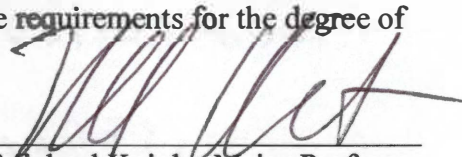
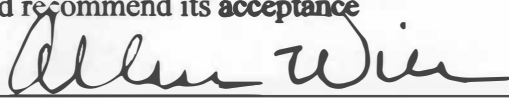


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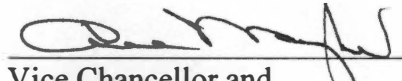
I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Tory Killian Niemann entitled "Möbius Strip." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.


Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance


Allen Wier
Amy Billone

Accepted for the Council:


Vice Chancellor and
Dean of Graduate Students

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MÖBIUS STRIP

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Tory Killian Niemann
May 2005

Abstract

This collection of short stories explores the moments of change in a variety of human experiences. Change is embodied in the stories not only in the literal action of the characters and through the expressions of prose, but also in the uses of certain formal devices, such as point of view, narrative control, and genre. Through unexpected redirection of these formal devices, the impact of change is given a different significance in order to better reach the reading audience. Each of the seven stories looks at the different experiences of change, for good and for ill, in human life, showing the commonality of struggling with our world.

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I. Introduction

The first structured, credit yielding creative writing course I ever took was during my senior year at the University of Dallas. The professor was a good-humored, grandfatherly novelist, Dr. E. C. Curtsinger. Students had a variety of complaints against him as a teacher (didn't listen to students, repetitive lectures, brazenly religious), but he had always been a favorite of mine for his perfect honesty and piercing insight. I had read several of his novels, which, though they sold poorly, impressed me thoroughly with their depth and daring. What he said in classes was often what he said in his novels, and if he was repetitive it was because the message was important.

In this writing class we all submitted work to him and to each other. Feedback from classmates was rarely useful (most had signed up for the class as easy credits), but some good work did turn up in the process. One evening Dr. Curtsinger approached me after class and said that the story I had written was different from what the other students were turning in. "They're trying to write stories," he said, "but you're trying to create art."

Since that night I have been attempting to earn that compliment. Dr. Curtsinger made the remark in full sincerity and I still hold it as the greatest praise I have ever received. I think he spoke in anticipation of what could follow after the story that I had written for him. "Trying" is the important word here, and I have kept trying in my writing since. I realize that the goal of producing art is a rather lofty one, but I also feel that it is important to have a goal worth striving for.

Valuing such a statement requires a few words on the separation between “art” and “stories.” This is tricky. Many different groups and thinkers have many different distinctions between what is art and what is just entertainment. Many adherents of New Criticism have postulated the divide in terms of complexity, difficulty, and unity: entertainment is easy and shallow but art is complex and must be navigated with effort to reveal the depth of meaning. Others such as art critic Clement Greenberg have seen the divide present in the end goal of the work: is it produced to be merely pleasurable and make money or to forward culture? For others, notably Adorno and Horkheimer, entertainment fiction is a shallow reflection of serious art, but a necessary reflection which is all that is ultimately accessible to the lower class or uneducated. Each of these ideas and more are laid out by Robert Scholes in his article “Exploring the Great Divide: High and Low, Left and Right,” published in *Narrative* literary journal.

My own definition of the distinction between art and entertainment is perhaps too vague for any sort of scientific certainty, but I find that inevitable. This is not a science. This is writing and we are concerned with people, their desires, and their ideas, subjects so varied that only the broadest statements are of any use. The subject is best described as life. Good, artistic writing is writing that communicates life. This is not as simple as telling someone what you think about the world; *All the King's Men* does not tell the reader how to live his or her life. Good writing allows for another less didactic but more potent level of communication. While bad or simply mediocre writing is limited by what can be directly stated to the reader, a work of art communicates meaning through the experiences of life presented in revealing language. If *All the King's Men* can be said to have a message, the message exists in how the events of characters' lives play out and are

created for the audience, irreducible from the work as whole. This is not an artificial restriction but rather a statement on the nature of writing. A mediocre work is not prevented from conveying meaning by its straightforwardness, but rather a well-written one is able to share, through its use of language, more than it literally states.

Our lives are lived in language. Words are how we understand our world and are the primary medium for expressing what we know. I do not mean that our words can be exhaustive in conveying human knowledge, but that language is our primary means of understanding and sharing experience. Language and words, even when incapable of direct communication, can be tools for suggesting or pointing to that which we understand but cannot fully articulate. Language, as de Saussure and his successors are so keen to show, is never transparent; what is said is never exactly what is meant. The beauty of language is that it allows the receiver to engage with a message and create a meaning. The art of writing is crafting words to present moments and experiences of life in language to allow the reader to engage with the language and develop the meaning therein that cannot be stated directly. Making use of this capacity of language is the most fundamental separation between mediocre writing and art. I am not suggesting that my stories have reached this level of communication, but that this is one of my overarching goals.

Certain strains of literary theory claim authors' goals and intentions are negligible and that a text's meaning is supplied or determined solely by socio-historic factors. Many theorists under the heading of Historicism, Marxism, and Feminism reduce the author to someone who reproduces the ideas of his or her time period or cultural category. I find these theories distasteful in how they disregard entirely the individual

role of the artist and, moreover, unsound. While it may be fruitful and interesting to view texts from a cultural and historical point of view, reducing them to nothing more than this obscures much of their artistic value. Yes, Homer's *Odyssey* is interesting as an example of the ancient Greek culture that produced it, but it much more than that and can teach the reader a good deal about heroism and hubris.

Despite my distaste for the reduction of authors and their intent to insignificance, I also cannot agree with the opposite view that authors have exclusive and total control over their works' meanings. By the nature of language and experience, more than the author intends to relate will be available in any work of literature. Or, more precisely, the bit of life the artist's work relates through language has the potential to mean different things to different people, though all filtered through the work itself. Stanley Fish has long contended that literary texts do not exist outside of a particular reader or group of readers and that it is the reader who creates the text. I think Fish goes further than is warranted; the author is not negligible in the final analysis of a work. However, Fish does highlight that creating meaning in literature is not a one-sided equation. The author encodes and crafts the language, but it is always the reader who will understand and engage.

For communication of experience through language to be possible in a written work, a certain level of linguistic sophistication is necessary. That is not to say that only stories with complicated prose can be artistic, but rather that this communication does not happen by accident. If a novel's simple prose is wonderful and profound, it is wonderful and profound for reasons the author crafted consciously. *Old Man and the Sea* is not simple because Hemmingway could not write any better; it is simple to more effectively

communicate. The ways and methods writers use language to craft experiences are purposeful. Writers use particular formal devices of tense, point of view, inclusion or exclusion of detail, genre, and more to produce certain effects.

How these formal devices are used to create meaning has been of interest to literature for a long time. Authors like John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, James Joyce, and many others use these old tools in new ways that highlight how they are used. The permutations of a formal device itself may be a means of relating truth differently from the invisibility or near invisibility that they have traditionally enjoyed. For example, in the final portion of *Ulysses* Joyce eschews the use of punctuation at all, creating a different experience, but also drawing the reader's attention to punctuation as a frame of understanding. In the stories of this collection I have tried to participate in this focus on formal devices and to relate it to the issues that I find engaging.

Change within characters is one of the most significant things in fiction. For a story really to have a reason to be told something important needs to be altered, or have had the chance to be altered, in the end. *Moby Dick* is rather pointless if it ends with Ishmael and Ahab no different than when we started. Stories are interesting and engaging to me because characters have changed, relationships have been altered, and lives, at least potentially, have been redirected. This is not to say that a story must have an epiphany or radical perspective shift, but that there needs to be a chance for life to be different in a significant way for a character. All of my stories, in one manner or another, attempt to focus on these moments of change and chances for transformation in a character's life.

One of the things I have attempted to explore with this group of stories is how these opportunities for change in character can be revealed in literary devices themselves.

It is not my intention to suggest that formal devices are as important or interesting as people, but that they are a familiar way of creating meaning and can be put to new, interesting, and fruitful uses. Primarily, the aim of this type of storytelling is break the reader out of the norms of expectation in how the different parts of the story work, work with each other, and work with the reader. The hope is that this can create new spaces for meaning to be created with the reader.

For more concrete examples, consider *Story about a Möbius Strip*. The story begins with the main character, Tom, arriving at a coffee shop to do some writing but really to pine for his secret love, Charity the waitress. Tom's true motives are laid out for the audience by the narrator, who readers generally assume knows the characters in a fictive work intimately. As the story moves on it becomes apparent that Tom is not interested in Charity romantically, despite the narrator's claims, and he eventually challenges the narrator over the direction of the story. The reader must then wonder about the trustworthiness and capability of this narrator. It is not expected for a character to understand that they are a part of a world described by a narrator, and readers have become so accustomed to the convention of narrators that, unless they act strangely, we spare them little thought. Tom takes the role of narrator for himself and offers the former narrator the chance to change into a character of the story in order to complete that story. This inversion of the story reawakens the reader to the constructed reality of the story but in doing so folds that perception of constructed-ness back into the story. The swapping of roles between the main character and the narrator does not "break" the story and prevent narrative closure but instead allows for narrative closure. In this way, the meta-fictional change is a part of the action of the story rather than a denial of it. *Story about a*

Möbius Strip could have been told without the meta-fictional elements (perhaps making Robert only a manipulative secondary character) but that would, I think, lessen the impact of the shift between characters, making it less radical and more ignorable.

This collection contains two types of stories: those which are concerned with chances for change within the action of the story, and those concerned with these chances in the action and the formal devices of the story. I do not see the later as quantifiably “better” or “more sophisticated” than the other. In fact, I see these as fundamentally the same, because when formal devices become a focus of the story it also becomes a part of the action of the story. With *Möbius Strip*, for example, the switch between character and narrator is a continuation of the action of the story, not a break from it.

The hope in many of these stories is that shocking visibility of devices which are usually invisible will allow the story to connect more effectively with the reader as a person. Readers, especially practiced ones, come to habits of partitioning their awareness when dealing with fiction. A touching or exciting story may affect us, but only as much as we let it because we approach it with the mindset that it is not reality. The dream of fiction is pleasant and engaging, but it is still only a dream, and what a work of fiction has to tell can be dismissed as such. These meta-fictional stories are an attempt to pierce through the barrier of reader preconceptions for a more undeniable connection by breaking the reader’s expectations about what fiction can do. This manipulation of once-invisible parts of a story is outside the normal or anticipated experience of the reading and forces the reader to engage the story with the rest of his or her mind.

There is a temptation to label this “shock value” and reject it as cheap or underhanded. However, I believe there is a qualifying difference between the effect that I

am trying to achieve and the tactics of a morning shock-jock. Shock value is a quality of empty displays that toys with unacceptability solely to elicit an emotional response.

Emotional responses are not necessarily shallow, but without an intellectual value or meaningful connection, emotional manipulation lacks lasting appeal. A shock-jock has no deeper message beneath his or her antics besides "listen to my show." What I am attempting with these stories is a method of shocking the reader into more fully thinking about and responding to the experiences presented in the stories.

I am by no means a pioneer in this method or in these uses of formal devices. There is a long history of literary experimentation and play upon convention. Of course, no author creates literature exactly like his predecessors, and each artist writes in a way that adapts and remakes what came before. However, many authors have consciously and purposefully engaged in manipulation of formal devices and they have been great inspirations for my work. Vladimir Nabokov has been a major influence, particularly his novel *Pale Fire*. The novel's form itself is utterly experimental, an epic poem with another story (or two) in the "notes" on the poem. A reader's expectations are further defied with a narrator who not only seems to know nothing beyond himself but who is not quite sane. The entire work is a play with the roles of and relationships between narrator, audience, subject, and author. The result is a maddening journey through a maze of mirrors, understanding and reality always out of reach. Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the other magical realists have also been a great inspiration to me with their stories that consciously push on the reader's expectation of what is real and what is fantastical. Marquez's *The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World* is one of the most perfect pieces of short fiction in how it juxtaposes the normal and the impossible to reveal such

experiences as the content of our lives. Reaching further back, Franz Kafka's works as consciously and deftly play with reader expectation, not to "tread new ground," but to tread the only ground we have ever had in new ways. *The Trial* is not on a subject no one had thought to engage before, but the dreamlike way in which it approaches the horror of impersonal bureaucracy gives it new and still powerful vibrancy. More contemporarily, George Saunder's stories continue the tradition of boldly shattering expectation, not just for empty shock, but to present things in a way that truly reaches people.

Most of the stories in this collection are not bold experiments of meta-fiction that strike down expectation and tradition; they are "conventional" stories. That is not to say that they are filler or somehow less worthy. They are simply stories for which a radical use of formal devices was not appropriate. As I said earlier, the different types of stories in this collection are ultimately the same in focus even if they differ in method. At the core of all of these stories is an exploration of the opportunities people have for change. At core, any story worth reading is about change. How we change as human beings is at the root of *Moby Dick*, *Hamlet*, *Invisible Man*, *David Copperfield*, *Beloved*, and any other work that we hold up as worthwhile. These works are able to communicate the core of that change because they use the tools to language to present experience to the reader. I hope that each story in this collection is crafted capably enough to hold the depth of human meaning about change in knowledge and control to allow the reader to understand, on some level, more of what this life is or could be.

II. Story about a Möbius Strip

The young man enters the coffee shop quietly, like the director stepping back stage during a performance. The warm odors of the place, pastries baking, coffee dripping, milk steaming, usher him in to Beck's Coffee. The young man's name is Tom. As usual, he carries a notebook.

It is about eight in the morning. People come through the shop in waves, letting in cold wind and the squeak of tires on wet pavement. Outside the world lingers in gray.

So far, this probably seems to you like an ordinary day. I'm sure it seems that way to Tom as he opens his notebook and sets to writing. Nothing is drastically different in his hole-in-the-wall coffee shop (no Seattle mega-corporation has bought out Beck's and no action/adventure plot hook has stopped in for cappuccino), but something is coming. Not some titanic thing to turn his world inside out, but a moment that transforms Tom, or just allow him to make that choice. Maybe I'm giving too much away.

Today Tom is absorbed in his work, a rarity for him at Beck's. He may get a paragraph or two each day, sure, but his eyes and nose wander too much. His lines this morning (a new story, I think) might include the suit-wearing man looking for exact change, the little girl in ribbons glaring at the pastries behind glass, the stubby woman in a sweater reeking of cigarettes, or the unrhythm of the register's ring. There is always a good deal for Tom to work with here. Perhaps that's why he keeps coming.

A newspaper rustles to Tom's left. Mr. Damascus.

"So, my boy, you're still here?" The voice is aged to almost grandfatherly.

"I'll always be here," Tom says.

Mr. Damascus lowers his paper for a squint. "Will you? Always is long time."

"I was here before Beck's became part of your routine, Mr. Damascus, and I'll be writing after you're gone."

Tom winces at the phrase as he says it, but the older man only laughs and sips at his tea. "Oh, I've no doubt you'll outlast me, Thomas. That's not what I meant."

Tom tucks in both lips and nods, turning back to his notebook. The leather bound volume looks weathered and hard-used, but that's how it was made to look. Tom's sister bought it while vacationing in Rome and, thinking the notebook inexpensive due to a miscalculation of Euros, gave it to him as a souvenir.

A hint of perfume sweeps by, but Tom keeps his head to the notebook. I'm amazed he can maintain any semblance of concentration. He certainly should know who the perfume belongs to.

"I meant," Mr. Damascus continues, his eyes following the perfume's wearer, "that maybe you had found what you're after. Or thought better of the pursuit."

