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Loose slots: Imaginations of the American demos

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LOOSE SLOTS: IMAGINATIONS OF THE AMERICAN *DEMOS*

by

Jessica Frances Thomas

Bachelor of English
Wayne State University, Detroit
2000

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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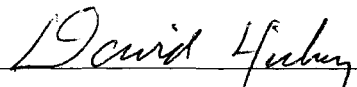
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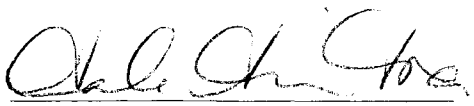
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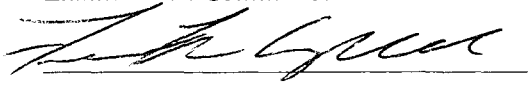
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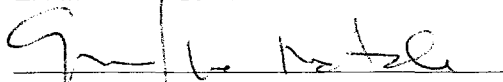
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ABSTRACT

Loose Slots: Explorations of the American *Demos*

by Jessica Frances Thomas

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Millions of Americans are subject to television programs about Las Vegas through shows such as *CSI* and *Las Vegas*, but there is little fictionalized writing done about this city, and only a small percentage of that takes place off the Strip. Since the publication of Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, there has yet to be another pop literary examination of Las Vegas as a cultural contributor to the American experience. Partially because of the fluid nature of the city, its ability to shape-shift within a decade, and partially because it is so difficult to avoid the risk and temptation that comes with living here.

But Las Vegas holds an interesting and important place in the contemporary pantheon of American cities. While New York is similar to Zeus, the King, and Los Angeles is similar to Aphrodite, the well of desire, Las Vegas is similar to Hermes, the trickster, the baby, the kind of thieves, the message-bearer. Placing Las Vegas at the center of this book allows new exploration of the panopolopoly of alienated, indeed, exiled characters, mostly women, who are all, by work or play, drawn to this city. Most are locals, brought here by dreams of easy money, the offer of a job, or the hope of a new marriage, but some are tourists, who, dazzled by the plastic dreams offered by Las Vegas,

come here only to discover that their traditional *notions* of good come too easy to *be* good.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vii
CHAPTER 1 FAMOUS FOR THE DESERT.....	1
CHAPTER 2 CIRCLE EIGHT AND A HALF.....	10
CHAPTER 3 I LISTEN TO THE WIND.....	22
CHAPTER 4 THE PEON-ETTE.....	24
CHAPTER 5 A DREAM OF LYON.....	35
CHAPTER 6 A DAY ALONE AT THE FOUR QUEENS.....	45
CHAPTER 7 CONVERSATIONS THAT TAKE PLACE AT THE BAR AMONGST THOSE WE NEVER MEET BUT OFTEN SPEAK OF AS IF THEY ARE THE FRIENDLY CHARACTERS IN OUR LIVES.....	55
CHAPTER 8 THE TURNING POINT IN LALAYA MARSALA'S LIFE.....	72
CHAPTER 9 ON FLOGGING	75
CHAPTER 10 THREE SECRETS AND ONE MAN.....	83
CHAPTER 11 IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT.....	98

CHAPTER 12	A MOMENT OF MAGGIE YOUNG’S LIFE IN A GATED COMMUNITY IN NORTHWEST LAS VEGAS.....	105
CHAPTER 13	THE DARK SIDE OF THE DUCHESS.....	107
CHAPTER 14	A MAN, A PLAN, A CAMERA.....	125
CHAPTER 15	TOKYO (AT THE IMPERIAL PALACE) A GO-GO.....	138
CHAPTER 16	NEVER, EVER QUESTION A DUCHESS.....	140
CHAPTER 17	A KELLY GREEN TANK TOP AND A PREPARATION.....	146
CHAPTER 18	THE FLASHING AT NIGHT.....	150
CHAPTER 19	GOODBYE, I LOVED YOU, YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH.....	159
VITA	161

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CHAPTER 1

FAMOUS FOR THE DESERT

From a distance, that is, through the television sets, through the cameras, and through the journalists, the city calls to him, to Charles Miller, that is, Charlie, and to them, his childhood friends, all back in New York during on their very last winter breaks from college. All are middle-class, from sturdy white-collar families, with dark hair and eyes, big noses, large hands. They are the ones who end up at school, unlike their brothers or sisters. To an observer, they hardly differ from each other physically - or behaviorally - except for Charlie, for upon observation, the observer notices that Charlie is a bit more quiet than the other boys, a bit more thoughtful. Occasionally he steps to the side of the group and stares at the ground. But *otherwise*, they are the same, and to them all, Las Vegas glitters, of course with more than light, the glitter in their eyes is more than the reflection from the computer monitor, which they all bend over, while looking for a vacation package for five, because they finally, finally, have a last vacation together, a real last hurrah, and this *idea* glittered.

They fly direct from New York to Vegas in six hours, and for Charlie, it isn't a good flight. He sits next to a large, pink, skulking mass of a human, who wears a black skull cap, a human, yes, but obese to the point of androgyny. Upon Charlie's reserved observation, the body reveals itself as female. During the flight, she makes dour

expressions and frequently sighs. Is she reacting to the pop music on the airplane headphones or the action-thrill-romance-comedy in-flight-movie? Her restlessness sets Charles on edge, that is, initially, but his friends order beer after beer in preparation for their landing. As the best way to arrive, they think, is with alcohol-tinted lenses.

The initial approach to Las Vegas - at night, over the glittering strip, is a dramatic thing, as they see a few things they recognize, such as the green glow of the Grand Casino, and the tiny Eiffel Tower, but also many things that do not. What is that glittering gold building? And there, what is...that light...shining straight up...they have heard of it...but to see it exists...

"It's the Luxor" says the miserable girl sitting next to Charlie. "The only two man-made objects you can see from the moon are that light and the Great Wall of China."

As they land, everyone on the plane cheers.

And then, they walk through the airport...at night...the lights are so bright and so dense, and the *dings*, the *dings* of the machines fill their ears as soon as they disembark, also, the *scent*, the *scent* of cigarettes and air conditioning, cheap perfume and old luggage. Money is peeled out of a wallet. Some people hurry, but there are others...groups...who walk too slowly...they stand in the middle of the hallway...or stop, suddenly...and marvel...

They pile into a taxi, Charlie in front, yet he is the only one who doesn't try to make conversation with the taxi driver, an Arab with a thick accent, who keeps changing the subject from women to politics....The group harasses the him until he tells them that if they want action that they should go to a very special club for very special gentlemen,

where there are women, and surely one of them will be willing...for some money.

As he lets them out at the Grand Casino, the largest casino in the world, a green block, with a towering golden lion, he hardly pays attention to their wide eyes, he sees it all the time, the wonder at the fake, and grabs their money, yawning.

“You’re my last ride tonight,” he says.

Charlie’s buddies run to the slot machines, leaving Charlie to register their room on his credit card. Why does he always have to be the responsible one? As he stands in line, his senses overwhelmed...that scent of cigarettes and air conditioning...in waves...and loud voices ringing off the marble floors...how amazing that indoor smoking is encouraged...

“Mario! Mario!” Charlie hears the name being shouted, and turns around while standing in line. “Mario!” A group is calling Mario Lopez, the actor, *right there*, walking past in pleated khaki pants, a soft button-down shirt, a gold chain, and a tan. His dark hair glistens, and he is *wearing sunglasses*. “Mario!” Women swoon as he passes, while the people in uniform, the workers, there behind the long brass counter, or there in the corners, sweeping, or there, out front, parking cars, they hardly bat an eye. “Next?” They cry. “Next?” The dark-haired, tired-eyed woman behind the counter calls...

”How you doin’?” Charlie says.

She smiles at how starstruck he is. “Oh, Mario Lopez,” she says. He’s *always* here,”

Up to the room, he drags his friends, because he has to take a shower, and it is late, and they need to get out on the town. Charlie says, “I want some honeys,” and his

buddies agree. They all want honeys. One buddy, at the wet bar, pours everyone a scotch. They toast to each other. Three times. And then...the images and sounds...for Charlie...they run together...with the scent of cigarettes and air conditioning. Down the elevator...and the sting of the hot summer night on his face. Large droughts of cold beer...Charlie is sitting at the sports bar in the Grand Casino, laughing with his buddies, at a group of bridesmaids, wearing matching t-shirts and sequined tiaras, who carefully make their way through the crowd, lifting their skirts, and one of the girls has a big wet stain on her bottom....

And then it was back to the jostling. The bodies. The voices. The lights. His perception is blurred, as if he is moving in a world of Vaseline. There are groups of laughing people, and the smell of marijuana, and now, cleavage, and more drinks -- tequila. Then, another cab ride, the smell of sweat, the hot air outside stings again, the glitter of lights, the black night sky, and these women squeezing past him...cleavage. Charlie watches as his buddy, who walks in front of him, cups his hand between the legs of a blonde girl who is passing in the crowd, and Charlie sees the girl's look of astonishment, and her attempt to turn around and yell, but the crowds keep moving them away from her...

Something new now, a red glow, and a cat walk, and poles, and naked women, beautiful ones, swinging around the poles...and then, this is very clear, outside of the well of Vaseline, one of his buddies asks Charlie to come out to the alley, because he didn't want to get jumped by the bouncer at the door...

In the alley, his buddy says, "You gotta believe everything you hear about these

Vegas girls,” he says. Charlie follows behind him, down the alley, to the car, with the girl...

Then he blanks out, and when he blinks open his eyes, finds himself lying in a cool-sheeted bed in their hotel room at the Grand Casino...his buddies...they are sleeping in the beds...there are a few girls curled up with them...the television had been left on the hotel’s “Poker” station...a low volume...someone had left the ac on too low, and it is freezing -- despite the body next to him...who is this?...he hardly remembered...someone they had picked up last night...why did she stay? Weren’t they supposed to leave after the fact? After they finished entertaining...how did he know about her job? Her makeup smeared across her face..the top of her head...her bleached blonde hair...she is tall...and he sits up...gets out of bed...stumbles to the living area of their room...nearly trips over his buddy, who turns over, opens his eyes very wide, then shuts them, and mumbles, “We’re all gonna get alcohol poisoning and lose our houses...”

Charlie puts on his clothes, heads downstairs, alone, for the breakfast buffet...he had learned the best way to combat a hangover was to eat as much as possible...and to drink lots and lots of orange juice and coffee...After waiting in line...he is seated, by a waiter in a green jumpsuit, In the corner, right next to the end of the buffet...where people have to squeeze past him in order to get to their own seats. Yet another disappointing seat. From the waiter, he orders an orange juice, a coffee, a coke, and a water. Four drinks. Does the waiter, in his green jumpsuit, does he think he is crazy? And him..eating alone...what does he make of it? Huh! Some jerk who slept with that hot little honey last night, right?...*Well try getting a chick with tits like that on your own*, he

thinks...as he walks to the buffet...and loads his plate...with sausage, hashbrowns, sushi, pancakes, an omelette with cheese and bacon and onions, boiled shrimp...and a piece of pizza.

The buffet is busy, full of large Asian families, older middle-class black couples, rich arabs, and lots and lots of suburban white folk, who all shuffle around in their flip-flops and long shorts, stop for a chat while on their way to the hotel pool...Charlie eyes his favorite types of tourist – the girls in bikinis and sarongs, and their perfect make-up and french manicures. He eyes them up and down, and occasionally they return his interest. They smile or walk past his table. But he refuses to initiate conversation, because cause everyone knows that all women in Vegas are hookers, that's what he thinks to himself. Imagine, an entire city... he remembers a brief flash of the night before...the woman's head...moving up and down...in the car...he chuckles.

So he sits down and begins to eat. And tries to remember the night before...he had read, in the in-flight magazine, that if you try to remember your memories, explore each angle, space and time...you can get "smarter." For example, you have an early childhood memory, riding your tricycle down the hallway...try to remember what that hallway leads to...why you are riding that tricycle, what you are wearing...what happens before you ride the tricycle, try to remember what the doors and windows and the walls looked like...

After gorging on all the food he had never before considered appropriate breakfast fare, after he sits and watches the people load their plates, after he inhales the rich aroma of cigarettes and air conditioning, and after he watches a group of girls, still in their nighttime costumes play at the slot machines, nothing they must not have gotten any

sleep, that they are still partying, and that's what he likes to see, girls who know how to party, their makeup, smeared, is emphasized and more dramatic, dark under the dim lights of the casino. With the sight of a tall girl with blonde hair, he begins to more completely capture what happened the night before. He lights a cigarette and closes his eyes, it seems the ambient sound of the slot machines help jar his memory into action, for immediately, he remembers..

He must have picked up the girl somewhere, where was it? The alley, the car, and the girl...that wasn't the end of the night, though he must have blacked out, he must have, because the next thing he can remember is another cab ride, and the cab driver yelling and talking and laughing with his buddies, and everyone patting each other on the back, and the enormous amount of money his buddies put in his hand to give the cab driver, and the long stairway upstairs, he had stumbled, he remembered, through a door that led into a room of couches and electronic music, a fist-sized mound of cocaine on the coffee table, and his immediate sense of pleasure as they all bent over and started snorting it up...groups of girls in strapless dresses, long legs, bare arms, the scent of perfume and body heat, fast talking, *The way to scare a guy, if you're a little guy, when he threatens you, is to act crazy, man, you gotta act crazy...you say something like, "You gonna take me out, and I'll go right for your eyes, man," and he'll leave your ass alone.... 'cause he knows you crazy...*and then...there was the girl with the blonde hair...it must have been her...she was so tall, taller than any of the other girls, and worked that room like the way Charlie worked the gold charm around his neck as he watched her. Did she own the place? She swayed back and forth, like a pendulum, and did he go up to her or did his

buddies get her for him? And her enormous hair, how did she get it so big? There was so much of it. Thick, lush, falling around her shoulders. Like the mane of the lion at the Grand Casino...and her little Asian friend, too...in her argyle sweater...and beautiful black hair...she seemed more demure than the rest of the girls, wore jeans, and stayed with her group. She giggled...Sometimes... He bought her a drink too, and then....

After finishing his food, after the warm champagne, and his ultimately unsuccessful attempt to fully recollect his night, he takes the elevator up to his floor, and, there, walks down the halls, full of housekeeping carts..but...so silent...silent...more silent than anything...and always this scent of stale cigarettes and air conditioning... He slides his key card into the door, and as he enters, he is greeted by a most astonishing sight...in silhouette against the window...a man, there, on the couch, tall, in a silky dressing gown, and smeared makeup...holding an unlit cigarette, his blonde wig thrown on the couch next to him...it looks like a dead animal...and across the coffee table, there she was, the Asian girl...and her long silky hair...in her blue jeans...and nothing else...her makeup is perfect...she is so *flat*...no breasts at all...and she is demure, for how else can she be but demure? ...so carefully, she sips a cup of coffee and smokes a long, thin cigarette.

The bald man raises his eyebrows, “MMMMmmmmhello?” he says. His voice is filtered through cigarettes, raspy.

“Who are you?” says Charlie..

“I’m the Duchess, my dear,” says the man.

“False Duchess, baby,” says the Asian, in a deep voice.

“That’s right honey,” says the man, “I’m your *False Duchess of the Morning*,” he

snorts and tosses his head, which makes Charlie remember...the blonde from the bar last night...the same movement of the head... The Asian giggles, then leans over and lights the False Duchesses' cigarette with a tiny golden lighter.

“I’m sure you won’t mind that we ordered room service...your friends are still passed out...much have been a big night for them, mmmm?” He leans back and inhales his cigarette, lets the smoke out with a long, thin hiss...then leans over, and grandly sweeps the sleeve of his robe aside. He lifts a glass of chocolate milk from the table.

“Things ain’t always what they seem,” he says, and sips his drink. “Sorry honey, but that’s tricks...”

CHAPTER 2

CIRCLE EIGHT AND A HALF

Virginia had put it off for years.

Now that the threat of a cross-country move loomed, which includes the necessity of renting an SUV – circumstances require that she have a drivers licence. At 35, she had spent her life depending on her bicycle and the kindness of strangers. But the bicycle is no good for long trips to the Department of Motor Vehicles in the Nevada summer, and asking for the kindness of strangers to stretch from an occasional drive to the supermarket to a trip to and from the DMV is possibly more unpleasant than riding a bicycle in the heat.

She can barely stand to face herself this morning, the responsibility is enormous. What do people think about people without drivers licenses? Bums! Obviously, they are never in situations that require verifiable identification, nor do they have cars, and furthermore, the reason they don't have cars is because they are lazy or poor or because they got caught drinking and driving. Gina, she looks in the mirror over the sink in the employee bathroom of the Casino, and she sees herself, her round, puffy face, her narrow brown eyes, her straight dark eyebrows, and thanks to her recent upgrade to middle-age-dom, her growing plumpness around her middle. Too many nights in front of the television spent eating take-out from the Hawaiian Restaurant, that's from, taking care of

mother, that's from. As well as too many mornings spent sitting in one place, in the lower depths, so to speak, the bowels, of the Casino, down there, too many mornings, her spirit moving slowly through the intestines of the monster, only to be spit back out, at the end of the day, into the roaring heat of the Nevada desert.

She spends the early morning at the Casino, then rides home on her bicycle! In her business suit! Down Tropicana!.

When she gets to the house, she locks her bicycle outside, and enters...calls out –

“Mother? Mother?” No answer. Gina walks to her mother's room...looks in...and sees the tiny woman there, still tucked in bed, under the polka-dot sheets....how fragile, how fragile! Even her hair, grey, wispy, straggly, what's left of it, it looks as if it would break. She breaths softly, and it is good to see her sleeping after she had been awake all night. Gina closes the bedroom door, so her movements about the house won't be disruptive.

It is only ten o'clock in the am, but she already stinks...because of this new deodorant...bought at the health food store...the deodorant advertised it worked through enzyme action, tea tree oil, and baking soda, etc. etc. It didn't occur to Virginia, when she bought it, that tea tree oil doesn't smell very good, and that maybe the benefits of tea tree oil might not be best utilized through its addition to a deodorant...but now the idea seems plain as day.

Oh, but in her hurry to get to the DMV, she has no time to shower again -- this business needed to be taken care of today! No later! She is skipping her drawing class! That she was paying so much for! At the community college! In exasperation, she rubs

more tea tree paste under her arms, throws the little bottle of deodorant in her bag, to be safe. The worst part of the journey, by far, is the walk to the bus stop...Because it is Nevada, the Mojave desert...and it is summer. The real suffering begins as she closes her front door...the heat hits her like a wall, pulsating, unforgiving, violent, but she trudges through it...oh, with nothing to think about...just her physical discomfort....the intense heat on her skin and her scalp, the bright sun stinging her eyes, even behind her sunglasses...it is so hot she can't see...except in dreamlike hazy images...it is like looking through the pale purple of a tanzanite...and they say that tanzanite is only mined from one place in the world...only one place, and so...how her mind wanders! And she lets it...She thinks about people who have it worse than herself.

- people in freezing climates who are required to walk to government offices
- disabled people who have to walk, slide, hop, etc. to government offices
- the lost boys
- women sold into sexual slavery-starving orphans
- anyone in the advanced stages of AIDS or cancer
- 80% of this here planet earth

Nonetheless, despite this reminder that she is healthy, sheltered, and fat, she still feels a bit...ignored by the gods...perhaps even reviled...look at Sarah Valachos at the casino, she has a car, a boyfriend, a job, a family, beautiful clothes, a great body and a drivers licence. She graduated high school and immediately began working for the Casino. A manager at twenty-two! A bad manager, but a manager nonetheless, and what's worse, Virginia's manager. And what does Virginia have? A room at Mother's

house, a gay boyfriend, an addiction to food, and to top it off, Mother's cancer...and the tray of medications in the kitchen...

Virginia feels the sun melting around her and imagines that, perhaps, this light isn't God's sight, rather, it's a form of divine excrement, this heat, pouring down on her, a sign that things will never change, because the deluge can only grow worse...over time, a trickle caused the Grand Canyon...oh, but then she began to think that times like these, these empty times, these were what love was for...so she has something to think about during these moments of unbearable drudgery...Oh, for something silly and light that could make her smile! She tries...tries to think of being in love...who had there been? She thinks, desperately, she thinks...him? no...him? no...no one here...no one in years...some lusty desires...but nothing strong enough to distract her...from the sun...and the tray in the kitchen...she tries to think of other people in love...Brad and Angelina, and their two adopted children, traveling through Europe..oh, .nothing comes of it...except that she can imagine them in their beautiful air-conditioned Los Angeles house...Virginia looks forward, steels her nerve, it is still years to the bus stop... Through the sun, she walks

Until...the bus stop! An oasis of peace in this desert of activity, its faded awning offering the most coveted possession in Nevada – shade. For half an hour, she sits in the last square of shade offered by the bus stop...near a big white homeless man...his left hand is swollen and wrapped in gauze...she watches him take out a leather pouch...filled with tobacco...and roll a cigarette...with his bandaged hand! As he smokes, he examined the

blemishes on his arms...picks at them...and flicks the scabs to the ground...Why do people do things like this in public? Virginia guesses that if you're homeless...where else are you going to do it...but then...the bus arrives! Finally...! She deposits her coins, then walks down the bus aisle, looks for a seat...but what's this...it's hot on the bus too! Virginia sits down on a sticky plastic seat, she looks around... People are fanning themselves with bus schedules, magazines, paper bags...and one large lady, wearing bulbous walkman headphones proudly using her "real" fan...it is round, with a picture of a rose...and she keeps sighing to herself as she fans...They are, all, a collective mass of sweaty, smelly, miserable peons...dirty...holding plastic bags...or talking too loudly on their cell phones. Without drivers licenses.

As bus moves...the lady with the headphones moves to a seat near Greta...and begins to look at a catalog...Virginia squinted for a better look...it is catalog of workout gear! The irony! The lady has a pencil and is circling all the things she wants...Checking off the things she wants, because the act of checking is almost like owning. Or at least it's close enough to owning...you have really made your mark when you check off what you want...The bus moves slowly...slowly! People get on the bus...people get off.

Everyone looks weary. The lady with the headphones gets off on the Strip, Virginia watches her head for Caesar's Palace...why?...why? Where is she going to go, her with her plastic bags full of newspaper and dollar-store purchases? She wasn't dressed for work...maybe she was transferring...to another bus... After the bus crosses the Strip, and continues heading west, Virginia feels that way she feels whenever she crosses the Strip on the way somewhere, no matter which direction. It is the prime meridian of

the city, like a long straight line of cocaine dividing one side of a cd case from another...the bus crawls...so slowly...everyone sweats...they are glistening...like miserable little sausages!...At the first stop after the Strip, the bus stops behind a fix-it truck....the engine stops ...the sausages groan...the man in front of Virginia wipes the sweat from his neck, where his new "om" tattoo was scabbing over...and suddenly it is hotter! The motor off...the sausages sweating, pressing together in desperation...the bus driver stands up, the passengers, including Virginia, look to him, hoping, hoping he will shout, Screw this city, we're going to the water park! But instead, he says..."we're stopping for a minute...to fix the AC"...ah, that explains everything...Virginia makes eye contact with a few of the passengers...they spoke to each other with their eyes...and she imagines that they speak to each other with their eyes...he could have told us earlier...

Then a woman, frazzled as everyone else, but tan, tan, tan, dark brown, almost red, in her forties, with burned-out blonde hair, wearing a local casino tank top...she pipes up..."Think cool! I'm a native Las Vegan! At least there's no humidity!" In response, the back of the bus groans.... One of the little old ladies in the front of the bus says, "You haven't been to Florida!" which cause the people on the bus, those not yet wilted, to dissipated into a discussion about the merits of a humid heat versus a dry heat....Someone says, "I haven't been to Florida since 1967, and it was so humid I never went back."

Again, the bus starts moving...but still no air conditioning...still no relief....this bus was an auxiliary circle of hell...for those who are lazy and childlike...those who can't be responsible for themselves...those who don't have the wear-with-all to get a driver's licence when they move to a city...it is these forlorn souls who inhabit this circle...which

smells of bacon and car oil. After a few stops, the bus driver says, "the AC will come back on when we hit Jones Street..it just needs to warm up..." Again, the irony!

Toward the end of the line (for the Department of Motor Vehicles was at the end of the line), the man with the brand-new "om" tattoo turns to Virginia...He is not as good looking as she imagined, for he had bad skin, and had waxed his eyebrows.

