Like Warm Sun
On Nekkid Bottoms
A Novel

Chuck Austen
Dedicated, with love and admiration,
to the woman who makes all things possible.
   My beloved wife, Ann.
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Prologue
If, on that particularly warm night in April, you had been anywhere near the one hundred seventeenth exit of
the US 108, just south of the city where the road first wanders off like a drunken frat boy and begins to flirt with the
dangerous curves of the coast, you likely wouldn’t have been able to see anything anyway because of the fog.

But if you had wound up there—in spite of the lack of visibility, and the fact that no one goes there unless
they’ve read the map wrong, gotten directions from an incompetent friend, or been forced to stop due to some
bladder-related emergency—you likely would have parked somewhere near the old stone fence off the side of the
recently resurfaced road to wait out the sudden, surprisingly thick and disturbingly dark mist that had swept in from
nowhere to envelop everything, including the hypothetical you.

Had you been there, you might have yelped a bit at the unexpected, unusual, and more than a little scary, low-
to-the-ground lightning that suddenly erupted from the center of that eerily dense fog. Perhaps you would even have
turned off the engine, moved away from anything metal, and begun muttering a prayer or two to whatever god you
thought wasn’t too busy to help.

Had you been there, in the right place, at the right time, and had something been visible once the low clouds
and mist had begun to fade along with the intense lightning strikes, and low, rumbling thunder, you might have seen
the deeply worn, patchy, and faded, ostensibly white 1956 Rambler explode toward you from the center of those
flashes and booms like a cannonball shot from the mouth of hell.

Had you seen, you undoubtedly would have watched with fear and concern as the dingy car slid headlong
toward you with considerable speed and lack of control until its brakes locked, its tires skidded, and the heavy
machine swerved to an eventual stop on the rain-slicked asphalt mere inches from where the front of your bumper
would have been, had you been there.

If you had then stepped out of your automobile and moved closer to the steaming, pinging, rusted old driving
machine that had nearly crawled into your lap, you would have seen a very pretty— and very frightened—young
woman staring out the front windshield. She would not have been staring at you, not at anything so much physical as
the flickering ghost images of her short, but mostly happy life as it continued flashing before her eyes, complete
with end credits, catchy song and special thanks to the producers.

You might have noticed she was sweating a little, shaking a bit, and breathing heavily as she gripped the
steering wheel tightly in white, blood-drained fingers. You might have seen her swallow, once, very hard, as if
downing a small rodent that had become lodged in her mouth but would have preferred to stay right where it was.

As she would have sat there staring emptily at the space before her, and you would have stood there staring
emptily at her, you might have noticed movement along the side of the road, and—with her—turned your gaze to
see one of those irritatingly healthy couples who do everything together, including power-walk their excess caloric
intake away in public with the specific intent of shaming the rest of us for our lonely, passive, and sedentary
lifestyles.

You might have seen them smile nervously at the frightened woman in the Rambler and then continue along
their way as the driver, in turn, watched them stride off energetically toward their evening protein drink, relaxing
sauna, and erotic massage.

If you had paid particular attention, you likely would have picked up on the fact that the woman in the Rambler
was paying particular attention to the tight-fitting tank tops, spandex shorts, and name-brand running shoes of the
passing pair.

And if you were close enough, you couldn’t have helped but notice the nervous, sweating, yet still remarkably
lovely young woman glance down at herself and say quietly, “Damn.” Then shake her head sadly as she—and you
—realized that she was entirely naked in her little car.
   “I knew I forgot something.”
If you were asked which you think a man would prefer: a long, hot, road trip to a comic book convention with the hygienically challenged Morgan Wiggen; or hours in a room full of sexy supermodels wearing wispy undergarments, the answer might seem rather a no-brainer, wouldn’t it?

No, it would not. I went to the comic book convention.

Wipe that look off your face. I am decidedly heterosexual (assuming we are, of course, excluding that awkward seventeen minutes in Mervin Wosserman’s gym locker after the annual homecoming ‘drink-yourself-sick-athon’, which wouldn’t even merit a mention if not for that damnable video which, for obscure legal reasons, is still available on some offshore websites).

The fact is: anything can get old, even beautiful, sparsely clad women shamelessly baring their this ‘n’ thats—especially when you’re not allowed to touch. It’s a lot like going to a strip club, for those of you who have never been. I imagine there are still one or two of you out there, mostly women, or, wink-wink-nudge-nudge, Republicans, no doubt.

Some men consider a strip club delightful fun, but most of us find it a rather uncomfortable exercise in sexual frustration—though we’ll still run right out and do it again if there’s nothing good on television. There are far more colorful terms that might do a better job of conveying said frustration: ‘Too much wood up for no good’, for example. ‘Called to attention with nowhere to march’, would be another. Or my personal favorite: ‘Stiff as a bored’; which really works only in written form I suppose. Maybe that’s why I’m the only one who laughs whenever I say it.

Food for thought.

In my grandfather’s day, the semi-naked parade was far more entertaining I’m sure. Hanging with the feminine undressed has far greater appeal when you’re not even supposed to see your own wife in the all-together. How children were conceived in those days is not something I ever want fully explained.

My grandfather, himself, certainly found girls vastly amusing, particularly unclad girls, at least until they acquired rights and became unclad ‘women’. Once what my grandfather considered ‘flirting’ became ‘unwanted sexual advances’ all the fun seemed to go out of it for the old bird. The birth of the sexual harassment lawsuit truly, and forever, destroyed his impressively active sex life.

Of course, even after a good several million was turned out in settlements, the randy old fart continued to enjoy the aforementioned ‘semi-naked’ variety of female while managing—mostly—to avoid actual physical contact. And as long as he could call it ‘business’, the many restraining orders allowed him to ogle and drool to his vasoconstricted heart’s content without legal entanglements. But for myself, women in skimpy underwear have become rather an annoyance. I’m sure you see what I mean.

You don’t? I’ll elaborate.
Did I explain that we run an undergarment company? I didn’t? Good God, I’m so sorry! No wonder things seem a bit confusing. Drove into a mental tree there apparently. Let me back up the brain truck a bit and reroute, so to speak.

We run an undergarment company. Rather, more correctly, we own an undergarment company. My family. One of the world’s largest (the business, not the family, although we do seem to have an ungodly number of relatives, most of them apparently waiting for Grandfather to die). Wopplesdown Struts, purveyors of fine briefs. (Wopplesdown is pronounced ‘Woo-puhls-duhn’. I don’t know—it’s an old-world English sort of thing. Somewhere back in the depths of time we may have been British. Or pretended to be. Now we’re just snobs.)

So, part of my job at Wopplesdown is seeing how our undergarments look on actual women. Well, not actual women rather supermodels who stand in for actual women. Real, actual women look more like my secretary, Mrs. Abrososa, a rather smart-looking, gray-haired sixty-year-old, but hardly the kind of vision to hold up traffic when seen semi-naked on a very large billboard; at least, not for the reasons that sell undergarments. Not that I’ve seen her naked on a very large billboard, but I can imagine, unfortunately.

And me? My name is Corky. Corcharan Wopplesdown, to be more formal. But please don’t. Corky works just fine. It beats the hell out of having to explain the proper way to pronounce ‘Corcharan’ (Cock-ran). Or worse, ‘Wopplesdown’ (one paragraph up). With a name like mine at least once a day someone is seemingly required to point out to you: “But . . . it’s spelled Cor-CHAR-an WOP-puhlsDOWN.” Which requires me, in return, to open my eyes and mouth wide in mock surprise, shake my head politely and pretend that particular pronunciation never once occurred, nor was ever tactfully pointed out in the twenty-some years I’ve possessed the name, and had it endlessly sounded out to me by kind-hearted, amateur, English pronouncers.

So call me ‘Corky’. Not a significant improvement, but at the very least simple, and more pithy. (I like the word ‘pithy’, though it does tend to remind one of dead frogs.)

I am the third grandson, fourth grandchild, of the aforementioned oft-sued-elder Wopplesdown, and as such remarkably useless. My job for the family business became—some two years ago, and roughly coinciding with the expansion of the scope and limits of various restraining orders, now also encompassing my father, brothers, and sexually ambiguous sister—to perform any and all functions necessary within a fifty-foot radius of whatever supermodels we may employ. Initially, for a man whose main interest had been, to date, masturbation, this function was a godsend. But as I mentioned on a previous page (or in a previous lungful, depending on whether you’re reading this, or having it read to you), anything can get old. Especially when you learn, as we all should eventually, to prefer being touched over touching oneself.

So my job—specifically—with Wopplesdown Struts, is to convey information to and from management, to and from designers, and so forth, after viewing and taking notes upon countless minimal forms of garmenty. This could ordinarily be accomplished by seeing our clothing on rather surprisingly attractive plastic mannequins, which also barely resemble real women. But since mannequins rarely file lawsuits, that job can still be handled by my various and sundry— and I do mean sundry—relatives. So my job is—exclusively—to view our clothing on actual near-naked women and not get sued. There is, of course, a men’s division, but that’s handled by Mervin Wosserman. The family gave him a kind of ‘pay-off’ job after the drink-yourself-sick incident, and it’s worked out quite well actually, as I have even less inclination to see women rather supermodels who stand

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Vegetablistically useful? You see, at this particular moment, my employment is in serious jeopardy. My long and valued career—all eight months of it—is, at this very instant, as they say (whoever ‘they’ are), on—the—line. The line. That infamous line no one ever seems to notice until they have pretty much trampled past it, scampered over the hill into the next town and are getting dangerously close to some other unnoticeable line.

But now, as I said, right this very instant, I am merely on the line. My life is flashing before my eyes, every second of it playing before me like a long, boring movie about a man asleep on a couch, and I’m realizing with horror how much time I wasted that I could have at least spent playing video games (or going to strip clubs). It is that serious and life-changing a moment.

So naturally I’m not going to tell you about it, yet.
Instead, let me take you back a little.

This mess began right after Mrs. Abrososa and I entered the room we have set aside for viewing garments. In the business it’s called, interestingly enough, ‘The Garment Viewing Room’. Mrs. Abrososa was present as a chaperone/potential witness for the defense, and I was there to do what many around the company laughingly refer to as my ‘job’.

The Garment Viewing Room is a small antechamber just off the designer’s workshop and its primary function is to hold clutter. Most of the time it’s filled with fabric scraps, loose sequins, discarded feather boas, cardboard boxes, old bolts of cloth, and dead mannequins. But once a week it becomes a makeshift runway for…well…looking at semi-naked girls.

"Joe Rudi led the league in total bases with 287…" 

"Muttering stats already, Corky?" Mrs. Abrososa asked, amused. "Have you met Ms. Nuckeby?" I asked.

"I have not yet had that pleasure, no."

"Attractive and charming."

"Ah, I see."

"An enchanting sense of humor."

"Oh, dear. Well, I understand the preemptive strike, then." "Better safe than sued," I said, smiling.

She winced. "You sound like your grandfather."

"Isn’t that the objective?"

"I hope not," she said distastefully.

Mrs. Abrososa had her issues with the old man, as did we all. But my grandfather owned the place and you followed his rules, no matter how arbitrary. Fortunately, the laws of the state often superseded his and were generally more socially and morally correct, which pissed him off to no end.

I was moving my chair around the varying bits of discarded fabric and thread that had become glued to the tile floor, trying to situate myself in such a way that any...em...‘unexpected stiffening of the joints’, as it were, could easily be hidden with a simple and nonchalant flourish of the legs, and a subtle movement of my clipboard, when our newest model, Wisper Nuckeby, stepped in wearing only the bottom half of ‘Satin-Lace-Babydoll # 43’ and nearly blew out the front of my trousers.

Panicked by this instant...em...eruption of embarrassingly obvious sexual attraction, I flourished my legs rather too ‘chalantly’ and fell over into the water cooler. Most of its contents sloshed over my groin area as if Moses himself had ordered them to do so, before I could fumble the thing off myself and onto Mrs. Abrososa’s lap.

She, as you can imagine, screamed at the top of her sixty-year-old lungs and with the strength of ten Mrs. Abrososas managed to grasp the gurgling tank, Hulk-like, and hurl it and its furiously flowing contents, several feet mind you, back onto me. With a precision born no doubt of many years playing lawn-darts in the backyard with the grandkiddies, the elderly woman corked a ringer, and for one seemingly infinite and utterly horrifying moment I sat there staring at the bottle as the thing pointed down into my lap, its remaining contents now ‘plugged’, as it were.

Ms. Nuckeby seemed, surprisingly, to approve.

"Nice save," she said.

“Yes...wuh...well,” I stammered efficiently, dropping my voice an octave in an effort to sound more in control of the situation than a man with a sopping wet erection stuck in a water cooler bottle could ever possibly sound.

“I’ve been practicing.”

“Really?” she asked, seeming genuinely surprised.

“Um...no. I’m kidding.”

“I knew that. I was also kidding.”

“Oh.” She was good. “Well, I knew that.”

We both chuckled slightly at one another and the loveliness of her smile helped tighten the fit of my newly acquired codpiece. I looked at my lap and considered removing the blue plastic container from my whatsit. But the image of said whatsit exposed to the air—soaked, bolt-upright, clingy, silken Natazzi slacks revealing its every swell and curve as they gripped the thing more tightly than a sailor’s wife greeting a husband who’s returned home on leave—possibly her own—froze me into immobility. After assessing various rapidly considered options, I simply laid my arms across the bottle as if I’d planned for the thing to end up there all along and smiled at the seminude Ms.
“Well,” I said finally. “Shall we get started?”

“Get…what? You want to…?” she asked, amazed, as I struggled desperately to make it seem as though every high-powered executive must, from time to time, conduct business with a water cooler bottle clamped tightly to his mighty manhood. “Get what started?”

“The posing. The modeling.”

“Oh!”

“Showing us your…what is that you’re wearing?” I said, trying to sound nothing-more-than-curious while crossing my legs, leaning on the water bottle, and rubbing my chin with my best author’s-photo-on-dust-jacket contemplative expression.

A rather large bubble ‘blooped’ up around my ‘cork’.

Ms. Nuckeby, her lovely mouth hanging open, watched the bubble in stunned amazement, and only after considerable effort managed to shake her brain and loosen its stranglehold of horrified interest on my nether regions.

“You want me to continue posing?” she asked incredulously.

“These designs are behind schedule, and the fashion show won’t wait I’m afraid.” I smiled, attempting to be firm. Mentally that is. “Time is short.”

“That’s about all that is.”

The red of my cheeks flushed even redder, and I moved the clipboard to block her view. She continued to look there as if she could still see it anyway. Perhaps she was yet another of the many sole survivors from the planet Krypton.

“Um…sir?” she asked. “Are you sure you don’t want to…”

“Nope.”

“Maybe just take a minute to…”

“No. Thank you.”

“But there’s a bathroom right out…”

“No time, Ms. Nuckeby.”

And besides that, little Corky would…

Hah! I just got that. Little ‘Corky’. Kind of a pun, if you…

Never mind.

Ms. Nuckeby paused and stared at me as if my head were three sizes too big, and not because it had extra brains. Mrs. Abrososa did the same.

“Well, all right,” said Ms. Nuckeby finally. “As long as you’re comfortable.”

“I’m good.”

“I’m sure the water bottle thinks so too.”

I flushed again.
“What is it you’re modeling for us, today?” I asked, gesturing toward the fluff that dangled before her fertile crescent.

“This?” she asked, surprised, while turning her magnificent hazel eyes downward to examine her own—in my obvious opinion—flawless womanhood. It clearly did not have the same debilitating effect on her that it had upon me. “I don’t know. This is just what they gave me.” She turned to look at it from all her many fabulous sides and another bubble blooped.

Truly, the wisp of a nothing she had entered wearing was barely cloth. The design was little more than a red, translucent, heart-shaped panty-like thing adorned with a few feathers and a bit of a fringe. The feathers were—presumably—for creating the illusion of potential flight, while the fringe was intended to obscure the view of her…em…

I made a note to have the fringe removed from the design immediately.

Three thin strands of alleged fabric connected this bit of gossamer fluff to something even more insubstantial in the rear, which wasn’t even really trying to cover what I considered to be her—and I’m sure others would have agreed with me on this point—glorious backside.

Gloop, bloop.

“Yes. Of course,” I said, ignoring the rising bubble, then creating another when I turned my attentions to the faint indications of neatly trimmed pubic hair through the sheer weave of fabric. I turned away, flushing, and scribbled more notes on my clipboard, supposedly in English, but I’m not entirely sure.

“Of course,” I repeated, my voice cracking like a tree frog being devoured by a python, and subtly adjusted my clipboard in another pathetic attempt to cover my ten-gallon fish tank and it’s lone swimmer. I looked toward the ceiling and did my best to appear disinterested. “But isn’t there supposed to be…oh, I don’t know…a top of some kind?”

Ms. Nuckeby, now suddenly concerned, looked down at her clearly well maintained breasts and scowled a bit. She absently reached up and cupped them as if she needed to feel that there was, indeed, truly-and-honestly, nothing between them and me. Multiple bubbles gurgled, and more water splished to the floor. Finally she turned her large, liquid, doe-like eyes to mine, smiled, and shrugged, which did delightful things to the aforementioned boobs.

Bloop.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. This is all they gave me,” she said.

“I turned—reluctantly I admit—from Ms. Nuckeby and consulted my clipboard through the blue of the water bottle. “According to my notes, and the original drawing, this version of Satin-Lace-Babydoll # 43 is supposed to have a top. Corkscrew patterns with little hearts in the center to match the…uh…your…uh…” Glurgle.

 “…the panties.” Creak, ribbet, gulp.

“This is all they gave me,” she repeated nervously, shrugging again as if that settled the matter. The shrugging made her now obviously natural and unaugmented breasts bobble yet again, and that settled the matter for me.

She smiled apprehensively and waited. I smiled stupidly and waited. What were we waiting for?

After an uncomfortable pause I realized my gaze had drifted down and I was staring, again, at Ms. Nuckeby where one should never stare at a woman one doesn’t know—semi-clothed or otherwise—especially when smiling, silent, and erect. Instantly embarrassed, I jerked my attention back to her face and smiled even bigger and more pleasantly, as if reassuring her that this certainly could never be her fault. She wasn’t responsible for the missing bit of non-clothing. I wasn’t staring at her crotch. I was ‘working’. ‘Assessing the product’. ‘Contemplating the viability of sales’. And the conclusion I had reached was that if our customers looked half as good in this as Ms. Nuckeby did at that particular moment, we could cut our fabric costs in half and exceed every stock estimate for the next ten years.

“Manschingloss?” I called out, suddenly enough that both Mrs. Abrososa and Ms. Nuckeby jumped a bit. I made a considered effort not to glance over to see how the abrupt movement had affected Ms. Nuckeby’s chest—but failed miserably.

Bloop.

After sufficient time, during which the room could preload Manschingloss’ silent irritation, the large, bear-shaped man strode into the room wearing lipstick, a floppy pink hat, a rainbow-colored scarf, and the kindly smile of an ogre whose every fiber screamed, ‘anything you might think, say, or do from this point forward can only aggravate me’.

“Manschingloss,” I asked. “Is there some reason Ms. Nuckeby here wasn’t given the top to her…em…ensemble?”

“Is there some reason you’re having sex with a Sparkletts bottle?” I blinked.

I saw his point. What was I thinking? Was I thinking? I believe the answer to that is patently obvious; so patently obvious that it cannot be tautologically over-expressed.
I stood, intending to exit, and in so doing proved my penis to be not only robust, but also filled with determination and resolve. The bottle remained suspended before me.

“We’ll postpone the viewing until the other half shows up, shall we?” I said, ignoring the fact that no one in the room was looking at my face.

“I have it right here,” Manschingloss said, holding out what looked more like a pair of comedy glasses than something an attractive woman might wear over her…em…

Gloop.

“I can put it on her now,” Manschingloss said. “If you, and your girlfriend there can just wait a moment.”

He began draping the bits of fabric over Ms. Nuckeby’s breasts, and I walked into a door.


After I had been gone a moment, I heard Manschingloss sniff. “Had I known all this time he could fill a ten-gallon bottle, I might have been nicer to him.”

And this brings us to ‘the line’.

My job description—as written by my grandfather, personally—contains just three words, though one is a contraction. ‘Don’t get sued.’

So you might be wondering why I didn’t simply exit the viewing room once the water bottle had made its interest in me known and put an end to the relationship quickly and cleanly with a minimum of water bottle sex. Any sane man would have. The answer to that is quite simple really: I am not sane. And besides that, more tellingly, I wanted to continue looking at Ms. Nuckeby.

Hence-o, Facto, Problemo.

I’d seen many a beautiful woman in my years with the family business; a high percentage had been erection-worthy. But there was something electric about Ms. Nuckeby that clearly revved up the old lust-engine where others had left it merely idling in park.

Even now, here in my office several minutes later as I stood shaking out the front of my trousers in an effort to—I don’t know, give the water molecules a ride—I was still fighting my way out of the ‘undergrowth’.

“You just did a pole dance with a water bottle in front of a naked girl. A naked girl employee.”

“No. Necessary. Not. Later. What?” I said. “It was an accident! I didn’t do it on purpose!” I studied her for a moment. “You were there. You don’t think I planned that, do you?”

“No, I don’t think you planned that,” she said, irritated, as if she were a motherly sixty-year-old woman, and I was headstrong child, young enough to be her…

Suddenly our relationship made much more sense.

“But don’t you think,” she continued, “you should have called off the meeting—maybe unstuck little Corky there and not made her stand around and watch you do…whatever it was you were doing?”

I gasped. I steadied myself against the desk. I looked around the room for a clearly marked exit.

“Make her stand there?” I said. “I didn’t make her…” I paused. I studied my secretary-slash-mother-figure and slowly felt sadness and fear overwhelm me as I realized she was right.

“Don’t be such a Wopplesdown!”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’re being a sexist pig! She couldn’t have walked out! You’re her boss! Her employment hinges
on staying and doing what you tell her to do—even if it makes her uncomfortable! Do you understand that this is why they call it harassment?"

Well, I did now.

“Oh, God. Really?”

Her expression said: ‘Yes, dumbass. Really.’ She could be brilliantly nonverbal, Mrs. Abrososa.

“Oh, God,” I repeated. “What have I done? This isn’t what I wanted, I just… ” I looked at her sheepishly and decided to just get it out there—as if it wasn’t already. “I’ve just never seen anyone so beautiful in my life. I didn’t want either of us to leave. I just wanted to stay there, and…be near her.”

Mrs. Abrososa’s sarcastic demeanor faded, and she studied me with deepening sympathy. After a tender moment, she moved closer and put a gentle hand on my shoulder, looking me in the eye with genuine affection.

“What are you, an idiot?”

I flinched, physically.

“That’s how it always starts!” she said and smacked the side of my head. “Men never mean to. But they still do! They like it, and they don’t think about the woman! This is why we need laws—and more lady judges appointed by Democrats!” She put her hands on her hips and glared at me. “That girl was naked! Vulnerable! And you made her stand there and watch you with your dick in a bottle! You think she found that attractive? I sure didn’t. If she doesn’t sue you, I should!”

Blood left my brain. My knees wobbled. My breathing shortened. I could already feel Grandfather approaching with my severance package in his right hand and a one-way ticket to shantytown in his left. I had no job skills. No interests. I would be homeless, and probably still erect. I wondered how much money one could make as a male prostitute. Maybe Mervin Wosserman could point me in the right direction.

Mrs. Abrososa was right. Unfortunately for me, and our family coffers, staying to enjoy Ms. Nuckeby’s immense beauty while performing ‘Live Sex Show with Plastic Container’ could also be interpreted as ‘intent to further inflict suffering, and harm’ by the sort of masterful legal minds who spend their days handing out business cards at funerals. At its simplest level, my staying in the Garment Viewing Room might have seemed innocently lecherous. But there’s another, very fine line between innocent and stupid, and I think it’s becoming rather obvious that I am on the other side of that particular line.

The…er…stupid side.

Quite plainly, I am not in a position to judge the ‘reality’ of the situation. I am too close to it. And I am a man.

If you’re not a man—and I’ll assume some of you may not be, or are unsure—you may not have experienced precisely how incoherent a male can become when confronted with an object of immense desire, and/or female, so I’ll try to make this as visual as I can. Are you familiar with how cattle are slaughtered for their meat? Do you have access to the Internet? What happens to a heterosexual man in the presence of a deeply attractive woman is really quite similar to what happens when meat producers fire those bolt-gun things into the unsuspecting brains of a cow: instantaneous brain death followed by several minutes of wide-eyed tongue lolling, and mindless squirming. It’s enough to make one a vegetarian. Or celibate.

Jokes seem funnier, especially your own, the sun shines brighter, and what happens for the woman really doesn’t enter into it.

Given all this, surprising as it may be to you, in my line of work until today I had never felt the need to impregnate a Sparklells bottle. Even with the seemingly endless parade of stunning young nubiles that have wandered up, and down the halls of Wopplesdown Struts, I have managed to avoid—aside from the occasional brief stiffy—any more significant attraction, and the resultant gibbering, thrashing, and lawsuits that proceed therefrom. Because for some reason, in order to overcome my intense, mind-numbing shyness, and fear of failure in order to actually approach a woman, I—until today—needed to be stimulated by a woman’s mind, as well as her body. My grandfather believes this is because I am a homosexual.

So in my case, the fact that I have found some woman attractive—debilitatingly so, even without so much as knowing her political affiliation—and have managed to overcome my innate insecurity and forced her to remain in my presence while I kept throttling my bottle, so to speak, puts me way, way, way over that damned line I mentioned earlier, and into a part of the world where English is, at best, a second language. Worse still, even now—as lawyers’ numbers are likely being speed-dialed throughout the building—I am continuing to feel a junkie’s desire to rub up against poor Ms. Nuckeby while removing Satin-Lace-Babydoll # 43 with my tongue, entirely convinced that she might find it appealing.

Brain-bolted indeed.

‘But…’ you ask, being the romantic that you are, ‘…isn’t it possible, by some miracle not yet known to modern science, that she might actually want you too?’ HA! You obviously know nothing about me.

Beyond that, there is a reason the number of company lawsuits far, far exceeds the number of successful
model/boss relationships at Wopplesdown Struts (the actual number of the latter being zero.) Take a moment to refer back to my job description. I’ll wait.
Back? Good.

While you were gone, Mrs. Abrososa went, at my request, to check on whatever trauma I may or may not have induced in Ms. Nuckeby, while I attempted to dry my pants with the iron I keep around the office for just such occasions. It might have been more effective, and less painful, had I removed the pants beforehand. But I was trying to hurry the process and avoid being caught—literally—with my trousers down. Fortunately for my future generations, Mrs. Abrososa returned and saved me before I singed off something important.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, snatching away the iron. Then, gesturing disgustedly toward my Natazzi’s. “Give me those.”

“What? You mean take them off?”

“That’s what I mean.”

“Here?” I said, horrified. “Now?”

“What? You think I’m going to see something I didn’t see back there with Ms. Nuckeby?”

I grimaced at the thought.

“Did you find her?” I asked. “Was she upset?”

“From what I hear,” she said. “I don’t know. I didn’t see her.”

“She’d already left?”

“If she did, she wasn’t wearin’ nothing but the company undies. Her clothes were still in the dressing room.”

The thought of Ms. Nuckeby running through the city wearing the bottoms of Satin-Lace-Babydoll # 43—in slow motion—once again caused the little soldier to pop up out of his foxhole.

“My God, boy,” Mrs. Abrososa said, apparently quite amazed. “You’re like a party balloon how you inflate. Lord, have mercy.” She held out a hand. “Now, gimme those pants.”

I withdrew from her. “Mrs. Abrososa, really…”

“I got twelve kids…”

“Twelve?”

“…most of ‘em boys—and twenty-seven grandchildren. You ain’t got nothin’ I never seen before.”

“But . . . we aren’t even on a first name basis.”

“Agrapanthila. Hand ‘em over.”

“Agrapanthila?”

She raised the iron and gave me a menacing look. “You want kids of your own?”

I still hesitated. “Wouldn’t this constitute harassment?”

“I got an iron!”

I stripped off the slacks without further hesitation.
Once I’d handed them to her, she stood there folding them over her arm and continuing to stare at my crotch. I moved my hands to block the view, and she looked up at me with disgust.

“I ain’t admirin’. I’m waitin’.”
“What? These, too?”
“They wet?”
I considered. “Damp.”
“Gimme.”
I paused, perhaps a beat too long, and she reached for them. I recoiled and my voice rose to a chirpy soprano.
“I can do it,” I said petulantly.
Trying my best to keep everything as tucked away as I could under the circumstances, I removed the silken boxers and handed them over.

