

An American Tale

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Denver, Colorado

His first trip to the Strip in Las Vegas had left him in awe of the glitter, of the waste of water in the desert, of the crowds walking and rolling along the boulevard and teeming inside the outlandish casinos. His second trip had been like going to the McDonald's down the street from his house with the smell of fries spilled on the floor. He had seen the haggard faces of casino workers after long shifts and decrepit gamblers throwing away their money down shiny slots to be rewarded with noise and lights, and he had hated himself for seeing those things.

Why could he not be like anybody else and just enjoy himself? His hypersensitive perception distorted normal life into half truths and ironies yet he could not get to the gist of things, to the whys and the hows, his insight getting mired on non-essentials that made his anticipated discovery of life's truths a disappearing mirage in the desert. He envied clods who got a kick out of eating at the NASCAR café whereas he could see nothing but a corporate attempt at deceiving him by giving him heroes he didn't care for, and he hated both the deceiving and the fact that he was too clever to be deceived.

There had been two moments of achieved satisfaction in this trip. He had stopped by a highway mirador in Utah to admire a landscape of mesas and canyons under a bright sun. He sat on a rock and took in the sights, breathing in a cold desert air. He had become enthralled by the sight of an eagle gliding over the rugged terrain with the smoothness of a celestial god. A crowd of screaming kids disgorged from a minivan and herded by their loud mouth parents had put an end to his bliss.

Later, he'd had sex with a whore he had met in the lounge of one of the casinos. The short climax had been worth two hundred and fifty dollars. It had not been true companionship but he had enjoyed sex without emotional strings and had satisfied his curiosity over the flesh of a stranger.

Now he sat in his car stuck in the Denver afternoon rush hour, crawling his way through potholes and around orange cones. As the car's stereo played Bob Dyland, he realized that he had divorced his wife only to fall into the lonely routine of a bachelor existence just as constraining as the shackles of a loveless and childless marriage. Something was amiss if his happiest moments of late had been sitting on a rock looking into the desert and screwing a whore. Whatever wasn't right with his life, he couldn't put a finger on what it was.

As he usually did on the way home from work, he stopped by the grocery store. With basket in hand he moved through the aisles not so much looking for goods but checking on the strolling humanity. He applied what he knew to be his flawed looking glass to the unsuspecting customers crossing his path. They came into view and he analyzed them and discard them and kept on moving, wondering how off the mark he had been in his judgments because he knew that his perceptions of other people were as flawed as people tended to perceive him. He envied people who could come into the store to buy groceries and walked away with just that. He always walked away with some groceries and the mental snapshots of the strangers he had crossed paths with.

He needed a hobby to occupy his wondering mind, something more enlightening than ruminating over stranger's mental snapshots. He tried reading the usual fare of bestsellers but they left him as empty as prime time TV. He even tried a literary tack and picked up James Joyce's Ulysses but after a few pages he asked himself, what the hell is this crap? Since this first and last try at keeping his mind entertained, he had come back to his stacks of Car and Driver magazines as his source of mental stimulation.

As usual, he walked with the basket in his hand. If a particular person caught his fancy he would follow that person around; very disturbing of course, but he made no distinction between genders or ages, just as if he were watching animals at the zoo, and he had consummate discretion. While he was looking for trash bags, he came behind a woman of about forty, her tight dress shaping her generous rump as she leaned forward to reach for a jar of sauce on a lower shelf. When he tried to squeeze past her, she shifted her weight on her pumps and her hip touched his.

"I'm sorry," they said together.

Her subdued fragrance was one of extraordinary femininity, something he had never smelled before, expensive and uncommon stuff.

Without further words or meeting of eyes he kept moving to continue his quest for trash bags. That night, and the nights that followed, he lay on bed basking in her remembered fragrance, a memory so fresh and clear that he felt she was next to him. It was a smell of orchids - he didn't know what an orchid smelled like, or if they smelled at all - but he fancied that it was a scent of orchids, moist and tropical, soft and penetrating, and that she, with her voluptuous and lascivious nakedness would lie on a bed of such flowers, next to him. At times this fantasy gave him an erection.

It had happened before that snapshots stuck in his mind like the hook from a pop song that keeps on playing itself to no end between the ears. Such obsessions would subdue, their power drowned by the flow of new images. But this snapshot was different; it had attached to it a scent and a touch, the softness of a mature and soft flesh. His imagination metamorphosed her image into the Venus she wasn't, but he didn't care because he knew that her scent and touch had remained intact. He marveled at his olfactory memory working so well. Of course he could remember and distinguish particular smells such as gasoline or ammonia, but he had never been so stimulated by the delicate scent of a woman who had become embedded into his mind so deep in such short a moment.

At the time of that brief contact, he hadn't had the foresight to follow her and take a better look. Maybe he'd had been ashamed at her being old enough to be his mother; perhaps the sensorial experience had not yet bitten into the marrow of his imagination. Whatever the reason, he now regretted it. He had glanced at her pleasant face where thick and dark eyebrows arched under a well-coiffured black hairdo streaked with silver. But what he remembered most vividly was her dark blue eyes, eyes that met his, before he had run down the aisle chased by his own embarrassment.

He had gone back to the store many times to patrol the aisles but neither she nor her perfume were there. He found his obsession amusing rather than disturbing, the innocent product of his unoccupied mind and sensitive nose.

Time weakens memories until they disappear into unintended forgetfulness or what is left is but a gray shadow of its true self. His memory of her had been reduced to such a shadow when, one Saturday, he caught a whiff of orchids at the mall. An instant flash of remembrance jolted him; the silkiness of her hips, the roundness of her shapely calves raising from her pumps to hide pass the hem of her dress, all came back to him as if it had never been almost forgotten.

He turned around and there she was, standing almost next to him, rummaging through her purse. Her dress was more elegant and stylish but she was the same woman. He imagined walking up to her and smelling her neck, feeling her breasts getting squashed against his chest, of getting lost in that scent. She looked at him, unblinking and expressionless. Realizing that he'd been staring at her, he blushed and tried to speak, but no words came to him.

"Well, hi there," she said. Her face was an unreadable mask.

"Hi," he answered. His eyes, which had moved down to the expensive necklace against her pale bosom, would not respond to his wishes to move somewhere else.

"Can I help you?" She smiled, ivory teeth enclosed by a bright and fleshy redness. His eyes moved back to her face.

"I..."

"Yes?" Her smile and direct gaze made a clod out of him.

"Sorry, I don't know what to say."

"Have we met before?"

"Yes, by accident. Grocery store."

"Oh, yeah. I remember."

Her answer took him by surprise. That he remembered her was a given but her, or anybody else, to remember him, that he didn't expect. Maybe he had been too abrupt when he'd said sorry, or maybe he hadn't smell too good after a day of running around the office.

"I remember you because of your perfume," he said.

She mentioned the perfume's name, something French and unpronounceable.

"Why do you remember me?" He dared to ask.

"Nice buns," she flashed a naughty smile and walked away, her hips swaying atop high stiletto heels. His eyes stayed on her until she disappeared in the crowd. Wondering what was going on, he sat on a bench next to tired and disgruntled husbands waiting for their wives. After thinking it over for half an hour, he was as confused as ever.

Nice buns, she had said. Old enough to be his mother, but sexy and appetizing, as classic as an old movie star, of the black and white days. Her wealth fit her like one of her tailored dresses, as much part of her as her own skin.

From that day on his obsession went from amusing to disturbing. Naked on bed he would masturbate thinking of a woman whose name he didn't know. Dating women his age had become a routine that fulfilled a biological need not satisfied by self-stimulation, but Mrs. Robinson, that is what he had started to call her, was a tantalizing unknown. Excitement built into the pit of his stomach, an excitement akin to the sensation felt when approached by the prostitute in Las Vegas.

Instead of pondering unanswerable questions and philosophical dead ends, now he wasted mind power thinking about her, making love to her, undressing her item by item, peeling off silks garments until exposing her tender and milky flesh unmarred by tattoos or piercing gadgets. He found himself fighting erections at work for a woman probably twice his age that he knew nothing about and whom he called Mrs. Robinson because he didn't know her name, and had no idea if he would ever see her again.

Regardless of the poor intelligence he had on her, the excitement of the chase to come endowed him with new energy. Remembering that she had said he had nice buns, he stood naked in front of the full-length mirror in his room, squeezed his butt cheeks, and said "Yeah, baby!" a la Austin Powers.

Everyday after work he walked the aisles of the grocery store where he had first seen her. As often as he could, he went to the mall to search for her. Nordstrom was his favorite hunting ground because he suspected she shopped for the best. While stuck in traffic he peered into luxury cars. He had made his mind she drove a Cadillac, a candy apple red Cady. Older people still liked those. He also checked Lexuses and Mercedes just in case.

He continued masturbating while thinking of her, involving her in the most illicit and shameless sexual machinations he had ever dreamed of. But after many weeks that had turn into months his persistence had yielded nothing. Even though she was still very much in his mind and his libido, his pragmatism allowed him to function as society would expect, dating and screwing women his age, and avoiding the pits of marriage as if they were burning coal under his feet.

One night he took a young woman with overdone hair and nice breasts to a fancy restaurant. This date had proven hard to crack and his experience on these matters told him that nothing worked

like an expensive meal and wine to make tough cases like her spread their legs, the reason d'être of polite dining as far as he understood it.

In the restaurant's lobby, as he and his date entered, he saw her, radiant in a short strapless black dress, embroidered stockings, high heels, jewels sparkling like candles in a chandelier, a fur coat sexily wrapped around her creamy shoulders. Any other older woman in the same dress might have looked ridiculous, even a slender young one, but she looked stunning to him. When it came to dressing up, she knew what, how and when. Their eyes met and he flashed his James Bond smile. It didn't matter to him that his date was hanging from his arm like a fruit basket, or that an old man was hanging from Ms. Robinson's in the same fashion.

She reciprocated the smile on the sly.

He felt like dropping his date, walking to Ms. Robinson, taking her into his arm and walking out of the joint - screw that polite conversation bit and get to it. He felt an erection coming up, and he knew his dress pants would not keep the bulge down so he stayed put and turned around trying to distract his mind to avoid an embarrassment. From the corner of his eye he watched as her party followed the hostess into the dark bowls of the restaurant, noticing how she kept her askew eyes on him until she passed behind a wall.

"Who is that?" his date asked him. After all, the young one was not as obtuse as not to have noticed his interest.

"Some friend of my mother," he said and there were no more questions from his date about what she had called that old mamma with the stuck up butt. He and his date dined on the opposite side of the building where Ms. Robinson and her party were sitting. He and his date ate, drank and flirted, he playing his cards on the table in front of him but wishing he was sitting at the other table where the stakes were higher, winner takes all, double or nothing.

"Where is the bathroom?" he asked the waitress. She directed him to the opposite side of the building - to her side.

"Excuse me for a moment," he said to his date who was already bubbly with wine. He did need to relieve his bladder but he also had hoped to catch a glimpse of Ms. Robinson, and he did and she noticed him standing by the bathroom wall. There was a slight smile from him and a discrete counterpart from her. As he came out of the restroom he found her standing in the hallway looking like she were ready to go into the ladies room but he knew better. She had been awaiting for him, stalling for time in front of the men's bathroom. This time it was not the aroma of orchids with the unpronounceable French name that greeted him, but nevertheless an indescribable divine fragrance shrouded her. Where does She get this stuff? He wondered.

"Nice to meet you again," she said offering him her small, warm and soft hand with immaculate manicure and he took it without hesitation. The hormones in his blood spun faster but he was determined not to flounder like he did at the mall. A small piece of paper had ended up in his hand as she went into the restroom floating on a smile, sneaking away like a feline. He dropped his hand and the message in his pocket, all very casual and smooth. She would appreciate his finesse. James Bond could not have done it better.

That night he got to play with his date's young breasts. His date didn't realize that his extra hard erection and willingness to please were inspired by the old mamma with the stuck up butt. Ignorance facilitated her pleasure and pragmatism voided his guilty conscience.

After he got rid of Young Breasts the morning after, he started to ponder about when would be the best time to call Ms. Robinson. There was no doubt about calling. The concealed paper had a phone number hastily written in well-rounded letters. He could play it cool and wait a couple of days so as not to look too eager, but he was desperate so he called that Saturday morning. The number was not available. I will try again later. Of course you dimwit, he kept on mumbling, I will call again and again until she answers or my dialing fingers wear out.

His next attempt, sometimes after lunch, succeeded.

"Hello," Ms. Robinson answered.

"Hello," he said, nervous.

"Who may this be?" she asked.

He couldn't answer because no reasonable answer crossed his mind. To her he was as mysterious as she was to him. After a pause he spoke.

"You gave me your phone number last night, by the bathroom."

"Oh yes, you're the guy from the mall."

"And from the grocery store."

"I remember."

"Nice buns," he said half ashamed.

"Do you have a name, nice buns? Or you would rather be called that?" She giggled and the sound tickled his ear.

He said his name and she said hers. Brenda. Now she had a name. There was a lull in the conversation. His groin throbbed and he wondered what she felt.

"I'd like to meet you." He had mustered all his wits to sound nonchalant.

"I bet you do." Again, that ticklish laugh came through the receiver.

"Are you always this bubbly?" he asked.

Their first meeting occurred at the Starbucks by the mall. After a friendly handshake they sat across each other. His heart beat hard enough to pop out of his rib cage. Their small table brought him closer to her. Her attractiveness was not magazine cover material but it had a mysteriousness and raunchiness that would draw the attention of many a man who crossed her path. She held his stare and smiled, half sneer and half something else he could not describe or explain. Her eyes flickered and thick dark eyelashes fluttered.

Her perfume wafted across the table and caroused his nostrils. Was he the victim of expensive perfume or there was something about her that triggered his hormones? He didn't know and didn't care either. He took a deep breath and let the aroma take him into rapture.

"Since the first moment we met, there has been something about you that has attracted me to you," he said.

"And what is that?"

"Many things yet nothing in particular."

"Then don't be particular and tell me one of those other many things." Her smile captivated him.

"Well, for starters, your scent," he said. "You know, it drives me insane."

"Is it too strong? I don't want to reek of it." She laughed with a coquettish mannerism.

"Oh no. Is not the quantity; it's the quality, so ... nice."

"Thanks. Tell me more." She felt back into her small smile.

"You dress sharp, and you have class, you know, spades of class." He blushed because he wasn't one to compliment a woman, and the few times he had done it, his compliments had been half lies designed to get laid. This time he was being truthful and for that he felt embarrassed.

"Thank you for noticing, darling."

The "darling" reverberated in his ears and his hormones churned in his blood stream. He felt a stab of pleasure in his groin. He saw himself and Brenda through the eye of a black and white camera, stylish and witty as forties movie stars on a wide screen.

"You're welcome."

"Go on," she pleaded. "Adulation is quite a pleasure."

"I could go on for a while, and I don't even know you."

"Perhaps if you were to know me better your adulation would diminish or disappear."

"No way. I like what I see." His face felt hot, ready to burst. He had flirted before and saw it as a stupid game but this time he felt like he was hunting dangerous game armed only with a spear. She, the prey, was a real dame, a well bred and heeled female of exquisite maturity, not some young thing

with a loud mouth. He played his cards with care and thought. His usual poker face had abandoned him and he wore his excitement on the skin, on plain view.

"I do too," she said without blushing, her smile turning small but inviting.

He wanted to grab her jeweled hands and kiss them but the tacit understanding that discretion would be a treasured quality stopped him from showing public and perhaps unwanted affection. Now what? he thought. He wanted her but her enigmatic facade hid her feelings. He had what he had longed for within his grasp but, like a hungry miner standing in the heart of the jungle holding the diamond he had long prospected for, he found himself both rich and lost at the same time. His mental dilemma was interrupted by her words.

"You like staring at me, don't you?" Her eyelashes flickered on purpose but he didn't know that.

"Sorry ... I didn't mean to do that."

"You don't need to say anything, darling."

"I find you tantalizing. Don' expect me to explain why."

"Attraction is more than the addition of small things," she said.

"Much more," he said.

The ensuing silence didn't embarrass him because there was plenty more said through their mutual stares that it could have ever been spoken.

"Do you have a place?" she asked softly.

"Yes, down the road, north of Arapahoe."

She stood and grabbed her purse. He also stood.

"I will follow you," she whispered. He nodded. They walked out together. He held the door open for her in their way out. Her scent made him dizzy. By the time he got to his place he had a painful erection. They made love and for him it was the best ever, beyond explanation or qualification. Her skin fair and soft, her curves enticing and accommodating and her thick dark bush inviting. He caroused her with the determination and excitement of a conquistador looking for Montezuma's gold. Every inch of her body he touched, kissed and sniffed, and every one of those inches was better than the one before. As they rolled in bed, they spoke.

"I'm married," she said.

He kissed her for an answer.

"I'm divorced," he said. "And I intend to stay that way."

She kissed him. He sank his eager fingers in her plumb flesh and discovered a soft and pliable femininity willing to embrace him with a unique warmth and aroma. Her detached yet rather willing method of lovemaking had a feline and mysterious quality, as if she knew something about his body that he himself didn't know. From the first moment she touched him he felt she knew the ticklish and erotic spots of his body as if they were tattooed on his skin; and yet, to him, she was the unknown. Every time he laid a hand on her or caressed her, a new sensation moved across his fingertips and he could not satisfy his desire for more fast enough.

The lure of a married woman in his bed, of an older paramour, perhaps a little Oedipus complex - he never figured out what was behind his attraction to her, and he didn't care or couldn't explain it or understand it. For the first time ever he had accepted his condition and enjoyed his situation. He questioned no one about why, how or what's next. His perennial list of things to have and to do dropped out of his consciousness, replaced by one desire, to be with her and to feel her body next to him. He became lax in his ways, imperturbable in his emotions, detached in his dealings with others because only she mattered and only she filled his mind and heart. He occupied his mind on the question of the enigma she was.

Her husband was the old man he had seen at the restaurant, she told him that one afternoon as they embraced in bed.

"Is he good to you?" he asked her, warm and exhausted from lovemaking.

"He is OK."

"He looked old."

"He is."

"Why?"

"Why what darling?"

"Why did you marry him?"

"I was too young to know better." She smiled.

"Am I too young to know better?"

"I was a lot younger than you are now." She kissed him on the lips and murmured into his ear, "someday you may realize you have made the same mistake I made but by then I would have enjoyed every minute spent with you."

"Enjoy Every Minute," that was the banner he flew over the ivory tower of their idyllic and adulterous relationship. It fluttered gently in the breeze of his everyday routine.

He had settled into the routine of chasing after her by playing phone tag and by sending her rather sexually descriptive emails, which she answered with eroticism sans foul language. She was the mistress of deceit as she managed to always come to their clandestine meetings conducted at his place. Now and then she managed to meet him at hotel rooms; the seedier the room, the more sexually aroused she seemed to get. At these motel encounters she wore the most daring lingerie. Seeing her mature womanhood on such revealing outfits made his hormones race faster than if he had seen her stark naked.

He didn't care whether his feelings toward her were love or nothing more than unbridled lust or perverted fetish. Even if he'd known for sure, it would have no difference. The idea that she belonged to him was all that mattered.

"My husband is a very jealous man," she said on another of their afternoons together.

"I would be too. I would never let you out of my sight," he said, and he meant it.

"You are nothing like him."

"Do you think I could not be jealous about you?" He squeezed her breast and rubbed her nipple.

"His jealousy is unhealthy."

"Mine would be wholesome."

They both laughed and that was the end of the subject.

Afterward, he ran her words through his mind many times and always came empty handed. Jealousy was foreign to him, an incomprehensible concept. He knew about its causes, symptoms and consequences, just like he knew things about the Ebola virus, and just like Ebola, he'd never experienced it; it only happened to other people.

Unlike other women he'd dated, she mattered to him. She was the one he couldn't keep; the one he could not show affection for in public; the one that aroused him with her mere scent; the one that one day won't be there anymore and he will be helpless in stopping her from disappearing from his life.

"What is going to happen to us?" he asked her one day.

"Why do you worry about it?" she answered. "Don't be silly."

"You answered my question with a question."

"Did you expect an answer to your question?" Her small laugh tickled his insides.

"Am I asking too much?"

"Yes. There is your answer."

"You haven't answered my first question yet."

Her smile disappeared between her now hard set lips and she turned away from him, staring at the window. He followed her gaze but only saw the evening rays sneaking through the vertical blinds and floating on rails of dust. He awaited for her reaction to his words but she revealed none. The white walls and ceiling turned a melancholic yellow that appeased his desires for a definitive answer. There was no answer, and if she gave him one, he probably wouldn't like it. He embraced her and pushed her back on the bed for another round of lovemaking in the twilight filtering out through the blinds and

chased away by faltering breaths and the smacking sounds of lips on skin.

The routines of his life before he met her were not much different than those from his new life. Their furtive encounters added the spice to his otherwise bland existence. Had she been marriage material, he would have convinced himself that he was in love with her. Also, had she been a candidate for marriage, he wouldn't have got too close to her, afraid of losing his independent and lonely and selfish life. He pondered these contradictions but could not arrive at a conclusion. Fantasizing about her seemed much more satisfying.

She called him a cold fall day. The sky along the Front Range had no traces of any impurity, natural or man made, which could blemish its magnetic ozone blue. The pristine quality of the weather that day was to remember for a long time because it was a juxtaposition to the murkiness inside him after he received her call.

"I cannot see you," she said before he could say his greetings.

"What about Sunday then," he said

After a long pause she said, "I meant ... I cannot see you, again, ever..."

Her words stopped his heart from beating while he tried to gather his wits.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"My husband found out about us. He had a private eye follow me."

"Bastard," he said, not sure whether he meant the PI or the husband or both. "Are you OK?"

"Yeah. I'm fine but our thing is over. I'm sorry."

"Hold on..." but before sounds could be massaged by his open mouth into unintelligible words, or any words, she ended the call.

"Good bye," she said and hanged up. Click went the phone in his ear. The motor that had propelled his existence ran out of fuel while still moving along on cruise control, nary a worry about the future. Now he was stranded too far along to go back to where things had started.

On the following days he mulled what to do next. He couldn't think straight; instead, hormonal rushes sent him to the bathroom to masturbate. No matter how hard or often he did it to seek exhaustion and relief, all he got in return was a brief sense of disgust while his sexual desire for her grew stronger and overtook his common sense like weeds growing on a manicured garden.

Restlessness poked at his nerves during the day when he left his mind wander off the work at hand. His sleep faltered at night with interludes of erections and lustful thoughts. He called her non-stop to always hear a nasal voice in a recording telling him that her number was not longer in service. The mechanical voice was as relentless as he was in calling a disconnected number; still, with each attempt the flimsy idea of maybe-this-is-the-one-call-that-makes-it-through forced his finger to dance on the keypad.

Once dumped he knew better than to try again but that rule, he had rationalized, applied to his other past and gone lukewarm relationships, to the other half-hearted attempts at finding the right woman. But his relationship with her was a bond of flesh, semen, blood and unbridled desire, of a want that burned like boiling oil through the thin skin of his civility.

Finally, he convinced himself that her phone was disconnected, that he wasn't dialing the wrong number and that the recorded message was not a fluke. Frustration or rage – he couldn't distinguish between them – flared up inside him. Instead of giving up and accepting a new stage in his life, he decided to switch to a non-existing, never before spoken of "plan B." Working on this new plan, trying to give it shape and substance, soothed him for a time by creating the impression that he had things under control.

He knew she lived somewhere off University Avenue, behind a guarded gate. He drove past the gate a few times. Now what? he asked himself. Assuming he could get through the gate, he didn't know her place. She had mentioned a big house but every house he could see from the bottom of the hill was as big and looked as empty as a warehouse. That is why she had sought him, to relieve the emptiness and lifelessness that permeated into her from such houses. Why had she chosen him to be her lover? He

was sure he wasn't the only available candidate; perhaps the most naive and easier to manipulate, or easier to get rid of. Perhaps he was only one of the many gigolos already at her beck and call. But no matter how hard he tried to configure his next moves with the precision of a military strike, his mind got diverted into mundane mulling that yielded no benefit.

As a kept woman she didn't have a job. He remembered reading on the newspapers how estranged boyfriends and husbands ended up killing the women they loved, or used to love, by showing up at their work despite restraining orders and coworkers being nearby. The thought of him behaving like those men flashed in his mind but with such a brief and feeble intensity that it did not have time to bother neither his intellect or common sense, or morality, qualities that had become unwanted baggage from the moment he met her.

Her Cadillac came from a local dealership. Camping on the sidewalk and waiting for her to bring the car for servicing could take months but was a workable option. He could also set camp in front of the gate to her neighborhood, or the one he suspected of being so. Both options were liable to bring unsolicited attention upon him. Not for a moment he stopped to think about what he was doing could be considered stalking. From the desperate schemes that ran through his mind, he chose to carry out what he called the Gym Plan. She had mentioned where she worked out, and activity she engaged upon to fight boredom more than to achieve physical condition because as she had said, she only liked sweating when making love. This information she had given as conversational filler, said once and forgotten but not by him who remembered every word ever said by her. Because of the same reason, her visits to the gym were few and short but he arrived to the conclusion that his loitering around a gym would be far less suspicious than loitering on the sidewalks across gates and car dealerships, plus the place is air conditioned and he would be in the shade.

His life's routine had been upset, again, by her, and there was nothing he could do about it. On hindsight, he knew that he had been rather naive by not gathering more information on her and her whereabouts; by God's sake, he didn't even know her last name! He knew every square inch of her anatomy, every hair on her body, and yet he had never bothered to learn where she came from, her full name, how to get to her house. He knew her body as if it were his own, yet he now had to admit that he didn't quite know her on the sense that she still continued to be the unknown, the deliciously and erotic unknown.

None of his schemes worked out. The hours spent searching for her, waiting for her, chasing after her, were for nothing. He felt chasing a ghost made out of intangible flesh, hormones and delicate and expensive perfumes, but a ghost nevertheless, untraceable and consumed by the daylight of his new days without her, hiding from him, perhaps forever.

He continued to live under the appearance that nothing had changed. Coworkers didn't notice his longings for her, his pain at her absence. His few acquaintances didn't notice either. He survived in an automated mode that allowed him to do his job and keep a reasonable social life. But at night he lay on bed naked, stroking his member, thinking of her, masturbating over and over, chastising himself for not having being more cunning and not learning more about her. He couldn't believe he didn't even have a picture of her.

The cliché that time heals everything was nothing but a load of crap to him. His pain may soften and its edges may not be so sharp, but he knew it would never go away, like a bullet embedded in a healed lung. His pragmatic side told him to move on, and he tried, but he kept on masturbating everyday with her image in his head, his fingertips remembering the touch of her supple skin. Back to Las Vegas he went. He stopped by the side of the highway again but this time only saw a hot and harsh landscape of dirt and rocks that meant nothing. Inspiration Point was gone for him. He screwed two whores this time, and it was good, but not like being with her. The rubbing of genitalia and its effects was not much different, but her fragrance was not there, her shallow breathing, her eagerness to touch, grab, asking for more, none of that was there. Money couldn't buy those things.

Of course he was pussy whipped, he knew that, and he laughed at himself because he had

thought himself too smart to fall for this malady more prone to occur on a teenager enamored of his first love or on an older man snarled by a younger woman. He didn't fit any of those two categories, he who had women at his disposal, now found himself pussy whipped by an old mama with a stuck up butt, and he couldn't explain why or how it happened, but he had the disease and there was nothing he could do about it.

Months went by and he started to date other women, and he made love to them while fantasizing he was making love to his paramour, and his unsuspecting lovers mistook his energy and passion the wrong way and could never understand why the relationship didn't work out, but at least he got a reputation as an enthusiastic lover and his bed was never lacking of female companionship. He kept on loitering on the usual places, the gym, the mall, the supermarket, the streets close to what was supposed to be her home, the car dealership, but his hopes had dulled and he expected nothing from these endeavors but still kept at it because hope was all that was left together with his memories of her embedded into the deepest interstices of his brain as if they had been branded in there with a hot iron.

Hiring a private eye came to his mind, but he had nothing that could get a gumshoe started on the right track, and he could not bring himself to confess his twisted passion for an older woman to a stranger. He imagined the investigator's smirk when he explained to the man what he wanted done – crazy nut – The man would probably take his money and he would never hear from him again, and then what?

Back he went to the usual places, and he kept on making love to other women while thinking of his missing lover, and his obsession he kept under tight wraps, but by no means it was over as that bewildering obsession controlled every minute of his life but he did his best to hide it, and he did a good job. As he put it to himself, he had become a master of disguise but he wondered for how long he could keep it up. At some point things would have festered long enough that something ugly was going to pop somewhere. He had no idea when or how or what, but he was sure that his unbalanced life would eventually have to crash somewhere so things would even out. That was nature's way of keeping things straight and no amount of will power or cunning from his part could stop it.

Summer turned into fall and the days grew short but the stubborn parched grasses of summer still hung on the foothills and to what was left of the prairies that had escaped Denver and its suburbs' coat of concrete, asphalt and water thirsty gardens. The sunsets had been outrageously beautiful, a symphony of radiant saffrons and crimsons befitting Martian vistas, because of the smoke spewed by grass and forest fires burning the desiccated land from all directions.

He was sitting on his apartment's balcony with a beer in hand, watching the spectacle of beauty and destruction when somebody knocked on the door. Without looking through the peephole he opened the door. He had told himself many times to be more careful, but every time the bell rang, he forgot his own advice.

It was her.

Her dark hair was up in a bun that made her eyes bluer under her dark eyebrows. Her long earrings shone like diamonds when the sunset light went through them, but of course, they were diamonds, he thought, or something equally expensive. No words came out of him, they couldn't, his tongue paralyzed by her presence. He sniffed the air and that smell of orchids almost wiped him out. He grabbed the door to steady himself.

"Are you going to ask me in?" she said with a soft smile and voice. He stepped aside to let her in, his nostrils flaring to absorb more of her essence. The door closed and she turned around and before he could say anything, she planted a delicate kiss on his lips, and another, and another. Her smell made his libido almost jump out of his body. They kissed and embraced and nothing, but absolutely nothing mattered to him that moment, the world be damned, hell be damned, she is the only thing that had meaning at that moment. Without saying a word they ended up in the bedroom where they made love as another fiery sunset got sucked behind the Rockies.

"Why?" he asked.

“Why what?”

“Why were you gone, and why did you come back.”

“Did you miss me?”

“Terribly.”

They made love all night, and he asked her if she didn't have to go home to her husband, and she said that her husband was gone, for good.

“Where?” he asked.

“Gone to hell, where he belongs.” He looked at her with quizzing eyes.

“Did he die?” She did not answer; instead, kissed him.

“Well?” He pressed for an answer.

“Yes, the bastard is dead.” Her face set into a hard expression. He kissed her neck and nibbled on her earlobe and decided to not stir things up because he wanted her to stay with him for the night, and for the next day, and the day after that, and then forever. With the old man out of the way, his mind filled with possibilities that both please him and scare him but that didn't stop him from making love to her, again.

Next morning he had to go to work. He proposed to call sick but she said no, and promised to be back that evening.

“I don't know if I can wait that long,” he said.

“It will be worth it.”

She gave him her new cell number and he ringed it while she used the bathroom, just to make sure it was not a phony number designed to appease him. A cell phone beeped inside her Versace purse. His spirits soared and his boldness made him dig through her purse and look for her driver's license. The photo was gorgeous, a truly photogenic gem. He read her last name and address and memorized both, then put everything back. When she came out of the bathroom, he had already written the information on a pad on the kitchen counter. This time he would be ready for her next disappearing act. He hid the pad face down under the phone book. He walked her to her car and watched her go, taking a good look at her license plate number and rushing upstairs to add that one to his dossier on her. He felt so smart about his cunning ways, and as the day moved through its hours he realized that last names change, people move and car tags come and go like the geese outside his window at work. Dam it!

He called her from work and she answered and he whispered sweet nothings and she laughed on the phone and the bulge in his pants grew to obscene proportions but he didn't care. She was there for him. What's next? He saw himself living with her on top of the hill, in the old man's house but then he felt like the pool boy, like a gigolo servicing the old lady. Not good. He saw her living with him at this apartment, neighbors and their gossip be damned, but then he knew she was used to good living. A cramped apartment was not her style. They should move to a far away place - maybe France or Italy - and live their lives as they saw fit. But really, the only thing that mattered to him was that she had come back, and he was ready to do whatever it took to keep her.

As promised, that evening she stopped by, and to his surprise she asked him to come to her place. She drove her car and the guard at her exclusive place opened the gate for her and gave her a polite salute without she having to stop. He sat next to her on the passenger seat and a knot rode with him inside his stomach; he had never been in a posh location like this, next to a rich and beautiful woman like her, going up the hill, passing houses as big as motels scattered among manicured landscapes that had stayed green despite the drought and water restrictions, or perhaps those restrictions only applied to the common folk outside the gates, to the little people like himself.

Her Cady passed through an automatic open gate that she had activated by pushing a button on her dashboard, and another button opened the five-car garage inhabited by a Big Ass red Corvette and a giant SUV. She parked next to the Corvette and both got out of her car. The grandiose house had been intended to be imposing but he thought that it had been overdone; it reminded him of the Bellagio

Hotel in Las Vegas. The only things missing were the slot machines and their racket of noise and flashing lights. She took him upstairs to the biggest bed he had ever seen in real life and both ended up naked and tired and full of each other on a sea of twirled silky sheets.

“I need your help,” she said while playing with the hairs in his chest, wrapping them around her fingers and pulling on them. He said nothing, wondering what she was up to. She had never asked him for anything. This would be interesting, he thought.

“It’s about my husband.”

“He is gone, right?” he said.

“Well, yes an no.”

The riddle puzzled him and his face showed it.

“Come with me.” She put on a short robe embroidered in gold, her voluptuousness trying to escape from underneath the silk garment. She stepped into high-heeled shoes that matched her robe. No bunny sleepers for her. He got up and only put his pants on and followed her barefooted as they made their way down three flights of stairs and into the basement. They walked in silence and he was happy just watching her rump swinging under the robe and her shapely legs rising from her shoes and disappearing under that same robe.

When he stepped into the cold concrete basement floor, he regretted not having put shoes on. The basement was huge; it looked like an underground parking lot but without cars, and better lit. He reckoned that it was as large as the house’s footprint. He could see nothing but a forest of steel posts scattered throughout the empty space in front of him and a few boxes next to the stairs. A room next to the stairs had to be the closet that held the furnace and the water heaters.

“It’s cold in here,” he said. “Even in summer.”

“Yes it is,” she said. She had stopped next to a big meat freezer, the chest type with a lid that flips open. His mother had one of those in the garage and it had been his job as a kid to dig stuff out for dinner. She opened the lid and he automatically leaned forward, expecting to see packets of meat wrapped in wax paper, bags of frozen vegetables, and maybe a bucket of ice cream.

What he saw didn’t register at first. It couldn’t be, his brain refusing to recognize that his eyes were not faulty. The naked and frozen body of a skinny elderly man encased in a gray and spotted skin covered with frost rested at the bottom of the freezer. His face was contorted into a ghastly and frozen laugh, his yellowed teeth peeled like a growling dog. The yellow eyes were open and each looked in a different direction.

He looked at her. She stood next to the cooler, one hand still holding up the lid. Her robe had come undone, or had she done it on purpose? Her thick pubic hair a dark forest against her snow white flesh and her breasts hanging like heavy globes on her chest. She had put a foot forward, like a model posing on the runway.

“Meet my husband,” she said and her free hand, palm up, pointed to the corpse as if she were a game show hostess, showing off the merchandise to be won. She didn’t smile though. Without closing the lid she moved and stood in front of him, looking straight at his eyes. She kissed him with that delicate touch of lips that never failed to ignite him, and this time was not different. They kissed long and deep and her robe fell to the floor. She ran her tongue down his chest and down his navel. She squatted in front of him and took the robe from the floor and rolled it into a sort of cushion she used to put her knees on while she unzipped his pants and gave him fellatio. His body tensed like a steel rod and he couldn’t get his eyes off the freezer that gave out rivulets of cold vapor alighted by the industrial light inside.

He couldn’t see the husband, but he knew who was responsible for him being there, and the lips of the responsible party moved up and down his shaft, creating such rapture that he couldn’t think straight and do what was right. He looked down and their eyes met, and he knew he would do anything for her, and she knew that too and she smiled and kept on rewarding him for his blind loyalty. He reached orgasm right where he stood and ejaculated on her face, convulsing on throes of sexual pleasure

at the same time he kept an eye on the freezer, thinking what he was getting into, but the consequences of sharing her secret didn't matter as long he could be with her.

They plotted in her room how to get rid of the frozen body, speaking in soft voices, holding on to each other, their naked bodies arousing. The idea of being a criminal aroused his libido, and the idea of making love to a criminally insane older woman reinforced that feeling of being rotten to the core. The idea of being in this together because both were rotten apples took hold in his mind, and he thrust his pelvis against her with force and determination. Her screams – of pain or pleasure, he didn't know and didn't care – made him feel like the incarnation of evil on earth, and he reached an orgasm like never before.

The morning light came through the cathedral-like windows and woke him up. He found himself alone in the huge bed. She was nowhere in sight. The thought of her coming behind him with a butcher knife crossed his mind and he jumped out of bed as if he had found a snake in it. As he was dressing hurriedly, she walked in, holding a silver breakfast tray, wearing a new, black robe with Chinese motifs and a radiant smile. Her high-heeled sleepers matched the robe, of course.

“Hi honey,” she said, and all his thoughts of butcher knives and another body in the freezer disappeared from his mind and he saw nothing but the beautiful woman he loved beyond measure and beyond common sense. He smiled too and both had breakfast and made love again.

After her returned home, the thought of the frozen body returned to him. He agonized about what to do. Plain common sense showed him a clear path that was blocked by his obsession for her, for her body, for her presence, for her smell. He could never leave her or betray her, neither could he ignore the frozen body in her basement.

Their plan had seemed simple when they had concocted it together, holding on to each other, but now the logistics seemed overwhelming. Using cash to eliminate traceable credit card receipts, he had bought the tools he thought would be necessary to get rid of the husband for good: thick rubber gloves, a pick, a shovel, an electric chain saw (less noisy than a gasoline-powered one), dark-colored heavy duty trash bags, a dust mask, and a mechanic's overalls. After he'd bought these items, he decided that he also needed a hand held vacuum cleaner from an auto parts store, work gloves from the hardware store, and a new pair of cheap sneakers from Walt-Mart. He decided to rent a car, too. He'd watched enough CSI episodes to know that using their own cars to carry a chopped-up carcass was a bad idea.

As planned, he showed up at her place late in a moonless night. To his surprise she was wearing a rather short dress, with embroidered hose and high stiletto pumps, all in black, and some nice jewelry; not the outfit he expected her to be in to dump a corpse but on the other hand it was she, the incorrigible queen of fashion to the end. He brought down to the basement all the implements he had brought with him in the trunk of the rental car. She didn't help with anything, but sat by the basement's stairs, legs crossed and showing a nice slab of leg that kept him smiling regardless off the grizzly task at hand.

He put the overalls on, the dust mask, an old Bronco's hat he had found in his closet, and the heavy rubber gloves, and then opened the freezer's lid. The naked body seemed mummified, with a gray color not found on the living. He hesitated and looked at her. She smiled and that was all he needed to grab the corpse by the head and yank on it until he dislodged the body from the freezer. The frozen carcass landed on the concrete with a thud and rolled on its side like a piece of old wood. He took the electric chain saw and turned the switch on but a last moment thought made him hesitate.

“What's the matter honey?” she asked from behind him.

“Somehow I need to hold the body down so I can cut through it,” he said. “I don't want it to jump under the blade.”

“Hold on,” she said. She came around him, giving him a saucy smile, and put her foot on the carcass' torso, hard, like if she were trying to dig her sharp heel into it. The running blade landed on the corpse's neck and cut it off in a second. The head rolled onto the floor and ended up looking up her

skirt with his crooked eyes. With a swift kick, she sent it rolling across the basement floor. The dismemberment operation continued and he noticed the relish that glowed on her face each time he sunk the blade into the old man's corpse and bits of frozen flesh flew and pelted her. Each body part that came off she kicked away across the floor. He had never seen such meanness on her, and he didn't know what to think of it but that he was enjoying the deed there was no doubt about. All he could think of is that he wouldn't like to be on her bad side.

As she held the trash bags open while he placed body parts inside, he couldn't help looking at her cleavage. He used the hand held vacuum to pick the frozen flesh dust and bits off the floor. He knew that his cleaning wouldn't be enough to hide all the evidence if crime lab people came snooping around, but he knew that it would be good enough for the casual observer. The last things to go into the bags were his overalls, the dust mask, the gloves, and the chain saw in a bag by themselves.

They left the house before midnight and headed east toward the barren Colorado plains. She sat on the passenger side and gave directions to the place she had chosen as a dumping ground. They drove for a long time, the road going up and down rolling hills. The headlights revealed mostly open spaces quilted with faded grasslands or barbed wire fences and shrubs, with occasional trees that seemed foreign to the prairies, survivors of droughts and frozen winters, their barks as tough as buffalo hides.

She pointed to a dirt road and he turned into it. Without light pollution, the Milky Way glowed brightly against the stark black of the moonless sky. He'd forgotten what a starry night looked like. She directed him to yet another narrow, rutted country road, which led to what looked like a patch of grassland. The car's headlights illuminated old and broken headstones. He immediately turned the lights off. In this abandoned cemetery, another nameless body would be hard to detect, a lot harder than at, say, a city park or the side of the road.

He had no idea how she had found the place in the dark. By tomorrow morning he knew he would be unable to retrace the miles he'd driven to this place. In a peculiar way, that was a comforting thought.

The clay soil, a sun baked brick with tufts of parched grass attached to it, didn't break under the pick unless he put all his strength behind the swing. Each time the pick came down, it landed with a hard crash on the tough prairie and he let out a breath, half anger, and half exhaustion. He toiled in a shrouding darkness that gave no hint of his motions and only the thud of the pick and the scrape of the shovel against the ground, and his breathing propagated to any discernible distance. She sat cross legged on the hood of the car, hands flat on the hood, watching him do the heavy work. He couldn't see her face to read her emotions, if she had any at all. It got hot, a combination of a windless summer night and vigorous exercise, so he took his shirt off and put it on the hood, next to her. She reached over with her hand and caressed his sweaty chest, her hand getting wet with his perspiration. They said no words and he went back to work.

How deep? How long? How wide? He wasn't sure, but after he'd dug a grave-shaped hole, he thought that it might have been better to dig a smaller square hole, which would be less conspicuous than a properly shaped grave. A casual onlooker would assume that somebody had just buried a pet. But would anybody ever come to this place? Well, it was too late, regardless, so he continued to dig deeper, sweat dripping down his nose, dust rising into his nostrils. The working gloves had come in handy; without them, he would have had blisters by now. After a few hours of grisly toil, his throat was as parched as the land, and he realized that he'd forgotten to bring water. He wondered how many other mistakes he'd made and continue to make. The whole thing was a mistake, and he was knee-deep in it, as deep as he now stood in the grave. How had those people done it in the old days, digging so many graves using nothing but muscle?

They haven't spoken a word since the digging had started, and that suited him fine, the sound of metal scrapping dry clay enough noise for him. He could barely see her, sitting immobile on the hood of the car. Beyond her and around him, he saw only a deep blackness that ran from his feet to the top of the sky, broken only by stars. He could scream at the top of his lungs and no one would hear him, no

one or nothing but her and the coyotes.

By the time he stood with the grave's edge just below his crotch, he had ran out of steam. His throat has swollen, dried as a cedar roof shingle under a drought sun. He climbed out of the hole dragging the shovel behind him, and sat next to her.

"I cant' go on," he whispered. "This will have to do. I hope the coyotes won't dig him up."

"It's OK honey. You have done good." She spoke in a normal and careless voice. Her hands grabbed the back of his sweat soaked neck and pushed his head near hers, and she planted a kiss on his lips. An another. An another. Her hands moved down his chest and she couldn't care less that his perspiration ran between her ringed fingers. Her smell felt out of place in such a stark place, he thought, mixed with dust and sweat. He gripped her by her waist and the silky feel of her dress felt foreigner to his hands after he had spent the last hours handling rough digging tools. He knew where things were going and until then he had never mustered any meaningful resistance but this time the dismembered body in the trunk had an urging that made him push her away from him, albeit very delicately.

"We got work to do," he said. "This place gives me the creeps." She got off the hood and moved to the rear of the car and stood there; mute, waiting for him to open the trunk. He opened it and the courtesy light attached to the trunk lid blinded him, a veritable source of intense light in a universe of absolute night. The little light bulb shone like a lighthouse and he popped it out of its socket, looking for a return to the overwhelming yet comforting darkness that kept other eyes from seeing what was going on. It took a few minutes for his pupils to expand and get accustomed to the darkness so he stood next to the trunk, with eyes closed, waiting for his night vision to return. While he so stood, she reached in the trunk and grabbed one of the bags and took it out.

"Make sure it's a bag with ... you know what," he said.

"It is," she said.

"How do you know?"

"It's mushy."

His stomach revolted at the thought. The carcass had started to thaw, at least skin deep. She walked away with one bag. He reached inside the trunk and grabbed one but couldn't tell if it had a body part or were just clothes or tools. He squeezed the bag with his hand and it sank into something soft but couldn't tell what it was. He removed his glove and ran his fingers along the bag and this time his fingertips sank into something soft, aqueous, an eye socket with a mushy eyeball. He let go of the bag and it felt to the ground where he heard it roll somewhere. He crouched and felt for the bag until he found it, again putting the palm of his hand on what felt like a cold face. He grabbed the bag and brought it to her, who had been waiting for him next to the grave's edge.

"Open your bag and let the trash fall into the hole," he said. "We are taking the bags with us." Fingerprints stick to bags, in and out, and he was not leaving evidence behind. He opened his bag and something heavy landed with a hollow sound on the ground. She did likewise.

