

*Thirst For Fire*

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# Toilet Bet

## by Dunc Williams

It had been a long hard day cleaning toilets in the down town area of city. These are some of the worse toilets across the whole country and this is probably the worst job I ever had. After ten hours of cleaning toilets I need a shower, a long shower, and a beer. This didn't happen today though. This was a particularly bad day. It wasn't over yet but as I stand on home plate with only one strike left I really wish this day didn't happen. If I could delete a day it would definitely be this one.

The reason I don't want this day is because it should have never happened. Firstly, I don't know Bobby Davo but I've heard rumors about him around the town. The grapevine is thick and often perverted. Everybody knows Bobby Davo is the big baseball star for the City Dockers. They are obviously the biggest team in the area. That's who Bobby Davo is, the biggest star in The Dockers universe, the star pitcher, the winner. All the ladies love Bobby D. That's why even though I'm one strike away from having my head smashed in by Bobby D with his choice of baseball bat, I still think I can smash him out of the Dockers ballpark and escape with my head and false teeth and with all the glory. As he chews gum and basks in the glory of the mob of thugs and drug dealing ex-players behind him, I still dream of the sweetest connection, the homer that might even get me laid.

It all started as I was walking across town after finishing the last toilet. The public toilets in the East Side are notoriously bad. All the junkies and gypsies and runaways have sex in them. They shoot drugs in there all night and shit in them all day and clear out just in time for the cleaners like me at 5 O'Clock. I wore a mask to go in there today, like one of those masks you see people in Asia wearing to prevent them from catching chicken flu. I had a hose running across the street from the bright red hydrant of my innocence.

I ran in there like there was a monster from the deep inside licking at the slimy porcelain walls.

“Ok, fuckers!!!” I screamed as the first blast slammed the first cubicle door open. There was toilet paper stuck to the walls and a freshly laid shit above the blood and piss stained urinal. There was brown water three inches deep around the bowl. Jesus, there were fish swimming in that water, dark goldfish swimming in that oily, steaming water. There were needles and a pair of blood soaked soiled panties on the seat, balanced there in unlawful abandon. This wasn't just the ordinary smell of scum shit, this was the bowel sweat and excrement of a thousand rotten cow burgers and plastic bean cheese burritos digested by the most hopeless gastric junkies in City and there were ten stalls of scatology to go.

After I came out of last toilet I was a different man. Never before I had I ever seen such waste, such disgusting violations of the laws of human decency. It changed me inside but the funny thing was that it did every time. When I first started I thought I would never come back the next day. I used think “Ok, that's enough. If I never clean another toilet I'd die a happy man.” After cleaning 37,703 toilets last year, surely that's enough for one human-being I still come back for more day after day. Now, after about a year, I know from experience that in the morning I will feel that empty feeling in my gut, that hunger for the smell, the feeling of order I get from seeing a dirty toilet become pristine. You know that saying: “It's a dirty job but someone's got to do it”? Well that someone is me but I would amend it to: “It's a unfathomably disgusting job and I need to do it”. It's a disease, it's a sickness, I know.

As I crossed the street half way to my apartment, half way to my newly refurbished shower room with double jets, gold fittings and every kind of cleaning product I could find in the drugstore, I looked left and right and left again and the next thing I knew I was gone. I had left my conscious thought. I was still conscious but I had been displaced. I was on some gravel and my knees felt warm. It turns out I'd been hit. Hit by a silver blue BMW roadster and both my knees were lightly skinned, nothing too bad considering. I

looked up at the shiny chrome front end of the sports car, I saw the shoes and heels of city folk but what I remember hearing over the general 5 o'clock traffic was a high pitched falsetto, "Oh my god, you hit him, baby!"  
"Hit who, baby?"

I got slowly off the tarmac in my City Toilet Cleaning Co. overalls, which now had big bloody tattered holes in the knees, and cast my watering blurry vision at the convertible sports car in front of me. In the passenger seat there was a blonde with big hair and even from this distance I could see that he had too much make up on. In the driver's seat there was a guy wearing mirrored shades.

"Get the fuck out the way, buddy," the mirrored shades said. I just stood there swaying in front of the gathering crowd.

"Honey, he's hurt," the blonde screamed at him.

"Get the fuck out of the way, buddy," said the shades. I took a step closer to the car.

"Hey, buddy stay off the hood," shades said.

"Dude, you hit me?" I said still in shock.

"Do you know who I am? Get the fuck out of the fucking road, buddy," shades said.

"Who are you?" I said as I formulated a spit ball in mouth.

"I'm Bobby D, buddy. Move your stinking ass out of the god damn road," shades said.

"Honey, he doesn't know who you are? You just hit him in the ass," the blonde screamed.

I dribbled the spit ball down my chin and said "I'll knock you right out the park, bitch."

That's how I got here, standing in my shitty overalls and bloody knees with a baseball bat in Dockers Stadium on a Wednesday night at 7pm. Luck, chance, fate, or just plain preservation lead me to this awesome situation. 30, 000 toilets cleaned, bad highway code and a loose foul tongue after a brush with death accelerated me right to the next part that shows that even road kill can lay down a bet if given an even chance.

"Buddy, I'd strike you out blind folded three times in a row and go home and bang your sister while you tried to remember who your mommy was," said shades in monotone.

"You'd bang his sister?" said the blonde.

"Wanna bet?" was my inspired reply.

The first eight pitches had gone quite well considering I'd never picked up a bat in my entire life. I've seen a few ball games in my life but Sports wasn't really my thing. I was more into biology in high school.

"Ok, Mr. Stinky, last pitch. Then I'm going to knock your teeth down your throat dumb throat. Fair's fair," says Bobby D as he turns and pulls back his arm...

...and I didn't even see it. Now they've got me pinned against the wire behind home plate and Bobby D is walking down a tunnel of cheering fans practice swinging the bat. The stadium is almost half full of screaming, blood thirsty zombie fans and S&M cheerleaders dancing on the hoods of sports cars.

"Ok, one to the body just for warm up, then to the main attraction of 9 swings at the head, ok buddy?" says Bobby D.

"Alright, whatever, dude," I say.

"It's not a "whatever" situation, buddy. This is going to hurt," Bobby

D swings the bat.

It's a solid blow to the lower stomach but the pain starts lower down and works itself slowly up to my stomach and ribs and then my chest starts to burn and I can feel a deep nausea engulf me and the involuntary rush of bile up my throat. Bobby D has thrown his head back with his legs spread wide, reveling in the glory of the first explosion of crowd adulation. I can feel bile fill my mouth and push at my lips as I try not to be sick on the first swing. It's no use though the bile jettisons out of my mouth and along with it goes my teeth which land directly on Bobby D's crotch.

The teeth are closed right over the zipper of Bobby D's jeans. They also have a tight clench on something which is of importance to him. They are biting and grinding with supernatural ferocity. The partying crowd that was cheering and hollering is now like a funeral. The cheerleader's pom-poms lie limp, the beer drinking zombie fans have wandered off and are bumping into each other on the pitcher's mound. The majority of the fans are horrorstruck by the scene of a half beaten man in Toilet Cleaning overalls with bloody knees and no teeth and Bobby D the star pitcher for The Dockers screeching with some false teeth snapping remorselessly on his crotch. As the dull pain of the first blow flows away from my body I probably look like unholy hammered shit but I have the clarity of sweet victory to savor.

# The Peeping Tom

## by Connie Vigil Platt

The television newscaster was talking about a county fair showing a Ferris wheel in the background when he switched in mid sentence to announce that a Peeping Tom had been seen in residential neighborhoods.

"All women no, change that to everybody should be on the alert to watch for this low life. He has been seen sneaking around looking in windows. Seven houses have been broken into and all of the women were alone at the time. When he is sure a woman is by herself, he will break in and tie her up with her own pantyhose and rob his victims. He always uses pantyhose. Please be on the look out for this perpetrator of innocent women's safety. There has been a run on pet stores for guard dogs due to these incidents. The owner of Pets Inc. says, "I can't get enough dogs to meet the demand. " The announcer went on to say, "Women out there arm yourselves with something and be prepared to protect yourself. This is a crime against everyone. You don't want or need to be the next victim. This person will show no mercy. So you don't need to show him any. Now good night and be careful."

Melanie was listening intently, absorbed in the story, when she heard a blood-curdling scream and than a loud bang coming from the bathroom.

There was only one thing that made that kind of thump. That was definitely the sound of a body falling. Melanie jumped from the couch where she had been lying comfortably wrapped in a blanket, untangled her legs from the coverlet and ran to the next room. The sound had undeniably come from the bathroom. Her roommate of two years, Brandi, had gone to take a long luxurious bubble bath.

Brandi ran out of the room with a towel wrapped around her dripping body, and bumped into Melanie causing them both to slip

on the wet floor and fall in a heap in the hall

"What happened? What's wrong?" Melanie asked when she could get herself straightened out.

"I saw him! I think I killed him, I didn't know he would be so big." Brandi sobbed. "Saw Him? Saw who? Did you see the Peeping Tom?"

"Peeping Tom? Is that what you call him? Look in there!" Brandi pointed to the white tile floor, as green liquid oozed from a broken shampoo bottle.

"Oh my gosh! You've knocked his head off. Brandi! You're a stone cold killer! He is pretty big though." Melanie was completely amazed.

"Well I didn't mean too. What do you want me to do sew it back on?"

"Brandi what a ghoul you are. That would be out of the question."

"What are we going to do?" Brandi asked.

"Not we my dear. You. You're going to have to get rid of the what's left of him. I don't want anything to do with it." Melanie told her.

"I can't touch it. He has such hairy legs. What will we tell people?" Brandi shuddered.

"We don't have to tell them anything if you'll get rid of him. Nobody has to know. It isn't as if he's a little green man from outer space you know."

"How do you know? This kind of creature might live in space. You don't know." Brandi took a step toward the open door.

"Be careful you don't step on broken glass. You don't want to go to the emergency room and explain how you cut your foot do you?" Melanie told her.

Brandi shivered and reached for a tissue. "I certainly don't want anyone to know we have cockroaches this big." She said as she flushed the remains down the drain.