Mrs. Abrososa—Agrapanthila—looked at them with revulsion.

“What? These, too?”

“Gimme.”
I shrugged, humiliated. “They’re softer than ours.”
She grumbled and headed for the door carrying my shame, stopping briefly in the open entryway to turn back to me.

“It’s sort of sad, really,” she said, glancing down. Not the sort of thing one wants to hear as a woman studies your privates. “She seemed kind of impressed with it, before you went and molested her.” “Impressed?”

“Oh, yeah. You two might have made a real cute couple.”
I felt suddenly flush with the thought of Ms. Nuckeby asking me to bare my boyhood for her—smiling and reaching for it.

“Right up until she sued you for everything you got,” my evil secretary concluded.

My fantasy degraded as Ms. Nuckeby stopped reaching and just pointed, laughing riotously at my shriveling crotch while rolling around naked in my inheritance. Somehow even that was erotic.

Gloop.

Mrs. Abrososa exited, laughing hysterically.

Rather abruptly my immediate situation overwhelmed me. Naked from the waist down. In a place of business. Erect. After having—mere moments before—sexually assaulted an attractive female employee. It was a rather compromising position. Someone might come by and see. Someone with authority. Someone who’d prefer that, while engaged in my profession, I wore pants.

What if ‘someone’ was already on their way? A representative from Human Resources with anti-harassment literature, disapproving looks, and things I’d have to sign while not wearing underwear? Or the police to discuss my lewd and lascivious behavior—or worse—to arrest me and haul me downtown in my overexposed state? Or perhaps Ms. Nuckeby’s Schwarzenegger-like father with a machete in one hand, an Uzi in the other, and a cigar to light the explosives he was going to shove up my ass?

Terrified, I called out through the door.

“Mrs. Abrososa? How long do you think it’s going to take?”

“Gimme half an hour,” she replied.

I felt a jolt run through me. I couldn’t stay in here—literally bucknaked—while SWAT teams converged on the area! I looked around, nervously trying to figure out what to do next when the phone rang.

And rang.

“Are you going to get that?” I called.

No answer. Must have gone into the bathroom, or the closet, or the company kitchen to show off my skid marks to other employees.

I looked at the phone. Internal line. Reasonably safe. Besides that, all the tension was ‘felling the old redwood’, if you get the supreme subtlety of my meaning, so I felt less perverted and more able to pick up the receiver.

So I did.
And heard the sound of an indescribably sexy voice on the other end.

“Mister Wopplesdown?” Pronounced correctly.

Gloop.

“Yes.”

“Mister Cor-CAR-an Wopplesdown?”

Well, .500 ain’t bad.

“Corky. Yes. Who’s calling?”

“Um…sir? This is Ms. Nuckeby.”

‘Mini-Me’ noisily banged a cup of pencils off my desk. “What was that? Is everything all right?”
“Fine, Ms. Nuckeby, fine,” I said as if, for all the world, I still wore pants. “What can I do for you?”
“I don’t know if you know who I am, sir, but…”
“Of course I know who you are, Ms. Nuckeby. You’re the model. The one wearing…”
“No top.”
I breathed deeply and fought to keep blood vessels from bursting in my brain. “Yes. Satin-Lace-Babydoll # 43 with no…no…no…em…correct.” I turned nervously, and my ugly stepson slammed the phone’s cradle to the floor where it clanged, banged, and ranged.
“Did something fall?” she asked. “What’s that ringing? Do you have to answer another line?”
“Yes. No! Something…uh…I have a…uh.” I picked up the phone cradle Polyphemus had trashed in his blind rage and tried to silence the ringer, “…the phone got…uh…hit by…” there appeared to be no off-switch, “…knocked down by…” damn, where was the “…it fell. It fell, somehow, all by itself, and…” I smacked the noisy thing against the desk, and it shattered into a million pieces, one of which continued to ring pathetically. “Sorry. All good. Speak.”
“Woof.”
“What?”
“Nothing,” she said. “Just kidding. I…uh…I wanted to come by and see you, sir. I…”
“No!”
She paused. Struck.
“Are you sure?” she asked. “I was hoping that if I saw you…”
“I’d rather you didn’t come to see me, Ms. Nuckeby.”
“Oh.”
“Right now, I mean. Parts of me at least. All of me. What there is of me to see.” I sucked air. In lots of ways.
“Now is just not a good time.”
“Then when might be? See, I was hoping maybe I could buy you lunch, and we could discuss…em…”
What? Settlements?
“I’d rather you didn’t.”
Another pause. “I see,” she said finally.
I flushed again, but from a different kind of distress. “I didn’t mean…what I meant to say was: I’m in the middle of something.” I looked down angrily at my throbbing, insistent little friend. “An unexpected guest has popped up in my office and is demanding my undivided attention.”
Her voice fell. “Oh.”
“He and I—we have other pants. PLANS!”
I repeatedly bit my tongue, angrily punishing it for its failure to get off its lazy ass and do its job properly.
“Oh. He?” she said, sounding—what—I don’t know—relieved? “Of course. I understand. Then maybe we can schedule another time?”
“Ooooh, I don’t know, I…it’s probably best if you talk to my lawyer.”
“Your lawyer?”
“He’s much more equipped for this sort of thing than I am. He’s intelligent.”
“Well, you see, this is what I was afraid of, Mister Wopplesdown…” She paused a moment as if carefully considering her financial demands and my greater malleability over lunch as opposed to facing actual legal counsel with functioning brains that didn’t have to struggle with competing thoughts of her mostly naked. “See, that was just a really strange and awkward situation down in the storage closet, just now…”
“Garment Viewing Room.”
“What?”
“It’s called the Garment Viewing Room. It’s not a storage closet.”
“Really? It seemed more like some kind of storage…”
“I would never force you into a storage closet, then make you stay there naked. I mean, while you were naked. I wasn’t naked. I had pants on then. And now, too, if you must know. You were naked, true, mostly, but I was just…”
“See, that’s what I want to talk to you about. I think you have the wrong impression of me. If you would just see me for a moment…”
“Honestly, Ms. Nuckeby,” I said, throbbing at the memory of already having seen most of her. “I saw all of you I need to see. I MEAN…”
“Oh!”
“That came out wrong!”
“No, I’m sure it didn’t. I’m truly sorry to have bothered you Mister Wopplesdown.”
Click.
“Ms. Nuckeby? MS. NUCKEBY!”
Why I yelled louder, as if somehow the sound might actually explode out the other end of a disconnected line, I
don’t know, but I’m a man, and as I’ve said, when an attractive woman is involved, the brain farts. I just desperately
needed to reconnect with Ms. Nuckeby and tell her I was sorry, please don’t sue me and take away all my money,
and, oh, by the way, let’s make lots of babies together. So I refused to be deterred by the fact that her extension was
already resting in a cradle somewhere deep inside the building.

Wait.

Somewhere deep inside the building,
I looked at the reader phone and read the extension.
4912.

I ran around the desk, grabbed my address book and looked through the various numbers.
4912. Henri Manschingloss. We still hadn’t changed the directory to reflect his insistence that he was now a
single-named celebrity.

I dialled.
“Manschingloss,” he said with clear irritation.
“Henri, is…”

“Manschingloss.”


“Why? Did you want to be rude to her some more?”

“I wasn’t rude to her.”

“Then why was she crying?”

“She was crying?”

“Actual tears. She stained my crinoline.”

“Can I speak to her, please?”

“You could. But she’s gone.”

“Gone where?”

“Shopping. The movies. Nude horseback riding, perhaps?” He paused. Waiting for a laugh I suppose. It didn’t
come. Not from my end. “Home, I would imagine,” he continued. “She’s a good model you know. Dedicated and
professional. Not like some of the prima donna flakes we usually get around here. You could have forgiven her.”

“Forgiven her what?”

“The topless thing! It wasn’t her fault she walked in wearing only half an outfit. I was fixing a stay. She didn’t
even know there was a top. Sometimes there isn’t you know.”

“I do know. Of course I know. Our designs are sometimes barely even clothes.”

“My designs are more than clothes.”

The mounting tension in his voice thickened the air around me and ate at my life force like some evil Star Trek
evampire alien. A really ugly, cheap-looking one from the original series.

“Of course they are, Hen…Manschingloss,” I said. “They’re beyond all, verbal description. But back to Ms.
Nuckeby. She was upset because…” I found it hard to believe. “…because she was topless?”

“Why else?”

“I don’t know,” I lied. “Lots of reasons, I suppose. None of them litigious. Perhaps she didn’t like the room, or
Mrs. Abrososa, or…”

“…your preference for fucking plastic?”

Okay, that hurt.

“Really, Corky. Water bottles? Ugly men with no fashion sense? God knows what else. There are other options
you know,” he said with significance.

“I keep telling you, I’m straight.”

“I know. You keep telling me,” he said seductively. “The closet is a lonely place, Corky.”

“The water bottle thing happened because of my reaction to Ms. Nuckeby.”

He paused, apparently confused. “What reaction?”

“The…you know…the erection reaction.”

“You got an erection because of a girl?”

“Yes, because of a girl!”

“Wow. I figured you were thinking about me. Or Mervin.”

“I—am—straight!”

“Since when?”

“Since always!”
“Then what about that video?”
“You’ve seen the video?”
“It’s on my desktop right now. I watch it all the time.”
I heard him click something with a computer mouse and pause while he absorbed.
“That video is not allowed on company property.”
“You did this, and you claim to be straight.”
“I’d been drinking!”
“Alcohol reduces inhibitions, Corky. It doesn’t change your orientation.”
“I thought he was a girl!”
“He has a beard.”
“I’m straight, I’m straight, I’m straight! Can we get back to Ms. Nuckeby?”
“You got an erection because of a girl—then made her stay and watch you do the nasty to a water bottle?” He paused and considered it. “She should sue.”
“No, she shouldn’t,” I said, my voice squeaking as a life of potential moneylessness flashed before me like an independent film with big name actors about ugly, drunken, mean people; the ‘arty’ kind of movie everyone thinks is ‘brilliant’, and ‘moving’, and a ‘surefire winner’ because they don’t actually have to live it.
Then, finally, something in his answers seeped through the porridge I like to call a brain.
“Is that why she called?” I asked, choking on the words. “To sue?”
“What, Wisper? No! She called because she was afraid she had done something wrong by walking in mostly naked. She was afraid she’d get fired. I tried to tell her that if she could make a homosexual hard, she should be extremely proud. But maybe not so much.”
“Uummm. Manschingloss. Does she think I’m gay?”
“Everyone thinks you’re gay. There’s video, remember?”
“I thought he was a girl!”
“And you claim a pretty thing like Wisper got you hard. Can you understand our confusion?”
“I was drunk!”
“In the Viewing Room?”
“In Mervin’s locker! I…” Suddenly something hit me. “Wait a minute. Did you show her the video?” I asked, humiliated, clasping my hands over my face and saying a silent prayer that even Manschingloss could never be that thoughtless.
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“Of course I showed it to her.”
“Of course you did. So she thinks I’m gay. And that I like hairy men. And that I’m going to fire her.”
“Boy, does she. Which is good. Otherwise she’d sue.”
I considered what he’d said and realized he was probably right. She would never want to go to court and have it on the public record that the idiot who could mistake a hairy man for a woman—even when drunk—had become sexually aroused by her. I suppose I should have left well enough alone at that point, but I really have no common sense.
“How can I get in touch with her?” I asked.
“Why?”
“I need to talk to her.”
“About what?”
Good question.
“Do you have her number?” I asked.
“What am I? HR?”
Then I heard horrifyingly familiar, intimate moaning and slurping sounds in the background.
“Soo.” Manschingloss asked, clearly distracted. “You’re not gay?”
I hung up and called HR. They had no home phone number for Ms. Nuckeby. She had come to them through one of the smaller agencies outside the city, and they wanted me to remind her, when next I saw her, that she still hadn’t given them her tax ID number. I made a mental note to do so, filed it under ‘Things To Promptly Forget’ and hung up, very frustrated, in more ways than one. I was about to call Manschingloss and fire him just because he used crinoline, when a nagging thought in the back of my brain bitchslapped me.
Manschingloss was two floors above me. I could still reach Ms. Nuckeby before she escaped the building.
I raced for the doors of my office, threw them open and ran out into the usual madness beyond: secretaries, designers, seamstresses, delivery men, all of whom gasped and screamed because I was still naked from the waist down.
I ran back into my office and slammed the door behind me. Even more frustrated I began pacing, which only
added injury to insult because all my thinking about the potential nearness of Ms. Nuckeby had brought the little general to attention again, and it kept bumping objects, getting caught in things and knocking breakables off my desk. It was like it had a mind of its own and was trying to do it, the little prick.

Heh. Funny. I didn’t mean to do that.

I was just about to call security and have Ms. Nuckeby physically restrained from leaving the building when Grandfather burst in, an apoplectic Yosemite Sam in a tailored business suit with a face like a cherry red, out-of-tune piano.

“What’s this I hear about you fucking a water bottle in public?” he yelled, not really asking—other than rhetorically.

“It’s not…”

“Is it true you performed some kind of sordid sex act in front of one of our models?”

“Sordid? Nooooo…”

“Trying to impress some young hottie who’s modeling for us?”

“Trying to impress? If I were endeavoring to impress some ‘young hottie’ as you so eloquently put it…”

“Endeavoring? ‘Eloquently’? Speak English, you damned re-tard! This is what I get for sending you to Oxland.”

“Oxford.”

“Shut up! I gave you this job because you were the one person I thought I could trust not to cross the line! You know: The line!”

“I am aware of the line,” I said, staring at him and seething a bit myself. The only reason he thought he could trust me with the models was because he—and everyone else in the company, apparently—still thought I was a homosexual. Or at least bisexual with a leaning toward men. Damned Miller Lite. “And I haven’t crossed any…”

“Oh, you’re a lawyer now, are you?”

I didn’t answer. He knew I wasn’t. Or was fairly certain. He was never really clear on exactly what I’d achieved at ‘Oxland’.

“We can’t afford another lawsuit, Corcharan. I made that clear when I gave you the job, and I thought that you—of all the family members available, including that damned, bush-diver you call a sister—could control yourself!”

“I have it on good authority she isn’t planning to sue. And until now, I think I’ve controlled myself quite admirably considering the circumstances, thank you very…”

“So you’ve been good up till now, and you figured it was the perfect time to start sticking your dick into water bottles…”

“I didn’t do it on purpose!”

“…in some sordid, attempt at foreplay?”

“Foreplay?”

“You’re not intending to date her, are you?”

“What? Date her? I’d be lucky if she could think of my name without laughing, let alone…”

“As a beard, or something?”

“I am not a homosexual…”

“Lawsuits are one thing. It’s to be expected when you’re rich, though we’d obviously prefer to avoid it. But dating? Potentially marrying away significant portions of the family fortune to a commoner just to hide your perversions? You know the rule!”

I choked. The ‘rule’ was the only thing that thus far had managed to keep my oversexed family truly in line. We all knew the rule: ‘Date outside the accepted, social circle of the equally rich,’ and earn instant disinheritance. Immediate pauperdom’. “I know the rule. I would never…”

“I’d also hate to lose this model. I hear she’s good. Professional. Not like the prima donnas and flakes we usually get.”

I squinted at him, wondering. That was almost exactly what Manschingloss had said just moments ago. “Were you in the room when I called Henri…”

“Manschingloss.”

“…Manschingloss? Because he said something…”

“I was trying to sort out your nonsense before it went legal!”

He said ‘legal’ as if he were saying ‘nuclear’. Or ‘nuke-yular’ if you’re from Texas.

“Were you in the room?”

“Waiting outside. I met with this Nuckeby girl as she was coming out. She’s a real looker. I can understand how you’d falter—even outside your own preference.”

“It’s not outside my preference…”
“All right, outside your ‘genetic determination’ then. Your ‘sexual orientation’. ‘Need for speed’. Whatever the PeeVee term for it is these days.”

“P.C. term.”

“Shut up. You couldn’t help yourself. I saw her. I understand that. She’s damned attractive; the kind of girl who could turn a man such as yourself, if only for a while. So I had to make certain she wasn’t going to involve lawyers. Fortunately for you…”

He stopped cold. He was no longer aware of me, as a whole, but was instead staring down with a deeply frightened expression at my…er…‘be fruitful, and multiplier’. Pale, lips quivering, eyes expanding madly like Peeps in a microwave (try it. It’s fun). I adjusted my hands to cover my ‘Ballpark Frank’ and Grandfather ratcheted his attention away from those ‘plump-when-you-cook-’em’ loins back up to my face, and seethed, rather spectacularly, for several seconds.

“What the hell is wrong with your head?” he asked through clenched teeth.

“The water bottle soaked my pants so Mrs. Abrososa…”

He closed his eyes as if in pain and held up a hand to stop me from going further. “Mrs. Abrososa? I can’t hear this. Now you’ve involved Agrapanthila? I knew her husband. We were friends. He was a pious man, offended by the very notion of sex.”

Unlikely, I thought, with twelve kids. But I let it go.

Older generations have an interesting gift for compartmentalizing their sexuality away from their real lives, honestly seeming to believe themselves sexless and disinterested—as if just saying so makes it true—often in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Of course, counter to this fact, Mrs. Abrososa had apparently reached a greater comfort level with her own—suddenly, images of my elderly secretary monkey-loving her wrinkled, dead husband exploded into my brain, and I had to steady myself against the desk.

“Armando Abrososa was not the kind of man who would approve of you parading your wood around in front of his beloved wife, Corky. Hell, no one would! ESPECIALLY OUR LAWYERS!”

“Mrs. Abrososa offered to dry my pants,” I said, still weaving a bit, but I managing to banish most thoughts of my elderly, rutting secretary. “And the water bottle was an accident. It fell on me…”

“…and you sat there with your dick in it, then made the Nuckeby girl stand around and watch you.”

He made it sound filthy. A lawyer would likely do the same. I wilted. Most of me anyway. I suppose it was kind of filthy. What the hell was wrong with me?

Grandfather rubbed his temples and opened his mouth as if hoping to expel demons.

“This ‘sexual harassment’ bullshit is going to be the death of me,” he said quietly. “No more, you understand? I need this model for the show next week a lot more than I need someone to take notes on clothing designs,” he said pointedly. “You get me?”

I got him. And seeing that I had, he gestured toward my family tree as if it were diseased.

“So, if you want to keep your money, your house, and your cushy ride on the Wopplesdown family gravy train, you will learn—like the rest of this oversexed family—to squelch your urges, and keep that thing where it belongs—under at least two layers of clothing!”

I lowered my head and spoke softly. “I’m sorry.”

“And until you can, you are to come nowhere near this office—or that model! In fact, I never want you to see that model again! Ever! Even in your imagination!”

He paused a moment to let the hot lava in his veins distribute itself evenly.

“Now, take the week off,” he said. “Take two! And before you leave today, Human Resources has a video. I want you to get a copy and watch it—repeatedly—and don’t come back to Wopplesdown Struts or its affiliates until you can quote it back to me, verbatim. You don’t have to believe it—lord knows I don’t—but know it! And if you ever come back to a job, here—any job…”

I winced.

“…I never again want to hear that you’ve been sticking any body parts, in any water bottles, anywhere…”

“I wasn’t.”

“…EVER AGAIN!”

He paused, glaring, and let the moment settle. Then he glanced down again and immediately regretted it.

“And if I catch you doing—whatever it is you’re doing with your pants off, and that goddam stiffy sticking out between your shirt tails—in this office, or anywhere else, in my lifetime—if I so much as hear you had a little extra blood flow in that thing because of another employee, some contractor, or just a random stranger walking by on the street—you will be disowned and tossed into the GUTTER! YOU HEAR ME?”

I quivered a moment, then wilted more completely and slumped down into my high-backed office chair. I could feel the skin of my butt sticking fast to the pleather, my erection now dying rapidly on the vine. There were times,
with Grandfather in particular, when you just had to roll up the carpets, put up the chairs and turn out the lights.

“I hear you.”

He stared at me with contempt and loathing.

“I am deadly serious, Corcharan. If I hear you went anywhere near that model,” he said with more calm, but greater threat, “I will end you. You understand?”

I nodded like a bobble-head doll in the back of a 4x4 racing insanely over ski moguls.

“You are not to see her for business,” he continued, “you are not to see her for pleasure. In this building, or out of it. Wearing clothes, or wearing air. Flaccid, erect, or…” he took one last look at my wriggling, shrinking erection and shuddered, “…or otherwise.”

“You don’t have to worry.”

“I’d better not.”

Finally, he took a deep breath, working hard not to glance down at ‘it’ again.

“You didn’t get that from my side of the family,” he spat.

Then the old man turned and headed for the door, opened it without another word and slammed the thing behind him. A picture fell. My coat dropped off its hanger. Someone in the outer office screamed.

Eventually the room settled into silence as the vibrations died down.

I slumped and stared for a moment at the wood-paneled exit, then slowly rotated my chair until it looked out the floor-to-ceiling picture window behind my desk, staring through it into the city beyond. A man in a building adjacent waved, then dropped his own pants and enthusiastically showed me his penis; clearly thinking he was returning some kind of favor. He then proceeded to get up on his desk and do a kind of perverse happy dance when a woman entered through the office door behind him and screamed. He promptly slipped on some papers and fell into a trashcan. I wondered absently if he could sue me for that, then turned my attention lethargically away from him and down toward the teeming streets below.

There, far beneath me (as my grandfather would prefer it), was Ms. Nuckeby stepping into a cab. After a moment of giving directions, telling the driver about her perverted boss and his water bottle lover, the cab slowly pulled away and drove her to that nude horseback riding lesson.

I could see her so clearly: naked, smiling, and galloping toward me in extreme slow motion.

Gloop.

I stared down sadly at my mindless renewing erection, and all other energy drained slowly from me as whatever ridiculous fantasy I might have harbored about Ms. Nuckeby bearing me twelve children after years of meaningful sex on horseback gradually faded away.

Lost in my own sad little world, I found myself saying her name out loud, and with longing.

“Wisper.”

What a delightful name.

The Nuckeby part I could do without.
It was an hour or so later when I finally left the building—pants dried and in their proper place, erectionless and anti-harassment tape in hand.

I felt defeated and lost. I didn’t want to spend a week, or more away from my job. That meant someone else would have to do it. Someone who might actually be qualified.

Worse still—I didn’t like the idea that I would never again see Ms. Nuckeby.

There had to be a way I could solve both problems by simply learning to remain unaroused in her presence. Was that so hard?

Ha! ‘Hard’. I’m pathetic.

But really, dogs could be taught to overcome their natural urge to drink from toilets. Was mind over member just too much to ask?

Apparently so.

Even now, as I exited the elevator muttering to myself, still trying to control the various lewd thoughts of Ms. Nuckeby swimming naked through my brain—doing primarily a form of the breaststroke—there was an increase in blood flow which I doubt Grandfather would consider safely within the legal limit. I covered my crotch with the anti-harassment tape and hoped my fellow Woppesdown Struts employees would have the decency to pretend they hadn’t noticed.

As I walked awkwardly, turned slightly to the wall, I focused intently on last year’s World Series. Not getting the desired result, I moved on to the previous year’s games.

Then the year before.

Unfortunately, there didn’t seem to be enough baseball statistics in the history of the game to tag out Ms. Nuckeby as she rounded third and headed for home wearing only cleats, socks, batting gloves, and a cap.

What I really needed was a hormone-removal kit. Not being an avid reader of Scientific American (they don’t have cartoons), I was unsure if such a thing even existed. Perhaps a home penis-removal kit? I bet you could make one of those for yourself.

I shuddered as I realized what I had just, genuinely, considered.

Grandfather was right. How could I come to work tomorrow—or ever again—as long as Ms. Nuckeby roamed free, and sometimes naked? My life as I knew it would be over the minute I saw her in anything even remotely sexy. Hell, let’s be honest; my life was over as soon as I saw her, period, even if she was smeared in mud with leaves and twigs protruding from her hair while wearing wet, pungent animal skin.

Mmmm. Revealing, easily removed, wet, pungent animal skin.

Gloop.

AAH! HAD I NO SELF CONTROL AT ALL?
Clearly, any thoughts of her—clothed, or otherwise—would doom me. I needed a complete distraction of some kind. But short of installing an ice machine in my trousers, what could possibly…?

Aaaaaah. That was it. I would stop someplace and buy one of those liquid-filled bag things. I believe they were called ‘icepacks’. I’d heard about them from people who were physically active. Supposedly you could find them in something called a ‘drug store’. From what I’d been told, all you had to do was purchase one, take it home, and put it in the freezer. It was that easy. Then, once frozen, you simply applied it to the afflicted area.

My area was quite afflicted. I bet I could slip one in my underwear before any potential Ms. Nuckeby sighting and—voilá! I would freeze my nuts into submission.

Genius. Pure genius.

Feeling renewed vigor, and confidence that I could squelch my penis’ vigor, and its confidence, I headed for the door leading out to the street and passed another of the Woppesdown Struts employees, my childhood friend, and once-fellow comic-book collector, Morgan Wiggen.

Yes, I was—until very recently—a superhero comic book collector. I’m sometimes ashamed to admit it, but no one died or anything so I’m learning to let go. Still, people often think there’s a disease of some kind involved when a grown man is interested in adventure stories about unrealistically well-endowed people who run around in brightly colored, skin-tight clothing. But you have to keep in mind that my parents wouldn’t let me buy porn. If you haven’t looked at a superhero comic in a while, keep in mind that the art is very detailed and those costumes are really tight.

Sometime back in my late teens I left the superhero fantasy world behind due to a waning interest in the bad stories, repetitive situations, and the newfound freedom to buy actual porn. Of course, when you consider the colorful, tight-fitting costumes on unrealistically endowed women I get to view on a daily basis—live, and in person—you might see the pointlessness of paying money for the relatively inferior, hand-drawn versions of same.

Hmm. Unrealistically endowed women in scanty, tight-fitting costumes appear to be a common theme here. I wonder if there’s some deeper significance I’m not seeing?

Probably not.

Anyway, my friend Morgan still seemed to enjoy said superhero experience quite thoroughly, and more power to him. Based on what I know of him, he’d probably feel the same even if he had my job. His interest in women wearing scanty, painted-on clothing never seems to flag, even to the point of his occasionally asking attractive women to dress up as one ‘superheroine’ or another so that he and she might reenact certain classic, comic book sequences as a kind of foreplay. The Wedding Night of Yellowjacket and Wasp. The Wedding Night of Cyclops and Marvel Girl. The Wedding Night of Hawkeye and Mockingbird. Date Night With She-Hulk and just about everybody.

He was likely doing that now while chewing happily on something brown; chatting up some bleary-eyed young woman I recognized vaguely from the shipping department in hopes of getting her into tight-fitting clothing while she was clearly searching for any opening in his monologue that would allow her to escape him.

“Archangel is my favorite X-Man,” he said, apparently going for the ‘Date with Psylocke’ angle, unaware of the fact that this woman could not possibly care less if he were lying on the floor bleeding from the ears. She was leaning, turned away from him and primed to run at the slightest visible crack in their one-sided conversation. “Or he was until they hired this hack writer who changed his skin from blue to normal flesh-colored. White people flesh-colored. They’re always changing writers, and each one is worse than the last. But this guy— wooh! Ruined Archangel. Archangel, not ‘Angel’.”

He said ‘Angel’ in the kind of whiny, sarcastic, singsong voice that homophobes with little or no acting talent believe sounds exactly like an unattractive homosexual. “He claimed he quit. The writer. But Marvel fired him. I know someone who was there. He cried. And he should have after what he did to Archangel. You see the movie?”

“Yes, brother is gay…”

“The third one. It sucked. ‘Angel’ was that faggy, feather guy. Archangel, from the comics, was tough and scary. He could fling them at you, you know—his wings—and these razor-feathers would disengage, and they could shoot at you, and cut you! So COOL! Now he’s just back to being like the guy in the movie. Gay white guy with ‘downy’ feathers who ‘heeeeeels’ people. He’s a ‘heeeeealer’. So faggy.”

“My brother is gay…”

“Either of you see the third movie?”

“No. I…”

“It soooo sucked. Especially…” unattractive, gender-challenged, singsong “…‘Angel’. Even gay guys wouldn’t like him. We should see it sometime. Wanna rent it and see it with me?”