"Does this bus stop at the DMV?" he asks. Why didn't he look that up himself? She gets nervous...tells him the address of the DMV...then thinks about the place...and her accuracy...and the way the heat plays tricks on her mind...and then she thinks why doesn't the man with the bad tattoo ask the bus driver instead of asking her to do it? But she can't stop thinking about it...is she even on the right bus? In a mental frenzy, she gets up to ask the bus driver...asks, "does this stop at the DMV"

"What?" he says.

"Does this stop at the DMV? Where's the best stop for this place?"

"The next one," he says

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After getting off the bus at the appropriate stop, Virginia looks around, she sees nothing but two gas stations and a...wait...that red hill isn't a hill...it's the DMV! It's been painted to look like the desert! Those tricky government buildings! It is two blocks away! She braces herself...for the walk...which is done in a haze, again, she is swimming through the pale purple of a tanzanite...the heat pressing down...down...and she looks for the entrance to the government building...then finds front entrance, which is in the back of the building, properly speaking...she walks, she walks!...through the entrance of the

building, past teenagers waiting with their parents, past gorgeous middle-aged women, registering their brand-new BMWs, past leather-faced hillbillies who carry bits of yellow paper, which act as scarlet letters (they got a DUI!). Remembering to keep up her fluid level, and, remembering that she had never been aware of her fluid levels until she lived in the desert, she buys a two dollar water (those gougers!), and chugs it down. And then, collected a bit, hydrated, she stands in line, which was surprisingly short for a Wednesday afternoon...at the end of which, an anonymous government worker tells Virginia to fill out a form, and points her to the testing room...for her written test...Virginia is furious because she thought she would be able to have it all taken care of today. But she is told that she must take this stupid written test. She thinks, Do I look like a teenager? This is yet another injustice to the mass of the unidentifiable...On her reluctant way to the room, another anonymous government worker seems to whisper to her, "If you get ten wrong, you gotta re-schedule to take the test on another day."

She sits, with fifteen teenagers, in front of a computer, the test is taken by pressing visual buttons on a computer screen. After each answer, the screen states the number wrong and the remaining number of questions. By question forty-eight, Virginia has nine wrong answers...can you imagine...how nervous...to have to go through this again! To add to the stress, she is starting to stink...her tea tree oil deodorant has given out...she could smell it each time she lifted her arm to touch the test-screen...terrified, she was. Of coming back and of her perceivable hygiene. The two last questions are easy, so easy she didn't need to sweat as she walked up to the desk and announced her completion, at which point, yet another anonymous government working points for her to

get in yet another line...at the end of which is a government worker, who has not yet allowed his job to collapse his personality...to begin with, he is fruity, also, he is wearing a Hawaiian shirt, and when he smiles, he proudly displays brand-new dentures. When Virginia speaks to him, his tone is both evasive and bitchy...she needs to make an appointment for a driving test before the end of August! He says, there's nothing open until the middle of September...at this point, she almost jumps over the counter at him...but she keeps it together...says, begs, isn't there anything else? And she gives him sad eyes...ignorant eyes...she tries to make him feel powerful, she wills herself to shrink...to make him feel strong...he clicks his dentures...maybe...he looks through the book again, sighing, another cog in the wheel...finally he gives her a phone number...he whispers it...no one else is supposed to know...and he shoos her away...and she hears him click his dentures in wait for his next customer...she flees to the corner to dial her cell phone...and finds he has given her an emergency get in quick line! She makes the appointment for the driving test next week...and got the hell out of there...that miserable government building full of miserable government people, built to punish people who are always in a hurry to get somewhere.

She really reeks by this point...like someone who had spent all day working construction...Again, she walks past the teenagers and the middle-class woman and the leather-faced drunks, only to wind up at the bus stop again....the walk seems to have taken no time, as if her time in the heat and the shuffle has made her limp to stimulus...it is so hot...and she waits...alone...no one else in this part of town needs to take a bus...she

stinks, she stinks! But then, she remembers...and takes the little bottle of deodorant out of her bag...and covertly applies to her pits again...as if anyone could see her! She stands and stands and waits and waits, until she notices a bus just up the street...why didn't it pass her? She walks up to it...mounts it, walks down the aisle of people, and sits down, relieved! But then, the driver gets off the bus...he is carrying a little tupperware full of pasta and tomato sauce. It is 1:50. Someone asks, "Are you going to lunch?" "I eat at the top of the hour," he says...then shuts the doors and leaves them...they all watch him walk away, dumbly...until...another bus is pulls just behind...and the whole bus of people scrambles off this bus, and onto that one. A marvelous thing happened when Virginia boarded this bus, she felt...cool...because finally, finally, here is an air conditioner that works! Because the air is conditioned, and her work for the day mostly finished, Virginia is able to look about the bus...she marvels at how beauty and filth can live in such close quarters...the faces of the proletariat...and one, one beautiful little girl amongst the uglies...she sits with her fat father, holds his hand, does not look at anyone. The others have wizened faces beyond their years...and peasant bodies...they wear dirty casino t-shirts...she imagines this is what it would be like if she lived in Poland...outside her windows, there are the beautiful people driving along in their beautiful cars...she wanders...somewhere out there is the real stench of construction workers...and then, horror of horrors, she starts thinking about her first love! how predictable! She thinks about him...hadn't thought about him in years... But what is he doing now? does he think of her? She feels a pang in her chest. He married a girl with her name...and she wonders if they are they still together...oh how she loved him...she aches...and the time passes...she

aches...and the street disappears...

Her stop is nearly up...but wait...who is that...now, outside her window? Is it that man she had a fling with? Why would he be here?...She doesn't want to see him! Having to watch him smoke meth...she wasn't going to find herself calling him! But if he catches up with the bus...she'll have to talk to him....go faster, she begs the bus...go faster...a few held breaths, and her stop arrives. Once her feet touch the sidewalk, she looks around furtively...but he is nowhere in sight...he must have turned...in fact, there is nothing, no one, nothing around for miles...so she puts her feet to the floor and walks more quickly. It is easy to walk fast when no one is in front of you. She thinks...she has part of her drivers license, but she is still miserable...she zones out until she reaches her house...and she checks the mail...nothing! Why does she bother? Then, she opens the door quietly...the wave of domestic air conditioning hits her, and as she notices how quiet the place is...her mother is probably still asleep...so she tip-toes upstairs...opens the door to her mother's room. There she is, tiny, sick, and fragile as she was three hours ago. It looks like she has slept the whole time. Virginia sits on the bed next to her mother, and her mothers stirs.

“Virginia?” she says.

“Yes Mother, it's me,” she says. “Go back to sleep.” Virginia watches her mother flutter her eyes closed...her breathing becomes regular again. Picking up the remote control to the television, Virginia turns on the Home Shopping Channel...she is exhausted...and lies down next to her mother...she considers holding her mother, but opts not to, because although the house is air conditioned, physical contact, in the summers in

Nevada, is a courteous no-no. So, as her body temperature returns to normal, as the muscles in her legs relax, the lull of the voices of the announcers on the Home Shopping Channel mesmerize her...they are selling tanzanite today...a stone she always found rather ugly...but they keep saying it's going to go up in price...because there's only one place in the world where tanzanite is mined...and that mine is nearly depleted...so it's a good investment, they say...something you'll hand down to your grandchildren...

CHAPTER 3

I LISTEN TO THE WIND

Occasionally, Victoria ventures out for lunch on her bicycle. Braves the heat, braves the sun, and finds herself searching for shade at the local twenty-four hour taco stand, ordering a bean burrito, and squeezing into a tiny little corner of shade, and waiting for her food, when a fat, shirtless, white man with a chest mottled with various stages of sunburn, tell her things *he just wanted to tell her*, while unconsciously scratching peeling skin from his chest.

“I fell off the wagon about two months ago, before that me and my sister were both sober for nine months. You know what happened? You know California? You know Newport Beach? Well my sister and I lived there and one night she calls me, and I could tell from her voice that she’s drunk. She calls me. “Bill,” she says, “Come and take me to the beach, Bill.” And I go because she’s my sister and she’s in her car, drunk. I wanted to have a little fun, too. She looked like she was having so much fun. So it’s raining and we’re listening to Cat Stevens albums. You know, “Moonshadow.” “I’m dumdumdum on a moonshadow. Moonshadow. Moon shadow.” Then she puts in America. “I’ve been through the desert on a horse with no...” My sister, she has real good taste in music. Janis Joplin. And I was just going to drive her down to the beach and not have a drink myself, but we got down there and she looked like she was having so

much fun. Later that night...we had four....I only drink four or five beers a day...but we had four forties and a fifth of whiskey, and later that night, I go to the bathroom and she's in the tub. My sister kind of...not fat...she's a big girl....190...I had to lift her out of the bathtub, and then I put her in the bed and put a blanket on top of her. I had to life my sister, my own sister, out of the bathtub, naked...then I went back to sleep. Next morning I woke up and the forties and the whiskey...I don't drink hard liquor, but she does...she's a real bad alcoholic, my sister is a worse alcoholic than I am...I woke up and those forties and the whiskey were all gone, she drank all of it, you see, she wasn't asleep...but I thought she was."

As he speaks, she stares at his sunburned chest and stomach, and notices a scab inside the bottom of his navel. During his speech, she watches his hand absently search his skin for eruptions. A hygienic habit. Like a gorilla searching for lice. His hand eventually wandered to his navel, and with a little poke, his index finger enters his navel and stops to caress the scab, and she watches as he dig, dig, digs the scab out and flings it to the ground.

CHAPTER 4

THE PEON-ETTE

Other things, more important things, more out of the ordinary things are happening in the world, tonight, Friday, March 10, 2006, between the hours of four to nine pm. The cosmos spins. The tides pull. Volcanoes erupt. Prophets are born. But in a little corner of the southwest quadrant of the continent of North America, there lies, in the midst of the north-east Mojave desert, Sin City, Las Vegas, Nevada, and the glittery little neon Strip, where blonde-haired, blue-eyed Virginia Malinda works in the box office of a *major casino production*

In the casino, there is the familiar scent of cigarettes and air conditioning, as well as the sounds of the slot machines, the pop music, and the crowd. And because it is a Friday, but not a holiday, there is a crowd before the show, but not a big crowd.

One of the things about this city? You can do the tackiest things in the most technically perfect ways. This show Malinda is selling tickets for? It's low-brow, and full of glittery costumes and old-time show-stoppers from the forties, and its audiences are the same way, low-brow, sporting their best shirts, reiterating old times with their old friends...they're all spending their retirement together...

4:00pm – After turning on the house and auditorium lights, and doing an once-over of the theatre, it is one hour before show time. Virginia unlocks the doors, and as

the crowd begins to trickle in, she meets briefly with the ushers, four of them: two men in black pants and purple vests over white shirts, and two women, in black unitards, purple vests, and fish-net stockings, and gives them their door and aisle assignments – the ushers are a strange breed, as they are, on the whole, more cliquish than the rest of the workforce at the theatre, indeed, they seem to enjoy keeping to themselves. *As if anyone has a life outside this place*, thinks Virginia, as they walk away, unsmiling, silent. As they walk away, Virginia become suddenly desirous of breaking through this invisible wall between herself and the ushers that had built over the months since the opening of this show, and no, other ushers for other shows were not this inscrutable. She stands in the back of the auditorium for a minute, but, as the crowd is not especially hectic, she nods to herself, decides to conquer these ushers for once and for all, and approaches the woman assigned to aisle four.

Seeing her alone, Virginia walks right up to her, and, up close, she looks older than Virginia had realized, the shadows of the auditorium permeate her crows feet and the smoker's lines that radiate from her upper lip. Noticing Virginia's approach, she looks down at her shirt and smoothes out non-existent wrinkles, perhaps in order to avoid eye contact with Virginia. But no, Virginia does not let her get away so easily. She waits until the usher looks up, and then Virginia proceeds to ask questions...to converse...with this woman...with short hair, dyed in alternating stripes of gold and honey...in this purple jacket and fishnet stockings...She gives up that her name is Ellie, that she just divorced her husband, that no-good two-timing sonofabitch, and left him and his lady friends back in Elko. She mentions how alienating her first year here had been, how difficult, how

poor...

"I couldn't work around mines any more," she says, and, for the first time, makes eye contact with Virginia. "And I've been meaning to ask you, are we allowed to smoke on the job?"

Virginia looks around. Few people. "Sure.

Perhaps this act of boss leniency will encourage the ushers, Ellie, to be friendlier...

"One of my neighbors works at the Rock Casino," says Ellie. "She's got real long red hair and a big smile...She's a dead ringer for Reba Mcintire...and she goes to all the big parties...she's like a celebrity magnet...and she's real good friends with Brookes and Dunn." A large crowd of people enters the theater, they want programs, they want to be seated together, and they want to bring drinks inside the theater. Ellie is suddenly preoccupied.

Walking away, Virginia contemplated their differences in age and imagination.

5:00 – The beginning of the show, and Virginia closes the doors to the auditorium, and, while on her way to the box office to phone the stage for their cue that it was time to begin, she passes the paid usher, a black teenager, who's shirts are always ironed, his ties are always tied, his breath is always minty, and she smiles at him. In response, he adjusts his brown-striped satin tie, and says something to the effect of, "Me and "Christina had a good time today."

Despite her interest in this revelation, Virginia continues to the box office, where she calls the stage manager and tells him to start the show. After she dims the lobby lights and checks the theater, she returns to the paid usher, who had, by now, finished

counting the tickets, and was sitting in one of the grand lobby seats.

“Gregory Marcel, did you kiss her?” she asks, remembering her own teenaged love affairs.

He replies in the negative. But then he tells her about the day he had spent with the girl, Christina, who works in the café above the theater. Christina is so beautiful, he says. She too is black, but with very light, smooth skin, a round face...and perfectly symmetrical features...but she is a virgin, and a Jehovah’s Witness. Regardless, Gregory Marcel tells Virginia that Christina had snuggled against him for protection from the wind while he showed her around campus today.

He decides it is time to go back upstairs, and turns away.

5:30 – While Virginia takes her seat in the grand lobby chair, Ellie the usher comes out of the auditorium and says something to the effect of “Two people are on the stage and they’re necking. I can’t stand that stuff. All that *necking*.” She crosses her arms and rubs her shoulders.

Virginia doesn’t know quite what to say to that. Yes, the show featured some close, cheek-to-cheek dancing, but no *necking*, as she understood the term. But, as she has made the decision to facilitate good relationships with the ushers, Virginia says, pleasantly, “Why don’t you have some coffee upstairs in the café?” Ellie nods, rubs her shoulders again, and walks away, the tails of her purple jacket swishing behind her, like two polyester fins...

Now Virginia decides to spend time on the other side of the marble hallway, where someone familiarly new and fairly attractive sits...behind the desk across from the

auditorium....he has black spiky hair...and no-good eyes...his job is to sell time-share condos in Arizona...he looks bored.

She walks up to him and says, “Do you go to the university here?” She wonders if he looked familiar because they had had classes when she was at the university.

He says no, but that he went to the art college nearby. She says, “You look familiar.”

He says, “You gave free tickets to me and my friend that night the show was cancelled.”

“Oh yes, and then you came to the next show with your girlfriend.”

“That show contributed to the downfall of our relationship.”

“Which show was it...oh? *The Sleeper!* Oh dear...”

They continue to chat about where they worked...all over Las Vegas, parts of Henderson. He even had a stint in Pahrump. He says sometimes this job requires so little of him that he could read 160 pages a day *at work*, which impresses Virginia, and they are just about to continue their into a more personal level of conversation when Ellie taps downstairs in her stage heels, then taps over to Virginia and says, “Wanna come back to my station with me? A most unexpected move. Ellie wants to talk more?”

Thus, Ellie and Virginia continue the conversation started earlier, as if the one question Virginia had asked had been enough to light the fire under Ellie’s life story. As if, while sitting in the café, drinking coffee, and smoking a cigarette, Ellie’s memories came flooding back more strongly, more urgently, than ever before, and she had to talk about them, *now*, and Virginia is the only one around. So they stand, Ellie and Virginia,

engrossed in whispered conversation, because once Ellie began confessing, she found it hard to stop -- *she spent three years in China and her philandering husband worked for one of the mining companies there...and while he worked, she traveled all over southeast...and to Australia...to Tibet...she saw an ice sculpture in Harbin, China of the great wall and she had walked on it.* Since she lived in China for three years, she says, *she could speak Mandarin.* “But there’s no way I could ever read or write the language.” This strikes Virginia as odd, as in her experience, a person is able to become fairly fluent in a language – both spoken and written, after one year of immersion in one of its cultures. Ellie’s statement means that either the Chinese language – lexicon and alphabet --is so incredibly complex that it takes longer than three years to even begin to recognize its characters, or that Ellie was not in many situations that were not catered to her linguistic needs. Perhaps the truth is a bit of both projections.

Granted, Ellie is a better conversationalist than Virginia had suspected, for the usher makes an effort to “equalize” the time spent talking, and despite her advanced years, which offered her far more interesting things to talk about, or perhaps because of them, she indicates a polite interest in Virginia’s experiences, asking her about her travels abroad and experiences in learning another language. To which Virginia answers with the usual song-and-dance about living in Paris and studying French.

Ellie says that, “My favorite memory was of trying to tell a cab driver where I wanted to go and finding hand movements uncommunicative the cab driver pulled over...somehow a white man and a Chinese female companion popped up, and if you see a white person, don’t you usually just assume that they’re American? Anyway, the cab

driver pulled over, and the usher told the white man where she needed to go, but the white man ended up being German, and indicated that his English was not so good, but that he would make an effort to help...to do the best he could...he listened to my English, then told his female Chinese companion the directions in German, and then the female Chinese companion gave the directions to the cab driver in Chinese.”

6:00 – The romance between Gregory Marcel and Christina has heated up, for Gregory Marcel jogs downstairs and tells Virginia, “I kissed her!” And for the remainder of the evening, Christina keeps walking downstairs to the bathroom...and Gregory Marcel keeps walking upstairs to the cafe...and Christina has let her hair down...and Gregory Marcel tap-dances on the marble hallway...are they now “together?” He is very happy.

Ellie returns to her post inside the auditorium. The man behind the exhibition counter had left. And for the first time that night, Virginia hears the closest approximation to silence she’s heard in a long time. Slot machines blank out into white noise...

6:15 – The silence is broken as Cam, a skinny white girl from the café, with shoulder-length, mousey, hair and the posture of a Saturday morning cartoon turtle, scuttles downstairs and asks Virginia to join her in a cigarette outside.

During their approach to their smoking spot (outside, but shielded by the wind), they both broke off the small-talk conversation and flicked their lighters at the same time.

“Wow, that was something,” says Cam.

“Wasn’t it?” says Virginia. They were both genuinely surprised by this moment

of simultaneous action.

While in the smoking spot, Virginia listens to Cam tell stories about when she used to hitchhike across the United States...back in the middle 90's...*when my friend Angie and me bought tickets for over thirty Phish shows, then drove their van out to California, at which point the van broke down...then we hitched with Phishers back up to Michigan, but then hitched back through Arizona with anyone...all sorts of people I don't wanna remember...shit, I used to hitch up and down the coast of California all the time...for protection, I kept a long knife...almost a sword... at my side...and if any creepy guy pulled over and tried to pick me up, I'd flash the knife at him quicker 'n you can say perrrr-verrrrt...and I was like "Yeah, I want a ride, you sick fuck."*

Cam says all of this as if these things, hitch-hiking, knife-carrying, and telling off sexual predators, are the most common things to be involved with...Virginia, who just moved to Las Vegas eight months ago with her mother, after her father ran off with that floozy...Virginia feels innocent and inexperienced next to Cam...whom she watches. Cam is smoking and talking and flashing her brown teeth...who has a five-year-old daughter...and tells Virginia, tonight, that her daughter has had eight surgeries since birth...and a pacemaker...and that her daughter's father now lives on the streets somewhere in southern California...but she takes good care of her daughter...and her mother helps her out...Cam has two other jobs...and in her spare time, collects motorbikes.

7:00 – Venturing upstairs to the café for a cup of coffee, and sees her boss, Larry, standing in front of the cash register, in his black suit and his black shirt and his black tie,

talking with the new blonde woman *who had taken the pregnant girl's place while she was on pregnancy leave.*

Virginia is about to approach the cash register as well, but is interrupted by Ellie, who, again, rubs her shoulders and shakes her head.

"Now there's two women in there massaging each other. I just don't like it!" She says. Virginia, sick of talking for the day, even to an usher, tells Ellie that she can go home if she'd like, that there are enough ushers for the end of the show, because of the small crowd. Ellie politely accepted, and, just before leaving, she put her hand on Virginia's shoulder (it was cold), and asks Virginia what she plans to do with her life. At a loss, she blurts out "translation!?"

Ellie says, "That's good. All you need is a plan and a goal...there's a wonderful future out there for you, as long as you have a plan and a goal...that's how I got to do all I've done...and you know what? I'm going back to China!"

Virginia, overwhelmed by the kind words of one of the inscrutable ushers, hugs Ellie.

7:30-9:00 – Virginia walks around the theatre, and again, the ambient noise of the show, the clinks of glasses, and the pop music in the air all disappear, and the slot machines emit white noise, and she feels like she exists in an aquarium, that there is a plate of glass in front of her and she is inspecting what's going on behind.

This is her favorite time of the day. Or night. Whatever time it is outside. Her "rounds," through the theatre and the casino, when she checks doors, collects box office receipts, moves money from the front desk to the safe downstairs, no task of which

requires her to speak. As she walks, she sees the woman who had taken the pregnant girl's position at the café go home, alone. And Gregory Marcel has disappeared, probably with Christina. It's Virginia in her high heels, tapping across the marble floors, and the white noise of the casino. She walks and she works, and then, finishes her tasks early, and ends up sitting down in the big chair outside the theater, back where she began the evening.

Then Larry comes downstairs and they proceed to strike up the first normal conversation they've had since she began working at this show. She guesses it is because she remembers to ask him about his puppet collection.

She says, "I'm a little jealous of your puppet collection." And she means it. He talks about *the oldest puppets in the collection (part of a commedia dell'arte set)...and I wrote this book about the collection...but it was such a pain in the ass to get it published...the editor's husband had cancer...and her boss was giving her a hard time because she was taking off work so often, so the book was behind schedule...which for some reason ended up pissing me off, because unless the book was published, the casino was going get rid of the puppets...don't get me started on who does what here, the boss sits up there making two million dollars a year and I've been busting my butt here for ten years...he's only in it for the money...he doesn't care about this show...he doesn't care about this theatre, or this casino...all the managers are dead-eyed, and the casino has lost its edge, don't you think? For example*, he says, as Gregory Marcel tap-dances downstairs. "Gregory Marcel, do you know what the next big exhibition upstairs is going to be?"

“No,” said Gregory Marcel, who has now switched from tap to soft-shoeing.

“What is it, what is it?” Virginia says.

“Norman Rockwell.” says Larry. The paid usher’s face lacks the spark of recognition that Larry was looking for, but Virginia raises her eyebrows.

“You probably don’t remember him, but Norman Rockwell made his name by painting idealized pictures of good old American middle-class households.”

“Oh,” says Gregory Marcel...

“It would be like having an exhibition of Andrew Wyeth.” sniffs Larry.

“Or an exhibition of Hummel Figures,” says Virginia. “Actually, that would be kind of interesting...”

Gregory Marcel turns right around and walks back upstairs to the café, and Virginia asks Larry, “Just what did you study in art school in LA?”

He says, “Lithography.” She asks why he doesn’t do that anymore. He says “This job.” Then she asks him about the class he’s taking right now at the University, and he tells her about the book he’s reading for class right now, *about Stalin’s murderous tactics in one of the Soviet borderlands. The monied farming class and merchants were locked in the city and starved to death.*

Then Larry looks at his watch.

“It’s nine o’clock,” he says. He waves. He walks back upstairs. Virginia stands up...Her head is buzzing...Cigarettes and air conditioning...

CHAPTER 5

A DREAM OF LYON

Charles Perry, a little cherub, sleeps. But he dreams, how he dreams!

It had been a dismal party. His twenty-eighth birthday. Despite his efforts – the invitations, and the very idea of an outdoor barbeque, was something, he thought, that would encourage the people he invited to the party to enjoy life – as well and the efforts of Ming and the Duchess – who had tended, tirelessly, the barbeque pit – to liven the party up, the party had refused to liven up. This can be blamed on the attendees, as they were mostly waiters and waitresses, who enjoyed gossiping and drinking and not much else, when Charles, in a fit of alcohol-enlivened good-nature, his blonde hair flapping, requested that everyone empty their pockets, stating that he wanted go about and photograph everyone's belongings, responded by emptying out their pockets collectively onto a Styrofoam plate, and leaving it, limp and alone, on the picnic table. Charles had stared at the plate, a pitifully small display of car keys, ketchup packets, two cigarette lighters and a real estate business card. In a fit of aesthetic exasperation, he narrowed his sparkling blue eyes to express all the contempt he could possibly express, which is difficult if one is sparkle-eyed, blonde *and* pink-cheeked, then lifted his head in order to sting, *sting!* the group with his judgmental gaze, but they had already returned to their quiet grazing of the picnic smorgasbord.