After a couple of more trips the trunk was empty and the grave was full. He thought of rearranging the parts into a dislocated body that had continuity from head to toes but the idea of jumping into the grave and handling the thawing, naked corpse did not appeal to him; anyway, any forensic examiner could determine by just looking at the bones that the body had been hacked so it really didn't matter that the parts were heaped haphazardly.

He got the shovel and started filling the grave. When the corpse disappeared under a blanket of dirt he jumped on the thin layer and stomp it to settle the dirt around the corpse. He stumped his way up and down the length of the grave and she smiled at him from the grave's edge.

It had been easy to fill the hole back now that the dirt was loose. The broken up dirt built into a small hump that spoke of a freshly dug grave. He thought of driving the car over it to squash the hump but leaving tire marks over the grave did not seem smart, even if the car was a rental. He walked the grave's length and stumped on the loose dirt, as if he were trying to push the corpse deeper into the

ground. This time he congratulated himself because he had been wearing the cheap sneakers that were destined to the dumpster so leaving footprints behind didn't worry him. That is, if he got to get rid of the shoes before the law got a hold of him. He danced his macabre pow-pow in the dark while she watched him, standing next to the grave. With a grin of approval on her pallid face. When the ground beneath him didn't settle any further, he stopped.

"Let's go," he said. "We have done what needed to be done."

Instead of getting into the car she stepped over to the grave and her heels sank into the fresh dirt. To his surprise she lifted her dress and pulled her panties down, one of her hands on his shoulder, to keep balance. She took her panties off right there, using him as a leaning post, and he couldn't figure out what the hell she was up to. Maybe she was going nuts after holding up so well for so long. She squatted down and he heard her waters run. She was peeing on the old man's grave! She squatted holding onto his leg, without looking at him while her bladder emptied on the grave, and he stood in place, looking at the lady of yore squatting like a peasant woman next to him, digging her manicured nails into his leg to keep her balance, to keep herself from falling on her ass because her heels wouldn't hold her weight. Once done she wiped herself clean with her panties that she dropped next to him, then stood, and this time she looked at him. Her face had set into a hard anger, as if she had been remembering past offenses and had exhausted herself concentrating on her revenge, on the final touch.

"Now," she said. "We are done." She walked to the car, pulling the hem of her dress down. He stood in place, mouth open, surprised by her, adding insult to injury in such a way, so out of character, but then, whacking the old man also had been quite out of character, much more so that just peeing on his grave. Or perhaps not, that was her real self, the vengeful murderer, and he only knew the side she wanted him to see, the well dressed lady of insatiable sexual desire and girlish smile.

He picked her panties off the ground and put them in his pant's pockets. He was not willing to leave on the scene a DNA calling card rich with body fluids and pubic hair. By the time he got to the car she was already in her seat. They didn't speak and he drove off with no lights. His eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness and he could make out the road if he drove slowly, not wanting to turn on the lights and give their location away until they were clear of the old cemetery. The lights came on when he hit the dirt county road and the glare from the instrument panel hurt his eyes.

She had to tell him the way out; again, she knew exactly where to turn, and he wondered how she could find her bearings so well in that desolated darkness. She grabbed his hand, wetting his fingers with her mouth, and brought it to her bare crotch. She spoke no words but he masturbated her as he drove back to Denver, wondering what kind of crazy life he'd got himself into while she moved her pelvis under spasms of pleasure from the same hand that had just buried her husband.

The next part of his plan was to get rid of the evidence. On the outskirts of Denver, he left the pick and shovel leaning against the wall of a half-built house, knowing that Mexican workers would find them in the morning. By the end of the day, the unclaimed, almost-new tools would be ridding in the back of a pickup truck or van, going home with their new owner. The empty trash bags that had held body parts, the bag full of clothes and tools, and the cheap sneakers ended up in a construction dumpster, safe from trash-digging transients, who seldom venture into suburbia.

They ended up in a seedy road motel near downtown Denver. He paid cash for the room after waking up the Indian attendant who took his money and gave him the key through a hole in wall at the motel's office just big enough for a fist to go through.

He wanted to take a shower to clean himself up from dust and sweat but she didn't want him to bath so they made love with him reeking of perspiration, and this dirty love making turned her on and he ended with scratches in his back and buttocks that smarted when he finally got to take a hot shower.

Just to make sure that no loose ends could mar what until now had been a perfect crime, he went back to her place with a couple of gallons of industrial strength disinfectant to wipe the basement floor, and the inside of the freezer clean. He loaded the freezer into the big SUV that had been parked in her garage and dropped it at the Goodwill store late at night so there would be no witnesses, wearing a big

cowboy hat, just in case there was a pesky camera at the Goodwill parking lot. He wore new gloves so his fingerprints wouldn't stay with the freezer. He even wiped the SUV clean of fingerprints after he parked back into the garage. Paranoia is a good thing, he thought. He imagined the freezer in somebody's garage, loaded with hamburger patties and ice cream for the kids, and he couldn't help laughing at the macabre joke.

Staying at her house gave him the creeps, as if they were spending the night in a haunted hotel with the ghost of the old man wondering the empty rooms. After that night, they met and frolicked in his cramped apartment where the memories of the burial did not perturb their love making, and quite often she insisted to go to a seedy motel for some more rough and dirty sex.

Despite his concupiscence having obliterated his common sense, bits of wisdom trickled unannounced and unwelcome from his subconscious and showed him that their perfect crime indeed had a few holes. While a homeless man can be made to disappear with not many noticing, it was obvious that her husband had been a well to do person.

He didn't know, and never asked, like he had never asked many other things, if he had been a captain of industry, or an odd and reclusive remittance man born with a silver spoon in his mouth, or a lottery winner, or what. She had mentioned that he had business deals in Arizona; she suspected they were shady business deals with organized crime but she wasn't sure. The old man had money so sooner or later somebody - a lawyer or a relative or a business partner - would come knocking on the door looking if not for the person, at least for his signature to get money moving from one pocket to another. It wouldn't be long before somebody noticed that him and his money were missing.

Perhaps she already had alibis and plausible excuses, but sooner than later she would have to get her hands on the money he had stashed away in investment portfolios and safety deposit boxes and who knew where else. What was she going to tell when asked where the old man was, and if he was authorizing that money to change pockets? The whole affair was so strange that it may be possible the old man kept his fortune in cash, right there in the house, available to her, and that he was a recluse with no friends and relatives; somebody who would never be missed from the living.

These spinets of reasonable doubt would flare with intense clarity in his mind but his innate capacity of rationalization would put them out as soon as they started to bother him so his relationship with her and his life continue ticking away without missing a beat ... but so do clocks attached to a bomb before detonation.

The first few days she didn't call didn't bother him too much because he was in need of a break, his body and mind exhausted by her continuous sexual demands on him. Once he had recovered he started to worry, and more so when his calls to her were not returned. Her cell phone would go into message mode and he left hundreds of messages, but she never called back. At least it wasn't disconnected like the first time. He attempted to go to her place but when the watchman at the gate attempted to call her house nobody answered the phone so he couldn't get pass the entrance.

Calling the cops to check on her would have been reasonable, but he didn't have the guts to send the law snooping around her house, afraid that his involvement in her affairs would become rather bothersome. He had no clue what the cops would find inside her house, if they found anything at all. Maybe there was another freezer in the basement, her body inside and somebody else living off the old man's money. Dog eats dog, as they say.

The next few times he tried to enter her restricted community, he again had to deal with new guards that wouldn't let him through. He decided to wait until the guard who had seen her and him together on a few occasions, a pudgy man with a shaved head, was on duty. After driving by and spotting the guard, he slowly approached the gate with a smile on his face and a knot in his stomach, praying that the ruse would work, and waved at the guard. To his relief, the guard recognized him and opened the gate to let him pass, waving at him in return.

He drove pass the gate acting nonchalant with his polite smile and with the knot in his stomach tightening. He drove to her place and stopped in front of the locked gate where he got out of the car. He

rang the bell on the intercom until his finger got tired but nobody answered. The gate had an electric lock that didn't budge to his yanking. So close and yet so far, he thought. He peered through the bars that made the wrought iron fence and didn't see her car or any other car parked outside, and there were no signs of anybody inside the house. He called her using his cell, as if being this close to the house somehow was going to make her answer the phone in person. He thought about jumping over the fence, which wasn't that high anyway, but didn't have the guts. On his way out he made sure the guard saw him. He knew he would be back.

He was back in about a week, after dozens on unanswered calls to the already full message box, after a low profile stalking of the entrance to catch her coming or going from her place, after pulling his hair out of his head thinking the unthinkable, after almost calling the cops to go and check on her. Using the same ruse of before with the same guard, he got pass the main gate and stopped in front of her locked gate, for the second time. Buzzing the intercom and yanking on the lock didn't do anything, of course, but this time he jumped the fence without any hesitation and walked up the driveway, determined to seek her whereabouts. He couldn't care less if the neighbors called the cops. He figured he could bleed to death on her driveway, the victim of a serial killer, and nobody could care less in such an aloft neighborhood where the only signs of life were passing cars with their tinted windows rolled up.

He rang the doorbell, knocked on the door, called her name, but nothing. Either he had an empty house in front of him or whoever was inside had no intentions of talking to him. He walked around the house and peered on all windows and saw no signs of life. He jumped on the deck and looked through the patio doors but still, nobody inside the house. The garage doors had windows that were high but by jumping up and down he could see that the SUV and the Corvette were still there, but her Cadillac wasn't.

In between his futile visits to her place, he read the newspapers expecting to see news about her missing and being sought by the law in connection with the disappearance of her elderly husband, but no such news ever made it to print. He made it to her house a few more times and drove pass by the empty house. On his last visit a realtor's sign hung from the locked gate. Now, if she were a fugitive, how could she put the place up for sale? Maybe the lawyers or the old man's relatives did it. He called the real estate agent and milked her for information about the previous owners of the house and all she could say is that the owners had moved overseas.

So that was it, she had left the country, that was the only plausible explanation he had. He made up his mind that she would end up in some little country where she could buy a death certificate and a headstone on a pauper's grave with the old man's name written on them, legal proof of his demise on a foreign and exotic land.

Some days he hated her for leaving without him. Other days he hated her for leaving without saying goodbye. Other days, few in between, he felt blessed that he had extricated himself from her bewitched grip. He masturbate holding to her panties, the ones he had retrieved from the grave. Day after day this garment held sway on him and he withdraw from any meaningful social life until he became a pariah who went to work, spoke little and then rushed home for hours of masturbation and obsessed memories.

After months of this meaningless existence, he caught a glimpse of himself in his bathroom mirror: unshaven, hair matted, dirty, with bags under his eyes, a poster boy for losers, and holding those damned panties of hers.

On his way to Las Vegas, this time for good, he stopped by the usual place by the side of the Utah highway where desert vistas were free for all. He didn't expect any epiphanies, and he didn't want any. Standing close to the cliff's edge he wrapped her panties around an apple sized rock and threw the bundle as far as he could over the edge. The bundle came undone as it fell to the bottom of the cliff and the rock separated to continue its fast freefall to the bottom. The panties floated down and disappeared behind a boulder, out of reach. He came for no epiphany but got a catharsis, and her hold on him came

loose as the rock did from her garment. It was high time for him to start anew.

He had left Denver without a forwarding address. The thought of cops knocking on his door and asking about a corpse found buried in the prairie didn't worry him too much. Answering a knock on his door and finding her standing at the threshold, looking at him with those dark blue eyes scared him to no end because he knew that if she asked for another favor, he would be, against his better senses, eager to please her.

Phoenix, Arizona

It came from nowhere; it had been like going for a walk at night on what seemed an empty sidewalk and turning his head around for no explainable reason to face a monster theretofore unknown to him, an overwhelming presence more disturbing than anything he could have distilled out of a nightmare. And like a nightmare, it also had a dream-like essence that made it impervious to anything in his material world.

Monster, the photographer thought. It was the loveliest of monsters but that did not console him. It wouldn't come out of his tired head; it took all the room in there and then some, spilling into every pore of his skin and every inch of his veins and arteries. No exorcise known to him could get rid of it, so he drank alone at the bar knowing he couldn't drown it, but at least a drunken mind wouldn't be so sentient of its presence.

But it wasn't working.

Other people could drink themselves silly, into oblivion, into hell rising assholes, into happy drunks but he just drank until a dull curtain descended over his blue eyes. His body numbed but his mind reminded alert and, worst of all, sharper to the nuisances of what he had tried to dull away to start with. He wasn't a successful drunk.

But he had to try.

He had to try because nothing else had worked and the monster was driving him insane, such a lovely monster. His soul shivered when her big hazel eyes beamed on him. Her taut breasts had not yet blossomed into the round and maternal shape that would eventually hold large nipples incrusting on a cushion of soft flesh. Her wee breasts and nipples stood straight out, pushed by the blooming pressure of youth from within her, right into his face, to mock him and to make him suffer.

She sauntered around the house after taking a bath with her long and smooth dark hair still dripping on her back, her oversized T-shirt barely reaching to her buttocks, and those dark panties that disappeared between her pale ass cheeks, cheeks that defied gravity and held their roundness when she walked as if they were made of hard clay, and he would think that the devil could not tease him in a more painful manner.

He chugged his drink and pushed the empty glass away from him. The images of her would not go away. Johnny Cash' "Flesh and Blood" played on the jukebox. Her young flesh and his blood running like wild ponies in the desert, that was his curse.

The bartender, wearing a heavy crust of make up that hid neither the rough texture of her skin nor the roughness of her character came forward, a cigarette held between her arthritic fingers decorated with ersatz jewels too big for her skinny digits.

"Another one, honey?"

"Reload for me, will ya?"

"Sure."

She turned around and he wished that Wanda, the fourteen year old daughter of Peggy, the woman he was living with and bedding, would hurry up growing to look like the firewater wench mixing him the drink but that is not how things worked.

He came back home late. Peggy wasn't home yet, still serving coffee and food to the late night crowd that plied the streets of Phoenix looking for fun or for trouble, sometimes both coming in the

same package. Sometimes? Fun and trouble were synonymous for that crowd. On his way into the master bedroom, he stopped in front of Wanda's bedroom door, which was closed, thanks God. He put his face to the door and inhaled hard, trying to absorb her essence, the smell of her hair. His body shivered. Damned, he was grown man, pussy-whipped like a young pimply face boy. He himself couldn't believe it, but the boner between his legs wasn't lying. It wanted Wanda, longed for her, almost knocking on the door with savage fury, throbbing with each pulsation of his blood that now thumped in his temples.

He dragged himself away from the door and ended up in the bathroom where he masturbated with a demonic intensity fueled by lust and anger. His ejaculation became a catharsis that knocked him to his knees. He cleaned up the mess, flushed the toilet and went to sleep, the monster having been fed; at least until tomorrow.

Next morning he lay awake in bed on his back and with a mild hangover. Peggy slept next to him, her breathing now and then turning into a rale that went away on its own. The noises reverberating through the house spoke of Wanda's morning ritual and told him what she was up to. His keen ear followed her on her rounds. The bathroom, the water running and the brushing of teeth, then the water running in the shower, and he could see her panties dropping to the linoleum floor followed by her sleeping T-shirt, she standing naked in all her glory, then stepping into the shower.

Water splashing against her pretty face and her nose with the high ridge that made her look like an Aztec goddess. Water tinkling and running down her terse skin, down her breasts, her navel, her crotch. At that thought he felt a jolt of pleasure in his loins; the monster had awakened and demanded nourishment.

The water ran and the changes in its splattering sound told him that she had moved around: picking up the soap and slathering her body, her hand leaving a wake of foam behind. Picking the razor blade and running it through her pits - she loved tank tops - and giving a cursory pass to her long legs - she also loved shorts. Shampooing her hair, bubbly water and foam sliding down her delicate back, between her butt cheeks, down the back of her legs.

His member was hard under the blankets, the pointy bulge looking out of place. His hand grabbed his penis and he started to rub it down. Peggy slept with her back to him, unaware of both his self-pleasure and torture.

The water stopped and so did he. He imagined her drying her body with one of the thin towels in the bathroom, running the ragged thing between her legs, front and back, and his hand picked up the pace. The bathroom door opened and bare feet ran in the hallway. His hand stopped as to let his hearing do its job. The wet and thin towel wrapped around her wasp waist, her legs carrying her to her room. That door slammed shut. His hand started to move up and down with great care, the ears still commanding the brain's attention. The hair drier hummed. Her long hair cascading over her head, she bent over with her little breasts pointing straight down and her rump up in the air. Oh Lord! He groaned. He rolled over Peggy and placed his hard member on the small of her back and grabbed her soft and bulbous breasts, fully matured and now starting to sag like melons put inside a stocking. Peggy opened one eye and smiled. Another early morning fuck.

He made love to Peggy, humping and huffing like a forest creature, trusting his hips hard on her, in her, against her, closing his eyes and thinking it was Wanda below him. Peggy moaned in pleasure with her legs up in the air. This was better than breakfast in bed, she thought as an orgasm rippled through her, epicenter her crotch.

On the next room, Wanda, getting ready to catch her school bus, listened to the humping and muffled moaning coming through the walls and smiled. Those two fucked like horny teenagers, she thought.

Jimmie Deveraux lived alone in a trailer that stood by itself among the hills outside Phoenix. The desert heat cooked Jimmie's trailer to a suffocating temperature that made him stay on his dirty couch during the day in a lethargic trance, like a lizard over a rock. If a lizard were to detect a bird of prey overhead, it would scurry under cover with the highest speed its instinct of self preservation would allow. Jimmie, on the other hand, would be unaware of anything but a one thousand pound bomb blast going off among the trash littered on the land surrounding what he called his estate. Jimmie's acquaintances, very few by now, had come to believe that the desert sun had also cooked his brains into a frittata of insanity and slumberous lazyness spiced with a lecherous affliction for prepackaged sex in the form of tapes and magazines, all sautéed with a good measure of cheap alcohol.

He lived off welfare, food stamps and odd jobs he did for whom he called the Boss. His cash became tribute to the triumvirate of booze, porno and gas, in that order. Years back he had been a hustler and a semi successful crook of sorts, but even being a crook took work, so little by little he had dropped from the rat race and had holed up in the trailer, which he thought of as some weird and oversized above ground coffin that glared under the sunlight. He saw himself as a modern day vampire, coming to life at night to drink and masturbate. As long he had booze to drink, porno to watch and gas to go into town and back so he could buy more of the former two and get a bite to eat, being entombed alive didn't bother him.

His ex-wife Peggy had given up years ago any idea of ever collecting child support from him. If he made any cash from his shady businesses with The Boss, which he did now and then, she and the IRS would never know. The phone would ring, The Boss would speak and Jimmie would take leave of absence from his couch, get in his Dodge clunker and head out to fulfill the bidding of his master. He would come back drunk with bags of chips and cans of dip under one arm and a new stack of skin magazines and porno tapes under the other. His door would not open again until all the pics and tapes had been watched and the booze had run out.

When he had lived in town and had been a sociable drunk and a full time crook that liked to blow all his money in topless bars, he had taken care of his daughter Wanda. He had done so not out of a desire to bond with his daughter or because of a sense of duty, such concept was too big to fit between his ears, but because Peggy had dropped her in his place when she couldn't find or afford a baby sitter before going to work. Saying that he had taken care of Wanda was an overstatement.

"I don't have time for this shit!" he would groan.

"Oh, I'm so sorry to bother you," Peggy would retort. "But somebody has to put food on the table, and your sorry ass ain't gonna do it!"

Wanda would listen to their arguments and watch her mother leave pissed off at her father and wondered if she was also pissed off at her for being such a burden. Her father would look at her like if she were an iguana or some other weird animal and would shake his head and roll his eyes.

He would take her around town in his dilapidated cars, stopping in alleys and sidewalks were strangers would stick their heads through her or his window and talk to her dad, and sometimes they would give him money and he would give them stuff, the transaction occurring right in front of her nose. The heads coming through the openings were black, and brown, and white and everything in between. Men with bloodshot eyes, women with too much make up and people with haggard and toothless faces. The last ones her dad called junkies but she never saw them carrying any junk. When she asked her dad about it he had belched a laugh that had lasted an eternity. After that, she never asked him anything. Just to be safe, Wanda didn't ask her mother either; just to be sure she wouldn't laugh at her ignorance.

Those had been the good days when Jimmie had stayed more or less sober, or not drunk enough to be noticeable, and had lived among other human beings, had chauffeured Wanda from street corner

to street corner, and had left her sitting in his hot car while he went into drinking establishment for those short minutes that turned out to be hours, Wanda reading her public library books in the parking lots of bars and nude clubs, sometimes hungry, many times going to sleep in the back seat after clearing the trash that had been there for who knows how long. Peggy had always dreaded leaving Wanda with Jimmie, but getting somebody to care for her when she had to work odd hours in a short notice was a dicey business and time and money were not always on her side. Jimmie had to do at those times, just like rat meat had to do for starving shipwrecks.

As Wanda entered her pubescent years, Jimmie fell off the face of the earth and became the trailer hermit but not many people had noticed or cared. Wanda was now old enough to stay home alone and Peggy had shackled up with the wedding photographer who had turned out to be a decent guy. Maybe this time she had hit the jackpot, Peggy wondered, after such a string of losers that had shared her bed and her life, coming and going like clients in the eateries she worked at, some not even leaving a tip or anything good to remember them by. The photographer was different though. He worked hard and made a good living and had never asked her for any money or special favors, like going to the jailhouse to visit a stranger and please, could you stick these little bags in your vagina and give them to him under the table?

Despite all the things that had been stacked against her, Peggy believed she had raised Wanda right. Her daughter was not the brightest or the prettiest girl in high school but she was smart and good looking and her share of teenage troubles had not been anything out of the ordinary. They both had moved into the photographer's little cinder block house, which he kept clean and neat despite just being a rental; he even raked the rock covered front yard when the pebbles felt in disarray. There was no junk belt circling the house and Peggy smiled when she looked out of the windows and saw no junked cars or motorcycles, toilet bowls, carcasses of small appliances. And the sex of course, he ready to jump on the saddle without the need for her to give him an oral primer, his tool hard and throbbing like he were overdosing on Viagra. He may have a skinny frame and a flat chest but the muscle that really mattered, thought Peggy, that one was rather well developed and he knew how to flex it.

The fact that the photographer's monster had moved between her and him had not dawned in her. She believed, she wanted to believe that his rambunctious sex drive of the last few weeks had been ignited by his desire for her, for her big floppy breasts bouncing and swaying under his excitement. What else could it be?

The phone rang and the Boss spoke. Jimmie nodded and said "umhuhh" as he head bobbed, his eyes half open. "Sure Boss, no problem." Jimmie said in a tired voice and then hung up. For the next fifteen minutes he sat on the couch, his stubbed face frozen in absolute disinterest, nothing on him moving other than his diaphragm to pump air into his lungs.

His eyes opened in full to let his aqueous eyeballs peer into the filthy room while gathering his wits and marshaling his neurons, the ones that still answered his muster. He got up and prepared to get ready to face what some called the real world. Reality had no meaning for Jimmie but it was necessary to deal with it to get money to buy the goodies that kept him isolated from it, and the Boss would get pissed at him if the phone company cut off the phone. He himself would be pissed if the power company cut off the electricity and he couldn't watch his movies.

"A man has to do what he has to do" mumbled Jimmie to himself as he dragged his ass into the bathroom. He cursed the Boss for calling him during the middle of the afternoon and stirring him out of his lethargy. Why didn't he call in the middle of the night like any other crook would? Like a modern day vampire, Jimmie felt a renewed vitality as darkness filled the sky from horizon to horizon. Then answering the phone and getting out of the house wouldn't be so painful.

By the time he had gotten decent - which meant a dab of deodorant under the pits, a quick

brushing of the teeth and putting on some clothes that did not reek - he sat behind the wheel of his Dart. He turned the key and the engine turned once, twice, a few more times, each time slower and with less enthusiasm while his boot held the gas pedal to the floor, unable to go further down. The engine caught and the car shook as a white cloud engulfed the trunk. The transmission clanked when he put it into drive. For a few seconds nothing happened and then it caught and the car lurched forward. Jimmie drove away followed by his dust, up the hill and into Phoenix, back to the Reality Kingdom of Oz to see its master hiding behind the curtain with the microphone in his hand, the Boss.

Jimmie came back the next morning when the sunrise had started to flare over the horizon. He stumbled out of the Dart, opened the rear door that creaked with the painful sound of hinges that had not seen lubricant in decades and got a handful of grocery and shopping bags out of the car. With undetermined steps he carried the bags from his car to the trailer. He went back and forth over the broken rungs leading up to his hovel until all the bags were gone from the back seat: groceries, booze and porno magazines and DVD's. The cash left in his pockets and the almost full fuel tank didn't hurt either.

He put the groceries away, opened a beer, threw the empty bags out of the kitchen window, inserted a new DVD in the player, Creamy Cheeks, turned on the TV, pulled his pants and underwear down and sat on his couch stroking his penis, ready to indulge in his debauchery, the cold breakfast beer by his side. Life was grand. Outside, the wind snarled the empty bags on creosote bushes and cholla.

"Where is Wanda?" The photographer asked. It was past midnight and he had just come from a wedding job. The door to her empty room was open and the light was off.

"Staying with friends." Peggy's voice came from the master bedroom. "They are having a sleepover."

"Good," he said, more to himself than to Peggy. Maybe he would be able to sleep tonight with Wanda out of the house; no need to lie on bed with his ears against the wall trying to guess what she was up to, what she was wearing, or not wearing.

"What?" Asked Peggy, half asleep.

"Nothing, honey." He put his gear and his film rolls away, brushed his teeth and went to bed, praying for a good night of heavy sleep, his lust for Wanda diluted by dreams he wouldn't remember in the morning.

The previous night Jimmie had gone to the bowling lane before closing time and had pulled out the merchandise that the Boss had stashed away for him inside a locker. He pulled out the sealed plastic black boxes and put them inside his bowling ball bag. Their shape and heft told him that the boxes might contain DVD's. They looked like his DVD's at the trailer. Maybe the boxes were made to look like harmless disks and there was smack in them, or plutonium, or who knew what. It wasn't his business to know and he didn't want to know; he just followed instructions like he had for a long time, and that is why the Boss kept him around.

He walked out of the bowling lane without bothering to check over his shoulder because he had grown numb to such silly precautions. What was he supposed to do if somebody followed him? Shoot? Run? Fuck it; whoever it was they could keep the bowling ball bag and the shit inside and the Boss could go fuck himself. He knew that he was just a gopher and there was no point for the Boss or strangers or the cops to harm him to get anything they wanted from him; he was just a mere mule carrying stuff around, ignorant of his cargo and its consequences, and he would drop his cargo at the

request of anybody holding a gun or a knife. He was no hero. He wasn't much.

The Dart hesitated, started, puffed, clanked and left the parking lot. Jimmie looked at the fuel gauge and it read empty.

"Shit."

He saw a gas station to his left and pulled into it. He parked next to a pump and tried to get gas but the pump wouldn't work. After many tries his eyes caught the sticker: pre-pay at night. As he turned to walk into the store a car load of youngsters pulled on the pump behind him, their stereo blasting through the hot and dry air like a weapon of mass destruction. Jimmie gave them a hasty look and went into the store. Some of the kids followed him in.

Jimmie walked to the back of the store and went straight for the beer section. A blast of cold air licked his face when he opened the glass door. He stood with his head inside the cooler, enjoying the soothing cold. He grabbed a half-case of Past Blue Ribbon with his hands, his dirty fingernails disappearing inside cardboard holes. He stood like that for a few seconds, unable to break loose from the chilly breeze blowing out of the cooler.

"Dude, we're gonna get carded," said a low voice behind him.

"No we won't," said another voice.

"We don't even have a fake ID, dude."

The low hum debate went on for a while. Jimmie smiled.

"What you want?" Asked Jimmie, his head still inside the cooler.

"Huh?"

"What you want? I'll get it for you," said Jimmie without looking back. There was hesitation and then a voice from behind said in a whisper, "A case of Bud would be fine." Jimmie stepped out with his PBR under his arm and moved two doors down to where the good beer was. On his way to the Bud he looked at the two kids and said in a calm voice, "You can pay me outside." The kids nodded and went to the cash register to pay for their gas.

Jimmie walked out of the store loaded with beer. He dropped his PBR in the passenger seat of his car and walked to the kid's car, a Ford Taurus, with the case of Bud under his arm. One kid was pumping gas and the other kid he had met in the store stood by the passenger side smoking a cigarette and acting as if he were some tough-shit gangster. Jimmie imagined the kid's lips still wet with his mama's breast milk. There were three young girls on the back seat of the car; all dolled up like little whores thought Jimmie, all ready to get their cherries popped for a Bud, if they haven't been popped yet. A sly smile crossed Jimmie's lips at the luscious image in his mind. He dropped the case on the passenger seat and stood facing the kid.

"Thank you, man," said the kid. He reached into his back pocket and his hand came up with three five-dollar bills. "Keep the change."

"Will do," said Jimmie. He turned his head and looked inside the car. Young and hard legs and short skirts, and a familiar face. It had been a long time, how long, Jimmie didn't remember but it had been at least a year, maybe two. He still remembered her as a skinny thing shaped like a pencil with a ball of hair and a face atop where the eraser was supposed to be. The tight tank top now showed a pair of round breasts the size of small apples.

"Hi Wanda," said Jimmie.

"Hi Jimmie," said Wanda, her eyes open as wide as her mouth. She hadn't seen her dad in two years and now there he was, still skinny and looking like a desperado, buying them beer. The stubble around his face seemed grayer and his shoulders had a steeper droop, but nothing else had changed. Jimmie spun on his heels and sauntered to his car, got in, cranked it up and moved away leaving behind a white cloud through which his tail lights shone like evil eyes.

"Who was that? asked Dawn, her dress too tight and her hips too big for her age. "He looked creepy."

"Is he gonna tell your mom?" Asked Alice, her dress too tight and her breasts too big for her

age.

“He’s an old friend of my mom,” said Wanda. “And he is telling nothing.” She had seen Jimmie’s look, the way his eyes had undressed her to see if she was no longer a child but a young woman. As far as secrets went, Wanda knew of many that Jimmie would rather not have Peggy know about it so Wanda surmised that Jimmie would not run his mouth. She and her mother had always called him by his Christian name, and other not so nice names, but referring to him as dad had been taboo, an embarrassment that was better left alone and undisturbed like the grave of an influenza victim.

The boys got inside the car and the car moved away from the gas station. Beer cans came through the gap in the front seats and young, manicured hands with long nails in garish colors eagerly grabbed them.

The wasted mind of a man, or the mind of a wasted man, or the wasted mind of a wasted man, Jimmie had run through his head which one ought to apply to him and had concluded nothing because his mental focus had shifted to lascivious scenes of flesh and pubic hair. His mind could not hold a thought for more than a few minutes before sex images popped inside his head like a stereopticon, the initial thought fading away into oblivion. Alcohol made him asleep in the mid-day heat and that was the time his mind rested. Dreams would come to him but he remembered none, and that was a good thing because he didn't like his nightmares to intrude in his awoken life, or what was left of it.

One thought though kept coming back to him, Wanda. Her face full of make up would be in his mind and then the dirty scenes would start to materialize over Wanda's image to dissolve her features away but Wanda would come back later on, this time pushing another thought out of his head. Jimmie shuffled his body on the couch and tried to hide in his alcoholic torpor but Wanda kept on coming into his head, her taut breasts, her smooth legs, her face painted like a whore. He turned this way, that way, he drank more vodka, the couch seemed too small, but Wanda wouldn't leave him alone.

Wanda's images kept interrupting his wistful sleep, mixed with pornographic slides from his movies. Before the sun had started to drop out of the sky, the images in his head had started to fuse into single mental illusions: Wanda giving fellatio, Wanda with semen on her face, Wanda on her fours, Wanda ... Jimmie would pass out and then his mind would recharge and pick up the thread it had left unattended, Wanda's breast bouncing up and down while she trust herself atop a huge penis, Wanda ...

The day was gone and night had arrived with its menagerie of tiny points of light that Jimmie still remembered were called stars. He had forgotten their names and couldn't tell a constellation from another even if a magic hand would draw the connecting lines between the stars. As a kid he had always marveled about the night sky and could identify the big constellations and knew the difference between a star and a planet, and could name the visible planets too, but now he only cared for the darkness that came after sunset. The darkness suited him fine; the rest of the stuff embedded on the sky had lost its magic.

The darkness spilling through the windows woke Jimmie up. He got up and went through his drawers full of DVD's and VCR tapes looking for a particular tape. He found it, an old VCR tape. The night ritual had started. He had things to do for the Boss, but the ritual could not be postponed. He turned the TV on and sat on his couch naked from the waist down and with his member ready in his hand.

It had been awhile since he watched Taboo, in which make-believe parents have sex with their make-believe son and daughter but now he felt an uncontrollable impulse to see it. He fantasized that the actress playing the role of the daughter was Wanda. His hand worked over his member and the images worked on his warped mind. Common sense tried to speak to him but it was like a distant voice trying to shout over the roaring of a passing freight train with billboards of sexual acts painted on its

sides. Jimmie heard no voice, his mind enthralled by the passing images and by the pleasure rubbing between his legs.

Afterward, he sat on the couch for a long while. His sticky sweat reeked of alcohol and filth. The cogs of his mind ground, halted, made a few false starts, whirred with sounds and efforts unknown to him and then restarted. His mind now had shifted to a new level of depravity, its cogs wobbling and skipping in their madness, fueled by a sick curiosity for incest that Jimmie knew, that Jimmie already regretted, was going to turn into a desire, then a need and finally an obsession. No amount of alcohol or pornography would satisfy his unnatural craving; quite opposite, they would fuel it and accelerate the outcome. No point in trying to stop the devil's hand, he thought. No point in attempting to redeem his fucked up life.

Shower, deodorant, shave, a clean change of clothes - not many of those left in the trailer - Jimmie was now ready to drive back into Phoenix and do the Boss' business, and he also was on his way to start the chain of events that he was sure would end up in the defiling of Wanda. His intention was like a boulder on the edge of a cliff whose weight had shifted under the pull of gravity and nothing would stop its drop, damn whatever got in its way and damn the consequences.

That night, the photographer came into the house late, his big equipment bag slung over his shoulder and a paper plate holding a piece of wedding cake covered with a paper napkin in his hands. He put the cake and his photo rolls and video tapes in the refrigerator - keep in a cool, dry place - like that Bob Dyland song said but whose title he couldn't remember. He got a beer and sat down at the kitchen table after taking his coat off and loosening his tie. Drinking at the job was a no-no for him but a cold one after a long night on his feet snapping pictures and shooting video felt like a treat.

He chugged half the beer at the first try and then sipped the rest as if it were the last beer in the world and he needed to make it last. Being busy was good, he thought, no matter how difficult or tiresome the job could be. It kept Wanda out of his head. In Mexican weddings half the party spoke English and the other half didn't, and he couldn't tell which half was which. "Smile please" he would say. Through his lenses he could see half the faces flashing their whites and the other half looking stupid. "Sonrisa por favor" he would say in his screwed up Gringo accent and then the whole group would be peeling their teeth. He had bought a dictionary long ago and had taught himself a few phrases in Spanish. He knew his pronunciation was badly off the mark and probably his subjects smiled not because he asked them but because his funny Spanish amused them. Whatever the reason, he got the job done.

How many weddings had he photographed? Hundreds, maybe thousands, he was sure. All of them melted in his memory into one huge job of shuffling people in and out of his camera's view finder, of brides and grooms, of children scurrying around in clothes that didn't fit or that looked too pretentious for their young age, of drunks, of old women sitting alone or in small groups in the corners, of DJ's, caterers and wedding singers, comrades-in-arms, and wedding cakes. There were always a few pieces in the refrigerator, white-coated and spongy.

His favorite weddings were the Mexican ones, despite the language problem. He thought that the live mariachi bands with their big sombreros and colorful charro suits singing to the bride and groom was a cool thing, as it was the piñatas done to keep the kids entertained. He just had to keep moving so the blindfolded kid with the stick wouldn't knock the camera off his hands. And when the Mexican polkas started to play, the whole party, old and young, would hit the floor and dance, the crowd flowing in the same direction like a human river and without the DJ having to beg and cajole to get them off their butts. Also, there was something about the humility of the Mexican weddings done in VFW halls and old Catholic churches that made them feel truer and more genuine than fancier ones done in expensive hotels. As a professional, he never made predictions on how long a marriage would

last but sometimes he got a gut feeling that his pictures would end up face down and forgotten in a drawer or boxed forever in a rental storage facility after the divorce. But it was not his job to worry about those things. He had enough worries of his own.

His eyes moved down the hallway and stopped at Wanda's closed door. There was no light sneaking from underneath the door or any sounds coming from inside. Either she was asleep or she was gone to another sleepover. She spent more time sleeping with friends than at home but he was not the one to tell Peggy about the wisdom of letting Wanda spend so much time away in other people's houses, if she wasn't doing something else all together. It was not his business to tell Peggy how to raise her daughter, and it was not his business to ask Wanda who her friends were and to check on her, God no. It was bad enough for him to try to stay away from her as it was and he had no desire of getting further involved with Wanda, God help him. Still, he couldn't get his eyes off her when she was at the house. Maybe Wanda had caught on to him and that is why she was always making excuses to be somewhere else; but then, it couldn't be. Why then, if she thought he was a creep, she kept on walking around the house in wet T-shirts and revealing thongs? Maybe she was a tease but more probable was that he indeed was a dirty old man at thirty-three.

A car pulled into the driveway; its engine shot off and a door slammed. He heard a key scratching the keyhole and then the kitchen door opened. Peggy walked in wearing her name tag on her breast and her purse on her hand.

"Hi babe," said Peggy.

"Hi there," he said. "Tough night?"

Peggy dropped her purse on the kitchen table and went to the fridge. "As usual. Same drunks, same shit, different night." She grabbed a beer and the cake and sat at the table next to him after getting a knife and a fork from the drawer.

"Do you want any cake?" She asked.

"I'll just have a small bite."

They drank and ate in silence for a few moments, too tired to think about something to say, and what was there to say? Peggy had been right, same shit, different night.

"Is Wanda Home?" He asked finally, unable to stop himself.

"No. She is spending the night at Linda's house."

He didn't say anything, didn't ask Peggy if she had called Linda's mother to check on Wanda's whereabouts. That was not his business. Peggy and he lived together and shared the same bed but were not married. He was not Wanda's stepfather. The unwelcome thought of being her stepfather made him wince.

"What's the matter?" Asked Peggy who noticed his tense features.

"Nothing," he said, relaxing into his old self, regaining control of his emotions. "It was a long night for me too."

After the cake was gone, they sat in each other's company but alone with their thoughts. Peggy got up and put the paper plates and napkins in the trash and the forks and knife in the sink. "Guess who stopped by," she said. "A ghost."

The photographer raised his eyebrows and kept silent.

"Wanda's dad came by. I haven't seen his face in years, and that was a good thing if you ask me."

"What did he want?"

"I don't know. I thought he was gonna hit me for money but he didn't."

"Just a friendly chat then?"

"Yeah. He just wanted to know how Wanda was doing, what she was up to." She paused, looking straight at him. "You know, I really wish he would stay away from us. The no-good son of a bitch is nothing but trouble."

He said nothing because he thought it would be wise not to get in the middle of old ex-marital

disputes. "I'm going to bed," he said after drinking his last sip of beer and putting the can in the trash.

"Yeah. Me too." Peggy waited as he locked the kitchen door and switched off the light.

A few seconds after the lights had gone out in the little cinder block house Jimmie's lime green Dart went by the street at a slow pace, dragging white smoke behind it.

A silver waxing moon shone through the paloverde and lit the bare ground peppered with grasses and small shrubs. The sheet metal from the car parked under the trees reflected the moonlight with geometric hardness. Through the open windows moaning and giggling sounds escaped into the night as the car bounced on its suspension.

With every up thrust of the midsection belonging to the boy underneath her, Wanda's head hit the ceiling as she rose in a wave of pleasure. Wanda clasped the top of the back seat and let the masculine force she was straddling to throw her up and down, her firm breasts moving at unison with her torso. Her head pounded the ceiling faster and faster and the boy moaned and rolled his eyes in his sockets. Lisa and her boyfriend in the front seat added their energies to the motion of the car and their voices to the rising choir spilling out of the windows. Wanda was facing to the rear of the car so she couldn't see what they were up to but she could feel Lisa's boyfriend pounding his hips against Lisa who lay on her back sandwiched between him and the seat.

The boy under her gave up a final deep thrust that arched his back and pushed her shoulders against the ceiling. She bent her torso down and put her breasts on the boy's face. Guttural sounds accompanied his hot breath fanning over her chest like steam coming out of a boiler. The force that had pinned her against the ceiling ebbed and her body descended to a more natural position, still attached to the boy's midsection. The boy kissed her nipples between tired breaths. Wanda heard behind her Lisa's boyfriend coming to a climax and Lisa making a hissing sound as if her insides were deflating. The car stopped bouncing.

One by one they stepped out of the car, naked and half naked and their foreheads glistening with sweat. The boys pulled their condoms out of their still swollen members and threw them away; they landed on saltbushes with a flopping sound and hung wet, long and dripping. By the morning they would be as dry as old cowhide.

"I need to wipe," said Lisa laughing and looking at her dark triangle between her legs.

"Anybody got a rag or something?"

Her boyfriend slid into the car and came out with a Mac Donald's brown paper bag in his hand.

"I'm not wiping my thing with a fucking bag!" said Lisa. "That paper is rough."

The boyfriend stuck his hand into the bag and came up with a handful of paper napkins that smelled of Big Macs and fries.

"There," he said giving a few to Lisa. "Happy now? Or do I need to wipe your ass too?"

Lisa grabbed the napkins, turned around and stuck her rump out at the same time she stuck her tongue out of her turned, mocking face. Lisa's boyfriend ignored her and passed napkins to the others.

The car departed from the paloverde grove leaving behind crumpled napkins, hamburger and fry containers, ketchup blisters, beer cans and cigarette butts scattered among the pigweeds and hanging condoms that shimmered with pearly colors under the moonlight when the soft desert breeze blew.

Jimmie came back from Tucson with a hole in his radiator that he'd plugged with pepper from a Burger King shaker he had borrowed. The old trick had worked and the Dart kept on rolling albeit still guzzling oil by the quart. Jimmie kept a case of cheap oil in his trunk and now and then he would top off the crankcase to find it low a few days later. He needed to talk to the Boss about it; he knew that the

Boss had his hands on a few car businesses, and he was certain that getting a car from the Boss to continue his sedulous work should be no problem.

Following the Boss' directions, Jimmie had sent by first class mail the packages he had gotten out of the bowling lane. The Boss didn't want them postmarked as coming out of Phoenix so Jimmie had driven all the way to Tucson and had mailed them from there, and furthermore, he mailed each package from a different post office each time. It could be paranoia, or just being careful, but those had been the Boss' verbal instructions.

Jimmie had picked up the list of mailing addresses from a rental mailbox. He, as principal of the corporation dully registered with the State of Arizona that owned the box, had a key for it. The corporation thing had also been a Boss' idea, a corporation not linked to him through paperwork. The list came in an envelope postmarked from Yonkers, New York. Jimmie was sure that the Boss could have given him those addresses during their face to face meeting, but being the Boss, he had taken the long and beguiling way. For some reason, and Jimmie was sure there was a good goddamn reason, the Boss didn't want any of this business to stick to him if the shit ever hit the fan. Jimmie knew he would be the fall guy, and for that he got paid good money.

Despite his dislocated mind Jimmie understood that the day might come when the Boss will pay some scumbag to put a bullet in his head as a way of assuring his perpetual and unconditional silence. Of course, this thought came and went into Jimmie's mind like a blip. Even if this thought had stayed long enough in his head to turn on a warning light, like the engine and oil lights in his Dart's dashboard that were always on, Jimmie Deveraux wouldn't have given a shit; life on the couch, life in the grave, he couldn't see much difference.

From his conversation with Peggy he had learned of Wanda's high school and some of the places she was fond of going to. Big tits Peggy, that one always had been a naive dope, he thought. Wanda, on the other hand, had his mischievous and shifty eyes. He felt them on him when he found her dressed like a two-bit whore on the back seat of that car, ready to get drunk and screwed; that little slut knew how to play Peggy for a fool, and now the young one was gonna find her match in daddy. He smiled at the thought, yes sir, just like daddy, a snake in the ground. His old tape which he had watched a dozen times by now, like an oracle, told him they were going to have fun together.

Now that he was awake in the middle of the day he decided to put in motion his so called plan to get Wanda. It wasn't a solid plan like something he could write on a memo and send to a henchman or put on a chalkboard and explain to his confederates, if he had any; it was more like a fuzzy idea of how to do it with loose ends capable of snarling the most determined of men. Of course, Jimmie's mind was too frazzled to worry about lurking pitfalls and details so his simple plan might have a chance of working due to his innate lack of common sense. Better minds would have balked because the plan was not perfect, but for Jimmie it was good enough.

He parked the car down from the high school in a street he figured Wanda took to go back to the little cinder block house. He had it figured out by driving back and forth between the school and the house, second guessing the easiest route for a pedestrian, and the spot he had chosen had to be in her path, so he waylaid her like a bandit hiding behind a rock waiting for the stage coach to come down the road.

Cigarette smoke came out of the driver's window while Jimmie sat behind the wheel of the parked car. The radio didn't work so he had to sit with his thoughts and the voices whispering in his head, which he ignored as a matter of course. He got a crumpled magazine out of the back seat, Best Big Butts Bash, and carelessly perused through it while keeping an eye on the road ahead, his eyes moving from the rag in his hands to the sidewalk.

Kids with book laden backpacks started to go by, none of them Wanda. After a long while the flow started to dwindle and ended up in a fitful crossing of kids going home late. Jimmie had started to turn the ignition key on when he spotted two girls walking side by side and coming his way. He squinted; the one on his left was Wanda. His plan – such as it was - was working.