“No, I…”

“I don’t blame you. It was the worst of the three. First and second ones are great. But the comics are still better. Especially Archangel, and Psylocke.”
“Psylocke, as any true fan knows,” Morgan said sagely, “is Archangel’s one, true love. Not that dippy little Paige Guthrie.”

Morgan winked at her as if she were one of the chosen few who understood. She stared back blankly, clearly one of the teeming masses that did not.

“And you,” he concluded, “would look great dressed as Psylocke.”

“Dressed as…” she shook her head, lost. “As what?”

“Psylocke. Yeah. And I could be Archangel. I have a couple cases of blue face paint. We’d look great together. Like an Adam Hughes cover! He draws women like you! SMOKIN’ hot! WOO! All feminist and strong in their tight-fitting little outfits. And he draws them really realistic so their boobs actually squeeze out in places where the costumes are too tight. Like they would on a real woman with naturally big ones who couldn’t find anything in her size.”

He glanced down at her, ‘naturally big ones’, and she reflexively covered them, goggling at him, open-mouthed and horrified, then began backing quickly away.

“So it’s more true,” he continued. “The way he draws them. Like actual art. You’d look like that. Squeezing out all over.”

“Squeezing out…what?”

“All over.”

She was moving away from him very quickly now, and Morgan stepped a few paces to stay with her.

“Or, now that I think about it, maybe Nekra. Ooooh, yeeeeeah. The original black costume where the bottoms of her boobs hang out from under the top. So sexy.”

He indicated on his own chest where his boobs would hang out if he had them and were so dressed, and she flinched.

“With a body like yours, you’d look amazing as Nekra,” he promised her. “And if I had to, I’d be willing to dress like Mandrill. It’s not out of the question.”

“Ewww! Yes, it is!” And finally, with a look of total revulsion on her face, she turned and ran away from him.

“Okay. You’re right,” he called after her. “The way he draws them. Like actual art. You’d look like that. Squeezing out all over.”

“Squeezing out…what?”

“All over.”

But the woman was gone. She had reached the building’s exit and slammed through its door, barely more than a Jesse Quick speed blur that was quickly lost in the crowd.

“Maddie?”

Morgan stood silently for a minute, watching for any distant sign of her.

“See you tomorrow!” he finally called cheerily, smiling and waving at no one.

After a minute or so of looking to see if she’d turned around to see his farewell, he looked over to me.

“It’s great how women totally dig comics fans, now that all the superhero movies have shown how right and cool we were all along.”

“The movies show that?”

“Duh.”

“Well, she’s certainly attractive.”

“She’s not attractive,” he said doing air-quotes around ‘attractive’, “she’s HOT. I can tell, man. I have pictured her naked. She’d look so great in our lingerie. Like Emma Frost. I’m getting her some for her birthday. Put that company discount to some good use.”

“Lingerie? But you’re not…” It seemed impossible, “…dating, are you?”

“Not yet. But once I get her the lingerie…” He pumped his fist in a gesture that was hard to interpret but might have indicated something sexual to a female mastodon, and I nodded as if I understood. We turned and began walking together toward the door at the opposite end of the building from where ‘Maddie’ had made good her escape.

“Buying lingerie for a fellow employee might be considered harassment.”

“Yeah, right,” he sneered.

“I’m serious.”

“What are you? Harassment Man?” he asked, apparently amazed at my stupidity. “Nothing’s harassment. I took that anti-harassment thing HR makes you do online. Now I can say whatever I want and it’s okay.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works.”

He cocked an eye toward me with a ‘what do you know’ expression.

“She can cook, too. Look.” He showed me some of the food in his mouth. “She made that. Madelyn Windom’s world-famous zucchini bread. She threw it to me when she saw me coming.”
“Threw it ‘to’ you? Or threw it ‘at’ you?”
“To. At. Same thing, Proper English Man. Want some?”
“Do you have any that isn’t pre-chewed?”
He offered up a Ziploc baggie so I took a greasy piece and joined the fun. Madelyn Windom’s zucchini bread truly was a marvel. You couldn’t taste the zucchini.
“ Heard you had a day today.” Morgan said, smiling evilly through another mouthful.
“That’s putting it mildly.”
“Did you really dry hump a model in the fitting room?”
“What? Good God, no! Is that what people are saying?”
Morgan smiled. “No. Just some nonsense about a water bottle that was so lame everyone knew it had to be bullshit. Of course, they might be saying it tomorrow if you don’t go to the comic book convention with me.”
“Come on,” he cajoled. “It’ll be fun.”
“A comic convention? No it won’t. You always say ‘it’ll be fun’, and it never is. Not even remotely. Those things are always filled with lots of people like that fat, rude guy on the Simpsons. Overweight, balding ‘writers’ who think they have a right to be surly to you because they’re the latest hired hand on ‘Boogie Man and His Disco Sidekicks’. Plus, everyone there has a body that should never be seen in public, yet there they are—exposing themselves in brightly colored superhero spandex, thongs, and electrician’s tape.”
“Not everyone dresses like that.”
“You only need one.”
“That’s the best part of the show!”
“If I thought people in outrageous costumes was ‘the best part of the show’, I’d find a way to stay at work.”
“Find a way?”
“Um. Yeah. Um…I can’t because…”
I flushed as I remembered why. Fortunately Morgan is in no way emotionally sensitive and it went unnoticed.
“Becaaaaaaause…?” he asked.
“Because I’m taking some time off.”
“What?”
“Grandfather thinks I need a vacation.”
“Vacation? Dude. Your job is a vacation!”
“I’m sure you see it that way.”
“Any normal guy would see it that way. Hey, maybe the old man would let me do your job!”
“He’d sooner feed alligators wearing a duck suit.”
“You could put in a good word for me.”
“No, I really couldn’t.”
“Maybe I’ll just call him myself and ask.”
“Maybe you should.”
“Maybe I will.”
We both chewed and walked a moment in zucchini bread silence.
“Well,” he finally said around liquefied brown that had gathered around the rim of his mouth. “If you’re not coming in to work, then you have to come to the convention with me.” He read my expression. “Come on! I’m going to invite Madelyn. Now that I think of it, she’d look perfect in a Phoenix costume. Duh. Why didn’t I think of that before? Madelyn. Like in Pryor?”
The Phoenix’s real name. In the comic, not the movies. Or one of the Phoenix’s. See, a long time ago, in another dimension…
Sorry. Nearly geeked out there for a second. Then I realized that it’s a long, complicated story, and no one cares.
“I should have realized sooner,” he said, glancing at me as I chewed silently, not at all getting that my own semi-clad superheroine still mentally distracted me. “Why don’t you invite Mindie?”
My brain froze. All erotic thoughts of Ms. Nuckeby ceased their attack on my exhausted libido.
“Invite Mindie?” I asked.
Morgan knew, of course, that I had been in love with Mindie Butterwycke since the dawn of hormonal time. She was a childhood friend of my sister’s; one I had longed deeply and unrequitedly for as the first girl who could—simply by entering a room—make my penis swell. Mindie had been—since my crossing the threshold of sexual, if
not mental, maturity—an object of perpetual personal desire; the kind of woman whose image you carried off into
sleep then dreamt of fitfully—probably because you had wanked off while imagining her jumping naked on a
trampoline. I’d considered marrying her at one point, but she wouldn’t go out with me.

Since my first encounter with Mindie, I’d thought of her at least once daily. But I suddenly realized that since
sexually assaulting that water bottle in the presence of the semi-nude Ms. Nuckeby, Mindie hadn’t even crossed my
mind. Naked trampolining or otherwise. Not once! It was a startling revelation, and might have told me something
significant were I more than just marginally sharper than Morgan.

“I think she’d be less interested in the convention than I would,” I said, not actually ‘thinking’—more ‘knowing
full well’.

“Yeah,” he said, clearly irritated, but accepting the truth. Then he brightened a bit. “So, fine. Come without
her.”

“No. I have to convince my grandfather I should come back to work.”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “Work. How many naked girls did you have to ‘work’ with today, Corky?”

“Just one. One was enough.”

Visions of Ms. Nuckeby danced in my head again. Before long I needed ice. I moved the anti-harassment tape
to obscure things; unfortunately, Morgan noticed anyway.

“Dude,” he said, looking disgusted. “I hope that’s because of the zucchini bread and not me.”

“I’m straight!”

“I’ve seen the video.”

“You took the video!”

“Yeah. It was pretty funny. I can’t believe you bought it when I told you he was Mindie.” He glanced down. “Is
that because I mentioned her?”

“No, it’s, um….” I looked around nervously. “Something happened in the Garment Viewing Room. I…uh…I
really can’t really talk about it, here.”

Morgan looked surprised, then leaned toward me and whispered in a voice that sounded almost afraid. “Holy
crap. Did you really fuck a water bottle?”

“No!” I lied and wondered if I looked as guilty as I felt. His smile said I did.

“Dude. I gotta hear this.”

I sagged and gave up. “Maybe I shouldn’t come in to work, tomorrow.”

“And maybe you should go to a comic book convention?”

Since you are undoubtedly noticing that our friendship seems a bit unlikely, this would be as good a place as
any to explain how Morgan and I became friends.

The two of us met in high school. I was a student at Wellmsley, an all-male boarding school, and he was a
student from a neighboring institution of the more public variety who had come through our institute of higher
learning in order to steal things.

I was lying on the floor near my locker comparing tiles, moaning, and bleeding profusely after one of
Wellmsley’s more exciting, semiregular, male-bonding events—one which involved some of the larger boys beating
me severely about the head, groin, and torso. Theirs was a more-than-occasional act of camaraderie that centered,
primarily, around the violent repositioning of my facial features, Mr. Potato Head-like, then racing off to bond
further with other boys about how funny it all was. I’m not entirely sure why I always happened to be the focus of
their affectionate ‘ribbing’. It was likely just a straightforward example of the stronger wolves culling out the
weaker; following Darwin’s lame ideas of strengthening the pack or something. It’s the sort of thing the Nature
Channel is always warning us about. Unfortunately for me, I usually watched Room Raiders on VH1.

It was at this particular low point in my adolescent struggle towards pseudo-manhood that Morgan happened to
wander by with an armload of shiny, expensive-looking items of no real value. He looked down at me, saw the
blood, and asked if I needed a Kleenex.

I told him I had a box in my locker if he wouldn’t mind opening it for me. I gave him the combination, and he
did so, pulling several white tissues from a carton within, then dropping them near my head. As I daubed the raging
flow of my life’s precious liquid, Morgan helped himself to some of the personal items he found behind my Kleenex
—a pen, some cartoon character key rings, a picture of a naked girl I’d cut from one of father’s old Playboys—and
slipped them into his pockets.

“Holy, shit!” he said, apparently stumbling across something of actual value in there.

“What?” I asked, almost as surprised as he was.

He pulled a plastic-covered comic from behind some of the textbooks—Incredible Hulk number 181—the first appearance of Wolverine, and right behind it—in my opinion the gold standard of modern superhero comics—Giant Sized X-Men number one by Dave Cockrum, Len Wein, and Chris Claremont—the first appearance of the current version of the X-Men, the ones who came to be the foundation for all the cartoons, toys, and movies. The total value of said comics was several thousand dollars when graded at 9.2 out of a possible 10, or higher. These were 9.8. Quite valuable and exceedingly rare at that grade level.

“Can I have these?” Morgan asked. I was surprised he even bothered to ask.

“I’m surprised you even bothered to ask.”

“Dude. I’m a fan. You don’t rip off another fan.”

He began replacing the items he’d stuffed in his pockets. He stopped short with the image of the girl from Playboy (Marianne Gravatte, October 1982. Quite a lovely girl with—I was sure if I ever met her—a darling personality to go with her large breasts), and repocketed it. Then he knelt on the tile and helped me up.

“So? Can I have ‘em?” he asked again.

“Sure,” I said. As long he wasn’t going to hit me, I felt he deserved some reward. “I’ve got more you know. Would you like to see?”

“Dude! Does Wolverine shit in the woods?”

“Not in any issue I’ve ever read.”

“He does between issues. They never show it, but he does. The guy’s an animal. He’ll crap anywhere and wipe his ass with leaves. Trust me. I wrote a fan-fic about it.”

“A what?”

“A fan-fic. Fan fiction. Online. People write all kinds of shit and post it on websites. Mostly it’s girls writing about Nightcrawler being all romantic and fucking Kitty Pryde. But some of us write Wolverine stories, and they’re cooler than the one’s that get printed. We don’t have censorship.”

“Marvel doesn’t get mad?”

“What are they gonna do? It’s the Internet! No one controls the Internet! It’s Lord of The Flies, man!”

“Wow.” I considered it, then blanched. “Lord of the Flies was kind of scary though.”

“So’s the Internet! But it’s all anomalous, so no one cares!”

“Anomalous?”

“Secret! People don’t know who you are! So you can pick on people and then pretend it wasn’t you!”

“Ah, anonymous. Though your description of ‘fan-fic’ sounds anomalous as well.”

“Oh, it totally is! You could even write some if you want.”

I immediately began thinking of a story where Wolverine massacres an entire school of snobs in one afternoon, then urinates on the bodies and sets them on fire. A morality tale. Very uplifting. With laser-like clarity, I finally understood the real value of the Internet.

“Are you a student here?” I asked.

“No.”

“That’s good.”

Morgan, and I continued talking as we walked out of the building and into a lasting friendship. Not exactly the first meeting of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, but our epic tale nonetheless. And at least neither of us had been decreed by the gods to die. At least up till now.

Morgan and I bonded quickly, and we considered, for a time, becoming professional thieves. For my part, I would point Morgan in the direction of truly valuable items as opposed to the things he assumed were valuable because they were ‘gold-colored’ and ‘shiny’, and he would devise clever ways of removing them from their proper owners, usually by dangling from high ceilings like Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible. But since I was already fiendishly wealthy, and girls weren’t realistically interested in joining us, Bonnie and Clyde-like in our never-ending run from the law, we decided to collect comics and write fan-fic instead. Which still makes you a social outcast, but at least you get to eat at home.
I became quite good at online storytelling, and even developed a following of sorts, which was anomalous in, and of itself. My fake screen-name of ‘Fool-Killer’ grew in popularity and notoriety among other fake screen-names, and given that I generally wrote to please Morgan, that meant lots of outrageous violence, nudity and sex among the heroes. Had I been a bit more astute, I might have worried about the people I was appealing to, but when you’re essentially a nonentity in the real world, you take your adoration and acceptance where you can get it—whatever the source.

Brainstorming exciting scenarios and lurid episodes for our online audience while bonding through comics collecting made for a fast and lasting relationship through our early teenage years. But eventually I grew out of all that owing to the fact that I had traveled to England, seen some of the world, debatably matured, and most comics were really terrible. My stories became more complex and sexually frustrated, like me I suppose, and the life lessons to be learned from mainstream superhero comics never really seemed to apply in the real world (as opposed to the ‘Real World,’ where the life lessons of comics gave Judd Winick lasting employment).

No woman was ever likely to discover that I was secretly cool and heroic; spandex only looked good on people who worked out constantly, and very few people felt comfortable around those who wore it anyway; when anyone was bitten by any member of the arachnid family, fever, swelling, and bed rest were not followed by the ability to climb walls, leap tall buildings, and trap thieves in webs just like flies. It was more likely followed by vomiting.

Morgan, however, as recently as last week, still secretly hoped that his mother would one day sit him down and tell him how she had, years ago, discovered his infant body in a crashed rocket ship, that he was really born on the planet Kryp-Lor (his own, made-up world of superheroes that had nothing whatsoever to do with Superman’s home planet of Krypton), and that by eating unusual combinations of spinach, B-vitamins, and Ginko Biloba, he would soon be able to knock over buildings with bad people in them. Like the White House.

When his mother did eventually sit him down one day for an important talk, he was horrified when she started discussing penises, vaginas, and ‘when a man truly loves a woman’. Parents take note: These things are better left learned in the street. Hearing them from someone you never want to imagine naked and doing them can cause fever, nausea, and even death in extreme cases. I was up with Morgan very late that night, paper bags at the ready. He didn’t eat for days.

Somehow, in spite of our differences, we remained friends, possibly because no one else liked us. We got together for ‘hi-octane, big-screen’ movies, lunches, and talked often about what he would do if he had as much money as I did. Occasionally, he would drag me to a comic book convention, and we would arrange to meet some of the real people behind the online screen-names, hoping and praying that they were attractive females who wanted to have sex.

With us. They weren’t. They were usually just average people—mostly male—many of whom apparently spent all their free time between reading fan-fic, working on elaborately detailed costumes which they would then wear every waking moment of the convention, talking only as the characters would talk, and behaving only the way the characters would behave. It was an odd, disconcerting experience, and I was all set to spend my evenings with Morgan ridiculing the folks doing it when he showed up as Archangel, complete with overlarge metallic wings, blue face paint, and yellow hair.

“Anyone seen Psylocke?” he asked me.

“Morgan, what…”

“Warren,” he said rather sternly. Then wandered off without another word.

It was a lot like the first time I learned Mimsi was gay. Suddenly you’re no longer allowed to be a homophobe because you’re faced with it being someone you know and care for. Their sexuality may still make you a bit uncomfortable, but from now on you’ll keep it to yourself, learn to understand, and be supportive of the one you love. Or, in Morgan’s case, at least someone you like hanging out with.

Ironically, Morgan claimed to have spent the next three days trying to get under the blue body-paint of a ‘hottie in a Nightcrawler suit’. But on the final evening of the convention, when she at last relented—likely because nothing better than Morgan had come along—he couldn’t get past the idea that Nightcrawler was a guy, even though it was a woman portraying him, Peter Pan-like.

Somehow, even after it was apparently quite obvious that she was genuinely a woman once he’d gotten her costume off, and she was mostly naked right down to her painted, blue skin, he believed that by her pretending to be a guy, his being attracted to ‘Kurt’ called his own sexuality into question. Why it should make a difference once she was mostly naked and willing I honestly don’t know, but Morgan has attained a level of homophobia that clearly sets a new standard for the term.

Amazingly, our friendship had survived all this, and Morgan had—in his own way—been as good a friend as he was capable of being. Which wasn’t much, but I was, obviously, not picky.
“You should write fan-fic again,” he said as we prepared to climb into our cars and head home for the night.

“Nah,” I sighed. “I’ve said all I had to say about superheroes and their intimate sex lives.”

“But you were so good.”

He was genuinely complimenting me, and I was touched by his sincerity, if not his judgment.

“Thanks,” I said appreciatively. “But no.”

“We could make another movie. I could be Archangel. The real Archangel, not that wimpy guy from X-Men three. People would love it!”

Not likely. Morgan and I had wasted a lot of our time, first studying how to make movies, and then, ostensibly, making them. Unfortunately for us, no one else wanted to be in them, and there’s only so much drama you can get from watching a guy wander around by himself picking things up and putting them back down again.

It’s a sad day when you realize Ed Wood, or Doris Wishman may actually have had more talent than you.

“Maybe,” I said, not meaning it.

“You just gotta do it,” Morgan said. “You can’t care what people think.”

He stared at me for a long time, waiting. Then, in a last, supreme effort to be honestly supportive, he told me, “Just because a couple of assholes online said you sucked, doesn’t mean you do.”

I said nothing. We’d had this debate before and there was no winning it. Not for Morgan anyway.

Morgan dejectedly got into his little, beat-up Toyota, I got into my recently detailed BMW, and we drove off in very opposite directions.
I pulled my car onto Vale Place and passed through the gates at number 1. The familiar feel of gravel crunching under my wheels as I approached the oaken entry doors told me I was home. Safe. Warm. Grandfatherless. I could hump all the water bottles I wanted to here and no one would complain. Except perhaps the Sparkletts man, but he could be paid for his silence.

I live in a very exclusive neighborhood known as Epsoms Roads in a house with more rooms than cells in my body. It often amuses me to think that I could be thoroughly dismembered, every piece of me hidden in a different room, a separate part of the house, and it would take specialized CSI people years to find them all and put me back together again.

Yes, I have a dark side. Who doesn’t?

As I stood in my foyer surrounded by all the opulence; lavish furnishings, very expensive first issues of
exceedingly rare comics, and original art lining the walls at regular intervals, I, once again felt eternally grateful to
whatever fluke of genetics had made me very rich.

And, as you might imagine, I wanted to stay rich. I would go to the comics convention. Something completely
asexual and uninteresting. Let someone else examine Ms. Nuckeby and her nonclothing. My odds were far better
never seeing her again and hoping they hired someone who would have less luck with controlling his urges than I’d
had. Having seen Ms. Nuckeby, I knew that to be damn near impossible for anyone; anyone interested in women
that is. And his foregone failings would forever cement my position as voyeur du jour at Wopplesdown Struts,
 purveyors of fine briefs. But…what if they hired a gay man? Or—God forbid—a straight woman? Promoted
Agrapanthila? Moved Mervin over from men’s underwear? Ms. Nuckeby wouldn’t have near the same effect on
them that she had on me.

Damn. I needed a drink. And those Frezee-Pacs I’d bought. “Woodruff?” I called.

Woodruff is my butler. His job is to wait on my every need, and he does so reasonably well, mostly because I
have very few needs. He’s a little long in years and not the best manservant around. In fact, if it were anyone but me
employing him, he’d likely be dead in a ditch by now at their hand.

“WOODRUFF?”

Nothing. He might be sleeping in a corner somewhere. He had a habit of doing that—stopping and dropping off
—sometimes in the middle of a sentence.

“Mister Wopplesdown, your bath is—zzzzzzzzzzz…”

One got used to it.

I opened my evening paper hoping to forget my woes by focusing on someone else’s and tossed my coat onto a
nearby divan from the eighteenth century, but which held a discarded coat as well as anything made in the
seventeenth century—damn those snooty, seventeenth-century people.

I noticed in the headlines that there was something of worldaltering political significance going on in some
other part of the globe and promptly skipped past it to the sports and comics sections. Those annoying political
things take up a vast amount of valuable newspaper space that would be better left to athletics, funnies, and
crossword puzzles if you ask me.

I was still trying to figure out the latest Opus cartoon, and confused as to why I never found it funny, when
Woodruff wandered in carrying my evening drink with the shirttail of his tuxedo hanging out. As I took the offered
libation, I found myself wondering if he had enjoyed his own adventure with a water bottle today as well. I folded
away Opus and made a mental note to set it on fire later (something not to be filed under ‘Things To Promptly
Forget’).

“Woodruff? How are you this evening?”

“Still breathing, sir.”

“Glad to hear it. Listen. I’m going out of town tomorrow and staying through the weekend at least. Could I
trouble you to pack me a bag, please?”

There was a momentary pause as Woodruff stared at me blankly.

“You could trouble me,” he said hopefully.

“Yes,” I said more pointedly. “I could.”

“Sooo…” he said, giving up rather quickly I thought. “…a week? That’s a good deal of luggage, sir.”

“I hadn’t thought about it.”

“I just did. It’s a lot of luggage, sir. So—you’ll be needing that first thing in the morning then?”

“If I plan to take it with me, yes. That’s the idea. Is there a problem?”

He stared blankly again; he seemed right on the verge of saying something else, but finally changed his mind.

“No, sir. No problem.”

He stared a moment longer. Then, as though he saw death about to overtake him with its swinging scythe of…
em…death, the old man shuffled off in the direction of the stairs. There are a lot of them. Stairs. And within minutes
that seemed like hours, I heard the methodical THUMP.

“Woodruff. I think I’d like to take a swim this evening.”

The thumping on the stairs stopped. There was a longer pause.

“Will you be bathing anytime soon, sir?”
“Now, I think,” I said and heard him sigh heavily. I took another sip and considered. “Yes. Definitely now. I
need the relief after the day I’ve had.”
He sighed again.
Another lengthy pause.
Nothing.
Then finally, “Very good, sir.”
THUMP.
Pause.
THUMP.
Pause.
THUMP.
Woodruff descended. After a number of thumps equal to the ones for the ascending, Woodruff turned the
corner once more, looking for all the world as if he might at any moment suffer a welcome coronary. Apparently
exhausted, he leaned against the doorjamb and breathed heavily.
“Indoors…or outdoors… sir?”
“The pool? Outdoors. It’s summer, Woodruff.”
“It all…blends together…sir. Will you…require…a bathing suit?”
“No. No, tonight will be au naturel, Woodruff. Just a towel for me, thank you.”
“But…the neighbor…sir…Mister…Weebimix…”
“To hell with Weebimix, Woodruff. Let him take in the glory that is me this evening. A bracing dip in the
altogether is just what the doctor ordered.”
“Your doctor, perhaps, sir. Not mine.”
“Oh, and can you put this in the freezer, please?”
I tossed him a bag containing the recently purchased ice packs. He looked inside then glanced up at me,
curious.
“Injured, sir?”
“A little swelling. Nothing to be concerned about.”
“I wasn’t concerned, sir.”
And with that, Woodruff departed like molasses over sandpaper, oozing down a corridor that led to the outside
pool.

There’s nothing like the gentle sensation of cool water flowing freely over one’s testicles. Take it from
someone who has them.
I had just enjoyed my third or fourth lap in the pool, much to the immense irritation of the man Grandfather
makes me let live in my guesthouse, Bailey Weebimix, whose upstairs office window afforded him a full-frontal
view of my swimming. This was my little method of payback for his dog’s endless incontinent episodes on my
various lawns. Or perhaps that was his payback for my endless late evening skinny-dips. Once in full motion, it was
often difficult to tell where the cycle of life began.
To be honest, though, my thorough enjoyment of this evening’s naked float had less to do with annoying
Weebimix than it had to do with reminiscing about Wisper Nuckeby. There was something so captivating about her,
so utterly enchanting, so blazingly sexual, that in spite of (or perhaps in conjunction with) the terror of potential loss
of home, possessions, and livelihood, mere moments into reimagining her in my mind’s eye I was forced to turn
over and swim face down so as not to expose more than even I was comfortable revealing to old-man Weebimix.
Let’s just say the human rudder began to put up some rather fierce drag.
Fortunately, that drag had a rather sensual quality, not unlike the actual ‘act’ itself, and before long I was frog-
kicking my way toward ecstasy, praising the name of Ms. Nuckeby very loudly in silent prayer, for the first time
actually thanking whatever perverted gods might have caused her to arrive half-naked before me earlier that day.
Rather quickly, illicit thoughts of her combined with the flow of water to become a rather potent combination.
So much so in fact that I felt the need to finish out the obvious, and had concluded that swimming alone might not
be sufficiently stimulating.
As I passed the filter pump, noisily floofing theoretically cleaned water back out into my pool, a brilliant idea
flowed over me like warm honey. Or perhaps not so brilliant. But when the human male is nearing climax, sticking his most precious body part into a machine whose primary function is to remove foreign objects from the water surrounding them will oddly seem somehow brilliant. It’s only after the paramedics have been called that the truth becomes rather obvious.

Consequently, I swum my way over to the wall where the jets were blowing warm, frothy liquid in a steady stream so that I might engage in what was now, in my altered state of consciousness, how the original designers had always intended their jets to be used. I rested my arms on the brick ledge, positioned myself appropriately, and leaned back to let Ms Nuckeby do the things to me in my mind that even Grandfather would have had to admit clearly made me a heterosexual.

The experience was intense. Glorious. Amazing. The most fantastic sexual experience I’ve had since—well—since actual sex I suppose. What made it so magnificent, though, I knew, was the mental image of the elegant, sensual, and willing Ms. Nuckeby. As I was nearing culmination, I realized the only thing that could make this experience any better was the actual Ms. Nuckeby.

Which is just about when she showed up.


Then, deftly realizing that her voice was coming from outside my head rather than inside it, my eyes shot open and there she was, just as she had been mere moments ago in my mind’s eye. Except not naked or straddling me.

I jerked so hard, I convulsively drove my ‘thingsis’ deep into the jet tube, far beyond the manufacturer’s recommended limit (I’m sure there is one), and for the second time that day found myself stuck in something I really shouldn’t.

“Ms. Nuckeby!” I repeated with more awareness. “What…? Who…? How…?”

She held out her hands to calm me and the bouncing of the braless breasts under her shirt did just the opposite. She was wearing far more than she had this afternoon—jeans, top, shoes, jewelry—and yet she was sexier than ever. I felt additional swelling below the surface and realized I might be stuck there for several days.

“I’m sorry, Mister Wopplesdown. I didn’t mean to intrude. Your butler said it would be all right.”

“Oh, did he? Well, he’s going to get the surprise of his life the next time he’s naked in the…” I paused, realizing she might not as yet be aware of the fact that I was, in every way, naked. Or—that I had my wanker shoved someplace that was likely to void my pool service contract for life.
“…tub.” I finished, correcting myself, barely in time.

