

The Denizens of Night

A Novel

By

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Rachel joked about separating me from the herd like I never had a chance of escaping her embrace with my body and mind intact. For as childlike as her eyes might beam she knew what she was doing when she looked at you that way with them. Predatory arousal caused a sea change from her typical merry jade to sparklers of astonishing green. Above her upper lip swelled a scar incurred crashing her tricycle down the front steps of some tenement flat when she was just a toddler. Growing up she never enjoyed a stellar home life. The dad deserted the family unit early on by jumping the barricades and disappearing for good into the ultimate silence. The mom never stuck around much past curfew after his abandonment. On the day of the accident her brother appeared as the one who finally found her, huddled alone and shivering in a corner of their abandoned hovel (all this well before she signed her first traumatic contract). Sown in late, the stitches above her upper lip created a scar rising like a pale and ghostly counterfeit of rosy-fingered dawn.

Her suspicious disappearance trapped me in these reflections involving our contentious past. How in our youth and

naïveté we climbed atop the crumbling concrete barrier covered from base to peak in crazy spiral spray paint tags threats and obituaries in however many superimposed languages. We perched above the ruin while she plucked a pomegranate from a tree rooted in the next zone over, a forgotten and twisted relic agonizing through the asphalt. Rachel took hold of my hands and directed my fingers as they slid inward and I split the proffered fruit and plucked the shiny seeds staining my fingers crimson.

Her dry, cracked lips scraped mine. She said, "I love you."

My turn to speak a line. Said I, "I love you, too."

For the only time in my life I caught a glimpse of what a human face looks like when wholly devoid of guile. Where Rachel disappeared to nobody knew and yet for solid reasons I continued to search for her everywhere.

I looked through thousands of photos. Academy graduates. Trooper profiles. Mug shots. Compod links. Milk cartons. Not a single aspect in any of those cold case sources matching sweet Rachel of memory.

In retrospect we were lucky a sniper didn't pick us off that day we spent side by side wall sitting. One sure-shot must have held us in his crosshairs the entire time we were exchanging our vows. Maybe smoking a cigarette kept him preoccupied. *Tok!* The rifle speaks. *Petack!* The human head

shatters like a pumpkin scattering shards and goo. You dance the meat sack flop. Down and out.

After our barrier sitting I grew bold with her and she opened up to me. One afternoon at The Club Abattoir she and I abandoned and unsupervised wiggled about in a game we had invented together called Taser Torture.

As partners we discovered our mutual interest in receiving and inflicting pain. We were too street legal for touching in earnest. If I could get both of her thumbs into my grip then I could hold her with one hand and torture her with my off-hand index finger. Probing her ribs. Zapping her with an electrode. Taser touch. How jolly and merry hearing her squeals amplifying into screams.

Once she broke free of the restraints and hid her right hand behind her back, struggling and breaking loose from her other shackles. With that maneuver she again left herself wide open and vulnerable.

I dove in, my Taser digging into her waist. She retaliated by doing the same with her free hand. Electricity paralyzed us until I was sure we would both pee our pants. Astounded, with our backs arching, our mouths gapping skyward, tipping sideways with a crash, the connection broke. The aftershock left us lying next to each other on the deep shag rug. Shuddering. In rough unison we panted with pleasure. By her searching eyes I could

tell she felt the same as I did in wishing one of us knew what came next. If I had understood anything, which I most assuredly did not, then I would have crawled over and kissed her right then, but I had no moves. Neither did she. We were just little show ponies. Our twitching nerves relaxed. We caught our breaths, sat upright. I cranked the handle, revving up the voltage, recharging the battery. Scratch the electrodes. Eruption of sparks. Renew the enhanced interrogation techniques. Tell me what I want to hear.

At one point Rachel slapped me across the face - playfully, as though she was daring me, saying, 'Come on baby, let's see what you got'. She laughed in triumph. So I reached over and undid the first of her one hundred brass buttons. The victory gloat came undone.

Through lips bruised and bleeding she whispered her safe word, *Mercy*, blushing, her cheeks pouting and burning not because of the sex angle but because she had lost the advantage. Rachel was competitive in everything, especially bondage & discipline, or sadomasochism, or whatever it was we were practicing.

The whole object of the game changed in my favor after that development. Now it was I in my disheveled straightjacket trying to undo her centipede, with her slapping my hands away. I would undo her top button, and while she was redoing it, I would undo

some of the lower ones, and so the competition progressed to see who mastered quicker fingers. Until, I managed a whole handful of buttons at once. Her centipede fell open. One peek at her exposure sucked the air from my lungs, turning me inside out like withdrawing a pale, slender hand from a tightfitting black leather glove.

She twisted her torso around. Kept her back to me. Buttoned herself up again. I waited, gulped, tried to breathe. When she turned to face me she was decent again. I reached out once. This time she leaned away.

"No", Rachel said, "how would you like it if I undid your buttons?"

"I don't care", I said. "Proceed governor."

She directed her gaze at my waist. I sat up straighter so she could get a better view of the target area. She regarded my shiny codpiece, black bulge surrounded by silver metal buttons. I dressed myself bum to boobs in gorgeous black latex, factory fresh and skintight, or was it my straight jacket? Was it the same occasion or a different day? I can't remember.

"Come on", I said, egging her to intone the magic spell, open sesame.

"No, I'm not going to", Rachel said.

"Why not?" I demanded.

"Because you want me to," she said.

"Don't be cruel," I pleaded, which in the context made her laugh, before I leaned forward and ducked in under her fluttering hands again to undo several of her buttons. Each time she looked down to redo her centipede, her wings slipped forward and covered her face. In the interim I studied the simple part separating her feathered hair. "Come on, my little pullet. You're afraid to undo my buttons."

"No, I'm not. Don't be such a child," Rachel said, reaching over and unsnapping my top button with one hand. The red glow in The Dungeon Room hummed silently. The vinyl on the Victrola had finished playing but not snapped off. The needle stuck in the same dead groove, evidenced by the scratching sound, critch, critch, critch.

Out loud, I said, "Oh, she's getting brave. Undo another one."

She tried again with one hand. Finding the task too complex she scooted closer in order to use both hands. Her hair fell forward again obscuring my vision. I was a patient victim. I could wait. Until she withdrew I saw nothing of her handiwork.

Now it was my turn to blush. She had managed to undo all five buttons and lay my cod open like an oyster on the half shell.

Whether it was that same day or not is unclear to me now. We knew the other girls wouldn't be in the dungeon anytime soon.

We had forgotten about The Body. We must've felt secure about having some privacy because when I suggested we retire into her cage she took me by the hand and led the way.

When we kissed I lay all of my weight on top of her in an attempt to crush the air out of her lungs. I swept my arms out to the sides knocking her menagerie of sex toys onto the floor. Who can be jealous of such things?

"Do you want to go for it?" I had to stifle my nervous urge to giggle. What a gross thing to say, so tactless, so clumsy, but I'll be d----d if she didn't agree. The way I put the question was as awkward and silly as the two of us crawling back out of the cage and standing up next to it.

Her tangerine and lime skin-tights slid down around her ankles first. The pointed tails of her bloodstained eggshell white shirt floated about where the smooth flesh hid between her thighs. Hooking my thumbs into my own tightskins down they dropped. Ankles bound and bottom bared she waddled toward her cage while I removed the cod and fastened on a different element, then I followed her into the cage for the second time. We sent the iron cincture gently rocking from its chain implanted in the ceiling.

Where she slid along my flesh her body was hard and smooth. She felt softer than heaven, dry as sin. While I awkwardly rested my weight between her thighs she gripped my triceps. In

the moment I could feel her watching me. Rubbing once, twice, three times. No room to maneuver. A little harder I tried, still with no success. She squeezed my arms. Her eyes grew wide with alarm. Everything was all so dry. Was I really going to force entry? Her eyes pleaded: could I, in fact, be so cruel?

At that moment, I said, "I love you."

She said, "I love you, too."

For as desperate as it may seem we both meant what we said, since the sentiment expressed under such duress confirmed a certain trust. Unfortunately, the magic words failed to ease matters any, sans rhythm, sans timing, sans tone. I was on the verge of ruining her. Whiplash. The best of times. Whipcrack. The test of time. Paddywack. Cry mercy.

Then out in the corridor The Body started banging his fist against the door - demanding to be let into the dungeon: "Let me in right now!" We could hear him bellowing.

I was so startled I blew off Rachel as though I'd heroically smothered a live hand grenade. Luckily Rachel had thought to bar the dungeon door. Time to pull up our accouterment. After regaining my latex skin I ran down the hall, element flapping wildly in the wind, back to my cell to huddle and cringe in a corner. A righteous beating was on the way.

Although Body had not caught us in the act of cheapening our resale value he was angry we were alone with the door

locked. Maybe just frustrated and mad at finding himself locked out.

I could hear Rachel's bravura argument with him in the hallway. She was slapping at his shoulders to get him to move past my cell and to prevent him from harassing me.

I heard him ask, "Who's here with you? Is it Roger?"

Rachel started slapping him harder. "Shut up! Will you? You're so stupid."

When Rachel came back to me where I lay curled in the fetal position the first tentative question I asked over my shoulder was, "Who's Roger?"

My full name is Alexandra Savage. I go by Nika. Everyone calls me Sasha the Savage, which is my stage name, and I hate it. I gave up trying to correct the world about my identity a long time ago. At one of the tables in the library where I was holed up I was eating from a bowl filled with roughage. Some called it pottage, and refused to eat it. I know the sodden leaves are dark green and you can survive for a long time on this murky soup. Sometimes if you go to the Ration Center they will throw bread, government cheese, and bottled water (which is not too oily) from the roof. You have to stand around a while, and slither about the crowd, changing position each time the G

Men throw to you, in the hopes a different official mistakes you for someone new, and he'll throw to you again. You're not supposed to double dip like this, it's against the rules, and people do get in trouble for it, but everyone does it anyway, including me, yearning upwards from a dingy black cobblestone street ending at a slick iron wall topped off by corrugated tin. I never liked going there. Always some tough guy stood ready to tear the bread loaf out of your arms. Steal your cheese. I needed at least one solid meal a day. The rest of the time I could scavenge. You couldn't rely on luck for the primary meal. In the zone feeding time meant joining the crowd to throw elbows and compete for whatever food parcels they were tossing to the mob of outstretched hands.

The cloudy sky overhead and the dirty rain dropping from the pink clouds overhead stained the walls of the city deep purple and black. Sooty and dirty. Oily and slick. Dark and overcast. A nation of sulkies. Every night our rights impinged on until you couldn't travel any farther than about a twenty-mile radius. The Police stationed above on high walls and roofs. Everybody else hunkered down below.

Basically left with nothing to do, no explanations from anyone, our handhelds spewing forth all the brainless propaganda and porn you could stomach. Not so much a lack of information as a lack of batteries. News in the ancient sense no longer

existed. So we spent a lot of time milling about and waiting for food. Servicing each other. Hiring ourselves out to the wealthy. Putting on shows at the various cabarets. In our business you might escape beyond the Main Gate for a weekend, never for much longer before they apprehended you and sent you back. You didn't want to be gone for too long anyway, end up missing for good in other words, and become a real goner.

Survival had become a full time occupation. Finding food and potable water. Inside the Pleasure Zone the strangest bulk supplies would sometimes appear out of nowhere. Once Hater and I were walking down a dirty alleyway. As usual the streets were empty. Daytime, which means the sky was purple and pink instead of black, when all of a sudden we came upon a whole case of tonic in a wooden crate resting in the middle of the street. Where this joyous nectar came from or whom it belonged to we didn't know. We stood there staring at it in disbelief for a few seconds, and then furtively scanned our surroundings for a previous owner. The thrill ran through me that it might be some kind of bait, a sick joke. Some sniper waiting on high to shoot us down the minute we reached for it. Those were all crazy thoughts, though, racing around in my head, maybe the result of adrenaline. Without any more hesitation we both grabbed an end of the crate and ran like lunatics back to my hole in the ground. Twelve pristine bottles of cool amber liquid. Maybe a

ruckus had occurred and the original owner had been killed for his case of bottled gold. Maybe it fell off the back of a truck. Who could say? Who cared? Ultimately, we didn't question our good fortune, and worry would not make the tonic any less cold and gorgeous splashing down our throats. Even drunk Hater didn't want the nice rub a dub. He grew up outside the zone so he was filled with all kinds of pointless shame and guilt. In a weird way he may also have liked me too much for us to be intimate.

From there the wavy texture of the table spaced me out to another reverie, egging me on to recreate Rachel, the source of sweet sustenance, the pestle wherein love and desire mixed into a potent narcotic.

I could not wait to see her again. I was going to encourage her to point out to me her new friend, this Roger creature, so I could crack him upside his stupid-ugly jaw. Maybe the sun's early morning glint shined in my eyes and blinded my thinking. Otherwise I really can't explain the anger because normally I'm a very peaceful person.

The front doors swinging wide plucked me from my reverie. I took a huge leafy green and placed it over my mouth and with my finger poked at the center until the whole thing disappeared daintily into my maw. A technical genius named Mr. Hater stood on the doormat ready to escort me. I could claim to understand parts of things. He was one of those guys who knew everything,

easier for him to lower himself to my world than for me to ascend to his heights.

Hater sported straight brown hair he almost had me convinced was better than my curly black hair which might be coaxed but never tamed. His eyes owned the color blue, and spiked lashes sprouted over them. Not a big boy. I stood a head taller, willowy and gangly. I took all this in while he was standing outside the main room in the Public Library, breathing puffs of fog, his hands plunged deep into the pockets of his worn out bomber jacket. I admired how he conserved every gesture.

In terms of squatting rights no one was ever impressed by my seizing control of the public library. Rachel least of all. I tried to explain to her how clever it was to seize an abode nobody else wanted. How many deaths occurred in squabbles over popular mansions and more coveted real estate. Here I had ample space, easily as much as most villas, and the books crowding the shelves were a surer talisman to ward off the violent types among us than any black magic could ever provide.

Hater smiled and slapped his arms like he was staving off the cold, but I knew he was not that uncomfortable. His jacket hung limp and stained with long ago blood. Greasy and black. It might have been green originally. Or brown.

Hater looked at me and said, "The things you see when you

haven't got a gun."

"Find some ammunition, did you?" It was a cold stab on my part. Everyone hid a firearm whereas nobody possessed ammunition. "I'm almost ready, Hater. If you're so cold, why don't you come in while I get ready?"

"Naw, it's time to go. I'll wait out here. Hurry, or I won't wait."

As I went to gather my jacket, over my shoulder, I said, "I'm going to get into a fight today."

Hater leaned his upper torso through the open doorway. "Who with?"

"I don't know, yet. Some android named Roger."

"Excellence. What he do to you?"

"He's messing with Rachel."

"Oh, *her*. Figures."

I barely heard that last bit. I let it go. If Hater took something the wrong way it could take forever to straighten him out again, and he and Rachel had not hit it off in their first encounter.

My jacket was leather. Tastes differ. Some denizens won't wear quality gear for fear of being robbed. Without any qualms a man lurking in these environs will drop you where you stand and rob your boots.

We would have to elbow our way through a feeding frenzy if

we didn't hurry. What made getting there early worthwhile for me was chasing Rachel. She was sweet as could be, a real peach, and so I was ready to pummel any upstart machine that thought he could pluck her from me.

Hater and I were on the sidewalk and moving towards the city center. The housing grew dingy and more dilapidated the closer we got to the Ration Center. An apartment complex along the way disgorged a gravel driveway across our path.

At the rear of the Food Distribution Center we filed through a gaping hole in the disintegrating cyclone fence and crossed the deserted fields. Sharp Objects to avoid here. Broken glass. Used hypodermic needles. Bloody piles of offal. Who knew from what species of creature? Shards of broken bricks. Gnarly green weeds. Wouldn't pull any greens from that toxic field. Our steps carried us nearer as the hum of the hive grew louder.

When we arrived Hater blocked my path and looked at me as though I had stepped in something foul.

"Are you going to look for Rachel?"

"She's cuter than you are," I replied.

Walking away with indifference constituted one of Hater's most hurtful tactics against me. Before he got too far he turned back and said, "When you get in your fight today, try not to get your ass beat too badly."

Hater left me standing alone among the milling crowd

gathering near the quad under the dirty black clouds on a dark and dingy morning. As my eyes scanned the crowd I wondered which robot named Roger would be cupping his hands and carrying his broken teeth to the mechanic's shop. What amazes me the most is how prior to this epoch in my life I had always been a kind of instinctual pacifist. Inside me a seam was ripping apart. Rachel Cozy, what a horrid girl. Who could ever feel sympathy for such a creature? A silent rain began to fall, greasy and florescent pink.

Sometime before noon I had Rachel pinned against one of the handrails about halfway up the main stairwell of a building called The Big Deal. A rumor had gone round about somebody selling narcotics, revealed at the scene of the transaction to be more like diet pills. Staying up days in a row wasn't really my nirvana. We were disappointed. Regardless of personal taste we grabbed what we could whenever anything became available to trade it later for something better. Speed freaks are usually not in a position to bargain. They'd give you anything, including their bodies, which I wouldn't want, but you get the idea.

A group of S&M novitiates, four abreast, tromped down the stairs against the general flow of traffic for that particular sales event. As people saw the black and white dungeon paint covering the girls' faces they got out of the way. Either this

one vanilla with black-rimmed glasses never saw them coming or maybe she thought the rule of law would protect her somehow. In her kitty-cat naivety she ran flat up against those tops who slapped the objects she carried out of her arms.

"Stupid bitch, watch where you're going." The red gums of the dominatrix showed between her black-painted lips when she bared her teeth. They jostled the girl down their ranks and off to one side. Blindly they kicked through her bag and what looked like a dead baby or a garden gnome. With relief I realized she was carrying a mushroom shaped phallus. The victim, obviously fresh meat, a true bottom, said nothing. In the thugging they had stripped her berets leaving wisps of straight black hair floating in front of her lachrymose eyes. They made her assume the position, palms flat against the wall while they helped themselves to a look under her slick, shiny leather skirt. Underneath she wore a strap, not panties. They inspected her, hands on and without restraint. Sometimes those dungeon girls took their roles far too seriously.

Passers-by did not see Vanilla Geek gather her stuff together and frown at the ground as she clutched her garden gnome and forged up the stairs. I watched this mugging guardedly, smiling as the whipping crew passed by me, eliciting a sly glance from one of them.

Once they were gone I let Rachel loose. She was angry

because I'd held her pinioned behind me during the whole of the foregoing scene. She was angry with the rough girls for how they'd treated Dolly Defenseless.

I had to get bossy with Rachel sometimes or we both would have been brawling right there on the stairs. I never had any trouble with a dominatrix. If I saw one coming I never recklessly eyeballed her or dared her to clear a path. I could give a little, here and there - they knew who I was, that I threw down only in self-defense. They needed control in their lives. Out of respect for myself I could give them what they wanted without any loss of honor on either side. I was a humanist by nature if not in deed.

A little mutual respect went a long way as far as I figured. Not with Rachel, though. She took nothing from nobody and as a result she had just about every top in The Zone mad-dogging her. My lover Rachel raged at the world full time.

"Did you see what they did to that poor girl?" Blood was blossoming through Rachel's cheeks. The blush of integrity.

"That's not so bad," I said. "I've seen worse."

"I would not even put up with that."

"I figured you wouldn't."

"You don't have to protect me, girlie-girl," she said. "I'm not avoiding them. Who do they think *they* are?"

By staying silent, I was in effect saying, *don't know --*

don't care. I tried to kiss Rachel to cool her down, a dumb move. She pushed me away before balling her hands into tight little fists. Her jawbone flexed and she drew her mouth to a hard point. Above her lip, that small scar, like a hint of the rising sun, burned with indignation. Her lithe frame shook. Blonde feathers trembled.

Later in the evening Rachel's tart words and the inevitable argument following came back at me. Besides the dominatrix episode she was angry with me because I quit the Club Abattoir and took up residence in the library by living off scrounging and the occasional government cheese. What follows represents a sample of how most arguments unfolded:

Rachel: "We'll never have sex if we're not on the same shift at the Abattoir together."

Nika: "And that's my fault?"

Rachel: "Yes, you could go back to The Body and beg to be put back on the day shift."

Nika: "You might change your shift to the night, too, and come live with me and be my love. You could just work there. Not live there. Like me."

Rachel: "And live off handouts and the trash you scrounge? No thanks."

Nika: "It's a peaceful, steady life. You work all night. Sleep all day."

Rachel: "It's not natural. Besides, business is better during the day."

Nika: "It's not worth it."

Rachel: "Yes it is."

Our debate continued like this seemingly forever. Without success she was trying to run me so she tried getting angry as an alternative, yet that wasn't working either. We were each trying to pimp the other. Her final argument was the only person she had at the Club Abattoir to perform with was some poor gay guy who'd latched onto her. I let her know. I had no problem with him.

After the midnight show I was thinking about all this in the locker room while standing in line, waiting for a salt pill. I'm not sure taking one was really necessary. The Body was pleased if you did as you were told. I preferred keeping The Body at arms length. Besides, I liked the brine taste on the back of my tongue. The salt combination reminded me of the sweat I licked from Rachel's contours.

"Dry up, Savage." To look at Rudy the towel boy you could tell he was a mutant. If you listened to him and let him have his say though he made sense in a human way. Behind his black-rimmed glasses Rudy existed. I think he appreciated my willingness to listen to his prattle. A definite group of stud muffins would persecute Rudy every chance they got - solely

because he was different. They would surround him and start shouting pointed questions at him. In his sweetness and generosity Rudy would do his mutant best to answer. They would only ridicule his answers or ask him stupid questions about his girlfriend when anybody with any sense knew he didn't have a girlfriend - and probably never would. In the back room Rudy paid and paid.

By the time I dressed in latex again and emerged from the locker room the denizens lurking in the alleyway crept into the shadows like vampires avoiding the burgeoning dawn. To my surprise Rachel was leaning against a wall and waiting for me. As I approached her she used her elbow to push herself upright.

The rancor from that morning still joggled in my heart. She approached quickly and I stopped short. I sensed the violence coiling within her. She swung and connected. The impact of her slap sent me sprawling. Later on I would learn I hit my head and blacked out for a time. I don't know for how long. Long enough for Rachel to get spooked and run for help. So you see she never really meant it, the violence I mean, and she was always sorry afterwards.

The good doctor's wire rim glasses reflected my own face in his lenses. Saliva gathered and dried like origami at the corners of his cottonmouth. Breath stinking like course tobacco soaked in single malt. He held up two fingers and a thumb in

front of my face and waved them back and forth.

"Son, if you can't find your dick, it's 'cuz it's been knocked in the dirt over there," he said.

"I'm not a boy," I said. The good doctor simpered, and so I said: "If I'm alert enough to realize you're condescending to me, then chances are I don't have a concussion."

Rachel gave me a sympathetic smile before squeezing her laughter into a grimace. Her attention was drawn in the opposite direction, up the dirty street where a ho wrangler and his chickens congregated on the street corner. Some billionaire running a string of ponies sent a droid to manage them rather than step foot into The Zone. As a sly smile slithered across her lips her eyes glazed over. She had spotted someone I couldn't see. Could anyone be more transparent? Or was this a new terrace in yet another one of her labyrinthine head games?

I rolled over onto my side, the concrete sidewalk unyielding beneath my shoulder. Piddle pool. Cool under my nose. I thought salty asparagus a nice acrid alternative to the usual liver stench. While turned away from her actual person I fantasized about a different possibility, a far more ideal Rachel:

I imagined Rachel as Caucasian. In that her hair resembled restless fields of wheat when the setting sun bathes the jostling buds in auburn tints and hues. With a curling iron she

crimped those shoots into feathered wings floating around her puss like a pilgrim's bonnet.

I imagined Rachel as English. In that her long blonde lashes drooping and raising lazily brought to mind an exotic peacock-feathered fan in the hands of a turbaned servant stirring the sultry air above his adolescent queen reclining nude on a soft silk couch among barbarous pillows near porcelain bowls overflowing with the opulence of rare and ripening fruit varied green, yellow, orange, red, and purple.

Below the soft curve of her chin her throat lay bare, shoulders exposed, thin and round. I'll use my hands to mold this next image. Her breasts were . . . just so. When she flashed me a smile her jaw dropped revealing where her lascivious tongue lay squirming. She finished me off by blowing a honeyed kiss traveling on shock waves through the swirling smoke wafting inside The Club Abattoir.

The doctor kicked my feet before staggering off and said, "She's not dead, yet."

In his prognosis I found sufficient solace, and sustenance enough to roll over onto my back and contemplate the dark and polluted sky.

I could feel her standing above me, watching me, amused by my cowardice and tears.

You're not mad at me, are you? Her lips quavered with

amusement, waiting for my response. Her body ripened before me inch by inch.

"I'm not angry. Why would I be angry?" I arched my back, climbing unsteadily to my feet.

"I don't know. You seem sort of quiet is all."

"You didn't have to hit me so hard."

"It was an accident." She lied. "I wouldn't have to hit you like that if you didn't make me mad."

"If having the same shift so that we can be together really means that much to you, then you wouldn't provoke such a knock-down, drag-out fight about it. If you really cared about us, as a couple, that much, then you wouldn't let our arguments escalate the way they do. I don't understand how you can act like this. You're too abusive. It's inappropriate."

"I don't know either," Rachel said, as though shrugging off a genuine mystery. "But look: here I am! I waited all through your performance for you. Never done that before, have I? Besides, I am not abusive."

Her hanging around after hours so long in order to see me was, in fact, unusual. There was not a whole lot to do in the environs of The Club that late into the early hours. She may have turned a few tricks while waiting. I didn't want to know about that. She always had plenty of script, though, so I knew.

The resentment burned hot in my ego, but after a full shift

I was too tired to fight. I rose to a standing position. Seeing Rachel anytime was a treat, even if she did make me mad sometimes, and I didn't want to waste the opportunity of being with her. I steadied myself on my six-inch raisers, moved closer to her - swooning in and out of her body space.

She was sweet on me. She received the message.

Her arm slid around my waist and so on we walked. Echo by echo our footfalls filled in the silences of the dark and deserted alleyway.

We left the buildings area and took one of the tree-lined footpaths. A wisp of wind lofted a forgotten health bulletin across our path. A chill breeze sent Rachel shivering up next to me. I accommodated her by lifting my arm higher and grasping her by the shoulder. Pine tree needles enveloped us both in pointed darkness. We yearned toward a spot where nobody could spy us anymore.

In unison we stopped and turned, face to face. For us to be alone was rare. With eyes closed our mouths sought to mesh flesh with flesh in one long enduring kiss. Our tongues rooted for the connection. When we withdrew our mouths we were warm against the evening cool. Foreheads touching we looked to where our bodies met like a pair of gentle question marks arranged in rhetorical opposition. She reached her other arm around me and clasped her hands and thus we rubbed.

"I've got to go," Rachel said.

"Why don't you come with me?" I was desperate for each moment I might spend with her, but she rebuffed me.

"No, go home to your little hole in the floor. You've had a long night. A long shift. Go home. Find me later, near sundown tomorrow."

I stole another kiss and backed away from her. All the while I kept my eyes directed at her retreating figure. Rachel propped her fists on her hips. "Hey, young lady, isn't there something you're supposed to say to me before you go?"

I knew what she was on about. I never played along if I could recognize the game. "Yes, of course there is... remember... practice your dance moves!"

She grew impatient with me and flashed me the palm of her hand.

I relented. "Oh yeah, one more thing: I love you. I love you a lot - more than anybody."

Hearing the magic words Rachel did a remarkable thing: she cradled one of her own breasts, as though to showcase the girl. Not that though, her heart, she was cradling her heart. She swept her hands down over the flat of her belly and out to her sides, wiggling those hips.

Upon her invisible lyre she strummed, "What you see is what you get."

To keep the squishies at bay I spun around and headed off diagonally across the field toward a side exit.

I waited for maybe ten minutes before I saw my bud, Hater, hustling up the sidewalk. I knew he had been to see the Gypsy by the half-drunk quart of absinthe in his grip.

"Thanks for getting me something to drink," I said. In reality I didn't want anything from the Gypsy. By attacking him first I hoped to keep myself off the defensive.

"I didn't get you anything," Hater said, flatly. "You took too long getting dressed. Listen, I just saw your so-called girlfriend crawling into a limousine with some Powersby."

Sometimes I wished Hater might have engaged more in the art of preamble. Still, I told him he was full of it.

He said, "I'm telling you, I saw her with my own two eyes. She climbed into a limo with some prince of darkness."

"Are you sure it wasn't somebody else's friend, or just some gay guy?"

"Naw, they were too friendly for that," Hater said.

"What do you mean, 'friendly'?"

"They were grinding some body English between them."

"Now I know you're lying. You're just jealous of her, or jealous of her and me together."

I shoved him and snatched his bottle of absinth away at the same time.

If he would have stopped criticizing Rachel and putting her down all the time I never would have taken him out at the knees like that - but he was making me mad. Hater was not long in finding his feet again and delivering a blow of his own.

"I don't give a damn about her or you," he said. "I'm saying she's playing you for a chump. It's obvious she's cheating on you. I hate seeing you made a fool of. That's all."

Hater whipped out his camera, held it up to my face, and pressed play. He grabbed the bottle back with his other hand. Hater claimed to have snapped a shot of Rachel climbing into a rich man's limousine. If her little ! had been right side up, she might have been easier to identify. Or not. I don't know. Looking at the photo I couldn't tell whose little i it was winking at me, whether it was hers or not.

The notion of Rachel cheating on me proved hard to deal with on the spot, something I could not get my mind around easily. Just moments ago had she not offered me the ultimate promise? Did this development signify, in fact, I would not be sole recipient of the special showcase prize? I pined in search of some logical explanation for what Hater had witnessed, some reason other than the obvious one. I wanted to believe it had been an optical illusion. Local sex was one thing. Limousines meant crossing the line. Rising above it. Risking your life in the process. Powersby had a bad reputation for liking the rough

stuff.

If Hater said he'd seen a thing then the thing he saw was usually so. What he had seen he called *body English*. Sometimes I wanted to slap him for the phrases he used.

While we walked along the dead tree-lined street my eyes searched for a reasonable explanation beneath the tangle of barren branches stark and snarky overhead.

"When I get home I'll zip her," I said. "I'll ask her what it's all about. The guy was probably some friend of a friend, or her cousin from out of town."

Hater tossed a sugar cube in his mouth and he gulped a slug of absinthe. Making crinkle-eyes and taking his time he swallowed.

"You ever know her to have a cousin, out of town or otherwise? And this morning, wasn't it you telling me how you were about to fight somebody?"

"Yes, I said that. I asked around today, but I couldn't find the guy. I'm not saying you're lying. I know you *think* you saw what you saw, but what I am saying is, I'm going to wait and hold off judgment. I'm not diving off the deep end until I've had a chance to talk with Rachel and find out for sure what's going on. She hasn't gone back to limousine crawling. She's not that stupid."

"You're not going to tell her everything you know up

front, are you? Because I don't *think* I saw. I *know* I saw. And what I eye-witnessed was your so-called girlfriend, all like, slinking by this guy, who was holding the door open for her. Climbing into the back seat. Then he climbed in after her with his tongue hanging out. And no doubt, I will wager you, his little red tip was showing."

I could no longer think straight. Awful images crowded my mind. Some aristocrat was dogging Rachel.

As soon as we reached the library Hater left me to make his way to his area of The Zone. In parting, he tapped his noggin before tapping on mine, and then he left me alone with the awful germ he'd planted in my imagination. I tried to remember the promise Rachel had made at our parting. Instead the night air reached into my ribcage and poked me chilly. Close by, somewhere in the shadows, a bum was bearing his teeth and growling like a dog. I squinted into the darkness. In the space between the tall apartment buildings a fence line was barely discernable, the sidewalk uneven from the oak roots thrusting beneath them. A street lamp shed its cone of light on the opposite side of the street. Black shadowy doubts lurked in the spaces between the scanty light.

Little girls who climbed into limousines usually disappeared for good. I didn't want for Rachel to disappear for good, in that way become a goner.

Powersby declared *Election Day* before anyone in the Pleasure Zone had time enough to think. Reflecting on how best to vote my conscience I sank into a reverie amid the riotous celebrations.

One by one the watchtowers lit up, each like an auto-da-fé, and I'd never seen so many jackboots manning the walls. The heightened security created the safe feeling we all longed for, knowing the plutocrats could arrest anybody for whatever reason and detain them forever, or simply make them disappear.

If the authorities whisked you away in a Black Maria then you had to be guilty of something. Since innocent citizens were never treated that way, I had nothing to fear, The Man said, because with dimples like mine, I embodied the soul of innocence. The Powers That Be would always watch over me and keep me safe from harm.

To ensure the continuance of what they referred to as the 'blessings of liberty', the current election supplied us with a choice between two candidates, both voluptuous women. The conservative candidate was campaigning as the incumbent, sporting a profusion of gorgeous blonde hair framing icy blue eyes.

For their cause the liberals championed a far more daring

choice. This time around the political left ran with a slightly darker haired woman in an attempt to curry favor with fetish voters. Pointy auburn helmet hair shifted about her green eyes. The outfit she wore, pictured on all her posters, amounted to nothing more than green lingerie.

I overheard a group of local denizens discussing the matter, and one of them felt there was no way, dressed in such skimpy attire, she could be tough enough on foreign policy or hold her own with Eastern diplomats. She appeared far too soft and vulnerable. Contemplating the conservative candidate dressed in a tight fitting red dress accentuating her ample curves, I had to admit she did look more formidable somehow.

A bum in the group countered by saying the liberal candidate would garner the votes of boys and young men and old men and now that he thought about it any man who wasn't married or gay since a married man's wife would box his ears if he voted for such a sexy candidate.

Yet a third pundit, his bare feet protruding from beneath a beige overcoat, argued the whole election represented nothing more than a scam because the incumbent had been in office for sixteen years, yet in all that time she had not grown older by a single day. He pointed out how it violated the rules for anyone to be in office for so long and opposed the laws of nature for her face not to have aged at least somewhat, considering how

much time had elapsed.

Bare Feet questioned whether the old rules still applied or even existed at this late date. Perhaps the rules had been thrown out, and new ones implemented we hadn't even heard about, or perhaps there were no more rules at all anymore. In today's climate, who could say? What with the technology not as reliable as it used to be and real information so selective and access extremely limited for the likes of us surviving here in The Zone. Who knew if the trickle down of prosperity perennially promised would ever arrive?

I piped up and declared myself for the liberal candidate. I thought she looked exotic and sexy and as a woman I liked her platform of happiness and well being for everyone.

The group of men gave me a real razzing for, as they put it, pretending to like her platform. My cheeks burned with indignation. I really did like her platform. I liked her body too obviously and for some reason I found myself feeling a little embarrassed. In my pique I wished sooner or later a little common sense might trickle down to some of these denizens.

One old sage opined how the only platform making any sense was the conservative line, work and reward, and he was putting his support behind a woman who had sense enough not to wear her underwear in public. I said apparel didn't matter in a federal

republic. Under his breath he grumbled in reply how we didn't have one of those anymore. What we have, he said, is corporate dictatorship ruling from the top down without dissent, no freedom of speech.

I reverted to thinking about my candidate's sexy wardrobe, a bold move on the part of the liberals. Risky, but eye-catching. Secretly, I resolved to vote for her no matter what anyone said.

To avoid being purged from the rolls we had to stand on line for voter registration. For this reason Rachel and I arrived early to beat the crowd and avoid the usual mayhem. She was my ostensible girlfriend, even though I knew she was cheating on me. She wore thigh high green latex boots and a tight pink mini. So tight you could see the heart shaped design she cultivated in honor of Venus. To showcase her pierced navel she bared her belly and wore a couple of mismatched sports bras and the leather jacket I found on that dead chick, deftly removed and carried straight to my girl Rachel. My leather thigh high's matched hers just enough without being an exact copycat. I wore my own sporty bra beneath soft leather. In public we made a cute couple; in private we were a mess.

We had barely reached the front of the line when the hum of a mob bearing torches and marching in loose procession entered the area known as The Honeycomb. In all your life you never saw

so many freaks and degenerates outside of a circus or an asylum.

Knowing we would never escape the crowd we at least tried to ignore the commotion. On my ballot I only wrote down my first initial and last name. No point in arousing suspicion with a flashy display of erudition. Beside me Rachel made her mark of the rising sun and at the same time we both went to slide our cards forward underneath the protective shield covering the voter window. Rachel tried to brush my hand aside to let me know she would be served first. By then she was too late. The hand bearing the voter card I drew back had been snatched clean. In retaliation she shoved her whole arm deep under the shield, made a huffy face as she too was relieved of her ticket, turned her back on me, and stomped away.

From inside the election office I heard the buzz saw each time one of the election officials fed a voter ballot into the counting machine. Once time I bent down to sneak a peak at the process through the slit and for my curiosity received a playful *tonk* on the head by a security truncheon. The goose egg on the back of my head wasn't worth it because I could only see clear plastic bags stuffed with confetti.

This particular year there would be much to celebrate. The Oil Cartel sponsored both parties with campaign contributions, totaling in the gazillions and distributed equally, which was only fair, since it wouldn't be proper for so much economic

power to take sides in such an important decision. So it didn't really matter who won. The after parties would be excellent.

I caught up to Rachel, and with her in the lead we shoved and threaded our way through the crowd. The nearer we approached the wall where security forces were dispensing extra ballots the denser the crowd grew and pushy. The troopers were trying to hand down ballots one at a time, only to be met by a dozen up thrusting hands. At that point people were really elbowing and jostling. Until then Rachel and I had been holding onto each other with the passion grip, fingers interlocked, so as not to be separated.

Without warning the crowd surged forward and our mutual grasp was torn apart as we were lifted off our feet. From the mouths of panicking men and women a deafening screaming and wailing swept like an ocean wind howling across a rocky and barren shore. My boobs were smooshed against the stranger in front of me and in turn someone's chest pressed against my shoulder blades in back. En mass the frantic sweaty bodies rubbing together created an instant pressure cooker. The rising temperature in turn depleted the oxygen. Some of the citizens were pushed to their knees and then trampled onto their faces. Others were smashed against the safety wall and had the life crushed out of them. With both arms extended I pressed my palms against the body in front of me and arched my back to make a

space where I could wiggle higher on the wave of humanity and try to find breathing space for gulping down some precious air.

From the top of my lungs I yelled, "Stop pushing!"

In the cacophony of yelling and screaming my plea added a single ineffectual droplet. The crush of humanity lunged forward again and smashed against the wall. In reaction to contact with an immoveable object the impetus shifted, staggering doggedly off to one side with heads bobbing and arms flailing, swirling madly before gathering into a swell and swooning and welling into a counter wave. I knew I couldn't stay afloat much longer and would sink to the ground under the human verge. Trampled by the mob. In my despair I searched for Rachel, and I spied her riding high on the rolling wave of bodies. Jostled tempest tossed she had popped to the surface buffeted over various heads and hands. She did not appear to be at all happy.

Just when my lungs felt like they were about to collapse Security Forces appeared above in greater numbers, along the walkways on the tops of the walls, and threw fistfuls of ballots fluttering down on the rioters below. When they hit the crowd the ballots acted like a potent dispersant dissolving the insanity of the voters, who stopped pushing and shoving each other and as if on cue dropped to their hands and knees scrambling around on the ground while they snatched up fistfuls of cards before running off towards the voting windows to

deposit what might be the winning ticket in the big grand prize of the Voter's Sweepstakes, an innovation instituted by The Powers That Be to counteract voter apathy and lure the citizenry back to the polls.

The whole crowd scrambled about on all fours, a welcome alternative to being trampled to death. Amid the turmoil of elbows and asses I was on my knees along with the rest scampering about like mad trying to gather up my fair share of votes.

I caught sight of Rachel in the near distance just as I picked up a ballot only to have it snatched out of my hand by a milf three times my age. For rain gear this interloper wore a trash bag in the true proletarian style. As this woman turned to flee with her guerdon Rachel suddenly appeared grabbing a hold of the makeshift parka, and as I closed in to back her up if I could my girl's fingers contracted into the patented kung fu grip. The plastic poncho stretched and grew thin without tearing or breaking so the woman snapped back like a rubber band, allowing Rachel to greet her with a roundhouse punch, smack on the chin. Doing so laid the bitch out flat. Her jaw yawned and her eyes rolled about in her head like a sleeper emerging from anesthesia. Rachel daintily plucked the ballot from the thief's somnolent grasp and handed it to me as though it were a dance card.

Rachel turned around, and for a parting shot she reared back as though she were kicking a field goal and delivered a boot to the ribs. Personally, I thought that last bit crossed the line. But that was Rachel. On impact that prostrate denizen's sight turned inward and searched for the source of such terrible pain and found it punctuated along her lower ribcage.

Between us we had scrounged thirteen ballots, and we moved off to the side of the festivities and slumped together against the wall. After rescuing one of my tickets Rachel turned around, claiming it wasn't fair for me to have one extra ballot more than she did so I discarded one by tossing it on the ground between us. Whereupon Rachel promptly picked it up and slid it into her deck. She batted her eyelashes at me and puckered her lips a few times. How I had fallen in love with a girl who could be such a constant trial can only be explained in the epilogue.

Neither one of us had to look around much before finding a pencil nub for marking our ballots. On my first card I filled in my own name as a write in candidate. Rachel saw how I voted and she guffawed, smirking in appreciation of my insolence, until her expression grew more pensive. Always the competitive type she made her own mark in the space for write in candidates on the top card of her own ballot stack. After regarding her handiwork she reflected for a moment as though seriously

weighing her qualifications for the job and finding her resume seriously lacking.

To snap her out of her reverie I voted for myself a second time. Immediately, Rachel retaliated in kind, glaring at me like a wet cat for opposing her in such a momentous matter. On the next card I filled in the name of my favorite cartoon character. In response Rachel scribbled her own sign for the third time, thus ensuring her victory in our contest to become the next Leader of the Free World. What can I say? She didn't read.

Her remaining cards she wanted to pencil in privately. So she turned her back to me and doodled with her nub. Without too much effort I was able to peek over her shoulder and spy what she was plotting. I assumed she would be penciling in her own symbol a bunch more times to ensure her victory as Queen Bee. To my surprise she was bubbling in for the Conservative candidate. Her actions inspired me to take my own responsibilities as a voter more seriously only I filled in for the Liberal candidate for the reasons already explained. When Rachel saw what I had done she was furious.

She said, "You would vote for a whore."

I replied by asking, "What are we?"

After that remark she didn't really like me again for a day and a night.

As we moved toward the collection windows I noticed the mob

had dwindled to the status of flotsam draining through the exits. The people leaving whooped and hollered, sang and chanted, and finally resorted to shouting obscenities. Other ne'er do wells from The Zone milled about with no discernible purpose in mind. Emergency workers in white and red hazard suits appeared through a clandestine doorway in the safety wall and were busy evacuating the wounded The Honeycomb had funneled into the front rows where the crushing mob juiced them. Even at a distance I could tell not all the people they evacuated had been merely wounded. Clearly some of the bodies they transported by stretcher were no longer breathing. The giant, iron dividing-wall, black and monolithic, belied the presence of a door at ground level. Were it not for the crews and stretchers and security guards in full riot gear posted at the entrance I could not have discerned an aperture in that particular spot at all, camouflaged by some kind of optical illusion. The practice of building the Big Wall along the Southern Border had taught much to Powersby about walling in and walling out.

Toward dusk, dirty drizzle fell from the purple stained clouds overhead and under closer inspection the drops looked oily when I rubbed my thumb and forefinger together. Smear'd thin the drips revealed a pinkish toxic hue. Protecting yourself from bad chemicals became a full time job in the Pleasure Zone. Indeed much of the population still showed chemical burn scars

from two winters ago when in response to the power outages the government issued free of charge special sheets, blankets, and pillow cases, thin plastic bedding with special chemicals inside activated by a reaction to a person's own body heat, enough warmth to keep you snug all night. In the way this mishap devolved on others but not on me I can't claim anything like prescience. On the contrary, in my lameness I missed the disbursement. By the time I heard about the new miracle blankets and hustled over to The Honeycomb the whole shipment of Chemwraps had been picked clean and I found myself peering into one empty cardboard shipping box after another.

On the way home to my basement I saw people overjoyed with the novelty of their new Chemwraps, so much so they were discarding their old cotton and wool blankets into the recycling bins. In amazement I watched and waited until some foolish citizen discarded a beautiful old heavy woolen wrap so all I had to do was skip across the street to rescue it and carry my treasure back to a growing stack on the sidewalk. By the end of the day I had collected maybe a dozen in this manner. Yet how was I to carry my own weight in gold? About halfway home I reluctantly had to choose only half a dozen of the finest blankets and jettison the rest. Once I got home it occurred to me to make a second trip to fetch the remainder. Not surprisingly the discards had been scavenged by the time I

returned. Even so that night I slept like a queen beneath an oppressive mountain of blankets with only my healthy wet nose exposed for air.

Very few people anticipated the Chemwraps wearing thin and leaking. Apparently shoddy workmanship was to blame. A poor quality item to be sure. After a few months usage sleepers awoke to find their arms and legs, their bodies, their faces, permanently stained with big blotches of crimson or fuchsia, the two most popular colors. Fortunately for Rachel she discarded her pillowcase before it failed because she said it felt slimy and gross next to her face. The blanket she kept on using though and her left leg, beneath the knee, paid the price. If she hadn't shoved off the cover in her sleep more than just that single portion of her leg might have suffered. Looking at the burn mark you could hardly tell the darker pink from the lighter natural pink of her normal skin color. Around the ankle and the top of her foot the burn appeared more noticeable, like she sported one pink knee sock.

In response to this mass disfigurement, all lawsuits filed were immediately rejected by the high court, on the grounds of being unprofitable, and the vast majority of laborers in the plant responsible for manufacturing the faulty Chemwraps were fired from their livelihoods, except for the CEO of course, who received a bonus of 42 million, which helped reimburse

everybody's belief in the rightness of the system. Anytime the elite one per cent ripped off the greater population, they told the same lie to justify their rapacity: the more the rich become obscenely wealthy, the slightly less miserable the poor will be in their grinding poverty. I knew this was propaganda because anytime a Powersby, who had recently raked in billions more at the expense of the people, would pop up at The Club Abattoir to celebrate afterwards and enjoy the show, without slipping one extra bill into my G-string.

Now the moon sidled to the far edge of dawn, away from the sodden mess left behind by the departing voters. For the longest time Rachel had been fussing with the contents of her shoulder bag. Sifting through combs, brushes, eyeliner, ball gag, lip balm, leather paddle, lotions, compod, and skeleton keys. Working at The Club Abattoir supplied her with all kinds of hard to find amenities. Specialty items. Neither one of us noticed the security teams deploying. By the time we felt their presence their boots were already on the ground and forming up into riot squads.

I karate chopped Rachel's arm just hard enough to get her attention, and when she saw their number bearing riot shields and with truncheons drawn massing at the crux of The Honeycomb and forming a phalanx for driving out the stragglers and preempting any night time rioting Rachel frantically threw all

of her junk back into her big shoulder bag zipped it tight and shoved her arm through the shoulder strap before leaping to her feet. Every civilian on the quad turned in unison toward the exit like a flock of birds sharing some unspoken and mysterious command for a uniform pattern of flight. The gathering menace spread out behind us and a shock wave hit us in the back as the troopers began cracking their night sticks against their shields, setting us at a hip churning quick-walk to obey the order to disperse. Running in the vicinity of Riot Troops was never a good idea. They were like dogs in that manner. They would chase anything. Under her breath Rachel fretted about our stupidity in remaining overly long. Knowing full-well survival was the name of the game we had allowed ourselves to become bodies at rest rather than bodies in motion.

Just as we rounded the right leg of The Honeycomb our trajectory towards escape collided with another phalanx of troopers marching against us. A porcupine of truncheons broke from the main group and moving with purpose menaced the two of us backwards against a wall. The extreme danger threatening us shattered Rachel's schema to the extent she grabbed me by both arms in an atavistic panic proffering me as a human shield. With our backs to the wall we slumped to the ground and quivered in fear at the impending onslaught. At least half a dozen shiny black nightsticks pointed down poised a precious few inches from

our dainty skulls.

Rather than beat us or arrest us, much to my surprise, one of the troopers produced a couple of garbage bags and after fluffing each one open with a few smart snaps he shoved them at us as the intercom on his battle mask crackled the order, "Clean up!"

I think we both surveyed the trashed landscape with the same sinking dismay. Being put to work against our will only seemed the better deal when compared to taking a beating although neither one of us hesitated for a moment to accept our personalized receptacle. Rachel was now officially speaking to me again. Bent to the task at hand we agreed this totally violated our contracts. We were pleasure models, not clean up crew. Mostly we were looking at scattered ballots food wrappers plastic bottles. Here and there I came across discarded articles of clothing like scarves shawls a left shoe a right boot one blue and fuzzy sock. To numb myself to the monotony of this work detail I lapsed into a reverie wherein I celebrated both the beauty and utility of black latex gloves like mine, pinching the flesh halfway at the bicep down snug over the elbow stretching the whole length of the sinewy forearm tight over the hands and taught all the way to the fingertips. Nothing I touched no matter how slimy or putrid mattered to me because my skin was not really touching anything. Then too I had the uncanny ability

to crawl inside my head and hide there until the conclusion of almost any bit of nastiness, a faculty helping me to survive more than one major unpleasantness in the course of my short-lived career in the Pleasure Zone.

This mental habit of mine annoyed Rachel no end, poor thing. Life for her was always whatever she found right in front of her nose. Anytime she caught me lost in a daydream her electric fingertips were sure to jab my ribs, or she grasped my upper arm and jerked me awake. Every time she jolted me like this in my mind I felt an elevator of inner peace snap loose from its cables and plunge the length of my body and crash land smashing to smithereens in the basement of my soul. A sinking feeling to say the least. Repeatedly I had asked her not to jerk me out of my reveries so violently. Never having known a gentle hand rendered her incapable of recognizing the difference between a caress and a slap. She was prone to violent outbursts, which just as quickly turned to passion, gulping for pity, then back to flailing, slapping hands lashing out before further surrender, replaying the violent loss of her virginity over and over again. She could be exhilarating to the point of inducing fear.

Three honking geese flew high overhead snapping me out of my reverie. Such an uncommon sight made everyone pressed into cleanup duty look skyward for a moment listening to the

plaintive honk-honking. Even some of the troopers paused to take note of such an uncommon sound. Those silly creatures must have lost their way in the dirty fog. No place for them to land among our black shiny asphalt and dilapidated grey concrete buildings and ruined hovels. They honked conflicting notes of exasperation as they careened through the sky in search of some mythic marsh well beyond the confines of our zone walls.

I broke off gazing at the sky and readjusted my vision to more mundane matters and Rachel swam into view a few paces away. At a distance she mutely implored me to explain those flapping apparitions. I shrugged as if to say, Who knows? An answer her slumping shoulders made clear was not the one she'd looked for from where she stood sequestered within the prison of her ignorance. I knew what kind of birds those were. I was holding out on her to be cruel on purpose. If there was one thing I could supply to Rachel it was a steady stream of answers to endless childish questions like Why is the sky purple and pink? or Why is the ocean dead and black? My own childish first memories were of the chorus, as though I suddenly emerged into consciousness while in the middle of the Can-Can on stage, by stupid chance only, a strictly look-don't-touch affair. As far as being paired with her I never asked why. Whereas for me now no greater why exists.

I never know what time it is. In the Pleasure Zones we don't keep track of time. Clocks prick the conscience advancing neither Denizen nor Devotee towards spending savings on the ultimate peaks of pleasure. Morning. Afternoon. Evening. Only the most general designations can be employed during the course of a single day. Morning does not arrive until you can see the broken nails and blood stained cuticles of rosy-fingered dawn. Where I squatted, in the basement of the library, the room stretched long and thin with a low ceiling. The previous occupant had left green shag carpeting and phony wood paneling that I did my best to cover up with oversized posters my favorite porn stars.

My computer and speakers were at the far end facing back to a green couch in the middle. An Army footlocker acted as a coffee table. An old red rocking chair had survived bonfires from an earlier era. Not many antiques like that had survived the burning age, and scattered like albino chicken poop were piles of those little white beans spilling from a blue beanbag with gray duct tape covering the holes. Behind the couch lay the rest of the room, my mattress, and a closet.

As living space went the basement was cool, long and narrow with a lot of space. The acoustics worked well. I could jam my

tunes as loud as I wanted and no one would ever hear me. The noise travelled the length of the room and then dissipated, absorbed by the wood paneling.

Sitting in the solace of solitude I could not wrap my mind around Rachel. Her Dad was a goner, never to return. The brother enlisted and after basic was shipped overseas to some godforsaken sand box where he was promptly stabbed to death in a bar fight. By the time Rachel was old enough her Mom never stuck around. For a while after the desertion The Mom went through a long, teary-eyed period of spouting *positive thinking* clichés like, We're going to be okay, and It's just the two of us now, but we'll be all right, and that sort of thing. I don't know why The Dad left exactly. Mom was still good-looking for a mom. Reddish hair. Copper-colored eyes.

Sometimes she'd grab Rachel for no reason and squeeze the air out of her while Rachel threw gentle elbows squirming to disentangle herself and then her mom would disappear into her room and slam the door rattling behind her. If Rachel stood just outside and put her ear to the door she could hear sobbing. Either that or The Mom would drink more than her fair share of tonic, puffing up her courage some. Afterwards she would crash twice as hard and not change out of her slattern's robe and dingy slippers for days.

Then a few years rushed by and her mom slipped into what

Rachel called the crazy period when the decisions became no longer appropriate. The hovel down the street getting broken into and robbed triggered the real madness. Mom announced she was afraid to be without a full-grown man in the house to protect them, so she went out and bought herself a gun for protection, a .9 mm pistol. What she thought she would do without any ammunition is hard to say.

In perfect seriousness and with all due gravity, she said, grabbing Rachel by the shoulders, "I'm promoting you to the level of an adult from now on."

I didn't know a person could become an adult through promotion. I thought you had to wait until you had actually ridden around the sun the requisite number of years. Back and forth the dementia swayed. The crazy eyed hysteria masked the back stab of coercing Rachel into signing her first contract.

She related how jarring it was to realize, between the two of them standing there, if she herself did not make a correct decision, a decision would be made for her.

Each week The Mom grew more generous with the cash allowance until the amount was enough to cover groceries and then some. I think her Mom was showing her appreciation for the way Rachel never made her feel guilty about not wanting to raise her anymore.

Accordingly she accepted her new promotion to adulthood and

etched her mark on the release papers. When she shared all this with me her gaze reminded me of a wishing well scoured clean of pennies nickels and dimes, and I realized I shouldn't become yet another disappointment to her. She'd had enough already.

Sharing this sort of identical happy home life brought Rachel and me closer. Before zipping her a line and getting into an argument I had to eat something. Dinner packets were available in new and exciting flavors in those days. I'd managed to scrape a few credits together that week to barter packets of both wet and dry food. I chewed my rations slowly and reviewed what I knew about Rachel.

Soon after that her Mom entered into another phase, one of going out at night and staying out later and later until eventually she found herself a new man and stopped coming home at all. The creepy uncle turned out to be some guy she met at a bar. I don't want to talk about him. He didn't like younger women. He negotiated her first contract. Sold Rachel into slavery.

After munching on greens for desert I went upstairs to resshelf the books I'd finished and pick out a few new ones. In the darkness with just a candle for light my own wretched past came to mind and I began thinking about Rosie. Crazy Rosie, the whore who raised me for a while. I grew too old for the Chorus Line and ended up a lawn jockey at a prestigious whorehouse. I'm

not sure how to explain that exactly. I wore a little jockey's cap, and a silk shirt, no pants - bare assed, and black leather riding boots. I stood out front and a boy stood on the side of the entrance to my right. It was a boring job. Most often we had to stand there for a couple of hours at a time. My feet grew incredibly sore. No one ever paid any attention to us, either. Sometimes a rich woman would laugh through her fur wrap, or coo at us in a motherly way. Mostly the clients remained oblivious to us as they passed through the entrance and into the grand foyer.

Inside The Palace pumped endless orgies. Crazy Rosie had gotten herself pregnant and given birth to a baby while under contract, clearly in violation of the terms of her employment. So when the baby was born they took it away from her and put the poor thing out at contract, too, because that maneuver was stipulated in the fine print. Losing her baby like that broke her spirit and drove her insane. Upon my arrival she took it into her head I was her long lost daughter. She took me under her wing and held me in her lap, even breast feeding me, the whole bit. Everybody thought our spectacle especially funny. I didn't mind. I couldn't remember a mother very clearly and so this surrogate situation suited me. A fallen angel with an education, she read to me every night and then tucked me in next to her. If a customer barged in I had to wake up fast and

scramble underneath the bed where I would lie listening to the hee-haw of the bed springs, the panting and groaning and cursing.

I slept for a while, and when I woke up, I went outside and it was cold and dreary and during the whole march back to The Club Abattoir the gray day and the gray walls and the sheer run-down grinding poverty weighed me down inside and I wheezed how you do when you're too emotionally drained to properly weep.

Before the next dancer rotation I met Rachel inside The Club and I said, "I was thinking of you so I wanted to talk."

"You want to talk? A rare occasion, my sweet, silent type," Rachel said. "What were you thinking of?"

"How much I love you. How much I love everything about you." I caressed her naked breast in one hand and with the other fondled the spikes around her dog collar.

"You're in a good mood," she said.

My throat constricted with the effort of acting. "It's you who makes me feel that way."

"Something's wrong," Rachel said, spotting my shtick instantly. "You don't ever talk this way. Not unless you want something. Or you've found something new to criticize me about."

"I think that's a little uncalled for. Why can't I ever talk to you and tell you how I feel, without your knocking what I say? Can't I just be in love with you? Can't I just tell you

how I feel without your coming back with a zinger?"

