse me. "

"How old are you, Rick?"

"Uh--twenty-three in two months," he repeated. Was *everyone* deaf these days?

She chuckled, and caressed his chin just a second with a pass of her finger. "You're such a fine-looking young man, " she said, straightening his tie. "Chastity's boyfriends are never to Mike's taste. But they're always to *mine*. First time I looked at you I could see how...*nice* you were. My mouth and everything went dry." She laughed, stepped in, and shut the bathroom door tight behind her with a strange, panting smirk. "Chastity show you the pictures of me?"

"Uh...heh, heh, pictures?"

"Or did you just have the magazine when you were in *high school*...?" She backed him slowly, arms over his shoulders, to the tub, her head swayed back in the most distressingly erection-inducing way. And he was still unzipped. "I got the distinct feeling you'd seen me before...*well*?"

"Well, uh, what?"

"I can see it in your eyes. You've seen me. I could tell the first moment I saw you. You've jerked off to me."

"W-what? I never...I mean, I would never...um, Mrs. Barlow, you maybe should get your hand out of...uh, there. Uh." He was going to remind her she was old enough to be his mother's younger sister, but it was rude to remind a lady, or whatever Mrs. Barlow was, of her age, especially when so particularly vulnerable. Her breath was inflammable, and far closer than he'd think his girlfriend's mother would think appropriate. She started moving the hand lightly back and forth.

"Tell me. Which do you prefer? My hand, or *yours*...?" She licked her lips. "I'm *flattered* you did. That's what I did it for, right? How *old* were you when you bought it?"

"I--Actually, I was scared to bring it to the counter. I just stole it."

"Naughty boy. Wanted me so bad you shoplifted," she whispered. "You were awkward. You were shy. You probably couldn't get the nerve up to talk to a *real* girl till--"

"Till I was eighteen."

"*Nineteen*," she chuckled, and tossed her panties to the other side of the room somehow without removing her pantyhose. "I was your only love. Your *first* love. You lost your cherry to me. I bet standing in front of me almost made you come in your pants, poor, nice boy." She ran her fingers along his hip. "Even when I was under the hot lights I wondered whose lonely boy's lover I'd be. Whenever you feels like the world hated you, you pulled me out from under the mattress and everything was be okay, because of *me*." She'd slipped his pants down. His knees gave way and his ass hit the toilet lid, which was perfectly warm and comfortable, and down though he thought he'd left it up. She straddled him and swaddled his face in her breasts. "Do they taste like you expected...?"

He couldn't help himself. He suckled them in a most undignified way, but she didn't seem to mind the noises. He was so happy. "You're trembling," she cooed, sniffing. "I'm not too old for you, am I baby?" She clutched his head tight to her chest.

"Not too old for me, ever," he gibbered perfectly clearly with her breast in his mouth.

“Oh,” she moaned more convincingly than any porn star could, “this, this is what *nice boys get* for being, for being *nice all their lives*... “ And then she did something. And then something else, that felt better than anything he’d ever...no, wasn’t there, what had he been...

No. He couldn’t focus.

“Goddamnit...” How did other guys do this? He had to go back out there soon.. Someone was banging angry and drunk on the door, asking the asshole inside to give someone else a chance.

There was nothing for it. Nothing would make this very apparent erection go down. Standing in front of her had brought what seemed a quite painful gallon of blood rushing to his embarrassing loins faster than even a blackboard could. He had to get these unwanted, ill-timed, ferocious fantasies out of his system. But his desperate stroking of himself had no effect, no matter how long he waited. But he could never masturbate this way. This shouldn’t have been happening, anyway; Chastity had just given him a damn *blowjob*. He should already have been drained of this, but then he hadn’t expected his obsessive favorite centerfold to be less than two feet in front of him, calling herself “Mom.” But in any case, he couldn’t let his malicious joke of anatomy embarrass her. He had this desire to keep it attached. Perhaps if he tucked it under.

The fellow was still knocking. But he had to take a little longer. He’d been in there long enough to need to piss again.

“Oh, for a world without sex...”



This needs to be understood: Chastity *always hated* hippies. Like most right-thinking folk. The thought of Zeke, for instance, walking textbook stereotype that he was, sodomized, squealing like a pig in pain, was a delicious, dear one when she thought it, just for his miserable stench of patchouli. She hadn’t meant *him* to enjoy the little scenario she’d hoped for at the hot tub. Hippies inspired some unnameable, unjustifiable gorge in her to rise, that beach refuse whistling at her at the Santa Cruz boardwalk from the very day her tits appeared till she’d run screaming to Chicago. Hippies were stupid, forgetful, dirty, smiling liars, thoughts evaporating in patchouli stink the moment uttered. They’d borrow something from you and say they’d have it back at the end of the week. Months would fly by. You’d ask for it back. But *oh no man*, they’d traded the last of their stash at a Dead show for that item, long before they ever met you, in fact. *Let’s smoke some kind buds and forget about it*. And they looked so happy it made you want to beat them all the more savagely.

But even more than the garden-variety trust-fund Deadheads her own age, she despised the real thing. The ones with who thought their suits were some kind of disguise. Like this one, who thought his shades with the shiny gold frames would hide his wrinkles. “

“I’ll freshen your glass. What are you drinking?”

“Vodka straight.” She did not give him her glass. She turned her shoulder to him and poured it herself. But she appreciated his curiosity. He poured himself some chablis, and tried to remember what comeback line had worked last time.

“I’m Ron Leary, “ he said as though she should bow. “And you’re?”

“Not interested. “

“Lovely name. “ And he just went ahead and kissed her hand .

“Enchanted, “ she couldn’t believe he actually said. This was exactly the sort of man she loved to laugh at. “May I say what a lovely necklace that is you’re wearing .”

She’d welded it from copper phone wire she’d pulled from a wall. “I know.” Anyone with eyes could see how cool it was. “And doesn’t it give you a good way to pretend you’re not talking to my tits. Excuse me.” Where had Jenifer scampered off to?

“But I was really enjoying your company.”

“Yes, I know. But this family gathering is beginning to feel more like a singles bar.”

“You’re such a wit.”

“*Sir*. You’re really kinda...creeping me out. *Okay?*”

But he kept following alongside her. “Say, what’s the pendant supposed to be?” referring to the three-inch-long drip of golden slag hanging from the aforementioned necklace. It whipped Rick in the face repeatedly whenever she was on top, but he hadn’t asked her to remove it yet, most likely hoping she’d notice all the pain it caused him. But she kind of like the way he squeaked every time it struck his eye.

“It *was* a crucifix, “ she grinned, “till I took my torch to it.”