Unfortunately, as you can probably figure out for yourself, the ‘correction’ created a whole new set of problems.

My ill-conceived choice of word, together with the lobotomized look on Ms. Nuckeby’s face, struggled valiantly through the waxy build-up that protects my brain from the avoidable twin traumas of understanding and reason, and kicked in the door marked ‘No solicitors, no peddlers, no intellejent thots. Deliveries in rear.’ Having stormed the Castle of Debatable Intellect, my words and her expression together knocked down my mind, tied it up, waterboarded it, and forced it against its will to sign a confession stating that it was, indeed, stupid.

Unable to face the truth, my brain fainted.

“In…in…in the…uh…the tub,” I said, foolishly continuing as if more brainless words were either needed or helpful.

I tried desperately to kick my mental engine back to life, but only managed to get my foot caught in the gears.

“Because…that’s when I…or rather when he…would be…uh…you know…naked. As opposed to in an…uh…outdoor pool, where one should always…and by that I mean always…wear clothes,” I said. “Always.”

“Really?” she said, genuinely surprised. “I never do.”

Bloop.

Without a doubt, I would die, stuck here.

“And anyway,” she continued, “why would you want to give him the surprise of his life in the tub—and when he’s naked?”

“Because he never uses the pool.”

I could see by her lost expression that the best method of clarifying this line of thought might be to stop talking entirely. “What can I do for you, Ms. Nuckeby?”

“Well, I apologize for coming by unannounced, but I really felt the need to explain my behavior this afternoon during the garment viewing.”

“Oh, really, Ms. Nuckeby. That’s not necessary. Your behavior was entirely appropriate. My behavior, on the other hand…”

Slowly, horribly, a groaning noise had begun to build from some machinery behind the shrubs that did pool-related things. Never having seen, let alone touched, any of them in my life, I only vaguely knew where they were, and what their true purpose was. But even my limited experience told me they were, at this very moment, having difficulty overcoming some obstruction in the pipes.

“My behavior, on the other hand,” I continued, speaking more loudly and pretending the noise and whatever was causing it did not exist in my world, “is what requires an apology. You see…”

Behind the bushes something began to grind, and was apparently making serious inroads toward blowing up. A furious amount of bubbles began to rise up all around me as if I were having the indigestion episode of a lifetime. Ms. Nuckeby was beginning to show the strain of splitting her attention between me and the now deafening noise that I—apparently—could not hear.

“YOU SEE,” I shouted to be heard above the clanking bangs that had joined in the chorus. “I’M NOT EVEN SURE HOW TO BEGIN…”

“MISTER WOPPLESDOWN, THERE SEEMS TO BE SOMETHING WRONG WITH YOUR POOL EQUIPMENT!”

“YOU THINK? INTERESTING. I CAN’T IMAGINE WHAT.”

“SHOULD WE CALL SOMEONE?”

“TO FIX IT? DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO WORKS NIGHTS?”

“NO. MAYBE YOUR BUTLER DOES.”

“MY BUTLER DOESN’T WORK DAYS, MS. NUCKEBY. BUT IF YOU FEEL COMPULSED TO ASK HIM—OH! YOU MEANT HE MIGHT KNOW A POOL MAN. EXCELLENT IDEA. WHY DON’T YOU GO AND CHECK WITH HIM, WHILE I CONTINUE TO MONITOR THE SITUATION FROM OUT HERE.”

I gestured toward the house, indicating that she should feel free to run inside and away from my nakedness. Slowly, showing herself to be unsure whether there might not be something seriously wrong with the chemical balance of my brain, she peeled herself away and headed for the door. I watched her go, my eyes wandering places they really shouldn’t for a man trying to counteract disadvantageous swelling, and did myself absolutely no good in aiding the extrication process.

Stopping in the doorway just before entering the house I, myself, might never again enter with a fully functional penis, she turned and gave me one final confused look. I waved her in with a smile.

“GO ON! REST ASSURED, I’M KEEPING AN EYE ON THINGS!”

Reluctantly, she entered the building and turned away in search of Woodruff.
With Ms. Nuckeby out of sight, I began to pull with all the force I could muster hoping to yank my way to freedom. I felt certain that, at any moment, the intense pain would cause the swelling to subside. But damned if my little friend didn’t show all the gusto and perseverance of an early American pioneer. Let’s hope he didn’t end up like a Donner.

Twisting my lower half in ways a man should never have to, I looked up to check on Ms. Nuckeby’s progress and saw her through the French doors at the end of the hall. Rear lit, as she was, silhouetted in the main foyer and trying to explain herself in some fashion or other to my retarded manservant, I could quite clearly see her breasts bounce and sway as she gestured urgently.

The plug tightened. The machinery behind the bushes began to smoke.

“…slipped, and fell…”
“…first my shorts were viciously sucked off…”
“…three men in dark masks held me at gunpoint and made me do it…”

I had nearly culled the possibilities down to one or two that seemed least ridiculous when Woodruff, the incompetent fool, waved Ms. Nuckeby back in my direction! She nodded her thanks and began running straight toward me. Running! Good, God, NO! I watched in horror as her breasts jounced about, magnificently!

I gave a couple last-minute jerks, but to no avail. Smoke now pouring from the pool machinery, I urgently drew in a deep breath and turned sideways underwater just as Ms. Nuckeby crossed the patio and reached the pool’s edge.

“MISTER WOPPLESDOWN?” she called.

She stepped farther into the darkness of the evening, glancing briefly over at the now sparking pool equipment, and leaned out to look around the yard.

“MISTER WOPPLESDOWN?”

When she got no answer, she stepped closer to the pool, just as the filter popped and sparked, and threw some flaming debris near her feet. She screamed and danced aside, but remained in the back yard, scanning and searching, apparently determined to find me and make sure I was all right.

Damn her.

I grimaced under some last-minute, increased pressure on the dying machinery’s part, and found the pain suddenly deflating my stuck balloon.

Finally!

The good news was: before long I’d be loose. The bad news was: before long I’d be loose. Meaning: the only thing holding me to the wall was about to let go and set me drifting, naked, into the middle of the pool with a mutilated Johnson.

I gritted my teeth at the embarrassment to come and supposed it to be only fair. I had seen her naked after all. I wondered if she’d find me as alluring, particularly given the angry black-and-blue shade little Corky was undoubtedly taking on.

I decided not to go down floating as it were—that the solution here was to take things head on. So I made one last Herculean yank and—glory-be-halleluiah—jerked myself free with a minimum of skin ‘lossage’. I then popped up over the edge of the pool as if I’d been waiting for Ms. Nuckeby all along, merely taking a moment to check things out from below the surface, and hoped there was no blood trailing up from my self-inflicted genital wounds.

But she was gone.

I looked around anxiously, then spied her inside. She was pointing and gesturing with concern back in my direction, and speaking in agitated tones, again to Woodruff. He seemed— surprise—to be having difficulty understanding. I took his sluggishness as an opportunity to make good my escape and bolted for the other side of the pool, splashing and thrashing like a sea lion being attacked by a killer whale.

Now was not the time for subtlety.

Somewhere in the distance, I swear I heard Bailey Weebimix laughing with glee.

Once at the pool’s far side, I leaped out and dashed into the house through a side door, traversed the kitchen in a mad slide, slipping only once and managing to avoid impaling myself on some wellplaced kitchen knives I had never used and whose only purpose, as far as I knew, were to skewer homeowners racing naked through their own kitchens.

I skidded briefly into a cupboard, banged my head on a hanging pot ($169.95 from Williams Sonoma, and apparently you can use it to cook things in), bounded over a dinette chair and managed to slip out the pocket-door leading into the foyer, at the back of which Woodruff was finally beginning to understand what Ms. Nuckeby was desperately attempting to convey in life-or-death terms.
“Do you suppose Mister Wopplesdown has been injured?” he asked, sounding curiously pleased.

“I don’t know,” Ms. Nuckeby said, sounding quite frightened. “Shouldn’t you do something? Check the grounds? Call someone? Turn off the power breakers?” Her voice was magnificent. Like milk and honey to a dying thing that needs—milk and honey. It made me sigh, audibly and desperately.

“What was that?”

Dammit.

“What was what, madam?”

“That sound. Like someone sighed. Didn’t you hear it?”

“I try not to hear such things, madam. It usually means I’ve done something wrong.”

Footsteps headed my way. Too quick and efficient to be Woodruff, so I dove into the foyer coat closet and silently shut the door. Outside, I heard someone come to a stop, and—presumably—look around in befuddlement.

“You think that was him?” Ms. Nuckeby asked.

“He has been known to sigh, madam,” Woodruff offered.

“Then where is he? Is he avoiding me?”

“Avoiding you, madam? You’re an attractive woman. I can’t imagine him doing such a thing,” he said with almost undetectable sarcasm.

“I gasped. He wouldn’t!”

“Unless, what?”

“Well,” Woodruff said, pausing for emphasis. “There are rumors.”

He would! I wanted to kick him through the door.

There are no rumors! There’s a few minutes of video, and I was clearly in an altered state of mind!

“Oh, the gay thing? Yeah, but I’m pretty sure that’s not true. This afternoon he…” she giggled.

She giggled?

“Madam?” Woodruff asked.

“Nothing. Then if he’s not avoiding me, where is he?”

“I’m sure I do not know, madam.”

“Well, he may have other reasons for not wanting to see me.”

No! NO! I wanted to see you, but just not naked. At least not me naked. Or, rather: not me being naked alone. I mean, not with other people, but with…

Lord. I can’t even talk to myself.

Then, finally realizing I was in a closet, I began searching feverishly for an article of clothing. After several seconds of silent, mad groping in the near-total darkness, all I could feel were a vacuum cleaner, a flashlight, a box of old Christmas paper, and ornaments, a power drill, a fireplace lighter, and some cans of spray paint. I considered my options a moment, and then decided these were really the wrong ingredients for me to be improvising with.

“He likes comics,” Ms. Nuckeby said, sounding pleased, apparently admiring my collection lining the foyer walls.

“He does,” Woodruff replied with disdain.

“My little brother likes comics,” Ms. Nuckeby went on, sounding almost nostalgic. Happy even. “I have a lot of fond memories tied to comics around the house.”

A woman who thought of comics fondly. I flushed and felt excitement swell inside me as something else swelled outside me.

Then—dear, God—the doorbell rang.

Ms. Nuckeby: “Who could that be?”

Woodruff: “I’m sure I don’t know.”

I sighed again, and horrified at my lack of self-restraint, quickly shoved my fist into my mouth. It nearly fit.

“I’m not supposed to be here,” I heard Ms. Nuckeby say.

“Why not?” Woodruff asked, trying to sound as if he cared.

“It would take too long to explain. Is there somewhere I can hide?”

I was at this instant that I finally saw life for the great, cosmic, professional wrestling match it so obviously was. I, literally looked skyward toward the great god ‘Fockyoo’ as he positioned his darkling game pieces with malevolent mirth and sadistic glee cursing his very name.

Really, really quietly.

“Fockyoo, you sumnuvabitch!”

For just then, Ms. Nuckeby—looking for a place to hide, as I knew she must—turned the knob and opened the door to the very closet that I had, until that moment, been so safely ensconced within.

And I was still naked.
Oh, and you just know Grandfather is the one ringing the doorbell, don’t you?
“Mister Wopplesdown!”

“Ms. Nuckeby!” I said, faux-smiling and covering as much of myself as two hands, arms, and legs can; which is surprisingly little under the circumstances. “How lovely to see you again.”

“Mister Wopplesdown,” Woodruff offered, standing beside her, ever the helpful one. “Someone is at the front door, sir.”

“Yes. I heard. Could you close this one, please?”

“Should I answer it, sir?” Woodruff was always hoping I might say no on the off chance that he could continue sleep-standing. This time I considered it. But then I realized that my car was out front, and anyone who knew me understood that Woodruff never went anywhere.

“Only after you’ve closed this one,” I said.

Woodruff looked at me for a long moment. Then, exasperated, he moved off to greet whatever new person was certain to add tension and suffering to his life and mine.
“And tell them I’m not here!” I whisper-yelled.
Woodruff moaned something incoherently.
“I have to hide,” Ms. Nuckeby whispered forcefully to me, sounding truly frightened.
“There are many, many other closets in this house from which to choose,” I said and reached out for the door handle. But she grabbed it first and pulled it from me.
“Ms. Nuckeby, please.”
Chewing her lip nervously—and quite sensually I might add—she glanced back at Woodruff and saw, as I did, that he might actually reach the front entrance during our lifetimes. Seizing the opportunity, she leaped into the closet beside me and closed its door on us both.
“MS. NUCKEBY!” I shout-whispered.
“Sssh. They’ll hear you.”
“Ms. Nuckeby,” I whisper-shouted. “In case you haven’t noticed, I am naked.”
“So? You’ve seen me naked.”
“But I didn’t climb into a closet with you.”
“No, but I bet you wanted to.”
Her daring left me speechless. And, once again, hard. I had to turn away from her to avoid unintentional intimate contact and nearly severed my ever-ready appendage on the rough edge of a cardboard Santa Claus. I yelped, slightly, and she shushed me. Shushed me!
With my masculinity wounded in more ways than one, I stood there, sulking and throbbing. We’d been through a lot, today, my penis and I. A comic convention would be just what we needed. Something distracting, uninteresting, and completely sexless.
I turned to Ms. Nuckeby, barely seeing her silhouette in the darkness, and felt her warmth too close to me for comfort. It softened my tension a bit. Some of it.
“Well. As long as we’re trapped here, Ms. Nuckeby, I’ll take the moment to apologize for my…you know…my earlier…eh…” I let it hang there. At least the words, if not the actual item in question.
She waited, apparently a bit lost or confused.
“Erection?” she said, maybe not so lost or confused. “Oh, that’s all right. I didn’t mind. Honestly, I’d have been disappointed it if hadn’t happened.”
She laughed a bit, and I melted at the sound of her delicate tones. I could see a bit of her smile in the small amount of light coming in under the door and wished I could see more. More smile, that is.
Okay, other things too.
“As it is, I was kind of flattered actually,” she said.
That surprised me. Who would have thought? I looked down into the darkness and wondered if seeing it now would flatter her even more. It never felt so…big. Like it was filling the entire closet and at any moment might take on a life of its own, knock her down, and start rubbing itself all over her like a neglected pet.
“More importantly, Mister Wopplesdown, I hope you didn’t think I was being unprofessional, or provocative in some way. Walking out as I did. You know. Topless and all.”
“No, no. No, of course not. Many of our designs are topless—you know…by…em…design. And you were marvelously professional. Visibly professional.”
“And, of course, I don’t mind being seen that way, you know.”
Bloop.
I said nothing. I was expending all my energy fighting to keep my panting erection down, boy, down.
“Topless,” she added, taking my silence to mean—I don’t know, lack of understanding? Ignorance? Having become a eunuch since last we saw one another?
Gloop.
“Otherwise I couldn’t do it,” she continued. “Model lingerie, I mean. You have to have confidence in yourself, right? Know you’ve got something worth looking at.”
Glorp.
“Indeed,” I said.
“I just thought you should know,” she said, her voice and stance relaxing a bit. “I appreciate my job. I need my job, and I didn’t intend to jeopardize it in any way. When your grandfather came in so angry, insisting that I stay away from you…”
“Yes. Well, he has other concerns. Some of them valid.”
“Oh, I know. We’ve all heard the stories. Quite a libido your family has.”
“We pay extra for that.”
“So I hear. Anyway, it’s drummed into the models before we leave the agency that we aren’t supposed to date
any Wopplesdown—male, or female,” she paused, and her voice lowered a bit. “No matter how desperately we may want to.”

There was a rather pointed edge to her last sentence fragment that made me seriously wish that I was either a) not a Wopplesdown, or b) at a comic book convention. Unfortunately for me I was neither, and, c) didn’t have the brains to leave well enough alone.

“I suppose,” I said, “that’s not a problem though. The ‘desperately wanting to’ part, I mean. I can’t imagine any…eh…Wopplesdown appeals to you well enough that you might feel…em…in any way…you know…desperate about them.”

“Oh? You imagine that, do you?” she asked, rather too seductively I thought. Or perhaps it just felt that way, my being naked and all.

“Are you saying there may be some…” I swallowed with some difficulty. “…A little…a tiny bit of…em…desperation, you know, to date a…uh…a Wopplesdown?”

“There is one I find somewhat attractive,” she said, breathing deeply herself. “My sister, Mimsi?”

She laughed again. A mesmerizing sound.

“She leans that way, you know,” I said.

“Everyone knows. No. It’s definitely one of the male Wopplesdowns.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Our grandfather.”

“What?”

More laughter. It melted me.

“Oh, he’s so hot,” she said sarcastically. “When he came charging at me, threatening me—it was hard to contain myself. Especially when he began verbally berating me. I love it when an older man treats me like a bad child. Particularly when I’ve done nothing wrong. It’s so sexy.”

“I’ll have to remember that,” I said, smiling. “Soooo—not that Wopplesdown, then?”

“No. Not that Wopplesdown.”

I breathed deeply and leaned closer to her. “Any Wopplesdown within earshot.”

I felt a tantalizing bit of her brush against someplace it certainly wasn’t expected to and my temperature rose high enough to bake a potato.

“A lot closer than that,” whispered Wisper.

“Um…wow. Okay,” I said, stunned and amazed. And still naked.

“But,” she began, pulling back slightly, which made me a bit fearful. “I never imagined there even being a possibility, at all, of acting on that attraction, I mean. He and I…we come from such different worlds.”

“You mean because your closets are smaller.”

Another laugh. I was on fire.

“Actually,” she said, “I meant a difference a bit more significant than that.”

She could properly use the word ‘significant’ in a sentence. What a girl!

“The only real difference between closets,” I said, “is the clothes hanging in them.”

“Or not hanging in them.”

“A Wopplesdown could afford to fill your closets with all the clothing you could ever dream of.”

“But could a Wopplesdown be comfortable wearing what he finds in a Nuckeby closet?”

“I would wear anything you asked me to,” I said, more meaningfully than even I expected, “if it made you happy.”

She giggled, hotly; she felt startlingly close and seemed to be breathing harder. Was it possible for either of us to breathe harder at this point? How long before all the air was gone from this tiny room and we both passed out? I had decided I wanted to kiss her and felt it might be more romantic if I managed it without fainting in the middle.

“You see, Ms. Nuckeby…” I said, the words hanging a bit in my throat, “if I were to ignore the combined wisdom of our many, highly paid legal counselors on this subject and be dangerously honest, I find you—truly—the most attractive women I’ve ever seen, in person or on the Internet. And your personality is certainly scoring some…eh…significant points in this closet.

“To expose myself further—I mean, legally, I mean, not…em…you know—I would love nothing more than to
find some way for us to...uh,” my voice trailed off. The room was filled with quiet breathing. I slowly, cautiously, took her hand. It trembled slightly at my touch. “But—you see—I have this problem...”

And as if on cue, Woodruff finally reached the front door, and once opened, in burst my problem himself.

“Where’s Corky?” I heard Grandfather bellow from out in the foyer.

“I’m never coming out of this closet,” I said.

“Oh,” Ms. Nuckeby said, withdrawing her hand. “So, it’s true.”

“What? Oh, no!” I said, almost too loudly. “I meant literally ‘this closet’. That’s my grandfather just arrived. He’s the problem I have.”

“Oh,” she said again, her voice dropping to a safer whisper. She stifled a laugh. “I guess I don’t blame you. He seems a bit...difficult.”

“Word problems are difficult, Ms. Nuckeby. Grandfather is an uphill mountain mud-run dressed in cement.”

I could hear him moving around in the foyer, shoes clapping in circles as he undoubtedly tossed coat, gloves, hairpiece, and whatever else to poor Woodruff, who like as not wanted to toss them right back.

“Mister Wopplesdown is not in, sir.”

“Bullshit! His car’s right out front.”

“Mister Wopplesdown is...” Woodruff stalled. “...In another part of the building, sir.”

“Well, get him. I need to talk to him before the others get here.”

The others? What OTHERS?

“The others, sir?” Woodruff asked. Clearly almost as agitated as I, though for entirely different reasons I’m sure.

“Yes. The family’s coming over with a few guests. We have a solution to this Corky problem.”

Corky problem? Ms. Nuckeby gasped. Did they know she was here? The hair on the back of my neck stood up. Turned white. And fell out.

“Would you care to adjourn to the study, sir? I’ll endeavor to find Mister Wopplesdown, and direct him to you.”

“Good. And bring me one of those big tumblers from the kitchen. I hate those tiny glasses he keeps in his liquor cabinet.”

“Of course, sir.”

“If he spent half the money on glasses that he does on these damn funnybooks, he might have some grownup friends instead of retards like that Wiggen boy.”

“Yes, sir,” Woodruff agreed, a bit too cheerily.

The nervous clicking feet moved away and there was a momentarily silence. Then Woodruff opened the closet and began hanging Grandfather’s coat between Ms. Nuckeby and myself—rather metaphorically.

“Your grandfather is here, sir. He...”

“I heard! Get me some clothes, Woodruff.”

“Very good, sir. What should I select from your rather expansive wardrobe? Would you prefer the cotton pullover, and tan slacks, or are you feeling more in the mood for the other cotton pullover and tan slacks?”

“Ha! Arent’ you the charmer this evening! Bring me anything, Chuzzlewit! Just get them now, please.”

“Very good, sir.” Having hung the coat, he closed the door on myself and my delightful houseguest.

For a long time Ms. Nuckeby and I stood in silence, and I didn’t hear anything from the outer rooms. Then, after a seeming eternity:

THUMP

Pause.

THUMP

“Oh, dear God. I’ll die of old age waiting for him.”

“At least I’ll be right beside you, taking care of you in your twilight years,” Ms. Nuckeby said in that smiling-voiced way of hers. I warmed and calmed all at once.

“You know, you could likely escape, now,” I said, not wanting her to. “Before someone else arrives.”

THUMP

“Probably a good idea,” she said. “Why don’t you take that coat and run upstairs? We’ll make a break for it together.”

“I’m better off waiting. If Grandfather catches me with my bare bits rubbing against the inside of his good coat, he’ll feed me to starving Pomeranians.”

THUMP

“He owns Pomeranians?”

“He’d buy some, starve them, then slather me in bacon grease and toss me all into a very small cage.”
“Kinky,” she said. Then sounding genuinely sad, “Well. I suppose this is where we say goodbye.”

My heart sank. I didn’t want her to leave. I wanted to kiss her. Parts of me wanted to do a lot more than that.

Bloop.

“I…eh…suppose so,” I said, not kissing her.

She waited. Did she want me to kiss her?

THUMP

“Okay,” she said, still waiting. “Well. I guess I’ll go now.”

She reached for the knob. The one on the door, unfortunately.

“So, do you suppose…em…” She paused.

“Yes?” I asked.

“I don’t know, I…” She couldn’t bring herself to ask whatever was on her mind.

THUMP

Damn the bloody lines. “Ms. Nuckeby. Would you like to go out with me sometime?”

Not the most romantic way of putting it, I suppose, but honest and to the point. In the dark, I could feel her smile.

“I’d like that,” she said.

“We could go down to Bourdaine’s,” I told her. “I’ve never been. But I hear their coat closets are to die for.”

She laughed. I overheated and had to turn slightly sideways to avoid poking her in the ribs.

THUMP

“I doubt it will be as much fun as this one,” she said and opened the door.

Light flooded in and nearly blinded me. Or was it her stunning beauty?

Ha! I’m such a sap.

She turned and looked at me, then her eyes were pulled down by the gravity of my manliness, which I had forgotten was now exposed to the illumination from the foyer, and she grinned with obvious pleasure. It was an unexpected reaction, and a satisfying one. Better than screaming and throwing things certainly.

“Had I known, I might not have opened the door,” she said and smiled at it.

I nearly pulled her back inside. Then, for a brief moment, the thought flashed, We hardly know each other. But being a man, it faded almost instantly.

“It’s very hard,” she said, staring.

“Yes. It really is.”

“Is it bruised?”

“No. That’s just…um…the bad light in here.”

“Oh,” she said, still staring at it intently. “Kind of a waste not to take advantage of it, don’t you think?”

Incredibly, it got harder. And throbbed.

“Oh, my!” she said.

I gulped. “Um, Grandfather is in the next room.”

She looked up at me sadly and sighed.

“I suppose he’s in every room, really.”

She was right. He was like a ghost, haunting me, Jacob Marleylike complete with chilled bones, chains, and moans. I was an idiot. This was my home. I could have sex with a supermodel in my closet if I wanted. To hell with lawsuits. You aren’t really considered rich if you aren’t being sued anyway.

Unfortunately, before I could say or do any of the wonderful things my fevered brain was finally starting to imagine, Ms. Nuckeby reluctantly and very slowly—glancing down repeatedly and smiling, I noted—closed the door. As I stood inside, aching for her to return, I heard her tentative footsteps on the floor of the foyer padding for the exit, and felt the loss of her for the second time that day.

Then the doorbell rang again, accompanied by several laughing voices on the porch and Ms. Nuckeby’s tennis shoes squeaked harshly on the foyer floor. They squeaked again, squeaked a third time, then rapidly padded back my way until the closet door suddenly exploded outward. Ms. Nuckeby, sheer terror in her eyes, practically fell into the darkness beside me and closed us both in again with a slam.

She had seen my erection and liked it. Now she was back, Grandfather was in the building, and yet others had arrived.

Can you see how this might be leading to trouble?

Somewhere overhead I heard Woodruff sigh with annoyance.

THUMP

Pause.

THUMP
Pause.

THUMP

Coming down.

“My clothes!” I said, loudly enough for only Ms. Nuckeby to hear. She didn’t reply—only breathed heavily—apparently still recovering from her near miss with whoever had just arrived. And—maybe—just a little from thoughts of my magnificent penis. At least that’s what I wanted to believe.

After several more Woodruff THUMPS, the newly arrived whoever-it-was felt they’d waited long enough and opened the entry door for themselves, shuffling, clicking, removing coats, and talking amongst themselves.

“—Why doesn’t he decorate—I love this neighborhood—how did he get this house—he still has those damned comics hanging everywhere—is that smoke back by the pool?”

Several genders, mostly female. One was my sister, another my younger brother, and the third sounded oddly familiar—

“Helloooo, Woodruff! How ARE you?”

“Miss Wopplesdown. Mister Wopplesdown. Mister Wiggen. Good to see you.”

“Morgan? What was he doing here?”

“And Miss Butterwycke. How delightful to see you, again.”

“That’s why it sounded familiar!”

I nearly choked. Mindie Butterwycke? My lifelong secret love?

Standing naked in a closet beside Ms. Nuckeby with what seemed my entire family just outside, you couldn’t imagine it getting more awkward—but you are sadly lacking imagination.

“What brings you tonight?” Woodruff asked, apparently waiting for an answer to the exact question that I, myself, wanted an answer to. He could only be this efficient by accident.

“Well,” Mindie began, sounding oddly giddy, “it’s supposed to be a surprise for Corky, so I can’t tell you. But I think you’ll like it. I really, really think you’ll like it!” Her voice practically sang out, cockatiel-like.

“What’s that?” Ms. Nuckeby asked.

“My…uh…er…old family friend,” I said, trying not to sound in any way interested. Curiously, my erection died like a carnival goldfish.

“Really? Because you sort of stiffened up. And not in a good way.”


Outside, Mindie forged on, talking about how much she loved my place, how it had everything one could want, except a woman’s touch, and that someday someone would make me get rid of all those damn cartoon books and pictures messing up the walls. She laughed. Others laughed. I gulped.

“None whatsoever?” Ms. Nuckeby asked, somehow unconvinced. What was she, psychic? “So, she’s not…like…an old flame, or anything?”

“Hardly,” I said, trying to come off as shocked and annoyed, but sounded mostly like I’d sucked helium.

“So you wouldn’t be nervous that she might find us in here, together. You in your ‘state of undress’ and all?”

I snorted derisively and felt something fly out of my nose. Please, God, don’t let it have landed on Ms. Nuckeby.

Outside, Woodruff was directing the guests into the study with Grandfather, and I knew he was mere seconds from opening the closet door, yet again, with additional coats and derisive comments.

“Woodruff’s coming,” I said.