The girls stopped to talk for a couple of minutes and then Wanda's companion, a taller and older looking girl, took off in the direction of a side street leaving Wanda to walk home alone. Jimmie waited until she came by the side of his car and then called out to her. Wanda stopped and for a moment recognized neither the voice nor the man behind the wheel. Recognition came about because of the lime green color of the Dart, not because of the man himself.

"Jimmie?" Said Wanda, stooping next to the passenger door to better see inside but keeping her distance. The man inside wore dirty jeans and a less dirty but quite frayed black T-shirt. His long peppered hair fell in long and coiled strands over his bony shoulders and his cheeks, sunken, rough and dried like old mud, held a prickly layer of gray facial hair. But the hazel eyes, it was like looking at a mirror, seeing her own eyes reflected back to her in a stranger's face, and a stranger he was, a man she had not crossed words with since she was about eleven, before her first period when she had run to show Peggy her bloodied panties, so proud.

"Hi Wanda," said Jimmie. He smiled but to Wanda it looked more like a sneer. "Get in."

"Why?"

"Oh, just for a little chat with your old man." Jimmie saw her doubts. She just stood outside, holding her books against her chest with a worried face that had far less make up than the last time he had seen her. Now he could really see how young she was, and his libido grew up a notch.

"You know," he said matter-of-factly. "Peggy will want to know what you were up to the other night. Remember?"

Wanda squinted and didn't take her long to figure out that she was being black mailed and that she had no options other than getting inside the car. She stepped to the car and operated the door handle. The door creaked open and assorted debris, mostly junk food stuff, fell to the curb. There was a dirty magazine on the seat. Wanda looked at it and then at Jimmie. He smirked, grabbed the magazine and threw it on the back seat without saying anything.

Wanda sat on the hot vinyl; it was a good thing she was wearing jeans. The musty old car stench came to her mixed with one from hot beer and perennially filled ashtrays and God knew what else. The car started, or tried to. The engine caught and the car took to the street with its usual smoke cloud behind.

"Where're we going?" asked Wanda apprehensively.

"Oh, we're just going for a short ride and a little talk, girl. You worry none." His wide smile showed a backdrop of stained teeth.

"Are we going to push drugs or to a topless bar to get drunk?" Retorted Wanda, Her words were like a dagger stabbed into the dead flesh of a rotten corpse, the intended victim too far gone to feel anything. Jimmie thought they were a compliment of sorts.

Jimmie drove back to his place like a coyote running back into the desert after having scouted the farmer's henhouse, to wait for the opportune time to come back and plunder it. He had dropped Wanda a few streets away from her house, at her own request, so that her mother wouldn't know she had been driving around with the scalawag of his father. The cunning slut she was, he thought, first calling Peggy in her cell phone with a made up story about going to be a bit late because she was going to study at a friend's house and then chewing bubble gum and using breath spray and cologne after smoking the cigarettes he gave her and lit for her. She knew how to keep dumb Peggy off her trail, and that made Jimmie proud in a very wicked way, that her own flesh could be so much like him, so deceiving and, unlike him, so charming at the same time. Her guile was too great for her age, he thought, and that made him grin.

His smile was not fatherly, Wanda had noticed, but a devilish one, like belonging to an ornery little kid getting ready to push his younger sister over a mud puddle. She reciprocated his smile and

both laughed without saying a word, as if they could read each other's mind.

During their ride around town she had tried to shock Jimmie by using cuss words, increasing the intensity of each new word as the previous one had failed to register in Jimmie's mind. She liked pushing the buttons of the adults around her, but Jimmie's buttons didn't click anymore; it was like punching the keypad on a disconnected phone. Evil had grown deep and hard inside Jimmie's head like a cyst and had taken over his sanity so long ago that no signs of amazement could cross his face when recognizing that evil core in others, or in the case of Wanda, a maligned desire to shock. Wanda realized that for each cuss word she used, Jimmie reciprocated with one of his own, and after a short while both were talking in the language spoken in blue collar lounges where the smoke never clears.

"Got a cigarette?" she asked, expecting a questioning look or a little sermon. Instead, he took a cigarette from the pack in his shit pocket, passed it to her between his dirty fingers, and then he lit it for her.

What a cool dude, she thought.

"What have you been up to?" she asked, smoke blowing out of her nostrils. Jimmie noticed how easily she smoked and talked at the same time, something he would expect out of a bar fly but not out of a high school kid. His libido increased with what he took to be evidence of his daughter's swift arrival at womanhood.

"Not much. Same old shit."

"You working now?"

"Fuck no," he said, glancing her way. "I'm too goddamn smart for that shit." She smiled with a complicity of sorts and blew the smoke from her mouth this time.

"Where you getting your money from?"

"I do an odd job here and there, you know," he said. "All cash under the table."

Wanda remembered her mother bitching about Jimmie not paying child support, like getting blood out of a turnip. The loser doesn't have a pot to piss in, Peggy would yell mad as hell on her way to another long night shift at a greasy spoon, walking on her flat soled shoes that had started to wear out like her youth. It was obvious to Wanda as she looked around Jimmie's car that his cash under the table may feed him and buy him booze and smokes but that was about it. And yet, it was so cool to flick her ashes inside the car without being yelled at. She was sure she could barf on the back seat and Jimmie wouldn't be bothered by it.

She liked that freewheeling quality on what she reluctantly had to recognize as her father, the one with the eyes just like her. Wanda was not sure what she had gotten from Peggy. Genetics had been lopsided and she had gotten all her DNA from her father. She was so much like stringy Jimmie, and that somehow scared her, and she couldn't explain why she felt smug and uneasy at the same time as she sat next to her father.

Jimmie went home to masturbate watching Taboo for the umpteenth time, Wanda in the role of the daughter, he as the father, his mind unable to distinguish between reality and drunken fantasy. He passed out with his wilting dick in his hands, his caved chest wistfully raising and collapsing between breaths that reeked alcohol, nicotine and decay, the drool running down his gray stubbed chin. His consciousness went under as the make believe grunts of sexual pleasure from the TV continued to fill the ramshackle trailer and his head.

That same night Wanda brushed her loose and silky hair in front of the mirror and Jimmie's eyes looked back at her but she couldn't make out what they hid behind. They were big and round hazel globes that reflected the lights overhead with a wet glint, and they were expressionless, as her face. The brush in her hand went up and down in long strokes. She remained enthralled while she continued to stroke her hair, wondering who was the girl in the mirror, and whom those eyes really belonged to.

Right knee on the ground, his left leg bent in front of him, his left elbow resting on his upper left leg, both hands holding his .357 Magnum revolver, the photographer held his breath and exhaled, his breath coming out as smooth as his pressure on the trigger increased with a trained steadiness. His hands recoiled with the bang from the gun. The empty beer can thirty yards away from him jumped up in the air. The trick was not to aim at the can but at the dirt right in front of it. The flying dirt exploding at the impact point would propel the can far and away. A direct hit in the can would put a hole in it but wouldn't move it; the bullet going through it was too fast for that. Jumping cans looked cool, he thought, and like many things in life, theatrics mattered more than results.

The game of appearances was also being played at his house and Peggy was the less adept at it. On one side of the table was Wanda with her stories of sleepovers and study groups. On the opposite side was himself, lusting after Wanda with such lecherous desire he had not even felt when he was a teenager who had just discovered ejaculation and was in love with his neighbor's daughter, Rachel, older than him and by the number of young studs coming knocking on her door and returning her late at night, with the experience to destroy his virginity with the force of a hurricane. Of course, that never happened, and he was sorry that it had never been so; instead, he lost his cherry to a twenty-five dollar whore while attending the Navy school in Orlando, and that had been a quickie that left him with an urge to take a shower and wondering if sex was all it had been cracked up to be.

Peggy couldn't play the game. Pretenses she had none and she could see none, and that was the reason he liked her. She wore her honesty in her sleeve for all to see and spit on it and could not see the deviousness of those she loved, and for that he hated Wanda and himself. Yes, he hated Wanda, the little prick that played Peggy for a fool, Wanda who had him by the balls even if she didn't know it.

He liked Peggy but didn't love her. Maybe with time he would come to love her, whatever love was like or felt like. He didn't love Wanda either, and had no plans or hopes on that issue, an underground hate is what he felt for her, but then it wasn't her fault that he had fallen head over ass for her, in a strict sexual kind of way. He knew that he couldn't hold a meaningful conversation with Wanda if they both were to stay in the same room for more than five minutes. He only wanted to bed her, hard and unceremoniously, like that twenty-five dollar whore, and he didn't care if Wanda was the one who needed a shower afterward.

His photographs of newly weds had never caught this so called love; it wasn't an aura surrounding the groom and bride. Perhaps it was a look but he couldn't fathom it. Maybe it was a warmth flow between the couples that infrared photography might uncloak. Whatever it was, he couldn't see it and couldn't feel it. Love was all make believe to him but he couldn't dismiss its existence off hand because he knew that everything in life had its opposite and hate he knew it existed as solid and true as the gravel crunching under his boots. He had to admit that, for some folks, this love thing could be a real feeling; he just have never stepped on it.

Many a time he had bitten his lips when Wanda had come up with her outlandish excuses for being late or when she mentioned her sleepovers that he knew didn't exist. He didn't want to get in the middle of any mother and daughter argument. Many a time too Peggy had looked at him with pleading eyes, "What should I do? Is she lying to me?" He had felt the urge to grab Wanda and put her on his knees face down and give her a good butt slap but he knew that the punishment would turn into carnal pleasure, Wanda's firm buttocks trembling under his palms, his hands eagerly feeling her up, caressing and not punishing. Because of his twisted feelings, he had stayed out of their arguments, standing aloof, or acting that way, while burning inside to tell Wanda a few things and then, what he was afraid of, taking her by force to relieve his penned up cravings for her flesh. The risk of putting the gas can next to the fire was too high.

He fired another shot and a can flew ten feet up and landed on the desert ground where it tumbled and clinked, not a hole in it. He opened the cylinder and emptied it, caught the hollow and smoked shells in his hand and put them in his vest's pocket. Reloaded shells were cheaper than new ones. A wounded saguaro cactus showed its broken silhouette against the dark blue sky of the fading

day. Gun slobs had used it as a target for shotgun practice. He thought that it would be fitting to tie the bastards naked and upside down to the cactus and then fire BB gun pellets into their pelts, "How does that feel boys? Are we having fun?"

He wondered what the punishment fitting a stepfather who raped his stepdaughter would be. Could he be punished for his lechery? He sighted and shook his head. This was no way to live.

The photographer sat at the kitchen table with his gun in pieces and his cleaning tools scattered over the bright green vinyl mantelpiece and its motif of red chili peppers. The smell of solvent filled the air and tickled his nose in a rather pleasant way. The sounds filling the air around him were not so pleasant. Peggy and Wanda had started their evening argument, this time about another of Wanda's sleepovers in the middle of school week. Doors slammed shut, feet trod up and down hallways and Wanda and Peggy ended hollering at each other while circling his table in a war dance. He kept cleaning his gun with a stony face and hard eyes.

"It's not fair!" cried Wanda. "I just want to go to Lisa's place and spend the night there so we can study all night!"

"You don't live in Lisa's house," retorted Peggy. "You live here with us. You don't go there to bother their family every week."

And the argument went on, and he could repeat in his head their dialog lines as he could repeat Humphrey Bogart's lines in Casablanca before he spoke them after having watched the damned movie what it had to be at least a hundred times, probably as many times as he had heard this argument between Wanda and Peggy.

He put the heavy gun down on the table and it sounded like a gavel striking a judge's podium. Peggy and Wanda ceased their bickering and looked at him, wondering what had that been all about. "Enough of this," he said without raising his voice but speaking with force. "Peggy, call Lisa's mothers and ask her if it is OK for Wanda to go there again, and tell her that you will be calling her tonight to make sure that the girls are doing OK."

He saw Wanda's eyes grow bigger and then more intense as if poison had flowed into them, a lethal poison directed at him. Her looks gave him pleasure. Lust or not lust, he had it with her and her cheap stories, and with Peggy and her misplaced innocence, a mortal sin for somebody raising a teenage daughter like liar Wanda.

"I don't have Lisa's house phone number," said Peggy with a soft and apologetic voice.

He held his eyes on Wanda and spoke to her. "Wanda may know it and if she doesn't, she can call Lisa on her cell and have her give you her house number." His lips were set in a straight line but Wanda could see a sardonic smile held in place only by his strong will. Her mother's boyfriend had her game figured out.

"I don't need this!" Wanda threw her hands up on the air and started a tantrum. "I don't need my mother calling my friend's mothers to ask them if I'm behaving!" She ran crying, or pretending to, to her room and slammed the door shut.

He saw through her performance as clear as if he were looking through an empty beer mug and started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" asked a bewildered and reproachful Peggy. "You got her really upset".

He stopped laughing and his smile turned into a sneer. "Peggy, grow up fast or your daughter is the one that is gonna be telling you how to run the house. Can't you see she is just putting on an act? Don't be such a fool." His last words didn't come out as an admonition but as an angry reproach. Now Peggy was the one marching off the kitchen but at least she didn't feign a tantrum like the young one had done.

Great, he thought. I opened my mouth once and now I have two pissed off women in the house.

He didn't know what irritated him more, Wanda's craftiness or Peggy's dull wit but what was done was done and maybe now Peggy, even if she felt like he had slapped her, would brush off her complacency and mind the store.

Behind the locked door in her room Wanda assessed the damage. She had known for a long time that her stories and acts of deceit and contrition were only for Peggy. The photographer's eyes always have had the steel glint of a cynic's, of the unbeliever, and more than once his eyes had rolled up in his sockets and he had shook his head in disbelief when she had slathered her improbably stories on her mother. But until now he had kept his mouth shut, just happy with banging her mother and happy that he had nothing to do with the daughter. He got fed up with the bullshit, Wanda concluded. Her hope was that her mother wouldn't catch on. She grabbed her cell phone and dialed Lisa.

"Lisa ... yeah is me," Wanda whispered on the receiver. She crouched over the phone and her eyes moved around the room as if expecting the prying eyes of strangers to spy on her.

"Listen, I'm in trouble ... we are in trouble." She spoke with one hand curling her long hair at mid-length and then sliding down to the end.

"That damned two-bit photographer opened his mouth and told my mother to call yours about our sleepover tonight, and to call her again tonight to make sure we were a your place." Another pause. Wanda listens with a hard set face then speaks again.

"Yeah, I know, it sucks. I just played it like I was really pissed at the idea of them checking on me like I was a little kid and then ran to my room. I'm gonna have to kiss my mom's ass and hopefully she will forget about what that jerk said."

The conversation continued in muffled tones, Wanda always checking for those eyes and ears she knew were not in her room with the mistrust of a natural-born liar. Wanda hung up and then rested her back on her bed, her long legs still on the floor. It was a waiting time now and the best thing to do was to stay under the radar screen until suppertime. Peggy was likely to forget about what her boyfriend had said, but Wanda also knew that tonight's plans were shot and it wouldn't be wise to push the issue again.

Her hatred for the photographer grew in direct proportion to the fun she would have to give up; the smokes, the booze, the weed, the sex most of all. She also was smart enough to not take him on as an enemy. As polite as he was, Wanda could surmise the hardness under the soft velvet, and the way he looked at her at times, it gave her the creeps. Better to stay away from him.

She lay on bed with her hands behind her head, thinking how cool it would be to live with Jimmie. Her dad wouldn't give a damn if she went out every night and came back every morning hungover and with a sore crotch. Life would be so grand then.

The photographer's goading woke Peggy up to the reality that her daughter had not been honest in her dealings with her. She called information for Lisa's home phone number and had called her mom. There had been a knot of fear in her belly when she picked up the phone and dialed, a dichotomy between her desire to his accusations to be naught and a knowledge that Wanda had been lying to her all this time. The last one came out to be true. Wanda had never spent a night at Lisa's, and Lisa, despite what her mother said, had never spent a night at Wanda's. Two dumb mothers and two sneaky daughters. Peggy slammed the phone down.

The photographer, reading the newspaper at the kitchen table, looked up at her but said nothing and his face bore no expression. Peggy's countenance, on the other hand, spoke spades of her anger at both having been played for a fool and at herself, wondering what the hell she had done wrong to raise such a lying, untrustworthy daughter. Tears streamed down her rosy cheeks. He couldn't tell if they were due to anger or disappointment. Probably both.

"I'm sorry," he said. There was no point to rub Peggy's face in the dirt with an I-told-you-so.

Peggy wiped her tears with the back of her hands and sniffled. "It ain't your fault," she said as she sat down across him. "I should have listened to you from day one."

"That's the type of stuff you don't want to hear, or I want to speak about," he answered.

"She is grounded; she is fucking grounded until she graduates from high school," said Peggy trying to sound like a disciplinarian, but her voice quavered underneath her tough talk. More tears welled up around her pale blue eyes but didn't drop to her chin. He reached across the table and grabbed her hand. Her moist and chubby fingers adorned with gaudy and faux rings and broken painted nails scratched to hell and gone from busing tables and carrying trays of food and pots of coffee closed around his hand. For a brief moment, as brief as a photo flash from one of his cameras, he saw a glimpse of what love looked like; it wasn't the sharing of happiness but the sharing of unpleasant moments that forged true love, and he had loved Peggy in the stark flashing light of her despondency.

Peggy confronted Wanda when she came home from school. The photographer had decided to stay out of it but he couldn't do it after Wanda denied everything and tried to hoodwink Peggy into losing track of who the deceiver was and who was the one being called to the mat. He stepped in to set things straight, and straight to hell everything went but he couldn't care less. Peggy sobbed and her tears wouldn't stop sliding across her cheeks; cheeks so red they gave the impression that she had been drinking all day.

He and Wanda squared off, Wanda's eyes piercing him with a baleful puissance that would have made anybody else wince but he channeled her hatefulness into his own sexual engine and reciprocated with a fierce look that screamed to Wanda how badly he wanted to make her his, to punish her with his vengeful shaft of hardened flesh, to penetrate her until she cried for mercy.

Wanda couldn't read his mind, of course, and couldn't figure things out, but she caught the savage desire in his eyes. She flinched, gripped by a feral fear she could not understand but that warned her not to awake a dormant beast. She hated the man, but she was also afraid of him, the hardness under the velvet belonged to blunt steel, like a war hammer, and she didn't want to pull the velvet off. She dropped her desperate lies and acquiesced to Peggy's punishments: grounded until further notice, a rather indefinite notice.

Wanda disappeared for the evening behind the door to her room, crocodile tears on her face. Once in the safety of her pink room where old stuffed toys rested untouched under a coat of desert dust, she tried to call Lisa to compare notes but Lisa never answered her repeated calls. Either the dumb bitch had misplaced her phone or most likely, in Wanda's opinion, her mother had taken it from her; grounded and incommunicado. And all this because of that freak, and a freak is what he was, Wanda mulled, her fists rolled hard by her sides as she lay on her bed, tense and mad, thinking of what to do next.

He wanted to leave his own house to the women and maybe head out for a bar or for a drive in the desert, or maybe leave for good; he didn't need this shit. Peggy washed dishes by hand, fishing the dirty things from the hot and soapy water trapped in the left sink and slowly scrubbing them with a sponge until they shone unblemished, then dropping them into the cold water trapped on the right sink. She didn't use the dishwasher when she was upset because she found dish washing to be therapeutic. The thoroughness of her cleaning was directly proportional to the severity of her emotional turmoil, and today she scrubbed the same dish so hard and long he thought she was going to wear the sponge out like an eraser being rubbed against sandpaper.

"Jimmie? Jimmie!" Wanda's voice coming through the front passenger window woke him up.

He had parked in the usual spot and had fallen asleep waiting for Wanda to leave school. His eyes flickered and adjusted to the bright day light and his mind came to action like a spinning wheel cage on rusty bearings propelled by a three-legged hamster.

"Hi there," said Jimmie in a groggy voice, the taste of booze lingering in his dry throat. His vision cleared and his thoughts became coherent after a couple of minutes during which his eyes had been golden pools of murky water. He didn't know how long ago he'd passed out behind the wheel, snorting and drooling inside the hot Dart but everything was well now.

The passenger door creaked open and then slammed shut and Wanda sat next to Jimmie. Without speaking, he offered Wanda a cigarette and she accepted. He held a match for her to light her smoke. He used the same match to light his own. They exhaled together.

"What's up!" asked Jimmie, very jovial.

"I'm in fucking trouble, that's what's up," said Wanda, her face a grimace. "Big fucking trouble."

"How come?"

"I'm fucking grounded for life."

The foul words did not bother Jimmie, who found it exciting to hear such words coming out of Wanda's little mouth. Her words sounded to him like the badly spoken lines in his porno tapes; the fake quality of Wanda's words matched the one spoken in those movies, and just like the movies, they didn't fail to arouse him.

He smiled behind a cloud of exhaled smoke. "Peggy caught you having too much fun?"

"Nope. The bitch's too dumb for that." Wanda relished the word bitch, the way it smacked inside her parting lips, the way it fit Peggy like a dunce's hat. "It was that asshole of her lover boy who put the drop on me."

Jimmie said nothing. With his cigarette hanging out of his lips he started the engine. After the usual hesitation the car shuddered to life and clanked into motion.

"I need to be home pretty early," said Wanda. "I got to let things cool down before I can make out stories to stay out late."

Jimmie looked at her, and his own eyes looked back at him. "No problem sweetie." The Dart moved into traffic, and Jimmie's mind also shifted into gear, trying to find a way to exploit Wanda's grounding. In the mean time, his hand reached over the worn out seat and landed on Wanda's thigh. Her hard youth came through his fingertips and Wanda didn't even flinch or try to move away; Jimmie misunderstood her smile as a green light to his sickness, and Wanda felt his hand as a touch of fatherly love, something she had never known, and which she couldn't recognize as a fake or the real thing.

"Everybody together, please!" The photographer motioned with his hands for the group in front of him to become more compact. His lights were set, his camera ready on the tripod for the wide family shot. The wild motioning of his hands was to convey his commands to the non-English speaking in the bunch. Children in fancy dresses and clothes scurried among the adults, and the adults tried to catch them as they went by. With each successful catch the group grew more compact and the dissonant choir of voices started to ebb.

He got behind his camera and looked through the lenses. At the center the old people sat with their tired bodies on straight backed chairs, crevassed faces as tanned and eroded as the hills in the desert, and their innards as mysterious to him as those same hills. The black eyes of the men had seen so much, Normandy, Bastogne, the Chosin Reservoir, too much furious death come too soon and too much youth wasted away in bloody beaches and frozen trenches. Their hands, and that of their women too, were hard and heavy as clumps of solid dirt, hands with thick fingers and intimate with hard labor. His hands would never be like that working with cameras, and he didn't know if to be thankful for his easy labors or to be sad for not knowing what it was like to scratch a living with his bare hands alone.

Behind the ancient ones the groom and the bride stood ready to continue the bloodlines. Among the feet of the ancient ones children sat pulling at each other's hair and making faces to the camera. From the center of the old and the new the present irradiated through a mix of teenagers, young and middle aged people, all gathered from across the West to celebrate one more wedding in the family, a far better excuse, in the photographer's view, for a get together than the funerals of the ancient ones that would have to come just like the wind comes from the desert to blow tumble weeds across highways.

The group became quieter. The children stopped wiggling and only murmurs escaped from the humanity in front of his camera. The ancient ones held their breath as if a *deus machina* was getting ready to reveal itself (perhaps the Gods would explain why so much pain had to be endured during their long lifetimes). He held his hand above his camera as a conductor ready to strike the first note of a symphony.

"Sonrisa," he said in his bad Spanish. Smiles appeared but the ancient ones had forgotten how to smile; instead, they looked into the camera with a serenity that made him envious of the wisdom hidden behind, a wisdom that had come at such a great price. His camera flashed. Before the group had time to react, he commanded, "Otra más," and his flash went off two more times.

He didn't remember how many times he had wished he were standing behind the ancients, surrounded by the crowd of the old and the new, among so many who had his same blood, looking at a camera, somebody's else camera. He thought of Peggy and Wanda, his so called family, and shook his head in disbelief, at the joke of his lonely existence and borrowed family.

His family portrait would be him standing behind a sitting Wanda with his hand over her shoulder, a hand that if left to its devices would creep to her breast and squeeze it with such delight, pinching the nipple until she cried in pain. His eyes would be wild with lust and looking like they are ready to pop out of his sockets and his smile would be an ugly sneer, not unlike Wanda's own. Peggy would stand next to both of them, her face smiling like a cow's, unaware of what's going on, with her huge breasts almost reaching down to her waist.

He raised his head above the camera and the group broke into motion and laughter. In a few seconds only the ancient ones remained, looking at him with those piercing black eyes that could see so much, right through his thoughts and his appearances, and he felt his naked soul in front of them devoid of its bodily shroud. There was no reproach from the ancients ones; they saw him as he was and judge him not.

Another night, another fight, his peace and quiet gone. The photographer sat at the bar having a beer not because he wanted to drink - alcohol did nothing for him - but paying for a drink bought him the right to sit at the bar, alone and away from the women at his house. The lukewarm brew sat half-full in front of him. TV images cut through the cigarette smoke. The sound of balls crashing against each other came from the pool table behind him. A few folks sat like him, with empty stares, watching TV but not seeing it, and the old bartender hag smoked long Virginia Slims and talked on the phone like if she were a teenager telling girly tales, only coming forward to refill an empty glass, no cue needed.

Every single time he had told himself that he would stay out of it, and every single one of those times he had got sucked into the Wanda versus Peggy fights, he the reluctant referee who ended up with a metal folding chair crashing on his back. Wanda hated his guts because she couldn't manipulate him like she did her mother, and Peggy, the one that asked for his help with her mute cow eyes when Wanda was too much to handle, slept with her back to him because he was too harsh with her precious child.

Tonight he saw another melee coming, Wanda making noises about being Friday night and having to go out 'cause she had an important social date and failing to show up would ruin her social life for the rest of her existence on Earth. Sure, he thought, everything was so goddamned crucial, a

matter of life and death to Wanda. Here he was; he could go out every night. What was the big fucking deal about that? To drink with other losers and watch an old hag behind the bar scratch her crotch, probably a bad case of clap. He had skipped the ceremonies and ended up on the stool that now propped his tired butt.

He wondered what he would find when he got home. Peggy would be gone to another round of serving late night food and black bitter coffee, her youth and life eroded into sagging old age by her treading among booths and tables, arms raised above her head and breasts going the opposite way. He should put daughter and mother on the street and get his house and sanity back but he didn't have the heart to kick Peggy out. It wasn't her fault, despite what he knew she believed, that Wanda was such a tart. Had Peggy and him been left alone, he was sure that they would have got along quite well for a long time.

Peggy, he realized while chewing on a stale pretzel, was not the problem. It was Wanda, and what bugged the hell out of him wasn't so much her rebellious teenage behavior but the invisible yet steely hold she had on him, a claw that had him right by the balls, tearing at them without compassion. Despite the fights, the nasty stares, the snootiness she lavished on him, he couldn't stop masturbating when thinking of her; couldn't stop going through the hamper and sniffing her dirty underwear while his member shot up as if loaded with a coiled steel spring.

What would happen the day the little fiend realized the power she had on him? That would be the end of life as he knew it; not much of a life he admitted to himself, but at least it had been his until then. Wanda would tell him to jump and he would say how high ma'am. He thought about the ancient ones in his pictures and wondered what they would do if caught in his predicament. Of course, they would not fall into his predicament, too tired for such foolishness; too wise to fall into the trap of their own obsessions, that is why the now sat on straight backed chairs at the center of his pictures. Fools like him would not make it that far. He had the gut feeling he would never be an ancient one.

Peggy took orders and her note pad grew thinner as she ripped the orders written in her loose cursive style and slipped then on the cloth hangers in front of the kitchen window, like hanging diminutive sheets that moved along a cloth line and ended up in the greasy fingers of the cooks who hollered at each other in Spanish and laughed at what Peggy guessed were rude jokes, probably making fun of her breasts, still rather noticeable under her oversized uniform.

By the end of the shift her feet ached despite the well worn out flat soled shoes she wore, shoes with no style that made her look like a frump but that saved her from backaches and swollen ankles. Far worse, her heart ached. Her photographer wasn't happy, and she could see why. Getting suckered in the middle of her arguments with Wanda wasn't a pretty thing, and she felt it had started to wear his stony patience down, like water carving the Great Canyon.

Just when she thought that her life had found its center, an egoist Wanda had thrown it askew; things were so shaky she couldn't see which way they would go but it didn't bode well for her. She liked him, loved him, admired him, a too good thing for her to hold on to, the sad story of her life, bouncing from asshole to asshole and when she finally found the diamond she had been sure would never shine on her life, Wanda had done her best to ruin everything.

Tears welled up on her eyes. She wished she could be forceful and tell Wanda off, but she loved her, too, and couldn't bring herself to use tough love on her. She knew Wanda would be her downfall, but she just didn't have what it took to be a disciplinarian.

Across the kitchen window she saw Armando looking at her with worried eyes, his attention caught by the excessive glint on her eyes. She wiped her eyes dry with her dirty apron and smiled. Armando reciprocated and asked her if she was OK.

"Oh yeah," Peggy lied. "I think I got onions on my fingertips and I rubbed'em on my eyes." Her

feet hurt and her skin gleamed with working sweat and kitchen grease.

Peggy had told Wanda to stay home but she had skipped out after her mother had gone to work. The boyfriend was also gone – where he'd gone, Wanda didn't know and didn't care. Her friends had picked her up and she had run into the back seat like an escapee bolting out of the county jail. There would be hell to pay if she were to be caught sneaking out like that, but she didn't care. Soft Peggy she could handle, and her creepy boyfriend, well, who gave a shit; he wasn't her daddy.

Her daddy, the one who didn't give a shit either, tailed her all night, and if she thought she had been sneaky, her talents were eclipsed by Jimmie's who followed her around and never lost trace of her and her unaware friends, all the way to the lover lane in the desert, under the dark trees where Jimmie watched the car rock and naked bodies come out and do their cleansing ritual. Jimmie had known from day one that he wouldn't be the first to dip his wick on Wanda and that was OK with him because the slut in Taboo haven't been a virgin either when her make-believe brother and dad had their way with her. Life was gonna repeat art, Jimmie thought and felt proud of his uncanny wit for coming out with such an expression.

Jimmie's broken mind spun more smoothly at night. The way Wanda had ran out of the house told him she was sneaking out and that bit of knowledge could become handy later on; how handy, he had no clue yet, but he would get there. He smiled, smoked and tailed Wanda while his mind digested what he now knew and came out with a plan of sorts. Like rain on the mountains, sooner or later it would reach the desert floor and swell the arroyos; there was no reason to hurry the inevitable.

He followed Wanda back to the house. There was a small pick up parked in the driveway and the house lights were off except for the porch light outside and the kitchen light inside. Wanda had to sneak back into the house but somebody was already in there, probably lover boy, guessed Jimmie, and he thought it would be fun to watch his daughter trying to pull a fast one, to see if she had what it took to be a cheat like himself.

Wanda's friend's car circled the block and stopped at a distance away from the house. Jimmie had parked behind an old U-Haul truck and his lime green Dart blended rather well in the dark with the faded white and orange from the truck. He had to stretch his neck a ways to get a sight of the action. He observed Wanda walking towards the house with her eyes scanning the kitchen like a shotgun rider scanning the hilltops for robbers and Indians. She moved with a feline fluidity that put her at the kitchen door in a flash. Her head turned flat against the door and stopped there for a few seconds. The little sneak, thought Jimmie, listening for life behind the door. With a delicate motion of her wrist the door came open and a slice of light flowed into the porch. Wanda stepped in through this electric flood and the door closed behind her, oh so carefully. Jimmie saw the back of her head bobbing away into a hallway.

After a few seconds the light on her room came up for a brief moment and then went off again. She had made it. Wanda went to sleep with a wetness in her genitalia and her skin that would have to wait until her morning shower to get off her. The Dart pulled from behind the U-Haul and its lights came on. Jimmie drove past the house, his manhood disturbed by dark desires.

The photographer slept, or tried to, in the master bedroom. Coming in he'd seen Wanda's door closed and assumed she had been slept. As much as he fantasized about it, no power on Earth would make him open that door because he knew the hardness between his legs would take over his common sense and Wanda's smug face would be wiped out for good and forever. He couldn't sleep fantasizing about that very deed. He tempered his fire but knew he wouldn't be able to hold it until Peggy got

home, and she would be too tired anyway. He ran to the bathroom to finish off what he had not wanted started but had failed to avoid.

For almost a week rain had dropped from a low and gray sky and had dampened the desert soil outside Jimmie's trailer, imbuing it with a darker color that would bleach to its former, lighter shade after a few hours of sunshine. The tapping of the raindrops against his tin roof had mesmerized Jimmie at those times when he had not been immersed and lost in his alcoholic lethargy. He watched Taboo and other tapes catering to those who desire sex with younger women, with Lolitas played by young starlets who had endured the touch of more strangers than an old city bus. It was all make-believe but Jimmie had moved beyond where reason could have told him otherwise.

The rain stopped, the sky opened to let sunshine bathe the land and the flowers bloomed on the desert floor like wild popcorn. Bright colors dotted the landscape, and the waters in the arroyos receded. Jimmie descended the broken steps of his adobe and landed on mud, such a foreign feeling. He stood looking at his worn out Adidas as if they didn't belong to him. "I will be damned," he said to himself, wiggling his shoes on the mud with a squishing sound. He smiled and walked to his car with muddy feet. He had more than mud to feel good about.

Almost everyday he had intercepted Wanda on her way to the house after school, and every time they had gone together for a ride, smoking and shooting the breeze in a colorful language that would have made sailors blush. He had ran his hands over her and had felt the hard body underneath the clothes, and he had also ran his hands on her bare legs, so smooth and taut. Wanda had never winced and he took this as her tacit acquiescence that touching her more and closer to intimate parts would be the next logical step. He had never tried to see things from Wanda's point of view, that perhaps she saw his touching as something to do with their odd father-daughter relationship.

Jimmie drove through stretches of road that had until that morning been under water. At the low points on the road there was a flutter of trash bags and other debris snarled on bushes and branches, hung in place by the high floods. But Jimmie only paid attention to the pulsation between his legs and the pounding between his temples.

He parked at his usual spot, and, before long, Wanda appeared. She came straight for his car without looking over her shoulder to make sure that nobody was seeing her getting into the clunker. She just opened the door, jumped in and slammed it shut, her anger reverberating through the car's frame. Despite Jimmie's dull senses, Wanda's discomfort, her being upset at something, came to him as clear as the cloudless sky that had followed the rain. Without saying a word he cranked up the car and headed out for no place in particular.

His hand landed on her leg, squeezed it, and then stayed in place. Pleasure sneaked through his penis like a desperado escaping from a posse; the excitement of the chase, of running and running to get away with something, of being a bad man planning his next move, all that made his member tinkle with the pleasure of anticipation.

"What's the matter, sweetie," asked Jimmie. He used sugary words with Wanda, their sexual connotations lost on her who could spot a high-school phony miles away but not a seasoned one like her father, or one that hid his true desires behind a steel mask, like the photographer. Wanda would eventually learn to see through that kind of phony, but at barely fifteen, she didn't have the experience yet to see beyond the obvious.

"I'm fucking tired of mom and that asshole boyfriend of hers."

Jimmie lighted a cigarette and passed it to her, watching her smoke with angry puffs as he lighted a second for himself.

"Givin' you a hard time?" asked Jimmie, and that was the turn of the key that opened a flood gate of teenage complaints, perceived injustices and abuses, Peggy's and the photographer's dirty

laundry dragged and rolled on the dirt, of how she, so right and so not deserving of the shit they dished out on her had to put up with their crap, and on and on she went on her verbal rampage, cigarettes going so fast through her fingers that Jimmie had to stop and buy a new pack. He bought Wanda her own, hell, at the pace she was putting them away he should have bought her a carton. She smoked and she didn't try to hide the smell with gum or perfume, as if she wanted to go home stinking like an ashtray to ignite a new family war.

Through all her diatribe Jimmie just smiled and nodded, his mind content with replacing the whore in Taboo with Wanda's own image, that prickly sensation on his penis giving him a buzz thus the smile that wouldn't go away. He drove through seedy streets he had plied on his younger days. The hookers had new faces, and their pimps, and the drug pushers, but as a human group endeavoring to make money of other's debased needs, nothing had changed. He pictured Wanda on a street corner, cigarette in hand, short skirt, high heels, low in self esteem but high in street cunning, selling herself for a few bucks, and the pleasure through his penis shot up a notch. He would be her best client. He would be her pimp. His hand landed on her leg and gave it a good squeeze and he ran his fingers up and down her thigh. Wanda had finally shut up, impervious to Jimmie's fatherly affection.

"I need a drink," she said. "I want to get fucking drunk."

"You get home like that and the shit will hit the fan again, big time."

Wanda returned him a hard look, her eyes intense and unblinking. "I don't want to go back to that fucking place." Jimmie looked at her and saw a hard woman, like the ones on the street, one that had grown too fast and who wanted adulthood thrust upon her without knowing the aches that came with it.

"Where you gonna go?" he asked.

Wanda held her eyes on him, squinting like a gunslinger ready to draw. "You're my dad, aren't you?" She said it with a softness that hid a hard boiled decision. "I wanna live with you. Fuck Peggy and her lover boy."

Things had finally fallen in place, like they always did for Jimmie, without much fuzz or toil. Wanda wanted to come home with him on her own volition. His penis now rose and tried to push its way out of his pants. His mind became obfuscated by the images of a naked Wanda serving him like his private Lolita, of both getting drunk and hanging around the trailer watching porno naked on the couch, playing with each other. He had no legal custody of Wanda; he had given that right away many years ago and had cemented such legal ruling by never honoring a single child support payment, but his obdurate mind couldn't, didn't want to grasp reality, the reality of people coming looking after Wanda, of smoking him out of his den, he and his tapes and his aberrations. The only thing that mattered is that Wanda wanted to come home with him, to give herself to him, to please her dad.

Wanda had wondered about Jimmie's touch but her inexperience on matters of paternal affection left her thinking that nothing was wrong. What could be wrong? Jimmie was her dad, Wanda told herself, and she, the daughter of Jimmie and Peggy, that impossibly mismatched couple, was part of that big fucking mistake that should have never happened.

As the Dart rumbled and headed away from town toward the desert, Wanda thought proudly that she was going to teach her mom a lesson by spending a night or two with Jimmie, an expression of her independence and her ability to go places without having to ask permission. Lost in her own vengeful thoughts, she wasn't aware of Jimmie's erection or his deep breathing.

The sun had started to slide behind the horizon and the western clouds glowed with sharp

orange and yellows around their edges. By then Peggy had called all of Wanda's friends and still no idea of her whereabouts. The photographer had driven up and down Wanda's route home a few times and hadn't seen her. In his mind he suspected that Wanda was pulling a fast one but Peggy's worried face was not the place to aim his suspicions at. Peggy called Wanda's cell phone but again it rang until that same stupid mechanical voice told her to leave a message. By now there would be so many messages that Peggy knew there was no need to leave another one.

"We should call the cops," said Peggy almost ready to cry.

"And tell them what? he asked, trying not to sound harsh. "That a pissed-off fifteen year old is late from school?" He was going to ask, "In case they find a body that matches her description?" but thanked God he'd caught himself before the words came out of his mouth. Instead, he said, "They can't even make out a missing person report until she's been missing for twenty-four hours."

"What are we going to do?" Peggy's voice cracked, and she started to sob. He didn't know what else to do but Peggy needed something to hang on.

"Have you called all her friends?" he asked. She nodded, more willing to cry than to talk.

"Come on Peggy," he said in his best soothing manner. "Don't take it so hard. Teenagers do this kind of crap all the time." Peggy started to cry.

Oh brother, he thought. He walked to the porch and tried Wanda's cell on his own cell, just to look busy more than anything else, to show his solidarity for Peggy. In his own mind, deep where his crazy desires for Wanda also resided, he thought that if they never saw Wanda again it would be a blessing and an unexpected deliverance for his tortured mind. But Peggy would die of a broken heart. He couldn't understand Peggy's unquestionable love for that troublemaker Wanda. The prick didn't deserve it. It had to be something only a mother could feel and bear, and he grew up with no mother so he never knew what unconditional love was. Maybe that was the reason for his cold detachment when it came to relationships. Never had love, never needed it, never missed it, and won't know what to do with it if it landed on his lap, a foreign thing like a bidet in a bathroom.

The ringing coming through his cell was gargled and at times broken. He had expected the recording but somebody picked up on the other side. He couldn't make out who it was or what was saying.

"Wanda?" he asked with a loud voice that brought Peggy to the porch. "Wanda, is that you?" The static in the fitful weak signal made it hard to listen. He squinted his eyes and plugged his free ear with his finger while his thumb on the hand that held the phone pumped up the volume button as if moved by a reflex. It was a female voice. He heard his name and Peggy's and the words "fucking" and "shit" and nothing else made any sense. Before the line felt silent with a harsh click he heard the name Jimmie. He closed the half shell of his cell and looked at Peggy. "Bad connection. I couldn't make out what she or whoever it was, was saying."

"Try again," pleaded Peggy. He flipped his cell open and dialed again, and again, but each time the phone rang and the mechanical voice picked up. He looked at Peggy and shook his head. "Sorry."

"What did you hear?" asked Peggy, her face strained with fear.

"Our names, a few swear words, and the name 'Jimmie'."

Peggy gawped at him and froze in place as if she had seen a ghost. He wondered if Peggy had suffered a stroke. He approached her and shocked her by her shoulders. "Peggy?" he asked gently. She looked at him and muttered, "that son of a bitch."

He had no luck trying to persuade Peggy that perhaps the Jimmie from the call might not be her ex. She said she felt it on her bones the moment she heard that damned name, and she had to go with her conviction that he was the right Jimmie. Call the cops, she had said, and he had argued, to tell them what? There is nothing illegal about he being with his daughter, at least not yet. They couldn't prove kidnapping, and he had the gut feeling that this had been Wanda's idea, not Jimmie's. Peggy became hysterical and he tried to calm her, feeling inadequate.

"Call this Jimmie and ask him what's going on," he suggested.

“I don’t have his phone number.”

“Let’s call information”

Jimmie’s name wasn’t listed. Peggy grew agitated and had started to hyperventilate.

“Peggy, please,” he pleaded. “He’s her dad. It’s not like he’s a escaped convict.”

“He’s an ex-con.”

“But she’s his daughter.”

Peggy rolled her eyes. “I don’t trust the bastard. I don’t trust her either. Those two together is nothing but trouble. Oh God.”

He felt that Peggy was more upset about Wanda running away to be with her dad than she just leaving to join the circus or the gypsies. The salty taste of betrayal came out with her tears; after all she had done to raise her daughter right, and now she had run straight back into the arms of the devil, leaving her behind like a dolt.

“Do you know where this dude lives?” he asked. Peggy nodded.

After Peggy had calmed down a bit, he had pulled his maps out and had Peggy show him where this Jimmie character had his place, a trailer in the middle of nowhere. Peggy remembered that the night Jimmie had stopped by the cafe he had been driving a lime green piece of shit car. He thought that the car, if he still had it, would be his best reference point. The only way he had found to stop Peggy from falling apart was to promise her that he would go to Jimmie’s place and look for Wanda. She had wanted to come with him but he convinced her that it wouldn’t be a good idea, she getting emotional and perhaps hysterical and making things worse. Anyway, if this Jimmie thing turned out to be a bum lead, it would be a good idea for her to stay home in case Wanda showed up or somebody called the house. Before leaving, he went to the master room and pulled his gun and holster from under the mattress, just in case, of what, he didn’t know, but just in case.

“I will give you a call as soon as I find out what’s going on,” he said as they walked to his truck.

“Please do,” she said, her eyes red and puffy. She hung from him, her breasts squeezed against his chest. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“No problem,” he said returning her hug with one arm. She watched him get into his truck and the holstered big gun in his hand made her nervous but also gave her comfort. He was right in taking it, she thought, who knew what the hell he was going to find out there.

As the miles built in the odometer and the sun sank leaving a dark sky behind it, the photographer wondered what kind of mess he had got himself into, chasing after young pussy who deserved nothing but a good slap for the headaches she had caused but who instead got spades of motherly love. Soft love did more damage than hard discipline, in his opinion. If he were to find Wanda at this Jimmie’s place he would talk to her about coming back home, his home, for Peggy’s sake. If she gave him some bad lip she could stick it up her ass and stay with her daddy, who Peggy had described as a notch well below white trash. Maybe father and daughter belonged together. Through his righteous state of mind troublesome images of naked Wanda sucking his member filtered through, and he honestly wished the little bitch would stay with Jimmie for good. Maybe then he and Peggy would have a chance of living in peace together, and his sanity would be restored.

Wanda had passed out in Jimmie’s couch, so drunk that she had lost consciousness. Any paramedic or ER doctor would have diagnosed alcohol poisoning or its onset by just taking a look at her and catching a whiff of her body odor. Jimmie, of course, the veteran drunk he was, hadn’t had enough yet to put too much of a dent on his body even though his mind was farther gone than usual.

Wanda had answered her cell once, tired of hearing the damned thing ringing, and had spewed an incomprehensible litany of insults and names into the phone that had not made any sense to Jimmie. Right after that she had passed out. He had grabbed the pesky phone, which had already started to ring again, and thrown it out of the door.

First he took her shoes off and then her socks. He kissed her toes and then sucked on them. He moved over her and unbuttoned her jeans and pulled them down, exposing her slim legs. His hands ran up and down them and his tongue licked her from toes to the crotch where her panties still kept her genitalia covered, but not for long. Nothing mattered to Jimmie anymore; the outside world had ceased to exist and his heart thumped so hard he felt as his temples, his chest and his groin were to come loose and separate under the pressure. His fingertips and his lips suffered a sensorial overload and his penis hurt inside his pants. There was nothing that would stop him from doing what he had in mind.

The photographer's truck went up and down the road a few times. In the dark it had become hard to follow landmarks, and the many trailers that littered the landscape, all looking like giant abandoned refrigerators, didn't make things easier. He kept on looking for a lime green car, hoping that this Jimmie character still was driving it because if that was not the case, he would be going home alone and Peggy would die of not knowing what happened to Wanda.