The next night as both girls sat on the couch to watch television, the newscaster announced, " The local police have made known that the Peeping Tom that has been terrorizing single women all over town has turned himself in. He claimed while he was watching the window of a bathroom he over heard two women talking about knocking an intruder's head off and sewing it back on. That made him decide that it was too dangerous to keep on peeking in windows. He realized he has a problem and wants to get the help he needs. He said he didn't want to get his head detached from his body like they were talking about."

Melanie and Brandi laughed gleefully together when they heard the news.

"Maybe we did something for the good of the entire town." Brandi said.

THE END

# You Dirty Whore

## by Brett Stout

I met this girl in a sleazy bar recently. Her name I can't remember, but who cares anyways.

It was late that's all I know.

I stumbled in drunk as usual and managed to mumble the words "PBR." I sat by myself in the corner, which is my usual spot. I sit there alone most times. I like it, no humans bother me in that spot. I often overhear conversations of theirs and that's enough to know I would never want to meet them.

There I was contemplating life and shit and the next thing I know she's there next to me talking my fucking ear off. I mumble a few words in between her pauses. I call her a "Dirty Bitch" and she still sits there. We leave the bar and head to her place.

As soon as the front door is open I'm all over her. Groping and kissing her and pulling her clothes off. I kicked her cat out of the way and it hissed at me, little shithead! We stumbled into the bedroom and pulled her panties off. I licked her for a few minutes. Then I said "This is going to be a night you will never forget," I won't remember you; but you will fucking remember the name Brett for the rest of your life.

I pulled out my cock which was as hard as I have ever seen it. I grabbed some hand lotion of hers by the nightstand and rubbed a gob of it on my cock. I told her to lie on her side. Before she even knew what hit her I shoved my dick in her ass.

She screamed in agony. She told me to stop but I just started to pound away as hard as I could. I told her it would be over in a minute and to just be open minded and experience new things since she was such a brilliant person. I fucked so hard I was about

to pass out. As I came the sun was rising and blinded me for a second. My dick popped out of her tight little ass like a jack in the box. I sat there and looked her for a minute. My thoughts were "You're a whore."

I lit a cigarette and wiped my cock off on her pillow. I left her laying there with a strange look on her face. I grabbed her pack of cigarettes and a Coke out of the refrigerator on the way out. The damn cat was in my way again so I kicked it really hard this time. I slammed the door and stumbled out trying to figure out how the fuck I was going to get home this time.

# The Move

## by Adeola Iyiola

The sex was stale, David thought as he entered the elevator. He was tired of making love to a log of wood, that is, he also thought, if he can get the log of wood to open up between its split ends. She was tense, passive and uncaring. The sexual deprivation he had endured recently was becoming a crisis for him. He was tired of waiting for the entrance. He was now ready to seek a different entry point. He wanted something smoother, sexier, more vibrant, and maybe younger. His relationship with Cindy was complicated by the fact that they had lived together in the last one year.

He watched the elevator slow to a stop and he exited on the 12th floor. They had decided they wanted a bigger place and had both moved out of their apartments into a bigger one. He had grown to love the apartment. His fear was simple. If he breaks off the relationship, will he be the one to move out of the apartment? He did not want that. He wanted the apartment he had grown to love, to himself.

He would get something to eat, he thought as he opened the apartment door, grabbed the file he wanted his colleague Greg to work on, sit around a while and head back to work.

The New York sunshine shined brightly through the open curtains in the living room. He was surprised to see television was on, the Jerry Springer Show blaring loudly from it. He didn't know Cindy was off work that day. Besides, he did not know too much of what was going on with Cindy these days. She was evasive about her schedules and he felt it was deliberate.

He walked towards the bedroom, opened the door and found no one there. He walked towards the bathroom. "Cindy," he called but got no answer. She was not in the bathroom. Maybe she went out for a while or had forgotten to turn off the television set, he

thought, and turned to walk back towards the living room. It was after he turned off the television that the sounds became audible. Very low tones at first but when he remained still, walked towards the possible direction of its source and listened intently, he could hear it distinctly. Moaning sounds came from the direction of the guest room.

As he approached the guest room, the sounds became louder. Maybe, he thought, Cindy was entertaining herself with pornographic movies; after all, he wasn't getting any sex from her. Something, he was sure now, must be pleasuring her. He smiled at the thought of catching his girlfriend watching pornography behind his back. He was slightly excited, lightly aroused.

"Cindy," he called as he opened the door and then stood still, staring at the two nude figures joined as one. He watched them quickly detach and scramble to get dressed.

"David!" Cindy called as she hurried to get off the bed.

David simply turned back and walked out.

"Oh, God," he could hear Cindy chorus behind him. He walked over to the cabinet his mother gave him when he first moved out of her home, his first most prized possession. He opened the third drawer and removed his second most prized possession, the gun his friend Marvin gave him. He walked back towards the guest room. At the turn into the corridors, he confronted the man who had been sleeping with his girlfriend in his home. He was walking towards his possible and hopeful escape. He had managed to get his pants on and in his hands were his shirt and shoes.

David stopped, raised the gun towards him and commanded, "Turn around and walk back into the room! Now!"

He stopped, stared, but did not turn back. David raised his gun higher, unlocked the gun with a noisy click. "Now!" he commanded again.

The man turned back and started towards the room. David followed him. Cindy was still inside, fully dressed, buttoning her shirt.

“Wow, Wow, what do we have here? How long has this been going on? “

They did not respond.

“How long?” he asked loudly.

“Six months,” the man answered.

“Six months!” David exclaimed with a frown, “And we’ve only been living together a year.”

He sat down in the chair in the corner, gun pointed. All the while he was trying to figure out what was wrong with their sex life, he thought, she had been having sexual relations with another guy. She was screaming and panting in pleasure in the arms of an alien body while he drowned in sexual deprivation. He felt cheated and fooled.

“Strip,” he commanded them.

They were reluctant and slowed to heed his command.

“Strip!” he commanded again, raising the gun once more, “or I’ll blow your brains out.”

They started to strip and he watched them and waited, his anger diminishing slowly at the sight of their helplessness.

“Sit,” he commanded after they were naked. They proceeded to sit on the bed but he stopped them.

“No, on the floor,” he said and pointed downwards.

They sat, their naked buttocks touching the brown rug. The man tried to cover his private parts with his hand.

“It’s too late for that now, don’t you think, open up!”

“Is this really necessary?” Cindy asked in soft mellow tone.

“Shut up!” he shouted towards her, turned towards the man and commanded again, “Open up!”

The man uncovered his private area and allowed it to touch the rug.

“And you too,” he told Cindy.

“No one in this room is a stranger to your display. Open up!”

She did, slowly.

David stared towards Cindy. “I have to commend you Cindy. You pulled this off—for six months.” He pointed the gun towards the man and asked, “What’s your name?”

He hesitated and answered, “Perry.”

“Liar!” David said stamping his leg loudly on the floor. “You don’t look like a Perry to me. Get up!” he pointed towards his pants, “over there, throw me your pants. Now!”

The man stood, got his pants and threw it over to David, who searched through it with one hand while holding the gun with the other. He found his wallet and opened it.

“Well,” he said, “what do we have here? Gary Taylor, thirty six years old. You lied to me. What you really look like is a Gary. Are you married?”

“No.”

“Liar!” he said and removed a photograph of a young girl about six years from one of the wallet’s pockets. “What do we have here,” he said and turned the picture around to face the two, “I bet this is the daughter you had out of wedlock.”

“You told me you weren’t married,” Cindy said facing Gary with an angry frown.

“I was. I’m separated,” he answered.

“You have a child too! You told me you were thirty. You are thirty six. You lied to me.”

“Hey! Hey! Save your adulterous accusations,” David said with a smile. “You got what you deserve. Will I get what I deserve? Now, that’s the question. Maybe we should all get what we deserve.” David said.

They were silent for a while.

“Shouldn’t we all get what we deserve? Answer me!” said David, waving the gun.

“Yes,” they echoed, “We should.”

“Get up!” he commanded, “Hold each other’s hands like the lovebirds you are.”

They stood up slowly and held each other’s hands.

“Raise your other hands so I can see them. Now walk in front of me, towards our bedroom. I want to show you something. Take your clothes with you. Don’t worry Gary. She will guide you. She knows where it is. If either of you make one silly step, you’re both dead. I can’t kill one and leave the other. Soul mates deserve to die together. Besides, I won’t want any witness, and I will clean up really good. ”

He ushered them into the bedroom gun held behind them heads. He opened one of the drawers and removed a digital camera.

“No David, you don’t have to do this,”

“Shut up! I will do what I damn well please. You’ve done yours for six months. Now, the two of you, get into bed and do what you do.”

Like a photographer he commanded they change positions, make poses and he snapped. When he was finished, he said, “If it were not that my reputation in this building will be compromised. I’ll have you two get out of here naked. Get dressed!”

They hurriedly got into their clothes. He then ushered them at gunpoint towards the living room. They sat quietly.

“Now Cindy what I want from this is pretty simple. We must end this relationship, which for you already ended a long time ago with little problems. I want you to leave this apartment today and come back within thirty days to get your things. I can not stand the sight of you.”

“I don’t wanna do that. Why don’t you leave? I’m the woman.”

“Hold on,” he said.

David stood, holding the gun, went over to the computer desk in the right hand corner of the room, sat down with the gun on one hand. “I wouldn’t try anything stupid if I were you?” he warned. He worked on the computer for a few seconds, walked back to where they were seated to stand in front of them and said, “I now have a copy of this sent to my computer at work. I wanted to make sure I have enough copies.”

“Is it worth it David?”

“Yes, just pack your things and go as soon as you can. That’s all I ask. Tell your lover to help you. He knows these photos could hurt

his marriage or divorce or whatever it is he claims he's in. And personally, I don't think your parents will like those pictures floating around somewhere where their church-mates can find them and when they find out he was married...hmm," he said holding his palm to his chest, "That will surely stop the beat of their Christian hearts. We don't want that do—"

"Alright I'll move."

"If you would need time to think about this—"

"No, oh no, she doesn't. I will finance the move," Gary answered quickly.

His anger, David was sure, was now transforming into pleasure. He enjoyed ridiculing the adulterous couple.

Cindy stared at him and back at David," All right. What happens to the photos?"

"I promise I would give them back the day you move and I change the locks."

"That will only take a week," Gary answered.