Dropping his head, he shuffled over to Ming and the Duchess, who were keeping to themselves, sitting under the solitary tree, smoking cigarettes and mixing their own cocktails, Pink Ladies, because that morning they had decided that mixing their own cocktails at a barbeque would be terribly decadent.

“Did you see that?,” he said, “Did you see those people? Why didn’t they keep everything in front of them, didn’t they realize it was going to be their self-portrait?”

“Maybe they didn’t want their self-portrait to be so revealing,” remarked the

Duchess,

and pulled on a cigarette, the cherry of which glowed the exact shade of orange as

her

button earrings.

“Snap out of it Charlie, let’s go for a walk. Ming! In which direction shall we head?!”

Ming, who had a few too many Pink Ladies, and had been until Charles’ arrival, rolled his eyes sleepily. “You go ahead without me, this combination of sun and apathy has done me in...I must sleep,” said Ming. Charles secretly thought Ming was more afraid, in this heat, of his hair falling, than being guilty of exhaustion..

“Come on, tough guy,” said Charles. Ming sighed dramatically, then held his hand out for Charles to pull.

“Help me,” he said, and fluttered his eyelashes.

And the merry group began to walk, walk off the path of the normal park visitor, deep into the brush and sage on the edges, where the wild desert begins to stretch out into

the far-off arms of dusty housing developments, and where, after fifteen minutes of strenuous clambering through the dry branched-landscape, they saw, under a toppled tree, a blue tarp.

“Ming, go check, you’re the smallest.”

“That’s what you say,” said Ming, and shrugged. “It comes in handy...” He stooped over and crawled under the tree and, with a flourish, pulled the blue tarp to the side. It came away with a cloud of dust, which rolled across the area, and left the three of them coughing and rubbing their eyes

And there was the safe. About the size of a breadbox, with a large combination lock face. And then, the three of them, Charles, blushing with excitement, Ming, stylish in an argyle sweater, and the Duchess, practical in her button earrings, were very excited, and tried to figure out how to open the thing .

First, they kicked the safe, next, they tried to crack the lock, putting their ears to the box in the ground just as they had seen people do in the movies.

“What am I supposed to be listening for,” asked Ming.

“A click, a click,” said Duchy. “Don’t you do anything but look in the mirror? Get out of the way, I have good ears.” S/he bent down. Placed her ear to the lock. “Shhhhh!” s/he said. She was concentrated, focused, desperate for a prize. She heard nothing.

“Ming, Charlie, do you see these marks?” The two squeezed into the small space, along with the Duchess, and inspected the face of the lock. Marks had been hacked into the plane around the face, lines and whirls, too meticulously done to be random.

Oh, but it was getting hot, and despite their efforts, nothing was working.

“Fuck, just dig it up, I’ll bring the car around,” said Ming.

And he brought his car as close to the underbrush as he could, while Charles and Duchy cleared the dirt away from the safe, which went much deeper into the ground than they had expected, and, as they pulled it out of the ground, was much heavier than they could have guessed. It took both of them to lug it to the car and deposit it, with a thump, in Ming’s trunk.

Later that night, at Charles’ apartment, they all tried to open it, they used tiny hacksaws and nail files, screwdrivers and hammers. They tried to read the marks etched around the face. They tried as many combinations of numbers and marks as they could. But nothing worked until Charles found his old drill, and then three of them began to drill straight into the brass. Thanks to the titanium bit, they made a hole. And then they made another hole. Ming found a flashlight and attempted to peer into the hole.

“What’s in there, what to you see?” said Charles. “What’s in there, for the love of Christ!”

“I see dark green velvet,” said Ming. “I see something that looks like Barbie doll hair.”

“Do you see any money?” said Duchy.

They tried three times, but they are drunk and tired and sunburned and finally, Ming saw how tired and empty Charles’ face is beginning to look, how it looked like he had lost interest in the safe, and instead, was getting lost in the recesses of the rigors of social analysis.

“Are you all right?” said Ming, standing up, brushing the brass shavings from his blue jeans.

“It was those jerks at the party,” said Charles. “They put all their crap on the plate.”

“Oh baby, don’t fret,” said Ming. “I know what you wanted to do.” He reached into the pocket of his very tight jeans and pulls out a little pillbox. “Now take one of these and call me in the morning,” he said, and put a tiny pink pill in Charles’ hand.

“Happy Birthday.” Charles looked at the pill, and he thought to himself that he is not really a pill person, that he is more of a drinker, but that his drinking today has given him the beginnings of a headache tonight. And pills cure headaches. So then he took the pill. Swallowed it dry.

“Don’t you want some water, baby?” said Ming. But his voice had already become faint. Charles hardly remembered seeing Duchy and Ming out, hardly remembered their excited exclamations about what they would do tomorrow with the safe, how they would open it, what they would find, their guesses about who it might have belonged to, and what they plan to do with what they found. And then his head began to spin. He could hardly stand. What was that in front of him? A large marshmallow where his bed was supposed to be...?

He collapsed. His friends leave, and him? Charles Perry? He passed out on the marshmallow, his bright blond hair spread around his face like a halo.

///

Charles Perry sleeps, he sleeps, but he dreams, how he dreams! His head aches,

and he dreams...

About the brass safe. He is standing in front of it, night-time has made it grow – it is the size of a large dog, and walks daintily on its corners. Now the combination dial is in front of him, and it seems to smile. It's teeth are made of money. Charles plucks a dollar bill from the safe's mouth, and suddenly he is flying through the air on a luxurious silken carpet, miles above the earth.

Soaring. And for hours, soaring. For so long that Charles begins to get bored in his own dream. Is there anything for him to read? There...there is the tag...on the other side of the carpet...he clings to the fabric, soaring above the globe, as he makes his way to the other side, grabs the tag, and reads it...and the tag says, really speaks, as he reads it, and what's more, the tag's voice is very low and very soft, like a radio announcer

"Made in Lyon," says the tag. Charles waits for it to continue. But it does not. It stares back at him, silently, having said its piece.

Lyon? Maybe, with the money they found in the safe, he can go to Lyon...

If he could go to Lyon, he would stay at the *Phénix* hotel, an interesting name, isn't it? Since he had seen the film *Santa Sangre*, the word *Phénix*, had continued to stir his imagination. And he...Charles, if there was one thing he always did, that was to follow where his imagination told him to go.

And there in France, in Lyon. In Lyon, here, at the *Phénix* hotel, he asks hostess behind the counter, in black stockings and a simple brown dress, for a *nice* room, because his apartment, with its marshmallow bed, back in Las Vegas, was terrible; it was full of rats and empty cans of tuna fish...one could say he lived in an *infected* room. She, the

sensible hostess, scowls at him, gestures toward the wall where the key hooks were fastened. There is a single key on a large brass ring, hanging from number twelve. Which, after another questioning look at the

The key ring in hand, he mounts the stairs, which are dark, unlit, and they creak, like an old fisherman's bones. He fumbles in the darkness until he finds number twelve, a small room wedged between numbers sixty-six and four. He puts the key to the lock, but the door swings open on its own.

Alas! His room in Lyon, at the Phénix is infected also, with swarms of roaches, and even there, in the corner, is a pile of dirty towels, stained with blood and reeking of vomit. *My God*, he thinks, *one would think that I prefer to live in filth!* Then he begins to worry that the towels would begin to speak in the same way the carpet had, but their voices would be lower, and more malevolent, and he was sure they had more to say than "Made in Lyon." They would mutter threateningly amongst themselves, as towels tend to do...yes, he has to get out of there. He gets it in his head that wants to go to the *Blue Banana*, not that he had heard of the place, but his imagination was telling him to search, he knows, there, he will be able to purchase some medicine for the ache in his head.

He wanders up and down the streets of the French city of Lyon, barely lucid, unnoticing of the cobbled streets, the fresh air, the whispers of French as the shop owners and customers speak....it was almost as if these well but poorly dressed men and women were ghosts, gossamer, floating along the streets in all their Frenchness, their feet hardly touching the ground.

Then, on the corner, he sees a blue sign, flashing. The Blue Banana! He sidles up

to the entrance, he senses that he should remain hidden, and enter the Blue Banana unnoticed by anyone. He lingers in the shadows, waiting, watching, and notices that when the sun goes behind the clouds, the people seem to forget the Blue Banana is there. So he waits for the sun to disappear again, until the streets are gray and the people walking them, all involved with chatting and floating around, forget the existence of the Blue Banana, it disappears to them.

Again, he hardly touches the door when it swings open. It is as if everything in France is expecting him, and upon entering he is greeted by two identical old women, they had been waiting for him, too. Their hair is pulled back in the same severe black chignons, their arms, the same milky whiteness, their eyes, the same piercing blue, their noses, aquiline, narrow, the same, the same! And they wore identical emerald rings on their right hands.

Putting a finger to their lips, they motion for him to follow, and they led him upstairs, more creaky steps, and through another small wooden door. One of the sisters clapped and the small door swings open to one of the most fantastic spectacles Charles Perry had ever seen. A beautifully painted hall, with high ceilings, a shining red wooden floor full, a small ragamuffin band of bums plays the jew's harp and bangs on old trash cans. The most impressive, however, are the dancers, the dancers! Filthy people, all of them, dirty from top to toe, their clothes are stained and torn, their hair styles were limp, make-up runs, men's shirts are unbuttoned and dark in the armpits. The dancers whirl faster and faster to the bum band's music. The steps fall heavy and echoing on the floor. Charles is unable to do anything but gaze, gaze! He notices that three of the men have

wooden legs, like pirates, he thinks, and then he notices her, a tall woman, with long black hair, twirling and twirling in the middle of the floor, falling in and out of the arms of the dancers who wait to catch her. As she twirls past Charles, he notices the large green ring on her hand, and then he sees, that despite these peoples' apparent squalor, they all wear large emerald rings, just like the identical sisters, on their right hands.

He turns to the women to question them, but he was unable to speak once he looked into their eyes, sparkling and blue, serious.

"Don't speak!" they hiss, in unison.

"But why?" he says, as the tall, black-haired woman dances past again.

"We have something to show you!" they whisper, "And if you speak to her..." they gestured, "you will never leave the Blue Banana."

"But she is so interesting..." he says. He thinks, I am on vacation and I should be able to talk to whomever I please, but finds himself unable to say this to these women and their stern mouths.

"Silence!" they say. "Follow us!"

One sister takes his left hand, and one sister takes his right hand, and they steer him through the crowd, carefully, so that he avoids being trampled by the peg-legs. And finally, after they In the back of the room, there was another, even smaller, wooden door. The two old women gave him a key, and he opened the door with the key. And there, in the middle of the room, was a leaf of paper, and on the paper were three numbers. Three. Thirty-three. Thirteen. *The combination to the brass safe!*

"Now, go!" they said.

“But I wanted to stay in Lyon,” he said. “I want to speak to the tall black-haired woman...and I read there’s an Andy Warhol exhibition...”

“No! You can see it, and maybe her, after you wake up, but now, you must go, and you must return to Lyon, with the money from the brass safe, yes?...we will make sure you see her...” He felt himself being whisked away.

“But the aspirin!” he cries. “My headache!”

It is too late.

He is lucid.

Oh, and with his luck, Charles wakes up, his head aches and spins with the number three. It was there, the combination...spinning in his head...like the dial of the lock...three...thirteen? Thirty-three...three? It was his luck. And the numbers fade as the pain increases. There is the tall, black-haired girl’s face, laughing, she whispers, “three.” And her voice thunders like a train in his head.

CHAPTER 6

A DAY ALONE AT THE FOUR QUEENS

Here we are, alone again. In line at the Four Queens-- a downtown hotel/casino facing the Fremont Street Experience. There is one man at the check-in counter, talking to a beefy biker himbo, who has an aggressive posture and a studded leather belt.

What do we do when standing in line? I'm already bored. You are boring, Franny. This hotel is boring. When do we get to party?

Relax, little grasshopper. Don't get impatient...being impatient makes everyone else in line uncomfortable, and frankly, you are already coming off as an asshole. You said you wanted a day alone, this is it.

What is that smell? Sometimes people forget to shower, and frequently, the absence of a daily shower is a manifestation of something being different from that to which are used. Perhaps the alarm clock didn't go off at the right time, or maybe we have a day off...or maybe our work is so hard and so long that we can't find the time to shower, nevertheless, while remaining unshowered is unpleasant when we prefer to be showered, it is pleasant to remain unshowered on purpose. The grime sticks to our skin, we begin to smell like wild animals, our face feels greasy, our eyelids feel heavier, and consequently, the visions of life we expect to see become foggy, which reminds us that

the daily grime is thick enough to cloud our vision. Remaining unshowered on purpose allows us to understand what other people might feel when they walk, tired, solitary, unshowered, through a noisy Vegas hotel/casino. Being unshowered means an adventure is about to start.

I think you're a moron. This sucks. Why didn't you get a nicer room at a nicer place?

Chill... After I pay money for a room number, we go to the elevators, taking a brisk tour of the hotel in the process. There are mirrors everywhere, they make this place look larger and allow us to watch ourselves 90% of the time...Look! There I am...and even though I am unshowered, there are some angles from which I am beautiful...and there you are...now you are smiling...now only the top of your head shows...you are most beautiful when you turn your head to the left, lower your chin, and look mischievous.

We push through the mirrors past Hugo's Cellar, "one of the best kept gourmet dining experiences in Vegas, where every lady gets a rose." Keep this phrase in mind, you'll hear it again. Hugo's Cellar is consistently rated as one of the best "gourmet" restaurants in Las Vegas, though what qualifies newspapers to use that word, and what assumptions they have associated with it are ideas only to be fully examined at a bar with a person to whom you are attracted.

Ah! There it is! Let's go down the steps into Hugo's Cellar.

I don't want to go in...

But why not?

We're not dressed correctly, we are wearing jeans and t-shirts, and....to be quite honest, you smell terrible.

We're just going to look, just look, then leave. We won't get hurt. Is that what you're afraid of?

I don't...

If they don't want us there, they'll say so, and then we'll at least have seen the place. Come on...Ha! And look! Here we are! It is a large room, larger than I expected, the lighting is very low, and the walls and tables glow maroon, the same color as a very fancy bottle of red wine. There are a few young men in dark suits cleaning the bar on our left. They look surprised to see us...They *are* surprised...one is gesturing as if to say, "we are closed." I would leave, but for one question, *what kind of food do they serve?*

You know, gourmet food.

Is that like swallows' tongues and lavender vegetables?

No, it's like...steaks.

Do they give everybody a relish plate?

*What's a relish plate?**

...Let's go back to the damn elevator.

"Hurry up" we hear a white-haired woman say to her companion.

Ah! Finally! The elevator! Let's get on...it is full of tipsy, elder-bikers. As the

* An aluminum platter brought to a diner's table before the meal starts...typical relish plate fare includes pickled watermelon rind, smoked herring in sour cream, sliced cucumbers, tiny black olives, and a tiny, salty stack of anchovies.

elevator rises, one of the women says “This is the one that got stuck earlier. It just stopped.”

“Oh heavens!” say the rest of the people on the elevator. Then they all giggle.

I want to kill her.

Why? Every time you get on an elevator full of strangers someone has to say something stupid and make the rest of us victims of their psychosis. Nothing could be worse, right now, than to be stuck in this elevator with these people, because they are aching (I can feel it, can't you?) for the elevator to stop...they want to make friends...and sometimes...conversations should be saved, like smile: for friends, children, and animals. So why are you talking to me?

Well I can't answer that, except to say you *are* my friend. The elevator door opens to the eleventh floor. Turn right, then turn right again, then find room 1108. See it? It's the beige one there...no...not there...not that one...that beige room, you see? That's where I am...oh God...it's him...the biker with the aggressive posture...he's staying on this floor...and he's with a biker-mama...she has long, damaged red hair. I would go on about the bikers, how despite their declared isolation from typical Americana, they seem to be the most American of anyone, the idiosyncracies of their fashion sense, their traditional nobility...and that *hair*...but I just opened the door to the hotel room, and now, there is a frenzied ten minutes of examination. Look at the wallpaper! It is beige and pink with a pattern of little “southwestern” triangles. The carpet is mauve, and cold, cold like the air conditioning which smells faintly of smoke. The mirrored closet door slides open...inside there is an iron with a white sticker with “housekeeping” written on it in

black marker. In the bathroom (for there are few things as exciting as going through all the tiny toiletries a hotel offers), there are only tiny bottles of conditioning shampoo and lotion, and two tiny bars of soap.

My favorite is the tiny sewing kit! There are no tiny sewing kits here...only a pile of plastic cups wrapped in plastic, next to a plastic ice bucket. On the desk, there is a tiny coffee maker with tiny packets of creamer and sugar and four tiny plastic-wrapped Styrofoam cups.

If we are really this concerned about the hygiene, why aren't there little bottles of Purell next to the slot machines?

Because germs don't travel in public, don't you know anything? Germs are only dangerous when you are alone.

...Can we make coffee?

Wouldn't it be nicer to wake up and make the coffee in the morning?

Yes, let's do that...

Wait for me while I take a shower.

Thank god.

If you were going to bitch the whole time, I wouldn't have taken you with. Just hold on. I like remaining unshowered so that I can experience the hotel shower. You can tell a lot about a hotel by its shower, and I love using the conditioning shampoo...it ruins your hair.

Why do you like to make fun of things? That's what you are doing, making fun.

Not making fun, little grasshopper, I am trying to look at the hotel outside of its rhetorical context.

Rhetoric, schmetoric, you stink like a...like you ain't washed your hair in four days.

In the bathroom, the towels are white and so thin...almost crisp...and while the shower is not made of marble, it is clean. What has happened in this shower? Hotels beg us to ask that question, they want to remind us of all the lingering memories that inhabit their anonymous rooms. More so than any house. Oh! The water is deliciously hot...and stays hot for all twenty minutes...

How was the shower?

It was hot. It seemed to gain heat as the shower progressed, instead of losing it...Do you mind if I sit next to you as you watch television?

As long as you...ah yes...you smell like hotel soap now...how wonderful...

Yes, better than anything you could buy at Crabtree & Evelyn. Hotel soap smells like a mystery.

You might want to watch TV? But there are only a few channels...

Dammit, one of the reasons I wanted to stay in a hotel was for the cable.

Well, they don't have cable...

*But what channels! Half of them dedicated to teaching us how to gamble!**

* 1. If entering the gamerooms, you must wait to be escorted to a table. 2. The difference between Seven Card Stud and Texas Holdem. 3. The bells and whistles of various new slot machines most notable the Elvis machine which was such a sensation when launched that women from all over the world came to kiss it. 4. How to play Battleship

My goodness! Gambling is easy! You just put in money, push a button, and get more money in return! I'm going...

Fine, get out of here. You're ruining my high. I want to go to bed.

You don't want to gamble?

No, I want to watch television.

Suit yourself, sucker. Watch TV. I'm going...farewell!

I smile. Truth be told, I'm glad to see you go, already, there's an extended advertisement for the dining experience available at the Four Queens, "Magnolia" (a diner with nice seats), and again, Hugo's Cellar, "where every woman gets a rose...a very classy restaurant...one of the best kept gourmet eating secrets in Las Vegas." There's that word again. Gourmet. I hope they show pictures of the...yes!...plates of rib eye steaks...lobster tails...chicken breasts...salads...no relish plate. The relish plate, I think, is the only thing that could validate the repetitive rhetoric (classy, gourmet, secret) used to advertise Hugo's Cellar. The relish plate would keep the restaurant from entering the land of irony and give it the exalted status of "authentic." But the relish plate question is never answered...instead, the commercial starts over.

So I get dressed, and try to comb my hair, which is sticky from the conditioningshampoo, and open the window so that I can look at the Fremont Street

Slots. 5. How to play multiplay video poker. 6. When the host of the television show initiates a round on a slot machine, he will always win in excess of 500 coins.

Experience below. I asked for a room that overlooked Fremont, because I wanted to watch all the drunken people dancing to clips of the Rolling Stones. But no, my room is above the experience, so I can watch the lights, and hear the music, but the people are blocked.

Many people who visit Vegas and stay at the Four Queens are distraught when they are given a room overlooking the Fremont Street Experience.* Here, ruined is a word that needs consideration. What qualifies this person to use that word, and what assumptions do they associate with it? Ruined for whom? I may be a curmudgeon but I like noise. Sometimes. Back on the bed, I fall asleep almost before I can bury myself under the foamy blanket. The television lingers on channel gamble...and then...the nine o'clock wakeup call...and without you here to help, you never came back, did you? I have to make the coffee (which is watery), then stuff everything into my backpack and get the hell out of here...then wait in front of the elevator...with another biker couple, the woman looks excited, like it is her first time in Vegas. The man, after fifteen seconds, starts to grumble.

“Where’s the damn elevator?”

She doesn’t say anything.

* Enjoy loud noises? Like to feel your walls and floor vibrate? Then be sure to stay at the Four Queens. With rooms so close to the "Fremont Street Experience" you can almost touch it, you too can shake, rattle, and roll on the hour from 8pm to 1am. Need more? Speakers pump out music 7/24 (sic) like a sixteen-year-old male home alone for the first time. I only made it through one of my twenight reservation and to be fair there is another tower a few hundred feet father (sic) back from the street, but why chance it and have your weekend ruined?"

“Where is this thing? Damn!”

We wait for three minutes. It was ten in the morning, when all the people in the hotel had just woken up and were staggering down to the buffets...or the bars...or back to the machines...the woman who had initially looked so excited, well her mood dissolves as her boyfriend continues to complain.

Finally, the elevator arrives. We all get in, and a few floors down, more people get in; a pudgy Asian lady with long hair, her chubby white husband with bleached hair, and their overweight girlfriend. The Asian lady is giggling and giggling, perhaps she is already drunk, and says...”Oh Honey! Your tummy is too big; you have to suck it in for all of us to fit!” He giggles, then, noticing the others, made his voice gruff and says, “Have any of you eaten at Hugo’s Cellar?...It’s a classy place....every lady gets a rose...” His wife pipes in, “Isn’t this place wonderful! Are you all enjoying your stay?!”

Me, I just watch. I’m a watcher. But I think these are good people (but good for whom?), and I’m sorry that no one notices their their obvious sincerity the way the woman earlier, who proclaimed the elevator would stop, was noticed.

When we reach the Casino floor, the pudgy Asian lady is still talking...everyone walks right past her...”We’ve been married 31 years!” she says. “We spent our honeymoon in this hotel!”...if she had been on the elevator last night, she could have taken them all to the bar, and the group could have spent the evening over drinks, talking about their hometowns...

I would have liked to stop for her, but I am naturally shy and though I sense her sincerity, I walk the other way...alas!...I walk the other way to look for you...perhaps you

are gambling...or you got sick...I exit the hotel and cross Fremont to Binion's Casino...drink a bloody mary while the bartender says hello to an old regular and, "I hear you've stopped drinking. You look good man, you look good."...but *you*'re not anywhere around here...so I wander down Fremont...(where are you?)...with an unlit cigarette hanging out of my mouth...until stopped by a quiet fat man in a t-shirt and gym shorts...who hands me a lighter..pats my elbow...and continues to walk west...I think...maybe you weren't with me to begin with...I decide to return my keycard...walk out of the hotel of mirrors into the taxi line...did you lose all your money?...Me?...I can't wait any longer, I need to go home...

There are three men getting out of a taxi, they walk toward the hotel rolling their baggage behind them. They say, to no one in particular, "Where's Bally's? I don't want to waste any more time! I'm on vacation!"

CHAPTER 7

CONVERSATIONS THAT TAKE PLACE AT THE BAR AMONGST THOSE WE NEVER MEET BUT OFTEN SPEAK OF AS IF THEY ARE THE FRIENDLY CHARACTERS IN OUR LIVES

Topic: Of all the bars in the world, she walked into his.

Scene: After walking down the dirty streets of Las Vegas, midtown, a bad neighborhood but not so bad as to be referred to as 'hood. A neighborhood where single retail clerks, drug dealers, students, and bartender all lived, in nearly identical cheap plaster apartments. Where, these hot afternoons, Mexican men slowly push small coolers with tiny ringing bells and sell ice cream. As the cooler is pushed over the cracked sidewalk, the bells tinkle. On the street, a raw-boned bum of the desert seems to taunt the heat, by bundling up in coats and sweat suits, he shuffles endlessly between the McDonalds and the Supermarket. And had for months, long before she frequented this bar, before it became his bar: The Satellite. Even before she knew it was his, back when she was just beginning to think it was hers.