Tom probably remembers how three weeks ago Mr. Damascus finally wrestled from him that what he was "scratching at" in the notebook was fiction, which he did not think profitable to Tom.

"No, Mr. Damascus, I'm staying with it. I think this sort of work is important. As important as anything else."

The old man chuckles again. "I think we're having a communication problem, Thomas. Or maybe you're being dense on purpose. I'm sure you could make a case for it being none of my business."

Tom marks through and rewrites something three times before he sets the pen down. "Can we leave it at 'none of your business,' even if I don't know what you're talking about?"

Mr. Damascus snorts. "The writer ending a sentence with a preposition? And I thought-"

"There's nothing wrong with it. Check a grammar handbook. It's been acceptable for years."

"It has?" Mr. Damascus drops the paper barrier to fetch his tea again. "To what is the world coming?"

"Are you going to tell me what you're talking about, or is this digressing into a 'what's language coming to these days' speech?"

The old man shakes his bushy white head.

"The *girl*, Tom. The girl."

Of course the girl. She who glides through the room like a spring rain. She of the sun-behind-clouds smile, flawless freckled skin, and well-turned earlobes. She of the passing perfume.

Of course the girl, Tom.

"Oh, right," is all he says.

That he is not smitten with her is impossible. To return day after day, poking about in his little notebook and crafting his little stories? Pretense, utter pretense.

Mr. Damascus again puts up his newspaper walls. "Well, isn't that something. It says here that they caught a coelacanth in the South China Sea, near Hong Kong. You do know they thought the coelacanth extinct? Nearly impossible to find these days. One has

to catch it when one can, right Tom? Get those nets out while there's still time." He smiles knowingly.

"Still time." Tom has already returned to his work, reading what he has scribbled down when his coffee was warm. "Well, I'm not fond of the metaphor, but I can agree that she's a catch. And, even if some people would think it's inappropriate, I think you'd make a great couple."

Mr. Damascus coughs. "Don't just joke this away, Tom. Don't you think I know why you keep coming here?"

"No, I'm not sure you do. And I wasn't joking about you and her. You two seem a natural pair to me."

"Come on, now, Tom. Enough of this. Go talk to her. You need to get over that while there's still time. I do this funny thing; I actually talk with people who work here. Seems there having a going away party for a certain team member tonight. Do you want to guess for whom?"

Tom throws another sentence on the story. His does not look pleased with the words. "I understand what you're saying."

"Good." Mr. Damascus folds his paper and stands. "Then I trust the rest will play out. Don't let opportunity slip by. You'll have only regrets." Mr. Damascus shuffles out the door and into the stream of pedestrians.

The murmuring scent of jasmine and peach flows past Tom again as he scribbles, and the perfume's wearer hums along with "90's Rock Mix, Volume 5" repeating on the shop's speakers. Tom does not look up and does not stop writing. But the movement of his pen curves with her motion through the room, swirls with her turn at the counter,

slows to an 'm' as she uses both hands to sweep auburn hair from her face. I can only guess how she informs what he writes, but it must be like that.

She is not a woman you can imagine statically; motion is the primary color of her beauty. Those taken by her are not bewildered by her hair or lips or legs. They are dazzled by the swishing of her hair, the gentle creasing in her lips, and the tightening of her leg muscles as she strains to reach higher cabinets.

I should stop. I will lose my focus if I linger too long. Her name is Charity.

Tom stops writing. Shaking out an ache in his right hand, he rises to refill his coffee. On his way, he glances at the counter where Charity rings up another half-caf double-mocha for another raincoated-customer.

She looks back and smiles.

She smiled. What more of a sign could Tom need? She smiled, and the other, faceless customer is leaving. Anyone can see that this is an excellent opportunity.

But Tom does nothing besides top off his coffee at the free-standing thermos and return to his seat. I cannot believe it. Is he still afraid of rejection? He has to realize that writing about her is not enough.

His table is now crowded with a pocket organizer, large Styrofoam cup, and an everything bagel. The second chair is also filled, to Tom's surprise, by his brother.

"Well, now I understand why you keep coming here," Brian's thick baritone announces. A red and white baseball cap contains his wiry hair and the bill veils his eyes. "Two fifty for a bagel and cream cheese? Sure ain't the value that brings them back."

"Morning, Brian. Didn't see you come in." Tom eases back in his chair.

“Yeah, you were busy looking at somebody else. I originally came to see if you were planning anything for Mom’s birthday that I could team up with you on-”

“Originally?”

“Yeah, but this chick is more interesting than Mom’s present. What’s her name?”

Tom goes back to his notebook. “Charity, I think.”

“Yeah, she’s interesting. Very interesting, if you get what I mean.”

Tom looks up and grins. “I sure do, Brian. It’s good to see that you’re finally getting over Emma. This is the first time you’ve looked at another woman since you two broke up.”

“Oh, come on, man. You know I didn’t mean it like that. Emma was the purpose of my life, and I’m not looking for somebody else. This is about you.”

“Ah. This again.” Tom shakes his head and reapplies pen to paper.

Leaning over the table, Brian snatches the notebook. “Let’s have a look here, see what the Great Writer Who Doesn’t Like to Talk about Women is churning out.”

Waiting, Tom scans the coffee shop. Charity is stacking to-go lids behind the counter.

“I swear if your handwriting is like this all the time you need a shrink. ‘Möbius Strip’? Is that like geometry or something?”

“Topology. It’s a figure that loops back and returns to its beginning, but reversed or inverted. It’s not what the story is about, really. It’s a symbol.”

“Symbols.” Brian tosses the book back to Tom. “You need to be more literal, bro. Think about what’s real and make your move. If she’s just another symbol, then what’s the point? Go over there. If you want something you got to take it, man.”

Tom grits his teeth. "I could tell you the same thing, Brian. Quit clinging to what won't work for you. Move on and get what you really want."

"Cut it out, man. This is about you, not me."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. You're the one who keeps coming here to check her out. Like I said, you got to go for what you want." Brian rises and stands over his brother. "I shouldn't have to tell you again."

Tom should see the rough wisdom of his brother's words, but he only continues writing. When he looks up, Brian is gone.

The point of Tom's pen returns to the notebook and he writes as if drawn by a natural force. He has to realize by now that there are more important things than his work, things that can change his life if he lets them. He needs to act before the chance is gone.

"Shit," a customer bellows.

The expletive beats through the coffee shop with the clatter of a large thermos that fell from the refill station. The smell of hazelnut spreads and the coffee has free range on Beck's gray tile floor.

An older coffee shop employee stacking mugs near the register sighs. "Damn it. That's going to be one hot hell of a mess."

"Don't worry about it, Meg," says a voice not angelic but still smooth and gentle. Charity. "I'll take care of it. Finish with that and get another thermos of hazel ready to go."

The other waitress, Meg, apparently, smiles. "You're such a good one, Charity. Times like these I'm glad I don't work with my husband. He'd just sit there looking at the mess until I did something."

Charity steps to the back room. "The mop still by the big sink?"

"Yep. You know, you're smart, Char. Stay single until I get a chance to go to college, that's what I should've done."

Charity reappears, mop in tow. "Smart? Is that what they call lonely now?"

"Oh, you. I'm going to miss that sense of humor of yours." A customer arrives at the counter, and Meg turns to take another hurried order.

Tom attempts again to add on to his story as a wheeled bucket rattles past him and the mop slaps on wet tile.

"Mercy, this is going to kill my back," Charity whispers as she works the mop into the puddle. The tails of her blouse have come un-tucked. She is so close to Tom that a casual movement by either could connect them. He is too far to feel the heat flowing from her skin, but he could imagine it.

My God, with her hand on the small of her back, she pauses to lean, her mouth opening slightly. Hair falls back to reveal her earlobes. I could understand if the earlobes don't get him, but to ignore all the rest Tom must be a fool. She's everything anyone I could imagine could want.

And she's right there. With the right words she could be in your life, Tom. Why do you keep writing, why are you acting like you aren't even in the same coffee shop? Men would kill or die for such an opening with a woman like Charity. Take it. Take it, damn it.

"Don't you understand yet?" Tom says.

The coffee shop breathes silently; even the street beyond the front door is quiet.

Tom has stopped his pen.

"You don't seem to want to believe it, but I'm not here for her."

There is no one there to hear him. And what he's saying is ridiculous. Anyone can see that Tom's writing is a pretense. He's just being stubborn. She can't mop up one spill forever, and Tom can't hide for the rest of his life.

"I'm not hiding."

What?

"I'm waiting. Waiting for you to talk to her."

Who, me?

No, I can't do that.

"Why not? She's a young woman in need. Just give her a hand. You're the one who keeps going on about how beautiful she is."

You can't tell me you don't think she's gorgeous. She is. Her eyes-

"That's not the point. She's beautiful, I agree, but I'm not in love with her. You are."

That's not really relevant, Tom. It doesn't matter how I feel. I can only tell how she moves the mop, gliding with it clumsily. I can only tell of the careless curl that falls across her sweating face, the contraction of lips to blow the hair back.

"Oh, stop narrating. You're trying to tell me you couldn't go over and talk to her if you wanted to? I think you can, Robert."

How did you know my name is Robert? Look, forget it. It just doesn't work that way. I'm here to describe the place, describe her and you, how you find her and how she makes your life complete. That's the story and that's what I'm here for.

"My life complete? Not mine. I have this, a firm story unfolding and almost finished. Charity is wonderful, but I don't need her. You do."

Damn it, Tom, that doesn't matter. It can't happen that way. Charity is-

"She's having a tough time with this spill as it spreads across the gray tile floor. You should give up the excuses and help her. Give her a hand with that mess, you a nice young gentleman with blond hair. It's a perfect opening, you said so yourself wishing you had the courage to take it."

No, I can't. Things don't work that way. Stories don't twist like that.

"Then I'll make it twist this way. Take the step, Robert. I'll worry about the rest."

It's not that simple. I wish it was, but I have to remain here.

"No more excuses. You've loved her from the first. I could see it in every paragraph and phrase. You even knew her name before I did. I won't let you out of this, Robert. You have to go talk to her in Beck's Coffee Shop, in this very moment."

But I-I...

I can't stay here. I have to try.

The tall young man with blond hair steps into the coffee shop, quiet as an actor late to the performance. He steps past the ordering counter to the refill station where a

wild-haired waitress is attempting to rein in a spill. His name is Robert, and there is no notebook in his hands. He has left it behind.

Robert's light steps show that he doesn't know if he should be there. He watches the waitress struggling with a mop too big for her as if trying to find the words to understand her. He fidgets with his fingers.

It's about nine in the morning. Customers come through the store in waves, but none of them notice or disturb Robert and Charity. Outside the sunrise struggles from solemn clouds.

Curving her lips, Charity blows a curl of hair away from her eyes. She notices Robert for the first time and, as he steps closer, she smiles.

So far, this may seem familiar to you. I'm sure it seems that way to Robert. Yet Robert is a stranger to Beck's Coffee Shop and his arrival changes everything. What happened here has already turned this world inside out, and the rest is for Robert to decide.

III. It Was You

I didn't come to plead or threaten or anything like that. I just wanted you to know what it was like for me. Not that my experience could be anything compared to yours, but I still have a part. And I wanted you to know what that was.

I was alone when this began.

My hands were cold so I stowed them in my pockets as I walked. The stairwell to the campus parking garage was directly opposite the building my class had been in, but when I approached, I heard voices, sharp and brief. Male and female. I assumed they belonged to some lovers' spat and I hated being forced to see such things. But my car was parked in the back of the lot so I skirted around to the side entrance.

The air smelled like fallen leaves and garbage. My white breath was a ghost in front of me. Tennessee wasn't as cold as Montana, where I grew up, but it was still cold.

My steps splashed through standing water, swirling an oil rainbow. I hurried. The voices stopped when I had entered, and the dark garage simply breathed. I shifted my messenger bag to my right shoulder, sloshed through more water, and squeezed by two vehicles. My bag hit the side-view mirror of an expensive-looking car.

Down the corridor of cars to my left, I heard a faint female voice. I did not look up. A second voice, male, came hasty and guttural. I did not look up. Something knowing beat in my blood, but I did not look up.

My bag knocked another side-view mirror. Noises of movement came from my left, like something heavy falling to the concrete.

The male voice. "Fuck."

Without thought, I turned and looked up. It was dark, I couldn't see much. The lighting had always been faulty in the parking garage. I could see a man looking back at me. He was almost as tall as I was.

Something was happening.

"Hey," I said. My heart beat faster at the silence.

The stranger ran. He forced through a beaten metal doorway at the back of the garage and was gone. From where he'd been standing I could hear a low, choking sound.

It didn't seem like I moved; it felt more like the world slowly contracted until I stood a few steps away. I saw blonde hair spilling into stagnant water. A book-bag on its side. A hand with blue fingernails extended, the middle nail broken to the quick.

This is how I experienced that moment.

A woman I didn't know was on her back between two cars. She sobbed and thin lines of blood seeped out of her nose and wormed over her cheeks. Her eyes were tightly closed.

My foot scrapped something on the concrete. I had stepped on a glossy pink button. Five others glittered in constellation around her. None remained on her shirt.

Tears mingling with blood on her cheeks. I could see that her book-bag had been torn open like her shirt. *History of Modern Finance* hung halfway out among paper covered in looping cursive. The girl wept, softly and privately.

"It's ok." I knew it wasn't truth, but it was a lie I needed. "It'll be ok."

The sobbing wouldn't stop. I didn't think she heard me. Other sounds were encroaching, but I was numb to everything but the connection of her sobs and my crushing heartbeat.

I wanted to go. I wanted to leave right then. This wasn't anything to do with me. I felt like I'd been asked to aid the birth of something hideous or hateful. This wasn't something I wanted to know. I wanted to get in my car, go home, and worry about my problems. But my legs wouldn't move and I couldn't look away.

"It'll be all right." My words were weightless. Other sounds crept closer, but the world felt shrunk to only her and me. I reached out with one hand across the distance and touched her bare shoulder with the tips of my fingers.

There was a scream. It was drawn from the bottom of her spine, and she convulsed up with it. Arms, legs, hands, feet batted aimlessly and she scurried away from me.

"Hey, it's ok, he's-"

"No, no, NO!"

Her eyes were blue, wide, and unblinking.

"I'm here to help, I-"

"Help me! Help me! Help ME! Get AWAY!"

"I'm try-"

Light barged over us and my shadow danced to life like some black demon. The approaching sound now roared steadily behind me, a car engine.

I looked. The man had a flashlight held up and his right hand was at his hip. The figure aimed the light over my shoulder and I could see the black of his uniform.

"Officer? This girl was, well, I heard something and-"

He drew his pistol.

“GET DOWN. NOW. ON THE GROUND. HANDS OUT. HANDS OUT. NOW.”

My body complied. “Officer, I came-”

“DOWN. ON THE GROUND. FACE DOWN. HANDS OUT.”

The hissed, sobbed words came from behind me.

“It was you, it was you, it was you,” and would not stop.

My face was against the wet concrete. My hands were out. Dark oil rainbows in the water.

In the clean, white police station office, men in clean white shirts and suits asked me my name. I told them. They asked me what I did. I told them I was a student at the university. They asked me where I lived. I told them the address of my apartment building. They asked me many questions I saw no point to and I answered them all.

I thought that if I cooperated they would see that I couldn't be the type of person who attacked girls in parking lots. But they never asked if I did it.

“What am I being charged with?” I asked while they took my picture. My mug shot, I supposed.

One of the two officers read off a sheet of yellow paper. “Says ‘Assault and Battery.’ Oh, and, ‘Attempted Sexual Assault.’”

The other officer, double chin and pig-eyed, leaned over and whispered something to him. I only heard the words “get it up,” and they chuckled like sniffing dogs.