“How come?”

“It was kinda cool to watch Christ drip. “

He chuckled indulgently, as at the misbehavior of someone else’s young child. “So, you didn’t bring your boyfriend?”

“What makes you think I’ve *got* one?”

“Just that you’re the most beautiful young lady I’ve seen in the last twenty years. I just supposed you’d be fighting them off with a stick.” She couldn’t stop her lip twisting her face into endlessly goofy shapes when someone was shovelling compliments on her little head, even if she felt like vomiting on his shoes all the same.

“I *did* bring him, actually.”

“Ah,” he replied as though she’d said something about astrology or homeopathic medicine. Then he produced a card like Jenifer’s, just for her, identically scribbled upon. Must have been up late, scribbling this groovy all-purpose proposition on every card in the stack. She examined it closer. No, actually it had been *printed* that way, the scribbled come-on and all.

“I’m a corporate lawyer. I run a *huge* practice downtown. We take up three large floors.”

“*Ohhh*. I guess I should be nicer to you, then, huh?”

He nodded, chuckling. “I’m worth ten million dollars.”

“I’m dripping all over the carpet.” She politely handed back the card, having one already to throw away. “You should really, I don’t know, melt this card down and donate it to the poor or something.”

“Well, I’ve already given “Well, I’ve already given you *my* number,” Ron continued, smirking.

“Say. Doesn’t that *itch?*”

“Doesn’t *what* itch?”

“That *beard*,” she snickered. “I bet it catches every single thing you eat. I bet it smells. And I bet bugs come and nibble the food when you’re asleep, and leave eggs behind. I bet they could hatch any moment. I really should go, I think.”

“Listen,” he whispered, “I know you’re probably a little tense. These occasions always are. But I have a solution to that. See this?” He pulled out a fat joint, and cradled it, hidden, in his palm. It smelled Jamaican from several feet away. She wished someone in the room could recognize the smell and bust him or whatever you do to old leches with ponytails annoying her. “Let’s go out on the patio and get mellow, eh?”

“You’re kidding, right? My boyfriend can get me all the weed I *want!*” It felt odd to sound so proud of it, though. And her timing was as good as always; her father was approaching. He looked jolly, stumbling and waddling across the carpet. What new game had he now? What the fuck had Rick told him?

But then again, when life gives you lemons: “See that *other* bearded guy coming this way? The one built like a tank? That’s my *dad*. *He’ll* fix you. Dad! This--”

“Ron *goddamn* Leary!”

They shook hands. They even hugged. They were friends, it seemed.

Nevertheless. “Dad, this guy was coming *on* to me.”

Her father never laughed so hard. “Well, Ron, there’s no accounting for taste.” A good, friendly, drunken manly chuckle was had by all, much to Chastity’s fury at her boyfriend who had left her alone with this. “Christ, Ron, it’s not like she’s got *tits* or anything,” he went on. Did he *always* have to mention that when she met his friends? Had he to mention it already about two hundred times? But only as a professional, of course, as he’d always explained.

Chastity had always appreciated her father’s candor. Someday it would give her such a good excuse to kill him.



chapter five.

THE FAMILY & THE FISHING NET

“ON goddamn Leary, You ol' shyster,” said her dad. Any ambulances back over you lately?”

“Just one, but I sued them till there was nothing left but the tires. Then I sued the tire company.” They had more good laughs, like that, and they would keep her there to hear them. She would grind her teeth flat soon.

Where the hell was her boyfriend, whom she *had* fucking *told* not to go off and leave her alone? He was supposed to shield her in situations like this. Men always talk to other men before girls. And a weedy weakling like Rick would be far more interesting for them to prick at. That was all she'd brought him for and was now his only chance at redemption.

She could slip away. No, not from between them. Her father looked away a moment. Ron stuffed the card in the front of her dress.

“Hey! “ Her father turned around. One white corner stuck out, now between her thumb and forefinger. “Heh. Whatcha stuffin’ your bra with, honey?” he asked, and would you believe Ron had the nerve; he laughed at her too. “It ain’t gonna help! This girl makes walls jealous.”

“No. He--” But he kept on talking and providing his own laugh track. Men talk to you if there’s nothing else, but talking back is unnecessary.

“With what?” Dad reached to her tit and pulled out the card. She was his, but not by blood. He’d always made sure she understood that distinction. And that her skin was only the tip. “A card? Don’t you think toilet paper might’ve been a better idea? Flat plus flat almost always equals *flat*, least that’s how it was when *I* was educated, before new math, condoms, and niggers screwed it all up. You kids today. Weren’t taught a thing. You’re fucked.” He laughed and gave her a whack on the back. “But that’s good. You’ll be easy to give orders when we get old. So what’s on the card?” He read it. “Ron, you dog. So you were coming on to my daughter?”

He didn't *mind*? No, if anything he was living vicariously through Ron. She really hoped Dad wouldn't paw her ass again, pretending to have drunkenly forgot who she was.

"Uh--I just dropped that. I was going to give it to her---friend."

"And you, married and everything. Heh, heh, heh."

"Don't be an asshole, Mike. You know how April is."

"Yeah," Mike said, biting the tip off a cigar and spitting it on Glinda's carpet. With hysterical adrenaline, Glinda slid through the white shag and caught the tobacco in an ashtray an inch from the floor. "You know, this guy...he used to live on a commune, in New Mexico...Drugs and sex and shit out in the desert for years..."

"Two years and six months, Mike. "

"...And they didn't wear nothing. "

"Oh?" Chastity asked. "Boy, I bet the sunburn sucked. Not even the kids?"

"Well, no," Ron said.

"Oh. That must have been very convenient. When the little girls had to bend over. I guess the little boys too, huh? You know, like to pick up their ball. Or whatever."

"We didn't have balls."

"No doubt," she giggled.

Mike let loose an oily whisky belch, inflammable and mighty. "She got a mouth on her. Ain't she got a mouth on her?" He pinched her cheek hard. The lip stretched and revealed her fine teeth. "You really *like* that mouth? I always thought it was kinda plain."

"No," Ron said, trying to sound suave, "it's very pretty."

He wouldn't let go of her face. Dad was drunk. She didn't want to make him look bad. He remembered whenever she made him look bad, no matter how much else of what he did was washed away by Scotch. "Pretty, huh? Well, how much'll ya give me for her?"

Chastity flinched away. Ron was amused by this. Her dad grabbed her again, not so hard as to cause bruises, but enough that she'd have to make a scene to get away. "Dad!--" This wasn't funny.

"Shut up, hon," he chuckled. "We're talking business."