The Satellite is from the genus of localis lasvegas dives: small, smokey, dark, the walls covered with beer art, just large enough to house five pool tables and an oil-barrel barbeque grill that's fired up on Sunday nights for \$5.00 hot dogs and steaks, which frame the requisite u-shaped plastic video-poker bar. The Satellite has a reputation for

toughness, and on the weekdays, tended by Joe, who is certainly in his fifties, with a balding, egg-shaped head, and large black glasses, but as his black leather vest and motorcycle boots suggest, has been unable to leave his outlaw past behind entirely.

Tonight, Victoria, who has taught middle-school English for 12 years, and unmarried, which means that all the cigarettes she smoked in high school are starting to show on her face, and that her hair is just beginning to gray, and that she has managed to maintain her figure, is meeting with Jack Wilson, her friend from college, who has put his degree in English aside, and happily supports himself as a valet at one of the casinos on the Strip.

She gets to the bar first, orders a whiskey for herself and a Heineken for her friend, and plays five dollars as she waits. She feels winsome, but what about? She watches a young man in the corner, she can tell he is uncomfortably drunk from the way he is staring at the table as his friends talk.

Jack arrives, he is out of breath. His hair is fuzzy, his t-shirt reads, "Onanist." He looks thin.

"Sorry, you'd never believe the traffic. They're doing construction on Tropicana and it took me forty-five minutes to move two blocks."

"You're fine," says Victoria.

He sits next to her, acknowledges the beer in front of him, swigs, and looks around.

Jack: You know how I told you about Joshua at work, who wears the same clothes every day? Today Gigi finally asked him why he does that. I was laughing so hard, and

she just went up to him and said “Josh, why do you wear the same clothes every day?” and you’d never believe what he said: “Because I want to be like a cartoon character. Have you noticed how cartoon characters always wear the same thing in every comic strip?”

“That’s brilliant,” she says. “It’s so European!”

“When I was in Europe, my Italian teacher had two outfits that she wore every day for six weeks.”

“It’s both European and comic.”

“It’s perfect.”

“And who we know wears the same thing every day, that black t-shirt and black shoes with blue jeans?”

“Right? Him. Him gets another point for good character.

Him is a man they both know, but only by sight, one of the many unknown but familiar individuals who populate the same space that Jack and Veronica frequent. Not only the Satellite, but the neighborhood. Him also happens to look like a movie star, with jet-black hair, a lean yet supple physique, pale skin, and dark, thoughtful eyes. Him has been spotted reading books, drinking beer, smoking cigarettes, and talking with his small, close-knit group of friends, none of whom are as good-looking or enigmatic, in fact, most are downright homely and forgettable, but by association, they become fascinating. A chubby redhead with glasses, glued to comic books, who is known to have married the first girl who talked to him. An obese local writer, famous for the pedantic nature of his self-proclaimed forward-thinking news column. And Her, his girlfriend, tall, tall tall, a

big girl, on the verge of chubbiness, so, large-boned, and ferocious-looking, with long black hair, for eyes she had black eyeliner, and she was covered, covered in tattoos.

Him is only one of the many, but he is the best-looking, and is seen doing the most things most frequently, which makes him more interesting to Jack and Victoria.

“Wearing the same thing every day, it’s very European. When I was in Europe, I remember my Italian teacher had two outfits that she wore every day for four weeks.”

“It’s both European and comic.”

“It’s perfect.”

“I am loving him very much lately,” she says.

“Love is a diagnosis of symptoms,” says Jack. “I thought about that today...take my experience with Taylor... I was loving him with every inch of my being and yet I had never met the guy. I talked to him a few times at the office, and I could have sworn he was gay...he loves Lucille Ball. And remember when my mother called the office and he answered and was so sweet to her? And last week, I was just walking down the street and there his business card was, at my feet. At the time I was sure, I was sure it was a sign. But how stupid is that? There’s no such thing as a sign, everything was entirely coincidental. I formed a pattern out of the chaos of reality...and I had been sure he would respond to me...when I sent him that email...but he never did...”

“I can’t talk about love anymore, it depresses me,” she says, and pouts.

“It’s being a virgin compared to losing your virginity.”

“Your adeptness at cliché is marvelous,” she says.

He gives her a dirty look, and summons the bartender.

"Charles, could I have another, and could you also tell this tramp to leave me alone? I don't know who she is or why she's talking to me."

"I'll get you the beer," says Charles, "But I think deep down inside, you don't want her to go, because you like her."

"About as much as I like garbage."

"You love garbage," she says. "You love to go through garbage and find good things, like me!" she says, and giggles.

"You can get her another one too," Jack says.

"What a gentleman, thank you," she says. "I am very thirsty because of the weather...did you know this morning a woman behind me in line at the drug store said, 'I'm from Ohio...this heat...I'm used to the humidity...' I said, 'I agree, it turns you into a prune.'" Jack, like everyone else, I dislike humid heat far more than dry heat, but I pretended to feel the opposite way because I wanted to be friendly. Why did I have to lie to be friendly? And then, she seemed upset at my usage of "prune," isn't that bizarre? She dropped her eyes, and shifted uncomfortably. Now that I think about it, the heat must be affecting the cashiers. Earlier this week, the cashier at Sally Beauty Supply said to me, 'Look at that mountain glowing, I love that glow...All my life, I wanted to move out west, and I never got to do it 'till after I turned fifty.' Isn't that sweet?"

Jack listens, but he keeps looking in the corner. "Look at that," he mutters, and gestures. Victoria looks, keeping her eyes hidden, that is, she looks without looking like she's looking, and glances back at Jack.

“He looks like Ewan McGregor,” she says, “And he’s reading”

“ What the fuck.”

“He’s been here every night since we started coming.”

“Oh, he has?”

///

Topic: The night in question.

Scene: Summer. Night. The parking lot of the Satellite. Jack and Victoria are walking back to the bar, having just smoked three cigarettes each. The parties they had both attended an hour earlier, work requirements for both, had been long forgotten. They stand in the parking lot and smoke cigarettes three cigarettes each because even though they had both quit, sometimes it is nice, in the dead of night, to stand in a dismal parking lot in the middle of a famous city.

“My party was such a bust, it was so embarrassing. Vicky, you wouldn’t believe it,” says Jack, as he lights his last cigarette. “We were all in the famous steak restaurant and somehow we got a cake, and Julie was sitting there. Remember, she turned thirty-five this year? And her Mother was there, standing behind her daughter as she blew out the candles, and after we all drunkenly, reluctantly sang “Happy Birthday,” her mother put her hands on her daughter’s shoulders and said to all of us, ‘Thank you for being friends with my daughter.’ And I thought how tacky.”

Victoria cringes. “Thank you for being friends with my daughter?”

“She’s mean and dumb.”

“The mother?”

“No, Julie. She’s mean and dumb. I can understand mean, and I can understand dumb. But together? That shouldn’t be created.”

“Give me the lighter,” says Victoria, then lights her final cigarette. “My party was just as bad. When I walked out on the porch, all the other teachers were there, drinking their single beers. Jack, I tell you, I walked on that porch and said ‘Hello,” and my greeting was answered by silence. Can you believe it? They all just stared. So I said, “Hello,” again, more forcefully, and finally fat fucking Marcel says, “Uh, hi?” So I stared back at them in all their hatred, went back inside, put on my coat, and came back here.”

“Thank god,” says Jack. He throws down his cigarette butt. “Why did I smoke those? I feel like I’m going to die.”

Victoria throws her cigarette away also. “I know. I always think I’m going to love it, but I never do. Is it time for cocktails?”

“I believe it is.”

“Do you think he’s here?”

“Which one?”

“The one we told we’d meet here.”

“Ah yes, Ewan.” Jack looks sideways at Victoria. “Don’t get too wrapped up,” he says.

“Oh I already am,” she says. They reach the door of the Satellite, steel themselves, and enter. For a moment, they are stunned by the heavy smell of cigarettes and air conditioning.

And they enter.

The Satellite, while dingy, dangerous, and diminutive, in the scope of things, is nevertheless enlivened. It is Friday night. And this is the pandemonium of The Satellite on a Friday night. Full of people in black sweatshirts, smoking cigarettes, laughing, talking, and there is the crack of the pool games, and the juke box playing old Nine Inch Nails. Jack and Veronica are hardly able to find a seat, until they find two stools next to the video trivia game. They are nearly hidden.

After sitting down, she looks around, and she sees Ewan, in the corner. Despite the din, he is reading (is he really doing that, she thinks, or has he been staring at the same page for the past fifteen minutes?) and smoking a cigarette, and then he looks up, directly into her eyes. Victoria is again, momentarily stunned. He smiles and gives a little wave. And she waves back.

"I don't recognize anyone tonight, but everyone looks like we should recognize them," says Jack.

"The same look?"

"Yes, and the same ethos."

"I think that's my favorite word," says Victoria. "It is the most charismatic, the most immediately noticeable rhetorical appeal. Yes, I like it. Ethos," she sighs. Joe, decked in his Friday-night leather vest, sees them through the crowd, and brings them their drinks.

"It's great to be a regular," says Jack, as he pays Joe.

"It's great to be a regular at a bar with such a great bartender," says Victoria, as she gulps half of her drink down. "I'm saving the rest," she says, seeing Jack give her the

eye. "I won't get sloppy."

Jack takes a tiny sip of his Heineken and sighs. "Victoria, my life has changed since we discussed the meaning of that word. Suddenly, everything is so clear. I have a purpose when I wake up. I understand what it means to get dressed. I was thinking about this today while parking all those cars. The Porsche, the BMWs, the Fords, and reading the people by the cars they drive and what they keep in the cars they drive. Vicky, it's an incredible word -- I was sitting in some fat guy's Mercedes and thinking about how I could read the car like I could read a book. And the word itself! -- Even its phonemes are exotic. Say it out loud. Ethos..."

"Putting your education to good use, obviously."

He glares at her. "Let me finish, wise one. Could you tell me the order and types of phonemes in the word? Come on, you're the middle-school English teacher, tell me."

She glares back at him. "You know very well that I can't." She sips her drink.

"However, I can tell you the entire plots and point out every metaphor in The Diary of Anne Frank."

Triumphant, Jacks says, "It's made up of a high vowel, dental fricative, back middle vowel, alveolar fricative. E, as in beet, keep, leap. TH as in those, these, them. O as in oh, horror, oval. And S as in simple, sake, solution. The fricatives, the th and s, make the word sound lighter than air, there is not much substance to the word in your mouth, when compared to words such as, say, "carbuncle," or "gruesome," or Pekinese." Those are words that fill up your mouth. The word ethos, however, is full of air, it is a surface word, and indeed, it is a word that speaks of nothing but surface, and it is a word that

describes the service. The kind of tea you drink, the spaces you inhabit, the clothes you wear, the books you read, the movies you see, the music you listen to... Are any of these things inside the person? When someone rattles off a list of bands they like?"

"I'll tell you my least favorite ethos tag," says Victoria, and nods toward the corner, where a group of men are having their picture taken. The men, in black sweatshirts, brandish their beers, make ugly faces, and give the finger to the camera. "It's giving the finger to the camera. Talk about tacky." She takes another gulp.

"You want another one?" He lifts an eyebrow.

"Don't be smart," she says, and slugs the rest of her drink as if to spite him.

"Why do people give the finger in their photographs? What are they trying to convey?"

"A certain sense of rebellion? They are saying 'Fuck you' to the establishment?"

"I am not a prude, not am I easily offended in the traditional sense, meaning I don't feel horror when I see people do things like steal a candy bar or run through a red light, and I believe that war is part of the this oroborus of existence...however, I am offended by such blatant displays, and the subsequent ignorant, adoring reactions to, mediocre imagination. Surely there are more interesting ways to show your distance for the photographer or your parents, which are the only two establishments who might be affected by the action....giving the finger....if you want to start something, a finger gesture at a camera does not exactly create inertia..."

"Can it be done ironically?" says Jack. "Perhaps if they do it in jest."

"I refuse to believe that anyone who would be dull enough to give the finger to the camera would have a very keenly developed sense of irony. Giving the finger to the

camera is almost as rebellious as saying “I don’t believe in God,” on the last day of a class in late 19th century philosophy!”

“Don’t say that to anyone in here,” says Jack. He is referring to how one of the most frequently overheard conversations at The Satellite seems to be rudimentarily disproving the existence of a Judeo-Christian god, these conversations, however, frequently digress into who will hold the next Magic: The Gathering meeting. Victoria slugs the rest of her drink, then catches Joe’s eye, he brings her another one, which she half-slugs. “Giving the finger” she says, “Says I am stuck in terminal adolescence, my uninteresting and unarticulated feelings of injustice are as important to the world as I am to myself. Continuous accumulation of formulaic cultural ethos tags, such as giving the finger, indicates a lack of authentic ethos. Jack, what are some more formulaic cultural ethos tags?”

“Barbed wire tattoos around the biceps,” says Jack, immediately. “And tribal tattoos, remember when those were big? Back in the late nineties.”

“Yes, and multiple piercings.”

“Black hair dye,” he says.

“Sometimes,” she says, quickly. “There are exceptions...”

“No, always,” he says firmly.

“And an obsession with Jim Henson,” she says, ignoring him.

“You think?”

“Trust me, I’ve met enough men with childhood infatuations...the Muppets or the beatniks, it’s the same thing.”

“My question,” says Jack, “Is what else can you do? Has every rebellious tag been repeated so often that they have lost all original meaning and now float in our sphere of existence, substantial but meaningless.

“Oh, Maybe you could kiss the camera lens, or roll your eyes in crazy ways, or be photographed with your back to the camera. Play with the actually visual perception of yourself, rather than giving 'the finger' -- oh god...it's just too obvious. be original. Be nuanced. Be invisible, but be impossible to forget.”

“Speaking of which, did you notice...?”

“Of course I did, I noticed the second we came in.”

“He’s there, across the bar. And who is that bitch he’s talking to?”

They speak of Ewan, who was sitting across the bar, whom they had had the privilege of finally meeting late last week, And their meeting had been everything they had wished. They talked about books and music and found out he plays the Piano. Seriously. He plays the piano seriously.

“He brings books to a bar. This bar. He listens to classical music. He is twenty-three. He knows German. Have you seen his hands?” says Victoria.

Jack is about to answer when the door of The Satellite opens and in They walk. Together, they are unbearable magnetic. Each body is surrounded by tags, tags, tags. Her more than Him. They move slowly through the crowd, greeting friends.

“Well it’s a good night at The Satellite,” says Jack.

“It’s a good night to be well in sight,” says Victoria, and slams her drink, again. While placing her empty glass on the table, she is bumped from behind by a man in a

black sweatshirt.

“Mother fucker of God,” she says, expecting Jack to sympathize. But he doesn’t. She looks up and the video trivia game illuminates both his face and the black-nail polished hand on his shoulder. It is Her hand.

“Don’t I know you?,” she says to Jack, and hoists herself, in her tattooed glory, onto the barstool. “You asshole! Why didn’t you say hello?” Jack looks at her, incredulous

He says, “I don’t know.”

Victoria is drunk, from the combination of alcohol and adrenalin. Things are beginning to spin.

“Oh...wait a minute,” Her says, “you’re not who I thought you were...Well who are you? I’m Holly Caust, and I’m a fire-breathing goddess bitch from hell!...

“Is that your real name,” says Jack.

“Of course,” she says, and stares at him until he looks down. She continues – “Hey, do you like my tattoos? I’m so cool...oh look...here comes my boyfriend, that asshole...We’re going to Thailand next month...isn’t he good-looking? I wouldn’t have it any other way...here you are, you fuck! Meet our new friends...Jack and Victoria.” Jack shoots Victoria a look as if to say, we haven’t told her our names yet.

Victoria, who, upon the arrival of Him, orders another drink from Joe, who serves it to her with a knowing wink, how does he know? And she gulps it down, and the night suddenly begins spinning around and around, and His face is there, but he is talking to Jack, and Her, Her, now she is talking to Victoria.

“You’re a teacher huh? Oh yeah, I like Akiri Kurosawa...Tishiro Mifune rocks...in fact, me and the little woman,” she gestures at Him, “Just went to watch the Last Samurai...that movie with Tom Cruise...man...the guy in there...he just had the most amazing face...that FACE!...oh my tats?...how many? Oh, I lost count...here’s a few of famous horror movie actors...that one looks like my father...yeah, I was in a car accident years ago...and now I got a morphine drip in my back...”

That’s why she’s so laid-back, thinks Victoria. Holly’s face, too, begins to spin, like a planet, on an axis. Victoria sees Holly’s face, then her hair, then her face, then her hair. And the whole time, Holly talks about herself, if she stopped for one second, maybe her head could stop spinning...

“Yeah...I’m going into entertainment law...and I did sound production for a long time...do you want one of my business cards?” She digs in the pocket of her black sweatshirt, and takes out a packet of cards, then gives one to Victoria, who looks down at the card. It is black with grey swirls: *Holly Caust, piercing, sound, firebreathing, spookiness, spooky makeup...*

Holly keeps on talking, but Victoria is entirely distracted by the business card, and thinks in her drunken state: *there it is, an entire ethos on a card...it’s so convenient...like giving a person a little bottle of your personality...*

Holly turns around and keeps on talking to someone else. Victoria exhales...and looks at Jack...his face still glows in the light emitted by the video trivia machine...standing behind Him, and Him is looking away, out the door, his hand absently squeezing Holly’s big thigh...Victoria meets Jack’s eyes and he lifts his nose

and dramatically inhales the air behind Him, as if He were breathing in the healing vapors of the fountain of beauty. Victoria giggles, but then grows thoughtful. *I never want to go home, I want to stay here, at this bar, with these people, whome we have never met, and will never meet, again, forever.*

But it ends. There are other people at the Satillite, dressed in black sweat shirts, who beg hif His and Holly's attention...so they eventually move to another location in the bar, hold court with other members of their flock, the members who *really* need them.

In the process of the meeting, Jack has drunk as much as Victoria. He is laughing at all the things he can imagine as the *worst*.

"Loose lycra biking shorts and a leopard-print sweatshirt, flip-flops. Fat single mothers in pink sweatshirts that read *he best part is instead*." He howls. "Vicky, can I tell you a secret? I want hair plugs. I was bald until I was three and my hair began to fall out at nineteen. I had a very limited number of years of good hair." He laughs again. "I want the plugs!" He stumbles off to the bathroom.

Victoria is drunk and alone. She looks at Holly's business card again. Their conversation had been entirely about Holly Holly Holly. Her tats, her morphine implant, her life as a sound tech, her father, her history in this city of outlaws, but it was a typical history. *The girl has a knack for filling up a conversation, as well as a room, with her ego.* Thinks Victoria. *And after I told her what I did, she kept calling me the English teacher.*

She feels someone sit next to her, and thinks it's Jack, so she turns to him, ready to unleash her ranting drunken jealousy all over her best friend. But instead of Jack, it is

Ewan who sits next to her. He offers her a cigarette. She shakes her head. He shrugs, lights one for himself, and puts the pack on the bar.

“You think he’s good-looking, don’t you?” he says.

“Who?”

“The actor, you know.”

“Him. He is beautiful.”

“I’m not that ugly, am I? Am I?” he says.

“You look fine,” she says. “In fact, you look better than fine.”

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Topic: Some things never change.

Scene: One week later. Victoria in her car, on the cell phone.

“Duchy, on Friday I was so depressed I cancelled my classes and tried to find a way to LA for the weekend, because the only, the only thing that would stay the depression that was about to descend was the idea of walking around in a big, big city. I wanted to stay in a nice hotel and watch cable at night, go to LACMA during the day, and then the tar pits. Only seventy-four dollars round trip on the bus...but after being on hold at some LA hotel for ten minutes, I hung up and dialed a certified maid service. Two Mexican girls came into my apartment with four large buckets of cleaning supplies, and a vacuum cleaner. Six hours later, the surfaces of my house were spotless...And now it’s back to the daily grind. Teaching is next to impossible. Since it’s gotten warm my students are as restless as a bunch of monkeys...as a bunch of rattlesnakes...they have spring fever...they giggle...they’re ecstatic to be alive. And me, assigning Poe! What on

earth can we talk about?

“Mmmm...yes,” says Duchy, bracing him/herself for the onslaught of tears s/he could sense about to quiver from Victoria’s lower lip...she hears a gasp...and then...the drama comes.

“Maybe I could sleep in the par,” she sighs. “Smoke with the kids on Sunset Boulevard,” she sighs. “Never come back,” she sighs. “And write it all down,” she sighs.

The hiccoughing crying begins.

“And walking around Vegas in the wee hours of the am, she sobs. “Drinking half-bottles of beer, then dashing them to the curb,” she sobs. “Sitting on the corner smoking and drinking,” she sobs. “With a man, but like a man,” she sobs.

Duchy, ever the trooper in times of trouble, waits for Victoria, who takes a deep breath, the lets one final hiccough.

“Spiraling down into mutual yet unconnected destruction...”

“Let me explain something,” says Duchy. “About living here...you know that feeling you feel right now? That empty, wretched feeling? The feeling that comes when no one recognizes you in the place where you life? ‘Till you’ve been broken in...back in ’99, you think I was having a good time as a lonely pre-operative transexual? Not only could no one recognize me, no one knew what I was...but it doesn’t take long for the locals to adjust...one they realize you’re one of them. Yes, they accept you, because simply by living here, you become a part of it, the American demos. You become one of them, that is to say...I mean...one of us...one of us...one of us...”

CHAPTER 8

THE TURNING POINT IN LALAYA MARSALA'S LIFE

I am a sick woman. I am a spiteful woman. I am most pleased when the men of a room pay attention to me, and I get angry with women who are slimmer or more streetwise than myself. Indeed, at times, I go out of my way to be hostile. I prefer watching television to reading books. I throw violent fits when angry. I bear grudges too long, and suspect others of being out to deceive me. I ignore small animals because they disgust me. In the mornings, I stay in bed too long. When an adolescent, I ran away from a mother who deeply cared about me. When a child, I was cruel to other children.

Six months ago I ran away, again, from the professor. Who, despite his relative poverty, insisted on educating me more thoroughly than other women like myself. He found me on the streets, and believed he could culture me, obliged me to listen to Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, bestowed weekly piano lessons upon me, and purchased oil paint sets, electronics, and dinner parties for my amusement. He always insisted I spend the summers reading the things he read: lengthy Russian novels, renaissance love poetry, plays produced by the *Comedie-Francaise*. Our friends called him Pygmalion.

Before I lived with the professor, I was a stupid person, but there was a softness in my feelings, a tenderness that made me guilty for the things I did, for I loved causing havoc in the lives of those around me. While in grammar school, I was instructed to

assist a mean, unlikeable girl with her practice for a spelling contest, but instead of correcting her when she misspelled a word, I encouraged her understanding of the wrong spelling. During the contest's second round, she incorrectly recited antideluvian, and I smiled at her elimination. Eventually, I grew to feel poorly about my satisfaction at her loss, but *today*, my negative coercions no longer concern me. That's the sort of woman I am. We are, all, expected to be kind, sexy, soft, mannerly, beautiful, and graceful. I can be those things, but I am also cruel, hateful, hard, frigid, unrefined, awkward, and labored. My body is singular, yet inside I am fragmented into five hundred tiny pieces.

After leaving the professor, I meet a man with a car bigger than any I'd seen before in my life. He takes me to a bar that smells like a barn, tells me I am beautiful, he likes my young looks, my dark hair, my deep-set eyes and fragile build, I know it is because my body can still draw a premium -- something I could still be thankful for. His name is Max. He gives me money, pills, forgotten friends from the past. I say I am no longer myself. He says he isn't either. I say I've killed myself. He says he has too. I say I kicked and screamed at the professor when I realized he couldn't see the real me, he couldn't see what I was feeling, and just went along with his own ideas, and yes, he saw me when I kicked and screamed, but only as a nuisance. Max says he did the same to his mother. He laughs when I say I used to play volleyball.

"I did!" I say. "I did."

Then he takes me to his room and fucks me like I haven't been fucked in a long, long time.

This was the perfect place to disappear. It would have been just like me, the old

me, or at least one part of me, to go to California or Florida. The professor would never expect me to return to the place I was found.