“I’d rather you were.”
I gasped in a very unmanly way for a man, yet for some reason she still moved closer and popped another button somewhere. Inexplicably, I was truly uncomfortable with her newest idea. Why, when a woman goes from being cute and sensual to overtly sexual it should oftentimes give men pause, I’ll never know. Something I’d learned in college about a Madonna and her whore slithered through my mind, but left only a slime trail. As I said, the thinking cells simply fail us males from time to time.

Maybe it was my inexperience with romance. Or maybe it had something to do with the growing number of people one panel of wood away, coupled with the fear of being caught and ridiculed by said people. They were family, after all, and that’s what family does in these situations—laugh scornfully and then dredge up the material at each and every opportunity thereafter until the end of time. Parties, family gatherings, wedding banquets, Internet blogs. Familial humiliation lives on forever, and grows funnier and funnier (to them) every time it’s remembered publicly.

It was bad enough to think of Grandfather lurking around out there, and possibly catching me illicitly engaged with an employee then disinheriting my ass. At least he might keep it a secret out of shame and lawsuit paranoia. But Morgan? Mimsi? Rupert? Daniel?

And Mindie? Why in God’s name was I thinking about her at this particular moment as more of Ms. Nuckeby’s buttons exploded open?

“I’m sorry, Ms. Nuckeby, but I’m really not up for something like this right now.”

“I think you need a little daring in your life, Mister Wopplesdown. A little spontaneity! A little fun!” She laughed, attempting to encourage what just wasn’t there. “You’re too damned repressed for someone so young, and so cute.” Then she squeezed me in a way that would have made any man spontaneous, and daring, and fun. Like a Wright Brother, Jon Stewart, and Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer all rolled into one.

“Life is hard enough,” she said, laughing, “not to take advantage of a little harmless joy when it comes your way.”

Then, horrifyingly on cue, the door opened, and I had to use Santa to obscure my Christmas present for Ms. Nuckeby. She turned away and smiled at Woodruff.

“Could you give us a moment, Woodruff?” she asked. “We were just about to have sex.”

“I nearly passed out.”

“Very good, madam,” Woodruff said and began closing the door. I stabbed a hand out and pulled him into my small, dark, sex chamber from hell, accidentally knocking the coats from his grip as I shut him in with us. He stood immobile beside me, arms at his sides, and though it was hard to tell in the darkness, he seemed not the least bit concerned that I was naked and shaking various body parts dangerously close to him in such a confined space.

“Why didn’t you send them away?” I asked him.

“Would you like me to, sir?”

“Yes!”

Ms. Nuckeby rubbed a hand up the back of my thigh and I jumped. “We both would,” she said.

“No,” I corrected, my mind racing around its brain track, and narrowly avoiding mental oil slicks. “Take your pants off.”

“Okay,” Ms. Nuckeby said, instantly unzipping her tight-fitting jeans, and hula dancing out of them.

“Not you!” I said.

“Ah,” Woodruff said. “Me, then? Assuming we three are the only ones in here.”

“Of course we are.”

“Very good, sir,” he said and began unzipping.

“Leave your pants on, please, Ms. Nuckeby.”

“Too late,” she said, and I felt her bend over, and push them down to her ankles. Dear God. Bend over? Push them down to her ankles?

“Why should you two have all the fun?” she asked, straightening up and stepping completely out of her Levis.

“It’s not fun!” I whisper-shrieked. “It’s funless! There’s no fun to be had here! I simply want to get into Woodruff’s pants!”

I could feel her studying me. “Are you sure you’re not gay?”

“It’s a question I’d like answered as well, sir,” Woodruff said, “before I continue.”

“Continue,” I said. “I am not gay.”

“Then wouldn’t you rather get into my pants?” Ms. Nuckeby purred, holding them out to me. “It would be
easier. They’re already off.”

I began to have difficulty thinking. The image of Ms. Nuckeby standing beside me—pantsless—possibly not even wearing—Dear God—not even wearing—there had been no visible panty line…

“Are you…wearing underwear, Ms. Nuckeby?” I asked, the words vibrating, frog-like.

“Just a thong,” she said, and I knew she was smiling. “But you can have that too if you want.”

“Does this mean you won’t be needing my pants, sir?”

Things had gotten terribly out of hand here.

“Please put your pants back on,” I said.

Woodruff began refastening his.

“No, not you! Off! OFF!” I said.

“Very good, sir.”

“Ms. Nuckeby, please…”

“You should know,” she purred, “being in the clothes biz Mister Wopplesdown: It draws unflattering attention to oneself being the only person overdressed at a party,” she laughed. “And the last thing I want is to draw attention to myself.” She had become entirely too giddy. Maybe the air was getting thin in here.

“Ms. Nuckeby…”

“So here,” she said, “let me even things between us.”

She tweaked my member. It was amazing how she could hone in on that thing in near total darkness. “There’s no reason you should be the only one naked in here.”

“NO!”

She made quick work of her underwear. They didn’t come off so much as evaporate, and then with a sensual twist-lift-pull, she stripped her shirt to complete the Adam and Eve ensemble, holding the discarded garments out to me. “If you really feel the necessity to be dressed now, you can have my clothes. I won’t be needing them anymore. Of course, as you wander about the house inside them, feeling the warmth that was me, just remember that I’ll still be here—inside your closet—completely naked.”

She paused, presumably to allow me a moment to take a breath and compose myself.

I obliged.

“Completely…naked,” she continued. “Of course, you’ve never seen me completely naked. Fortunately it’s dark in here, and there are no water bottles. But take my word for it. If we had light, you’d be able to see everything from the tip of my nipples to the crack of my ass, because I am completely naked.” She paused again for maximum effect. I got the feeling she was trying to get a rise out of me. “To the skin,” she finished in a sensual whisper. “Here. Feel.” And with that, took my hand and guided it to something soft and warm, and pliant. I nearly fainted as blood surged everywhere but my brain.

“I’m sorry,” Woodruff said. “I didn’t get that last part. Would you mind repeating it, please?”

She gently pushed her clothes against me and let them go. Struck dumb and immobile, I failed to take hold and the loose fabric fell somewhere near my feet. As I struggled, briefly, to remember what one does in a situation like that (to this day, I have no idea, so if anyone knows, please send a letter care of the publisher) she kicked the stuff that used to make her not naked somewhere away from me and into a darkened corner of the closet.

“Oops,” she said, not really at all upset. “Whatever will we do, now, Mister Wopplesdown? Now neither of us has any clothes.”

“Dear God,” I wheezed.

After a moment of mouth-hanging-open silence, I shook my head to defog it.

“Ms. Nuckeby. This is highly inappropriate…”

“I know. That’s what makes it fun.”

“There are people out there…”

“And won’t they wish they’d been in here when they hear about what a great time we had?”

She trailed a finger down my chest, heading right for the gold. I jumped and turned around, which didn’t please Woodruff, who had his pants down to his thighs by now. Another two to three years and they’d be off entirely. When the man undressed for the night, he must have finished around dawn. No wonder he was always so tired.

“That’s a side of you I hoped never to see, sir,” he said.

“Makes two of us.”

“This may be beyond the realm of my job description.”

“It’s not for you, Woodruff. This is the only safe place to put it at the moment.”

“Says you,” Ms. Nuckeby trilled, and reached around me, taking a firm grip on things.

“Oh!” I said.

“Oh!” she mocked, using my designer’s handle to pull herself closer, pressing her bare breasts against my back.
“Oops,” she said. “I fell.”
“You did not.”
She laughed, breasts jiggling against me, and I felt everything going dark. And it was already dark enough.
“The pants, Woodruff,” I wheezed weakly, my voice growing faint. “Give me the pants.”
“If I must, sir.”
“I’m trying to show you,” Ms. Nuckeby purred, and squeezed, “that there’s an easier solution, here, than all this ridiculous clothes swapping.”
“There is?” I asked.
“There is,” she said. “Have Woodruff tell everyone you’ve unexpectedly left the building, Elvis-like, and he doesn’t expect you back. Then just stay in here with me.” Leaning close, Wisper whispered the rest of her idea into my ear. “And fuck me till I walk funny.”
“Oh, dear God,” I said.
“I know, sir,” Woodruff said, sadly. “The lady’s brazenness is taking its toll on me as well.”
“Oh, dear, GOD!” I said, realizing he had removed his underwear and only appeared to have three legs. The middle one looked as though it should be climbing trees in the Amazon and swallowing monkeys whole.
“I get it from my father’s side,” he said, sadly. “It’s why I’m an only child and unmarried.”
Unbidden and unwanted, I briefly flashed on Woodruff’s potential wedding night. He’d need to rent two honeymoon suites. He’d be in one, while his penis was having sex with his new bride in the other.
“As I’ve heard many times, madam. Yes.”
Many times?
“Woodruff?” I asked. “Why have you removed your underwear?”
“When it gets like this,” he groaned, “it’s far more comfortable if things are unencumbered.”
“Far more comfortable for whom?”
“You can have the underwear along with the pants if it pleases you, sir. It will be some time before I can fit them back on anyway.”
“Thank you, no, Woodruff. I won’t be needing the underwear,” I said.
“No,” Ms Nuckeby said, squeezing, “you certainly won’t.”
Whereupon my voice hit a register only dogs can hear. “Never mind. I’ll take it all,” I said, bending and reaching for his trousers, feeling Ms. Nuckeby’s breasts slide down my back.
I paused and lost track of what I was doing. Why was I trying to get out of here, again?
Then I heard Grandfather’s voice.
Ah, yes. That’s why.
“Where the hell is Woodruff?” he bellowed, coming closer. Of course coming closer. There were six million square feet in this house. Why should he be using any of it but the four square feet I happened to occupy?
“And where’s Corky?”
Mindie’s voice. Undoubtedly also heading right for this closet. Life was just a vicious bitch with rabies and huge teeth. “I can’t wait!” she squealed. “I want to tell him our surprise!”
The doorbell rang.
“That must be the others.”
Dear God, there were still others? A door opened with a chorus of voices “... hello ... lovely to see you ... how have you been ... are you sure you want to do this ... what’s that smoky smell?” And then the sentence from hell...
“What are our coats doing on the floor?”
Perceiving the obvious, even Ms. Nuckeby gasped and her libido seemed—at long last—to subside. She panicked right along with me and immediately began scrambling for her clothes. But amidst the boxes, objects, and clutter, all we found was the thong. Not really much help unless I wanted to floss my teeth, which I didn’t.
Woodruff—either because he didn’t feel the need, couldn’t fit them back on, or simply because he was Woodruff—took his time pulling on his boxers while we continued to search frantically. When the closet door finally began to crack open—as we all knew it had to—I stopped my search and tried desperately to pull it shut. But whoever was on the other side fought viciously and with the strength of ten men.
“It seems to be hung on something,” Mindie said.
Mindie? Mindie was the one pulling?
She’d been working out. Or I hadn’t.
As the door popped open with brief flashes of light, and views of the foyer from Mindie’s incessant yanking, it became abundantly clear I couldn’t hold the knob (the one on the door) forever. So, in what I imagine was an effort
to help, Ms. Nuckeby began throwing stray bits of ribbon and Christmas decoration over me in an apparent effort—I supposed—to disguise me once the door ultimately slipped free of my hands.

“Never mind that,” I whispered. “Just help me hold this damn thing shut.”

She did, wrapping her hands over mine and pressing her breasts into my face—unintentionally I’m sure. But before long it had become a parlor game for those on the other side, and we were, without a doubt, about to be on the losing end of things. Judging by the amount of effort it took to hold the door closed, hundreds of people must have been in the foyer, all laughing and jerking us from our hiding place.

Creeeeeak, SLAM, creeeeeak, SLAM, creeeeeak, SLAM.

After what seemed like hours of wrestling fun for the whole family, the handle at long last slipped from Ms. Nuckeby’s and my sweating fingertips and the closet door exploded open—flying nearly off its hinges—exposing us for the entire world to see.

Or, at least, for all those in the foyer to see. Which certainly seemed to us at the time like the entire world. Mimsi, Morgan, Daniel, Mindie, Grandfather, and standing in the now open doorway some new arrivals: my aunt and uncle (the Struts of Wopplesdown Struts), my father, his new wife, and stepdaughter, my older brothers, and—of all people—the leader of the family church I never attended, Pastor Berthram Winterly, were all there, and alternately amused, stunned, or deeply horrified.

The sight that greeted what amounted to my entire family, and then some, was a naked Ms. Nuckeby, who had managed to find an old package of Christmas bows, and was holding a few over one or two of her unmentionables. A naked me, holding a small cardboard Santa face over my crotch with a word-balloon saying ‘Presents Inside!’ as well as a few ribbons and garlands thrown gaily over my shoulders, and Woodruff in his boxers—pants still around his ankles—standing stiffly and waiting to serve.

“I’ve found Mister Wopplesdown,” he announced helpfully.
As you can imagine, reactions were somewhat mixed.

Morgan and most of the males stared in awe at Ms. Nuckeby. My sister snorted a laugh. My little brother, Daniel, goggled with wide eyes, and open-mouthed at everything. My Aunt Helena stood to one side, alone, watching and smiling, seemingly amused by the whole thing. Her husband, Pjuter, had—likely to avoid being caught by his wife ogling Ms. Nuckeby—disappeared somewhere, possibly to the same darkened corner Mindie had vanished into when she had—inevitably—run crying from the room.

Grandfather was the first to speak.

“Jesus Christ on a fucking BIKE!”

An excellent way to get the conversation going I thought.

As everyone stood in a circle around us, apparently too stunned by the events to bother getting us some clothes, I decided now was a good time for a vacation.
Ms. Nuckeby, though nervous, was obviously far more comfortable being naked to the world than I. She stood rather calmly beside me, hands at her sides, gift bows still adhering to various parts of her body through no effort on her part, while I still held the cardboard Santa as if my life depended on it. Woodruff had returned his trousers to their rightful position and slunk away someplace, undoubtedly to laugh his ass off.

On the plus side, I was no longer fighting an erection.

Morgan sucked on a lollipop as he stared at Ms. Nuckeby like a partially opened Christmas present he longed to finish unwrapping. He was drooling puddles of colored spit onto my inlaid, Italian marble floor and making odd, moaning sounds as if his engines were overheating—which I suppose they were.

Eventually, Grandfather stopped pacing and screaming, screaming and pacing, and stared me right in the eyes.

"Apparently you're not even a homosexual."

For the life of me, he sounded disappointed.

"There’s a simple explanation..." I began.

"The explanation is rather clear," he snarled, glancing over at Ms. Nuckeby’s exposed everything.

"He didn’t do anything wrong," she said, wading into the deep end of the shark infested waters.

"Excuse me?" Grandfather goggled, apparently startled that she could do more than just stand there and be naked.

"I said: ‘he didn’t do anything wrong.’ It was all a crazy misunderstanding, and the more we tried to fix it..."

"Are you aware that just by being here, let alone in your obvious situation, you are in violation of your contract with us, and the morals clause your agency has you sign before..."

"The situation may be obvious to you, but in reality..."

"Madam—you are naked. He is naked. I can’t believe you’re still talking.” He glared her to silence, then turned to me. “And you...”

"He didn’t do anything wrong,” she interrupted again, utterly unfazed by Grandfather’s anger or strength of will. She certainly had one up on me.

And then, in what could have been a magnificent act of heartfelt defiance, she did something so small, so very simple, and so beautifully touching; she reached out to take my hand.

And in an act equally small, massively cowardly, and stupendously insensitive, I did something I would regret until my dying day.

I pulled my hand away.

The act shook her, and she glanced up at me with hurt and surprise. Then, without ever looking at her, I felt her expression change and was immediately chilled as the room temperature dropped at least a hundred and thirty-two degrees.

She took her hand back and folded her arms across her stomach, lowering her head to hide her embarrassment.

The silence that suddenly filled the room was deafening.

"I'm sorry, Grandfather,” I said, completing the defeat.

He stared at me intently, then glanced briefly at Ms. Nuckeby, who kept her eyes on her painted toenails—and had, to his personal amusement—lost her edge.

My dear Aunt Helena stepped forward with Ms. Nuckeby’s clothes and kindly handed them to her.

"Here you go, dear,” my aunt said, putting a gentle arm around Wisper’s shoulders.

Ms. Nuckeby took the clothes wordlessly and held them to her chest. Aunt Helena handed me a pair of trousers, then guided the silent Ms. Nuckeby away, head still down and silent as a tomb, into an adjoining room and away from prying eyes.

I didn’t even turn to watch her go.

(──────)  (──────)  (──────)

Sitting shirtless on a footstool in the study with Grandfather as he continued pacing and repeating himself for the ten thousandth time, or more, I stared at the carpet and wondered who was the first person to think, ‘Hey. If I take this stuff that grows on the backs of a sheep and twist it for hours on end, I’ll bet I can make a neat floor covering.’

No one ever accused me of having too much depth.

I suppose most of you would expect I’d be thinking about my horrible showing with Ms. Nuckeby, and that did flit through the old cranium from time to time. But the mind wanders, and who did first look at a sheep and think
—‘Clothes!’

“…exposed the company…failed at your job description…horse’s ass…” were a few of the repeated phrases that leaked through my woolen thinking now and again.

Mercifully, Aunt Helena walked in and cut him off.

“Oh, for God’s sake, leave the poor boy alone, Cecil! He’s a young man, and young men do stupid things. Would you like me to run a litany of the stupid things you’ve done in your lifetime?”

Grandfather gruffed, mumbling something about ‘dredging up the past’ but wound up cutting short the lecture anyway.

Helena smiled at me. “Sooo…your Ms. Nuckeby was planning to visit her parents this weekend?”

I looked at her blankly. Apparently she thought I should know this. But she could tell instantly, just by my expression, that it was news to me Ms. Nuckeby even had parents and quickly plunged on to help me avoid further embarrassment.

“Well, now—because your grandfather is so damn longwinded—the trains have stopped running, and she’s been stranded. But you needn’t worry about her. I’ve asked Biddleby to take her home, the poor thing.” Biddleby was her driver.

“Poor thing. HA! Exactly!” Grandfather laughed.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It’s always the poor who try this kind of stunt. Fortunately, she won’t have an inkling how much it’s worth. We’ll give her a small settlement of some kind, and that’ll be the end of it.”

“Maybe she won’t want a settlement. She seemed to genuinely like you. Then the subpoenas arrive.”

I sneered at him. He could see I was unconvinced.

“She’s a model! They’re teenagers! The only thing more selfabsorbed than a teenager, or a model, is an actress! Each is as incapable as the other of loving anyone but themselves.”

Helena chuckled. “Don’t project your lack of appeal for women onto Corky. I’m certain any woman who’s ever had sex with you would naturally feel afterward that she was owed something more. But Corky’s different. She wasn’t exactly leaving here happily, you know.”

“She wasn’t?” I asked, with an odd mixture of pleasure and guilt.

“Because her little mission had failed, that’s why!” Grandfather snorted. “Give her a few days to mull it over—suss out how ‘psychologically damaged’ she was by this experience, and mark my words…”

“Oh, let it go, you old poop,” Helena snapped. “It’s not all about money you know.”

“Says the poorer side of the family. Everything is always about money.”

Helena, Grandfather’s sister, had married Pjuter Struts, one of our tailors, and ‘poorer’ is clearly a relative term. She still owned just under half the company, plus the added value Pjuter had brought to it by expanding the line to include lingerie, outerwear, and edible jockstraps.

“You don’t know she’s a gold-digger,” I said. “You’re judging her on no evidence…”

“More evidence than you have that she’s NOT a gold-digger!” Grandfather snapped. “I talked to her at least. On a more non-threatening level than you apparently did…”

“You’re in no position to comment rationally,” Grandfather interrupted. “You had already surrendered to the reptilian brain. A hot dick looking for a hotter hole. Mark my words, that woman is in it for the money.”

“You don’t know her…”

“And you do? I saw your expression. You didn’t even know she had parents, did you?”

I lowered my head sadly.

“How long have you been acquainted with this woman?”

“Well, technically we met a couple of weeks ago, but…”

Grandfather glared, and I hesitated. When I finally spoke again, my voice was so shallow I was surprised he could hear me at all.

“Since this morning.”

“Since this morning, you said? This afternoon, more like. And not more than a few hours later, she’s naked—in a closet—with you. Proper women don’t behave that way.”

Aunt Helena sniffed. “Proper women have always behaved that way. ‘Proper’ society just pretends they don’t. Especially the proper men who stick their hot dicks into their even hotter holes.”

“You, of all people, have no business commenting on this.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant, but Aunt Helena lost her smile and stopped talking immediately. Clearly, I was going to have to start paying more attention to family gossip.

“This woman is an opportunist,” Grandfather continued, apparently getting back to Ms. Nuckeby. “She saw a
chance, and she took it.” He turned to me. “Whether to snag you into a sham marriage, or—more likely—simply to find an opportunity to sue for whatever she could get. It’s well known we Wopplesdowns are an easy mark.”

“And whose fault is that, Mister Hot Dick calling the kettle black?” Helena slid in. I was glad to see Grandfather hadn’t silenced her completely.

“We can’t help it if, genetically—with the exception of Corky, here—Wopplesdowns are oversexed.”

“Harassment has nothing to do with sex,” Helena snarled. “It’s about power.”

“Pshaw!” Grandfather said. It was something my grandfather said a lot. I was never able to find the word in any dictionary. “Women have all the power, my dear sister. And you know that better than anyone.”

Again, Helena was momentarily silenced. But with the opening she had created I tried to regain the upper hand—which I never had to begin with, but you know what I mean.

“How can you possibly know…”

“Did you talk,” he interrupted, taking away even the illusion of an upper hand, finger, or nail, “you and this Nuckeby girl?”

I said nothing.

“Did you discuss family?”

The wind blew.

“Moral values?”

The house creaked.

“Current events?”

Someone far away coughed.

“Child rearing, religion, the environment?”

Who did first look at sheep, and…

“Does she enjoy watching people do strange things to animals with electricity?”

I wasn’t sure how anyone could possibly answer that one.

“Did you say, or do, anything that might give her any idea that you would be someone with whom she was, in any way, mutually compatible in a long-term relationship?”

I returned my attention to the carpet.

“No. You got naked in a closet. Hormones and intent. You had hormones, and she had intent. Take it from someone who knows all too well.”

Studiously fighting off the horrifyingly uncomfortable visuals of Grandfather bare-assed in a closet with anyone, I began to find myself wondering about Ms. Nuckeby. I really did know nothing about her, and—other than the fact that the tiniest breeze seemed to arouse a sudden stiffness in my loins—she knew nothing about me. Why was she attracted to me? Why would anyone be?

The downside of an argument like Grandfather’s was: it didn’t rely on logic or facts, and worked terrifically well on someone with profoundly low self-esteem. And my self-esteem hovered at, or near, a grasshopper’s gonads.

Consequently, for good or ill, I began to see Grandfather’s point, and it grated on me. My instincts in the closet were, somehow, correct. Cleary, someone as forward as Ms. Nuckeby had to be in it for something else.

“I think you’ve done all the damage you can do here, Cecil,” Aunt Helena said. “Why don’t you go and annoy someone else?”

Grandfather wanted to be angry with her, but he was obviously too pleased with his decisive victory over me.

“I should go see how Mindie Butterwycke is doing, anyway,” he said, and after a last parting smirk in my general direction, he moved to—and out of—the study door.

Mindie Butterwycke? See how she’s doing what?

Aunt Helena sat beside me, put a hand across my shoulders and pulled me, tightly, to her. She and I had always been very close, ever since my mother died all those years ago in that horrible chair-lift accident with her ski-instructor. We never did find their pants.

“No listen to him. He’s just old and bitter.”

“No,” I said, sadly. “I’m afraid he might be right.”

I explained the situation in the closet, leaving out certain personally embarrassing details. The omissions shortened the story considerably. I described how Ms. Nuckeby had nearly left, then returned and become rather unexpectedly randy.

“But you said you two had made a connection in those previous few minutes. Made a date. Why shouldn’t she then feel more comfortable with you?”

“I don’t know. Something just felt strange about it.”

“Like she got greedy and was trying to score quickly?”

“Mmm.”
“I don’t think so. She didn’t seem the type to me. You don’t get in the face of the owner of the company if you’re just looking for a piece of his personal pie.”

She considered me a moment.

“I think you’re just being a man,” she said finally. “Men always want the horny slut until they either make some kind of personal connection or ejaculate. Then you want her to go home, or make you breakfast and go home, or have sex with you again, make you breakfast and go home. And once she’s gone, you decide you can’t have a ‘relationship’ with a horny slut so you run right out and find someone demure, boring, and utterly sexless because you need to impress your mother. Often not realizing that your own mother could set the standard for horny sluts.”

What an odd thing to say. Was she implying there might be more to that chair-lift accident?

“You’re the closest thing to a mother I’ve ever had,” I said.

“And look at what a horny slut I am,” she laughed.

I didn’t. She was old enough to be—well—Grandfather’s sister. And although she was eight or so years younger than he, worked out regularly and kept in shape, the image of her riding Pjuter roughshod, and enjoying it…

I suddenly flashed on Mr. And Mrs. Abrososa and shuddered violently.

“Oh,” Helena said. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to gross you out. But someday I’ll tell you the story of how I met Pjuter. That will really make you shudder.”

I said nothing, and she pulled me more tightly to her. “Oooooh, Corky. You’ve always been so sweet, and,” she paused, searching for the right word, “non-threatening. I’ve always felt a deep connection with you too. But you’re a tad too naïve sometimes to see the world as it really is—particularly in things amour. Don’t give up on the naked girl as yet.”

“Seems Ms. Nuckeby’s impressed you.”

“She certainly has. That doesn’t mean I don’t need more time to properly evaluate—maybe see how she looks in clothes. It is the family business after all. But I admired her courage in facing down your grandfather, and I have no problem with the fact that she found you instantly beddable.”

“So, it didn’t concern you then that in your first experience with her she was naked?”

“And proudly so, I noticed. With good reason too. Hell, if I looked as good as her, I’d never wear clothes—or make-up. I’d even love to see the world follow my example—in spite of what it might do to the family coffers. I’m more progressive than you think. Fashion is such an elitist, arbitrary business anyway. I mean, it’s really funny when you think about it, isn’t it? Do you feel strange when you meet someone on the beach and they’re wearing a scanty little bathing suit? No. But meet them in a shopping mall dressed exactly the same way and it’s somehow disquieting and ‘inappropriate’. Can you imagine dining at Sizzlers and everyone’s wearing a thong? Not a pleasant thought perhaps. But on a beach in Cancun, or Rio, or on the French Riviera . . . We see people naked in gym showers all the time. C’est la vie. But if we met them that way on a street corner—scandal!

“You remember my young friend, Wilhamina Morgenfraugen? She and I met in the office showers. We were both naked. She asked to borrow a tampon. And yet we’ve been friends ever since. In spite of the fact that her boobs are much nicer than mine. It’s all about context, Corky. Context and how much elasticity you’ve left in your skin.”

“But elasticity, tampons, and impressive breasts aside,” I said, “that’s far more socially acceptable than Ms. Nuckeby’s willingness to undress in a closet with a complete stranger. Two complete strangers if you count Woodruff.”

“Woodruff is two complete strangers all on his own,” she said, shuddering herself. “You never know, Corky. Maybe nudity and being open about her sexuality doesn’t mean to her what it does to you. After all, she does bare all in her profession on a regular basis, and clearly she’s more comfortable with it than you are.”

She waited—noticed I wasn’t quite buying it—then leaned in and kissed my cheek.

“Well,” she said. “It’s your life. But honestly, I’m convinced that unreleased semen interferes chemically with brain activity in males. So don’t make any rash decisions you’ll regret later until after you’ve masturbated and given it some additional thought.”

I laughed. She laughed. Then she got up to leave. I missed her comforting arm the instant she removed it.

“I will give your grandfather credit for one thing,” she said. “He’s right—it would help if you knew her better. Help you. The rest of us don’t matter. If you spent more time with her, you might find there were good reasons for her behavior that have nothing to do with being a gold-digger. In fact, the simple answer might be that she’s…”

She stopped. Her eyes widened. She seemed to think of something or remember something, and slowly smiled a rather grand and affecting smile.