"Good, now get out and Cindy, you can come back tomorrow to pack some of your things. Pack enough for a week, and I trust as you said, by the end of seven days you will be done. I don't want to have to remind you."

"You wouldn't have to. But we would have the photos back." Gary answered.

"Yes, I promise," David answered.

When they were gone, he sat in the living room, caressing the gun his friend Marvin gave him. He remembered what he told him.

“This toy gun, as good as the real ones, definitely looking good, if not better than the real deal. It is a rare commodity. The government ordered them not to make it anymore. Trust me, it’s amazing. When you pull it, it makes a sound like its firing but it has no bullet. It is that good and will never be stupid enough to get you a felony charge. It might get you places and out of compromising positions. What would be most powerful is having the real thing. What would be most stupid is not having one of them,” Marvin had told him.

Marvin was right, he thought, smiled and relaxed comfortably into his chair in apartment 12C.

# The Saddest Break of Day

## by P.H. Madore

Massachusetts was dry, as were Providence and Newport, and the first thing we did the morning the call came was attack a homeless dude with a shopping cart full of food. We'd smoked from Corey's reserve stash and were feeding our respective munchies in our usual fashion: wandering around the Hi-Lo grocery store across the park from our two-bedroom filling a cart with whatever seemed right. I'd been relying on a now-imprisoned redneck named Cob in Newport during dry season for about two years—an eternity in our culture. But I knew a guy who knew an Asian in New Jersey named Yao, and I paid him to put me in touch with this shady unheard-of fuck. Excited by the ringing of my cell phone, nothing else seemed important.

“The one you been told about,” I said on demand.

“Have I what you need.”

“Ten-pack, twenty-pack, what?”

“Fifty, no less.”

I was stunned. I'd never picked up fifty pounds before, never even close to that from a strange connect. “How much?”

“Thirty-five per Z,” he said, thinking I could do the math in my head.

“I'll call you back.”

“C'mon!” I told Corey, who was grabbing a leg of cooked chicken from the cart. “Wha'do-I-do-with-this?” he spat and I said, looking around and pointing at a harmless drifter we'd once drank with,

“Him!” Then I was running across the parking lot. Corey followed and all I heard as my feet hit grass was the metal wheels bouncing across the asphalt and the incoherent, chasing thanks of the bum.

Back at the apartment Corey executed a mad search for my calculator and once it was found we did the math: thirty large. We talked it over and he brought up the obvious: we'd be crazy to go to New Jersey with that kind of loot. According to him neither of us had ever been there—he didn't know about the time I went to Newark to drop off three white kilos and had a bullet graze my neck in the process. My explanation for the scar was always some bullshit tale of a childhood accident.

He was right, though. New Jersey definitely wasn't safe for guys like us, life-long New Englanders. This is basically what I said to Yao while adding that the price was truly unbeatable. Before I'd even finished my sentence, he said, “We will bring. Two days. You wait for call.” Then he hung up, and I felt like a sucker for tossing all that food.

I couldn't even calculate the profit. During dry season we could sell skimpy bags for higher prices and not lose a single customer. I figured the first eight pounds would be gone in a couple days. I contemplated cocaine to stay awake; contemplated hiring help—but where was I to go for that, the classifieds? Rats were everywhere, and there were days when I even wondered about Corey. If given the chance and the right conditions, would he roll on me? I wasn't stupid enough to ask—all I could do was watch—but I wouldn't have blamed him or been surprised if he had. I'd never told him all the evil I was responsible for; he knew. The eyes of a man like me give nothing away, but my hardened presence and stories on the street inevitably lead to unconfirmed assumptions. “This is fuckin' nuts,” I said to him later on. We were waiting on some girls, finishing off some gifted top-shelf vodka.

He was looking out the window and not paying me any attention.

“Yeah this shit hits pretty hard.”

“Not that,” I said. “This deal. We’re gonna make around seven-hundred percent at-fuckin’-least. We could retire no problem when it's gone.”

“But we won’t,” he said and dawned an Irish grin. Into the night we blinded ourselves with inherent alcoholic darkness.

Waking up at about four the next morning excited and jittery, I pulled a book out of my hiding place and picked up where I’d left off two weeks before. It was *A Walk On The Wildside* by Nelson Algren.

“Stranger on a strange-lit stair, you have come to a strange frontier,” I read, and my heart moved, though that's rare for me.

I wondered if they’d be the last words I would think if we got hit in Newark or Hackensack or wherever, and heard Corey stir in the next room; as he flushed the toilet I hid the book again. Spent the next hour carefully oiling an unused, clean AR-15.

At about seven I woke his ass up and directed him to get me high, knowing he still had some Canadian hash from a queer dealer I refused to associate with.

When my phone finally rang that late-afternoon, it was the number I'd been waiting for again. Nearly every other number had gone ignored.

“Yeah.”

“You have left yet?”

“F'wheah?”

“You decide. Call when you reach turnpike,” Yao told me.

“Bu—“ I started as the line went dead.

Corey was looking at me with happy wide hazel eyes. I nodded.

In my room I stuffed three pistols (two for Corey, one for me), the AR, and two fresh bottles of Bacardi into a duffel bag where the cash had been resting since the day of the first call.

Corey was already outside revving his Thunderbird. I took a last look at our apartment, and soon nodded out as we went south of Boston.

I awoke to Corey's laughter and looked at him and said, "What?"

"Nothin."

I knew. He was a happy drunk—it was why he drank pretty often.

"Pull over," I said. "I'll drive."

"Ain't got a license," he said, suddenly serious.

"Yer fuckin drunk!"

"We get pulled over we're completely fucked—these plates'r still hot," he admitted.

"Ain't eithah," I said thinking I was right, but he didn't answer.

"What the fuck? I thought you fixed that, you stupid son of a bitchin motherfuck!" Again he didn't answer and he was wearing a moronic smile which actually angered me. "Then gimme the bottle." I could smell rum emanating and remembered that it was how we'd met—the only two at some forgotten crack whore's party who could drink straight rum.

"Na—"

I cocked my heater.

"Wouldn't shoot me, Pete." He said my name in a way which implied that I was being irrational.

“You think,” I said, not exactly sure how serious I was.

He tossed the bottle into my lap carelessly, rum slopping onto my clothes. I was satisfied with that, even if I wanted to bust the bottle on his skull. It was his car though, probably the only thing of value he owned besides a gun or four. I put the safety on, made sure he noticed. “I will next time, you cunt,” I told him, and couldn’t help but smile.

I turned the radio on medium volume. I hoped to fool him, keep him thinking I was aware although I was trying to be rested and mindful for the transaction. I leaned back in the seat, relaxed.

The sun set.

The next time I awoke, we were at a gas station. Corey was inside, all smiling red cheeks. I noted three cop cars. I felt pride—he was becoming bold as me every day, finally learning that people see only what they want to.

He came out toting four packs of gum. Unlike most drunks, his cheeks were the only giveaway—he never stumbled, talked too fast, or got belligerent without provocation.

I reached behind the seat and quickly checked on the cash and protection in the pump island lights. Reclined and fell to sleep once again, and in my dream I heard a tugboat—I'd spent the entire dream somewhere near Booth Bay Harbor up in Maine.

The sudden shatter of glass was real, and I was launched to consciousness as my body heaved forward, my head smacking the dashboard. I smelled rum and burning rubber and blood—surrounding me was the stink of indulgence. As my head slammed back my eyes were wide. Headlights I knew to shine golden were spots of white; tail-lights I knew as red were countless scattered shades of gray.

As the car rolled once on its side, I reached left for Corey to touch his heart, see if there was a pulse still; touched his neck and was immediately and truly shocked for the first time since adolescence—there was no pulse, no head.

I pulled my piece and held the barrel to my temple. I thought about cashing in right then. Starting over's a bitch, I knew from experience; the game had turned on a silver dollar and I felt unwilling to change with it. My partner and closest friend was lost to me, to his family, to the game, to his own weak desire.

The radio filtered into my weakened consciousness: Oh-oh, take the money and run, Steve Miller sang. Corey's favorite drinking song ever since we'd hit some fuck called Chad for our first eight grand.

I yanked the hefty duffel bag from the back of my seat and crawled through the open skull of the windshield, dragging the duffel behind me, and walked until dawn.

It wasn't just the saddest break of day I've ever witnessed, in grayscale as it was, but one of my last. I haven't seen anything for over two years now, and sitting here doing nothing I am often glad that I can't see things which jog my memory. Things which make me regret not pulling the trigger either time.

# Swim

## by Paul Kavanagh

There was special offer, stated Grunfeld.

No there wasn't, replied Satogata.

Yes there bloody was, proclaimed Grunfeld.

I'll not have your eyes upon me wine! bellowed Satogata.

They're not on your wine! bellowed Grunfeld.

Satogata lost for words, or maybe a frog in his throat was croaking swigged from the bottle that was adhered to his mud caked hand. This abroach was watched with much pathos. The disappearing wine matched Grunfeld's declivity into the doldrums. Grunfeld was lachrymose but was too desiccated to weep. Satogata moaned as though in the act of micturating. Each moan got louder and each moan exacerbated Grunfeld's despair and dryness. Satogata looked up, coughed violently and expectorated in an agonal whimper a bolus green compound, that contained much hair, grass, liver and kidney.

Grunfeld with scotopic blur analytically diagnosed the mess with much avidity. It dissipated the acedia.

Save me the dregs, entreated Grunfeld.

What me blood, snot, kidneys and lungs? impugned Satogata.

That would be wonderful, rhapsodized Grunfeld.

You're a cannibal! bellowed Satogata.

I'm not! screamed Grunfeld.

You're not a Christian, exclaimed Satogata.

Satogata lifted up the bottle so that the sun could illuminate the dregs swirling within the wine. The wine was the color of piss and tasted like piss. This acerbic product was the ramification of monks' reeking gouty feet. The trapped rays of sun were iridescent in the viscosity. From the aperture of the bottle the reek of dead fish emanated.

Give me a swig, said Grunfeld.

Spell transphenomenality for me, said Satogata.

Give me a taste, said Grunfeld.

Explain the trinity of the soul, elucidate how the soul mirrors the holy trinity, said Satogata.

Let me wet me whistle with the wine, said Grunfeld.

How many circles did Dante illuminate? asked Satogata.

Go on drown me in wine, it would be fun, said Grunfeld his pissstained orbs nystagmic.