"I'm sorry, Nika. I shouldn't be judgmental."

"I don't want anything," I said, my nose in the air, even though she could see the gesture as pose. "I'm just a little worried."

"I could tell by the phony tone in your voice. You're like all on the surface with me. I can tell. I can hear it. It's just beneath the surface. But you're about to burst, you're so angry."

"How do you know what goes on beneath my surface?" My nose came down out of the air. My eyes narrowed and focused. "You don't know what I'm thinking. You can't see into my mind to know what's going on there. You don't understand everything about what goes on in my head."

"Then why are you mad?" Rachel was about to talk me out of existence before I even started. Hater would have despaired of me.

"I start out trying to tell you how I feel about you - about us - and I end up mad at you, because you put me down for it - and twist my words around. You turn the beautiful things I've tried to express into something ugly, when that isn't the way I started out feeling at all."

"So you're saying you're in love with me?" She peered around the sharp edge of incredulity.

"Yes, I'm saying I love you. Can't you get that through your head? I love you! I love you! Why does everything have to be so hardcore with you?"

"If you're so in love with me, then why are you shouting? It doesn't sound like you love me. You're saying the words, but the tone in your voice? It's all wrong."

"I said it right a minute ago, but you weren't buying it then - so I've had to repeat it over and over - until the words sound stupid coming out of my mouth."

"What do you mean 'I wasn't buying it a minute ago'? Were you trying to sell me something? Trying to sell me a bunch of goods? Trying to put one over on me? I know what you're like, Sasha the Savage. If you're saying you love me, you must want something. What is it?"

"You are completely insane."

"I know that. I know I'm insane. I know I'm crazy. I don't need you to tell me that. You don't think I know that? You don't think I know you're the one who's made me this way? That it was you who turned me into a crazy bitch? You know, Nika, usually, I'm not a bitch. I'm really not. I know you think I am, most of the time. Most people do. But it's you who's doing it to me. Who else can put me into a state like you can? Who else drives me crazy this way? Who else am I crazy in love with?"

"You're still in love with me?" My voiced smoothed into a

whisper.

"Yes, you harlot, I'm in love with you. What did you think? What did you think we've been doing this whole time?"

"I didn't know. I wasn't sure. I guess that's what I wanted to know. Now that I think about it, it's exactly what I needed to find out. That is exactly what I was worried about, because I didn't know."

"Well now you do. So you don't have to worry."

"I guess I don't," I said. "It's nice to know. I guess I needed to hear you say it."

"Now you have."

I'm not real thrilled about being called a harlot, but the 'I love you' part was nice."

"Well I meant it, the 'I love you' part," she clarified.

"Right, I got that. I understand that. That's nice."

"It is nice."

We passed a moment of silence before I spoke again. "One thing, though, still bothers me."

The starch drained from Rachel's neck, and her head lolled around a few times.

"I knew it. What is it? It can't be good. You're always mad about something. Go ahead. Out with it. Tell me how wrong I am. Tell me how stupid I am. Tell me how, even for a prostitute I've been acting like a whore."

"Why don't you lighten up? I've never said any of those things to you."

"Nika darling, at one time or another, you've said all of those things to me," she replied.

I had to stop and think about that accusation for a minute, and I experienced the weirdest sensation of water rising up around my ears.

"If I said those things to you, then I'm sorry. I didn't mean any of them. Those are terrible things to say, and I should never have said them. We're both whores. What can it matter? I'm not talking about the flesh. I'm talking about the heart."

"Tell me about it. I was on the receiving end of it."

"And I'm sorry," I apologized.

"I know you are. You always are, afterwards. But when you get angry, you say these things. They only come out when you're angry. So it must be how you really feel. Because people only say what they really mean when they're angry."

"No they don't," I countered. "It's just the opposite. People only say the things they mean when... when they're not angry, when they're being calm and rational."

"Not so, Nika. You say things when you're angry because it's what you've been thinking all along. All it takes is for the anger to make you forget what you're hiding from me. The anger frees you. You drop your guard and blurt out the truth."

That's how I know, finally, what you've really been thinking all along. Not all those surface words you hide behind. But what's underneath. What really counts. What you really mean. How you really feel. That's how I find out."

"I don't have an answer for that."

"I knew you wouldn't, 'cause I'm smart. I leave you speechless."

"Don't flatter yourself. Not because what you said is so profound, but because it has to be the most pathetic thing I've ever heard. How can you go through life believing only the things people say to you when they're angry? That is so sad."

"It's how people are. Anger is real. It's true."

"No, you're wrong," I said. "That isn't how people are, not how I am. The things I say when I'm not all stirred up, when I'm calm, those are the things I really mean. The things I say when I'm angry, they come out of nowhere - and I'm always sorry for saying them afterwards. That stuff isn't really me."

"That's exactly how you really are," she insisted.

"And what about you? What are you like? Hater tells me you've been running around like a silly whore, jumping into the backseats of limousines with guys I've never even seen before."

"I haven't been in the back seat of any limo with any guys. If Hater has been saying that, he's crazy."

"Is that a fact? You did not climb into the backseat of a

limo, last night, or morning, or whatever, right after I left you, with some aristocrat? Some guy? Some bronze-domed guy?"

"What bronze-domed guy? You mean Roger? You must be joking. He's a major, motorized pimp. I haven't been *in the back seat* with him. By myself I was getting a ride to a club with some John. We weren't together. Hater told you that? Hater better watch himself, if he's thinking on starting trouble with me. Telling lies. Spreading rumors. I will go up to him in front of everybody, and I'll let that boy know right to his face!"

The anger was so thick in my mouth I felt as though I might be developing rabies. Rachel's air of dismissal and subsequent threats toward Hater did nothing to change how I felt. Either Rachel was lying, or Hater was. No matter how much trouble it caused between the three of us, I vowed to discover the truth.

Whenever I was inspired to do something wild or stupid I always blamed it on the full moon. What did that pale and distant orb have to do with my indiscretions? I might as well have blamed my assignments on the Evening Star.

On the night of my annunciation a full moon had upset my equilibrium, and Venus? She was twinkling the first time Rachel and I unveiled ourselves on Global Uplink International.

The orgy was at Club Abattoir. I was hoping a certain pimp named Roger would be there, too. I might have a few drinks first - together with the alignment of the moon and stars, I was sure to be howling. In reality, I was pink and hairless, a little love doll. Not very tough at all.

For transportation I commandeered a go-bot. I took my first baby steps toward freedom on that battery-powered scooter. To get from my place to Club Abattoir, a good mile across town, required seven or eight blocks just to break free of what I considered my quadrant before I was onto the main thoroughfare within the zone.

On the roadway that night I joined a smattering of scooters amid the growing aristocratic traffic flowing through The Zone. Only the uppermost 1% could still afford to operate motor vehicles that ran on gasoline. Taillights glared in pairs ahead of me until a red traffic light corralled a whole stampede of transports, giving me time to reach the head of the pack at the intersection. Watching the cross lights, timing my arrival just right, the minute the light turned green I whipped through the intersection - taking the lead on all those limousines for half a block before the mainstream traffic overtook me again. The real me.

On the far side of the bridge the traffic lights showed go-ahead green. The light to turn right on the far side also shone

green. Then a green thought of my own lit up my head - I was about to be run over by right-turning traffic.

I squeezed the brake handles. The wires flexed, sending the scooter into a skid. By crouching on the pedals, and rocking my body, I kept the gobot, and me with it, from sliding sideways. Together we shuddered to a halt.

A transport cut across my intended flight path. I saw my reflection on the warbling flash off a bright chrome bumper. After that several more limos hurtled past. Then the road was clear. I looked in all directions before I tiptoed my scooter across the big intersection.

Interloping through those neighborhoods proved as dangerous as racing with traffic. On street corners rude boys clustered like drones waiting to repel any foreign invader from another neighborhood. Even though they flexed tougher than they really were sometimes when they ung in a bunch they waxed brave and would hurl a tonic bottle followed by insults and challenges. Hiding in a group made them cocky that way. On their own, one on one, they would never dare.

The rattle of changing gears. The whirr of rubber brushing asphalt. Gobot and I sliced through the night unmolested. Hovels surrounded me, maybe a choice of two different constructs. One set with the garage facing this way, the house next door spun just the opposite way. Most of them decayed and dilapidated

beyond recognition. I was making good time between them with no homeboys the wiser.

We emerged from the poverty stricken hovels and entered into the downtown area. No one could have missed where the cast production party raged. I could hear the music, the crowd talking and laughing. The hilarity. Gobot and I parked around back in the alley for safekeeping. I sidled indoors to explore the situation.

The noise and commotion served as a distraction, allowing me into the party without the usual courtesy frisk. Finding my way up the hallway of The Club did not present that big of a challenge.

The DJ ensconced in his perch spun vinyl and prerecorded track and various computer noises. No one was in the room on the right, the formal room reserved for VIP guests. I strolled up the hallway where the bright and shiny coming attractions posters hung.

For a second I had a vision of Rachel on the half shell, surrounded by three suitors. I didn't know any of them. By the looks on their faces they knew me. Their eyes searched the floor and ceiling. Rachel withdrew herself from their circle in order to greet me.

"Hey stranger." Standing near enough I could smell her body wash. She was clean in ways boys and girls both liked. She

wiggled all over right in front of me.

"How are you, sweet thing," I said.

"Pretty all right, actually." Rachel took my hand. She was covered head to foot in latex, every inch covered, except for the naughty bits, which were exposed.

"Actually? Been drinking?" I didn't really need to ask. I could see her eyes were mystified.

"Yes. You want one?" She asked.

"Sure, it being my birthday and all."

"You always say that," Rachel said. "What's that make it, about your third birthday this year?"

"I don't know, dear. I guess I'm getting predictable in my old age. I have no idea when I was born."

Rachel waylaid one of the waitresses, retrieving a tall, cool tonic.

"Here you go, *dear*," Rachel said, handing me the bottle.

I accepted the tonic and smiled. "Is it free on the drinks?"

The three suitors who had been talking to Rachel when I first walked in had not budged. Nor had they created any conversation to fill the void left in the wake of her departure.

Rachel said, "Yes, the drinks are free. The Body says they are on the house in honor of our big debut together. So have at it. Don't steal any and take it home with you. But party while

you're here. There's a spigot running at the bar."

"Steal any? I'm offended." I knew what she was talking about. One for the road, two for the road, a six-pack for the road: I'd done it before. The remorse never came until later, when it was too late.

Rachel said, "Just kidding. I know you wouldn't. Drink up. It's a party. We're going live tonight!"

I cracked the tonic in my hand. Sometimes you don't realize how thirsty you are until the liquid is pounding down your throat.

"Feeling parched, Slut Puppy?" Rachel was laughing at the tears in my eyes.

"Yes, it was a long ride over here."

"You and Gobot make it okay?"

"No problem."

I could see Rachel's little scar starting to blaze.

In order to retrieve her drink she had to lean between the three gonads still hanging where she had left them. She spoke not a word to them. I didn't either. I got myself another tonic and with our drinks we proceeded arm and arm into the Main Event Room and continued out onto the patio where most of the party people mingled, including Rachel's friend from before me, Candy Kane. Around her, I kept my comments brief. In my opinion she was an airhead. I could not stand her attitude. Even her breasts

were impudent. She probably called me bad names, too. She was shorter than Rachel. Same crimped wings, only her hair shone with a brownish hue to it. She had a pointed little nose and an even sharper attitude she wielded like a switchblade, and she maintained a hardbody, no doubt. She and Rachel dressed alike for the evening, even though it was my turn with Rachel.

She saw me, squinted her eyes, and gushed to see me.

"Sasha! How special!" I knew better than to be drawn in by her enthusiasm. I wasn't sure I could keep up with her verbally, so I kept my distance.

"What's happening, Candy." From the gay heights from which she had greeted me she came fluttering back down to Earth and met my sullen tone without crashing.

"Not much Sasha." What's happening with you?

"Not much, Candy."

I was just this side of becoming the aforementioned bad name she called me behind my back, and she knew it - but she wasn't going to cut me, not with Rachel standing next to me.

"Interesting," she said, looking around for someplace else to stand. Then I watched a tremor pass in ripples across the surface of her drink before her free hand shot out like she was trying to catch her balance. "Oh you guys, let me tell you what happened to me yesterday."

She said this to no one - and to everyone, so a little

crowd gathered. "I was walking to the hairdresser's the other day, and that guy, that one, you know, what's his name? The one who's so creepy? I think he's the towel boy or something. Candy looked to me for clarification."

"You mean Rudy? He's a helper or something."

"Soap flake boy, whatever. Anyway, you guys know who I mean, right? The really weird guy with the glasses and his face is all..."

At this point Candy's descriptive powers failed her. Rudy's appearance was apparently too horrible for her to put into words. a couple of her chicken-headed friends were already bobbing and clucking in support. We all knew who Rudy was.

"I was on my way to get my hair done," she continued, "you know - minding my own thing - when all of a sudden, he's standing there against the wall, and he started *talking* to me! And I'm like, 'Hello? Do I even know you?' and he's all like, 'No, but I know you,' So *Mr. Cool*, let me tell you."

I interrupted her. So at this point: "you were feeling attracted to him?"

Rachel's rather sharp elbow made contact with my rib cage.

"Hardly," Candy said. "He is so creepy, so weird. He's disgusting, and I'm like this to him: 'I don't remember saying you could talk to me. I don't know who you think you are.'"

"He probably thinks he's Rudy. You know Rudy. He's a good

guy."

She was trying to be sly about it, but Rachel was yanking the back of my latex so hard I was loosing my balance.

Candy glared at me in defiance.

"He's disgusting. He gives me the creeps. Who does he think he is, talking to me?"

"He was trying to be friendly."

Candy almost spit out a sip of her drink. Of course she did not - because that would be too gross. She acted like she had to laugh so hard she couldn't swallow, and she waved her hand in front of her mouth to show either the drink was burning her tongue, or she might spit her drink out yet. I was no longer sure at that point.

I sort of bobbed and weaved along with Candy, trying to decipher each nuance of her performance. Finally, after gasping for air, she regained the power of speech.

"I have all the friends I need, thank you very much. I sure as hell don't need some geekoidal loser like - what's his name."

Rachel's hot whisper scorched my ear.

"Give it up, Nika. You're only making yourself look bad."

"I don't care how it makes me look."

"Well you should." Rachel crossed her arms.

"Well I don't," I said. I could feel the stubbornness jelling in my heart.

"Let's not argue." She uncrossed her arms and laid her hand on my arm. "Not on our big preview night. We go on in about an hour."

"I'm not arguing, I'm just saying..." but the look of reproach in Rachel's eyes, the sly little grin, said that spoiling tonight would be wasteful in ways neither one of us wanted. She put her arms around me, and we drifted away from the herd.

Candy managed to swallow another sustaining sip of her drink under the guidance and solicitations of two friends, one helping to steady her arm holding the drink, the other gently patting her on the back.

Meanwhile Rachel and I were drifting away from the mainstream. I'd taken her in my arms and we were swaying in time to a slow song blaring from the speakers. Rachel was mooning until I thought she might swoon. When I spoke to her it was softly so that only she might hear.

"Had any visions lately?"

"Not lately, but I'd say the chances for later tonight are pretty good. You and I together are going to be magnificent."

"You have been drinking."

"Yes, I have - but that's not the reason."

We were by ourselves under the moon and the pollution. Her eyes were wide calm and bright. Looking at them in that light I

thought I could draw all the necessary sustenance I would ever need from their surface. Then I saw deep into them like looking at the bottom of a pool where you know the water is warm all the way down and pleasant. Candy's voice disturbed my reverie.

"No, you two. I want you to hear the rest of this."

A voice from the crowd said, "Leave them alone. Can't you see they're in love?"

We wrinkled our noses and moved away from the crowd caught in the thrall of Candy's contempt.

I used my tonic bottle to tap on Rachel's drink.

"You're half empty there."

"So I am," she said. "Come with me, girlfriend."

We returned to the kitchen, and those same three guys were still standing there bereft. I turned my back on them to watch Rachel extract a bottle from a hiding place within one of the lower cupboards and pour herself a new drink.

"Grain Pain? Brain damage in a bottle. Don't get too drunk or you'll look sloppy on camera."

"You're crazy," Rachel said. "I'm only using a little. It's not like I'm drinking it straight. You can't even taste the Grain Pain."

She handed me the glass and I took a sip. The pirate smell scorched my sinuses. Rachel smiled like a wild child.

"Smecht gute?"

It took me a moment to regain normal breathing.

"Mother's milk," I said.

"Can't even taste it, can you?"

I wheezed as I spoke.

"Can't even taste it."

"You can too, liar." Rachel wasn't hiding anything, and I realized I didn't need to either.

"I can taste it, just a little. You want to be able to taste it some, add enough mix to smooth the edge."

Rachel went back to the patio, probably to affect damage control with Candy over my defense of Rudy. I knew it was useless trying to get that crowd to lighten up. At least I hadn't stood by and said nothing. Of course, in reality, I was acting hypocritically because it wasn't like I was going to hang out with Rudy either.

Candy wouldn't speak to him at all. I'd speak to him but not hang out with him. The most I might lay claim to is how on a sliding scale I registered as a slightly lesser bitch than Candy.

While my mind was turning over these thoughts I'd drifted over to the DJ. I was thumbing through the albums, picking out an occasional one to hold along my forearm so I could frown at the cover art and read the credits.

People left; others arrived. The party reached a certain

peak. I found myself standing next to some dude wearing slacks and a sweater. He had to come supervise my album choice. As far as the music went we were exactly able to agree on a number of selections, exactly. Exactly which ones were good and which were not. Exactly.

I ditched Mr. Music Critic and went in search of Rachel and snuck up on her and put my arm around her.

Rachel slumped into my arms.

"Hmm, you like to play with fire?" Her tone had a resonance drawing me to her mouth, which tasted sweet and lethal from the Grain Pain.

"Yes, let's go play with fire."

"Not afraid of getting burned?"

"I'm retardant," I said.

"You're retarded for sure." Rachel said.

"Come with me, my little pyromaniac. The time has come for us to go live."

We ended up on a couch in the green room where people were listlessly dancing. The tonic and the grain were battling for supremacy of my soul.

Rachel plummeted onto my lap. She wrapped her arms around my neck and gave me a kiss like a pythoness. I was gone, lost all track of time.

When I remembered myself no one was dancing anymore. No one

was in the room besides Rachel and me. I think we chased them out. The producer, Judy Large, stood over us.

She had an attitude like the steel rod up her back. She'd had scoliosis as a kid. It was the first thing anybody ever said about her. She spent six months in a body cast, enough to give anyone a bad attitude.

When I first met her I said, Nice to meet you. In response, she raised her eyebrow, spun around on her heel, and walked out of the room. It was the first time I ever heard the word 'snubbed'. Candy and Rachel had to explain it to me.

Even then I remained unconvinced I should care. By the way they acted you'd have thought I had just been run over by a train. To me it was ridiculous. We all lived in the same pit. No one stood in a position to put on airs.

"But you said *hello*, and she didn't," Rachel said, almost frantic to make me understand.

"That's stupid," I said. "It doesn't make her superior; it makes her rude. It shows a lack, not a strength." There was no convincing her. Rachel and her crowd lived by the snub. This particular brand of stupidity was an inborn girl thing I didn't possess as far as I could tell. I couldn't make her understand how anyone who lacked the self-confidence to say a simple hello was blatantly revealing her own lack of self confidence. So I was surprised to come up for air and find Judy standing over us,

and speaking in a halfway civil tone.

"Stage One is available if you two are ready to go live."

She did not have to tell Rachel twice. She stood up in a wave and hauled me up in the process. Hand in hand we tramped across The Club. The farther we proceeded down the hallway toward the studios, the more I became aware that my toes were not clearing the carpeting like they should.

I started laughing because even if I concentrated I could not get my feet to cooperate. The nerve centers were not relaying their proper messages. At least the knees were responding, so I was still *picking 'em up and putting 'em down*.

We turned into the Studio One doorway. In the booth were Judy, a mop of hair I didn't recognize controlling the sound board, and Hater, my tech guy, trying to go unnoticed standing in the background. Like a couple of felled trees Rachel and I went *timber!* onto the bed. The cover was thin and the mattress hard. Without direction or anything else we resumed our kissing. Somebody said something metallic over the speaker. It might have been, "Whenever you're ready." Or something like that.

Rachel was amazing. Her body was writhing in ways I never guessed it would. A wave passed from the feet, up the legs, through the hips (oh, the hips!), and the stomach and the breasts - and finally our necks and mouth. Our tongues were going crazy and our hands were roaming around so roughly, the

rubbing and touching almost hurt. I slid to the side, trying to slow down, and get a handle on the situation.

"Don't just lie on me Sasha," Rachel said, sniveling. "Take me. Take me, Sasha. No Don't just lie on me; take me. You don't love me. You don't." She was starting to cry. I fixed her crying with a kiss. She responded like she was starving. I stood up by the side of the bed and stripped off my gear, and then Rachel's. She spoke from the field of poppies where she lay. Her meaning now laid bare, her eyes hidden behind the crook of her arm. The other arm was flung and forgotten out to the side. I stood for a moment watching her doing the backstroke. She wasn't getting anywhere, but her form was good.

From the sound booth came the voice of the almighty: "Are we ready to go out there?"

Rachel started flailing around like she was drowning. I flung myself toward her lifeguard style. I doubt they salvaged anything printable, unless they labeled it Drunken First Time, or some dumb thing.

Rachel naked was the same as body surfing on waves of tan and blonde. A girl pressing and welling lovely and lithe, swelling shapes rose and fell and we were buoyed up and tossed about and lost for days.

Rachel protested I was too much for her, the first time. Remnants of some idiotic dialogue we were supposed to have

memorized. Rachel was coming in agitated waves. There was no holding out. I loop-de-looped and Rachel's eyes grew wide with insight.

I heard a gaggle of party girls giggling in the sound booth. I became aware of Rachel lying beneath me.

I sprinkled kisses around her neck and thought we might catch another swell together. Rachel said no.

She pushed me off her and started mooning around, looking for her outfit. I asked her what the matter was. Her answer was inarticulate. She started mumbling and shaking her head - as though my question was so out of line it should never have been asked in the first place.

I realized I was lying there naked. I scooted to the edge of the bed and tugged on my tangled suit to unknot the mess. I had my bottoms and tops on before Rachel was dressed. She clutched one boot in her hand while searching for the other one.

I tried to embrace her. With one arm she leveraged me away from her.

"What's wrong?" I wanted to bask in a moment already past.

"Nika, where is my other boot? *Find* my other boot."

Like it was the most important thing in the world. I started looking for it on my hands and knees. I found it where she was standing. I sat up on the edge of the bed and held the musty pink thing up to her.

"Here's your damn boot."

She snatched it out of my grasp and started pulling it on most ladylike and offended.

"You'd better get that booth door open," Rachel said.

I wasn't sure what she meant. The door wasn't locked.

A blazing shaft of light poured in from the hallway. The door shut, and I was sitting in the shadows again. It took me a second to realize Rachel had left the set. I blew all the air out of my lungs and sat there hanging my head, shaking it in disgust.

Eventually I bowed my neck and went to find her.

The only thing Rachel had to do was cross the hall and she was in the women's lavatory.

Judy came out and gave me the lowdown. Rachel had been sick, and then she was sick some more, then she went into Candy's dressing room and passed out against the door. They could not get the door open because she had collapsed against it in a heap, blocking the way.

Finally, they managed to shove Rachel aside, enter the room, and drag her onto the bed. In her unconscious state she was going to live. I could hardly believe this was Judy with the rod up her butt talking nicely to me. I guess caring for a drunk - plus whatever guilty expression was on my face - brought out the good rod in her.

For that I was truly grateful. She told me I could hang out if I wanted to. She was just letting me know how Rachel was fairing. She disappeared up the hallway then, and I could tell I was not invited since I didn't officially live there or work for the club anymore.

"Nika, what on Earth happened?" Candy bowed toward me like a cat smelling something curious.

"Rachel had a little too much to drink, I guess."

"A *little* too much? You guess?"

"A lot too much, I know."

"I should say," Candy said. "She vomited her guts up, then she passed out cold. What happened with you girls?"

"I don't know. I guess she was nervous because of the live feed or something. I don't really know."

I left Candy gawking and passed through the empty control room.

Outside The Club I straddled the Gobot and together we set a course for the library. I had no idea what time it was, almost early again.

My mind struggled to arrange the facts. How quickly news of what happened would spread I had no idea. An on-air debacle would not be so bad for me. A bad showing for the cameras could be disastrous for Rachel. Her reputation as a pro was everything to her. Drunk on the job was not her style.

I had fixed that one for her. On the other hand, Judy and her magic rod were a trip. Poor Rachel. I was sick to death she became wiped out. I wanted to talk to her. I wanted to explain how much I loved her. A thing like this could put her off women for good. I was sure she would be angry, at herself for drinking too much and at me for not stopping her.

One thing was for sure: no more talk of Roger, whoever he might be. He could not have been at The Club. Candy would have been sure to introduce us if he had.

The nighttime teased the warmth out of me. I was beyond the old people camp and riding on a deserted road running adjacent to an ancient and abandoned schoolyard. I heard the tinkling chains of the swings and the clinking exercise rings knelling softly for me.

The wind was increasing from fitful gusts into a stubborn breeze growing in resistance the faster I throttled. A dust devil leaped up in a whirl and caught by the shifting wind drifted like a shroud across the deserted school yard and through the drooping steel fencing. I plotted its trajectory but couldn't avoid a collision. For a moment the swirling brown granules pattering against my face enveloped me. I squeezed shut my eyes and lips. Then I was in the clear again, with my eyes open under a moonlit night with only the grit taste left in my mouth. A grave premonition passed through my mind making the

soul shudder between meat and bone.

I puttered beyond the school and arrived near the railroad crossing. Gobot vibrated and shook when we crossed over the remnants of the tracks. From there I had the wind at my back and only a few blocks more remained before I arrived home in my basement hovel safely alone.

In the VIP room Hater and I reclined opposite one another on an overstuffed couch commodious enough for two fellows ensorcelled by the spirit of Epicurus to hold a revelatory conversation in the garden of Earthly delights.

Hater mentally tortured me for information about what happened before, during, and after the live feed at The Club Abattoir that night. He had been sequestered in the sound booth the entire time and only seen the middle portion of what happened, which, he confessed, he found sexy, except for Rachel's sudden departure.

"Stop being a *puta* and tell me what went on at that party," he said.

"I'll tell you but you can't repeat this, not to anybody."

"Not even The Body?"

"No, I'm not talking about him, but don't tell him either," I insisted.

"Why would I say anything to that guy?"

"I don't know. You brought it up. I'm just saying, don't tell anyone."

"I'm your friend," he said. "You know I won't."

"Yes, I know you wouldn't. It just makes me feel better to hear you say it. Now tell me you love me, because that makes me feel special, too."

"Just tell me."

I started from the beginning.

"We went to the party at The Club. That is, Rachel was already there, obviously, and I showed up later."

Hater rocked forward, and rested his forearms on the tops of his knees.

"Any women there?"

"There are always women at the Abattoir. They don't let you out much, do they?"

"No they don't. I'm not supposed to be in The Club during business hours. I have a job to do."

"Candy was there."

"She has a nice face," Hater said, "Her nose is kind of pointy. Her legs are good. Hate to say it, but she's starting to get the kind of ass short girls get when they start gaining weight. She either needs to lay off the snacks or grow about two inches. And her tits are too small. Sometimes they seem all

right, because she arches her back all the time to try and make them look bigger, but when you get right down to it, they're itty bitty."

"No wonder women aren't interested in you. You're so derogatory about everyone. Anyway, I was there to see Rachel. She was standing with these three geeks having a big conversation, but it was cool, because she ditched them as soon as she saw me. She showed me where the tonics were."

"Where were they?"

"They were in the refrigerator behind the bar. Where did you think they would be?"

"I don't know," he replied. "You said she showed you where the tonics were like it was someplace special. They might have had a keg or something."

"There was a keg. I see your point. Anyway, she showed me where the cans were, and she'd already been drinking."

"What was she drinking?"

"Grain Pain."

"Holy Cinco de Mayo!" Hater whistled.

"I kid you not. She was tanked. So was I, pretty soon. We went on like that for a while and somehow we ended up on this couch where we were making out. Once we were warmed up and ready we went into the Live Show recording theater."

"Cool. I saw that part."

"Our act was going fine," I continued, "but afterwards it was a nightmare. Rachel got really sick and puked her guts up in the bathroom. Then she disappeared into Candy's dressing room. She wasn't looking so good."

"Road hard and hung up wet."

Hater and his man-purse full of ready-made phrases.

"Go easy there." I didn't have to get mad to make my point. "She's my partner."

"Sorry," he replied, "but she's more likely to go out with a robot like Roger."

"Who the hell is Roger?" I felt my tummy flip.

"Thought that would grab your attention. He's the dude - the one who you say you've been looking for. I found out his name, and it isn't her cousin. He's a giant Ho-wrangler."

"Is he big?" I asked, half afraid to hear the answer.

"He's huge." Hater smiled at me as though I were already lying in a hospice bed.

"Now I know you're lying."

"I have to hand it to you, Nika," he said. "When you go looking for trouble, you surely find it."

"He's got no claim on Rachel. I'm the one who's got a claim on Rachel. Big time."

"Yes, I know. You can't fake what you two did for the live feed. I'm just saying, Roger has his eye on Rachel, too, and

sooner or later you will have to do something about it."

"Like what?" I asked, looking for advice.

"From the size of him, I'd say get the life crushed outta you."

"I'm not afraid of anybody. Well, actually, I'm afraid of everybody and everything, but not of this. Not if Rachel's at stake."

"I know," Hater agreed. That's all you have going for you - pluck and ignorance. You've been lucky so far."

"Luck, nothing. It's skill, boyfriend. And you know perfectly well I'm not ignorant."

"As far as humping on Rachel goes, that's true. I'm in awe of you there. You're some kind of stud pony in reverse. I need to do something myself."

"You're such a perverse combination of techie bad boy and virgin."

"It's a combination that works for me - better than getting your ass beat by Roger the Android is going to work for you."

"Hater," I said, "I'm tired of hearing that name, and don't curse. It's really beneath you."

I leaned back against the arm of the couch and began picking the label off a tonic I'd been nursing. I'd worked up most of one corner when I said, "I really love Rachel. She is amazing to me, truly amazing. That night was crazy. It was

great, too, though. She zipped me the next morning. I think she was worried, like maybe I never wanted to see her again. So I told her how I really felt. I hope we never break up."

Hater took a small sip of the tonic he was nursing. "Don't get me wrong or anything, and don't go psycho: your girlfriend is fine. That's all I'm saying. She's damn fine. Oops. Sorry."

This was the first time in a long time Hater had said anything positive about Rachel. Since he wasn't being clever I could agree with him that she was indeed fine and I overlooked his potty mouth.

"I know she is, and she likes me."

Hater looked right at me.

"I know. That's the hardest part to understand." Hater didn't blink. "I'm not kidding."

I didn't blink either. Looking at the hollow place where the love should have been, I said, "When are you getting a girlfriend?"

"I don't know. Hater looked down into his tonic as though the Genie of the Malt might provide him a lover through three wishes granted. "One thing I do know: this tonic is starting to taste really good."

I stood up and relieved him of his empty. "Have another one," I said. I reached into the miniature tub filled with ice and spirits. On the sly I had arranged for our little picnic

with one of the bartenders in return for services rendered.

When I handed him a loaded one, he said, "This tonic didn't cost you anything?"

Now I showed him the hollows behind my eyes.

"It isn't costing you anything."

We sipped in silence for a while. He was right about one thing: the tonics tasted good and buzzy. We couldn't get much higher. Time for a swim. The main attraction, what The Club Abattoir was really known for, a giant transparent water tank equipped with a curvy slide. Every hour on the hour a fresh gaggle of girls frolicked naked in the tank for the viewing pleasure of the paying audience. They called it The Tank of Mermaids. The pornographic aspect of the naked girls was compounded by the obscenity of so much fresh water being used for such a frivolous and prurient purpose while the world outside dried into dust. At the end of the evening each of the partygoers got to take home a jug of the stuff for private use. I'm not sure what that was about, other than naked girls were dime a dozen in The Zone whereas potable water was at a premium.

Dimples accentuated Hater's sinews. I stripped down too and joined him at the lip of the Mermaid Tank.

The muggy air inside The Club surrounded us. The water was deep and the first step felt warm and inviting. Farther below the water cooled producing a pleasant thrill. He braved the

chill about peter deep before backing out again.

"Creeping in slow like this is too brutal," he said, stepping out of the water and onto the deck - padding with wet feet to the deep end of the tank. "You have to get in all at once."

He made a horizontal dive into the deep end. I covered my crotch for no good reason and jumped in as well.

At first the water shocked, cold and sharp. Quickly it felt warmer sliding smooth across the skin with a thrilling hint of resistance as I swam with my head above water to the shallow end. Hater had surfaced to rub the solvent out of his eyes - an impossible task.

He stood in the tank hugging himself and shivering.

"You should have turned the heater on."

"It's still early in the year for that," I said. "I don't have the authority anyway. You have to keep moving if you want to stay warm. Go down the slide. It is completely different when you're in the buff."

"Let's check it out," Hater said. He waded toward the steps before diving the remaining distance. I followed him out of the pool.

Hater padded to the ladder and climbed to the top of the slide. I went to retrieve the kitchen pot they stored aside for scooping water and wetting the slide.

Newly installed the slide had come equipped with automatic water jets. They broke eons ago and nobody knew how to fix them. The guy with the expertise probably died of dehydration somewhere out there in the wasteland. Hater excelled at fixing everything. Apparently, no one ever thought to ask him.

"Wait a second," I said. "The slide has to be wet or your rear-end will burn up on reentry."

"Can't I just go down?" Hater sat on the top of the slide and walked his buns to the edge. "You're taking too long. Time's a' wasting. I'm a sitting duck up here."

Just the wrong amount of taunting in what Hater said awakened the minister of cruelty, and I encouraged him make the mistake for himself.

"Sure, Hater, go ahead and slide down. I'm sure it'll be fine."

He pushed off. His bare backside skidding down the fiberglass slide sounded like the wheels of a half-ton truck with the brakes locking up. He skid to a standstill on the lower stretch of the slide running parallel to the platform. He let out a groan before rolling off the slide and slumping onto the deck. He lay there in a heap looking like either flotsam or jetsam, one or the other.

The slide had to be wet before anyone could ride its length. This new knowledge came to Hater where he lay gripping

his scorched bottom cheeks.

"I tried to warn you," I said, bringing a pot full of water by the handle and splashing the length of the slide.

Hater lay very still on the deck, and without lifting his head he mumbled when he spoke.

"That was seriously painful."

"I could tell by the sound your bottom emitted. The best-case scenario is when you're wet and the slide is wet too and you lose traction like mad."

Hater roused himself, saying, "I'm getting back in the pool then," plunging into the shallow end, hauling himself out again slippery and sleek. When he reached the ladder he paused to tenderly touch his raw cheeks. You go first to show me how it's done.

The water was shocking only if you let it be. As Hater had done I sliced in and out before there was time to feel sorry for myself. The slide was slick - and so was my hide. I clambered to the top of the incline and without hesitation I pushed off down the chute. I was plunging with my ankles in the air before I had time to give a *whoop!* A whoosh and a splash later I gasped to the surface and blew out a snoot full of solvent.

Hater followed suit and was lying on his back with his ankles in the air by the time he hit the water. For that very reason the wealthy old gents who frequented The Club never tired

of watching the girls play on the slide.

Afterward we wrapped ourselves in towels. Through the skylight I searched the sky for inspiration - we needed something else to talk about. The night was full of the soft light of a sky impregnated with stars. I said, "I have to get you and Rachel together sometime."

Hater asked, "Why? So you can check our stories against each other?" He always tried to act like such a hard case when I knew perfectly well he was a nerd.

"Not anything that terminal," I said, shrugging it off, "so you can get to know each other better. My best pal and my best gal, that sort of nonsense."

"I wouldn't mind meeting up with her again. It's been awhile. Hater drank in some tank water, and spewed it back in an impudent arch. "A showdown between her and me. I like it."

Swollen with glowing toxins and ready for the rain to break a pregnant storm from the sea swept over the coastal range and dropped its heavy load spattering across the Pleasure Zone. The streets were slicked clean from days of rain. At night the wind moving across the wet pavement sent a chill through Hater and me. We were out of our league, tapping shoulders outside of a drug dispensary. You never knew what people might barter in

exchange for their script.

I was the one tapping shoulders. Hater was hiding around the corner. He peeked his head around every once in a while. Other than that meek involvement he stayed clear of the negotiations. I had begun the process of corrupting him, a fact I'm not entirely proud of.

I couldn't begrudge him his fear. He had sense enough to be scared whereas I acted gleefully stupid about it - until I heard Hater whispering ferociously.

He said, "There's a trooper!" And he repeated it under his breath about half a dozen times.

Message received, big-boy. The urgency of Hater's alarm put me into a panic without my having to look around for verification. I dropped all pretenses and ran like a hoodlum.

Behind the chemical dispensary lurked an alleyway with a cinder block wall we overcame in two moves - grip and hoist, kick out and over, landing on our feet.

We plummeted to earth in a forlorn backyard strip shared by a row of maybe a dozen hovels. Year in year out the rain had washed away any dignity from these dwellings. They were only standing up from a kind of crossbred stubbornness. The people who lived in this neighborhood were poor squatters living off the grid, under the radar. I could tell by the weeds gripping the metal junk dumped and rusting along the wall, stuff like a

bicycle frame, a shopping cart, an old refrigerator with the door off.

We were nevertheless standing in someone's back yard so I nudged Hater and we worked our way around someone's little garden patch all gone to seed. Then we moved in between two makeshift hovels whose drawn curtains were suffused with an orange glow muffling the family noise. Pungent the waft of deep fat frying.

We maneuvered our way between the two buildings with none the wiser and reached the public walkway before taking off at a trot. We put a good half dozen blocks between the drug dispensary and us before quieting to a walk.

Amid the purple drizzle Hater was puffing for air.

"Do you think the owner busted us?"

My hands were on my hips to facilitate my breathing.

"He might have been the one. Either that or the trooper was just making the rounds on his regular patrol."

We were headed into a deserted unknown neighborhood and heading deeper into the west side. The ghetto soldiers had yet to muster for the night - maybe it was the rain keeping them in. We reached the pass under the abandoned highway and saw an abandoned transport on fire. For a while we stood there watching the flames, neither one of us saying a word. No one but us was around to take notice of such a bizarre spectacle, and nobody

cared enough to extinguish the burning wreck.

"We're in the wrong place," Hater said.

"We could go to The Body at The Club," I suggested.

Hater whipped out his index finger and pointed from the hip.

"Through there? I think not. This situation is too crime-oriented for me."

"You won't come with me?" I glanced sideways at Hater.

"Nope. You can count me out of this." Hater put his hands on his hips making our stances identical.

"If Body supplies something, and I carry it all the way back to the library, you will help me ingest it, though, right?"

"Oh, I'll help you ingest it, sure," Hater grinned at me.

"Why don't we go to The Club and wait there together, in case Rachel shows up early?"

"How about I go back to the Library and wait for you there."

No one mourned the burning car or kept a vigil by the fire as I stayed on the opposite side of the underpass and circumambulated as fast as I could to resume my merry way. The flames threw wild light in flickering patterns along the concrete revealing cryptic symbols spray painted in red and black by gang members long since murdered. I left those ghosts

behind and continued on my free agent's enterprise.

Once I reached The Club I located The Body entertaining in the VIP Lounge. Various lizards puffed on a central hookah drawing pleasure from a tentacle all their own.

I don't know why I ever allowed myself to get dry-stoned. If I could have a couple of drinks first I could be fine with it. Getting stoned by itself always morphed into a real drag. The true pothead will insist my reaction emerged from my own predilection for melancholy, only magnified. So be it. If I was a little anxious about life before, getting stoned transformed me into a trembling wreck.

"Hello, Sasha, come in little sister. Good to see you," The Body said. "Where've you been keeping yourself? You want to get high, Sweet Meat?"

I cringed in response to his creepy vernacular. I wanted to say no. Getting stoned was bumming me out a lot lately.

"Sure," I said, my innards churning with anxiety.

The Body spread out his arms in a way that left me no choice but to embrace him. Leaving The Body hanging was not an option. When he took me in his arms I hugged him because I had to in order to keep peace. He delivered one of those brief, slapping-the-back kind of guy hugs before the inevitable smarmy hug set in until he tightened his embrace and wouldn't let go. If I didn't fight him he'd start squeezing and pinching. If I

did fight he pretended we were engaged in playful rough housing.

"I've been around. I get caught up in the on stage productions," I said after The Body released me.

"How's that going? You're career on track?" The Body gestured for me to follow him into his little wet bar area. The room was filled with people I didn't know. They didn't act like they saw me. To them, I was invisible. They were of various types. Some were pretty porn people. The guys were all straight, at least as far as their professional lives were concerned. The women fell into various categories, fetish, feet, bondage, spanking, straight, gonzo, vanilla, big black rimmed glasses, every imaginable flavor of demimondaine.

Body led me into the kitchenette, opened the refrigerator, and handed me a can of Red Fever. There wasn't much we could say or do that didn't somehow involve those cold cylinders.

"You want to puff the magic dragon?" The Body knew I was there to get a buzz on of some sort. I had hoped to get a hold of pharmaceuticals without having to get stoned in the process. His question was really more of a statement. A big part of me wanted to say no. Saying no would make the rest of the score impossible.

"What the hell. A hundred years from now, who's going to care?" I said with resignation, trying to let go the worry.

Body lifted the lid on one china storage pot in his

collection, and from the pocket of his crimson silk dressing gown he withdrew a white ceramic pipe emblazoned with the figure of a red Chinese dragon. He laid the pipe on the counter and pinched it full of red-haired dragonfly.

So moist curled the greengage Body had to pack the bowl repeatedly by tamping it with his thumb to make the bud lie flat. He then opened a small ceramic phial and dusted the green bud with white powder. He handed me the bowl for the first inhalation, the ceremonious show of respect by a stoner for an honored guest. I put the clay pipe to my lips as The Body struck a match.

"Nobody will care in a hundred years?" The Body repeated my words from the moment before. He lowered the match onto the green bud swelling erect to kiss the flame. "Sweetheart, let me tell you, nobody cares right now."

Whatever emotion it was I felt in response to that remark slipped from the grasp of my understanding like a sleek salmon slicing through a mountain stream. The Body's voice was disappearing beneath the din of confusion created under the smoke.

I couldn't fix on a single idea. After that sickly sweet smoke filled my poor bloody lungs my thoughts were swarming around me so thick and furious I couldn't take a bead on any one of them for very long. My thoughts hurled themselves headlong

towards some goal that was no longer there, like a hive of bees whose queen was killed by a freak of nature, leaving the rest of the hive swarming aimlessly, frantic and directionless. A thought here, a notion there, spun by only to recede and disappear again into the deafening buzz inside my head. I wanted to crawl inside of myself and try to calm the thousand errant thoughts forcing their way towards the edge of the map where the water fell over the edge of the known world and after that it was nothing but dragons patrolling the abyss.

Within various private conversations around the room heads turned to regard me. From being invisible the moment before I had now materialized in front of them all. They could see me and I could see them and they knew I was one of them since I had smoked from the magic bowl.

I had only taken three hits, which was enough to make me dead certain I would never speak again - never utter another syllable out loud. Anything I said now was going to be misconstrued anyway. I would be ridiculed and attacked in the company of strangers. My fragile little ego cowered at the prospect of being stomped on by the heavy sarcasm of the In Crowd. They would remain fully dressed while I would be stripped of my clothes until I stood naked.

Suddenly I didn't want to be there anymore.

My fight or flee instinct froze up on me. I knew I had come

there for a reason and I had no problem remembering Hater was waiting for me and Rachel would be joining us sometime in the evening. I knew if I didn't get back soon they would be there alone together without me to referee - which could mean a potential calamity.

I had come to The Body because he was The Club Manager and I knew he was holding, or more accurately, holding out on the really good stuff. A simple twist had been eluding me all this time. I could not have been there for more than ten minutes yet somehow it seemed like hours since I'd first walked through the door. In one way or another I had to force the moment to its crisis.

"Can I get a little something to go, do you think?" A poor puppy whininess crept into my voice.

The only reason I was there was to ask a favor, the same favor I was always asking of The Body, and I could not have revealed my subterfuge in a more awkward or embarrassing manner. I had to waste face a little before I could explain:

"I'm sorry, man. You really put me under the weather. I'm jumping ahead of myself. I meant to ask you a favor when I first got here, and I forgot. I'm having a couple of people over tonight, and I need some sort of something entertaining, and I was hoping you might have some for me."

Once I managed to explain myself he understood and had no

problem. He liked buying for me because keeping me high kept me beneath him, under his thumb, within his control. Even so, I felt guilty about it, like maybe I was using him - and I was. Getting drugs from someone you don't like can be very stressful because I just wanted to score, whereas drug people don't look at it that way. To them it's a whole social network.

He grabbed his keys and said what I wanted would require a special trip. He didn't have anything good, only the pot and the sprinkle. We left The Club through the back entrance into the alley and climbed into his beater solar pod. He was the only employee at The Club who owned this type of conveyance. The rest of us tramped on foot.

The cold air outside blew a welcome relief across my fevered senses. I started rubbing my face, hoping I might remember who I was supposed to be, and how I was supposed act.

The Body was carrying two cans in one hand. He handed me mine before he slid in behind the wheel. I climbed in on the passenger side. His piece of crap solar pod had oxidized right down to the primer.

A form of car-etiquette had to be followed when drinking with The Body in his vehicle. You had to crack your drink carefully so it didn't spill, and drink some of it so it wasn't full when the pod started jostling. Also, the opening needed to be turned away from you when you wedged it between your thighs.

That way the opening was on the up-slant, and less likely to spill. Never raise your can for any reason other than to take a swig, and then you might as well chug a little to keep satisfied longer. Don't go for a drink at a four-way intersection, and never when you're stopped there. Other than that, it's mostly common sense when it comes to drinking and driving. I learned a lot from Body and his rules for staying out of jail.

We arrived at some anonymous hovel. Body said it was best if I waited for him in the car while he went inside.

The asphalt in the street sparkled from the granules of a thousand broken bottles. Then I noticed a glare emitting from two outside lights protected inside wire cages.

In fact, the hovel itself had been fortified like a pillbox. The windows had all been boarded over, creating a wall covered in big white paper advertisements proclaiming in bright red lettering what drugs were available. The government used to bust these places all the time. I guess considering the whole extinction scenario they figured, why bother.

There were two doors - one for going into the hovel and the other for exiting, allowing no way to reverse the flow in that order of operations. Customers either went in the in and out the out, or they ran the risk of dueling with knives and clubs.

The doors were made of Plexiglas surrounded by metal frames with wrought iron welded across their faces. This hovel was the

only business on this corner. It was the only building for a hundred yards. Around this fortress the ground lay beaten hard and flat with yellow grass dead ten generations.

A denizen in leather pants and a wife beater was talking so loudly I could hear him from inside the car. A woman standing nearby struggled to hear her interlocutor on the other end of the signal emanating from her compod. She held her receiver up to one ear and had her finger stuck in her other ear to block out the booming voice of the guy next to her. She twisted and turned, trying to shield herself from his noise. He didn't care, and she wasn't about to risk telling that muscle bound freak to shut up.

Standing out in the front of the hovel and smoking a cigarette was one tall red headed girl in a light green silk blouse and a pink mini-skirt that looked like it was made out of rubber. Her high heels were the same green color as her shirt, and her lipstick matched the pink of her skirt. Simplicity never goes out of style.

She had a nice body. The look on her face said she would kick your ass for even asking. Other women came and went. They were slouchy looking dikes who wore baggy blue jeans and oversized sweaters with wool caps as though trying to pass for men.

Older guys, in pairs mostly, entered the front of the

business empty-handed and emerged a moment later cradling brown paper sacks in their arms. Along the side of the hovel and disappearing around back into the alleyway a pack of angry young men moved through the shadows. In his immaculate evening robe Body fit in somewhere with the general insanity. He was empty-handed when he returned.

"Where's the stuff?"

"We go around back for that."

"This place is crazy this time of night."

The Body glanced upward at the night sky, and he smiled at the purple and black clouds broiling overhead.

"This place is crazy every night."

He started the car, whipped us out of the parking spot, and hurtled us around the corner to the area behind the hovel. Body got out of the car just as a thin pale looking guy came out the back door and handed him a brown bag.

Body jumped behind the wheel and we were on our way.

I don't remember much about the ride between the hovel and my basement in the library. The streets were deserted. The rain made a soft pattern of drops on the windshield the wipers smeared into garish pink streaks.

Body took a frontage road I had forgotten existed and made the onramp to the old highway. We drove around the edge of town with lights blurry and exited the highway onto a thoroughfare

that was right near an old neighborhood.

The Body had a good sense of direction. Every time I road with him I got lost.

He parked the car in the dark near the building and demanded payment. I asked couldn't I just blow him because peeling off latex in a pod would be incredibly awkward. Fortunately, he agreed because it would be easier to get rid of him later. I leaned over sideways, and the smoke goes up the chimney just the same.

I remember the three of us together sharing a cold can of Lethal Green. Hater and The Body together, and me nervous with those two not being buddies. They knew each other vaguely from The Club; the technical boys came under different directives. Body handled the girls, the bar, the kitchen, and the live entertainment and all that. The Live Feed involved cameras and uploading and all kinds of stuff nobody but the IT boys knew how to operate. I was worrying more about their feelings than they were. The Body I didn't worry about, other than his propensity for violence. I guess it was Hater I was thinking of. He was straight, and I knew he still worried about right and wrong. He grew up in some other zone and I guess you could say had been sentenced by the court to our zone for crimes committed out there, which he would never talk about. He was a genius and the drugs affected his brain the way they do wicked smart people,

setting his imagination on fire.

Once he polished off his tonic The Body said he was leaving. I walked him out to his car and thanked him for everything. He slugged me in my shoulder so hard it made us both laugh. The hurt made me feel like less of a punk. Later, if he could get away, he said, he'd come back to check on our progress, which sounded more like a threat than a promise.

I walked back into the Library and down to my room, and with this alarmed look on his face Hater met my entrance - like a tidal wave was rearing up behind me. I turned around and there were Rachel and Candy.

"Didn't you see us? We came in the door right behind you," Rachel said.

She was always managing that kind of weirdness. I hadn't seen her in the dark, or my mind had been someplace else. Now my mind was all around her, no doubt. She was slim and trim in her naughty schoolgirl get up, as pert a girl as any need be.

Candy was there beside her. Blonde hair. Snooty nose. Blue eyes. By the smirk contorting her lips I could tell she hated me shopping her giblets. Her eyes slid sideways in their sockets to escape the weight of my ogling.

Girls spend all their time getting made up. Then they get mad at a girl if she looks at them. Of course they get even madder if you don't look at them. So there you are. There I was.

We each held a drink in our hands just like we'd seen the wealthy swells do. Rachel thought we ought to sit down. I was buzzing by that time, the tonic reducing me to acting like a little girl around her. I wanted her to hold me and pet my hair. She laughed at me for making moonies at her.

She asked me, "How is it you're so wasted already?"

"I went to The Club to enlist The Body's aid, and I had to have one over there before I could ask him to go to the Gypsy for me."

I didn't mention the bowl we smoked.

Rachel was screwing up her face at me for some reason.

"You had one of what? That's the question."

"One tonic. Maybe two." I realized what she was asking. Rachel didn't like me smoking. She was afraid of green and sprinkles and thought it was evil - which it wasn't really.

With Rachel giving me a hard time about it I wanted to skirt the facts. I didn't want her mad at me. Not on a night of insanity like this one.

I tried to plead innocent; I was too stoned and stupid to carry it off. She saw all this and knew. She wasn't happy about my forays into drugs. I watched her decide not to make a scene. She would wait until later before giving me an earful.

She had no problem with putting on a tonic buzz. Drinking from cans was perfectly okay with her. She was also one of those

drinkers who were always either ahead or behind depending on how much everyone else had already consumed. So tonight she found herself behind and in need of catching up. I never understood gauging your high by other people's levels of intoxication. She liked to fit in with whatever scene she was making, and she did a better job of fitting in than I ever managed.

"If you try and drink as much as us, you'll get wasted," Hater said.

"You think so, do you?" She asked in a way that made my tummy shrivel.

At that Rachel stood up and left the couch area.

"Shake it, don't break it, Honey," Candy said as we watched Rachael tromping towards my kitchenette area. From the sound of glass ringing in contact with other glass, and plastic bouncing around on the linoleum we could tell she was rummaging through my cupboards looking for a container of some sort.

She came back carrying an old gugglet, the kind you might use for storing drinking water. She sat down and poured three tonics into this receptacle, mixing reds and greens into a combination known as a Sailor's Suicide.

Rachel took that big container between both hands and lifted the rim to her mouth. She tipped the contents down her throat while keeping one eye open for Valhalla. She finished her guzzling and lowered the container. Her eyes wobbled in their

sockets before she let go with a belch toxic enough to peel the paint off a Black Maria.

Hater was enthralled, and therein laid his downfall.

"Hand that thing over here. Let me try this new invention."

Hater took the makeshift mug into his hands, filled it with more tonics, and tipped it up less expertly than Rachel had done. The tonic sloshed over the rim. It ran down both his cheeks, his neck, and soaked his jumpsuit - none of which stopped him from chug-a-lugging for his total worth. He emerged from his personal orgy like a drowning swimmer gasping for air.

Hater refilled the makeshift mug and handed the gourd over to Candy who wrinkled her nose at the contents and quickly handed it on to me.

"I'll finish what's left in my can," she said.

I looked into the barrel and what I saw was not appealing. Not that there was any foreign matter floating around in it, but the swill inside had a kind of slimy, foamy look - like two other people had already had their lips on it, which they had.

I passed it along. Rachel didn't care. She lifted the gugglet just as she'd done the time before, and drained it.

Rachel handed the empty container to Hater. He couldn't believe she had managed to finish off the contents again.

"Now how'd that happen?" Hater peered into the empty container and up at Rachel. "You took two turns. I only took

one. That can't be fair."

Rachel wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She was acting like a cowgirl, not the school girl befitting her costume. In fascination over the performance I watched her. I figured I would kick back and let events take their own course.

"Hater, there's more tonic in the fridge there. Help yourself." My feeling of responsibility as a host overcame any scruple about remaining neutral.

"Happy Days," Hater said, jumping up and running toward the refrigerator. He had to get past the girls and stepped on Candy's feet as he went by. Rachel had seen him coming and retracted her toes off the floor in deft self defense.

"Ow! That hurts! Get off of me," and Candy slapped at his legs to keep him moving.

Stepping on feet must have struck Hater as funny because he laughed when he should have apologized. At this point he was a man on a mission, and I couldn't believe such an intelligent person was going to drink himself unconscious.

A binge competition was underway and I could tell just by looking at Hater there was no way he was going to let Rachel get the better of him by drinking more than he could. Candy was present, and that she'd gotten herself all dolled up, possibly for his sake, never occurred to him. He just stomped on her feet and laughed at her protests on the way by.

My buddy.

Hater came back to the sofa and popping the tops on four more tonics he poured the contents into the ancient receptacle. Scowling, Candy sat beside him. I had my foot resting on the footlocker and Rachel put her foot up there next to mine. We played footsy while Hater swilled as much tonic as he possibly could. For a guy who didn't like the taste he was doing all right for himself.

He let out a triumphant belch and passed the container under Candy's nose toward Rachel.

Poor Candy. She might as well have been invisible.

Rachel took the makeshift mug. She sighed as though the burden was already growing greater, and her resolve was slackening. Nevertheless, she put the container to her lips and bravely managed a few swallows, nothing like what she had accomplished the first go-round.

She set the barrel on the footlocker when she was done. Then placed one hand over her belly like the contents of her stomach weren't settling like they should. She made a fist with her other hand that she held in front of her mouth while she exhaled small burps.

Hater, thinking he saw his moment for taking the advantage, leaned past Candy, pushing her sideways and grabbing hold of the container. He brought it to his lips and focused his attention

and energy on polishing off what was left.

"Are you ready to admit defeat?" Hater demanded when he finished.

"Hell no," Rachael twanged.

Hater stood up, clutching the makeshift mug with both hands.

"But you know you're losing."

Rachel didn't look at him as she spoke. Her gaze was hiding beneath the length of her lashes.

"I know I'm behind a little. I don't know about losing, though."

"Well you will in a minute, little lady," Hater said.

"Little lady?"

I rubbed my eyes in a convulsive motion.

"Stop stepping on my feet," Candy yelled.

"Move them out of the way if you don't want them stepped on," Hater said. Now I knew he was beyond his limit because usually Hater came across as the most polite sort of fellow. Like a bull harassed by a hornet he was stomping and thrashing around without realizing he had kicked his way through the corral fence and was trampling on a flowerbed.

For the moment the only thing Hater understood was a contest in play - and he was a winner, always. Yet this heavy consumption was a new kind of contest for him, more of a

Pleasure Zone competition, and he never stopped to consider what winning a drinking contest implied.

Exactly how many tonics he poured in that container I don't know. He was raising the bar for sure. As the drinking competition continued he emerged as the obvious leader.

On average he took at least five or six swigs to Rachel's one. At first she hung in there. As the competition wore on the time element began to tell and she wilted some around the edges until her enthusiasm showed the first signs of extinction.

She continued taking dainty little sips before handing the mug back to Hater, who filled his belly with that swill in the full gluttony and glory of the competition.