Ron stroked his chin, and considered. "Hmm...how much do you want?"

"Tuition costs me eight grand a year. Expenses are twelve thousand. She's always been an expensive girl."

Chastity tried to wriggle loose. "Stop," she growled. He held her body fast from her, as from a shoplifter.

"Woulda arranged it years ago if I'd known," Mike laughed, thread along thread of viscous slobber stringing the length between the left of his lip, across his beard, to the tip of his chin.

If Rick ever grew a beard, she'd kill him. How long could it take him to take a shit? Had the booze made him vomit again? *Where was he?*

"Could I...give her...a little turn?" She slapped his hand away. So her dad did it. She could feel her father's fingers half an inch from her ass, running down. They snickered. "Nice," said Ron. "Hard to walk away from. How about...a *lease*?"

"Dad. .." she threatened. Any minute, she didn't care, she was going to yell very loudly.

"Fifty thousand a year?"

“Seventy-five .I’m losing a tax deduction.”

“Fifty-five. “

“She’s only nineteen! Sixty.”

“She told me she’s got a boyfriend. Fifty-seven five hundred.”

“Ron, all I gotta do is shoot him. Sixty-five.”

“Sixty-one.”

“Well, it’s damn decent of you. But--I’m married, so I think it’d be best if I just beg off for now,” Ron said, and then they laughed their heads off at their stupid joke.

She would’ve laughed back, but she was too angry to manage much but a grimace smile. Chastity had never been so scared as when those men stared at her now. This was how they did it in the old days. Marriages and concubinages were arranged to get the daughter.s family out of debt and other troubles. Her father had more than a few of those. She knew that. If he’d been serious, unless he *was* serious: Could you do this? Her father had all the money. Rick could never support her. Would she have any choice but her father’s, ever?

“C’mon, Chastity,” said her dad. “Don’t look so serious.”

“Hey. We were only kidding, “ Ron said. “Just a tasteless joke. *You’re* old enough, huh?”

“She certainly seems to think she’s old enough to *drink*,” her dad said, “but that would lower her market value.” And they had a merry snort once more. She was glad to bring so much joy to the world. Really. “Like you’d want a girl who makes pancakes look swollen. *I’ve* seen the babes you’ve been with.” Her dad swung his arm close around her, hand clutching a little too far down the front of her shoulder. “Lucky to be in the *Midwest*; they’re natural. Heh heh. Say, Chastity, when the Good Lord was handing out tits , what’ d you do?”

“I--”

“Remember?”

She hated him. She hated jokes. She cooperated. “---Got lost and went to the brains table...” *Don’t*.

“But they were *what*?”

“Down to the damaged and shopworn at half-price.” *Don’t fucking cry*.

“So you went back to the tit table, but...?”

“All they had left were some nipples.” She smiled with gentle good humor, playing his pretty, useless artgirl daughter, knowing no humiliation mattered in front of those who’d be dead long before her, and would be giving her money and be gone soon besides; at least, till Christmas. She drank some more and scanned round again for her useless boyfriend. She didn’t know why.

“Naw, honey. I could never sell you off. Hell, even if I wanted to. Heh heh!” Ron still looked just as interested in the proposition, though. “Tell ya, I’m gonna *need* someone rich to take her off my hands, though...she’s an *art student*.”

*Daddy? Daddy, would you like a nice, rusty, serrated butcher knife in your bloated stinking guts? Would you enjoy that as much as I’m enjoying this? The kitchen. Where is the kitchen...*He was still holding her there.

“And even worse, her *boyfriend* is apparently gonna to be a famous *writer*.” Cigar ash fell in her hair.

“That’s very cool,” Ron patronized.

“Yeah,” said her father. “Too bad nobody reads or looks at paintings anymore. But at least when they’re living on welfare and food stamps in some rat-ridden unheated attic with a bug-infested mattress on the floor, you’ll be able to cover the crumbly walls with lots of pretty paintings. Oh, and you’ll have plenty to read. Don’t you envy them their bohemian life?”

“Now, Mike. No need to worry. Everybody grows up sooner or later.”

Disgusting hairy fucking bearded bastards, how’d you like me to shove your faces through piano wire? He wandered away. Ron stayed behind. “You’re shaking,” Ron said. “Are you cold?”

“I love Rick,” she whispered through clenched teeth.

“What?”

I love my boyfriend. And now he was finally coming out of the bathroom. “I want to go.” She almost broke away, but when she turned back around, Barbi had intercepted him and they disappeared. She’d have been able to see *where* if she weren’t so short.



“So,” Barbi said with high-strung civility, startling Rick into a corner, “Chastity tells us you’re some kind of writer?”

“Uh--yeah--” He wasn’t getting hard again. He wouldn’t. It’d show in these pants. He thought nothing but smelly Bowery nuns. He concentrated so hard it was nearly impossible to understand what Barbi wastalking about. And he would not look at her tits, as ripe, soft, and heaving as he’d always...*smelly old nuns. Smelly old nuns.*

“That’s exciting. I think reading is fun. After a long day, sitting in your chair, opening a Harlequin and letting your mind, turn off and drift. You know, I had this great English professor back in college, and you know what he told us? All the greatest writers were,” she whispered now, “*gay.*” She clutched his hand in earnest pity. “And I think that’s great. Nothing wrong with that at all.”

“...Excuse me?”

“Come on, you can tell me,” she giggled. “Don’t worry, I’m not judgemental. I have *lots* of gay friends. So, c’mon.” She patted his hand. She wouldn’t stop. She probably thought she was being very comforting. “Just between us *girls.*”



“Least if you’d gone to a *real* college, you’d have flunked out, but...you’d have happened across a guy who could support your hobby, like Jenifer,” Mike said to Chastity.

“I didn’t meet him in school.”

Mike snorted. “You had to search around for that?”

“And I think it’s so *nice* of you to pretend like this,” Barbi said. “You’re a real friend to her, Paul.”

“What?” He laughed. “I’m not Paul. Paul’s---*Chastity’s* roommate. I’m Rick.” No trouble in the groin now.

“Uh-huh. Look, I know there’s no ‘Rick.’ That girl’s still a virgin and we

both know it. She's just trying to piss Mike off. Don't worry. I won't give it away," she giggled. "He needs to be humbled sometimes."

"That's all...very good, but I'm not gay."

"Look, Jenifer told me all about it." She pinched his pudgy little left dimple. "You look just like a little boy. They must go bananas over you in the bars. Do that voice."

"What voice?"

"You know, that high-pitched, faggy voice you do. Sounds just like my hairdresser. I think it's simply a scream."