The gods, he couldn't tell if good or evil yet, smiled upon him. He caught a glimpse of something lime green parked behind a trailer. He circled the property and confirmed it was an old car, and old Dodge. This was his best bet. A knot formed in his stomach, a kernel of fear growing around the fact that he would be knocking on a stranger's door at night in the empty desert, not knowing who or what was behind the door. He pulled onto the long driveway lined with junk. No dogs in sight, and that was good. He shut the headlights as he approached the trailer to stop his beams from bouncing on the trailer and blinding him. He stopped in front of the trailer where a set of broken stairs led to what looked like the main door. There were no lights on the porch but the inside was lighted. It had been this luminosity spilling through the broken windows that had painted the traces of lime green he had seen from the road.

He shut off his engine and grabbed his holstered gun. On the one hand, it would be impolite if not dangerous to knock on a stranger's door with a gun on his person; on the other hand, it would be foolish not to if there was trouble waiting. He thought about it for a few minutes. His eyes never stopped watching the door and the windows. He pulled the revolver from the holster, got out of the truck and put the gun in the hollow between the small of his back and his pants and then pulled his t-shirt over it. The damned thing was too big and uncomfortable to be a concealed weapon, and it felt like a heavy brick stuck in his pants.

No sounds came from the trailer as he approached. The muzzle of the gun goosed him. With careful steps he started to climb the rotten stairs, his eyes rising with each step, closer to the window.

Wanda had not moved while Jimmie had stripped her off her clothes, and she continued to be lifeless as he ran his hands and tongue all over her, squeezing and caressing and kissing and licking. Jimmie was also naked, his hard penis sticking out and as hot as a burning candle. He stood over Wanda's face and started to rub his penis on her mouth, his pupils dilated as if he had emerged from a dark room. The raging of his debased emotions inside his head blinded him to the face looking through the window, a white face contorted with surprise and horror.

The door crashed open and the butt of a gun crashed against Jimmie's face as he turned to face the intruder. His legs buckled and he fell on his knees and hands. The photographer gave him the coup

de grâce with another gun butt blow to the top of his head that sounded of something hard and hollow cracking. Jimmie's body slumped face down next to the couch, his skinny white ass pale under the electric light. The photographer stood over him with his gun held in his hand by the muzzle, like a misshapen hammer.

His breathing hard, the photographer's eyes moved to the couch where Wanda lay in her stark nakedness. He couldn't get his eyes off her, her pubis, her hard small breasts, her long legs, flat stomach, and her narrow slit through her soft mound. His breathing increased and his hand holding the gun dropped to his side. A furor rose between his legs.

For many months afterward, he ran his actions of that damned night through his head a million times, and not one of those times had he been able to remember for how long he had stood watching Wanda while the slanted member in his pants pained him, hard and bent the wrong way. With all his will he had resisted the temptation to do what he finally did, and while he did it he damned himself which each stroke but couldn't stop thrusting his hips against hers, feeling himself inside her, extracting vengeance and giving himself up to the demons that had haunted him for so long, everything else be damned. He had come inside her with a guttural sound that had startled him because of its subhuman nature. His release had been an explosion of life and damnation. His head had spun and his knees had trembled but he still could not free himself from her and in a few minutes, with sweat dripping down his face, he went at it again, and he could have gone until the end of the world have not been for his physical exhaustion that dropped him to his knees.

And yet, after his taking of the forbidden flesh and the time that had passed in between, his lurid desires had not been satiated because he still masturbated thinking of that night when he had had Wanda, and no other woman on earth could break that damned grip she had on him. Had him by the balls for good, and the little slut didn't know it, and would never know it because that was a secret he would take to the grave.

When he had finally come to his senses and stood with his wet limp member hanging in front of him, he realized that Jimmie had not stirred or moaned since he had landed face first on the floor. He had knelt next to him and had seen the blood tricking out of his nose and ears. The carpet strands in front of his nostrils hadn't stirred either.

Sitting on the floor, he the murderer and rapist, put his chin to his chest and hung his head on his hands. The ancient ones from his photographs gave him reproachful looks and shook their heads, not in anger but in sadness because they knew that the demons of this night would hunt him for the rest of his life, shackled to his memories like leg irons that he would have to drag behind, never to leave him alone and never out of sight.

He had buried the corpse in the hills in a shallow grave where it didn't take long for the heat to dry Jimmie into human jerky wrapped around his skeleton, and it didn't take long for the coyotes to find the carcass, dig it out and fight over the dry flesh and then spread the bones through the countryside where they bleached and turned into dust.

The only decent thing he did that night was to bring Wanda back to Peggy. On the way back Wanda had started to come out of her nightmare. He had been rather worried about Wanda suffering alcohol poisoning and having to go to the emergency room where the doctors and nurses would know she had had intercourse, and then the questions would start, and the cops would come around, and he knew that with each round of questions his improbable stories would crack and crumple and show what a liar he was. But Wanda came around, and the wetness and soreness in her thighs he blamed on Jimmie because a dead man cannot argue, and she had believed him.

Nothing was ever the same. The photographer was sure that Wanda looked at him with suspicion, and he couldn't stand her eyes on his guilty face. He couldn't make love to Peggy anymore because he had only desire for Wanda, his taking of her increasing, not diminishing, his sickening lust for her. Living with mother and daughter consumed him and drained him. Peggy felt his desperation and she blamed his sense of guilt for having killed Jimmie, who after all, was a stranger to him. But for once in her life, Peggy felt no remorse for the demise of other.

They had agreed to keep quiet, each for their own reasons, about Jimmie's fate. Nobody came around looking for Jimmie; nobody cared when he was alive, why would they care when dead? The Boss would eventually wonder about Jimmie when his calls to the trailer ended up in a disconnected line, but the Boss was not the man to call the police.

Like a windup toy that looked whole on the outside but that had a broken spring coil inside, family life at the photographer's became a broken thing. He became cold to Peggy, a coldness he couldn't avoid and she couldn't ignore. He wouldn't look at her in the face, ashamed of his sins. For the first time in her life Wanda saw that her actions could hurt other people; she saw it on Peggy's eyes, the pain of having lost what she thought she had, a weariness that veiled the former happiness in her eyes like cataracts. Wanda grew ashamed of her role in the whole mess, her haughtiness replaced by the realization that she had screwed up things for everybody, even for Jimmie who otherwise would still be drunk at his trailer minding his own dirty business alone and unmolested. The thought of having been raped by her own father made her toss on her bed at night, and the filth she felt on her wouldn't wash away no matter how many showers she took. The filth had sipped under her skin were it crawled at night to give her nightmares.

One day Peggy walked into the kitchen and said to him that she and Wanda were moving out. Wanda was at the table eating her cereal breakfast and almost choked. He only nodded in agreement and just when Wanda thought he was not going to say anything he opened his mouth and said "sorry," a sincere sorry.

"I'm sorry too," said Peggy, and she also meant it.

When he came back from a wedding gig that night the house was empty, as empty as his heart.

Denton, Texas

A cold breeze from Oklahoma blew over the frosted prairie and chilled Detective Nevergold's bones to their marrow as if his plump flesh and jacket existed only in his mind. Dead bodies had no consideration for his comfort and they always showed up at the more inconvenient of times and places. No killer he had dealt with had ever dumped a body in an accessible, pleasant place to be found at his leisure.

There was a column of vehicles parked along the ditch next to the farm road, a gathering of the officialdom too familiar to Nevergold after twenty-seven years working for the sheriff's office. Sheriff's cruisers, unmarked detective cars including his own, the Coroner's, the van from the crime lab and the covered pick up truck from the coroner's office, affectionately known as the meat wagon. The coroner's office used pick ups because they were easy to clean - just hose down the box and let the fluids and whatnot run out of the tailgate.

Nevergold appreciated the utilitarian quality of the meat wagon. During his Viet Nam tour he had washed blood and shit from many a medevac helicopter by landing on a river and splashing buckets of water on the cabin floor. Red tinged water would cascade from the edges of the open doors and fall into the river where long stains of diluted blood flowed downstream. Life wasn't worth much back then, he thought, and sometimes, like today, he had the conviction that things had not changed a bit.

Nevergold walked to the edge of the ditch. The Coroner's people had jumped in and had started

to move the body under the supervision of the crime lab boys and John Goldstein, the Coroner, not a bad guy for a Jew, in Nevergold's opinion. They both had been digging up bodies for many years and worked well together.

"Damn!" exclaimed Goldstein while inspecting the just lifted carcass. He looked up and saw Nevergold standing on the ditch's edge shivering in the cold.

"This is fucking sick," Goldstein said to Nevergold.

"What about it?" asked Nevergold, trying to make out what the Coroner was talking about by looking at the cadaver. Some parts were missing and the partially decomposed and mummified body did not say anything to Nevergold but it was obvious that something wasn't right.

"The head and hands are missing. Female and young, but look here." Goldstein pointed his gloved hand to a wooden stick dangling from the body. "The killer stuck this here stick up her ass and it came out through her pelvis."

"Jesus," muttered Nevergold. "Cause of death?" he asked in a louder tone.

"Not sure until I put this mess on the table, but that would be more than enough to kill anybody, I reckon."

Nevergold ran the crime through his calloused mind, the killer driving that sharpened stick through the victim's ass with such blunt force that it tore through her and popped through her belly. How many impacts the killer used until the stick cleared the hipbone? Death would have come from internal bleeding. And the pain, Nevergold blocked the pain from his mind, irrelevant to his investigation. Such thought would come to bother him at night while trying to sleep. After more than twenty-seven years he still could not forget the victim's fears and pains. He couldn't be that cold blooded. He had tried since the days he had splashed buckets of water on blood soaked helo floors but had failed every single time.

Somewhere there had to be a head and a pair of hands, concluded Nevergold, and he also knew from experience that the chances of finding those items were nil. All they had was a mutilated body, identity unknown, perhaps the killer weapon, and unmatchable DNA. There was a good chance this may end up as a cold case and if ever there were to be a clue, it would come from an unexpected place, at an unexpected time, just like the bodies he had dug up during the years.

The Coroner's boys put the cadaver in a body bag. Nevergold got a good glance of the horror Goldstein had described before the body bag was zipped closed. Nevergold's eyes rose to meet the line where a gray sky and a parched prairie met and gave thanks to God for living in the Great State of Texas where capital punishment was the law of the land. He lamented that softhearted liberals had made the state replace the hanging noose with lethal injections. He would gladly provide the rope to hang the bastard who did this, and he would have no remorse in putting the noose around the killer's neck. Let the killer's putrid body dangle from a cottonwood and let the crows eat the extinguished eyes, the evil gone from them forever.

Vegas, Nevada

Hillary's so-called boyfriend had left her stranded. She had crossed long city blocks under a merciless desert sun to get back to her hotel room, elbowing her way through a Strip teeming with sunburn tourists, wishing she had money to buy a bottle of water. All that walking because she had used her last coin to call him at the hotel and he never had answered the phone. Of course, he couldn't because by then he was well on his way back to California, taking with him the little money she had left, and her fake but rather copious jewelry. An ashtray full of butts smoked to the filter, and an unflushed, loaded toilet with the lid up were the things she found that hinted at him having spent the night at their room.

"Son of a bitch!" Hillary muttered, flushing the toilet as if to say good-bye to him forever. She had no time to worry about the asshole but rather about what to do next. The room was paid for one

more night and after that she would be on the street with her bag, a bona fide homeless person.

Her feet, raw from walking in high heels, refused to take one more step and she sat on the edge of the bed. The tap water tasted like paradise inside the flimsy and translucent plastic cup that she had found next to the minuscule bar of hotel soap on the bathroom sink. So far, that had been the only honest thing she had found in Las Vegas, the water, everything else being an elaborate scheme to take money away from people, but the water tasted fresh and soothing, and she didn't have to pay when she turned the tap on. She wished she could live on water alone.

Clasping the water cup in her fingers adorned with big, faked rings, she took time to ponder. It took her great effort not to fall in love, keeping herself detached and at a safe distance when in a relationship, and she always had to remind herself that all relationships were suspect, an hoax to get sex and money from her, that today's love was tomorrow's pain. The facts had proven her correct, one more time. Until now being love proof had served her well. No asshole boyfriend had ever laid a hand on her, at least not more than once, and none had stolen from her more than once either. The self-imposed void in her heart was easier to live with than dealing with a heart broken by others. Today she had lost a no good boyfriend, some cash and assorted junk but her heart remained intact.

She took off her clothes that reeked of cigarette smoke and her own body odor and threw them on the pile of dirty clothes in the corner next to the TV. She took a shower and dried her hair with the hotel provided blow drier. She rummaged through her bag but couldn't find any clean clothes but a pair of thongs the asshole had bought her. She was not a fan of butt floss but there was nothing else to wear. From the dirty clothes pile she retrieved a bra, some real panties, a pair of shorts and two shirts. While she scrubbed her clothes in the sink she watched in the mirror her breasts bouncing as she rubbed her garments in her hands using shampoo as detergent. She had to find a way to get out of Las Vegas and all she could pay attention to were her breasts swaying as she washed her clothes. No wonder she had ended up in another predicament, with such a wandering mind that didn't let her think right when the time called for it.

Getting jammed up like this was not new to her, but it had never happened so far from home. Even LA could not really be called home; a rented room in an apartment where she lived with an old and grumpy lady would hardly qualify as home, but at least the toilet lid was never up and there were no unpleasant surprises floating in the bowl. After a string of no-good boyfriends and crazy roommates, living with the old lady had been a well received break. Esther was her name, a recluse that never left that apartment full of old figurines. The walls were decked with sepia photographs of what looked like country folk during the Depression days, all surly looking in too-big clothes, hand me downs, perhaps, usually a background of pastures turn into dirt behind them.

"Esther," she had asked. "Are those your relatives?"

"Yeah. All dead." And that was the most she could find about the pictures on the wall, a graveyard of paper corpses. For the most part Esther just watched soaps and the only time she paid attention to her tenant, Hillary, was at the first of the month, when she expected the rent money in cash, with no delays and no excuses; after that, Esther would retreat back into her soaps and Hillary would become a living ghost that moved around her, as unnoticeable as the colorless people plastered on the walls.

Hillary hung her clothes to dry over the shower-curtain rod. While she waited for them to dry, and because she have no idea what else to do, she sat on the chair next to the TV, smoking her last cigarette from her squashed pack, taking long drags that went deep into her lungs where she tried to hold them as long as possible because she didn't know how long it would be before she could afford to buy another pack.

Somebody knocked on the door. Before she could exhale the smoke from her lungs she heard the rasp of keys on the door lock.

"Who is it?" She asked aloud once the smoke had cleared her throat.

"Maid service."

"Crap," Hillary said to herself. "I got no clothes on."

"Hold on a sec!" Hillary shouted while she ran to the bathroom. All towels were on the floor in a big wet heap. She ran back into the room and found an oversized T-shirt that had belonged to the asshole boyfriend. The maid came in and did her cleaning with Hillary curled up into a ball in the chair, her T-shirt barely covering her hips, and she felt embarrassed by the mess and the clothes over the shower rod.

It was apparent that the maid couldn't care less that Hillary was stuck in that room with no money and nowhere to go. She changed the sheets, checked that nothing was floating in the toilet, or out of the toilet, and that there were no used rubbers or other unmentionables in the trash can or anywhere else.

After the maid left, Hillary checked her wet clothes and they were as wet as when she had hung them. She couldn't wait all day long for them to dry. She rummaged through the pile of dirty clothes and picked the ones that were less offensive to the eyes and the nose. She ended up wearing a summer dress and sneakers when she stepped back into the hot and dry sunlight, unawares that her dark thong and bra showed under her light dress as if they were painted on it. She made the rounds through all restaurants and eateries she stumbled upon on the Strip and asked for a job waiting tables. She got no job but her fingers got tired of filling worthless job application forms where she had to put as address a hotel room. She knew she didn't have a chance in hell; and besides, she couldn't wait. She needed cash by tomorrow morning before check out time.

On the sidewalks, illegal immigrants from Central America shoved pamphlets hawking topless joints, massage parlors and escort services on tourists' faces. Hillary grabbed a few and sat next to a water fountain. The sound of falling water pleased her in a low yet satisfying way. Sex in Las Vegas was good business. Dancing topless was good cash and after a few nights she could get enough money to buy a bus ticket back to LA. On the other hand, why LA? Her belongings in Esther's room were nothing worth a damn, not even at a Goodwill store or the Salvation Army. She saw herself on a dancing platform under hot lights, shaking her booty and her breasts in front of creepy guys who stuffed folded bills into her garter belt and somehow that seemed a step up from waiting on rude customers and cleaning up after them and their bratty kids.

She made up her mind on an empty stomach to join the adult entertainment industry, but there was a catch; there is always one, she thought. All the topless bars were on the old downtown area, or far out there, and she had no way of getting to those gold mines on her tired feet. She took her sneakers off and stuck her bared feet into the fountain, wiggling her toes in the refreshing water. By tomorrow morning she would be on the street with her bag. She saw herself pushing a grocery cart with her stuff in it, her hair in dirty knots, sleeping on urine smelling alleys.

Freedom is having nothing to lose, Hillary remembered an old song that said that, or something like that. Being a step away from becoming a pauper, a street person, that didn't bother her at that moment because the coolness of her feet inside the clear water sent throbs of soothing pleasure up her legs and through her body to her brain. No inhaled or smoked drug could make her feel that good, and she dreamed of hitting the jackpot and buying herself a big house with a huge indoor pool under smoked glass and she sitting on the cool water until her skin would wrinkle like a prune and the flesh at the tip of her fingers looked like it were to fall off to expose the bone.

Hunger pangs awakened her to reality. Bad boyfriends and lousy friends in general had been the scourge of her life. A lousy mother too. Her father? Who knew? She would get along with just about anybody, and dirt balls and scum gravitated toward her easy going ways as if attracted by easy prey, and her good looks and loose morals made this attraction stronger. All these relationships had left her with regrets and bad memories, the unwanted gift from abusers and free loaders who had enjoyed the ride and had left in a hurry.

Carl, the Toilet Bandit, as she now called the last loser, had seemed like a nice guy when they started this Vegas trip but ended up a complete asshole, his assholeness growing in direct proportion to

her money diminishing, mostly at his hands and his bad bets. Now she realized all he wanted was a free ride to Las Vegas and free pussy, all on her, and when the money ran out, the pussy didn't matter anymore, and there she was, sitting barefooted on the ledge of a water fountain, wondering who the next loser would be, and she knew for sure that she was not done with them yet, and she could see them, the losers-to-be, prowling around her, watching her playing with the water at her feet. She felt them licking her body with their luscious eyes. She wondered if ugly and unpleasant women had better luck with men.

The soothing from the water combined with her lingering tiredness from staying up all night and walking all day made her sleepy, and she would have taken a nap right there but regardless of her many tattoos spread on her body and rings and studs piercing her right eyebrow, tongue, left breast, belly bottom and her left labia - the last one done by a woman because she didn't want a guy staring at her thing - her modesty didn't allow her to fall asleep in public.

She would wake up every morning contorted on a whorl of sheets, the pillow on the floor and her hair a mess because she was a restless sleeper, mumbling nonsense and sleeping in compromising positions, a trait corroborated by many of her boyfriends and one-night stands. She once had a room mate, Melissa, a nice Mexican girl, who would go to sleep and wake up in the same position, as if afraid of disturbing anything during her slumber. Watching her sleep was like watching a corpse. Hillary, in contrast, would make a mess of anything she slept on, and she could see herself on a park bench, sleeping with her legs wide apart, her mouth an open gap with drool running down her chin, talking to herself.

She spun her legs out of the fountain, put her shoes back on and dragged her tired self back to the hotel room, to take a nap so she could wake up rested to face up to her old problems, that would be bigger by then, such as the hunger in her belly. But at the time a nap sounded like a good idea, and her body didn't want anything else; even food could wait.

To her surprise she woke up a few hours later and the bed sheets were still taut and the pillows were in place. She'd slept like Melissa, The Mexican Corpse, on her back, and probably had snored like a Diesel engine; she always did when she slept facing the ceiling, or at least that is what her bed mates would complain about when they kicked her out of bed at night. But there was nobody to kick her out of her own bed that day, the silver lining to her predicament. She sat on the bed's edge with a nicotine urge stronger than the restless hunger in her empty stomach.

"I need a goddamn cigarette," she said to herself while searching through her purse, looking for an improbable cigarette left behind by accident. Exasperated, she dumped the purse's contents on the floor; lip stick, make up kit, lighter, match books from different casinos, doodads, Kleenex, in sheets and rolled into balls, and a piece of paper with a phone number. She grabbed it. It had been torn from a bigger piece so there was no masthead or any other markings besides a hand written phone number, in red ink, and the name Brenda. Not her handwriting, and no idea whose number it was.

"Who the hell is Brenda?" she said aloud.

She shoved everything back into her purse but the note. It had happened to her before, finding phone numbers and names of people she had no idea who they were, many times written by her own hand, and still, completely clueless about who those people were. Sometimes even the area codes she had never seen before. This was one of those numbers, but wait, she thought. Where did it come from? She didn't even carry a pen. Well, anybody working in a casino carries one and she could have asked to borrow one to write this note, but again, it was not her handwriting. Maybe the asshole put it in her purse because she didn't remember putting anything in there. Or perhaps she did, half drunk with free drinks while playing with the one-arm bandits. But again, no, she hadn't done it, and she didn't remember anybody giving her anything like that. But there it was, wrapped around her fingers, Brenda's phone number in big, flowing red letters. And again, "Who the hell is Brenda?"

Every time she had found one of these orphaned numbers, she had shrugged her shoulders and tossed the number in the trash can. What was the point in calling somebody who she doesn't know at a

number she doesn't recognize? Of course, in every one of those occasions she also had had the urge to grab the phone and call, just to see who that unknown person was, just to see if the number was not disconnected or if it ended up ringing in the White House or who knows where. Hillary rolled the note into a ball and was aiming for the trash can when she froze with her hand raised, ready to do the deed. Freedom is having nothing else to do, she remembered again, and she was as free as a bird, because she truly had nothing to lose. She was staying in borrowed time, penniless, hungry and with a bag of dirty clothes, the poster child for freedom.

She scooted toward the night stand and grabbed the phone, punched nine and heard the tone come up and started dialing with the hunger knot in her stomach turning into a nervous one. As her fingers danced over the keypad, a mischievous smile came to Hillary's lips. She had no idea what she was going to say. "Who the hell is Brenda?" sounded like a good line, and perhaps was the only line that would make any sense, at least to her.

The phone rang, once, twice, a few more times, and Hillary thought about how stupid the whole thing was and just when she was ready to hang up, a raspy female voice said, "Hello?"

Shit, thought Hillary. Now what? "Is Brenda there?" Hillary asked in a pleasant voice, trying not to smirk. Her question was followed by a silent interlude before the raspy woman's voice came back with an answer.

"This is Brenda." The raspy voice rolled the last syllabus in Brenda, as if the person behind the voice were not sure of her own name.

"Hi Brenda," said Hillary. "How you doin'?" Hillary's voice was as chirpy as a game host's.

"Fine, thanks."

"How's the family?" Hillary asked, barely holding off the laughter ready to pour out of her, thinking about how ridiculous the whole thing was, she talking to a stranger that surely had no clue who the caller was either. Hillary expected the raspy voice woman to hang up all pissed off at any time, maybe after uttering a few well deserved insults.

"Family is fine," said the raspy voice, without a hint of mockery or surprise or doubt.

"That's good. That's very good," said Hillary, and she had nothing else to say because there was nothing else to say. After a short pause Hillary decided to just explain how she had come to call Brenda. At worst Brenda will tell her to fuck off and then hang up.

"Listen Brenda...", Hillary smacked her lips before speaking again. "I found your phone number and name in my purse but I have no idea who you are, and you don't know who the hell I am. I just wondered how your name and number ended up in my purse. Do you know an asshole called Carl?"

The raspy voice hesitated but then came back on. "I know many assholes but I don't think I know that Carl one. Who is he?" The raspy voice spoke with no anger, or disdain, but as pleasant as it were talking to an old friend.

Hillary laughed on the phone. "My ex-boyfriend, headed back for LA, leaving me stuck here in Vegas with no money."

"You alone?"

"Yes," and Hillary couldn't believe that she was telling a stranger she was alone in a hotel room, even if the stranger was a female.

"What are you gonna do?"

"No idea. Tomorrow I will be on the street and broke." Hillary had no idea why she was telling these things to Brenda, whoever she was, but under the circumstances, what the hell, why not? "This sounds weird, but I have no clue why I called your phone number." Brenda laughed on the other side, a laugh mingled with coughs, a smoker's laugh.

"Well, I have no clue either. What's your name?"

"Hillary." After saying her name, Hillary thought that it would have been better to use a false one, but her lips had moved faster than her cunning.

"Nice to meet you Hillary."

"Nice to meet you Brenda." After a short pause Brenda's voice asked, "You need to make some money?"

Hillary hesitated but answered with the truth. "I sure do."

Brenda became businesslike and asked for her age and if she was "presentable," whatever that meant. Brenda asked about her family, or the lack of it, and Hillary answered questions like a zombie, without really thinking about the things she was revealing because to Hillary, the facts of her life were irrelevant, such a life as hers. Hillary believed that her unremarkable biography, from the days of foster homes to her waitress job in a greasy spoon and renting a tiny room from Esther were not worth preserving from strangers; what were they going to do, steal her crummy identity? She had been sure that by the end of the bizarre conversation she would be not better or not worse, but at least she would be amused.

After she had hung up she had a casino name and a meeting time dotted down in pencil next to Brenda's red phone number and name, but the basic question of Who the hell is Brenda? was still unanswered. All Hillary knew is that she had a raspy voice. Brenda had told Hillary to look for her at one of the casino's lounges where she would be sitting at the end of the bar, to look for a long and dark haired woman in a black dress.

Hillary sat on bed with the mysterious paper on her hand, shaking her head in wonder at the bizarre phone conversation she had just ended, and at this meeting with the unknown Brenda. Who the hell is Brenda? How had her phone number ended up in her purse? She had no clue. Common sense told her to forget about it but her situation was outside the realm where sensible things happened, and there are no sensible things when hunger and a crave for nicotine override the brain. Plus she had nothing to lose, as that song she couldn't quite remember said.

Wondering whether the shirt and shorts that had been hanging from the bathroom shower rod, clean and dry but wrinkled because neither she nor her room had an iron, would qualify as "presentable," she walked into the casino lounge looking for Brenda, if that was her real name. A few times on her way to the meeting she had been ready to turn back, but back to what? And where could she go? If she got lucky, she may be able to bum a cigarette from Brenda, or maybe get a free meal, but Hillary wasn't too naive; nothing is free in Vegas or anywhere else.

With the noise of the slot machines fading behind her and replaced by the techno music in the lounge, Hillary eyes squinted through the smoke and the subdued ambient lightning of the windowless room, scanning the bar from end to end. One part of her, a small part that nagged at her from the depths of her mind, tried to make her conscious of the dangers of meeting a stranger under weird circumstances; that small and almost inaudible part wished that no Brenda was here. Curiosity, on the other hand, carried the moment, and Hillary was eager to find an answer to the question, Who the hell is Brenda?

A middle aged woman whose long, jet-black hair that fell past her waist sat alone and cross-legged at the end of the bar, wearing high heels and a rather short dress that exposed generous thighs wrapped in fish net stockings. Rings glittered on every finger of her hands and no less glitter came from the jewelry around her neck. Probably they were fakes like Hillary's own, as fake as the ones that used to be hers until the Toilet Bandit ran off with the loot. The stranger smoked a long cigarette and blew smoke high above her face, as if she were watching flies on the ceiling.

Hillary decided that the woman at the end of the bar must be Brenda. She had pictured Brenda like some old lady, not much different than Esther the landlady. The raspy telephone voice had threw her off. As she approached the woman, Hillary could see her tight dress and the love handles under it, a voluptuousness trying to escape, soft flesh wrapped too tight in an attempt to smooth out what should be round. Fat is not the word that Hillary would have used to describe what she knew was under the

dress; plumb would have been a more precise adjective.

Hillary stood next to the stranger, a safe arm's length away.

"Hi, You Brenda?"

The stranger smiled and let a plume of smoke blow out of her nostrils. The cherry red of her lips matched the red on her long and well-manicured nails, enameled with gold filigrees.

"May be. Who are you?"

"Hillary."

"Nice to meet you Hillary." The stranger tapped on the stool next to her. "Please, have a seat." Hillary sat, her back straight as a rod, trying to read what was behind this woman's face, and knowing that she would have a better chance of hitting the jackpot than guessing other people's intentions.

"I'm Brenda," said the woman.

"Nice to meet you." Hillary put out a fake smile while thinking about what the hell she was doing. She didn't know what to say next. To her relief the bartender showed up and asked if she wanted anything.

"No thanks," said Hillary. She could have used a drink.

"Come on, get a drink. It's on me," said Brenda, smiling.

Hillary was going to order a beer but then thought that it was too blue-collar, without any panache, and this Brenda had a mixed drink of some sort. She ran the list of fancy drinks she knew by name through her head and had no idea what they were and was not sure if the names she remembered were right.

"Rum and Coke please," said Hillary, grateful for remembering a mixed drink that was named after its own ingredients, for ignoramus like her. The bartender nodded and went on his way without asking her for ID, thanks God. Do I look that old now that I'm down in my luck?

"Cuba libre," said Brenda.

"What?"

"Cuba libre. Free Cuba. You mix Cuban rum and American Coke and end up with a free Cuba. That is what old Cubans call rum and Coke."

"You Cuban?" asked Hillary.

Brenda just smiled and took a sip of her drink. It was obvious that she was not going to answer anything. She would be the one with the questions. After putting her drink down Brenda grabbed a fresh cigarette from her pack of mentholated Virginia Slims. She saw Hillary's mouth water at the sight of her cigarettes and offered her one.

"Thanks," said Hillary. She put it to her mouth and Brenda lighted it with a nickel-plated lighter that flicked a smooth yellow flame. Then Brenda lit her own.

"Thanks," Hillary said gratefully.

The bartender came over with Hillary's drink and laid it on the counter atop a coaster.

"Thanks hon. Hey, can we get some chips?" Said Hillary. Chips and mixed drinks, Hillary had no idea if that was a gaffe; all she cared for is that she needed to feed her belly. The bartender nodded and went on his way again.

"Sorry about the chips," said Hillary. "I haven't eaten since last night."

"That's OK," said Brenda. "I understand. Things can get tough."

"Yes, they can." Hillary looked at Brenda straight in the eye and kept a sly smile on her face, wishing she had the knack to read other people's minds, or at least to second guess their intentions, but that would be too easy. All she could do was play a sort of social poker where bluffing was her biggest asset as she never had a good hand of cards to start with. But even at bluffing she wasn't that good, and often she got trumped. She observed Brenda, or this woman trying to pass as such, and noticed her fancy jewels - no fakes - and expensive dress and she knew she wasn't playing with an amateur. Even bimbos and kept women had to have a highly developed degree of cunning to stay in business, their dizzy personalities a front that hid clever players holding their cards close to them, waiting for the right time to put their chips on the table. Brenda held Hillary's stare and smiled.

"You're a looker," Brenda said. She had raised the stakes. It was time for Hillary to match her or to fold.

"Thank you. These are not my best threads." Hillary kept her stare. The bartender came with the tortilla chips and the crispy smell made her blink. Her stomach grumbled so Hillary grabbed a chip, dipped it in the hot sauce and popped it into her mouth. Brenda continued smiling at her and now Hillary didn't feel like playing this poker game any longer. It was hard to keep a cool facade and munch on chips at the same time.

"Let's cut to the chase," said Hillary, grabbing another chip. "You asked if I wanted to make some money, so here I'm." She swallowed the chip and went for more. Her stomach was a riot that not even her nicotine craving could stop. She watched her cigarette on the ashtray, slowly wasting away while she stuffed her mouth with more chips, but she was too hungry to care.

"There is money to be made, but all depends on what you are willing to do." Brenda spoke with an amicable voice and blew smoke towards Hillary as if saying, here, have some good stuff from me. Hillary inhaled Brenda's smoke through her nose as her mouth still held half-chewed chips. Hillary swallowed hard, took a sip from her Cuba Lib..., whatever, and followed it down with a good drag from her cigarette, the menthol climbing through her nostrils on its way out and tickling the pleasure zone in her brain.

"I'm all ears," said Hillary, now blowing smoke in Brenda's direction, here, have it back.

"I got a small business, and I need models to pose naked. Interested?"

"What kind of business?"

"Web site, an amateur web site."

Hillary looked at the ceiling, just like Brenda had been doing when she saw her for the first time, and also blowing smoke in that direction. There was nothing on the ceiling, but it was a good place to divert her eyes while the mind tried to put two and two together. Hillary knew what her two and two would add to five, or three ... always wrong, but is not like she had a basketful of options. She had nobody to call for help. Had many times had she seen other young people just pick up their cell phones and call their parents for money or help, and then have that help show up as cash in a Fedex envelope? "Do you need a credit card to pay off your debts and come home? Sure honey, here is the number". She had nobody to call for cash or tickets. Once out of the foster care system, she had been on her own, and even as a foster child, she had always felt on her own, living on borrowed homes and friendships, her well being trapped inside the stacks of paper in the file case of a social worker, her name and D.O.B. written on the outside, labeled as property of the state.

She could say no and walk away, chips and rum and Coke in her stomach and the taste of her last cigarette in her mouth, walk away to a hotel room she would have to leave in the morning, to wander the streets with no place to go, with nobody to call, her dirty clothes on her and in her bag, to end up in a homeless shelter with junkies and crazy street people.

Or she could say yes to Brenda and get herself into "show" business, getting paid for showing what until now she had been giving away for free to assholes. Despite her best efforts, the word "whore" kept on coming to her; she swallowed hard, and her stomach contracted, not from hunger but from fear. Hillary closed her eyes and took the last drag from her cigarette. Her nervous fingers squashed the butt against the ashtray, as she were squashing not just a butt, but her past and her future, all squashed under her angry fingers, down to a flat pile of garbage. Why not?

"Can I have another?" asked Hillary. Her face had a hard and unsmiling face, all business. Brenda gave her another one of her Virginia Slims and lit it for her. Brenda's expression reciprocated Hillary's.

"Just naked pictures?" asked Hillary.

"If you want to. Porn videos sell better and pay more." Brenda's voice continued to be friendly. "It is up to you. Not everybody has the talent for this business."

"How much talent do you need for fucking on camera?" blurted Hillary. Brenda smiled. If she

was offended by Hillary's outburst, she didn't show it.

"A lot. Some people are naturals in front of a camera, looking better than in real life," said Brenda, smiling from ear to ear. "Other, regardless of how good looking they are, appear like humorless dummies on the screen."

Hillary smoked hard, her heart racing. Her feet ached from walking, and from her memories of long hours waiting tables for sorry wages and pitiful tips, putting up with so much shit for a few coins. Could she do it? Why not? She had started having sex with her foster care brothers when she was twelve, and continued in high school until the day she dropped out and continued after that while she bounced from crappy job to crappy job, getting fucked for free, to please others who couldn't care less about pleasing her. Why not profit from it for once? she thought.

Hillary swallowed hard, "I'll do it. The naked pictures bit." She looked at Brenda straight in the eye. "Naked pictures are fine. Sex ... I'm not sure. I have to see how things work out."

Brenda smiled and pumped her leg over her knee up and down. "You will like the money, trust me, better than starving to death."

Hillary finished her drink in one gulp and returned a nervous smile.

"When I ... do this thing," she asked.

"Tomorrow will be fine," said Brenda. She looked in her purse and pulled out a note pad where she started to write an address.

"I have no car, and I don't know Vegas," said Hillary. "How far is this place?"

"Where are you staying?"

Hillary mentioned the hotel, and the fact that she would have to be out by tomorrow at noon time.

"I can pick you up at two o'clock in the afternoon and bring you to the studio. After that I can find you a place for you to stay. Just wait for me in the lobby with your things."

Hillary couldn't believe that somebody, a stranger, was offering to give her a helping hand, just like that, for a few naked pictures, and pay her money for them too. Why had she never thought of this before? There had to be a catch somewhere, but for the moment she was in no position to look for the dark lining in the silver cloud.

"OK," Hillary managed to say.

"Here," said Brenda. Two new and crispy twenty dollars bills landed in Hillary's hand. "This will hold you over." She finished her drink and put out her cigarette. "I have to go now," she said to Hillary, living the cash to pay the bill on the counter, adding to the bartender, "Keep the change."

With the twenties still in her hand, Hillary asked, "How do you know I'm not going to skip on you?"

Brenda laughed. "That money will buy you but two days of food, at best." Brenda now stood in front of Hillary, her full figure drawing the eyes of a few customers. The palm of her hand landed softly on Hillary's cheek. "I know you will do the right thing." Hillary watched Brenda leave, pumping her rump from side to side with expert knowledge, making men stop to look at her, at her voluptuousness wrapped in the too tight dress. Other women would have looked fat in such dress, but Brenda could pull it off, that much Hillary noted.

After buying two packs of Marlboros from the quiet bartender, Hillary headed out straight for McDonald's where she had a Big Mac, super size fries and a big chocolate milk shake. Would she have to watch her figure now? she wondered. Probably not, just a few frigging naked pictures. What did it matter?

Was Brenda a whore? A madam for sure, or a business woman, and she, a paid model, not a ... whore. Hell, she was a whore, doing it for money. She would get paid cash on the barrel, thank you very much. Bimbos got paid in a different way, with a marriage certificate and half the asshole's money after the divorce. But they were whores nevertheless, using pussy to get what they wanted.

She had almost finished her dinner when the old question resurfaced again. Who the hell is

Brenda?

Waves of people flowed through the lobby. Families and couples and groups of young people, all checking in. Check out time had ended at eleven in the morning, and since then Hillary had been sitting in a chair whose upholstery had seen better days, watching the clock on the wall, her bag next to her. The same clock now showed almost three in the afternoon, and no Brenda in sight. Hillary felt like an absolute dupe, sitting in that chair, but at least she had smokes and a little bit of cash, better off than last night before she talked to Brenda, or whoever she was.

She had spent a restless night, rolling and tossing and waking up to go back to a fitful sleep full of bizarre and disconnected dreams. Now it was time for her to think about what to do next. Back to square one, almost. Not, wait, she was worst off because now she didn't have a place where to spend the night. The cash on her was good, as Brenda had said, to feed her for a couple of days at best. She could ply the lounges as a prostitute, with no idea whatsoever of how much a real whore charged or how to go about the business. She would end up picked by Vice or stabbed to death and dumped in the desert. All this worrying had given her a pounding headache. The weight of the universe gravitated towards her as if she were sitting on a black hole, light and mass spinning around her, getting soaked into her throbbing head.

"Hi Hillary."

Hillary opened her eyes. Brenda stood in front of her, in a revealing red dress more fitting for a night club than for a hotel lobby full of crying kids and tired tourists. Her hair rested atop her head in a big bun held in place by a jewel studded accessory that Hillary couldn't remember the name of. Rubber bands worked fine for her. Brenda's high heels were red, of course, to match her dress, her lipstick and her nails. And her underwear, Hillary was sure.

"I thought you stood me up," said Hillary with a tired voice. She tried to stand up but her head spun and she felt back on her butt. "Wow, I have been sitting for too long," she apologized and smiled to hide her embarrassment.

"Don't be silly. I'm never on time, but here I'm." Brenda's smile showed a row of yellowed yet perfect teeth. Their discoloration had been less evident in the dimly lit, smoky lounge of the previous night. Hillary succeeded at standing up, bag in her hand, looking as she had just got up from bed. "Let's go," said Hillary.

She followed Brenda out to the front of the hotel where a valet, a Mexican-looking guy, brought her gray Lexus right to the curb. Damn, thought Hillary. She had expected an old Cadillac, at best, but a new Lexus? All that from a web site with naked pictures of losers like her? There had to be a catch, Hillary felt it in her bones.

Hillary sat with legs together, knees touching, her beat up bag on her lap. The leather seats felt foreign to her, and so was the smell of the expensive interior, with all its shinny wood, no fake peeling plastic. The AC worked hard without making a racket. The tinted windows softened the impact of the abusive midday sun that pounded the streets and sidewalks. She floated in smooth comfort through the Strip, not believing that whoring could be so profitable. Who the hell is Brenda? Hillary didn't have the desire or the guts to ask the question at point blank, and did it really matter?

"Let's go shopping," said Brenda.

"You don't seem to need anything," said Hillary, clutching her smelly bag.

"Silly you, we are going shopping for you, not for me."

Hillary looked askance at Brenda, ready to blurt something about not having any money, but it was obvious that Brenda was not expecting Hillary to pay for it, at least not yet. Nothing is for free, Hillary reminded herself, and the day of reckoning would come.

They ended in a strip mall and parked in front of a store specializing in sexy clothing. Hillary

followed Brenda inside, to the lingerie section. Hillary had guessed that Brenda was talking about new clothes, like dresses and hose, and nice shoes, but the idea of lingerie had not come to her, but now she realized that her new "profession" would require such attires. Off camera, she would continue to wear her wrinkled shorts and shirts and cotton underwear with holes in them, and her scuffed sneakers and sandals.

Brenda went through the racks that held skimpy, semi-transparent little outfits, butt floss and see-through underwear, lace and puffy trim and straps so thin that they pained Hillary by just looking at them. Brenda picked things from the rack and held them flat against Hillary, gauging the fit, the look, comfort be damned. Her head would tilt to one side, then to the other, and then back, her mouth puckered in deep thought. If the outfit passed muster, she would smile and give it to Hillary to hold; if not, she threw it back on the rack.

Hillary followed Brenda through the racks, her airy bundle growing as they moved from rack to rack. Other customers, male and female, now and then would glance at them but went back to their business after a non-judgmental and perfunctory look. Sex shop etiquette, Hillary assumed. She could use a new pair of cotton briefs, but knew that she was not going to find anything so ordinary in that store.

When they had finished shopping, a skinny and dark girl with hairy arms ringed up the sale. The price tag shocked Hillary but Brenda opened her purse without hesitation and paid with cash, more crispy twenty dollar bills. Maybe the woman is a counterfeiter, Hillary thought, not believing that so many new bills could come out from anybody's purse.

Outside, the black top, the hoods and the roof of cars simmered in dancing mirages of heat waves. The glare blinded Hillary and she squinted through half closed eyes, holding the bag with her new whore outfits, her I.O.U. to the madam, a debt to be paid back with flesh and sweat. She could drop the bag and just walk out in the urbanized desert under a searing sun, a walk that would take her nowhere, possibly to a homeless shelter or to a park bench, or to whoring for Big Macs and Marlboros. This thought, rather brief, flashed through her mind.

Brenda stood in front of the open door of her Lexus, overly big dark glasses hiding her thick make up, gaudy looking for Hillary's taste, and smiled.

"Shoes. We need shoes," she said to Hillary.

"I like Doc Martens, and Vans," said Hillary. Brenda's confused look showed that she didn't shop where Hillary did. "It was a joke, Brenda."

This time they ended up in a big mall where soccer moms, trophy wives and packs of tourists roamed the hallways of consumerism and must-have items that anybody could do without. Hillary knew this kind of place, having hung out in them because of the free air conditioned that offered a reprieve from the mugginess outside, watching others do the shopping while she sat with her friends from the hood on a bench or on a planter's edge, a teenage isle beaming looks both envious and defiant, mall security keeping a weary eye on them.

Brenda picked Hillary's shoes, all high-heeled torture devices that would take her a few tries to master so she would not look like a plodding hick on stills. The price tags were outrageous; Hillary had to take a double take on the prices.

"Brenda, these things are way too expensive. You shouldn't."

"They are not, trust me, you haven't seen expensive yet," said Brenda in a condescend voice, throwing the shoe back on the display where it landed on its side. After Brenda moved on to search for more shoes, Hillary propped the shoe back where it had been, ashamed of Brenda's lack of consideration for the overworked clerk. Hillary remembered the many times she had to wait on Brenda-like customers, and couldn't care less if she had a purse filled with new twenty dollar bills. She could not peg a lousy boyfriend even if he had the word "lousy" branded on his forehead but she could sniff a difficult customer as soon as he or she walked through the door, and Brenda would be one of those customers she would have tried to dump on another waitress, preferably one she disliked at lot.

Despite Brenda's efforts to be pleasant, there was an ugliness of character that lurked underneath, and Hillary felt this mean spirit ready to sprout at the smallest of provocations, when Brenda didn't get her way. Hillary had reciprocated Brenda's fake hospitality with a false friendliness of her own, but had kept her distance, just as she would keep her distance from a caged lion, even if the cat was just sleeping, or looking like sleeping. It would be a matter of time; perhaps a short time, before Brenda's true colors would surface and her bitchiness would show itself to Hillary. But for the moment, Hillary played the game rather well, being pleasant and accommodating, but also ready to retreat and protect herself. The only thing Hillary could not phantom was the depth of Brenda's dark side, not yet, and she was not eager to peek down that hole, afraid of what she may see. A string of lousy boyfriends had taught Hillary that cutting her losses short and walking away was always healthier than trying to deal with defective personalities; she would leave that to shrinks and priests. She wondered how difficult it would be to walk away from Brenda, and she knew that with every garment and gift Brenda gave her, the thread between them would become more difficult to sever.

In their way to the cash register, Hillary cajoled Brenda to buy her two pairs of Fruit-of-the-Loom panties.

"It looks like men's underwear," Brenda said.

"But they are so comfortable," Hillary had replied. Brenda had returned a look of disbelief that said, "If it didn't have lace, it wasn't made for women," but she said, "OK, if that makes you happy."

"It makes my butt happy. Thank you." Hillary meant it.

The shopping continued and Hillary's initial expectations of dresses and stockings were fulfilled. Brenda had wanted to dress her like a bordello whore in a rampage, sort of a Brenda mini-me, but this time Hillary had stood firm and the garments, although a bit racy and short and not appropriate for a church service, were not embarrassing. In and out Hillary came through the fitting room, showing a dress to Brenda and arguing with her about its merits and demerits.