“It's a mistake,” I said. “I wanted to help her. The girl.”

The officer with the card stood and shook his head.

"I don't care."

The florescent lights in the police station were white like an avalanche.

My sister Amanda lived in the same apartment complex as I did. She occasionally invited me over for dinner with her husband and their son, but I rarely went. I did not have time, I would say, but that wasn't true. I just didn't want to go.

Amanda was asleep when I called from the Knoxville Police Department asking for help. She had some legal background (one year of law school before her meltdown and marriage), but I only needed someone who could help me post bail. She agreed to help me instantly.

The cell they kept me in was cold and large and smelled of what I assumed was urine. Two other men in the cell, one black the other Hispanic, were playing cards. They gestured me toward a battered metal chair next by them and the black one said something to me in a slurred voice I didn't understand. I shook my head. Eventually they went to sleep on the flat benches. I didn't sleep and couldn't feel the passage of time.

In the morning under the same mountain-white lights, I was removed from my cell and given a chance to enter a plea. My sister arrived. We sat briefly in front of an ancient, spear-bald, judge who looked twice at my blank criminal record before determining I wasn't a flight risk. The judge had nodded geriatricly when I pled not guilty. He was so silent that I wasn't sure he'd heard me.

Amanda drove us back to our apartment complex.

"I saw your car wasn't out front when I got home from work," my sister said. The morning was cold and bright and we were both tired. "I thought that maybe you'd gone out with friends after class. Like you keep saying you will."

"No. I was thinking about it, before all this." It was a lie. For the most part, I didn't like my classmates and secretly thought they were unintelligent.

I had never noticed how big Amanda's Buick was. Three people could have sat between us that morning.

"Instead," Amanda said softly and slowly, "instead, this happened."

The car's engine stuttered every few seconds. Dave, Amanda's husband, continually said he would fix it but never did. Amanda called the stuttering the car's "heart murmur."

"Why don't you go to church anymore?" Her voice was still low and quiet.

I settle back into the car seat, folding my arms over my chest. "Because I don't think there's a point."

After a few minutes, she sniffled. "Mom wanted you to go. You should go sometime."

I had been to mass several times since the family moved to Tennessee, but all of my memories of churches, like my memories of childhood, belonged to Montana. The church my gut revolted against was in Montana, a great building shaped like a capsized boat. I recalled it in flashes and pieces, mostly the stifling heat of the place. And hands. The church was full of hands for me. Holding hands, hands that ruffled my hair, hands trying to give me things. The church was a sea of demanding, grasping hands.

Amanda hadn't seemed to hear me. "I'm not a hypocrite."

I looked at Amanda but she remained firmly fixed on the road. Sunlight clung to the edges of her eyes.

Drifting into a parking space and cutting off the engine, she opened her door.

“I’ll give you a lift to your car tomorrow. But not now.”

We got out and Amanda moved toward her wing of the complex. My apartment was behind us.

“Hey,” I shouted thinly, “you know it wasn’t me. Amanda?”

Her back was to me. She did not slow or stop.

The morning edition of the paper was already on my welcome mat. It wasn’t my welcome mat; the last tenants had left it along with metal bowls in the high cabinets and the smell of curry. The mat was nearly threadbare and the words “welcome home” were only shadow-thick.

The paper unfolded to vapid stories about canned food-drives, hospital workers, and a five year old rescued from a tiger pen. I looked at them from habit and a need to think clear thoughts about the world. My breath eased at a misplaced comma found in the second paragraph about the zoo mishap. I unlocked my front door and stepped inside.

The door closed and I unfolded the paper. On the bottom half of the front page was a picture of a man’s face. He stared out the page disoriented and unaware. The article identified him as a pedophile and sex offender, alleged, who was finally coming to trial this month. The newspaper detailed the heinousness of his crimes, his alleged crimes, which he would no doubt rot in prison for. How he had abducted schoolboys in Georgia, allegedly, was also discussed. His portrait continued to stare out, unknowing of

what was printed about him, unknowing of how to answer the claims, ignorant of everything that would damn him.

My lungs burned, like I had been running all night. I threw the paper down, couldn't stand to look at it anymore. I didn't turn on the lights, I didn't want them on. The phone was ringing.

It was Rick, an acquaintance from my undergraduate years. We had never been good friends, but couldn't seem to get rid of him.

"Oh, man, I heard some crazy shit about you."

"I'm not feeling well, Rick. I don't want to talk."

He plowed on. "Crazy, crazy shit about you and that Mary White chick in the parking lot. You know what I'm talking about?" Rick sounded almost pleased.

"Where," I stuttered, "where did you hear that?" I sat on the floor. I couldn't stand. It was the first time I'd heard that name.

"Rumor mill, man. Believe none of what you hear, right? But this is great stuff. Heard from Justin whose brother's in campus security. You and Mary White in the parking lot?"

"Shut up, Rick, shut up." I wanted to shout it, but could only whisper. "I didn't touch her."

Rick laughed. "I didn't believe it, really. But, man, did you?"

I drew breath, but stopped. I had. I had touched, finger tips on the shoulder.

Rick went on. "I met this chick before, you know. It was at a party Tyron was throwing. You know Tyron, right man? Well, this chick was kinda preppy, but totally hot. No blaming you tried to get--"

I hung up. I was shaking, but I didn't know if from anger or fear.

I sat on the couch with the lights off, didn't turn on the TV, didn't lie down. The phone rang again after several minutes. I couldn't answer.

Time passed. I noticed the walls of my apartment were white, not the colorless nothing I remembered them as. Outside the light moved, shadows leaned and shifted. I couldn't stay here.

It was cold out, but I didn't take my jacket. Tennessee cold couldn't touch the Montana cold that settled in my bones. The phone rang again as I stepped outside and closed the door.

The air was quiet. I took the metal staircase down to the parking lot. Black scabs of flaked paint from the handrails clung to my hands. Most of the parking spaces were empty. I circled around the building in the grass, spiny bushes clutching at me. I didn't know where I was going.

I stopped in front of the complex's pool which I had never used. There was nothing in the pool, only a pond of rainwater choked with leaves on the frayed tarp that covered its emptiness. Happy mosaic fish were inlaid in the concrete around the pool's edge and the smell of chlorine lingered like summer's ghost. The metal fence around the area peeled black flakes like the stairs to my apartment.

I stood and looked at the pool without seeing. I thought about where I was walking and how long before I would go back. I imagined some foreign place, a dim jungle or forest with moss and vines, and myself exploring there. The forest would coo with its own life, of which only I knew. I imagined that these places existed all over the world and that one just had to find them. The fantasy was painless. The only hands in

this forest were mine. The eyes and hands and broken fingernails of the world would not intrude or make any sound at all.

I would be happy in my jungle home. I thought I would be happy there.

Someone was crying. I shook my head and the forest melted away, but the weeping remained. It came from the low, square bushes on the far side of the pool.

A young black child, eyes red with tears, sat crying at the empty pool. I couldn't tell how old she was. Anger and sadness and frustration twisted her face. At the other end of her stare, across the metal fence on the tarp a Frisbee lay out of reach.

I could feel the heat from her contorted, trembling face. She didn't care if anyone saw her. She sat in the bushes and cried her grasping cry that, for some reason, frightened me. For a moment, I could see my face, framed in a newspaper article, disoriented and unaware of the words around me. Known sex offender alone with child. Alleged crimes hideous and uncounted.

She looked up and saw me and continued crying.

I thought that I should leave. She wasn't my problem. Not anyone I knew or wanted to know. Nothing to me at all. In the forest, no one was my problem.

Her crying sounded familiar. She was crying over the unfairness of it, the injustice of life, the harshness that no one cared. Each of her sobs was heavy as time.

I forgot the heat of her face, the image of mine on newsprint, and the ashen silence of that empty forest. Clumsily, I hoisted myself over the metal gate to the pool area. My long adult steps moved me to the edge of the pool and my long adult arms salvaged the Frisbee from the tarp.

I gave the toy to her through the bars of the fence. She took it in her hands cautiously. Tears still streaming on her face, she ran, showing me the brown soles of her shoes. I remembered then what it was like to cry to exhaustion. I remembered crying in a house in Montana because I didn't want to leave and didn't want to understand the reasons we had to. Because I did understand the grief in my sister's eyes for our mother even while she lived.

I turned back toward my apartment.

The answering machine was full. I began skimming through the messages, trying to see if any were from people I knew rather than rumormongers who needed no evidence to reach judgment.

I recognized the voice of my brother-in-law Dave near the end. He was saying that Amanda wanted to apologize for how she acted. She hadn't meant to offend me, but the whole thing was very frightening to her. She remembered the same parking lot from when she was a law student, not feeling safe there. Dave said that he and Amanda believed I was innocent.

I rewound the message and played it again. I hadn't known that my sister used the same parking garage. I felt like calling her and asking if it was true. I tried to picture her there but could only see her as I remembered her in Montana, a bright-smiled and pretty older sister in a yellow sundress.

I needed sleep. Finding my way to my bed, I kicked off my shoes and climbed into the cool covers. I dreamed of pink buttons, black hands, snowfields, and a rainforest growing inside a cathedral.

It was getting dark when I woke up. I walked over to my sister's apartment and asked for a lift over to the garage on campus.

The seats of her car were cold, but she cranked up the heat as soon as we were on the road. It wasn't a long drive.

"How are your classes?" she asked.

"Good, I guess. I like the professor for my Wednesday class. She knows what she's doing, and she's got an accent. I think she's French."

"Sounds nice. I like France."

The vents by our feet seeped odd-smelling warmth and the engine murmured.

The campus soon materialized beyond the windshield, draped in what seemed until last night a soothing darkness. Students walked in groups and clusters, huddled against the cold.

The parking garage was dark and nearly empty. I pointed out where my car was.

"I used to park down here," she said. "I complained about how dangerous it was, the bad lighting and hidden corners, but nobody did anything."

"Dave told me." I opened my door. "You were right. It isn't really safe. I'd never really thought about that before."

Amanda nodded, smiled wearily and then drove off.

At my own car door, I took out keys and unlocked it. Before getting in, I looked in all directions down the dark of the garage. I looked, ready to see the whole world, beautiful, disgusting, dying, hateful, or loving.

I didn't see you there this time, but I knew then that I had to find you. Not to say that you were wrong or that I'm innocent. Because I needed to tell you this story and that I was sorry.

IV. The Sea Won't Know

What time is it? Eight thirty. This neighborhood heard of a streetlight? That house is, let's see, 1046. Still a ways to go. If I'm even on the right street. Goddamn, I'm burning up in this outfit. Tomorrow is November and I'm sweating like an animal here. Beth better think this is funny.

This could be it. Lots of cars, two jack-o-lanterns, yep, must be the place.

I could use a beer. And some candy corn. Mmmm, beer and candy corn. I wonder if Jimmy's brother is going to come in that Homer suit again. That guy was hilarious. Didn't Beth really like him? Hope he doesn't come then. Only room for one fat guy in a full-body outfit this year.

Let's park the old girl and see who all's here. Guess I'm on time, for once. This is the place, right?

Time to gorilla up. Gloves on. Check the drawstring on the furry pants. Stretch the neck and here we go. God, can't breath. Who designed this piece of shit mask? Ok, it pulls down more, thank the Lord. Smells like an inner tube.

Give this a shot. "Ooohoooh, aaahaah!" Awesome.

Ok, on to the party. Two stories? Lawn looks like Astroturf. How's Andrew pulling this on tech support pay?

"A baboon? You're adorable, monkey-man."

There she is, by the door. Wow. Marilyn Monroe, in the flesh. Must be Andrew's wife. Lucky bastard.

"I'm a gorilla, not a baboon." Damn it's hard to talk in this. Like chewing on the Michelin Man's ass.

"Hmm? What was that?"

"Gorilla. Not baboon."

Nothing. Screw it, she can't hear me.

"Come on in, we have no prejudice against other species here." Real funny.

"Most of the guests are in the back, but there are a few in the house, probably by the bar. You're on Gregory's team, right?"

Whose team? Wasn't the guy organizing the rugby team Jimmy tried to get me into named Greg? Must be what she's talking about. I'll nod.

"There's a bathroom here, off the living room, and one upstairs. Have you been here before, maybe at the barbeque in August?"

Blah blah blah. Where's the beer? Drinkie-drinkie? I'd try talking, but she'd just hmm at me. Nice figure, though. Gorillas approve of low-cut dresses.

Hardwood floors, nice furniture. Seems pretty well kept.

"Almost everyone's here, I think. Not a bad turnout. Just the people we love and the people we love to hate." That's a rehearsed giggle. You're hot, babe, but a total fake.

She isn't wearing a ring. Is this Andrew's wife? Maybe she took it off for the costume.

This suit itches like hell. Look the other way, sweetheart, I need to scratch a personal area. Or keep looking.

A Hawaiian-themed bar in the middle of the house? Coconuts, fake palm trees, furniture made out of bark, plastic hula girl. Weird.

Marilyn's clearing her throat. "And here's the bar. The monkey's arrived, everyone."

Look at all these people waving at me. Don't know that guy, that guy, those chicks, that guy, the bartender, or the grim reaper there. And that's everybody. Who invited all the strangers? Beth said "a few" of Andrew's friends.

Do I know this guy in the knight get up walking toward me? Can't see behind the face guard.

"Hey-hey!"

Guess he knows me. Wave, do some gorilla capering. Yeah, I'm a riot.

"Didn't think you were coming until later, pal. Good to see you."

Voice doesn't sound familiar. Hope he's not somebody from last year's party. Don't remember much of that except throwing up in Jimmy's bathroom and getting in a fight with Beth's ex. Beat the hell out of that jerk. Wonder if Beth ever found out about that?

I'll try talking. "Is Jimmy here? Beth?"

He's shaking his head. "Sorry, I didn't catch that. Beth? She's here somewhere, you know, doing what she does. But I bet you want something to drink, right?"

"YES."

"Right this way. Huzzah!" He's pointing to some seats with his, uh, what the hell is that, a mace?

Now here's a wet bar. Hey, bartender, gorilla at the bar. Stop chatting with Cleavage McBoobsy and get me something. How stable is this bamboo stool?

Bartender's looking our way, finally. "You got to be kidding me. Let me guess, a banana daiquiri?"

Laughter all around. That smug bastard. Let's try some universal sign language with the old finger. Bam!

Much better, people laughing with me. That blonde shrieks when she gets going. Oh, that's Marilyn Monroe again. Can't fault the bartender for hitting on her. Must not be Andrew's wife after all.

"Ok, ok, what do you really want, Grape Ape?"

That guy has a beer. Gesture at him and see if the bartender gets it.

"Beer?" Nod. "Beer it is for the big guy."

Big guy? You calling me fat? Jackass. Yeah, just give me the beer.

What brand is this? Import, new to me. How am I supposed to drink in this mask? Need a straw. Hey, knight in shining armor, over there, the straw? Thanks.

"Why not take of the mask? Be easier to drink that way."

Knight's got a point. But if Beth saw me it'd ruin the surprise. I've been planning this for months, even before the party got moved to Andrew's. I'm leaving it on.

"Staying in character? Me too. I always wanted to be one of the Knights of the Round Table when I was a kid. Perceval was my favorite. Huzzah! And I get this nifty mace. Personally, I think the prop guys went a little overboard on it. Anyway, how's work going?"

This thumbs down will have to stand for "Servertech's still treating me like crap."
Drink beer and let the man talk.

“Well, that’s life, isn’t it? I’m glad I got out of that department. I’m a lot less stressed in the east wing. Certainly nowhere near as hectic.”

The department? Maybe this guy works at Servertech too. Mark Keen? No, he moved out to Nevada. Kyle whatshisname? Too tall. That Francis guy with the tricked out Honda? Could be.