Lost in all of this binge drinking was Candy Kane. I never would have imagined myself in the position of feeling sorry for her, but sure enough, I found myself sympathizing with her misery. She sat there nursing her tonic and her wounded toes and staring into the empty space in front of her, focused on nothing. Club Girls took rejection hard because they spent all their time engaged in phony foreplay. When on their own time the loving took on a heartfelt seriousness.

How four people managed to finish a case of tonics in under an hour I do not know. With the walls closing in on us suddenly we decided to go to The Club. As we marched through the night the landscape began to glow. By the time we reached The Club we

were free floating. In The Club Abattoir groovy ghouls filled every fetish room to capacity.

In friendship, my mind belonged to Hater. Everything else ached something fierce for Rachel Cozy.

Nowhere among the growing tangle of faces could I find Rachel. Parties are transformed when you are really wasted. Faces bob around you and you act like a total idiot and everybody applauds. Girls are laughing so hard they threaten to pee their pants. They grab hold of their girlfriends. They hang on each other, swaying about.

Then they end up on the floor and people suddenly have a change of attitude. Just a second before getting drunk and out of control was the cleverest thing in the world. You're lying on the floor in a big heap, your underwear is showing, tears and snot stream out of your face until you're in real danger of blowing it somehow. You're acting too drunk. You're wasting face, and that isn't cool.

A little drunk is okay; way wasted is not good. An hour went by. Maybe two.

Rachel was around here somewhere, I was thinking, so I went back downstairs. There I found Hater in one of the rooms sitting on a heart shaped bed. He was glassy-eyed as a catfish and still holding the mug that moments ago had contained hard tonic. He told me Rachel had handed it to him. He had drained it to the

bottom. I asked him how he was doing.

"My perceptions have never been more clear." In one acrobatic motion he leapt up on the bed and punched his fist through the plasterboard ceiling.

I was so astounded I did nothing more than stand there watching bits of crumbly white plaster sprinkle down around his wrist and his forearm. Then he retracted his fist and popped open the hole he had created. Hater crashed backwards onto the bed. He lay there looking up at the ceiling and the destruction he had caused and said, "Oh, Sweetheart, that was really blowing it."

As you might imagine the management of a place called The Abattoir were willing to put up with generous amounts of aberrant behavior. Out and out destruction, however, was not tolerated. If you broke anything expensive the cost was added to your bill, and as far as the girls themselves went, the general rule was no permanent damage. For some reason I felt as though I would end up having to pay for Hater as the player answerable for the damage.

Tucked away somewhere in the back of my head hummed the realization Hater was screwing up in ways jeopardizing his job. He was going to get us all into trouble because explaining to anyone in security or management how such a gaping hole appeared in the ceiling was going to be impossible. They would be angry,

and they would make damaging phone calls at the very least. I didn't know if them dragging him into the alley to 'teach him some manners' would be worse than what his own people would do to him or not.

I could already see his emotions rocking out of control. If I started chewing him out about socking a hole in the ceiling he was going to be crushed and filled up with feelings of remorse. Then, knowing him, he would go out into the night where disappear would swallow him whole. He would do something stupid and self-destructive for a penance, like hurt himself on purpose to somehow atone for getting me busted, or to beat The Body to the punch.

No way was I going to get mad at him. Hater was too wasted. "Don't cause any more damage, Butch. We'll worry about fixing this tomorrow."

Drunk as he was he still knew how badly over the line he had stepped. Hater tried to stand up. Failing in the attempt he collapsed back onto the bed, bouncing so hard he did a neat flip, spun off the bed, and with an awful thump crashed onto the floor, *kerplunk*. I figure the floor would be a safe place for him because he couldn't fall any farther nor hurt himself any worse. I looked once more at the hole Hater had made. I left in search of Rachel because I was already looking for ways to avoid repercussions.

Upstairs I found Candy. We headed up another flight of stairs leading into a third area of The Club, the hideaways. The girls lived on the second floor with the kitchen and lounges on the ground floor. The rooms upstairs were empty of clientele.

I reclined on a couch as the room spun out of control. I felt a twinge because I was lying next to Candy, and I knew the proximity to her wasn't right. So I struggled to my feet. On my way down the stairs I completely lost control of my body and careened downward sliding against the wall and swiping every picture frame clean off the wall in a horrendous crash. I sat down at the bottom of the stairs so hard my jaw popped. From where I was sitting I stacked the smashed frames in a neat pile. They featured the faces of forgotten celebrities. Still, when Body saw this damage he would be furious.

In the kitchen area I staggered into the man himself. I asked if he had seen Rachel.

"Yeah, I saw her. She looked pretty drunk. She went downstairs, I think. Hey, by the way, I think your friend Hater pissed his pants."

"What makes you say that?"

"I was talking to him, you know, while he was lying there on the carpet in the hallway downstairs, and I asked him, 'Man, are you all right?' and he says, 'Body, I think I pissed my pants', so, you know, that gave me the first clue. And I think

he puked all over the place. He's covered in chowder, like he'd been rolling around in it."

"He's acting like he's never been drunk before."

"I don't think he has. Not to skip out on you or nothing, in your time of need, but I'm calling it a night. You better go get Junior Techie out of the hallway. Fun's fun, but I don't let no drunks lie around on the floor. And by now I'm guessing he missed his curfew."

I stumbled down into the lower region of The Club to find the dungeon empty of people, except for Rachel and Hater. That poor boy was sitting on the side of the bed with his head cradled in his hands and he was sobbing. Rachel was on her knees in front of him and smoothing his hair, trying to comfort him.

"What's the matter with him? And why are his clothes all wet? Look at him, he's sopping wet."

"I had to toss him in the shower," Rachel declared. "He was getting out of hand. His big mistake was mixing the tonics and the powders."

"You spent your shower credits on him?" I pointed at Hater.

"It's no big deal. I had some saved up. The boy was a mess. I warned him it would be too strong. He wouldn't listen. Said he had to have powder. So I went upstairs and found a small vial of some pink. I opened it. I poured a glass and mixed some in, gave it to him, and he, big macho man, pounded it down."

"So I poured him another one. Before I knew it, he was barfing on the carpet. Then his compod went off. Whoever it was calling sounded pissed off, and wanted to talk to him. He wouldn't get up. So I had to drag him over there by his feet. I guess I wasn't careful because I dragged him through a pile of his own puke. I know. It's gross. I heard the conversation because I put my ear to the receiver at the same time. So he wouldn't get himself into trouble. I coached him on how to talk and what to say. It was somebody yelling to report back to barracks right now. After I hung up for him, he smelled like a skunk, so I threw him in the shower."

"She kissed me," Hater said.

"Who did," I asked, "Rachel?"

She stood up, and wavered in front of my face.

"I should have slapped her," Hater said. "I should have killed Body when she kissed him, too. I should kill myself for letting her kiss me."

Hater was rolling on the fiery lake of confusion and self-recrimination, and I had to ease him down before I could think about what to do next. Rachel supplied an answer for me.

"He has to return to his barracks. Whoever it was who called had the voice of authority. Angry authority." She put her hands on her hips, studied Hater, and shook her head.

"We can't take him back to barracks in this condition," I

said. The stench of wet clothing, tonic, vomit, and urine reminded me of the sidewalk where I'd landed once myself after Rachel punched me.

"We can't let him lie here. What if somebody comes looking for him? They might bust you, me, and everybody else."

"Everybody else left," I said.

Rachel took me by the hand and led me a few paces away from where Hater was stewing in his own juice.

"Listen Sasha, Hater chose to get himself wasted. Now somebody is calling after him. Wanting him back to barracks. He's blown his curfew or something. You know people call troopers over stuff like this. Is that what you want? A Black Maria rolling up in front of The Club? How's Body going to react to that little event?"

"All we can do is take him back to barracks. Let him face his own consequences. You and I drank the same amounts he did. And we aren't wasting face. I'm pretty buzzed. But we're not blowing it. The only way we can blow this evening is by not taking advantage of being alone. We can't be together with him here. Worrying all the time about somebody coming to look for him. Let's take him back now. Then we can relax and be alone together. Just the two of us."

Rachel wrapped her arms around me, and pulled me close to her. I felt her soft tongue lick my neck and her lips follow up

with a kiss. She moved around my neck, drilling little holes with her tongue and planting kisses in a ring.

The whole time I was looking over her shoulder at my buddy, Hater. He was a mess, no doubt, and he was going to have to face his superiors eventually.

"We're going to have to walk him to his barracks, escort him to make sure he gets there."

Rachel pulled away from her ministrations, looked me in the eye.

"Of course we'll escort him. After all, we're escort girls, are we not?"

We were on the sidewalk and heading toward the Technical Housing Unit. Rachel and I were on either elbow of my combustible friend. Rain must have fallen while we were drinking in The Club because our feet were slapping on wet pavement.

"Tell them you're tired," I kept whispering in Hater's ear. "Tell them you're *really* tired, and you're going straight to bed. Let me hear you say it. 'I'm so tired'."

Hater repeated the phrase as I instructed, only he got stuck on the second syllable, stretching it to the point of absurdity:

"I'm soooooo tired."

I kept after him about the excuse he was going to make, repeating the phrase so he would mimic the words. He was dead

meat. I never knew what kinds of rules the tech guys were answerable to. Somebody important sounding had called after him and sounded angry, so maybe he missed a curfew or a roll call or who knows what.

When we got to the governmental part of the zone we could see the lights on at the barracks. The lights over the front entrance to the Quonset hut cast a dull red glow. Rachel and I trotted him onto the porch, propped him wobbling before the front door, rang the bell, and jammed. *Ding-dong ditch*, only instead of a flaming bag of pooh - there stood poor wavering Hater.

We stopped about a half a block away, in time to see him like the guttering flame of a candle burned down to a pool of his own wax. The front door opened and a flood of indoor lighting came streaming over him and bathed and illuminated the fluttering form of the young lad formerly known as Hater. We could hear the yelling. Rachel pinched me by the elbow and dragged me away from that awful confrontation.

We trolloped through the night, matching each other step for step and stride for stride, the soles of our hip highs spanking the wet pavement.

I spazzed along beside her until the beauty and the symmetry of her form reminded me to tuck in my elbows, let my hands hang loose, and bounce off of each step. Our jumbled beats

became one simultaneous clip-clop on the wet pavement. I would challenge anyone to make better time in three inch heels.

Back at The Club we decided we could not go into the heart shaped room anymore because it reeked of vomit. The hole in the plaster of the ceiling gaped, the spewed crumbs of white dust lay scattered over the stuffed chairs.

Rachel led me upstairs where I undressed her and she undressed me until you became naked. Of her own volition she sank to her knees. When it was my turn I bit into her because she tasted like juicy peach flesh in a white-toothed dream.

Later, after we had settled our struggle under the covers she lay sleeping in my arms while I inspected her feathered wings. She must have spent a long time on her hair. How stiff they were, each like a barbaric shield on either side of her head.

I was overwhelmed by my foolish affection for this girl. She was so beautiful, so savvy, and kind sometimes in ways that poor old drunken Hater would never understand. She was a woman endowed with rare physical beauty, a remarkable symmetry of parts, an incredible fount of humor and strength and charm. I loved her smile, the kindness in her eyes, and the way she would tilt her head and say my name, my proper name, and with each syllable purse her pouting lips.

At that moment I missed her because she was asleep and

hence far away, alone in a private dreamland. I wanted her to awaken. I wanted her to be conscious of my presence and pronounce my name with her teasing voice in the true love way.

So I whispered to her gently, calling her name and rocking the precious cargo of her soul to and fro to awaken her without a jolt. Rachel stirred, and her eyes, still hidden beneath their lids, began to search for the pathway leading to the conscious door of our waking world. I called her name again, ever so sweetly.

Speaking in kind, half asleep, Rachel whispered:

"Oh, Roger."

Absurd how those antiquated notions of honor recurred to me in times of duress. Acting as my second a few weeks later The Body arranged for a confrontation. I despised The Body and never would have chosen him for a friend. He was the type of guy you had to make nice with because the necessity of work threw you into unbearable proximity. If you were going to survive in The Club world then you had to make friends with pimps like The Body.

I wasn't afraid of Roger. I wanted a fair fight. I looked forward to the chance of showing Rachel who was the more ardent lover through physical violence. When I explained this point of

honor to The Body he took up my cause without any hesitation.

He drove over to the lair where Roger dwelled in darkness, and there on the rocks near the entrance to his cave threw down my latex glove, demanded an appointment with Roger, to meet me at The Combs for a showdown. The Body said he was confident about the duel. The honeycomb represented the only place he could think of as neutral ground.

The tricky part was going to be maneuvering Rachel there at the same time. If I was going to beat up Roger and teach him a lesson I wanted her to be a witness.

If I told her the plan beforehand she would never show. She would be on the compod with both of us trying to talk us out of making a spectacle on her account. I didn't want to take part in any three way conversation. I didn't want to talk anymore.

No more behind-the-scenes negotiations. We were going to drag this tangle of emotions into the open, in front of everybody, to decide who was who, and what was what.

I told Rachel we were going to hang out with The Body, to be juvenile delinquents for a day. The idea of having fun lured her into joining us. Plus she liked The Body, and they got along.

We were walking along the train tracks headed for the concrete stairs leading underground to a pedestrian walkway. I think a train hit a whore once and a big civic outcry ensued to

make the area around the tracks safer motivating the wealthy to pry open their creaky wallets and after a fundraiser or two they paid a gang of low-lifers who dug the underpass and one quality boss who supervised the concrete.

If nothing else the underpass gave the junkies a place where they could hang together and stay dry out of the rain. No clean whore would come within fifty yards of the underpass. You could still see all of them toiling along the tracks headed for The Honeycombs until some trooper at the wheel of a Predator drove up and yelled at them to get off the tracks.

We fancied ourselves slumming for the day, walking the tracks. Body had the brown paper sack with him, and we found the underpass empty.

In a way that place was the saddest corner of the zone. Every inch of the walls and ceilings - even the floor - had been covered in graffiti. Black lettering, orange swirls, green insignia, yellow curse words, garish caricatures born from narcotic highs, mixed together on one garish pallet.

Why some people develop such private hells I don't know. I think mainly it's because they're lonely, or they don't have anyone who's proud of them.

I was starting to feel lousy and not in the mood to carry on this charade with Rachel when The Body directed our attention to a spot on the ceiling where his own nickname was emblazoned

in red paint. With her head thrown back Rachel read the tag and shrieked with delight. You could tell she honestly thought it was cool. His name must have been there for years - which impressed me, because in all that time nobody had ever tried to deface it or paint over it. In certain circles Body was legend.

I found myself trying to picture Body as one of those underpass ghouls until I realized he made his start pimping the street. The way street walkers huddled in a herd for protection, looking over their shoulders every once in a while. They would glance with hurt, uncomprehending eyes at the society routinely feeding off of them and rejecting them.

Even sadder was seeing one of them separated from the herd, all by herself, trying to go unnoticed - looking self-conscious as hell with her scraggly long hair and black clothing, getting bumped into by a slag in red hot pants or surrounded by young scions whistling and jeering in their black evening clothes.

Because of the beautiful people rejecting them friendship meant something more to those underpass whores - a lot of the time their friends were the only family they had. They themselves became a tight circle, and they would not let in just anybody.

The three of us formed an odd circle at that moment, the manager and the two sex dolls, as we passed around a bottle of tonic The Body had with him. Rachel knew how to drink, and she

could hold her blast. She could gut a couple of slugs with a minimum of grimacing.

She was a lot tougher than most other girlie girls. In fact she wouldn't last very long with the dance squad in the Club. She got sick of the game playing. The other girls ganged up on her and head tripped in ways she couldn't compete with, buying two and three of the most expensive outfits they could find in the catalogue. Their petty harassment counted as the only time I ever saw Rachel flushed into the open.

She got blasted.

She launched into this big tirade with the whole cabaret squad one day about how she couldn't afford to buy all those expensive outfits. She expected to convince her fellow dancers to back off on the spending. Instead, the other girls listened in silence, their eyes shining.

Even when she had spent her anger they just stared at her until their attitude finally hit her heart, and she left. Then they had a little huddle to which she was no longer invited. She had the looks and the moves better than any of them, and they couldn't compete so they showed her up on a different, pettier level. She quit dancing and finagled a spot on the Live Feed. I felt sorry for her.

Today, however, the big hurt was reserved for Roger. I was going to bust him up in front of Rachel. To show him that she

was my girl and any guy who snuck around dogging her behind my back was going to pay the price.

We drank the entire tonic by taking turns sipping from the bottle. As we were walking up the stairs leading out of the underpass I still had the empty in my hand. I was going to drop the thing in a garbage can somewhere. A different urge overcame The Body. He grabbed the bottle out of my hand, trotted back down the steps of the underpass, and hurled the empty bottle toward the far end. The bottle disappeared from sight. We could hear the tinkle of sweet obliteration.

"Was that absolutely necessary?" I asked when he caught up to us at street level,

You should have seen the look on his face.

"Yes, it was." His eyes were red, as though he was angry to the point of tears as he pushed his way past me. You never know what tonic will bring out in some people.

We crossed the street and entered The Honeycombs through an open steel gate slanted on ruined hinges. A long time ago some naughty citizens had made a game of riding on this gate, clinging to the wire mesh and swinging back and forth. They even lured honest citizens to come along and jump aboard and join the fun - until the top hinge cracked from the weight of their swarming mass.

One by one they jumped down and fled from the scene of

their vandalism, except for the most mischievous among them. He stayed behind to drive the gate open flat against itself and lodg the lower corner into the mud. Satisfied with his handiwork he too finally ran away.

None of the authorities noticed the vandalism in time and under a falling rain the mud turned into mush and the listing corner settled deeper into the underlying layer of clay. Two days later the clouds moved on and the sun came out blazing, baking the exposed clay until it might as well have been concrete holding the gate open. Only denizens left unsupervised could have wrecked a useful object so thoroughly.

We past through the ruined gate and approached The Honeycomb area by hopping a fence in a three-point maneuver, two if you were sturdy. Reach up and grab the top, hoist yourself up, whip your feet out to the side, land poised horizontally along the fence top, kick over, and nail the landing.

If Hater had been with us he would have whipped his feet over without touching like one of those highly paid professional athletes competing in the games. Two moves - up and over. After he had helped me hunt up the right material for repairing the ceiling in The Club, and new picture frames, Hater didn't come around me much anymore. Only Rachel, The Body, and I hopped the fence near The Honeycomb, with only the usual bums milling about trying to stay warm naked under their overcoats.

The Body ditched us across the quad in order to chat up some hookers who looked underemployed. I remember the sky was gray with clouds that day, as though a giant wool blanket was pulled over our heads. Even though little drops of errant rain were landing to wet my cheek with their oily stink, with the tonic in my belly, and the day gray, I felt cozy and secure.

I took Rachel in my arms and we kissed. I thought her mouth the softest creation I had ever tasted. I opened my eyes for a moment while hers remained squeezed shut tight. Her thin eyelids were papered over like gold leafing. I could see an active green vein coursing above the upper portion of her gentle orbs. I even peered skyward and saw the gray rain streaking down in angled sheets and I closed my eyes tighter and opened my mouth wider sinking deeper into transitory bliss.

The figure of the creature loomed in the distance, and for a moment I thought some sort of animal had escaped the zoo. I watched this thing approaching, and I kept waiting for it to bark or whiney.

The closer he came the more I realized he wasn't human at all but a bronze giraffe with a shotgun penis. So this was Roger the Ho-wrangler. Hater had not been kidding; this monster loomed huge.

Rachel had blissed out from the tonic and the kissing. She floated down to Earth landing with a plop when she saw who was

approaching.

"Oh, my God," she said, flatly.

I turned to face her.

"What? You know this contraption?"

Rachel shrugged and kicked at the tiny stones of the asphalt.

"Yes, I know him. His name is Roger."

As the rain abated he galloped over the cobblestones and trotted up to us. The Body quit his fooling around and came over to referee. Roger swung his enormous neck around and gave him a quick glance. He understood why The Body was there, submitting to his justice as referee.

Rachel was the first one to speak.

"What are you doing here?"

Roger looked at me as he was answering her question.

"I have an appointment with Sasha, here. Apparently, she thinks she has a problem with me."

Rachel sputtered her incredulity. I ignored her and focused on the threat in front of me. My head stood the same level as the android's breastbone.

"Yes, I have a problem with you. I don't want you dogging my girlfriend anymore."

"I don't give a damn what you want."

That was my cue. I stepped forward, planting the palms of

my hands against its bronze chest and giving him a solid shove driving him back a single pace. His hoofs clippity-clopped on the cobblestones. He regained his footing and stepped up again regaining his former posture.

At this point the symmetry of the situation arranged itself in perfectly random order. A kind of transfiguring aptness of the parts to the whole existed as the fight began in earnest.

There stood Roger, the Bronze Giraffe, and there I stood opposite him, with the two sides of my face solid and open so that both seemed perfectly and evenly meant to collide.

Smek! Smek! He hit me in the face with alternating swings of his long neck, the attenuated horns on his head to be precise, left and right, retreating behind that incredible reach of his towering over me.

The first shock wave had rippled across my lips and passed into the flesh of the opposite cheek. My head snapped sideways and the spray of saliva and sweat flew off in different directions.

The second contact sent the same kind of ripple traversing the length of my lips, only in the opposite direction.

This time, when the saliva and sweat leaped from my face, another bodily fluid had joined the ballet. Blood sluiced from the side of my mouth. My lips were bleeding on both ends. My teeth were fine. I had good teeth. They weren't knocked out of

their little sockets. Their strong roots kept them anchored unperturbed.

The delicate flesh of my lips has been violated, grossly. Split right open and like an allergic reaction to a bee sting they showed signs of swelling.

The worst jab assailed my ears, yet Roger Ho-wrangler did not deliver this taunt.

In the midst of the mayhem assaulting my senses the catalyst hurting me most and driving me into a true frenzy was the sound Rachel emitted, a squeal of surprise and dismay that started out low and ran to the top of the harmonic scale. On its way to the top of the scale it lost the tone of dismay and took on the screech of hilarity she did a poor job of muffling by cupping her nose and mouth with her hands.

If I'd had any sense I would have quit while I was behind. But that sound - that *noise* - escaping my one true love, that squeal of shock, delight, and hilarity - fear and pity, all registered in one upward tilting whoop of excitement goaded me to tackle that giant girlfriend stealer.

I ducked my head and ran forward knocking straight into him and bouncing off again. Somehow I grappled my way in under the belly of the beast and found myself face to face with the shotgun. My only saving grace resided in the knowledge no ammunition had been available in the zone for decades.

I slammed my palms flat up against that big kettle drum of a belly, failing utterly to lift him one inch. So I began pushing and pulling, rocking him back and forth. In reaction the four hoofs began scrabbling frantically trying to keep traction on those wet and oily cobblestones until finally the awful beast went over on his side and crashed onto the stones resounding with a hollow and earsplitting clangor. His head smacked the stones in kind creating a noise like a coo-coo clock dashed to the ground.

The crowd of bums had formed a half circle to watch the fight. The great beast went down and they gasped in alarm. Why they immediately sided with the beast against me I don't know. They rushed to Roger's aid, and about a dozen of them working together hoisted that unnatural beast back onto its hooves. I swear, before the fight started, both its eyes faced forward. Now each eye looked in opposite directions. I had definitely sprung the gears in that bad boy.

Two wobbly legs on a punch-drunk human are bad enough. Four on a bronze giraffe is way too many. Watching that bronze ho-wrangler try to keep its balance made me feel queasy. Something metallic sounding was clanking around inside its big belly drum. Finally, the beast pulled itself together a little and with as much dignity as it could muster ambled off, listing, and disappeared around a corner.

"That was messed up," said one of the bums.

I didn't have an immediate answer to his statement because to a certain extent I felt the same way myself.

Rachel was standing off to one side, still covering her nose and mouth with her hands. I couldn't tell if she was mortified or amused. A little of both.

"I'm proud of you, little sister. You stood up for yourself. I didn't think you had it in you," Body said.

"My poor baby. Look at her face," Rachel said. She came over and smoothed my hair. She produced some little tissues from her bag and daubed at the corners of my bleeding lips.

That was my first great encounter with the machine, the big bout to win the hand of fair Rachel. In my victory I was overtaken by a fit of trembling, which passed as quickly as it arrived - leaving me spent and hollow.

I had to bend over and projectile-vomit that good tonic I'd drunk earlier. The chowder came out in three neat hurls. I could hear Rachel and Body laughing at me. Afterwards I felt better overall because I had won, as far as the abstract principles were concerned.

Physically, I was torn up and busted. My face, knuckles, elbows, and knees were bleeding in unison. My hair was sticking out at all angles. I had won.

I could console myself with the fact Roger the Ho-wrangler

would no longer want any part of me. He was a bigger creature, but I was the bigger maniac, and I did not need a unit of psychology to know who Rachel had chosen.

Her mate would have to be, before wealth, before prestige, before looks or position, style or class, penis or vagina, one ass whoopin' sombitch.

And that was me, ladies and gentlemen.

That was me, in all of my primordial baseness. The wench would choose me because I had come out the winner in a violent contest. Now I was the cock of the walk, the strap-on, the swinging chili femdom.

Winning that fight put me into a position of power and leverage - a terrific height where from on high I could triumphantly dump Rachel Cozy. I shoved her, and she plunged backward into a big pile of garbage.

What I'm about to tell you I learned from reading Rachel's diary. Other parts of the story came straight from the lips of Candy Kane. The rest Rachel whispered to me while in a corner of The Club where we nestled on a divan and passed the time in each others arms.

A very old and wealthy couple selected her from the catalogue and made everyone's jaw drop at the price they

offered. Were we back together? I never knew anymore. We had this conversation, but I'm not sure about the chronology, so I stuck it in here.

"The future," Rachel said, curled into the fetal position and as though speaking from across the room her voice was so small. "What's going to happen to us, Nika, in the future?"

"I guess we'll keep on the way we've been going, and get married, sooner or later."

"You'd marry me?" She tried to snatch the fickle trout as she swam by darting to and fro. "The Powers That Be don't allow for that, you trickster."

"I'd marry you anyway," I said. "I love you."

"Oh, I love you, too, Sasha. And I really am sorry about how I acted. I don't know what's wrong with me sometimes. The power of love, it conquers all."

I looked at one of her gaudy bracelets, a silver one, as she twisted it upside down to where it read, *Amor omnia vincet*. Although I knew she had misconstrued the Latin I decided to forgo the pleasure of translating the true meaning and satisfied myself instead with taking a hold of the bracelet, pursing my lips and narrowing my eyes to read the inscription for myself. A long silence developed between us, broken by Rachel.

"I love you, Sasha."

"I love you, too."

"I'll see you when I get back."

Rachel composed a brave face until she crawled into the limousine. From there a few tears escaped. Crying didn't help any. She was only nauseous afterwards. Nor did it move her towards more decisive action regarding suicide. Whatever method she chose the agency of her self destruction would need to be as sure as a stinging needle to the arm.

The sucker punch love delivered was too intense and she wasn't about to wait around for it to deliver another blow any harder.

Rachel remembered hearing about a woman back in the olden days ending her life by sticking her head into an oven. Rachel did not understand that approach at all. *Why would anyone go about suicide so painfully? Wouldn't your hair catch fire before you died? How could anyone stand the heat long enough to die from it? Too gross that way,* she thought.

She flirted with the idea of taking a serrated kitchen knife to her wrists except purple blood squirting all over the place would be repulsive. Perhaps on one of these limousine jobs she could ransack the medicine cabinet for pills enough to sleep forever. Whatever she chose the method needed to be painless and failsafe.

The sun created oblong shadows on the guest room walls inside her Sugar Daddy's house. From the vision of herself lying

dead her imagination flitted to a different consideration, the pain her suicide would cause for those who loved her. Her present surroundings smothered her morbid reveries, what with the baby dolls and frilly pillows and a baton with the one rubber tip missing on the end leaning in the corner. Outside the local aristocrats gathered to imbibe gasoline martinis and their animated conversation wafted up from the patio and in through her open window.

Their aristocratic neighborhood stretched out into the desert where they enjoyed all the privileges of living one step beyond the pollution. She no longer ran the streets with the younger heir apparent. During the last assignation they drove her away with their constant poking prodding her into back rooms parked cars or the semi-seclusion of the odd-angled mansion walls. She locked herself away at the beginning of this job to shield herself from their advances. Paying customers only.

The grandsons in the house were still too young and not one of them brave enough to knock on her bedroom door. They went only as far as milling about in the gazebo in front of the house, or congregating in the billiard room. In the twilight their voices called out to each other as they played games on the spacious green lawns or long black asphalt driveways. Boys huddled together on the concrete sidewalk, some of them standing in the street and only grudgingly moving aside as the security

patrol made the rounds. The grandsons argued sports and other trivialities which young men form their first opinions about including what they thought about Rachel.

In the days spent thus far she had not revealed herself to anyone beyond the contract. They knew she was on the premises anyway. Sugar Granddad had rented her services for an extended stay. In reaction to her arrival news spread like a jolt from pole to pole up and down the neighborhood. More than one young lad had spanked himself to sleep at night while rejoicing in a vision of her beauty.

They had no way of knowing Rachel had in fact ventured out of the house a few times - only she crept out the back way. She slipped into the back yard protected from prying eyes by a high stone wall and crept to the acropolis covering the swimming pool. People were dying in the streets for lack of clean drinking water while the wealthy couple owned an industrial juicer filling a whole pool.

If others were in the house, which was not often, she wore her yellow bikini. Sometimes the old couple demanded she lounge about au natural like a living model. A prim and disapproving seneschal let her know when her services were needed. More often they were not at home and she wore nothing more than her white silk robe as she emerged from her bedroom descended the stairs and threaded her way through the mansion to the sliding glass

door.

Her purpose in all of this was not to offer cheap thrills to any of the maids or houseboys. She wanted to swim in the nude, that was all, and she could if she wanted. Not entirely shameless. Living in the moment. Luxury and leisure a part of the recompense. Considering she performed as a professional exhibitionist her behavior during her stay at the mansion becomes difficult to explain.

The robe slipped from her shoulders, slid along her lovely contours, encircling her bare ankles in a heap. As she stepped free the breeze stiffened. She slipped into the water from the steps of the shallow end.

She swam, keeping her head above water, a sleek mammal on the watch for predators. In smooth strokes she crossed back and forth from one edge of the pool to the other until the smoothness of the water flowing over her limbs brought a shudder leaving her clinging by one hand onto the side of the pool where her fingers plied the lip.

She dunked her head under the surface and swam the whole length of the pool underwater. She surfaced and blew spray, slunk from the shallow end, and pulling on her robe never bothered to rub dry.

Rachel padded through the kitchen and back up the stairs as though a thousand eyes swarmed after her in mad pursuit. Only

when she was back in her room with the door well slammed against prying eyes did she disrobe and towel dry. Then she lay on the bed to conjure memory flashes of day light cool water and warm air exposure, a certain girl named Nika, even a corny pop star made a guest appearance, and once again, the shudders.

The first time she frolicked in the acropolis she realized how on the return trip through the house she might have left water prints across the kitchen floor. The realization startled her off the bed. She pulled on a clean pair of panties, jeans, and a sweatshirt.

When she entered the kitchen, just as she suspected, her little puddles perched round and tense like saucer-shaped eyes protruding from the marble. In such an inclusive kitchen she pawed at the towels suspended from a wooden roller. Her tracks she erased by stooping to sop up the puddles before going down on her knees like a washerwoman to mop up every drop.

Moving to the living room Rachel hid behind the curtains hanging in front of the sliding glass door and peeked around at the area within the back patio. Her wet footprints had dried in the sun and been effaced. Where she had exited the pool a healthy puddle brooded.

Worse was the agitated water whipping the slanting afternoon sun into triangles of commotion. The sieches bobbed and plummeted, while beneath the surface the strange patterns of

light whipped and whorled. Blue geometric prisms with white borders careened across the bottom and stretching up along the sides of the pool. Each one appeared like a snapshot of Rachel caught in the act.

The perturbation above and below showed no signs of slowing. She wanted the water to stop pumping before anyone saw her behavior mirrored in those refractions. A feeling akin to the honey bee poised on the glass surface formed across a pool of water and drawing sustenance before plunged beneath the surface by some errant influence and embroiled in the tumultuous insanity leading to death. Her delicate balancing act with reality had become that tense.

She fled from her own demons and retreated upstairs. In the second-story bedroom facing the street she heard the boys' yells and hollers, their arguments and appraisals, their boasts and lies, with a clarity requiring no more subterfuge than leaving her wood frame window open while sitting nearby in a green rocking chair.

She never spied on those boys. She didn't have to. They weren't doing anything except gossiping in a circle. She brought her knees up under her chin and listened, felt safer, connected in some small way to a part of that elite world, until she heard her own name mentioned, with a question mark now attached.

The timbre of their voices dropped to a hum having the

opposite effect to their intention of not being overheard. Their subdued tones made them queerly more audible so that her name, the word virgin, and the unanimous consent dismissing the term in defining Rachel Cozy all reached her hearing through the open window. Even in their ignorance and naiveté they knew she was no 'granddaughter'.

Her hand moved to cover herself and when she realized what she had done, her hands were covering her privacy - it now seemed the whole world had an intimate knowledge of - she bolted out of the rocking chair. On a certain level she had known all long her dreams of opulence were futile and absurd, and yet Rachel sought too late to stifle a cry, covering her mouth with her hands.

The chatter outside halted. She dropped to the floor so they might not see her shadow on the curtains. She crawled away on hands and knees until she reached the far wall.

The sounds from outside returned, a strange echoing laughter - leaving her unsure whether those boys outside had heard her cry of humiliation or not.

She sat on the floor with her back to the wall. How did they come by such an intimate knowledge of her body? Had they heard her swimming in the pool? Had they been drawn to the fence for a closer look? Had they stolen a peek when she was off her guard?

How did they know she was about to pass under the knife? Her reputation in that part of the world was ruined. There would be no hooking a husband now. She had believed she could enter the mainstream. Deluding herself into believing she was close to crossing over into respectability. Now she only desired a quick and painless end.

I had no way of knowing Rachel was contemplating suicide. There was nothing the least bit romantic about it. The whole situation was dreary and depressing. A pathetic waste. A sickening tragedy. Nothing cool about it. Nothing good. No redemption to be had. My response was mostly anger and a terrible feeling of betrayal.

She loved me and I loved her, and we shared a lot, yet she was always hiding things from me. Plus we were separated at the time so I was not her favorite rub a dub ducky anymore. Besides, she was not about to admit to me the extent of the torment I myself was causing her. Without me knowing, she was on the verge of plummeting, and taking me down with her.

Not content with the pain Rachel was causing, on my own I sought out self-inflicted wounds for myself. For the first time in my life I bought my own bag of powder bud and locked into the process of smoking myself into oblivion.

I tried filling up the empty place in my heart where Rachel's love used to be with dense clouds of toxic smoke. It should come as a surprise to no one drugs proved a poor substitute for love.

To be honest I made a wimpy junky, burning out in no time, and I was ready to flush what was left of my bag down the toilet the day The Body knocked on my dressing room door.

He knew I was holding powder. He was the one who sold it to me. How many times had I showed up in his office with a sheepish look on my face? I couldn't say no to him now. How could I? The principles of addiction involved obligations of quid pro quo.

By the time he backed out of the doorway an hour later I was a vibrating mess. In the room by myself I stood in the middle of the floor and spun circles.

I had forgotten how to act. I was drifting through space and moving objects from one place to another, cleaning and arranging the objects in my room to no real purpose. Taking a cold shower was the only way I could think of to wash away some of the buzz. When I stripped down I realized I'd already used my two minute coupon so I opted to go for my routine swim in the Tank of Mermaids instead.

To me warm chlorine is a holiday smell. They'd been running the heater all morning. Steam roiled across the water and rose in wisps from the placid surface of the pool. The place was full

for a weekday afternoon. Most of the old sweethearts wore their penguin suits with delicate white carnations adorning their lapels. Real class.

The air of The Club was heavy with cigar smoke. The heated pool was like bath water and I was more clear-headed after a few laps. I climbed out of the pool and tip toed behind the curtains where the wild seeds of my youth were wasted.

Once I was dressed I felt more relaxed, undaunted and intrepid, enough to go all the way out to the front desk. Waiting there for me was a text from Rachel, and this is what it said:

Nika,

Well hi! How've you been? I'm doing pretty great. Today is Thursday, so I've only been here a couple of nights. But, I'm already exhausted! I've played tennis and ran two huge workouts up these desert roads!

I already find myself thinking about you! I believe I needed this trip, I only wish the timing were better for us. But I don't think you know how happy you make me. I hope you're happy. I don't think I could ever find anybody else I could ever trust and love as much as you. You're very special to me. I keep my every picture of you by my nightstand. Can you feel how much I think about you? I can't wait to get back and talk to you + be

with you. Everything will be okay, won't it? I only wish I'd told you more before I left, but I was worried. Oh well, they'll be time when I get back.

Take care of yourself for me, I'll write you in a few more days. You'll have time to write me at this address. Write me if you can okay? It gets awful lonely out here in the mansion.

Be good + take care,

Love you,

Rachel

P.S. here's a big kiss 'X'

I reread the text several times, wondering who she had found to write it for her, especially the parts about her loving me. I was worn out from powder smoke burn and chlorine and missing Rachel was bringing me down hard.

To escape the buzz I returned to my room and nodded. While napping a woman came striding across a country landscape darkened as though after a storm. The landscape smelled of raw, exposed earth, dark and fecund, except for a cragged tree with branches splayed against a crimson sky. The woman continued across the plowed fields, stumbling and dropping to her knees, her face contorted by pain, or perhaps some excruciating ecstasy.

She neared the tree, which I thought was her goal. She

crawled face down, not exactly on her belly, because she was distended with child. The woman's hair was gnarled like the branches of the tree and her face sparkled with perspiration. As she gained the ground beneath the farthest tips of the branches she reached her true destination, a neatly sculptured, rectangular pit.

The woman dragged her heavy haunches around until her legs dangled in the pit, almost pulling her down. She regained her balance by bringing her knees up against her breasts.

She was going into labor, giving birth with the aid of gravity. The purple-headed child emerged head first, shoulder by shoulder, free-falling into the pit, trailing the umbilical cord snapping taut.

In a moment the rest of the placenta and slimy fluids cascaded in a flopping, quivering mass. Lying at the bottom of the pit the child's little eyes and nostrils were still covered in the amniotic fluid. It turned its pinkish noggin this way and that, tiny hands grasping at the air. The child made no sound nor gave utterance to cries of any kind.

The woman's moans of anguish turned to hysterical sobs of pain and triumph helping her regain her breath as she smiled, beaming in relief at the blessed event. As she departed she dragged herself away though still lying on her back. In the process she showered fine particles of earth upon the gasping

newborn babe, her mucus-covered eyes and cheeks dotted by the black crumbs left by her mother's crabbing locomotion.

I heard the sound of a cat fight in the hallway and swung my legs off the side of the bed. I somehow knew by the knock it was The Body returning for more.

He could not have been gone for more than a couple of hours and he was back just like I'd done with him a million times. I let him in, and I didn't make him wait. He didn't want to ask. I stumbled to the high boy, opened the lowest drawer, reached under the stacks of lace panties and retrieved the cigar box I used to hide my paraphernalia.

The last thing I wanted to do at that moment was to get more stoned, but what could I do with the many favors I owed?

"How do you like it?" The Body was smiling, and rocking back on his heels.

"It's a lot stronger than I'm used to." I sat down on the bed, and pulled out my rolling machine.

"What's that contraption?" The Body rocked forward for a closer inspection. "Don't you know how to roll a coffin nail?"

I paused in my preparations.

"I have a feeling you're about to show me."

He took the baggie he'd sold me and filched a couple of sizable buds, half-emptying the lid. My eyes grew wide when I saw how much he intended consuming.

He crumbled the buds into a fine shake. Since little, red Medusa hairs swirled throughout a cleaning was really unnecessary. He pulled the first rice paper. On principle he crushed it into a tiny ball and flicked it into the cigar box. The second paper he accepted as worthy of the ritual.

Each rolling paper came with a crease in its middle. Body gave it another fold at the one-Quarter mark, creating a trough for the pot and powder to rest in, which he filled to overflowing. I did the same, packing my own rice paper full and manipulating it with my fingers pointed towards each other like in a Chinese torture trick.

"What you want to do," The Body said, "is roll and tuck, roll and tuck. Just pay it along, concentrate on what you're doing. It's easy."

I concentrated on my trembling fingers, rolling and tamping at the rice paper to keep the narcotics cradled in the trough.

Then I looked at the finished number in his hand. Anybody would have mistaken it for a manufactured non-filtered cigarette if not for the sly ducktail at one end. We smoked them both, the one he rolled as well as my lopsided and monstrous creation. In passing those joints back and forth my fingertips lost sensation.

Handing him a couple of buds to prevent his return appeared like this huge act of generosity, when in truth I had been on

the verge of flushing it anyway, and at that point I just wanted to get rid of the drugs and him both I was so strung out. Over the years of trying to quit I probably flushed as much as I smoked.

After The Body left I wallowed around in self-pity for a few hours, sorry to be stoned - and what was worse, missing Rachel more than ever. Tripping about her gave me an upset stomach. I was so sick and tired of missing her. Nothing was going right anymore. I wanted to stop feeling lousy all the time. I could not help but think of her. I could not help but think.

In fact, that afternoon I started my own contemplations of suicide.

Gunmetal tastes funny. I got a buzz from sticking the pistol barrel in my mouth. A spark leapt through my skull as though I'd actually pulled the trigger. If only I could locate some ammunition.

Rachel's absence preyed on me. I wanted her out of my head, and the only way of escaping her punishing memory lay in putting me out of her misery, permanently. Single-handed I set psychiatric medicine back a whole millennium. If I could only open a hole through my cranium then the evil spirit stinging my genius might be exercised once and for all.

Rachel had been away on her trick with the millionaire and

his bored young wife, and she didn't come back until the weekend. I had never looked forward to seeing somebody so much in my entire life. I couldn't wait to be with her again. I was bursting to tell her how much I loved her - this much (arms flung wide) scary tentacle style.

Through text, the last thing she said before starting the homeward journey was how she would zip me on Saturday so we could make some big plans - an actual appointment - to meet and be together.

I wanted to celebrate by having sex with her on the spot, even though I knew she wouldn't be into it after a long couples thing. I just wanted to be with her again, never mind that we were still broken up, technically. To me that was all in the past, a petty squabble. Forget about it.

While it was true Rachel still wanted me to act as her Live Feed partner I had not succeeded in pulling the hood over her eyes by any means. If I was ever going to keep her from flying off again I was going to have to work harder than ever to lure her back to me in the first place.

What I failed to count on was her baiting me first.

On that Saturday in my naïve enthusiasm I was hoping to hear from her by noon. A morning zip would have been terrific. From her such a minor courtesy appeared too much to expect.

Noon came and went and I reasoned hearing from Rachel

sometime mid-afternoon would be tremendous. I would have preferred to see her sometime in the early afternoon. We could still get together before suppertime. She had said she would zip. In fact she had been very specific about that, pointed even, so no doubt about it in my mind. Rachel would hit send.

The big hand, stiff with indignation, pointed at twelve. While the little hand, limp from disappointment, hung lamely toward the four. The afternoon wore on, as minute by minute wrought a terrible change in my heart.

Anger was gestating inside of me full of bitterness and recrimination. What amazes me now is that I didn't just pick up the compod and reach out to her first. I was nurturing unhealthy doses of stubbornness and pride at the time.

Who am I trying to kid? I was a selfish twit, and when I didn't get my way, I turned into a mean twit. I whipped around mad as a hornet ready to put the hurt on impact, heedless of the cost. None of these emotions ever did anyone a bit of good. What they did to me was distill into hatred. On that afternoon an urge to deliver a poisonous hurt against Rachel was born.

By six o'clock that night I was grinding my teeth and pacing the floor. The heart of the day had been spoiled, wasted forever, and now Rachel was threatening to do the same with the entire evening.

If she didn't call within the next hour or so there would

be no chance of enfolding her in my arms at all because tomorrow would be the start of a new week and the clubs would be freshly open and nobody spent a day like that paying social calls. With what was left of tonight we could at least see a porno together. If only she would call and make that appointment. I transformed into a psychotic bitch waiting for her to contact me.

By nine o'clock I was sitting slumped on the couch and staring at nothing in front of me. My belly was bubbling full of the kinds of stuff the Weird Sisters might have tossed into a boiling cauldron - because Rachel had lied to me. She betrayed me by ruining our chances at a reunion before going back to work at The Club.

Now we couldn't work things out and be together before facing the crowd. We couldn't pick up like before. I was feverish with indignation. I went mad during the length of that very long day. I wanted to pierce her heart. I burned to crush her soul. At eleven o'clock that night I finally picked up my compod and thumbed her and by doing so I woke her up. She had gone to bed already without any intention of calling. My sweaty hand wrung the compod.

"I thought you said you were going to call me."

She snuffled her sleepy-headed reply.

"I was too tired to thumb, Nika. It was a long drive home yesterday."

"I waited all day because you said you were going to call me. I waited *all day!* What do you think? That I've got nothing better to do with my time?"

"If you spent all day staring at your compod, then apparently you don't."

"Wrong answer." I held the compod about a foot away from my face so that I could better scream into the mouthpiece. I don't want to repeat what I said, how I went off on her.

By the time I replaced the pod against my ear there was no transmission, only dead air. My rage doubled. I remained sleepless that night. On the first day back at The Club I was a bleary-eyed freak prowling the halls in search of Rachel whom I did not locate.

I didn't hear a word anyone said to me. As far as I was concerned the whole show was a noisy and diabolical circus.

By the end of the week I was a homicidal zombie, as though my guts had been torn out and replaced with oil-soaked sawdust, and then set ablaze. Rachel was nowhere to be found.

It wasn't like I could ask anybody where she was - especially not her friends. She would win points somehow if she knew I was looking for her. I wanted to catch her on my own, unawares, so I could yell at her more, so I could let her feel my rage, so we could have it out once and for all - resolve what we were doing to each other.

The whole week went by, and I never saw her once. I refused to call her. After all, she had hung up on me, and I was not going to humble myself for a second attempt when she was the one who never called me in the first place.

During the week I went to dance practice every day and did my little number every night. The starting pole position was mine for the taking, and I had done nothing but blow it through distracted and dispirited performances. That left working the menu as my only chance for getting into the spotlight. The Body would have pulled me off those joints, too, if he'd talked to me or taken stock of the look on my face.

Perhaps they mistook my expression for a game face.

Friday morning whipped the covers off my sorry frame to reveal a shivering wreck. I was so mad at Rachel. She and I had spent a lot of time together over the past few months and really grown closer together.

We told the kinds of secrets you never share with another person. Not to mention the fact we'd been intimate, that she was my first Global Upload online lover.

I'd even given up my friends for her sake, and here she was at a crucial juncture in our lives ditching me. My anger crested and now I was plunging into self-pity. I couldn't concentrate on anything. In my heart I had already surrendered.

In my mind I was working up the text of my apology speech.

You win girl. You got me. I was wrong. I acted like a bitch. I shouldn't have sat holding the compod all day like a big baby waiting for you to zip me. I should have zipped you first and respected the fact that you were too tired to get together.

I was more than ready to play the dancing cat. As it turned out she wouldn't let me get close enough to grovel. She had vanished when she should have been there.

When I finally caught her in my sites I was standing in the wings during Friday's big number. I felt guilty about scanning the audience while the show was in progress. Watching the girl ahead of me on the depth chart making twirl after twirl grew old so I looked for Rachel.

I recognized Rachel's blonde hair bobbing through the crowd and recognized her fine behind squeezed into a tight mini. What I saw next I saw for sure and there was no avenue of denial left open to me. Rachel came in with somebody else. She was strolling side by side with some fancy woman I didn't even know. From here on out we will be slogging our way through muck. Step this way...

The dance unit pranced offstage and huddled in the wings. We clustered around the dance captain, and we flopped our paws on her right paw, forming a pile of flapjacks. On our pledge we swore to *go go go* and then we broke apart, running onto the

stage in fine formation.

We lined up and watched for the kicker to give the high sign. My gaze flitted towards the audience, and I'll be damned if I couldn't pick out Rachel sitting in the crowd. The identity of the woman sitting next to her I couldn't tell - an empty blur to her right, so by this woman's absence I could tell she was present.

The kicker's hand dropped, she trotted forward, and let loose a beauty. We all followed suit with high kicks of our own.

For a moment I lost concentration and my back leg went out from under me. I convulsively gripped the shoulder on either side of me and like a chain reaction the whole row followed, and we crashed to the stage boards together. I crawled off the stage on my hands and knees through a gallery of anguish. My mates convulsed in every conceivable posture of agony - heads thrown back and lamenting toward the sky, heads bowed down and held between their hands in dejection, high heels scraping the stage looking for traction, chewing their spangles in frustration and anger.

I knew exactly how they felt, from an entirely different causation. Indicative of how low I had sunk, at that moment, I didn't care how badly I had humiliated myself in front of a packed house. I didn't give a damn. I didn't give a damn I'd let my sisters down on the stage in front of everyone. The catcalls

and the whistling were deafening.

One would think this sort of selfishness would be as low as a body could go, yet at this point I was only halfway to the bottom. I could sink lower, and I would, eventually.

They pulled me off the dance squad. The show resumed in a very unsteady fashion. Most of the grumbling I heard put the blame for the pratfall on the chick who replaced me, and I did nothing to disabuse anyone of that misunderstanding.

As soon as the dance review ended I headed for the locker room to take my four minute shower although I'd hardly earned the extra water ration. I didn't talk to anyone. I was afraid to, after how I had failed my team. What with Rachel tearing my heart out, I could only focus on so many calamities at one time.

I walked out of the locker room and heard someone call my name. Rachel was sitting on a divan in one of the alcoves. The doors were open and her feet were tucked underneath her. She was motioning me over with one hand and slipping a sandal strap off her heel with the other.

By the time I reached her she was barefoot.

"How's it going, Sweet Angel?"

"Not so good," I said, standing before her like a naughty school girl ready to be spanked.

"I know. You all fell down. What a bummer."

"That's not the half of it."

"What do you mean?" She tossed her sandals into the shag rug, and from a large box she produced a pair of black thigh high leather boots with a frilly pink sock rolled neatly and tucked inside.

"I mean that I'm lousy at dancing," I said. "I don't know why I even bothered going out this year. I never get to go on, and when I do, I screw up so badly they yank me."

"Oh, poor Sasha. I'm sorry. I know how much it means to you. Come here."

I went to her, knelt down on the shag rug, and laid my head in her lap. She stroked my hair, and I had to swallow hard to keep from crying in shame.

Instead I spoke my true heart's meaning:

"I love the way we can be broken up, for long periods of time even, but whenever we come together, we're right back the same."

"Do you want to get back together?"

"Yes. I do."

Rachel took my face in her hands and brought it up in front of her own.

"Nika, are you going to allow me to whip you tonight?"

"Will you? I know I deserve it. I know I've been a naughty girl."

My anger and resentment had vanished. I needed her, and I

didn't care on what terms.

"Yes. I'll see you in dungeon and we can talk about it some more. I've got to change my darn footwear first. Go on. I'll see you downstairs."

I don't know what sort of hallucinations I'd been having on the stage. She hadn't been with some other woman. She was alone, and she wanted to be with me, like always.

What a boost, what a lift. Life was great again, and things were good. I was flying high all of a sudden.

Blasting music filled the dungeon, and denizens milled about those dark environs. The slap of the whip. The groan, the moan, the piquant cry.

On a stretch of bench along the floor, I took up position by myself. Rachel made her entrance a moment later. She stripped me unceremoniously and fixed me with a dog collar and leash, gently jerking the chain so I would follow her to the crucifix where she bound my ankles and wrists and with a ball gag stoppered my mouth. As soon as she had her slave captive and bound she motioned with her hand, and her Jezebel appeared.

Rachel's head lolled, nuzzling a stranger's neck. Her body weaved in sensual time to the slow motion of the music. The jealousy made me feel like a nicotine freak tweaking for toxins. My brain swelled outward pressing against the confines of my skull and my whole body twitched uncontrollably. My lungs ached

with thirst. My arms tingled as my fingertips went numb. Try as I might I was unable to tear my gaze away from the naked spectacle before me.

My mind whispered in wonderment.

"She's hurting me on purpose."

I felt lucky to have survived the session without vomiting.

I watched those sharing drinks from a brown paper sack.

When I was a little girl, and my red rubber ball ended up perched out of reach on top of a well-manicured hedge, I couldn't touch it, reaching over the hedge so I forced my hand through the tangle of thick foliage. I found myself up to my armpit in scratchy leaves and twigs, and then my fingers made contact with some sort of paper bag.

As it turned out what my fingers were touching wasn't a paper bag at all but a hornet's nest. Those nasty brutes came boiling out of their papier-mâché fortress and swarmed over my knuckles. Inflicting vicious bites.

Years later I was watching a paper bag with a bona fide pint inside; my bumper buddy sipping on Hornet's Juice. Some poor, unsuspecting little woman put her hands on my bright shiny ball. In agony I yanked and strained against the leather restraints, to no avail. Voyeurs mistook my straining as erotic. I cried mercy. Immersed in her sexual cruelty Rachel ignored even my safe word.

Together they drained that bottle and hurled it, rejoicing at the tinkle of shattering glass. Once they were done putting on their show for my benefit Rachel undid the restraints. I waited until the shackles were free before assaulting that little tramp she'd been sexing. Grabbing her hair and yanking her head every which way. Little Miss Thing burst into tears, broke free and ran off squealing.

In a flash Rachel was in my face, wagging her index finger under my nose.

"If you have a problem with me then you talk to *me*. Not her. Me!"

I backed away, laughing.

"I don't have a problem. If anybody has a problem, I'd say it's you for the rest of your relationship with her. Have a nice evening comforting your little girl friend."

Rachel tried to repeat what she'd already said. I told her to clap it, before I spun around and stomped off. I could hear her inarticulate rage as she flipped through her mental thesaurus, looking for a comeback, and coming up empty. On the way to my dressing room I laughed uproariously for the whole world to hear.

The rest of the freaks partied on, oblivious to the heartbreak of this dungeon acolyte. The cheerful party evening highlighted my isolation and made me feel empty and stupid, just

what Rachel intended.

At that moment I wished I was dead. As it turned out we weren't like the tragic characters in some old-fashioned play. Maybe in some ways Rachel and I were the same as in a tragedy; only our fate was in living long enough to disappoint each other. In the long run I'd say those two young lovers they wrote about got off lightly.

How quickly a young girl's fancy will turn from thoughts of suicide to those of homicide. I'd been on the verge of killing myself because of Rachel. After more serious consideration I found myself wanting her dead instead, considering the way she had humiliated me in the dungeon.

The biggest problem I faced was the irrationality of the love I still bore for her.

I wanted her to suffer a more painstaking and excruciating death - like being slowly digested alive inside the belly of a terrible beast. I wanted to fling her whole into the gaping maw of a giant riggedy-be-bob.

Or somehow if she could remain conscious through the whole process I wanted her pecked to pieces and digested in the gizzard of a voracious cliff dwelling fowl. After such nonsense I realized some far subtler torture was required and the only weapon I possessed to pay her back in kind was psychological terrorism.

In collusion Hater and I were loitering between shows in The Club one day. He was standing out of area, but desperation measures were needed, and he responded to the menace in my voice. I had him clued in concerning the whole revenge angle - and he was more than willing to engage in any scheme that might cause harm to Rachel Cozy. We were girl watching, picking through the crowd in order to select the proper agent of woe. We found the perfect girl in a newly arrived piece of work named Svetlana, stage name Sweet Lana, or Sweaty Lana, depending on your POV.

To begin with I used Hater to scout her out so I knew ahead of time she was going to be receptive. Hater characterized her as 'easy pickings'.

After his initial reconnoiter I wasted no time in paying my respects. In passing one day I said hello to her. In response she put herself in my path at least ten times a day. She must have memorized my work schedule.

Negative reactions came in from all sides. First I learned how she'd already been busted inside The Club as a kleptomaniac. Somehow she had snuck her way into the other girl's lockers and stolen all kinds of basically useless junk. I was less sure about the rest of her neurosis. She had blonde hair with black roots, the kind that looks like a dirty butt crack running up and over a girl's scalp, and she wore too much makeup. You could

see the base line where it curved around her neck. She was a liar too. Then again so was I. In a lot of ways we deserved each other. Svetlana was some kind of crazy clown. I didn't mind her. She was using me to get attention, and I was using her to get at Rachel.

Speaking of Rachel, she was holding hands with the Bruised Cherry one day when I caught her red-handed in the middle of a furtive glance. From then on I made sure that my new squeeze and I stood in the middle of the lounge in the same spot every day, which is where we were when Svetlana told one her more outlandish lies.

"Do you see that girl over there?" She nodded toward someone several tables away. I looked in the direction Svetlana indicated. She gripped my biceps in panic. "Don't look at her now, stupid. When I say 'look', I don't mean stop and stare. Do you see her, though? Do you know who I mean?"

I spoke in a mutter from the side of my mouth.

"Do you mean Inna? What about her? Do you wanna go up inna?"

Svetlana suffered from Valley-speak something fierce. Whenever she told a story her tone of voice pitched upward at the end of every sentence like a little kid.

"I was in the gym the other day. In the locker room. After we played volleyball. And this one girl. She was getting

dressed. And this other girl."

"Inna?" I asked.

"Right, but don't interrupt, stupid."

"Ho, sorry."

Svetlana laughed louder than was necessary and swatted my arm. I could sense certain heads turning, obviously what Svetlana wanted. Public attention was her tacit reward for putting up with me. When I realized she was mad-dogging some girl I told her to knock it off.

"That girl was staring at me."

"Why, because you were staring at her first? Besides you were going to tell me what happened in the locker room."

"Nothing," she said. "Only Inna threatened to kick this one girl's ass."