The tone of Grunfeld's voice had metamorphosed. Affability had superseded desperation. The Machiavellian had ratiocinated that a friendly approach would be more fruitful, that exasperation manifested would only be futile. One only achieved the impossible by luff. It was only a simple thing that was obturating, Satogata could yaw arbitrarily. Satogata was like a rubber band; he could snap any time. A wrong step and Satogata would more than likely kick out Grunfeld's broken teeth on the other hand he could simply hand over the bottle. But this was a bit of luff, computed Grunfeld. And so riantly Grunfeld slapped Satogata on the back and smiled at the bawcock. There was much aplomb in his countenance. This new façade obfuscated the ague. Satogata was a mercurial bugger forever spitting spitty grist, vim about coprophilia, with a

constitution that best can be described as crispation. Satogata was perplexed by the recrudescence, he was a bloody stubborn caitiff was Grunfeld.

I'll give you a swig if you swim across the river and touch the other bank, said Satogata.

The tete-a-tete was taking place on the bank of the river. The river was a lugubrious, tenebrous reek of dead dogs and drown cats. A tramp floated by now and again, bloated and bleached. The undulations croaked like frogs and moaned like bored whores fighting off ennui, feigning interest in the cock that is pounding them. The river dichotomized, anatomized the town like all good rivers.

You bloody bastard! bellowed Grunfeld.

With alacrity Grunfeld stripped to his ball bag and eczema. His shitty arse smiled at Satogata as his toe tips tested the temperature of the river.

You bloody bastard! Bellowed Grunfeld.

Get in you bloody arse! ordered Satogata.

Can you see me grapes? asked Grunfeld.

They're close to popping, said Satogata.

Thank god for that! proclaimed Grunfeld.

Slowly with much hesitation Grunfeld in the throes of pusillanimity lowed his skeletal frame into the murky depths. He could no longer see his toes, his knees, and his cock and ball bag. Satogata lifted the bottle to his mouth and sipped. With acumen Satogata had computed that twenty sips would leave enough dregs for Grunfeld.

Bloody hell start swimming or you'll drown! bellowed Satogata.

Against the dead dogs and stray cats Grunfeld vigorously beat his arms and legs. The fear of death drove him on. The taste of wine left him indefatigable. Grunfeld with head above the water swim like a hound in proximity to moribundity. Satogata bellowed with laughter and swigged viscerally from the bottle adhered to his blood caked hand. Now and again the arse of Grunfeld popped out of the dank waters and this facetious moment, though ephemeral, spasmodic, illuminated Satogata with cheer and felicity. Drowning in ribald tears Grunfeld became obfuscated to Satogata. And out of sight out of mind.

Lost in the disequilibrium of happiness and laughter Satogata downed the wine and dregs.

Grunfeld looked behind him and saw that Satogata was blinded by laughter thus turned back without touching the other bank. The recreant knew that Satogata would be unable to impugn the veracity of his endeavor. Grunfeld was wet; he was huffed, puffed and shagged.

Did you see me swim? asked Grunfeld.

I did, said Satogata.

Grunfeld dried himself with his rags. With damp rags Grunfeld covered his gout, pox and syphilis. Happily dressed Grunfeld jounced over to the muddy puddle and sat juxtaposed to Satogata who welcomed him with much mendacity.

Well, where's the wine? asked Grunfeld licking his slimy lips.

I swigged it all, confessed Satogata.

Satogata dropped his head with much compunction.

You bloody what? gasped Grunfeld.

It was the fear I thought you were about to drown, wept Satogata.

I'll have me weight in blood then! bellowed Grunfeld pugnaciously leaping to his feet.

Satogata reciprocated this aberration. With fist clenched both bellicosely huffed through a rictus of braggadocio. But Grunfeld was fatigued. The swimming had done him in. He could barely stand. Truculent though he was the punch he launched never even cut through the air. Overcome with ataxy the arms of Grunfeld effately fell to his side. Seeing this providence Satogata brought up his boot with jutting toe and connected superlatively with Grunfeld's crown jewels. Upon impact Grunfeld burst like a sack of wine and pissed blood. Lying in the scotia Grunfeld whimpered.

Bloody hell I can't stand you anymore! cried Satogata sitting back down.

Death! Lovely death! bellowed the reaved Grunfeld.

I dead man needs a drink before entering the fiery walls of Hades, said Satogata rolling a full bottle towards Grunfeld.

Two for one you bastard, wept Grunfeld. Two for one.

# Summer Spent

## by J. J. DeCeglie

Together they sat with beers at a table by the road down the far end of Fremantle. This was the old part of town and it was the part they enjoyed best. The authentic section that the sun would set behind leaving a sheen of rays about the whole stretch of road and aged building faces along it as if a runway for the orange burning light. The only place you could really enjoy the beer and the town as one unless you drank it down by the ocean, but tonight there would be too many others that way. The heat was close and felt as if it were sweating out of the sidewalk and road then hanging low leaving their skin wet against their collars. Both of the men shined with it in the yellow of the streetlights. Their beers perspired leaving puddles on the table. They sat in the night waiting for it's end and they sat in their town. They knew it's lighting by heart. Sep had explained to Chase how Hunter Thompson had copied out the entirety of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* just so as to understand the style and art of it, he had the sickness Chase said, and Sep knew that he had and that they did too or were as close to it as any he knew of.

Sep gulped a long portion leaving his glass done then motioned up and got another for he and Chase. Both were having a genuine bitch of a time in life. Sep had no work and his girl at home now without him and Chase was facing dismissal with the armed forces if he went too far just once more and both knew he probably would.

Maybe the boat has sunk Chase said, I know many have already for us both but maybe this one has too, Sep considered him, if you mean the writing you're wrong, Sep said it and meant it, not the writing, never that, how could that ever be...you have that and you know I believe you do and I am really on you to give me some of it, Chase was approaching it and Sep reckoned he was, Sep knew what he was coming to and that he didn't want to say it, Chase took an even mouthful and smacked his lips for it when done with the beer

down his throat, this I mean, this, just this, just now, it's you and your girl now and you know how that goes and Sep did. It had followed him for days now.

This feeling of heartbrokenness that minced with excitement and left you exhausted and vacant.

He knew of the sprawl of it and the weight and had seen others done in by it though he was convinced he could beat it. I love her Chase and there is no other way for it, this is what is done, what else is there anyway?

You could leave her, just leave, many do it just that way, this Sep had thought of already, no he said, then drank, I would end up dead in a cheap Paris hotel room and you know it, and he had already thought it out thoroughly, that and many other things, always a blur sharpened into a cutting clarity, though mostly on all the other three billion girls out there some of whom he'd had and seen and smiled or flirted with or read about or masturbated over and some he'd never meet or seen and he'd loved others and wondered mostly on that and what happened to the ones you loved and never had or almost had and who he knew had known he loved them just by the glint of their eyes and sway of their voice, what became of the love you lost and the pain that had been and gone with it, you could still feel it if thought about it enough, he knew that, it was different for each girl you'd lost and there were maybe only five who had counted for Sep, by five he meant five whom he was quite sure could feel the pain for him if they tried enough to, individual loss of another aching in a past whose future never came, I love her, it is that simple, there is nothing that simple stated Chase, Sep knew it, knew in a way he was done for because all men are eventually done for in some way, let's get whiskey said Sep, Chase ushered him to sit while he went for it, so he sat and made eyes for a girl walking by and she made them back and he thought by fuck it's useless, you can love them and never had spoke a damn word to them, Chase had the drinks and they downed them in swift snaps and then had more this time Sep buying and they were scrupulously spent very quickly on whiskey having at least three more shots each

with beers for the burn and then walking along the street away from town and to the beach beyond the old limestone convict holding on the hill.

Sep felt he was handling the liquor very well. He felt that mostly he always did this. He measured his gait and watched the road and train tracks they crossed and then the rougher terrain down by the water. There wasn't a false step he had taken and both had spoken well on literature and football with two conclusions reached, the first that much more Faulkner must be read and read out and his life must be understood more fully, he worked with Fante in Hollywood you know Sep had said, Chase adding that Bukowski had told Fante on his deathbed that he was as good as Faulkner ever was, Sep already knew this, he also knew that Faulkner was the greatest drunk of them all, more than Hem or Jack, than Buk or Hunter, Sep wondered in a flash of the work he could produce if he left and died in that Parisian hotel alone and drunk with whores and books and paintings fresh in his eyes, the second point settled was that the Dockers may do well this year if they just had more courage when the ball was there to be won and if they would play genuine football, Sep added that Pavlich would have to be All-Australian Captain and both admitted he was one of the real ones and could kick eighty goals from centre half forward. They both handled the booze well and sat on a bench on the grass before the sand of the beach was below them.

The sand under the green of the grass was white.

Both were sweating now and the breeze down that way did them well for cooling. Sep felt the whiskey in his blood more when he was sat. He could see the moonlight on the water more than the water itself. The breeze wasn't cool but due to the heat had an effect as though it was. The ocean and night together were what looked as vast as the space past the moon and out to the stars. Sep could barely make out the separation of sea and sky but for the moon's light that was a flickering yellow tower ceasing flat with water's tucking under along with earth's curve. He felt tired now and knew neither should drive home. He hoped Chase would offer anyway.

By god it is hot Sep said, this summer seems to never want to end, he unbuttoned his shirt, let the air run over his skin some, I kissed a blonde beauty just over there Chase, he pointed to the start of the park behind them, she read poetry I wrote of her and we kissed and I loved her then and for a time after but that is so far away and dead now, I think of it sometimes, it makes me so gloomy that I stop thinking, she was wonderful that girl, she kissed like a firm warm heaven and had skin like vanilla ice-cream, she smelt and tasted like fresh milk, when I kissed her she was the most marvellous thing I had ever known and nothing else could matter cause that marvellous thing was kissing and holding and thinking of me, that never dies, it shouldn't and doesn't, Chase didn't speak, he listened to Sep and enjoyed the listening, Sep was finished speaking though, he thought to himself that he was gone, even with the love you're gone, and what makes it so and what can take it away, there is nothing for it and maybe nothing for anything, the ocean did not cease it's coming and going, it crashed against the rocks of the mole and the roar was clear each time it combusted in the dark, are we better off alone?