He slammed his drink down on the table. "Ma'am. My name is Rick. Paul is out-- is *Chastity's* roommate. I am Chastity's boyfriend. Really. Paul, yes, *he's* queer as a three-dollar bill. Proudly and outspokenly. Incidentally, he's never written a thing in his life." The glass had broken, and cut his palm. The drink stung and sterilized it.

She set her glass down calmly, like a lady. "Well, that's very nice. I'm sure you'll be a...fine young man someday. Excuse me." Barbi retained her composure as she strolled over to Chastity, and asked her "Is he the first?"

"What?"

"Is he the *first*, or were you doing this back home, under our roof? Hm? So all those other boys, the ones you had in your room with the door shut--I bet *they* weren't gay either. How could you *lie to me*?"

Rick had a big fat flapping mouth. Rick had said something stupid. When they got home, Rick was going to die.

"You just wait," Barbi said.

"I LOVE HIM! LEAVE ME ALONE!" She broke away to Rick. "I want to go."

"Isn't it kind of early?" She turned them away from sight and slapped him. Nobody heard over the party noise.

"Don't you argue with me. Don't make a scene. Not here. I'll tear your heart out and eat it," she whispered. "We're going."

"But we don't have a car."

"God, you're useless."



Mike was telling Ron, "Last month *Courtesan* ran this article...Y'know, worked for that mag this long and that's the *first* article I ever *readf* in it? Anyway, it was about how the Injuns up in Maine useta put their squaws in huts on really tall stilts whenever they had their periods. Pen 'em up in there. They'd feed 'em raw meat on sticks."

"Those Native Americans," Ron sighed wistfully. "They were so in touch with the earth."

Chastity broke away from all of them. There had to be somewhere where she could be alone and break something.

Suddenly in Chastity's path was deaf old Aunt Myrtle. "Ch-Ch-*Chastitee*?"

Chastity dutifully stopped in her tracks and donned the nervous, condescending smile older relatives find so soothing, mistaking it for respect.

She always just mouthed her words to Aunt Myrtle. She never left her hearing aid on and she'd never hear no matter how loud you yelled. "When I saw you last you were only--" She patted Chastity's head. "--*this* tall!"

"I'm still this tall."

Mike yelled across the room to his daughter. “HEY! HEY, CHASTITY! THAT RIGHT? YOU ON THE *RAG* OR *WHAT?*”

“Eh?” Aunt Myrtle asked. “What did your father say, dear? I don’t know what in the world could be wrong with my hearing aid.”

Chastity smirked at her dad. “He called you an ugly old hag, “
“Eh?”

Chastity shrugged. “That’s what he *said*... Couldn’t tell you why.”

“Why, “ Aunt Myrtle flared, “that--*that*--!” Her brittle spine straightened all the way to the brain stem. “Well, *I* have a word or two to say to *him!*” she muttered, though she thought she was yelling. She could feel every bone scrape and chip as she stomped over to confront Mike, but she wasn’t about to let osteoporosis come between her and her dignity.

“What’s so funny?” Rick asked. Chastity didn’t answer. She wasn’t done watching the show.

“Oh. This’ll be good, “ she giggled naughtily.

That rotten, rotten Mikey! He’d always been a disrespectful, fat little brat. Always! But Aunt Myrtle had never been afraid of *him*. She felt the moxie go to her head, more so than for decades. Now she was right behind him. Now she was darn well going to give him what for.

“*I--*”

But just as Myrtle raised her matchstick arm to strike, her voice seized into a squeak. Everything stiffened, then something gave up just behind her left knee. She fell like a bag of dried peelings to the carpet, three more bones shattering on impact. Her body laughed at her as she begged for help like any other whimpering old lady. Her stomach went cold on the inside.

A red-cheeked Chastity was already dialing the ambulance.



Glinda clutched her withered, baggy, thin little hand once they’d loaded her in. “Didn’t even get...halfway, dammit...” Myrtle kept repeating.

“I’ll visit you almost every day, *I promise*” she cooed, as to an infant. “Maybe the hospital was the best thing for you all along.”

“The *which?*” Myrtle shrieked. “*Which?*” They shut the doors. The medics knew the delirium of trauma when they saw it. A mask full of gas and they wouldn’t have to listen to it all the way to the hospital. They drove her away. Everyone waved them off.

“Do you think she can see us all waving?”

“Probably not.

“Should we go back inside?”

“That’d be rude.”

“Right, right.”

So they kept on waving till the flashing lights had disappeared around the tree-choked curve down the fifteen-mile- per-hour road. In the emergency room her ID bracelet was switched with a Mr. Phelps who had come in complaining of a weight on his chest. Six hours later, he died of a heart attack. The nurses said they’d never seen anyone in traction wiggle that much. During Aunt Myrtle’s quadruple bypass surgery, meanwhile, a nurse

commented that the catheter was encountering no blockage in her arteries anywhere. The surgeon admitted the nurse could be right. The arteries did appear to be in perfect health, at least to the untrained eye. But, said the surgeon, why go to school for years and years when blind, uneducated instinct was all that was necessary to become a doctor! Perhaps the nurse was right and he was not, in which case the patient was in the gravest danger. He offered the nurse the scalpel. Just then the heart/lung machine clogged. And still Aunt Myrtle might have lived, if only the repairman worked holidays without double time. But her insurance hadn't cleared yet, so there was nothing to be done. All those years of having no butter, eggs or milk down the drain. Probably a mercy anyway, they said; she was so old and all.

Aunt Glinda visited after the party had cleared out and the house was properly clean again. It was a rude shock, but the doctor apologized, assuring her he'd have got around to calling eventually, so that was all right. Glinda didn't like to cause trouble.



Rick had lit a cigarette and didn't look like he was going back in. "Everyone's gone inside," Chastity nudged him. But he didn't take her seriously when she spoke nicely. He wasn't moving.

She said it as nicely as she could. She'd been hard on him all day and he'd taken it. She certainly would never sleep with him again, nor he in his bed ever again, if he'd spoken to her like that. Men were simpler and didn't understand, and never really could. Since she wasn't into girls that meant she'd have to get herself a thicker skin.

"Nice out tonight," Rick murmured, looking up at the stars. Not that he found the stars particularly interesting in themselves, nor that he felt some sensitive, poetic rush looking at them. But other people rhapsodized of their wonders, so to look at the stars from time to time was apparently as necessary to being a good human being as fiber in the diet, especially if you fancied yourself "artistic" was part of the package. And in the city, even if they shut down all the lights after 9 p.m., you'd still never see them through the pollution. So he got his dosage while he could. Besides, she might think it romantic. That was the sort of thing one was supposed to talk about with one's girlfriend, wasn't it? "First time it's been nice all day."