"No way," I said. Now I was not a good friend of Inna Space, but I knew she was the type of woman who wore high heels and a bikini poolside. No way had she ever threatened to kick anybody's ass.

"You're crazy," I said. At that remark I felt Svetlana's whole body prickle.

"It's true. She threatened to kick that girl's butt, and then she threatened to kick mine, too. She was all like: 'I'm going to kick your ass, bitch!'"

Whenever somebody carded her on her ridiculous lies

Svetlana had the amateur's habit of stretching her falsehoods even farther until beyond belief they snapped and fell to pieces. A more sensible liar would have embellished more, and not expanded the overall falsehood. Her poorly stitched hoodwinks bore no sense of proportion.

I cultivated a relationship with Svetlana in spite of her obvious insanity. A bigger challenge than her mental instability was getting her alone in the overpopulated environs of The Club. She couldn't tell her roommates she was with me, or they never would have allowed her out of the room. Supposedly her dad had been a big man in the military before disgracing himself somehow, and when he fell from grace she tumbled out of the nest and onto the street. One of Body's cronies brought her in and they signed her to a five year contract even though she had no experience of the kind that counted inside The Club Abattoir.

Svetlana was waiting for me on a silk divan in the VIP Lounge. I knew she saw me coming because she did a double take when she spotted me. Before acknowledging me she had to play her goofball head games.

I stood there not ten feet in front of her while she turned her head this way and that with an air of nonchalance. She had to pretend she hadn't seen me. I couldn't be charmed. I could only be annoyed.

"Are you insane or what?" I asked

And I swear she did another double take, like she was seeing me for the first time. A big smile spread across her face, which looked like it was splattered in white flour and raspberry preserves, a bona fide tart.

She fanned me an ecstatic little wave of her hand. I couldn't generate impatience because her performance was too lame. Although, I could be cruel because she allowed for it.

Svetlana sashayed over and as she sidled up next to me.

"I've been waiting here forever!"

"Forever? Philosophically, that's a long time."

We walked through the lounge and down the hallway and past the room where Rachel now lived. Her fame and prestige were growing ever more pronounced.

I took Svetlana back to my dressing room. We walked in the door, and I pointed toward the bathroom.

"You can change in there."

"Is there a lock on the door?" Svetlana flapped her false eyelashes.

"You'd better hope so," I said, batting my lashes right back at her.

Her eyes widened. She kept her gaze fixed in my direction as she backed toward the bathroom door. She tried to reach behind her to open it, like she couldn't trust me enough to turn her back nor take her eyes off me for one moment. She was such a

lameoid she couldn't get a grip on the door handle so she had to give up the pretense, turn around, and grasp the handle. Then, I don't know how, she tried to hurry across the threshold and her bag got caught in the door. She hit her head. She was trying to play act and be funny yet she couldn't execute a single maneuver and only managed to come across like she was suffering a major spazz attack.

Once she managed to get the door shut behind her I could hear her struggling with the skeleton key to tumble the lock-works. I finally opened the door and stepped in next to her to show her how to work the key. She had forgotten I was the one she was supposed to be protecting herself from.

Once I'd shown her I stepped back outside and sure enough she managed to lock the door.

For a moment I'd had the strangest impulse. I felt like grabbing this little phony, throwing her in the shower, turning on the water full blast, and washing off all that freaking makeup to find out who she really was underneath that mess. After thinking about it I decided she wasn't worth the water credits.

Physically I could have done it but that never would have happened. I'm just saying I had the impulse. I didn't need to get rough with her. I was confident I could find the right combination of kindness and kisses to open her up sooner or

later - and if I didn't it was no big deal. In reality I was just killing time waiting for Rachel to come to her senses. I missed her body when next to me she laid out raw and vibrant.

The Virgin Svetlana. Of her status I had no doubt. She was getting to be that age. Not quite ready. Soon. Soon. She was still working herself up to the deed. She knew there was something she was supposed to be doing. She just didn't know what. The fact we were both girls made her dry lack of instinct only slightly more complicated.

If she wanted to be friends with me, fine. If she wanted to get naked, double fine. Between us there would be no talk of love. I wasn't going to lead this girl on in that way. I didn't love Svetlana. I wasn't even sure I liked her. On the other hand I didn't need to squash her like a bug. I didn't need to full-on destroy her in the process of making Rachel jealous. Rachel's unspoken presence roamed along the background of this present relationship like a black cloud of locusts swarming above the green and golden fields of Svetlana's virgin hopes. Rachel threatened to descend at any moment and devour the entire edible landscape.

Like most girls Svetlana instinctively hated Rachel Cozy, so we had at least one thing in common.

I sat on the bed in my kimono.

"Are you ready, Pet?"

"No, I'm not," Svetlana said, speaking from the beyond.

"I'm going out by the Tank of the Mermaids."

"Go ahead," she answered. "Who's stopping you?"

"That robe hanging in there is for you."

"I can't believe we're doing this in the dead of winter."

"The pools heated, Svetlana. It's like a bathtub. You'll love it."

I'd been in and out of the tank several times before Svetlana emerged through the curtains and onto the deck. I'd lost interest, and wished she wasn't standing there anymore. She was shivering inside my robe.

She gripped herself around the waist as she came tiptoeing across the deck. Naked I exited the water. I had to pry her loose from herself in order to kiss her mouth. Afterward I wished I hadn't. Once she glommed onto me she wasn't just kissing. She latched onto my face like some invasive parasite. Having once formed a lip-lock she might never stop feeding, like a suckerfish - the kind found glued to the glass inside an aquarium. I'm not being cruel. This chick was scaring me the way she clung. I couldn't breathe.

By pulling away from her I tried to reassure myself we wouldn't be conjoined in this posture forever. Unfortunately the slightest movement toward withdrawal only intensified her grip around my neck, tightening the seal affixing this creature to my

face.

Her mouth was so covered in lipstick I received no taste of her flesh. She tasted more like hand lotion, or some other substance never intended for contact with the human mouth. I had to force myself to relax, and breathe through my nose. It wasn't kissing; it was major suckage, and I was starting to panic.

My eyes were open, and I was searching the ceiling to combat the tension of claustrophobia suffocating me. I had to take her by the shoulders and thrust her away to pop the seal.

She looked like she was about to swoon. I felt the same way - for a different reason. I was going to make some rude comment about how she kissed. The poor thing mooned in such rapture I couldn't muster the cruelty.

As far as I knew that might have been her first kiss. I drew her to me. She turned her head and rested her ear pressed against my chest. I turned my face up to the sky to stretch open my windpipe and regain normal breathing. I felt like I was standing on tiptoe in the deep end of the tank with the water just under my nose.

"Your heart is beating really fast," Svetlana said.

"How about that."

"Yes, my ear is pressed against it. I can really hear it beating."

"That's the effect you have on me." It was not a total lie.

I helped her remove the bathrobe she was wearing and tossed it aside.

Her breasts were peeled avocados, yellow and drooping, none of Rachel's hard champagne contours.

My hands languished along the small of her back. Next I took her by the shoulders and set her back, less than an arm's length away.

Her temporary befuddlement clarified into panic. She squeezed her elbows in tight against her sides, and covered her breasts with her hands.

"I don't think so," she laughed in a defensive, twittering, broken beak sort of way.

"What's the hang up? I thought you said you were ready."

"I am, but not here." Her arm swept out, and her hand dangled at the end, encompassing the steaming surface of the pool, the more or less empty lounge.

"What's wrong with right here, right now?"

"Sasha, it's daytime," her tone exasperated by what struck her anyway as an obvious impropriety.

"So what if it's daytime. What difference does that make?"

I wanted to hear her explanation because I didn't believe she could come up with one.

"People can see us."

"Sweetie, that's rather the point. People pay good money to

ogle your pretty young skin. If you're not ready for the big time, we can go back to my room, if you want to start slower."

"Nika, it's *daytime*."

"What difference does that make? You keep saying that, like it's some sort of self-evident truth. So it's daytime. So what? We can go where it's nice and private, and no one can see us, and we'll get busy like any two red blooded American girls ought to."

"I'm not doing... that... in the middle of the day."

At this point it occurred to me if she wasn't ready to say out loud what *that* was, then she probably wasn't ready for *that* at all. Which I found disappointing because sex can be a lot of fun, especially during the middle of the day and even more fun in a heated pool in front of an appreciative audience. It's delicious. That she was hung up was obvious, so I repressed the small pang of disappointment and moved on to other obstacles.

"Shall we get in the water?"

"You go first," Svetlana said.

I went around to the shallow end steps and crept in slowly so as not to spook her. Obviously Svetlana was not an aquatic bird by nature. If she relaxed in warm water for too long her wax might melt. How could I have mixed myself up with such a painted phony?

"C'mon in," I said, floating up to my neck. "The water's

fine."

"Sure it is," Svetlana said, her incredulity no longer an act.

"Look at the steam rising off it. You can tell it's warm. It's like bath water."

I swept my hand across the surface, sending a sheet of spray slapping across Svetlana's feet and ankles. She jumped as though the water scalded.

"Don't you even dare," she said, retreating as fast as she could in the scant space provided by the deck. Some bald guy seated at the bar boomed out a laugh.

I drew in a big mouthful of water and spewed a stream in her general direction.

"You're acting like a big chicken. Don't be such a child."

Svetlana had her arms crossed as she paced back and forth, knock-kneed, cornered like game prey.

"I'm serious, Sasha. Don't splash me. I didn't bring my kit, and if you mess my face up, I won't be able to fix it." She started muttering to herself. "I can't believe I'm standing here naked in the middle of the day in the middle of winter."

"I won't splash you, for cripes sake. Just get in the tank."

"I'm not getting in now."

"Yes you are. Look, I'll stay over here on this side. You

can get in at the steps, I won't come near you, and I won't splash you either. I promise."

"You promise?" Svetlana first uncrossed her arms, and then re-crossed them for emphasis.

"Yes, I promise."

"You swear to God?"

"Calling on the Almighty seems a little extreme in this situation, Svetlana. I'm sure he's a busy guy. Let's not annoy him with the little stuff."

Svetlana approached the lip at the pool's edge.

"You better not splash me. I am so serious."

"Don't worry," I reassured her. "I'm not going to. I already promised."

"You better not."

"I won't."

Svetlana sent an exploratory big toe penetrating the surface.

"It's warmer in here where I am than it is pacing around out there in the cold air like you are."

"It's down there that I'm worried about, not out here."

Watching her uncertainty as she became rooted to the first step, I realized this girl was petrified. I asked her, before I offered to show her the real deal, if she knew how to swim.

Judging by the temerity, her positive answer may have been less

than the truth.

"The air seems colder now your feet are wet, huh?"

Svetlana answered under her breath like she was communing with the spirit of her dead ancestors. With her head lowered she scanned the water as though on the lookout for unseen hazards, though the chlorinated water was steamy and clear.

She gripped the stainless steel rail as she sent her foot searching for the second step. As soon as she was assured of firm footing she followed with her other foot while still holding tight to the guide rail. She was backing in, keeping herself poised for an emergency exit.

"You must be ready now. Jump in!"

"I don't think so," she said, laughing over her shoulder.

"Listen," I said, "I'm coming over to help you. Don't get scared."

My words were like saying don't look down to someone teetering on a high ledge. By the time I arrived at her side she was trembling, and the rims of her eyes were brimming with tears.

"No need for that," I said. "I'm not going to do anything stupid. I'm just going to put my arms around you. There. That's not so bad, is it? Now turn around and put your arms around me. Let go... let go of the rail. . . let ... that's the girl, put your arms around me. Are you ready?"

"Don't get my face wet."

"I won't get your face wet. Here we go."

I took a step backward and carried Svetlana with me as we eased into the water together. I submerged us up to the shoulders, and no farther. For all of my outward kindness I was delirious with the urge to dunk her whole head underwater. I wanted to soak her a good one, get her whole head wet, and wash away the mask of face paint she was hiding behind. I knew there wasn't anything to it, no hideous scars or burns - just a mousy brown little girl with a bulbous nose she tried to shade away.

I was sure she wouldn't survive an unmasking, and after all the promises and reassurances I'd given her, dunking her now would make me a certain kind of punk. I never was that kind of punk. I put my feet solidly on the bottom of the pool and stood up with Svetlana still clinging to my neck. The weight was killing me.

"Stand up, Svetlana. *Girl*, put your feet down and stand up. We are in the shallow end. It's only four feet deep."

She put her feet down, and I peeled her off me. Finding herself abandoned in waist high water, Svetlana lifted her elbows, did an about face, and headed for the steps. She clambered out of the pool and went around to where dry towels were stacked on one of the deck chairs. After toweling dry she slipped back into my robe. She unfolded a couple more towels

and covered herself with them, winter fashion. If The Body had seen this performance he would have lifted her in his arms and heaved her upside down into the deep end.

With an easy breaststroke I glided on the surface to the deep end of the tank. I turned, put my feet against the side, and pushed off, swimming the entire length under the surface. The water streamed around my body languid and warm. I submerged into a reverie wherein Rachel appeared. When I broke the surface Svetlana was sitting there instead.

"Show off," She said.

"It's no big deal."

A smattering of applause accompanied me as I climbed out of the pool and sat in the chair next to her. A few regulars had entered the club and mistaken my laps for performance. I ran a hand over my face and pinched the moisture out of my nose.

Next to me sat Svetlana, her face motionless beneath her makeup. I saw where her pancake base left off and her actual flesh tones appeared. She looked content enough to be sitting there without talking until eventually she broke the silence.

"Sasha, what was it you were thinking about just now?"

"What a wasted opportunity this afternoon was," I said, being mean to her for no good reason.

Svetlana began kicking her feet.

"We can't do it until it's nighttime. My God, Sasha, be

decent."

"You do realize they expect you to plunge in here when the whole room is full of guys."

"I don't want to end up like your last girlfriend and have about a million abortions."

I really had to sit up straight on that one.

"Were did that come from? What in the hell are you talking about?"

"Rachel Cozy. Everybody knows she's had about a dozen abortions."

"You know something Svetlana, you are truly moronic. You tell the most asinine lies imaginable. I know you don't like Rachel. You don't have any reason to be anything but jealous of her, but don't say stupid stuff like that thinking spreading rumors will somehow make a difference to me. If anything, hearing you repeat that kind of trash just makes me mad. Don't talk to me about her anymore. Not if you want to stay friends."

Svetlana hung her head, mumbling.

"Fine. You don't have to be so sentimental."

"I know it's fine," I said. "I don't need you to tell me it's fine. But I think the word you're looking for is temperamental." I stood up suddenly because I'd had enough.

"Come on. Let's go get dressed."

I heard her agreeing disconnectedly. To some extent she

must have realized she was fresh meat and badly in need of a friend. The choppy surface of the pool had quieted down as we walked around its edge and catching a reflection of Svetlana gesticulating wildly and rudely behind me, mocking my every step through the surface smoke, I thought, *as long as she does it quietly*. Spinning around to catch her in the act didn't feel worth the effort. I recognized she was two-faced.

After spending more time with Svetlana I realized the extent to which her lies were utterly pointless. One time she pulled a photograph out of her purse and showed me a picture of a boy in a striped tee shirt and cut offs who was supposed to be her cousin. In reality he turned out to be some kid who had lived up the street. She also told me she'd been adopted, when in fact she had not.

She told me her favorite little brother had passed away when she was just a girl, when in fact she did not have a little brother. I never bothered to ask her why she lied so much because it would have blown her whole scheme, kind of like if I'd dunked her head when we were in the tank together. If she was trying to make her life more interesting by adjusting the facts, she was flailing.

What follows is the story Candy told me about Rachel and Hater, how they got together, and why they broke up. Imagine my surprise.

Apparently, some time after I clocked Roger on his head and she climbed out of the garbage pile where I left her, Hater and she went out on a date, sort of. I guess Rachel didn't want to look as though she was breaking up with Roger because I showed him up, so she seduced Hater, an easy enough task.

He outlived his usefulness for her pretty quickly. After their second date was over, for some reason, they ended up in the control booth in The Club. They were kissing, chaste enough, then they went to open mouths, which is the only way Rachel and I ever kissed. Finally, with trembling fingers, Hater built up the nerve to touch the outside of her blouse.

I don't know exactly what struck Rachel as funny about his manly maneuver. Whatever. She guffawed down his throat. Having someone laugh in your face is bad enough. When your mouth is open, and you're vulnerable like that, to have a hard gust of derisive wind fireball down your esophagus and hit the top of your stomach, well, the blast proved more than Hater could endure.

I guess Rachel tried to apologize, and knowing her she probably meant what she said. Her mistake? She couldn't stop laughing at herself for being such a spaz. Of course, Hater

didn't take her laughter as self-effacing. He took her snickering as emasculating, his crippled ego requesting she get out of the control booth, *now, please*, and after she complied, breaking equipment in his impotent rage.

On my end, when I broke up with Svetlana, she cried. She had to know why, and I could only tell her Rachel put a spell on me. Svetlana told me I was a fool, making her final evaluation the most honest thing she ever said to me. I'm not being melodramatic when I say I never saw her again. I really didn't. She just disappeared from The Zone. The poor thing became a goner.

One day about a month later I was dragging my ass around The Club and heading for my locker. For some reason our lockers had air vents. I can't imagine why they would have air vents installed in them, except maybe to alleviate the stench of sex.

Sometimes we used them for passing notes to each other. With the paper folded just right they would stick in one of those slits and no one on the outside would be able to see them whereas the moment you opened the locker door there was no missing a note perched there, waiting.

A thrill trilled through my veins when I opened my locker door and found a note perched for me. My only thought was for Rachel. I was sure she wanted me back, and this was her first hello. When I opened the letter, my hopes plummeted because I

could tell by the handwriting this missive was not from her.

I looked at the bottom of the page, expecting to see Svetlana's signature. Instead I found the author had signed herself Anonymous.

Anonymous wrote with a light blue pen in big even loops indicating it was a girl's handwriting. The gist of the note advised me in my own best interest to proceed to a certain address this Friday night if I wanted to find out the real truth about Rachel Cozy.

I should be there no later than eight o' clock and keep myself hidden in the park across the street. I folded the note and stuck it in my jacket pocket. Before moving on I whipped my head around scrutinizing every person I saw.

I thought maybe whoever had written the letter might have stuck around to gauge my reaction. Maybe she was standing at a distance and watching me read. I didn't see any girl who might even remotely fit the bill. Nobody in The Club cared about me anymore. I had proved a failure at being exploited.

When Friday night came, you can bet I was dressed and ready to go. I wrapped myself in black latex the length of my smoking hot bod. I didn't know how clandestine an operation this adventure might turn out to be, when the whole mystery might prove to be nothing more than a cruel hoax.

If this arrangement turned out to be a surprise Rachel had

cooked up, then I might pass for cool in my all-black ensemble. An anonymous tip about Rachel, including a house address I didn't recognize? I had to expect anything.

I walked to the street address provided in the letter. The closer I got the more I realized I was approaching one of those Villas reserved for weekend parties by the aristocracy, and what's more, a party was raging. Sure enough, the closer I got to the house the more the house I was looking for became the party house itself.

This two-story Tudor faced a small grassy area with a bike path serpentine.

The streets were dark, wet, and shiny from a recent downpour. The rain pizzled onto the warm concrete. I high-tailed it up the sidewalk and crossed the street at a right angle. I went into the park deep enough to where I was swallowed by the shadows, then I tiptoed my way, tree by tree, to a point where I could see Rachael and some dude smoking in a limousine, but they couldn't see me.

They finished smoking their bowl, and I was just waiting to see who she was with now, just waiting for him to step out of the limousine.

Why she had hooked up with The Body I never could understand. I was dumbfounded as to why she would be with a guy like him. What he represented more than anything else was the

failure of Svetlana to bring Rachel to her senses. If anything, she had gone farther off the deep end because of Svetlana.

The Body was the biggest pimp bullshit artist of all time. He was older than we were by a few years, and he still drove a battery car because he thought it was cool. His wife beater revealed his tight pistons, and he was overdue for his first steroid rage. He'd already beat the crap out of Rudy at The Club and hurled him into a dumpster in the alley outback.

When he disentangled himself from the garbage Rudy cried in front of everybody. Nobody had done anything to help him because Body was the man in charge, and mean.

I wouldn't be making The Body jangle like a coo-coo clock any time soon. I was still a little kid compared to him. Seeing my Rachel with that Neanderthal crazed me with the desperation of the defeated.

I watched them get out of the bubble mobile and go back into the party with their arms wrapped around each other's waists like an old married couple. I was thinking I would have to go after her. I would have to commit an immolating gesture if I was ever going to win back her affection, like busting my way into that party and demanding satisfaction.

I was going to die.

Body himself was bad enough. The body guards he employed were huge - guys with names like Armstrong and Jorgenson and

Hammersmith. They would tear me limb from limb and throw me in scattered pieces down the front steps, girl or not. Any one of them could have done that kind of violence to me let alone the whole fraternity.

So this was the gist of the anonymous letter. Get there at a specific time to see what your ladylove is up to now. I didn't get the big picture. Was I guided to this spot as a cruel joke on Rachel's part? Or did one of her friends write the note? Rachel didn't look like a girl who was aware she was being watched.

If she had known I was supposed to be out there in the dark, gnawing my own heart, she would have had some fun betraying that knowledge somehow, or at least put on a better show. Rachel could pretend a little. She didn't have enough imagination to be a good actress.

No, the whole thing had been too natural for a set up.

I quit my post in the shadows of the trees and wandered through the darkness towards Body's dumb transport sat parked.

Then I noticed something really making me feel bad, as if I could possibly feel any worse. A little egg had fallen out of a tree. The little halves of the shell were still stuck to the roof of the bubble. I couldn't really see the yolk all that well. The egg had been too young, and now it was broken and wrecked forever.

At that moment I wished I could summon wild animals to my aid. I would call every hidden bird for a mile around to come flocking over Body's prize bubble and immerse it in avian guano. Something heinous like ten gallons of bird pooh would fix him.

They should drop their eggs like they were dive bombers. Eggs weren't good for car paint. Somebody egging his car would serve him right.

I'm not particularly proud of this piece of dirty work. Under any other circumstances, I would have challenged this guy face to face, but the fact is I didn't do that because he would have kicked my ass. As a general rule, it is not a good idea to enter into a fistfight unless you're sure you can win.

The fact remained I had to do something to bring those two down. I had to throw a curve into the path of their relationship somehow. By surrounding them with adversity, by creating a general atmosphere of misfortune, I thought I could break their tenuous connection.

Let Rachel get a load of how Body acted when he was angry. Let her get a look at him when he was really mad. A guy who's angry is never impressive, and a guy like Body would go off in no uncertain terms if anybody trifled with his transport. I figured I was going to die somewhere in the process of gaining revenge anyway so I might as well go down having delivered a few licks of my own.

From the street I could hear how loudly the party was raging. Something about the poor quality of the music lead me up the porch steps to take a peak in the window. Body had lined up a baseball squad with Rachel in the middle. They hadn't started yet. The crew was still setting up the lighting and testing the boom. Not only was he giving her the love, he was advancing her career. How could I possibly hope to compete with that? I walked down the steps, hunted around and found a good sized rock, and smashed the passenger side window. For a moment I stood there contemplating the destruction.

A girl closed the door behind her. She came skittering down the front walk and called my name in a pinched squeal underneath her breath.

"Sasha! Stop it! Please! What are you doing?"

If Rachel was stoned before, she must have been tripping by now.

"Hi, baby," I said, wiping my hands, even though they had nothing on them. "Just paying my respects to your new boyfriend. Then again, it's kind of my way of saying to you, Rachel, 'Hi Hon, how ya' doing? Miss ya!'"

"Nika, you are insane! If Body and his friends come out here and see this mess, and you standing here next to it, they will kill you. I shoot you not, honey. They will beat you to a pulp. They will put you in the hospital. And that's if you're

lucky. You have to get out of here, Nika. You have to get out of here - now! Not a second from now. Not a few minutes from now. But *right now*! Please, run away. Do it for me. Will you? Go. Please. I'm going to go back inside and pretend like nothing happened - but you have to get out of here, quickly!"

"I love you, Rachel. How can you be with that guy?"

"Nika, sugar, we'll talk about that later. Right now you have to go. Please? Go."

Rachel stepped up to me and kissed my lips. She was gentle and caring. I knew she was only trying to get rid of me. I looked up at the house where through the front window somebody was motioning at me. The semaphore turned out to be Candy Kane. She was gripping the curtain close beside her to block the view of the street from inside while with the other hand she was motioning for me to run for my life.

"Let's talk. Soon," I said. "Our situation is starting to get out of hand."

Rachel looked over at the hole in the transport and shook her head in negative agreement.

"Yes, I would have to say this has definitely gotten out of hand." She looked back at me and pointed her finger at me. "Now get out of here. Candy and I will cover for you. We'll make up a story and just go back to the set and pretend like nothing has happened. We'll talk later."

"Are you sure you can trust Candy?"

I waved at Candy in the window, and she laughed in panic and kept motioning for me to skeedaddle.

"Yes, I can trust Candy. And so can you. Now go!"

I did as I was told. I ran, rounding the corner and slipping into the darkness without anyone seeing me. Did I mention that I had drunk a pint of tonic before this whole evening started? I doubt I would have decided to do such a punk thing sober, not that it excuses what I did. Obviously I was not healthy.

I groaned and moaned. I couldn't eat. Sleep came to me not as a friend but as a plunge from despair into oblivion, and I reawakened troubled and vexed and un-refreshed. Undulating beneath the covers my somnolent form slowly awoke. Rachel sat on the side of my mattress.

"Why did you do that?" Rachel had given up saying hello.

"Because I'm insanely jealous," I said, even half awake articulating to her the pain she was causing me. "I couldn't stand seeing you with that idiot. You used to have much better taste in men, like when you were going out with Hater, for instance."

"You can't beat up or vandalize every guy I go out with."

"No, that's true. This will probably be my last escapade."

I sat up on the side of the bed. "Was he angry?"

"Angry? Nika, be glad you didn't stick around longer.

Candy and I went back inside. We pretended nothing was wrong. A few hours later, as we were leaving, we got about half way down the steps before Body saw the damage you caused. You should have seen him go off. He ranted and raved and stomped up and down the sidewalk. He made such a scene. The whole cast and crew came out to watch. Then they all ran back inside for fear of their lives."

"Does he have any idea who did it?" I was fully awake now and taking stock of my situation.

"No," Rachel said, "They all went back inside, and sat around for a couple more hours. Trying to decide who could have done such a thing."

"You didn't tell them?"

"Hell no. Sasha, those boys would have come and dragged you out of your bed. They're not afraid of the law. Your name did come up once. I told them you were not the one. That you and I were ancient history. They believed me. Body has a lot of enemies so they passed on to other people. I saved your pretty little tail, Honey."

Tears popped from my eyes, not because she had saved my worthless life. I cleared my throat and swallowed hard.

"If you told them that, and they believed you, then I guess there's nothing to worry about."

"I wouldn't say that, Nika. You've got plenty to worry about if they ever *do* find out. If anyone ever tells on you, you could still be in for a world of hurt."

"Who's going to tell on me? You? You already had your chance, and you chose not to. Candy? She's a trooper. She wouldn't tell."

"Oh, I know neither one of us would tell. We both like you too much. I mean if somebody else saw you, then they might tell. Or if you were ever fool enough to brag about it."

"I won't be bragging about this to anyone, believe me, and nobody else saw me. I made sure of that. If someone had seen me they would have told by now. You would have heard. I'd already be dead. But I'm not. So I'd say I got away with it."

"You might want to talk to Candy," Rachel said, "just to thank her. Let her know how much you appreciate her protecting you."

She stood up and quickly left having said nothing more to me. In normal times I could never get her to set foot in my basement. I wish she would have said something to me about her reaction to watching The Body go off like an idiot, like she no longer wanted to be with him after such a pathetic exhibition. She had not said anything along those lines and probably wasn't going to any time soon.

Other very promising developments had come out of our

conversation. Like the fact she had lied to protect me. She was siding with me against her own pimp. Personally, I never cared for the term 'stalker' to describe my behavior. I preferred romantic fool.

The reason she protected me had to be she still cared about me. All I needed was one more trick to turn her away from that guy, one more nudge to start her emotions roaming back in my direction, and I found the instrument I needed in a most unlikely individual: Rachel's own best friend turned the tide in my favor, Candy Kane.

Rachel encouraged me to have a conversation with Candy concerning my attack on Body's put-put. I hooked up with her as a result. As the facts were revealed Candy suffered from the Pretty Girl Syndrome. Nobody ever tried with her because most guys were afraid of rejection. She had enough admirers from The Club, true enough. Real life love could not be bought so easily, if at all.

She was too cute. She could also be pretty harsh. The few guys who did go out with her usually didn't come back for a second dose of her verbal abuse. I was different. I'd known her for a long time and I'd grown used to ignoring her stupid

comments and grew comfortable in her company.

I could tell when she was trying to be mean, as opposed to when she opened her mouth without first engaging her brain.

Going to Candy's room in the evenings helped to ease the pain of being without Rachel. At the beginning and for a while afterwards Rachel was all Candy and I had in common. She was the only friend we shared.

Later on we stopped talking about Rachel and we started making out a lot. Kissing was easier than making conversation. Munching on someone's lips I did not love became boring after awhile. Sometimes we would sit on the couch in her dressing room and make out for minutes at a time. Sooner or later I'd start looking around the room, noticing the wallpaper pattern, the ceiling, whatever I could see with my face pressed close to the face of another human being.

Candy always kept her eyes shut. I can't say what drove me to her. She had always acted like she hated me before, with me acting the same to her. Maybe jealousy for Rachel kept us from acting like friends. All that animosity became a relic of the past. We got along just fine when it was just the two of us. Soon enough we headed for bed.

The night of the Main Event came about in the cold season. We'd been practicing for almost a month and a half. I tapped The Body for a bottle of vodka. I made a beeline for her dressing

room and wasted no time slipping past the door she had left slightly ajar for me. The inside of her room was dark and quiet.

Candy's psychology, the short version: her parents divorced. Her Dad had remarried a girl about half his age, and they were on permanent vacation on an island somewhere. When the new step mom moved in Candy's older sister moved out. Candy didn't have that option. Forced into the street she rebounded into this joint. Stripping became a revenge tactic against Daddy, or Daddy had disowned her and the inheritance money belonged to the new wife. Something along those lines.

Candy was lying on the floor among some overstuffed pillows. She was pretending to be asleep. I lay down on the floor opposite her and rested my head in my hand. Underneath their lids her eyes were twitching. She finally opened her eyes.

"You're so stupid," Candy said.

I smiled past her sharp nose.

"Was I supposed to pretend I was asleep, too?"

"I was asleep," Candy said, sitting up, stretching and yawning.

"I can see that better now," I said, appreciating her full performance.

She spotted the brown paper sack lying between us. I removed the can of Death from Above for her to see.

Her eyes grew wide with alarm.

"Are we supposed to drink all that?"

"Some of it. Most of it. You don't have to have any, if you don't want it. You might like some mixed with orange juice, though. I think they call that drink a pile driver."

"A pile driver?" Candy was one of those people who found double entendres in everything anybody said. She was positive I was trying to send her subliminal sex messages through my every utterance. Either that or she was having wishful thoughts. Or she was flirting. I often felt as though I suffered from some sort of autism when it came to picking up on these kinds of flirty signals. Either that or I picked up all too well and grew into the habit of shoving everyone away just to stay safe.

She wanted it. She just didn't know how to go about getting it. It wasn't like she could ask for it outright. Acting forward would have compromised her ego, but she wanted it, and so we played these little games on the way to the VIP Lounge.

"We're going to need a couple of glasses if we're going to drink it as a mixed drink."

"Yes, you need two glasses, and some ice would be helpful. The colder it is, the better it tastes."

"I don't want to stink up two glasses."

"So wash them afterwards. There's this new thing called dish soap. The bartenders who work here keep it under the sink and use it in emergencies like this one."

As she raised herself off the floor Candy laughed and I caught her checking me out, trying to gauge how mean I was being. I relaxed my face and smiled at her until she was satisfied I was kidding her. I hoisted myself off the floor as well and followed her into her kitchenette off the VIP room.

I removed the bottle from the bag again, folded the paper sack, and laid it neatly on the counter.

"I'll put the empty back in the bag when we're through, and take it with me when I go."

Candy nodded in silent agreement as she opened a high cupboard door, took down two fancy glass tumblers, and set them on the counter. She stood staring at them as though catching her breath before submerging herself in the drowning pool of tonic.

I prompted her out of her reverie.

"Do we have any ice?"

"No, we don't have any ice in this Club. We don't believe in ice." She opened the mini-fridge door, and pulled out two trays.

"Those little cubes of frozen water will have to do, then."

I watched Candy cracking the ice. In turn she gripped each plastic tray twisting it with vigor over the sink until every cube popped loose and crashed into the basin and rattled to a slippery halt. Her mind was working around something else and I could see she was absorbed with the task in front of her to

avoid the lesbian standing next to her watching her every move.

I reached over and collected a fistful of cubes for each glass. The plastic top on the tonic bottle snapped and unscrewed. The clear liquor cascaded over the crackling ice.

"I hope that one's for you," Candy said, indicating the first one I'd filled.

"I'll put less in the second one if you like," I said, delivering about a shot and a half into her tumbler and then for good measure adding a second half-shot. "Now for the orange juice. This Club does believe in orange juice, doesn't it?"

"Yes, we believe in orange juice." Candy had lost her joking mood. She went to the refrigerator again. After searching every shelf she removed her face, nonplussed. "We usually have some in a big green plastic pitcher. I don't see any."

"Maybe we'll have to make some."

"Are you kidding?" Candy turned around to face me.

"No, I'm not. Are you? What's the big deal?"

"We can't be making a big mess in here, and I can't afford juice. I'm not using my water credits for this business," Candy said. At that moment she seemed very young to me.

"Making juice won't be a big mess, and it's not like the stuff they serve in here is real juice, and I have some water credits we can use. Besides, you think anyone's going to question you, or get mad at you because you made some orange

juice?"

"You've forgotten what it's like living in this Club," she said.

"Making juice is a fairly natural thing to do. I'll make it, and I swear, all you'll have to show for it will be a pitcher full of orange juice. You can drink from it for days."

"I'm not drinking alcohol for days."

"Not the alcohol, dingbat, the orange juice."

"Don't you mix the tonic in the orange juice?" she asked. "I thought that's what you're going to do."

"Well, yeah, in the glass. Not in the pitcher. You could make a big pitcher of pile drivers, I guess, but we don't need to go that far. We'll just use it as a mixer and add it as we go, and that way they'll be less waste. The bartenders will be pleased to find a big pitcher of juice already made. No, Candace, I was not suggesting you feed yourself vodka for breakfast. Sheesh. What is wrong with you, girl?"

"I'm just nervous. I've been jumpy all day. I don't know why."

"Is it because you knew I was coming over this evening? You were afraid of going on stage with me?"

Her eyes were fixed on the invisible object of her dread as she began shaking her head no. It wasn't me she was thinking of, and she shook herself out of her reverie, and when she made eye

contact with me for the first time since we'd come around behind the bar, she smiled again and seemed relieved to find I was the only specter standing there.

She searched the cupboard and found the famous green pitcher and out of the third drawer she looked into she pulled out a long metal spoon. She handed them both to me and said she wanted no part of such a potential calamity, laughing, before she went back into the lounge area to recline on a couch. I think the truth of the matter was the club had spoiled her and she was used to being waited on. I didn't mind.

I reached into the mini bar storage and pulled out a stick of concentrate. Patience was the thing when you were trying to get her open. You had to go slowly, holding it under warm running water for a while to coax it, let it loosen up some, before popping the top on all that sweetness. Candy was right to be worried. These chemical canisters had the propensity to explode. In order to make it taste like an orange the chemists had to employ all kinds of chemicals, some of which were patently unstable.

A big tube of orange concentrate slid out and plopped into the pitcher. I swiped my card and mixed the juice like substance with warm water from my daily allotment. Adding ice would make it cool. At times a kind of opulence existed for the denizens of night. No one outside The Club could afford a delicacy like ice,

let alone clean drinking water. I poured some juice into each glass. Candy's drink was bright orange; mine was light yellow.

I placed the pitcher in the refrigerator and then carried both glasses into the main room. I handed Candy her glass. She received it with both hands. I watched her take a sip before I sat down next to her on the couch.

"Not too bad?" I was hopeful she wouldn't be finicky.

"No, that's not bad. It's good," Candy said. "What do you call it again?"

"You've got to be joking."

"No, I don't. I'm sorry if I'm not a big drunk like you are to know these things."

"It's called a pile driver," I said, taking a sip and grimacing from the whiff of petroleum.

"I'm sorry." Candy held her glass in her lap and looked down at it. "I didn't mean to call you a drunk."

"It's okay. You're right. I do drink a lot."

"I don't see how you can drink it like that," she said.

"It's practically straight."

"You get used to it."

"You better not get too used to it," she warned.

"It's too late. I already am." I took another sip and grimaced in a professional manner. "So, we have the place to ourselves tonight?"

"Yes, except for the Johns waiting for us in the Main Lounge. Let them wait. Let them wait all evening."

"What happens if they come out of there and find me here?"

"They better not come out of there. Not if they know what's good for them."

"I could tell she was more worried about the consequences to herself if they were to see me here uninvited and report it to The Body."

For a while we drank in silence, long enough for Candy to have a second drink and for me to have several. At one point Candy disappeared up the hall to check on her customers. I could hear a muffled argument going on in the recesses of The Club. I used the opportunity to take a few violent slugs of tonic straight from the bottle. Something about the way this evening was turning out depressed me.

When Candy returned I asked her if everything was okay.

"Sure, everything's fine. Our clients are such brats," Candy said, but there was a touch of familial fondness in the way she said it that sounded kind of sweet. She took pride in the quality of her clientele. She took good care of them.

"If they're really ready for us, what say you and I retire and give the people what they want."

"Retire?"

"Go in there."

"Oh, okay then. Yes, sure, um, we can go into the Lounge. We're performing on Bumper #3."

She was letting go one finger at a time, and allowing herself to be immersed in the situation. Up the hall we went, tiptoeing. Before we got too far she pushed me away angrily, and for a moment I thought she'd balked and was bailing on me.

The VIP Lounge stood square with four dark red walls. There was room enough between them for a giant ottoman, large enough for two women at a time at least, surrounded by what we called observation chairs. The whole setup reminded me of a small cage. Small-framed pictures of so called celebrities nobody seemed able to recall decorated the walls.

A while later Candy returned, her attitude liberated from further hesitation. I hoped if she had popped some pills they weren't such a high dosage she would wind up falling asleep during our performance. On the ottoman we embraced and kissed and our passion increased. First I removed my shirt because I was not the reluctant one. In virgin-like resistance she was not going to hold her arms straight up in surrender while I tried to remove her shirt. The seven or eight men in the room kept silent in the shadows.

Her arms slung around my neck provided her with something to hold onto while I removed her sweater. The only article left then was her bra. I was adept at removing that type through

practice with Rachel. She gasped, and wanted to cover her naked breasts. The only expedient for hiding them was by pressing hers against mine.

The flesh-to-flesh contact elicited a different type of gasp, more of a groan, really. When I ducked to taste each one she laughed pleasantly, suggesting nothing could have prepared her for the reality of how marvelous she was feeling.

In my mind I was someplace else by the time we lay down on the ottoman together. I remembered when I was a girl and Rachel and I had set ourselves the task of traversing one end of the block to the other via the zone wall. We navigated the wall, an elevated path the width of a foot, slinking past fir trees and pine trees. We moved slowly between rows of abandoned warehouses until we reached a certain place where a pomegranate tree grew.

We perched upon the fence. Rachel plucked the ponderous fruit and handed it to me. I forced a crack in the outer shell and ripped open the pomegranate. Candy and I finished then, when my mind had been someplace else the entire time.

Before departing the audience slapped their palms together, polite applause. Faint praise. On their way out several patrons dropped bills on us there where we lay. Left lying next to me afterwards she must have sensed my reflective mood, and I'm sure she thought she was bonding when she asked:

"What would you do, if you knew you had a fatal disease,

and had only a week left to live? Don't laugh, Sasha. I'm serious."

"I'm sorry, it's just you're so random, and it's one hell of a question."

"It's a good question," Candy said, nuzzling me to pet forth a reply. "Now what's your answer? What would you do differently?"

"I wouldn't do anything differently. I'd read, go for walks, sit around and think about life, try to remember positive moments. Forget the negative experiences."

"You wouldn't try base jumping or surfing or scraper climbing?"

"I wouldn't do any of those things if I was healthy. Why would I suddenly start doing them if I knew I was going to die? Besides, most people do those kinds of things for the thrill of it. They want the rush of facing possible death, but if you knew you were going to die in a few days, what would you care if you jumped out of a plane and your chute didn't open? You were about to die regardless. Nobody can afford that kind of nonsense anymore anyway."

"I don't know about you sometimes, Nika." Candy waited for me to ask her the same question. I never did so she supplied her answer, like she'd wanted to from the beginning. "I know what I'd do. I'd travel. I'd get out of this dump, with all its rules

about stuff. And I'd get away, and never come back to this wretched club. I'd go around the world, and when I did come back to the zone I'd open a big club of my own and be the manager."

"Damn, baby. Dare to dream."

"I'm serious. I'm going to be a club manager someday, and people can come to my place where they can eat, and have somebody else do the dishes. They could sleep, and nobody would yell at them to make their beds. If they spilled something on the carpeting, nobody would yell at them or act like they committed a crime, just because they spilled when it was an accident in the first place."

Once before I had discussed the future, with Rachel. I remembered what I'd said because people were always badgering me about it. Over time I had cultivated certain answers to keep people at bay on the whole subject. What dismayed me now was I could not remember what Rachel had said about her future. I don't think I ever once heard her say what she wanted to be when she grew up. As far as I knew she had no passion for the future. She was a girl unburdened by imagination. In her own way she was more of a fatalist than I pretended to be.

"Are you thinking about Rachel?"

My whole body jerked and turned rigid before it relaxed again. My performance was *so bad*. Candy caught me in the open and startled the daylights out of me. I *had* been thinking of

Rachel.

How Candy knew exactly what I was thinking about with such pinpoint accuracy and carding me I'll never know. Considering she was lying in my arms at the time no wonder she felt the shockwave her question produced as it traversed the length of my body.

Candy let go of me and dragged herself to her feet. She began pulling on her clothes. Having forgotten about modesty she only had the chore in hand to complete before she could turn and walk out of the room.

I started to plead with my eyes. Her glare burned right through and my resolve fled like an animal flushed from the brush. I couldn't say anything in my defense because she and I both knew she had caught me thinking of Rachel - and on the occasion of our first time in public together. We both dressed and she walked me to the back door of The Club and I told her I was sorry. Being mean to people took the stuffing out of me, and I always felt rotten afterwards.

In reply to my apology Candy shook her head.

"Sasha, you're a fool."

With conviction she shut the door against me, and that was the end of us.

Rachel knocked on my basement door a day later. She discovered Candy and I were through. As it happened she was

through with The Body as the steward of her career. She dumped him, to his face, and he wept like a little boy. She said to me:

“Can we talk for a while, Nika? I’d like to talk about us. Do you want to talk about us? Let’s talk about us.”

A warm spring wind whispered in my ear and filled me with the expectation of being alone again with a girl named Rachel Cozy.

I couldn’t sit still inside my basement hideout. I had to stand out on the overgrown matted spring lawn and enjoy the thick warm air and watch for this girl. Somewhere behind me a cat yowled, another joined the chorus with fizzing and spitting followed by silence.

Rachel emerged from the dusk as though she were stepping out of a cubist painting. One of her shoulders, an arm on the other side, one green eye, her even white teeth, each aspect of her registered within the visible, part by part coalescing into a whole. In expectation of her approach I lingered and stared at her form. I could tell she relished my admiration. Being worshipped like a queen proved to be a good enough gig for her after all.

We met in the middle of the ancient parking lot crumbling into pieces. Neither one of us spoke beyond a shy hello. I

walked her up the ramp to the big double doors and opened one for her, and she curtsied.

"Why, thank you."

"My pleasure."

Having been so rude and hurtful to each other we intuited simultaneously, it seemed, if we were ever going to get our act together we would have to begin by being overly polite and create a climate of respect. She bowed her head, flipped one of her wings and flashed me an upward glance. I shook myself down and straightened back up again. This is the way nerds act when they're in love.

For my reward she laughed her silent laugh. As we walked through the lobby Rachel smiled reservedly at the old lady curators busily tending to the tattered remnants of Knowledge.

I entered my basement bungalow first, followed by Rachel.

"I'm glad you're here," said I. "Let's sit down."

Rachel settled on the couch, and I accommodated myself next to her. My words weren't working. To do the talking for me I put more faith in my body. I sat up and curled one leg underneath me then put my arm around her and kissed her, and yet my posture felt awkward.

I was perched a head taller than she was so I backed off and it was so cool because I caught sight of Rachel's lips and eyes yearning after me as though she was saying, *no, it's okay,*

don't pull away. I want this. I want you to kiss me.

And I looked at her as if to say, *I know, honey. I want to kiss you, too. I'm just trying to get comfortable on this stupid couch.*

I gave up trying to get comfortable on that stupid rollaway and stood up and offered Rachel my hand and led her to the sink serving as my kitchen. I was feeling overheated and embarrassed, and I knew it would be cooler where maybe we could also fix ourselves a drink.

All I could find in the cupboards was a big gallon jug of cheap red tonic. I poured us both a glass. We took a few sips and grimaced and giggled at how bad it tasted, like grape juice mixed with earthworms, before we each gulped a more serious shot for courage.

Rachel stood in front of me for a moment, her opal fingernails tapping against the tonic glass. She bowed her head, and at the same time looked up at me through her lashes.

"You still love me?"

"I've always loved you," I said. "I never stopped loving you. I will always love you. I may not always like you. "

In response Rachel protruded her lower lip. Play-acting a baby doll with an overly sensitive heart, while she was still just as tough underneath as she had always been.

"Sometimes I've even hated you," I continued, "hated you

from places inside of me that I didn't know existed. Not that the pain we've caused each other can be completely healed. Maybe at least we can stop trying to hurt each other all the time, and in the process stop being miserable. I have been really and truly unhappy."

"You're not the only one," Rachel said, shaking her head in amazement. "I didn't think I would ever be happy again. I didn't know I could feel so rotten."

"Are you happy now?" I asked.

"You mean right now?" Rachel pointed at the ground. "Standing on this spot?"

"Yes, I am," she said. "Are you?"

"No," I said, "I want to hold you. I want to be near you, touch you, then I can be happy again. I love you Rachel."

That *no* I uttered gave her a jolt. The rest lured her into my arms as we came together in our former, true embrace. The way my arms fit around her convinced me she should never have been absent in the first place.

She helped to heal the very place where on her account I hurt the most. I held her close, closer, because I knew this was not going to last. This act was the most wonderful counterfeit, one more taste of the nectar-turned-narcotic that would keep the pain at bay. If only for a little while.

The love of this girl was what I needed just to feel ground

level, let alone high flying. Her flesh, her scent, embracing touching caressing took the top off my head and my exposed brain became a field covered in ice where snowflakes gently fell and landed like kisses from a lover.

The Victrola speakers crashed forth with a din and woke us from the reverie consuming us. I stood away from her and looked into her eyes. At least for a moment I could gather an image of myself worth keeping, even if our romance lasted for this night only.

Somehow I knew this moment was all we had left to share.

I took Rachel by the hand and led her outside to the waiting limousine. We had a command performance in one of the most powerful houses in the city. Let the decades change as they may I will never be able to thank that kindly old couple enough for renting the two of us together. Their home spread out larger than the whole club. They wasted no time in welcoming us inside through giant double doors constructed of wood and iron and farther into a great hall with an oversized ottoman draped with a mink blanket just for us. They had invited many of their expensive friends dressed in tuxedos and beautiful floor length gowns. The women sparkled with diamonds and jewels.

After climbing aboard the mink Rachael and I each removed the clothing belonging to the other and the hands animated by her spirit were the hands sliding across the flesh of my flesh.

We transported ourselves to an earlier embrace, a younger moment, a softly whispered first time. Rachel had crawled onto the ottoman and I followed closely behind her and when she rolled onto her naked back I lay beside her and beneath the muted chandeliers her golden skin sparkled.

We could do no more than follow the lilt of the unspoken refrain floating up and down the scales of true-formed youth in open song. Frantic in our kisses, devouring, tasting, biting, earnest and desirous - not to miss a single delicious note of time or beat of pulse transmitted through flesh upon flesh illumination, sliding against the hard nighttime silence.

So slow the tempo goes. Too earnest and unabashed. Pleasures stolen from out the very gods' unwary watch. We were not to have been allowed another such moment, yet through curly ringlets of ink black hair, with her above and me below, we lolled a rolling shut-eyed stare.

Breaths catching, tongues brushing, falling away brutal, beautiful, we locked into that lusty *oh-yes* hush. Loving unerringly we chose to revel. Because we'd agreed, it was an act of love.

Rachel cried broken and jagged tears as I held her. I drank in the pearl drops of moisture beading from her flesh, drawing out her everything as best I could. We lay together, holding on for dear life. Murmurs of approbation swept into a crescendo of

applause.

We slept for some unmeasured time. Then we were both awake and the passion and emotion were spent and we lay in a more relaxed embrace. The audience were posed in postures of repose, enjoying a cigarette, carrying on muted conversations.

"Have you talked with Hater recently?"

"Not recently. Who needs him?"

"I surely don't," Rachel said.

"I don't either," I said. "I stopped by to see him the other day, but he was in a mood. When I invited him over, he said he had a date with some chick he met at a party. I said that was cool, and he says, 'Yeah, she thinks you're a bitch,' and he said it just like that."

"What a bitch. Screw him and her," Rachel said, propping herself up on one elbow and making traces on my chest as we talked. How reassuring her voice felt defending me.

"I know, and when he said it, it was like, he was all mad and taking her side, so I'm like, *okay, have a good time. See ya!* And that was about the extent of our conversation. The way things have turned out, though, I'm glad he didn't come over. He would have been in the way."

"I guess so," Rachel laughed, and she had to give her head a few shakes to dislodge from her mind the image of the three of us before she continued. "How did he find this girl?"

"She was drinking at the party."

"That's how they met?"

"She was there with another girl," I told Rachael. "I don't know the connection. It was one of those unauthorized parties. When the troopers showed up, everybody panicked and jammed. Hater made his escape with those two bimbos. Some people split left, some split right, and others jammed straight ahead."

"What did you do?"

"I ran straight. I was bringing up the rear pretty much. Hater and those girls were already a block ahead of me by the time I cleared the neighbor's yard. Those girls split to the left and went up to where the Gypsy dwells in darkness. Hater went with them. He bought them a Green Spleen tonic, they sat on the curb in front of the store, and they had this long talk. I guess he got her Compod number then."

"Why does she think you're a jerk?"

"Because I was teasing her. She has a funny accent. She's from the Southland or some other God-forsaken place, and she was laying it on pretty thick so I was making fun of her."

I could feel Rachel's body stiffen.

"You were flirting with her."

I tried to sound matter-of-fact instead of defensive.

"No, I wasn't. I was making fun of her, putting her down. I wasn't flirting with her. I was killing time, wishing you were

there."

From what I could remember of the night in question I didn't think I had done anything Rachel could add to the heap of injustices I had committed against her heart. The whole evening had a way of coming back to me in fragments. The timeframe for the sequence of events was jumbled, and I was not a hundred percent sure about everything I had said or done.

Rachel and I were well into negotiations for reconciliation by the night of that particular party and I knew it was risky for me to even attend yet being a moron I went anyway with the greatest intentions of being a good girl and not screwing up our chances.

Now Rachel was going to press for whatever unflattering facts might pop loose to incriminate me.

"So you were behaving yourself just in case I happened to show up?"

"No, I knew you wouldn't go to a party like that."

"You're right. I wouldn't go to a party like that, but you said yourself you were flirting."

"No-o-o," I drawled, trying to keep my temper under control, "I did not say I was flirting. I wasn't attracted to them, and I really didn't want to have anything to do with them."

"Then why were you talking to them in the first place?"

"Because it was a party," I said. "Everybody was talking to them. Hater was busy putting moves on one of them..."

"... and you were putting moves on the other one," Rachel said, finishing my sentence for me.

"No-o-o," I drawled again, "I wasn't putting the moves on her. I was making fun of her. Everybody was laughing at her."

"You were teasing her," Rachel said, by her attorney's tone indicating the answer she had supplied for me might be viewed as acceptable.

Knowing better than to let her lead my answers, I was measured in my answer.

"I was being mean to her."

"Then you were teasing her!" Rachel the Rambunctious pounced on me, and pinned me to the bed in a classic playground pin. "I know how you are, Sasha Savage, how you are when you tease girls. You only tease the ones you like."

I knew she was playing with me to an extent, holding down my alibi before letting it scurry away so she could pounce on it once again. She had a good-natured tone in her voice for the purpose of cajoling me, but I knew if I kicked down with a major confession she would become furious and go for the pulsing vein in my neck she was already marveling over, tracing its course repeatedly with her index finger.

She was whipping me with the tips of her long, blonde hair,

which was like raw electric current raking across my boobs. She was scissoring me and grinding for answers in a way that made it hard to think straight. I remained passive in my body but stubborn in my mind, a losing strategy. I grabbed a hold of her and we wrestled for the top spot, an activity turning several heads and concluding their conversations. I was on top now:

"Listen, I was making fun of her, not teasing her, not flirting with her, just talking. There's a difference. I was rambling stupid stuff."

"But why were you even talking to her?"

"Because, like I said, it was a party. People talk at parties. Everybody was talking to them, not just me. What do you expect me to do, stand in a corner and not talk to anybody?"

Rachel set her jaw with firm determination.

"Yes, for starters."

"Oh, like you don't talk to pretty girls at parties." I rolled off of her, which was a little harsh. I was tired of her pestering me.

"No, I don't talk to girls at parties," Rachel said, lying on her side unabashed.

"You talk to The Body," I countered.

"That's different."

"How is it different? I know you have a thing for him."

"Oh, shut up!" she blurted.

"What did I say about telling me to shut up?"

"Sorry. Hush your mouth, then. You're being silly. But you know you were teasing that girl, and for you, teasing is flirting."

"I wasn't teasing her. I was making fun of her, being mean to her."

"But you've said before that you're never mean to people on purpose."

"Rachel, you of all people should have learned better than that by now. Sometimes I can be cruel on purpose."

"Ho, I know you can be cruel on purpose. You don't have to tell me that."

"So? You know that about me. So you're right about that."

"I know I'm right."

"So there you are," I said.

"So there *you* are," Rachel countered.

"All right then."

"All right yourself," she said.

We rolled onto our backs and lay there in silence for a while, staring at the high domed ceiling. I studied a discolored piece in the pattern of the tiles, and remembered Hater and me fixing the hole he punched in the VIP Lounge that time. I thought maybe being right would relax Rachel. After a quiet interval she was on the attack again.

"That still doesn't explain what you were doing in that back room with that Mary girl," she said.

"Oh for the love of clean water," I said, sitting up on my side of the bed.

"You see? You think I don't know about you," Rachel said, "and the things you do when I'm not around. But I know! I've got my spies out, and they're watching you, and they tell me *everything* you do. I know! Tell me you weren't in the back bedroom with that... that cow."

"I was at the door, but I never went in," I said, my head bowed in fatigue from quarreling.

"That's not all, from what I heard," Rachel said.

"I don't care what you heard," I said, not knowing how much she really knew, nor remembering how much I'd actually done. She might have known more than I did about my own actions that night. "Do you think that any one of those so-called dancers wouldn't sell me out in a minute just for the chance of talking to you, to see that little twinkle in your eye?"

"They do sell you out to me, all the time, Rachel said, sounding a gleeful, triumphal note.

"Congratulations," I said. "You've turned all the girls in The Club against me by flirting with them."

"I have never flirted with your girlfriends," Rachel said. "The girls in The Club are all losers. They come up to me and

tell me stuff when I don't even ask them. Like how you were trying to have... trying to... get that girl into the back bedroom with all those guys."

"I wasn't trying to do anything of the sort," I said. "I wanted no part of that. Hater was the one trying to jump on a train."

"Really?" By the way she asked, I could tell she didn't know many particulars.

"Yes, really. I let everybody know I didn't want a turn. That was Hater's thing. He thought he might get laid. So did every other guy there. It was a guy thing, Rachel. We girls were just standing around watching."

"I didn't think Hater would do a thing like that," Rachel said, her voice smoothed by wonder.

"He isn't like that, exactly. He just wanted to go first; he wasn't thinking about afterwards. He was drunk. He's so hopeless anyway he wasn't able to carry it off."

"But still, a gang-bang? For free?" Rachel squirmed. "So how many guys were in the room?"

"About half a dozen."

"And where were you?"

"I told you, Rachel, standing outside the door. You know, in case they got too rough." I lay back down next to her on the ottoman.

"You shouldn't have been anywhere near that room, at all, in the first place."

"I know," I agreed. "I wasn't there for very long. I left."

"Where did you go?"

"To the bar, to get a tonic, a Blue Devil."

"And then what did you do?" She asked.

"I sat in the waiting area by myself and drank my drink."

"You sat by yourself and drank a tonic, yeah-right." She turned her head away from me. "Weren't you afraid you'd miss your turn?"

I moved on her, taking her by the shoulders and forcing her to look into my eyes.

"I wasn't afraid of missing my turn because I didn't want a turn. I didn't want anything to do with that business, and I let everybody know it, and they all called me a dikey fag, or some such nonsense, for my refusal. I didn't want any part of that because first and foremost I'm not that kind of girl. It's not my style, but also because we'd been talking for weeks by that time, and we were near to an understanding. I love you, and I didn't want to do anything to screw us up again.