Alone inside the fitting room, she ran her fingers over the brand-new clothes, inhaling their smell, savoring its unblemished stiffness, so different from the hand-me-downs and discount store stuff she had used all her life. She watched her figure on the mirrors and posed at different angles to admire or deride the dresses as she tried them, but not once she dared to look in the eyes of her image, afraid of the shame that would come back on her own reflected look. These were no teenager clothes designed to shock adults or to be hip, but dressy clothes and the perfect camouflage to sneak into a casino or a fancy hotel lobby without raising any suspicions from security. Hillary understood there had to be a reason for Brenda putting out the cash for such clothes, and charity or Hillary's own pleasure were not good business reasons. Hillary knew that pay back would be required and extracted, so she couldn't look at her own reflection straight in the eye because she knew how she would have to pay Brenda back. Nevertheless, she embraced the clothes and reveled in their smell and crispiness, closing her eyes and partaking in something she had never experienced before, the circumstances be damned.

Back on the car, wearing her own wrinkled clothes, business details cropped up inside Hillary's head. Again, Brenda had paid for everything in cash, her purse a bottomless source of freshly minted bills. Of course, Brenda's purse wasn't bottomless, so the money had to go in before it could go out. That is where I come in, Hillary thought. She wasn't anything else but a source of revenue for Brenda. The question was how much profit was she going to reap herself, the dupe in the pictures, the whore on her back. At times the word "whore" repelled her; at other times it looked like the appropriate noun, like saying "nurse" or "cop". "Sex worker" sounded too sanitized and half the people she knew would have to think before their minds would substitute it for the right word, "whore." So call a spade a spade and a whore a whore, Hillary concluded, and she stuck to the derisive yet quite descriptive noun that defined her new profession, a profession she wasn't sure she would have the stomach for or the will to avoid.

The streets baked under the still powerful sun. Hillary pictured herself on the sidewalk with her bag of dirty clothes and the few dollars on her. No folks to call. No friends to ask for help. No

acquaintances to bother. Nothing to barter with but her own body, and Brenda seemed to be the highest bidder so far; the only bidder really. Going once, going twice, sold to the lady in the red dress.

"Are we going to the studio?" asked Hillary.

Brenda nodded.

"Just naked pictures. Right?"

Brenda nodded again, no diverting her stare from the road ahead.

"How much ... I mean, am I getting paid money this time?" Hillary had to swallow hard to ask the question. She didn't want to piss Brenda off, not at least until she got some cash in her hands in case she had to hit the road on her own. Brenda could keep the clothes, except the Fruit-of-the-Loom panties. This time Brenda turned her head and looked at her. She didn't smile but she didn't look pissed off either.

"Of course you will get paid. Nobody works for free."

"Well, I thought that after you paid for all those clothes, you know, that I owe you a lot."

"The clothes will come off the money you make, but I'm not going to take it all at once girl. You got to eat too."

Brenda sounded reasonable so Hillary tried to prod more information out of her. "After this studio thing, I need a place to stay. It doesn't need to be fancy."

"Don't fret about it. I already got a place for you, reasonable and clean."

Hillary felt both reassured and apprehensive, as if the life line thrown at her to get her out of troubled waters was a noose around her neck. The smoothness of the Lexus put her at ease. They drove to the edge of the city where the desert awaits to reclaim what civilization took away, held at bay by the millions of gallons of water diverted from the Colorado River. They drove through an industrial area filled with large metal warehouses that radiated thongs of heat from their surfaces, distorting the atmosphere around them. The Lexus stopped at an office building with empty parking spaces and not a person to be seen anywhere.

"Grab the lingerie bag," commanded Brenda, as they got out of the car. Hillary twisted her body between the front seats and grabbed the bag from the sex shop that rested among the other bags on the rear seat. Her stomach tightened, as if she were a soldier grabbing his rifle and helmet before shipping out to the front.

"No shoes?" asked Hillary and as soon as she said it, she regretted it. She couldn't walk on those things.

"Oh yeah. Grab those too," said Brenda, already out of the car. Hillary could see her from the neck down, her roundness of flesh wrapped in a red shine under her dress lit by sunshine, a giant chili pepper, thought Hillary. And damn it, why had she opened her mouth about the shoes? Think before you talk, think before you talk. Hillary exited the Lexus with both bags, one under each arm and followed Brenda out of the sunshine into an office door marked as number fifteen, Excel Enterprises, Inc, a rather non-descript name, as if the business were ashamed of its true activities; on the other hand, discreteness was a virtue.

"Wait here," said Brenda curtly and disappeared behind a door. Hillary stood in a bare office; so bare that she felt the place was only being used as a hallway to the door Brenda had gone through. There were no pictures on the walls, and a thick coat of dust carpeted the few mismatching furniture pieces in the place. What should have been a receptionist's desk didn't even have a phone, and the receptionist's chair was missing. Hillary spun on her heels, doing a complete circle to observe the place, bags under her arm, wondering what kind of place was this.

Brenda popped her head out of the door. "Come in." Her voice was a command, not an invitation. Hillary hesitated but moved towards the door. Freedom is having nothing to lose, she reminded herself. This new room was different, the dust not being present. There was a prop consisting of a couch, a carpet, and an artificial potted plant, all against the background of a white curtain. Lights and silver umbrellas that Hillary didn't know what they were for stood in front of the little stage, her

stage.

"This is Cey," Brenda said. "Cey, this is Hillary."

Cey took a good look at Hillary. He measured her from head to toes. Hillary realized that she would have to get used to such stares that tried to calculate her worth as porno flesh. The thought didn't bother her, but she understood she had to toughen up, despite the butterflies in her stomach.

"Nice to meet you," said Hillary, unsmiling. Cey's unruly beard gave him a look as of somebody that had escaped from Deliverance or a farmer looking to buy a pig in a county fair.

"Nice to meet you too," said Cey, without smiling or offering to shake her hand. Then looking at Brenda, he added, "Let's start." He moved away to a briefcase full of photographic equipment and started fishing cameras and doohickeys from it, loading the pockets in his vest.

Brenda grabbed the bags and pulled a pair of stiletto pumps from one bag and a transparent nightgown with a matching thong from the other. She removed the price tags from the lingerie and handed everything to Hillary. "Put these on," she said. This time she smiled. Hillary's eyes darted around the room, looking for a place to change. She saw a little bathroom and decided she had to pee.

Down she sat, her waters running, wishing they would run forever so she wouldn't have to ever get up, wishing the people outside would get tired of waiting for her and leave. After flushing, she washed her hands and took her clothes off, folding her crumbled things into a neat pile that she left atop the toilet cover after she had wiped off the dust with a wad of toilet paper. She put the lingerie and the stiletto pumps on and stood facing the closed door, feeling like a skydiver ready to make her first jump. She breathed hard, opened the door and stepped into a new life.

A hot and lazy breeze continued to move through the second floor balcony of the Gold Dust Motel despite the moribund sunset. Darkness replaced light at a fast pace but the heat continued to raise from the city. It wouldn't be long before a tepid night air would replace the suffocating day heat. The night air would still be uncomfortable to those not used to it. Hillary wondered what winter would be like in Vegas. Did this place ever know temperate days and cool nights or just the extremes of stroking heat and freezing cold?

She sat smoking a cigarette on a chair she had brought from inside the room Brenda had found for her. Brenda had paid for the first week, cash of course, and after that it would be Hillary's responsibility, and that was fine with Hillary. This way, Hillary mulled, Brenda couldn't run her off when the time came to fly free. But Hillary would still have to depend on Brenda giving her work to make that weekly payment, at least for now, and that, Hillary knew, was what Brenda had intended.

Her smoke plumes rose in whirls above the handrail. The parking lot below was visible through a widely spaced baluster made out of bright green iron rods. The front office surrounded by garish green neon occupied a section of the bottom floor across the parking lot and across her room. A No Vacancy sign peered out of the window with a red incandescence. Her back rested against the wall and her chair stood on its rear legs, the front legs and her own feet dangling in front of her, and her flip flops dangling from her feet, her bright purple toe nails made darker by the contrast against her pale skin. She smoked in long drags, enjoying every pull, exhaling slowly, watching the smoke blowing away and fading into the air, carried away by the breeze, like so many of her childhood fantasies. She had bought a whole carton so she puffed away, knowing she wouldn't run out too soon.

She had taken the plunge and was not quite sure where or how it would end up. Cey had directed her how to pose, move this leg, raise that arm, lift your chin, smile - a smutty smile, a candid smile, a bad girl smile. Take the panties off, good girl. Move your hand. Run your tongue through your lips. Great. His camera clicked away, and he stopped to move lights and those silver umbrellas and to reload his cameras. His eyes had a fiery shine. She grew hot under the intense lights, but it didn't matter to her because she was too busy following Cey's instructions like a soldier following orders in the

trenches. Nothing else mattered. His camera a few inches from her genitalia, clicking away, that didn't matter. His fingers setting her genitalia, her pubic hair, that didn't matter. Brenda smiling at her while smoking a cigarette, that didn't matter. She was the good soldier doing as told. Cey's hand on her rump, her crotch, the camera sniffing her ass, click, click, nothing mattered. She faked naughtiness, pleasure, innocence, and realized that it was show business, acting the way she did not feel, putting out a facade to please others. She wanted to be a professional and both Brenda and Cey congratulated her in her outstanding performance, and Brenda had slipped five hundred dollars in her hand, smiling as a partner in crime.

Hillary had taken the money and reciprocated the smile and as a true actress concealed the fear in her belly, the shakiness in her spirit, the doubts in her mind, and the remorse in her conscience, but the feel of the crispy greenbacks had wiped out any doubts and she told herself she had done the right thing. Time will tell if she did wrong, but that money in her hand made her see no evil today. After taking a shower she had gone to a nice restaurant and had a real dinner, and had left a generous tip for the waitresses that had got stuck with a second shift because somebody had failed to show up. Been there, done that.

Still, she knew, this had been her initiation, her boot camp. Naked pictures were just the beginning. The real money was in hard core movies and maybe prostitution. She closed her eyes. Her muscles stiffened at the thought but she reminded herself that she had nothing to lose because she never had anything to start with – a few friends scattered throughout California; no family except a drunken mother, for whom Hillary felt a hint of pity but mostly a nauseating contempt for putting a bottle of booze over her daughter who cried her eyes out every night while going to sleep in stranger's houses as a guest of the State of California, wondering where her mommy was. Her dad had been a semen donor, Hillary suspected, the extent of his involvement in her conception, and probably didn't even know he had a daughter, and couldn't care less if he knew. At times she wondered what her father looked like, if she had inherited this unknown man's better qualities and had genetically forsaken her mother's weaknesses.

Now and then she would catch herself with a mannerism she had seen in her mother, or would examine a look in the mirror that harked back to her, and the discovery made her uneasy, as if the beginning of her unavoidable slide into perdition had started. This porno thing was a perdition of her own choosing that Hillary couldn't blame on her mother. It was her own road to hell, or to a better life. Hillary didn't know yet. Cigarettes, a place to stay, food on the table, new panties, that is all that mattered. Maybe one day she would learn to drive. She would buy a convertible and then drive away without knowing where to go or when to stop, a carefree and wealthy porno queen searching for who knows what, just being happy of searching for something, an excuse for being out there on the road, giving the big finger to everything that was in her past, her hand raised above the topless windshield.

"I'm so full of bullshit," Hillary murmured to herself, with a hint of disgust. The front legs of her chair dropped onto the concrete followed by her feet. She threw her smoldering butt on the parking lot, got up, picked up her chair and went inside. A tawdry portrait of Elvis hung over the bed. Tonight, she thought, I will be sleeping with the King.

Brenda had promised Hillary that more work would be coming her way, and it did. The only thing that bothered Hillary was the timing of it. A new studio section with Cey would always come just as her money was ready to run out so she lived with the money she earned from section to section, never being able to put some money away in between. Hillary felt that Brenda was just paying her enough money to keep her going but not enough for her to plan her departure.

The sections with Cey happened at the same makeshift studio as the first one, and Brenda would always pick her up and drive her back and forth. By now Hillary wondered now many close up shots of

her ass Cey could need, but she got paid and she kept her mouth shut. Brenda would often come by and take her shopping and drinking, many times paying for both activities, always in cash, trying her best to entertain Hillary, Brenda the forced hostess, and Hillary could feel that Brenda worked hard at being sociable, but her friendship was not to be trusted. The image of a tiger in its cage kept on coming back to Hillary, and she had tried to turn such image off without success.

Cey running his hands over her with the excuse of helping her pose for the camera didn't bother her anymore. The camera buzzing around her didn't either. Brenda watching and smoking, smiling, that was no bother either. Now she could drop her clothes right in front of them without having to hide into the bathroom first. Doing the sections had become as routine as waiting on tables, and the pay was far better; Hillary only wished it was more often.

Hillary had walked up and down her street and had seen many greasy spoons and had thought about walking in and asking for a waitress job, but her stomach had knotted the moment she had taken her first step in that direction. That was hard work, underpaid, long hours, coming back to her room with her hair smelling of garlic and onions, her dress covered with food stains, with a roll of mostly one dollar bills and a handful of loose change in her pocket, the squalid harvest from those long hours. The crispy twenties and fifties she got from Brenda for smiling to Cey's cameras were like stealing candy from a baby in comparison.

"Do you want to make movies?" Brenda asked Hillary. They had been drinking mai tais, Alabama slammers, Long Island ice teas, white Russians and daiquiris in the outdoor bar of a casino hotel that looked into an artificial lake that separated them from the overheated tourists crowds shuffling over the hot sidewalks. By now Hillary had a working knowledge of mixed drinks and despite her not being twenty-one, she had never been carded. She could now order fancy drinks with the confidence of a seasoned drinker, just getting a perfunctory look from the bartender and a nod of approval. She had wondered if her new profession, or semi-profession, she wasn't sure if working a few photo shoot sections now and then could be called a job, had made her look older, or haggard, or had taught her to show a face that fit the occasion - be naughty, be sensual, be innocent - she remembered Cey's requests and the easiness with which she could comply, a natural born deceiver. Or perhaps nobody gave too much thought to the law; if the customer looked old enough, serve them. That was Las Vegas' business, to make customers feel a notch above their hum-drum lives. Alcohol and a luxurious decor encouraged customers to part with their money, fancying themselves high rollers for one night.

"Hellooo?" Brenda said, laughing and kicking her under the table with her bared feet out of her high-heeled sandals. "Are you drunk hon?" Brenda was a happy drunk and Hillary liked her a lot better when she had a few in her. Brenda's toes playfully caressed Hillary's sheen under the table.

"Not quite. I just got a buzz," said Hillary, aware of Brenda playing footsie with her but not sure of what to make of it. After having Cey's camera go over every inch of her naked body while Brenda watched had made Hillary thick skinned to some things. Brenda was paying for the drinks, with her new crispy bills as usual, so she let Brenda have her fun. After all, there was no need to piss her boss off, her sugar mama, her chaperone, or the giggling and playful fool she would become when getting drunk while escorting Hillary from bar to bar, from club to club, blowing cash as if she had a money printing machine inside her designer purses. Brenda's drunkenness blunted the underlying meanness that crawled under her skin so Hillary preferred the drunkenness to the underlying meanness that she knew for sure laid in wait ready to strike like an unseen snake under her feet.

"Well, what about it?" Brenda asked.

"About what," said Hillary.

Brenda laughed and her toes moved under Hillary's skirt, under the back of her legs. Hillary spun on her stool, out of reach, without any fuss.

"About making movies, you fool," said Brenda, her thick lips puckering into a reproach.

"What kind of movies?"

"You know ... movies."

"No. I don't know," Hillary lied, just wanting to see Brenda fumble her words and throw her hands up in exasperation, like she was doing now.

"You know ... fuck movies!" Brenda's words came out loud and the conversation around them stopped and all eyes fell on them, just for a brief moment. After the ambient noise went back to its normal level both Hillary and Brenda started laughing.

"Sure," said Hillary in a low tone, after the laughing fit had passed between them. "I think I can do it." She had used her confident face to say the words, but inside her a knot had closed her esophagus, her natural response to fright.

"This Friday," Brenda said, smiling. "We'll try our first."

They clinked glasses and smiled at each other. Behind her confident smile, Hillary hid her apprehensions and wondered what it would be like, and if she could do it, and even if she was not sure exactly what was she supposed to do, she knew it wouldn't be easy. But at least the money would be better.

Brenda was not in a condition to be driving, despite her objections, so Hillary had put her in a cab and sent her on her way, to wherever she lived. Hillary's taxi dropped her off at her motel. On the way to her room on the second floor she noticed the face half hidden between the curtains in the first floor, near the ice machines, opposite her own window and across the parking lot. She waved and the face quickly disappeared behind the now drawn curtains. That weird sonofabitch, Cey, Hillary thought.

She brought her chair out and put it on the balcony and sat with her legs crossed, smoking a cigarette and staring at the room with the drawn curtains. She liked sitting on the balcony, watching people pass by. It was like watching monkeys at the zoo. Instead of bars to look through, she had the railing, but the effect was pretty similar. Passer by's going by, thinking they had come to the zoo to watch the monkeys but really it was the monkeys that were watching the parade with a keener eye.

She knew that Cey was behind the curtain. Why had he moved right across her place? To keep an eye on her?

Brenda had dismissed Cey's new digs as just plain coincidence when Hillary asked her about it.

"He needed a cheap and decent place to stay, that's all."

"Right opposite me? Come on, Brenda. He is a creep."

"But he is our creep, remember that."

Brenda had closed the subject with a drunken laugh and Hillary didn't have the nerve to ask her when she was sober. She wasn't afraid of Cey, and she had no problem in staring right through the railing into his window where the curtains now and then would open with a slight tremor to close fast the moment Cey got caught by Hillary's rude stare from across the parking lot. He never left his room, other than to grab something to eat. His little Toyota truck never left the parking lot. Hillary imagined him masturbating day in and out, using her pictures, cut off from the real world by his own perversion.

Sitting on her chair on the balcony, smoking and watching the world go by, this is what Hillary called her thinking time, the time when she tried to put two and two together to no avail. What kind of job was this? she asked herself. For the kind of dough Brenda hands out, she ought to be running the biggest brothel in Vegas, thought Hillary; yet, she spends almost everyday with me, treating me to bars and clubs and whatever else she fancies.

No doubt that Brenda, the drunk and happy one, was coming on to her. Brenda's drunken eyes ran over her skin and undressed her with a lewdness that a nearsighted nun could not miss. Maybe Brenda was a rich lesbo in search of a young girl as a lover, but then why the masquerade? Maybe Cey was the master behind the curtain, no pun intended, pulling the puppet strings and this job thing with Brenda was a facade for him to snap pictures of young girls like herself. But such wealthy patrons could grab the phone book and hire the best escort services in town, which Hillary was sure would

cater to any taste if the price was right, so her conspiracy theories always felt short of plausibility; still, something didn't add up.

Maybe Brenda - if that was her real name - wanted her own private toy, inexperienced and naive. Hillary exhaled, trying and failing, as always, to blow smoke rings, but they never came out right, no matter how much she contorted her mouth. It had taken her forever to learn how to blow bubble gum. Perhaps smoke rings were out of her capabilities, like trying to put two and two together. She got herself a sugar mama and even the weirdo behind the curtains across the parking lot was no bother to her - at least, not yet - but she couldn't answer the question, Who the hell is Brenda?

Flicking her smoldering butt over the handrail and onto the parking lot below, Hillary imagined one of them landing on a pool of gasoline from a parked car's leaking fuel tank and the whole place going up in a big explosion with fire higher than the rooftops. That would break the night's monotony and would be a good incentive to skip town and this crazy business with Brenda and Cey, and not having to make that movie on Friday.

For that movie, she thought, she would have to fabricate fake noises of pleasure. Maybe she should practice right here on the balcony, or she should move her chair next to Cey's door and do it right there, just to drive him nuts. Who would be her partner? Cey? The thought made her cringe, but fortunately, he had to work the lights and cameras. Would there be a script? The whole thing would be written as huffs and grunts and now and then the classic line of "oh yeah baby, oh yeah," easily interchangeable between both protagonists, could be added in. That is as much as she remembered of the porn flicks she had watched with her boyfriends, who always seemed more tuned in to what was happening on the screen than to her on the naked flesh next to them.

She would get paid to screw an unknown, or unknowns - So legally it would be prostitution. Well, maybe not, movie making was some sort of right-to-speech thing, even if that speech was "oh yeah baby, oh yeah." Who cares, she told herself, but if she really didn't care, why was she thinking about it so much?

Her thoughts got interrupted by a tricked out old black Honda Civic, the Fast and the Furious on the cheap, that had pulled into the parking lot. She knew the car because it was always coming in and out of the place, scrapping bottom every time it hit the street and sounding like a lawn mower with a megaphone stuck in the tail pipe, and hip hop blaring out of its speakers. While the car didn't do much for Hillary, the perennially shirtless driver did.

His bleached-blond hair was short and spiked. Rippling muscles under a nicely hairless and tanned skin adorned with tattoos in a Celtic motif made shirts unnecessary. A young man of modern style, his baggy pants hug his narrow hips and his underwear showed its top half, a *de rigueur* look aptly accomplished and not lost in its wearer who knew himself to be the top dog, at least in his mind. Hillary leaned forward on her chair to get a better look of the hunky driver at the same time the driver stuck his head out of his car to take a better look at her. His blue eyes met her brown ones and he flashed a movie actor smile which Hillary reciprocated with her own and more restrained version.

From one of the rooms below a door slammed shut and another young man came into her field of view, looking his best to fit into an MTV hip hop video, with more tattoos than the driver, but with a paler skin, the little of it that Hillary could see that wasn't covered with ink. The new character got into the passenger side and closed the door and started saying something to the hunk, who had continued to stare and smile at Hillary. The hunk turned his head towards the passenger and the little Honda took off spinning its front tires and its tail pipe screaming in a high and loud pitch. The Honda scrapped bottom, again, when it left the parking lot and merged with the traffic in the street, its speakers blasting the air in an attempt to be heard over the noisy muffler.

For the last few days, Hillary had gone on drinking binges with Brenda, hoping to find out what

exactly was she supposed to do in the movie. Finally, she asked the question directly.

"Girl, don't worry." Brenda answered. "It won't be too bad or messy."

"How many guys? Five? Three? One? Come on Brenda, I just want to have an idea, please."

"None."

Brenda had broken up laughing at Hillary's confounded expression, and she had caressed Hillary's cheek with a soft touch.

"It will be a solo act, honey. It will be you and a couple of dildos and your own hand."

"A masturbation flick?" asked Hillary, and Brenda nodded in approval. Of course, there would be no script to follow, nobody else to worry about but Hillary felt that such a film would be more demanding on her histrionic abilities. An sporadic "oh yeah baby, oh yeah" was not going to cut it. She would practiced alone her masturbation bit in her own bed using a cucumber because the local grocery store carried those but no dildos; anyway, everything was make believe so the cucumber could play the part of a dildo and she could play the part of a hot porn star.

After a few rounds of practice Hillary had to admit that practicing her movie part had been quite rewarding and exhausting. She laid on bed, her arm over her closed eyes, her warm body sticky with sweat and her genitalia wet and dripping over the bed. She had fallen asleep and had woken up in the same position, wondering why she hadn't rolled and tossed until landing on the floor, as was her usual sleeping habit. It was the hard work, she thought while she stretched her naked body, feeling a great delight in doing so. She turned her head and smiled at the cucumber next to her.

"Still here? Want a smoke?" she asked the cucumber. She lit a cigarette for herself and turned back to her green lover. "You must be the strong and silent type." She tried to blow a smoke ring, but no luck. Some things are not meant to be, she thought.

Hillary, followed close behind by Brenda, entered the studio and the only person in sight was Cey, busy with his camera gizmos. With an acquired nonchalant face, Hillary dropped her clothes right in front of both and folded them on top of a chair. She sat on a stool and Brenda came over, the self-appointed unofficial make up artist of the aspiring sex starlets, and started working on Hillary's looks using the stuff she had brought in her big pursue. Brenda spread a good smelling body cream on her hands and applied it on Hillary, on her shoulders, her back, between her breasts ... on her breasts. Hillary kept a stone face and Brenda tried to do so too, but couldn't stop giving Hillary a sly eye contact that said I like your breasts. Hillary eyes remained as inexpressive as a poker player's while Brenda's hands worked over her chest, rubbing and squeezing.

"Are we ready?" asked Cey, standing behind Brenda.

"Yes we are," answered Hillary in a curt voice. Brenda reluctantly stopped her labors and moved out of the way. Cey came over and explained to Hillary what the camera set up was, what he had in mind, the best positions to make use of the light, the audio set up and the microphone and other many things that Hillary paid attention to because she was a true professional and Cey, despite being a weirdo, was also one. Cey gave hints and Hillary asked questions and after a while both felt that they were ready to roll. Brenda stood nearby, looking bored, picking her teeth wearing a dress that Hillary thought it was too short for her plump legs.

"Roll at three ... one ... two ... three," Cey said from behind the camera. Hillary saw the little red light come on. The show was on, and a show she gave, masturbating with her bare hands and a dildo that Brenda had pulled out of her pursue. Ripples of true pleasure moved through Hillary's body, and she projected her feelings by twisting and flexing her body and huffing and making faces that amplified what otherwise would have just been a simple orgasm, making it look like a sexual nirvana. She ended her act purring like a content cat and smiling to the camera, using her naughty face to blow a good bye kiss to her audience. The light in the camera came off.

Cey and Brenda stood with their mouths open in big circles of surprise, taken aback by Hillary's performance. Brenda started to clap. Cey put his camera down and he also started clapping. Hillary jumped to her feet and took a bow. "Thank you. Thank you."

That same night Hillary sat on her chair on the balcony that served as a walkway to all rooms on the second floor, drinking a cold beer and smokin. A six-pack minus one laid on the floor next to her. She had been afraid she would freeze in front of the camera; instead, she had lost all her inhibitions. Go figure.

Cey had run back to the motel with his gear and hadn't left his room since then, probably staging his own private masturbation act using Hillary's own as inspiration. Hillary hadn't seen his face glancing through the curtains. Maybe he was dead, she thought, with his cold fingers wrapped around a stiffy, her video playing endlessly on his TV. Nobody would know until the stench started to slip out from under his door.

Brenda had paid her more than the usual and had said to her, "quite a performance that was." Hillary remembered Brenda's hands rubbing her breasts, and Brenda had been sober. This time it didn't take too long for Hillary to figure out where things were going to end up. She felt neither nausea nor pleasure at the idea of Brenda using her to satisfy her sexual cravings. It was business, Hillary thought, and the sooner she learned to see sex as show business, as a money making business, the best it would be for her. What difference was there if was Brenda or other stranger who squeezed her breasts? Money was money and a dollar was a dollar regardless of where it came from. All she had to make sure of was the Brenda didn't get a free ride.

These cold thoughts about sex as a money making enterprise made Hillary shudder in the hot night as if a cold wind had blown through her. A few weeks ago she had been waiting tables for a sorry wage and sorrier tips, worrying about no good boyfriends, partying with friends, trying to stretch every dollar as if it were made out of rubber. Now she sat on her chair, smoking Marlboros – she had a few cartons inside her room - and drinking imported beer in green bottles, her fat envelope cash taped to the inside of the toilet lid. Now her worries were about putting two and two together, or to stop trying to do that impossible task, of measuring sex in dollars and her future on what she was willing and able to do in front of a camera or in hotel rooms paid by strangers. Again, she could grab the envelope under the toilet lid, pack her stuff (a lot of it now, including nice dresses and shoes), call a taxi and disappear, and again, to where? To do what? "While the going is smooth, keep going; when the going gets tough, then it is time to bail out," she said to herself.

The black Honda came into the parking lot, scrapping bottom as it went over the access ramp. It came to a stop right below her balcony. Both the loud engine and the stereo stopped at the same time. The doors opened and Hunky and his buddy came out. Hunky gave Hillary one of his cool smiles, or what he thought no doubt was a cool smile. To Hillary it looked more like the smile of a predator ready to claim a victim; yet, she liked it. Hunky and his partner disappeared under the balcony ledge. She heard a door slam. Soon she had forgotten Hunky and her mind started to wander again.

"Hi there." The masculine voice derailed Hillary's introspection. Hunky sans his sidekick stood in front of her, smiling, his blue eyes taking her in, as if she were merchandise to be given away at a raffle, and he had the winning ticket.

Hillary smiled, understanding that she would be hurt again but reached into her six pack without hesitation and handed him a beer anyway. He was so fine looking!

On the next weeks Hillary's life blossomed like a black rose, such a pretty flower endowed with

a poisonous fragrance whose effect would be felt as time went by, but which right now smelled like money. Her solo performance had given way to movies with third parties. Hillary called them hired dicks. To the usual team of Cey and Brenda, a new person had been added, Gary, handsome and well hung, but with a loathsome personality and deficient hygiene. In their first section together, Hillary had asked him to go to the bathroom and wash his weenie because it stunk like rancid piss at the bottom of an old toilet.

Brenda had promised better leading men and the next hired dick, Cedric, while not so well endowed had been far more pleasant to work with. He'd been working in the business for a while, Hillary found out while talking to him between sections.

"Have you ever worked for such a string shoe outfit before?" Hillary asked him, while glancing at Cey, who was prepping his cameras and Brenda, who was filing her nails.

"Never," he answered. "Every other movie I've done, there were at least a half a dozen people in the room working."

"Tell me about it." Hillary rolled her eyes. "Can you get me in touch with a real company? Her soft voice did not want to raise Cey's and Brenda's suspicions.

"Sure," said Cedric.

At the end of the shoot, he discretely passed Hillary a piece of paper with a phone number on it and whispered, "Mine. Call me." Hillary nodded and smiled.

Just like her solo stellar performance, her first fuck film had been rather good, at least she thought so, and Cey had ran back to the motel room with his stuff and the film and hadn't showed up his face through the curtains for the next two days. She had the moves and poses, and the smiles and the eye contact. She had it all, and even without breast implants she looked good on camera and nobody could tell what an amateur she was and how disgusting she found that guy Gary to be, but she made "love" to him like she were the horniest woman screwing the last man left on earth. Sex was show business and the business was sex. It all came to money.

As Gary and later Cedric had been pumping her in front of the lenses, she had thoughts of what her friends or her mother or Esther, the old landlady, would think of her but, one by one, she stopped worrying about what they would think. None of them had really cared about her anyway, and what their opinions of her may be didn't matter. She only had her conscience to bother her, and her conscience was in survival mode. She made a good living on her back, faking her lust for strangers, better than on her feet, waiting tables.

The specter of HIV haunted her during her balcony thinking sections on the balcony. She and her partners never used rubbers because their discriminating and demanding audience wanted bareback sex, or at least that is what Cey had said. None of her boyfriends had ever used rubbers either; after all, it had always been her problem, not theirs, to avoid getting pregnant, and HIV only happened to other people, usually gay people. The best rationalization that Hillary could come out with was that she would have to die of something eventually, so why not AIDS? Of course, she didn't buy into her own argument so she chose to ignore the whole HIV thing but the frightening subject would come back to bother her when she was not expecting it, blind siding her smugness and making her smoke faster and wiggle uncomfortably in her chair.

Brenda had brought Hillary to her room after her first section with stinky Gary. Hillary had been in a hurry to get in the shower to clean herself from anything that Gary may had left behind but Brenda had come into the room with her, uninvited. Hillary could not say much because she hadn't been paid yet.

"I need to take a shower," Hillary told Brenda.

"No, you don't," said Brenda. The blue in her eyes had the intensity of a maniac's. Her hands grouped Hillary's breasts. Brenda moved closer and started kissing Hillary on her neck, breathing in heavy gasps. Hillary, on the other hand, kept her cool, her breathing short and regulated as if it were coming out of her when sitting at a park bench feeding squirrels. There was no nausea. There was no

discernible libido or desire for pleasure. There was only one question.

"What's in this for me, Brenda?" asked Hillary in a flat voice.

"You little slut," said Brenda, her hands moving over Hillary's derriere and squeezing her buttocks. "You will be well paid for your services." And with that Hillary had turned out another performance where mundane orgasms became spectacular acts of convulsions and shouts. No wonder whores call this turning tricks, Hillary thought, because she was tricking Brenda into thinking she was giving her the best time of her life. The fact that Brenda had licked her genitalia still soiled by Gary's juices had not made her gag in disgust but had showed her what a strange bird Brenda was. Let her have her fun, Hillary thought, and when it came time for her to reciprocate the favor, something she had never done before, she did it as well as expected, making Brenda shout and shake like a holy roller receiving the Lord.

Brenda had been rough and demeaning in her epithets, deliberately inflicting pain on Hillary, just to hear her scream through pinched lips. Hillary was not surprised. The lovemaking had confirmed Hillary's suspicion of Brenda's dark side underneath her fine-lady facade. If the money was right, Hillary was able to endure some of it, and give some back too.

They continued to indulge in their lovemaking sections after their first encounter and Hillary had been right in her suspicions that a drunk Brenda would be less inclined to inflict pain, so Hillary had become adept at manipulating Brenda into their sexual engagements after Brenda had been properly juiced up. Sober Brenda caught up with Hillary's modus operandi and demanded sex before drinking, and Hillary had a few bite marks and bruises as a result. But the money was still good. Hillary derived physical pleasures from these liaisons with Brenda and did her best to please her, the paying party, but kept her focus on the whole affair as a business transaction and on Brenda as a difficult customer, not her lover.

Russ, who Hillary still called Hunky in her head, she gave to him for free what she now charged others for. Not only giving herself away for free, but giving him money from her stash under the toilet lid to buy weed and threads and whatever other fancies he may have. Another Toilet Bandit, she thought, this one taking away, not leaving anything behind for her in the porcelain bowl.

He had asked what she did for a living, and she hadn't been able to find the right words. She wasn't a whore, or at least not a street whore walking up and down the sidewalks flagging johns down. She was a porn star that probably had never been seen in film by anybody but Cey in his motel room. A kept woman, that would have been a better description, a lesbian toy of a mean sugar mama, that would have been the best description. Of course, she didn't say that to Russ.

"I'm a personal assistant," she told him. "A gofer."

His eyebrows had closed up in a scrutinizing look where one eye was almost half shut making him look like Popeye. "Gofer?"

"Go for this, go for that, you know," she explained. "Do stuff for my boss."

"What else do you do for him?" he had asked Hillary with a voice full of dirty implications.

"I do things for her," Hillary corrected him. "I get paid well, so you don't need to know anything else." Russ wasn't as stupid as to antagonize his golden goose so he kept his dirty insinuations to himself after that.

He drove her to various places but always managed to have her pay for his gasoline and for everything else. Hillary felt as if she were impersonating Brenda, and also felt a Brenda-like attitude toward Russ: if you pay their way, they're at your beck and call.

Russ liked talking trash and pushing around weaker people like his sidekick, Freddy. Russ was good in bed, easy on the eye, and handy when it came time to bum a ride or go to parties, so Hillary kept him, letting him think that he was in control at all times, getting money and sex as he pleased, but she was one step ahead of him, ready to stop the game any time she felt like it. Sooner or later Brenda would find out that Russ was more than Hillary's private chauffeur, and then the shit would hit the fan. Hadn't Cey moved across from her room to keep an eye on her and tell Brenda her whereabouts? She

began to wish that things would come to a head so she could tell Brenda and everyone associated with her to go to hell. Russ could take her to the bus station so she could go somewhere to start over, or she could call Cedric, whose phone number she had stashed away with her cash under the toilet-seat lid, and get on with her career. By now, she had confidence in her looks and talent, without any bothersome guilt.

What would Brenda do without her? Well, kiss my ass, thought Hillary. I'm a paid prostitute, not a slave, and I can take my business somewhere else. Brenda would just have to get over it. If your whore is gone, get yourself another one. Still, something about Brenda scared Hillary, a dark force inside her that pushed outward when Brenda bit and smacked and insulted Hillary for pleasure. What if that dark force breaks loose on me? Hillary thought. She had no answers, but it was easier and less frightening to stay than to leave.

Day after day, Hillary saw herself becoming more like Brenda, the tough player who could take away all her generous gifts and then some without blinking an eye. The world was made of two kinds of people; those who hurt and those who got hurt. Hillary saw herself as somewhere between the two, in a group that didn't give a damn either way. She knew that Russ could dump her any time without any remorse, but the feeling was mutual so she didn't lose sleep over it.

The callousness that had thickened around her heart like a tough rind sometimes frightened her and sometimes made her feel protected. She wasn't the destitute waitress who'd been dumped in Las Vegas, but she wasn't like Brenda, not yet, at least. She sat on her chair by the balcony, watching sunsets disappear between narrow buildings, wondering what kind of person she was or would become.

Russ' Honda drove southbound on I-15, heading for a warehouse where a rave would take place. Hillary saw the lights flash on her cell phone and a number appear on the screen. Brenda had given the prepaid phone to her, "to keep in touch." She lowered the deafening volume in Russ' stereo, turned the call on and placed the phone on her ear.

"Hey, what the ...?" complained Russ, cut short by Hillary serious frown and her index finger vertical across her set lips. "Sshh! The boss."

"Fuuuuuck heeeeeeeer," said Freddy sitting on the back with a tall boy beer can on his lap, already high on pills and booze. If only you knew, thought Hillary, laughing at her own joke. "Hello," she said into the phone.

"Hi. Where are you, whore?"

Hillary didn't mind the name calling as long it stayed between them as a private matter. "Going to a rave."

"A what?"

"A dancing party." Hillary rolled up her eyes in disbelief. Bad ass Brenda didn't get out much. One day she would get her drunk and high and take her to a rave, just to see her acting like a fool.

"Who are you going with?"

"Some friends."

"Are you banging any of them?" asked Brenda in a humorless voice. Hillary was ready to tell her that it wasn't any of her business but decided to play her. "All of them, for free. Why?"

"You little slut," said Brenda laughing. "You owe me, remember that."

"Whatever."

"Listen, tomorrow at two o'clock in the afternoon, another movie. I'll pick you up."

"What it's this time?" asked Hillary.

"Threesome, this new guy and another whore like you. Be ready to swallow some cum you bitch."

"I will be ready then," said Hillary in the most pleasant of voices, as if she were talking to an

old friend.

"Better be there or I will stick this phone up you filthy ass, you worthless slut," barked Brenda into the phone.

"Good night to you too and thank you," said Hillary in her still cordial voice, then clicked the phone off. Freddy started to say something rude about Brenda but before he could put his words into a coherent sentence, Hillary cranked up the stereo, drowning his slobbering speech. She reached over shirtless Russ and kissed him on his neck, his shoulders, his breast, running her tongue over his nipples. Who the hell was Brenda anyway?

Brenda smiled, put her phone back into her purse and hit the mute button on her remote to bring the voice back to her TV. She sat on her couch wearing a blue robe and pink bunny slippers. She was watching the episode where Lucy's false nose catches fire when Ricky lights a cigarette for her, one of her favorites.

With each new movie, Hillary's inhibitions lessened, and she came closer to accepting herself as a prostitute, albeit a well paid one working in odd circumstances. Brenda got more bizarre and violent in her lovemaking but Hillary toughened and started reciprocating Brenda's rough play, all in the name of the mighty buck. At first Brenda was taken aback by Hillary's capacity to induce pain as well to receive it, but never complained and their love sessions became a tit for tat.

The movies themselves became more risqué, the last one being a gang bang with three guys and the one before that a threesome using a black dude with a long pencil dick and an old whore that must have come out of a retirement home or out of a discount Mexican brothel. Hillary had wondered if she would also end up looking that worn out and haggard at that not so old age, everything sagging and still having to make a living on her back, clients paying less and less as the package worsened with age and wear. She thought about her future and while she didn't see her career branching into more respectable endeavors, such as movie impresario or madam, she took a good chunk of the money under the toilet cover and opened checking and savings accounts. For once in her life she had money put away for a rainy day, and a debit card to get to her money. She hid the debit card behind the Elvis portrait above her bed.

"I'm putting my money on the King," she said aloud to herself while straightening the picture, standing on her bed. For some inexplicable reason she had taken a special liking to the garish painting, so motel-like, so flea-market-like, so much like her, defiant in her roughness and unsuitable for a decent home, but quite good for a cheap motel room in Vegas.

She had sat on the toilet with Cedric's phone number in her hand, thinking about giving him a call. With her experience and talent, she ought to be doing real films in studios full of people working cameras and lights and microphones and a director who used typed scripts handed out by assistants, and make up artists that did their job without squeezing breasts and without Brenda following her into the little bathroom to lick semen off her face with her hungry tongue. Despite all the good reasons why to jump ship, Hillary had not found the strength to make the phone call. The money was good and so far things were not out of hand, and she didn't dislike Brenda when she was drunk. She put the phone number under the toilet cover, inside the cash envelope, in case of a rainy day too.

After one of their lovemaking sessions, with Brenda's blushing cheek resting on her heaving chest, Hillary felt emboldened by the brief moment of intimacy to ask Brenda about the phone number in her purse.

"What are you talking about?" asked Brenda.

"Don't you remember? I found a piece of paper with your name and phone number and I called for the hell of it, not knowing who you were."

"I didn't put it in your purse."

"Then, how did it get in there?" Hillary ran her fingers through Brenda's hair in delicate and swirling motions, bribing her into speaking the truth. Brenda sighed in pleasure.

"I gave it to some creepy guy that was with you. I told him that he could make some money if you came to work for us ... for me."

"Carl?"

"I didn't get his name, and I didn't care," said Brenda, lifting her head and nibbling on Hillary's breast. "It was you who caught my fancy." So it had been Carl who had put the damn piece of paper in her purse, perhaps with the intention of making money out of her later on, dealing her to Brenda like if he were a butcher selling meat over the counter. The lazy scoundrel had skipped town before putting his plan to work, too much hassle for the weasel.

Brenda bit Hillary's nipple, clamping hard on it and making her back arch as pain discharged through. Hillary's hand landed on Brenda's face with a loud slap that made Brenda's face turn red in the shape of a hand imprint. Brenda let go of Hillary's bitten nipple and laughed, her cheek burning with both pain and pleasure.

"That bite," Hillary said, "is gonna cost you another twenty bucks, you harlot. The slap is free." Both laughed at the word "harlot," their private joke that didn't make any sense but made them break into stupid giggles every time one of them used the word.

"I hear you got yourself a boyfriend," said Brenda.

"Sort of," said Hillary. Both sat in a corner of a windowless casino lounge bathed by dimmed lights that instead of creating a cozy ambiance gave the place the feel of a funeral parlor, a dank place that catered to the local alcoholics. Its patrons were as hard and worn out as the chairs both sat on, but the smoky and chill atmosphere had been a relief after the blazing sunshine and oven like heat rustling through the streets outside. Both blew smoke on each other's faces while talking and sipping on their mud slides, sitting across each other, a small round table between them.

"Are you his whore or is he your toy boy?" asked Brenda.

"He thinks I'm his whore and I play the part, but he is at my beck and call," said Hillary.

Brenda smiled and Hillary realized that she just had described the relationship between she and Brenda; after all, if was she who now called Brenda to go out to drink and shop and Brenda was the one that would come running. Brenda kept on smiling and Hillary couldn't figure out if either Brenda had not caught on or if Brenda already understood how things were going, or perhaps Brenda was already a step ahead of poor Hillary and was letting her think that she had Brenda wrapped around her finger. They interchanged smiles and smoke, but Hillary could still figure out nothing.

"That's my girl," said Brenda. "Have your fun and when you get tired, get rid of him." She stumped what was left of her cigarette butt against the almost full ashtray. The butt almost disintegrated under her angry fingers. She picked a new cigarette from her pack, put it in her lips and Hillary lighted it with her own.

"Is that what you're planning to do with me when you get tired of me?" asked Hillary. Her own drunkenness and Brenda's, had given Hillary the courage to ask the question.

"Honey, I'm sure you will get tired of me way before I get tired of you, if you are not already sick of me."

"How you figured that out?"

"I'm not a pleasant person," said Brenda. "And I don't apologize for that."

"You ain't bad, but I like you a lot better when you're drunk."

"I know. I mellow out with alcohol. Usually people are the other way around, you know, add alcohol and puff! Instant asshole."

"Let's get you real drunk tonight," said Hillary, her bare toes caressing Brenda's feet.

"How much is that gonna cost me?" asked Brenda, looking at Hillary with distrusting eyes.

"Not a damn thing. My treat." Hillary couldn't believe her own words, but her drunken mind gave her the sixth sense that probably there was a trace of tenderness in tough Brenda, and it would be fun and pleasant to find tender Brenda hiding underneath the abusive personality that shrouded her better than the business clothes she always wore.

"Oh shit," said Brenda. "You ain't falling for me, are you? We ain't lovers, just ... business partners." Her words came out almost like a whisper, as if afraid of the possibility, and they caught Hillary by surprise. So that is what scared Brenda the most, not a hitting, biting, name calling lover, but one that actually cared for her. Of course, Hillary understood that fear rather too well, but this was the first time she saw it on another. It was like looking into a mirror and seeing her own warts for the first time ever.

"No lovers, not at all; we are still business partners," said Hillary in a soothing voice, then added in a quarrelsome tone, "you stupid fat assed nasty cunt!" She gave Brenda a good kick under the table. Brenda beamed a smile that cleansed her worries and made Hillary also smile.

"Yo!" Brenda yelled at the waitress. "Another round!"

They spent the night in a room in the same casino they had started their drinking binge because they had been too inebriated to walk or, God forbid, drive anywhere else. Hillary made love to Brenda without any pretensions to fool her and there were no bites, scratches, hits or insults between them. Their kisses were long and deep. They passed out in each other's arms and waked up embraced. Both looked at each other and the awkwardness of the moment hit upon them like a sledgehammer. They got up in a hurry, or tried to get up but their heads or the room spun - hard to tell which.

"I gotta go," said Brenda, avoiding Hillary's eye. "Do you have money for a cab?"