"Nothing is nice about this fucking day. We've put in our appearance. I want to go. We've got to get a ride to the train station. Quick, before my dad passes out. I don't want to stay. Come *on*."

"I want to smoke this."

"There's ashtrays all over in there. What do you think they're *for*? Come *on*." She didn't mean to nag, but Rick was getting on her nerves. It wasn't nice of him to get on her nerves. "Everyone else has gone in."

"That makes it nicer still. I want to smoke this in *peace*. Maybe a couple more too."

"Well. As long as we're *out* here...Let me ask you something," Chastity growled. "You've been away from me all night. What were you saying to my stepmom?"

He liked having a lit cigarette in his hand, which had stopped him from quitting every time he'd even pondered the notion. It was too necessary a prop. It gave his hands something else to do but tremble, his lips something to do besides say something stupid

between others' sentences. Why he would feel lost without it he wasn't sure, but he was. At least he felt comforted that it certainly wasn't addiction. "She was asking me about my writing."

She'd give him two more chances. "You think she's pretty?" He laughed. That wasn't the seriousness with which she'd wanted to be taken when she took the already considerable trouble of bringing this up at all, which it wasn't nice of him to make her do. "I saw those magazines you have. That old one that's really worn-out. I saw the same one once on my dad's dresser. He *photographed* her. That's how they *met*."

"I had...no--"

"*Oh* yes you did. I saw that look when you got close to her. The same look you had on your face that first date, when I wore that tight red dress. Before we slept together. It's been awhile since I saw that look.---Did you jerk off to her? Huh? Did you jerk off to my *stepmom*?"

"I--yes, yes I did."

"And how often do you still do it?"

"I--well, I don't, I don't *count* it, I mean--"

"I fuck you sometimes two, three times a day, and you still need to *masturbate*?"

"Uh..."

"Do you ever think of *me* when you do it?" Chastity asked. She didn't know why she was working herself to tears; she didn't know why she wasn't waiting till they got home. Her father could easily come along and hear. But this is the sort of thing you were supposed to do. This was how the movies did it, and people today seemed to only know what the movies told them, so she assumed this was appropriate behavior. She was supposed to be outraged over this sort of thing. She wasn't sure why; she didn't actually care. But it wasn't her private opinion that mattered. This was what she saw on TV.

"*You* want to *fuck* her, don't you? If she'd let you. You want her. God, *you* want my *stepmom*! *You* want that *hag*. That's sick. *You're* sick."

"*No*. Jesus. I don't want your *stepmom*. Leave me alone."

"I should. I should leave you alone for *good*." She walked away, hoping he'd grab her arm, which, desperately pleading, he did. So she got turn around and continue what she had to say while knocking his hand away. It was all a ballet. "Why do you think I brought you? To show you off? So you could make new friends? Why didn't you interfere? Why didn't you shield me? That's what I asked. That's what a boyfriend is *supposed* to do. I should leave you alone. It's only fair. I should leave you alone for a long, long time." She'd slammed the door before he could speak the standard apology.



Chastity nearly tripped over her father the first step inside, passed out stone cold on his face, spilled glass set neatly upright near his drool. Everyone stepped around him. It would've taken sober men to move him. It was the only polite and sensible thing to do. At least on his face he wouldn't choke on his own vomit.

"Where's your boyfriend?" Barbi asked.

“He’s outside, “ Chastity giggled like an excuse in the embarrassed way her mother used to when Dad wasn’t home and relatives called. Smile, clenched sphincter, *nothing’s wrong, there’s nothing wrong*. She remembered it very well.

“Everyone’ wants to see this amazing boyfriend you’d said you were bringing.”

“Well, uh, he’s not feeling too well. After what happened with the car. You know. Shook up. “

“Mm. Will he be getting it fixed?”

“Well, uh...he, uh, can’t really afford it.”

Hm. Doesn’t he have insurance?” Barbi sipped and said *Hm* again before Chastity’s tiny head-shaking was done. “Can’t even afford insurance?...You know, Jenifer says she’s got a very rich boyfriend. Do you know where she met him?”

She did, but didn’t feel like discussing it. “No.”

“Hm. Perhaps you should find out. So, why is he so strapped?”

“Mom, almost everyone here is these days.”

Barbi nonchalantly checked over her shoulder. “Doesn’t surprise me one bit, though, now that I’ve.” She took a sip of her drink. “Met him.”

“Huh--? What doesn’t surprise you?”

, “but he keeps going off by himself.” Sip. “I bet he *did* cheat on you last summer. He seems like the sort. I couldn’t get him to look me in the eyes, not once.”

“What?” But she didn’t tell them about that. “But--I--”

“Jenifer told me, dear, “ she whispered reassuringly, motherly pat on the shoulder. “She’s a better friend than you know. You shouldn’t keep things from us, honey. We’re your parents. We love you and only want what’s best for you.”

“No--no, that, that was just a misunderstanding. I was just...being paranoid. I never mentioned it because I was embarrassed.”

“I’d be embarrassed too if your father ever cheated on me.”

Chastity wasn’t about to go into that. “He *didn’t*. He likes having time by himself. He’s a writer. He needs to think. That’s why we don’t live together anyway.”

“Or why you won’t.”

“What? I--”

“I should let you join him. He should want to spend every minute he can with you,” Barbi said.



Oh sure, now that everyone was gone and Chastity couldn’t freak over this little effort to calm down, what the *hell--Zeke’s* “New York”(i.e. toothpick) joint lasted Rick less than a New York minute. Never mind. He felt a bit of a buzz, surely enough to last till this ordeal was over. Chastity was rustling up a ride. He’d soon be good to go back in to speak a little while with everyone, smiling at everything they said, not listening but nodding like he cared.

“Excuse me, “ someone said behind him. “I know that smell. “ The man had a ponytail, but his Armani nearly made Rick piss himself. His father had always worn a suit and tie every day of his life. He’d looked through his father’s closets of khaki and power stripes many Sunday afternoons alone in the silent house. The fabric was so thick compared to his flimsy clothes meant to be grown out of; and slick, texture impassable,

not like fabric at all. He'd never been comfortable in suits, especially because people told him he looked great in them. Suits frightened Rick. The fathers wore suits. The responsible men, who determined who rose, and who fell. The fathers punished.

The man smiled like a point-blank loaded gun. He approached Rick, stuffing something back in his pocket. There was a lighter in his other hand. "You from the party? I didn't see you. I know everyone in the family."