I stand on the corner in the middle of downtown for a time. My coat is in good shape, though it hides my deteriorating clothes and empty pockets. The night grows cold in the desert, the neon lights hang as prettily as angels in the sky. As usual -- against my better judgement for I could easily find a regular job -- I enter the Downtown casino with high ceilings and sparkling glass and dirty carpets, for a warm place and a John. But as the doors close behind me, instead of warmth, I feel a chill, as if I have descended into a deep place. And I remember, suddenly, that there is no escape from the smells of work and desperation, the animal scents which are only momentarily washed away by the luxury bathrooms on the Vegas strip. And that this is the Western inferno, full of smoke, framed by dirty carpet, wet with nylon jackets that hang on the backs of chairs. Chubby girls in short skirts and chubbier men in khaki shorts and free t-shirts, plunking quarters into the hungry metal mouths of the machines...

I had been taught, long ago, by coarser men than Max, what to do.

CHAPTER 9

ON FLOGGING

The yearly Las Vegas Renaissance Faire was held this summer at Sunset Park.

Coming forward and standing before us in his black pants and bare chest, a young man prepares himself for a flogging, which is carried out by a friend, another boy, similarly dressed in black breeches, with a bullwhip in his right hand, which he shakes about, causing it to dance like a fakir's cobra, which is what any of us could do, but then, the boy, after snapping his whip a few more times, rears his arm back and lets the bullwhip fall, copiously, on his friend's back, which is what few of us could do to save our lives. Over and over, the bullwhip lashes into the young man's back, and he makes not a sound. Over and over, the boy flogs, until, perhaps swayed by the gasps of the small crowd that has formed around them, he lets the bullwhip fall silent, indeed, he throws it away, and his friend, the flogged, begins to shake out his head and arms, and spits, "Argh!" He shrugs his shoulders to dispel the pain from the long, blood-tinged welts on his back, and walks to the side of the performance space, while another young man in a bare chest picks up the bullwhip and hands it back to the boy, then takes his place in front of him for another voluntary lashing.

It takes some kind of power to whip your friends so methodically in front of strangers, it takes another kind of power entirely to receive lashes in front of the same

crowd, yet, while a part of me is impressed by the show of self-control, another part of me thinks, "How stupid! How much attention does a young man need, and how far he is willing to go for it!" This display is something we read about in books, or perhaps, we have friends involved in a lifestyle which encourages the exchange of power and pain. It is something I have always been both drawn to and repulsed by. It is the utmost human sacrifice, that sacrifice not for God, nor country, but for, we hope not purely social attention, but for the individual. Thus, though it is easy to object to these kinds of displays as ego-stroking, it is the noble, the historical aspects of the practice of public flogging which are the most captivating.

It is how we find out man is a wonderful animal, for the flagellum "aestheticizes" a man, so we can see him in relief from ordinary animals. The most famous floggers were the ancient Roman *Lictors*, (from which derives our term, "to get a licking"). Flogging, one of the responsibilities of the *Lictors*, was, to the Romans and according to Suetonius' rendition of the senate's edict to kill Nero: "punishment in the ancient fashion, [where] a man is fastened by the neck in a fork, then beaten to death with rods." Even Nero, though he had been an avid practitioner of consensual flogging throughout his life, was so terrified by the edict that he chose suicide. To enhance their terribleness, the *Lictors* carried *fascies*, a bundle of sticks tied around an axe, as a symbol of their authority. Mussolini took the symbol of the *fascies* as the root of his definition of fascism, the political system that emphasizes the state's importance as greater than the importance of the individual, therefore, the *fascies*, the *Lictor*, and one of the *Lictor's* duties, that of flogging, are fully representational of power. Thus, he who cracks the whip today is

participating in an ancient aesthetic, a metaphorical event, whether he is aware of it or not. He who cracks the whip says the individual who carries it is no longer an individual, but a symbol, a representation of the idea of power. The man ceases to be man and is transformed into "the idea."

The spectacle of the floggers at the Renaissance Faire costs nearly nothing to the performers. He who is flogged has nothing to do but stand fast and watch the spectators at the Faire, those masses of science-fiction nerds, band geeks, wiccans, pot-smokers, beer-guzzlers, dancers, goths, children who are forced to attend for the Faires educational values, and their parents, high schoolers with a rebellious streak, Jehovah's Witnesses, and D&Ders, who munch on greasy fish and chips or German sausages, and drink beer or lemonade. Some dress for the occasion, purchase, months in advance or at other Renaissance faires-- peasant corsets, lord's tunics, polyester fairy wings, jingly belly dancer necklaces, floppy velvet hats, ladies-in-waiting gowns, two-toned tights, or wide leather belts with sheathes for titanium swords decorated with dragons. They have come to see a voluntary "display" of punishment. In our minds' eyes, we saw images of medieval monks in horsehair shirts, who walk the dirt roads of their villages, slapping themselves on the back with their cat-o-nine-tails, in a display of spiritual purification. Yet in that eye is another memory, that of true punishment. This communal memory was brought forward to Victoria as she watches the floggers. It is offered to her memory on a silver dish, the backdrop of Paris, as if to mock her horror. For she remembers standing

in the middle of the *Place de la Concorde*, and that memory causes her to shudder.*

Her memory is of walking, on a balmy, summer evening, through the *Place de la Concorde* to the obelisk of Luxor. She had spent the day, one of her last in Paris, and her last seven Euros, at the *Arch de Triomph*, and then walked the length of the *Champs-Elysees* to arrive at the *Place de la Concorde*. Exhausted and overwhelmed with the sensations that fill a person when the realization of a looming departure from a place they love, instead of hopping the Metro for a direct route to her bed at her hostel, she pushed herself to see the *Place de la Concorde*. Turning the corner from the *Champs-Elysees* to the *Place*, she was struck by how small it seemed in comparison to my initial, jet-lagged appraisal. The obelisk, while large, was not so large as to be overwhelming, the two fountains that flanked it were magnificent, yes, but there was something else in the air that made me shiver. As she gazed upon the obelisk from the outskirts of the square, she

* The *Place de la Concorde*, the largest public square in Paris, is an octagon that covers 8 hectares (1 hectare = 10,000 m²). In its center is the 3200 year old obelisk of Luxor: twentythree meters tall, and carved from 230 tons of pink granite. On one side of the *Place de la Concorde* is the *Champs-élysées*, to the other is the, the *Tuileries*, the gardens designed by Louis XIV's famous gardener, Le Notre. Constructed by Jacques Ange Gabriel, Louis XV's architect, and finished, in 1763, the *Place de la Concorde* sits on the north-south and east-west axis of Paris.. It was considered a masterpiece of Enlightenment urban planning, and served as intersection and decoration until 1792, when a guillotine was erected in the center of the square, and it was renamed the *Place de la Revolution*. Here, Louis XVI, Robespierre, Marie-Antoinette, and Danton were among the over 2,000 victims of the guillotine. It is said that at one time, the square was so blood-slicked, and the smell of its human gore was so strong that herds of cattle refused to walk from one side to the other.

thought about how it stood in the very place where Marie-Antoinette was beheaded, in front of thousands of people, people who had stood exactly where she was standing. Suddenly, she could see her, small, delicate, haughty and bewildered, being led to the guillotine. Victoria was a member of the crowd then, watching her, the Queen, and there were people everywhere. She heard them speak archaic French, smelled the stench of their workdays, saw the muted colors of their hand-made clothing, and felt their warm bodies pressing against me. The weather was suddenly bright, clear, and hot. Victoria heard jeers and whistles as the Queen's transportation, a garbage cart, carried her through the square to the machine. Indeed, Victoria nearly touched the wheels of the cart, she passed so close, and when she caught a glimpse of the symbol of a woman on the cart, she hardly looked a queen, more like a old woman in peasant clothes, with roughly shorn hair, her hands tied tightly behind her back. The crowd cheered as the executioner, Charles-Louis Sanson, pushed the queen on the plank, and shoved her head in the vice of the guillotine, then, precisely at noon, he let go the catch and the eighty-eight pound blade neatly sliced her head into a basket, and blood poured furiously from her body as her heart continued to pump. Victoria sees this. *She is there.*

As she stands watching the floggers at the Renaissance Faire, this memory overtakes her so swiftly and so clearly that she gasps. *She is there*, in that place, where those people died, and here she is again, watching people being hurt. The feelings that overwhelm her at both times are also similar to the feelings she gets when she thinks of the Donner Party, crossing the Sierra Nevada, starving and dying and forced to "ma[k]e meat of the dead bodies of their companions," or, oddly enough, of astronauts, who float,

suspended by life-ropes, outside their ships, in the endless vacuum of blackness and stars.

What is this feeling? She asks herself. *Why is it aroused by such disparate memories?*

What is their similarity? She thinks of this question for days after the Faire, rolling these figments of her imagination on her tongue, savoring their flavor, as if trying to find the common spice. It is not cinnamon, nor costume, nor love. It is a feeling of emptiness, if she listens carefully, it sounds like wind blowing through an empty heart.

Cannibalism...lost in space...flogging...cosmic unease...another image...Jeffery

Dahmer...in Milwaukee...and then Marie Antoinette again...yes...it is...solitary....it

is...silent....it is...abjection....it is...that if she puts herself in the position of any of the actors in any of these imaginings, she is utterly alone. They are utterly alone. We are utterly alone. The true lesson learned by displays of punishment is personal.

To be flogged voluntarily takes a powerful will, and most likely, the position calls on the boy's inner spirit of rebellion. As a purely metaphoric recipient of the flagellum, the flogged should take great care in preparing their performance. The effort is not in standing, the effort is in preparing to stand, for their behavior is the axis of the spectacle, their behavior becomes our behavior. If they are brave, if they hold to their inner spirit of rebellion, if they stand in a certain way, to both protect their organs from the bullwhip and appear heroic, if they dress in a certain way, modest yet modern, if they remain silent, and their faces betray no emotion, then Victoria is satisfied, the boy has succeeded, he has held to his spirit of rebellion, his sense of individualism, at whatever cost, and he has won

If the boy, however, stood limply, and allowed an unhappy expression to dominate his face, the crowd would feel uneasy, which is obviously counterproductive to these

kinds of spectacles. "Is he hurt?" they would ask each other, in low tones. "How much longer will they make him stand there?" If the boy has an individual spirit, however, it is as if he is in charge. "He has stood there for so long!" they say, and transfer their understanding of him from the passive to the active tense.

The floggers at the Renaissance Faire do a passing job of presenting the spectacle. There is a small show of force, the costumes are clean, if cheap. The men involved are young and relatively handsome. Is it not their responsibility, however, to be the most decadent act of the Renaissance Faire? So many of the participants are voluntary members of the BDSM community already, there are, as observed by Victoria, quite a few men at this year's Renaissance Faire who wear dog tags stamped with "Property of Mistress Xenia." There are teenaged couples leading each other about by leashes, and booths dedicated to bondage-inspired costumes. Enormous-breasted women place their bosoms into their corsets, which hold their breasts so high that they became not unlike cushioned platters on which to rest their chins. Smaller-breasted girls don the scanty garb of a belly-dancer. The air is filled with the scent of dangerous liaisons.

Do not assume the entire Faire is filled with lust and pain, the Faire is a pastiche of many things: children's workshops, capitalism, history lessons, and food, but the decadent aspect lingers in the air. And do not the Floggers have the most potential to be the most decadent act of the event? For what does she admire most? This coolness required by the floggers, this delicacy...which requires her to leave irony behind. Pain is the most authentic experience of being human, it is more objective than language, it is an agreed-upon reality. When someone is in pain, they can't fake anything. The result of

the participation of the audience is pain, but they are glad when its over, and in its conclusion, they have experienced more delight than if they had watched a juggler.

Bah! It makes Victoria ashamed of herself, for watching. Why did she watch them? She doesn't necessarily enjoy watching people be hurt, and she considers herself principally non-violent, but the display takes away the guilt, momentarily, that she feels when she watches people go through their everyday lives – and they are in pain, so much pain...it reminds her that there was a time when power was more often enforced through communal, physical brutality....how awkward, now, to see she is indulging in nostalgia for those pre-modern times when power was enforced through brutality, nor psychology. Like everyone else there, the Renaissance dancers, performers, the audience, she longs for the past without understanding it.

CHAPTER 10

THREE SECRETS AND ONE MAN

On an afternoon one year after his father's death, Gordon's mother receives her red-headed freckle-faced friend, Debbie White, who has, like his mother, recently skipped her womanlies. Both women also have curly hair, which the sun illuminates from behind as they disappear from the old-fashioned kitchen into the depths of his mother's greenhouse, little Gordon sees the sun flash in their eyes, shine on the bridge of his mother's nose, and hears the rustling of their calico pioneer dresses, but then the door closes, and they disappear into the depths of his mother's greenhouse. Now, because of the bright sun, Gordon only sees his own reflection in the glass door...he is a thoughtful-looking boy, with large blue eyes, and is holding a ball of yarn.

Half an hour later, the women re-appear in the kitchen, where Gordon has been sitting at the table, quietly tying knots in his ball of yarn. His mother puts the pot on to boil, and Debbie puts the freshly-picked herb into two teacups. They wait in their places quietly until the pot whistles, then his mother pours the boiling water, and the scent of menthol fills the air. The women sit down at the table with him, and drink their tea, still, no one has said much, but when Gordon reaches for a sip, his mother slaps his hand away.

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To Brother Gordon Romly, sin is real and tangible and sticky. It catches you in its trap and slowly digests you. The intensity of his beliefs are almost unbelievable given that it is this day and age. Nevertheless he writes for God and lives for God and breathes and sleeps and loves for God..

It should be stated that Gordon is not a Mormon he-man, he is rather short, balding, with, a slight belly, a pinched mouth, and has been this way since the age of twenty-four, but he has a smile that compensates for his general unattractiveness, because when he ceases to smile, the memory of the expression lingers in the muscles of his face, and he is one of the lucky few who become attractive, incredibly so, as his face becomes more familiar.

Born in an area of Nevada just north of Las Vegas, he is the youngest of five sibling, and, thanks to the absences of his father, his childhood education is primarily spiritual. All household activity center around the church. He, like his brothers, serves in the Aaronic Priesthood, is endowed at the Temple, and endures a two-year mission in a remote area of Argentina, after which he returns, as most good Mormon boys do, to marry his high school sweetheart, Margharetta LaGrune, she of the shining brown hair, she who is certainly the most spiritually devoted of his familiar female acquaintances. She has lost some weight during his absence, he notices - not enough to detract from the fire in her eyes - but some.

After their marriage, and during their honeymoon in Hawaii, they have an incredible spiritual and sexual connection. Having both remained virgins, they endow their sex with Godly fervor, but upon their return home, and their subsequent and necessary move to the city of Las Vegas (where, as locals like to say, over six thousand people move a day, and Gordon is hired as a building inspector), things change. They set up a new house, and establish new ties in the

community. Las Vegas is different from their rural Nevadan town, and they learn about the Strip, and gambling, and indulgence, and restraint, and the tourists, and, as time passes, they learn about the war in Iraq, and the boys at Nellis Air Force base, and Catholicism, and friendship. Gordon learns how to play the guitar. Margharetta learns how to throw spiritually nurturing, yet casual and relaxing Relief meetings, which center around group singing and scripture discussion, after which the men break off into the living room, and the women huddle in the kitchen, in order to facilitate gender-based spiritual discussions.

Tonight, as usual, the men forgo talking much about scripture, and instead, talk about sports. However, the night's *female* discussion is led by old Georgina Esson, in her practical shoes and modest blouse, who, because of her bad knees, is unable to stand during her presentation, and lectures, while sitting, about the godly connection between fasting and praying – how these two elements of spiritual dedication not only bring the women closer to God, but encourage humility, and the practice has long been rumored to give the power to cure whatever it is that ails them. The women are incredulous. Georgina, for all her senility, senses her zealotry has gone too far. “At the very least,” she croaks hastily, “It contributes to a healthier, more spiritually inclined household.”

Georgina finishes, and the women are, despite or because of her finishing remark, inspired. Not a-one touches the leftovers. One woman, young Debbie, ventures to ask for a cup of tea, but the rest spend their time at the kitchen table, diligently applying themselves to the night's activity, spiritual collage – Margharetta sifts through the piles of computer-generated clip art for images of food, hungry people, and, of course, the cross, and pastes these images to a small piece of posterboard.

When she places this talisman on her night stand, Gordon knows he's lost her, because while the talisman isn't the only indication of what's going on, it is the most permanent. The most noticeable. Every night, he sees her adore her talisman, succumb to it. In the beginning, he thought the spiritual battle was between her heart and her mind, but with his wife's growing obsession, he sees that her stomach, as well, has entered the ring.

It is easy to ignore someone's increasing weight loss, especially if the person is someone who is part of daily life, and it is easy to say, as the women of the church do, *You can't starve yourself to get that way, it's genetic*, and it is easy to attempt to understand, as a Godly husband, a wife's hysteria over spiritual fasting. But it is also easy, too easy, for Gordon to remember the Margharetta he fell in love with, the one he wanted to have children with, the one who was rounder, plumper, rosier, the one who was not, as she is now, sharp, fragile, and pale.

He wants to council her as a husband should council his wife, and talks to their bumbling bishop for guidance.

"Margharetta is taking this fasting thing too seriously," he says.

"I suggest you pray about it," the Bishop says.

"But cooking and eating is an integral part of our relationship as man and wife," Gordon says.

And the Bishop responds, "I will have Sister Rachel talk to her about it, but Brother Gordon, do you really wish to admonish your wife for being too adamant about her beliefs?"

So, the night after the UFO sighting, Gordon finally questions her about her relationship with food. He tactfully avoids any mention of her weight, and suggests to her that perhaps God appreciate it when we show reverence in many ways, not just one, and that perhaps she is

depending on her fasting too much, that the talisman at her bed might be more properly replaced with a cross, or a book of scripture, that in fact, reading scripture might be an admirable substitution for fasting, occasionally. She declares, coldly that fasting has brought closer to spiritual clarity, and, throwing a glance at his growing waistline, suggests that he might consider a fast himself.

That night, he wonders why they still sleep in the same bed. One last try — and he reaches out to her in the darkness. Under the covers, he attempts to burrow next to her, to cling what is left of her besides her bones – her skin, her hair, her shining hair – but the sharp rise of her shoulder blade shrugs him off.

“I’m tired,” she says. Without a sound, he turns away, and, resigned, falls asleep. But Margharetta lies awake, and stares at her talisman, which dares her defiance.

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It should be mentioned that while shy, Carleen Jamison isn’t all peaches and cream. Since she moved to Las Vegas from Southern California, in order to help her sister look after the children, she has harbored fantasies of her sister’s husband, the young black-haired pit-boss, Eric James, because he really was the only worthy man she has met, and while she does not love him, she finds him a pinnacle of what a man should be, that is, he provides. In fact, she has shameful fantasies about encouraging the children love her more than their mother, which might draw Eric to her through emotional sabotage, and also thinks it might be easier to seduce him the old-fashioned way, show a little too much skin out by their pool, pretending to think she was alone, because she hasn’t forgotten the two seconds too long his hand remained on her hip during the family photograph at the wedding. But, because she loves her sister, she has decided upon the

path of least resistance, she would simply be a godly woman, and depend on God to notice how hard she works, how much she *contributes*, which could encourage the Holy Ghost to descend upon Eric's chest when he thinks of his wife's sister, Carleen. Meanwhile, however, she couldn't be single forever.

Thus, in hopes of either attracting Eric's attention and finding a more available man, tonight, she attends a different chapel.

Quite naturally, Brother Romly, tonight, standing behind the podium, notices Carleen in his audience. She is stunning, with dark red hair arranged with center part, which frames her smooth, white forehead. There is a pleasing roundness to her figure, bordering on plumpness, and she wears modest clothing: a dark dress and simple shoes. But it is her eyes that stand out among the other faces of the ward, and not because of her looks or the fact that she was a new face, but because as he speaks, it seems she does not look at him, but through him, her eyes so radiated pure spirit that for the first time in his life, Gordon has difficulty focusing on the audience rather than the individual, and this difference of perception throws off his normally engrossing oratory powers. To each other, then, their eyes betray that mutual *something wrong*, and he forget what he was saying, he forgets. For two seconds or two minutes, he forgets what he was saying.

It is said that initial introductions such as these are fairytales.

During the week he all can think of is her. On his building inspector rounds, where the hard hat did little to keep God from knowing Gordon's thoughts, his desires, his sinful wish. He thinks, *Will she come back? She bewitched me with her presence. I am powerless. Reduced to a cliché. What is this emotion but a cliché? There is no other word.* He thinks, briefly, that

polygamy should be reinstated, and then feels guilty for that thought because he could not think of his mother having to be just “a” wife of the ghost of his father. Though had she remained faithful to the end? The memory came back then, swiftly, hot, the scent of menthol, and of the two women, across the table, the slap on the hand. *If she had not been faithful.* But Margharetta. He can’t stop.

Then, as he writes next week’s sermon, the spirit of the white-faced woman haunts him. He writes for *her*, to impress *her*, to absolve *her*, to prick *her*. To reach out to that *something* he saw hanging over her as visible as a nightgown, like the gossamer fabric of renunciation, white, clear, blinding. While he writes he knows he is sinning, that this is the first time he had written not in His name, but in hers.

On Friday night, he spouts more prolifically than he ever had before, with a power that his ward had not seen nor felt since the sermons of Brother Johnson back in ‘92, for while behind the podium, before the congregation, before *her* (for she had returned), he uses more emotional words, he enunciates more vigorously, and uses more gregarious hand gestures than he has ever dared before. He feels more mighty, more human, more heated than ever before. He has never felt this way when doing something for God, and this is greater than any feeling he has ever experienced while doing something for a group, this doing something for an individual. He even finds the confidence to wander from his scripturally-based lecture about innocence to the topics he liked best. He talks about the appearance of animals in the Book of Mormon, how they are representative of *wild prosperity*, and how often the image of the mother hen protectively gathering her chick under her wings appears.

Afterward, during the ward dinner, when the women of the relief society have brought the

usual, the traditional foods that had ceased to amaze Gordon with their blandness and sweetness are consumed en masse: pudding, peanut butter bars with chocolate kisses melted on top, green lettuce mixed with marshmallows and marichino cherries, Jell-o molds, funeral potatoes.

But while receiving the accolades of his audience, he smells something, a familiar smell, which surprised him with its intensity. Basil. Fresh basil. Like from his mother's greenhouse. He sniffs out the responsible dish at the end of the table, nearly untouched, and what peaks from beneath the foil is red and green and yellow. Upon closer inspected he finds it is a dish of polenta filled with fresh corn and doused with what can only be homemade tomato sauce, and sprinkled, lavishly, decadently, with fresh basil. He spoons out a bit on his paper plate and tastes. Heaven! Mid bite, and a fellow male of his ward comes to speak to him, privately. He says, "My son is thinking of leaving. My son, who served his mission in France." Gordon inwardly thinks *that's what they get when they send the boys to France*.

They discuss the boy's future prospects: a good Mormon school, a good Mormon girl, a vacation in Utah... Gordon finally manages to steal away from the fold long enough to search out the woman with the dark red hair. He finds her, sitting alone, silently eating, and he can see Margharetta in his peripheral vision, and he is ashamed, for instead of, as a proper Sister, attending to the new member's social comforts, she has filled her plate with lettuce, and is eating it with her fingers, leaf by leaf, as she gossips with young Sister Amanda. Which gives Gordon and excuse to approach the woman with the dark red hair. It is only mannerly.

As he makes his way to the new woman, she seems to sense his approach, and within seconds, has moved away, thrown her plate into the trash, and exited the chapel. Stealing a look back at his ward, he waits for a count of five, and follows her.

She has walked quickly, and has reached her car by the time he catches up with her. Panting, for he had this task of introduction, he dumbly announces himself.

“Sister? Sister? Why not stay and meet more members of the church? My wife will be happy to introduce you to everyone...” She turns. Her eyes, again, strike him. Her eyes, above anything else, exist.

“I am too shy,” she says, in almost a whisper. “It is difficult for me to socialize properly. Sitting and waiting for attention seems to me a bit trying.”

“That situation rarely happens in our ward...I apologize. Please, won’t you come back and meet the rest of us? I am Brother Gordon.” He holds out his hand. He longs to touch her, and this is the most Godly way of doing so. While shaking, her fingers, in his hand, are warm and soft. He feels a warmth in his chest and is confused. Is this the Holy Ghost descending upon him? Now? While he is talking to this woman with every intention of learning more about her? While he was already married?

“I am Carleen,” she says. “And thank you but I can’t go back. Not tonight.”

“Carleen, will we see you again? The basil...” He has a brief flashback to when his mother brought the most sumptuous dishes to the ladies’ relief society meetings. Succulent dishes, exotic, which brought much jealousy upon her from the other women of the relief society.