Goddamn, that’s a good beer. Just what an overheated gorilla needs.

New people in the room, staring. I’ll give ‘em a taste of monkey action:

“Ooohoo!”

Haha. Everybody loves the guy in the gorilla suit. Great costume idea. And none of them know who the hell I am. All part of the fun.

Still don’t see Beth. No way she’s topping my outfit this time. Her Britney Spears costume last year, that was hilarious. And pretty hot. Wonder if she’s still mad at me about Kelly. Shit, it’s been like a month.

“Paul?” Hmm? Woman in fancy getup, headdress, flashy. Queen of some kind. Seems a bit old to be at one of Jimmy’s parties.

Knight does a little bow. “Hello, Samantha. Always nice to see you. I love the house.”

“Thank you, it was a lot of hard work. Are you enjoying yourself?”

Wait, is *this* Andrew’s wife? Interior decorator?

“You can bet I am. Huzzah!”

“Good, good, because having fun isn’t optional this year, Paul. And who’s this in the monkey suit?”

“A good friend.”

Does she expect me to say something? I can try.

"I'm Mick. From Servertech. A friend of Jimmy."

Did she hear me? Christ, talking in this mask is pointless. I'll just shrug and give her the monkey dance. "Ooohoooh!"

Her age shows when she smiles. Crow's feet. "Not telling? It's a game then. Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile, loves games."

Cleopatra, right, right. She's smiling again.

"Is the gorilla looking for anyone in particular?"

Ok, loudly, enunciate. "BETH!"

"Beth? An interesting choice. I can take you to her, if you'd like. Follow, oh great ape."

Someone's tugging on my arm. Marilyn wants something now? "Picture before you leave?"

How could I say no? Where's the camera? Ah, that jerk bartender again.

"Stand in the palm trees, like you're jumping out to get me. Be menacing."

Ok, here we go. Menacing, like you're going to tear her head off. Hurry up with it, bartender. I'm menacing from behind, she's pretend screaming. Gives me a great cleavage view. Wow, those are some melons. Take your time, bartender. Ha ha. Ok, calm yourself, Mick.

That flash was bright. Can I leave now?

Tapping on my shoulder. "Ready? Don't forget your drink."

You can trust I won't, Cleo. Hey, the bartender got me a fresh beer.

“When can I leave?” Why is the bartender whispering? Oh, he’s talking to Cleopatra. That’s some glare she’s giving him.

“When I say you can, Jeremy. Don’t expect it to be soon.” And now she’s back to smiling at me. Bet there’s some history between these two. Not like I care.

Off I go with the Queen of the Nile. Wave goodbye to cute Marilyn.

Nice and cool out here on the deck. Would be great to take this mask off, but can’t yet. Not until Beth sees me in it.

Big backyard. Tons of people, tons of people. Anyone I know? Not that I can tell. Didn’t know Andrew was this popular. They’re waving, wave back. What’s that smell?

God, I love a party. Even if I don’t know most of these folks. Where’ll all these people go to when the night is over? Or go home with? Everybody wants something. Who gets it? Strong gorilla will get it, that’s for damn sure.

Lincoln’s here, cool. Abe, either that’s really good makeup or you’re actually pretty old.

“Is that who I think it is in that monkey suit?”

I’m shaking my head. Cleopatra, little help?

“I believe it is, Mr. President.”

Does she know who I am? Maybe she knows Jimmy and he told her. Hope that idiot didn’t tell Beth.

“Won’t hold you up, King Kong, but I wanted to mention that bit of business.”

Nod like you know what he's talking about. Could he be a Servertech client? Seems the right age and I can't remember any of those guys. Why in the hell would he be here? He's holding something.

"Well, you were right. I asked Dan about the turnover rates and he backed your estimate. One of these days I'll get you, but I think this settles our bet for now." He's trying to give me an envelope. Seems kind of nervous, uncertain.

No, no. I'm not the monkey you want, Abe.

"Come on now, I can't keep owing you. You know how this makes me look at the office. I'd feel better if you'd just take this so we can be even again. Take it." He won't let me say no, the envelopes already in my hands, and he's walking away.

Just keep it. So I get somebody else's five bucks or whatever, big deal. Hey, free money. Your mistake, dude.

"This way, gorilla." Cleopatra's gliding on. Must follow. So many people I don't know. God, next year this is at my place, and none of these strangers are coming. Maybe Marilyn can come. Haha, oh yeah, she can come.

Stop that, stupid gorilla. Bad monkey.

This is a really nice place, huge backyard. Is that an apple tree? This party just keeps going, people everywhere. Smells like something's burning. Ah, there, a bonfire. People dancing, having a good time.

"Whoa, the gorilla's here. This party's just getting started!"

Damn straight, whoever that was. Beat my chest and "Ooohohohohoooooh!"

Are they playing that Jungle Boogie song? Rocking.

Catwoman by the bonfire knows how to work it. Get down, get down. Jungle boogie. This song reminds me of Senior prom, right after I met Beth. Oh, Catwoman's coming my way. Bet if we met at a club without costumes she wouldn't even look twice. I love Halloween.

Is that guy dressed as a waiter, or is he really one? Carrying a few glasses, don't look like props. Looking at me. "Punch?"

Alcoholic punch or punch punch? Seems to be what everybody's drinking, so I try it. Down the hatch. Hmm, fruity, but there's a kick there. Hold up waiter, I'm done with this one, time for another.

Where's Cleopatra? Talking with blonde toga-wearing type. Too much makeup.

"-was looking for you. Did you order a monkey?" Oh, she's talking about me, is she? Better make my way over.

"Well, I've never turned down a servant, mortal or animal. More minions, I'm sure you know, are always desirable." Crooked smile. Wine sloshing out of the glass. Do I know her? Nope. "Do you wish to be in my service, great gorilla of the jungle?"

Shake head. No way, uglasaurus. What the hell's this all about?

Cleo's laughing. "Looks like he wants to remain his own monkey, Beth."

Beth? This isn't Beth. Wait, all this time she's been leading me to some other woman named Beth? Well, shit. That's just...this is just... Man, my head's swimming. What's in the punch anyway?

Hold on. Steady, you damn ape. Look around. Check faces. One by one. Everyone you can see in the whole ocean of them. Over by the stereo system, dancing by

the fire, under the apple tree, stand here, and over there. Do you recognize any of them?

Not a single one.

Holy shit. I'm at the wrong party. I'm at the wrong goddamn party.

How in the hell did this happen? Sweet Jesus, I'm such a fucking idiot. Only I could do this.

What the hell was I thinking anyway? This couldn't be Andrew's place. Look at these people, not a crappy homemade costume in sight. These are probably successful people. Goddamn lucky nobody can see my face.

Cleopatra's still talking to Beth. "Jeremy had the gall to complain about his position. I can hardly believe it after the blunder he caused. But I know he used to be one of your favorites, so I'll be kinder to him than I would." Sounds serious. Who's Jeremy? Ah, fuck it, why should I care? I need to get out of here.

"I honestly don't care what happens to him. Matthews has the most claim to him and he hasn't been near the bar tonight." Fake-Beth again.

Cleo responds. "I'm glad you feel that way. I think an example needs to be made of him, the more drastic the better. Going, gorilla king?"

I'll point to my crotch and then inside. Bathroom break, get it? She's nodding me on. In I go.

Wave to the people at the bar. Bye bye, Marilyn and Perceval and jackass bartender. God, Marilyn's hot. No time for love, Dr. Jones. Just keep going. Whoa, crap, almost knocked over that vase. Who has a vase in a hallway? And why the hell can't I walk in a straight line?

Ah, there's the front door. Let's see, keys? No, that's the envelope Abe gave me, keys over here. Good thing these fuzzy pants got pockets. Here we go, keys, and out we go, to the real party.

Hey, what the hell, Perceval?

"I don't think you're ready to leave quite yet, friend. I saw you packing away those drinks. You need some time before I let you drive."

Bastard, give me back my fucking keys! "GRRRRR!"

He's smiling, holding me back with the mace. "Growl all you want, Mighty Joe Young, but you should know better."

You don't even know me, you self-righteous ass. He's put the keys in his pocket. Crap, what am I going to do? What can I do? I need to get out of here.

"And why would you want to leave now? Samantha and Beth haven't really put things in motion yet. Huzzah!"

Just great. Percy's motioning me back to the bar, might as well follow. Hello again, Marilyn. Take a seat and wait.

God, I need to get out of here. They're probably wondering where I am already. Wait until I tell them about this.

Never did look inside that envelope ol' Abe gave me. Let's see here. About six bucks. They're strange, stiff. It's-

Ho-ly CRAP. These are hundreds. That dude gave me six hundred dollars. That's like my last paycheck, before taxes. Oh man, that's a lot of scratch. If he finds out I'm not who he thought I was, shit, he'll think I was trying to rip him off. Shit, shit, shit.

God, I'd love a few extra Benjamins. Finally get my car paid off. But there's no way I'd get away with it. And Beth, no way she'd let me. She'd have a fit, like when she found out about me and Kelly. Plus, whoever he thought I was could show up any minute. Christ.

"You ok?" Perceval, buzz the fuck off, ok?

Did that bartender just say something about me? I heard "ape." I swear, I'm going to tear this guy a new asshole if he looks at me funny again. This monkey will seriously beat him down.

Think, Mick, think. Beth must be wondering where you are. She's probably chatting up Jeremy's brother. In a closet together by now. Forget her, man, this is important. Let's say it's an hour before you can go. Need to give Abe his money back, sober up, convince Percy that you're sober, get the keys, and get out. Without taking off the mask. Stay focused, monkey.

Let's go back outside and find Abe, for starters.

"Don't get into too much trouble, ok?" Yeah, don't worry about that, Percy.

And here we go. Concentrate, monkey. Find Abe. Not seeing him from here. Get out there and sweep the area. Man, there must be almost a hundred people here. Waves of people. Why does it feel like I'm swimming?

Sorry about that, buddy, but I'm in a hurry. Yeah, I'm a big drunk ape.

Ok, focus on Lincoln. Did I check by the stereo? Not yet.

"Back for more?" Catwoman again.

"No, I'm looking for Abe Lincoln."

Did she hear me? She's rubbing my fur. Biting her lower lip. This woman is crazy sexy. Noses is kind of big, but unbelievable figure. I wonder what she's been drinking. Probably the punch.

Focus, Mick, try again. "ABE?"

Someone's behind me.

"Sorry, Gina, this gorilla's mine." Hmmm? Oh, it's Marilyn. Catwoman must be Gina. "And you? Menacing other women behind my back?"

Sorry, baby, haha. Catwoman's slinking off, Marilyn's cozying up. If only I deserved this. She probably thinks I'm someone else, like Perceval does. God, she's amazing. Makes Catwoman look like a skank.

"You were looking for Abe Lincoln? I saw him leave a few minutes ago. Samantha only invited him for old time's sake. The party turned out pretty great, though. And you need another drink before the fun really starts."

Abe's gone. Shit. What am I going to do about the money? It's not mine, I can't keep it. Maybe I should just give it to somebody else here who knows him.

I can't trust any of these people. Can't trust them at all. Giving it to anybody else would be like throwing it in the ocean. Why should I? I need this money. I'm scraping to get by and they just put this kind of cash out for a bet. I'm keeping the money. Nobody has to know. The sea won't know. And I'm just a monkey, after all.

Marilyn's tugging my arm. Where to? Cleopatra. Tons of people standing around her. That's a vampire, a skeleton, a Jason, a Green Goblin, and a Terminator. Nice collection.

"You found our wayward ape? Good, good." Cleopatra's smiling up a storm at Marilyn. Yep, definitely related. She doesn't have half the rack Marilyn's got, though.

"Mighty gorilla, what do you think of the party?"

For a party I wasn't invited to anyway, thumbs up. Big ol' monkey thumb.

"You were looking for Matthews, yes? He's left. Not much of a partying type, I think." Must be talking about Abe Lincoln. "He's really past his prime, anyway.

Certainly the east wing had its day, but even Matthews knows my division is where things happen now. Influence is like water; it has to go somewhere. Understand?"

No, not at all. But I'll nod anyway. What kind of party is this?

"Good, good. Though he's certain a good man, Jameson has to retire eventually. Have you thought about where you'll be when he does? A man of your talents is wasted on the third floor. Matthews knows he can't keep you there. Maybe we can come to an agreement, yes? One Beth doesn't have to know about."

Beth? She doesn't have to know what? Oh, she's talking about her Beth. This is hilarious. Who does she think I am? Maybe I can get myself a promotion for a job I don't have.

"No comment? Take your time. Marilyn, why don't you get our simian guest another drink. See if he can be persuaded by hospitality."

They're all smiles tonight. Sure, babe, lead me away. Back inside we go.
Monkey likes a forceful woman!

Where's Percy? Not at his station by the bar. I'll need those keys back in a couple of minutes.

"Hey, Jeremy, two glasses of the punch?" She's doing that Marilyn voice again.

"Sure thing, babe." God, this bartender annoys me. So self-assured and cocky.

Was he the Jeremy somebody was talking about before?

"Thanks. And next time, can you do it without staring at my breasts?"

Bo-ya, bartending jerk.

"What, are the twins reserved for the gorilla?"

"Maybe they are."

Now there's a pleasant prospect. Where's she headed with the drinks? Wants me to follow. Monkey is still curious.

What's that sound? Some kind of announcement outside. Cleopatra. "...better than last year's by far. Take your time, but move inside so we can begin to discuss...and move our star forward in the next fiscal year. Sacrifices have always needed to be made, but with-"

Yeah, definitely not my kind of people. The money is nice, though. Like the six big ones in my pocket.

"I love this punch. Don't you?"

Oh, this one's for me? No, I can't, well, if you insist. Damn tasty, but I've had enough as it is.

What the hell are you doing, monkey? You can't be drinking more. You need to sober up and get out of here.

I can just move the timetables back some. No big deal. Where's Marilyn taking me, anyway? Let's see what's through door number one. Yeah I'll follow.

But there's nowhere to go. Silly, this isn't a hallway, it's a closet.

Oh my.

There's no light, she's closing the door. "I don't think anyone will disturb us in here. Sammy tells me you're going to be important at the company. That's so wonderful for you."

Ok, I need out of here. She's practically laying on me. God, she even smells good, like peaches. No, got to get out, got to find Percy, get my keys and leave. This is just too much. Where's the doorknob?

"Looking for something? Let me help." She's putting my drink on the floor, taking off my gloves. No, I need those back. Don't put my hands on your hips, I'm not the guy you think I am. Oh, God, hot skin, smooth. I'm not an important person, not a part of this company, not someone.

"Settle down, it's ok. This is what I want. You don't want me unhappy, do you?"

I can't see, but I know she's smiling. My heart feels like it's going to explode. I've never been with a woman like her.

"And it makes me happy to make you happy." Whoa, that's cold. Her hands at my waist. No, please stop, don't go there, oh God, her hands.

She's stopped, thank God. I can't do this. Oh, hell I want to, but I can't. Beth. She would know, she would find out, women always know, she would hate me.

Marilyn's putting something into my hand. Soft, thin, warm. Her underwear.

My ape-pants are falling off. She must have unlaced them.

"I want you. Be an animal to me."

She smells so good. Damn, I'm stiff as a board. I don't want to do this. I do, but I can't. I shouldn't, I can't. It's giving up. She won't know, but I'll know.

It's just giving in to instincts. It's just a small step. It's nothing important.

Animals don't care. Why not take what you want?

"That's right, go on, be an animal."

Motion, warmth, breath, flesh.

"Ohoooh, urggg, ahaaaah..."