"I--yes, I'm--I'm, um--I'm not really part of this family--I'm just one of the boyfriends."

"Well, lots of young girls around. Lotta girls in that family." He took what was left of the joint and dragged more smoke from it than Rick thought the whole thing had contained. "But I must say you're the *only* 'boyfriend' I've seen. Heh. Lucky me."

He wasn't tossing it away or grinding it out. He just held it out of Rick's reach, letting it burn. What if he asked the man to give it back? Wasn't it his? This wasn't his principal. "Um--could I have that back?"

The guy looked very shocked, and a little hurt. "Just a moment. I haven't had a hit yet."

Yes he had. That *liar!* "You didn't ask," Rick snapped.

"O-ho! In *my* day everyone *shared!*"

"I--okay." He tried to relax. The man was more than implicated in any disaster that, no doubt, would happen now. In this kind of neighborhood the cops came around as often as buses. He was taller, broader, older and slower than Rick; he planned to duck behind the old guy to buy time when the firing began.

"God, the weak-ass pot you kids get these days. Sad. Probably for the best, though." Rick was swinging his hand. He grabbed it and shook it. "Glad to meet you." *Pfft--* "Name's Ron Leary." At last he gave it back. The flaming cinder danced a bit between Rick's jolting fingers till he gave up and let it drop.

"Rick. " Ron was taking another hit, from another joint, one he'd drawn from his pocket, the size of a cigar. He blew it straight into Rick's face, so he was sure to stink of it.

Then he didn't pass it to Rick.

"Um, could I...?"

"What, *this?*" Ron laughed. "No, no, I really couldn't share this with you...you're too young. You've never smoked any herb like this. You wouldn't be able to take it."

"May I give it a *try?*" It felt so embarrassing to even be arguing about this.

"You shouldn't be doing that anyway."

"Uh--what did I just share with you?"

"You didn't *share* it with me. I confiscated it. I was being a responsible adult."

"What?..."

"Geez, I must have had a lot to drink. Not usually this talkative." Ron took another huge hit, after each of which between sentences he let out gales of patronizing laughter "People my age already did it, many many times. The damage has already been done. I've got a son your age. You kids should learn from our mistakes."

"Well, then, why are you still doing it?"

"We know *how* to. This is *our* thing. *We* already *have*. *Your* sort didn't experience what we did, learn what we did. It doesn't have the same significance. *We're* allowed."

"Sorry, I like it too. "

“Yeah, yeah...I bet you decided to do that around the same time as you grew your hair,” Ron said. “Watched Woodstock on videotape, I’ll bet. Thought it looked like fun. It was, and nobody can ever have it again. Live in the present, son. Be responsible.”

“It was Pink Floyd, actually. And I just grew it like this because I *like* it like this. I’m not trying to emulate ‘your generation.’ I smoke pot because I like to, just like *you* do. What the *hell* are you talking about?”

“I swear, seeing you trying to dress up like us, it’s really cute, but looks so *stupid*. Like if we’d worn zoot suits. Don’t you have *any* imagination these days? We threw those outfits together in thrift stores, and now they sell them ready-made in the mall and you’ll waste three times the money.” Ron chuckled. “Sad.”

“These are just my clothes. This is just my hair. I’m not following any fashion. I haven’t bought new clothes in four years.” He’d have left already but was afraid this insane asshole would go snitch to Chastity’s folks.

But how would he know to approach *them*?

“I remember back when hair like that would get you *killed*. Those were the days. It meant something, y’know? But it doesn’t mean anything for *you*. You kids are so fucking pissed off at nothing. “

“What?”

“We were the way we were because *everything was wrong*. When things went *right* for us, we joined society. And kicked ourselves we hadn’t earlier. Everything I read about you guys--it’s amazing how a group that pays attention to nothing important can find so many reasons to get angry and depressed. I’ll bet you’re a vegetarian. That’s your equivalent of politics these days. You haven’t got something *real* to protest like *we* did so you have to pick on innocent, unassuming food.”

“No. I wear a leather belt,” Rick declared, “and I’m wearing leather boots,” and he showed him, “and I eat fat, greasy hamburgers every chance I get.”

“Well, that certainly explains your complexion,” Ron remarked. “And what do you fight over anymore? Flirting? *Words*? All this “womyn” crap and all that. *They’re only fucking words!* “African-American”--don’t they ever *quit*? I remember when they fought to be called black. Now in my office someone could sue my firm right out from me as though I’d said *nigger*. Which I’d *never say*. Don’t have anything to fight so you turn on each other. And when I was your age, we got laid. That was normal. They didn’t call it rape. How can you stand it? Sex is like a food group. How can you be such puritans?” Ron sneered, putting out the half-smoked joint.

“Well, who gave us a fucking *disease* to *kill* us if we *weren’t*?”

“That was the *fags*. That’s *their* business.” Ron yawned. “I’m getting bored with this.”

“Yeah, so’m I. Hey, it’s been nice but--” but even when Rick turned away Ron still had more to impart.

“God. I’m looking at the future. I hope we don’t get senile for a long, long time. Once we’re ready to kick off your kids can take *our* place. I mean, cultures can skip a generation. *Anything* can--look at Prince Charles,” he laughed.

“Excuse me, but will you shut up so I can just, um, *not* reply to you, go inside, and end this conversation?”

“Show a little respect.”

“You have a son?”

“Yes.”

“Please stop mistaking me for him, then, and talk to *him* like this.”

Show *respect*? Your parents went to fight *Hitler*. And *beat* him. When did *your* generation ever show any respect?”

“Our parents didn’t *understand* us! We listen to rock and smoke pot just like *you*. We know. We have the *same culture*.”

“Divorced?”

Ron looked annoyed. “Extended separation.”

“Why’d you walk out? Got bored? That all it takes for your generation?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“But getting married--bet it seems magical the day you do it. But a kid makes it too *real*, doesn’t it? All those diapers and all those lectures you have to give that remind you you’re The Establishment. That everything you hated hearing from your parents is what now comes from your mouth, because it *works*. Can’t wait till you guys get to be eighty. Can’t *wait* till you ask us for help.”

“Christ, shut up. What do you know? What have you lived through? You know nothing. You can’t. I spent six years in the middle of a desert to avoid the draft. You’ve suffered nothing.”

“I’ve what?”

“You weren’t even alive when Kennedy died,” Ron bragged. “I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing.”

“What do you want, a biscuit?”

“Huh. You’re a funny guy. Well, answer me this.” Ron punched Rick, laying him on his ass in the flowerbed. “Forgive me,” he said cheerfully. “I’m stoned.” He walked off back inside. “Useless. Totally fucking useless. Should’ve kept aborting them till the rivers turned lumpy.”