Sep asked it of Chase, he asked it to the dim, no said Chase, I was only saying. That was it then. They went back into town footing across the park and aiming for more whiskey. They wanted to see their town spin and spark and burn out in the morning's drunken pale light. The entire time Sep wished he were at home asleep near the girl he simply loved. It got worse as he got more thorough. There was no way to explain anything. He realised it as the sun beat back the darkness and converted it light blue.

# Closer Than You Think

## by Jason Jackson

I wait outside for you, wet in the rain. The bass sound moans down the dark staircase, and I shrink into the shadows outside. You're still in there, still dancing, still a part of Saturday night. But the evening's already over, and if you were outside with me, you'd know it.

There are people everywhere. They shout, puke, stumble and fall; it's chaos. But it can't touch me. These others – with their bare skin and their make-up and their student-hairstyles and their laughter – these others are exhibits. Their lives are paraded in front of me. You see, they say, this is how we live. We are young, and far from home, and there is nothing else. I push my hands deep into my pockets, and turn away from them.

You'll be here soon.

The alley stinks of piss, and rotten food, and petrol. When we fucked here, that one and only time that we ever did – or ever will – fuck, we were so drunk we could hardly stand. It was September, the end of summer, a new town, and the start of the rest of our lives. You were wearing those shoes, with the little stars that you'd painted on the front.

'I'm a sucker for shoes with stars painted on them,' I said, and you laughed. You thought I was joking, but it was true. You ripped a hole in the crotch of your tights, and I counted the stars on your feet as we fucked. Thirteen on each shoe.

'For luck', you said, after we'd finished.

The music stops and the light comes on in the stairwell, making the

faces of those leaving first seem washed out and decayed. The lipstick on that girl, the one with the bag, makes her mouth look as if it's been punched, that one has eyes so shadowed they seem like holes in her face, and this one, the one laughing, or crying, is too drunk to lift her chin from her chest. There is a noise that comes down the stairs with them, a kind of rushing, a kind of howling, and I pull my hands from my pockets to block my ears. It's still raining, but they don't care. They don't even notice, most of them. The rain slicks their bare arms and legs, the wind molests their hair, and they laugh, and sing, and argue, and cry, while I wait.

You'll be here soon.

Before you left this evening you touched my shoulder

'Don't work too hard,' you said. 'It's Saturday,' you said. 'You should come,' you said.

I smiled, of course. I always smile. 'You go,' I said. 'This essay's due Monday,' I said. 'Don't worry about me,' I said.

You clattered downstairs with Angie, the two of you already unsteady with wine. The door slammed and I stared for a long time at the screen, the black letters becoming all the colours of the spectrum as I rested my head on the glass and stared at my own words. My gut was tight. My hands shook.

I tried to work. I kept typing for an hour or so, but it was no good. I needed a break. I needed some air. On the landing, I passed your closed bedroom door. I rested my palm on the handle, but didn't try it I still have some limits, some depths to which I will not stoop, apparently.

It was just a fuck.

We were drunk.

It was just a fuck, and we were drunk. I repeat the words that you said to me, whispering them into the wind, and they drop to the pavement where the rain soaks them. To you these words were lighter than air, but they weigh so heavily on me I can carry no other burden. The currency of flesh on flesh, of wanting and of being needed, had a value for me. For you, it was loose change, to be discarded, or given as charity.

A taxi passes, cutting through the water that spews from the blocked drain, and when I look back at the stairwell, there you are. That red coat you brought back from home after the Christmas break, the broken umbrella, the tiny bag. You're already at the bottom of the stairs. I don't look at the man who's with you. I don't see his arm around you, his face close to yours, his confident strut of ownership. The cold wind is in my face, and the freezing rain has drenched me. I smile at you, but I'm held here by the shadows, and you're already heading to the taxi queue.

You'll be home soon. You always come home. And if there's a man, as there is tonight, then sometimes he comes too. You like the safety of the house, you like to know where you are. You even told me once that it's a comfort, knowing I'm there. Just in case.

The taxi queue is a long one tonight, and my car is just around the corner. I'll be tucked up in bed before you're in the cab, and I'll be listening out for you. When the front door closes, and I hear your feet on the stairs, I'll lie in the dark and hold my breath so that I can hear every fumble, every sigh, every curse as you undress in the bedroom next to mine. If he's with you, I'll ignore the sound of his piss as it drills into the toilet bowl, the rumble of his voice, his heavy tread. I'll listen out for your words, your laughter, your breath. It's an old house, but the walls are thin. I'm closer to you than you think.

And when you're finally silent, when the slit of light under my door darkens, and I know that you're asleep, I'll close my eyes and tell myself again that it was just a fuck.

# Twisted

by A. F. Cronin

Before we begin, if I may, I'd like to say a few words about pretzels. Pretzels can be soft or hard, crunchy or chewy, salty or not. But to be considered authentic, a pretzel must twist. Pretzel-sticks are nothing more than a pale, rod-shaped rip off of properly twisted pretzels. If they were mammals, pretzels and pretzel-sticks could not reproduce. They are as different as water and ice: same substance, different form.

I bring this up so you won't internally whine later on, as I am sure many of you will be wont to do when you read the pretzel section. You will want to complain that the metaphor is not apt because not all pretzels are twisted, and I'm sure some of the more cynical will proclaim that the parallel symmetry of actual pretzels is so imprecise as to be non-existent and that only a fool would consider their shape geometric. Think what you want. It's my story. I get to define the terms. In this tale pretzels, as most things, are perfectly twisted, and tasty, and hard to stop munching on once you've started in on them.

There. I'm done with that so we can begin.

Luscious. Yes, she, my Beatrice, is luscious. And I mean luscious in the purely sexual, want-to-just-chew-on-and-taste-something-you-can't-actually-chew-on-and-taste-way that only a man can find a woman luscious. She was especially luscious at the beginning of our time together, since we met after my disastrous relationship with Miranda and my subsequent nine-month self-imposed celibacy.

If you ever meet her, Miranda that is, I'm sure she'll tell you our sex life sucked. But she would be lying. Miranda, for your information, is expert at lying; trust me on this. The only thing in our relationship that didn't suck was our sex life. In actuality, it was the

only thing in our relationship that had any substance at all. But she, for some weird reason, could not admit that. Instead she claimed she wanted a “eudemonic emotional connection”-- whatever the hell that is. And those were her actual words, spoken (or shouted) at me more than once. She insisted that she wanted more than what we had. I, for the most part, was fairly content. We had sex often enough and we took meals together. What else is there? But she insisted that I did not take her seriously, that I did not respect her mind or her talent, and that I treated her like a whore. If only it had been so easy.

But I want this story to be about Beatrice, not Miranda, so enough of that. It's irrelevant anyway. Except for the fact that not having been with a woman for nine months (this does not include the last few frigid, basically sexless months when Miranda and I were splitting up), has made me appreciate and marvel at the subtle, simple aspects of woman-ness more than I would have otherwise. Thanks Miranda.

Here's the story.

At the risk of sounding cliché, I have to tell you that Beatrice is a gymnast. She is. And she isn't a figurative gymnast or former child gymnast but a current, working, trapeze swinging, horsie-thing-vaulting, floor-exercising gymnast for a secret, roving, magical burlesque circus on the lower east side of Manhattan. Sometimes it roves into Tribeca, but not often.

Right now you're probably thinking, “what a crock. But it's true. And it's impossible to prove that there's not a secret, roving, magical burlesque circus in Lower Manhattan. It's like the weapons of mass destruction thing. Just because you can't find them, doesn't mean they weren't there. So give it up, and get on with your reading.

The secret, roving, magical burlesque circus in lower Manhattan, where Beatrice works, is a trip; complete with beautiful leather-bustier-wearing clowns with Pinocchio noses that, by the way, are not there to indicate the telling of untruths but for a myriad of far

more clever, creative and entertaining functions that only a burlesque clown would ever imagine -- or consider performing. Even though they don't make me laugh, I sure like watching those clowns.

There are dancers in the secret, roving, magical burlesque circus as well as clowns. Strip-teaser sorts with various gags. The gags aren't as good as the girls themselves, but I suppose they add a bit of something to discount the pure puerility of staring at women's naked bodies for the sake of staring at women's bodies. One of the girls, and I never understood the why of this, did this dance where she started out dressed as a lumberjack with an axe and somehow she ended up naked and using the axe like a golf club. That's one of the problems with strip-tease dancers; the little scenarios aren't as important as the completely naked part, so they tend to skimp on the narrative structure. But Pamela, that's lumber-girl's name, swings the axe with such verve and looks so incredibly great doing it who gives a damn?

My Beatrice's act is sort of a naked Cirque du Soleil thing done to a heavy metal ballad. It's quite good. She is really amazing. Not only can she jump up on stuff, swing on bars and trapezes, and tumble and vault around amazingly well, all while being, for all intensive purposes, naked, but she can get her body into these intricate poses really slowly and then stay in them for a long time. When she does that it makes your eyeballs go sort of wacky. It's hard to comprehend the shapes she creates. For me, it's a lot like staring at a sculpture by Michaelangelo; I can never get quite far enough past my sheer amazement at the technical perfection of the statuary to grasp the purity and breathtaking beauty of the form itself.

I had met Beatrice before I knew her to be a burlesque gymnast, so her profession had absolutely no bearing on my attraction to her: at first that is. In fact, when we met, her blue hair was tucked up under a big knit ski hat with a red pom-pom and her exquisitely lean and muscular body with the fantastic shoulder to butt flamenco and skull-headed pirate-girl tattoo were concealed beneath layers of shirts, sweaters, and a massive down coat. And

her boots were knee high, furry and black, something out of a Conan the Barbarian film, but with platforms. Beatrice isn't a tall girl. But she is limber.

It had been a cold and snowy day in New York and everybody was bundled up like Ralphie's little brother in A Christmas Story. I was hungry and had gone into my favorite neighborhood eatery, the falafel place on St. Mark's and 1st, to assuage my hunger. Beatrice, then an unknown quantity to me, had tromped into the place just after I did and she stood right behind me as I ordered. She moaned in despair when I ordered the last of the falafels in the warmer. I turned around and looked at her.

"Have the chicken." She said. "I want the falafel."

"You want the falafel?" I asked.

"Yeah," she replied.