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Someone's knocking. Are my pants back on? Where are my gloves?

"Mmm, that was rough, but what else from a beast like you?"

That's bright, can't see. Who's there? Cleopatra?

"Are you kids finished?"

"Sure are, Sammy."

"Don't call me that. It's Cleopatra tonight." The hallway seems empty except for her. Voices coming from somewhere, the living room. How long as it been?

"Right, right. How's the party going?"

"Splendidly, I suppose, except for Jeremy. He had the gall to insult me in front of McDougal and Lewis. Can you believe that?" What in the hell is she talking about?

Marilyn's shaking her head. Her curls are messed up where I grabbed her by the hair. Wonder if she ever put those panties back on.

"No, I can't believe that. Someone needs to teach him that kind of attitude won't be tolerated when you're in charge."

"My thoughts exactly, Ms. Monroe."

They're looking at me. They're walking down the hall, away from the voices.

Follow. Motion.

The bar, empty. Cleopatra's pointing outside. The bartender's out there alone, drinking a beer. Sitting on his heels like a frog. I hate that fucker.

Cleo's leaning over me, smiling. "He's been disrespectful to me and to Marilyn too. We can't have that in this company. Don't you want to teach him better? Everyone else is inside. We'll ensure no one will hear a thing. An example needs to be made."

Perceval's mace is on the bar. Marilyn's smiling, nodding. Her lipstick is smeared, looks like she's been drinking blood. Cleopatra's opened the door. They're asking me to hurt him. Oh yeah, why not fuck up this guy.

What was it that kept me from those things I wanted?

Cleopatra smiling with skeleton teeth. "Business is survival of the fittest. Don't you want to show me how fit you are?"

The mace is heavy. He laughed at me, talked about me. That bastard. I could crush his fucking skull. Step outside. I could bash his face in.

Something about the voices from inside the house. Something about them tells me this is not good. The voices grow louder, laughing or crying or cursing. Hyenas or jackals. They are people, but I hear the hyenas and jackals underneath, straining out of their throats.

The night is cold, the bonfire has almost died, dull smoke. The mace is heavy. It's quiet out here. He doesn't see me.

V. How to Make an Omelet

The bowl rang like a cracked church bell when Eddie dropped it on the cook table. The kitchen smelled like hunger and sweat.

“Ok, Rusty. I’m going to learn you how to make a real goddamn omelet. Not one of those scrambled egg shitballs Dennis calls an omelet. Listen good if you want Mr. Nikaniks to even think about letting you cook back here.”

I got real quiet. Eddie was a big guy and you never could tell what’d do when he was weird. Normal days, he’d walk in the Athens Grill, put on the apron, and you knew what to expect from him: good cooking. This week it was something else. And not just drunk neither, because the man could cook when he was drunk.

“You start with this bowl. You listening to me, Rusty? I ain’t training this shelf, am I? Start with this goddamn bowl. You want get to cracking eggs, right? Well, you don’t. It don’t work that way. You got to start small, understand?”

I didn’t but I just nodded like a duck. Eddie usually didn’t talk much. I don’t mind people talking, but it wasn’t like him. Most times, Eddie just glares at us waiters, moving us around with a twitching eyebrow.

He went on. “Chop the vegetables first. That’s where you start, with the small stuff. Cut yourself up green peppers, onions, mushrooms and you put them in the bowl. Then you got something, someplace to build from. Get me that knife.”

I fetched Eddie the knife, and he sniffled again. Earlier in the week he said he was under the weather, but I’d never known Eddie to be sick. We’d only worked together for about two years, but I remember his little brother, Randal, bragging on how

Eddie only got sick when he ate strawberries. That was back in high school, before I got kicked out for selling meth.

“This ain’t like slicing vegetables for the fajitas we tried in April. You chop these guys up fine. You see that? That’s almost there. You got to chop the living hell out of them, you got to work. Don’t give those bastards a chance.”

Eddie chopped like the vegetables had insulted him or insulted his wife, Beatrice, who he call Bebe and loved like a grease fire. He didn’t take the seeds out of the green pepper or the ends off the onion.

When they was chopped small as cigarette butts, Eddie stopped and just sort of stood there. After a minute he mumbled something and threw the knife across the kitchen into the Enrique’s busing tray, knocked the whole thing over.

“Shit,” I said. Eddie just gave me look like he didn’t know I could talk and wasn’t pleased to find out.

“Let’s stop screwing around.” He pointed to the stovetop next to cook table. “Fire up that range. You don’t want these vegetables tough in your omelet. That’s Dennis’ problem. He doesn’t give a goddamn, he ain’t going to eat it. But you better give a damn, even if it’s something small like that.”

Eddie blew his nose on a handkerchief again. Things was quiet except for Mr. Nikaniks past the swing doors cashing in the register, dime by dime. When I’m out front setting up my tables I hear the roar of Interstate 59, but back here, before the grill is fired up and fryer get going, there’s barely any sounds at all.

Far as I care to think, Eddie and Mr. Nikaniks is the Athens Grill. Mr. Nikaniks owns the place and pays the bills, but Eddie is the head cook, and people love his stuff

even if people don't know him. I remember the night Mr. Nikaniks pointed out the guy who'd been bouncing checks and stealing tips. Eddie dragged that guy through the back door by his jacket and beat his head against the brick wall of the dry cleaners. Stain's still there.

Eddie got a pan down from the rack above the cook table. "Rusty, put a little oil in that pan. We're going to sauté these bastards. You know what sautéing is? Good. Sometimes I wonder if Mr. Nikaniks knows what people're about. Ricky can't even talk English, but Mr. Nikaniks hired him."

I never understood why him and Dennis, the off-hours cook, called Enrique "Ricky." When I called him Ricky he scowled awful. When I said "Enrique," tripping over the r like they did in that beer commercial, he smiled. The only other person who called him by his full name was Bebe, but she was always real nice to everybody.

"Look here. This pan seem big? This is the one we're going to use to make the omelet later. No sense dirtying two pans. Keep everything close, save work. Just common sense, here or wherever you cook."

The vegetables got dumped into the pan, and Eddie stirred them around for a minute. They popped and whined, and I leaned back against the grill with my hands in my pockets.

Eddie made this face like he just bit into a bad peach and then he swore. Looked like he was going to break the knobs off the range, he turned it down so quick.

"Too hot. Don't let things get too hot. That's a problem. People who don't cook, slobs who come in and lay their money down, they think if it's hot, it's good. Well, I'll tell you, hotter ain't always better. You got to be careful. Heat'll ruin a meal."

Pepper, onion, and mushroom sizzled in the pan. Eddie wasn't looking at them or at anything.

"You let things get too hot, you let them boil up when they should simmer, you let them char, you ain't left with nothing. Nothing."

Eddie ran the back of his hand over his eyes and cut the burner off.

"You listening, boy? Mr. Nikaniks pays me twelve an hour for this cooking, so it needs be good. I can't suck up to nobody like you waiters can. If this cooking ain't good, if it don't work, nobody gives a damn how hard I tried." Eddie kept turning his head to look up at the exhaust fan hood and this empty square of Scotch tape there. He shook his head but didn't say nothing.

"What next?" I said.

Eddie gave a start like he'd been broken from a trance. "Cheese. Fetch me that block of Colby. Get the eggs while you're in there."

The Colby and eggs were right up front in the walk-in fridge. When I got back with the cheese and the eggs, Eddie had the grater ready. The vegetables was out of the pan and back in the bowl, steaming up the sides.

"Now we grate that cheese. A solid cup and a half will do it. If the fryer was going, we might throw in some bacon, cook it up real quick, and crumble it into the vegetables. But this one's going to be vegetarian."

Eddie took a hold of that cheese and that grater. He kept trying to start it on the grater, but it was like every angle stopped him, reminded him of something else he didn't want to think about. After a minute of this false starting, Eddie started shaking his head.

"You. You do it. I can't grate this, I done it too many times."

I grated that cheese without a word. I tried to grate unjudgmental-like.

Soon Eddie blew his nose again and nodded that I'd done enough. "How many eggs we got there? Four? Four'll be enough."

He picked up the eggs slow, but I could see he was shaking like a wet kitten. Eddie opened the carton and looked at them eggs. For a minute I thought I'd gotten the wrong kind and he was going to bawl me out, but then he picked one up.

"Jesus. You ever look at an egg, Rusty? I mean, really look at it? Look how white that is. Smooth. They all come out perfect, like God taught them chickens to lay."

I knew that he weren't talking about eggs, or just about eggs. But I also recognized it was none of my concern.

Eddie took the bowl and the egg. I seen him crack eggs before, quick and graceful, like he was on one of them cooking shows. Now he just held the egg and looked at the bowl, like the egg was some treasure from Egypt or Tokyo. Like it was something worth worrying about.

After a solid minute, Eddie just staring, it was getting to be too much for me.

"You know how they say, Eddie. You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs."

Eddie turned and looked at me, his eyes all red and swimming, that egg still in his hand. He was trying like hell to say something, but the word stuck in his throat like a dirty fork. I thought he might take a swing at me, but he turned back to the bowl and cracked the egg.

It didn't go clean. The shell crumpled and crushed. The egg's innards spilled half out of the bowl and yolk covered Eddie's hand. Jagged bits of shells like little broken teeth was everywhere.

Out front, Mr. Nikaniks cursed at a handful of nickels that jangled across the floor. The dishwasher finished its cycle and gave a whine. Outside a tomcat wailed.

Slow as a collapsing barn, Eddie buried his face in hands. Leaning over the cook table, he sucked in a gallon of air and wept. He drew them tears up from his belly and heaved them out. The sound of it spilled through the kitchen, filled it up with hurting.

He leaned there, elbows on the table and getting yolk on his face, and I tried to stay quiet. Hell, I ain't even got my GED yet, but I know when to keep my head down. Eddie's a damn big guy. If he went fierce, well, that'd be it for me. I thought about slipping out front and asking Mr. Nikaniks what to do. But when I thought about his Greek worry-beads and his shuffling walk, I knew he would find a way his cook going to pieces was my fault. And weren't it? I said that crap about breaking eggs.

I stood between the cook table and the grill by Eddie's shoulder, scratching my arm on the panther tattoo I got three years ago. The clock over the dishwasher said it was getting close to 8:40. I'd have to get my tables ready soon, silverware sorted and napkins folded. Eddie cried on with no stopping in sight.

I sighed big and cleared my throat. "Eddie? Come on, now, Eddie. We got to finish that omelet. Come on. It ain't that bad, Eddie."

He took shallow breathes and raised up a bit. His face was, well, I don't think I can tell what his face was like. "I can't, Rusty. I tried, damn it, I tried."

I sort of waved my hands around, didn't know what else to do with them.

“Eddie, I can’t finish this omelet without you. I can’t. I need you on this. Come on, let’s go.”

“I can’t, I can’t do anything. That’s why. That’s why she done it, because I can’t. She knew it was my fault.”

“We’re opening soon, Eddie, now please.”

“Nothing works. That why she done gone. That’s why it’s over. Bebe.”

The entire cook table shook underneath him and a stack of plastic fry baskets on the table slanted and fell off.

I ran my hand through my hair and took a deep breath. “Eddie, you listen to me. You’re a damn good cook. The best I ever seen. Now maybe you ain’t the best husband, I don’t know any of that. But I know that you never let things get too hot around here. You know when to chop and when to slice. You can tell well done from medium well, and not just guess like Dennis. You’re a good cook. Now, we got to finish this omelet. Come on.”

Slowly, he’d reined in his crying, just leaned with his head on the table breathing ragged and deep. He sniffed wildly. The register rang out front, so Mr. Nikaniks must have been done cashing in.

“What do you say, Eddie? We going to do this? Come on, let’s do this.”

Eddie started straightening up, and I thought maybe he was over it.

Then his fist slammed down on the cook table and Eddie grabbed my collar. He yanked me in so close I could see the veins in his eyes and he breathed over me like a boar.

“What’s the fucking point, Rusty? Why’s the point of this shit?” His whole body was shaking like hate, like an earthquake deep underground that can’t get out. “Bebe left and I ain’t got nothing. What can I do? What?”

I gave the only answer I had. I’d never had a Bebe or anything, but I told him what I knew.

“You do whatever you can, Eddie. You go on. You finish the omelet.”

I could hear his teeth grinding. “I can’t. I can’t.”

“Ok, Eddie. But you do anyhow.”

His hand came away and Eddie sank back onto the cook table. He was still crying some, but it was dying down. I tried to fix my t-shirt.

After a minute, Eddie got up and rubbed his hand which was as red as his face. He wiped the egg yolk out of his eyebrows. Out front, I could hear Mr. Nikaniks singing his old songs to himself.

Eddie let out this deep breath. “All right, Rusty. All right.”

I got a towel and cleaned up from the first egg. Eddie slowly cracked the rest into the bowl, not as graceful as he used to, but he did them. I threw out the shells and he wiped everything with a big fork. I wanted to ask him if it wouldn’t been easier to put those things in the bowl after he mixed the eggs, but I figured I’d leave it alone. When the pan heated up again, he dumped the whole mess in.

“Salt and pepper now, before it gets too cooked. If you got bacon or ham, you throw that in with the vegetables. See that bubbling? Wait ‘til that’s gone all way around, then you fold. But you got to be patient. You got to wait until things are right.”

He folded it in half and flipped it. I got down two white plates and some forks.

After a minute more, he switched the range off slid the omelet onto a plate.

I cut it down the middle and pushed one half toward Eddie.

He shook his head. "Ain't hungry."

"Like hell, Eddie."

We stood there and we ate that omelet. The day was getting started and we ate that omelet. The sun was still rising and we ate that omelet.

VI. Naked Armies

Garbage and weeds choked the thin alley, and our Jeep slowed to a crawl as we rolled in from the main street. Weary black faces stared out at us from high windows. Music, a familiar American song, came from somewhere and a baby cried. Midmorning light slanted down from the rooftops, leaving the alley dim.

Our driver and guide, who had asked us to call him David, stopped the Jeep in the middle of the alley. There was not enough room on either side for another car to pass, but there was no other vehicle in sight.

Monrovia had been almost like an American city. Totota, just a few hours east over decaying roads, was something else entirely. Totota was full Liberia, weary, dirty, and pocked with bullet-holes and mortar scars. I'd written down the words "tired disregard" for the people of this town, who looked at us, a pair of white journalists, with eyes too worn by violence to care about anything less than surviving. The loss of life here was well documented. On our drive this morning, I had seen a billboard that read "Infrastructure, not Destruction!" torn and nailed to a wall.

I looked to my photographer in the back seat. Jerry shrugged and said nothing behind his sunglasses. Nonchalant and indifferent, he was every inch a pro.

"The LURD rebels are here, in one of these buildings?" I tried to keep a confident but not arrogant tone. My experience state-side was that people clammed up if they thought you were talking down to them.

"No," our guide said, "but someone who knows them. We follow crumbs, like a bird."

He stepped out of the Jeep and turned to us. "Wait here." We nodded and he stalked off through the accepting doorway of a dingy white building.

I glanced around, vaguely aware of the number of windows that looked down on us. We waited. The singing, not in English, went on. I tried, but could not follow the tune. The baby stopped crying.

Jerry leaned forward, resting his chin on his crossed arms. "You seem nervous."

"Shouldn't we be? I mean, how much do we know this guy? He stops the car here on an empty street and runs off. That looks bad to me. Like the scene in a movie when the soundtrack cuts out."

Jerry rolled his head back and forth. "You're thinking like a movie. Foreign correspondence work will teach you that there's no soundtrack. If trouble comes, it doesn't play around. You can't do anything about it, so take it easy. Things turn out the same whether you're worried or not."