Chastity came out a minute later to find him sprawled there, as she’d thought it too ridiculous when Barbi said he probably was. Nobody ever said anything nice about Rick behind his back. Chastity had to defend him whenever his name was said. And this was her thanks for it.

“I don’t care *what* your story is,” she said before that open mouth could shape a single lie. “Get up. Glinda’s giving us a ride to the train station.” She’d been right to kick him. He deserved it. And since he was still on the ground, this one too.

“Oog,” Rick said, drawing clumsily to vertical. “Someone hit me.”

“Good.”



Jenifer caught them just as they’d got their coats on. “*Rick*. You dropped this,” she said, making sure Chastity saw good and well it was Rick’s wallet she was handing back to him, and how careless a boyfriend she had. He didn’t recognize it at first.

“Uh---thanks. I didn’t even notice it was gone,” he said, not making Chastity any happier with him.

“You *stupid*, stupid *fuck!*” she hissed in his ear, giving him a good jab in the ribs. “Suppose *Dad* had found it, huh? Suppose he saw your *driver’s license*.”

“I--I’m *sorry*... There must be a hole in this pocket or something...”

“Why do you wear that rotten old coat anyway? Huh?” Another jab. She was mad and had to. “Thanks, Jenifer. You just saved my ass.”

Jenifer looked flattered. “Well, what the heck are friends for, anyway, huh?”

She saw them off. She was staying the weekend with Chastity’s folks. “Jason’s coming up tomorrow. Barbi wanted to meet him.

Aunt Glinda dropped them off at the train station. Halfway back to the house she saw, to her horror, several piles of wet soil from the flowerbed all over her white velvet upholstery. She screamed like the damned must in Hell.



“Please don’t glare at me,” Rick asked a number of times. The train was late, and she didn’t speak a word to him till they got on board. But she couldn’t take her eyes off his. “Please stop. That’s very disturbing.” Of course, once she opened her mouth he’d beg her to shut up. He knew that. But whatever she said to him, at least it would be narrowed down from the billion things he couldn’t stop imagining she could say, getting worse every second they raced around his skull. We always want what we can’t have. Silence was drowning.

Chastity walked on board ahead of him, going straight to the seat *she* wanted and snagging the window so she wouldn’t have to look at him. The sky had cleared. The whole landscape glowed with snow. She could sketch it later. She’d go to the bedroom and lock the door for the night. There were blankets in the hall closet. He’d be fine.

He didn’t seem to know if he should sit or not.

“Oh, will you... Will you *sit*.” Great. He’d made her talk. “You look nervous.”

“Well--uh--you’re, you’re making me a little nervous,” he tried to chuckle, coiling into his seat.

“You *should* be nervous,” Chastity said. “You should be nervous all the time. Keeps you from moving. Keeps you from doing things. Damaging things. You know. Do you have to sit here, next to me?”

Only one sentence he could think of wouldn’t light the bomb. And even if it did, it’d be *her* fault. “I love you, Chastity.”

“I know you do,” she complained. She crossed her arms and looked out the window all the way home. He tried to read her breathing. He jolted, ready to smile, at her slightest flinch. And since she wasn’t looking at him, he talked. He apologized for things she wouldn’t have noticed had he not mentioned them. He knew she could see his reflection in the glass. All the sorries he said, all his promises to be good, it all made her sick. Nobody liked him, why should she? Already two roommates had confided in her their plans to leave. But he kept yammering a thousand sorries. She couldn’t ignore him forever. “Can you *say something*?”

So she told him. She hated him. She hated everything about him. She never *had* to meet him. It was only random bad luck that the very first time she’d tried to find a job, it had been where he worked. It was only blind chance she’d been desperate, homesick and lonely at the same time as someone had dumped him, and that ought to have been a danger sign to her right then, but she was too trusting, always. *Always*. Fucking always. If she hadn’t been longing for warmth, to just be *held*, and how often did he just *hold* her anymore? How often? She ought to have just avoided boys altogether, like her dad

wanted. She'd at least be safe now; she wouldn't be scared as shit now that she was going to lose everything she loved, least of all *him*. Did he think of that? Did he ever think of that?

If she'd done what her dad wanted she wouldn't have been going crazy wondering what he almost *certainly* slipped and told Barbi, because she knew, she knew *something*. And of course he'd have lied had she asked what it was, which was why she wasn't asking. Her father had wanted her to remain cloistered for the sake of her expensive studies. Her studies were art. The more art she made, the more she'd be able to sell, and then she wouldn't need her dad, or his opinions as to the proper conduct of her genitals, *or* his fucking money ever again. Had he thought of *that*? Not talking to her father again was one of the prime goals of her life. As fucking up her life was one of the prime goals of *Rick's*.

Rick and she could have been happy together forever, if only they'd never met. Didn't he see? Didn't he see the horrible irony of it? Wasn't it funny? Wasn't it so funny he could scream? She knew *she* wanted to. And not stop. And never, never stop.

This went through three rephrasings on the same theme, each a bit faster than the one before (and one accompanied by a few frustrated punches to his shoulders, he felt impelled to whine, were quite uncalled-for), till falling into a sulking silence the last forty-five minutes of the trip. She lit and started smoking one of his cigarettes, and thrust it into his hand when the angry conductor came to take it and scold.



When they got to the station, she ran from her seat straight out of sight the instant the door hissed open, shouting out joyfully, "I CAN'T WAIT TILL I GET MY *OWN* PLACE AND I'M *AWAY FROM YOU FOREVER!*" And with a hearty "YAHOO!" she was out of the station, a block, then two, then three ahead of him. At first he kept running as though he could race it home. He slipped and fell on the ice. She was glad he couldn't see her laugh, so he could complain later what a cruel bitch she was, like his previous girlfriend. This would not be an easy break to make. He'd warned her with those stories she knew she ought to have listened closer to now.

Cigarettes had stolen too much of his breath for him to keep up. He was still two blocks behind, and had a limp. No, that wasn't her problem. She had no responsibility for him. He was supposed to be supporting her. He was supposed to be there for her. He wasn't supposed to be nagging her for her forgiveness, hanging on to her every word as though he cared more for her good opinion than life itself.

He wasn't even *trying* to catch up to her.

The antique shop on the corner was open. Its lights were on. She wanted to see what a place like this looked like when it was supposed to be closed. He came along, almost passing her. She grabbed his arm, cheerfully. "Hey," she said, "come in here with me."

"What, like you didn't just do that?"