“I have to go,” she said hurriedly, and raced for the door before I could ask her what she was going to say. She bumped into Mindie on the way out, and they bounced off one another repeatedly as each tried to squeeze through first.
“I’m coming in!” Mindie snarled.
“And I’m going out!” Helena responded, equally churlishly.
They struggled momentarily—Helena partially pinned by trying to avoid contact with Mindie’s rather massive breasts—until Mindie finally managed to shove past and into the room. Collecting herself and breathing hard, she glared a moment at Helena, eyes visibly red from crying, then turned with a huff and strode toward me, supported by Grandfather, who had followed her in past Helena.
“Where are you going?” Grandfather asked his sister pointedly. “We’re going to talk to Corky, now.”
“I have to see to something,” Helena said and then paused, looking at Mindie nervously. “Something urgent.”
Mindie was sniffing dramatically and leaking fluids from various facial orifices. Why was she so distraught?
“Corky,” Helena said to me, her smile vanished and she didn’t seem at all pleased. “Don’t do anything you’ll regret until you know more about your model.”
Mindie shot Helena a look of withering death at the mention of ‘your model’, as did Grandfather. Helena sneered back at them, then quickly darted out the door and disappeared.
I scowled, not getting any of this. It was a very confusing, and uncomfortable night.
I wanted to go back to thinking about sheep.
“Are you all right?” I asked Mindie.
“I will be,” she said, sniffling sadly. “And I forgive you. After all, a man needs to get a certain amount of wildness out of his system—as mother told me so many times when father worked late.”
“Men need to—what?” I asked, lost.
“But I don’t want you to see her anymore. You understand?”
“…who? Ms. Nuckeby?”
“Don’t even mention that slut’s name!”
“Um, all right.”
“So you won’t see her again?”
I glanced at Grandfather. Then back to Mindie.
“I’m not seeing her now.”
She smiled at me, and some of the darkness that had enveloped her seemed to lift.
"Thank you," she said and dropped into my lap, putting her arms around my neck. She adjusted to make herself more comfortable, and me less so, managing to wedge her substantial chest under my chin. Being as she’d never so much as even bumped into me in the past, this was a bit of a shock, and I looked at her like I’d been pithed. (It is a great word.)

Smiling a bit sadly, she looked back and forth from one of my eyes to the other as if comparing their sizes and relative positions on my face. Eventually she decided they were more-or-less where they were supposed to be, or could be with minor plastic surgery, and she turned to Grandfather.

“You can bring in the others, now,” she told him.

He smiled—seemed almost relieved—and quickly opened the door to my den, brusquely waving in the rest of my family. They filed past him, gleeful, and most of them were eating snacks they had likely not been offered by Woodruff. My older brothers in particular were ravenously working over some week old chicken legs from somewhere in the back of my fridge which were skirting that razorthin line between ‘leftover’ and ‘natural laxative.’

“I can’t really be mad at you, I suppose,” Mindie told me, smiling and sniffing. “You don’t even know the real reason for my coming here tonight, do you?”

“I…er…no,” I admitted. “Not really.”

“I’ve decided to accept your proposal of marriage.”

“My…my…my what? My proposal of what?”

Suddenly I felt more naked than when I’d been naked. I looked at everyone in the room, and most of them were —more or less—smiling. All except Morgan, who couldn’t manage it around another large lollipop he’d found. But he still gave me the thumbs-up.

“What proposal of marriage?” I asked.

“The one Morgan told me about. The one he said you’d been wanting to give me all these years, and I—Oh, God, Corky! I had no idea!” She hugged me tightly, and her boobs cut off my air.

As she scrunched me, vise-like, I turned to Morgan—who slurped, winked, and mouthed the words, ‘You’re welcome.’ He held his hands out and made the universal symbol for gigantic breasts, nodded briefly toward Mindie, then grinned even bigger, and gave another thumbs-up. Blue spit dripped on my carpet, plopping down beside my brother’s greasy chicken-leg fragments.

“I’d just about given up on you ever even asking me out, and then this! I was over the moon! I wanted to come right away, and see you— start making plans, discussing dates.”

“But I did ask you out, Mindie. Many times. You always said ‘no.’”

“When did you ask me out?”

“Well—there was the time I invited you to the air show. But you said,” I screwed up my face in an annoyed and dismissive expression—not unlike how someone might look if they were having their face shoved forcibly up a baboon’s ass—that, I’m sure, paled in comparison to the one she had actually given me at the time. “No! Get away from me!”

“Well, why would I want to go to an air show?” she said, capturing the expression far better than I had. “Dirty planes and engine noise. Smelly gasoline everywhere. A date involves dining, Corky. Dancing. Gifts. Two people being seen spending romantic time together. Not jet fumes!”

“Well, there was the time I asked you to stroll with me that evening in Monaco by the sea…”

“In the sand? It was cold! I was wearing Manolo Blahnik’s, for God’s sake! A thousand dollars a pair! I thought you were being flip!”

“Not to my knowledge, no. I…”

“We’ll go on a proper date, Corky. Lots of them. I’ll show you what a proper date really is, and how much it should cost. Ooooooooh, Corky.”

She kissed me. I almost managed to kiss her back before she pulled away and picked something off my chin that apparently offended her, maybe the thing that had shot from my sinus in the closet earlier. Then she kissed my nose, obviously unwilling to return to the infected area.

She smiled and turned to the others.

“Well,” she said, beaming. “Congratulate us!”

And they did. Even though, technically, I still hadn’t asked.
Amidst the pats on the back, the hugs, and the ‘welcome to the family’ greetings to Mindie, Grandfather pulled me aside.

“This should solve all our problems, son. Getting it regular at home will make it easier on you in the office. Especially since you seem to be so undersexed anyway. Can’t believe I thought you were gay. You’ll have to explain that damned video to me sometime.” I had. Repeatedly. “I imagine it’s far more embarrassing now, eh? Being straight and all.”

He laughed heartily and slapped my back. I wheezed.

“Grandfather…”

“Best of all, there won’t be any temptation from the Ms. Nuckeby’s of the world. Money grubbing little tarts! I’ll write her a check. Get her to sign a waiver. This will all be forgotten by next week. You’ll be engaged, Mindie’s somewhat attractive, and has huge tits, and that’s the end of it! Right? Good? No more closets?” He laughed. “Of any kind!” He laughed harder and returned to the others.

No more closets.

I watched him a moment, sadly. Then reached into the group and grabbed Morgan, dragging him out of earshot. I asked how all this had come about, and between sucks on what seemed an endless supply of drooly candy-on-a-stick, he explained.

He had called my grandfather, as I had suggested, asking to be allowed into the Garment Viewing Room. After a considerable amount of time reminding Grandfather who he was, Grandfather turned him down flat. Grandfather said the last thing he needed was two perverts running amok among the models, to which Morgan informed him I was too nice a guy to have done anything untoward—although the actual word Morgan used was ‘skeevy’.

(I prefer, however, to use ‘untoward’. ‘Skeevy’ just makes your mouth feel dirty. So, in the future, anytime you see me use ‘untoward’ feel free to substitute the word ‘skeevy’ if that explains the situation more adequately for you.)

Grandfather told Morgan he obviously didn’t know me very well, and Morgan said, no, it was Grandfather who had his head…er…in the dark—and before Morgan could be hung up on, he told Grandfather, by way of example, about my chaste and unrequited love for Mindie.

This brightened Grandfather considerably and things moved rather rapidly from there. Grandfather called my sister Mimsi, Mindie’s best friend. Mimsi told Mindie, who happened to be visiting for the night, and Mindie, though cautiously excited, wanted proof, ‘even if it comes directly from the mouth of that idiot, Morgan.’ Grandfather called Morgan back and before long, everyone was invited for a meeting at Mindie’s a few blocks over on another of Epsoms’ Roads.

Morgan carefully explained how long and how deeply I’d been in love with Mindie, up to and including my abortive attempt to propose to her on the night of our prom. She was, of course, going with someone else.

As proof of my commitment, Morgan had produced the engagement ring from his car’s glove compartment, where it had lain undisturbed for six years, ever since Morgan placed it there during our long drive to the ER after Mindie’s prom date knocked me unconscious (He apparently took issue with my desire to ruin his chance for ‘prom night sex’ by proposing marriage to his date before the evening had even begun. I knew it might be a mistake in telling him. But I felt it the honorable thing to do. I lost a tooth. Mindie never even knew what happened. He never got sex. Chivalry in action).

Upon seeing the ring, Mindie gasped with excitement, fully appraising its full-market value to within a few cents, and quickly assessing its potential for being upgraded to a more appropriate style and design. Then one thing led to another and Mindie—apparently swept up in the emotion of the moment I was not actually present for—decided to come over and surprise me by accepting.

She called Pastor Winterly and, given that her family donates considerable wads of cash to his church, was apparently able to ‘twist his arm’ to come by and begin the arrangements immediately.


My father stepped over to me with Rupert and Henderton, my older brothers, and they all smiled vacantly for a disturbingly long time before saying anything. The silence became a bit uncomfortable, and I glanced down to make sure my fly was zipped and nothing was swinging free.

“So,” my father asked. “Did’ja fuck her?”

“What? Dad! Isn’t that between Mindie and me?”

“Not jugs—no one’s fucked her. She keeps her legs together so tight it’s a wonder she can walk. I meant the hottie in the closet with no tan lines? Did’ja fuck her, or was she just for show?”

Henderton was giggling like an idiot and nodding—waiting for an answer he hoped was going to be detailed
and sordid. Rupert, eating some chocolate crispies that hadn’t been crispy when I first put them in a bowl on my desk at least five years ago, was only slightly more reserved. “Just for show?” I asked, confused.

“Yeah,” Rupert nodded. “I’ve got a bet this was all staged to try and ‘prove’ you’re not a fag.” I was stunned. How many times did I have to explain this?

“I had no idea you were coming. So why would I stage it? And I am not, as you so eloquently put it, a…” “E-Lo-quen-ty…” Rupert mocked.


“Same thing.”

“Not even remotely.”

“Re-mote-ly. Whatever.”


“You wish,” I said.

Rupert took a moment to realize I was accusing him of wanting to have sex with me, and when it finally sunk in, he exploded and leaped for my throat. Henderton and my father had to hold him back. “You’re the fag! I’m not the fag!” Rupert spat. After a moment he finally calmed, withdrew, and contented himself with sneering at me while speaking to the others. “He didn’t fuck her. She hasn’t got a beard.”

“I fucked her,” I said, shocking myself and throwing a silence over them like a rug. Woolen. Made from sheep. They studied me intently for a moment, not entirely sure if they could believe me. It annoyed me that they might think I was lying, even though I was.

“She tight?” my father asked hopefully.

“Nearly squeezed it off,” I said, grinning as though there was nothing better than having your penis sheared away. At least that wasn’t entirely a lie. She had quite a grip, Ms. Nuckeby. Surprisingly, the fact that I’d led them to believe more about her than she’d actually done bothered me very little. If there was one thing I’d learned in this family, it was how to devolve rapidly into classlessness.

They stared a beat longer, waiting to see if I would burst out with a ‘Just kidding!’, and when I didn’t, they hooted and laughed as if they’d been in there with me. In the closet, I mean. Or maybe in Ms. Nuckeby. Where illicit sex was concerned, they were highly imaginative.

Finally, my father slapped me on the shoulder. Hard. The way ‘men’ do when they share ‘manly’ things like degrading the women dearest to them.

“What an ass,” father said, giggling. He was marveling at Ms. Nuckeby’s behind, not insulting me, though I’m sure he’d get to that eventually. “It was all I could do to keep from reaching out and grabbing a piece a that myself.”

Then he winked and took my brothers by the shoulders back to stand with his new wife and stepdaughter. Through the rest of the evening he continually glanced back at me, winking with obvious pleasure. ‘My son is not a fag.’ I could hear him think. ‘My son is not a fag.’

It was then that I noticed the striking similarity between Dad’s wife, Faunita, and my seemingly impending wife, Mindie. Two tall, slightly heavy women, both very made up and overly dressed for the occasion, each enjoying themselves more than the situation seemed to require. They wore snugly fitting designer dresses with chaste necklines that still revealed, with pride, significant amounts of mammarian overload—something I noted had been passed on genetically to my stepsister, Ynadia. From all appearances, I was marrying a woman just like the woman who married dear old Dad. Though without the illegitimate offspring.

That should have been my first warning. Or maybe my thirtyseventh. Only instead of being terrified out of my mind, I found myself thinking that maybe this wasn’t a bad thing. The family liked it. Mindie already belonged. Plus, she had her own money. There was no question she had to be interested in me because of me.

Incredibly, I found myself warming to the idea. Twelve hours ago I would have killed for this opportunity. Mindie and I engaged. The family gathered proudly around me. No one being sexually harassed. This could be a very comfortable existence. It might be exactly what I needed in my life.

Mimsi, my sister, pulled away from Mindie and Faunita and made her way over to me as I stood alone to one side, watching them plan our wedding at some little chapel by the sea that had everything, according to Faunita, including impoverished locals who would wait on us hand and foot for less than minimum wage.

Mimsi smiled and stared at me with curious eyes, as if studying me for lice. “What?” I asked.

“So-o-o-o-o-o-o,” she asked. “Did’ja fuck her?”

“Mims!”
“Just kidding. I know that’s what Dad asked you. I’m really just trying to figure out what you think of all this. You seem kind of happy. But it hasn’t escaped me that you never actually asked Mindie, or that you were, mere moments ago, bumping nasties with another woman.”

“Let’s not forget Woodruff.”

“Contrary to what everyone else may think, I know you have no interest in bumping nasties with Woodruff.”

It’s true. She always understood that the Mervin Wosserman incident had been a horrible, drunken disaster, not unlike the Exxon Valdez, and nearly as damaging. Like recognizes like, I suppose. Or recognizes when like isn’t like. Or, like…something like that anyway.

“Bumping nasties,” I said, tasting the words. “An interesting expression.”

“And inappropriate now that I think about it,” she said. She’d been to Oxford too. “There was nothing nasty about her. Woof. She was quite a hottie.”

Mimsi would know. She had dated some stunners. She was what I think they referred to as (‘They’ again. Someday someone was going to have to track ‘Them’ down and kick them in the nuts. They obviously have too much free time in their lives to just stand around and say things that deeply affected other people). At any rate, Mims was what’s called a ‘lipstick lesbian’. Not that she sold cosmetics for Ronco or anything, but that she was somehow more feminine and attractive than your average lesbian, but still liked girls. As such, Mims could tell a good-looking female as easily as any heterosexual lesbian. I mean woman. Heterosexual woman. She could tell any heterosexual man too, I supposed. Heterosexual, period. Human being? Come to think of it, pretty much anyone could recognize a good-looking woman. Why could men never recognize a handsome man unless they were gay? Maybe ‘They’ would know.

Sorry. I’m easily distracted.

“Soooo…” Mims asked, studying me for any sign of falsehood, “you’re okay with this? The Mindie thing? That girl in the closet was just a poke-n-grope or something?”

I stared at her silently for a moment, trying to hide it and failing.

“Or something,” I said finally.

Her quizzical look faded and understanding filled her face. “Gold-digger?” she said. Mims had run into a heaping helping of those as well. There’s something about being rich and single that attracts pretty, insincere, poor, and single people who want your checkbook more than your heart.

“Apparently,” I said, a bit curtly.

Mims studied me. “You sure? Because she seemed into you. And the way she stood up to Grandfather… well…”

“I’m sure,” I said sharply, mostly because I really didn’t want to believe it and was trusting Grandfather’s loud and angry assessment over my own. Volume often makes another’s point seem more right. Or yours more wrong.

I saw her surprised look, softened, and looked away from her sadly. She lifted my chin with her thumb and forefinger and smiled at me, almost as sadly, then pulled me to her, giving me a hug I needed more than I would have realized.

“Do you ever miss England?” I asked as she held me tightly. “I liked it there. Everyone seemed nicer, and I felt more comfortable with the people.”

“That’s because you’re repressed,” she said, grinning. “And I’m not sure that’s a good thing.”

After an insufficient amount of welcome human warmth, she reluctantly let go of me, smiled one last time, and without another word wandered back into the crowd, leaving an opening for Morgan.

“Things seem to be wrapping up here,” he said. “Wanna bust loose and go strip-clubbing? I’m thinking we should maybe ask that red-hot stepsister of yours if she wants to go. Maybe we could convince her to get up on a table.”

He smiled and sucked another lollipop. I looked at him with murder in my eyes, imagining cartoon axes flying from my pupils into his heart.

“What?” he asked, a little frightened. “You’re not related!”

I continued to glare at him, and he eventually took the hint, wandering off, drooling.

(ಠ_ಠ)

The rest of the evening was a bit of a whirlwind, and I vaguely remember some of it. But I can’t remember what.
As everyone splintered off and began heading home, Mindie found her way back to me and wrapped an arm in mine as she helped me guide her to the door.

“So we’ll head down the coast tomorrow to that little chapel Pastor Winterly mentioned and see if it meets with our approval,” she told me. “A small wedding would be so lovely. Just a thousand or so. I hope this place isn’t one of those rattletrap shanties that look good in the pictures, but then you get there and you can actually smell the sea. I suppose that can be overcome with sufficient flowers, but—you’ll drive. That way I can talk with the pastor about my needs on the way down. Make sure you bring your checkbook for the deposit.”

She stopped and held me out at arm’s length as if examining a disheveled child to make sure he was presentable for the family photo. After a moment’s study, she brushed my hair off my forehead. Apparently I wasn’t. There followed more, vigorous adjusting before she finally stopped and looked around to see if anyone was nearby. No one was. They were all on the porch or already gone. Satisfied we were alone, she turned back to me and grinned, darkly, as though she were considering which side of my throat to rip out first.

“I hope you understand, I won’t be staying tonight. I figure you should at least take a shower after rutting around with that little hooker in the broom closet.”

It was like she’d backhanded me in the forehead. I said nothing. But my teeth still felt loose.

“And I’ll expect an AIDS test of course. And a venereal screening. And even then, we’ll only do it with a condom for the first two or three years, if at all. Children will just have to wait. They would have had to anyway, I want to travel, but after your little lapse…”

Lapse? Apparently since she had accepted a proposal I didn’t know I’d offered, I’d nearly shattered our commitment. My mouth opened to say something, but for the life of me I can’t imagine what.

“And during sex?” she said, and adjusted my hair the other way, until—still not liking it—she sighed heavily and gave up. “And during sex?” she repeated, taking hold of her breasts, one in each hand and hefting them toward me. They took some hefting. She was quite well endowed. “Off limits. At least until you’ve shown me you can behave. That’ll be your punishment.”

She continued staring directly into my eyes, thinking—I imagine—how divinely they would taste with butter if I expressed any upset over her pronouncement. Following a tense moment where I considered screaming and running away, she continued.

“These could have been yours, tonight. To suck on, you know. With your mouth.” As opposed to…? “To rub, or lick, or—you know—whatever. I know men like that sort of thing. And I’ve never shared them with anyone before, ever, other than Poopkiss.” Her dog? “But this evening,” she said with significance, “I was ready.” She moved them up and down independently of one another a few times, as if priming them to fire. “Think about that as you lie up there alone, tonight.” She nodded toward what she must have thought was my bedroom, but was actually the upstairs laundry closet.

Then she stared deeply into my eyes again with that same, dark, hungry, unsatisfied smile. After more up and down joggling, apparently to show me what other tricks her breasts could do when she was alone with Poopkiss, she finally released both Pride and Joy, letting them fall to their natural position somewhere down about her waistline.

Slowly, the darkness in her faded—or rather moved into the background where it probably lived most of the time—and a kind of brightness returned.

“Say goodbye to the three of us,” she said.

There was an awkward pause, and for a moment I was unsure what to do. Lacking conversational skills and intelligent ideas, I leaned in to kiss her, but she jerked back, alarmed, and I froze midpucker. Slowly, her scary smile returned.

“I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow morning,” she said, blowing me a kiss from several inches away. “Don’t oversleep. I hate it when you’re not on time.” Then very brightly, as if bidding farewell to a game show contestant who had picked the wrong curtain and lost everything, she said cheerily, “Bye, now!”

Apparently satisfied on some level, Mindie quickly turned and walked out the entryway onto the porch and headed toward Grandfather’s car. Aunt Helena and her husband Pjuter were nowhere to be seen, and I wondered what had happened to them. Had they left with Biddleby as he went on his mission to drop Ms. Nuckeby wherever it was she lived?

Ms. Nuckeby.

As I watched Mindie climb into the car, being a man, I stared at her ass. More ample and less shapely than Ms. Nuckeby’s, it did nothing to arouse my libido, and I sensed a certain irony in that, but I wasn’t sure since I really don’t know what irony means. Something to do with needing spoons, I think, based on a song I’d heard somewhere once.

Finally, as Grandfather’s driver slipped behind the wheel and drove the last of my visitors away, Mindie turned to me, waved, and smiled as cheerily as if she had never seen me in any closets having anything at all like sex with
anything even remotely resembling a woman.

The difficulty she must have endured forcing such false sincerity for my benefit really touched me.

I closed the front door and locked it behind me, muttering to myself, then turned and headed slowly up the stairs while mentally swimming back through the day’s events. I was engaged to a publicly lovely woman, taking a week or more off, and everyone now knew for certain that I was not a homosexual. Life might be as good as it was ever likely to get.

In truth, I now saw that Mindie was as good as it could possibly get for someone like me. I didn’t deserve a woman as magnificent as Ms. Nuckeby. Or, rather, a woman as magnificent as Ms. Nuckeby would be if she weren’t a gold-digger out for my money and was instead an actual, nice person who could see me for what I was, and still want to have sex with me. My ‘loser-ishness’ made it obvious to anyone with sense organs that the woman had to be in it for the money. I had nothing else to offer.

I was simply not worthy.

Oddly (or, perhaps ironically? I really should look up more than just ‘Pshaw’ in the dictionary now and then), had I not encountered Ms. Nuckeby that afternoon, and subsequently been in close, naked proximity with her, this moment would have been as close to perfect as I could ever have imagined happening in my life. Which is a sad commentary, I know, but nonetheless there you have it. Mindie was mine for a lifetime of longing, and in a few years I would be having chaste sex with her on an occasional basis while studiously avoiding contact with her breasts.

Unfortunately, gold-digger or not, ‘The Thrill of Ms. Nuckeby’ was taking its time abating. In fact, it had actually begun struggling its way to the forefront, charging out ahead of ‘The Modest Joy of Mindie’ like some exciting, long shot race where you’ve bet on the wrong horse.

Stopping short on the stairs for a moment, I wondered if maybe it was really such a bad thing to have a woman who wants you for your money if she let you squeeze her breasts a lot—and without reservation.


Gloop.

I sighed and shook my head like a spider had landed on it. No. Mindie fit. Ms. Nuckeby was a disruption—and besides, I really didn’t know a thing about her. She could, in reality, be an evil harpy who, once she had my money, never went near my penis again. Perhaps even ridiculed it. Poked it with sharp objects while I slept. Who knew? I had to keep reminding myself that I had absolutely nothing to go on where her intellect, perversions, and mental state were concerned. ‘Semen interfering with brain activity’ indeed.

I could see this called for drastic measures. I’d have to masturbate—repeatedly if necessary—to remove her forcibly from my head. It had worked, eventually, for Mindie all those years ago. It would work again tonight for Ms. Nuckeby, and the lingering sensation of her gripping fingers.

Bloop.

After a good hour or so of rigorous clearing of the plumbing—she’d be forgotten.

Ms. Nuckeby, that is, not…em…

Mindie. That’s it. Mindie.
Or maybe it would work by tomorrow morning, before Mindie arrived.
I lay in bed spent and exhausted, having done my level best to expel Ms. Nuckeb y from my mind, and various other body parts. But after repeated attempts—more than I’d ever managed before—she still hovered before my mind’s eye. Smiling. Tanned. Naked.
Well, naked except for the gold high heels.
Perhaps it would just be best to make peace with it. There was no rush after all. Mindie wasn’t here, and
wouldn’t return until morning. She would never know. I would certainly never tell her, and Ms. Nuckeby wasn’t talking. At least not to anyone outside my head.

But definitely by tomorrow. Thoughts of Ms. Nuckeby had to be gone by the next morning before Mindie arrived. In the meantime, I would let my model—and what remained of Satin-Lace-Babydoll # 43—cuddle up beside me in my mental bed.

Somewhat relieved—as if accepting her continued presence had somehow purged the demoness—I rolled over, drained and exhausted, and fell instantly asleep.

The entire night, I dreamt fitfully and constantly of Ms. Nuckeby. She rarely wore clothes. On the few occasions she did, they were transparent.

In my most disturbing dream all the gratuitous nudity, harsh language, and adult situations would have earned it an ‘NC-17’ had it been shown in theaters. Fortunately for me it wasn’t, because in that dream my penis was small, black and withered, and people were laughing at it.

Then Ms. Nuckeby—more naked than I had ever seen her—took it in hand and defended it to the hecklers surrounding me. Warm and protected, it regained its natural, flesh-colored appearance and swelled to ten times its actual size.

And glowed.

Then Ms. Nuckeby turned into Mindie Butterwycke, and the little redwood acted, once again, as if he’d been sprayed with Agent Orange.

Why can’t dreams be less surreal and easier to interpret?

The next morning, I awoke alone and was pleased to realize that my first thoughts were of Mindie.

I smiled. I felt warm, relaxed, and comfortable, ready to settle into a cozy relationship of not walking on romantic beaches, rarely, if ever, kissing, and never touching breasts. It wouldn’t be so bad. At least I’d be able to have sex, albeit with a condom.

Eventually.

That was an improvement to no condoms, and my right hand. My needs really were surprisingly simple. I mean, really. Who wants a sexy supermodel whose profile can induce erections from five blocks away, or whose voice can instill that same stiffness simply with the whisper of potential lewd acts in your…

Wisper. That was Ms. Nuckeby’s name.

What an interesting name. I wonder where it came from? Did she have a brother named ‘Shout’? A sister named ‘Normal Speaking Voice’? A dog named ‘Sparky’? Would they approve of her behavior—getting naked in closets with strangers? Throwing garland over them? Rubbing her bare breasts on their backs?

Gloop.

I had to admit, once you’ve been touched by breasts, especially warm ones, it was difficult to imagine going back to not being touched. I supposed that was why drug pushers sometimes gave free samples.

“Here. Just feel a little a that, hunh? Nice, right? Now, you say you wanna go off and do a little Mindie, instead? Awww, that ain’t gonna get you where you need to be, my friend. Come on. I got a little more Ms. Nuckeby right here, and it’ll only cost you half your inheritance. Just half. Come on. Feel it again. You know it’s worth it.”

Forgetting Ms. Nuckeby was clearly going to take more than a single night of savagely roughing up the corporal. Replacing Wisper with Mindie on the fantasy list—perhaps a lot longer.

Wisper. What a lovely name. Wisssssspeeeeeeer.

I began to wonder if it might not be all right for me to continue thinking of her, or at least various parts of her, even after Mindie arrived this morning. Maybe even on into the future, at least until Mindie eventually, possibly, theoretically, allowed me fondle various parts of her. Certainly there was nothing wrong with enjoying memories of Ms. Nuckeby, as long as they remained private, without Mindie intruding upon them in any way.
Wait a minute. Thoughts of Mindie *intruding* upon memories of another woman? Last night I had agreed, in absentia, to *marry* Mindie. Was this a common theme among the newly engaged? To fondle yourself and fantasize about other women the day after said engagement? Hell, the very *evening* of? Was this some sort of reflexive reaction, wanting to grab hold of singlehood—so to speak—take independence in hand—so to speak—and keep it firmly in one’s grip for as long as possible? So to speak?
Or was it something more?

Something someone had said to me recently was floating around near the occipital lobe of my brain (which, I believe, is in the front). Something about acceptability, or meeting one’s mother, or some such. I really should pay more attention when people are talking directly to me.

Whatever the thought was, I felt certain it had something to do with this Mindie/Ms. Nuckeby thing. I was so lost in trying to reclaim the memory that when someone knocked at the door I told whoever it was to ‘come in’, completely unaware that I was once again wanking on little Corky like there was no tomorrow.

Woodruff entered and acted as if he’d seen it a million times before. He probably had. I believe I’ve mentioned my predilection for this type of thing.

“Morgan Wiggen wishes to see you, sir.”

“Oh. Right. Tell him I’ll be down in a minute.”

Woodruff quickly—for him—backed out the door. “I’ll tell him you’ll be down once you’ve finished expelling, sir.”

“Right ho,” I said, and valiantly carried on.

I entered the kitchen to find Morgan eating cereal at my breakfast table with a large black woman in spandex.

Actually, she was more coffee-and-cream—heavy on the cream—and she wasn’t ‘fat’ large, more tall and muscular, and accessorized with rather exceptional ‘accoutrement’, if you follow my lead.