I sighed and nodded. Jerry had been sent all over the world by the paper and he had certainly been in a war zone before. This civil war, the bodies we'd seen yesterday on the road from Monrovia, the gunfire in the distance, it seemed to roll right off of him.

"Just remember to act like a journalist. Your stuff is damn good, by the way, but that was home-turf journalism. This is whole other deal. You act like you're just some guy, that's what they'll treat you like. Focus on the story and let the stuff you can't do a thing about take care of itself."

A thin, molting dog, like the spirit of famine, scurried down the alley. The smell in this part of town was undecipherable, woodsmoke, strange foods, filth, and maybe

blood. I had out my pen and pad, tried to put down the alley and the sense of dread that pressed against my skull. "Sense of dread" reassured me from the white page.

Jerry cleared his throat. "Did you see the Sixty Minutes piece on LURD and this whole mess? It was some interesting stuff. Very different."

"No, I didn't." I hadn't been following the Liberia stories very closely. Nothing larger than a trip to Kentucky had been on my agenda until Cartwright, the lauded foreign reporter, had a stroke.

"Liberia's army isn't very professional, apparently. Or the chunk of it that is doesn't see a lot of fighting and the irregulars don't play by the rules of modern combat. Had shots of this one guy fighting in a dress. Apparently a lot of them do it."

I chuckled slightly. "Craziness. I heard stuff like that, not from Sixty Minutes though. Some eccentric people down here, but that's why this conflict makes good stories."

Jerry nodded and began to check his camera gear.

I realized a couple of years ago, after finishing a story about the Y2K scare, that words make events. Pictures are useful and capture attention, but without words there is no motion, no direction. Words are action. If we want to understand the action of an event, we need words.

Of the stories about the Liberian civil war, the one that had convinced me to take the sudden assignment was one that I couldn't make sense of. The story was about the Women's Artillery Commandos, an all female squad of rebel fighters, the ones we were going to get a second interview with. The article said a lot of things, but the words failed

when the story described how sometimes, while fighting male troops, the women commandos would go naked.

I had tried to imagine, kept trying to imagine, a force of naked soldiers pushing through the forest. Dirt clung to their toes and leaves slapped at their thighs. Weapons warmed against skin, bare spines crouched in waiting, sweat hung from ribs. Twigs drew blood and bark tore flesh, but they marched on, naked. The faceless images crowded my thoughts, singing with some kind of power, but I could never make the idea sensible or real, never see it as an event.

I didn't ask Jerry about it.

There was no sound from the building David had disappeared into. Sweat trickled down my stomach underneath my shirt. Our shade was being eaten by the slow advance of the sun.

Several dozen yards in front of the Jeep, a girl stepped into the alley. I guessed she was in her mid teens. She wore a red bandana, sunglasses, a pale blue halter top, and fade jeans, nothing that would have been out of place at any mall or high school in the United States. She walked lazily in our direction. I could not tell if she was looking at us.

The girl stopped at the hood of the Jeep and adjusted the duffle bag hanging from her left shoulder. "You are looking for the Women Artillery Commandos?" Her voice was older than her walk or her clothes.

"Yes," I said. "Our contact David was supposed-"

She nodded her head back the way she came. "This way. Get up. Follow."

Something about the calm of her voice convinced me. I obeyed and Jerry scrambled to get his equipment back in his satchel. "You're taking us to meet them? You're a runner or something?"

"No," she said.

I saw a starburst of raised skin on the back of her right arm as she led us away. "You're one of them. One of the Artillery Commandos."

Jerry shook his head. "She's like fourteen, man."

"Seventeen. But we have fighters of fourteen. Do you think that strange? Charles Taylor has young as ten forced to fight in his army."

I had my pen and notepad out again. "So you are one of the Commandos?"

"Yes."

She led us out of the alley, down a wide and empty street. We were nearing the edge of the town. Untamed plant life grew up next to low stone buildings. A man in a formal shirt, black pants, and no shoes rode past us on a bicycle. The heat of the day rose to greet us, leering down the road like a skull.

Jerry soon had his camera out, taking pictures as we walked and I figured I better get to work too. "What's your name?"

"Call me Cynthia."

"Do you mind if I ask you some questions, Cynthia?" I flipped over a new page in my notepad.

"About LURD? Or the Women Artillery Commandos?"

"Both."

"We have a camp, not too far. Journalists always want to see weapons. We have many weapons there." She spoke as if this were an answer to any question I could ask.

As we passed beyond the last building a small boy, no older than eight ran out toward us. He called to Cynthia and held out a cantina and something else for her. She took them.

I watched him jog back where he'd come from. "Friend of yours?"

"His mother was a fighter. She is dead. Now he gets useful things for us."

Cynthia stopped and sipped from the cantina before placing it on the ground. She then unzipped her bag, and removed a battered AK-47 AKM, and jammed the newly-received clip into the weapon. She cocked it smoothly. My heart tried to climb out of my mouth but I forced myself to remain calm.

"Holy shit," Jerry said, grinning. "That'll teach me. Mind if I get a few shots of the gun? Pictures, I mean."

Cynthia slung the weapon over her left shoulder and picked up the cantina. She nodded to Jerry.

I let out a breath and continued. "I was hoping to get an interview with your leader. Black Diamond. Would that be possible?"

She led us on, down to where a path into the dense green met the road. The city receded and the jungle surrounded us with cooler moisture. Leaves and twigs crunched under our feet.

"A ridiculous name. We do not call her that. They made that up."

"Who?"

"Men. Charles Taylor's people."

“What do you call her?”

“Patricia. They make up Black Diamond so they have something terrible to fight. They make her Black Diamond because they fear most that they can be killed by what she really is. A woman.”

Jerry snapped pictures like a natural reflex, took pictures like blinking. Pictures of Cynthia, pictures of the jungle, pictures of the gun. He made sure neither of us was ever in a shot. An insect buzzed by my ear, like a bullet in slow motion. I tried to jot down everything she said.

“How long have you been a fighter?”

Cynthia adjusted the weapon on her shoulder. “I do not know.”

I wiped the sweat from my eyes. “How could you not know?”

She stopped and took off her bandana. It was already soaked with sweat. Flies circled her, all of us, and she slowly folded the cloth and tied it back around her head.

I thought about rephrasing the question more professionally when she responded. “What does a fighter mean? Was I a fighter when I would not let the soldiers hurt us any more? Was I a fighter when I followed the rebels, the other men with weapons? I was ten when I first picked up a gun. Was I a fighter then?”

She was not looking at me, but at the thin path ahead. After a moment, she began walking again.

“It is like asking when the seed became a tree. No one can tell you.”

I wrote in my notepad “unknown” and envisioned a sentence for this discussion, this young path. I considered “primeval forest,” but dismissed the phrase as hokey.

"Have you ever killed men fighting for LURD?" I tried to keep my voice steady.

It seemed like a fair question.

"Yes. I have killed men. Many of them. But not for LURD."

"Not for LURD? Then why?"

Turning on her heel, Cynthia suddenly faced me. I was a solid foot taller than she was but the heat from her face pushed me back. "Because I wanted them to die. Because they killed my brother and raped my sisters and me."

She walked on but the force of her response stopped me on the path. I had dropped my pen. Sounds of jungle animals came constantly from all around us.

Jerry came up behind and slapped me on the back. "Come on, you're doing fine. She's just trying to unnerve you with answers like that. Remember to be professional."

I nodded and we walked on in silence.

Eventually, I saw thin smoke rising through the trees a few miles away.

"That's your camp?" I said.

"For now," Cynthia said. "We will move soon."

"What about Black Diamond? Patricia?"

She made a sound like a sigh or a grunt. "No interviews."

Cynthia kept ahead of us. She hadn't denied that Black Diamond was here. I knew I should have pressed more, and repeated to myself that I needed to maintain focus.

I started to smell the fires. Voices came dimly through the trees, but I couldn't see anything.

I tried again. "Why no interviews? I would think she'd want to get her message out."

“She has given interviews before but never liked what was printed in papers. They were all wrong.”

“Factually incorrect? This could be a chance to correct some things, then.”

“Not facts. Just all wrong. Does not matter, she’s not here.” There was music coming from ahead. Not tribal music or chanting. Rap. Deep base rumbled.

“Where is she now?”

“I cannot tell you.”

The forest broke and we stood at the edge of a camp. A dozen or so shacks trembled in the clearing and the smoke of six fires mingled in the air. Stacks of wooden crates were scattered through the camp. Some were used as seats, but others lay open or on their sides, bleeding chains of ammunition in to the dirt. Several large weapons stood on tripods at the edges of the camp, pointed into the warm jungle.

People moved everywhere, talking, walking, eating, but a knot of them gathered at the middle of the clearing around a portable stereo. They danced as if in a trance, seemingly without reference to the music. Several of them also shouted with the song, sometimes the wrong words, sometimes in the wrong language. Many of the people in the camp carried weapons and all were women or children.

Cynthia stopped and looked back at us. “This is the Women Artillery Commandos. There are many more, more camps, more guns. This is what you came for? What you came to see? Take your pictures, write your story.”

Jerry nodded quickly and grinned, but her questions gnawed me. They sounded like an incrimination, as if my desire to see women and children prepared for war had put them there. I ignored it, tried to ignore it, and wrote my notes.

From the edge of the forest, Jerry was trying to squeeze as much as he could into the frame of his photograph. Most of the women I could see were young, teenagers, and were dressed in tube tops, jeans, short skirts and bandanas. Only a few were dressed in any resembling combat gear. A cluster sat polishing their nails next to a heap of mortars.

Cynthia stepped away into the knot of bodies at the center of the camp. Several women called out to her and she answered them quickly. She gestured back and Jerry and I and said something that set off an explosion of laughter. A girl of about twelve behind a large machine gun on a tripod swiveled the weapon toward us while making machine gun sounds. Our bodies were riddled with imaginary 7.62 mm rounds.

I tried to scribble down the details of the camp. The smell of smoke, the heat, the rap music, the bullet casings in the dust, the spotted dog that chased naked children. The quick rhythm of their language, the low jungle, the trash on the ground, the rusted shacks. The tiredness of the people was everywhere and many of them wore scraps of cloth tied around wounds. Nothing I wrote really captured the stubborn desperation the whole place exuded and scrawling "stubborn desperation" was worthless.

Jerry stopped snapping pictures and stared into the center of the camp before shaking his head. "Oh, right. I thought that was an American flag."

I hadn't noticed the flag swaying on a crooked poll at the center of the clearing, behind the dancers. On some level I was vaguely aware that the Liberian flag had been based on the American. Red and white stripes, but instead of fifty stars there was only one. The difference made the flag seem perverse and cyclopean. I wrote "cyclopean parody" in my notepad but knew I wouldn't use it in the final draft.

"Hey." A boy of about seven had approached while I wrote. "You got money?"

"Yeah. You selling something?"

"Five American dollars and I show you where they keep Charles Taylor."

I smiled. "Charles Taylor is here?"

He nodded without humor. "Five dollars, I show you where he sleep last night."

"Yeah, ok." I took out my wallet and gave him a five. The hand that took the money had no pinkie.

The child sprinted away toward a shack. I followed, trying not to hope for anything unreasonable.

Jerry grunted. "You're ruining my shot. Where're you headed?"

"This kid's got something to show me, so I'm--"

"Following the story?"

"Following the story, Jerry."

He nodded at me and went back to photographing the weapons of these women.

The kid led me toward the largest shack in the clearing. A few women looked at me as we went, some with interest or shock, others with cold contempt. The boy handed my five dollar bill to a thin woman with a mangled ear I assumed was his mother. She took the money without a word or a glance.

The outside of shack he led me to was rusted like the others, but one wall was decorated with "No Stupid Man Allowed" in green spray-paint. I wrote "sic" next to it in my notebook. The boy slid the metal door open and stepped inside.

"Here."

The single room was mostly empty. A filthy mattress was propped against the wall and an oil lamp sat on crate in one corner. In the opposite corner there was an empty

birdcage. The place smelled like perfume and feces, and muddy foot prints covered the floor.

“Charles Taylor was here?”

“They keep him in there at night.” He pointed at the birdcage.

I stepped closer to it and peered inside. The cage was too small for a person, even collapsed and folded. “I, uh, ok. I’m not sure this was worth five dollars.”

“He does not mean the Charles Taylor you think.” Cynthia, without sunglasses, leaned against the doorway looking in. I had not heard her approach. Her rifle was still slung around her neck. “Another Charles Taylor.”

“A bird?”

“Monkey. A bad monkey who must be beaten often.”

The concept of a monkey named for the president they were trying to overthrow seemed natural. “I didn’t see any monkeys outside.”

“He does not belong to anyone here.”

“Who does he belong to? Black Diamond?” It was a strange leap in logic, but she didn’t deny it. “So she must have been here recently, last night.”

I was pressing hard, but that’s what I was here for. This was chasing the story, I thought to myself, this was journalism.

Cynthia looked at me expressionlessly. “You have seen what you came for. You should go. We are fighting a war and we do not have time for you. You should go.”

“But you said she wasn’t here. She obviously was, as recently as last night. I understand this is a sensitive situation, but why can’t you just-”

“Stop this. It is time for you to go.”

"Think about this, Cynthia. Media exposure can only help your cause. We're here to find the truth about things and share that with the world."

The whites of her eyes burned at me, but I tried to let it roll off. The boy who led me here had left.

"You, what are you?" She spat the words.

"I'm a journalist," I said.

"Jour-nal-ist?" She sounded the word out in sharp syllables. "You are a journalist, not a man? No, you are no real person at all. Real people meet and live and fight, but you just ask questions and write. You are not really here at all. I want you to leave, go away, and sell the story of a man who was not here at all."

She stared at me without moving. It was hot and still inside the shack.

I wanted to ask about Black Diamond, to find the story I'd been sent for, to follow what the audience found interesting. But what she said twisted in my stomach, made the back of my head burn. Tried to remember the questions that I had, remember what was important about the mantle of journalist, and why I was here at all. Words crowded my head like an ocean. I put my notepad away.

"Leave." Her face was like iron.

I found something, something that meant more than I understood. It was the only question I could still ask. "Before I came here, I read something about how you fight. I can't make sense of it. I heard that sometimes you fight without clothes. Is it true?"

She nodded.

"Why would you do that?"

She spoke with deep breathes, she anger already spent. "Of course you do not. You do not hold a gun waiting to force frightened children into the dirt. You do not hold a gun to punish those who do. This is not your war. These are not your people. They are only news to you."

Her words hung heavy in the air like incense. We stood about five feet apart, but it seemed like miles. I did not have anything to say.

I took a step toward the door but Cynthia did not move.

"Wait."

She lifted the strap of her AK-47 over her head and tossed the weapon onto floor. "Pick it up. I will show you why we fight this way. If you truly wish to understand, pick it up."

Keeping my eyes on her, I bent and took the rifle.

Cynthia pulled a pistol from her waist and placed it on the crate with the oil lamp. She unknotted her bandana and folded it into a triangle which she placed on the ground between us. Next she undid the ties of her shirt and let it fall away. She stepped out of her sandals and unzipped her jeans, pushing them off easily. When Cynthia was totally bare, she picked up her pistol again.

"Don't turn away. Look at me. This is what you wanted to see. Look."

The light inside the shack was poor, but I could see her clearly. Without clothes Cynthia was small and thin. Lean breasts reminded me of her age. Round scars like nickels on shone her leg and shoulder. A long horizontal wound, barely healed, hung below her navel. Her skin was whiter, rougher at the elbows and knees. Limbs thin like solid metal, iron.

She pointed her pistol at my face. "Can you kill me? I will shoot you unless you do. Can you? Raise the weapon. Kill me."