"So do I," I said. I thought she was nervy for asking me to give up my falafel. I turned away from her in disgust.

"Fucker," she whispered.

I slowly turned to face her. "Did you just call me fucker?" I asked.

Her cheeks were bright red from the cold and her eyes were an eerie whitish-blue and they glowed with an evangelical fervency. Clear snot had congealed on her nose and with the pom-pomed hat pulled down to her eyebrows she wasn't exactly sporting the sex-kitten look.

"Yes, I did." She responded. "You're a fucker. You won't let me have the last falafel."

Ahmed, the falafel guy, was a little concerned about the escalating conflict in his establishment. He suggested "Five minutes. I'll have new falafel."

“I want those,” she growled.

I stared at her in disbelief and we locked eyes in a New York stare down. I have to admit I wasn't really staring at her in some macho test of wills. I just didn't know what to do, and couldn't contrive a retort to her flagrant assault. So, as was to become the norm for our relationship, Beatrice was the first to speak. “You eat flesh. Have the chicken.”

Not at my rhetorical best, I countered with, “How do you know I eat flesh?”

“I can smell it,” she answered.

That threw me off. Big time. Being told you smell by a snot nosed puffy coated young woman with barbarian boots in a falafel place in the East Village is confounding, to say the least. The first thing I did, I must embarrassingly admit, was to try and catch a whiff of myself; my own bodily odor. I couldn't, of course. I shower every day and use good soap, deodorants and other toiletries so normally I'm not particularly pungent and my skin that afternoon was buried beneath at least four layers of clothing and I was locked tight at the neck with a massive wool scarf. Air wasn't flowing in or out of my cold-repelling attire, so any smell I may have reeked was trapped beneath my layers. Besides, Ahmed, while making great falafel and shwarma, has created a restaurant that is redolent with the smoldering aroma of sizzling meats seasoned with every exotic herb known to man. At that moment it didn't occur to me that even if I had stunk like a mountain man after a long winter of trapping beaver, and if Beatrice had had a nose like a bloodhound, she couldn't have smelled me in the midst of Ahmed's super-aroma-saturated environment. But insults hold no logic, just pure hurtful intent. That's why people use them to such effect.

“Ok.” I relented, more out of sheer stupefaction than lack of the backbone to resist. I just couldn't contrive an effective counter-argument to this assertive, snot-nosed, young woman's “smell-

like-a-flesh-eater” comments. I turned back to the nervous Ahmed and, with calm and great dignity, I magnanimously said, “Chicken for me, Ahmed. She can have the falafel if she wants it.”

“Thank you, sir,” Ahmed cooed. “I’ll make you great chicken shwarma. Hummus?”

I nodded assent and waited for the chicken shwarma sandwich to be prepared by Ahmed. I had expected Beatrice, then considered by me as “the-obnoxious-snot-nosed-girl”, to apologize and thank me for my gallant gesture. Instead she reached past me, pulled a napkin out of the dispenser and blew her nose.

Beatrice can be a real charmer when she wants to be.

She got her sandwich before I did, since Ahmed had it almost done for me anyway. She took the sandwich and her iced green tea and sat at one of the tiny tables and ate in silence. I settled against the opposite wall and tried to check her out with out her seeing me check her out. Lacking x-ray vision, I couldn’t see beneath the stay-puft marsh mellow-man outfit she was wearing. But, as she warmed up, the redness of her cheeks diminished and I noticed a very pale and flawless skin, nice cheekbones and full, black-lipsticked lips. Her exquisite, frigid- blue eyes reminded me of wolf-eyes. She paid no attention to me, of course. This irked me even more. I was pouting and feverishly trying to come up with some hurtful remark to toss at her when Ahmed brought over my sandwich and broke my vengeful reverie.

I would have been a shitty ancient Greek King or Appalachian Clan Patriarch because I can never hold a grudge for very long. Especially if I’m hungry. Ahmed set down the red plastic basket with the chicken shwarma in it and returned to his post. I turned my attention to my steaming sandwich and forgot about the verbal vendetta with my formerly-snot-nosed rival. I ate my food instead.

Ahmed’s chicken shwarma was really good; much better than his falafel, in fact. I loved it. As I relished the spicy flavor of the

shwarma, I realized that the only reason I always ate the falafel was because Miranda, a dyed-in-the-wool vegan (except on the big, family holiday feasts, and when she ate pizza with pepperoni), had always made me eat falafel at Ahmed's, and I had just never changed that habit. Beatrice, exhibiting her almost psychic ability to read people, had simply told me something about myself that was true: I am a flesh eater. I should have been eating the chicken shwarma all along. She, of course, is not a flesh eater, and therefore deserved the falafel. Beatrice can be a bit of a know-it-all-fair-is-fair freak: but at least, unlike Miranda, she's consistent. And usually she's right. Sometimes it gets a little annoying.

Beatrice eats quickly. She had finished her falafel long before I was done with my shwarma. I noticed that she didn't get up right away, but remained at the table bent over some little project she was working on with her hands. By that point in time I just thought she was a weird.

I had finished eating and was reading the menu board, considering the benefits of a second chicken shwarma when something thwacked against my coat and bounced onto my table. It was an origami bird made from an intricately folded postcard. I looked up and Beatrice was standing looking at me with her wolf-eyes. They sparkled like stars on a moonless night. She gave me a little wave then pushed through the door and walked away.

I picked up the paper bird. Come alone. You'll like it, was written under one of the wings. I unfolded the bird and found an advertising postcard/admit-one-ticket for the Secret, Roving, Magical Burlesque Show of Lower Manhattan. It was scheduled for that night. Beatrice, the puffy-coated-snot-nosed-rude-girl with the wolf-eyes, had asked me to go to see naked women dance. I ordered another chicken shwarma and considered the strange invitation.

I went, of course. It's not often a girl asks a guy to a burlesque show and it's a pretty good excuse for going. Even women can't call you a pervert if a woman asks you to go see other naked women

prance around shamelessly. Instead the woman who invited you is praised for being so open-minded and uninhibited and progressive. Of course the same women who are so effusive with praise for their open-minded sisters are the same ones who would have called me Taliban-ape-man if I went at my own urging (I know that phrase makes no sense but once, when I pulled a Playboy off a magazine rack at a news stand uptown by Columbia, a large spiky-haired woman in silk peasant garb and an enormous yellow scarf actually called me Taliban-ape-man).

I dressed for the show: black books, black jeans, a black t-shirt with a black v-neck sweater over it, a black scarf, my nice knee length black wool coat, a black wool hat, and black leather gloves; the stereotypical New York City downtown attire. Even my wallet's black. And I had showered and shaved and made sure I pumped my most expensive cologne all over me to counter Beatrice's ultra-sensitive nose.

I left my apartment and headed south.

The Secret, Roving, Magical, Burlesque Circus of Lower Manhattan was playing a few blocks south of Houston St., just off of Ludlow. It didn't seem such a secret. I arrived a few minutes early and there was a mob of men standing on the sidewalk dressed exactly like me — black with black with black with black. The men were of all shapes, races, sizes and ages and they huddled together outside the door to an old, ratty-looking brick tenement building like a herd of cattle in the cold. Steam rose above each man's head with the exhalation of his breath, and each man clutched a postcard in his black-leather-gloved hand. No one spoke. No one looked at each other. We all just stood stone still and stared straight ahead at a pair of burning white candles in a gothic, metal candelabra that hung on the windowless, black door to the building.

A hundred or so men had a come to see the Secret, Roving, Magical Burlesque Show on the Lower East Side of Manhattan on that freezing January evening, and we all waited patiently in the cold. I didn't look at the faces of the other men, and I didn't want them to

look at mine. There was a strange, almost religious solemnity to the group; a self-reflective absorption that we all acknowledged and respected in each other. Each of us stood in silence, a part of the group yet alone with our own private thoughts, waiting for the door to open so we could enter and see women willingly and uninhibitedly prance around naked for us. We were all lost in our own thoughts, and mesmerized by the flames of the small, white candles that burned on the door that blocked our entrance to the show.

It began to snow. Big, white, serene, snowflakes silently fell through the night. They landed on the darkened sidewalks and the streets and the roofs and the people of the vast city. Our black wool coats and hats received the snowflakes' gentle landings graciously, and soon our heads and shoulders were dappled white. We waited and watched the motionless flames.

The door swung open and an acappella chorus of women's voices broke through the silence in a slow dirge-like chant: sort of Enya with out the synthesizers. It was a lovely sound. Then a light flashed and a beautiful woman in white was there. She smiled at us and said "Welcome to the Secret, Roving, Magical Burlesque Show of Lower Manhattan! I'm Shania." We all surged forward.

Shania was a sight to behold. She was over six feet tall with pure blonde hair that hung down her back almost to her butt. She wore thick red lipstick, like a fifties poster girl and had flawless white skin that stretched over high cheekbones and a fine, long chin. She had frigid-blue wolf-eyes, like Beatrice had, and they sparkled with joy. She wore a pristine white tailcoat-tuxedo outfit exquisitely tailored to exhibit her lean, hourglass figure, a white ruffled shirt, a white cumber bun, a white top hat, white, 6" spiked-heeled shoes, and a red bow tie. She was spectacular. She beamed a smile as each man passed and she whispered "Welcome, thank you for coming."

When I got up to her she locked her eyes onto mine and spoke those same words to me. I felt embraced, welcomed and appreciated. I wrenched my eyes from her immobilizing gaze but

she pulled them back when she softly added, “Wait afterwards, your friend wants to say hello.” She raised her eyebrows and flashed me a knowing wink.

I nodded stupidly and muttered “OK.”

At the moment, I didn’t consider how Shania knew I was the one Beatrice had invited to the show. In fact, at that moment, I didn’t even know it was Beatrice that had invited me. I didn’t know my hostess’s name and knew she didn’t know mine. All I knew was that a snotty-nosed-wolf-eyed-puffy-coated-furry-booted-falafel-loving girl in Ahmed’s Pita Heaven had invited me to a burlesque show by throwing an origami seagull at me, and I had accepted her invitation and come. I proceeded down the cramped, pitch-black hallway toward a dim, reddish light and the wonders beyond.