"I didn't take part in that filthy business, and I left all those guys alone in that room with her, went to the bar, got myself a drink and sat down, yes, all by myself, in the waiting room area, until they all came piling out of the room and went

to that empty lot across the street."

Rachel was smiling at everything she saw in my eyes. Out of nothing more than pure curiosity now, she asked yet another question:

"Why did they go across the street to the empty lot?"

"Hell if I know," I said, "rolling onto my back again. "They were desperate men. There were too many guys in that little room. I don't know. They all went over there, and I sat on the couch. I was being a good girl, just drinking my drink and minding my own thing."

Rachel shuddered all over.

"Pulling a train with a bunch of guys outdoors in that empty parking lot? That chick is disgusting. She has no professionalism whatsoever."

"Nothing happened. They came back more rowdy than ever, then the troopers showed up, then everybody jammed. She's the kind of girl who likes the wrong kind of attention."

"She's a disgusting pig. I can't believe Hater would stoop that low."

"Rachel, you are right on that one."

I used the second instance of her being right to make good my escape to the bathroom. Naked I tiptoed over to the hostess and whispered my request for directions. Civilians can be a little squeamish sometimes about professionals using their

facilities, but this little old lady turned out to be very nice about it.

The facilities were bigger than my old bedroom at The Club. They had three different kinds of scented soap. I used all three, giving myself a kind of standup bath. They had the kind of fixtures where when you turned them real running water poured out of the faucets, as much as you wanted. Somewhere nearby a giant juicer was at work. I wrapped my lips around the spigot and drank my fill.

When I returned the hostess beckoned to me and so I obediently padded over to her side. She gently stroked my body as she gave me whispered instructions to take my little friend outside to the pool area for the second act. I nodded my assent and gave her wrinkled cheek a kiss. I love the flesh of old people, so soft and delicate, as though woven from spider web silk.

I went over to where Rachel still lay and gave her a hand up so we stood side-by-side, and we were holding hands by the time we stood at the door. We stepped across the threshold into the warm night air.

We walked through the small garden area to the pool and strolled hand-in-hand to the edge of the deep end. The other guests had already gone outside and taken up position among the white statues, as though the spirits of the ancient Romans too

had gathered in appreciation of our sport. The water was smooth, glassy and bright with the light of the moon and the evening star. Despite a certain amount of flotsam around the edges, a perfect reflection formed on the surface of the water.

"Look at us in the reflection," I said. "We're beautiful."

"Lovely," Rachel said.

"When you think about it," I said, "we're as young and beautiful right now as we're ever going to be. We'll never be lovelier than we are right now. Look at our bodies, how firm and smooth they are. We better enjoy ourselves while we can. We'll be standing among the watchers, soon enough."

"You never know when to stop," Rachel said. "You can never say anything nice without turning morbid, and ruining it."

"But it's true," I insisted. "We're young and beautiful now, but it won't last."

"Will you stop saying that?" Rachel was pleading with me.

"I'll shut up about it."

We stood for a moment longer in silence, gazing down at ourselves. Rachel broke the silence.

"What's all that stuff floating on the surface?"

"Debris."

"I know it's debris. What kind of debris?"

"Whatever falls in from these trees, or gets blown in by the wind. There are usually a certain number of bees and wasps."

"Bees and wasps?" Rachel tried to back away from the edge of the pool.

"They're dead, you know," I said, keeping her hand in my grip and not letting her escape.

Rachel freaked.

"Nika, why are there bees in this pool? How did dead bees get into the swimming pool? I'm not into any freaky insect bullshit."

"Nobody put them there, if that's what you're implying. They're always there. The water draws them. They can't help themselves. They need it to live, and they land to gather it up whether it's safe or not, so when they hit the choppy surface, they get water logged and drown and they die."

"A dead bee can still sting you," Rachel said, wrenching her hand out of my grip.

"No, they can't."

"Yes, they can, Nika. I know."

"If you step on one, maybe, but they can't sting you if they're just floating around dead in the water like that."

Rachel crossed her arms across her bosom.

"I'm not getting in the water with those things floating around in it."

"Is there a problem?" I couldn't pick out the grandpa who had asked the question. They all looked alike to me, frozen in

anticipation.

"No, no problem," I called to the general gathering. Turning to Rachel I whispered, "Calm down. I can fix this." I disappeared behind some bushes along the back wall and returned a moment later with a skimmer pole. Laughter and approval from the old people greeted my antics. Causing barely a ripple I dipped the net end into the water. I skimmed the surface back and forth ladling what debris I collected into the bushes behind me. Here is another thing I like about rich people. If you're young, pretty and obedient, you can do no wrong in their sight. Once the pool was clearer, I replaced the skimmer, returned to Rachel, and took up her hand.

"Nice and clean," I said. "Now stop being a pill. They're all watching. Let's hold hands and jump in together. Ready?" Rachel leaned over and kissed my cheek. "One, two... three!"

We leapt together and crashed through our surface reflection smashing it into a million pieces. The splash sent shock waves rolling from every corner of the pool. The pieces of our semblance were preserved by the Evening Star upon the surface of every rollicking seiche framed between the crest and the trough.

A broken, jumbled fragment of our likeness still appeared - hair eyes mouths, throats breasts bellies, pollen tulips wings, thighs knees feet - these images bobbed and pumped on the

turbulent surface oscillating in radical combinations.

Beneath the water our bodies shined and sparkled. Our vision cleared and we could see well enough for one perfect kiss before pushing off from the bottom amid an entourage of bubbles.

Gasping for air we broke the surface in each other's arms, our mouths open and tongues brushing. We held each other with one arm, and swam in tandem - stroking with the free arm. We were slippery and playful like a pair of sleek otters out of the deep end and into the shallow water where we could both stand on our own feet, slippery and wild.

Fitting together underwater wouldn't work. We got out of the pool and ran back inside and flopped on the ottoman together. Our skin was still wet and slippery and we wrestled and squealed with the warm night air stifling our cries amid the appreciate applause of the audience members who had followed us indoors like so many ghosts.

In summer The Zone heats up to boiling and the temperature stays that way for weeks. People say heat is relative. I say it's hot.

Damn hot.

I hated the heat. You can't get naked enough to be cool in that kind of weather. I was wearing gym shorts with my boxers

peeking out at the legs. I also had on a tank top and a baseball cap, turned backwards.

This version of Rachel turned out not to be the same one I knew when I first met her in The Club. This new Rachael had been around the zone a few times. She was the one who had hurt me worse than I'd ever been hurt before. Struggling to forget the past was as painful as being without her.

Living together in our shared past remained as unimaginable as any future existence without her. In my mind I had been working on forgiving her, to the same extent I think she had been working on forgiving me. I came to realize, if she was ever going to be wholly pleased with me as a person, I was going to have to be somebody else, like that guy with the hair standing over there, maybe.

But I didn't know how to be that guy. Unfortunately for our romance I only knew how to be me. For as much as I tried not to let her down, for as much as I tried to let go of the past, Rachel and I could not stop disappointing each other. The littlest things could now tear us apart because we had experienced other worlds out there.

People existed outside of our little connection, and while the larger world could be frightening, it had also proved bracing. Breaking up became too easy.

We hadn't made love in some time. I no longer pushed that

agenda. Sometimes when I went to coerce her the saddest expression emerged from the depths of her eyes.

Seeing that look dispirited me to the point where I gave up the art of seduction. I didn't have the heart for molesting her anymore. I looked at Rachel and wished she were still the girl I used to know instead of this present incarnation with the ghosts of so many men standing between us.

Those apparitions never dematerialized and I wasn't grown up enough to work my thoughts around them. Even though in my troubled mind I thought I'd been working out the problem.

I imagined I had a helpful spider inside of me and whenever I felt any pain my imaginary friend would spin her soothing silk and wrap up the hurt in a ball of silk and soften the sharp edges until none of them spiked through anymore.

My helpful spider eventually rolled away into the back of my mind where it sat in the dark more than disappearing completely.

The time it took to get over something unpleasant varied with the size. If somebody denigrated me my hurt feelings grew about the size of a hornet. My internal spider could manage to have it wrapped and disposed of in a few hours' time.

With the level of pain Rachel delivered the healing silk would have to perform one walloping wrap job. Healing was going to take a considerable amount of time and a lot of her thread

before a hurt that size could be well wrapped and properly neutralized.

She didn't say much on the way back to my place, nor did I.

Before entering the Library Rachel confronted me:

"Why did you cheat me on the pay-day for the old people's gig? I know you didn't pay me fifty-fifty. What you gave me amounted to more like forty-sixty."

I stood there staring at her, utterly perplexed. "What are you talking about? I didn't shortchange you. Why would you say such a thing?"

"The Body told me you shorted me. You took more for yourself. I can't believe you stole from me. I cannot believe you cheated me out of my fare share, Nika. On the way here today I did some serious thinking. You haven't matured a bit. You are the same self-centered little girl you've always been, and it's obvious you're never going to change. I can't live like this, Nika. I can't be with someone who's dishonest and thinks only about herself. That's why I'm breaking up with you. You're too selfish. You never think about anyone but yourself. I'm moving back to The Club, Nika. Goodbye."

She delivered her little speech, and I was dumbstruck as she walked out on me. My little spider, the gal who had been so busy wrapping the hurt, died. She never gave me the chance to contradict whatever lies The Body told her. Instead she grew

accusatory and dumped me because that is what she wanted to do. Who knows if the Body told her anything.

In my pain I withered at the prospect of having to concoct a plan elaborate enough to exact full retribution and satisfaction. Other people don't think like I do. Apparently, they let things go.

What I came up with was an idea I knew would work, only because I knew Rachel. I knew what she was like, what she wanted to hear. Silently, in my mind, I worked on my routine. I exercised my imagination to a sharpened point and came up with the perfect plan.

The first thing I had to do was arrange an audience, and my subterfuge wouldn't work if she saw me coming. So even though I hadn't talked to her for a week, I didn't call first to ask permission because then she would have had time to prepare her defenses.

I didn't want her armed and ready. I wanted to catch her in a down moment, when she was unguarded. Then I could deliver my blow.

I hopped into my sexiest gear and headed over to Club Abattoir. She was surprised to see me, but she welcomed me in. I could see by the startled look on her face she saw my eyes were blazing. I walked past her into the waiting room alcove. I had my hands on my hips. I was pacing, impatiently. I asked her to

sit down, which she did.

I began my recital.

"Rachel, there is something I need to talk to you about," I said. "I've been doing a lot of thinking since the last time we broke up, and I've come to certain realizations about myself. I have come to realize I am a selfish woman.

"No, I mean it. I am. And I feel badly about the way I act, not because it reflects badly on me, or because in a flash I understood how badly I've acted in the past and felt a deep wave of embarrassment wash over me. Although I did, that wasn't what made me feel the worst. What made me feel worse was the way I've treated you.

"You, Rachel, are the kindest, sweetest, most decent person I have ever met. You are strong, kind, intelligent - all of those things. You also happen to be beautiful, and that goes along with the rest. What is most important is that you are beautiful on the inside. And it's on account of those inner qualities, the inner beauty that you possess, your personality, that I love you.

"I know we say this to each other all the time. I know I say *I love you* a lot, but now, coming from me, the word has a whole different meaning because I've finally realized what I haven't been giving you, and what you deserve more than anything: respect.

"I should have been giving you more respect. I should have been listening to you more. If there's anybody who should be in charge of our relationship, it's you. Because you're not only smarter and stronger, you're powerful. And the power that you possess is marvelous.

"What I'm trying to say to you, Rachel, is that I love you, damn it. I love you. And I'm powerless at your feet. What I need to make my life complete is you. Because I love you, and you'd better realize that because you and I are standing on the cusp of our lives here.

"We are really teetering on the brink, and if you don't throw me a lifeline, then we're both sunk, but if you do, then we're saved.

"I've changed. I'm a changed woman. And I'm here to say I love you. I love you, damn it, so don't leave me hanging.

"I've played a lot of parts in my life. This one-act play was by far the cruelest."

My forehead was covered in beads of perspiration. My voice grew louder, nearly shouting. The one thing that pierced Rachel to the core was seeing me mad.

She could plainly tell, she thought, my emotions were getting the better of me. When I saw that idea appear in her eyes, her awakening, her keen attentiveness, I knew I had drawn her in with my meretricious dialogue: *People only say what they*

really mean when they're angry.

Then things got ugly. Rachel stood up, and tears blurred in her eyes. She came to me with a clarity of vision I should have accepted and embraced. Instead I kept up a ridiculous patter of love words until we reached the soundstage.

I took her that day and every day afterwards for a week. In front of the Live Feed cameras I put her through a Karma Sutra of maneuvers in the name of love, when unfortunately, strike my bitter heart, it was all a lie.

I was playing a game. I preyed on her weakness for me as part of just another stupid game. I could not stop myself and appreciate I had already won. Her eyes begged me for it all to be true, and the look I gave her back lied and said my love was the real deal, just like before.

Then the day came for me to deliver the hurt. Sado-masochism isn't just about spankies. It's about control. I showed up at The Club unannounced.

"Hi Rachel."

"Well hey, baby. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Listen, Rachel, there's something I need to talk to you about. I need to break up with you because this just isn't working out for me."

"Oh Nika. You can't be doing this to me." A terrible vacancy expanded in her voice.

"I'm afraid I am," I said, almost giddy with the pain I was inflicting.

"You wouldn't do this to me if you knew what I'd done for you."

"What did you ever do for me? Sleep with a bunch of guys? Is that what you mean?"

"Goodbye, Nika."

"Goodbye, Rachel."

The moment I left The Club I knew I'd stung her deeply and filled her with my hateful venom. When I pulled away from her I left half my guts behind still pumping poison into her. I was depleted in ways I hadn't anticipated. I resolved to give it a day or two.

What I had not counted on was the blowback. Hurting so badly myself I was striking out at her blindly. I thought I'd let it go for a couple of days and then pick it up again like we'd always done. No stupider or more dangerous creature exists than a young woman wounded by love.

I went to The Club to find her but I couldn't locate her anywhere. The buzz around The Club Abattoir said that Rachel Cozy had disappeared, become a goner.

Searching for lost Rachel felt like the most natural course of action. Hater refused to help me. Instead of being supportive he provided the thousand and one reasons why my rescue mission was sure to fail. Knowing him as I did fortified me with a certain amount of patience while he ranted and vented and paced back and forth along the entire length of my basement hideaway. What I found curious and not a little amusing was the way his shins instinctively avoided barking against the sharp edges of the foot locker and his hips swiveled each time he rounded the end of the couch on his way to touch base at the far end of the room before spinning about and beginning another lap while slagging with the vilest depredations he could dredge up whoever was responsible for stealing Rachel, and despite his emotionalism the thought of transgressing beyond the zone scared him so much he didn't want to go on any kind of rescue mission.

Eventually, his tantrum ran out of steam and he stopped in front of me, his cheeks puffed in and out, full and slack, until the tears condensing in his eyes spilled over and ran in rivulets down his drooping countenance. Cleansed in this way his eyes sparkled a remarkable blue until the affection in my heart for him surged with compassion enough for me to reach out and take a hold of his hips and draw him to me, sitting him down on my lap and enfolding him in a warm embrace. Smoothing the hair from his forehead and soothing with words the perturbation

pounding in his heart I explained to Hater why I needed his help so much, not trying to manipulate him or otherwise take advantage of him against his own will or better judgment rather appealing to him as an older sister might a younger brother after a familial disaster, the kind of emergency requiring immediate Dickensian self-sacrifice on everyone's part.

"Without your technical expertise," I pleaded quietly, "I won't even be able to get started. I need to find a way over the barriers but I don't know how. The stuff I've learned reading the books in this library won't be helpful for a mission like this one. The only things I've studied are romantic literature and history and philosophy. Not useful in the outside world. Not applicable like your technology. I know you know how to get beyond the barriers, don't you!"

After pausing to allow time for my persuasion to work on him I squeezed him and rattled his frame. In response he laughed and smiled at my professed faith in his abilities before remembering he was angry at Rachel over some small slight, as well as for getting herself stolen, and recovering himself, pushed my arms away breaking free of my embrace standing up and going around behind the couch in order to lie down on my bed.

One small generator provided two dull bulbs with enough juice to light either end of the room. Over the end where I sat hung a plain white shiner, over the bed where Hater reclined

glowed a red one. He lay there quietly staring at the red bulb before he said, "I'm in need of more convincing."

Every month The Propaganda Minister emerged from a hidden aperture in the barrier, not so secret since Hater had been tracking our target on his appointed rounds, including what must have been an unofficial stop at the Abattoir to watch the Mermaid Tank from the front row. Back when I still worked there and whenever he saw me without fail the Propaganda Minister would exert himself to the ends of his toes, letting me know about his latest encounter with Rachel, how not only had the aristocrats paid in full for her attention but he himself had tucked script into her G-string. Every nobleman's name he mentioned in connection with her filled me with poison gall; as though that business-like superficiality counted the same as the love she and I shared in private, somehow elevating him to the same level as my intimacy with her. He acted as though Rachel existed as a shared secret between the two of us. I never had any response to this cruel impertinence he relished as a victory over me until in my impotent fury my restless eyes searched for a blunt instrument to crush his fat skull. I hated the Propaganda Minister. I admit it. In secret he was a dirty pervert who hated women and hurt them, young and too young

alike, and he did so with impunity. I wanted him dead. Hater said for the sake of our purposes his death could not be allowed. To transgress the barrier we needed the Propaganda Minister alive.

The quality of Hater's knowledge always impressed me. Where it came from I never understood exactly. I remember him telling me everything begins and ends with access. At one time education was provided free for all citizens, before learning was privatized and one by one the windows of opportunity closed.

These thoughts were going through my head right before I blurted out, "There used to be news," as we stood in a barren second story room of an anonymous and abandoned building. Surrounded by bits of wire, an empty crate, in one corner a pile of moldy paper and plastic bags and sticks of broken furniture, mute testimony of decay with nothing more to teach than how much the pristine and glorious past had deteriorated into the present toxic trash heap.

"News still exists," Hater said, smiling as he always did whenever I resurfaced from deep within my own musings. On the floor he placed a metallic silver briefcase. Popping the latches he opened the case to reveal a pristine weapon broken down into easily storable parts, needing only to be reassembled, which Hater proceeded to do, less by expertise and more by trial and error. "I think it goes. Nope." Turn. "Not quite." Twist.

"Wait." Click. "There we go." While he worked on the weapon's assembly, he said, "Take out your comport."

I reached into my bag and whipped out Kitty Katya. She was a Level C Interloper and already two years old but I still held tremendous pride in her. Hater always commented on her quality, too. I scrounged her off a dead aristocrat I found face down in the alley. I was really lucky to be the first one on the scene that night. The cause of death wasn't foul play because there wasn't any blood. His blue face led me to believe he'd overdosed on too many pills. Besides the fact I found a big stash of reds in a baggy in his coat pocket. Hater and I stayed numb for three weeks on those pills. Then we ran out. An unexpected come down set in and neither one of us slept for a week. We developed facial ticks we'd never had before. An alcohol hangover lasts... what, a day? The hangover coming off those pills lasted for months. After awhile my memory of the numbnombs we enjoyed faded under the never ending withdrawal pain until the short lived tripping no longer seemed worth the price. For my part I vowed never to swallow happy pills again.

In the stiff's inner pocket I discovered my new comport. The memory stick was filled with all kinds of documents covered in numbers. In the pictures folder I found porn and amateur photos of either his wife or his mistress, or maybe his favorite prostitute. On her face she wore the look of love every newbie

does the first time she spreads her legs for posterity. I went to Hater and we uploaded that picture into World View just for spite and deleted the rest of the content and replaced it with my own. I heard how by the time authorities found the body it had been stripped naked. Allow me to assure you he was still fully clothed when I left him. I just took the drugs and comport and left the rest alone.

"How many channels do you get on that thing?" Hater asked.

"Five thousand," I answered.

"Just the free ones?"

Hater dug around in his jumpsuit pocket and pulled out a small accessory antennae and snapped it onto the end of my comport. Right away Kitty Katya swelled up with a new message: *Downloading Content. Please Wait.* In amazement I watched as fifty thousand channels flooded into my little hand held like gold coins crashing and tinkling from a slot machine jackpot.

"Access has to come first. Unfortunately, afterwards comes a blizzard of information, and you, gentle poet, must sift through a mountain of dandelions to find the magical one you're looking for."

About the time Hater slipped the last piece of his assembly rifle into place, locked and loaded, my new channels finished downloading into my comport. It hummed purred and expanded about a thumb's breadth all the way around, making me information rich

beyond belief. My eye and hand coordination struggled to accommodate this unexpected largesse.

"Think you can handle all that new input?"

"I think I'll grow into it."

My sweet little hand held Palm Kitty. I put my back to the wall and slid to a sitting position on the floor. Holding the device in both hands I stroked my Kitty gently, bonding with her, keeping her loyal. Swollen. Bulbous. Shapely. All grown up.

"You can get the news now, if you're so interested."

For a moment I peered up at him, and then back at my comport as though she were a total stranger.

"How do I do that?"

"Just look for it. It's that simple."

"Then why are you smiling like that?"

One by one I began flipping through the new channels and I quickly realized they had become interspersed with the old ones. After about a dozen channels I saw the first porn channel. Usually the programmers clustered these channels together so no telling how many hundreds in a row I would have to flip through to find another cluster containing alternative content. To expedite my search I began flipping channels a dozen at a time. I have to admit I bogged down in this quagmire of porn. You know how it is. Once you start ogling pretty porn people it's difficult to turn away.

After watching my futile attempt, Hater said, "Find what you're looking for yet?"

"So tell me the secret. Which channel shows news?"

Hater peered out the window left and right before retracting his head back into the room.

"I don't know. I only know that it's in there somewhere. They change its location about once a week. If anybody does see it then it's usually by accident. Not much to see, anyway. A bomb blew up somewhere. People leaking blood running frightened down the street. People dying of radiation sickness. Toxic shock. Little colored babies starving. Pollution. War. Death. Who wants to see any of that stuff? Not when you've got twenty four hours a day of your kinky favorites at your fingertips."

Even though the chance of my finding the elusive floating news channel was not good I resolved to make a point of looking for it a certain amount of time each day.

Fully assembled, Hater's sniper rifle gleamed black, a long, lean set piece of nastiness. Automatically I uttered the phrase, well worn from years of usage:

"Nice weapon. Got any bullets?"

A look of real fondness crossed Hater's face as he caressed his rifle. As it turned out he had anticipated that very flippancy.

"Funny you should ask," Hater said, cradling his rifle in

one arm, while with his free hand he reached into his leather bag and drew forth a clear Plexiglas box with a black plastic handle. My mouth hung open as he dangled the cage in front of my face and I found myself eye to eye with an actual Golden Wasp. Almost as though he were aware of his own magnificence the golden bug fanned his intricate wings and rotated his head, regarding me as much as I regarded him. For some dumb reason I lifted my index finger, perhaps to test whether or not cage and occupant were real.

"I wouldn't go there if I were you," Hater admonished, swinging the cage away.

"Is it real?"

"Real as they come."

"How did you get it? Where?"

"Your friend Body proved a remarkable resource. You were right about him."

"Body is hardly a friend, but I was right, wasn't I, about him being useful?"

"Naturally I felt a tinge of pride at having been a part of such a rare acquisition."

"I just said you were right, didn't I," Hater said, peering closer at the bullet himself.

I leaned against the wall for leverage while rising to my feet. When I spoke my voice lowered in awe:

"He's really something."

"He's something alright. Live ammunition."

"Seems a shame to waste him on a lousy target like the Propaganda Minister. He should be reserved for a wealthy prince, or a banker, or oil executive!"

"An executive at the very least," Hater concurred. Then a blush broke across his face and his eyes narrowed. "Here comes the man now."

We stood on either side of the window and observed our quarry. Along the grassy verge The Propaganda Minister waddled, believing himself immune to the big bad world and protected by the rule of law, unaware of the gathering storm and the rapidly encroaching darkness symbolized by my friend Hater and me. The propaganda minister had put in another long day of bloviating the most vitriolic bilge from the privileged position of his radiobroadcasting booth above the dirt and grime high in a golden tower. Our vantage point provided complete surprise, a height from which to drop a Molotov cocktail on a passing trooper transport. As it turned out our target proved considerably less formidable.

Without waiting for any signal from me Hater broke his weapon and connected the exposed end of the barrel to the Plexiglas cage and flipped the air pressure switch sucking the wasp, stinger first, into the rifle chamber. When he flicked the

switch a second time the barrel and cage parted with an airtight gasp. He snapped the rifle into the kill posture and took aim.

Bending at the knees allowed Hater to filigree the cube back into his athletic bag for a possible reuse at some future date, whenever that might be. What can I say? Hater practiced recycling like it was a religion.

Standing upright again Hater gently stroked his weapon as though in deference to his precious ammunition locked inside. Now loaded he once more took aim at The Propaganda Minister, paused for a millisecond, and then squeezed the trigger. To my surprise the shot didn't pop. It made a *thoom* sound like an African blow dart. My eyes barely caught sight of the winged projectile as it inscribed an arc low to high. Impact at the back of the neck bowled the Propaganda Minister off his feet and onto his face. Dropped him like a tub of butter. Prostrate. Not a quiver. He remained lying face down on the grass only a couple of yards from the slate black barrier.

"Wow, that was really forgiving," Hater said, examining his weapon as though looking for a clue to explain the accuracy of his shot.

"It looked like it corrected itself mid-flight," I said.

"I'll say. I was aiming at his ass and it hit him in the back of the neck. I guess my little buddy saw a spot he liked better."

Hater began breaking down the weapon and packing the parts into the form fitting Styrofoam slots lining the silver case.

He snapped shut the latches on the case and rolled the tumbler locks and we exited the room and padded down the hallway together and pounded down the stairs and slid around the landing and tramped down another flight of stairs before clomping in unison across the parquet floor of the lobby and slamming the double doors open out into the air and over the sidewalk across the black asphalt street onto the spongy, dew moist grass to where our victim lay, a big steamy pile of poison vitriol and hypocrisy.

Dropping his bag of tricks to the ground Hater unzipped and fished out a medical kit. Before opening it, he said:

"Now is the time for your manmover."

Flush with the adrenaline rush I turned without question and ran across the street to where I'd left the manmover leaning against the wall. On my retrieval mission the thought flitted through my head how although Hater never held complete control over the technology he employed he nevertheless always managed to make it work for him. I guess you could say a part of his genius was instinctual.

Towing the handcart behind me I ran slap bang down over the curb and congratulated myself on my quick reactions to Hater's orders. Given the chance, I would have made a good soldier. The

wheels of the cart clanged over curb again and caught for a moment and I about lost my arm from its socket. The reverberation caused my grip to slip.

By the time I rearrived Hater had opened his kit and was kneeling next to our victim and fidgeting with a scary looking device resembling some kind of deep ocean spider whose spindly albino legs Hater was forcing to expand and contract in a wicked ballet. As I found myself doing so often with Hater I stood by and watched him as he fiddled with the technology. The spider legs flipped and flopped about like the staves of an unruly umbrella until he finally manipulated them to shoot out straight, flush to a point.

"Okay, flip fat boy over onto his back then," Hater said, very much in control of the operation.

"Is he dead?" I asked, grabbing the load by his shoulders and attempting to leverage him onto his back by twisting his body and creating torque.

"No, he isn't dead," Hater replied, "but he is definitely deep into a somnolent state."

On account of the elasticity in his blubber no matter how much I twisted the Propaganda Minister's shoulders his flabby body would not follow suit. My thrashing him about caused the tail end of the wasp protruding from his neck to fall apart into a myriad of fluttering golden flakes dissolving and disappearing

in the grass.

"Stop fooling around and flip him over," Hater said, holding the base of the spider's legs precariously coalesced into the shape of a long spike.

"He's a big bag of unwieldy bilge," I said, letting go of his shoulders and taking up position instead with my knees pressing into the soft grass for leverage at about the point where the Propaganda Minister's fat belly dovetailed into his shriveled loins. Grabbing hold of his cheap dark suit, which stank of tobacco and stale sweat, I dug my toes in and lunged with my palms pressing into him and drove load flopping over onto his back. A little air forced its way out of the gasbag, causing a snort. Otherwise he remained unconscious and silent.

"Good girl, Sasha. Now look inside the kit there and find the scalpel, and that metallic looking nut will go with it. No not that. No not that either. The round thing, good girl. Take the scalpel first and slide the protective cover off the end. Be careful. The blade is sharp. Enough to slice off the end of your thumb."

Holding up the scalpel in one hand and the chrome nut in the other, I asked, "Now what?"

"Now you have to make an incision in his throat," Hater said, nudging up next to me, on his knees as well and balancing the spider's legs.

"I don't know what 'incision' means."

"I mean make a hole, in the depression, there, below his windpipe."

"Oh, you mean make an incision. I thought you meant slit his throat."

"Yes, make an incision, a cut, right there."

"I was just asking for a point of clarification. That's all. So poke a hole, right here," I said, pointing with the scalpel, "and then what?"

"Then you insert the nut to make a passage for the air to flow in and out of. So he can breathe. Basically, you have to perform a tracheotomy."

"Here we go. Don't try this at home, boys and girls."

"Oh for crying out loud, just cut him!"

I pressed the tip of the scalpel to the flesh on his neck, plunging through the tissue only so far. When I retracted the blade surprisingly little blood appeared, along with a strange little gasp of breath escaping from his windpipe. I looked at his face for any signs of a reaction but my patient remained motionless, out cold.

Hater next instructed me to insert the nut into the hole I'd cut, establishing a stable passageway. It wedged in there pretty snug. Under his auspices I also tossed the scalpel back into the kit and removed a tube of clear goo I untwisted the cap

from and squeezed, slathering from one end of the spider legs to the other while Hater gently twirled the spike until they were completely coated. I emptied the whole tube and we didn't waste a drop because the goo was very clingy.

"What is that stuff?" I asked, replacing the cap and tossing the empty tube into the kit as well.

"Liquid flesh," Hater said.

Further discussion was temporarily suspended while Hater maneuvered the spider legs toward the aperture in the Propaganda Minister's throat. Sensing the moment was at hand the tips of each spider leg began wiggling as though yearning for the insertion. For as intractable as they had appeared right out of the box the moment they made contact with the nut they contracted to a collective point and slid right in of their own volition, spreading up or down once inside his neck. Most of the legs headed north toward the back of the throat. The rest headed south towards the lungs. Hater kept up the pressure shoving them all the way in until just a little liquid flesh blurped out of the blow hole, not a lot. Then the top of the handheld part locked flush with the nut.

"It's really intuitive."

"Good job, my man."

"It practically guides itself."

"Sounds like an advertising slogan."

"Yes, indeed," Hater said, with an air of abstraction clearly denoting he was not listening to me. "We need to strap him onto your manmover, quickly."

While we worked hoisting that poisonous tub of jelly onto the cart and wrapping the safety straps around him and securing them snugly I remarked at the utility of the voice reverberator and in my ignorance asked for what purpose such a contraption had originally been designed. With certain hauteur, Hater replied:

"The purpose to which we are applying it."

"Why would anyone devise such a monstrous thing?"

"For every action there's an equal reaction; for every code there is a hack, or if not, there soon will be. Using genetic prints like eyes and vocal chords and tongues and fingers must have seemed like a good idea at the time, because of the uniqueness factor, plus the personalized aspect, your eyes, the timbre of your voice, fingerprints, gene prints. Unfortunately, opting for genetic identification material made flesh and blood intrinsic to the process and therefore vulnerable to attack; in fact, it made several points on the body the elemental point of attack. They'd have been smarter and averted a lot of mayhem if they'd simply kept the pass codes abstract. Sometimes human flesh can be incredibly resilient. More often, though, we tear, break, and bleed out much too easily."

By the time Hater finished his dissertation we had managed to prop our victim up and position him in front of the security exit interface.

"Make him say 'I love the New Deal', and 'I love Eleanor Roosevelt'."

Hater tapped away and the words emerged from the arch conservatives lips and tongue, and we snickered until our shoulders trembled.

The Guardian Intelligence sensed a presence and sprang to life, asking for handprint identification, only in a woman's voice, soothing, with a hint of underlying desire, in my opinion a pleasing aesthetic choice.

Hater grabbed a hold of the Propaganda Minister's limp arm at the elbow, bent it enough to withdraw it from the confines of the safety strap, and flopped it forward onto the metallic palm saddle. The G.I. sensed the compliance with protocol and in a bedroom voice said, "Thank you," as though she had just lit a cigarette. Barely audible inside the interface the hard drive hummed and whirred accelerating and coasting as the data input processed. The illicit nature of what we were engaged in prompted a little paranoia on my part. Even though I knew this stretch of the barrier had been thrown up in careless haste and created a lot of blind spots I alternately swept my gaze left and right to reassure myself of a clear coast.

The sexy G.I. voice next demanded retinal identification. At her prompting I rolled fat boy closer but lost control of the momentum and smashed his nose against the interface. Hater and I struggled to pull him back again and restore equilibrium to our shifting load, but the damage was already done. His nose had broken on impact with the glass and a splash of blood discharged over his lips and mouth.

Hater whispered fiercely at me to steady the load when the Guardian asked a second time for retina identification. Some of the sexiness had drained out of the request, replaced by a hint of impatience. Hater was standing to the side and tried to re-position himself more around front so he might possibly do something to leverage the eyelids open with his thumbs but the operation proved too awkward. Time elapsed. In the moment the idea occurred to me to lean my right knee into the hand cart, and allow the steel to press against my chest for balance, while I reached over the top of his head, and probing with the tips of my fingers located the Propaganda Minister's eye sockets, pressed in above the eyeballs, and thereby drew the lid-skin up and open.

Seeing his stark, uncomprehending eyeballs exposed in their hypnotic state motivated Hater to perform his part by helping me steady the payload as we waited for the hologram to reach out and laser detect the pulse beating in the capillaries, which

eventually it did, signified by a satisfied, "Thank you."

The third demand, delivered in what now sounded like a business tone, was voice confirmation.

Hater was whispering to himself, as though now came the fun part. In the time spent passing the first two tests Hater's handheld had fallen asleep. He fumbled with it, booting it awake. I'm sure Guardian Intelligence was on the verge of copping a real attitude when Hater's fingers tapped across the keyboard. I don't know what I expected, but I was really surprised when Hater's pinky hit Enter and the word Hello croaked out of the Propaganda Minister's orifice. It sounded slurred and strange.

The G.I. said, "Vocal impression outside of normal parameters. Do you have a cold or hay fever?"

Nonplussed, Hater looked to me for an answer. For some reason I vigorously shook my head *no*. In the next second my reasoning caught up to my intuition. If the machine thought the Propaganda Minister were ill, she might ask next for a pin prick of a blood sample, and who knew what toxin it might identify in the process.

The Propaganda Minister croaked, "No."

Next, she asked if he were drunk. To Hater's raised eyebrows I gave the go-ahead nod and was consumed by quiet panic. If a cold might prompt a blood test what further tests

might not be prompted by inebriation? Clearly, however, I was over thinking the consequences because once Hater shocked the flesh into answering Yes the machine let us know she had created new parameters, and in her sexy voice she was adjusting her expectations, kind of like a dutiful, long suffering wife.

With a throat and tongue borrowed from the Propaganda Minister, Hater repeated the phrase, "The quick brown fox jumped over the tall wooden fence."

Upon completion of this test the G.I. said her thank you and goodbye and a steel panel whooshed open. When technology opens doors the way it's supposed to I experience pleasurable feelings, almost like a sexual rush. I hope I'm not abnormal in this reaction.

Hater stepped through first, having a quick look about before waving me forward. I cannot imagine how either one of us would have reacted if the coast had not been clear on the other side and instead we had encountered some kind of armed security detail.

With himself still unconscious and trussed I wheeled the manmover through the portal and far enough into the new zone to the point where I could lay my burden down in the grass growing plush and green on the other side.

While we both knelt to the task of unstrapping our strapping young lad the security door whooshed shut on its own

behind us. Hater and I both stared at the wall returned to its monolithic form. In unison, we jarred loose from that temporary mesmerism, stared face to face, and without uttering a syllable, returned to the task at hand with a renewed sense of urgency. Who knew what kind of silent alarms we may or may not have tripped as a result of our chicanery.

Having successfully undone The Propaganda Minister, Hater and I positioned ourselves on the same side of the grand lump and rolled him off the cart and facedown onto the grass. Naturally, we rifled his pockets and stole his security papers, his wallet and identification, his cards, compod, and credit counter. We even found a few crumpled bills. I took them and hooked them through his belt until he looked like he was wearing a little green hula skirt. With the rest of the articles piled into Hater's cupped hands we headed into this new, unknown sector, which to be frank looked exactly like the old well-known sector we were leaving behind us.

Stained and streaked, oil black residue covered each structure and left little visible surface of the original brownstone color. In their frenzy of barrier building The Powers That Be had evidently found it most expedient to build and isolate right down the center of a parkway. Leafless trees remained the only organic inhabitants. This zone had been cleansed a long time ago, and so the one major difference I

spotted was the number of unbroken windows. Usually you didn't see them whole like that. In a populated zone the windows would have been smashed to the last man.

Once across the street we invaded the neighborhood without spying a soul. Two blocks up we ducked into what must have been a pub or a restaurant, its double doors opening towards the center of the intersection, its glass had been smashed in sure enough, through which we stepped, our foot gear grinding on the granules of glass. Using both hands I grasped the manmover and hoisted it through and did not set it down again until I found a spot against the wall where I parked it forever.

Hater evaluated the loot we had scavenged off the Propaganda Minister, discarding most of it as worthless. Huddled together we spoke of plans and ideologies.

"We should take that hand cart with us. It might prove useful down the road."

I disagreed: "I think we should leave it here, since inevitably I would be the one burdened with dragging it along."

Hater's eyes and mind remained fixed to the task of rummaging through the contents of the Propaganda Minister's compod. Only his eyebrows seemed to be listening to me and rose in response to my contradiction.

"We could pile all our heavy stuff onto it and take turns hauling it along."

"In a pinch we will undoubtedly want our packs on our backs. If we have to take off at a run, you know perfectly well we'd both be inclined to drop the whole load. We have what we need already in our packs. We don't need to drag this thing along."

"You may have a point there," Hater conceded. "I just hate to abandon good equipment if it's still viable."

"We can leave it parked right here. We'll hide it where no one will find it, and if need be, we'll come by on our way back and pick up our stuff."

Hater's lips compressed and he shrugged as a clear indication he doubted we would ever be passing this way again. He slipped the Propaganda Minister's comport into one of his bags.

"If you don't like leaving good equipment behind, why did you leave the reverberator inside the Propaganda Minister's throat?"

"That unit was designed as a one shot deal. We coated it with liquid skin, a type that bonds permanently with the subject's real skin. If we'd tried to remove that device now we'd end up ripping out his throat."

"How will he get it out, then?"

"I don't know. They probably have a process or an antidote for it by now. No doubt, he's going to be an unhappy boy when he

wakes up from his nap."

"Maybe you can leave the gun and case behind, too, as one less thing to carry."

To an extent I felt bad at strongly suggesting he leave even more equipment behind, and technology to boot, but if I didn't intervene from time to time Hater would try to bring along an entire chemistry lab everywhere we went. Dude was gadget happy. Nonetheless, he set down the silver gun case, which now contained only half a gadget anyway, since there was no more ammunition. Using his boot he nudged it in behind the manmover.

Maybe in order to stop this hemorrhaging of equipment Hater pulled out our water canisters from his front pack, asking, "Should we throw these away, too?"

"No, of course not. We'll need those," I said, patting his arm.

"Do you have any drops?"

"No, I only brought flakes. I don't use drops."

"Why don't you use drops?"

I unzipped my front pack and pulled out a packet for each of us.

"Body said that water flakes are better for you. The drops are just cosmetic. All they do is dilute the impurities, change their chemical configuration. They don't prevent them from

entering your system. Whereas the flakes trap the impurities and drag them to the bottom of your container so you don't drink them in."

Hater shook his head to emphasize the triviality of what I'd just said.

"Drops neutralize the impurities. With flakes you always loose some H₂O trapped at the bottom. It's wasteful. Besides, since when is Body an expert on anything scientific? He's a glorified pimp. He can barely read."

"I'm not thirsty right now," I said, when Hater proffered me one of the canisters. "I'm going to wait until later for water."

"Wait? How long? Until you dehydrate to the point where you do feel thirsty? Why not hydrate now, before we start?"

Considering he was offering me clean drinking water I felt hard pressed to refuse a second time. In response to my acquiescent shrug he handed me one of the cold metal cylinders and I unscrewed the stopper and performed the operation of tearing open a flake packet and sprinkling it on top of the water. Hater watched me as I held the canister steady for a few moments to allow the flakes time to sink to the bottom.

Hater's comment was that they also made the water taste soapy.

"That taste is how you know the water is potable."

"They should put artificial flavoring in it. Flakes would taste better with flavoring."

Hater produced a vial of drops and carefully squeezed one into his water.

"Why did you ask me about drops if you had some already?"

"If you didn't have any, I was going to share."

To continue the contest of wills over which purifier was better he drank his potion down to the lees and making a point of having consumed the very last drop smacked his lips like a Turkish connoisseur.

"Nice lemony taste."

I drained my tube down near the lees, shaking out the residual onto the ground.

Hater pointed to the blob lying in a tiny heap.

"See? Moisture! Wasteful."

"Aren't all those chemicals you just ingested hard on your system?"

Again the dismissive shake of the head. Very much a brand loyalist, my Hater.

Before we could begin the march north, or the going up, as some would have it, we had to look over our packs and get squared away. We both had hip packs, front and back. I wore the log pack vertically up my spine. From inside his back pack Hater produced a black velvet cape of real quality. As he draped it

over my shoulders and affixed the cords around my neck he told me how wearing a cape like this would make me look like a real super hero. Knowing my love of reading and the fact of my vanity Hater reached out momentarily to my spirit in a way he rarely attempted. Epic hero would have been cooler than super hero. No matter. He was trying the best he could. With his little gesture he embarrassed us both so that we stood there in red faced silence until I could sense his displeasure growing. To stave off an outburst ruining the situation I gave him a playful punch in the shoulder and said thank you. To which he replied by patting me on the back a few times and saying thank you in return. I slapped his shoulder again, and he slapped mine, and we continued hitting each other until the bad feeling dispelled and what with the bruising and the promise of a great adventure our mood became lighter and I might even say elated.

For me the good feeling was short lived because in the next gesture Hater produced a baggy of *motta*, the effects of which I personally cannot stand. Lately he had really gone under with the stuff. Why Hater persisted in pretending I shared his affinity for weed I was never able to understand. Like users and pushers he made drug use the lynchpin of our friendship, of our whole association, as though by saying no to his weed I was abnegating him as a person, even though I consistently complained of suffering panic attacks. He had manipulated me

into a double bind, ushering me through the gate, and the bestowal of the cape, were both for my benefit, and now he was going to extract a favor in return. Medicinal grade or Government grade, M grade or G grade, sometimes I heard the quality referred to in this way. Either that or homegrown, which could be anything. Apparently acquisition of the market had been a lugubrious war of attrition. Scripts were nearly impossible to come by. Obtaining one could increase your popularity among potheads tenfold.

From his bag of tricks Hater withdrew a pipe, the likes of which might have played no small part in putting Rip Van Winkle to sleep for a decade or two. Hater packed the bowl and by applying flame we each took a couple of puffs, and immediately afterward the poison of the day began to seep into my mind and a general paranoia ensued.

Usually I could avoid allowing the purple and pink hues of the chemical sky from depressing me. Under the influence, the poison atmosphere we lived in began pressing down on my soul, overwhelming me with the putrid sadness of a beautiful planet like ours spoiled beyond redemption.

As an emotional simpleton Hater merely giggled as he turned and without a word struggled through the broken door and down the steps. He stumbled up the sidewalk, giggling all the while like a schoolgirl who develops the hiccoughs and cannot stop

them. At the mercy of the drug, my heart beat so hard it threatened cardiac arrest. As I walked, I weaved more than stumbled, a society spinster about to swoon, as opposed to Hater, the punch drunk stumble bum, advancing and attacking, oblivious to the warning bell.

We didn't travel more than two city blocks in this desultory manner, my spirit rising and falling with each step in response to the desolate environment and the hopelessness of our cause, when the manhole cover in the center of the street blew sky high, twirling like a tossed pizza crust. Right behind it, from the depths of the sewer, a monster made of human excrement, a Poo Monster if you will, burst forth and rose tall as a fountain and spread wide its demon wings, then dissolved and cascaded all over the street splattering pat-a-pats, a fetid brown mass burbling and spreading out equally in all directions like pancake batter poured onto a hot griddle. In order to get passed this horrific menace before it crawled onto the sidewalk and devoured us both Hater and I increased our trot to a jog. No sooner were we passed the first miscreant, than a second, The Mother of Poo, doffed her lid and lunged up out of the sewer and onto the street and spread quickly in all directions. Hater and I were looking at being trapped at the waist of a perfect figure 8 of raw sewage. I screamed like a true doyen. Overcome by a sense of the horrid futility of life I slackened my pace for a

moment, and a self-loathing spoke to me from a dark place in my own soul I never knew existed, whispering for me to surrender.

Lovely Hater. He grabbed me by the arm and put himself between the Burblehump and me as we accelerated into a sprint. The Poo Monster widened its maw and was about to swallow us both alive when I suddenly straight armed Hater right towards the creature in the hopes it would engulf him first and be satisfied with his life, thereby sparing mine. I ran as fast as I could yet despite Hater's spin out and face plant I still found myself plop plopping through about two yards worth, ankle deep, just as the sickening Poo stench hit my nostrils as though some renegade angel had thrown wide the gates enclosing the pits of Hell.

Even in my latex heels I didn't stop running for several blocks. Once out of danger I slowed my running, if you could call my accelerated clippity-clop running. Some superhero I turned out to be. Defeated in the first five minutes by a giant Poo Monster.

The stench emanating from my footwear made plain the reality I had been trying to deny: in my last mad dash I had not entirely escaped the smutches of the evil beast. Around the base of each boot and splattered some up the legs clung the creeping brown ooze. Had I any tears left for my pathetic state of humanity I would have shed them. To a certain extent I did weep. The muscles contracted around the tear ducts and I croaked a

dry, whinging sound. No water works came. The wells were empty. Only dry heaves of emotion.

The gutter on my side of the street had been filled with the worst kind of crude water, rain water corrupted by oil spill, picked up and cycled through filthy rainfall. Impure and undrinkable by any standard, yet I stepped right in it and sloshed around until some of the excrement washed away. Then I was prone on my side where my hip had impacted with the asphalt. In the greasy water my feet slipped out from under me that fast. With what weariness was I forced to acknowledge how the jarring of the fall had forced me to soil my silk panties. For a moment I lay on my side. I rolled forward and my elbows grated against the asphalt, my face propped inches above the grimy, fetid street surface. Through the pain glowing from the fresh bruise cracking the capillaries across the skin of my hip, and the shame of my shitted drawers, squeezed, sure enough, two tear drops, emerging enough to cleanse the eyeballs and collect in the middle of the rim, wobble there a bit, before escaping the rim in an arrow streak pointing at my cheekbones. Squeezing my eyes shut forced the issue a jot more, not big roly-poly tears, just enough to slide to the side and fill the delta of my premature crow's feet. From out of the primordial ooze we crawled, in the end only to be drowned in our own fetid filth.

I gazed dazedly at the oil slick in the gutter water on the

other side of the street and the trunks and denuded branches of the dead tree still rooted between the street and the sidewalk in front of the steps of a once fine building now abandoned and smeared in putrescence compounding the pain in my hip and the dirty shame inside my suit with my feet submerged and lying on my side in filth right up to my knees. Looking up, I craned my neck skyward in case some grand piano might be plummeting down upon me to finish the job. Nothing of the sort. The overcast sky remained purple and pink, and only oil drops the size and color of rotten grapes fell and burst upon me and the street and the dead homes and the stark lifeless trees.

The distance to the sidewalk appeared not so great I couldn't pull my heels in under me. Hoist myself up. Stagger a few steps. The span of the leg stretch required to hop the treacherous gutter water lit up the pain in my hip. Standing in the pelting rain the desire to lie down for good dragged at my head and neck and shoulders bowed down by the weight of the sky raining filth on me.

The rain washed the fecal matter off my bodysuit for good and left an oily residue in its place. Generally it wasn't healthy to stay outdoors when the acid rain fell. In my present predicament I didn't feel as though I had much of a choice other than to stay on my feet and wait for Hater.

He appeared as a figurine about two blocks away, clear of

the buildings, and although I couldn't discern his facial features, I understood the hand and arm haloing could belong to no other than himself. He had stripped down to the skin and was standing in the middle of the street lying his clothing flat to allow the rain to wash them. He turned his face to the sky and let the precipitation wash his skin clean as well. You had to be desperate to do something like that, which I guess he was.

I felt concern for his health and well being, even though I hadn't given him a second thought in the heat of panic. He was still ambulatory. I reasoned he must be okay. I waited for him on the stoop of the nearest building for I don't know how long. At one point he danced around waving his clothing in the air. Finally he climbed back into his gear. Hater was a trooper. Not literally, but he could go the distance.

At first I struggled to make eye contact, and felt how much I had disgraced myself. Once I had stopped running and my mind cleared I had been struck by the implications of bailing out on him and leaving him behind, possibly to die. My mind was registering so much pain at that point I could not have mustered a self remonstrance even if I had wanted to, which I did not.

"I have to take my suit off for a minute to get clean," I said, limping up the nearest flight of steps as though assured of finding solace and succor inside the first abandoned building.

"The H₂Oil washed it off me well enough," Hater said, leaving off glaring at me in silence to examine his boots, his trousers, his jacket. He had definitely sacrificed himself for the good of the team.

In an unwarranted moment of optimism my grasp enclosed the knob I plied with a simple twist. To my surprise the front door opened, and so we stepped inside dry and safe and out of the poison rain. Silent as a novice Hater followed, pulling the door closed until the latch clicked behind us. In the darkness of the foyer Hater stank to a degree no lit match could dispel.

We listened to the house because you never knew who or what you might discover. One of the most popular legends told the tale of an unsuspecting traveler bedding down for the night in a household den, home to a pack of wild dogs, who when they returned from their nightly foray found fresh meat sleeping unawares. Supposedly a cleaning crew working through that neighborhood found the body gnawed down to its skeletal remains, the jaws of the skull frozen open in the throes of what must have been a terrible death agony.

Nothing of that sort would happen here, though. An urban legend is just a story, and if you knew what to look for all kinds of warning signs became apparent, smells mostly, rot, feces, a kind of sickly fur stench, the sound of skittering claws. Nothing of the kind in this mausoleum. The air remained

dusty and still as the void. Difficult to say how many years or decades this place had lain abandoned. The inside had been picked clean of furniture and carpeting; otherwise the walls and floors remained in pristine condition.

"I'll take a look around," Hater whispered, and he moved off through the gloom creating a swirl of dust motes in his wake. Light from some upper bay window illuminated him as he crept one boot at a time up the creaking staircase. In the dim light I could see the red and green lights blinking on his Taser.

Blinking fitfully in the dark and dreary interior I followed Hater, who despite his recent defeat at the whim of chaos, that which happens next, he had preserved his intrepid stance towards the unknown. At the top of the stairs he even threw out a protective arm barring me from further advance, an act of theatricality not unappreciated by my bruised and humiliated sensibility.

We crept along a murky hallway, the light on Hater's weapon slicing through the gloom. Along the way we tried each door and thankfully found nothing but emptiness until we reached the final door revealing a bathroom.

"Here's a place for you," Hater said, advancing on a bathtub and turning at the tapes as though he expected serpents to spill out. To both our surprise and delight a shot of water

spit out, chocked, gurgled, and spat some more, running steadily for a moment or two, and thinning from a dribble to a stop.

Hater twirled both knobs to off.

"Wait here. Do what you gotta' do. I'll be back in a minute."

With that he stepped into the hallway, closed the door behind him and was gone, taking with him the light and leaving me in almost total gloom. Good old Hater. Always a problem to be solved. Always the best of intentions.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness I noticed a dull glow of light from what turned out to be a small rectangular window situated above the commode. Getting the window open took some rough pounding. Eventually it leveled on its rusty hinges and let in some of the murky purple day. The air from outside smelled freshly oiled. My olfactory senses performed the requisite sniff and snort, trying to draw in the water and reject the black crude oil clinging to its tail.

In the dim interior of that secluded space I stripped out of my suit right down to the skin. At six foot even I weighed probably all of about a buck twenty five. My panties were soiled beyond repair. I used one of my clean rags moistened in the tub to clean myself thoroughly. My sense of personal shame overrode my shame of being wasteful as I hid both the dirty rag and the soiled underpants in the commode and closed the lid. Thinking

the better of it, I retrieved them both and chucked them out the window. Disposing of the evidence.

Submerged in the shadows I sat on the commode and with ginger fingertips inspected the yellow and green contusion festering into a bruise on my hip. While I was inspecting the damage Hater burst into the room and advanced straight to the knobs on the tub and briskly turned them.

"Check this out."

My lack of a response caused him to look over his shoulder to ensure I was still there somewhere in the shadows. In my nudity I sat more upright and attentive. Still, I found no words.

After more gurgling and splattering like before water in the most robust profusion I'd seen since the night at the command performance burst forth from the nozzle and flowed in a steady stream filling the tub. Unmindful of my bare skin in the presence of this miracle I jumped to my feet and padded over next to Hater to watch the beautiful clear liquid filling the tub, a thin layer of grey dust swirling about as the whole bottom of the tub submerged and the steady stream of clean water showed no sign of abating. Hater swished his hand around to clean the tub and I joined in. He let that much of the water run down the drain before plugging it and filling the tub again.

In answer to my unspoken question Hater said, "This house

was equipped with a real classy juicer. They left it open when they departed. So that was smart. Fresh water has been collecting up above for who knows how long. I'm not sure it's potable, but you can definitely wash in it. Let me test it first . . . or you can step right in. There you go. Sure. Sit down. I'm sure it's fine. It has no odor."

While I sat there in the tub, luxuriating and uncaring, Hater rummaged through his bag of tricks and produced a litmus stick, which he submerged up to his own wrist (there was that much water) thrashing it around a bit to register a proper reading. He knew how to do so many clever things when I didn't know how to do anything useful at all, sexual know-how excluded. If the water tested impure somehow I was going to feel foolish I knew sitting there naked up to my belly in water with my arms clasped around my legs, sort of kissing my kneecaps for good luck, I suppose. What can I say? I was a born Epicurean, a creature of comfort.

Hater shook the stick and held his pen light to it and studied it and then announced his findings.

"This water tests out blue-green."

"Is that good?"

"It's the purest I've seen since my lab days."

"I shouldn't be sitting in it, then."

Hater flicked the water with the tips of his fingers while

he pondered this rare and wondrous find. Then he snapped out of his reverie and turned off the tap.

"What the hell," he said, cavalierly. "There are gallons and gallons of it. Whoever lived here must have been wicked rich because they installed a nice unit. Live large, Princess. That's my advice. Life is short. Tomorrow, we die. So tonight we celebrate with the cleanest bathwater this side of the Golden Tower."

Although Hater spoke words of *carpe diem*, when it came time to embrace life, he always took a step backward and let others go before him. I loved consuming things. If only the girls in The Club could see me now. I pinched my nose and slid lengthwise onto my back until my head submerged and perfect amniotic silence descended around my ears. I shot to the surface and wiped away the water from my eyes, sucking at the excess on my lips.

Hater laughed and somehow intuiting my mood said, "Say, you are a pleasure model. You know how to enjoy."

I looked down at my nudity, realizing I had seen better days.

"I want to drink some of this. I'm really thirsty all of a sudden."

"Let me get the canisters. You don't want to drink that now you've been sitting in it."

While he was turned away, busying himself in his back pack, I surreptitiously cupped my hands and fed on a big sip. I'm sorry if that seems gross to you. Very powerful men and women have begged for a drink of my bathwater, not as fine a bath as this, but still. I figured it couldn't hurt. The water tasted like the dust at the bottom of the tub. Yet it was nothing in comparison to the phenomenon that it did not taste of crude oil.

Hater twisted the knobs and more pure water gushed forth, picking up dull rays and spinning them dazzling with little stars dancing and falling like where the falls plunge into the lake. I don't know which lake. Any lake. The ones I'd seen in the picture books in the library. After filling both tubes to overflowing he shut off the valves and we toasted to good health and drank our tubes dry and repeated the whole operation several times more until our bellies grew taugth and I for one had to pee.

When I stood up in the tub I was again reminded that Hater was not brought up in the zone and hence remained vulnerable to fits of shame in the presence of a body like mine. As I sat on the throne tinkling down the dry drainpipe Hater squirmed about in a squeamish manner, digging through his various packs for no other purpose than keeping his eyes averted. With Hater I found it best to mitigate rather than exacerbate the tension sometimes developing between us during these intimate moments. So for

example I never told him about the showers at the Abattoir where some of the girls would run wild, sneaking up behind you and urinating on your leg. Even I thought their behavior adolescent.

So when I had finished I let down the lid as quietly as I could, tip-toed back to the tub, and slunk once more into the velvety smooth rapture. Over his shoulder Hater offered me a sponge for a sponge bath. Normally these pads had enough cleaning solution for several rub downs as long as you used them sparingly and afterwards stored them properly so they didn't dry out. First I plunged it in the water and the suds burst from it filling up the whole tub. The silky smooth soap caressed my skin until I didn't care if Hater was in the room or not. I stroked myself all over with both hands. I plunged my head under water again and came up cleaner than I had felt in what seemed like forever.