I could see each muscle in her arm tensed and writhe under her dark brown skin. My hands were on the grip of the rifle she'd given me. She pulled back the hammer of her pistol with a callused thumb. The rifle was in my hands and I raised it. There was no sound from the jungle or the camp or her or me.

Staring at her over the length of the weapon, I saw Cynthia. At seventeen she was already a mother. She had fought and been wounded. Cynthia had suffered and led, worked and killed. The jungle was watered with her blood and the blood of those she loved and hated. All she had was given to this. Her body said all of this in scar and muscle and skin, and I could barely look on her without knowing these things. Over the length of the weapon, I could barely look on her.

She pulled the trigger of her pistol. There was only a click.

The woman who asked me to call her Cynthia dressed quickly without taking her eyes off of me. She reclaimed her rifle when she was finished and stepped out into the jungle.

My heart beat like falling hammer. I thought about my flight home and the story I found but did not have words to circumscribe. From the forest came animal sounds, angry, deep, and nameless to me.

VII. An Annunciation

Others may prattle about the meaning, significance, or purpose of this event, but I'll tell you what's really important. I'll show you what was worth telling.

First, let's consider Peter. Upper twenties, conservative dresser, nothing spectacular to look at, but with a sophisticated and knowing air. He's from some place interesting, like New York or LA. No, Peter's too airy and impractical for places like those. He could be from Paris, except he's not French. I suppose it doesn't matter where he's from; he's at the party and that's what we're interested in.

Peter is a poet. I'm not sure if he actually writes anything but that's the title I'm giving him. He has that attitude or presence about him, insinuating that he understands the world in a way others don't. To criticize, one might say he is concerned too much with abstractions and grand concepts, too little with the bruised and cracking realities of life. But that's just a guess.

Peter's really not the partying sort, but he loves people and that would bring him to the party. Henry (that's the host) would invite him. Right now Peter lingers at the edge of things, not dancing, not drinking, not flirting, not hungry at all. This will change.

Molly doesn't need someone to invite her to this house party. Though she's young, there have been few parties since the invention of the concept she has not attended. Just look around your own parties, the real kickers, and you'll see her there.

I could tell you all about Molly, about her curves, her hairstyle, her newest bourbon and condoms boyfriend. But I won't. I'll let it come out, as any good narrator would, in contrast and clever conversation.

This night Molly sits oddly alone on the leather couch. She is settled on the couch across from the stairs, in front of the de facto dance area, to the left of the stereo by the liquor table. Twentysomethings, college students, young professionals, drifting souls, crowd and sway and drink and talk loudly, but Molly sits alone.

Now the coming together. Just watch.

The couch squeaks as Peter settles next to Molly. He's in jeans and a loose button up the front shirt, clean but nothing exciting. She turns slight and tries to let him disappear in the curve of her hair.

"Hello. I'm Peter." He barely speaks above the stereo's clatter.

Molly smiles and nods automatically. "Hi."

"Why are you over here?"

It takes her a moment. "What?"

"You don't seem like you belong."

She scoffs in a way only beautiful women are allowed. "I'm a friend of McKenzie. I come to Henry's parties all the time."

And she has. Let your imagination full out "all the time." Molly is a young woman and attractive. Imagine vague, half-drunk encounters, the semi-dark of back bedroom spaces and you'll get the basics.

Peter just smiles deeply. "I meant by yourself on the couch. This doesn't look right on you."

"Doesn't look right on me?" Her eyebrows scrunch. Everything looks right on Molly. "Are you that writer?"

Peter does not blush. "Yes. You seem more built for motion than stillness. Or simply more accustomed to it."

"Is that- Are you coming on to me in some geeky way? Because I've already got a boyfriend."

"No, I'm not."

For the first time, Molly looks directly at Peter. He does not hide his eyes and nothing there looks like desire.

"Sorry I snapped at you. I'm just so used to being hit on by these weirdo losers at parties. Drives my boyfriend nuts. Drives me nuts too."

She is smiling slightly, if only too herself. But the ice is broken and the potential of the scene is unlimited. Friends, lovers, soul mates, mortal enemies, anything could have now, any reality solidify between these two.

"But I shouldn't badmouth Harry and his get-togethers. Nothing better than a good party, right?"

Peter smiles and scans the crowds of people. "They certainly are interesting."

She is only half listening. "I'm Molly, by the way."

"Peter."

Molly smiles and sighs, as if letting go. "Hey, neither of us have anything to drink. Isn't that crazy? We look like teetotalers or Bible-thumpers in the middle of this party. You want to get something?" She leans forward, about to rise.

Peter has barely moved from the place he first sat down. "No. I just came to talk."

She settles back into the couch, smoothing her lime green skirt. "Just talk? I can't remember the last time I just talked at a party. No offense, but for most guys talking is just a step on the ladder. You know what I mean?"

Peter nods. "If that's your experience with these parties, why do you keep coming?"

People swirl around them, dancing, talking, flirting, but none of them will interrupt. Things are going as they should. I know Peter and Molly don't look like the perfect couple yet, but be patient.

"Well, because they're fun, even if I do have to put up with dickheads. That's not much of a reason, is it? I guess because I like to belong. Or because I'm still kind of looking for someone. Where else am I going to look?"

Peter doesn't hesitate. "You already have someone."

Molly smiles weakly. "You don't know my boyfriend."

"I wasn't talking about your boyfriend."

There is a long silence between them. Molly's look sours. "What is that supposed to mean? You mean you, right? God, men are unbelievable." Her hand over her stomach, she stands.

Another time she might have felt flattered by such an obvious come on, but now she is repulsed. And things were going so well for them. Maybe this little bump will make things work for the better later on.

Molly steps away, pushing through the throng of dancing bodies, toward a table crowded with bottles. A few liquid partygoers call Molly's name as she passes, a few lick their lips with the possibility, but she gives them all the same smile. They could

have seen past it if they cared to look, but this is a party. All that matters here is lipstick, perfume, and motion, and Molly has all three plus long legs and more. The air in the house is hot and sticky.

On the table Molly finds the right liquor, one clear and painless, and fills an empty cup. The hollow bottle returns to the table where it will later be broken by a random baseball and swept up by an equally random guest. A year later one of Henry's roommates would step on the last shard of the bottle and curse God for his bad luck.

For now Molly returns to the couch, ignoring a song throbbing on the stereo, and pondering the contents of her cup.

"Is that necessary?"

She almost jumps. Peter is still sitting there. We'll assume she was too lost in thought to see him.

"What?"

"You don't have to, you know."

Molly could act as if she hasn't heard him, but she's in no mood.

"What are you talking about? You don't know me-"

"I know you, Molly."

He doesn't, really. I would know if he did. Peter is just being poetic, trying for the cliché about destined souls always knowing each other. The cornball. I didn't think he would be this forward or this cheesy.

She waves his words off. "Look, this isn't making sense. I'm not even sure what we're arguing about. Could we stop?" She gives Peter her party smile and turns away.

She's playing hard to get, but he shouldn't give up.

Molly lifts her full cup and sighs over it with closed eyes. The cup is raised toward her mouth and tilted.

She opens her eyes. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Peter does not answer, only keeps his hand where it is, holding the cup away from her lips.

Molly reiterates. "What the *hell* do you think you're doing?"

Peter eases forward and slips the cup from her hand in a motion she does not follow, depositing it on the end table behind him. His attitude isn't angry or desiring or anything. Not many guys like this.

Odd that he wouldn't let her get drunk. Most modern relationships start in the depths of a cup. Molly certainly knows that and Peter needs to get with the world.

"I can't allow your beauty to pass away like this."

Wait a minute, what's this about?

"Look," Molly says, brushing back her hair, "I don't care what you're talking about. Just give it back. I'm not asking you again." Her blue eyes smolder behind nine-dollar mascara.

Peter does not balk. "I can't let this happen."

"Let what happen? My getting drunk? I'll do whatever I damn well please. Now give it back!"

Who is this man, she must think, to act like this? Nobody acts this way.

Peter finally gives in, shifting to give the cup back to her. He reaches for...no. He tilts forward, away from the end table and the cup. His hand comes to rest on Molly's stomach.

This shouldn't be happening. Real people don't act like this, touch like this. But there Peter is, silently holding his hand over her navel. We should see the event as Molly probably sees it, shocking and confusing. He is not groping or caressing or forcing or clutching.

It's weird, but I'll let it play out. That's the beauty of life, right? Never know what people going to do until you put them together.

Peter looks unwaveringly into her eyes. "Why would you do this?"

"What are you doing?" Molly's mouth hangs open, and she totally disarmed by his touch. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're casting away what you have as if it were nothing."

His hand has rooted her to the earth. "What are you talking about, I--"

"Your child, Molly."

Whoa.

"What?" Molly is breathless and disbelieving. "How could you know?"

Yes, how could Peter know? Molly must have told someone at the party. An old friend, a passing comment, it could have happened. And Peter found out. No need for mysterious knowledge, nothing unrealistic. But it's still bizarre that he would bring this up.

"I can't allow you to betray this, Molly. I will not."

He removes his hand.

"I don't understand."

"No, you do. You just won't let it be. Because you're afraid."

Is she crying? No, no, no, that's just nonsense. This story needs to get back on track. We're going to far from the purpose.

Peter continues. "You shouldn't be afraid. It isn't easy, but if—"

"I can't," she says.

"It isn't easy for anyone, but it is what you are called to."

"I can't. I can't do it." Does she know what he's talking about? She must be struggling to bring the conversation back to the couch and his rudeness. Real things. Forget about this other stuff. "Please go away. Give me back my drink and go away."

Peter's eyes still fix Molly in her place. "Why would you do this?"

She knows that his "this" dwells not only in her cup, but in something akin to it, a procedure that had to follow. It's not that terrible, really. It happens every day.

But who cares? That's not what we're here for, not the importance of this event.

"Because I can't do anything else." Molly's hand falls to her stomach, as if following grooves left by Peter's hand. Her eyes are clogged with tears. "My boyfriend's gone as soon as I tell him. My mom thinks I'm some kind of whore. She called me a slut the last time I saw her, right to my face. What kind of life is this for anybody?"

Peter is silent. I'm sure he's realizing that he can say nothing to her or to any woman in her condition. He shouldn't look at her, he should look away. In fact, it would make things better if he just left.

Molly continues. "You get it, don't you? I can't do anything else. Why would I, anyway? This whole world is so screwed up. It's all straight to hell. There's no point—"

He cuts her off with a look and a passion I can't name. "You know that's not true. That's a comfortable lie, a mask for being selfish. You are worth more than that. And so is he."

But he doesn't make sense. This is not the truth of the world. It's poetic foolishness. It doesn't belong in a realistic story.

Molly hunches over, wraps both arms around her waist. "How can I know anything? How can I know this choice won't just destroy my life? How can I know?"

"You can't. No one can. We need more than human assurances or human efforts. We need faith. Believe for the sake of this beauty, Molly."

That is *it*. I cannot allow this. This is supposed to be about a relationship, a romance. Instead, we have this, this shit. Don't worry, dear reader, the story may yet be salvaged.

Kyle, an important and interesting character, pivotal to the event, approaches the two from out of the crowd. Tall, blond, sharply dressed.

"Molly, nice to see you! Almost missed you here on the couch. Great little get-together, huh? I see you don't have a drink, but that can be fixed, right?"

His tone is fitting to a party, his smile big and easy. He's quite a dashing handsome fellow too, isn't he?

Peter, predictably, only glares.

Kyle continues. "Hey, you must be Peter. Somebody mentioned that you'd been invited. Strange to meet a poet at a party, right Molly? I didn't think you people came to these things. Why don't you spin us out a haiku or two, eh? I know just about everybody here, so—"

"Leave."

I don't think he'd say that. Peter's too passive to act that way. He's-

"I told you to leave. We do not need you or your excuses or your distractions."

That's kind of out of character for him. Is he even talking to Kyle?

"Get out."

No, he can't say that. This is my story. I know what's best and he-

"Leave us. Now."

Turn to Molly. She will help. She can accept reality.

Her words form slowly.

"Go. Please. I must do this."

I...the story...dear reader ...this isn't how things were supposed...

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Something changed. Maybe something in the light, maybe something deeper.

My mascara was running in my tears, but I didn't care.

The party continued. A song I didn't know played on the stereo and someone finally opened a window. Moonlight came in with cool night air. I wiped my cheeks and joined Peter in looking at the people around us.

People talked. It was like they hadn't really been talking before or I hadn't been able to listen. I could see Henry walking among his guests and they were complementing him and the party, noticing all those around them for the first time. Smiles that were more than just what other people expected to see started to form.

I turned back to Peter and he smiled too. "Do you understand now? It's about accepting the life you find."

I finally figured out the edge on his words that brought me to tears every time he spoke. It was honesty. "It can't be that easy."

"It's not, but that's the soul of it."

I sniffled again and wished I'd brought a tissue or something. "But my boyfriend and my mother and everything else? What do I do?"

"Those are the questions you have to answer, Molly."

I tried to look him in the eye one more time. "Why did you come?"

He stood, though I'm sure I was only person who saw him. "I already told you. I came to talk with you."

Peter left after this, though I can't say to where. It was almost too much. I think I was the only person who could really be sure he was really there. For everyone else he could have been just a figment or a joke, an old story that meant nothing. Not for me.

For me, this was an event worth telling.

VIII. The Crimson Affair

Waiting at a small table in the corner of the Il Paradiso, Susan Payne decided that dinner at such a sumptuous restaurant meant Reggie was either going to propose to her or dump her. Only such scenes seemed appropriate for the refined ambiance of the place. While she wanted to believe Reggie could offer to make her his bride, Susan had long suspected he, like so many other men, had been unfaithful to her. The light of the restaurant was lavishly weak, and near-darkness folded softly around her corner. Out a nearby window, Chicago seemed to sparkle like a handful of diamonds floating in warm May air.

“Would you care for anything else?” The waiter, gymnast thin, had already made three visits. Susan noticed how taut his rear was the first time he stepped away from the table.

“No, thank you. I think my date will be arriving shortly.”

The waiter gave a nod and departed. Susan wondered if he had been forming plans of his own when he looked at her. Perhaps plans to throw caution away with his shirt and ravish her right there on the table. You could never tell with the wait staff, she thought. He could have taken one look at her low cut black dress, her ample bosoms, her still youthful (if not young) complexion, her delicate neck framed in silky black hair, and be overcome. That short apron of his could hide any sort of burgeoning passion.

While sipping her second gin martini of the night, Susan considered where the waiter would fall in her history of love. She had had a slow and awkward beginning with her romantic life, as most people did, fumbled encounters and misunderstandings of the

heart that made her smile now. A high school sweetheart that came back to town, a weekend lover she could not forget, and a fiancé she had loved and lost. Some part of her had thought that Reggie would have been the end of that.

Reggie Carmine had been for Susan a glimmer of mystery, danger, and luxury. The weekends at his private cabin in Aspen, the surprise visits with roses, the nights of uninhibited passion. How this dashing, wealthy, handsome man had dropped into her life she was helpless to explain. Reggie simply appeared one day and Susan silently chided herself for dreaming it could end any other way.

A firm kiss landed on her left cheek.

"Sorry I'm late," Reggie whispered before circling the table and swooping into his seat. He was a towering, muscular man, but somehow still nimble.

"No, you're not," Susan said.

"Really?" He took a long draw from her glass of water. "I thought I was running behind. Good that I'm on time for once."

Susan almost let it go for his smile, but forced herself to be firm. "I meant you're not sorry, Reggie. You always say you're sorry."

"And I am, honey. I just can't always keep track of time."

Susan remembered the likely reasons for the dinner and did not pursue the matter. His punctuality had always been an issue between them, and it continually forced her to question how much he cared.