At the end of the hallway I entered an enormous, vaulted room lit by hundreds of candles that flickered in tall, freestanding Candelabra. There was a large black floor area where the performance would take place, and the seats rose steeply away from it. The walls were brick that had been painted black, and there were no doors except the one we used to enter the room. There were no set pieces, furniture, or even lighting instruments on or over the stage area. I climbed the stair risers and found myself a seat. There was a sort of table on the right side of each seat where we could lay our heavy coats and scarves and we all took off our outer layers and laid them down. The seats were upholstered with black velvet, wide and comfortable with abundant legroom and plenty of space on either side. It was a very comfortable situation. Soon everyone was seated, and we waited in silence for the show to begin.

The music stopped and the room fell silent. Then, without any apparent cause, all the candles on the stage went out and we were wrapped in darkness. The darkness lingered a few moments until a soft glow appeared in the center of the stage. It grew in intensity until it burst into an exploding sparkle-throwing flash that left me momentarily blinded. When my eyes readjusted to the light an

elegant and dignified old woman in a long, white, satin gown stood before us: she resembled a beautiful Gandolph in drag. She smiled at us and said “Welcome.” Her voice was the crackly rasp of an ancient crone. But the voices of a powerful, mature woman, an adolescent girl, and a child sounded with perfect synchronization and harmonic resonance along with her refined and deliberately articulated cadence. It was strange and hypnotic uttering.

She said, in her four toned voice, “Tonight we choose you few to see us as we really are.” The eerie resonance of her voices rang like a bell in the cavernous room. She held her arms out to her sides and held her hands in soft fists. She raised her right arm above her shoulder and let it drop past her side in a soft flowing gesture. She opened her fist as she did, and sparkle-dust flowed out and floated around her. She repeated the gesture with her left hand and let more sparkles swarm into the air. Then she brought both her hands together above her head, clenched them into fists and throwing them forward she threw sparkles at us, the men in black, and, like the snow, the sparkles gently settled on us all.

Then there was a spectacular flash of light and a fantastic thunderclap, and the show began.

As our eyes adjusted from the flash, the stage was flooded with a pure blue light, and a horde of 4 or five-year-old little girls, as naked as the day they were born, stood peering at us. They were all shapes and all sorts of little girl: light skinned, dark skinned, almond eyed, thick lipped, pug nosed, plump as peaches, and thin as rails -- but they all had white-blue wolf-eyes and astonishingly long white hair.

Music started up. It was a rumbling bass line with a hard driving drumbeat behind it. The little girls screeched with joy. They scattered and flooded the seats and, although I can only speak for what happened to me in those next few moments, due to my preoccupation with my own vivacious greeter, it seemed there was a little girl for each man in the audience. An ebony colored princess scurried onto my lap and gave me one of those phenomenal

squeeze-hugs little girls love to give to raggy teddy bears. Then she sat back and focused her wolf-eyes on me. She lifted a yellow rose and held it between us and she whispered, in a voice that was more akin to Kathleen Turner in her younger days than a four year old girl, "This is for you, for I am a flower too." I took the rose and she gave me a kiss on the cheek and giggled as if kissing me was the funniest thing she had ever done. Then she whispered, "Eeeuuw, Cooties!" and jumped off of my lap and scooted back to the stage where the horde somehow formed itself into a big circle and just ran around and around laughing and shrieking. All of us men in black sat holding our yellow roses and staring at the galloping herd of little girls.

As they ran, a fog flowed up around them, and soon they were obscured within a swirling, misty, ring.

There were no lighting instruments anywhere but the blue light on the stage remained cool and even, but above the stage the blue faded into a deeper hued night-blue canopy that spread above us. Stars peeked out one by one and began to sparkle. It was like a planetarium with a funky baseline pumping through it.

Beneath the stars, one from the left, one from the right, two lanky, naked, prepubescent beauties, one light skinned, one dark, emerged from the misty ring and walked across the stage toward each other. They moved like young colts in a green meadow. Their wolf-eyes were locked onto each other's. When they were close enough to touch, the light-skinned girl's hand reached out and caressed the dark-skinned girl's hip. They stretched themselves toward each other and their lips came together and they kissed. Somehow, the sound of their breath and the suctioning sound of their lips mushing together rose above the rumbling music. Whoa! The Madonna/Britney peck was nothing when compared to this!

Their hands rose up above their shoulders and came together and they intertwined their fingers and their hands pushed against each other as they finished their long, spectacular make-out. Then they disengaged. They moved their faces a few inches away from each

other and their bright eyes locked together. They released their grasping fingertips and let their hands float away from the others touch, but their hands lingered in the air in a gesture of farewell as the two lovely teenagers slowly backed away from each other and disappeared into the swirling circle of mist.

The Secret, Roving, Magical, Burlesque Circus of Lower Manhattan was getting off to a great start.

Then the light, light that had no source that I could see by the way, changed from blue to red and the music ratcheted up. A full rhythm section kicked in, filling out the rumbling bass and drums, and a lead guitar screamed over the top. Then a dozen of the aforementioned leather-bustier-wearing clowns dashed onto the stage. It was riotous. The nubile clown-women rocked to the beat, dancing wildly and doing burlesque clown-stuff I can't even describe. We, the men in black, jumped to our feet and roared our approval. And we danced. It was impossible not to join in with the clowns. The room was on fire and, as much as a bunch of lonely, isolated men in black can be, we were too.

This mayhem went on for quite some time until the music reached crescendo then crashed and the clown-women rushed pell-mell into the mist-circle, laughing uproariously as they ran.

Those clowns know how to have fun.

We stayed on our feet and cheered and clapped for a long time. The Music had settled into a sort of New-Age-I-Feel-Spiritual transitional piece—like harp music without the harps.

Shania strutted out of the mist to the center of the stage. She had changed out of her tux into a clingy, backless, white gown that glittered with rhinestones. She gave us the eye. The music went soft.

“Some of my girls are going to dance for you now,” she purred. “When they're good, they're good. But when they're bad, they're

better.” She winked and started back toward the mist. We hooted and hollered as she strutted off stage and she blew us kisses and waved. The music kicked back in loud and fast.

A squad of wolf-eyed dancers trotted out of the mist. There were four of them in their various costumes and they pranced and skipped around the stage as if they were cheerleaders coming onto a high school basketball court at half time. As they bounced around the stage, a glittering silver pole rose out of the floor at the very center of the mist-ring. Three of the girls, including Pamela the lumber-girl, stood back and watched as Francesca, dressed in a Roman Legionnaire’s uniform, complete with polished greaves, breastplate, and sheathed gladius, started her routine.

Wow. Then wow for the next girl, Waleesha, in her business suit. Then wow for Pamela with her axe, and finally wow for Miyoong and her pirate get-up. Wow pretty much says it all.

They all took final bows together while we, the men in black, were exorbitant with our applause. The dancers pranced into the mist-ring and a gaggle of pixie-like adolescent girls scrambled around the stage area and cleared their discarded attire. A few burlesque clowns ran across the stage pantomiming an x-rated Punch and Judy routine. It made no sense, but we laughed anyway.

The stage was cleared and Shania strutted out of the mist-ring and toward center stage. The silver pole descended slowly into the floor. “It always makes me sad when it goes down like that,” she rasped. We laughed wildly at her joke. She gave us a wink. “Did you like my girls?”

We all stood up and roared our approval. Shania’s eyes twinkled with amusement at our unabashed enthusiasm for the magical burlesque show of which she was the Queen.

I must note something here, and I think I speak for all of us men in black. There was nothing even remotely pornographic or titillating about this performance. There was nothing lurid, nothing

degrading, nothing puerile, and nothing dirty. It was a joyful performance, filled with love. The performers simply and enthusiastically embraced and expressed the sheer delight they felt at being beautiful, erotically charged women that could run and skip and dance and strut so exquisitely and so flawlessly and be so admired and appreciated for just being what, at their core, they were. They performed with such ebullience and vivacity that it was the purest, most spiritual, most profoundly joyful aspect of the feminine that strutted on the stage in front of us. And we, the men in black, adored them for doing it. It was a really good show. And the best part of it, my exquisite Beatrice, had yet to perform.

Shania had to raise her hands to shut us up. The music stopped and silence fell over the room. She said, “Here is something very special for you all-- the astounding Beatrice!” Shania sauntered into the mist-ring as the light dimmed and became low-angled amber rays streaming across the stage from left to right. We all settled into our seats and waited for the next sensation. A hard-edged drum roll blasted away the silence, and a heavy metal ballad started up. It had a searing guitar lead running over a rhythm designed to make you want to sway to it with a lit cigarette lighter held above your head.

Then, from the mist, she appeared.

She slipped out of the mist-ring at its furthest upstage point and she walked toward us slowly. Warm, low-angled light caressed her body and her white skin was slick and shiny with oil. Shadow and light rippled on the slick surface of her skin as she walked. She was astonishingly lean, and she held herself like an Amazon warrior, taut, powerful, and proud. Her red stiletto heels gave her the gait of a big, stalking cat, and the tiny red “G” string accentuated the feral swing of her hips. Her abdomen was ripped and it curved up to her individually articulated ribs where the tiniest red bikini-top covered her exquisite, dewdrop breasts. Her face was beautiful and her hair was bright blue with short bangs in front and pulled back in a long, high ponytail that looked like a horse’s tail. Her wolf-eyes sparkled as she brazenly eyed us as she moved across the floor.

She reached center stage, stepped out of her stilettos, and raised her hands over her head. Her muscles rippled with the movement. She threw herself forward and began a series of fantastic cartwheels and tumbles and summersaults. A trapeze dropped from the ceiling and parallel bars and a vaulting-horse rolled out of the mist. She used them all. And each routine was more astonishing than the last one, the perfection of her physical form and her powerful and graceful articulation of the movements was as pure, and beautiful, and mysterious to see as the colors bursting out of a blue sky as the sun slowly sets over the Pacific Ocean.

We all just watched, mystified by her skill and hypnotized by her grace and beauty, until at last, in perfect synchronization with the music, after a tremendous twirling dismount from the non-parallel bars, she landed with her back to us. She slowly raised herself up and thrust her arms above her head in a gesture of completion; her shoulder to butt flamenco with the pirate-headed girl tattoo glistened through her perspiration. The equipment silently rolled off of the stage and she slipped her feet back into the red stilettos and, without even turning to us and nodding her head, she walked back upstage like a conquering hero and slipped into the mist ring and out of our sight.