“You liked my food?” She pauses. Looks at the sky. “I’ll be back next week, of course. I love church.”

And she is gone. Like that. It has begun.

And six months later, they have developed a pleasant friendship, but tonight, they became especially close, that is, they speak, together, secretly. Later, Gordon, giddy, can hardly

remember what they said to each other. It had something to do with God, and faith, and how to use that faith, and what the Holy Ghost felt like on their chests. He learned that her parents are dead. That her sister is all she has. He thinks, *she was with me yesterday. She was with me. She was with me. Carleen. Carleen. Without a father. Without a mother. Carleen. Carleen Butler. She was with me. Yesterday, she was with me, in the temple, in her dress. She had brought me cups of coffee, while I studied my address. I wrote her all my sermon without thinking of God, and then I go and think of her when...Ridiculous. Rhymes. Ridiculous.* He thinks. *Rhymes come to me when I say her name, her name, Carleen.*

The next morning, after his wife leaves for the library, he stands in front of the open closet, staring at his old missionary costume. He takes it out and puts it on, then closes the door to the closet and examines himself in the full-length mirror. He ties his red tie. After all this time, the costume nearly fits him as it had fit the old Gordon, just a bit tight around the middle. Downstairs, he rummages through the hall closet and finds his old bicycle helmet. This too, he dons, then goes to the garage and uncovers his old bicycle. Its tires were a bit flat, but it was still rideable.

It is nearly one hundred degrees outside, but his chest burns hotter, and he feels that riding in the heat will burn this longing for Carleen out of his spirit...but he can't get her out of his mind. How could feeling this way be wrong if his inner voice is telling him that this is what he is supposed to do. God would have blessed him with a more physically enabled wife if he hadn't wanted Gordon to talk to Carleen. He wouldn't have put the dark redhead in his path. It could not be a test, he had already been tested, could it be a test?

(He remembers young Amanda Gooding, and how he had kept himself away from her,

even though she had tried to corner him so many times. She, standing with a plate of frog-eye salad in one hand, touching his arm with the other. And she had been every man's dream. All the men in his ward agreed, he could see it in their body language. That day when the Amanda Gooding had walked past, in her white skirt and black top, swinging her purse, they all realized she had filled out nicely.

After he rejected her advances she ended up moving to San Francisco and falling away from the church. He had seen her just two months ago, before Carleen had come into his life. Amanda's hair was blue, she had pierced her ears with at least 15 silver hoops. She was with a man covered in tattoos. When they had seen each other, she had called, "Hello Brother!" and introduced the men. "This is Howie, my boyfriend," she had said. Howie grunted and sized Gordon up. Gordon had felt uncomfortable, in his well-fitting suit. It was summer. Summer was always too hot for the garments. Howie wore a pair of flip flops, cutoffs, and no shirt. There was a tattoo of a cross on one of his breasts and the tattoo of a yin-yang on the other. He was covered in grease from working on their van.

"Where you two off to?" said Gordon.

"We're getting ready to go to Burning Man," she said. "It's an art festival, up in Black Rock Canyon," she said. "Howie's an artist," she said.

"What does he paint?" said Gordon

"Not that kind of artist silly, a sculptor. Like Rodin."

"Rodin?" Said Gordon. He wracked his brains to think of where he had heard that name before.

"Here, look in the back of the van."

Opening the back door, he peered into the dark interior of the van. It had been painted purple, and carpeted. After his eyes had adjusted to the light, he saw what looked like a large pile of wood.

“What is it?” He said. He didn’t want to be rude and say it just looked like a pile of wood and that no sculptor used wood as far as he knew Michelangelo used marble.

“It’s all the pieces of a big mouse,” she said. “Look, here’s its ear.” She held out an oval of pine. “At Burning Man, we toss all the work into the fire at the end of the week.”

“Like the Phoenix, creativity is born from the flames of destruction,” said Howie. He had a high-pitched voice. Like a little boy. But the seriousness of his belief in his words resonated deeply.

Immediately Alma 14:9 flashed into Gordon’s head: “And it came to pass that they took Alma and Amulek, and carried them forth to the place of martyrdom, that they might witness the destruction of those who were consumed by fire.” He knew they Burning Man was something that she should not be going to.

“Amanda,” he said. “I know you’d like to stay with your parents for a while, why don’t you let Howie go to the concert and you stay here with us for a while? Your parents have expressed great sorrow at your renunciation of the church.”

“See, this is what they do to you,” she said to Howie. Howie shrugged.

“Brother, you might know what my parents want, but you don’t know what’s best for me.” She placed her hand on his shoulder. The same place she had placed it when she was just a girl who wanted something.

“Brother, I ask that you forget what you know. I am going to Burning Man. My parents

don't know me. I had to forget what I knew...it's wrong, it's not real, Gordon".

It sounded rehearsed. Amanda acted as if he were just another Brother, that she hadn't pushed him in the corner of the chapel and said those things to him, that he hadn't had to remove her hand from his crotch. She acted as if it had never happened. A part of her life, but an old life that she had left. Like a chess piece in a box of checkers).

How many times does one man go through the same test? He thinks.

What Amanda had was now running through Gordon's mind. What did he know? Now, at thirty-four? He know the church, of course. He knows God is the eternal Father. He knows that Jesus Christ love him. He knows the necessity of repentance and baptism. He knows that the Holy Ghost exists and has, in the past, descended upon him to indicate the right path -- he knows that burning in his chest -- he knows his callings, he knows the necessity of prayer. He knows about the original falling away from the church which led to the necessity of Joseph Smith's revelation of the Book of Mormon. He knows the president of the church is a prophet.

He also knows that his wife is not fasting, but that she is anorexic. He knows he does not love her. He knows Carleen appreciate food...He knows Carleen. He knows her. As he thinks about her face, her body, her thoughts. What is she thinking? She is probably at her sister's house right now, the children were at school. What is she doing? She is cleaning, no, she is reading scripture, no she is tending to her garden. Maybe she has just taken a shower, stepped naked out of the tub, wrapped herself in a towel, and now stands before the foggy mirror, brushing her long red hair. Maybe she is thinking of him, too. He knows she is. He knows. He pedals more quickly. And finds himself in her neighborhood. In her gated community. His tie is tight. He is sweating. He knows he is becoming dehydrated, and curses himself for not thinking

to bring a bottle of water. Living so long in the desert, he knows to bring water. They used to hammer it into him in church. Convert the masses and bring plenty of water with you. We don't need you dying of thirst because then who is going to preach the gospel to these people in need? He is close to her house. She is home. She will give him a glass of water. That's what he will do. Stop at her house and ask for some water. Just a friendly visit from a brethren, if anyone saw him. That's what he will say, that he is out calling on members of the ward, Having thrown his bicycle down and run up the stairs, he is at her house. He rings the doorbell. Nothing. He listens for a sound. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. He rings again. And again. He pounds on the door. He is very thirsty. He walks around the back of the house, he knows they have a pool. He can jump in it, maybe. Drink the water. They won't mind, if they come home, to find him here. He is just in the neighborhood, and he is very thirsty. He walks around the corner of the house and there she is in one-piece bathing suit, sitting by the edge of the pool, her feet in the water, wearing a pair of headphones, singing along to the music. Godly music. The song they were all taught as children:

"A gentle voice, so still, so small/A voice that's hardly heard at all/A voice so clear to me/a desperate call/A voice that pierces to my soul."

Her own voice trails off as she sees the Gordon. He has opened the gate and is approaching her.

"Don't be scared," he says. "I'm just thirsty." He stands there helplessly. What a mess I am, he thinks. What a mess, and this poor woman singing her Godly songs. Her voice, it stirs me more deeply than the holy voice. Perhaps her's is the holy voice.

"There's water in the kitchen," she says, and holds her hand out to him. He smiles back.

Gratefully. Great Lord above he says to himself, as they walk inside.

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When Carleen becomes pregnant, Gordon knows what to do.

CHAPTER 11

IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT

Hate has to come first. You hate the doctor for pulling you out of your mother and you hate yourself for not fighting harder, because you don't scream until they slap you, hard, then leave you alone in a cold crib in a dark room. You stay awake all night and listen to the sound of the blood in your ears, then hear, "I don't remember another baby who refused to sleep." Hear your mother say, "She must be afraid of the dark...all babies are afraid of the dark...don't be scared..." Hear your father say, "I'll turn on another light." This is the only way to begin.

Do not require anything of your parents. Be a quiet child, do what you are told, eat very little. Live on a beach somewhere, so your mother can cover you with sun block before you search the sand for small beautiful shell and sharks' teeth. Bring the shells and the teeth home, create a pile of shells on the front porch. Spend a week adding shells to the pile, memorize their differences, line the teeth up according to size. Then wake up one morning and find the shells kicked into the sand and drawn back out by the tide. Stand in the sun and listen to the ocean. Sneak out without sun block, run to the shore, dig deep in the wet sand and look for your shells. When your mother wakes up and finds you not in bed, she will call the police, who you will see as you walk home. You are eight. This is only the beginning.

Three summers later drive to Iowa to stay with your grandparents for a week. Your mother says, "This is the house I lived in until I married your father...Be good...you know how

your grandparents are...don't make too much noise...and make your bed..." Later, you will wake up to the telephone at seven a.m.... You will be tired, so tired, curled up on the hide-a-bed in the basement. After you hear the phone ring, you can imagine your grandmother narrowing her eyes and calling, "Your mother's on the phone...would you like to speak with her?" You do not think, you are so tired, so you sigh, "I'll talk to her when she gets here." It helps if your grandmother's mothers die from stomach cancer, her brother hung himself in the family barn, her father took a boat to Belgium and found himself unable to return to his farm and nine children. She stomps downstairs. Hear, "You wicked...if your mother dies before she gets here...if she's in a car accident...her ungrateful...unloving child who doesn't have time to say hello..too busy loafing about...I'll think at her funeral...why don't you worry you little soul sucker? Why don't you care..." When she goes back upstairs, feel your stomach tie itself in knots, sweat rise to your forehead, think about your mother's car colliding with a semi-truck on the highway...the driver will be asleep...they will not see your mother's blue Volkswagen Bug until it is crushed under the wheels, along with her head and arm...thin rivers of blood...Run to the shower, turn the water on, and cry until your grandmother voice cries through the steam, "How could you be so unreasonable...so unloving...after all she's done for you..raising you the way she did it's no wonder...and in my house...the very thought..." she seems to be blubbering.

Instead of getting out, having more friends, going to the movies and dances, having boy/girlfriends, obstinately refuse to do anything but sit and do nothing. Sometimes you will wander the streets of the third new city you have lived in six years. When you do this, do not tell anyone what you're doing or where you are. Keep your room extravagantly untidy. Leave bowls of unfinished oatmeal in the windowsill until mold grows on the surface. When your mother

asks what's bothering you, scream endless diatribes at her about your father. He doesn't think you are a person, he makes you feel like you'll never be good enough or smart enough. He never wonders what you do, only how can you do this? Swear like a rock star. Find an article about a teenager who was denied entrance into an Ivy League college because of their frequent use of blue language stuck to the refrigerator. Regardless of the fact that you do not have the grades necessary for entrance into an Ivy League school, listen to your father lecture on unbecoming language. Say fuck you very much. Be grounded for six months. This is where it becomes fun...night after night...instead of sleeping...your stomach aches...you think about your school bus...the loud children...and the bus driver...not able to hear the police sirens...and the impact...of the bus and the...car...and the cracks of the heads...against the windows...and the sound of the blood...in your ears...there are masked gunmen...at your high school...who steal jewelry from the faculty...cover your head with a hood...hold a gun to your back....visions of yourself falling headlong down the stairs...unable to control yourself...you trip accidentally on purpose...and crack your head open on the cement...your parents asphyxiate in their blankets...the carbon monoxide builds up in their room and...you will never speak to them again...and the water...in the kitchen...it poisons your best friend...the girl who gave you watercolors...when you told her you heard voices...say there is a razor in the bathroom...and that you could sit on the cold tub...put the razor into your wrists...and slice vertical, not horizontal...so they know that you wanted to die...you are thankful for your house...and the books you read...and the records you play...too loud...certainly you can never be an astronaut...fly to Mars...and be a colonist...you think you are lucky...because something you look out your window and see your neighbor wash his car at three am.

Go to college, somewhere, anywhere. Live with an ex-Jehovah's Witness, or a Wiccan, or a drag queen, or a violinist. Find that drinking helps you sleep, you like electronic music, Polaroid cameras, and drugs. This infuriates your roommate's older but shorter boyfriend who likes action figures and loony toons. You argue with him about child labor in Cambodia. He says, "I don't care as long as its not my child." Throw your beer at him and scream, "I can't go on, you are arguing to win...at best you win...at worst you lose...but I am arguing to preserve my existence!" He raises his eyebrow...looks like an alien...your stomach hurts....you leave the house...walk the streets...wake up three days later...under a tree...You can smell yourself. Something sticks into your hip, you feel your pocket, and pull out a stack of Polaroids of all the dog shit in your neighborhood...three weeks later start taking medication for your problems, but do not tell anyone about it.

Don't finish your degree, instead, get a job in retail, or at a restaurant, or behind the counter at a bookstore. Have a boss you find attractive despite their acne and obsession with Star Wars. Start to spend every weekend at a bar. Pick up writers/store clerks, writers/students, writers/factory workers, writers/rockstars. Sleep magnificently thanks to the alcohol and the medication, but spend your days hung-over and insecure, feel dirty and stupid and useless and worthless and ugly an beer-bellied...one night, during inventory, tell your boss...they will sleep with you then give you a book about aliens.

After you read the book, the beer no longer helps you sleep. You forget to take your medication, because you can only think of aliens shining flashlights outside your window in the middle of the night and you lying there in your bed, unprepared. Think they've taken you before, an start to search your body for marks to prove that you were

abducted and that is why you feel this way, that is why you can't be an astronaut, that is why you have that noise in your ears, it's their blood in you. But there are no microchips in the skin on your legs...or your arms...or your stomach...or on your face...there are only pores and hairs that grow out of the pores. Pluck your way through the next two years, and leave your skin a blistered wasteland of empty treasure holes.

Your boss takes you to a professional. And now you take Lithium...have weekly blood tests...take Paxil...take Xanax...which will help you sleep again..take Anafranil..take Buspar...take Tegretol...gain weight...sweat profusely...you have arm pit stains...from morning to morning...you soak your sheets...but do not dream....you get a promotion...but you marry your boss...and you quit your job...you turn off the lights at night...the roof of your apartment blocks the stars...you live in a dismal area of a suburb...you have a baby...and watch television...where large families...in beautiful houses...are happy people...but this is not a mother...this is not a father...this is not a child...this is not a woman...this is not a phone call...to the airport...for a pilot...who gets on the phone...after much shuffling...and tells you that flying is like nothing...like a care ride...but with a blue highway...and that people never panic...so far above the earth...in their tiny upholsters chairs...with their cans of diet cola..until the airplane flies too high...an you're stuck in outer space...where the stars all look like assholes...and the oxygen runs out...people cry and hug each other...and soon the airplane loses power...and you plunge into the ocean...

Your building has two washers and two dryers. While the baby and your spouse are at the park...you do the laundry. On a Saturday. You think over and over t yourself: Those who do laundry on Saturday night never have arguments never have fights. Over and over. Up and

down the stairs with the baskets of baby diapers. You leave the detergent downstairs for five minutes, then when you come back you find it gone. If you had a car and a credit card, you could drive to an all-night Walmart and buy new diapers and laundry soap, but you do not have a car or a credit card, just three dollars to last you, the baby, and your spouse for the next week. Grab a marker and a sheet of paper, scrawl out a nasty note to the perpetrator, something like if you took my detergent I'm sure it was a mistake I'm not mad yet but you're pushing me and I push back so it better be back fucking soon. Reach for the tape you know you left on your desk. Do not find the tape. Search the living room. Do not find the tape. Remember you once saw a roll of tape in your bedroom. Search the closet, then pull the bed away from the wall. Find an old *Us* magazines and an old copy of *Fingerprints of the Gods*, but do not find any tape. Look in the bathroom, empty the medicine cabinet, watch the bottle of aspirin fall behind the radiator, which you search behind, and while you reach for the bottle you find a roll of duct tape. Grab your sign, run downstairs, and slap it up.

Lie wide awake. The clock says three am and you have no window to look out of and watch your neighbor wash his car. Get out of the bed without waking your spouse. Find your slippers and put on a pair of jeans. Lift your baby out of her crib, because it seems that you want her to go with you. She cries, but you give her a bottle and she quiets down. Lift her into her stroller, and take her outside. Push her stroller up and down the dark quiet streets of your neighborhood. They say this is a safe neighborhood. There are flags on the front lawns, and the apartments all have dish washers and ceiling fans. There are no clouds in the sky, and the moon is full. The breeze is soft and cool on your faces, and the tinkling of wind chimes dances through the air...push the stroller uphill... find an abandoned church you have never seen before. Open

the gate, and walk away....walk away...just walk away...

CHAPTER 12

A MOMENT OF MAGGIE YOUNG'S LIFE IN A GATED COMMUNITY IN NORTHWEST LAS VEGAS

I am having an attack...holding a piece of chocolate cake to my mouth, in front of the icebox! If anyone were to see me now...They had sent me in here to fetch beer and chips...it's not just any day, it's NASCAR day! A day that's more important than any business meeting, wife's birthday, or family outing. Here I am...standing with the cake...and then, I push it into my face! Chomp down once, and my mouth is full of icing and cake, and does not taste sweet, but greasy, the dominate taste is the fat they criticize me for being! They want me to eat it, but don't want me to be it! This is what comes when you marry the wrong man, sweethearts! This is what comes when you follow *their* dreams...

Like you, I used to have that something you have... that spark, that fire in the eyes, that noble enlivening of the spirit when you imagine poetic beauty...My imagination once had no limits...I went to Vassar! I could look out the window of my classrooms, and see the world in all its curious, gelatinous, sinuous, tidalious...foldable, prismatic...Bah! I can't describe things well. Suffice it to say, the world looked...deeper... before I met this man who, although had no noble sense of poetic beauty, looked the part. Because of his beauty, I ignored his sloth. His failure to notice that I'd rearranged the furniture, for

example, or his disinterested shrug of acceptance when I asked him to move his feet...imagine! What a boring man, my children! Gorgeous and boring! And me, afraid that he's going to enter our kitchen and see me stuffing my face with supermarket cake!

...They are cheering in the living room...someone must have crashed...nothing like a pile of fire and metal to make those morons howl...Oh! Let them say it is the sway of a woman's hips...or a song on the radio...you must know they are lying! I insist...I implore you...look away while I wipe my mouth...and look!...look at the chewed legs of the table! Follow me to the living room....look at the arms of the couch! Ignore us, Leopold, Gary, I'm showing something to my friend...look darling...and the Laz-Y-Boy! Buddy! Buddy! Come here!

Oh that's right! You can't...I put you in that cage...Follow me to the garage...that's right...you see him there? Isn't he beautiful? We think he's a lab mix...He's whining now...you think he wants to get out, don't you? Well he doesn't! My little daughter Madeline comes in here after school and talks to him...she sings and pretends to read to him! He's quite happy...the cage is wonderful...Maddie and the dog are happy and I get to rest for a change! Put my feet up and watch TV...for a change...*Oprah*...Yes! I watch *Oprah*...and sometimes I watch other talk shows too! They relieve my stress...sitting in front of the television and eating chocolates relieves my stress! Oh those hours are so wonderful when there's no one to pay attention to...

CHAPTER 13

THE DARK SIDE OF THE DUCHESS

His own preoccupation with found objects begins in high school. After seeing a bit of folded-up paper ground into the snow and dirt and picking it up opening it and finding a wedding proposal. Instant obsession.

The rubbed-on stencil letters, and the fact that it had been thrown away

When he becomes her, which means when he moves to Las Vegas from Elko, Nevada, which means when he leaves his wife and children, which means when he stops being a miner and becomes the Duchess, which means when he becomes herself, her first found object is, to start, a Polaroid, the Queen of finds, in the sofa cushions of the hotel room she lives in for her first four months in the city. The photo is of the lower half of a woman clothed in a pair of black nylons which had been ripped open at the crotch, and it had obviously been taken right after the model had had sex, most likely with the photographer.

After she begins her new life, her real life she says, because she rarely harbors grief about her past -- her collection of found objects, as well as wigs, continues to grow.

(Her favorite, wig, that is, was a big red bouffant she had purchased from the Soap Opera Specials show).

Her name? Her name is found like everything, she looks down, and it is there,

suddenly, while she is sitting on the couch in a hotel room with Ming after they had spent the night *hamming it up* with that group of rugged men from New York, while smoking very daintily, she thought.

That night,

It was one of the first nights

S/he sat on a large couch

With large arms a couch so large it

Made her look small

Even with tiny little Ming nearby

S/he looked small

S/he and Ming had woken up before the gentlemen

When s/he called room service

S/he caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror

In the night, s/he had removed her wig

But not his/her makeup

Which was smeared down his/her face

Two black lines

From the couch, s/he ordered three breakfast trays and a chocolate milk.

"You're a Duchess Baby," said Ming.

"I am?" S/he said.

"Look at you, with your bad makeup and your wig on the couch next to you... it looks like a dead animal!" Ming squealed.

"If I'm a Duchess, I'm a false one."

Ming snorted through his cigarette. "You're the False Duchess of the Morning, You bitch."

"I am, aren't I?" S/he pat her bald head as if arranging the wig. "I am."

///

After the fiasco with the New Yorkers, she, the Duchess, the False Duchess who is now a real Duchess, she keeps her eyes on the ground, always, never looking forward. And it's not because she's insecure, rather, it's because she is *looking*. Always looking for *something*...she remembers that on her way home from that fiasco with the New Yorkers, she saw something...out of the corner of her eye...on the ground...it was a piece of dirty white paper, folded, scrunched under the chain-link fence that lined her walk from the airport. She could hardly breath, the excitement...the piece of folded up paper...it had so much potential...what could it be? Mostly, the bits end up being nothing --directions, or a receipt, or simply blank sheets of paper, having been folded up in a moment of boredom...stranger things have been done! But this piece of paper...that she saw that morning...dirty white..folded...scrunched under the china-link fence, it glowed with potential...As she bent over, neatly flashing the oncoming traffic the tops of her large white thighs...*accidentally on purpose*...she stood, and, shielding her eyes from the glare of the morning sun, unfolded the paper...slowly...the first unfold was extraordinarily promising...a scrawled penciled note – adult's handwriting that looked like a child's. It said "Meet me in the park at 6:00," and then she unfolded the paper completely, and someone had drawn, with drugstore colored pencils, the figure of a woman who bares her

breast to the baby in her lap, while a little boy stands to the side and watches. He is saying, "Mommy I'm hungry."

She recalls that she gasped, she laughed, she looked around to see if anyone had seen her find what she had found, but there was nothing but cars whizzing past, the sun, the airplanes overhead....So she put the piece of paper in neatly her pocketbook, and continued her walk home. The Duchess often considers that along with the fruits of her obsession, as in addition to the pleasures associated with all hobbies, there are burdens. Usually, the trash she picks from the ground ends up to be just that – trash, and she, the finder, is burdened with the question of whether to be a responsible citizen and *hold on to* the trash, until she finds a public garbage can, which are few and far between off the Strip...which forces her to consider putting the trash *in her pocket* until she finds a garbage can...the burdens of the hobby are worsened by the fact that, now, most women's clothes don't have pockets, so she is stuck carrying the trash in her hands, and more frequently than not, the retrieved trash is gooey, rained on, or covered with questionable dried-out *something*. So she usually drops the trash on the ground, but is then subject to the eyes of the people who see what she did. And they judge her, *litterbug*.

But it was trash to begin with, she wants to say.

Also, there is the aspect of bending down in broad daylight and picking something off the ground which garners quite a few stares in and of itself. Do people wonder if she feels guilty for littering and is picking up what she had already dropped? Or, what if no one sees her pick it up, but rather, sees her drop it? Again, she would be blazoned with the moniker of "litterbug." Being a litterbug, she thinks, is worse, much worse, than

being a transvestite....

And, there is the problem of collecting so much trash, so many little clues to the inner lives of the people around her, that it is beginning to overwhelm the the Duchess's apartment. Old photographs of people she doesn't know litter the hallway, old scraps of paper, thrown away by the creators, fill the filing cabinet in her bedroom. Her house is becoming a pathway into other people's memories, and she is beginning to lose her own...