Big’uns is how the porn magazines refer to them, I think. A Queen Latifah type with augmented breasts. Augmented to make them larger, that is, not smaller. She had a magnificent figure, but her mammaries seemed overly immense, even for her six-foot-plus size, and would have definitely given Mindie’s a run for their money. If they ran, which I’m sure they didn’t. At least I hoped.

Running breasts. What a disturbing thought.

“Morgan,” I said flatly.

“Hey, Corky! You’re up,” he said, looking back at me over his shoulder, then gestured to his friend. “This is Wendy. Wendy Waboombas.”

“Waboombas?” I asked.

“It’s Italian,” Morgan said, giddy with her very existence.

“Actually,” she corrected through spoonfuls of milk and flakes, “it’s made up. I’m Italian, but I don’t know what the name is.” A flake fell on her chin, and she made no effort to remove it. Perhaps she thought it looked good where it was.

“That’s not what you said last night,” Morgan whined, sounding sincerely disappointed that her name didn’t actually sound like the huge objects bursting forth from her chest.

“I said it was my real name. And it is. It’s legal. I paid for it. But it’s still made up.” She returned to her eating.

This seemed to placate Morgan slightly. “Oh,” he said, and returned to his own cereal.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Waboombas,” I said, reaching for the napkin caddy. “You have a cornflake stuck to your chin.” I handed her a tissue and took the moment to notice she was dressed as some kind of superhero/goddess/Fredericks model in a costume that did far more to reveal than it did to obscure.

She stuck out her tongue—which was surprisingly long and flexible—and touched the flake, testing its shape and texture, but not actually removing it. Then she smiled up at me. Breakfast fragments nestled between her teeth. Milk slipped over her lower lip, dribbled down past the cornflake and plopped to the table, joining several of its fallen comrades. She—apparently—thought this was alluring.

“Wanna lick it off?” she asked.

I backed up quickly, as if her tongue might actually reach out and pull me inside her like some Amazonian frog.
“Thanks, but no,” I said.
Her smile remained, and I flinched as the tongue flicked out again and removed the flake in a disturbingly animated and sexual way. She continued to smile all over me as I moved quickly to the opposite side of the table and took a seat as far away from her as possible, while still remaining in the same room.
“You’re cuuuuute,” she said, as if she were already having sex with me.
“He’s getting married,” Morgan snapped. I gathered his ‘cuteness’, or lack thereof, had never been mentioned by her, at least not to his satisfaction.
“But he’s not married yet,” she said, her eyes clamped onto me, her smile unflinching. Suddenly she yawned dramatically and stretched upwards—enough to lift her ample bosom out from behind the edge of the table. After slowly, and expressively exhaling, she relaxed and brought her breasts down to rest near her cereal bowl where they spread out like the fluid filled balloons they were. She noticed me watching them settle into place, and between chews she winked at me.

“Once you go black, you can’t go back,” she said.
Like being face-to-face with one’s executioner, I continued to stare at her in amazement, as much to take her in as to be prepared for the moment she leaped across the table to eat me. Slowly, not making any sudden movements, and without taking my eyes off her, I began to reach for the sausages that someone had thoughtfully gone to the trouble of microwaving to a blackened char.

She glanced down at my efforts to assemble a breakfast without actually watching what I was doing and seemed amused by it. More food skidded across the table than wound up on my plate, and after a moment, I smiled at her and set my ‘breakfast’ before me. Buttered napkin ring, pile of sugar, and morning paper, all generously covered in salt.

“Don’t you have a butler?” she asked.
“Yes.”
“Doesn’t he…like…feed you or something?”
“Only if I hold a gun to his head.”
She laughed somewhat—a sharp burst of sound. Or maybe she burped. It really could have been either. “Funny too,” she said as if that sealed the deal. What deal I have no idea, but an important deal of some kind.

Her tongue danced out again, exploring for more lost food, or perhaps passing insects.

“I’ll feed you,” she said, smiling with intense sexuality, the words sounding more like, ‘Suck my tits, please.’
Morgan’s mouth fell open in horror. Clearly he considered Ms. Waboombas his territory. Even more clearly, she had already been well explored long before our arrival by other, far more daring adventurers, and was, in reality, ‘No Man’s Land’.

“Thanks. I’m good,” I said, frightened and trying to change the subject. “You know—Morgan’s never mentioned you. Have you two known each other long?”

“No.”
I waited. But she said nothing more and returned to eating and leering, as if ‘no’ was answer enough, which it really wasn’t.

“Well—how long have you known one another?”
“We met last night. At the club. So we’re not attached or anything.”
She flicked her tongue again, and realization slowly seeped into the important parts of my brain.

“The club?” I asked, suddenly more frightened. Morgan looked away nervously. “The club…?” I repeated, remembering his requested destination of the previous evening. Like a bat to my skull, it exploded into my head. Instantly, things made much more sense. A terrifying kind of sense. But sense.

“Yeah,” Ms. Waboombas said, winking at me again. “The club where I work. It was a slow night last night. Not even any reason to get up and dance, let alone get naked. So we got to talking, him and me. Normally I don’t like the customers, but Morgan’s all right sometimes. He’s into comics.”

“Comics? You like comics?” I asked, cutting my buttered newspaper and becoming more shocked by the second. In my seemingly endless lifetime, I’d never met a woman who enjoys comics, other than in the abstract—except manga perhaps, but that’s not really ‘comics’ as ‘comics fans’ think of them—and I’ve known even fewer who look like Ms. Waboombas. Yes, fewer than…um…‘none.’ It’s possible. Negative numbers exist for a reason. Anyway, what I’m trying to say is: she was actually quite attractive, though in a predatory sort of way, and that made her comics interest all the more unusual.

“Sure, I like ’em,” she said. “They show women in a positive light. Sexy and tough.” She pumped a fist in that ‘sexually alluring to Mastodons’ kind of way. “Built.” She took another spoonful of food but didn’t let that interfere with her talking. “I write my own.”

She leaned back to show off her costume, dripping milk down the front of it. The front of it being mostly breast
matter. “This is my character. War Woman.” She smiled, obviously proud of...well...everything.

I studied the design more closely. It was made from some kind of metallic fabric, decorated with random weapons, and featured, primarily, a lot of empty space. She had two unusual circular objects at the center of each tightly fitting bra cup, and I focused on them, curious as to what their design represented. After a moment or two of intense study—which she seemed to thoroughly enjoy—I realized the decorations were what doctors sometimes refer to as ‘areolas’.

Ms. Waboombas wasn’t wearing a ‘costume’. She was covered in body paint.

I made a sound—not unlike a horror-stricken little girl—and dropped my spoonful of sugar-salted newspaper. Then I turned my eyes back up to Ms. Waboombas face, and she laughed—or burped—again.

“Yeah,” she said to me, beaming. “Morgan helped me brush it on this morning. I can tell you like it.”

Morgan—popping another muffin into his mouth—smiled at me as though he could die—right now—a happy and deeply fulfilled human being.

Ms. Waboombas stood up—all six-foot-plus of her—and left a paint imprint of her muscular backside on my dining room chair.

“Looks good, don’tcha think?”

She meant what was left on her, not on the chair.

Slowly, she turned side-to-side, then once all the way around, completely, as if she were modeling actual clothes. It was a different kind of fantasy look from the one I was used to working with every day. Manschingloss would have run screaming from the room, viciously clawing his eyes out. Of course, he was gay, so fashion was far more important to him than raw, steaming, feminine sexuality. Still—the point is—her ‘outfit’ was not something that would have been approved for sale at Wopplesdown Struts. Or even to clean the floors there for that matter. Besides, the only pieces of actual cloth in the ‘costume’ were strap shoes; a bandana tied around one thigh; several belts, which gave support to her various, arcane weaponry; and a thong. The rest was nothing but shaved, painted skin.

Tough to package for worldwide distribution I have to say.

It did, however, do a marvelous job of showing off the stately Ms. Waboombas. She really was a magnificent specimen of womanhood who obviously worked out with actual weights. Had I not spent the previous night wanking myself dry, little Corky would have been thumping out Morse code against the underside of the table.

“Wanna touch it?” she asked with steam.

“I wouldn’t want to smudge the delicate line work,” I said.

“I have touch-up paint.”

“Oh, come on!” Morgan said, fidgeting angrily.

“Really…” I said, “…it’s probably best if I don’t.”

“Says you,” she responded with obvious disappointment.

“He’s getting married!” Morgan repeated.

“I just wanted to see how well the paint holds up,” she said defensively. “It’s gonna get a lot of contact at the convention, so it’s important to know.”

“Contact? The convention?” I asked, getting worried. “You’re going to...to the comic book convention?”

“Yeah,” Morgan said enthusiastically. “She’ll be riding down with us.”

“She will? With us? Oh, really?” I said, feeling as if I had been strapped into an electric chair and was currently having electrodes and damp sponges applied to my bare skin.

“Well. How marvelous. That should make for a much more...em...pleasant drive,” I lied.

“Probably,” she said, still disappointed at being untouched by human hands. “Sooo...you wanna see my book?”


“My comic book.”

“You have a comic book?”

“You think I’m dressing this way for fun?”

I did, yes. But shook my head ‘no’ because her tone made me fear doing otherwise.

“It’s just to help me sell my books,” she said.

‘Books’ is shortened slang for ‘comic books’ within the superhero comic book community. It didn’t mean actual books with words in them. In Ms. Waboombas case, I imagined very few words would have been necessary. Or helpful. And from my past knowledge of comics conventions and the men who attend them, I determined that—dressed as she was—she could likely make vast wads of dough selling blank pages. Or even just the promise of them.

“So, you wanna see it?”
“See what?” I said, confused due to having become lost again in Ms. Waboombas costume. It was hard to imagine there was something I wasn’t seeing.

“My book!” she said, getting annoyed.

“Oh! Right! Sure! Absolutely!” I said, genuinely interested, but not for the reasons she supposed. Her smile brightened and for the first time seemed sincere. She sat down again, smearing body paint deeper into the woodwork of my Louis the 14th chair, and reached under the table to pull a copy of her comic from one of several in a canvas bag at her feet. She handed it to me gingerly, as if it were spun from the finest gold.

“I printed it myself,” she said proudly. “Place in Hong Kong. They speak English there, sometimes. I think it looks nice.” She smiled again, and—handoff complete—returned to shoveling food in her mouth. The woman had an appetite. But then she had two hungry breasts to feed.

I set her comic on the table, and she immediately began to spasm at her end. Food, and milk spluttered out of her mouth, spilling across lips, chin, and breasts. It took a moment to realize she wasn’t having a seizure—she was just concerned about where I was placing her comic.

“There’s milk!” she finally managed to shout, spewing more food—pretty much everywhere.

I jerked her masterpiece off the table as if it were a small child reaching for a hot stove and saw that there were, indeed, a few small drops of milk on the surface before me, likely having been spat there by Ms. Waboombas herself.

Seeing that her baby was now safe, she calmed and returned to eating, and talking through her food. “You want it to stay mint. Could be worth money someday.”

As opposed to not being worth money today? I thought, and thankfully had the sense not to say out loud. Instead, I smiled insincerely and turned my attention down to the thing in my hands.

It was a typical ‘independent comic’ with superhero contents that were pretty much the same as the two major companies—Marvel or DC—but with more violence, less talent, and no inside color—all at a higher price. The art was vintage, bad, imitation Image—a company renowned during its inception for their large-breasted female characters, and seemingly willful absence of any actual writing ability. The drawings were each meticulously created with excessive amounts of line and detail that seemed almost to indicate actual form and substance—but not quite.

Beneath the logo on the cover, the main character, War Woman, who looked only vaguely like the actual Ms. Waboombas, was drawn in all her semi-naked glory, using her sword to behead a fat, doughy looking gentleman wearing a velour jogging suit. As if to prove he was somehow a ‘bad guy’ his severed head wore sunglasses, and the rest of him was bedecked with a staggering amount of cheap looking jewelry, all rendered with lots of shiny ‘glint’ marks.

Oh, and he carried a gun.

In the background of the cover there were two or three (the art was unclear) semi-naked women tied to some kind of torture device that—apparently in order to operate—must first remove the victim’s clothing in a rending fashion that leaves just enough shredded bits of material to obscure nipples and pubic hair from the view of any stray parents who might be wandering, lost, through the comic book store displaying it. In the foreground, the ‘villain’ (please, God, don’t let him be a rich, innocent fashion executive) clenched wads of money in his soon-to-be-dead, non-gun-toting hand. There was an amazing amount of blood everywhere, and—though you’d think it physically impossible—War Woman’s breasts were actually larger than the real Ms. Waboombas’. In her secret identity she must be a flotation device.

“In her secret identity, she’s a stripper. Like me,” said Ms. Waboombas, correcting my internal monologue and making me fear she could read minds. “The guy she’s killing is a club owner who takes advantage of the girls in the back room, then steals their money, then steals their money, then apparently reading my distaste. “He deserved it.”

“Oh, I’m sure he did,” I said smiling, and double-checking the proximity of—and direction to—all nearest exits.

“In her secret identity, she’s a stripper. Like me,” said Ms. Waboombas, correcting my internal monologue and making me fear she could read minds. “The guy she’s killing is a club owner who takes advantage of the girls in the back room, then steals their money, then steals their money, then apparently reading my distaste. “He deserved it.”

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“I need,” she said, “we learn he’s got a little dick. At the end, War Woman cuts it off and feeds it to him.”

I crossed my legs.

“Would that be before or after she beheads him?” I asked, not really wanting to know.

“After,” she told me, as if it happened every day before lunch. Twice during.

“How very Sin City,” I said.

She pointed at me and winked in a ‘gotcha’ kind of way. “Frank Miller. Love him. He’s got the right idea. People love seeing dicks cut off.”

Not really.

She picked something out of her teeth with an impossibly long fingernail. Whatever she was reaching for was so far back in her mouth, it was practically in her stomach. As she dug, she continued sucking at stray bits of
blackened sausage flesh. The combination of sight and sound was simply enchanting.

I briefly thought to ask if her War Woman ‘story’ had any basis in fact, and if she had any wants or warrants, then quickly realized I couldn’t face it if any of the answers were ‘yes’. I strip-mined my brain in an effort to remember if I’d heard anything about headless strip club owners who’d been fed their own penises, miniscule or otherwise, and didn’t recall anything of substance. Not that it would have been in the sports or comics sections. I really should read more of the ‘news’ parts of the newspaper. It was now scaldingly apparent—as my fifth grade teacher had always said about math—that it really did have applicable uses in real life.

“I got a customer of mine to draw it,” Ms. Waboombas explained, still tooth-picking. I began to wonder if there might be a whole pig stuck in there. “He’s in love with me, so he did it cheap. His dad’s somebody.”

I waited. Then asked: “Somebody…?”

“…Famous in comics. I’m pretty sure.” She turned and looked off into the distance scowling. “Or maybe he’s the one whose dad was the dude they based ‘Natural Born Killers’ on.” She turned back to me and shrugged, then went back to roto-rootering her teeth. “Can’t remember.”

“Sooooo…” I said, suddenly even more nervous, if that was physically possible, “he’s not joining us, is he? On the trip down? This Natural Born Killer artist?”

“No. He’ll meet us there. And he’ll have his own room. He won’t be sharing ours.”

My eyes widened. “Ours? Sharing…sharing ours…sharing…”

“Yeah. Morgan invited me to stay with you. Fun, huh?” I would have to re-check the definition of the word ‘fun’. But I was already fairly certain this wasn’t it.

“Your hotel sounded nicer than mine,” Waboombas continued, examining a piece of flesh she had removed from her mouth and now hung off the end of an impossibly long fingernail. “So I cancelled my reservation. I hope the beds are more comfortable than this place, though.” She rubbed her back, smearing paint. “No offense. You should change the mattresses once every hundred years.”

“Change the what? The mattresses? You…” I turned to Morgan. “You stayed here?”

“It was late, and she lives on the other side of town,” Morgan said, laughing heartily and hoping that would encourage me to see the ‘lighter’ side of it and not murder him with any nearby kitchen implements. “We wanted to get an early start on the drive, right? And she already had her costume with her at the club, so…”

“Don’t worry,” she said, seeming a bit annoyed with my apparent distress. “I didn’t leave stains, or nothin’. Your roommate made me be careful.”

“Careful?” I jerked my head toward Morgan, who had developed a sudden, intense interest in the floor tiles. I couldn’t seem to speak. “My roo…my roo…my rooooomuh-muh-muh…”

“Yeah?” she asked, grinning, and taking a break from the endless tooth-picking. “Like maybe you would have tucked me in?”

“Orrrrrr—gotten you drinks!”

“We had drinks. I needed to be tucked in.”

“You had drinks,” I said, becoming less surprised by the second. Clearly, what was mine was Morgan’s, and hers.

“I would have tucked you in,” Morgan offered, with a whine. She ignored him.

“Oh!” I said, partially relieved. Partially. “Oh—you slept separately then?”

She stared.

“In my…” I caught myself and corrected, mid-sentence, “…in our…spare bed.”

“Yeah?” she asked, grinning, and taking a break from the endless tooth-picking. “Like maybe you would have tucked me in?”

“Orrrrrr—gotten you drinks!”

“We had drinks. I needed to be tucked in.”

“You had drinks,” I said, becoming less surprised by the second. Clearly, what was mine was Morgan’s, and hers.

“I would have tucked you in,” Morgan offered, with a whine. She ignored him.

“Oh!” I said, partially relieved. Partially. “Oh—you slept separately then?”

She looked positively revolted. “I wasn’t gonna sleep with him. Guy wouldn’t even buy a pity dance from me on a slow night. I don’t spread ‘em for a guy won’t even pay for a pity dance.” She leaned back a bit and waved absently at her body. “Come on! This is worth something.”

“Of course it is. Absolutely it is. No question,” I agreed, to Morgan’s obvious annoyance. “Without a doubt. A good deal, I should imagine, on the…em…open market.”

“There are different kinds of payment, though,” she said, leaning in, again on her bumper cushions, and returning to the offensive. “Sometimes a pretty face on top…that’s enough. Especially if it’s rich.”

“Ah. Good to know. Good to know. Lock that away in the old ‘reference file’ for later, if I see…if I come
across…if there’s…so you slept well?”

She shrugged blankly.

“Oh. Right. The mattress. And now you’ll be sharing our hotel room which will—I’m certain—have a better mattress.” I laughed like a giddy piece of electrified Jell-O. “Of course there, they’ll turn down our beds at night. And speaking of ‘our’ beds, and who’s sleeping where…”

“Woodruff turned my bed down,” she said.

“What?” I said, shocked. That comment so completely derailed my train of thought that even Harvey the Happy Crane Engine would have had a hard time getting it back on the tracks. Woodruff did something? For a guest? This guest? With no monetary requirement or threats of violence necessary?

I furrowed my brow as it slowly sunk in. Could he have expected something more than just verbal appreciation from Ms. Waboombas?

“Left a little chocolate on the pillow and everything.”

Sex! That randy bastard! Clearly Woodruff hoped for a little Waboombas nooky! He never put chocolates on my pillow. I would have to speak to him about the appropriateness of doing things for people. I looked around, wondering why he wasn’t here—now—waiting on her every whim, spoon-feeding her cereal, wiping her chin—please, GOD, someone wipe her chin!

Through the pocket door I saw the foyer closet open—just a crack, Stephen King Boogie-Man-like—and wondered if Woodruff might be in there right this minute, watching Ms. Waboombas and choking his anaconda.

“I’m…” I fumbled like a man who’s been water-boarded one time too many, “…delighted—I suppose would be the word—that he…made you feel…welcome? He made you feel welcome?” I asked, an injection-molded smile embedding itself into my face.

She shrugged. “Most guys do.”

“Yes. Well. I imagine so,” I said, grinning, Joker-like, and clinging to sanity with my fingernails. “Now, as to our sharing a hotel, and who’s sleeping where…”

“We were all going,” Morgan interjected. “So I figured we could just split the cost, you know. Save us all a little money.”

I turned my smiling death mask toward Morgan, showing him I knew ‘cost’ to be the last thing on his mind when he offered her our room to our resident sex machine. My unspoken message hit him directly between the eyes, and he actually flinched.

Ms. Waboombas glanced around at the opulence of my home. Mine and Morgan’s to her understanding. “‘Course, it’s not like you need to save or anything. You could afford to pay for the whole thing. You were going to anyway, even if I didn’t come.” She paused. Waiting. Then getting nothing, she looked around again—very slowly—at the posh surroundings to emphasize her point. Finally, she fixed her attentions on me again.

“Me?” she told me. “I’m on a variable income.”

“Well…” I said, not sure what to say, which shows how dense I am. I glanced down at the comic book cover, pictured my own severed head flying from the bad man’s body and shuddered deeply. “Well…” I repeated uselessly.

Finally I managed to find the necessary words, which had to be forced out one word at a time, staccato-like. “I’d-consider-it-an—insult—if-you-didn’t-let-us-take-care-of-the—entire—trip-Ms. Waboombas. Your part—as—well—as—ours.”

She barely reacted, apparently never uncertain of this particular outcome. “Meals and everything?”

After a brief pause, and a menacing look at Morgan, I nodded slowly in agreement.

“Hot,” she said. “Thanks.”

“It’s the least I can do,” I said. “As a wealthy man who is not on a variable income.”

“And it really is the least he can do,” Morgan agreed.

I evil-eyed him again, but he was becoming immune. I slowly turned back to Ms. Waboombas. “Now. As to the sleeping arrangements…”

Abruptly, her smile collapsed. Her eyes squinched, and moved slowly back and forth between us, studying us carefully. Anger seemed to rise quickly within her. Her skin visibly bristling.

“You pay, so you expect me to fuck you? Is that it?” she asked. “Just because I take my clothes off for a living, you think I’m an easy lay?”

I was stunned. Of course I thought she was an easy lay. Especially when she appeared to be repeatedly offering to be an easy lay smothered in butter right there on the sausage plate. But that didn’t mean I wanted to be the layee. The thought had never exposed itself. Hadn’t even opened its raincoat and flashed a brain cell or two; well, maybe it had done that in my subconscious, but my subconscious is a pervert with no sense of personal consequences, and never even uses contraception.

I shook my head ‘no’ almost as rapidly as Morgan nodded his ‘yes’.
She began to pick her teeth again—slowly—looking at Morgan with grave intent. There seemed to be blood in her eyes, and I shifted nervously, trying to think of an out, nudging Morgan under the table and fearing an incident. Finally Morgan stopped nodding and shifted direction to indicate ‘no, not at all, never in a million years, even if you offered.’

After a long beat, Ms. Waboombas laughed once, sharply (or burped), then smiled broadly, again vastly amused.

“Just kidding. I’ll fuck you.”

She returned to leering at me. “From you, I might even take it up the ass.” She turned the toothpick around in her mouth, apparently thinking I was enticed. “You got a big dick?”

I laughed like a dying man. “I don’t know, I suppose it’s…”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re fun to look at, and you’re payin’. I’ll fuck ya even if it’s dinky.”

I laughed again, tried to look appreciative, and then wet myself.
It took us some time, and a change of pants, but we finally convinced Ms. Waboombas to remove the body paint—at least for the drive down. To achieve this goal, I first had to convince Morgan. He was rather petulant about her washing away all his hard work. But when I reminded him that he’d have to do the hand application again once we’d arrived, he brightened rather enthusiastically. It was, truly, the only answer. The oily colors couldn’t be
removed from my dining room chair, and the thought of Ms. Waboombas bare behind imprinting the back seat of my Beemer in some permanent kind of way left me weak in the knees. At least I think it was the thought of the paint that made me weak and not her bare behind. Best not to dwell too long on that subject.

Soooo—Morgan and I loaded while Wendy showered. She, of course, invited me to join her and bring my loofa, dinky, or otherwise. But I declined, citing the time crunch to reach the convention center and hotel—of which there really was none. But I knew it would give her pause to think she’d be missing valuable comic-selling time, or valuable ‘parading around a crowded convention floor in colored skin’, time, depending on your point of view.

As she reluctantly walked away she told me she really meant what she’d said: It was okay if my dick was tiny. I assured her it wasn’t. Tiny, I meant, not ‘okay’. She didn’t seem to believe me, then paused, thinking it through.

“Is it deformed?”

“No!” I said, maybe too emphatically, a bit overly neurotic about that odd bend to the left, and last night’s thrashing about in the pool tube. “I just need to get packed. I’ll show you later. Promise.” I said, smiling. “No deformities.” I assumed that by the time ‘later’ arrived, I’d have figured out a way to get through some kind of inexpensive Russian astronautics program and rocket myself to the moon.

Morgan sneered at me. He apparently believed I really wanted to show my penis to her. We’d known each other quite a while, he and I, but evidently, most of that time he hadn’t been paying attention. If there was one thing I was not, it was adventurous enough to hand over my most prized possession to a volatile, horny bump-and-meatgrinder.

Ms. Waboombas stared at me as if I were tenderized flank-steak and smiled, unabashedly leering at my crotch as she backed away, heading up the staircase to where Woodruff waited with a towel. He claimed to have gone back to sleep after waking me this morning, owing to his nocturnal adventures entertaining my ‘roommate’ and his well-developed guest. Morgan and Ms. Waboombas had apparently arrived at four a.m., or thereabouts, likely near the time Woodruff was just getting around to removing his shirt. I forgave him, mostly because he kept getting between Ms. Waboombas and myself, and I really needed the shield. He was obviously smitten, the old pervert. As well worn as Ms. Waboombas appeared, he likely assumed his monstrosity would fit, unimpeded. I had to imagine he was right. Slow, constant wear could do wonders for enlarging things. Just look at the Grand Canyon.

Ms. Waboombas finally tore her attention from my hidden member and bounded up the steps two at a time, jigging wildly due to the fact that she was, essentially, naked. As she neared the top, I swore I could see one of Woodruff’s pant legs fill out like an inflating balloon. Apparently he dressed right. I studied closer, and yes, he was visibly pale and faint. Served him right. Chocolates on the pillow, I ask you.

Waboombas stopped before him on the upper landing, took the towel he offered and brushed a fluorescent, painted fingernail across the poor old man’s cheek as she jogged off, bouncily, down the hall to where he had indicated a pre-warmed shower awaited her. It wasn’t the only thing already turned on. Once she was out of sight, his breath exhaled, his knees buckled, and he had to steady himself on the banister. I laughed so hard I dropped a very heavy suitcase on my foot.

Outside, we finished loading the Beemer. With Ms. Waboombas still close enough at only two floors away to make me jumpy, I couldn’t help thinking that this is what my life could have been like had things continued with Ms. Nuckeby. She obviously had similar boundary issues to Waboombas, and would surely have devolved, eventually, into similar types of outrageous public behavior.

I shook my head. What a narrow escape I’d made. As fun and tingly as it might be in a darkened closet, the thrill would, no doubt, fade very rapidly in the bright light of life’s foyer. I realized I might actually have to thank Morgan for bringing Ms. Waboombas along, if for no other reason than that fortuitous lesson learned.

I sighed. Suddenly, I felt very relieved to be saddled with Mindie. She was publicly cold, deeply reserved, and devoutly prudish. A real catch.

As Morgan and I packed, gravel crunched behind us in the driveway and, as if on cue, we turned to see Mindie’s car driving our way.

What an odd coincidence. What was she doing here?
I paused.
I remembered.
I slapped myself for being an idiot.
Dear, God, I was supposed to be going to that damned chapel with Mindie, and Pastor Winterly today! The same day I was supposed to be driving down to the comics convention! The same day Wendy Waboombas was naked all over my house!

_Damn my college-destroyed brain cells! The warnings on alcohol bottles should be in much larger type!_

As Mindie’s car (complete with Mindie, and pastor figures included) drove toward me, I fidgeted nervously, trying to put on a false air of confidence that said loudly and clearly, ‘there isn’t any naked stripper in _my_ shower.’ The car crunched to a stop on the gravel driveway beside me, and Mindie essentially burst from within, vibrant, full of life, and ready to chastise me for—I don’t know—the rising of the sun probably. She wore a very matronly outfit that did its level best to hide the gifts God had lavished upon her and strained at the seams with the effort. You could practically hear the stitching screaming for release from their tight-fitting agonies like that creepy little man-bug at the end of _The Fly_. The original one with Vincent Price.

“What’s he still doing here?” she asked, waving dismissively at Morgan.

“Well,” I laughed, “you’re not going to believe this, but…”

“He’s not coming with us?” she said, not so much a question as a declaration of fact with an accidental question mark at the end.

“No, he’s not actually coming with us…”

“So, you did invite Mindie,” Morgan said enthusiastically. “Perfect.”