We were a group stunned. When we finally realized she was finished we all leapt to our feet and howled our approbation, cheering, clapping and carrying on like deranged football fans, trying to call her back so we could see her once more. She refused our exhortations, and did not return.

Shania walked out instead. We fell silent when she reached the center and stopped and eyed us. She beamed us a smile and purred. "I told you she was astonishing." We erupted in applause. Shania watched with amusement as we all spontaneously began to howl like wolves and to clap our hands to try to call the astonishing Beatrice back in front of us. She did not heed our primal calls. At last we fell silent again.

"Beatrice is a little shy," Shania said. "But she hears you and loves

you all.” We erupted again. She loved us!

Then the leather-bustier-wearing clowns dashed onto the stage in a riot of dance and laughter. They were out of control. After a moment the little girls, the adolescents, and the four pole dancers joined the celebration. All of the performers, except Beatrice danced good-bye to us. We jumped to our feet and roared our approval and danced with the exquisite female horde. After some time the music roared to a stop, a brilliant light flashed, and after the moment of blindness, the stage was empty of the performers and Shania stood there alone.

“We’re about done here,” Shania said, “So we’ll just thank you for coming, say good-bye and wish you well.” She twirled in a circle and she transformed into the old woman in the white gown. . She held her arms out to her sides and held her hands in soft fists. She raised her right arm above her shoulder and let it drop past her side in and opened her fist as she did, and sparkle-dust flowed. She repeated the gesture with her left hand and more sparkles swarmed into the air. Then she brought both her hands together above her head, clenched them into fists and throwing them forward she threw sparkles at us, the men in black, and, like the snow, the sparkles gently settled on us all.

There was a fantastic blast of light and we were blinded for an instant. When we could see again the candelabra were back in place and the candles flickering. The mist-ring and all the women and girls were gone. The other men stood and pulled on their black coats in silence. They all left the theater and me in my seat, lost in my thoughts.

I was slightly befuddled. Never before had I seen so much exposed female flesh yet felt no libidinous urges. Somehow these gorgeous women had succeeded in transcending the facile and puerile “sexuality” most commonly associated with naked dancing and exhibited an ebullient and intensely pure joie-de-vivre that resides in and is regenerated by the female half of our species. The show unveiled a simple mystery of life for me—we should relish and enjoy

our brief time alive and that just to be alive, with all it's trials and troubles as well as all it's pleasures, in and of itself, is reason for raucous celebration. I gave the show five gold stars.

I broke from my reverie and realized the snot-nosed-wolf-eyed-falafel-loving girl I was waiting for had not shown up yet. I reasoned she must be turning off the lights or putting away costumes as, not having seen her on the stage, I assumed she was a part of the technical aspect of the production. I was planning to take her to a fine Middle Eastern restaurant on St. Mark's Place, the Café Mogador. I knew they had kick-ass falafel-- and beer and wine. I was eager to bombard falafel-girl with questions about the show, about the magic, and most importantly, about Beatrice.

But where was this unnamed woman? I suddenly wanted some answers.

I stood up. I thought I would walk to the hallway and see if she was there. At that moment a short, elderly woman in a long print dress walked into the theater. She wore bright white running shoes and white ankle high socks and she had the slow, grounded shuffle of an old peasant women. Her thick, salt and pepper hair was tied back in a netted bun. She walked up to a candelabra began to blow out the candles.

"Excuse me," I asked. "I'm waiting for my friend. She's..."

The old woman let out a long, cackling laugh and looked up at me. She, too, had wolf-eyes and she fixed them on me and smiled kindly. She shook her head slightly, and pushed her hand at me in a gesture of playful dismissal. She returned to her candles. I didn't know what to do.

"I'm right here." It was falafel-girl's voice.

I turned and sitting right behind me was the Blue-Haired, gymnastic princess, Beatrice. I was stunned. I had not heard her sit down. She was fully dressed now, wearing an enormous purple sweater and

jeans tucked inside her barbarian boots, but her blue hair was down and cascaded over her shoulders. She gave me a spectacular smile and tilted her head to the side a little.

“Hi,” she whispered.

“Hi,” I answered.

“Did you like the show?” she inquired softly.

“Oh, yeah,” I replied. “You were very good The jumping around part was... really good. Amazing.”

I had actually said the jumping around part was really good. To this day, at odd times and places, that moment in time flashes in my memory and my pathetic ineloquence turns my face red with embarrassment and shame. Her performance had been transcendent, exquisite, perfection—it was beyond description. Telling Beatrice, directly after that show, that the jumping around part was really good would have been like telling Einstein that the General Theory of Relativity was a good read or telling Picasso you liked the bluish–grey color he used in *The Old Guitar Player*. They’re not appropriate compliments for such staggering works. It’s best to keep quiet in the face of greatness if you’re not prepared with an appropriate comment. But most of us are born blathering idiots and die as blathering fools – such is the way.

I know now that I should have responded to Beatrice’s question with a simple yes or no, or maybe a little nod. But she had snuck up on me and I had been caught flat-footed. Even now, after having been together for many months, when she tilts her head and smiles at me, the neurons in my brain’s language center misfire and my usually sharp wit becomes thick and dull as a log.

Beatrice, never one to let my inarticulateness get in the way of her own speech, ploughed onward.

“Really?” She asked.

“Really.”

“I’m glad you think so.” She whispered. “I was a little off tonight. Nerves, I guess.”

I was, quite rightly and quite involuntarily, speechless.

She was lovely in the dimming candlelight, by the way-- more beautiful than she had been on the stage. Her wolf-eyes were soft, and relaxed, and they flickered with the reflections of candle flames. She was wearing a grey, hooded New York Athletic Club sweatshirt and baggy orange sweat pants—and her high barbarian boots of course. Her stay-puft down coat and her red scarf were beside her.

She twisted her blue hair back into a loose French braid and she stood up. “You wanna go?” she asked.

Not realizing that Beatrice and the snot-nosed-wolf-eyed-falafel-loving girl were one in the same, I stuttered “I’m waiting for a girl who invited me...”

“You’re waiting for me.” She giggled.

“You?” I replied.

“I’m the girl from, Ahmed’s.” She smiled and pulled on her coat, wrapped the scarf around her neck, and yanked on the red pom-pom hat. “See?”

I did, indeed. It was she. Beatrice, the exquisite, trapeze swinging, blue haired, awesomely ripped, red-bikinied gymnast was, in actuality, the puffy-coated-snot-nosed-rude-girl with the wolf-eyes from Ahmed’s—or vice-a-versa. To this day I’m unsure of which one is the real Beatrice.

“Thank you for the falafel.” She whispered and she leaned across

and gave me a soft kiss on the cheek. “It was kind of you to let me have it. Let’s go.” She took my arm and we walked down to the stage. As we started into the hallway the old woman spoke.

“Love each other,” she urged. “Love each other well.” She held up her ancient hand in a simple benediction and smiled softly at us. Then she returned to her candles and Beatrice and I walked down the long hallway and out of the building into the softly falling snow.

Beatrice clutched my arm and looked up into the gentle maelstrom. Several flakes landed on the pale skin of her face and she sparkled like a fairy princess. She leaned her head against my shoulder and we watched the snow fall a moment in silence. If I had uttered one intelligible sentence to this young woman before this instant I would have given her the softest of kisses to mark that magical moment on a quiet, New York City sidewalk in a lovely nighttime snowfall, but, since we had barely conversed with each other, and I my most recent attempt at conversation had been the dreadful jumping around part was good line, and since she didn’t even know my name, I restrained myself.

“My name’s, Anthony,” I whispered. That sentence, while short, came out pretty well, I think.

“Hi, Anthony,” she replied. “Anthony?”

“Yes?” I answered.

“I want a pizza.” She said. “ And a gorgonzola salad and garlic bread and red wine.”

“OK.” I said. “Where do you want to go?”

“Where the pizza’s good,” she whispered. Then, thanks to the extra six inches the barbarian platform boots added to her height, she gave me a second soft kiss on the cheek. “Just take me, Anthony”, she whispered, “Take me where I want to go”.

So I did.

## CHAPTER 2

An enormous bowl of baked Ziti with a vegetarian marinara sauce with a thick frosting of melted cheese augmented Beatrice's pizza, gorgonzola salad, and red wine. She ate it all -- and she talked while she did so. I sat munching on my pasta with meatballs and small green salad and listened to her. Occasionally I would get in a phrase or two but, by and large, Beatrice voiced a meandering, multi-faceted stream-of-consciousness monologue that was as spellbinding as it was confusing.

I'll give you a small example.

A chomp of pizza, a gulp of wine, and a breath of air and she'd start up. "I'm from the southwest, so we have lots of burritos but not such good Italian. You'd think Spanish food would be more like this but it's not. Mexican food is really just slop—it's good slop, but slop. Beans. Falafel are ground up chick peas you know. They're legumes, as are most beans, but do you no what they really are?"

This is where I would insert "No." Beatrice would continue and she chewed her salad.

"They're seeds. Isn't that amazing. Seeds. Little seeds. Just like fruit. Pits? They're seeds. Strawberries have all those teenie seeds in them. Beans and peas, and fruit are seeds. Corn is seed. Wheat. Barley. We eat proto-vegetable children to live. What savages we are. But.... Did you know that women were not allowed to be performers in Medieval Europe? At all? No acting, no dancing, no circus work.? You know why?"

I would again insert "No," and she would go on.

"Because seeds need a place to grow. Can disturb the field. I never liked chickens. They're stupid animal. Now horses are not stupid. Or dogs. But chickens... Most people are like chickens. They don't

have a clue; they get born, eat a bunch of seeds and then have their necks wrung. Metaphorically wrung I mean. It sad. They believe what they see because they trust their eyes to tell them the truth but eyes don't tell the truth because they only process the light reflected of the surface of things. For example—where's all this food go?"

She'd shove a fork full of cheesy ziti into mouth. I would answer "Your stomach."

She would continue.

"That's right. But how do you know that? You can't see it go there? What if it really went to my lungs? Think about it. This is why cats get it. They don't think. They just want. So...."

She went on and on.

A wave of shame shuddered through me. As if somehow all the putrid sexual fantasies and images and thoughts that had plagued each man since adolescence could be miraculously cleansed by this evenings show.