"I sure do."

"Let me give you some anyway."

"No. Remember what I said, this was my treat."

"Whatever," said Brenda, angry, picking up her clothes and putting them on without paying any attention to fit or look while trying to stay on two legs. Hillary did likewise and both were out of their love nest in a few minutes, hair disheveled, clothes rumpled, in need of a shower, their mouth dried up with hangover, both heading in opposite directions along the hallway, both afraid and repentant of their drunken tenderness, a sign of weakness that didn't bode well for neither of them. I'm not a lesbian, Hillary repeated to herself as she walked away, Brenda's kisses still flavoring her memory.

The chair on the balcony had become Hillary's center of the universe where all things good and bad, happy and sad, clear and muddled gravitated to be pondered upon between cigarette drags and beer sips. The world went by across the balcony balusters, sometimes on wheels, sometimes on its tired feet, and sometimes flew by above the handrail in far away metal drones. She had reached the conclusion that all this motion around her was circular and spun around her on her chair, otherwise, how could you explain that day after day the same people went by? Sometimes she would open her legs and let the hot breeze blow between her shorts and then the crazy idea that the world gravitated around her vulva didn't sound so bizarre; after all, that vulva was the reason she could make a living, and the world as she knew it, Brenda, Russ, Cey, the hired dicks and other hired vulvas, that is why they came to her, searched after her. If it wasn't for her vulva, she would be waiting tables with no time to seat on a chair and watch how all things gravitated toward her.

After the hotel freebie affair Brenda had come back to her for more sex, stone sober and meaner

than ever with the intentions of teaching Hillary what fools both have been when searching for tenderness where none was to be found or encouraged. Whatever traces of such abominable trait had been found; either by mere accident or the byproduct of an alcohol induced misinterpretation of just vulgar sexual satisfaction, both had striven to wipe it out. They would come out of their love making sections bruised, scratched, missing clumps of hair, and with teeth marks that took days to clear. More than rough sex they encounters seemed like orchestrated cat fights where orgasms came in between cries of pain and foul mouthed insults. Hillary discharged her anger towards Brenda for being Brenda, and her anger towards herself that came with the by now acknowledged fact that she had liked kissing Brenda and caressing her with a tender touch. Such sensory experience could not be denied, could not be erased or deprogrammed; and yet, Hillary swore up and down she was no lesbian, but then, her heterosexual experiences had always ended up in a fiasco perhaps because deep down she knew that penises didn't hold to their promise of enduring happiness and didn't give a damn about it.

Hillary sat on her balcony and watched women go by.

"I could make love to that one," she would say to herself, thinking love as another porno flick where women on women scenes were part of the menu. She could say the same about men going by. Flesh was flesh went it came to making money. At the end Hillary rationalized that she had been wasted when the Brenda affair happened, drunk out of her head. Even after repeating this reason to herself a thousand times, that nothing had really happened and that she should go back to being herself, she would end up beating up on Brenda with a fury proper of a jilted lover.

"We have to stop this shit," Hillary said to Brenda, both facing each across the bed in a motel room, not like lovers but like gladiators in lingerie looking for their enemy's weak side, for the spot where to sink the sword. Hillary had told Brenda not to come to her place anymore because the noise was embarrassing her and she didn't want Russ knocking on her door when the racket was going on, she having to come to the door bleeding and bruised. How was she supposed to explain that?

"You're tired of me, aren't you," said Brenda in an emotionless voice.

"Not of you but of this so called sex that is more like a steel cage match."

Brenda said nothing, her face set in stone.

"You know, all these bruises on me, that is not good for business either," added Hillary. She sat on the side of the bed, looking at Brenda who stood frozen in her place.

"Come on," said Hillary, tapping on the bed, next to her. "Let's stop this nonsense." Brenda came around and stood in front of Hillary who remained seated. Brenda's open hand came around in a furious swing that landed square on Hillary's cheek making her head turn sideways, spit coming out of her mouth. Brenda's leg came up and her foot impacted on Hillary's chest and pushed her against the bed where Hillary stayed motionless, her face burning in fiery pain, saliva running down her side of the mouth. Brenda ripped Hillary's panties off and started to sodomize her.

No a word was said. Hillary laid back and let Brenda eat her while tears of pain or anger, Hillary couldn't figure it out which, ran down her face and soothed her reddened skin. Brenda kissed and licked in gentle slaps of tongue and lips, but never biting or hitting or calling Hillary names. Hillary did not look down because she did not want to make eye contact with Brenda, and Brenda never looked pass Hillary's breasts for the same reason. Hillary's orgasm came over soft and deep breaths as a gushing and sparkling wave that crashed on a quite shore where nothing but the stillness of the moment had filled the space.

Brenda stood in front of her with a wet chin and cold eyes.

"Remember who is the boss. I decide what kind of relationship we are going to have," said Brenda in a soft and firm voice. "Yes Ma'am?"

"Yes Ma'am," acquiesced Hillary, still on her back.

Brenda got dressed, took a handful of crispy bills from her purse, folded them in half and walked towards Hillary who hasn't moved. Brenda carefully inserted the money in Hillary's vagina. She left without saying a word, swinging her rump atop her stiletto heels on her way out of the door.

Hillary propped herself on her elbows after Brenda had left and looked at the bills sticking out of her mound. She pulled the wet money out and counted it. No bad for just a slap and a lick. There was no reason to be angry with the paying customer if she was going to be a repeat customer.

A repeat customer, that is what Brenda became, and Hillary became the obedient whore who did as told and right away. No more bites and bruises but now Brenda commanded their sex with a bossy voice peppered with demeaning comments towards Hillary who only said yes or no Ma'am when spoken to.

Since there were no more bruises and scratches Hillary no longer had to make up any explanations to Russ about the shape of her body, a ritual that had become tiresome and unnerving to Hillary, that idiot of Russ being too obtuse to figure out what was happening, a dick after all, only interested on the regular and pleasurable discharge of his love sacks without having to pay for it.

Hillary made love to Russ until he, exhausted, had to make excuses why he could not keep up, like having to be a work early in the morning when he didn't have a job because he had been fired from his last one. Hillary looking for happiness, for the answers to her sexual inclinations in every inch of Russ' tool inside her, wanting more of it because she couldn't find an answer in what Russ had given her, and perhaps no other man could give it to her either, but there was no pain in trying.

Her relationship with Brenda had turned detached but more pleasant in a way as now it was predictable and each one knew what was expected of them. They continued to go out and drink, and they drank like fiends and friends, but Hillary made no attempt to have Brenda make love to her when drunk, and Brenda did the same. Their sober meetings were business like and well paid, and the carnal pleasure surpassed any unpleasant emotions.

"Not on the mouth, please" Hillary had said when Brenda attempted to kiss her on the lips. Brenda gave her a surprised look but had understood and had kissed her on the neck instead. If only Russ could get it that quick, though Hillary.

The theme of the next flick would be lesbian love, Brenda had told Hillary. Hillary was not sure if the choice was done to satisfy the buying public, if there was one other than Cey and Brenda, or to play mind games with her while Brenda watched her going at it with another chick, deep throat kissing included. French kissing a stranger was of no consequence to Hillary because she would never have to see that stranger again, at least not outside the business.

Cey had given Hillary a ride to the studio this time because Brenda was busy doing something else. Not having anything better to do, she helped Cey unload all his video paraphernalia out of his truck and gave him a hand setting up the lights and the set. As weird and quiet as Cey was, at least he knew his stuff and didn't mind explaining to Hillary the whys and the hows of what he was doing. Hillary had shouldered a camera and was playing with it while Cey gave her pointers on how to use it when the studio door opened and Brenda came in wearing a too-short skirt. Hillary watched her through the camera's viewer, Brenda standing in front of the door and smiling like a dope.

"Smile Brenda," said Hillary still pointing the camera at her. "Say cheeeese."

Brenda gave her a finger that rose in front of her smile. Behind her, a girl entered, holding a shopping bag stuffed with clothes. Hillary focused the camera on the stranger, a very young, short haired blonde a few inches taller than her. Her nose hooked upwards giving her the look of an English snob at a tea party. Her bangs fell over her small eyes locked in a perpetual squint, even when fully open as now to observe the new room and the people inside.

"Howdy stranger," said Hillary focusing on the newcomer, "Are we number one in your book

too?"

The stranger gave a timid smile and held her finger for the camera like Brenda had. Cey picked the camera from Hillary's shoulder; the fun was over.

"This is Erika," said Brenda introducing the gangly girl to Hillary and Cey. Hillary could not believe that she was the hired vulva for this section, far too young looking - tough looking, but too young. Where does Brenda find these losers? Hillary remembered the phone number in her purse. Losers are everywhere, she thought.

When Brenda ordered Erika to get ready, the girl's eyes had nervously searched the room, gray balls bouncing inside her slits under thin brown eyebrows, and had stopped at the bathroom door. She walked across the room, entered the little bathroom and closed and locked the door behind her in a fashion painfully familiar to Hillary. By then Hillary was buck naked in the middle of the room, putting on the lingerie and high heels, or as she called, her whore fatigues, not paying any mind to Cey and Brenda who watched her getting ready, lewdness in their eyes.

"Where did you find her," Hillary asked Brenda. "At the bus station fresh off the Hickville special?"

"Is it not that the bus you came on, princess?" Said Brenda, smiling as she blew smoke from her cigarette. She always smoked during filming, as if she were trying to keep her hands occupied and to stop them from going under her dress to play with herself.

"Nope. My bus came from Dumbville, honey. Dumb and Dumber came together to Vegas and only Dumber stayed."

Erika came out of the bathroom holding her folded jeans and blouse in front of her pale nakedness, covering her firm and small breasts, pink nipples perking up like her nose under her translucent negligee. She came to an empty chair and placed her clothes on it, the negligee's price tag hanging from her neck. When she turned around Hillary saw the hardness of her smallish breasts and realized that she had to be in her early or mid-teens. She couldn't be eighteen, not even close.

What the hell is Brenda doing? Hillary thought. She remembered all porno flicks that she ever saw started with a disclaimer saying that all the models portrayed in the movie to be shown were eighteen or older. Of course, shady operators like Brenda's outfit probably didn't give a damn about it, but still, there was no way that this Erika could pass for eighteen, no even with a flawless false ID. How could she sell the damn movies with such an obvious young performer? Perhaps the catch was that the movie was intended for a special audience that only wanted to see a young girl like Erika, and they were willing to pay a good price, like anybody did when they wanted illicit goods.

Hillary stepped to a corner of the room out of earshot from Erika and motioned to Brenda to come over. "What the hell is this?" asked Hillary, angry, keeping her voice down.

"What? Don't you like her?" said Brenda in a patronizing voice. She too kept her voice soft in order to keep their talk private.

"She should be in school or playing with Barbies."

"But she ain't. She came to Vegas to make movies and money. Just like you."

"Come on Brenda, you're gonna tell me her parents will let her do this!"

"Her parents abused the hell out of her, so she ran away." Brenda's voice showed no emotion.

"So now is our turn to abuse the hell out of her? That's it?"

"Listen darling, she has seen more dick than you and I put together. The little slut can give you a run for your money."

"Yeah, right, that is why she locked herself in the bathroom to change, too shy to undress but sluttish enough to screw anything," said Hillary, still not convinced of anything. Erika looked at both of them talking in whispers, Hillary's head popping now and then around Brenda's body to peek at her. Cey would not take his eyes off Erika but apparently she had already developed the thick skin required to ignore lusty eyes so she blocked him out; he was just another prop.

"I'm not doing this Brenda. This is bullshit."

"Listen to me, you stupid ass," said Brenda in a low but authoritarian tone. "We have put a lot of money in you, and there is more money to be made by you, a lot more, so don't screw us and we won't screw you." After a pause Brenda added, "My employer does not like to be messed with and my advice is, do as you're told and the money will roll in; otherwise, I'm not responsible for your skinny ass."

Hillary's heartbeat had increased to the point she could feel the thumping in her chest. Brenda's hand gripped her arm and her thick fingers dug in, squeezing the flesh around the bone. She had locked stares with Brenda and saw not a trace of bluffing. So this was it, she had become the private whore of a few perverts that were willing to bankroll her as long she only said yes ma'am. Thank God for the money under the toilet cover and in the bank. Hillary swallowed hard and said, "yes ma'am" with contempt.

Hillary came close to Erika, almost a full head taller than her and told her in the same conspirator's voice she had used with Brenda, "I don't like this. You need to go home and forget about this people. This ain't good for you - or me."

"I got no home. Either I make it here or end up back in the street," said Erika, no wavering in her voice, with a hard set adult determination. Hillary understood her predicament, yet couldn't get over her young age.

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"Good Lord," muttered Hillary.

"I have been hooking on the streets. This cannot be worst."

"Since when have you being doing tricks?"

"Last few months," said Erika, then started to say, "Before that ..." and hesitated.

Brenda, in a bad mood, barked across the room. "If you two are done with your chit chat we have work to do here. Let's get on with the program." After the program ended and both Hillary and Erika had got back into their street clothes, Brenda had wanted to drive them both to Hillary's motel where she had gotten a room for Erika.

"No thanks", Hillary said. "I'm going to help Cey get the stuff back in his truck and then ride back with him."

Brenda looke at Hillary with hate-filled eyes and said, "Whatever, suite yourself," and had left swinging her rump in the large pendulum motion that Hillary now understood to be her body language saying she was pissed off. Too bad, Hillary thought. She can go to hell. Brenda grabbed Erika by her skinny arm and took her out with her.

"Poor girl," said Hillary, loud enough for Cey to hear.

"Life is hard," said Cey, not stopping his labors, not wanting to look at Hillary. "Some are harder than others, and some are downright unbearable."

"How is yours?" asked Hillary.

"Mostly sucky, but I manage."

"Everybody has luggage to carry, I suppose," said Hillary. "But at fifteen, my God, it shouldn't be that heavy."

Cey said nothing but he looked at Hillary and she could see in his eyes that he agreed with her but he had learned to say yes ma'am a long time ago. That is how he managed. They loaded up Cey's equipment, locked the studio and drove away. Hillary's cell rang on the way to the motel.

"Hi honey," said Brenda all bubbly and happy. "I forgot to give you your money."

"Just push it under my door," said Hillary in a flat voice.

"I tell you what. I'll give it to Erika and you can get it from her." Before Hillary could object, Brenda had hang up.

"She can be such a bitch," said Hillary as she put the cell back in her purse.

"That's Brenda for you," said Cey, talking on his own, and guessing correctly that it had been Brenda who called.

"How did you get involved with her?"

"Long story. I don't want to get into that," said Cey, producing a mild smile.

"She must be blackmailing you," said Hillary. Cey's smile disappeared and his face turned cold. Hillary couldn't get another word from him after that. What dark secrets must this man be harboring? When Cey's truck stopped in front of his room, Hillary did not wait for him to say anything, as if he was going to say anything anyway. She opened the door, got out and walked across the parking lot on her way to her room, up the stairs and three doors down the balcony. Brenda's Lexus was parked next to the stairs. On second thought, she knocked on Freddy's door instead. He happened to be in, hungover and in his briefs, and he was more than happy to let her in. His room smelled of stale beer, pot and dirty clothes.

"Have you seen Russ?" asked Hillary.

"Yeah. He came by about an hour ago and went out to buy cigarettes. I don't know where he went." Russ never told him and Freddy didn't care. Hillary called Russ on her cell. "Russ, is me, Hillary. I need you to pick me ASAP. It is important." After a short pause she spoke again.

"I don't give a shit what you got to do. This is important. Get you ass over here. Now." Hillary used Brenda's command voice. She put the cell back in her purse. Freddy looked at her with a lost in space stare, his eyes vacuous and empty as if a taxidermist had sawed them to his face. He was stoned on something, Hillary guessed. She sat on a chair next to the window and looked into the parking lot through the blind slots. Cey's truck and Brenda's car have not moved. Nobody was in sight.

Go to the police - that had been Hillary's initial plan. Now, sitting on the chair, looking at Freddy half passed out on his unruly bed, his testicles hanging out of his shorts, she had her doubts. She was in tape making love to a minor; wasn't that estatu-something rape? Wait, she didn't have a dick, thus it was not technically possible for her to commit rape. Regardless of what the law may call it, she being on tape going at it with Erika was not exculpa-something evidence. Besides, she was a movie whore; were the cops going to believe her? Erika for sure would say that nothing happened, the poor girl was more worried about where to sleep and what to eat than about laws in the books, and Hillary understood that feeling quite well. She wanted to smoke. but her hands were shaking too much to light a cigarette.

Russ noisy car approached. Hillary checked through the blinds and saw his Honda heading for the front door. She double checked that the parking lot was clear and stepped outside before Russ had any time to switch the car off. She opened the door and jumped in.

"Let's go!" she shouted. Russ put the car in reverse, spun tires and peeled out of the parking lot. The little car scrapped bottom as he left the parking lot and merged into the street traffic.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I just needed to get out of there," said Hillary, her mind searching for a believable excuse. "I was having a bad day and I needed to get out and get lost for a while."

"It looks more like somebody is chasing you."

"Nobody is chasing me," said Hillary. "Not yet." She closed her eyes and replayed the image of Cey standing by his truck, looking straight at her as the Honda had left the parking lot.

Russ brought her back to the motel late that same night. They had done what the unemployed and the rich do with their spare time; they had got drunk, high, had sex, partied with friends and got bored with each other at the end. During idling interludes Hillary had pondered what to do. At the end the idea of going to the police looked rather foolish to her. She was as deep as the others. Skipping town had looked like a good choice but Elvis had her debit card and her cash was taped under the toilet cover. She would be damned if she were to leave without at least a change of clean underwear and some money.

While Russ strained himself on top of her doing his manly duty and she corresponded with well rehearsed huffing and screams, she had reached the cold conclusion that she could not trust Russ with Elvis' secret and the loot under the toilet cover. Having sex with him was one thing, but telling him where her money was stashed, no way. He was liable to get the stash and leave her standing on the parking lot, on her own.

Again, running away to what? From what, it was obvious, but who knows what she would end running away to, to another pimp, to another Russ, to the streets. At least Brenda was a somewhat predictable factor, and the money did come in after all. Yes ma'am, that was the key, to just say yes ma'am, that was how to manage the strange situation she had got herself into, all because of a frigging phone number in her purse.

After Russ departed, she stood in the parking lot, looking in the direction of Cey's room. She hesitated for a while but then walked towards his door, her steps clumsy due to the alcohol and pills in her. She knocked on Cey's door and the door opened right away. Cey had been watching, and he had been ready to call Brenda with the news of Hillary's arrival when Hillary had walked towards his room.

"Yes?" Said Cey, his door fully open, wearing shorts, a black Harley-Davidson T-shirt and a surprise on his face. Hillary just stepped in and pushed the door closed behind her, Cey still holding to it.

"I need a favor from you," said Hillary. Cey remained mute, wondering what she was up to.

"I want to learn to drive. Can you teach me?"

"Why should I do that?" asked Cey, knowing that Hillary was fucked up on something. Her eyes didn't seem to focus too well. Hillary kneeled in front of him, pulled his shorts down and put his member in her mouth. Cey gave a loud grunt, his body tensed as if an electric current had run through it; he then relaxed into a rather pleasant state, soothed by Hillary's lips smacking around his shaft.

On his late night call to Brenda that followed Hillary's departure, Cey had told her that Hillary had come back, that they had talked and that everything was cool. No, there was nothing to worry about. Yes, Hillary was not going to create any trouble. Cey thought it wise not to mention the blow job and the fact that he had agreed to teach Hillary how to drive.

Hillary walked back to her room tasting Cey's cum, thinking of the double whammy she had accomplished, patching things up with her business partners and getting the chance to learn how to drive. She was sure that Cey would never figure out that the main reason for the blow job had been for him to put a good word with Brenda, and she had also guessed that he would never mention the blow job to Brenda, or the deal about learning to drive. Cunning had to be developed as any other craft, and Hillary felt that cunning was more important than just saying yes ma'am if she were going to survive this mess she had got herself into.

Hillary slept like a log and woke up in the same place on the bed and position she had fallen asleep. She knew that she was no longer the same person who had come to Las Vegas with the Toilet Bandit. This new girl was wiser; a professional whore who fucked her way through her problems and not longer had to work for pitiful wages and tips. A cunning cunt, that is how Hillary self described her, a label both loathsome and one she was proud of. There was no remorse because there had not been too much of a choice other than a homeless shelter or whoring on the streets. Skinny Erika came to her mind. How harsh it was to make that choice at fifteen.

Erika had done all right in the movie. She kept looking at the camera and Hillary kept on whispering in her ear, "Don't look at the camera" but she did it anyway, unable to control her curiosity. It had been a truly amateurish performance, but perhaps that was what the whole thing had been about, she, the consummate slut, teaching a supposedly innocent neophyte how to screw in front of the camera. What Erika had lacked in knowledge she had made up with enthusiasm so the flick had turned

out fine. But fifteen years old, Hillary couldn't get the fact out of her head, no matter how she looked at it, fifteen years old and already in the same boat as her.

Fifteen years old, Hillary tried to remember what she was like at that age. A new foster family, this time in East LA. Somehow the state had put her in a Mexican home. She had to be the only Anglo around the place. At first it had been strange, living among the dark people, and to her horror she discovered that the Benavides family had no TV. Seven kids of their own and no TV! That had been one of the times she had seriously considered running away. Mr. Benavides, or Big George, as the name tag in his work shirt said, was indeed a huge man, his back as broad as a door, his shoulders sloping into the sides of his head, no visible neck from behind. Ms. Benavides, short and broad and as brown as a mound of compacted dirt, had potted plants - the pots were mostly coffee cans painted in bright colors - in every corner of the house, in and out. Her green thumb kept the place surrounded by flowers and greenery.

At night the family would gather and play monopoly or other games, some of them Spanish, things Hillary had never seen before. But the biggest entertainment of the night was Big George and his accordion. His thick fingers moved over the keyboard like they had been made for nothing else. He played Mexican polkas and sang to them, and his kids did the same, a choir of foreign voices. Big George taught his kids to play the accordion and the guitar, and taught them Mexican folk songs. He wanted to teach her a few chords, but Hillary had proved to be scale deaf so the whole family, who had a rather fine ear, decided that she better keep on listening.

The Benavides had been the best foster home she ever lived in. Hillary's favorite time had been those evenings when Big George's friends - a band of janitors, movers and landscapers still wearing their work clothes - showed up with their instruments, playing and singing their soulful music until late at night under the trees in the backyard.

The warmth inside their cramped house where amenities were few but relationships were as thick and rich as the chipotle sauce Ms. Benavides used to cook with had taught Hillary's cynical heart that not every human was a jerk. When the social worker came for her, to move her to another foster home, she had almost run away. Her heart had been ripped out of her when she left the Benavideses. Since then she had promised herself to go back and visit but had always found an excuse to not keep her own promise, afraid of not being wanted anymore.

Hillary had lost her virginity right after that, and since then things had gone mostly downhill for her, picking up bad habits, like smoking and bad boyfriends. Despite all the bad decisions and lack of luck, Hillary had remained an optimist, albeit a cautious one. And now, her life seemed to be going somewhere at last.

Hillary pulled her chair out to the balcony to enjoy the fresh morning and to watch the morning stage of the rat race where people in business suits and work clothes rushed through traffic in their way to offices and casinos and assorted dungeons of capitalism. The first cigarette of the morning was the best tasting one; after that, her taste buds would become numb to the tobacco and only the nicotine fix would matter, but that first morning cigarette tasted like paradise. Cey's truck was gone; it would probably be parked by the pancake house down the road. She didn't feel ashamed of what she had done the night before. The man already had had his nose just a few inches away from every part of her body, and who knows how many times he had masturbated watching her in film. The blow job had been a good business transaction. The idea of the Benavides family knowing about her new profession made her uncomfortable.

A door opened down the balcony and Erika came out, eating a banana and wearing the same clothes she had the day before. Brenda had taken care of her whole fatigue but had not bought her a stitch of wearable clothes. Erika looked at Hillary and froze in place with her mouth full of banana, as if caught doing something illegal.

"Hi there," said Hillary. Erika's eye slits opened as wide as they could go and she ran back into her room. Hillary shook her head, thinking what a strange bird Erika was. She knew what she smelled

like, what she felt like under her hand, what she tasted like, her skin, her mouth, her breath, her vagina, and how she shuddered in pleasure under her expert guidance; yet, Hillary didn't know who this person was. Well, Hillary thought, she had been doing Brenda for a while now, and she was as enigmatic as always. Who the hell is Brenda? Hillary still had no answer.

Erika came back out of her room, an envelope in her hand instead of the banana.

"Brenda gave me this to give to you," said Erika holding out a timid smile and the envelope.

Hillary grabbed the envelope and opened it. She counted the greenbacks, twice, to make sure she hadn't made a mistake the first time; there was three times more than usual. The money was rolling in. Hillary took a good look at Erika, tall and bony and young and her sex partner by business reasons. Her kisses had tasted good, but so did Russ's so that didn't mean anything.

"Thank you," said Hillary. Erika said nothing, just smiled as if afraid of something, probably a temper outburst from Hillary.

"You don't have any clothes, do you?" asked Hillary. "Brenda only bought you sluttish stuff." Erika nodded.

Cey's truck came into the parking lot. Hillary stood and waved to it and motioned for it to come her way. The truck stopped and Cey waved back and he parked in front of her balcony.

"What's up?" said Cey sticking his head out.

"We need to go shopping. Can you give us a ride to the mall?" asked Hillary.

"Sure."

"Let's go," Hillary said.

Erika who for once smiled from ear to ear, ran after her down the stairs and into Cey's little truck. The ship of fools headed for the mall where Hillary and Erika shopped until their feet tired. Hillary had been willing to pay for Erika's purchases but Erika said that she had the money for them. Cey ended up carrying bags stuffed with comfortable underwear, sensible shoes, and reasonably priced shorts, jeans, and shirts that could be worn in public, as well as makeup and toiletries. Hillary noticed the pride in Erika's face when she paid for her own stuff with her own money, as if forgetting what she'd had to do to earn it, and she felt a vicarious happiness because she remembered feeling the same way. No doubt, Erika viewed the cash in hand as her ticket to independence, and whatever Brenda asked from her, she would say, "Yes, ma'am" and do it without hesitation.

Hillary paid for their lunch, including Cey's, because he had carried bags and kept a pleasant face all along, like a happy horse hitched to a hay ride wagon. Erika had gone into a public restroom and had changed into a new outfit. Her old clothes ended in a trash can, like her old self, not to be seen again; new things would come and for the better, Erika was convinced of that.

Cey's cell rang.

"Yup," said Cey on the cell. After a pause he said, "We are all here, at the mall." After a few more short sentences and phrases he hung up.

"Brenda?" asked Hillary.

"Yup," answered Cey. Nobody said anything but the mood turned a bit more sour.

Evening time and neon flicker on the sky. Hillary sat on her chair in the balcony with a cigarette dangling from her mouth; the chair's front legs up in the air and the chair's back resting against the wall. Erika sat on her own chair next to her with a straight back and her long legs crossed in front of her. She was smoking a cigarette she had bummed from Hillary. Too young to buy tobacco but already a prostitute, a street hooker, a play toy of perverted and sick relatives. Hillary had hesitated when she asked for a cigarette but then looked at the facts, at her own history, herself smoking since she was sixteen, and could see nothing but hypocrisy if she were to deny Erika a smoke.

"They are bad for you," Hillary had said to Erika as she lighted the cigarette for her.

"Why don't you quit and give me your pack then?" Said Erika, mocking Hillary.

"I like many bad things and I'm too dumb to worry about them. I'm keeping my smokes" Hillary had given Erika a whole pack. If Erika wanted to smoke, and have sex with strangers, and do drugs and booze, who was she to say no? She was not going to baby sit strangers for Brenda or anybody else. Erika now followed Hillary like a puppy, but Hillary realized that Erika was a pit bull puppy, a tough one that knew how to bite to survive.

"Where you from?" asked Hillary.

"Phoenix, Arizona."

"Brenda told me your family didn't treat you right." They both talked without looking at each other, just blowing their smoke over the handrail and watching it go up in spirals under the electric lights.

"The whole lot is a bunch of alcoholics." Erika stopped talking and Hillary awaited for more details but none were forthcoming.

"My mom was a drunk too," said Hillary. "She dumped me into the custody of the State of California. I was a foster child."

"Did the state treat you right?" asked Erika.

"I had good foster families," Hillary thought of the Benavides, "and had indifferent ones." Hillary couldn't remember their names. "But I cannot complain much. It beats rape at home and hooking on the streets."

"You were lucky," said Erika. Hillary had never thought that somebody could truly said that to her and mean it. "My dad started molesting me when I was ten and my mother was too drunk to notice or to care. My uncle joined the club when I was twelve."

Hillary had no words. What could she say that would make any sense to Erika, or to herself?

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Hillary after a long pause. She couldn't come up with anything better. She looked at Erika who still had her sight set on the skyline of high rises on the other side of the balcony, her eyes moist with tears that did not roll down, held in place by her hard face that took long and deep drags from her cigarette.

"I can see why you ran away," said Hillary, turning her face to the skyline.

"I left home about half year ago. It was hard living with so called friends that ended up screwing me and pimping me. If I was gonna get screwed, at least I should keep some of the money," said Erika in a matter of fact tone. "I found myself a professional pimp that kept me busy and let me keep some of my cash."

To the horror of such revelations Hillary could say nothing. Brenda looked like a savior when compared to Erika's pimps.

"I once almost ran away because the new foster home they sent me to had no TV," said Hillary. Erika and Hillary looked at each other and broke up laughing.

"Oh you poor thing," said Erika, still laughing.

"It was a tough life, you know," said Hillary, looking at her past from a new perspective and realizing it could have been much worse.

"How did you end up here?" asked Hillary.

"Mr. Kushner," said Erika and then said nothing else, as if Hillary were supposed to know who the man was.

"Who?" asked Hillary.

"Mr. kushner, our boss."

"I didn't know we had one," said Hillary, embarrassed that the new girl in town knew more than her. "Brenda never mentions any names."

"I had this date with a john, a rich one who had promised good money for something young," explained Erika. "You know, young girls are at a premium. Anyway, he had his fun, kind of a rough bastard if you ask me, but at the end he made me an offer to come here to make movies and get paid

real money, all mine and no pimps."

"Didn't your professional pimp say anything? I'm sure you were making good money for him."

"He did. Mr. Kushner offered him cash. He refused so Mr. Kushner put a gun to his face and told him to fuck off ... so here I'm."

Erika's smile told Hillary that seeing her pimp being told to get lost had made her day. So their boss was some sort of rich gun toting likes-them-young bastard. Each new bit of information made Brenda look better, and she had not been bluffing about her employer not being kind to screwballs.

"He put me in a nice hotel for a few days until Brenda picked me up. We flew to Las Vegas, first time in an airplane. That was cool."

"Brenda? He had Brenda come down to pick you up?" asked Hillary, surprised at the news.

"Yeah, and it was a good thing. He came to my room every night and was getting too rough. He has a mean streak."

Hillary sat on her chair stunned by the news. Brenda as a gopher, their boss some rich gangster who likes it rough. Had Brenda been his sex toy thus explaining Brenda's penchant for rough sex? Or was their common taste that had brought them together? Erika's voice pulled Hillary away from her mulling.

"You know, it was nice making that movie with you yesterday."

"What was so nice about it?" asked Hillary.

"Well, you know, you are so tender, and smell so good ..." Erika's blushing face stopped her sentence short. Hillary knew that at that very moment Erika was regretting her comment. Hillary herself felt some of that blush on her own face.

"Thank you dear. It is nice to know I don't stink. You don't stink either."

Erika smiled without looking at Hillary, her gaze back to the skyline. Both sat until late that night doing small talk, girly talk, and prostitute talk, smoking their time away.

More flicks came. In a few Erika went solo with hired dicks and Hillary got to play the Brenda part, standing to the side out of the camera's view and smoking a cigarette. Being and spectator instead of a player had bothered her, and she couldn't figure the reason why. The older guys banging Erika, it just didn't look right. Erika did as told and learned to play the part; her welfare required her to do so. Hillary smoked not to control her lust, like Brenda, but to mellow her uneasiness.

Brenda was already bedding Erika, a fact that did not surprise Hillary but somehow it didn't set well with her, even if she had gone down that same path while filming their lesbo love flicks. Make believe of course, but Hillary had felt Erika's response to her touch, a shock wave under Erika's skin that had come across their bodies and had electrified their muscles. Hillary had tried to blot the sensory memories, but they would not go away. Erika's warmth and feel and smell would not get out of Hillary's head. Going back to Russ for straight sex would wipe out those sensations for a brief period but they would come back like a nicotine craving, relentless and unavoidable.

Maybe it was a motherly instinct gone haywire, that need to feel Erika and embrace her and protect her from the nastiness of the world; but then, licking her genitalia had nothing maternal about it. Hillary contemplated the possibility she was a closet lesbian. She remembered the hard core dikes in LA. Half the time she couldn't tell if they were ugly women or strange looking guys, the short hair, the man's clothes, their thick bodies, and their masculine faces without make up. Their friends had called their type a butch and had, she included, made fun of them. On the other hand, she had no qualms about making a film with another "normal" looking girl, or rolling in bed with Brenda, who was not petite nymph either but who at least behaved very much like a woman.

Hillary wondered if Erika also felt that under the skin tremor when she touched her. That is the type of question that Hillary would never ask Erika. All she could do was give Erika a few pointers

about Brenda, both leaning over the balcony's handrail resting their weights over their forearms, side by side, watching over the parking lot and looking for nothing in particular.

"Don't let her get too rough," Hillary said.

"She's the boss, you know."

"Yeah, I know, but if she hurts you, say so, ask her to back off. Bite back or slap back if you have to. She won't mind getting roughed up in return. Trust me."

Erika smiled, "you have been doing this longer than me, so you must be right." Hillary looked into her eyes and nodded.

"I don't want her to hurt you," said Hillary.

"You're the first person who ever gave a shit about me," said Erika, her eyes almost hidden behind her half closed slits, in the way she usually stared at Hillary when they made their flicks. Such stare gave Hillary goose bumps. Damn weird kid, Hillary thought.

"Whatever. I'm just doing you a professional favor." Hillary felt her face reddening.

"Thank you," Erika said, leaning over and planting a hands free kiss on Hillary's lips that landed and took off with the delicate touch of a butterfly on a rose. Damn weird kid! Erika took off laughing and running down the balcony and disappeared into her room. Hillary stood frozen, wondering what the hell had happened, licking her lips, searching for Erika's taste.

Starving horses loomed over the ridge line, their ribs showing under their pelts. The full moon lighted the barren landscape with a variegated intensity that created dark long shadows from the Joshua trees and rocks that stretched over the desert ground as crooked fingers of darkness over glowing sand. The horses ran following the ridge line, skeletons on hooves, their manes short and frazzled, ghosts of times past when miners and Indians and explorers roamed the open land in search of richness, of the next best thing. People are still looking for the same things, different people now on wheels and artificial wings, a few of them buried under the sand, the missing in action of the never ending quest.

"Somebody ought to feed them horses," said Hillary.

"They are wild ponies," said Russ with eyes bloodshot from booze and drugs. "Somebody should shoot them." He stood in shaky legs and pointed his index finger to the herd and went "Bang! Bang!" mimicking a pistol. His thumb went up and down with each imaginary shot. His other hand held an almost empty bottle of Captain's Morgan.

A real shot rang next to Hillary and it made her ears hurt and the muzzle flash blinded her. She jumped sideways and there was Freddy, as fucked up as usual, with a handgun in his hand, holding it sideways like he had seen the bad mother fuckers do in TV, laughing his head off.

"Die fuckers! Die!" he yelled. Shot after shot flew over the hills. Freddy steadied himself on the hood of the Honda, his idiotic face made more so by the moonlight. Erika had run to the other side of the car and held her hands to her ears. The horses looked at them from the top of the ridge, then dissolved in the shadows behind the hill, not bothered by the bullets flying by, way off their mark.

"Freddy, you dumb fuck!" screamed Hillary. She looked in the direction of Russ. He was standing with his dick out of his pants, taking a piss, one hand on the bottle and the other on his waist, his dick dangling from side to side and spraying urine over the desert and his feet. His drunken face was as idiotic as Freddy's.

Hillary had driven the Honda to the desolated spot in the desert, Russ and Freddy too fucked up to drive. Cey's lessons had paid off and she had managed to drive the low-slung car without getting stuck in the sand or in a ditch. Russ had given her directions, telling her what a beautiful place this was. Perhaps with sober eyes the desert under the moonlight would have indeed been a sight to see, but not so when accompanied by a drunk with a gun and another pissing on his own shoes. Hillary just wanted to go back to the motel, and take Erika with her, away from those fools. The problem was that Russ had

the car keys in his pocket. Hillary turned to Freddy.

"Put that gun away, you moron," Hillary said in a peremptory voice. Freddy looked at Hillary and his hollow laughing face turned into an expression of contempt. He pointed the gun at Hillary.

"You don't tell me what to do, you bitch!"

Freddy's unsteady hand waved the gun in front of Hillary; unable to keep it aimed at her. Hillary froze and her breathing became fast and deep. The booze and drugs in her body cleared in a chemical catharsis precipitated by the muzzle dancing in front of her. She saw with painful clarity the bad situation she and Erika were in.

"Please, put the gun down," pleaded Erika from the other side of the car, her voice calm and steely. Freddy turned around, the gun now pointed at Erika.

"Come here you stupid ho," said Freddy. Erika didn't move and Freddy fired a shot over her head.

"One more time you goddamn cunt! Come over here!" yelled Freddy. Hillary again looked in the direction of Russ, expecting him to do or say something to put Freddy under control, but Russ just stood there with his dick hanging out of his pants and a stupid grin on his contorted face. The bottle had fallen by his side.

Erika moved closer to Freddy who grabbed her by her hair and pushed her against the Honda's hood. His gun's muzzle rested against Erika's forehead.

"Take you pants off," commanded Freddy at the same time his free hand pulled his own shorts down to expose his penis.

"This ain't cool," Hillary said to Freddy in a low voice. "She doesn't deserve this."

"Shut the fuck up!" yelled Freddy who was now rubbing himself against Erika's bare legs that glowed with a pallor of moonlight and fear. His gun still rested on Erika's head. Erika said nothing, her face set in a mask of tensed muscles, like a boxer's.

Hillary felt Russ grabbing her from behind and throwing her on the hood next to Erika, grouping for her shorts, trying to get them off.

"Stop! What the fuck you're doing?" screamed Hillary. Freddy's gun ended up in her rib cage, poking at her.

"Pull them shorts down," commanded Freddy, his voice serious and short tempered.

"Do as he said," said Erika in a soft voice, almost a murmur. "Don't argue with a drunk." Her hand reached over and grabbed Hillary's, giving it a reassuring squeeze. Hillary let Russ pull her shorts down.

The men grunted under the moon, raping the girls, laughing and shouting obscenities at each other and at the girls to celebrate their manhood. They traded victims and the bacchanalia continued unabated until their ejaculations cut their debauchery short. During this time Erika had held Hillary's hand, squeezing it hard, never letting it go. Hillary had turned her head and had seen a long tear coming out of Erika's closed eyes, silent and luminous as ice. After Russ and Freddy were done, the girls stood and used their underwear to cleanse themselves as good as they could, throwing the dirty panties on the nearby brambles. The guys, now quiet and talking in low voices between them, stumbled to the car and got in. Russ cranked the car and took off, tires spinning sand. The girls watched the Honda's headlights disappear over a hill, its noise lasting a while longer but it also came to fade away with the distance until silence returned to the land.

"Are you OK?" asked Hillary, her voice barely a whisper. Erika nodded but Hillary sensed that old memories had been revived like a Frankenstein monster hit by a lightning bolt. Erika's face had the hard features of a war weary soldier and her slanted eyes were narrow slits that hid her moist eyes.

"I'm so sorry," said Hillary in a soft and rueful voice. "It was my fault..."

Erika embraced Hillary and put her chin on her shoulder, squeezing her. Hillary felt Erika's hard and bony edges pressing against her.

"It wasn't," whispered Erika. "Drunks are drunks. We did the right thing, trust me."

Hillary wrapped her arms around Erika and both held each other. Erika's muffled sobbing and the far away neighs of hungry but free mustangs roaming the open desert were the only sounds reaching Hillary's ears.

She should have seen it coming, Hillary chastised herself. The way Russ had got pissed at her when she refused to give him money that day before they all went out to party, as if she were his personal ATM machine; insert dick here, get money there. He had turned nasty and his eyes had had a hatefulness that Hillary remembered from past boyfriends who had ended up hitting her or screwing her out of her things. But it had been a brief storm, or that is what Hillary had thought. Russ the quick chameleon had revised his face and his convincing smile had put Hillary at ease. Hillary now understood that from that moment on Russ had decided to teach her a lesson on why little bitches like herself should not deny him anything, and his due money being the most sacred thing in his long and whimsical list of things not to be fucked with.

Of course it was not his money but he felt that by bedding Hillary, what was hers was his, no questions asked. Russ had enough cunning in him despite his own delusions to know that Hillary was an independent creature, toughened and quite capable of sending him packing without shedding a tear and then he would be left with no pussy and no dough. So his plan had been to finish their sex laden-love lacking relationship with a big bang. Freddy provided the helping hand and Russ rewarded him with double carnal pleasure, and he himself got to dip into that Erika girl 'cause new pussy is always good pussy, and the most important thing, he got to teach that Hillary ho not to disrespect him.

The big bang took care of the sex part; now the money part. Hillary had left her purse in the Honda with her phone, her money and her keys. Erika had her key and her money in her pockets and Russ and Freddy had been too drunk to bother to pad her down and take her stuff away.

Hillary and Erika walked out of the desert the same way they had driven in. The cool night made hiking easy and the moonlight highlighted the fresh wheel tracks showing them the way back. They soon reached the highway where they walked on the highway shoulder for about an hour before getting a ride from a Mexican in a pick up truck belonging to a construction company. The Mexican didn't speak much English but was kind enough to drop them at a convenience store where people drank steaming coffee, ate breakfast burritos and gambled in slot machines as the sunrise rose and shone through the dusty glass windows.

Cey picked them up. On their way back he asked what had happened. Hillary did the talking and had no qualms speaking about the rape because she felt no pretenses when in Cey's company. How could she? He was the man she gave fellatio to after each driving lesson and the man who had seen and filmed her demeaning herself like the whore she was in so many flicks. Standing naked with her defects in front of him had no consequences to her because he had seen it all, knew it all. Cey made no comments and just nodded his head from time to time.

Cey parked under Hillary's balcony. The early sun had started to cook the parking lot. He got out of the truck and told the girls to stay put until he came back. From under the seat he pulled a stainless steel revolver, huge and short nosed, stuck it in his waist under his T-shirt and went up the stairs towards the girls' rooms.

"What's that all about?" asked Erika.

"I don't know," said Hillary.

Cey came back and opened the truck's passenger door for the girls.

"I'm sorry. Too late," he apologized.

"Sorry for what?" asked Erika.

They followed him up the stairs where Hillary found her place ransacked and vandalized, her stuff scattered all over the floor.

“Oh no!” cried Hillary. She ran to the bathroom where she found the toilet tank cover on the floor, cracked in half, her envelope gone. Turning around she saw that Elvis laid on bed with his face punched out. She ran to him and flipped him around and found her debit card still safe behind him. Not all had been a loss.

Randy the motel manager came and then the cops. Before that Cey had instructed the girls on what to say in his patient and teacher like fashion that Hillary had grown accustomed to; speak the convenient truth and leave out Erika and the rape. Erika must go to her room and stay there and out of sight. Hillary must tell the cops that Russ and Freddy had dropped her in the desert and had taken off with her keys. Don't lie about the drinking. A rape complaint would bring them both to the attention of the law, too much attention; burglary and general assholiness would just be another police report soon shoveled under a huge pile of similar reports, but rape had the tendency to bring in detectives, medical examinations, forensics and close scrutiny. If Erika got involved she would be found out to be a runaway and sent back home or to a juvenile tank. Attention like that didn't bode well for their business and themselves.

The girls had looked at Cey and understood his wisdom but Erika couldn't help expressing her feelings.

“Those assholes are gonna get away with it,” she said, angry.

“No. They won't,” said Cey. He gave no explanations and the girls didn't want to press him for details. His huge revolver's rubber gripped handle lurked from his waistband. “Trust me. I'll take care of this.”

They did as told. Hillary talked to the cops telling half the story and leaving Erika out who sat in her room waiting in nervous apprehension for the cruisers to leave the parking lot. Cey had gone somewhere unknown and had promised to talk to Brenda, to make sure she wouldn't fly off the handle when she found out what had happened. Some promises are harder to keep than others.

The cops gone, Erika came out of her room and helped Hillary pick up her things. Randy, a chubby man with a stained Stetson hat and jean shorts that showed his rather suntanned bowed legs came in and told Hillary that he wouldn't have any rooms until after the weekend.

“That's OK Randy,” said Erika. “She can stay with me while you fix this mess.”

“If that's OK with you two, it would work out fine,” said Randy, accommodating to the idea. Hillary saw no choice.

“That will be fine Randy,” said Hillary. “Thank you.” She thought of Freddy's room downstairs. That scumbag wouldn't be coming back, but the idea of being where he had slept made her cringe. She would rather share a bed with Erika. They had shared too much already so sleeping side by side for a couple of nights would be of no consequence.

They had just finished moving Hillary's stuff to Erika's room when Brenda came up the stairs and down the balcony, harried on her high heels.

“What the hell happened?” she asked, loud and angry.

“Cey told you, didn't he?” Said Hillary without rising her voice. “You know what happened.” Before Brenda had time to start hollering Hillary opened the door to Erika's room and told Brenda to come in, and Brenda followed suit.

“We both got raped,” said Erika once Brenda got inside and the door was closed. She and Hillary stood side by side facing Brenda.

“Damned it!” said Brenda. “You almost blew the whole fucking business by bringing the cops into this!”