"Ah," the waiter interrupted. "Are we ready?"

Reggie rattled off his order as if he ate at Il Paradiso daily. Susan had decided on the mandarin shrimp fifteen minutes earlier, though she did not think she would eat much of it. The waiter and his tight buns departed.

“Judging by your martini, I’d say I was supposed to meet you here at seven-thirty and not eight. Right?” Reggie adjusted his tie, the same bright red one he wore when they went out. “I really am sorry but-”

“Reggie, what happened to your neck?”

Frowning slightly, he poked at his sculpted neck. “Oh, that. Racquet ball. Jim Merner—you remember Jim from the Christmas party last year?—well, Jim and I were playing a doubles game last night. He walloped me in the neck with the follow-through to his backhand. Remind me not to play doubles anymore. It’s murder.”

“I see,” was all Susan said. The mark looked fresh to her. Perhaps, she considered, it was not a bruise at all. A love nip, a mark of possession, a high-schoolish hickey. She imagined the lips that might give him something like that, the blondes or redheads latched onto his neck. Susan did not consider herself a jealous woman, but she could not stop considering the possibilities. This had happened to her before, good men she found with foreign lipstick, strange marks, and guilty smiles. It was the way of the world.

Reggie reached across the table and took one of Susan’s hands. His straw-blond hair fell playfully over his forehead, and his grip was strong but gentle.

“How was your day?” he asked.

“You know, the usual,” she said, removing her hand slowly.

Most of the usual things she never told Reggie, though she suspected that her life did not differ greatly from that of most women. The yearning glances from male coworkers were expected, but the veiled propositions from her superiors and occasionally the magazine's clients were different. Not that all of the propositioners were unattractive (the managing editor was ruggedly handsome and, if office gossip was believed, still surprisingly virile for his age), but Susan knew the game of intra-office romance was a dangerous. Some days she wondered if any closed doors in her office building didn't conceal some clandestine love affair or sexual adventure that could begin careers or end them.

Susan tried to focus on the things she could tell Reggie. "Miriam keeps forgetting that 'assistant editor' doesn't mean 'assistant to the editor.' She had me getting her coffee three times today. What am I supposed to say to that, 'get your own damn coffee'?"

Reggie laughed deeply, another quality that had delighted Susan so much when the first started dating. "Maybe you should."

"Because I want to get fired? Miriam'd fire me faster than a speeding bullet if I said half of the things I should."

Their waiter slipped in with salads, and Susan began to question her guess about Reggie's intention. If he intended to break up with her, he was going about it all wrong.

Susan finished her salad in a few quick bites. "And how are things at Carmine Supplies?"

"Doing great." Reggie smiled at her again. She could not tell if it was hiding guilt, sadness, or passion.

“Still just ‘doing great’? That’s all you ever say.”

“What do you want me to say? Nothing happens.”

Susan’s fork clanked against her salad plate as she put the dish aside. “I just feel like you’re keeping me in the dark. I don’t get how nothing can happen at a major company like Carmine Supplies day after day.”

He shrugged. His shrugs had seemed so cute to Susan for so long. “My father and my grandfather were believers in stability. Their plans for Carmine Supplies worked so well that the company runs itself. The most radical thing I’ve done in years was renegotiate my employees’ vacation time. Gave them an extra day a year.”

Shaking her head, Susan finished her martini. Once again Reggie amazed her by being able to communicate nothing. She had only the vaguest idea what Carmine Supplies even supplied. The mystery of her beautiful man has intrigued Susan at the beginning of their relationship, but she had come to realize that she could get very little out of him about who he really was. She knew Reggie made a fantastic amount of money but rarely went out, that when he was not with her he went to bed early even on weekends, and that despite being the handsome and successful, he had never been married.

What these facts, and lack of facts, added up to was obvious to Susan: a man afraid of intimacy. He always seemed loving and caring in regard to people in general, but Susan was sure that inside Reggie was afraid to let others know him. She was hiding innocent day-dreams and office tension, but what was he concealing? Was there a secret love in Reggie’s heart that would be revealed if she got close? Was he leading another

life, maybe even secretly married to another woman? Or was it an unrequited, unforgettable love he could not release or admit even to himself?

Susan straightened her back and looked at Reggie. "Why don't you just tell me why we're here."

"Hmm?" Reggie wiped his mouth with the thick cloth napkin from his lap.

"Reggie, men don't take their girlfriends to ritzy restaurants for no reason."

Reggie blinked a few times and then sighed. "I suppose that's true."

A waiter, meticulously avoiding eye contact with both of them, slipped in and took their salad plates. Reggie fidgeting with the gold ring he always wore, and Susan began suspecting a number of seedy truths about the piece of jewelry.

"Well," Susan said.

"Things," Reggie began, "things have been great with you, Susan. I want you to know that. I've been happier with you than I have ever been. You're a wonderful woman, but I--"

"So it's time for the 'it's not you, it's me' speech?" Susan hated that she couldn't keep her eyes from clouding. She had heard, and given, this classic breakup routine at least a dozen times. "God, Reggie, can't you be more original?"

"But it isn't you, Susan. You're wonderful and beautiful. It's me who's to blame for any problems we've had."

"No, don't you--" she interrupted.

"Can I finish, Susan? It is my fault that this relationship hasn't worked. But it hasn't. We've been fooling ourselves to think this relationship is going anywhere, but

it's obviously not working. You're a great woman, Susan, but if this isn't making us happy, shouldn't we end it?"

Susan sat in silence for a moment. Relationships did not just end because they did not work. Life wasn't that simple for Susan. There was always some underlying secret, some passionate misdeed or consuming problem.

Looking him squarely in the eyes, she released her big question. "Reggie, are you married?"

He made a face like he had been hit with a brick and almost jumped out of his chair. "What? Married? No, no. How could you think that? You know I'd never do—"

"I know? I don't *know* anything about you Reggie. You've always kept me at arm's length. What was I supposed to think? You always been late, your being unavailable at night, always 'out' when I try to reach you? What else could it be?"

The both sat in emotional silence. Reggie's jaw still hung open and Susan's eyes still clouded angrily.

"I want to know, Reggie. Is there someone else? If not, why all this? Why can't we try to make this relationship work?"

"I swear to you, there's no one else."

"Then what? I want you to tell me the truth. The truth, Reggie."

Reggie looked Susan in the eyes. The world seemed to be only the table, suspended in time, space, and light.

"Okay."

Their main courses had arrived.

They ate quickly. Susan thought her mandarin shrimp were excellent, but she could not eat very many of them. Reggie went through his filet mignon methodically, as if building up his strength for an arduous task.

When they were finished, Reggie was silent for a moment and then cleared his throat. "I know I've kept you out. I'm sorry for that. I didn't really have a choice, Susan."

His voice had fallen to a whisper.

"Yes?"

"Susan, I..."

"Yes?"

"I'm a superhero."

This had not been at all what Susan expected.

She took her glass of water but did not drink from it yet. "Really?"

Reggie nodded. "Yes."

The dim bulb above their table flickered. Its light became clearer; the red of Reggie's tie and Susan's lipstick became redder. Grays narrowed to darkness or light.

"Which one?" She drank deeply.

"The Crimson Huntsman."

Neither of them spoke for a moment.

"How does being the Crimson whatever explain this? I don't think it's that easy."

Reggie rubbed his neck over the bruise. "Huntsman. Crimson Huntsman. And, to start with, it's the reason I'm always late for things. Like tonight."

"What happened tonight?"

"I really was on time and the interstate was clear for once. The exit was right there when my police scanner picked up reports of running shoot-out with an armed suspect. Double-Barrel, the Bullet-Proof Menace. I wouldn't have stopped, but I happened to know his weakness, and this is the sort of thing the boys in blue count on heroes for. Responsibilities, you know?"

Susan sighed and looked around the restaurant, hoping no one else could hear them. "And the mark on your neck isn't from racket ball?"

Reggie smiled. "Double-Barrel hit me with the butt of his shotgun after I'd tackled him. By then it was practically over anyway."

The more Susan visualized the struggle, frame by frame with Reggie in red tights bulging with muscles, the more she could accept the event.

"I want to believe you, Reggie, but how can I? You're basically saying that your whole life has been a lie. How can I trust that what you're telling me now is true?"

Reggie nodded but did not look at Susan. "You're right. You don't have any reason to trust me. I'm really sorry I haven't been honest with you, Susan, but in this profession you can't be up front with things. It just doesn't work that way."

Susan saw eyes straining for sympathy, for belief. Because he was being truthful, or because he wanted her to think he was being truthful? Men and their lies were something Susan was deeply acquainted with. Was this just another mask, another way of getting out of cheating on her, falling to the lusty embraces of another woman?

"So I'm supposed to believe that every time you weren't around, you were off fighting for, for what? Truth and Justice? What about your 'business trip' to Acapulco?"

Susan had assumed it was more of a personal pleasure trip, every ring of phone when she could reach him another lover wrapped in his arms.

Reggie gave a smirk and a nod. "I really did go to Acapulco, just not to stay. I met up with Vigilant Factor, a group out of Miami, and we fought the Vhorlox for control of New Atlantis. We eventually had to destroy the underwater city and its stores of untold knowledge rather than let it fall into Vhorlox hands."

"Vhorlox?" The name sounded to Susan like a painful sexual maneuver.

Reggie's seriousness did not waver. "Alien conquerors bent on world domination. Nasty guys, but allergic to bronze. Once we figured that out, it was easy going."

Susan shook her head and stared out the window for moment. Chicago seemed different, the buildings taller and the lights brighter. "So how long have you been the, uh, Crimson Huntsman?"

"Quite a while now. Started when I was about twenty-three."

"How do you even get into that sort of business?"

Reggie snorted. "It's not like being a dentist, Susan. You don't have to go to school or anything. For most of us, all we really needed was a reason and a neat outfit. You just look different, fight crime, and once you make a few big catches you're good to go. As long as the newspapers don't mix you up with somebody else or brand you a menace to society, it's really not that hard. For me it was a family thing. My grandfather was a Crimson Huntsman, and so was my father, and now I am too."

Susan remembered wondering why she had never met his family. "Does it pay well?"

“Terrible. That’s why most of us have day jobs. The health care costs alone for this line of work are mind-boggling. Being a masked vigilante means two trips to the hospital per month, minimum, and guys like the AbominaTor won’t pull punches just because you’re over your HMO’s covered incidents limit. I’m just glad I get my insurance through Carmine Supplies. I don’t know how those fulltime guys do it.”

“So Carmine Supplies isn’t just a cover?”

Reggie nodded. “I’ve been totally honest with you about that. I really do own the company, and running Carmine Supplies really is the most boring job in Chicago. It’s one of the reasons I’m glad I can be the Crimson Huntsman. If I couldn’t beat the crap out of insane criminals in clown outfits, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Susan laughed and tossed her hair over her shoulder. “A good break from the boredom of me too, I guess.”

Reggie reached across the table to caress her cheek. “How could you say that, Susan? You’ve been a joy in my life. I’m sorry I’ve kept you out of so much of it, but I had to.”

Despite herself, Susan closed her eyes and enjoyed his strong hand on her skin. If only they could forget all this crime fighting nonsense, she thought, they could work on their relationship again.

Susan’s eyes snapped open. “Do you have any, you know, superpowers?”

Reggie smiled and took back his hand. He slipped the large gold ring from his right hand, leaned in, and pointed out the worn suit of arms on the front. Susan scrunched her eyebrows at it.

"This family ring is a kind of mind-reading device. Magic. It allows me to feel the evil intent of people and know what they're going to do next, as long as it's evil. Helps me know when the bad guys have backup plans and hidden death-rays and that sort of thing." The ring went back on his finger.

"Sounds depressing," was all Susan could think to say.

"Kind of, I guess. It does allow me to stop people from succeeding with their evil plans, and that's good."

Their waiter made another visit to remove their dishes, and Reggie put his ring back on. The waiter smiled at them both, but Susan saw what she had expected earlier, a telling bulge underneath his apron. His desire was so blatant and uncontrolled, his passion for her still boiling. In a strange way, the observation reassured her.

"Did you see that?" Reggie said softly as the waiter left. "Under that guy's apron?"

Susan was shocked that he would notice, much less point out, such a thing. She nodded.

Reggie did not blush. "A gun. My ring's telling me he's planning to rob the restaurant later this week. It was a good plot, joining the wait staff under an alias before making his move. Unlucky for him that the Crimson Huntsman will be here to stop him."

Reggie's fists tightened and his eyes narrowed. In all their days together, Susan had never noticed how blue his eyes were or how well-defined his features.

Susan rubbed her hands together. Her bare fingers were cold.

"Reggie?"

He seemed to have forgotten she was there. "Yeah?"

"I know that this is big deal and I really do appreciate your openness. It's never been like this before. And this secret identity thing, I mean, whoa. But..." Susan's chest felt tight, her breath frustrated. "But why are you really breaking up with me? Can't we make this work, Reggie?"

Now he looked out the window, toward the bustling dark streets and towering heights of Chicago. He smoothed his hair several times before turning back to her.

"I'm breaking up with you because I'm not just Reggie. I'm the Crimson Huntsman too. And the Crimson Huntsman's a part of a whole different world, a world of intrigue, violence, and danger."

"But why does that mean we can't be together?"

"Because it's just a matter of time before some criminal mastermind finds out that you're important to me. Then you could be kidnapped, brainwashed, held hostage, cloned or anything so the bad guys can get to me. I can't let that happen. Whether I like it or not, our relationship will drag you into that world."

Susan frowned. "I guess I just didn't think of it that way."

"People think being a superhero is dangerous, but it's their loved ones who really have it rough. The kidnapping and such usually amounts to nothing because we're there in the nick of time, but still, it's very risky. I can't put you through that, Susan, not against your will. I mean, if you were a superhero, that'd be different, but you're not."

Susan, deeply into her third martini, reflected that this was not how she thought this or any other breakup would turn out. "So you love me too much to keep dating me?"

Reggie nodded. "Believe me, Susan, if I was going to give up this game and settle down with anybody, it'd be with you. But I can't turn my back on this city."

Without superheroes, villains' plans would go unfoiled and put everybody in all kinds of danger. My responsibility to the people of Chicago just can't be ignored."

Susan looked up at Reggie, who seemed larger and clearer every moment. "I think I understand."

"I truly am sorry Susan. You really are the best girlfriend I've ever had, considering that you didn't turn out to be an android, clone, or alien. Or a White Sox fan. But I just can't ask you to share my life if that will put you in danger, and it will. It's just how the world works."

They hugged and Reggie promised they would stay friends, which Susan wanted to believe but could not. After paying the check, Reggie suddenly grasped his ring finger and said that he had to go, for the good of the city. Susan nodded and watched him leave.

When she was alone, Susan ordered the Crème Brule and a cup of coffee. The dessert was excellent and sweet, and the coffee warmed her body.

Her thoughts turned to how she could get Reggie back in her life and keep him from leaving. Susan considered becoming a super-villainess, a creature of sultry seduction and inexorable schemes. A perfect name presented itself too, "Mistress Payne." According to what she knew about superheroes, a love-interest turned foe was nearly unstoppable. No matter how Reggie could forget Susan Payne, there would be no way the Crimson Huntsman could ignore Mistress Payne.

The more Susan thought on it, however, the less the idea appealed to her. She was in no shape physically to battle the beefy masked men and buxom superwomen who might come against her plans. And her budget really was not up to funding such schemes involving pricey laser rifles, deathtraps, and so on. She knew she was much better off

just finding another man, someone who could satisfy her fantasies and still allow her professional and personal growth as a modern woman.

Out the window Susan caught a glimpse of a figure in red dashing into the inky darkness of the night.

Vita

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