Oh Duchess...tell us....what are the names of your children? What, what is the name of your ex-wife? When did she serve the divorce papers? Duchess, you throw out your own photos in lieu of preserving the memories of people you have never met...

///

Gentle readers, you read my story in the lines above, written by this tart, Victoria, who sits in coffee shops and frequents thrift stores? *My* story is as much of a revelation to her as all found objects are to me. She opened her eyes, and there it was. But she has problems...she likes to drink...and sometimes she passes out...leaving no one but me at the computer...and things don't just write themselves! As she is asleep, in the corner, after having taken three xanax and drank all of my wine -- now, she's lost control. And I can speak, finally speak, myself, without her stupid sluggish heavy intermediary body. Being given this chance to speak, I must reveal to you my favorite found object, the gem of my collection, which I found in *her* wastebasket. My gentle readers, there are times when you find things that disturb you, that make you nauseous. What follows is one such thing..

This story that surfaced from a perusal of *her garbage* lends us a pathway not only

into the mind of a *tart* of a female, but of the submissive male, she and he, each, who is for the most part, mocked by society. What man wants to or admits to domination by a woman? What woman wants to control a man? Is there any power in control over an individual? No! Lordness, especially *her*. Ah! Without further obstrufication, I present...

Objet Trouvé #4453

Princess,

Of all the responses I have received only Yours excites me. I am hoping to find a Woman who will use and abuse me in private for Her own personal professional gain.

Would You whip a male to get noticed professionally?

slave

Miss,

I realize this is unconventional but it is something I have longed to do since I first hear of it happening about ten years ago. Here was what inspired me.

I used to work in a large publishing company in New York. One of the main honchos there was a really dominant male who terrorizes everyone but for one young woman, who seemed to be his protege. Sometimes in meetings he would defer to her. She got the choice assignments. One day his boss stormed into his office about some screw up and there was the honcho on his knees before the woman, kissing her shoes. Word got around

that the guy was her secret slave and he gave her the best travel assignments and paid her a higher rate than others. Worse, sometimes she didn't even do the work, he did, but she got paid for it. He was fired. She continued to write for the company.

I have long been a fan of women who are willing to use their power for their own ends. At present I am the editor of a small but national magazine. The magazine is getting noticed. Circulation is up. I have need to develop writers in various categories. Profiles of Famous People, Grooming, Fashion, Travel, Airplanes and Boats, etc. I recently decided to let my style editor go and I was struck by an inspiration of what the other editor had done.

So I am taking an ethical chance here. I have always played by the book. I never take the freebies offered to me and have passed up many opportunities to travel, go to spas, etc., and I admit, I have this longing to have a woman secretly using me. The outside world would never know.

This is not a sexual thing at all. There is no sex involved in any way. It is a power thing. The idea of a woman wanting to have Her name on a masthead to jumpstart Her career is intoxicating. That I might be able to help is more appealing, but there is, of course, real work to be done.

I am slightly ashamed of taking this route but there it is. What I can tell you is that You would be paid fifty cents a word for stories and You would have some behind the scenes power and influence.

That said, yes, I would like to kneel and kiss shoes. If I could be whipped that would be wonderful, but I am far more interested in the writing and I loved your response about

being a bitch and to “capitalize on the more disorienting aspects of my personality.”

I would like that too. In any event, even if You don’t want to play the power game, I would be happy to look at your work. Needless to say, I consider this something to keep silent about.

Please let me know if this is of interest and I would love to see a sample of your writing.
slave editor

Princess,

I appreciate the subtlety and your discretion. I think we both know this is highly unusual and yet could obviously kickstart your career by giving you a credit in a national magazine, as well as real world skills You can use later.

Just to keep things above board, so to speak, I will correspond with You from my business address and will not refer to anything but work there. That part will be completely professional.

However, I have to add that I am very excited by the secrecy of this and by Your willingness to explore using Your power for professional gain. If You get this and can respond in the next day, I will be writing to You and will forward all the information You need to decide if You wish to continue. I am not trying to play games but am just attempting to also be discreet.

Thank You

slave

slave,

After considering your request, I will allow you to deliver the magazine to me in person – I'd like to hear you talk about the magazine and am interested to hear what you have to say about the journalism industry. As I am a novice to journalism. Any advice you might have might be appreciated, though such advice should be meaningful, and I expect you to be articulate and informative. Also, I'd like to know more completely what to expect from this relationship.

Princess

slave,

I appreciate your response to my work thus far – good job. The flowers on your tray, though slightly wilted (your whining attitude about the irregular nature of my emails was annoying) will be ignored for now because your rhetoric was impressive.

Also, that you are thinking of writing assignments for me is pleasing, it is very important that you remember to always consider me for interesting jobs.

However, you didn't notify me of the assignment at the Bellagio in time for me to think completely about your magazine (tho' I looked at the web site and, if you are going for a glamorous magazine, your site sucked), this is unfortunate, because going to a suite in the Bellagio to look at diamonds would have been quite enjoyable. I'm not too happy with the lack of foresight on your part, but as our relationship is just beginning, I'll let your mistake slide...this time.

I'd like to say a tentative "yes" to your position offer, but still need to see the magazine. I

will be at Father's Restaurant, across from the University, between 3 and 4 o'clock, where I expect the magazine to be quickly delivered in a plain manila envelope, along with a note thanking me for my interest. Please do not deliver the envelope yourself, as seeing each other might ruin all the secrecy I have worked so hard to maintain – perhaps even put you into a dangerously indiscreet situation, and if I give you the honor of meeting me face to face, I expect a more elegant venue. Finally, make sure the courier doesn't waste my time with a lot of needless chit-chat – have him deliver the envelope and leave.

I'd like some guidelines about the kind of journalism you want the magazine to project – is this to be glamorous or are you going for a younger audience?

Also, what kind of money are we talking about here? Frankly, I'm disgusted that you haven't had the consideration to let me know what kind of money I'd make, I'm a busy woman and waiting for your coy little brain to start working for itself is not my job.

Princess,

I will be honest and will also make myself vulnerable when I confess that having not heard back from You for what seemed an extended period of time gave You an eerie, remote kind of power. I think I felt a bit like a manservant kneeling at Mistress' door with a breakfast tray, waiting for the bell to ring, concerned that the food would get too cool for your liking and that the flowers might...

slave

how disgusting – my picture on your computer backdrop?!? – that is ruly sick and would make any other girl feel violate. As I know your reasons (weakness, sickness, patheticness), I’m not offended like other girls would be, but I AM offended that you used it as your backdrop without permission.

So today, wear your absolute tightest nipple clamps for three hours (this is your first indiscretion – I’m being sweet), under your shirt, while you got about town, enjoying what could otherwise have been a beautiful, reading Sunday. When you drink your coffee, I want you wincing and remembering your indiscretion. As you unfold your Sunday paper, I want you sweating in agony. After you take the clamps off, you can take a shower but than you don’t get to touch your goddamned nipples again, not even with soap, until you write to me and tell me how terrible the experience was for you – and if it was bad enough, I might let you start pinching them in private again...slave, this hurts me more than it hurts you – I didn’t expect you to be so disgusting so immediately – obviously you can understand my need to nip kind of behavior in the bud.

Now, as far as your financial tribute – what gave you the idea that I would be submissive enough to allow you to pay me for work that is not related to writing for the magazine? You are obviously some kind of sick glutton for punishment. If you behave properly, someday you might have the honor of paying me for telling you what to do – I can’t have my behavior too distracted by your pointless whining.

Regarding my riding crop, send me some pictures of the kinds of crops you think are up to my position, and I’ll pick out the one that pleases me the most.

I would also like the following:

1. A cell phone – one that takes pictures. I'll let you pick it out, and you better do a fucking good job – no shitty plans or ugly designs. You'll pay the bill, of course, and if I even SEE the bill you can expect a whole lot of trouble...but I certainly do NOT expect you to look at who I call or who calls me. Also remember, I'm not like other skanky bitches who keep men all over the country. I make mostly local calls (luckily for you). I am, after all, classy, hmm? The phone will not only allow me to do magazine business properly, but sadly, give you an outlet to badger me. I don't think I'd ever answer it for you, but you can't be sure. Maybe you'll piss me off so much that I'll have no choice...Whatever you do, don't call me on the phone more than once every three days.
2. A PO box – I certainly don't want a freak like you to know my home address, nor do I want the rest of my neighbors knowing the kinds of measures you are going to put me through in order to get the magazine "done well." I will go to the post office tomorrow and register, then send you the bill at work (work address, please, where I hope other people see the bill and wonder what kind of shady deal you've gotten yourself into this time...

I don't know if you'll be lucky enough to have a session with me, or even see me, before I leave town. However, as I obviously am forced to respond to your emails (they're so immoral that they deserve punishment – and any other person would throw them in the recycle bin without a glance – aren't you lucky that I give you the time of day?), I certainly expect some kind of payment. This is NOT to be confused with your disgusting offer of paying for my existence – only very special people are allowed to do that, but I do want some kind of compensation for all the fucking time I'm going to have to spend

telling you what to do via email. These checks can be sent to my PO box. Now, we've discussed that a woman taking money from a man is wonderful, enticing, and proper, but I'm not skanky enough to take or expect "everything" from a man— I don't want to ruin a thing that works well at menial labor. But I do expect some kind of monetary compensation for my words. Remember, I am a WRITER first and foremost, and want to be paid for my writing.

Our conversation the other day was lovely, I appreciate your concern with my comfort, and surprisingly, your stories were interesting and funny. How nice that you get along with me – not many people are allowed to.

Princess

Princess,

thank You so much for allowing me to meet You. I was honored that You would even consider this in the first place and I felt that, through Your letters, I had discovered a good writer who was curious about the other stuff but I had no idea how stunned I would be with Your beauty, intelligence, natural power and interested in more.

First, the beauty. Your entire look had the kind of affect on me that You said You wanted in a male. Melting with desire to please You. That you wore your hair in a brown bob was stunning enough, but Your smile, Your shape, Your angry look, the way You smoke, all the visuals, were way beyond expectations. In Your note You did not mention You were beautiful.

What is curious is that neither of us saw one another's eyes. Sunglasses shielded them.

Your intelligence is clear, open-minded. You are blessed with a razor-sharp mind and the education to flesh it out. The discussion itself was fascinating. Whether about books or movies or s/m. I suspect that the people on the other side of the window might have been listening, which makes it even more tantalizing. When I noticed that the feet on the other side of the glass were tapping for half an hour, I figured someone was excited and it was not just me.

I am sitting here right now with one of Your smoking photos in front of em and feel it was worth more than the price I was honored to pay. I now have someone I truly feel I could worship, if that isn't too bold...the pictures enhance my submissive feelings but rest assured, I am no stalker. In this screen image You look cold, powerful, maybe even a little sadistic, and makes me want to two things...

First, to punish myself in your name, to whip my skin and wear nipple clamps and the hood while kneeling to Your picture and praising You; to imagine literally begging You to punish me for being inferior to You and for so much more. As I write this I am looking at Your incredible face as my desktop background and I twist one nipple, in part to honor You, in part to feel Your power, even as pixels on a screen.

I love how Your mind works and when I told the stories I expected to bore or disturb You (testing limits, I think) but I was delighted tat how You seemed accepting of them and might even have been playing the scenes in Your mind to see if they resonated with You.

In some cases they did, I humbly believe. You even seemed to like that I starved myself and I half felt that was a power you wanted to have.

So, frankly, it was all I could do to not fall to my knees and kiss your lovely feet *yes,

princess, I checked; they are exquisite). When you drove off in your tight bike, I twas astonishing.

You left me wishing to explore this like never before. To be the slave of such a bright and talented and exceedingly pretty Woman is a true dream. I see amazing potential for You on both fronts; work and play. That we will possibly be able to do more is almost orgasmic.

I cannot wait until you let me greet You at the door, dressed in a way that pleases You, kneeling and kissing each foot once, then bowing and wait for instructions. Fantasies are already forming and, I know from experience, you have exactly what it takes to be the Goddess.

And I wish to pay financial tribute to You; to take the money I used to send to another and give it to You. It won't be much but it will keep Princess in ...

slave – I tried to send this to your work addy but it came back – what is what about? So im breaking the rules a little and pasting my “job” response below:

john,

I contact Ramona about the pictures and am waiting for a response. The idea you have for the article is great – Esp. Since jewelry is so visual, well almost everything expensive is visual, an enormous, lux spread of the work would be great eye candy.

Of course you can funnel the work to me ..I'm not leaving until the end of the month, and I'll have, as stated before, easy internet access while I'm gone, as well as many pencils and notebooks with which to scrawl, just in case the article doesn't need to be finished

until the middle of July.

The store in the Bellagio would be interesting to write about– it's so completely over the top, and I'm not the only person who gazes dreamily at their window displays– there's something about enormous gaudy jewels that brings the world together (much like toilet humor). I've looked at and conversed about those emeralds with people from places as diverse as Germany , Africa, and Nebraska, and yes, all of us as poor as...students.

Maybe you could do a special bit about it later in the mag.

You want me to send you Elise's photos when they come through? I'll comment on them, if you like..we can talk about them.

Best,

P

I can see I made a number of errors right off the bat with You and so I apologize for them, of course, I should have asked permission to use Your photo as my background, and, even though I find it to be a tribute and one that has the effect of constantly reminding me who is Boss, it was presumptuous of me. I do recall that I had mentioned I wished to use the pictures to further my worship of You, but still that was beyond what I had mentioned. Until authorized, I will replace Yours with a generic landscape, but, in all honesty, I will miss it. I would have to add that it is one of my all-time favorite smoking photos and I find it inspiring.

I received Your note about five pm and instantly put on the clamps as instructed. It helped to channel my thinking for the next three hours so that it was all about You. Of

course, it was critical that they hurt because You ordered it, so I kept increasing the pressure every hour. I also read and reread your note every half an hour so I would not miss any commands. Mindful that my Princess objected to a slave viewing Your image, I purposely put it aside, though I would rather have framed five photos so that one would look at me with that contempt that was so obvious in Your note and is reflected in Your expression. After the time was up I removed the c lamps as you said and showered and have not touched them again.

I will, of course, look for photos of riding crops to send to You and will mention that there is a store here (presently closed while they move) that features over 500 handmade whips of superior quality.

I also apologize for mentioning financial tribute, which was stupid of me, in that I am really not in much of a position to do too much, partly owing to an incident a couple of years ago that ruined my credit (which had been perfect). I won't bore Princess with the details but I generally cannot buy things on credit and pay cash for everything. My personal phone is from virgin Atlantic and I pay for time through my bank account. I wish it were otherwise because the last thing I want at this delicate phase is to displease You but I double a picture phone is doable at present. I will try, however, simply to please you. I will, of course, pay for a po box for you.

I also like that princess wishes to be paid for the words this slave receives from You and while I don't know what kind of compensation would work, I will do my utmost to honor this privilege. Of course I am disappointed that Princess does not wish nor have time to see your slave before You leave but a slave has few if any rights and must be content with

Your words and Your photos.

Finally, although I mentioned the five things I find most attractive as fetishes (so that you could use the knowledge to further Your power over me) I did want to mention that among the names I most respond to are dog, puppy, pig, pet, and sh*t. I also wish to get You copies of Contemporary Dom magazine or, at least, to forward articles You might find of interest.

I await your instruction.

slave.

///

Darlings, that's where the story ends....what were the *letters* written for in this day of modern convieiences? Oh....I doubt they were of interest to you...the tart to whom they belong revels in boring drama. But darlings, would you catch yourself in situations of this kind? I ask you, what kinds of people indulge in this kind of classless behavior? The young lady, I know, is the type to talk on her mobile phone in public. And she is still asleep as I finish this story. Her hard little head on the pillow. She tried to tell you about me, but then she drank too much, and now I told you a little too much about her, I think.

Let this object serve as a warning, then, to those young girls who want the experience of being a woman. Dominance and submission is a farce. Leather pants are as much of a facade as the words used to describe them.

CHAPTER 14

A MAN, A PLAN, A CAMERA

It was those cats again. They run. Back and forth. So I pick up my broom, and I bang on the ceiling. They stop for a while. But they start again. That is it. I put on a tee-shirt and then I storm into the hallway. I slam my door.

“You stupid fucking bitch,” I shout. “Shut up!”

Nothing happens, so I stomp my feet.

“You stupid bitch!” I shout again.

Her door opens and she comes onto the landing and looks down at me. She is in a pair of sweat pants and wearing a tank top. Her hair is pulled back and her face is greasy.

“What is wrong with you,” she says.

“Shut the fuck up!” I yell.

“What are you hearing,” she says.

“Your cats, your stupid fucking cats!”

“I’ve bought rugs,” she says. “I spray them with feline pheromones. My cats are ten pounds each,” she says.

“Why don’t you go to bed at a normal hour like normal people!”

“You think you’re normal,” she says, and chuckles.

“Yes,” I say, my voice raising, “And you’re an ugly fucking cunt, and you’re fat

too.”

“I was sitting at my computer,” she says, without blanching. “My cats were lying on my bed. What are you hearing?”

I gave it to her then: “*You are the most inconsiderate person I’ve ever met.*”

“You know what,” she says. “Why don’t you come up here and hit me, you know you want to.”

“What, and get sued, I don’t think so,” I say.

She starts to walk down the stairs. “Come on,” she says. “Hit me. You know you want to.”

“Oh yeah,” I say, backing up. “So you can sue me? I’m going to call my super on you!”

“We have the same super,” she says. She is grinning. “Come on,” she says again. “Hit me.”

I back up some more but she continues to come toward me. Enough! What a bitch! I slam the door in her face. She knocks on my door, but I don’t answer it. I listen to her, then, on the other side of the door. I can hear her breathing. Fat girls’ breath. She knocks again. I do not answer. I will not answer. I am a man. And a citizen. Of the United States of America. She knocks one more time. Sharp raps. I heard her say “Coward,” but then she walks back to her apartment. I sit down on my sofa and pick up the remote control and I try to channel surf but there is nothing on television. I couldn’t remember what I had been watching before she started to harass me. Why does she do that I wonder. Then I put down the remote control and go into the kitchen. I open a new

bag of corn chips and take a can of cola out of the icebox. I eat and drank while standing over my sink. I think about the ways I can make her cry. Then I start thinking about my insurance plan - will it work out? - is what I am most concerned with. I finish the can of cola, but continue to eat the corn chips. Suddenly, there is a knock on the door. I freeze.

“Come on, open up,” says a male voice. Very slowly I finish chewing then turned around to face the door. Again a knock and the male voice: “Open up you coward, I just want to talk to you.”

I reach over and turn off the kitchen light.

Silence. Then a pounding. And the male voice again louder.

“Come on, you coward, you can yell at a girl, but you won’t talk to a man? Open up, open the door.”

Again silence. I take a breath then a step toward the living room.

But still, the pounding! What do they want from me? She is making so much noise I can’t sleep at night, at all hours, people walk back and forth across the floor. Or something falls on the floor in the middle of the night. Each time I hear something I pick up my broomstick and bang on the ceiling. Sometimes she bangs back. She is going to get it.

A week later I get a letter addressed to “Kevin.” No last name. At first, I think it is from Susan because she didn’t know my last name. But I open the letter and read:

To the Occupant at 5050 Tamarus #235, Las Vegas, NV 89119: This letter is to inform you that I am documenting your noisy and harassing behavior toward me. Any further incidents of this kind from you will result in a complaint to the police.

*Sincerely,
Victoria Tumenski
CC: the super*

Suddenly my head begins to hurt. I look up from the letter and can't see.

Everything goes red. I think I drop the letter. I want to bolt upstairs and beat the shit out of her but I am afraid she could beat me up because she looked pretty strong. I'd need something - a weapon. Her voice comes back taunting me.

You think you're normal.

Through the red fog that surrounds me I can see myself standing over her and she is tied to a chair and sobbing. I am pulling her hair out by the handful. Parts of her scalp are coming away with the hair and blood runs down her neck and stains her tank top. But I blink and the image is gone. The red fog disappears. I pick up the letter and carry it along with the rest of my mail into my apartment.

I stand over the sink and turn on the faucet and the garbage disposal, then stuff the letter down the drain. Afterwards, I take a can of cola out of the icebox, then walk to the living room, where I sit on the sofa and turn on the television with the remote control. It must be miserable to be her I think. I open my can of cola and watch the news. During a commercial I see the rest of my mail in a pile on the coffee table so I sift through it and find a letter from the insurance company. They had accepted me! Now I only have to work twice a week, and everything else is taken care of.

I was just beginning to feel better when the phone rings. The caller ID indicates that it is my super. I do not want to answer...

“Hello.”

“I’ve had a complaint about you from the girl upstairs.”

“She’s complained about me,” I say.

“She says you’re banging on the ceiling and that last week you stood in the hallway and yelled at her, that you called her names. She says she thinks you want to hurt her.”

“That is ridiculous,” I say. “That night, she started to knock on my door in the middle of the night. I was watching television because I couldn’t sleep. It sounded like fifteen people were in her apartment and it was one o’clock in the morning that was why I couldn’t sleep. I’ve lived here for two years,” I say. “Has anyone complained about me before? I pay my rent on time. That girl is out to get me,” I say. “I think she is attracted to me but it is obvious I have better taste than to want to be with a girl like that.”

“I have a letter from her,” says the super. “It says that if you bang on the ceiling again or yell at her again, that she will contact the police. I do not want the police involved with my real estate. I run a clean business.”

“She is hysterical,” I say. “She’s only lived here for two months and she’s from Detroit. That’s what they do. Women get hysterical and don’t see what’s really going on.”

“You may be right,” says the super. “But you have been complaining about her so much, that now she is upset about you. I asked if she would like to move to another

apartment, but I only have three bedroom apartment available, and she does not have the money for that.”

“Of course not,” I say. “She’s not the classiest kind of girl.”

“She is from Detroit,” he says.

“Yes, she is from Detroit, and you know what they say about Detroit.”

“Maybe she works nights at a casino, you don’t think that maybe your schedule are so different that maybe she hears you and you hear her because of that,” he says.

“She has parties with lots of people and I’ve smelled marijuana,” I say. “She is trash and she is lying. She is out to get me because I don’t want to stand for her kind of riff-raff. Her kind of ghetto games. I am a decent citizen. Of the United States of America. I won’t tolerate her kind of malevolence. She must be jealous that I live in a bigger apartment. Her noise is enough to wake the whole house.”

“No one else has complained about her.”

“My dear landlord,” I say. “That is because they are scared. She is a big girl. With big arms. I bet she threatens everyone else in the building too.”

“Your lease is up soon,” says the super. “Perhaps you should think about moving.”

“Where,” I say.

“Well,” he says.

“I’m not moving out of the building, I have lived here for two years and you have not had a single complaint about me yet.”

Silence.

“You said there’s another unit open in this building,” I say.

“...there is,” he says.

“I’ll move into that one.”

“It won’t be open until the end of the month. Can you try to not bang on her ceiling for the remainder of the month? I know it must be difficult for you. People from Detroit are often nuisances understand.”

I think about what he says. The unit he offers is far nicer than the unit I am currently living in. Bigger windows. Better air-conditioning. A more interesting view. My porch just looks out over an alley of rocks and other empty porches. My new porch would face the greenery the grass the sprinklers that go on and off six or seven times a day which would cool off the building and help save money on my energy bills.

“I’ll take it.” I say.

“The unit won’t be open until the end of the month. Can you be quiet for the rest of the month?”

“If she is,” I say. “She needs to get her life together. I have known women like that. Hysterical. They are drawn to me.” I have a subconscious memory of Susan but I ignore it.

“Fine, this is all taken care of then,” says the super. “I will tell her to be quiet.”

“You do that,” I say. “Tell her to start being an adult.”

Susan, I have to talk about Susan. Marco from unit 233 brought her over one night, long ago. Marco used to always come over. We sat on the couch together and drank cans of cola and he talked to me about stuff like graphic design. I told him I was a

painter, and he asked to see what I did. And I showed him. Page after page of abstract images. I use poster paint. "I don't have the means to fund my truth love," I told him. "Someday, I want to be able to use acrylics."

"Oh yes," he said. "Or maybe you could try oils..."

"What are oils," I say.

"Well, maybe you should stick to your acrylic aspirations," he said. "I've been told that oils are passé."

"Pass-what?"

"You know, old hat."

"Oh."

He had some deal in the works, something about screen printing custom tee-shirts. I drank cans of cola and he drank Heineken. That rattled me - the alcohol - but he seemed to like coming over and never got sloppy drunk.. I must have intrigued him. A hermit painter. With a big grey pick-up truck. Marco only drove a Jetta. What kind of man drives a Jetta I asked myself. The kind of man who feels that I'd be interested in what he has to say or the kind of man who's interested in what I say?