“Hey, they trashed my room and stole my cash. The motel manager called the cops. He needs a police report to get his insurance to pay for the damages,” said Hillary, then she added “and thank you for your fucking concern.”

The women looked at each other as boxers do across the ring before the bell rings but Brenda backed down when she averted her eyes from Hillary. Brenda then apologized.

“Sorry. I’m just upset about the whole thing, about you getting hurt and the business being wiped out if the cops had found out about Erika.”

“Cey did a good job at coaching us,” said Hillary, her voice also trying to defuse the anger that had floated in the room like static electricity ready to materialize into a flash of light and heat.

“Where is Cey?” asked Brenda.

Hillary and Erika hesitated. Brenda’s fury started to build in her eyes so Hillary had to speak to stop her from boiling over.

“We don’t know. He said he would be taking care of business.”

“Shit. He knows who those guys are,” said Brenda. “I hope he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

Hillary’s mind churned while watching Brenda going for a cigarette. Why would Cey know Russ and Freddy? Did he follow them out of his own freakishness or because Brenda had ordered him to do so? Why weirdo Cey, out of all people, would be the one to see that Russ and Freddy got what they deserved? That was not his job. Maybe his job had been to protect them, to protect Brenda’s investment and he had failed so now he was gonna get the guys who made him look bad with his boss. Or could it be that Cey was genuinely pissed off? Out of all people she ever knew, it had to be freak Cey the one that stood up for her. Life couldn’t get weirder.

“What a fucking mess,” said Brenda, sitting on the bed’s edge, smoking to calm her nerves.

That afternoon Randy came back with news.

“The cops called. They found your purse with your id, and your phone.”

“That was fast,” said Erika.

“Where they found the stuff?” asked Hillary.

Randy laughed. “Those two guys who stole your stuff and trashed my room, they got beat up pretty bad by a motorcycle gang. They put them in the hospital.” Randy winked and eye. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that?”

“I swear to God,” said Hillary. “I know nothing.” Her smile and Erika’s made them look like accomplices.

“I don’t know nothin’ either,” said Randy, tipping his Stetson. “Ma’am.” He nodded and left with a grin on his face. Hillary and Erika looked at each other and both said at the same time, “Cey!” Late at night Cey came back to his room. Hillary knocked on his door.

“Do you have any easy rider friends?” asked Hillary with a surreptitious smile.

“I got friends in low places,” said Cey, reciprocating the smile. “I’m sorry about your money.”

“I don’t worry about the money.”

“The deal was for them to keep whatever money they found on those two.”

“Money well spent,” said Hillary.

“I agree,” said Cey.

“Listen ... I owe you a big one, you know what I mean.”

Cey nodded.

“But after what happened, I just don’t feel like performing. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Cey. “It’s rare when I do the right thing, and for once this felt like one of those rare occasions.” Hillary kissed him on his cheek, right below his eye, the only part that didn’t have hair, and left. Cey closed his door and went back to his loneliness and his nightmares that awaited for him every night.

There was a darkness tarnished by the leaking of electric lights from the city outside and a stillness violated by the noise of cars going by, all sipping through the window glass and the thin curtains. Inside the room life now rested to the heaving rhythm of Erika’s breathing, her warmth breath spilling over Hillary’s neck who laid awake staring at the ceiling.

Erika had come to bed naked, and Hillary had wanted to protest but she hadn't had the heart to do it. Now Erika's body laid next to hers, curled in a fetal position and fast asleep, Erika's hands resting on Hillary's chest which had by now matched Erika's cadence in its breathing. At first Hillary had kept her arm next to her body, straight and cold, away from Erika. Her arm now cradled Erika's waist with the hand resting on the small of her back. The thin sheet covering them gave Hillary a sense of false protection; she knew it was false, but the cover felt like an impenetrable shield that kept the ugliness of the world outside and their soft bodies inside, ensconced in temporary happiness.

Russ and Freddy would now be in a hospital bed, black and blue and perhaps with a few broken bones. Do they handcuff burglars to their beds? Even if the cops let them go, they got what they deserved. Erika and she may be whores but what happened in the desert had nothing to do with sex and everything with humiliation. Abuse, like the colors in a landscape, can take on many hues. Russ had selected the rape color from his palette and applied it with his and Freddy's penis using deep strokes full of hatefulness. One more vaginal penetration, that meant nothing. Freddy's dick was not different than any of the hired dicks she had to deal with. No, the rape ran much deeper than that; it took away her will and her control over her body and gave it to two losers who used her like a trash bag; filled her up with their garbage and then dumped her on the desert. Russ' desire had been to humiliate her. Rape had been the means to that objective. Erika had been collateral damage and Hillary felt terrible for it. She didn't need any more drunks forcing themselves on her like that.

Russ had gotten his satisfaction but it was now she who was laughing while he was fucked up with painkillers. Her own coldness made her shiver. Who was she turning into? Brenda? A cunning cunt? The last word bothered her, too dirty. A wiser and tougher woman? She hoped so. She snuggled closer to Erika wanting to feel her body. And she was not a lesbian, but it felt good to have Erika next to her, to be able to smell her hair.

Brenda and Cey sat together in a corner of a roadside bar, opposite the pool table where a floozy played with her boyfriend, him more interested in feeling her tits under her tank top than playing the game. Brenda and Cey saw another candidate to their business, young and gullible as the previous ones, but they had not come to scout but to discuss Mr. Kushner last set of orders.

"How was your trip?" asked Cey. Brenda's bruises on her neck and arms and thighs told him the story, but he asked anyway, just to see what Brenda would say.

"Rough as usual," said Brenda. "No, I take that back, rougher than usual."

"You think he's losing it?"

"I don't think he ever had it to start with."

"You're more beat up than usual." Cey spoke the truth.

"What you see is not even half of what went on," said Brenda. Both sat through a silence fit for a funeral, somber and long, not knowing what to say to each other; perhaps there was nothing else to say, or if there were, it wouldn't matter anyway. Mr. Kushner had them where he wanted them, in his grip, and he squeezed them like the talons in an owl do with field mice. Many times both had thought, in their own minds and never telling each other, about disappearing from the known world and leaving behind Mr. Kushner's sordid business, if that is what it could be called, a business. None of them knew the details of his business but had their own suspicions, like those people living next to a concentration camp with smokestacks belching smoke fouled with burning flesh would, but at the end denying knowing anything, suspecting anything. The truth was too horrible to be accepted; yet they suspected ... and did nothing.

Brenda pushed an envelope over the stained table, pass the ashtray, next to Cey's hand.

"Here is the schedule," she said. "Same places, same people."

"Same end," said Cey. He didn't want to look inside the envelope.

“It is not our business to know what’s at the end of the road,” said Brenda.

“Where does the road ends this time?” asked Cey. He gulped his whiskey.

“Denver.”

“Son of a bitch,” muttered Cey. “Son of a bitch.” He put his empty glass down with a loud thud that made the floozy look in their direction.

Brenda took them to lunch at a fancy eatery and got a table away from potential eavesdroppers. Following Brenda’s request, Hillary wore hose, heels and one of the dresses that they had bought at the mall. Erika wore a similar outfit. They looked uncomfortable in their new threads but also felt a notch above the tourist rabble that populated every restaurant in town. It was amazing what clothes could do for self esteem, thought Hillary.

“You two look wonderful,” said Brenda. Hillary and Erika smiled. “After this we will go to the hairdresser to fix your mops, and a manicure and some make up won’t hurt either.” Hillary and Erika looked at each other on the sly, wondering what was all this about. Brenda caught onto their suspicions.

“I know you’re wondering what’s going on, so let me explain,” said Brenda, stopping to sip from her wine.

“It’s time for us to make good money, real money.” She held her stare on the girls across her and saw their curiosity. “Let me explain our business plan and what you have to do.” The girls listened to Brenda talk about their “business” plan. They had made enough movies now. As Hillary had suspected, they had gone to selected customers all over the country, she and Erika the exclusive porno chicks of a few well to do willing to pay good money to put their hands on the protagonists. The girls would travel to different cities and have sex with these selected customers who would be able to live their masturbating fantasies on the real flesh of the porno stars they had seen in their exclusive movies. Until now Brenda had been feeding these customers the flicks Cey had filmed. Now, for a generous fee, these same customers would be able to screw the very same girls they saw in their films. The fact that Erika was underage seemed to be no bother, or perhaps was an added bonus.

Erika and Hillary listened to Brenda pitch her proposition. Despite the money, the traveling and the exclusivity of the deal, it was prostitution, plain and simple. If they got caught, Hillary wondered, would she be accused of being Erika’s pimp because she was of legal age and she wasn’t? Hillary knew she was as deep as Brenda and Cey in this. Her doubts eased when she heard Brenda put a price to their services. It would be foolish to bail out now with ripe money ready to drop from the money tree, just one more shake, that’s all it would take. They would be hired vulvas dealing with johns.

Brenda pitched her plan in a low voice as not to be heard by anybody else but by the girls, stopping her spiel every time the waiter or the buss boy came by, then picking it up after they moved away. Brenda’s easiness at picking up her presentation where she had left gave Hillary the impression that this was not the first time Brenda had gone through it and that made her wonder about the hired vulvas that had been in business prior to her.

Of course, thought Hillary, after these rich johns had their fun and their fill of the new girls, their curiosities and longings would be fulfilled and the so called new girls would be no different than any other call girl – Hillary liked that word better than whore or prostitute – so she was sure Brenda would send them packing or try to pimp them at a discount during salesmen conventions as if they were damaged goods; get to fuck two for the price of one. That was the time to bail out. By then she would have enough money stashed away in the bank to do other things, or to go in business by herself. She wasn’t twenty-one yet so she still had a few good and profitable years left in her.

What would become of Erika? Why in hell, Hillary asked herself, did she have to worry about her? She wasn’t her mother, or sister, or ... lover. They were just business acquaintances, business partners at best. Erika had taken a liking to her, obvious in the way she looked at her and wanted to

always be next to her, sleeping naked side by side – which she had to admit was enjoyable – but the whole thing was just a teenage fixation that would pass, born out of Erika’s need for somebody who could take care of her because despite her rough life and toughness she was a little girl at heart in need of affection.

Once upon a time, Hillary pondered, there had been something called friendship, but she had problems now understanding what that word really meant, just like she had in the past. Erika was her friend, Hillary surmised, but that didn’t mean she was her responsibility. Take one day at the time, concluded Hillary, do the job, collect the money and then worry about what’s next.

“Hellooo,” said Brenda across the table, speaking to Hillary. Erika pinched her in the leg.

“What?” said a startled Hillary.

“You were in dreamland,” said Brenda laughing. “Trying to spend all that money for sure.” Hillary just gave a sheepish smile and said nothing. This time she had put two and two together and the laugh was not on her.

Money had always been a good excuse for Hillary to rationalize her deeds and this time it had not been different. When Randy told her that he had a room available and she could move in right away, she told him that she and Erika had decided to be roommates and that a room with double beds would be good. Hillary had never discussed the idea of being roommates with Erika but she knew that there was nothing to discuss.

"That will save us some money," had said Hillary. It had been a very reasonable excuse, or a excusable reason, Hillary wasn't sure which.

"Sure," had said Randy. "No problem. I got two of those. First or second floor?"

"Second. We like the balcony."

"I noticed that. You two are like crows perched up there." Randy was not the man to ever question his guess' tastes or motives and he was less so inclined when those customers paid in cash and in time, like Hillary and Erika always did. When Hillary told Erika of the new arrangement, Erika had said nothing but had a smile that showed all her teeth. Her face radiated such happiness that Hillary congratulated herself for once doing the right thing. Well, that was the thing that bothered her the most; she was not sure if she was doing the right thing. The money saving part was true but the nightly snuggling had become tender touching and kissing, gentle fingering and passionate licking. Maybe I'm a lesbian, Hillary had told herself, but she didn't feel like one; she still craved a well hung and hardened male, and she had no desire to dress like a man, but being with Erika at night also pleased her and made her feel wanted, not for her money but because Erika adored her in a way that sometimes made her proud and others sick.

Hillary wasn't sure if she would ever be able to reciprocate Erika's love, or her teenaged affection; Hillary couldn't tell the difference, but she enjoyed sharing a bed with her and feeling her bony and lanky body cradled in her arms, kissing and telling each other silly things, no pain whatsoever involved. For once in her life she didn't feel being taken advantage of but she had the nagging idea of she being the one taken advantage of Erika's vulnerability, of her thirst for the affection she never had, of her young age. Erika had had her first menstruation at eleven, so she could not be called a little girl, at least not from a biological point of view. From an emotional point of view, her innocence had been wiped out even before her drunken father had broken her hymen with a loveless and perverted thrust of his fat hips.

Like many times before, Hillary sat in her chair on the balcony, pondering her life like a Rubric's cube, moving the pieces around but never putting it together, but the mere exercise of trying kept her amused. From her new location on the balcony the landscape had changed focus but it was the same theme. Elvis was no more, his place taken over by two pictures of squaws standing on a stylized

desert, one over each bed. She liked Elvis' naughtiness better against his background of black velvet. Erika popped her head out of the door wearing nothing but an oversized T-shirt.

"I'm gonna take a shower," she said with a grin and a shine in her eyes that spoke of a happy girl. With that said she disappeared back inside the room. Hillary got up and got in without even bothering to bring her chair with her. She closed the door and stripped. Her figure on the mirror over the dresser reflected her pierced and tattooed body still in good shape, her hair now long and dark with sun bleached red strands running along. She entered the bathroom and stepped into the shower where Erika stood under the running water, rivulets of water racing down her straight back and into the crack of her narrow and taut rump.

Hillary grabbed the soap and started to rub Erika with it, bubbles and soapy water squeezing from below her fingers as they moved around with delight. Erika's height over Hillary's was rather obvious when standing together like that. Hillary thought about the possibility of Erika still growing taller, and the fact that she was not done growing up yet put a knot in her stomach but now she wasn't sure if it was due to guilt or just plain lust for the beautiful woman that Erika would grow up to be.

Cey saw that they both boarded their flight to Atlanta, their first in the last stage of their business relationship. Driving the girls to the airport: Cey knew from past experiences that each subsequent trip would become more unpleasant and the last scheduled trip would be pure hell. He had let Hillary drive to the airport, he sitting on the passenger side, Erika between them, her left hand resting on Hillary's right leg. Hillary wished that Erika would not show her affection like that, so carelessly, and she had spoken to her about it a few times before, but again, Erika had slipped. Hillary hadn't had the heart to slap Erika's hand away. Cey had seen the hand but had said nothing. Lately, Hillary had noticed, he had drawn more introspect and quiet. She only got grunts out of him while paying off her driving lessons and he only spoke to criticize her driving, which had come along a long way so he didn't critique much anymore.

Both wore their respectable people outfits, hose and heels and make up and good hair. Both girls had experienced the more polite and deferred treatment they got from everybody when dressed in fancy clothes instead of shorts, flip flops and tank tops, and they also attracted more lustful looks from traveling suits. Going through the airline counter and security had been a breeze. When asked for a picture ID Erika had shown her high school library card. For a panicking second Hillary had thought that the airline people would find out she was a runaway, but they just smiled and returned her the card. Hillary's heart rate didn't slow down until they had cleared security.

They sat together. By agreement Hillary would get the window seat going to Atlanta and Erika would get it coming back. They felt like country pumpkins and Hillary more so because she had never flown before. During take off Erika held Hillary's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze as the heavy and noisy aircraft separated itself from the desert and climbed at a high pitch in a shudder of metal and plastic. Cool, thought Hillary, her petite nose squashed against the window, watching her world downsized to an expanse of dirt crisscrossed by roads and dotted by shrubs the size of flies.

Brenda had briefed them on what to wear, on what to expect, on how to behave. Her instructions had overwhelmed them at the beginning but finally, after some repeating, the girls got it right. Their customer was a high paying john who had to be pleased and obeyed, and Brenda had emphasized the last word. Discretion was a must as the john was probably a family man, a respected churchgoer, and an executive. Hillary had thought that paying for hookers, one of them underage, made him a vulgar prostitute chaser and not different than any other dirt bag looking for sexual favors along the sidewalks of busy streets. She had kept her comments to herself. A loose mouth did not fit well an exclusive call girl. Discretion would be her motto.

"Your services are paid for," said Brenda. "But if you go the extra mile, he may tip you."

Brenda gave them a naughty look.

"I'm gonna give you cash for your eventuals, and it is for you to keep." Brenda talked like a general briefing her troops. The only thing missing was a map on the wall and a pointer in her hand. Again, Hillary noted the trained voice and rehearsed speech that told her that this had not been the first time Brenda had gone over these things. Brenda couldn't put a sentence together without peppering it with blank pauses, "huhs" and "ummmms," not even when sober.

On route, Hillary checked her purse. There was cash, but not all of it. Some she had given to Erika and the rest she had hidden inside her dress, just in case her purse got snatched. There was a jewel box with a DVD in it, done by Cey and to be delivered to the customer. The johns liked to have sex with the girls while watching them perform on the screen. The DVD had nothing written on it. Their last flick had been a free for all where she and Erika took on two hired dicks. It had taken more than one section to shoot because Brenda had wanted multiple cum shots, and the hired dicks couldn't perform one after the other so a day between cum shots had been required. Cey had patched it all together into a continuous orgy that made the hired dicks look like undrainable semen gushers. Hillary thought that you couldn't beat the business plan, providing the porno start for a live performance in the customer's couch while he got to watch her on his TV. She wondered how Mr. Kushner had come up with the idea.

She had two packs of Cigarettes, good stuff, not that nasty generic crap. Erika now had her own, bought by her. She was sleeping with the girl and making porno flicks together, how could she refuse to buy her cigarettes? Somehow that stuff about underage drinking and smoking did not make sense when talking about young prostitutes.

There was no cell phone. Brenda had told them to call her collect from a pay phone and never to use the customer's phone. This had struck Hillary as odd. Brenda's explanation had been that, like spies, if they run into vice or other cops, they were on their own, and having a cell with them would give the law a way to trace their contacts back in Vegas. Don't write numbers down either, memorize them instead, had advised Brenda.

"Should I change my name to Pussy Galore?" had asked Hillary in a mocking tone, referring to the Bond girl in one of the Double-Ought-Seven movies.

"Uh?" Had been Brenda's response. Erika had laughed. Even Erika had gotten the joke.

"Should we take our cyanide pills with us?" asked Erika, joining in the fun. Brenda still didn't get it. Hillary had just shaken her head in disbelief; Brenda the dope had struck out again.

Erika fell asleep to the lullaby of the engines and her head came to rest on Hillary's shoulder. Hillary pushed her back onto her seat, being as gentle as possible. Next thing, she thought, Erika would be grabbing her breasts or putting her hand on her crotch, asleep and behaving as if they were in their own bed.

Hillary observed with brand new curiosity the life inside the cabin. People typing on laptop computers, others talking on cell phones, some reading newspapers, magazines and books – she had never read a book, not even in high school, what it would be like? She wondered. A few people snoozed away like Erika. She grabbed a magazine from the back of the seat in front of her and when she opened it a paper bag came out – a barf bag.

Watching the flight attendants at work Hillary had pondered what it would take for somebody like her to get such respectable job. After more watching and a round of peanuts she realized that pushing a heavy cart loaded with food through the narrow island between the seats wasn't much better than waiting tables at a greasy spoon. It wouldn't feel like a very glamorous job when somebody handed you a barf bag filled with puke for you to dispose off.

Whoring so far had not been so bad. Tasting stranger's fluids wasn't worse than carrying somebody else's puke in a bag, with half the puke on the outside and running through your fingers. The hired dicks all had been young and presentable with rather good hygiene, except for that Gary dude she had asked to go wash 'cause his dick stunk. What if, she asked herself, one of these high heeled johns

was a stinky overly fat slob as pleasant as a pineapple under the armpit? It was her job, so she would have to suck it up. No profession was free of unpleasant moments, she concluded. The only difference was how much you got paid for putting out with them.

They landed at Hartsfield and the size and congestion of the place overwhelmed both of them. A black man in a suit held a cardboard sign that said “Ms. Peters” written in marker. They walked to the man and Hillary said to him, “I’m Miss Peters.” The man introduced himself as Ken and welcomed them to Atlanta. Ken walked with them to pick their baggage up. Everything was working out as planned; no need for the cyanide pills yet.

The humidity in the air told the girls they were not in the Nevada desert. They hadn’t experience humidity like this before, their faces moist with perspiration that would not evaporate but that stuck to their faces to make them shine. They could feel the cold conditioned air but it wasn’t a match against the moisture laden air.

Ken put their luggage in the black Crown Vic. It wasn’t a limo, but discretion being a virtue, it made more sense to Hillary. She felt like a movie star when tipping the Sky Cap who had brought their luggage to the car, she all dressed up and generous with the cash Brenda had given her. It was so easy to be generous with other’s money.

There was no horizon, that was the first thing Hillary notice when looking out of the tinted windows. Atlanta was built in the middle of a forest of gigantic trees. There were tall pine trees everywhere that hid the horizon and shortened the sightseeing distances. The landscape could not go further than the wall of trees in front of her. She couldn’t make up her mind if the never ending open spaces of the West or the claustrophobic ones of the South would suit her better. Her mind was still mulling this question when their car stopped in the driveway of a fancy house hidden in a verdant forest that made it look like a castle in a fairy tale. Hillary had the gut feeling that what was going to happen inside that house would lack a fairy quality though.

Ken opened the car door and Hillary and Erika stepped outside. Now they got a full blast of humid air that palled their faces with a moist shine. Hillary walked to the door and looked under a potted plant. The key she found did open the door. She stepped in followed by Erika, and both were grateful for the cold air inside. Ken followed them in with their luggage in his hands and under his arms.

Hillary stood next to the window and watched the Crown Vic depart, Ken a happy man with a rather generous tip. Hillary reminded her to ask Brenda how much to tip; she suspected she was overdoing it, but hell, she would not be the person to ever under tip anybody, not after being on the receiving end of lousy tippers for years.

The opulence of the casinos was a sight to behold, and Hillary saw it as a corporate trick to bamboozle the masses that walked and gambled among the slot machines and card and roulette tables, shuffling their feet in awe while they got plucked off their money. But she had never seen opulence such as this in a private home, made for one person’s consumption. The concept of personal opulence had never been a bother to her. Movie stars and organized crime, they could afford it, but to step into a non-descript house and find it, that had taken Hillary aback, and Erika too.

They sat on a big white couch that smelled of fine leather, knees together, holding hands as if they were in a dark forest surrounded by ghouls. They looked at the main door and wondered what kind of person – or monster - Master Hinckley would be; that was what they were supposed to call the john. They were supposed to behave as “servile peasants.” Hillary was sure that Brenda had not come out with that expression by herself.

“Are you nervous?” asked Erika.

“I’m scared shitless,” said Hillary.

“We better take a quick shower and get ready.”

Hillary nodded but none of them could move, overwhelmed by the strangeness of everything. Who the hell was Brenda? What the hell were they getting into?

Fall had come to the Nevada desert. The landscape colors had not changed but the temperatures had. Sitting on the cool balcony had now a soothing way of relaxing Hillary and Erika who spend most of their free time sitting on their chairs smoking, making fun of and mocking the humanity carrying their personal burdens of work and family when it passed by in front of their motel going who knows where.

At times they just sat there and said nothing to each other, just smoking. Randy wondered about those two strange birds and their habits, and their comings and goings in fancy clothes but after years of managing the Gold Dust Motel, he had learned not to let the weirdness of others bother him. If they paid on time and caused no trouble, let them be. He waved to the girls, his longest staying tenants, and they waved back to him, grinning. He remembered the other girls that had come and gone before these. Every one who came into his motel sooner or later would leave, like water passing through a flower mill, their swift passage his daily grind and livelihood. They were not to be missed because others would come right behind.

“He’s a strange dude,” said Erika. Hillary agreed. Life was good at the same time it was strange. The last month had been one of travels to distant cities across the U.S. of America. For each trip they had carried precise instructions of what to expect and what was expected of them. Brenda had put together a tool box they carried with them: dildos, strap on toys, vibrators, spiked leather harnesses, whips and all kind of kinky artifacts that either made them laugh or made them cringe in disgust. Hillary had always checked the toolbox in at the airline counter so it didn’t have to be opened by security. She wondered what would happen the day some security person wanted it open, or if it went through an X-ray machine and all those toys showed up in the screen, shaped like missiles and with wires and batteries in their innards.

The more Hillary got sucked into the sex business, the more she was convinced that it was show business, pure make believe like a magic act involving sex, or a con job, she and Erika putting an act for the benefit of the paying customer. True feelings of lust or orgasms had nothing to do with it; it was just making the customer feel like he, or she, was number one. She and Erika were getting to be quite a tag team, both quickly picking up on what made the customer tick and putting out acts that haven’t failed to get them sizeable tips.

From every trip they had returned with bruises and scratches. On a few occasions Hillary had been concerned about their safety when the customer got way too rough, but somehow she and Erika had been able to defuse those situations. The beatings paid off handsomely in cash so Hillary and Erika saw them as part of the job and learned to live with them and to act as if nothing was abnormal.

Master Hinckley in Atlanta had been verbally abusive and had insisted on anal sex without Vaseline. Hillary felt her butt was going to explode days after that. Erika had shown no discomfort whatsoever, she with that tight ass.

Mr. Smith in Orlando had been rather abusive, both verbally and physically. Erika had returned back with a black eye, but he had provided a rather large tip, and even apologized to Erika afterward. Mr. Hager in Hagerstown, Maryland – couldn’t he come up with a better name? – Had showed up with a nasty girlfriend and the three girls together had beaten the crap out of him, his fantasy thing, while he wore woman’s lingerie. Whatever floats your boat, Hillary had said to him when he proposed what he wanted. The nasty girl also took her anger on Hillary and Erika, both coming back with more bruises just when they thought they were going to get away with it.

Master Blaster in San Diego, Mr. Big in Seattle and Master Rapist in Bangor, Maine had followed. More bruises and unrestrained decadence, and more money. Where were things going to end? The DVD’s had been a big hit and never failed to get things going. From their last rendezvous in

Bangor, Erika had pilfered a DVD from Master Rapist's collection – he wouldn't notice one missing. It resembled the ones they had been giving to customers. The pilfering had been Hillary's idea because she had guessed that the previous girls had to be in those DVD's, just like they were in the current ones. Or maybe the damn DVD was one of their previous flicks, or it had a wedding or a barbecue party in it, but it was worth the try. She would have to find a way to play the DVD. Hillary just had a morbid curiosity to know what the previous girls looked like, and wanted to see if they were any good. She put the disc in her underwear drawer once back in Vegas and then forgot about it.

While Brenda didn't get drunk with them, she would come by and get laid, all three of them frolicking in bed, Brenda being verbally abusive and the girls reciprocating her rudeness. During one of these encounters, with Brenda in a good mood and extenuated, Hillary had asked her what had happened to the previous call girls. Brenda lay on bed sandwiched between Hillary and Erika.

"What girls?" asked Brenda, her face tense and suddenly pale.

"You know," said Hillary playfully, running her index finger between Brenda's breasts. "The ones that did this stuff before us. I know you had others before us." Hillary's finger rose and descended in deeper and faster cycles, following Brenda's breathing. Brenda's lips remained closed but Hillary knew she was concocting an answer by the look of her eyebrows closing around the centerline of her nose; true or false, that would be up to her to guess.

"Come on," said Hillary, gently running her tongue over Brenda's nipples. "Don't be a bad girl and tell me." Hillary put her innocent girl face on and pointed it at Brenda.

"They left," said Brenda in almost a whisper. "To make more money somewhere else."

"Why?" asked Hillary. "Money is good here ... and you are delicious." Hillary had turned her bullshit powers on. Erika looked at her approvingly from behind Brenda's pasty white shoulders marred by old bruises, smiling like an accomplice would, running her finger in a soft line up and down Brenda's spine.

Brenda's eyes filled with tears that burst into a streams sliding down her face. Hillary couldn't believe what she was seeing. Brenda got up and got out of bed. Without turning her back to the girls she spoke while gathering her clothes and putting them on.

"They had to go, that is the nature of this business ... they are happier somewhere else." Hillary and Erika looked at each other in disbelief at Brenda's teary outburst.

"Trust me, you also will be happier away from this place."

Brenda got half dressed in a hurry, grabbed her purse and left, never looking back, and without paying.

"What the hell was that all about?" asked a frightened Erika.

"I don't know," said a confused Hillary, and then asked, "Where're we going next?"

"Denver, I think," said Erika.

Hillary had driven Cey to the parking lot next to an empty warehouse. Cey had pulled two traffic cones from the back of his truck and had placed them a few feet apart next to a concrete culvert. With his usual patience he taught Hillary to parallel park. In and out Hillary went, first knocking the cones down but now being able to park the little truck with an acceptable degree of skill.

"How's that?" asked Hillary sticking her head out of the window. The sun highlighted her hair in reddish hues that streaked through her otherwise brunette hair. Cey saw his own reflection on Hillary's sunglasses when he approached the truck. His belly looked huge under his abnormally diminutive head on the convex golden surface covering Hillary's eyes.

"Darn good," said Cey. "You're ready for your test."

"What test?" asked Hillary with a smile.

"Driver's license. You're ready."

"I don't need stinkin' license," said Hillary. "I'm a bad ass ho." Her giggling laugh sounded to Cey like fine crystal bells. He picked up the cones, put them back in the rear of the truck and got in the passenger side.

"I'll buy lunch today," said Hillary, hitting the accelerator and pulling out of the empty parking lot. The last few driving lessons had been freebies, Cey refusing the lip service that Hillary thought he was entitled to. At first she had seen his rejection as an indication of his disgust for her and her life style but then Cey had let her know in his usual terse vocabulary that there was nothing wrong with her and that he just couldn't take advantage of a friend. He would teach her to drive for the hell of it as long she didn't say anything to Brenda.

Cey's admission that he considered her a friend took Hillary by surprise, but then, who was the one that had stepped to the plate when Russ and Freddy did their dirty deed? It had been Cey, and he had never asked for anything in return. Who was the one always available to drive them places and play the chaperone and the bag carrier roles? It had been weirdo Cey. Who knew every cranny and hair on her body and yet had never been her lover? Cey again. Hillary now realized that she had confused his quiet demeanor with weirdness, his aloofness with a lack of care. Yes, he craved solitude, as if he were hiding from something, hiding in his room, hiding behind his hairy face and dark sunglasses. Hillary felt that a demon of some kind tormented Cey, he living in constant fear of the pitchfork coming out of nowhere to nail him and pain him.

She had tried to look behind his facade but each time Cey had retreated behind a shelter of stubborn silence, like a man with no clothes embarrassed by the prying eyes of strangers, running away with his open hands on his buttocks and never looking back. Today she didn't even try to pry into Cey's life but just made small talk about the present. Even talking about the future made Cey uncomfortable.

"The day Russ and Freddy got what they deserved," asked Hillary, "were you present?"

"Why?" asked Cey.

"Well, I just wanted to know if they knew why they got beaten."

"Oh yeah," said Cey smiling. "They knew quite well. I personally told them as I stepped on their necks."

"Why did you do that? I mean, why did you stand up for us?" asked Hillary. Cey did not answer right away, mulling his answer with the patience of a farmer chewing on a straw.

"I like sex as much as the next guy but rape ain't right," said Cey. "It just ain't right."

"Not even when raping a whore?" asked Hillary. Her voice soft and her eyes fixed on the road ahead. Cey looked at her for a brief moment then looked in the same direction as Hillary.

"We're all whores. We do ugly things either for money or to get something from others. You trade sex for money; I trade my work for money. You do what you have to do to live on."

"Your views are very liberal," said Hillary with a smile.

"I ain't no liberal," retorted Cey. "I vote Republican, or I used to."

Brenda gave them their Denver briefing. The customer called himself Mr. Obitus. Hillary and Erika felt like standing at attention while Brenda delivered her spiel in a dry and angry voice. Hillary pictured Brenda in a Nazi uniform giving orders to a sonderkommand unit. Unbeknownst to the girls, her bad humor was not at them or because of them, but because of Brenda's terrible knowledge that she wouldn't be seeing them again, and there was nothing she could do about it.

At least she had tried to convince herself that there was nothing she could do about it. A short drive to a police station would take care of everything, but her own past and Mr. Kushner's knowledge of it didn't let her do the right thing. Mr. Kushner had her on a short leash with a choker collar, and with every passing day she looked more like an accomplice than a victim. She was sure that Mr. Kushner had planned her slip into complicity with every request she fulfilled for him, no matter how

grudgingly she did her job. At the end, she had been the deed doer, the one the law would prosecute and castigate. Brenda also knew that Cey was in the same boat as her, even though both had never talked specifics. The least they knew about each other, the better for both, that had been their tacit understanding.

She had tried not to get emotionally involved with the girls. She only did as told and directed by Mr. Kushner, and she had the wits to have guessed that this Mr. Obitus was really Mr. Kushner. Who did he think he was fooling? She and Cey had drunk a bottle together last night, not to celebrate but to give them the courage to do their jobs. A few times Cey had started to talk macho about putting an end to the business and telling the girls not to go, and each time Brenda had reminded him of what it would mean to them. Cey had emptied the glass in one angry swig each time he had heard Brenda's reasoning.

Not to get emotionally involved, easier said than done. These two girls were so sweet and special. Brenda had called them whores over and over in her head, but couldn't get the harsh noun to wipe out their humanities. Cey had sought his demons to make him ignore the present but they were not to be found; the living reality had more pain than his old memories.

Hillary and Erika got their walking papers and headed out with their luggage for the parking lot where Cey awaited with his truck, he as grumpy as Brenda.

"What's the matter with these two?" asked Hillary on their way down the stairs.

"They need to get laid," said Erika. "Maybe they need to fuck each other."

Brenda stayed in the girls' room, her heart broken and her conscience in a fire doused by guilt at knowing some evil was ready to befall Hillary and Erika and she didn't have the guts to do anything. Cey let Hillary drive to the airport. He didn't have the mind for it. Not a word was said by anybody on the way. At the airport, Cey helped unload the luggage, including the toolbox piece. He was getting ready to leave without saying anything when he stopped, turned around and said to the girls in a cold voice, "If you need any help, call me, anytime. I will come and get you." Without waiting for an answer he got in his truck and left.

"You know, this is getting weirder and weirder," said Erika, perplexed at Cey's words.

"I think we need to start looking for a new employer," said Hillary. "Those two and their moods are driving us nuts."

They got a Sky Cap to take their luggage inside to the airline counter thus starting their journey, their next scheduled stop, and their last one but they did not know that. Had they bothered to look in a Latin-English dictionary the meaning of the word Obitus, they would have been forewarned. Mr. Kushner had a penchant for melodramatic clues.

Phoenix, Arizona

Mr. Kushner, attorney at law, stopped by his bank and withdrew nine thousand dollars in cash from his personal account. Trip money. He flirted with the bank teller while waiting for her to count the money and put it into the pneumatic tube. It wasn't unusual for him to withdraw large sums of cash, sometimes for legitimate expenses, many others for illicit ones, the degree of illegality in direct proportion to the amount of cash. The higher the sum he withdrew, the more illegal its intended purpose would be. Nine thousand dollars would be enough to get done what he planned to do.

The tube came back to him announcing itself with a thud. A squeaky voice followed through the microphone embedded on the tube dispenser.

"Have a nice day Mr. Kushner."

He smiled to the teller behind the thick glass, middle aged but fuckable, Mr. Kushner thought. He reached for the tube, got it, counted his money and after putting the tube back, his Jaguar roared out of the drive through. On the trunk there were his luggage and a few extras intended for this trip. He would pick a few more on his voyage to Denver, buying them along the way and always paying in untraceable cash for everything, gas, food, lodging, trinkets. The anonymity and acceptability of the

greenbacks avoided electronic and paper trails, and cash always spoke louder and had more immediate effects than plastic.

His Jaguar moved through the streets in an easterly direction, the sunset rays behind him painting everything in hues of nicotine yellow. Long shadows ran to meet the incoming night that loomed over the car's hood, and inky mass of darkness filling up the sky in front of him. He came to a stop in front of a beat up chain link gate. After unlocking the gate and getting through he parked the Jaguar under a lean-to shed next to a dilapidated warehouse. Once his things were out of the trunk, he covered the Jaguar with a canvas tarp that had been rolled up under the lean-to, making sure that the car was well covered. To finish his work, he piled a few empty crates and other debris on top of the tarp covered car.

Satisfied with his concealment, he grabbed his things and walked to an old Buick LeSabre parked nearby in the lot, rust under the rocker panels, a few dents here and there, dark blue painted faded and a vinyl top that was peeling off in long tears. The Buick wasn't stolen, but it wasn't his either, not directly. Through a convoluted maze of phony companies acting as a front for many of his shady business, he had put the Buick in the name of one of his businesses. The Arizona tags were legal and the car, even though it looked in bad shape, had new tires and had been checked out and given a thumbs up by one of his best men at the chop shop he ran and where the Buick would disappear from circulation after his trip was done.

Mr. Kushner's criminal practice firm put him in contact with many felons eager and willing to work, and his contacts with both the low and high criminal element were many. Maricopa County Sheriff's office and the Maricopa County Attorney's office investigators could smell a rat but they couldn't pinpoint the origin of the stench, just like a dead rat trapped behind the hot metal wall of a warehouse; they knew the rat was behind the wall, but they didn't know where to punch the hole to get to it. Some speculated that Mr. Kushner was the mastermind behind many chop shops, escort services, gambling operations, Ecstasy and amphetamine distributors, and other criminal enterprises that seemed too well organized to be run by dumb ex-cons fresh out of the pen.

Other investigators speculated that Mr. Kushner was a gopher for organized crime, a wannabe wise guy that craved connections but that sooner than later would get his ass burnt by his current benefactors who would dispose of him when his usefulness ran out.

The truth was a combination of both schools of thoughts. It was true that Mr. Kushner had contacts with a crime family out of New York and did business with them, but not as a gopher, but as a savvy crook able to get his hands in many illegal business while no leaving clues behind for the cops to pick on him, or his partners. Mr. Kushner saw himself as a one man franchise. Money came from New York to finance his businesses, and the same money fattened by Mr. Kushner's enterprises went back after Mr. Kushner had taken a tidy cut. Now and then the wise guys would lend Mr. Kushner some muscle to deal with local problems and Mr. Kushner returned the favor by sheltering family soldiers in the Arizona desert when things got too hot for them in the Big Apple. A healthy cash flow kept friendships afloat, Mr. Kushner always said.

Besides his regular law practice Mr. Kushner also owned car washes, a car body shop, a bowling alley, and a titty bar. All served as a front to launder money and the last one had the bonus of satisfying his craving for young women. Extortion, black mail, intimidation, forgery, assault, rape, and many other felonies were not unknown to Mr. Kushner, not only as an attorney representing clients but as a practitioner who had shown enough acumen to keep his nose clean and remain a member in good standing of the State Bar of Arizona and the Maricopa County Bar Association.

The Buick headed for the highway in its way to Denver, Mr. Kushner making sure that he never went five or ten miles over the speed limit. Road trips invigorated him in a way just plain sex wouldn't do anymore. Mr. Kushner's idea of "plain" sex wasn't everybody's cup of tea. Paid whores and submissive sex partners could be roughened up but the whole scene was make-believe; everything had a limit. He felt arousal and pleasure tingling at his groin when he thought of what he was going to do to

those two bitches up in Denver. There was no substitute for the real fear and pain he could feel shaking under his hands when touching the clammy and bloodied battered bodies of his victims. Even the smell, that rancid odor of adrenaline loaded sweat, of hormones released when facing horrible pain and death, that could not be matched by any BDSM game. And the sobbing and pleading, sincere and yet so pitiful, how he loved to snuff it out with a well placed kick or slap to the mouth. His mind retreated into its darkest recesses to think the unimaginable and the cruelest of things he would inflict on those two little whores that Brenda and Cey had groomed for him.

Brenda and Cey had done well this time, judging by the movies sent from Vegas. For this type of job there was not better henchmen than those under the threat of black mail. Cash kept them up right but it was their fear of their past being exposed that made them dance like marionettes under the long and invisible strings attached to his fingers. The fact that the marionettes were kept in the dark about the real purpose of their jobs was a bonus. Mr. Kushner knew that by now Brenda and Cey would have an idea of the fate of the previous girls, and he also had correctly guessed that they would be afraid to do anything about it, at least for now. Of course, he had planned for them to be disposable, and the day they would also have to disappear could not be far. Brenda would be a pleasure, his pleasure, to dispose of.

Mr. Kushner's damaged mind had already planned the manner of her dismissal, horrid and humiliating, the last salvo in what had been a dangerous yet quite fulfilling fling that had also made him money on the side, not much because of the expenses of running the whole show, but enough to show a profit by providing others who shared his perversions with films of his own debauchery. While profiteering had been a good excuse for making and distributing the films, his hedonistic ego had been the motive for the enterprise, to show others that he was the master who controlled life and death. Such recognition from his peers meant more to him than the money or the risk of exposing himself to the law.

Sadistic snuff films like his could not be kept secret forever; the darkness in his exploits was such that plain human curiosity and the urge of the masses to experience the dark side as a willing spectator while still claiming innocence would make his films crawl out of their hiding places and eventually end up in the public domain. It wouldn't be long before the cops got a hold of one of the DVD's or his films would show up on YouTube and then the sniffing and digging would start. By then, he hoped, his operation would have been shut down long ago, gone and untraceable, he a shade suffusing into the background of pitch black anonymity where his evilness could lurk unmolested.

Life was good, Mr. Kushner a.k.a. Mr. Obitus thought, his Buick's headlights slicing through the cool nocturnal desert air on its way to death and pleasure, both mingled in Mr. Kushner's mind like blood and life, like fire and light.

Las Vegas without girls

The day after driving the girls to the airport Cey found Brenda waiting for him at the Dust Gold motel when he returned from breakfast. She came out of her car to meet him as he exited his truck.

"Are they gone?" She asked. He nodded. Brenda's eyes had the redness and puffiness of having been crying but they were dry now, her make up restored to its original colorfulness.

"This one hit me pretty hard," she said. "I'm getting too old for this."

"I know," Cey said. "I'm not happy about it either. I have been thinking, ..." His words trailed off into a long silence.

"What?" asked Brenda.

"Nothing," said Cey. The price to pay for giving up Mr. Kushner would be high, too high for their cowardly hides. "If I come up with something I'll let you know, give you time to pack your bags." Brenda said nothing for a long while and they both stood in front of each other, like statues in a wax museum, their features hard set like a concrete culvert over a whirling of confusion running through,

wrestling with their powerlessness to do the right thing, to do anything and unable to break free from the sticky web they had been suckered into.

"I'm gonna go talk to Randy," said Brenda, giving up on herself, Cey and the world. Cey nodded and walked to his room, his bearded chin dropped over his chest.

Randy saw Brenda approaching. She and her girls and that Cey character, a strange bunch, but always paid on time and caused no trouble so he put his best face when Brenda entered his office, the bell above the door ringing.

"Hi Brenda. What can I do you for?" asked Randy showing a row of big yellowed teeth.

"The girls are gone. Gone out of the state," said Brenda in a low voice, almost a murmur.

"Business?" asked Randy. It was always this way, they go and never stop by to say good bye to him. Nobody gives a damn about the motel manager, not after he toiled his ass off to make their stay pleasant. His motel wasn't a fancy casino hotel but the sheets were clean and the place was kept nice and decent and bug free, but who gave a shit about that? They came, they slept, they left. Good riddance, and good luck if they didn't rip something off as a souvenir in their way out. His pleasant face gave no signs of his true feelings.

"Yeah, business," said Brenda. "You gotta go where the money is."

"No keys again?" asked Randy.

"Nope. They took them with them." Brenda opened her purse and put a twenty dollar bill on the counter. "Sorry about that." Randy said nothing. He went to the back office and came back with a key and traded the money for it on the counter.

"It won't take long," said Brenda grabbing the key. Randy watched her leave his office, the bell ringing again. The part that bothered him was, if the girls had decided to take off, why they never took their stuff with them? It was the same old and odd story; Brenda came, girls gone, no key, the twenty-dollar bill to overpay for the missing keys but really a bribe to buy his silence and understanding, and then she and Cey cleaning up the rooms of everything and anything that had belonged to the girls. Once he had asked Brenda about that and her lame response had been that they would be shipping the stuff to them wherever they had gone to. He had found all kind of kinky underwear in the dumpster, the same stuff he had seen Brenda carting off from the room. But he was just a motel manager; it wouldn't do any good to call the cops. What was he going to tell them? Tenants gone from a motel? Thongs in the trash? Randy could see the cops rolling their eyes thinking what a cuckoo bird he was.

Brenda opened the door to the girls' room and felt like a thief. She closed the door behind her; that Randy character was getting too noisy. Mr. Kushner's instructions had been to clean the room of any personal effects and put them in the trash. Brenda always took the dresses and shoes to the Goodwill store and threw away the underwear and toilet items. Cey no longer wanted to do this job with her; his stomach got nauseated. Her stomach did too, but she had no alternative. From her purse she pulled out a trash bag and started going through the drawers but had to stop when her stomach nauseated. She sat on the edge of the bed, the same bed where she had had sex with the girls.

She had tried to be a bitch and a loathsome creature with the hope that no emotional attachments would grow to later make her feel like she felt now but every single time she had failed, and with every new girl she had tried to be harder and more loathsome to no avail. The attachments were there, and it hurt like a razor blade going through tendons to cut them loose. The memories never went away either and they haunted her. Living like this wasn't worth a damn. Tears slid down her cheeks and she didn't care if her pancake makeup got ruined.

With eyes closed she saw Mr. Kushner's head split open with hammer blows and the hair on his scalp dripping blood, the hammer coming down hard over and over again, trailing blood behind it and splattering it on her and everything around. The hammer and the blood were real memories but Brenda had superposed Mr. Kushner's face on what should have been her husband's. Crimes of passion are violent, and the only way out for those who felt trapped by their tormentors, at least that is how Brenda saw it. Mr. Kushner killed for pleasure, Brenda was sure of it, but that was the catch, she had no proof.