She didn't want to talk about that anymore. "Look, just come in here--"

"Like, like you didn't just say all that shit to me." His arms were thrust still in his pockets. He wasn't looking at her. Somehow his sulking was cute. She grabbed his head,

and turned it to face her. She was glad she was a girl. He'd have *never* gotten away with this.

"Look at those *dimples*," she said, and kissed him. Such timidity. She'd never have let him do that. While he was still befuddled, she dragged him in. Her head was rushing with notions and she wanted to act on them before she realized they were stupid.

She hadn't said it was a joke. "So. So, um. *Why*. Why did you run away from m--" He saw the owner and quieted down. Rick didn't like making scenes with spectators.

The proprietor was a sad, dumpy figure with long, straight, thin greasy black hair, glasses twice the size of his face, and an ill-fitting pale blue sweater, and was deeply into a mimeographed Biblical crossword puzzle.

"Hey, what're you doing open at night, on *Thanksgiving*, anyway?" Rick couldn't help but ask.

"What else'm I gonna do?" he asked, very defensive.

"Don't talk to people, dear. They'll *distract* you." And further she dragged Rick, to the back, through a roomful of rack upon rack of prom dresses.

"Is that it?" he asked. "I'm supposed to be inspired now to buy some nice, romantic gift for you to make it all better? Is *that* the idea?" Down to the basement he went with her anyway. It had a low ceiling and a cold cement floor, and was crammed messily thick with an uncountable inventory of the estate detritus of dead attics.

"That would be terribly thoughtful, but right now I just want you to come down these stairs. Watch your step."

"You tear me up to the last inch of skin and in return, I get you a *nice, pretty dress*?" And he just wouldn't shut up. He never knew how to close his mouth at the right time. He never knew how to let anything slide, or just happen. Past the broken vintage cameras, he kept going on about how she had no right to blame an accident on him. Who was hurt by that most? Past the scattered boardgames with no gameboards, he wondered had *she* still had a car, any *kind* of car, only that morning which was dead forever now? Had she? Because if she did he'd much rather they'd have taken it instead. He'd done his best, he repeated as she tugged him past the Yes records with no jackets, and the yellowed bridal dresses, toward a hanging, dim light bulb in back of an aisle, deep inside the dusty fake furs. Thank god his dried vocal cords gave out once they got to the stool, directly under the bulb.

She didn't know why he couldn't just follow her and keep quiet. She wasn't blaming him *now*. She was done. Didn't he realize?

But he kept going *on* and *on* about how unfair she'd been to him, that maybe if she hadn't made him so jangly and nervous he might not have fucked things up as much as he did. He reminded her she said this, at a moment when she turned him around and sat him down on the stool and attempted to shut him up by kissing him again. He even kept on through the kiss.

She threw off her jacket and unzipped her dress, and clamped her hand hard over his mouth until he chose to stop even mumbling. She removed the hand, placed her finger to her mouth, and said "Shh." But he didn't get it, and started talking again, so she had to cover his mouth once more till he got the picture. She was trying to forget. Why wouldn't he let her? Was he stupid? Did he not really love her?

She stared very seriously into his eyes, touched his lips now, and repeated, "Shh," very low. Then her fingertip slid to the underside of his chin, and tipped his head upward

to face the lightbulb. She said nothing. She just held it there a moment till he realized she wanted him to stare at it. She licked his throat a bit once he wasn't looking. He knew then to freeze.

She walked a few steps backward and slipped off her dress, donning some dead woman's synthetic, but thick and luxuriously snowy, fur coat. It tickled her ass.

Before he could look down or tell her to stop, and he was the only man alive that self-righteous even at moments like these, she'd yanked his pants and underwear down, clamped her hand firmly over his mouth and mounted him right there on the stool, the dust flying from the fur with every thrust.

On top she could forget and be in her own world with Rick. When he was on top she couldn't help imagining her father in her. But this was what it was supposed to be like. She was sure it was. She remembered. She needed to be reminded. Reminded why it would be too much trouble to leave him. Because she remembered why she'd taken so much trouble to trick her parents, and for what if she simply gave in anyway?

Because they still had this. Because if he was already erect it meant he loved her, and if she was this moist already she could still stand him, at least enough for her. Because she didn't want to be scared and to not do this with him would have meant she was scared and she wasn't scared of her dad, she wasn't.

Because this was good. In any case she couldn't stop thinking about it if she tried, nor doing it. She knew it was good. Because it wasn't talk. He couldn't talk now even if she hadn't sealed his mouth. Sex was the only thing that ever shut him up. It shouldn't be in words. It couldn't be translated into them without ruining it all. Only grunts, groans, touches, tastes. It was like putting a string quartet into words. It couldn't be explained. It looked like love to her.

Because she needed what she heard love was. Because she blamed him for everything that had gone wrong, and she didn't want to think about that, but if she broke up with him now she'd never stop. Because she needed an oasis of one thing that did not make sense. That she wanted anyway, no matter what harm it caused her, no matter how stupid or self-destructive even she might agree it was. There has to be a dot of destructive nonsense at the heart of every sensible soul. It was human to do stupid, impulsive things, everyone said. All right, then, she thought, if I'm careless I'll be human.

Not like her father said. Not like her father wanted. Not the virgin robot whose function was scheduled and planned already from birth to death. Not the timid squirrel never walking a single path he'd not already lined with walls. He wanted her to behave. He also wanted her to fuck up. The one was less trouble. The other was his entertainment. And he'd always find a way to turn the slightest mistake into material for his endless clever quips and notions about her. Why bother with the worry, if damned either way?

Someone else might think her insanity an obstacle to a relationship. Someone else might have been creeped out that first time she screamed "Dad" during sex. Someone else mightn't be there to want her, on the nights she knew she'd want someone regardless of her commitment to the holy cause of art. It would have to be someone. He was enough. She thrust her hips down harder and twisted them further down around him. *Yes*. He was more than enough. She was tired, far too tired. He was better than sleeping alone.

And when she came, she thought she saw a glowing sign of some great inspiration to come before she passed out upon him. But of course, it was only the light bulb.



They were awakened at eight the next morning with a haughty *Harrumph* and a foot loudly tapping, both from the owner, standing at the end of the aisle.

“*Shit!*” She was still on top of him, his pants were down at his ankles, and she was still wearing nothing but the fur.

“You gonna *buy* that, or what?” the owner demanded

“What, *this* tacky piece of shit? Maybe in 1972, before I was *born*,” Chastity laughed, tossing the fur to the floor.

END OF BOOK ONE.

BOOK TWO: The Humid Press Of Days
***coming in* SPRING 2001**

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