Pulling my knees up under my chin and embracing my shins I invited Hater to wash my back for me. Sometimes I really had to work not to be offended by his reluctance to approach me physically. In our first association we'd romped together naked, but we were both more innocent then. Before we left we'd fondled and rubbed off with our clothes on, but that was as far as our intimacy went. Like all the other men raised beyond the zone the desire and lust my body aroused in him easily turned to disgust and hatred. Plus in our case the glimmer of affection I

sometimes saw flicking in his eyes phoomphed into the auto de fe at the mention of Rachel. In other words, he despised our lesbianism.

In quieter moments I could lure him into manning a sponge to smooth away the dirt and ease the cares of an evil world and forget about how much he was capable of hating Rachel and me both for being whores, his word, not mine, for he spit when he called us names like that, trying to make the power of our female sexuality sound evil.

Before leaving me to privacy I neither asked for nor desired Hater paused at the door and held it loosely by the brass knob.

"Weren't you a boy when this story began?"

"No, I replied, my scorn plosive from my lips. "Go back and check if you don't believe me."

"No, that's okay. I'll take your word for it," Hater said. "We're heading into the future. Not the past."

That night we slept in the bathroom since the presence of water made the tub the source of all sustenance, and the four walls the space most compact and inaccessible in the house without resorting to closet cringing. We supped on a delicious combination of wet and dry food and all the clean drinking water we could stomach. Hater soaked his duds and sudsed them well while we ate and then I donned my second skin and he climbed

back into his gear as well.

The dark toxins imbrued the whole width of the evening sky. Hand to mouth I wept over the rip developing on the hip of my suit. Hater and his duct tape. I swear. Given his way he would have wrapped me head to toe in the stuff and had fun in the process. I shouldn't complain. He patched me like a surgeon.

Repacked, we slept in the toboggan position, my back to the corner and my man Hater, his ass to the floor as well, leaned back into me. Far too much excitement for my big boy. He slipped into sleep right away.

Not me. I remained awake most of the night. For about five minutes I basked in the good fortune of drinking water before the bad thoughts crept out from the dark crenellations in my brain. Too much excitement for me too. Replaying each of the day's events repeatedly. Submerged teeth grinding nighttime insomnia. The horrors we had committed against The Propaganda Minister turned and snapped at me in cosmic retaliation. For a weak moment I believed in such things. I worked past the old superstitions as the moon was buried alive, and through the transom chilled air poured into the room, filling it with clean smelling oxygen less the usual gasoline vapor stink. Hater had left the door ajar so during the night we would not become asphyxiated.

Random molecules. Nothing more. Some technical something or

other probably broke weeks ago and the sewer had been backing up ever since. Pure coincidence that we were crossing that piece of terrain at that particular point in time. Not divine retribution nor any other kind of moral blowback. Moving across the landscape you encounter other objects with trajectories and velocities all their own blank to what a collision with you might fracture.

The next phase coming under repeated scrutiny starred me, absconding in the face of danger and failing miserably at being solid, by allowing fear to drive out any thought for my best friend buddy and pal. Rachel would have doubled back and thrown us over both her shoulders and carried us to safety. I didn't want Hater to think badly of me. I needed to have a conversation with him. So while he slept, I talked to him in my mind.

"I'm sorry I pushed you towards the monster, but if one of us has to go, it always has to be you."

"How do you figure?" Hater asked in my mind.

"Because women and children first."

"I've never understood that rule."

"It's because women are capable of creating new life. Whereas you're just a man, and replacements are available elsewhere."

"I think that's an attitude peculiar to women."

"It's like ants dragging their eggs to high ground when

threatened by floodwaters."

"It wasn't nice pushing me like that."

"No, I know. I'm sorry. What can I say? I'm a selfish bitch."

Followed by the good fortune of the pure drinking water, fortuitous, yet equally random. A full bath and a meal, and a warm body to hold onto, how many denizens of the night could boast the same level of opulence? Not many, I answered myself again and again in the quiet of the night. The energy driving my thoughts wore itself out finally and I closed my eyes and joined Hater in sleep, deep and forgetful, till dawn.

The drone must have awakened me because when I came into consciousness my brain had given my eyes the impossible task of listening. My eyes darted around in my head looking for a noise coming from outside, no longer audible. Hater was awake, too, and listening, so I knew I wasn't tripping. Both of us tensed, remained stone still as the drone made another pass along this side of the street while still in forward trajectory and not hovering mode, so it hadn't found us, yet. We waited for the engine hum to recede into the distance before Hater jumped to his feet and spun around to clasp my outstretched hand and haul me onto my feet.

Immediately, we suited up and vacated the bathroom and raced soft-stepping down the hall around the banister loop and

rapidly down the stairs to the main floor where we fled to the kitchen at the back of the house and crouched behind the door leading outside. How capable the drone searching for us would be, what class of killer, depended on how big a priority we had become to The Powers That Be. Assaulting a propaganda minister. Breaching a security point. Either crime by itself might make you a goner. When the sound of the metallic whir returned, this time stalking up the alleyway and crisscrossing the grid, I'm sure the same thought sent a chill through Hater as it did me. Drones are not authorized to take prisoners. They don't negotiate. At best they convert to hover mode until the Black Maria arrives, or maybe equipped and authorized to kill outright. For a short while shooting down those bastard contraptions became a local craze. Then everybody ran out of bullets. The fleet had been shot full of holes and replacement drones never made it into the budget. By cannibalizing parts the Security Forces continued to maintain a small fleet. One always showed at any sign of trouble and hovered, contemplating spraying the crowd with death.

Our fear carried us through a beginning middle and end. The drone approached. Grew loudest at the pass point. Receded into the distance.

To his credit Hater manned up wonderfully. He grabbed my hand in the passion clasp and led me out of the kitchen and

returned through the hallway interior of the house to the front door where we again crouched and waited, listening. In the adrenaline rush of that mortal threat the thought crossed my mind about how nice it felt to hold hands. Then the killer drone passed by again, only this time behind us and farther afield, whirring through the air. Hater waited for as long as he could still hear the engine. The basic rule of thumb held that if you could hear them, they could hear you.

Hater rolled his palm across the top of the front door knob so smoothly the latch gave way with barely an audible click. When he opened the door a breeze hit us in the face. We tarried a fateful moment gazing down the street. Time enough for the breeze from outside to flow upstairs and grabbing ahold of the bathroom door slamming it shut, *Wham!* Off in the distance, the drone coughed, switched gears several times, sputtered as it reversed engines.

Hater stepped outside and drew me along with him in one motion. Shutting the door and skipping down the front steps we ran fast up the street until we reached the corner and crossed the walk. We slowed to a jog, all the while the drone bearing down on our location though the wretched beast had not yet caught sight of us.

For so many blocks I was running and dodging zigzagging from street to alley and back to street again I didn't have time

to consider options other than succumbing to my own worst passive tendencies, my urge to quit and lie down and beg forgiveness. Essentially I had been raised a slave, and while growing up, developed a slave's mentality. Melting under the application of the whip into creamy smooth pleasure spiked with pain did not ready me for confrontations with the mechanized world. Whatever stubborn or rebellious tendencies I exhibited I learned from watching Rachel deal with people. She was a great role model, but for her the triumphant human spirit rose from within; for me life felt more like an alien set of behaviors I had to struggle to emulate.

By the time we paused to catch our breaths Hater and I had put half a dozen blocks or so between us and the drone. In a glimpse we both saw it fixated at the open transom to the bathroom where last night we had spent the night. Whenever one of those beasts went into hover mode the bloody thing looked like a several headed cobra, each sensor disk an open hood. Hater and I both bent double, panting for breath, hands on knees.

He looked up and asked, "Can you go on?"

As if answering for me, the drone began firing hot rounds into the bathroom. The volley perforated the walls and the old brick and mortar crumbled into dust and a gaping hole emerged.

Not possessing any extra breath for word formations I

lolloped my head to indicate we should resume our flight even though my throat was roached and I'd perspired away all that good water. If I'd cooled down then my limbs would've stiffened and any further exertion become painful. We shoved off about the same time the drone circled the house and picked up our heat prints.

Jogging at a fair clip we rounded a corner and heard the rattle and crackle of gunfire in the distance. Not air cooled and fierce like the drone closing on us from behind; rather, the peppy rat-a-tat of small arms fire, punctuated by the shwoom-pow of an RPG. Rebel fire.

Ammunition, Hater said in a soft voice, his awe tinged with envy.

In the course of a couple of days we had traversed the breadth of one entire zone and were rapidly approaching the border of the next. The black wall appeared as we rounded the last incline and the drone slid, in air, around the corner behind us and confirmed visual contact. Why the soldier on the remote controls at the other end miles away did not open fire immediately I cannot explain with certainty, especially since he'd already displayed a propensity for annihilating us. Maybe our feeble dogtrot induced pity enough to stay his bloodthirsty trigger finger. Maybe my latex shape, including sassy superhero cape, threw off his expectations, to the extent curiosity drove

him to monitor and observe rather than terminate. Whatever the reason, we continued to live as long as the drone bobbed along behind us and collected data.

We rounded the last corner and leaped off the sidewalk and onto the street running parallel to the iron black zone wall where we became witnesses to a slaughter. Large sized ordinance had punched several holes in the barrier wall structure, the largest of them a twisted iron breech smoking from the violent energy of the impact. At some point the fighting had spilled through into this empty sector. At least a couple of dozen bodies lay mangled in the street. We stepped between the corpses and I noticed most of them were face down until we reached the breech where the bodies were ripped open into mangled disarray and twisted offal lay in heaps steaming in the brisk morning air.

Hater and I clambered over the breach and lost our momentum catching full view of a city battle in our direct line of flight. We put our backs to the wall in the new zone and slunk sideways a few paces and slumped to a sitting position. Unmindful of us the drone floated through the breach with its nose pointed to the ground as though still taking notes. My eyes didn't fully register the flight of the RPG. It moved too fast. My mind's eye took a snapshot though because later like Zeno I could see the missile clearly, boink, boink and one more boink

in the sky before impact with the drone blew both objects back into the empty zone side of the wall shielding us from the fireball and shrapnel.

The concussion rocked us into a two man huddle. After such a terrible explosion, above the stinging ringing deafness hurrahs drifted over the battlefield from both sides, the voice of the People's Army as well as the Home Guard. Towards the top end of the field soldiers were entrenched in concrete bunkers and open air trenches. Strewn all downfield were hunks of concrete the size of boulders, plenty of cover for shock troops. In the opposing trench farther below huddled forces waiting to go over the top and advance their way up the boulder field.

Oblivious to danger I grabbed hold of Hater's jacket and hauled him to his feet. He had suffered a minor concussion. At least that's what they discovered later. I knew my ears were ringing. As we stumbled over the field of battle strewn with concrete rubble my eyesight and attention narrowed to the area directly under my feet. Instinctively, I suppose, because I can't remember making a conscientious decision, we rambled downhill towards our RPG savior who had fired the round destroying the drone.

With each step my head cleared a little. Hater, not so much. He slapped ineffectually at my guiding hand leading him along. Probably because he realized people were watching. A loud

speaker blared instructions of some sort. Cease fire. Stand down. Time out. The sound blared so badly I could hardly understand the words for the distortion. I was able to infer some sort of a ceasefire had been called in order for a pair of non-combatants to be escorted from the field. The recognition sent a burning cold shock wave through my body scorching the nerves in my knees, leaving me hobbling on wobbly sticks. I get nervous sometimes.

I couldn't decide whether the combatants were security forces of some sort or a special branch of the regular army. They wore shiny black boots, of course, and baggies of a horizontal blue cinched by a black belt in addition to long sleeved, button down shirts of the same color and square caps with short bills. I thought they looked weenie.

Each time we approached a soldier, man or woman, they waved us away. I felt like a random electron bouncing down the war games field of play. Everybody crouched behind a perfect hunk of cover as though they were playing at battle, only with live ammunition. A young woman in uniform ran toward us none too gracefully. She stopped a ways off, motioning insistently for us to come her way like a stage hand in the wings of the theater trying to wave a couple of actors offstage without exposing herself to the audience. Off course we moved towards her. She was waving us out of harm's way.

By the look of her she was definitely belonged to the second string. Her saddle bags stretched her uniform at the seams, as though in spite of her lack of athleticism they could find a use for her and so lowered the bar allowing her on the team. We reached the lower end of the battle field while she continued to entice us dog-leg right.

Before our surroundings disappeared from sight behind a giant concrete bumper I looked up-field to scan the distance and test my bearings. My spirit sank not at the field of carnage but at the sky scrapers in the far backdrop. Our goal was a tower just like those, and here we were moving down hill father away from our target destination rather than approaching closer to it.

In the flash of that realization I resisted all forward momentum and tried to reverse direction. But we were already in their grabby custody and being ushered away towards a hospital area. We had an escort on either side of us and the flunky who had been dispatched to corral us leading us not towards the general in severe leather standing with legs braced atop an embankment and whose dignity would only allow him to consider us distastefully out of a safe corner of his peripheral vision. We were being led, I quickly discerned, toward a woman wearing spectacles with her hair slicked back into a tight bun coiled at the nape of her neck. She wore a white lab coat over a

conservative below the knee white work dress and white stockings. In the crook of her left arm she cradled a clipboard, and in her right she held a bright red pen. Expectant. Poised. Exacting.

"I'm Chief of Medicine," she said, and told us her name and with the very red pen wrote down our names. By way of a preliminary investigation she asked us if we were injured.

"Yes," I said. "We both are. Him in his head. Me right here," and I indicated where the duct tape had come loose and lay hanging by a corner. Like a pinhole in a windowpane the crack in my latex had fractured into slivers radiating in all directions. The instigator reached down and inserted her finger and at her leisure stroked my skin. Up close she appeared older than I had thought. Nevertheless, she was still young enough.

"Does that hurt?"

"A little. It's really badly bruised."

Once she was well satisfied with me she stood upright and asked a second time, "What's wrong with him? What's wrong with you, soldier?" She pointed her pen back and forth between us.

I answered for him, "Shell shock."

She seemed taken aback. "Shell shock... what's that?"

At first encounter this blonde cougar met me with a steel gray and penetrating glare. Then the grey softened and her manner became coaxing, she pled in a way for clarification,

insinuating, I felt, the truth might buy us time, if not wholly bring about our salvation.

So I said, "He got rocked by an explosion. It jarred his head. Me too, a little bit. Not as much."

"Not as much," she mimicked me, and in that moment I realized the instigator was smitten by me.

She pulled a light from her smock and shined it in Hater's eyes.

"Head trauma," she said, confident in her jargon, almost haughty in her disregard of my historically outmoded diagnoses.

We waited while she wrote quick and efficient notes.

"How did you come to be on the course in the first place? We're in a restricted area here."

"We came through a hole in the barrier wall. By accident."

Without altering her caressing gaze she inquired about something over her shoulder to a riot goon whose presence had gone unnoticed. He wore five chevrons on his sleeve, and standing behind him I counted five more goons sporting one chevron each.

"This morning a breach occurred. Several, actually. Followed by out of bounds play."

The instigator turned back to me. Her lip curled into mordancy.

"You didn't go out of bounds, did you?"

Our presence there remained an unexplained anomaly. Not a good thing.

"We arrived after that. We wandered in by mistake."

"Yet the next zone over is supposed to be empty. Vacant."

"Yes it is," I said. "We were driven from our previous zone by an outbreak or rioting and civil war. We're okay. We're just lost."

Her interrogation had lead to the only dead end conclusion available. The instigator pulled from her breast pocket the same silver pen-light. This time she examined my eyes. With sympathy she laid a hand on my shoulder and said, "Clearly, you've been through something this morning."

Her note of tender sympathy gave rise to tears. Not real ones. I let them rise, considering how her pity would govern our future. I didn't believe she had discerned anything of medical significance in my gaze, although my ears were in fact ringing. She took a couple more swipes at Hater's eyes and she turned to the Corporal and said, "They're in need of treatment. You'll have to wait."

Hearing the doctor's orders the goon squad turned in unison and trotted off to a corner of the compound delineated by the white buildings of the field hospital. We were moving towards white lines painted around the complex of buildings and tents shielded from the battle field by a small valley of it's own

with raised inclines on either side concreted along the natural contours.

"This one to emergency. Set up a scan," Doctor said, using only two fingers to guide poor bewildered Hater into the hands of a young Angel of Mercy who had been waiting with head bowed patiently along the Doctor's flank. The nurse gently took her charge in hand and led him ahead to what appeared to be a smaller side building. His boots flippy-flopped as he walked. His neck elongated in order to balance his head, carry it carefully. At the Doctor's side a second young angel remained, awaiting orders on my account. Black hair. Blue eyes. Milk white skin. She was beautiful. A problem, though. Alas, high maintenance. With skin so fine she would be impossible to restrain and discipline bruise free.

"Let's get this one cleaned up first, and into some decent clothing. Take her to the showers."

With her long slender fingers she cupped my cheek with a couple of firm pats, reminding me that quality health care always comes at a price.

Just inside the entrance to the main tent Hater's nurse steered him straight up the main corridor while mine maneuvered me off to the right with the omniscient doctor implicitly directing us from behind. We walked the length of the corridor past waiting rooms, offices, doors marked storage, a unisex

symbol for latrine. Carpeting underneath and a clear rubber matting cushioned our steps the entire way. When we reached the end of the runway the Angle of Mercy negotiated the door, waving me through and holding it open for Dr. Redpen as well so that I found myself awkwardly enough leading the parade.

Grass grew next to the building and where it stopped a dirt road looped around the shower building in what looked to be a deserted area of the compound, except for the presence of two girl guides armed with comports. At first sight of the doctor they sprang off the empty fuel drums where they'd been perched and onto their feet. With their comports visible they stood facing each other in a pantomime of absorption. As soon as they realized they were not about to receive a dressing down they lapsed into their dereliction of duty again wandering elbow to elbow up the service road and sharing interfaces.

I forgot about them as the Angel of Mercy squirted ahead in order to play usher once again. Inside, rows of grey lockers and wooden benches had been fixed onto a solid slab of cool smooth cement. Here the Doctor ordered me to strip. Simple as that. A one word command. I obeyed. I peeled out of my skin and allowed the latex to unfurl to the floor around my ankles. Without having to be told Nurse Angel gathered up my suit into her arms and bundled it off to some unseen incinerator.

The Good Doctor meanwhile patted my naked bottom forward

past a long concrete trough with at least a dozen spigots and into the shower room segmented by open stalls again numbering about a dozen affording not even semi-privacy.

In self-preservation mode I'd been cradling my breasts so they wouldn't wobble-wobble as I tip-toed around in all my opulence. Then some kind of orderly appeared from out of nowhere, gave me the once over, and said, "I'm going to need a water voucher for this business."

I crossed one arm, covering my nipples, while the other hand I let slip like Venus on the half shell. This uninvited spectator looked like the short, big breasted butch type I didn't really care for. The type who with a gentle kiss would moon you up against the wall and then grab your breast and squeeze, baring her teeth, pinching and twisting until it hurt, as though her rudimentary sadism was somehow sexy.

At her leisure the Doctor filled out a requisition slip while the Orderly sent her groping gaze wandering over every inch of my body. By averting my eyes and cringing in modesty I could almost pretend she was no longer there, longing for a time in the near future when she would be absent in reality.

My own gaze never left the gray floor as I heard paper perforated and flipping about. At the sound of the Doctor's voice, impervious and unflinching, I did look up:

"Powder batch and ten minutes water ration, by order of the

Chief Medical Examiner."

The dumpy orderly looked at the paper she had been handed and her rubbery face expanded into a round O of astonishment. Just as quickly recovering herself, but not before a single puff of protest escaped her lips and she turned to fetch the powder and ready the water ration, all the while shaking her head in astonishment at the largesse expended on the likes of yours truly.

"Don't you worry, my modest flower, you're in good hands," The Doctor said, moving in front of me and taking the locks fallen across my face and gently sliding them away, lodging them behind each ear. She played with arranging my hair like that until Nurse Angle returned with a bar of soap, a towel, and a whole box of wash powder. I had forgotten how outside my own zone people actually had credits for buying such things, especially if you were tied to a corporate sponsored government agency.

"No more fooling around now. Hands to your sides. What happened there?" For the first time the Doctor fisted her pen and pointed with her index finger to indicate the purple bruise flowering on my hip.

"I fell down."

"How long ago?"

"A couple of days ago. Maybe yesterday."

"You can't remember?"

I paused to listen to a score of little warning bells ting-a-linging in my mind.

"It was yesterday."

Then she asked me about a long list of diseases, some of which I'd never heard before.

Finally, she leaped to the core:

"Pleasure model?"

"Display model. Bait and switch, mostly."

"There but for the Grace of Global Inc. go I," she said under her breath, and grimaced. "We'll get you cleaned up, first. Then we'll have a proper exam."

She had no sooner said that bit about showering first when curiosity overcame her and she drew out of her pocket a viewfinder of some sort and stuck it in my ear and then she peered down my throat and listened to my heart and lungs with her cold metallic stethoscope and slid her fingertips around the base of my breasts all the way up into my armpits and my tummy tightened as I thought *here we go* but nothing untoward ensued. The Doctor stepped back as the Nurse came forward and pressed the box of flakes into my one hand and a clod of something cold, hard and white, I didn't know what, into the other. They both took a step back as though to inspect their handiwork. Beneath their admiring gazes I stood there unsure of what behavior they

expected from me.

Eventually the Doctor said, "She doesn't know what to do. She's going to need your help."

I'm not sure I really did need help, if they had just told me what to do. The Angle moved with such surety, took control of the powder and flung it about my person, then showered me with flakes, which I'm sure I could have managed myself. The flakes turn to liquid in their own creepy way. For this extravaganza however I stood beneath a nozzle and when the light turned green and a signal horn blared the Doctor herself jammed the green button with her palm and purified water cascaded in a myriad of crystal droplets cascading onto my humble naked flesh and the flakes turned to oil, not the noxious crude variety. Oh no, sweet scented stuff. Standing on my toes I raised my arms and stretched my fingers toward the source and upturned my face and puffy lips and closed my eyes and I didn't care if they watched while I communed with the pure water falling like lover's kisses upon every portion of my naked body. With my eyes closed in rapture I heard an embarrassed snicker escape Nurse Angel's lips, which when I opened my eyes she sought to stifle, making me love her all the more. Who could resist such flaming pink cheeks?

Dr. Redpen said to her by way of instruction, "You see how she craves cleanliness? She's a rare, hairless little mammal, to

be sure. Don't try to drink the water, Sweetie. We'll get you some proper drinking water if you're thirsty."

So be it, said I to myself. How often had I overheard others discussing my body, only to feign as though I didn't understand, passing under the radar unmolested. Of course I yearned to be clean, especially in a world wholly corrupted by crude oil and toxins. Supposedly life in our zone was better than anywhere else. I learned then it wasn't true. A couple of days out and already I'd had a bath and a shower of finer quality than anything I'd ever been allowed at The Club. While my temporal guardians watched over me I cleaned, I might almost say cleansed, myself under a delightful pair of watchful and approving eyes.

I'm sure at no previous time in my life had I enjoyed a full ten minutes straight. In my line of work lucubrating takes on the power of a narcotic. Given the opportunity, which of us would resist striking the tympanum of pleasure, making the whole world go away with the magnificence of a resounding gong. As the last remaining minutes of fresh water washed away my flowing juices I anticipated their shame for me, though I felt no shame myself.

Before I had time to completely wipe my eyes open and pinch the moisture from my nose Nurse Angel enveloped me in a voluminous cotton towel much cleaner than the ones provided for

the talent by the management of Club Abattoir.

Later on, after we had left the shower room behind and relocated to the Doctor's examination room number 3, two large-scale orderlies took me by either arm and hoisted me upon my back and they lay me down heels hoisted high on stirrups. Then they manacled my ankles. I had experience in these types of fun and games. Soon, the realization came to me this amounted to something different, and I probably should have fought back. The Doctors in the zone only pinched and prodded and sniffed about. They were only looking for diseases, and they usually took blood. We never saw first-rate doctors like this one. We only saw doctors who'd been kicked out of the profession for one infraction or another someplace else, higher up, usually having to do with alcohol and drugs. This Doctor donned her rubber gloves and oh so gently inspected my nether lips. Tears squeezed from my naïve eyes. To quiet my fears Nurse Angle softly tapped her finger upon the tip of my nose three times:

Doctor...knows...best.

Upon my forehead I received a most angelic kiss, and I wept for the two fingered penetration as well as for the kindness of the nurse's sympathy. I knew I'd never been pregnant before nor had an illegal abortion so this government mandated inspection didn't worry me too much. This requirement began with the Christians. Nothing they loved more than sticking their fingers

into young females to ensure their moral soundness. You could earn the yearly stamp of probavi, which means test, prove, approve, which was the three stage exam Doctor Redpen administered. In this manner the Government carried on a kind of Pleasure Zone all their own. I think the Right-to-Life movement didn't mean to victimize every woman on the planet, even though ruination was the ultimate result of their campaign. I wept for girl's and women's passive spread eagle existence and the two-fingered government intrusion into all our lives.

After the exam they issued a paper gown for me to wear while I sat on a plastic chair and recounted my medical history.

"Someone fed you well when you were a child. Your bone structure is good. Solid white teeth. Beautiful smile. You have the usual hiss in the respiratory system everyone has these days. Not the full blown emphysema though. So you've done well by staying indoors. You're lucky not to have any serious problems. And, lo and behold, you are free of diseases. Overall you're remarkably intact."

At that last revelation she cast a quizzical glance.

"I only work with other women. I'm not allowed to work with men. Working with them is a whole different thing."

Ducking away from my response she searched her folder for something else to say. From her reaction though I could tell that she had never been a patron in the Pleasure Zone.

Once she found her footing again, she said, "You are, however, somewhat undernourished at present. I'd like to see you gain a few pound so I'm keeping you for a few days. Your friend, Mr. Hater, needs rest and nourishment as well. Keep him awake tonight. Keep him sitting up. He should be fine in a day or two, but it's important he not fall asleep tonight for long periods of time. Wake him up every twenty minutes."

Here she set down her red pen and spoke to me more confidentially:

"In the medical area of the compound, the one we're in now, my word is law. So you'll be safe here for awhile. But eventually, whoever is looking for you, will find you. If they press me I can't keep them at bay forever. Do you understand, little Rabbit?"

Confused for a pause, I said, "No one's looking for us. We're the one's looking, for a friend of ours."

"Sweet Pea, if you're zone hopping, they're looking for you. Be that as it may," she said, leaving her ablative absolute unbound by an independent thought. She stood up and closed my case file and carried it as far as the door where she slid it into a plastic file holder affixed to the wall.

"I hope you find your friend," she said, before she slipped out the door and closed it behind her.

At this parting my spirit grew heavy and I wished Rachel

had been there to string me up by the wrists and give me a good lashing in front of everyone. Seeing me punished always made the other denizens feel better about themselves for awhile. Flogging also chased away mental anguish by replacing it with physical pain and I daresay a twinge of pleasure. I was lost in my reverie until Nurse Angel entered the room and interrupted my thoughts.

"You can join your friend now. He's in Ward 6. Do you know where that is?" When I shook my head no, she said, "I'll show you. But first, let's find you some nice clean clothes to slip into."

"Where is my suit?"

"That ratty old thing? They tried cleaning it. But it fell to pieces so we burned it for the sake of health standards. No worries. A salesman from Unicorp has been hanging around the last couple of days, trying to peddle his wares. He's got all kinds of free slag in boxes. I'm sure he'll be able to hook you up with something hypnotic."

In the Doctor's absences the Angel of Mercy grew quite chatty. My own natural reticence concealed from her the panic consuming me over the loss of my suit. I had been tortured with threat of ending up naked on the streets for as long as I could remember. In the interim The Angel furnished me with a robe not much thicker than my current paper gown. Walking around with my

backside exposed was not an option, not unless I wanted a train of admirers, which in this situation I most certainly did not. The only hope keeping me from growing hysterical was the promise of a new suit. I begged the nurse for new clothes, odd because she'd already promised them. I guess I felt I had to have them before I saw Hater because even in his injured state he would have been very angry with me for losing my suit, based on basic survival principles.

Considering my job description and the number of perverts I'd performed in front of in my time at Club Abattoir you would probably expect me to be more callous and uninhibited about nudity. The difference resides in that onstage at The Club I'm in a controlled environment, with the Silver Back Gorilla there to slam any John who became carried away and tried to climb onstage, which they sometimes do. Out in the wild, survival and the threat of rape became much more serious, and a much more scary. I don't mean to sound conceited, but as I walked behind the nurse down the long corridors heads turned to watch me go by, and then other heads turned from curiosity about the source of the fascination, and again I became the object of desire, only now with no protection other than fabrications like goodness and decency.

My guide and I left the main building and outside in the raw air crossed another small intersection. The general

atmosphere of the people who were milling about in a deflated way reminded me of backstage after a show at The Club. Everyone exhausted and down spirited. I guess the staged battle had really gone off with a pop.

We entered another non-descript portable structure, and inside a man dressed in a pink shirt and blue trousers stood pinching his lower lip and contemplating the disheveled periphery of a mountain of boxed merchandise, clothing mostly, boots, pants and shirts, all military, in a wide variety of colors and styles. This sales-rep apparently possessed some kind of sixth sense telling him we were of no account, without him having to look up at us as we stood there waiting for his mental calculations to conclude. Either that or he wasn't very bright.

When he was ready his arms dropped, dead meat at his sides, and he turned his full attention upon us. To say a man with no depth had a smile all surface merely means he appeared to me as a man devoid of ulterior motives. He was not the typical salesman who practiced the art of deception, the type who could rape you with his lies. He was more the type of rep who asked *what size* and *what color* and *how many*. I'd seen these types in the Pleasure Zone. To say the least we were a costume oriented community who happily shopped and encouraged the Fathers to buy us presents. It was so demeaning, but you had to wear something.

Without any preliminary niceties Nurse Angel stood next to

me and enclosed my shoulders in a parenthesis formed by her two hands.

"This one," she said, (meaning me) "needs a new outfit, and the Chief Medical Officer said you're the man to talk to, the one in charge. If you want the perfect model, a walking advertisement for your product, this beauty is at your disposal."

The smile on the Sales Rep's face went from professional and courteous to cheesy, either in response to the frank name dropping or my own calculated smile. My guess was for a clothing merchant he didn't come in contact with beautiful models very often. Like I said before, he was more of a ground level operator, taking orders in bulk.

Free samples however were obviously within this man's prevue. His facial features were pleasant, and he was enthusiastic enough to have learned the responsibility of his trade without realizing, within the limitations of his youth, he occupied a dead end position.

In reply to The Angel, the Sales Rep said, "Oh, well then, the Chief Medical Person."

Something about the way he referred to Doctor Redpen and then lifted his hands towards the piles of boxes as though magically scanning them with the palms of his hands told me he had no idea whom the nurse was talking about. Rather he had been

alone in this windowless, airless portable building by himself for a little too long, no matter how meager or perfunctory his position, he had spent too many days alone.

"Let us see now. Let us see," he said to himself, looking back to size me up in a professional manner before doing a double-take to satisfy his own personal needs. Take a picture. It'll last longer. He flipped open a few box lids and extracted a pair of shirt and pants much like I'd seen the dead soldiers wearing earlier that morning. He displayed the apparel draped expertly over each forearm.

At that point I would have settled for anything to replace what I was wearing, paper robes that would disintegrate in the first acid rain. Nurse Angel exerted herself as a much choosier shopper than I. She put her finger to her lip like a shushing librarian and leaned closely to inspect the garb up close and leaned back again to take in the whole ensemble and by the vigorous shake of her head presaged her final verdict:

"No, I'm sorry. Not good enough. We need something nicer...something with class, you know, clothing with style."

"Well...I don't know," the Sales Rep drawled, his thought process trailing off as he flung each garment more or less back into their packing boxes. He looked doubtfully at his mountain of slag. His gaze picked over several more boxes, which he appeared mentally to dismiss one by one.

Before he had time to display another sample, Nurse said, "Look here, at what you have to work with."

So saying, she deftly stripped me of my dainty garb so that the Sales Rep could see not only my symmetrical eyes and nose and puffy lips. Nurse standing behind me and taking a firm grasp of both my elbows and pulling them to a meeting point behind my back she flipped me concave like a finely diced papaya, forcing my bee-stung lips and breasts and my flat tummy and shapely hips and clean shaven Venus and long legs into full display.

The poor man's eyes bulged from their sockets. I couldn't stifle the laughter in reaction to the rough handling. If Nurse Angel liked it rough we could go there. She had no idea. As she loosened her grip and began stroking my arms I relaxed the sum of my parts and they fell more naturally into place. Although as I looked down at myself in appraisal the Doctor's diagnosis of 'undernourished' ran through my mind. I think she meant skinny because my ribs and hip bones stuck out a little.

Following what must have been the most voluptuous moment of his young life the Sales Rep made eye contact revealing more panic than pleasure and a hair toss and The Look from me sent him staggering backward until his heels hit the boxes behind him and he lost his balance almost falling over backwards onto the mound of product. Meekly and submissively, as I had been trained to mimic, I lowered my eyes and waited as though this boy were a

billionaire proffering a mink coat.

Gaining control of himself required a few minutes and eventually he quelled the trembling in his extremities and he moved with absolute certainty towards a sold black cardboard box when the lid was removed revealed a two piece leather outfit, no, three piece, I didn't see the vest at first, the combination of which took away my breath. Leather. Oh genteel reader: accept no substitutes. The deep, sexual aroma rose from the box and coated my sinuses with the smothering smell of pleasure. Now when my little man-at-arms proffered his wares I didn't wait for Nurse Angel's approval since I too knew the real goods when I saw them. I snatched the leather bottoms from his arm and stepped into them and slid them up my contours until they embraced my ass like a hundred smooth kisses. The vest was as tight as I could live with because the cramped fit ensured my boobs would be supported and stay put. I must say to his credit like a true gentleman the Sales Rep helped me slip my arms into the short cut jacket. He may have missed his calling as a classier haberdasher.

Nurse Angel stuffed my hospital gowns into a trash receptacle near the door. Only my feet remained in those shoddy slippers. I held them up one at a time. Reading my gestures correctly the Sales Rep held up a single finger to forestall the necessity of my saying a word. He attacked a wall of shoe boxes

without a thought about making a mess. He emerged with two possible candidates and approached with a box under each arm while narrowly inspecting my feet. Both of my benefactors gently urged me towards taking a seat, and I'll be darned if that nice young gentleman didn't bend down on his knees and measure my foot against a black combat boot before slipping a virginal white sock on and then the boot and lacing me up tight. Now properly shod I stood up and took a few steps down the cat walk before stopping, turning, and absolutely beaming. A moment later my spirit fluttered terribly because I knew that I had done nothing to earn such largesse. The Sales Rep had usurped my place on the chair and sitting there with a handkerchief wiped his sweaty brow.

For an awkward moment I tried to calculate how best to thank the Master-at-Arms, one who gears you for war rather than enslaving you in a burka. My intuition told me to go easy on him since he had probably experienced about as much beauty as he could take, and yet it had brought out the very best in him. Even an enlightened man reacts negatively to a woman's sexuality sometimes. To fear a woman's beauty is weak and lame, a psychosis, an excuse to beat her down and keep her servile. What rot men invent to cover their own shortcomings. After all his exhilaration by a manly standard would soon be prone to violence, the kind of infantile vagina fear leading to a public

stoning, the despicable depths of male hypocrisy. My Beauty caused an erection. How is that my fault? How anyone could misconstrue the very meaning of life, the propagation of the species, as a bad thing, remains forever beyond my contempt. Grow up. Drag your sorry asses out of the dark ages. The Sergeant at Arms appreciated my beauty in a most enlightened manner.

"You did just fine," I tried to reassure him. "Much better than most. Why...look!" And having hooked his attention once more I hid my arms behind my back and totally tucked my chin doing my best Venus de Milo. I lifted my head and said, "A beautiful woman should only be a cause for joy." To myself I confided, and if my beauty troubles your conscience then look to your own pecker and stop blaming me. Grow up. Be a man. Learn to deal with a woman as your equal. Don't fear the vag, and so on. I didn't say it out loud because that line of reasoning is enough for most little boys to wet their pants and turn violent. These are the wages of guilt and shame.

Before we left him Nurse Angel said a few quiet words to him in a consoling manner. Whatever it was she said seemed to buck him up a bit. By certain signals Angel indicated to me it might be best if I waited outside. Before stepping out the door I did say thank you.

Outside continued to be a typically dreary day. At one time

the world had been such a bountiful place, green and life sustaining before they poked the surface full of holes and injected poison after poison, never believing it would permeate the water supply. Short term fixes supplied by little men of limited thinking blinded by greed.

In defiance of the past and their wretched legacy I began practicing my karate kicks. The moisture level in the air was high enough the noxious fumes made my head ache, and my cool new gear gave little protection against the toxic poisons of my forebears.

Nurse Angel emerged from the portable carrying two plastic bags full of even more slag finagled out of the Man-at Arms, impossible to find items, made of cotton, like panties and sport bras and socks.

"I got a little something for me, too," she said, explaining why she handed me one bag instead of both. I could not have been happier for her, and I smiled to impart my sentiment.

Out of gratitude I gave her a hip check and asked, "Does her Holiness know how resourceful you really are?"

As soon as I made the comment I could tell on a couple of different levels my flippant words about the Doctor were poorly timed. I had underestimated the reverence Nurse Angel felt for her boss. Moreover I had forgotten it was Dr. Redpen who had

instigated our scavenger hunt in the first place. Ultimately I had only tried to test the bond we might have shared, both being passives or bottoms, although I realized then our positions in life were not wholly analogous.

"I think Doctor appreciates the professional manner in which I perform my duties," Nurse Angel said stiffly, folding her hands together and tightening her demeanor.

I had not meant to be ungrateful nor challenge her loyalty. Out of deep rooted feelings of anxiety and inferiority I disrespected all authority. With me rebellion was ingrained. I shouldn't exaggerate. I could sense the rigor mortise setting in with her attitude so I simply apologized to her and Doctor Redpen both and left it at that. While we walked along in silence I struggled with self-loathing for having cracked wise the wrong way and already undermined a friendship that might have developed into mutual understanding and care. Dutifully Nurse Angel led me right to the hospital bed where Hater lay freshly bandaged.

"Here's your man," she said. "He suffered a mild concussion, but with two days rest he should start feeling better. If he drifts off to sleep tonight, though, someone needs to wake him up periodically. Think you can handle the job?"

I nodded yes I could, and shopping bag still dangling from my wrist, I threw my arm around Angel and squeezed her in a hug

signifying my gratitude for the countless props given to me during the course of our brief acquaintance.

"Thank you for everything," I said, tears of gratitude creeping into my throat. "You and the Doctor both," I continued, still trying to make up for my earlier faux pas.

By the smile on her face I could tell how all was forgiven.

"You take good care of yourself," she said, standing on tip-toe and pressing her lips to mine for a moment longer than sisterly devotion usually allowed.

I had to laugh, saying, "I was right the first time. You are a scamp."

This time Nurse Angel smiled and raised one brow as if to say, You don't know the half of it.

In our jocularly we parted fast friends.

"Which of the Bronte sisters are you today?"

I turned around and there was Hater sitting upright propped by pillows in a hospital bed. On his head he wore a turban made of bandages.

"Oh hush," I said, in good humor to his flirty impertinence. Then gingerly inspecting his head wrap I asked, "Is this for real?"

"Apparently so. The good news is I should be better in a couple of days."

"How do you feel?"

"Strange. I can hear myself talking, but it feels like I'm behind a glass partition."

"That is strange. Have you eaten? Did they feed you?"

"Did they feed me? Yes, they fed me."

"How was it?"

"It's all wet food here. Fancy."

Even I could tell he was a little glassy eyed. In sympathy I leaned over, careful not to jostle him, and gave him a soft kiss on the lips.

"What did you do that for?" he asked.

"You've the only friend I've got, boy."

"What's that smell?"

"Nothing, only real leather. You like?"

With a certain amount of effort he focused his eyes in my general direction, took in what he could, and then closed his eyes once more, recoiling from the effort.

"I'd say you make friends wherever you go."

"You're in a mood."

"It's you who's beautiful."

"That's just the concussion talking."

I went to sit next to him on his bed. He winced as my weight shifted him and threw his head a little off balance and so I stood up again right away and apologized.

"I think there's a chair somewhere." He pointed without

looking to the other side of the bed. Sure enough there was a chair, along with our gear stowed half under the bed. Long rows of mostly empty beds ran up and down both sides of the aisle.

"They sure take good care of you here," I said, making myself comfortable.

Hater opened his eyes, and staring blankly before. "Yes, but for how long?"

Trying to be reassuring I ventured a guess: "Till you're well?"

"Definitely until you are well," a man in the next bed interjected.

His comment drew my attention, and I saw how half his face and all along the right side of his body lay bandaged. As though compensating for the loss of vision in his right eye, the left one seemed preternaturally active.

"Are you badly hurt?" Given his appearance I felt like a moron for asking. Luckily he took my question in the proper spirit:

"Naw, this here's nothing. It's worse than it looks...I mean...It's not as bad as I feel."

"I got you."

"You're really beautiful."

"Thanks," I said. "Say, tell me, what place is this?"

"You don't know where you're at?"

While asking the question he sounded genuinely puzzled.

"I know it's a hospital," I supplied, "but why all the shooting?"

"It's a proving ground for the Dark Matter Corporation."

I pretended to be sheepish and simpered.

"I thought you guys were the People's Revolutionary Army."

My interlocutor laughed and said, "They don't have no ammunition."

At this point I realized a third, silent party was auditing the conversation uninvited. A Peppermint Striper a few beds down had frozen stiff at the mention of the PRA. She made up her sheets and distributed her clean bedpans from off a trolley cart while feigning the worst attempt at nonchalance I had ever seen. I talked with Private Fodder and I kept her within my peripherals, and since none of us were going anywhere, I saw no harm in encouraging him.

"No, that peacenik business is nowhere. If you take a look at what they're fighting for, it's socialism. Plain as day. I'm fighting for corporate supremacy. It's way better."

"Like the old rules, you mean?"

"I don't know nothing about that. I mean that, if you work for the company, if you fight for the company, if you give them your hard work and loyalty, then they take care of all your needs. Take today's skirmish, for example. We were testing a new

line of zap gun, much better than the old models. New and improved beyond belief. Granted, I got thwacked, but the referees judged it a righteous wound - honestly incurred. That's the best kind of wound there is. Short of being killed. You get bonus credits super big time. The worst kind of wound is self-inflicted. But I ain't none of them. The judge made that plain as day. Even wrote out a certificate saying so."

His undamaged hand crept blindly up the wall behind him until he reached his proof pinned to a bulletin board, and tapped it for my edification.

"I'd keep track of that if I were you."

"No worries," Private First Class Fodder said, allowing his arm to subside. "Once I've recovered from my wounds I'll be back out there. Put me in, Coach!"

He yelled that last bit with such unexpected gusto I looked around as though his coach had in fact walked up behind me. I recovered without his noticing my confusion. The Peppermint Striper busted me, though. She hiccupped, which drew the eye in Fodder's head wobbling in search of the sound's source. To show I understood his joke and take the heat off the Striper I drew him back into our conversation.

"So what do you hope for in the future? What is your ultimate goal in terms of a job?"

"The sky's the limit with the Dark Matter Corporation. If I

live through the testing ground phase I make the team. I'll be eligible for Security Force's training, Level A1," Fodder said.

"Is that the same as the Army?"

"No way. It's so much better. I kid you not. The Army has to follow all kinds of rules and regulations and stuff. Hell, when you're in private security you can do whatever you want, get away with murder. But don't get me wrong: You gott'a support the troops."

"I've heard that. Isn't that only going in? Not so much coming out."

Lunging up out of a sound sleep, Hater cried, "Red Herring!"

"What's his problem?" Fodder asked, defensively.

"He got hit in the head."

"What with?"

"A tank."

"Everybody comfortable here?" Candy the Striper had been edging towards our group in the hopes of ingratiating herself into the conversation, and from where I sat her arrival was well timed.

"Do you want a sip of water?" I asked Hater.

He answered, "I want a sip of water."

"I have water for you here."

The Striper fetched a water bottle off her trolley and

handed it business end first over the Private's bed to me. I stuck the nozzle in Hater's mouth and gave the bottle a couple of squeezes.

He grimaced, muttering, "Soapy." Then he asked, "When was the last time anybody didn't support the troops?"

Peppermint Striper said, "You mean besides our own government?"

Poor Private Fodder's one eye fixed its gaze toward the ceiling since he found himself unable to fathom how in his wounded condition he had somehow fallen in with peacenik agitators. He regained his bearings and after a moment's contemplation the eye fixed its gaze on me. At the same time Peppermint Striper scribbled something on a pad and tore off the top leaf and hiding it in the palm of her hand slipped the note to me. I received the note in the same conspiratorial spirit it had been proffered and filed it next to my boob. I don't usually use my rack as a storage facility like some women do. On this occasion it seemed kind of sexy and in keeping with the secret agent theme The Striper was encouraging.

Now the eye narrowed as it spoke:

"What exactly is it that you do around here?"

"I'm in Public Relations," I said.

Hater guffawed in a really high-pitched tone.

I turned to him and demanded, "Will you maintain?"

Hater's demeanor sank.

"You work public relations? Who for?"

"The Dark Matter Corporation. It's my job to interview prospective employees on how they feel about the company."

The eyeball oracle went a little haywire with agitation for a moment.

Fodder beggerd, "Ask me! Ask me! Oh ask me anything about the company. I'll tell the truth and nothing but the truth."

Beneath his turban Hater started gurgling. As I reached over and patted his hand to coax him down I noticed the Striper still loitering and listening.

Hater murmured, "You've got to support the troops by questioning foreign policy at every turn. You've got to support the troops by not allowing them to be thrown into a bloodbath so that others might profit financially. Never allow anyone to use that phrase to deflect you from questioning the highly questionable validity of violence as the answer to everything."

Fodder yelled, "But you gotta support the troops!"

Hater slumped back against his pillows and whimpered. Somehow once again the conversation had been scuttled. The oracular eyeball ceased vibrating and came to rest.

A night and day and the second night. The ward where we slept filled up with wounded. The first night I slept underneath Hater's bed. Whenever they brought him food I slipped down to

the commissary and ate my fill. An obvious conduit connected these corporate warriors to a food farm. We never received half as much variety or quality in The Zone.

Sometime during the afternoon of the second day they took Fodder First Class away and amputated his right hand and right leg below the knee. He was still unconscious when his hardbody girlfriend wandered up the aisle between the beds of the ward. I didn't know quite what to make of the way she was dressed. She wore a sports bra for a shirt, bare midriff, skin tight exercise pants stretching down to above her calves, and then white socks and shiny plastic looking booties. I wondered what she did for a living in the dirty world outside because she appeared remarkably clean and well nourished. Maybe the spokesperson for a sexual purity foundation. The type to have a woman of my profession burned at the stake or stoned to death.

Her hardhearted attitude turned to ash the moment she saw her man lying there. Her face melted in anguish, his pain her pain. Clearly suffering at this level of intensity had never been a part of her perfectionist agenda. Who could blame her for the disgust twisting her lips into bitter disappointment? He stood tall and muscular with an awesome six pack. He was intelligent, but not too smart, that is to say, not weird smart. He knew how to speak, regardless of his imperfect grammar, but he also knew when to shut up, especially around her girlfriends,

who amazingly enough approved of him as he politely fended them off when they started hitting on him behind her back. If she bought him a new shirt he wore it, and hence matched her purse, perfectly. His athleticism. His ambition. His even white teeth. Her man, who had passed every test, except the explosive trial by fire sponsored by the Dark Matter Corporation.

The Company really did have their eye on him. This skirmish presented his last hurdle before he was expected to make the team. Her parents had tried to warn her about the danger, advised her not to commit too much too soon. Wait and see. What had a young, facile heart like hers to do with dire predictions? As soon as he made the team they would move out of their present hovel and into a real apartment. Rise right up above the dirt and the grease, the squalor and the noise.

The color drained from her face as she contemplated the new shape of her future, a far different destiny than the dream she'd been constructing for them both. By what right, what temerity, what gall, can I make these observations? Really, other than I sat there as a witness, watching her, reading her thoughts, and desiring to supply to her the solace of philosophy. I justify the ways of The Dark Matter Corporation to man.

"He's a good man you've got there," I ventured, getting her attention. In answer to her jealous glare, I said, "We talked

briefly yesterday. He seems like a very nice guy. You're lucky."

Jody looked over the wreckage lying before her on the hospital bed and said, "Lucky? Is that what you call this?"

"Could have been worse," I said, dreading that she would demand to know how. She understood I could see her assessing the damage to their lives. "They do remarkable things with robotics these days. They can fix him up, good as new."

"They can but they won't," she snapped with hard certainty, as a woman does who can do the math for herself: If he had made the team then he would have been covered. "But not now. Not like this," and she held out both hands, "for this you get disqualified."

"But they gave him a commendation," I said, pointing to the certificate pinned to the cork board.

She moved closer and leaning carefully over her husband so as not to disturb him and pulled both the tack and the certificate off the board and took a seat in the chair beside the bed. For a long time she sat reading the words thereon and contemplating their meaning, absently rolling the tack between her thumb and forefinger. From the blank depths of the anesthetic he rose gasping for air to the surface, and I turned away to give them some privacy, yet I couldn't help but overhear her call him baby and the gentle love tones coalescing into the face of bravery. Tears shed on both sides before they lapsed

into murmurs and whispers.

For his part my man Hater was on the mend. He really seemed much better. Although he still wore his turban a certain amount of clarity and focus had returned to his expressions. The Peppermint Striper continued on her rounds throughout the ward. Every once in awhile I noticed her shooting me meaningful glances. In a way I'd grown immune to these types of advances, from both men and women. Out of boredom sitting next to Hater for hours on end I was fiddling with my new finery, sipping and unzipping, snapping buttons, when in one jacket pocket I found a small rectangular card with a warning printed on it reading: Do Not Eat This Garment, while in the other pocket I found Candy's clandestine missive I'd relocated there for safe keeping, scrawled in less fine print: "Talk to Me!" Of all the artless come-ons I'd ever endured hers at least had the saving grace of brevity.

The longer the test games dragged forward the more casualties wheeled in on squeaky gurneys until every bed in the ward was occupied. Every few hours a different doctor made the rounds. Inevitably he or she paused at our bed a moment longer than the rest, reading over not only Hater's medical history but also trying to determine who he was militarily and why he was receiving medical treatment at this facility. Eventually the whole staff collided with the fancy red signature on the

admitting page, in the face of which they stopped asking questions the answer to which did not concern them, medically speaking. They had rounds to complete. Patient healing satisfactorily. Next case.

With the doctors Hater could handle himself without me. Either he pretended to be asleep when they came around or he feigned amnesia, the later proving not such a great strategy because it only increased the doctor's professional curiosity, so after awhile he feigned hostility instead, which was more in his line. In these cases I either crawled under the bed and hid or slunk to the women's privy and locked myself in one of the stalls.

On one of my sabbaticals to the powder room Peppermint stalked right in behind me, passed the powder dispensers, and into my favorite office stall. What can I say? The one on the far end had a neighbor on one side only and therefore provided more privacy.

"I need to talk to you," Pepper whispered, pressing thumbs against my inner elbows, leveraging me backwards against the concrete support wall, pressuring me for my complete attention. As a passive I was inclined to listen. "The other day, when you were admitted, I overheard you say that you were looking for The People's Army. No, don't try to deny it. You don't have to. Not with me you don't. But my advice is don't say it out loud again.

Don't repeat yourself. Not here. Because the next person to overhear you might not be as sympathetic, to the cause or to you."

A simple nod of agreement on my part with what she had said thus far provided all the reassurance she needed in order to continue:

"I have a contact in the movement. Well, someone who knows someone who knows something about the movement. I can help you get in touch with them if you want. I can help."

For as much as I appreciated her unsolicited offer of assistance I couldn't help but drool a little over this black eyed pea. She was one of those shorter models with a perfect rack. I probably had the same-sized boobs as she did but because I was taller I sometimes felt downright flat-chested. Maybe because she was messaging my pressure points with her thumbs I became lost in a reverie of what the Striper might look like naked.

"I could tell right away you were committed to class struggle. I can see it in your eyes right now. Your level of commitment."

"My friend Hater always says I should be committed."

"Well he's right. If that's his story, then I can get him into the next zone as well."

"We're looking for our friend. We think she might be in the

Tower District. Can someone in the movement help us, do you think?"

"People are disappearing all the time now. It's everyone's main point of concern these days. But we'll never get justice until people like you and your friend get involved in the struggle for liberation. We need young people like you. I'm sure we can find a way to help each other. What do you say?"

I would have agreed to anything if I thought it might bring us closer to the Tower District. I tried to seal the deal with kisses but Peppermint Girl shied away after the first few lip smacks. My feeling of elation at discovering a confederate dropped after being rejected. As we exited our conspiratorial closet I saw Jody washing her hands with dust flakes.

To Peppermint I whispered, "You go ahead. It won't do for us to be seen together too much."

My remark matched her paranoia perfectly. I watched her scurry past Jody, giving her a furtive, side-long glance as she passed behind her.

Out of a towel dispenser I pulled a few sheets and offered them to the wounded wife. For this small kindness she sighed with gratitude, a resigned admission that she was spent pretending, and would value any amount of realspeak.

How are you holding up? I began, taking her by the collar bone and providing her taut nerves with a soft message. Although

Peppermint Girl had stirred my juices into flowing just a moment ago, when I made physical contact with Jody, and realized she was crying as much as a woman of her type would ever allow herself to do, those other sexy feelings subsided.

"Oh you know. Considering everything we're been through," She began, falsely.

For a moment after wiping her hands she stood conflicted about her next gesture. In one hand she held the dirty towels in need of recycling; the other hand in this case belonged to my grasp transmitting the promise of solace. To make her slide into catharsis as easefully as I could I relieved her of the towel balls and drew her into a supportive hug. In my embrace the poor dear gulped for air like a consumptive in the middle stages, while on my end I patted her back along the lines of a nursing mother trying to elicit the blessed relief of a simple burp. Maybe a little transference occurred. An emotional burp. Difficult to measure. Anyway, she stopped crying.

She released our embrace in the interest of raising her defenses again. She puffed forth a deprecating laugh and with a swipe of the knuckles she dried her eyes, and said to me, "I can't believe I'm acting this way."

Sometimes you can offer advice to a stranger in a way you never could to someone you know well, fearing the bluntness might slay them:

"He needs you right now. More than ever. You've got to be there for him, and for yourself. The meaning of your life has been recast."

She glowered and riposted, "They amputated his right hand and foot."

I don't know where I mustered the temerity to answer:

"What part is a man? Is he eyes? Nose? Lips? How much of his soul resides in a foot or a hand? To love a man is to accept him wholly, not as the sum of his parts but as a soul entire. At first your eyes were drawn to the beauty of his form, naturally, yet what sort of a woman enters into compact with a man unless her heart has been stirred by the noble, manly spirit animating those parts. These visible wounds, so sore and regretful in the moment, will heal of their own accord. The scorching of his soul will be far deeper and longer lasting. You must work first to assuage his soul. These wounds belong to you as well. For any healing to move beyond the physical you must plant the desire in him to recuperate."

When I detected a dull, sullen expression creeping down over her eyes I stopped speaking, wanting only to bolster her spirits, and offer to her mind whatever consolation I could. Together we stared down the long road toward eternity, she with a growing cognizance of the hard choices confronting her, and I the worse off, completely bereft, in a search for my imperfect

other, who nevertheless had made my soul feel more complete than any other.

The warrior's wife continued talking over the first of many trials including the attempt to wrestle benefits away from the bureaucracy. On those procedures I had no experience nor advice to impart and wisdom was of no consequence so I listened politely, interjected a sympathetic note wherever one seemed appropriate. In this conversational style we drifted towards the exit and stepped into the hall where I collided with an entire group of men in uniform.

General Hardnard and his staff must have been quick marching through those wards at a determined clip because the force of his impact sent both him and me reeling. The shock and disorientation were too much to play off this humiliation as a pratfall. For my whole life I've had to live with being a klutz so collisions of this sort, while nothing new, never failed to mortify. By the time I managed to regain my balance several of the other officers had interposed their chests, beating hearts proffered like shields, as though I presented a threat. The General's composure suffered no permanent impairment. Not for an instant. He ordered his men to stand down only loud enough for our little group to hear. You could align the stars and plot a course with a haircut as severe as his.

"I'm terribly sorry," I said, as he elbowed aside his young

officers and stood before me.

"Not at all," he replied. "An accident, I'm sure. I should post a sentry here to direct traffic."

His little attempt at wit made me snicker. When I drew the air in again I snorted, which I never do. Glances made the rounds of the staff officers. No one laughed nor voiced the derisive comments swelling behind their eyes. We were having what almost amounted to a moment. However, outside the moment, a realization was taking place in the minds of the junior officers. On either side of The General, pairs of eyes were working us up and down, first scanning him from head to foot, and then performing the same perusal of me, until I too realized the source of their fascination. The General and I were wearing identical outfits. Only our shoes were different. He wore black snakeskin boots, real class, and under his vest he wore a lovely silk shirt, whereas I was bare skin. Other than those minor differences The General and the Leather Girl might have passed for an S&M duo.

At first our surprising similarity escaped those perspicacious gray eyes. For some dumb reason I reached out and took hold of his collar and pinched the fabric. In the middle of admiring the silk texture I observed the dawning of an idea spreading behind his eyes. Without looking directly at me, his already formidable bearing froze up a pinch, and with all the

dignity he could muster, he marched around me and the rest of his Dark Matter entourage followed suit. I watched them form into marching order and turn, in unison, when the General made a sharp left around a hospital corner. Unlike General Beauregard Hardnard, who kept his gaze a thousand yards ahead at all times, every other officer in his entourage turned their heads my way and with varying degrees of hostility and suspicion took a good long look before they disappeared around the corner out of sight.