One night he came over. I could recognize his knocks. They were light, playful, cheery. His knocks suggested excitement and regret. I did not did not want to get up from the sofa. But I wanted to hear what he had to say. He's the only one who I let visit. The others on the streets – tall black men who ride dirty bicycles Mexicans on motor scooters. Fat Mexican women and their enormous groups of dirty sullen children all with limited English begging for a cup of laundry detergent. Do I work for these people? No I

worked for a casino and I ended up cutting off two of my fingers on the elevator. And the casino pays me well to keep me quiet. Even gives me 100\$ chips whenever I threaten to contact the union. Pussies.

“Listen, he said. “I have a proposition.”

“What might that be,” I said.

“I have these two girls. I met them last night at the bar.”

“Which bar?”

“Naturally, the Aloha Kitchen,” he said. “We were doing Kareoke,” he added.

“I don’t do Kareoke. And I don’t like girls who like kareoke.”

“You’ll like these girls,” he said, and winked at me.

“I do not want them over here.”

“But they are upstairs. Just wait, you’ll like them.”

He disappeared just long enough for me to look at myself in the hallway mirror.

What did I see? I saw a middle-aged man.

Marco returned with two women. One woman was black and one woman was white. They were both dressed in blue jeans and fancy shirts and high heels.

“This is Marsha, says Marco,” squeezing the black girl’s shoulder. “And this is Susan,” he says, and hugged the white girl close. They all came in. The girls sat on my sofa. I stared at them.

“Do you have anything to drink,” said Marsha. Her voice was squeaky, high-pitched.

I looked at her, as if.

Susan started to bob her foot. We were all there, in my living room. I kept waiting for someone to say something, but no one says anything. After five minutes of this nonsense, Marco stood up.

“It’s time to go, ladies.”

The women followed him out the door.

The cats run back and forth. Back and forth the cats run. Over my head like someone walking on me with high heels. I try to ignore the sounds, I try. I try. I try. The broom stands innocently in the corner. That cats run back and forth. I look at the clock. 10:45. Fifteen more minutes, I will give her fifteen more minutes.

It is summer and it is hot. There is nothing surprising about that. But the heat of a summer in Nevada makes everyone and everything lethargic tired unmoving. Yet these cats run back and forth. I watch the televisions set, flicking through channels because there is nothing on. I look at the clock. 10:48. The broom stands innocently in the corner. The cats run back and forth.

At the end of August, the landlord tells me to change apartments. I have to move a sofa, a coffee table, a television set, dishes, utensils, an easy chair, and a bed down three flights of stairs. While moving I see that girl that neighbor. She is carrying a bookbag full of papers and books. I scowl at her because she is the reason for my misery and it summer and I have to move my things. She doesn’t have a life. She doesn’t have a boyfriend. What man would be interested in her kind of woman? Glasses. I scowl at her and she looks at me nervously. I open my mouth to say something that will put her in her place, but she runs away because she is scared of me, she is scared and she should be

scared. I could kill her with my eyes. I could kill her with my thoughts. If I think she will die she will have a car accident eat poisoned food fall down a flight of stairs. But what fun is there in thinking? I will wait. Wait until it's time.

Days later, I see her again. I am parked in front of the building, unloading my groceries. She zooms around me. She tried to hit me! I look at her car and she sees me and she gives me the finger. *Now is the time*, I think. After parking, she moves swiftly across the parking lot. I wait until I could walk up right behind her while walking to the apartments.

"It must be miserable being you," I call out.

"I thought my letter told you not to harass me any more," she says, still walking and fumbles in her purse.

"*You're harassing me*," I say, and come up close behind her. The bags of groceries in my hands rustled. She looks at me and her eyes look stupid behind her glasses.

"Fuck you," I say. It felt so good to say it to her. I could smell her patchouli oil.

"Say it again," she says, still fumbling in her purse

"Fuck you," I say again. She turns away for a moment, then turns back. She is a feisty one.

"Say it again, louder," she says, and lifts her arm.

"Fuck you!" I say, exhilarated, and as I say it I see she is holding a camera and hear her press down on the button and hear a "ding."

"Fuck you too," she says, and quickly walked upstairs.

What did she do, did she take a picture of me, did she try, did she try? I almost run to my apartment, I almost take the knife out of the drawer, I almost run upstairs after her and force the camera out of her hand, shove it in her face, bang her head against the concrete. I close the door to my apartment. I am breathing hard like an athlete. What is going to happen. I have to sit down on the sofa. My head hurt. The bags of groceries stay by the door in white plastic lumps. I turned on the television and flip channels. Then I put the remote control down and rub my temples. How much do I want her to hurt. I fall asleep.

How long did I sleep? In Nevada the summer time has no boundaries. The days and nights are equally miserable. Equally hot. How long did I sleep. Long enough for the power to be turned off. Long enough for me to sweat through my clothes. Long enough for the groceries to spoil and begin to smell. The heat, the heat. It could have been a day or it could have been a week. The heat kills everything in its path like my eyes. I go to the bathroom and piss for an eternity. I am so thirsty that I have to leave the house, I have to buy some cola. If I see her, she better watch out because the sleep has transformed me, my eyes are burning fire, if she looks, she will die, wither up into a stream of smoke as black as the desert mountains.

In heat like this where one degree can make all the difference it can be cooler outside than it is inside. My only thought is to leave the apartment, to get somewhere else, where there is cool water, cool air. I kick the bags of groceries out of the way and open the door.

There, on the wall opposite, is my face. Blown-up twenty times its normal size.

My mouth is fixed in an “O.” I look at the photograph and I see a middle-aged man.

CHAPTER 15

TOKYO (AT THE IMPERIAL PALACE) A GO-GO

Did you know your father hired me months before that night? That I was fort-three, not twenty-four? That there was a gun strapped to my thigh and that it is the same gun? Did you ever see the knife in my sleeve? The camera in my necklace? That I sent those pictures to your father? Which pictures do you think I kept to myself?

Were you still under twenty-one? Did you still miss your father? Was I hired because of the family?

Was it raining when Mr. Nakagawa found you? Were you on a narrow street, crouched under a neon sign? Did he offer you an umbrella? Were you happy to take advantage? Or embarrassed when he asked you to do what you did to him? Maybe you were too cold and tired and hungry to care? Did he taste the way you thought? What did he give you in exchange?

Drugs?

Money?

Happiness?

A Pekinese?

Which clubs did you frequent? What was your costume? Were there friends, and did they hire you? Do you remember how they liked it? Did you prefer being borrowed

to playing tennis Did you claim you never liked it but if you were high enough, you did?
Did you snort things from glass-topped coffee tables with Japanese businessmen and take
them one by one into the bathroom and do things to them that made y our jaw strong and
square?

Where do you sleep? How much can you bench-press? Did they make you wear make-
up?

Did you serve sake in small glasses to men who pawed your body?

Ming, that girl your father hated? She drank beer from a can?

Where is she?

Do you remember the ballroom, and the high red ceilings? Was it raining outside? Were
the walls decorated with unhappy lovers separated by bridges, with peacocks and orange
blossoms? The dancers, and the woman singing with her white-tuxedoed orchestra, and the
black lacquer staircase? But under the lights, weren't the carpets filthy?

That night, when I sat across from you, did you know my hand was on Mr. Ito's knee?
That your eyes pleaded with me? That I was the first woman you had wanted since you had
forgotten?

Can you guess how long I waited after you and he went to the bathroom? Or that I
listened outside the door? Or that in that moment after I kicked the door in, could you explain
Mr. Nakagawa's face? Did you even see the gun in my hand?

Did you remember how you had built yourself for pleasure, but that you only gave me
pain?

CHAPTER 17

A KELLY GREEN TANK TOP AND A PREPARATION

Hannah Starlet went to the bars, alone, during the day. That's where she met Roger L. Broth, Esq. Both of them hung over, bleary-eyed, depressed. They had placed their identical cell phones on the bar, and when one started to ring, they didn't know whose it was.

"Is it yours?" she said.

"No, is it yours?"

Nevertheless, she answered it, his phone. It was a girl. She gasped. He had the bartender come over and explain the whole thing to the girl on the phone.

"Fucking cunt," he said, after he hung up. "Not you," he said quickly. She smiled, lifted her glass to him, then lifted the glass to her lips.

///

That's how it began, and continued to up until this afternoon, when it follows her upstairs, to the room at the downtown casino that smells of stale cigarettes. It is summer, of course, it is always summer, and she wears a kelly green tank top under her business casual blazer, which she removes and throws on the bed, and then sits in the chair, in front of the desk/chest/vanity, in front of the mirror, and proceeds to look out the window at the busy street, the downtown strip, the *Fremont Experience*. She watches a child buy

a bottle of water for two dollars and fifty cents from a vending machine, then she watches an older boy linger around a souvenir booth, look both ways, then shove a tiny stuffed kitten down his pants. There, sitting in the corner, under the shade provided by the awning of the Four Queens Hotel and Casino, she sees a lanky Mexican boy, his features are distinct enough to make out from her room – a long face, a flat nose, shirtless, clothed only in a pair of red, white, and red white and blue swim trunks. It is ninety-seven degrees outside. What is he doing? Waiting for whom? Does he live on the streets, or in a gated community? She thinks he is her age, but then looks more closely, and he looks like he is seventeen. Without warning, he looks directly at her window. Could he sense her eyes, could he see through the glass of this fourth-floor hotel room? His eyes, from that distance even, are shocking. Dark and old and miserable. Needy.

You have got to be kidding me, she thinks. *I'm waiting here, for this?* There is one florescent light in the ceiling, there are yellow walls, the bed is not a true full, but two twin beds pushed together

While waiting, Hannah starts to look through her purse, and pulls out her wallet, which she opens, then slides her finger behind the hidden flap and removes the time-worn photograph of a baby, her son, whom she had given up at sixteen, not without guilt. This photo comes to her during moments of boredom, which makes her wonder why she only remembers him when she is bored, but then she wonders about what his hair is like now, if he was as blonde as she was when she was a child. White blonde. So fair...

And he, Roger, is late, although he is usually on time. Traffic was heavy as she drove over the highway, maybe he's stuck? The holiday is approaching. Memorial day. Oh,

she doesn't care if he's late, but she is curious.

Their meetings had become dry and lifeless, but they maintained their erotic schedule meticulously, pretending it means something.. They are holding on to each other in a desperate attempt to create a double life. Something that could still be different. If she sees him on the street with his wife, a short, fat, thing, with red hair, and a yin-yang tattoo on her left calf – a college student with a high tolerance for alcohol and mouth to match, with a penchant for strip clubs and the occasional gossiped-about heroin binge in the bathroom with her brother, she must have experienced everything by the age of twenty-three, when they got married – Hannah was always surprised to see them together on television, in his commercials. They came on late at night, while she watched the news and removed her shiny tights, and he made a big production of being a married family man who can take care of his clients' needs the-old fashioned way, as the red-headed cow, dressed demurely in wool, sat beside him, her eyes flaming with irony..

There is a knock at the door. His knock. His pink, fat fist. She walks slowly. Their meeting, after the door was opened. Yes. Yes. They are equally disinterested and hungry.

After the embrace, he says hello, and walks into the room, leads her to the bed, and wraps his arms around her. Quickly. He runs his hands up to her face, kisses her *urgently*. He is like that. An adverbial actor... With cold, wet kisses, movements that had once seemed so inspired now reek of desperation. He lowers her to the bed, spreads her legs, and pushes into her in one movement. The mattress begins to creak beneath them.

One of the twin mattresses slips away from the other, and hangs over the edge of its box spring.

“Oh Roger,” she says.

She doesn’t want to think about it, but the crack between the beds smells bad.

CHAPTER 18

THE FLASHING AT NIGHT

It could have been from the planet *Kolob*.

Maybe, Ominex built the ship in less than a day, but as they all liked to remind each other, one day in Kolob is equal to one thousand earth days. So while, if measured by his earthly standards of time, Ominex's first attempt at building a fully functional ship with a heartcrystal engine, and the engineering would have been a success, the malegentles who inhabited Kolob would have hardly been impressed, because while Ominex would have built a functional heartcrystal engine, he would not have built it as technically precise as he could have, instead would have spent more time than was necessary inlaying shipshell with gold and platinum, and even constructed a small window at the bottom, for the mengentles to look out. Maybe, when he showed it to Ryan Larding, the oldest mangentle around, Ryan would have laughed and said, "Try it to fly, little one, try it to fly," and walked off surrounded by his minions. As if they were so smart. But perhaps Ominex did *try it to fly*, and after the ship was probably programmed with a destination and flight pattern, he would have watched it hover over its home base, shimmering, the gold and platinum inlay reflecting bright slices of light, like a baby duck that didn't want to leave its mother. But then, of course, since the heartcrystal engine would have been built hastily, Ominex would, of course, lose control, and the ship would

have taken off like a whip, on its way through a marvelous and indescribable transdimensional and transuniversal journey. On its way to *Terra*.

But there was something more spiritual about the thing, the way it glowed, in the sky, three stars, because conditionals aside, when the revenant came down...the flashing at night...it stunned their eyes.

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On this night of April 18, 2005, in Dr. Jodi Marsh's small tastefully-renovated barn, a small group of vacationing professors, who have all succumbed to the stereotype of being grey-haired, slightly stooped, and well-dressed in natural-fibre leisure wear, are about to enjoy a relaxing evening of mah-jongg, that is, they had just sat around Jodi's antique polished-oak table of late colonial design, and Jodi is mixing the tiles, when suddenly, a bright red light shines through the barn's historical windows, illuminating the game room and the mah-jongg table and the startled faces of the four professors. Jodi looks up from her tile-shuffling, out the window, and the image she sees is slightly mottled thanks to the age of her historical windows, but nonetheless, she sees that behind the red light, indeed, its very source, is a spinning, glowing horizontal disk. Her mouth drops open, and the disk, as abruptly aware of its witnesses, ascends straight up and away, away. As the rest of the professors sit and blink in surprise, Jodi runs from the table and looks out the window, up, up, and watches the glowing object disappear far into the night sky.

She breathes, hardly aware of her own luck.

"Don't you study those things Jodi?" says Dr. Farness, the ruefully balding

professor of literature at a noted Boston university.

“I do,” says Jodi, still straining to see. Thinking *shut up shut up Dr. Farness, you bumbling old idiot, I am having a moment of intellectual and spiritual harmony, something you could only dream about you old phoney, after all these years, it's here*”

“Jodi, we have a game to play,” says Dr. Tumenski, the quirky professor of anthropology at yet another noted Boston University. His voice betrays a hint of impatient irony, a verbal slap on Dr. Farness’s insensitive hand.

“Jodi, what do you see?” says Dr. Brown, the beautiful and staunchly lesbian professor of feminist studies at a noted New York University.

“I see...I see,” she says, her hands are grasping the frame of her historic window, and she is pressing her face to the glass, like a little girl. “I see a world of individuals coming out as aliens. I see thousands of women, bad girls, wanton, unreliable, telling their tales of abduction to the police, and the police, unable to appropriately respond subject these girls, lying on cots in paper dresses, advise the orderlies to prepare rape kits. I see male priests admitting to seeing flying objects, to abductions, and I see their stories on the television. I see that according to the *Weekly World News*, twelve of our senators are verifiably aliens...” She trails off. “...but this is the first time *I’ve* seen one of them.” She looks at her hands. They are white, gripping the frame of the window. She notices that Dr. Farness has also seen her bone-white fingers, and realizes that she is being too wrapped up in the moment, and surely, these three professors, namely Dr. Farness, will go back to their respective universities and attempt to undermine her work, now that she has proven that she is too emotional, and subject to fits of unrestrained passion, and will

never be, if Dr. Farness is willing, the academian she had dreamed of being.

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When it passed over Nebraska, little Jessica Luedtke was busy cutting tulips for an arrangement to go in the front hall of the town's public library, and she was deep in the bowels of the flower shop, so she didn't hear anything and didn't see anything, but when she got home that night her husband was not drinking and he was busy reading the bible, something he hadn't done in years, and he looks up as she enters the kitchen, the first time he'd looked up at her in months, because he couldn't help himself, he has to ask.

"What was it, Jess? Was it an airplane? No, it was too close and the light pattern was too unfamiliar. Was it a hot air balloon? No, who ever heard of a hot air balloon with a big red light? Was it a shooting star, no, who had seen a shooting star that stayed in one place for that long? And it didn't leave a trail..." "Jessica," he says. "Did you see it?"

"I did," she says, and sits in the chair across the table from him. "Peter, I saw it. And you know what it was..." She trails off...and reaches for his hand, and he reaches back, grasping her tiny white hand, stinging the tiny cuts on the tips of her fingers, he holds it very tightly, and she sees there are tears in his eyes. *For the first time in months, she thinks, he is holding my hand instead of the bottle, and for that, I'll pretend to see anything.*

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Half an hour later, it is seen in Eureka, Utah, near the power plant. Little Emma

Handson sits at the kitchen table, and watches her mother use a blender to crush ice, when the power goes off. Outside, the red light glowed above the mountains, over the town, and spills into their kitchen. Emma's mother panics, and screams a name, "Joshua!" which is neither the name of Emma's older brother nor father. Without turning off the blender, Emma's mother, in a frenzy of fear, runs out of the house, into the streets. Meanwhile, Emma's father, who had been working in the garage, hears his wife cry out, and is outside just in time to keep her from running away. Emma can see him grab for her mother's arm, and watches her mother fight against him, in the red light of the object, when Emma sees the handsome man who lives across the street, who's name *is* Joshua, open the front door of his house, but when he sees Emma's father and mother tussling in the middle of the street, indeed, what member of the neighborhood didn't see it? He quietly retreats back into his little house, where he is rumored to be taking care of his sister, who, in addition to suffering from constant migraines since her husband died, had been given the unfortunate name of LaPrunne.

The red light glows over the mountains and into their house, then disappears as quickly as it appeared, and although the sky is clear, there is a clap of thunder.

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Then to Nephi, where a redheaded teenaged girl named Abigail is walking past the power plant, home from the movies, with her older brother Aaron. She nearly skips with joy, for she had managed to sit next to her brother's friend, who also had red hair, and they had held hands in the dark. Aaron walked with her, annoyed, a little, at his sister's giddiness. *Doesn't she know it's all rhetoric*, he thinks. And his friend, he was disgusted

with him as well, for taking advantage of the dark in order to manipulate the feelings of an innocent girl. Aaron thinks of *Hamlet*, he thinks of *The Catcher in the Rye*, and he is thinking of getting the hell out of Utah as soon as he graduates from high school, when the red light drifts down to the ground near the power plant. Aaron runs forward from Abigail, and says, urgently “Come on, come on!” She tries to run after him, but trips over a crack in the sidewalk, and falls, skinning the palms of her hands on the cement. She calls for her brother to wait, but he does not stop running, he doesn’t even look back. She looks after him, imploring, pathetic, sorrowful at the sight of his back, sorrowful at having to say goodbye so soon, when the light lifts off as silently as it had landed, and disappears to the south.

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Robinson Utah – A chubby, broken-out teenager, Ethan Meryl Chuggers, is busy digging in the garden for worms, because his father, yesterday, had promised that they would go fishing tomorrow morning, that they would get away from this whole family, and spend the day together, father and son. Unbeknownst to Ethan, his father had gotten this idea for a father-son day from the sitcom he watches so religiously. In fact, Ethan’s father had never considered spending any time with his son at all, until tonight’s rerun of the *Cosby Show*, which showed father and son, talking, fishing, and suggested that this interaction might be beneficial to both parties.

While the boy dug, his parents sat on the couch, and touched each other for the first time since their argument the previous week, when Lee (Ethan’s father) had told Samantha (Ethan’s mother), told her for the last time that he *didn’t want to eat bread that*

hard no more and that if she couldn't get it through her thick head that he had sore teeth then maybe she wasn't as good a woman as she claimed. The earth in the backyard is hard and dense as plywood, but the boy keeps chipping away at it with the tablespoon he had retrieved from the kitchen sink especially for this task.

And then, Ethan hears a gasp, looks up, and sees a bright red light in the sky spurt forward, then hesitate, then spurt forward again. The light does this three or four times, then arches and falls toward the earth, leaving a wobbly trail of smoke in its wake. Ethan swallows as the light changes from red to yellow to white to blue, and then extinguish as it reaches the horizon.

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Finally. Las Vegas. The police telephones light up as hundreds of phone calls pour in. *Something crashed, they say. Something big and red and different. Is it a military experiment? Why didn't they give us advance warning so we could watch? They let us know when they were testing atomic bombs, why didn't they let us know this time?* Richard Triguard, elderly, shaken from the shock of seeing the crash, dials 911. He reports a tremendous flaming sword of righteousness, like God reaching out and giving him the truth on a cloud.

Sheriff's deputy Walter Bun gets the call. In his car, he sets his lights on silent whirl, and speeds through the desert Nevada highway, up, up, onto Spring Mountain, where the sagebrush grows. He drives faster than he has ever driven in his life. Speeding toward the wreckage, he thinks *now is the time; now is the time, I'll find out what this whole thing is about.* But as he nears his designated location, there are other cars with

lights there before him. Cars he has never seen before, and swarms of men in black uniforms. One of which flags him down before he can go any further. Walter is dismayed. He begs, *please, please let me see it. Let me see what's over there.* But he is turned away, and so, drives back to the city, dismayed, depressed, but resolving to continue to move up in the chain of command, maybe even join the army, until he's allowed up there, with the men in black uniforms, and the mysterious crash sight.

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Late in the evening, in a cat-shit twenty-four-hour gas station in North Las Vegas, after Officer Walter Bun had been turned away from his rookie encounter with unidentifiable crashes, Marshal White, unknown, self-taught, twenty-something physicist, makes three more marks with his pencil, leans back from his desk behind the cash register, and looks out the window of the gas station at the night sky. The calm blanket of stars and atmosphere.

He had found the theory of everything.

A car drives up to one of the pumps, a teenaged girl jumps out of the car, and, after fumbling with her credit card, begins to fill her car up, and she smiles and makes gestures to her friends who are still inside the car, while inside the gas station, old toothless Markus smokes Marlboro reds and plays his last quarters on his favorite slot machine. Marshal is swimming in the dreamlike state that comes every time he contemplates and loves these ordinary things.

I do not want the theory of everything, he thinks, and begins to burn the edges of his paper with his cigarette.

CHAPTER 19

GOODBYE, I LOVED YOU, YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH

Oh Vegas.

Our time has come, I have to leave. Please don't do that with your eyes, you know I can't resist. Wait...don't speak. You have to listen, like you have so many times before, remember? At the bar...we drank so many cranberry and vodkas, so many bottles of California wine...

We've lived together for four years, but it's time to break up. I know, I know--you've promised to change, to start taking our relationship a little more seriously. I remember, you took me to First Friday a few times, *and* you promised you would read those books I gave you. You tried to make our life downtown a little more exciting, I remember! You promised you'd take care of the traffic in our backyard, put up streetlights, and I even remember when you took those pills that were supposed to give you a bigger "infrastructure."

Vegas, we have to break up.

After busting my ass for four years, I'm too deep into debt, and too far away from financial independence. And it's **really** not my fault, especially after you made me wait 8 months for my money, because you didn't know how to use the computer program that would allow you access to the records you continued to make me procure, running all around town, on your travesty of a bus system, in the middle of the summer, which I wouldn't have had to deal with, but you stole **three** of my cars.

Vegas, we have to break up.

Sure, you can offer beautiful escapes, but your beautiful escapes get old. A woman can only go to Red Rock on a date so many times. After a while, she longs for a museum, a symphony orchestra, a good cult movie on the big-screen --more often than once a year at Cinevegas -- a woman needs these things on a *constant basis*. She needs to meet men who follow *major* league teams. Face it, hearing "I've got season tickets to the *51s*" is not nearly as thrilling as hearing "I've got season tickets to the *Pistons*."

Vegas, we have to break up.

Sure -- you treat your local ladies well when we want to party with you -- and you don't care what we look like, because no matter what, you always let us in free, and you're so cute in your bouncer suit, especially if we catch each other watching a group of miserable, dancing girls from Nebraska, in too much makeup and painful shoes, forcing themselves to enjoy being rubbed up on by a group of greasers in electric-blue rayon shirts and black pants, and you wink at me. And a couple of times, you let us see Perry Ferrel, Owen Wilson, and Rufus Wainwright, and the Backstreet Boys, for free! You gave discounts on spa massages and dine-arounds, free drinks whenever we wanted to hang out, and so many nights of strange men and good drugs. But Vegas, Vegas, what else do you have to offer?

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