Maybe the girls really went somewhere else to keep on prostituting themselves to the highest bidder, life a continuous fuck after another, orgasms and money for everybody, semen on happy faces. Brenda didn't buy it; she had the gut feeling that the girls were dead, and that Hillary and Erika would follow on those steps, she and Cey having fed them to that insatiable and blood thirsty monster, Mr. Kushner, the son of a bitch. One day, one of these days, Brenda thought, but then she didn't have the guts to continue her dreams of revenge. She got up and started going through the drawers again, her stomach still rolled like a pretzel.

On a pile she had dresses and everyday clothes that would go the Goodwill store. In the trash bag she had make up stuff, toilette things and personal items, including a DVD disc. She found cash and she put it in her pursue. To her, it was blood money; all of it would go to charity. As she started to tie the trash bag, the DVD disc caught her attention; it wasn't one made by Cey. She took it out of the bag and put it in her purse, curious to see what it could be.

Brenda knocked on Cey's door. He opened with a frown on his face.

"I'm done," she said. "I need you to help me get the stuff out." After having done the hard part, at least Cey should get the things out of the room, Brenda decided. She could smell alcohol in Cey's breath.

"I need a drink," she said to Cey. He moved away from the door to let Brenda in and went to the table where a bottle of Jim Beam stood open. Cey got a plastic cup from a bag full of them next to the bottle, poured enough bourbon to almost overflow the little cup and gave it to Brenda. Both sat across each other with dejected faces, slugging their drinks.

"You got a DVD player?" asked Brenda. Cey nodded.

"I found this in their room." Brenda pulled the DVD out of her pursue. Cey grabbed it and looked at it.

"It ain't mine."

"I know that you dummy, that's why I brought it."

Cey walked to his equipment table full of electronic gizmos and cables dangling underneath. He pushed buttons and the TV screen came on with a deep blue screen and little rows of numbers on it. He inserted the DVD and went back to the table to sit next to Brenda.

"What the hell is in it?" asked Cey.

"No idea," said Brenda.

The show started and both got quiet, sipping on their bourbon.

Denver and Mr. Obitus

Hillary and Erika had arrived at the Denver International Airport the night before. As instructed, they grabbed a taxicab to a Motel Six hotel in the suburbs and got themselves a room under an assumed name. Brenda had told them to remain in their room and expect a call from Mr. Obitus with further instructions.

Erika looked outside the window into a landscape of car dealerships, strip malls and big box stores.

"There is nowhere to eat around here," said Erika, her face against the glass scanning the outdoors. Hillary came next to her and pointed to a roof on the distance.

"See that brown roof? I think it's a steak house. I saw it on the way here."

"Shit, that's a mile away."

Hillary put her arm around Erika's waist and rested her face on her shoulder. "Don't be silly. It is a nice night for a walk."

Indeed it was, fall in the Rockies, when the searing heat of summer has retreated south and the knifing cold of winter hasn't arrived. Such pleasant nights didn't last long before early cold fronts hurried over the Front Range and descended on the flatlands to give a hint of the winter to come.

They found the restaurant under the brown roof. It wasn't a steak house but a buffet bar where they stuffed themselves with fried chicken and ice cream sprinkled with crazy combinations of syrups, cookies and candies, daring each other to eat their creations that although palatable were somewhat disgusting to look at. The other dinners gave them strange looks as they laughed and giggled and behaved like silly girls and ate their bizarre desserts.

"They must be thinking we're high on something," said Erika with her spoon stuck to her chin. It fell on the table and bounced to the floor; both exploded laughing. It was relaxing to be out of Vegas, away from Cey and Brenda and their moods.

They walked back to their motel on empty sidewalks of light colored concrete. A soft nocturnal breeze swayed the landscaped trees planted at intervals. Hillary could imagine a Mexican army of gardeners cutting the grass, checking the sprinklers, tending to the trees and flower banks, riding on mowers, walking with machines strapped to their backs that growled in two-cycled voices, having lunch under the shade of the trees they cared for, catching a quick siesta before going back to work. Where they whores as Cey had said? There was nothing unpleasant or degrading about their jobs, taking care of living things, bringing greenery to what otherwise would be a grass prairie, sweating under the sun to make a living; not like her, sweating under a john, giving herself up in body and mind, playing a make believe game. Nope, concluded Hillary, she was a whore; the Mexicans weren't. Honest work, no matter how low paying, could not be called whoring.

"A penny for your thoughts," said Erika.

"You like this life?" asked Hillary.

Erika hesitated. "Better than the one I had before."

"That's true," said Hillary, "but sometimes I wonder if we can do better, you know, getting a real life."

"I don't know, and I don't care," said Erika in a tired voice. "You worry too much. Money is good so let's ride this horse until we get thrown out then we can change ponies." They finished their walk in silence. As soon as they entered their room the phone rang. Hillary picked it up.

"Hello."

"You stupid cunts, where the fuck have you been?" growled a man's voice through the receiver.

"Well, fuck you too honey. Who the hell are you?" answered Hillary looking at Erika while moving her free hand up and down like if she were stroking a penis, rolling her eyes. Erika laughed.

"I'm Mr. Obitus!" yelled Mr. Kushner on its side.

"Oh, so nice to meet you Mr ... whatever. Whazzzzzzuuuuuuup!" Hillary put her hand on the receiver to let out a laugh. For a few seconds the voice in the receiver remained mute, Mr. Kushner taken aback by the brass response he was getting to his demands. They were supposed to be afraid of him; they would pay for this disrespect.

"Listen to me you worthless cunt, you were supposed to wait for my call. I have been calling all night." Mr. Kushner used a phony deep voice that to Hillary sounded like a bad impression of Darth Vader's voice. "I don't like waiting for white trash like you two."

"We went to eat down the road and just came back," said Hillary, so pleasant and matter of fact. "They got no room service in this joint."

"Not my fuckin' problem," said Mr. Kushner. "Tomorrow at nine in the morning, be in front of the motel with your stuff, and don't fuck with me!" Hillary heard a click and Mr. Whatever was gone.

"Asshole," said Hillary, slamming the phone down.

"Another piece of work eh?" said Erika.

"Yeah, another moron. Good thing the money is good."

Both went to sleep on the same bed ignoring the empty one next to them. Hillary lay on her side facing the bed's edge, curled up with her knees up to her belly. Erika came behind and wrapped her arms and long legs around her. Erika's hands rested on Hillary's breasts. She kissed Hillary on the neck and said good night. Hillary also slept naked; there was no point in playing the aloof and

condescending part any longer. She liked feeling Erika's body against her and she craved for such moments. Ensnared in Erika's warmth old thoughts came to Hillary to be spun around her head to reach the conclusions of before, that Erika's age didn't matter, that there was only four years difference between them, that she, perhaps, was really in love with Erika, a silly kind of love, too fragile to survive the real harsh world, the unavoidable end of Erika's teenage years and her future shift in taste and desire to meet new people. And Hillary had doubts about herself, about her sexuality; she still liked a hard penis and also children and a "normal" family, or at least one not as dysfunctional as hers had been. At times Erika felt like a burden to Hillary, but a lovely burden she was not capable of dumping. A mature Erika would do the dumping and Hillary knew she would end up with the short end of the stick. None of that mattered now, feeling Erika around her, Erika's chest and her petty breasts pressed against her back.

They fell asleep embracing each other, dreading the next day and another abusive customer and new bruises. Good thing the money was good.

Gold Dust In Vegas

Cey walked around the room with his hands on his head, pulling his hair out and chanting "motherfucker" like he were a stuck gramophone. Brenda still sat where she had been watching the just ended movie. Her right hand covered her gaping mouth in mute horror. So that was it, the reason d'etre of their work for motherfucker Mr. Kushner. The girl in the movie was Margit, or had been Margit, the little hick from Oklahoma. The man pounding the stake up her rectum in the movie wore a black mask that covered his whole head, a silver spider painted on front of it, like one of those Mexican wrestlers in TV. His hairy and bulbous belly and his long and skinny dick - pencil dick - had told Brenda that it was Mr. Kushner. Brenda had been under that belly and that penis and she had no doubt about the identity of the masked man. She also recognized the name-calling and the brutality.

"That was Mr. Kushner," said Brenda. She closed her eyes but the images wouldn't go away. They would never do so.

"What?" said Cey. "How do you know?"

"I have been with the bastard. Trust me; is him."

The stark truth had blown to smithereens their feeble shelter built of rationalizations and best wishes; what they had suspected had been corroborated beyond any doubt. They were walking among the corpses, stepping on the carcasses. Denial could no longer be carried around like a mask that protected them from the stench of burning bodies coming out of the oven stacks. They were waist deep in death and their lungs filled with a foul air of rotten flesh. Cey still walked in circles. He stopped and looked at Brenda.

"You know what motel the girls are staying at?" Brenda nodded.

"Call right now and tell them to get the hell out of there."

Before the movie, Brenda would have refused, afraid for her own hide, but after watching such horrors inflicted in a poor girl that had had the bad luck of wanting to make a living fooled by her promises, she had found the strength to act. She had sent them to their death like a concentration camp capo loading the railroad car and closing the door shut, the smoking stacks at the end of the line. She called information twice. She talked to somebody and then hung up shaking her head.

"Too late. They checked out," she said. Cey started walking in circles again, like a monkey in a too small cage, swaying his arms from side to side.

"Should we call the cops?" asked Brenda. She couldn't believe her own words.

Cey stopped circling. "Nope. Even if they watched the movie and believe us, by the time they were done questioning us and got their shit together it would be too late."

"What can we do?" asked a dumbfounded Brenda. Her eyes watered.

"You been to Denver with him, haven't you?" Brenda nodded and wiped her eyes dry.

"Call the airlines and get us tickets to Denver," said Cey. "Just tell me where his hiding hole is and I'll take care of that piece of shit."

"I don't know the address but I'm sure I can find the place. It's in the mountains just outside Denver," said Brenda picking up her cell phone. While Brenda called for tickets Cey went to his night stand and pulled out his revolver from the drawer, put it in a holster and grabbed a pair of speed loaders. He started packing his overnight bag. He would have to check in his bag and his gun to pass security at the airport. He wrapped his weapon and ammo in the kernel of his clothes bundle and put everything inside the bag. Action had taken over and consequences be damned.

"I got us tickets for this evening," said Brenda closing her cell phone and putting her credit card away. "Earlier flights are booked but we can be at the airport earlier and get on their stand by list."

Cey zipped his bag closed, his things a rolled bundle of clothes. "Evening flight? Damn, we may be too late." He ran into the bathroom and got his toothbrush, tooth paste and a comb and he stuffed them in a side pocket of his bag.

"How long it takes to drive to Denver?" he asked.

"I don't know, about twelve hours."

"It may be faster to just drive there."

"I'm sure we can be there today, this evening," said Brenda. "You're right. Let's stop by my place so I can pack a bag."

"You go and get your bag fast, and I mean fast. Don't bring your freaking wardrobe with you and a dozen shoes, just a change of underwear and the essentials. I'll be awaiting for you here."

Brenda took off without arguing that it would be faster to hit the highway from her place than she coming back to the motel to pick him up but she had been caught up in the action and her thinking had been left lagging. After Brenda left, Cey knew he had a few minutes to do what he had thought of as a life, or death, insurance policy. He took the DVD out of the player and grabbed a yellow pad and a pen from a drawer and started writing all he knew about Mr. Kushner, the other girls that had been with them in Vegas and had disappeared. His details of Mr. Kushner and the girls were as prolific as he could make them and any references of him and Brenda were rather anemic. There was no point to draw attention to the middle agents; on the other hand, if the cops were to read his notes it would be because he and Brenda didn't make it so it really didn't matter. Cey's ingrained carefulness not to draw attention to him could not be shaken off even when writing what amounted to his last words. He placed his notes and the DVD in a manila envelope and wrote on the outside in big block letters, "Any homicide detective, L.V.P.D." He examined his work and shook his head in disbelief at what he was doing.

Cey walked into Randy's office, next to his room. The bell above Randy's door rang.

"Howdy," Randy put his newspaper down and greeted Cey. He liked Cey, a quite kind of guy who kept to himself and maintained a clean room.

"Hi Randy," said Cey, putting the manila envelope on the counter, the addressee facing Randy. Randy caught what was written on it. His smile disappeared and his big dark eyes under his furry eyebrows looked at Cey straight on, like a gunslinger looking at a troublemaker at the other end of the bar.

"Trouble?" Randy asked.

"Yes," said Cey. "Please, listen to me, this is a matter of life and death. Take this envelope and keep it. If you don't hear from me or Brenda by tomorrow night, go to the cops with this." He pushed the envelope in Randy's direction. There was hesitation from Randy but he took the envelope and said to Cey, "This has to do with the girls being gone?"

"Very much. We're going to Denver to get them back."

"Then, tomorrow night, if I don't hear from any of you, this goes to the cops," said Randy waving the envelope.

"You got it partner, right into the cops' hands."

"Godspeed," said Randy. "Git out and get them girls back." His smile was all Cey needed to understand that Randy would do as agreed. The old coot wasn't dumb at all, a quick study he was, thought Cey. Cey left the office in a hurry and went to his room to wait for Brenda.

Brenda drove off the street and parked her Lexus in front of Cey's room. She tapped her horn. Her essentials were two large bags full of clothes, shoes, slippers, make up, hair drier, and numerous bottles of toiletry, nail polish, and skin creams, not to mention perfumes. Cey came out with his bag, closed the door to his room, came to the back of the Lexus and tapped on the trunk. Brenda activated the trunk release. The lid came up and Cey squeezed his bag inside the trunk shaking his head in disbelief at Brenda's essentials.

The lid closed with a gently click. Brenda felt it, her eyes on the mirror built on the sun visor, checking out her make up. Then she heard two shots that sounded like they had been fired right behind her, one after the other. She opened the door and jumped outside to look behind her car, more nervous reflex than thought out action. She saw Cey slumped on the black top, bloodstains on the back of his shirt. He was not moving. A young man came from behind her car holding a gun at face level and sideways. It was Freddy, one eye still bruised from the biker gang beating.

"You motherfucka!" yelled Freddy, "You don't fuck with me no mo'!"

Freddy saw Brenda standing next to her open door and pointed the gun at her. His eyes had the fucked up look of being way too high on nothing mellow. Brenda froze. She made water in her panties. The wavering gun circled and the circling tightened, struggling to find its bead on a paralyzed Brenda. On the last seconds that Brenda saw herself being alive, discernment came to her as shockingly as if she had jumped into a pool of ice water: Mr. Kushner sooner or later, like it was his fashion, would have to cover his tracks and that she and Cey would have to go. They both were as disposable as the girls before them. Brenda closed her eyes; understanding had come too late.

There was a huge blast and Brenda swallowed hard. She had expected a piercing burning pain, somewhere, but nothing yet. Seconds went by. Nothing yet. She opened her eyes and found herself still standing. Freddy lay on the black top, not too far from Cey, his chest a huge crimson patch, his legs shaking as if he were having a seizure and his face contorted into something not human.

A small black car with the passenger door still open spun tires and left the parking lot in a cloud of burnt rubber making a shriveling noise. Brenda saw Randy still shouldering an over-and-under shotgun. With a precise rotation anchored on his waist, Randy followed the fleeing car's path as his finger moved to the second trigger. A new blast punched a huge round hole in center of the rear window. Sparks flew from underneath the car as it made its escape to the street, clipping a UPS truck on its way out.

Randy's hand to eye coordination honed by years of hunting and skeet and trap shooting could have had planted a load of buck shot right between the driver's ears but Randy knew that cops had a problem with up right citizens shooting fleeing felons so he had tagged the getaway car with a perfectly centered hole on the rear window.

Randy unshouldered his shotgun, broke it open and caught the two ejected empty shells with the dexterity of a man who had done it thousands of times before. He put the empties in his shirt pocket - to reload later - and chambered two new shells from the bandolier velcroed to the stock. His eyes met Brenda's as he closed the shotgun.

"Are you gonna get the girls?" Randy asked Brenda. She nodded with her mouth open. Words wouldn't come out of her. She wasn't even sure why she was nodding.

"You're it. Get the hell out of here before the cops show up. I'll take care of this mess."

Brenda hesitated; a hot fluid ran over the inside of her legs.

"Git goin'!" commanded Randy in his old Gunny voice. "If I didn't have these here stiffs I would

go with you. You're it!"

Brenda got into the car, put it on reverse, almost ran over Cey's body and peeled out of the parking lot, her hands shaking and her vision blurred by the tears. That sonofabitch of Kushner, he had Cey whacked, she was sure of it, and almost her if it hadn't been for Shotgun Randy. She lighted cigarette after cigarette to calm her nerves and had smoked a whole pack before getting out of the state of Nevada in her way to Denver. Puff by puff she regained her composure. Her determination to right things strengthened with every mile eastward. She was it.

Denver is it

Hillary and Erika came to the front of the hotel with their luggage ten minutes past nine, on purpose, just to piss Mr. Obitus off. The man had the hallmarks of a real jerk so jerking him back did not bother them. It was half hour past nine before the blue Buick came to pick them up. What a piece of shit had been Hillary's first thought at looking at the Buick. The car stopped in front of them with a groan of too many miles on the body. Hillary and Erika leaned over the open passenger window to take a first look at this Mr. Obitus. Hillary saw a middle aged man with no chin, a Hitlerian mustache, a bad shave and sparse hair atop his cranium that he had tried to make look healthier by combing thin and long hair strands from one side of his head to the opposite side as if pulling a camouflage net over a shiny spot.

"Mr.Kushner?" asked Erika from behind. Hillary turned her head and looked at Erika who shrugged to signal a lack of understanding.

"Get in the car!" barked Mr. Kushner. His brown eyes moved in his sockets with a nervousness that reminded Hillary of somebody high on speed.

"You want to open the trunk so we can put our stuff in?" asked a very polite Hillary. Mr. Kushner froze in place as if Hillary question had been such an unexpected event that it required his full mental power to deal with it. His frown turned angrier and his eyes stopped bouncing around to focus his hate on Hillary.

"Get in the fucking car. Now!" commanded Mr. Kushner in his bad Darth Vader voice. Hillary looked at Erika and asked her, "Are you sure this is Mr. Kushner, our boss?" Erika nodded. Hillary returned her glare to Mr. Kushner and said nothing. Hadn't he been their boss, she would have told him to go fuck himself; instead, she opened the rear door and started loading their luggage, one piece at the time, pushing each piece over the rear seat so as to make room for the next one.

"Come on, hurry up you stupid bitches!" Mr. Kushner tapped his fingers on the steering wheel to telegraph his impatience. His mouth turned into a spout of disgust.

"If you would get your fat ass out and help, we could do this faster," retorted Hillary, already sick of Mr. Kushner. Fuck him, boss or not boss. The other johns have been nasty when they had been expected to behave that way, in the privacy of their lairs when everybody, like actors in a stage, had been ready for the game. Acting like an asshole in public turned Hillary off. Erika looked at Hillary and rolled her eyes and bit her lips but kept quiet. With feisty Hillary by her side, she was not afraid of the boss.

Mr. Kushner got out of the car and walked around the front of the car, his face awash in pure hate.

"What the fuck you said?" he yelled at Hillary and then regretted doing so. His sudden awareness of the two large black dudes that had been standing out of his sight behind the girls and who now regarded him with hard countenances abashed his bravado.

"Just kidding!" said Mr. Kushner with a new smile that had wiped out his previous face with such easiness that it scared Hillary. He had seen this talent on Russ, and she wasn't going to fall for it again. She knew that his unabated anger had burrowed under his skin and his appearance had

transmogrified into something he was not. Mr. Kushner's mastery of the art of deception bode no good tidings to Hillary. Her common sense told her not to get in the car and to tell Mr. Kushner to stick it where the sun didn't shine but as of late Hillary had not been paying too much heed to her common sense. Her life as a call girl had placed her mind in a fantasy land where things happened out of sync with the everyday reality that common folks lived in, a reality that she used to live in when waiting tables. Now she lived as if everything was possible and acceptable, and the money was good, so she got in the car's front seat, Mr. Kushner holding the door open for her with a greasy smile. Erika followed her in like a lamb. He closed the door with a gentle click. Mr. Kushner finished loading the luggage on the rear seat avoiding eye contact with the black guys behind him.

He got in the driver's side and drove away wearing the practiced mask of his polite and pleasant smile. His left fist itched to fly across and land on Hillary's face hard enough to break her jaw but he restrained himself. There would be plenty of time for him to extract his revenge and teach that stupid cunt who was boss. The Buick headed west towards the foothills and nobody said a word, the air in the car poisoned by a feeling of something not being right, of something being skewed the wrong way and twisted into a misshapen turn.

Hours later Brenda approached Denver eastbound on I-70. She had gotten a ticket in Vail for going 90 mph. She had mulled telling the Trooper the reason for her hurried trip, but Cey had been right; by the time she convinced the cops that something had to be done, it would be too late. She signed her citation and kept her mouth shut. Minutes later she was climbing Vail Pass at full speed.

The sun behind her bathed in a soft light the flatlands at the end of the steep highway descent. Denver's little clump of buildings jutted over the prairie surrounded by a suburban maze of roads and low rise structures. She couldn't make out where she was supposed to turn to get to Mr. Kushner's place because she had always come the other way, westbound. She kept on rolling downhill assured that she had missed her turn. She drove to the bottom of the foothills until the grade leveled and then at the first exit turned around and got back on the highway, westbound this time, climbing back into the mountains. Now the picture coming through her windshield pushed the right buttons in her memory and she knew how far she had to go before getting off the highway.

Turn left here, right on this road, right again, her mind knew the way even though she would have been unable to explain to somebody else how to get to Mr. Kushner's hideout. As the road unfolded in front of her, the landmarks would raise a flag in her memory and the correct turn would come to her. One more turn and there it was, the small house atop the hill, so sixties with its back then modern look that today was in shambles due to neglect. There was a blue car parked up front. She went by the house slowly, attempting to get a glance of what may be happening inside, her tires popping on the gravel. The parked car had Arizona tags. It had to be Kushner's, she concluded. The house spoke no evil, heard no evil, saw no evil. She drove to the dead end of the road and turned around and drove back through her own cloud of dust. In her hurry to get here, she had not thought about what was she supposed to do next. Planning ahead was not her forte. She drove past the house again and kept on going back to the main road where she parked on the side of the road and turned the engine off.

Her doddering fingers lighted a cigarette. What was she supposed to do now? She wished Cey were with her; he would have kicked the door down and blown that sonofabitch to pieces; end of the story. The sun had sunk behind the Continental Divide leaving the bottoms of the clouds with round edges that glowed like cinders. The glow extinguished into darkness and the clouds blended into a deep and moonless night. From her purse Brenda pulled her gun, a small nickel-plated semiautomatic with pearl grips, so stylish, the reason she had bought it. She had never fired it before and wasn't sure if it even worked. Her gun slid back into her purse. She couldn't imagine facing Mr. Kushner with such a

peashooter, then she remembered Cey's gun in his bag still in the trunk. She activated the trunk release and got out. The trunk light let her see Cey's bag. She rummaged through it and found his revolver. She couldn't believe how heavy it was, like carrying a brick in her hand; it felt like a hand held cannon. Her finger put pressure on the trigger, a lot of it, and the hammer started to cock. So that is how you fire a revolver. A car went by and shone its lights on her, hunched over her trunk. The car slowed but didn't stop and continued on its way. Brenda's hand with the revolver in it hid inside the bag until the passerby disappeared on a turn down the road.

Brenda got back inside the car and put the revolver in her lap, cranked the engine and drove towards Mr. Kushner's house, her anal sphincter so tight that it hurt, her intestines ready to relieve an internal pressure that she felt was not feces but pure fear. She felt bloated with it, thick inside her and could taste it in her throat, such a bilious thing.

On her slow way to the house her mind found a myriad excuses why she was wasting her time; they would be dead by now, that was the strongest argument that urged her to turn back and run. But then what? Kushner had a price on her head, so may as well kill the dog to avoid the rabies. She had killed before and this would not be different; she just had to let her hate do the job. As she approached the house she turned her lights off and almost crashed into the mailbox, her eyes not used to the darkness. She remembered how in the movies they always did this trick and it looked so easy; well, this ain't the movies, she told herself. Tough luck. She parked behind the blue car and killed the engine. Now what?

She stepped out of the car with the revolver hanging at the end of her hand like if she were dragging a boat anchor. The front door was locked when she tried to open it. A high pitch scream, a female yell, long and loud, almost made her lose control of her sphincter. The hair in her arms rose with goose bumps. She tried the door harder, kicking it and slamming her body against it but it wouldn't budge. Brenda stood frustrated. There was an all glass window next to the door, narrow and tall with a flimsy curtain behind.

Looking around she found a big rock on the ground. She put the revolver down, grabbed the rock with both hands and heaved it against the window with a grunt. The glass exploded and the rock landed with a thud on the hardwood floor and rolled a few feet as glass shards rained right behind it. Brenda took the revolver and used it to hammer away the shards that still clung to the window frame. The opening was narrow but she reckoned she could squeeze through. She wished she were wearing pants and sneakers instead of a short dress and heels. Too late to worry about that, she thought.

Hillary lay naked on her side hog-tied with duct tape around her ankles and wrists. She cried not in pain or fear but in anger at herself for being such a sucker and in anger at Mr. Kushner because she was powerless to do anything about him. For hours he had used her as a punching bag and had humiliated her by urinating on her and finally taking a dump on her head while he held her down on the floor. His feces were intertwined in her hair and smeared on her back. The unbearable stench already had made her puke. He had rubbed her face in it too, his foul mouth never ceasing to insult and berate. Words and feces didn't hurt but the blows and kicks had her bruised, her skin spotted like a leopard's. Her lips and her left eye had swollen and broken ribs complained when she breathed.

Erika had not feared better. There were red welts on her back where he had stuck cigarette butts on it while encouraging her to scream as loud as she could. He stuck another lit butt between Erika's shoulders and held it in place. Erika's scream made him laugh.

Hillary could not see his face under his black leather mask embroidered with a silver spider, his red nose poking out of the arachnid's belly. His hairy paunch bounced up and down and his penis dangled like a little sausage between his legs as he moved around. His knee high black boots and his steel studded bandoliers crisscrossing his chest looked ridiculous on his soft and pale hairy body. If it

weren't because she knew she was facing death, Hillary would be laughing at the sight, such a pathetic clown.

Now she had finally put two and two together, like the deer that looks down the barrel of a rifle before the bullet comes out and realizes what rifles are made for, at little too late. The missing girls had spent a night like the one she and Erika were having now. The money and the trips, all had been a smoke screen to hide the real reason of their employment; they had willingly walked into the slaughterhouse like innocent lambs, blinded by money's luster and by the flashy life of a high roller call girl. But all along they had been nothing but disposable whores to be used and thrown away, discarded like fish guts and dumped in the woods, out of sight and out of mind.

What a dope she had been. Erika was only fifteen, she couldn't know better, but her, Jesus, she should have known better. Her tears flowed harder, tears of frustration, of hate towards that laughing bastard. Erika also cried, her back in a searing pain that cut through her like an incandescent dagger. Glass broke overhead and something heavy rolled on the floor above them and came to a stop. A few seconds later more broken glass sounds came from the floor above. Mr. Kushner jumped up and turned around looking in the direction of the spindly iron stairs that came into the room spiraling down around a central pipe. He ran to his bag and pulled a heavy meat cleaver out of it and ran upstairs, his boots clanking on the steel rungs with a hollow metallic sound.

Erika was on the floor face down shaking and sobbing, her back full of those red welts. Before Hillary had time to feel sorry for her she noticed that she was not tied anymore.

"Erika!" yelled Hillary. "Get me loose!"

Erika didn't listen or couldn't listen.

"Please, Erika! Don't let him do this to us! Come on, let's fight!"

Erika rose to her knees still crying. She rose to her full height on unsteady feet and waddled towards Hillary. Loud voices came from above speaking unintelligible things.

"Quick! Rip the tape off my hands!" said Hillary. Erika wiped the tears off her face and started to peel off the duct tape, slowly at first as if not wanting to hurt Hillary or being too weak to do the job but then picking up the tempo as a female scream above spoke of a struggle. Erika tore and pulled tape as fast as she could while putting aside the pain on her back. Hillary prayed that she could be on her feet before the black boots appeared at the head of the stairs.

A thumping noise came through the stairs opening and that hateful laugh. Erika finished freeing Hillary and now both stood side by side, naked, bruised, hurt, wondering what to do next. The only exit was running up through the stairs. Hillary looked into Mr. Kushner's bag. Knives, a mall axe, a big hammer, a stake, electric drill, electric meat carver, pliers, rope and twine, duct tape, leather straps, every item her eyes identified made her cringe. She grabbed the twine and ran to the stairs. She tied one end to one of the handrail support rods and threw the roll over the stair rung and then grabbed it off the floor at the other end.

"Erika, come here," she whispered to Erika who hadn't moved. Erika came over and both stood under the stairs, Hillary holding the roll of twine on her hand, the other end tied to the handrail vertical rod. Knives, a hammer, Hillary realized they had no stand off weapons to fight with; it would have to be a mano a mano. This discovery came to her as Mr. Kushner's boots landed on the first rung. Hillary and Erika froze, their breathing stopping and their hearts pounding hard.

Hillary saw Mr. Kushner's hairy ass crack through the stair's runs as he came down. A liquid felt on her. Blood. Not a few drops but a steady stream that squirted her like a water pistol, but she didn't move. One hand held the meat cleaver, also dripping blood. On the other hand Mr. Kushner held what it looked like a bloody wig. That is where the blood dripping on Hillary was coming from. Mr. Kushner stopped, he noticed that something was amiss, and then he rushed downstairs.

With a mighty yank of the twine Hillary put all her hopes for life in that tense line of threaded jute. The boots snagged the line and yanked in return. Hillary felt the burning between her fingers and through her hand, but what was pain to her? Nothing. Mr. Kushner lost his balance and crashed face

first onto the stairs and slid to the floor, yelping in pain as his breath escaped out of his lungs. The meat cleaver fell off his hands and so did the wig that bounced off the floor leaving bloody stains. It rolled to a stop and Brenda's face, her open eyes rolled up with no pupils, her tongue hanging out in a gruesome gesture, looked at the girls. Erika screamed in a shrilling yell.

Hillary grabbed Erika's hand and jerked her around and tugged her up the stairs. Mr. Kushner struggled to get up but the pain of the impact didn't let him; his lungs had collapsed and he needed time to fill them up again. Time is what the girls needed to get to the top of the stairs and run for the door. There was a headless corpse stuck in the window next to the door. A pool of dark blood spouted out of the severed neck and the copper smell of blood filled the room, sickening and powerful. The girls skirted the growing black pool and tried to open the door but it was locked by a massive dead bolt. Mr. Kushner hollered from downstairs, damming and cursing. His boots landed on the stairs and moved up but his steps were slow but not for long. Erika looked at Hillary and her face exploded in tears like a little girl's who had fallen from her big wheel and had scraped her knees.

Brenda's body was stuck in the window, tits down, her skirt pulled up and her big white butt with a thong trapped between her cheeks pointing to the outside. That was the only way out. Hillary stepped on the bloody pool on bare feet. The floor was slippery and nauseating, so much blood inside a body didn't seem possible. Hillary put her foot on Brenda's back and placing both hands on the window frame she propped herself over Brenda's butt leaving her footprints on her plump cheeks. Her slim body slipped through the opening and she was out.

"Come on Erika!" yelled Hillary from the outside, leaning over the opening. Erika stood in place, her eyes glued to the headless body with blood still dripping from the gapping hole between the shoulders. The boots rang over the rungs like incoming thunder.

"Come on! She's dead!" Hillary screamed and held her glass cut hand over Brenda's corpse. "Don't give up now! I love you!"

Erika looked at her and stepped on the pool, climbed over Brenda's back and grabbed Hillary's bloodied hand. Hillary yanked as hard as she could and Erika came flying out of the window to land on her, knocking her down. Mr. Kushner's meat cleaver swooshed the empty air where Erika had been just a brief moment ago. His masked head came through the window but his blood splattered torso couldn't make it through. His mouth writhed as more cursing and spit came out of it. He got his arm out with the meat cleaver at one end and tried to cut them down as they crawled away from the window. Hillary's ribs and Erika's back hurt like hell but an adrenaline overflow made them impervious to the pain.

"Come back here you little cunts! Come back to daddy!" His screams tore the quiet night but disturbed only the wildlife concealed in the darkness around because Kushner's closest neighbor was two miles away. He went back inside the house. Hillary looked at Brenda's rump stuck high in the window frame with their bloodied footprints on it. The events of the last hours seemed so unreal and unlikely that if it were not for the pain shooting through her body she wouldn't believe any of it. There was no time to think. She got up and pulled Erika up.

They started running past the Buick. Mr. Kushner came back to the window and his arm stuck out, Cey's revolver in it. He pulled the trigger and a deafening explosion accompanied by a huge flash flooded the front of the house. Mr. Kushner's ears rang and his contracted pupils lost track of the girls still running away from him with nothing but their bared skins on them. Every shot after that first one had been a wild one. Bullets zinging by and the girls running on bared feet, crouched, until they almost ran into Brenda's Lexus. They ran around it when Hillary stopped their mad race.

"What?" asked Erika. Hillary couldn't see her face in the deep night.

"The car," she said. "The keys may be in it."

Another bang and another bullet way off its mark went by. The girls crawled around the car and Hillary opened the driver's door. The dome light came on and flooded them in an amber glow.

"Shit!" complained Hillary. But there they were, keys hanging from the ignition.

“Get in on the other side,” Hillary said. Erika went around the car and jumped on the passenger side, her bare buttocks pale under the dome light. Hillary jumped on the driver’s seat and at that moment another shot rang. This time the bullet came through the windshield taking the rear view mirror with it. Shards of exploding glass hit Erika on the face and she screamed. Hillary closed the door but the damned light wouldn’t come off. She fiddled with the keys and turned the ignition key on.

Mr. Kushner now had a bead on Hillary. This time he took his time and pulled the trigger. The hammer felt on a expend shell. Fuck revolvers and their six shots Mr. Kushner thought as he threw the revolver down and ran to look for the key to the front door.

The Lexus started. Hillary put it on reverse and hit the gas. She ran over the mailbox on her way out. She stopped, put the transmission on Drive and peeled off in a cloud of dust. She tried to turn on the lights but the windshield wipers came on instead. The car clipped a tree Hillary hadn’t been able to see. Broken glass and bent metal didn’t stop the car. The lights came on minus a headlight and Hillary saw a dirt road ahead. She aimed the car straight down the road not knowing she was heading for a dead end.

Mr. Kushner found his keys, opened the door and ran for his Buick, still naked and wearing his mask, the meat cleaver in one hand. He pulled out of the drive and the dust cloud still hanging on the air told him which way the girls had escaped. Dumb pussy, he said to himself, heading for the dead end, and Mr. Kushner meant dead end in a literally matter.

The Lexus skidded to a stop, almost going over the edge. Hillary was not used to driving on dirt roads and she skidded out of control before the car came to a stop at the end of the road. She put the car in reverse and tried to back up and turn the car in the direction they had come from. The rear end of the Lexus hit the side of the hill and half the taillights went out. Hillary turned the steering the opposite way, her hands rushing over the bloodied steering wheel until it wouldn’t turn anymore. The Lexus lurched forward and its headlight went over a dark and empty void while the front wheels barely missed going over the cliff. As the Lexus straightened out, a set of headlights came over the hill and aimed straight for them.

“You wanna play chicken you bastard?” said Hillary as she punched the accelerator and her tires peeled off in a dust of dust and gravel, almost out of control. Mr. Kushner saw the single light coming at him like a freight train, getting bigger, no showing signs of wavering or slowing down. At the very last second his nerves failed him and he pulled to the right to let the Lexus pass. It scrapped his rear left fender as it went by and almost made him go over the cliff.

“That cunt! She is gonna pay for this!” Mr. Kushner turned his car around and started to follow the single taillight that glowed through the dust in front of him. The old but powerful Buick gained on the inexperienced Hillary, moving relentlessly through the thick cloud dust like the bow of a ramming ship pursuing its victim.

“He’s coming after us!” screamed Erika. She rolled into a fetal position on the passenger seat, put her head between her knees and started sobbing. Hillary saw the glow of headlights illuminate the inside of the Lexus, brighter and brighter. She wanted to go faster but her tires didn’t hold to the dirt road and she kept over correcting every time she skidded. Cey had never taken her to a dirt road to drive fast. She felt bumped from behind. Erika yelped. Another bump. The Lexus started to skid. The rear end tried to swap ends with the front and the back wheels felt of the side of the road. Erika screamed and the Lexus careened over the edge and landed on its roof. It skidded down over a slope of grass and wild flowers and came to a hard stop when it hit a boulder that crushed the front end and deployed the air bags.

A set of headlights alighted the dust hanging over the road. A door opened and a dark figure stood in the dusty glow at the edge of the road, meat cleaver in hand. The figure sunk into darkness as he started his descend down the grassy slope.

Inside the overturned car Hillary and Erika tried to move. The instrument panel lights marred the absolute darkness outside. The headlights were out. They wiggled and tried to squeeze out but were

getting in each other's way, and Hillary felt new aches she didn't have before. With her back on the ceiling, Hillary kicked out the already cracked window on the driver's side. Her bare feet felt the crunchy safety glass pushing against her soles. The window exploded and her feet stuck out of the car and landed on dew covered grass that soothed her cut up soles with embedded glass in them.

Hillary screamed.

"What's happening?" screamed Erika in a panic, on her knees and hands. Hillary slid away from her. She was being dragged out.

"He's outside!" yelled Hillary. She grabbed the steering wheel and the dragging stopped. She felt a harder tug and the laugh from outside exploded through the darkness. His tight grips on her ankles hurt her. She was out of the car from the waist down. She felt her legs raised and spread apart and then Mr. Kushner's penis rubbing against her exposed crotch.

"What about it honey?" said Mr. Kushner laughing, banging his hips against her. "A little fuck before I cut you into little strips of bacon." His laugh boomed. She didn't want to let go of the steering wheel even though she wanted to get her hands on his face and poke his eyes out. Erika sobbed not knowing what to do. Her side of the car was resting against a boulder and she had no way out.

The broken safety glass was embedding itself into Hillary's buttocks and back but that didn't worry her. Mr. Kushner continued to rub his penis against her but was not getting an erection, his flabby member bending like a thin rubber hose against her. She felt in her bones that impotency in such a man was not a good thing.

"Oh hell with this," said Mr. Kushner in a disgusted voice. "I'm just going to split that pussy open." He grouped for the meat cleaver with one hand while holding on to Hillary's ankle with the other. Hillary kicked him with her free leg but Mr. Kushner just laughed.

"Here it is," said Mr. Kushner like if he had found a lost pen or other mundane object. He pulled Hillary's leg wide apart, tugging at her, and raised the meat cleaver above his head. Hillary screamed in terror. Erika was now crying. Her right hand stepped on something metallic and smooth. Brenda's gun was under her hand. At first she couldn't believe her fingers, her eyes, couldn't comprehend where it came from, but the fact was, there it was under the cup of her hand. She grabbed it and scooted over Hillary to get closer to the window. Hillary yelped when Erika's bony knees landed on her chest. Hillary thought that Erika was trying to get out over her own body, and didn't blame her for it and sincerely wished she could get away.

Erika's face came in view through the only spot left in the window opening and peered up. She saw Mr. Kushner's belly glowing under the starlight and the spider embossed on his face. Mr. Kushner froze with his arm holding the meat cleaver above his head when he caught a glance of Erika's face.

"There you are!" he said rejoiced. "You and I aren't done yet. I'm gonna split that little ass of yours in two."

In response Erika stuck her arm out of the window, gun in hand and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened; the trigger wouldn't click. It took a few seconds for Mr. Kushner to realize what was in her hand. He swung the cleaver down and it landed on the window frame a half second after Erika had pulled her arm inside. Erika looked at the gun under the dashboard lights. There had to be a lever or something somewhere. She found one and tried to move it.

Mr. Kushner pushed Hillary out of the way and stuck his head and one arm through the window and grabbed Erika by her hair.

"Come here you cunt!"

He tugged hard at the same time that Erika's nervous finger made a knob move on the pistol. She stuck the pistol on Mr. Kushner's face and pulled the trigger. A cry followed the bang and the flash, a male cry. Erika pulled the trigger over and over as Mr. Kushner struggled to get out of the window frame. His body disappeared in the dark lighted by muzzle flashes. Erika pulled the trigger until the gun stopped responding. A smell of gunpowder mixed with the excrement in Hillary's hair filled the inside of the car and little empty shells rolled on the padded ceiling.

Something stumbled outside.

“You hit the fucker!” said an elated Hillary. They could hear grunts and gagging noises, as if somebody were choking. Hillary kicked her legs and they didn’t hit Mr. Kushner. She slid out of the window, the broken glass be damned. Mr. Kushner’s on his back lay just in front of her. He wheezed and held his throat. There were tiny holes on his chest and belly, or perhaps they were just old blood splatters, Hillary couldn’t see well in the dark, but one thing she knew for sure, he got one in the throat. Fresh blood flowed between his fingers wrapped around his neck.

Erika came out with the empty gun in her hand, crawling on her belly.

“Where did you get that?” asked Hillary.

“I don’t know. It just happened to put my hand on it.”

“I bet you it was Brenda’s.”

They stood between the wrecked Lexus and the choking Mr. Kushner. He gagged and writhed without letting go of his neck. The Buick lights shone above the edge of the hill.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” said Hillary. She Grabbed Erika’s hand and both started walking uphill circumventing the ailing Mr. Kushner. When they had their backs towards him, he swung his arm around and grabbed Erika by the ankle. She screamed. Guttural noises came out of his broken throat. With his other hand he grouped for the meat cleaver that had to be somewhere nearby.

Hillary had it. She grabbed a rock and lifted it above her head with both hands before swinging it against the center of the spider at her feet. The sound of crushing bone told her she had found her mark.

“That's for Brenda, you sick fuck!”

He released his grip on Erika and his breathing became short and fitful. The intervals between gasping snorts became longer and the intensity dropped with each breath he took. Hillary and Erika made their slow way to the top of the hill, their bodies aching beyond measure but happy for being alive and in one piece.

Florida coast

The tanker truck moved down the taxiway, Hillary going through the gears like a pro and the engine grunting under the heavy load of Jet fuel. A silver ocean shimmered over the edge of the runway parallel to Hillary's path. A twin engine lifted from the runway at full power and climbed towards a hot blue sky peppered with nimbus clouds. By the afternoon those harmless white puffs will turn into menacing thunderstorms that will shower the coast with cooling moisture. Hillary liked predictability.

Now blonde and tanned, she searched for the next tail number on her clipboard. She drove through lines of parked aircraft and stopped next to her next client, double checking the registration number. She was not the one to fuel the wrong aircraft. She got off the truck and started her fueling chore anew with the confidence of a seasoned flight line attendant. There was no cigarette pack in her shirt pocket. The only things in her pocket, below her name tag, were a pen and a package of bubble gum. Smoking in her line of work was neither healthy nor wise.

Vegas, Denver, the West, flesh for hire, that belonged to a past so far and odd that it was more nightmare than fact. Her memories of those times seemed the inherited memories of another woman, not her own, a stranger's memories that somehow had been duplicated inside her head against her will. The scars on her and Erika's body proved that it had not been a bad dream or somebody else's tribulations but their own experience that had almost killed them.

The cops had sent Erika back home but she had run away soon after and had come back to Hillary. Like a messenger pigeon, Erika delivered a message to her dysfunctional family: forget about her or she would go to the cops with her stories of incest and abuse, and by then she knew enough cops to have her pick of whom to complain to. They had let her go her way, both parties telling each other good riddance, no love lost.

"You should call your mom," Hillary advised Erika one Thanksgiving day.

"Why? The goddamned drunk wouldn't know it was me calling." Erika's angry voice did not convince Hillary. There was a longing below her hostility.

"She's your mom," said Hillary. "I wish I could call my drunk mother but I have no idea where she is. Maybe she met her Mr. Kushner and her bones are bleaching on the desert."

"What am I going to say?"

"Nothing. Just say hello."

Hillary had left the room while Erika called. Even lovers need to have private moments alone. Erika came out of the room with puffed eyes but since then she has kept in touch with her mother. Women alone in this world become the victims of the likes of Mr. Kushner, Hillary believed, and the day she and Erika parted her ways, at least Erika would have that family link that would keep her tethered to reality and wouldn't let her drift into strange relationships. Of course, Hillary knew, everything was wishful thinking. She had given up trying to plan for the future because doing so neglected the present, and the present had to be lived as best as it could be lived.

Erika belonged to the present and her love for Erika was as real as the fuel hoses she carried over her shoulders all day long; it was a heavy burden but it had substance and weight and made her happy, gave her a sense of purpose, and who knows, it may be on her shoulders for a long time to come. Who knows, who cares?

Denton, Texas

Detective Nevergold walked through rows of graves holding in his big hand a small bouquet of flowers he had bought at the grocery store with his pocket change. A humble bunch of weeds it was, Nevergold acknowledged, but flowers nevertheless.

He knelt in front of a pauper's grave. The name Jane Doe and a number were on the cheap sign embedded in the earth; it was too cheesy to be called a headstone or tombstone. With a fat marker, Nevergold crossed the Jane name and wrote Margaret in big block letters above it. Margaret doe. It was half right, which in Nevergold's mind was better than all wrong. The FBI couldn't find out who she had been, where from Oklahoma she had hailed from. Nobody had claimed her; nobody gave a shit. He left the flowers on the grave and stood wiping the dirt from his knee. Nevergold tipped his Stetson hat and gave a little bow to Margit.

He walked away with the sadness that had never left him since the first day he had flown his first casualty out of the battlefield; such a waste. He pictured that Kushner monster dangling from a gibbet by his sorry neck and the crows feasting on his lifeless eyes. But that was not to be; this was the age of enlightenment and such spectacles were no more. What a pity.

The End