More than halfway down the hallway I spotted Jody with her arms folded and leaning against the wall, and now she too wore a war face, a mixture of suspicion and contempt, because she could tell whatever my deal amounted to, it was not okay. For some reason none of the pejoratives hurled at me in my career had stung me as much as her single cutting glance. I passed by without saying a word or acknowledging her knowing stare. The rest of the way up the hall I could sense her following behind me until I reached the ward and arrived at Hater's bedside.

I whispered into his ear, "Time for us to go, big boy. Right now. Right away," and so pulling on his arm I managed to haul him out of bed, and hospital gown or not we were heading for the nearest exit when The Striper materialized at Hater's other elbow and we fell in together helping him down the hallway. On the way I noticed more often men wearing the black

leather jackets denoting officers where before there had only been enlisted men. I think it must have been some kind of general inspection. The whole hospital crowded up with the killer elite of all ranks. As he walked Hater strained to keep his delicate cranium poised. So many black shirts preening with self importance rendered us nearly invisible, a walking wounded, a Peppermint Striper, and an oddball babe in a strangely familiar outfit.

After clearing the exit I was proud of myself for remembering the way to the building where the Sales Rep had set up shop. I told Hater and Peppermint to wait outside while I went in to transact some business. A few minutes later I returned with a brand-clean pair of tech white overalls and a pair of brown ankle high work boots and a pair of proper wool socks. In our zone they gave away free stuff, too, but nothing like the high quality gear in the Military Zone.

Peppermint was a great help in organizing Hater in his new duds for the next leg of our journey. As the sky darkened from purple and pink to solid black we strolled toward the rear entrance to the hospital zone. The same two explorer scouts were still on guard duty making me wonder what type of emergency it would take to withdraw their noses from their compods.

At the back gate the flow of men and material narrowed to three possible lanes, one for military transport and two lanes

on either side for foot traffic. Judging by the volume of walkers we must have arrived during a shift change of civilian support personnel. As we paused to watch them come and go I realized we had plunged head first into our escape without a thought of any exit strategy. Rotating red lights and revolving blue lights, stark white search lights, and torch beams from dozens of flashlights stabbed into the dark their beams careening wildly slicing across the dark night.

"We can't just stand here. We have to do something," Striper said.

"What can we do? We can't go through there."

"I have a plan B. I didn't want to use it, but now I can see we're going to have to. Come on."

With no apparent choice in the matter we wheeled Hater about and headed off in a new direction, taking us away from the bright and brutal scrutiny of Checkpoint Charlie.

The anxiety constricting my heart relinquished its terrible grip as we elided into darkness. I demanded to know where Striper thought she was taking us.

"I have a way of getting you out. I was saving it for myself, but I'm not ready to make my move, yet. I think your case is an emergency, and one look tells me the movement needs you. I have a pass card. A one shot deal. Never mind how I got

it. I'm spending it on you two. Another will come my way, sooner or later."

Among the things she said I could only wonder why the movement would be in need of a sex worker. My instinctual reticence prevented me from further inquiry. Enveloped in darkness we crept through shadows draped like funereal banners covering bunkers and storage warehouses with alleys freshly paved organizing the area into an iron and concrete grid. Each building supplied a glimmer of light allowing us to find our footing and for Striper to keep her bearings as we wound our way towards some mythic portal. I cannot recount the lefts and rights because we took so many of them leading to the encompassing wall looming suddenly in front of our faces. Beyond its shadow ponderous and dark no living light escaped.

The same turned out to be true of the transit gate. We had followed the iron and concrete wall for countless steps and stood in the faint glow of the interface with its stern pinpoints of green and red light. Striper took us both by the shoulder and positioned us facing a blank spot where the portal would appear.

She stood behind us and gave last minute instructions.

"Once the door opens you have to step through quickly because it won't stay open very long. Once you're on the other side, you're on your own. Be careful about talking to strangers.

You can't trust everyone. Most of the workers in that zone are disgruntled, not all are in favor of the movement. Stay away from the high rises and stay more towards the old housing section. The code word is 'passive'. You say 'passive' and the contact says 'aggressive'."

Without any warning she leaned around me and inserted a black card into a slot, and the portal opened. As we stepped through she gave us both a shove for expediency and the portal closed and we found ourselves standing in silence and total abject darkness.

Somewhere in the black abyss behind me I heard Hater say, "She wasn't kidding about quickly. Man, where did all the light go?"

The abruptness of the transition caused a dislocation in my perceptions.

"What now?" I asked, waiting for my eyes to adjust from the previous gloom to this black hole madness. Hater, bless his heart, always ready for any situation, flicked on a little pen light cutting through the abyss. Knowing him it was probably some kind of laser beam. Even with the light neither one of us could get a bearing.

"Don't move," Hater cautioned. He waved the light up and down, left and right. Everything my eyes recorded looked like blank black sheets of pig iron, as though somehow we had stepped

into a strong box, except that I could still feel the night air. What followed I'm not proud of, but I'm going to tell you about it anyway.

Closed in by four walls and total darkness I suffered a panic attack. The worst one I ever experienced. I felt the fear start at the bottom of my lungs where oxygen was no longer reaching. The worst thing about this kind of fear is how it feeds the anxiety. You can feel the loss of control seeping throughout your body in every direction, along the nerve endings lighting up before going dead. A whimper escaped my throat involuntarily in the presence of oblivion.

"You okay, Kid?"

When I made my reply my vocal chords constricted so the words came out in a creepy little girl's voice:

"I don't want to be here anymore."

No more had the last syllable escaped my lips then my air valve shut off tightly, and I was drowning.

Hater understood the panic in my voice and reacted by reaching out to me floundering in my sensory deprivation, and he said, "Hang in there, Sasha. I almost have this figured out."

The tactile approach and the encouraging words didn't hurt any as I began first to hyperventilate and then to cry.

Hater said again, "Hang in there."

His arm squeezed around my waist. The urge to tell him how

much I loved him welled up after the hole opened beneath my feet because I knew that I was going to die there, buried alive.

Holding onto my waist, Hater said, "We're going to take a step backward together. Ready? And grab your partner, dosy-doe..."

When he stepped away my feet wouldn't move and my knees buckled leaving me lying in my grave. I was buried. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. No air. Suffocation. My heart valve croaking like a bullfrog from a lack of oxygen.

My arms clung around his neck and my torso twisted enough for him to grab me under both arms and tear me loose from the wet cement sucking at my feet. For some air, crying and spluttering and slurping through snot and tears. With his loving embrace Hater supported and nourished me. He massaged my back, by which I mean he massaged my lungs. I hugged Hater while we spun free falling through space. In the midst of my emotional melt down I couldn't decide if this was an improvement to being buried alive.

My eyes were shut tight. I could hear Hater talking and sense his left arm swinging about as he pointed with his light:

"Look here. On the left is the barricade. Standard twenty foot tall. Same as always. See? There's the top of it. On our right is one tall-ass building. I'd say nine stories at least. And these fins are called flying buttresses. That was the part I

couldn't figure out at first. Come on. They left space enough for a walkway."

On my head I wore an old fashioned, deep sea diving helmet, filled with water on the inside, while an elephant sat on my chest. After Hater published the results of his scientific inquiry, the diving bell emptied of the water and the elephant downgraded into the weight of a St. Bernard.

On the comedown I hyperventilated in reverse. Gasping for air, but this time inhaling some. Oh sweet relief. Life pouring in again and my lungs swelled. I realized I'd peed myself.

"Come on," Hater urged me onward.

I clung to him for support like a total weakling as we shuffled a few steps together to the edge of the first of several escarpments. Hater guided me into a sitting position so that my legs dangled over the edge and he hopped down and reached up his hands and secured me firmly at the waste and guided me on my first leap of faith. After the third operation of this sort I found the strength to open my eyes. Shame for the vulnerability I had betrayed crept into my soul, offsetting the exquisite relief I felt at once again breathing. I was alive again for better and worse.

We walked a ways, keeping the monolithic structure on our right. We gravitated away from its mass enough to escape from oblivion into shadow. The clouds overhead were still

predominantly black, yet here and there ragged streaks of purple and pink emerged.

In spite of the obvious danger of being spotted Hater escorted me to the first cone of light he could find, one suspended in front of a big retractable metal door, the entrance to a two story warehouse plastered and re-plastered with the shredded, faded slogans of a long failed yesteryear.

Hater parked us on a small set of concrete steps leading to a metal door, locked and painted over in beige.

"Try to breathe," he said. I took the kind of deep breaths you take when a doctor has her cold stethoscope pressed firmly to your chest. Only then did I begin to feel better.

"I'm exhausted, Hater. I got totally disoriented back there. I'm sorry for being weak. I need to lie down and breath, and sleep."

"I understand, but we can't do that here. Can you go any farther at all?"

"Yes. I can make it. The trouble is I'm worn out. I feel all shaky inside."

"Let's travel a ways onward. I'm sure we can find a place. This area isn't right for us, though. I don't know what goes on in that tall building, and I don't want to find out. Let's move on and find a nice abandoned living area."

"That does sound nice." I started to turn dreamy.

"Here we go," said Hater, hoisting me onto my feet. "Don't let anybody kid you. You're a soldier."

We set off together, and on our way we did not encounter another soul for blocks. I suppose I always found the empty streets eerie because in the zone somebody was always staggering here or there. Our zone never went completely to sleep. To keep up my spirits and borrow some of Hater's energy I clasped hands with him while he led us through the deserted and silent streets. How far we walked I cannot gauge exactly. The distance turned out to be more than just a little way. Many city blocks, I can say that much. Until the warehouses and factories turned into the store fronts and the store fronts changed into apartments. As he hauled me along Hater explained how factory workers slept at night and worked during the day, the exact opposite of the Pleasure Zone. Here I could tell by the wet dog fur and cooking grease and urine stench people lived and slept in close Quarters. Cigarette smoke lingered about the doorways of tenements and the alleyways between the buildings teemed with wet garbage and a nightmare of rats scuttling about on transparent yellow claws.

About three blocks into this neighborhood we encountered a husky bald man in a short jacket, jeans and jackboots who cradled an aluminum baseball bat in his lap. To me he looked like a hooligan to run from. Hater correctly intuited the big

man represented some kind of night watchman elected to guard the entrance to the den where his brethren slept. In reaction to our approach he extracted a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, shuffled one out, and ignited a flame he touched to the tobacco end, producing a dull blazing ember. The Guardian inhaled deeply and exhaled a defensive smoke screen around himself. Hater accepted the smoke shroud as a demarcation line he would not encroach.

"Howdy," Hater hailed the man.

The Guardian nodded in reply. He remained seated. Sucked on his cigarette. Adjusted his grip on the baseball bat resting in his lap.

Hater's face hardened in turn. However, he kept his voice civil as he ventured a question: "Any place to sleep around here?"

The Guard gripped his bat, swung it past our noses and pointed across the street:

"Over there. In that building."

Hater scanned the building opposite.

"What about in this building?" He pointed into the doorway past the man with the weapon.

"Full up. No room. Folks living here all work at the plant. Folks over there are squatters, drifters, slackers, and other no accounts without proper I.D."

"Thanks for the info," Hater said with a broad smile, ducking the challenge to our identity.

Hand in hand we crossed the street and climbed the concrete steps to the entrance of a roach motel. Like a detective Hater clicked his laser on and shined it all about the interior of the hallway. The place stank of wood rot. The walls were barren. A worn down brown carpeting spread from wall to wall, here and there permeated by ghostly stains.

We hung a right down the first corridor. At the near end all the doors were shut, occupied. At the far end, though, near the emergency exit, three doors stood ajar. Hater by-passed the two on the left in favor of the one on the right since it faced onto the street and promised a better perspective. After we crept in Hater let go my hand, carefully pulled the door shut, and I also heard a click.

"This door locks," he said, sounding surprised and pleased.

His laser cut through the gloom to reveal a single room and kitchen area. The place had been picked clean of furniture, probably burned for firewood a long time ago. The same misty, dank smell of the entrance and hallway filled this studio apartment as well. We chose a likely corner beneath the front window for rolling out our mats and positioned our bags and lay down and no sooner had I reclined then exhaustion shut my eyes and I slept.

In the vagaries of morning my sleepy eyes still aflutter I sensed Hater up and about already, moving around the room and rummaging through his gear. As always in the early morning I hid my face from him until I could see it in a mirror for myself, never wishing to appear unbeautiful.

Once he saw that I was awake, Hater said, "People are moving around outside. Things are happening. I'm going outside to have a look around. This canister is still full of water, and we have all kinds of food packets left. I'll find out what's going on and see if I can scrounge anything good."

His doting on me made me suspicious. The possibility struck me that he might have been preparing to ditch me in that place.

"Are you coming back?" I asked, trying unsuccessfully not to sound pitiful.

His look of amazement that I would harbor such a notion passed into a smile. He came over and took a knee beside me and proceeded to rub my back.

"Of course I'm coming back," he said. "I wouldn't abandon you. Not now... not ever. Look," he said, with an encompassing sweep of his arm, "I'm leaving all my gear here. I'm just going out to have a look around. That's all. Everybody I talked to outside keeps mentioning this plant, or factory. I want to see this place for myself. Find out what I can. Maybe get our bearings for us. I think you should stay here for a day. Try to

relax and recharge your battery. That was kind of an intense experience for you last night. I could tell, so stay here. Sleep some. Get rested up. I'll be back by nightfall."

"Give me your laser," I blurted, betraying my total disbelief in everything he had just said. Without any hesitation he unclipped it from his jumpsuit and slid it cold and hard next to my boob and clipped it to my vest. I looked down at it and realized he was telling the truth. I'm not sure where my paranoia comes from. Issues of abandonment, I suppose.

"How's your head feel?"

"Better. It's going to be okay."

Standing up Hater said, "Why don't you try to sleep some more. I'll be back before nightfall."

"Before it gets dark," I emphasized, although I don't know why. I wasn't afraid of the dark. Pitch black oblivion, yes, but not the dark of night. I was, after all, a denizen. "And find out where we are, and where the Tower District is, and stuff like that."

"That's the plan," Hater sighed. "I'll be back. In the meantime, rest up." Before he stepped out he said, "Lock this after I go," and he clicked the lock back and forth a couple of times as though to show me how it worked. Then he closed the door behind him.

Immediately I jumped up and walked over and locked the

door. I don't know why I was being such a scardy-cat. Hater's words about relaxing came back to me and I realized he was right about my mental and physical state.

Choosing this room for its proximity to the street proved to be a joke when I began to size up the joint in the dreary light of day. Filth covered the one front window on the outside, caked with sludge. In a way I was relieved. I didn't want to see out, and I surely did not want anyone spying in.

Not long after I lay down again a giant siren wound up a warning blast, a loud and persistent wail. Closer, outside, hundreds of voices broke into excited chatter. As I lay in the dull gloom of early morning I listened to snatches of conversation as the workers passed by on the way to the factory. What a relief to know they were total strangers, my presence was unknown to them, and hence none of their talk could be about me. Men's voices booming. Women chattering. Dozens more footfalls passing otherwise silent. The neighborhood emptied. A laggard scuffled by. Silence permeated the neighborhood.

When I opened my eyes sometime later I realized I'd dozed off. I had no idea what time it was. Sometime early in the morning but later than I thought. The same murky gloom persisted. Next to me on the floor a nice ration of wet food Hater left for me. Tearing open the packet I ate the contents with my fingers, slurping at the juice and licking my fingers

clean. Having eaten I searched through Hater's stuff for a clean-wipe and discovered a whole bath sponge that hadn't even been opened yet. My actions may have been selfish. I stripped out of my leathers and stood naked on the kitchen floor area and massaged enough golden sparkling oil for four people to have a bath, all over my body, again and again. Too bad no one was there to watch because I glowed radiantly. I slide my fingers down and massaged my button in wanton consumption of resources standing up for awhile before lying down on my mat and spreading my legs for more proper manipulation. Now I was golden outside and in, front and back. I fantasized about fair haired Rachel the whole time, arranging her in lewd poses, each new position more obscene than the last. When the starry blast erupted the juices dropped and I lay back and cleaned my fingers again and felt very relaxed, lonely, and my heart grew cold for my lovely girl become a goner. In my soul gone cold I felt a goner, too.

For most of the afternoon I lay naked trying to picture Rachel in my mind, wondering what might happen if Hater returned and caught me in flagrante. He never did return soon enough to catch me, though, so I got up for awhile and turned my leathers inside out and swiped them off with what was left of the sponge and aired them out and let them dry while I gave myself another once over until I started feeling human again. Then I ate a couple of packets of crunchy dry food and washed it down with

water from the canister. Once my gear dried I climbed back in and lay down and slept for a few hours more.

Time passed imperceptibly for me lying on my mat in that darkened room. During my afternoon sojourn of silence I tested the toilet handle and made water appear, or more properly dirty Oil₂O as the comedians on stage at The Club referred to it. Clean water? Before my time. I forget which politician first said that dirty water can still wash dirt. Once the ocean waters were blue and alive. Teeming with life. Now the waves rise up like diarrhea stains and the fish and aquatic life are extinct. Our ancestors unleashed the toxins killing us now. They say the Dying Time is at a tail's end. Some say good news. Others say the numbers are trailing off only because so few of us remain.

As if to better illustrate my morbid reveries a toxic rain began to fall splattering against the already grimy window. The filth ran in rivulets down the pane of glass only to be superimposed by another layer, and yet another. The colors of death, purple and pink, crept in swirls, their toxic waltz, as they would for all the foreseeable generations. That strident voice of denial grew louder every day. The extinction of the human race is unthinkable. Many are dying of sickness. It's True. Many more will continue to die. Here the human imagination shuts down and the science fiction survival scenarios kick in. But surely a handful will survive. Up a mountain. Down a mine

shaft. In outer space, even though nobody goes out there anymore because beyond the beyond lies nothing. Only one philosophical challenge remains, to imagine the planet Earth devoid of human beings. Anything less is suicide.

I should have known Hater would wait until the rosy fingers of day were almost submerged in the oily black glove of night before returning. He kept his promise without a minute to spare. The voices of the returning workers resounded in the street. Each now marching home to the beat of his own drummer. Each man and woman distinct. Among that throng Hater brought up the rear, breathless from the day's adventure.

According to Hater, after leaving me in the morning he had joined the crowd and followed along right up to the security gates of the plant. The guard who stopped him said that he couldn't enter without a pass. In a direct and matter of fact tone Hater demanded to know where they issued passes, and stood there waiting, hands on hips, reckless eyeballing the guard through a protracted silence until the sentry jerked his thumb toward a building housing the business office.

Before they could ask him for I.D. Hater introduced himself and mouthed off about his credentials in that irritating know it all way geeks have of overpowering unsuspecting civilians. Since his full profile might reveal him Out of Area he only offered them his basic Citizens ID. One of the big bosses who happened

to be in the front office at the time overheard Hater's impromptu audition and motioned silently to sign him up. The plant suffered from a shortage, skilled technical labor especially. I told Hater that it was just this sort of bending of the rules leading to the downfall of order in our society. Hater conceded he had been lucky not to be reported.

What he discovered inside the plant was machinery held together by baling wire and wishful thinking, as he put it. To hear him tell the story, his arrival was greeted with less than enthusiasm by a group of lower level mechanics. As he moved from one problem to the next however fixing one issue after another his legend swept throughout the plant winning him the hearts and minds of the workers as well as the bosses until by afternoon having fixed what were merely mechanical problems in the first place he graduated to the offices where he performed miracles of a higher, more digital nature. I could picture him preening in front of a bevy of thankful, moist eyed secretaries, and explaining in a technical language they could not understand a word of exactly how he had managed to repair their beloved comports.

I'd seen him do it in and around The Club Abattoir often enough. In that brothel he maintained the uplink keeping the reservoir of porn imagery flowing, a much more complicated matter than any issue he was likely to encounter at a food

processing plant. As I was lying in my bag on my mat that night I had to reach over and physically put my hand over his mouth to stop him from regaling me any further with tales of his technical exploits. He never did ask me about my day.

In the morning, the plan according to Hater was for me to go to work, earn a few meals, maybe a shower for that day, and find out what I could about contacting the movement. In reality I think it was about him acting the tech god for another day, and to keep me occupied he relegated me to the salt mines.

Before we set out I borrowed his bomber jacket to make myself less conspicuous. Motley appeared to be the costume of choice among the crowd moving toward the plant. The age of the average worker ran the gamut, young and old, yet in their soft cotton clothing they were all mismatched in roughly the same way. To my eyes they looked like a sea of bobbing advertisements, as though the local textile mill produced the same white sweatshirt with the choice between a dozen different logos. They were carefully rearranged copies of each other. These poor factory worker drones were fall out children clinging for support to their heartless masters.

As we neared the gates Hater steered me toward the assembly line entrance and instructed me to wave the badge he'd procured for me under the scanner and show it without hesitation to anyone who demanded to inspect the number since he had arranged

for my identification on the level, within the confines of the plant. On the positive side he said to be on the look out because someone had been detailed to show me the ropes. He gave me a shove to preclude the objections rising in my gorge and dashed off towards a separate entrance not nearly as crowded as the one sucking me inexorably into its devouring maw.

I watched him join a circle of his fellows and quickly drawing their attention he began telling anecdotes and they responded with laughter. He always amazed me by the way he could fit in with any crowd. For a few moments I held steadfast while the course of humanity flowed around me. The urge to turn and run, escape to the crash pad and hide out the rest of the day beat powerfully in my heart. At that crucial tipping point between fight and flee a weird old matron took me by the elbow and pointed me towards the entrance, saying, "Come along, Missy. It's not as bad as that. You get used to it, after a while."

I turned in the general direction she indicated, finding the first step impossible. The soft wrinkled hand of encouragement slid away and did not insist. After that a gentle bumping ensued knocking me into motion and funneling me into the women's line forming ahead. A line of men formed to the right. Glancing at them I realized they were all checking me out, which in my career was the norm but here seemed inappropriate.

A pair of strong gruff hands grasped my shoulders and spun

me about until I faced the employee scanner.

"Not on company time, Cinderella," a booming woman's voice intoned, much to the amusement of the entire working class.

Becoming the object of ridicule confused me. Behind me a large and buxom presence was making itself felt pressing against the full length of my backside. As we neared the scanner I watched the girls a few places ahead of me in line wave their plastic ID cards and reap the reward of the go ahead green light of recognition and acceptance and permission to proceed. The curious part was that as each one did so, she looked back shyly at me to see if I were watching the demonstration she had put on for my benefit. When my turn came I took a hold of the card hanging by a lanyard around my neck and tried to bend down and scan my ID without talking it off. The lanyard wasn't long enough. I ended up twisting my neck this way and that, trying to bend closer. The Ogre behind me grasped my shoulders and pulled me upright. Loudly enough only for me to hear, she said, "Take the card off your neck and wave it over the beam of light."

As you might imagine I did as I was told. The stubborn sensor remained red. So I stood there holding my card in my hand while the entire line watched and waited. The Ogre snatched my card from me and waved it over the scanner a few times herself without any better success. She gave a professional harrumph of vexation before unclasping the ID card from the strap and waving

the plastic by itself a few times, and that seemed to do the trick.

"Unclip it from the lanyard before swiping it across," Ogre said, flipping the card at me as well as the lanyard before placing four thick fingers and a thumb against the small of my back and delivering a firm forward nudge. The green light remained lit long enough for me to move through the revolving metal door.

On the inside I noticed the pungent odor of industrial cleaners and disinfectants, and the assembly line itself, an outrageous cacophony of scraping and clanking metal parts. Then I recognized the faces of the women who had been in front of me in the line just a moment ago. When the revolving doors disgorged Madame Ogre I watched her minions communicate in desperate pantomime how they had dutifully demonstrated the scanning procedure to no avail. Their long faces and moving lips communicated how although they had done their best to avert catastrophe, catastrophe had nevertheless arrived unabated. Mama Ogre waved away their fears because indeed there had been a problem she alone with her know-how had been able to fix from her long years of experience.

This conversation registered so clearly in that deafening noise I turned away because it also created the sensation I was eavesdropping. Clearly though a conspiracy was afoot to take the

new girl in hand. Anyone in their right mind would have been pleased to know how the veterans were looking out for her, trying to make things easier for her, show her the ropes the first day. Their unsolicited attention totally creeped me.

I cleared the anteroom and passed into the factory proper where I could tell the roof was suddenly stories taller. The rest of the masses dispersed in every direction so that I found myself turning in a small circle watching them go while I was abandoned and hemmed in on all sides by huge walls of cardboard boxes stacked double over and above my height. Most of the women disappeared through a space left between the boxes and a concrete wall. With a certain amount of hesitancy in the midst of the unknown I followed them through the narrow path left there by the forklift operators, heavy set men whirring about in electric machines. I'd never seen a contraption like that up-close and was fascinated by the smooth forwards and backwards and up and down of their movements. They were busy little drones indeed. My enjoyment of their dance was interrupted by the presence of Ogre consulting with a lady carrying the inevitable clipboard. Obviously they were discussing my case again, and that's not just my paranoia talking. They both stared right at me. Ogre stuck her index finger at me and jerked it several times, signaling the order to come hither. Front and center, on the double.

As soon as I stood tall before the woman, others began to introduce themselves. The manager bidding me welcome, the chief worker holding herself aloof. In self defense my mind immediately disposed of their names, straight to the trash bin. In that din of machinery a conversation would have been impossible anyway. So not that it mattered.

From where we were standing I caught sight of the production line. Constructed of shiny silver metal the extended gizmo ran madly about like a midget roller coaster inside the cavernous middle portion of a gargantuan warehouse.

We split up our congregation and with blind trust I followed my new boss parallel to the production line. Periodically cardboard crates shot along the line and careened around a curve only to plunge out of sight again. I might have sworn I heard screaming amusement park patrons were it not for the obvious confusion caused by the metal machine noise. I'd seen vintage footage of those rides before on my comport. I have to admit it became an obsession with me for awhile. I had to ask Hater why, with all the real things to be afraid of in the world, would the ancients have gone out of their way to frighten themselves artificially. He reasoned they had suffered from a false sense of security. They road on amusement park rides while the environment collapsed underneath them. Screaming and laughing until they went home and flames shot out their water

taps. Once a band of Gypsies were allowed into The Zone and set up a small track. It didn't look safe to me so I didn't try it. Ever afterwards I was sorry for chickening out. The locals who did ride the ride looked awfully sad, as though acid rain weren't bad enough, they had paid good credits to be tortured by centrifugal force.

These reveries had done their best to protect my élan from the assault on my senses as we left the screaming machines behind for the moment and entered a locker area full of women in various stages of undress murmuring their mysterious spells. I tried to distance myself from the crushing weight of this ton of flesh by appraising them all with a professional eye. Which woman would I most like to perform opposite? Unfortunately, the answer came back none of them. Except perhaps the youngest of them. Fair hair. Pink lips. Pink puffiness. Skin whiter than soap flakes. Neither she nor the rest would have made the stage cut in the Pleasure Zone. They were matronly types mostly, and those who were not looked to have aged prematurely. With a shudder it came to me how working in this place lurked as the culprit robbing these women of their beauty. I hope you won't think me conceited when I say I shrank from contact with their sagging sallow flesh. Grime between the folds of their belly fat. Flesh in my experience felt hard and taut, smelling of sweet fragrances and tasting of flavored unguents and exotic

juices. I don't mind a fluff every once in a while. This warehouse packed with blubber demanded too much of my delicate sensibilities.

"Might as well take off your coat and stay awhile," Ogre shouted from the wooden bench in front of her clothes locker. A smattering of derisive laughter pelted my sense of self-worth. Some internal bell sounded warning me not to flaunt my body. I had no choice but to do as I was told and so I removed my jacket to reveal a sports bra underneath. For a few moments I stood there clutching Hater's jacket to my chest and looking around at the ground about me, on the floor, for no good reason, and trying to figure out what to do next when the woman on my left tapped a locker she told me was empty, and I could use it to store my gear. On my right another woman with motherly instinct moved unbidden to an array of clean laundry arranged in stacks on a table placed against a wall and she selected several items and delivered them in a stack on the bench in front of me and I thanked her for her act of kindness. Then I thanked good fortune on account of this once, I was wearing panties.

"Take a look at that skinny ass. Girls, we've got our work cut out for us, fattening up that little chicken."

Again with the laughter. I wanted to run over and plunge my fingernails into her eyeballs for tormenting me thus.

Instead I said, "I just want to fit in." I might as well

have rolled onto my back and spread my legs like a dog to expose my throat and belly.

I could see Ogre turning my words over in her mind before harumphing a gruff nod of approval, and those women watching my drama nodded the same with secret smiles of satisfaction. My helpful handmaids on either side patted me with gentle encouragement and took a moment finally to mind their own business. I cannot recall this scene to mind without wincing at my cowardice. Those words were the only ones I spoke all morning, and they represented the exact opposite of what I actually felt in my heart. I endured it. I survived. But what a cost. Getting punked physically hurts in a way that eventually goes away. A split lip heals. Bruises disappear. When somebody punks your spirit the bad feeling stays with you forever. Believe me. I've been punked every way imaginable. I'm such a weakling. I wish I could be a shot caller. But I'm a victim. A survivor. A witness. After all, in their own terrible way, they were only trying to be nice.

For whatever reason my polarities are reversed when it comes to relationships with other human beings. There I cringed surrounded by a group of women who were doing their best to show me the ropes and help me to fit in, and their every gesture and word stung me to my inmost soul. It's not that I don't like people. I simply don't need people. Or perhaps because I need

them so much even the slightest interaction becomes acutely painful to the point where my only hope for survival is to withdraw. I'm so much calmer and happier when I'm alone, by myself. I'm simply turned inwards, which I believe is a genetic predisposition. Rachel always remained so sure the cure for my condition was total social immersion. Drag me into dances and parties where my soul floundered and drowned every time. When your feelings run counter to every normal person you meet how can you explain what you need is the opposite of what they're offering, namely friendship, without insulting them to the bone? You're either normal or an anomaly, and anomalies are not allowed.

When I'm alone life is manageable. I can relax and feel comfortable inside my skin and think my own thoughts. Dream dreams. Invent fantasies. Wear my fingers into a crimp inscribing these lines. A normal person would have been empowered by the solicitations of so many newfound friends and squirmed to find their niche, longing for the tight fit. Not I. The more overtures they made the more I longed to escape, yearning for the solace of solitude. I was drowning in a sea of human kindness.

One embrace. A single friend to me was more than an entire orchard in bloom. More bounty than Rachel's I simply could not bear. Sensory overload made the world a detestable blur numbing

my genial powers, such as they are.

The Ogre took me by the wrist and led me through the locker room entrance onto the floor, as they called the work area. They stuck me at station number 2, a likely enough place to start. Situated in this room stood two giant boilers for mixing the product, an energy drink with a grain of real cocaine mixed in for that powerful pick me up. According to the faithful workers this yellow liquid contained all the proper nutrients a body needed in a given day. Personally, I found it revolting. The oily, slimy texture. The occasional crunchy bit. A metallic aftertaste. As I discovered this plant manufactured all kinds of real imitation food products. Only men were allowed to work in the slaughterhouses. Everyone whispered, if you saw how the animals were processed, you'd never eat meat again. Hater claimed he could remember when the government legalized rat meat for human consumption but that event had to be way before his time.

A crater with a drain at the bottom dominated the center of the room. Whenever they switched the product line they had to drain and scrub the boiler. I didn't hang around long enough to see this procedure performed. It's just how Ogre explained it as she showed me the finer points of how to load the topper machine.

The topless aluminum cans scuffed through a metal chute and

disappeared behind the boilers where product squirted in and the cans reappeared for a moment more with the yellow slurry giggling before the cans dancing in a big long rumba line disappeared into the topper machine where a lid was slapped on and sealed shut. My job consisted of feeding lids into the topper. The lids came in stacks of a hundred wrapped in a long tube of brown paper. The Ogre demonstrated how to take a tube of tops off a tall rolling cart and slap it into the waiting upright metallic clasp of the topper apparatus and grasping the tail end of the brown paper wrapping whisk the cover off, *voila!* Leaving behind in the chamber all one hundred lids, locked and loaded. At least a dozen chambers rotated on a carousel. I didn't need to keep them loaded all at once. Staying four or five chambers ahead kept you safe from the machine running dry. If the topper ran dry then hell would break loose, which was true of every station all the way down the line, hence the need for human involvement.

So I fed the machine. I threw the tube into the claws, ka-chunk, and the machine grabbed hold, ka-chunk. Ka-chunk, ka-chunk. Ka-chunk, ka-chunk. Watching the cans whizzing along. Mindful of the active lid stack diminishing. Slapping another stack in and whisking away the brown paper tubing. Working to stay a few chambers ahead of the game. Ka-chunk, ka-chunk. For five hours straight. In that time, in my mind, I travelled half-

way around the world and back. Visited the ice caves of Kubla Khan. Went out of my mind from the drudgery. Being a slave to a man was bad enough. Being a slave to a machine felt far worse. By the time lunch rolled around I had hatched several schemes for escaping.

Several hours later the Ogre dragged me into the lunch room where the ceiling hung low, a nauseating optical illusion squeezing my shoulders into a rounded hunch. At the long tables the workers split into two roughly equal camps, the skinnies and the fatties. Right away one of the skinnies tried to steal me away, sidling up and whispering in my ear shell, "Don't eat the deep fried stuff. It's poison."

In the instant following this disclosure, Ogre called over her shoulder, "Don't eat that vegetable rot. It's pottage."

She was referring to the most amazing array of fresh vegetables I'd ever seen. I'd thought the land had all been poisoned by fracking. Somehow a few choice acres must have survived the widespread destruction. Maybe I was suffering from denial. I weep for my body when I think back on the opportunity for healthy eating I was forced to forgo that day. I'd never seen so much fresh food in one place before.

I had been consigned to the ruling fatties. In fairness I should also relate I'd never seen so many types of burgers nor imagined so many different patterns existed for dicing, slicing

and deep fat frying a potato. Ogre, bless her clogged little arteries, directed me to load up my tray with more food than I could have ingested even during the course of multiple meals over a series of days. As we moved our trays down the line Ogre explained how the workers were allowed to eat all the food they could as long as they were inside the plant. Removing food from the plant was strictly forbidden, grounds for banishment.

We joined the others at the fatty table and my gaze wandered in search of the skinnies and spied them a couple of tables over enjoying their lovely salads. When I made a silent comparison with the animal fat and grease on my plate I whimpered and would have cried in frustration too had not the hot glare of Ogre's attention landed like a search light on me and doused any hope of a healthy meal.

As a kind of benediction she intoned, "Eat up, Ladies. Eat your fill, for who knows: tomorrow we starve."

By Ladies she meant me because the other fatties were already in deep communion with the food on their plates. In trying to do her best for me the Ogre got it all wrong. In my youth and naivety I wasn't strong willed enough to assert my individual spirit. Instead I acquiesced to the Ogre's demands in the hopes of appeasing her. I selected a cheeseburger from off the stack Ogre had placed on my tray and I took such a huge bite I had to breath carefully though my nose so as not to choke.

From cheek to cheek like a chipmunk I shifted that glob of white flour and animal flesh until Ogre harrumphed in approval. Placing one arm prison-like around her plate, and the other elbow squarely propped on the table top, she bent over her plate and snarfed growled munched and hummed while she otherwise gorged. While she was thus lost in rumination I spit my ball of food into a cloth napkin. I tried taking a smaller bite but the taste was just as disgusting. Somebody told me they loaded the product with hormones and chemicals to make the taste better than real food. If you were not addicted from a young age though the mouth tenderizers could take awhile to shred the taste buds in your mouth.

The Ogre surfaced from her nod into fat, salt, and grease oblivion and was not at all pleased to find me picking at a lump of deep fried potato coagulating on my plate. For the first time she spoke her displeasure directly at me:

"You'll never fatten up against a rainy day eating that way."

Even under the best of circumstances I don't like it when people watch me eat. At The Club I always prepared my own small plate of dark greens and hid in a corner while I nibbled. At the lunch table at the factory every eye turned to me and saw the impossible lump of lard stacked untouched on the plate before me, bounty overflowing, pride of the factory. In self-defense I

whined:

"I'm not used to so much delicious food. To tell you the truth, I've never seen so much food in my life." I took a few bites.

Some of what I said wasn't entirely a lie, and it struck the right patriotic note. Hail to the factory. Lord of abundance. Hail to the bosses and the benevolent owner of the means. To the one percent who do none of the work goes 99% of the profit. The 99% who do all the labor share the remaining 1%, which in these factories meant food, clothes, shower, and shelter, and nothing more. As long as you're working, eat as much as you like. The factory becomes your only source of sustenance. Feed the machines and the machines feed you in return. You need the machine to stay alive. Without it you are nothing. Some of this Ogre actually said. I may have got the tone wrong. In order to get her off my case I asked her which was more important, Democracy or Capitalism. The Grease Queen had a ready answer all the way:

"Capitalism is far more important than Democracy. Democracy would never have gotten started in the first place if it weren't for capitalism, and it wouldn't have survived. Okay, seriously, it hasn't really survived. I mean, everybody knows that so why pretend? Most of those politicians are just communists anyway. In a Democracy the crazies come out of the woodwork all the time

to have their say. Now much better to have one strong CEO, a real corporate raider, to make all your decisions for you. What do you know about millions of dollars? If he needs help he can have a secret meeting behind closed doors and they will decide what is best for the rest of us. You know anything they come up with will be more profitable and be in everybody's best interest. After all, money is sacred, and an unbreakable bond of trust."

"You sound like you really admire the CEO."

"You bet I do. Why, he's a captain of industry. Take the hovel industry as an example. If you build a bunch of hovels, you don't want to price them affordably. Not unless you're a simpleton. No, what you do is jack the price up, inflate it beyond all reason. Then you train up a phalanx of vipers to sucker people into loans they can't afford. Then you squeeze every last drop of profit imaginable. Then when the low life sucker, you know, the average citizen, defaults on the loan, which you know they'll do, by the hundreds of thousands, the economy tanks and you fire every last viper, your own employees, because they're just peasants, too, and bingo, The CEO walks away with all the cash. Million dollar bonuses all around. Now that is the American dream, my young lass."

"And you see all of this as a good thing?"

"Of course. Because otherwise, how will the rich grow even

more rich? If the rich don't grow richer, then the grindingly poor will never be slightly less miserable. When the rich have all the money, they create jobs, like buying diamonds and furs keeps people in work, and antique dealers and stuff like that. Otherwise, they'll be no trickledown effect. You might as well move to Loserville right now. I for one pray for the good health and well being of hereditary wealth; otherwise, the universe might go askew. The sun might fall from the sky. Who knows. If the aristocracy weren't above the law, then nothing would ever get done. You can't sue the CEO of a big company anyway. He's too important to fail. You can sue the President, sure. He's just a figure head. But big money men have to be above the law for the sake of National Security."

After lunch I bussed my own tray bringing bad memories of a three month stint in a corporate orphanage. Bussing her tray at the same time the skinny who had whispered in my ear earlier caught sight of me for a second before quickly looking away. In her mind the fatties had already recruited me into their ranks. When would I ever find the opportunity for explaining how I was being held under duress and had not in fact rejected her friendly overture of fresh vegetables? On the other hand a woman so quick to bitterness would not make for a very good friend anyway so what did I care except for the recurring feeling of being roundly misunderstood wherever I went.

For the second part of the day they stuck me on the middle section of the production line. Here I was instructed by the Grease Queen how to use a metal scoop to shovel a load of poker chip sized bits of raw plastic into a cauldron where they melted down into a liquid form pumped through tubes and emerging as plastic wrap. The cans marched forward and the machine collated them into groups of six and then twelve and then twenty four, scooped onto a cardboard gondola and given a plastic wrap then a quick ride on a conveyor built up and up rising all the way to hanging just below the ceiling before taking a left along the wall at the far end and then a right through an opening leading into the third section of the warehouse, out of sight.

To begin with four of us were stationed to watch over this big middle stretch of the line. One by one my compatriots drifted off on their way to disappearing completely. The last one to make her excuses had a long nose and sported crooked teeth. She also chewed on the plastic chips. I saw her pop one into her mouth. Before scopering off she admonished me to watch the line, and if the machine jammed and cans shot into the air and exploded I should press the big red emergency button, which would shut down that section of the production line.

Soon after she abandoned her post Hater swaggered onto the scene. With utility belt hung with power tools and him sporting his special green safety helmet denoting tech support, wasn't he

a dandy, tipping his hat with a two fingered salute to all the other workers scurrying by. What a clown. I wanted to brain him. When he saw me he waved. I stood there like a tethered lamb at my appointed station. Waiting for the cans to explode.

Poor boy. Obviously he was enjoying the time of his life as the new sheriff in town. Firing a murderous glance I shot his horse out from under him. Left him standing low legged in the dust and dumbfounded:

"Get me outta' here, Hater, you nincompoop. Why on Earth did you bring me to this place? I don't belong here, and I want to leave."

"I thought you would appreciate the free clothes and a free meal or two. They have showers at seven. This place might be good for you. Give you a taste of the real world. You can be an effete intellectual at times."

"Hater, if you don't get me out of here, I will give you a taste of that power tool by way of your backside. This place is not what we came for. I will not be trapped into this routine. Do you remember why we came out here? Have you forgotten Rachel already?"

At my mention of her sacred name Hater's demeanor sagged.

"Get off it, Sasha. Rachel's a goner and you know it."

"No she isn't, Hater, you punk. Don't say that to me ever again. You don't know that."

"Do you even know what it means to be a goner? What it truly means?"

"Yes," I hissed, "I know what it means to be a goner. You forget I know how to read."

"Moldy old books..."

"Still, I know things. To be a goner means they arrest you and stick you on a train bound for the Southland where they drag you off the train and shove you over the wall into the badlands. Seriously, Dude, nobody has shipped off a prime piece of flesh like Rachel Cozy to the badlands. You yourself might get arrested and shipped off if you don't stop dicking around this place. You don't belong here, Hater. I mean, obviously you qualify to do this work. Overqualified, for that matter. And I can see you've been having fun with that, but technically, legally, you're not supposed to be here. What's going to happen if they enter your name into the system for real, Mr. H.? Then you *will* find yourself a goner."

Having beaten him down I pinched his trapezes and tried to reboot him:

"C'mon big guy. We didn't come out here for this nonsense. We didn't risk our lives for a plate full of comfort food. Let's ditch this turnip factory. Let's steal everything useful we can find, and hit the trail."

His head was nodding, not with any eye contact, though:

"I was liking it here. That's all. I like being useful."

"Then become useful to me again. I value your expertise, too, Mr. Hater, and you wrong me if you think I don't. I need you in order to find Rachel. If you hadn't been with me to begin with, I never would have made it this far. But I need for you to not give up and stick by me and help me to get going again. I need your help finding Rachel. She's not a goner. She's in the tower district, H. I just know it."

Hater came to his senses with remarkable rapidity: "We'll never get her out of there standing around here. If you really need my help that much then I can let this situation go. It's a little too low tech around here for my skills anyway."

"Oh Hater, you are so much better than this place."

"It's true, you know. I really am."

"You are too good for them; I know, and I'm sure they appreciated the help and whatever, but a high level tech guy like you could never be completely satisfied here. Let me get you back out on the street where the real technological challenges lie."

Several hundred cans burst high into the air exploding and raining yellow pus down upon us like a benediction of our impending failures. The burst reminded me of that toxic blow hole Old Faithful spewing its polluted filth like clockwork. The exploding cans slaughtered us. I ran screaming like a girlie-

girl, thank you very little, right to that stupid red button and with the flat of my palm delivered a kung fu slap dead on bringing the production line to a halt. About half a dozen slackers crawled out of their hidey-holes where they'd been goofing off and swarmed up to clean away the mess and get the line moving again quickly as possible. In the confusion I backed through the crowd of helping hands and slipped away to the women's locker room.

When I entered the locker I found my acquaintance, Skinny Minnie, by herself reclining with her feet up along one of the benches. Our greeting upon meeting sounded cordial enough for me to recount to her my recent disaster at the plastic wrap station.

She laughed in silent mirth and said, "It happens. Take off that jumper, Sweetie, and toss it in the bin around the corner there. They'll take care of it. Grab a clean one while you're at it. Don't cost nothing. Grab a new scarf, too. They just brought 'em in."

Because they followed my own inclination her directions were easy to follow. As I was helping myself to the free stuff I came across a stack of new white cotton panties, too. Normally I never wore them. On the verge of shoving off again I felt the impulse to stock up on extras. Miss Skinny looked pleased to see me all logo-fide, doubly so, perhaps, because her injunctions

had been obeyed. Smile gave way to wince as she stretched forward and began massaging her shins.

"Are you okay?" I asked, opening the locker and retrieving her gear.

"I'm fine," she lied. Then she turned honest on me. "My legs are tired. That's all, really. Standing around all day they start to hurt."

In response to her simple admission I felt empowered to sit down on a bench nearby and confide to her a little myself. The lights were off in the locker area and the darkness draped with shadows dank and cool and from the surface of the tiles and the concrete surface in the next room evaporating shower water. Other than Hater nobody had said a word about shower privileges. Considering how much yellow pus in a can they were churning out they must have had some major juicers installed.

"That yellow stuff got all over me," I ventured

"You don't want to drink that stuff. It's no good for you," Skinny conceded frankly.

"I know what you mean. At lunch my plate was loaded down with greasy food. I wish I could have had a salad instead."

As I watched the import of my message register her smile returned, secretive but kind. Then she wagged her feet and clicked her boots several times until I realized I'd been staring at them and broke off my gaze.

An awkward silence intervened so I dispelled it by asking, "What are the rules or taking showers around here. Is it real water?"

"As real as it gets, these days."

"Can you take one any time?"

"Oh no. They turn them on at seven o'clock sharp. It's kind of late. But that way people stick around longer and they squeeze more work out of us. You know how that goes."

I didn't know, but I pretended I did.

"I won't be here that late."

"What? You're quitting after only one day?"

"Yes. I'm afraid so. I don't really belong here."

"Sometimes people only fit in after awhile."

By way of response I removed my new jumper and tied it around my waist, and then I locked elbows for support, placed my palms on my thighs, and scooping up my girls on either side and leveraged them together and up until they formed a pretty showcase pair, fairly bursting from my vest. Poor Skinny fell for the bait as people always do. Somewhat bewildered she looked me in the face and so I batted my lashes and made with the kiss-kiss. In reaction her cheeks flooded with blood right up to the hairline and her eyes fluttered shut from the pixy dust.

"I see what you mean," she said, straightening her sensibilities.

You never know which way the action might flow when you make a straight girl blush so I pressed the advantage while it was mine for the taking:

"I'm on my way to Loserville, just as soon as I find out where it is."

Miss Skinny fixed her eyes, quick and sharp.

"It's not really called that, you know. It's the Liberal Quarter. My sister lives there."

Their supports released, the sisters drooped into their normal position.

"Of course your sister is not. . . one of those. I'm sure she is a perfectly wonderful person. Somebody I'd like to meet, actually. The type of person I'd like to get to know," I said, as I slid into my jacket.

"You need a contact in the Quarter?"

The glitter in her eyes told me I'd been too forward.

"My buddy Hater and I do okay finding places to stay. I'm always up for meeting new people, so long as they're nice, like your sister." I said, as I slid into my jacket.

Skinny sat upright planting her aching feet gingerly on the floor.

"You know Mr. Hader? The technician? He came by and fixed my station yesterday. What a charmer he is, and so handsome, too. Smart with the mad skills."

I strained to prevent my eyeballs from rolling up inside my brain:

"Yes, he's quite the guy."

"He's the kind of man my sister should meet. Since her divorce she's been so mopey all the time. How soon are you going there?"

"Today, this afternoon. As soon as we leave here."

"Wait and don't go yet. Let me find a piece of paper and I'll write down the directions for you on how to get to her place."

Her shin splints healed by the warm glow of matchmaking Miss Skinny hopped to her feet and rushed off in search of a writing utensil and a papyrus leaf. When I stood up I realized my arches were weary too from standing all day. Before leaving the locker room I cast a wishful glance towards the shower room, which did not do me one bit of good. Our good fortune of late had spoiled me.

Outside I searched for Hater and found him loitering just beyond the main gate.

"You ready?" He asked, confirming the obvious.

"I had to change and get cleaned up some after that disaster."

Hater launched into a big technical explanation about the causes of that phenomenon. I didn't want to listen so I blurred

him out. Pulled down the shades and took a nap standing right there next to him. I pictured Rachel frolicking naked in a field of waist high cat tails. At first she was having a great time, but then the thumpity-thump-thump between her legs became too much. The vast field was an endless phallic sea. Poor damsel in distress. With her knuckles pressed to her lips she pleaded for relief from so much pleasure. Skinny burst my bubble and jolted the life out of me.

"Here's the directions to my sister's hovel, Mr. Hader. All you have to do is start out on the right foot, by following this front street here, down the hill and around to the left, and there are a few twists and turns after that, but I wrote it all down for you so you don't get lost."

By the deferential bow and the cocked ear throughout her recital I could tell Hader had no idea who this woman was nor what she was on about even though he did his best to be respectful alternating between screwing his attention to the scribbles on the page and gazing off blindly in the general direction indicated by Miss Skinny's pointing finger. I hadn't told him yet about Skinny and her sister in the Quarter. But that was Hader. Polite at all costs to everyone. Except me.

Before departing for Loserville we hurried back to the flop house and gathered up our gear. On our way I noticed mostly grannies tending small children along with an indolent male

shirker whose pointed appraisal I steadfastly ignored. In retrospect I'm puzzled by the way Hater accepted everything without question or protest. I must have promised to explain everything to him later and then never did.

Without deviation we pursued the path mapped out for us by Miss Skinny and easily discovered the portal leading into the Quarter. Here sat a sight unimaginable in my zone. One person had opened the sliding metal door while someone else slammed a couple of good sized wooden logs in there to jam the gate open. Judging by the blast scars I'd say short circuit, explosion and fire, in that order. How long ago they wrecked it open I couldn't say. A typical act of Liberal mischief. A waste of perfectly good technology according to Hater. Whatever. It remained busted open for us to duck through. The image of that burned out, hollow interface stuck with me for awhile. The logs were a folksy touch.

We kept the map before us as we went. From around my waste I untied the jumper and handed it to Hater. In disposing of his dirty old one he had neglected to grab a clean new one.

Loserville proved to be a logo-centric environment as well. When a commodity became available in this zone citizens flocked to line up, often not even knowing what for. If people were queuing then something good was for the having, and you might as well hang around for awhile to find out what. Bread. Milk. Soap

flakes. As a result of the shortages no one's clothes matched and no discernable fashion held sway. The adults looked like ten year olds who'd been allowed to dress themselves for the first time. At best a motley assemblage, intellectual workers whose knowledge grew stale and arcane and was no longer valued by the power elite. Poetry. Art. Philosophy. History. These artists and intellectuals stretched out their suppliant hands for free blocks of cheese provided by a government who actively reviled them for their uselessness.

That first day and all the subsequent days we spent in the Quarter I watched their slow motion parade, sometimes singly, often in pairs, promenading on the streets and in the parks. These thinkers, arm in arm, discussing every theory from ancient to modern. In earnest I tried to ascertain what constituted their agenda, and I was surprised to discover they did not have one. Each was the disciple of a god long dead. They dreamt of class struggle when all the while money became the dividing line until only the children of the immensely wealthy could afford their particular brand of tomfoolery. While they paltered with the truth greed and cruelty reigned supreme. Their masters now had no interest in revolution let alone education. Not of that sort, anyway. Mobs of neglected students converged on their ivory towers and dragged them blinking and dazed into the polluted light of day. Their million pointless treatises created

a hot red glow upon which to pitch even weightier tomes. Eventually the flames died low and the world plunged into a digital dark ages. If only they'd had the imagination to memorize a classic and go about reciting it as some would have you believe. No, I saw them myself and heard them. They despised literature almost as much as they did their own students. Only their own theory survived in them, in reference to a petty nothing. If you couldn't speak in pointless riddles you were not prepared to play a shell game with meaning and exclude the truth. You could not join the circle, which the moment you tried to, broke apart, following the yelling and general commotion because a new queue was forming a few blocks away. In the abstract class struggle they stamped you with the imprimatur of high sanctimony and insider cynicism. In reality their phony class struggle meant the factory drones who in reality were the types they had worked rather hard to transcend. They loved the worker in the abstract more than in reality. Better to be a rich man's slave than to teach the rabble.

We watched them scurrying to line up while barkers with clipboards sallied up and down their ranks importuning them to sign the latest petition, mostly for the reopening of the long dead universities, as long as most of them would not be required to teach. Because if you faced East, stood on your head, covered one eye, and whistled a merry tune, Charles Dickens could be

made to look the exact opposite of what he actually was, or was purported to be, I was never entirely clear on that point, which became the point, and so on. Round and round we go. Any theory capable of being understood became worthless, or a theory like feminism could fill an entire career so long as one didn't actually have to apply them to far off, scary countries where a revolution to overthrow the patriarchal power structure might actually put an end to chattel slavery. Apparently, the sisterhood did not extend to those trapped beneath the burka, since one could hardly call them sisters at all, so far away, and so melanomically challenged. Who in their right mind, from the comfort of their couch, with puss-n-boots complacent in her lap, and a nice cup of tea with lemon, would want to incur a fatwa? Besides, it's a part of their *culture* for women to be slaves. I'd really only stopped to ask for directions. Instead I received this long and disjointed lecture, followed by endless requests for 90,000 Credits and a room of one's own. Hater and I managed to find our way, regardless.

One question I would have liked to ask the philosopher was how a woman can be brown as a berry when I cannot think of a single berry whose natural color at maturation is brown. Ablative absolutes notwithstanding, Skinny's sister, Berry Brown, was enough to render the question moot and me mute at the same time. After several failed attempts we located her in the

basement of a windowless burned out apartment building. By way of introduction we presented her with our map drawn by her sister. Considering our flimsy evidence she reacted well to strangers showing up on her basement stoop uninvited. As sisters go Skinny and Berry were the good kind, which means they liked rather than hated each other, were supportive rather than derogatory, and since each held the lifestyle of the other in perfect contempt, the well of their relationship was never poisoned by envy.

For as much of a charmer as Hater fancied himself, by certain unmistakable signs I recognized I and my vagina were especially welcome. Sometimes after an unhappy marriage followed by a bad divorce a woman weighs her options so thoroughly and carefully the conclusions she draws or the truth she admits to finally surprise even herself. The case with Berry might have been different in spite of the picture of a daughter with the father folded backwards out of sight so perhaps I should not have rushed to a hasty generalization as she welcomed us into her snug little hovel and asked us to sit at her wooden kitchen table which by some miracle had survived being broken into kindling a long time ago and she served us some soup bubbling on the stove as though somehow she had been expecting us.

For the uninitiated Hater imagined her ministrations to be showered on him alone. The warm and inviting cup of coffee, the

biscuits, the request from her to fix the device for toasting bread. Whereas any Denizen would have known better. She was marginalizing him while at the same time a hall of mirrors opened up for me. The straight man sees only his own reflection. A true Denizen sees many images, both of herself and of her interlocutress. So while on the single plane all you might notice was her tasking Hater to fix her toaster, out of the corner of my eye I caught in a third or fourth refraction of a reflection she and I under the covers where she coiled her legs around my thigh and locked her arm around my neck and delved her darting tongue, moist and warm with desire, down into my very soul. My how I love a Milf. Nipples gummed to a hardened perfection. Belly so flat and you could bounce a poker chip off it. Her saucy fingers frisky in circular motions of emotion. Sun, sluice, source, and moon, her fingers slipped me in and out of time.

About a week later I woke up to Hater sitting next to the bed and proffering me a cup of coffee. Cold embrace compared to a morning cuddle with Berry Brown. When I asked where she was Hater simply said she had gone out.

"Did you sleep well? You two looked like a bag full of angry cats last night."

"You were watching us?"

"What choice do I have? I'm trying to sleep right over

there on the floor. Don't worry. I couldn't actually see anything. I could hear things..."

"Is there a point you're trying to make?"

"No, I'm just talking smack."

"Wonderful. Where did Berry go? Did she say?"

"She left for the park already. She said we should meet her there. The rally starts in a couple of hours."

Keeping myself well wrapped in the sheet I swung my legs off the edge of the bed. For some reason Hater in close proximity brought on a spirit of modesty, an absurdity when I considered the number of times he'd seen me on stage at The Club. We weren't in The Club anymore though and Hater had a jerky attitude sometimes. I noticed he was holding my jacket and I asked him why.

"You left it in the discothèque dive last night. You and your friend walked out the door and were on the way back here before I grabbed it for you."

"Thanks," I said, as the gurgling liquids in my tummy sent the message I wasn't quite ready for morning coffee.

"This is a quality piece of protective gear, Nika. You should try to hold onto it."

"You're right. I should. Listen. No offense, but I don't want this coffee. I need a sponge bath. Then food. Maybe."

"You remember that pep talk you gave me awhile ago, about

the need to keep moving? I think we need to have that little chat again, only this time for your sake," Hater said as I creaked to my feet.

Too hung over to continue the pretense I dropped the sheet and walked over to where Pretty Berry kept her wash tub stored and yanked it forward before stepping in one delicate foot at a time. In his usual way Hater ran his gaze over me and then looked away before I could accuse him of desiring me.

Balancing the unwanted coffee cup in his hands Hater stared at the floor as he spoke:

"We need to get out of here, kid. We need to move on. One more push to find Rachel. One of us has stayed true to her."

"And which one of us would that be?"

"That would be me since you've been frolicking under the covers here for a week."

As I spread the creamy oil covering my body I pondered how best to explain. After a minute I gave up trying to be profound and went with what I could think of on the surface:

"Do you have any idea how many different sexual partners Rachel has been with?"

"No, I don't," Hater said, tightening his grip on the cup in his hands.

"Let me put it this way: she is credited with 137 scenes. Not people, not partners, but scenes, because more often than

not there are more than two people per scene. Sometimes a bunch more. And you know Rachel as well as I do. She loves to be the center of attention. So the actual number would be much higher, adding in the live shows and all the nights at The Club."

Hater stood up and detoured around me and passed into the kitchen where he poured the coffee down the drain and set the cup on the sink and turned around to lean back against the counter. His head hung low.

"I don't know how either one of you can register any feelings anymore."

By this time I was toweling off.

"People are always surprised to find out whores have feelings, too."

"You're night a whore," Hater said, and for a moment I feared he might swallow his tongue. "How many scenes are you credited with?"

"A dozen. All girl on girl. Not that it makes a difference. I admit there aren't too many surprises for either one of us, physically. But our encounter, our affair, was a spiritual matter, a matter of the heart."

"And this woman you've been sleeping with here?"

"She's nice. But you know what she said to me? 'You're young enough to be my daughter.' I was not at all sure how to take that. She's starting to creep me out."

"So it's over then? And we can get out of here today?"

"Sure we can leave. We already decided today's the day, right?"

"Yes, but that was two days ago. I felt the need for clarification."

Trying to decide what to wear I bent over and picked through my gear.

"Consider our plan confirmed. During the protest today they're planning to rush the barricades and push into the Tower District. When they do we'll go with them. Stop staring at me, pervert."

On this day we were subsumed into the rivulets of protesters combining into a larger wave flowing in a boisterous mob towards the park. An area of greenery, a relic from the days, plus a steady stream of old people to tend the flowers, prevented the park expanse ever falling into total disrepair. The surge of the crowd reached the near end where people chose to go with the flow around the far edges and keeping to the streets. Others channeled into the various winding lanes and foot paths until they swept over onto the open grassy areas between the trees and bushes and immaculate flowers. Conspicuously absent from this mass of protesters were any small

children, wisely left at home in case a melee broke, which Brown Berry confided to me the leadership was hopeful for:

"One of the problems our combined movements have is nonviolence. The Powers That Be have become so adept at making arrests without hurting anyone we're hindered by a total lack of martyrs. If nobody dies, where's the drama? Where's the pathos if nobody bleeds? Where is the tragedy if the final upshot is being rounded up and swept aside? The Power's plan is to be so nice about arresting us, the only thing accomplished is a court date. Today we're going for more. We aim to force them to draw blood. Unless blood is shed, our actions will never become sacred to the cause."

While we shuffled our way along a gravel path I felt guilty in a way for profaning such a pious mission with my mercenary presence. Growing up my education was limited to the pleasure garden, and the one true purpose in life, Pleasure. So as I looked around, marveling at the thousand different causes represented by this mob, I was dumbfounded by how much remained wrong with the world. I became depressed by how many wrong paths we had taken, by how much we had done things the destructive way. How could we have created so many problems for ourselves, which even near extinction had failed to register with us? Here we were, Hater and I, merely hitching a ride on this wave of humanity as it crashed against the barricades to progress, set

up by The Powers That Be for their own moneyed ends.

In the distance shouting and screaming became audible so we knew the advanced guard had reached the front lines of battle. Bullhorns magnified the desperate orders of the leadership into a strident metallic squall. We reached the far end of the park and so the boulevard resumed and the masses momentarily separated by the park flowed together once again into one solid mass. Grabbing Hater's hand in a passion clasp so as not to lose him I turned in order to slice through the crowd more efficiently and move us closer to the front lines. Like most zealots Berry was not afraid of cracking a few eggs for the good of the cause, so long as her own egg wasn't one of those cracked.

In the very front they had once again short circuited the portal and I could hear Hater deploring the waste of perfectly good technology.

By now you'd think they would have found a way of bypassing security without destroying the whole mechanism.

On the other side a solid mass of security police deployed into the street. Black battle armor. Dark helmets. Dark, opaque shields. Truncheons. Side arms. Shotguns. Zap guns. The protesters chanted and whistled, shouted imprecations, sang songs as the spirit moved them.

Caught up in the euphoria of pending violence, I shouted,

"Read a book!"

Laughing and singing led to dancing. They cleared a circle around me and I danced the hoochie-coo, occasionally shouting, "Liberte! Avidite! Fraternite!"

Behind the deadly phalanx of troopers loomed an armored box carrier armed on top with a water cannon. Our side responded by releasing above the heads of the crowd two helium balloons, one heart shaped and the other with a yellow smiley face. The riot squad responded with tear gas. A collective gasp swept through the crowd now that foreplay had begun, surging back and forth. One young stud muffin with a bandana tied across his nose and mouth ran out by himself and picked up the canister chuffing out green smoke and heaved it with an athletic lob right back at them. That had to be the coolest thing I'd ever seen. A veteran with steady nerves in their ranks simply picked up the smoker and gave it a healthy underhanded toss so that it landed lengthwise and rolled on its side another twenty feet as choom choom another two canisters fired and landed, dividing our forces into thirds and scattering our people as only the real provocateurs among us continued harassing the advancing troopers who were clanging their bone crackers against their battle shields.

Another young revolutionary in a black ski mask, and then a young woman with a bandana mask and baseball cap, picked up the

canisters spewing smoke and returned the gifts, but the green acrid stink swirled between us and divided us and thinned out our resolve. People were crying and puking saliva. Then a chuffing stink bomb landed only a few yards away and rolled lazily towards me. I saw my chance. Dropping Hater's hand I ran forward and picked up the noxious canister and yelled as loudly as I could, "Fight the Power!" I wound up and heaved that smoke bomb as hard as I could but the throw curved wildly, clocking a middle aged Marxian professor on the back of his head. He was about a dozen feet in front me when I dropped him. The bomb careened off his bean and landed in a solid mass of our people, dispersing them in every direction.

Some tall skinny guy next to me in the crowd said, "Dude, you totally nailed that old guy."

In truth I was on the verge of running away so I might hide myself in the crowd. Instead, to my credit I think, I ran forward and helped my victim to his feet although he remained bent over clasping his dented dome. I know I must have given him a terrible headache. I bent over too and put a supportive arm around him and apologized profusely for my poor aim, taking full responsibility for my actions. As it turned out he wasn't badly hurt, and I managed to coax him back to an upright position. To assuage his pain I pampered his beautiful bald dome with butterfly kisses until he blushed and laughed a little, assuring

me he was going to survive.

An ancient axiom holds you should never turn your back to ocean waves. I feel wise now in opining the same about a riot. The violence crashed around us, knocking us both flat, and as though I was caught in an undertow of scuffling feet two officers dragged me by my heels toward their lines while a mass of black jackboots surged forward passing in front of my eyes. To my relief they stopped dragging me and helped me to my feet. They were very gallant about rescuing me from a trampling. I loaded my fingertips with kisses and planted them on the war masks of my helpful admirers.

The battle had shifted so ferociously I found myself standing marooned behind enemy lines. Maybe half a dozen protesters remained lying down in protest, waiting patiently to be arrested. I watched as they too were helped to their feet. In order for the water canon to advance the troopers had to first clear the intersection. We few were among the first captives to be marched single file passed the tanker and up the avenue narrowing between abandoned office buildings. The street inclined filling my heart with new hope because with each step I advanced that much closer to the Tower District. The exhilaration stirred in me by the rioting commingled with the excitement I felt at the prospect of finding Rachel.

Among the crowd I remained aloof, yet as we milled around

in front of the Choker, a portable black wall about a dozen feet high made from some impermeable stuff, I was infected by the carnival atmosphere increasing with the arrival of each new gang of detainees. Pretty soon we had a real crowd packed against the wall and filling the street. In their eyes burned jubilee fading to reveal the growing apprehension and fear of the arrest process at the hands of the troopers. More protesters arrived, only the really athletic ones clapped in steel bracelets. The mass of people compacted and grew quieter, sullen. With the pressure of bodies increasing they pressed me to the wall until I struggled to breath. For some reason they had only opened one portal. The business of processing us crawled slowly as the morning gave way to the afternoon. Soldiers with zap guns stood watch on a gangway running along the interior of the security wall so I could only see their bodies beginning about the knees. Using my best feminism I unzipped my jacket and called up to them in distress:

"Help! Help! I can't breath!"

Right away the whole crowd of humanists took up my cause, calling out with the upmost indignation, "She can't breath! Don't you understand? Help her! For goodness' sake, help her!"

About a dozen feet from where I was standing the troopers on the portal looked around with an annoyed *what on Earth is wrong now* sort of attitude. The guards above me kneeled and when

I raised my arms to them they clasped my forearms and deftly hoisted me right up and over the parapet. I had to raise my feet a little. Up above that huge crowd where everybody could see me my polarities switched and I turned from natural introvert to trained extrovert. Raising my hands above my head, snapping my fingers as though they held castanets, and wiggling my hips with the freedom to choose I yelled out, loud and sexy:

"Viva la Revolucion!"

The crowd erupted in wild cheering and whistling. I was about to rip open my vest and give them something to really cheer about when my two saviors, both of whom were laughing behind their crash masks, by the way, took me firmly by my triceps and off my feet, whirling me about, lined me up with a tight gauntlet of troopers formed down on the ground below, and with a one two three pitched me headlong off the gangway. As impossible as it may seem I enjoyed my airborne flight because I had a clear picture in my mind of my suitors, arms extended, palms up, waiting below to catch me. One trooper caught me by the boob, a hold he did not immediately relinquish. Discreetly he adjusted his grasp. Otherwise a featherweight landing. With a heave-ho they set me on my feet. Loading my fingertips with kisses I planted them on the war masks of this very talented group of gymnasts. They high fived each other and punched knuckles and said things like "That's how brothers work

together" and other rah-rah nonsense. They were so proud of themselves, so full of élan.

No sooner had I completed my dismount than a new squad of troopers advanced with serious intent to the black wall and braced themselves in a defensive posture while their lieutenant punched in the code for a second portal, opening right in front of the startled expressions on the other side. With two doors open the crowd stepped through the barricade in more rapid succession. Up ahead waited processors with datatrons taking down information and directing people into various queues cordoned off by ropes.

Maybe a dozen different lines of people formed, each leading up to its own circus tent striped red and white and blue. I loitered for as long as I could instead of proceeding to the next stage of incarceration. I hate being the first one in line in any situation. The queues filled quickly and from a trooper a firm nudge in the small of my back propelled me towards the induction tables.

When my turn came I stepped forward. The man demanded I state my zone and I replied The Pleasure Zone. He asked me my occupation and I answered Sex Worker. He didn't even look up. He gazed into his comport screen. He kept on telling the comport to scroll. Scroll. Scroll. A soft plosive of frustration parted his lips as he swiveled about in his chair and focused his attention

toward his supervisor standing away at a small distance. This man with the answer to the question my problematic presence posed remained absorbed in a conversation precluding my clerk from attracting his attention.

The Clerk said, "Hold on a sec'" like I would go somewhere without him, and I watched his purposeful gait become more deferential the closer he approached his boss until his stature turned downright obsequious as he waited for the Captain to cut short the dialogue with what I realized was one hottie of a second lieutenant. When my man finally managed to interrupt, Lieutenant Hottie snapped an about face on one heel and marched away without waiting to be dismissed. Annoyance cast a shadow across the Captain's features as he snapped one last glance at Hottie making good her escape before accompanying the clerk back to his table station where he resumed his seat in front of the screen. Unlike Corporal Clerk the Captain indulged in a thorough inspection of me before snapping at me, "Who are you supposed to be?"

Having spent the last week in the Humanist camp I thought he was challenging me with some kind of existential dilemma. In a trice common sense kicked in and I realized he was asking about the way I was dressed. His lips compressed to sharp slits.

"My name is Nika. They call me Sasha the Savage."

"They call you...."

The Clerk drew his attention back to the comport screen. Whatever he saw hardened his expression even more. He brushed the Clerk's hand aside in order to commandeer the mouse and he performed a few clicks of his own. At that point I thought I was a goner for sure. For the edification of the Clerk the Captain pointed at the screen and indicated, "That one." The Clerk nodded his head and resumed control of his own keyboard. Straightening himself the Captain avoided eye contact with the anomaly of my existence. Without any further intercourse he swiveled and marched off, scanning the crowd looking to resume his colloquy with the reluctant Lieutenant.

With an air of relief to be back on track a line had formed behind me to the extent other clerks were calling out how they could help the next person in line; he punched at his keyboard until hard copy whirred out of a printer and I took it myself as he pointed to the only rope line that was totally empty and ordered, "Go to the line at the very far end, the very last one, and enter your assigned tent from there."

I walked ahead a few paces and caught sight of Hater already standing in a crowded line. Arms crossed he was engaged in one of those amiable conversations only he could hold with a total stranger.

Without thinking, I called out, "Hi Hater!" Really loud. A chorus of male voices called out in mockery, mimicking the ditzzy

yoo-hoo tone of voice squeaking out of my head. I should have known better than to call him out when he was busy doing the guy thing. First his face flamed into red. Next he abandoned his place in line and worked his way upstream toward me against the flow of the crowded line. His dolor subsided into a salubrious blush by the time he reached me. To my surprise he wasn't angry. On the contrary he greeted me with civility and a certain amount of amusement beaming from his countenance.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "I didn't mean to embarrass you in front of your friends."

Hater waved off the matter as being of no consequence.

"Aw, what friends? I was just talking to some guys. Actually, I'm really glad to see you. I'm relieved to know you came through that rioting business alright."

"Oh I'm fine."

"I saw your cheerleading stunt earlier, at the barricade."

"That was meant to be funny."

"It was funny. You got the whole crowd going. You definitely have a certain charisma at times."

A compliment from Hater set off a warning bell inside my head. Focusing my attention in order to scrutinize him better I noticed his eyes were moist and yearning in a way that elicited tears from me for some reason. I looked away and in a ridiculous charade of normality warbled a question about the purpose of the

lines and the tents. Hater thought it was some sort of processing set up for dealing with large numbers of arrests. Then he took me into his embrace because I was sobbing, and I felt myself coming apart at the seams. One of the things I always liked about Hater was how he always let me cry. Unlike everybody else he never tried to sush me into shutting of the valves of my emotions. When I finished my outburst I told H. I was sorry.

Hater said softly, "What for? I'm the one who should apologize. I promised to get you to her, but by the looks of this situation, I'd say it ain't happening. As they say, 'Access Denied'."

"We're so close, though, Mr. H. Look at those building way over there. Look how tall they are. They must be the towers of the tower district. We are close. We are so close."

"Sweet Pea, we're in the Tower District. All the buildings are tall."

"Exactly, Hater. But there's a special one. And once you've seen it there's no mistaking it. I know I'd know it if I could only see it again. Just once."

"Do tell."

"No, really."

"I can imagine."

We shared a laugh, last thing. I've always been glad for

that. A Stentorian trooper commanded everyone to join their assigned line. I realized Hater and I formed part of a group of citizens loitering at the threshold. That cruel voice put a chill into me. This time I hugged Hater.

Hater spoke closely into the shell of my ear, coaching me with phrases like Take care of yourself. Be watchful. Be cooperative. Go with the flow. I'm pretty sure we're not in that big of trouble. It's been civil so far, all things considered.

"I'm the only person in my line."

"Why does that not surprise me? You are one of a kind, my dear."

I kissed my friend on the forehead. He reciprocated by petting my arm. I turned to go and my gaze swept the skyline. Being the only person in my line made me feel like an idiot. I did a catwalk the entire way up the aisle between the guiding ropes and when I reached the end I knocked on the clean white door. Nobody responded so I turned the knob and let myself in.

The initial chamber was lined by benches on either side with cubby holes affixed with clothes hooks. Each station bore its own number. I looked around for further clues and read a sign declaring, Turn over your valuables to the attendant for safe keeping. Considering I didn't own any valuables I determined those instructions didn't apply to me, and I was in no mood to strip so I let myself into the next chamber where I

discovered a desk and a chair. Otherwise the room was empty, and the eggshell white walls offered nothing.

In order to enter the next chamber I had to push through heavy vertical plastic strips hanging in a very narrow passage. Having pushed my way through I found myself in an operating theater, complete with a stainless steel table with drain and a tray of instruments and all kind of medical supplies stacked to the ceiling.

In the next room I startled a janitor looking guy with a mop cleaning a shower room. For a moment we stood regarding each other, and I wondered what quality of shower they were providing and regretted no one was present to okay my taking one. The old guy with the mop jerked his thumb toward the exit. Clearly, I was not listed among his job responsibilities.

In the final room someone had arranged stacks and stacks of clean white pajamas. Under my fingertips they felt like a good product, a nice cotton weave. I thought about requisitioning a pair, but I didn't know what the rules were and didn't want to get into trouble.

I passed through the last door and suddenly found myself outside again. Citizens were exiting the tents all the way down the line and forming a crowd shuffling away from me towards the far end of the street where troopers were helping people aboard, not a Black Maria like I would have expected with arrest but a

Slaver, the same model I'd once driven for The Body.

Feeling guilty because I hadn't checked through properly I dragged my feet, and seeing that Slaver made me feel like I didn't want to go there anyway. Then I noticed I wasn't the only one dragging her feet. The man in front of me was dragging his, too, literally. I noticed with growing distaste that the seat of his pajamas were turning brown seconds before a moist turd flopped out his pant's cuff and split in two, yawning like brown toffee. Uttering a squeak of disgust I side-stepped it. I looked around and saw their faces. They were all bleeding from their eyes gone dead. Their mouths hung open and drool coated their lips and chins. An ice pick had violently sliced their brains off from the outside world, their alert intellects trapped inside. Living Dolls, they called them. Fresh meat for the brothels and harems.

Well I'm sorry but I flipped out. I totally lost it. Before that moment I'd never believed in zombies. Now I know they really do exist. I'd witnessed a lot of weirdness and cruelty in the Pleasure Zone but nothing truly nightmarish. Not like this outrage. This rape of the mind. This slaughter of the senses. Whenever I have bad dreams about this episode it's the eyes I remember most vividly. Brown, hazel, green, blue, each and every one faded to pitch black. Opaque and lusterless. Black holes from which no light of reason could escape.

Trembling in every nerve I backed away from this parade of the damned. As the door to each colorful tent opened and another newly lobotomized slave descended I thought of Hater and his beautiful mind oblivious in the queue on the other side. My temperamental genius. My friend with the beautiful mind.

My body shook uncontrollably as I felt an anxiety attack unlike anything I'd ever suffered before choking off my air. I distinctly remember thinking to myself, I'm going to have a seizure. What a strange moment, clarity of mind and physical collapse.

Then Rachel's voice spoke to me from inside my own memory. First she said, Stop being such a crybaby. Then she said, I love you. Then for some reason Berry Brown's voice said, Wake up and smell the coffee.

I cried out. An inarticulate, strangled, guttural glurp of defiance. I stamped my feet to get some feeling into my numb feet, and as though I suffered from writer's cramp I flapped my wrists to force some blood back into my fingertips. I swear if you saw me you would have thought I was suffering a major spaz attack. I sucked air for all I was worth. I was about to scream. The first expostulation didn't accomplish much other than opening my throat. I was crying but my tear ducts were dry heaving, so I stopped. Why bother? It was of no use. I hated myself in that instant. I loathed the weakness of my own body

and mind. In defiance I drew another breath, and then another, again and again gasping harder and harder.

"Hater," I whimpered, barely audible. My lungs were slack and empty. I was in a death struggle to fill them.

"Hater," I rasped, louder than before, and I started giggling hysterically. In defiance of a random and chaotic world I drew one deep breath after another, oxygen the only antidote, filling my voice with volume each time I called out his name until finally I let loose with a cry pitching wildly up the vocal scale twisting off into a peacock's shriek. Rejoicing in my success and dry weeping in horror of the calamity before me I screamed his name in warning to the very rooftops of the tallest tower.

The commotion I was making had the sole effect of attracting the attention of every sex doll in this grotesque zombie parade. They shuffled and scuffled and turned en masse in the direction of my clarion call, and crowded around me.

The guys loading the van I think had disregarded my screaming. I'm pretty sure they only perceived my presence when their human payload turned their backs on the loading process and wandered off in my direction.

I backed away from the crowd of ghouls, tripped, and fell flat on my ass. It wasn't the first time. A triangle appeared in my mind, the first love triangle in the history of literature

that would have to be counted as a strength and a blessing. If Hater loved me then I could love Rachel. If Rachel loved Hater then Hater could love me. Then I could love both Hater and Rachel and he could love Rachel and me and she could love me and him both. The sides would be equal and symmetrical and touch all around. True, infallible, complete. I yelled both their names like a talisman, getting to my feet and regaining some power.

One of the trooper yelled, "Hey you!" Then the rest yelled a bunch of stuff I don't care about. With his zapper one of them took a pot shot ricocheting behind me off the concrete wall of a building.

I bailed. Turned and bolted. As fast as I could. For all I was worth. I sprinted. I ran. Up one block and careening around a corner up another block and over. Blasting through the roadblocks unexpectedly from behind, determined to escape. Heedless of the astonished stares from ordinary good citizens who were strolling their innocent pedestrian lives just a couple of blocks from the holocaust. Surprised to see a leather clad beauty hauling coals. In reality my left hand shot out akimbo and spasmodically my right hand was slapping air like I was trying to paddle my canoe faster. When I rounded another corner daylight vanished and I was standing in the cold shadow cast by a Golden Tower. There was no mistaking this edifice. A tower so tall a wealthy man at the very top might transcend The

Constitution itself. I knew all along (if I could just catch a glimpse of it) I would be able to recognize this building. In an attempt to appear less conspicuous I left the middle of the street and hopped onto the sidewalk and marched along as steadily as I could. Even though motor conveyances were far and few between, the model citizenry kept to the sidewalks amid empty streets. I marched along as steadily as I could, humming a drum and fife tune in an attempt to regulate my stride.

At the crucial intersection I paused to evaluate the government troopers stationed at the entrance. They were not allowing foot traffic to pass by the entrance on that side. No matter. I knew another way in. A secret entrance. In the back. I noticed a man standing among the troopers. Only he wasn't dressed like them. He wore a leather fedora, a leather trench coat, dark, oily slacks, and shiny black hard soled shoes. I found myself staring at him, and he returned my stare. Before I had made up my mind he smiled at me before I had time to turn away. He lifted a comport to the side of his face then dropped to his side the hand holding the pod. He wagged his head at me as if saying no, which made me pause, puzzled. Then he did just the opposite. He smiled and nodded his head, and like a foolhardy mongoose I stared straight into his eyes. Far too late I felt the cold electrodes against my neck. The current flowed into me and I rose ecstatic onto the tips of my toes as my

eyeballs rolled up and I saw the penthouse bay window near the very top, black and opaque.

Against my better judgment I climbed into the back of the limousine when Rachel waved me in. We sat on the bench in the very back facing down a row with a very long bench on either side. Two Keepers sat near a window at the very far end near a mirror. Neither one seemed to notice Rachel and me sitting there. One of the Keepers knocked on the mirror and I'll be darned if it didn't slide down. Emitting a metallic whirring sound as it did so. The Keeper said something to the driver I couldn't quite understand. The driver turned his head as though to listen more intently. Having received his instructions he nodded and faced forward and disappeared from sight as the mirror whirred up again and sealed him away from view. The sound of the engine grumbled faint and far away, and the vehicle did not vibrate at all. Quite different from the battery powered trash The Body drove.

As we made our way toward the security choke point I kept expecting those two Keepers to slide down their benches our way and head bag us. To my wonder and relief neither one made a move. Not only were we not bagged but windows in the doors at

either end of the bench allowed us to see out. Both Rachel and I strained our necks to look out and up at the underside of the massive walkway arching over the checkpoint gates. You could see the boots and uniforms of the guards who were walking back and forth. You could bet their guns were loaded wit bullets.

On the way to the party Rachel pointed out various points of interest, which she hardly needed to do. I was so entranced by it all I never once took my inquisitive gaze off the passing parade of novelties. Everything appeared so much cleaner than in our zone. The buildings were so incredibly high I twisted and craned my neck to see up. What pedestrians I saw wore whole pieces of clothing, whole outfits, not bits and pieces patched together like I and everybody I knew wore in our miserable existence. Shops were open too with whole glass in their shop fronts, not all broken bits and covering ply board. People with credits bought items I couldn't imagine and carried them away in brightly colored bags. Eventually the limo pulled up in front of a very grand building with a portico, Rachel explained, designed so that you could move from the car to the building without ever getting wet. Men in the most brightly colored uniforms I'd ever seen stood at attention at the main entrance as well as the usual Dark Matter Guards and Soldiers. I couldn't believe it when Rachel told me they weren't really guards. That their only job was to open the doors. With uniforms like that I would have

guessed they were the Generals of the Army.

The mirror came down again, and heated words were exchanged between the Keeper and the Driver. Apparently we were not to be dropped off in front. Instead we were to be ferried around through the alley to a special entrance in the back. I was glad for that. I would not have felt comfortable walking in between all those guards and soldiers. Knowing we were taking the alley comforted me. I was used to them. The mirror remained down and I watched the walls of the big buildings swallow us up on both sides and block out the sun. We were in the shadows between the tall towers. As we swung around the last corner the limo creaked and rocked a little, not too bad. I thought the ride had been most excellent.

The keepers climbed out first and then motioned for us to follow suit. They didn't say much, those two. They were awfully stony faced. Not in a bad way, necessarily. More in a way that inspired confidence. You felt you were safe with those two around. They approached an outdoor elevator and pressed the green button. For a moment I could not fathom why we were standing there wasting our time, until a bell sounded somewhere and the doors opened! At this miraculous occurrence I have to admit my jaw dropped a little. Rachel took my arm and moved me towards the elevator. She saw the look of astonishment on my face and nodded as though to reassure me it was real. I'd never

seen an elevator that actually worked, let alone rode on one. We stepped in and the doors slid shut. After a little jolt the floor vibrated under my feet and my knees sprung a little and I could feel we were rising. I could feel Rachel watching my face for my reaction so I let it show. I looked at the colored numbers above the door as the light flitted from floor to floor. I looked over at Rachel and leaned in and kissed her on the lips and we finished the ride with an immense feeling of satisfaction.

When the doors opened we were not in a hallway. We stepped out into a room that faced two closed doors. One of the Keepers took his radio off his hip and spoke into it. He stood and waited until the doors unlocked and we were passed into the custody of another Keeper on the inside. The doors closed behind us, and I was immediately aware of how dirty I was in comparison to such a luxurious suit as this one in every respect immaculately clean. The carpet was pure white with tightly woven threads. The walls were papered in a crème color, and all the tables were made of glass that shined with polished severity. Through the windows facing outside I couldn't see anything, only the usual purple black clouds. I wondered to myself where the other buildings had gone until I realized that we were in what must have been the tallest building in the world. We were encouraged forward to the edge of the pit that made up the main

room. Three steps down and we stood in the middle of the pit. Three steps up on the other side and we were standing in front of the gargantuan windows with our noses pressed against the glass looking down from an Olympian height. Rachel must have sensed my giddiness because she chose that moment to poke me in the kidney. I gave a startled jump and she silently laughed. I really hated it when she did stuff like that.

We turned away from the windows just in time to see a very handsome grey haired gentlemen in an immaculate black pinstripe suit and red tie enter the room. He motioned at the Keeper who disappeared through a door leading who knows where. This was our Grandpa, or Papa. Our special guy. The one we were there to spend the weekend with. Everything happened so fast I barely had time to register all the sumptuous details. We were led down a long hallway into an enormous room with a very grand bed. In the master bath we were directed by our Papa to undress and walk into the shower stall area. He had very kind crystal clear blue eyes I remember and I could sense from Rachel that like me she wanted to please him very much. I counted twelve shower heads. You could get a lot of people clean in a shower as commodious and luxuriant as that one, but it was only Rachel and me who needed cleaning. We were both smooth and using the soap, and Papa could not have been more pleased. His sad happy eyes watched us all the while and when we were done he draped us in

the softest towels I'd ever felt and he admonished us with gentle encouragement to step over to the raised bathtub. We climbed the couple of steps to the tub to discover the expansive bowl filled with soap bubbles clean and white like the pictures of clouds I'd seen in the books. I was about to protest if anyone thought I was climbing into that mess but Rachel hiked a leg over into the tub and disappeared for a moment only to reappear a moment later wearing a hat and beard of white soap bubbles. Grandpa gave me a couple of very gentle pats of encouragement on my bare bottom and so I mimicked Rachel's example and followed her into the bubble bath. The bubbles had a way of clinging to your skin and then popping and dissolving into slippery fragrant oil. The two of us, rambunctious as we were, didn't take long to snap all the bubbles. Then we sloshed around in the fragrant oil. Stood up again. Modeled our gleaming hard bodies front and back. Grandpa clapped his hands in delight.

This type of encounter had a choreography all its own. When the bubbles were well spent he lifted us out by turn and once again wrapped us in those delicious towels. He led us back into the master bedroom and directed us onto a large round divan. He seated himself in a chair a few feet away and we put on a little show for him. At one point he left the room. When he returned, he was wearing a white and flowing silk robe. He sat down with

us where we had exhausted ourselves on the divan and ran over our flesh his hands wrinkled and soft. He had very nice hands. Gentle with interesting little dark spots all over the tops. The skin was old and thin as rice paper. When we moved to the bed I spent some time examining his grey hairs. He was grey all over. I thought it was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen. He was very thin, and his skin fell in folds here and there. His breasts drooped a little and they reminded me of my Crazy Rose. Rachael and I did everything we could, singly and together, to make Grandpa happy. When his fluid emerged it was thin and almost see through, and it had a trickle down effect, across my knuckles, but his sad and tired eyes filled with happy tears, and we both were up on our knees with our arms around his Grandpa's neck where he sat at the head of the bed and we hugged him and squeezed him and gave him as much encouragement as we could to be happy, some of that human touch he was so in need of, because he lived alone in the highest tower in all the land, and had no one to love him anymore, except his money, which left him cold and lonely, and in need of a good hug. I wish there were more old men like him around gentle like he was with hands so soft. I'm sure the quality of our lives would have been very much improved.

Crack in the ceiling. Before the ceiling surrounds the crack. The gray concrete showing through a black hairline fissure. Scratchy wool beneath my chin. Thin wool blanket. Instinctively I pulled it away. Shoved it aside. Iron bars. I sat up and swung my legs off a padded ledge where I had been lying unconscious, overhearing this exchange of words:

"She's awake."

"I'll go tell the Boss."

One uniformed soldier I could already see sat behind a desk, his elbows propped, leaning into his work, pen poised above paper. From off to the right a second uniformed guard appeared and passed in front of the bars and disappeared down a corridor to the left. Although both guards had inclined their heads toward me in deference to my presence neither one raised his eyes, not wanting, I suppose, to obligate themselves to any unofficial intercourse with a prisoner.

The junior partner returned a short while later abstaining a second time from eye contact who nevertheless informed me, "The Chief will be down in a minute to see you."

I nodded my understanding. Having delivered his message the herald returned behind the walled portion of the cell. I thought it poor planning creating a blind spot in a holding cell. On second thought if all their detainees were hauled in on stretchers I supposed it wouldn't really matter.

For the most part my mind and body felt intact, uncertainty arising only from the lacuna torn from time missing from memory.

A very well dressed and clear eyed bureaucrat emerged from the hallway on the left. In his left hand he carried a file folder. He wore his light brown hair trimmed neatly short. Dressed in the latest office apparel, pressed and creased and abounding in sharp angles, he appeared not so much fashionable as impeccably appropriate. He stopped in front of the bars and with his free hand raised his knuckles as though he was going to rap them knock-knock let me in on the bars. He bared his teeth. I realized a beat later he was smiling at the guard I could see, who sensed this superior's pressure just in time to leap from his seat and scuttle across the room simultaneously shaking his key ring to jangle forth the one for opening the cell before the Chief's knuckles clanged him tardy.

No more had the gears tumbled in the lock than the chief swung wide the door, carrying along the guard keys still dangling from the hole. Unaware of his subordinates dilemma as the guard darted his hands after his one major responsibility in life so rapidly departed and his reaching retracting and recoiling just as smartly to avoid bumping into his boss: leaning forward as though he might try a quick side step behind the boss when he entered the cell, but the boss didn't do anything of the sort. He swung the door full wide until it

clanged against the bars, the keys now dangling inside the confines of the cell. If I'd had a mind to I could have reached out and grabbed them. Straining with self control the guard ceased bobbing and weaving and came to attention, doomed to endure the wait until his hands could take hold of his job security once more.

The Clear Eyed Bureaucrat looked off into the blind of the cell as he spoke:

"You will stand up and come with me, please."

His indirect discourse caused a hitch in my getting up. The watery eyed guard looked straight at me now and nodded encouragement. I think he wanted me out of there quickly and without incident just so he could retrieve his keys and retreat to the safety of his desk. Upon exiting the cell I paused between the two men before advancing a few feet towards the corridor in assuming correctly we would proceed in that direction. The Chief turned to me and taking a few steps stopped and spread wide his arms using the file folder to fan me onward as though trying to herd a cat and at the same time projecting a strained smile barely concealing a grimace of frustration. In this odd choreography I realized that although he was not executing his steps any better than the rest of us his steps were still the only ones that mattered and we were all revolving around his lead. In deference to his bidding I turned and headed

for the hall while thinking how awkward my going first would prove since I didn't know our destination when I felt the grip of the Boss grab hold of my upper arm. He didn't encircle. He pinched to maintain control, in the soft area between the bicep and the triceps, messaging the two muscles apart so as to clamp down on the bone. A sharp pain lit up in my head before rebounding down the nerves to the point of origin.

Fighting the urge to jerk free my arm, which would have only incited a worse consequence, I hung my head instead, hoping to placate his cruelty with my spirit of cooperation. As we made our way up the hall we passed various secretaries and clerks in civilian dress who I noticed shot hopeful glances at their Boss only to cast down their expressions and go about their tasks unrecognized and crestfallen. For the duration of our walk I longed for the pain in my tender arm to stop hurting, for the spot he was pinching began to grow numb. To take my mind off the pain I studied the insipid regularity of the floor tiles, the walls bare except for a fire extinguisher, a door on the left, a door on the right, receded lighting just that much too bright forcing me to wince when I looked straight at them. The whole time he kept up the pressure, and each time, in the spaces between my reveries, the crushed nerves cried out prickling with pain.

At the end of the corridor he halted us. Relief flooded my

system because he had to let go my arm to open the door. One thing the school of S&M taught me was never to move a muscle until ordered to do so. A sadist who gains satisfaction from control and obedience receives his initial pop from capitulation. In the long run he prefers complete surrender, not just surface acquiescence. Nothing else sets his soul at ease.

So as not to compromise his erect carriage he bent at the knees and stooped to open the door. Feeling the soft pressure of his folder against my shoulder blades I was ushered into the room ahead of him, saying, "Please enter." We entered into the waiting room where a smart looking secretary arched her back in front of a large screen and a colorful pedicure busily stabbed at the keys. These citizens exchanged a few words with perfect familiarity I could not understand. She was mid twenties and still very pretty in her tight fitting office worker costume. I smiled inwardly to think how a man like this one would never have settled for an ugly secretary. She managed a whole row of files, and along one wall arranged chairs for visitors. Under the circumstances I guess introductions were deemed unnecessary and inappropriate. I felt disappointed when The Boss steered me away from her and through a side door already propped open leading into his office. I would have enjoyed the eye contact with Little Miss Bulging File.

His office space surprised me because it was larger than I

expected. A beautiful oak desk with three ornate chairs facing dominated the center of the room. The view through a big bay window revealed we were ensconced many stories high. In the far distance I could discern the tower district, but I could not single out my tower of hope.

Mr. Pincher bade me sit down, circled around his desk and took up position in his chair. He ignored me while he read my file. Without looking up he asked me to verify my name, and having confirmed my identity said, "Young woman, you are a long way from home. Are you lost?" He looked up, and those dry blue eyes fixed their gaze on me.

"Yes, sir. I don't know where I am."

"Did you know where you were when you were apprehended?"

"Sire?"

"When we caught you, where were you standing? In the place with all the tall building. How did you get there?"

"I walked."

"How did you manage to exit your zone?"

"Well, I went by the front gate, and I saw the people leaving through the gate, so I went too because I'd never been out there before. Then I got lost. Then you found me."

This time was not the first I'd been forced into impersonating an infantilized woman. I'd been paired with enough of them to know what they sounded like and how they acted. Doing

so always left me feeling dirty and need of a hot shower afterwards.

"You know that... look at me... you know that leaving your zone was wrong?"

"Yessir", I whispered, neither rebutting nor making excuses.

The honesty of my answer left him deeply satisfied.

"There's been so many security breaches lately it doesn't surprise me a little pullet like you wandered off."

Then his tone changed and he scolded me. From this I realized that I was not slated for punishment. The phone on his desk rang and he answered it. I was a captive audience to the following one sided conversation:

"Hello there. I'm fine. How are you? Kids doing okay? No, I should be home on time. I have one case before me and two more interrogations this afternoon, but I'll be home on time for dinner. No, nothing special. I'll put the screws to them and be home before you know it. Yes, I did hear about it. No, up here in the clouds we're removed from that sort of general commotion. No, it isn't serious. It doesn't mean anything. It was just rabble. It's been cleaned up already. I'll be through with work on time by this afternoon, and I'll see you this evening. Love you, too. Bye for now."

During his conversation I noticed copper colored blood

stains caked in the cuticles of otherwise exquisitely manicure finger nails. Once he hung up the phone he turned his attention back to me.

The Clear-Eyed Bureaucrat said, "You know better than to leave your assigned zone, and if you don't, you ought to. If I catch you outside your zone walls again, I'm going to cream you, understand? Good. Now, let's see. You were contracted to the... Club Abattoir, correct? And that job agreement lapsed... six weeks ago. You've been lost for six weeks?"

"No I don't think so."

"How long have you been gone, then? How many days?"

In answer I held up three fingers and lisped, "Dis many."

Feeling I'd overplayed my part an electric shock coursed through me. Incredulity flickered in his eyes. So I hid the number three in my lap and stared down my lashes at this desk top. He didn't detect my subterfuge. He just couldn't register how a grown woman would not know her numbers.

Very softly he asked, "How many is that?"

I squirmed in my chair and waited, not answering.

"No one ever taught you your numbers?"

I shook my head, no. I remained quiet, listening to him flip back and forth through the pages in my dossier.

"Nika, aka Sasha the Savage: you have been detained on suspicion of plotting a terrorist act, to wit: blowing up a

government building. Nika, did you intend to blow up a government building?"

Vigorously I shook my head, sat bolt upright, and executed an elongated No! both answering the question and protesting my innocence. In response he patted the air with his hand as though to press me back into my chair.

"No, I don't imagine you did. Normally, this charge requires a mandatory arraignment. However, your case is clearly one of mistaken identity. You see how much trouble you can get into, though, when you exit your zone without permission? Alright then. I'm going to treat this little incident as a lesson learned. Since I hold total discretionary power in all cases before me and can do as I see fit. I'm going to save The Powers That Be a lot of time and trouble. He smiled and his gaze drifted out the window. In a way, when you look at it, in many ways I am The Powers That Be."

Powersby stood up and walked around the desk and passed where I sat and opening the adjoining door leaned his head through and asked for something called a transfer order and to his secretary he spoke other jargon I couldn't understand. No sooner had he resumed his seat then the pert little office pastry appeared carrying the requested documents. While Mr. Powersby scribbled and stamped I gazed on her clean white staulings stretched tightly over the delicate turn of her

anklebone.

I yearned to be far away from that angular man sitting across from me at his iron desk.

"Okay, Nika. Here is what you are going to do. You are heading back to your zone and you are going to stay there from now on. Permanently. Always. Never to leave again. Understand? Or big trouble comes to you. Also, the offer of employment made by Club Abattoir, you are to accept said employment forthwith. When you return to your zone, you are to report to The Club, and sign the contract they are going to offer you. Make your mark. I'm letting you go on the condition that you get a job and go back to work. Now is not the time to be unaccounted for. You sign up. You get back in place. You stay put, little girl. Understood?"

In response I sat up straight and smiled, nodded till a lock of hair fell across my brow.

"Good girl." When he stood up so did I, but I waited for the word of command. Come with me now and we'll get your transport squared away.

He scooped me once again into the encompassing file folder. Before leaving he stopped to explain to his secretary the disposition of my case. They conferred about who would need copies of which documents. In response to some barely spoken challenge from his secretary he winded up by saying, "It's my

call."

She said 'Okay' with a mixed air of I hope you know what you're doing and obvious pleasure basking in the strength of his authority and prowess.

This time he escorted me without the pinching. No longer a wanted criminal on a rampage I stuck to his side in gratitude he wasn't going to rape and torture me as we walked to an elevator and rode down together all the while keeping my mouth shut. We dropped a long ways before we bottomed out in the transport area. Those walls featured the some lights and floorings. The walls were plastered over with bulletins, schedules, announcements and every type of safety warning.

My man Powersby escorted me into a dull waiting room with only a single wooden bench. His hand slid onto my shoulder as he turned me with my back to the bench and then he pinched my trapezes muscle until I sank to my seat.

"Wait here," he said, and passed through a second door. He wasn't gone long. When he opened the door and returned I could hear raucous, disembodied laughter. Powersby smiled that shark toothed grin of his and countered the laughter by saying, "If you were any more funny, I might have to cream you."

The laughter died, which in itself struck him as funny. He smiled in satisfaction at having had the last word before turning to me, pulling some papers from his file and handing

them to me. Gathered together they formed quite the bundle.

"Wait there. At the end of this shift someone will come to fetch you and give you a ride. When they let you off at the front gate to your zone, you hand these papers to a trooper out front. Stay here now. Catch the ride. Hold onto these papers. Got it? Understand?"

For the last time I nodded like an idiot, and not able to conjure the saccharine little girl's voice anymore, whispered, Thank you to him, a gratitude he did not accept. With that same bureaucratic angularity he left me sitting along unsupervised in that cramped and dreary waiting room.

A long while I sat, the wild events of recent days revolving in my mind, the image of each memory more disagreeable than the last. Breathing deeply I exhaled and slumped with my back to the wall. Condemned to serve in The Club again, despairing that my life held no promise of any greater purpose.

The door opened and a fat sweaty bald guy stuck his dome in the room and with the most absurd look of expectation on his grubby face searched all the way around the room before his gaze finally alighted on me. How stupid do you have to be to look for one person in an otherwise empty room?

He reigned-in the cheery grin and said, "C'mon with me. It's time."

Standing up I then followed him into an underground garage

area. For the most part only the PTB owned and operated wheels. To my right a dispatch office with sliding windows faced an open area of concrete ending in a concrete wall obscuring the rest of the garage. I know there was more area to it because while I stood there waiting I could hear tires squealing around corners and men's voices shouting.

Laughing Boy pointed at a spot on the pavement and ordered, "Wait right there."

I took a step forward onto my mark and feeling as though I was tied to a stake in the ground waited while he went into his office and said who knows what until I was treated to a series of looks and glances of open derision from everyone working behind the glass. They gawked at me knowing a Pleasure Model is essentially defenseless.

My self-esteem felt like it was draining out of my toes by the time the Black Maria rolled up and screeched to a rocking halt. The air break sighed in gaseous relief. Leaving the motor running the driver, a tall thin drink of water, descended from the cab just as Fat Boy scurried out of his office to meet him and hand over the invoice on me. The Driver, the type of lean young man who can eat anything and never gain weight, looked over the travel permit and dubiously asked, "Her?"

Fat Boy made some dirty remark I couldn't hear and they both laughed. Then they left me standing there while they

indulged in a personal conversation. Without any right to approach them let alone interrupt I stood there waiting while exhaust poured FROM of the tail pipe and began drifting directly at me. After everything I had been through I was not about to stand still for asphyxiation. Fanning my hand in front of my nose and teetering back and forth and sideways while uttering a squeamish squeal of protest broke the fellas out of their high level executive conference.

They looked over at me and Laughing Boy said one thing more, undoubtedly rude, making them both snicker. Before Laughing Boy walked away Driver shouted, "Front or back?"

Fat boy shouted, "Back!" and held his palms upwards in asking what kind of question is that?

Driver shrugged and put on a face saying, How was I to know? I guess he was confused about whether to treat me like a prom date or a prisoner.

Those two parted, and the Driver trotted over to the back of the truck, opened the back door, and let down the stairs, completing the whole maneuver without wasting a slap-bang gesture. Hanging onto a hand rail and poised acrobatically on the bumper he swung around facing me, and waved me over. By that time I was so ready to go I moved with alacrity and some economy of movement myself.

At the foot of the fold out metallic stairs I hesitated as

Driver Dan spoke loudly enough for me to hear him over the otherworldly motorized echoes bouncing off every surface:

"When you get inside sit down and brace yourself. The ride back there can get really bumpy." Sensing my reluctance he held out his long lanky arm and proffered me his hand. I took that hand and stepped onto the bottom step and felt uncertain but he steadied me so that I could reach for the rung opposite to the one he clung to and haul myself up the next couple of steps and into the cage.

Once inside I immediately slid into a sitting position on one of the benches. Slap crash bang, the folding metallic steps collapsed and stored, door locked, and me seated inside with the fleeting impression of the uniform he wore lighter than a trooper but belonging to the same tribe. Usually he must have had heavyweights traveling with him because I couldn't see him loading prisoners by himself. He wasn't a guard. He was a driver.

The engine revved. Heeding the boy's instructions I tried to brace myself even though there was nothing for grabbing a hold. The only time I was aware of my location came with an immediate steep incline. I figured we were climbing up to street level. After that my impressions were of a lot of bouncing and jostling. The interior of that transport smothered me with how it must feel to be left alive but hiding beneath bodies at the

bottom of a mass grave.

Without any warning the breaks squealed and the Black Maria rocked to a halt. The door opened and the steps were already deployed by the time I steadied myself and breached the exit. With a steady hand from my chauffeur I managed to descend the steps without falling. Once I landed safely, he said, "There you are, Pretty Lady. Save and sound."

Guys are so stupid sometimes. I said thank you in return and headed toward the front entrance where all the people in and around the gate area had frozen so everyone could concentrate on staring at me. I walked up to the first trooper I saw, a giant brute, and handed him my papers. He shuffled through them, tore out a couple he recognized, and then handed half of them back to me. For a moment he stood there ignoring me while he read the documents. His battle mask was off so I could see his expression of concentration. He made a wry face and said, "You know, young lady, I've been working the gates around here for 15 years, and you're only the second time I've ever seen one of those conveyances dropping somebody off. I keep this copy. You keep those, and this one, too. It orders you to get where you're going, by tonight, so get a move on."

In reply, all I said was, "Understood."

My mind clouded as I walked through the main entrance. I hadn't proceeded more than a couple of blocks when a tall buxom

blonde wearing the usual white silk bra, panties and high heels flashed by screaming in a silly and affected manner. In hot pursuit came a hoard of a dozen naked midgets sporting erections the size of cucumbers. From that spectacle I turned away and in the opposite direction I saw a dominatrix leading on a leash a three hundred pound man wearing nothing but a diaper.

I was back in the Pleasure Zone.

Before doing as I was told like a good little girl I chose instead to do what I wanted to do, which was go home to the library. The Body, The Club, the whole prurient scene would have to wait one more day for the return of Sasha the Savage.

At one time in my life I would have been afraid to walk through this area alone. The wet and the rot did more damage to these ancient A-frame houses than any other catalyst of decay. They looked like burned soufflés, most of which had collapsed over time. As I was walking through there by myself when one of them decided to crash. The wooden beams started making these loud snapping noises like the popping of gun fire before the whole structure crumpled to the ground. It kicked up billows of dirt and debris and other stuff across my path. There I was, strolling along, just minding my own business, when right beside me a whole house fell over for no reason. I find it very

difficult not to take that kind of randomness personally.

The ones already collapsed I feared the most because under those fallen roofs vermin found a favorite nesting place. If I could stomach the rustling and squealing as I walked past and not dwell in my imagination on the orgy of stinking black fur narrowing to slimy pink tails I knew to be seething and writhing amid the decaying lumber I might still be alright as long as it was daytime. Passing through at night represented an entirely different scenario. Under cover of darkness the largest rats grew bold, cocky even as they ran skittering across my path. Everyone in the Zone knew some version of a story about an old drunken whore staggering through the lost night and collapsing in a nice soft grassy area like the ones ringing each of these dilapidated A-frames. Poor old drab blind drunk thrashing about in a warm pond of rats. Submerged. Drowned. Down to the bone.

Like I said, if you can stop yourself from imagining all that taking place the short cut through the ghost village to the library presented no problems.

A chill wind drove my bare hands into my jacket pockets where my right hand made contact with a hard metallic object. In the failing light of day I stood contemplating Hater's laser beam pointer lolling in the palm of my hand. He must have slipped it into my jacket pocket for safe keeping and forgotten. Maybe he meant it as a parting gift, in the mind of a nerd the

equivalent of a dozen roses.

When I thumbed on the laser its bright white beam sliced through the gathering gloom. Depending on which way I rolled the cylinder the beam shined broad and flat or as a fat cone or right down to a pin point. As I stood in the wasteland wielding my light ray I caught a reflection off a pair of beady pink eyeballs about twenty feet away. The sight made my skin crawl and right away stirred my feet into motion. He sat back on his haunches the fat bastard sniffing the air as I passed. Adjusting the settings I honed the beam into a searchlight cone sweeping the street ahead from side to side. Another rat, not as big as the first, caught sight of me and skittered away disappearing into a pile of rubbish. While I can't say the laser saved my life, which sounds a tad melodramatic, the light proved a great source of comfort for the last couple of blocks before I cleared the ruined area and entered the park beyond.

A long time ago dogs and cats had become fair game as a food source, and since dogs were easier to catch, in this zone anyway, they were hunted to the brink of extinction. Now they were only raised on farms. Cats, on the other hand, proved more elusive prey. The old people had been feeding them for a long time maintaining them in a semi feral state. An old woman showed me how if you pet them they purr for you and make friends. She also taught me how they hunt vermin. Friends indeed. I'm sure

they're the reason why we never found any rats in the library. As a kid growing up in the brothel I only saw them headless and naked whenever Cook would lift one grey and wrinkled out of a pot of boiling water and smack her fat greasy lips with anticipatory pleasure.

The windows facing the park represented the back of the library. I went around to the front where the ramps lead up to the entryway. In the darkness candles burned, the flame pumping gently from the wick. The stacks of books were safe and dry, row on row. With my laser beam I frightened three old witches who began whimpering at the sudden intrusion of a robust stranger.

"Shush shush," said I, allaying their fears. "No worries. Good evening to you, Grandma. Auntie, how are you?"

Then one of them recognized me. She said, "You've been gone awhile."

Between the jagged darkness, among the spires of light, beamed the visage of my old friend the cat wrangler.

"It's true. I have been gone for awhile. Back today. I need to sleep. That's why I came here."

"Sit down first, child. Don't rush off like a hunk of fire. You must be tired, and hungry, too. Sit down and have some of our food. We're sharing."

"Thank you," I said. "I'm famished."

One of the weird sisters cocked her head to one side and

listened as though someone had struck a beautiful note of music.

"Famished," she softly repeated to herself, which I ignored as some kind of delirium.

The Cat Lady emptied wet and dry food into a clean bowl and mixed them together. I wished she hadn't combined them because I prefer to eat them separately. I was so hungry though I fell upon the free meal and relished every bite. While I ate I ruminated over how vulnerable these little old ladies were huddled together around their candles. I concluded what a blessing it was for the status of the library as a safe haven since nobody knew how to read anymore.

After slicking my bowl I about fell asleep sitting upright on my stool. To stave off somnolence until I could crawl into bed properly I groaned to my feet and thanked them for the meal and turned toward the stair well when the old lady's voice reached me in the darkness:

"Don't be too angry with us, Dear."

"Okay, I won't be," I answered, having no idea what she was talking about. I switched on the laser and by holding onto the hand rail carefully picked my way down the staircase. When I opened the room to my hovel I found a lit candle and about a dozen old people sleeping sitting up elbow to elbow with their backs to the wall around the whole perimeter of the room. Next their rank stench hit my sinuses and knocked me back a step. The

door swung shut on its own leaving me standing in the hallway. In my mind's eye the glimpse of naked wrinkled flesh. Sagging breasts, both male and female. On my mattress. Blankets belonging to me I suddenly no longer wanted. For a lot of different reasons I understood the futility of trying to evict these squatters. At least one of them looked like he might have been dead awhile.

As I walked past the old ladies camped out in the main lobby the Cat Wrangler called out after me, "I'm sorry, Dear. We assumed you were a goner."

Without stopping I said over my shoulder, "It's okay. I'm not supposed to be here anyway."

Outside I breathed deeply, thankful for the crude oil smell wafting in on the drizzle accumulating in the still air. The stench of human decay had coated the interior of my sinuses and any other smell no matter how odious arrived as a welcome relief. One day I would be like them. Mortality, the sagging flesh, brittle bones, blurry vision, deaf to words, teeth decayed, drooping ears and nose, aches, pain, death. In The Club each girl watches obsessively for the least signs of aging. No one would suspect us of cultivating existential awareness. No one would dirty their conservatism assigning to us those types of human attributes. What else do you call an intense, morbid awareness of your own failing existence? It isn't vanity on

their part. They know all too well The Pleasure Zone provides no plan for retirement with dignity.

As I approached The Club my superhero status melted away. Parties raged up and down the strip. The friction of electric lust powered the pink neon night. At The Club door the fellas acted like jerks and wouldn't let me in so I went around back and waited for one of the girls to come out for a cigarette break. A girl named Missy emerged a few minutes later, a petit young thing sporting a perfect rack natural. Too bad she smoked. We exchanged delighted to see yous and a kiss-kiss, pat-pat. I told her I needed to talk to The Body, and she understood me well enough. Her eyes sparkled in expectation of high drama.

Leaving Missy to corrupt her her pink lungs to black I went inside and passed through the kitchen area and avoiding the dressing room stepped straight into the lounge. The usual kings of industry types were enjoying their rented pleasures. Girls on laps. Girls on stage. Two girls on a velvet cloud performing one off the menu. How I despised this place.

An enormous silver backed ape detached himself from his swinging tire and intercepted me half way across the lounge.

"Well if it isn't Sasha the Savage. Come to beg for your old job back, then?"

"How are you, Fangster?"

"Not bad. Can't complain. Things behind the circulation

desk not working out for you?"

"Instead of wasting my time talking to you, I think I'll talk to your boss instead."

"Time is a precious commodity, and as such it is on my side. Play high toned now my dear girl, when the day is rapidly approaching. That's all I've got to say. My day with you will come."

"Is he in his office?"

"He knows you're here."

Charming Fangster returned to the bar where he resumed swinging on his tire while I went up the hallway and nodded a couple of times to girls whose only acknowledgement of my presence included putting their heads together, whispering and giggling as I passed. Man, I despised this place. And everybody who dwelt therein.

Without knocking I opened the door and entered the main office. Slightly startled as always Body flinched at the intrusion. Then he saw who it was.

"Well-well, the Prodigal... Daughter... returns."

"Don't strain yourself. I'm not here by choice. I've been ordered back. You're going to offer me a contract, and I'm going to sign it."

"You seem awfully sure about that."

"Check it," I said, "handing him my papers."

He was some time looking through those documents. An impressive show considering he was functionally illiterate. Finally he gave up and asked, "So what?"

"So you're signing me up again, and I don't have to do anything I don't want to, and you're going to give me a raise in credits, and I get a better room, one with a window."

"And if I don't?"

"Then my new Sugar Daddy, aka Powersby? He said he'll come down to this stinking pit of a club and kick your ass sideways. Check the stamp, Boy, and the signature. That's him, and he's a major shot caller for the government. A real G Man. When he shows up to check on how I'm doing and sees things aren't right, I'd hate to be wearing your sorry ass, that's all."

My play was so out of character and over the top I smoked him. He brought the paper closer to his nose, and when he recognized the stamp it bore, he jerked back in fright.

"Don't get me wrong, Sasha. I'm happy to see you," Body said, laying the paper flat on his desk.

"I wish I could say the same. I've been out and about, Body. I have seen first hand how normal people live. I'm not taking your bullshit anymore. I am no longer willing to pretend that somehow you are in charge of our situation. Let's face it. I am stronger faster smarter better than you at everything. I was a fool to look up to you and trust you and allow you to

manipulate me. If only there had been someone else to replace you, someone with actual knowledge, with style and substance. Instead, it was always just... you."

"I'm sorry."

Don't say that to me. I don't want to hear that word from you. If you start saying I'm sorry for a lifetime of poisoning my well, we will be here all day. I want a better room. And I'm not one of your little performing seals anymore. And if you don't give me what I want and start treating me right, I'll call my new boyfriend, and I kid you not, man, he will come down here, post haste, and kick your pucker string up past your lips."

For the moment I had him cowering. Yet behind the worried look in his eyes I detected the petty machinations of revenge grinding away already.

Since then, since my return, nobody in The Club likes me anymore. The only two who ever did are now goners, and I've never given anyone else a real reason for wanting to be my friend. I don't have the least desire to fit in with people. I never talk to anyone. They call me a bartender even though I rarely mix a drink. I force whoever else is on duty to perform the work for me. I make The Body pay an emotional price with my displeasure. In retaliation he works the open end of the bar, effectively penning me in the whole evening long. He won't let

me pass except to go to the powder room. Other than that every spare moment I keep to my room. Powersby has succeeded in trapping my body. In private rebellion my imagination still roams free.

In my new room I've positioned my bed so at night as I'm lying there I can see my face faintly reflected in the overhanging windowpane. I pretend I can trace the features of my two lost companions informed by patterns of crude oil droplets falling from the clouds like rain. I watch their images in the dripping liquid patterns superimposed over my own, first one, and then the other. They want to take turns on me, and so I let them. I pleasure them as they pleasure me. I take turns kissing them both. I kiss their lips.