He rubbed his hands together, obviously believing this _greatly_ improved his chances with Ms. Waboombas—not understanding that simply having an active bank account greatly improved his chances with Ms. Waboombas.

“What,” Mindie asked, her voice rising toward shrill, “is he talking about?”

“You see,” I laughed again, “there’s a really funny story here…”

“Funny, ‘Ha Ha’, or funny, ‘no sex on our wedding night?’” Mindie asked, apparently sussing things out at a much faster rate than I gave her credit for.

“Mindie…” I said, sounding upsettingly like I was about to begin begging. I was. But I didn’t want to _sound_ like I was.

“You got any bags?” Morgan asked her, not helping in the slightest.

“Bag?” Mindie asked. It was amazing how she could—with a small adjustment in tonal inflection—make you feel as if you smelled like old, wet goat fur.

“Yeah,” Morgan said, beginning to recoil. “Aren’t you—staying the whole time?”

“Staying _where_?” she asked, adjusting her tone further and turning up his stink factor to ‘sun-heated garbage dump’.

She stared at him a moment, and he withered under her glare, saying nothing. Then, slowly, she turned on me.

To me. Turned to me. This was my beloved fiancée, after all, not some vicious animal in Armani.

“Are you two idiots _going_ somewhere?” she asked, cranking the ‘you stink’ level right past ‘cat vomit’, ‘baby diapers’, and all the way to ‘scorching summer in a New York sewer’ with a simple tilt of her head.

Morgan—finally getting wise to the fact that he was an idiot who talked too much—mumbled something about getting biscuits for the fish and quickly scuttered off. Mindie folded her arms across her enormous chest, and put her weight on one leg as if to suggest—silently—‘You’re stupid, and I’m not.’

Some of you may be wondering why I would tolerate this kind of treatment from Mindie. Why I would put up with this kind of rude, controlling, angry behavior when just yesterday an attractive—and what you might call _naked_—woman was being so nice to me in a darkened, confined space. At this particular moment the thought was kicking me, rather hard, in the mental testicles as well.

But the simple truth is: this had _always_ been my relationship with Mindie. It was the reason I felt comfortable with her and had asked her to marry me. Or considered asking until I was beaten up. She was, clearly, the domineering mother figure, and _I_ the disobedient son who needed ‘shaping’. One might suppose it was because my mother had left me at a tender developmental age, and I was looking for a psychological substitute. I think it’s just because I’m a wuss, and Mindie has big tits. Never underestimate the power of big tits over a man who’s never touched them.

Actually, the real reason is—more honestly—because I’m a shy person with little social life who has not been allowed to date the women he worked with—whatever their breast size. Consequently, since I spend all my days either at work or at home, my options are severely limited. As you can imagine, very few available women just happen to wander through my living room looking for snacks. This means the only females of any kind I ever meet are coworkers or refugees from the occasional daring foray into online dating (from which I have been banned for the hairless chimpanzee incident—which I will not talk about since no video exists). This leaves me with almost no dating options, and a lot of time for masturbation.

In this kind of isolated social situation, men often rely on the kindness of female siblings to introduce them to
their friends. However, being of the homosexual persuasion, my sister was usually already too interested in her own female friends to share them with me. Mindie was the one exception, because—through some strange quirk of fate—my sister isn’t attracted to large breasts—which I do not understand, and never will. The homosexuality I can ride with. But the breast thing…? Really. What’s that all about?

So anyway—for me—Mindie became a bird-in-the-hand kind of thing. Or maybe a not in-the-hand, but certainly within-reach-of-the-hand kind of thing. In my entire adult life Mindie had been pretty much ‘it’ as far as available female companionship, and when it’s all you’ve experienced other than Mervin Wosserman, and the hairless chimp, you begin to feel no one else will ever be interested—ever—and you damn well better take what you can get while it’s right in front of you—especially if it’s got big tits.

I’m telling you: never underestimate big tits.

Because Mindie had accepted my sister’s homosexuality with kindness, understanding, and true friendship, I often hoped she might someday show me the same kind of tenderness—while letting me put my hands in her bra.

Said possibility was looking more and more remote.

“Mindie, I…”

“You made other plans, didn’t you?”

“…”

“You forgot we were going to the chapel, didn’t you?”

“We…”

“You screwed up again. Didn’t you?”

“Actually, Mindie, these plans were made before last night, and everything was happening so fast….”

She stopped me with a look. You know the look. The sort of look that says, ‘You’re wearing your underwear on the outside, and they have skid marks.’

I glanced down at the pastor, who still sat in the passenger seat of Mindie’s car pretending the buttons on his jacket were the most fascinating mechanical invention ever.

“What am I going to do with you, Corky?” Mindie asked. Not me. God, perhaps. “Tell him you can’t go, then get into the car with Pastor Winterly,” she said, turning to walk into the house. “You ride in back. I’ve decided I’ll drive.”

“But Mindie…”

She stopped and turned to me, letting me know in the gentlest of all possible ways that I was stupid and ugly. She pointed quickly to a breast and made a ‘cutting’ motion as if to indicate: ‘not in your lifetime’. Of course, she might have been saying, ‘I’m going to the kitchen for a knife to slice them off so you can’t even look at them.’ But the former seemed somehow more likely.

“I’m going to use the ladies room,” she said, settling the kitchen/knife question. “Be in the car when I get back.”

She turned to walk into the house and ran straight into Ms. Waboombas. Fortunately they were both well cushioned, and bounced harmlessly off one another.

“Oh. Hey,” Ms. Waboombas said, looking down at the much shorter Mindie. “How’s it goin’?”

Waboombas had obviously finished her shower and—now dressed—looked far more naked than when she had actually been naked. Her hair was wet and wild, and she had on a pair of filmy shorts and matching tank top that were sheer enough, and small enough, that they looked, not so much like clothes, as free-floating electrons.

Mindie goggled at her like a fish being reeled in by a bass master. For a moment, my fiancée looked frightened, then with a sudden inrush of breath, valiantly regrouped as anger rose within her and rejuvenated her like Popeye swallowing spinach.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“Wendy,” Ms. Waboombas said. “Who are you?”

“Mindie Butterwycke. Mister Wopplesdown’s fiancée.”

“Ooooh, riiliight. Morgan mentioned you.”

Ms. Waboombas studied Mindie up and down, then tsked. “Yeah. I can see you being kind of a tight-ass.”

Mindie gasped as Wendy sized up her opponent’s ‘Waboombas’ and apparently decided she, Wendy, rated marginally higher in overall size, shape, and appearance.

“Nice,” Ms. Waboombas said. “Doctor Pflemmel?”

“What?”

“The implants. Pflemmel or Hoovascotia?”

“I’ll have you know these are natural in every way.”

“Suuuure they are. So whattaya do? You a dancer?”

“A dancer? You’re asking me if I dance?”
“Isn’t that what I said?”
“I have been known to dance.”
“Me too. Movies?”
“Do I see movies?”
“No. Do you make movies? Are you in them?”
Mindie was stunned and suddenly softened. She smiled, apparently flattered.
“No. I’m not in movies,” Mindie said girlishly. “Though many people have said I should be.” She adjusted her hair coyly, and laughed a bit. “In fourth grade, I…”
“You wanna get in? I can get you in, easy,” Waboombas told her.
“What?”
“You wanna get into movies? I make ’em, and I know some people who’d love to use you.”
“Use me?”
“Well, not use you. That’s just an expression. You’d get paid to be in ‘em. They’d kill for someone like you.”
“Someone like me?”
“With a body like yours.”
Mindie giggled, girlishly again. “I do take care of it.”
And keep it well protected, I thought.
“IT’ll look great on camera,” Ms. Waboombas said.
“In front of the camera?” Mindie couldn’t believe it.
“Where else?”
“Acting?”
“Some people call it that. I think of it as an overall performance, but sure. ‘Acting’ works.”
Suddenly Mindie was Wendy’s best friend.
“You can get me into movies?” Mindie asked.
“Is there a language barrier, here? Yes. Into movies. They’re always asking me if I know any other hot girls. If you’re reliable, they’d give me a finder’s fee.”
Mindie blushed and chuckled.
“Especially with gazongas like yours.”
“And they really are my own,” Mindie said, laughing. At no other time in her life would Mindie be pleased to have someone refer to her ‘mammarial vesicles’ as anything other than ‘ta-tas’, or ‘boobies’, yet, for some reason, now—
“So they’ll move good on camera,” Waboombas complemented.
Mindie blushed, and smiled shyly, again. “If that’s what they’re looking for. Good movement.”
“Are you kidding? Why do you think so many girls get the Pflemmels? They’re bank. They cost more, but he’s a genius. Still, the natural ones are—well, there’s no substitute for the real moosh factor. And they’re great PR. They can really bring in the customers when you dance.”
Mindie hesitated, not understanding. “When I dance where?”
“Wherever.”
“Like…at clubs?”
“Yeah. Any club. As long as they promote it well, you can make as much as five thousand a night.”
“Dollars?”
“I know a girl who made ten once.”
“In one night?”
“Four hours worth of work.”
“In one night?”
“For that much, you gotta do a little lap snorkeling, though. Maybe let the swimmer take a dive.”
“Lap snorkeling…” Mindie said, apparently somewhat confused, then a light seemed to dawn, and she took a deep breath. “I don’t think I could do that.”
“So you make a little less,” Waboombas shrugged. “It’s all good. Whatever gets your motor runnin’.”
Mindie studied her intently for a moment and then smiled. “Do you have a card?”
“I’ll write my number down,” Ms. Waboombas said, winking. “We can talk more about it on the ride down.”
Ms. Waboombas turned and headed toward the car, as Mindie hesitated, visibly torn. Her smile fell. I prepared to dive for cover.
“You’re going?”
Waboombas turned back to her and hesitated. “Aren’t you?”
I could see the wheels spinning in Mindie’s head, and the friction was heating them to a melting point. Finally,
the combined oils of selfinterest and potential fame lubricated the grinding into submission, and her smile popped back onto her face. She held out a flattened palm indicating ‘wait’.

“Of course I’m going,” Mindie said. “Just give me a sec. I have to go potty.”

The word ‘potty’ obviously set Waboombas radar spinning. “Sure,” she said, smiling darkly. “Take all the time you need to ‘peepee and poo-poo’.” Then Waboombas laughed heartily.

Mindie hesitated a moment, looking at Ms. Waboombas, and grinning as if she’d just found a long-lost sister. Then, haltingly, my adoring fiancée turned away and raced for the bathroom, running through the door and into the foyer, where her shoe got stuck on something, and she fell face down onto the tile. Instantly—holding her nose, but acting as if nothing had happened—she leaped up happily and turned back to us through the doorway.

“I’m all right!” she said. Then looked down at her chest and back to us. “We’re all fine! We’ll still look good on camera!”

Chuckling, she bent down to retrieve the shoe. After a few moments of struggling, she gave up with a laugh and then ran off to the restroom, leaving the thing stuck where it was. Probably on some of Morgan’s Lollipop drool.

Wendy watched her go, then—shaking her head—she turned to me.

“Well,” the stately stripper said after studying me a moment. “I guess I can understand why you weren’t swayed by these.” A slight hand-wave indicated her surgically altered Waboombas.

“Of course,” she continued, walking toward the car. “In ten years, hers’ll be floppin’ down around her knees, and mine’ll still be right up here where they are.” As she opened the door, she turned and fixed me with an intensely sexual stare. “So you’d still be able to reach mine while I’m suckin’ your dick.”

GLOOP! Big time.

I nearly fainted. It was an ambush, and I wasn’t prepared for it. With Mindie’s arrival, I thought Waboombas had given up. I should have known better. The Nubian stripper was a determined juggernaut of preheated lust. She probably assumed there’d be some sort of orgy in the hotel room with Mindie, Morgan, myself, and whatever other interested comic fans we might find. And what comic fan wouldn’t be interested? Images of naked Simpsons’ Comic Book guys and their female counterparts all naked, greased up, and rolling over one another’s writhing flesh while reading out loud from the latest issue of X-Men nearly made me pass out.

And worse, based on what I think she’d just been saying to Mindie—would she be filming it all?

“Um…Ms. Waboombas,” I said.

“Wendy.”

“Em…Ms. Waboombas. By ‘movies’ you meant…” I hesitated, feeling as if someone had just pulled my underwear up over my head and lit them on fire, “…you meant ‘pornography’ didn’t you?”

She looked at me like my face was flat and had shrubbery growing out of it.

“What’d you think—I’m working with Spielberg?”

No, but Mindie clearly did.

As we waited for whatever was taking its own sweet time working its way out of Mindie, gravel crunched on the driveway again and I turned to see my Aunt Helena’s Duesenberg racing in through my outer gates, heading like a rocket straight for me.

She was actually driving—Biddleby, the chauffer, was nowhere to be seen. I leaped to one side as the car hurtled toward me and swerved in my direction. I dove again to the other side, and it swerved my way once more. I was trying to figure out what I had done to offend Aunt Helena so much that she felt the urgent need to grease her axles with my blood, when suddenly she braked late and skidded to a stop on the loose rocks, nearly pinning Ms. Waboombas and myself against the Beemer. Wendy seemed to take it all in stride. I felt my legs go weak and collapsed on the hood of Helena’s car.

“Sweet ride,” Waboombas said admiringly.

Aunt Helena jumped out of the driver’s side carrying a hammer and ran at me with a fierce look in her eye. I recoiled, fearing she intended to ventilate my skull. Maybe she’d come to the conclusion I was possessed and felt a ball-pien was the perfect surgical tool required to release whatever demons now controlled me. She had that look.

My mind raced through the last twenty-four hours trying desperately to remember what I’d done wrong. Had she reconsidered her feelings toward me and decided I was a sexist, model-groping pig who needed to be taken out? Had Grandfather convinced her that I really was useless? Did she stand to inherit anything from my sudden demise?
If it was Woodruff, she’d more likely be trying to elongate my life, not shorten it. Perhaps the answer was as simple as she had just been watching some documentary on Roman surgery techniques and felt an urgent need to try them out. She was a fan of the History Channel.

“Corky! I’m so glad I caught you before you left!”

“You are?” I said, my voice high and terrified. “Why?” “Because I want to talk to you.”

“Just talk?”

“Of course. What else?” She noticed Ms. Waboombas and nodded quickly. “Hello.”

“Hi,” Ms. Waboombas said. “Nice car.”

“Thank you.”

It really was. A Duesenberg model J 1934 convertible club sedan with the top down. I had admired it often, and had been looking for one myself, but they were exceedingly rare —especially the threeseater. But if I was going to live a sexless existence, I had decided I deserved one, and would really look good while driving off my frustrations. Unfortunately, like the perfect woman, ‘my’ Duesy was nowhere to be found. Instead I had settled for a Beemer. And Mindie.

“I need you to do me a favor,” Helena said, flushed and out of breath—as if she’d had to peddle the Duesenberg over. “Can you take it in and have it repaired for me, please?”

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Fine,” she gasped. “Never better. I was just afraid I’d miss you before you left, so I rushed.”

I stepped closer to the Duesenberg, and Helena moved with me. Ms. Waboombas opened the rear door and climbed in with cooing appreciation.

“What’s wrong with it?” I asked.

“Ooooh,” Helena said dismissively. “I had a little accident— broke the light. See?”

She pointed to a headlamp at the front, and I could see it was pretty badly damaged. Fortunately the surrounding area wasn’t disturbed; only the headlamp itself, and the injury seemed minimal.

I leaned in and inspected it more closely.

“What happened?”

She fidgeted nervously and gestured absently with the hammer. “I’m not entirely sure. I just came out this morning, and noticed it was like that.”

“It looks as if…” I said, speaking earnestly, as though I knew even the slightest thing about cars or how they were supposed to look, “somebody’s been hitting it. With a rock or something.”

“Really?” Helena said, moving the hammer behind her back. “How odd. I wonder who would do something like that?”

“Teenagers,” I said, irritated, and nodded knowingly. I knew how they operated. I had been one once. On some mental levels, I still was.

“Well, just be glad they didn’t do any more significant damage,” I said, standing and putting my hands on my hips with confidence while looking sternly proud. I was now about to repeat something which I had heard Uncle Pjuter mumble a few times in that strange, regionless dialect of his that was actually going to prove useful and appropriate in this situation. There was something invigorating about using other people’s knowledge as if it were one’s own. “Parts are going to be difficult to find ats eet ees. Thees wan may haf to be punded out and re-krahmed,” I said, unaware that I had done more than repeat the information, but had actually slipped into speaking ‘Pjuter-ese’.

Aunt Helena looked at me oddly. “Re-what?”

I shook my head to free it of any, and all, strange accents— especially ones that might be perceived as making fun of her husband.

“Pounded out and rechromed,” I said. “Did you say you wanted me to take it in? Why me? Why not you or Pjuter?”

“I have a…uh…thing…today with Pjuter in fact. So he has to be there and can’t do this. And neither can I. We’re doing something…that really needs to be done—today. While the car, also, really has to be repaired—today—as well. Because…” she hesitated and looked off into space, as if searching for the right words, or flying insects. “The repair place is only open…uh…once a…uh…month,” she said, not sounding at all sure.

“Once a month?”

“Ooooh, you know these specialty repair shops. They make so much money they only work one day a month and spend the rest of their time rolling around in Caruna.”

“Aruba?”

“Or there. Anyway, it’s on the way to the chapel you’re visiting with Mindie—you’re still going with Mindie, right? You haven’t come to your sens…I mean…changed your plans or anything?”
I had no idea. I was waiting for someone to tell me. I’d have to check with the others. Ms. Waboombas, and Mindie, in particular.

I looked over at the lengthy stripper, who was lying on her back in the rear seat of the Duesy. I opened my mouth to ask her opinion, then closed it just as quickly when I realized she was putting her legs up, resting them on the doorframe and slowly spreading them eagle. She seemed to be trying to determine whether she could comfortably—and with what number of men simultaneously—have sex in the back seat.

As Aunt Helena and I watched her, she wrapped her arms around the empty space in front of her as if to rub the back and derriere of some imaginary—but undoubtedly physically attractive, and exceedingly well endowed—man. As we stared in awe, she began to slowly roll her hips, as if reacting to her invisible partner’s amorous, thrusting motions. Getting into it, she leaned back and pretended to moan and writhe with pleasure. After a bit of this, she stopped the fake moaning and looked to one side, reaching out to cup what I supposed were the imaginary testicles of a second individual. As she continued to be rounded seriously by her ‘not-there’ lover, she took the cupped object into her mouth, then reached over with the other hand to pull vigorously on something that belonged—presumably—to a third lucky gentleman.

I felt little Corky spring back to life, then turned away toward Aunt Helena and began to run feverishly through 1974 baseball stats. Aunt Helena had no such luck dragging her attention away from the lively motions of Ms. Waboombas, but didn’t seem at all disturbed—only fascinated—by what the leggy stripper was acting out in the back of her elegant, rare, and very expensive automobile.

“What is she doing?” Helena asked me quietly.

“Joe Rudi led the league in total bases with 287, and doubles with 39, Billy North with 54 steals…”

Suddenly Helena looked at me with concerned surprise. “Good Lord, Corky!” she shout-whispered. “You’re muttering baseball stats! You only do that when—does this mean that woman is doing something sexual?”

She looked at her more intently. “My word, she is, isn’t she? She’s pretending to…”

“So, you…uh,” I asked Helena, darting artlessly away from the subject and narrowly avoiding an aneurysm, “you want me to take the Duesy, and…”

“Get it repaired,” said Helena absently, looking over my shoulder at the imaginary sex show. “He said he can do it while you wait. The repairman, I mean. Goodness. She seems rather optimistic, doesn’t she?”

“I think I’d give her the benefit of the doubt—Gene Tenace led the league with a hundred, and ten bases on balls—I don’t think getting the Duesy repaired would be a problem. You want to take my car, then?”

“Oh, no. That’s all right. Pjuter will be here in a minute to pick me up. He’s probably obeying the speed limits, so he fell a little behind. Heavens, those men appear to be rather lengthy. Do you suppose she actually knows men like that, or is it all just her imagination?”

I flashed on Woodruff mounted atop Ms. Waboombas and immediately regretted it. “In 1974 Catfish Hunter led the League with a 2.49 E.R.A.”

“If we go in this car,” she said, “you can take all night as far as I’m concerned.” She glanced up at me meaningfully. “All night.” She winked. Apparently one of the penises she was servicing might have been mine.
By the time Mindie returned, Ms. Waboombas had finished, complete with mock orgasm (I supposed it was ‘mock’ anyway), and was recovering in the back seat of the Duesenberg, apparently quite satisfied with the car’s performance. Mindie trotted up happily toward me with one shoe still missing, carrying an armload of framed and sealed comics, and comic art, all of which had once been decorating my various walls.

“Here,” she said cheerily, handing me the priceless collection. “You can sell these at your comics convention.” Then she turned to the others and called out in shrill excitement. “I sit next to Wendy!”

“I can what?” I asked, trying not to drop my near mint copy of Superman number one, lost in the fog that seemed to have perpetually surrounded me since yesterday afternoon.

She stopped and looked at me as if I was something a cat had coughed up on her Manolo Blahniks.
“You can sell those,” she said, her cheeriness almost completely dissipated. “And the others I piled on the floor in there. I don’t want them around after I move in, so you may as well take the opportunity.”

“Why don’t you want them around?”

She looked down momentarily at them as if they were something I had coughed up. “That can’t be a serious question.”

“These are valuable…”

“To retards.”

“This one alone,” I tried again, ignoring her.

“And perverts.”

“This one alo…what? Perverts?”

“Yes, perverts. All the people in those things are running around naked.”

“Naked?” I asked, barely able to hear her last word.

“They’re not naked. They’re wearing super suits.”

“Please. You can see every detail. Even spandex doesn’t show off that much.”

“They’re not wearing anything! They’re naked! Naked, and colored blue, and red, and the girls all have enormous boobs, and bodies that are totally unrealistic, and I don’t want you looking at them—or any other kinds of porn—after we’re married!”

“Porn?”

“NAKED! HUGE BOOBS! CARTOON PORN! END OF DISCUSSION!”

Everyone turned to look our way, and I stood, red, silent, and embarrassed.

“They’re not…” I began, then glanced at the pile, and saw an Adam Hughes Wonder Woman cover on top, which depicted the heroine colored red and blue, with enormous, squishing-out breasts. I quickly slipped it to the bottom of the pile.

“Mindie,” I tried again, not wanting to lose this battle, “these are extremely valuable.”

As an example, without looking closely enough, I mistakenly held up the next book in my stack, a copy of Nuderman number one, a parody of Superman number 1. The cover was nearly identical to that of its satirical source material, only the hero was—well—nude. Hence my error.

Unfortunately, as should be obvious by now, it was exactly the wrong thing to use for driving home my point because of—not only the nude thing—but because the comic in question was essentially worthless to anyone but me. I had laughed myself silly reading it, and so, had paid handsomely to have it graded by the Certified Guaranty Company, professional comic book inspectors, as 10.0, perfect mint, and sealed forever in a plastic box so that I could never read it again.

Don’t ask. It’s a collector’s thing.

“This one alone, is…” I repeated.

“Naked,” she said, covering herself with her hands as if Nuderman, a.k.a. Dork Bent, might leap off the cover and ravage her.
I looked at the comic and rolled my eyes.

“Oh,” I said, and quickly shuffled through the others until I found an actual, valuable comic with a male character on the cover who was mostly clothed, Captain America Comics number one. “This one alone,” I tried again, “is worth two hundred thousand dollars.”

She scrunched up her face in a magnificent combination of disgust and disbelief. “Why?”

“Because it is extremely rare—especially in this grade—and coveted by collectors…”

“…who apparently have too much money and too little brains,” she said, finishing my sentence in a way nature had not intended. “Wonderful,” she continued. “So when you sell it, you can afford a nice down payment on a decent engagement ring.”

Done with me, she turned and sprinted giddily off toward Ms. Waboombas.

“Oh, Wendyyyy…” she said.

I watched her go, horrified at the changes I now saw coming in my life, then was startled a bit as Morgan suddenly appeared beside me, licking another lollipop, and ogling my collection.

“Can I have those?” he asked.

The four of us, Mindie, Wendy, Morgan, and myself, discussed all the particulars with Aunt Helena, and given Mindie’s giddy belief that she was soon to be a major motion-picture star working beside Steven Spielberg, she was
more cooperative than I ever could have hoped.

We would all drive down in the Duesy, make the quick trip to have it repaired, then head to the chapel for the inspection. Aunt Helena would meet us there with her husband, Pjuter, later that evening after their ‘thing’. We planned to have a nice dinner at the restaurant (on me) where the reception might be held (dependent upon food quality, atmosphere, and cleanliness of toilets—or lack thereof). ‘Nice dinner’ being a somewhat optimistic hope in my view. Mindie did not yet know Ms. Waboombas well enough to be in any way concerned about Tourette’s-like outbreaks of sexual gesticulation in public places, and once she found out there would likely be hell to pay—a payment Mindie would undoubtedly be charging to my account.

After dining, Helena and Pjuter would return home in the Duesenberg with Mindie, and the pastor, and Mindie would allow me to spend four nights away at the comics convention with Morgan and Ms. Waboombas, clearly still unaware that Ms. Waboombas planned to spend the entire trip fucking me raw. Mindie could be profoundly generous when distracted by good news that was all about her.

As Morgan, Wendy, Mindie, and the pastor positioned themselves in Helena’s classic automobile, my quirky aunt pulled me to one side and handed me an envelope.

“There’s some cash in there,” she said, “and a credit card to pay for the car.”

“I can take care of that,” I said, pushing back the envelope.

“No, no, I insist,” she said, returning it to me. “You never know. Something unexpected might come up, and I’d rather you had it just in case.”

Then she cocked her head to one side and began to whisper, conspiratorially, turning bodily away from the others while speaking out of one side of her mouth and not moving her lips. It made her completely unintelligible.

“Crky. Ijswanadnokwivynwmmn,” she began.

“What?” I asked. “I can’t understand you. What’s wrong with your face?”

“Nothing. Sssh. I just wanted to see if you knew…” she paused, eyeing me carefully. “You never actually asked Mindie to marry you, and—are you sure about this?”

I looked past her to Mindie, sitting in the middle seat with Wendy, talking in animated tones. I wondered how long it would be before Min learned the truth about the kind of movies Ms. Waboombas really made and the whole thing came unglued like a space shuttle.

“Of course, I’m sure,” I said, scoffing. “You think I’m some kind of spineless airhead who would go along with a marriage he didn’t want just because he was afraid of confrontation?”

I laughed. She didn’t. It hurt.

“Well, I’m not,” I said.

“I see,” Aunt Helena replied sadly, lowering her head a moment.

After a bit of studying her toes as she gently pushed driveway gravel around, she looked up and fixed me with an almost frighteningly intense stare—as if she could read things through my eyeballs that were printed on my brain. Things that were misspelled.

“Ms. Nuckeby was fired from her agency this morning. Did you know that?”

I was struck. “No, I didn’t. Because of that business yesterday?”

“Yes. I think your grandfather had something to do with it.”

I found myself suddenly growing very angry. He had no business…

“Damn him,” I sputtered. But after a moment, I softened a bit. Anger was difficult for me to sustain. “Well, I suppose it had to happen.”

“Corky! She didn’t deserve that!”

“I don’t know. She did show up at my home unannounced…”

“She liked you!”

“She didn’t even know me.”

“Sometimes you can just tell about someone,” she said warmly, as if remembering a time she could ‘just tell’.

“Or maybe she could ‘just tell’ that I lived in a multimillion dollar home…”

“Corky! You can make negative judgments about her without knowing her, but she can’t make positive ones about you without knowing you? You know what that is?”

“Umm—savvy?”

“S sexist. Misogynistic. At the very least, just plain unfair.”

“But with a certain wisdom of experience, Grandfather might have a point…”

“On the top of his head. And now I’m beginning to see the same point on the top of yours. Genetic, obviously.”

“Aunt Helena…”

“How does Mindie make you feel, Corky?”

I looked again over her shoulder at Mindie in the car, laughing vivaciously, chatting up Ms. Waboombas,
obviously certain that she was on the brink of becoming a major Hollywood star—the kind who doesn’t have to perform oral sex on camera.

Aunt Helena continued without waiting for an answer. “And how did Ms. Nuckeby make you feel?”

I hesitated, then admitted in a soft and faraway voice, “Wonderful.”

“Then don’t you think, Corky, that she deserves at least a little time for you to make a proper determination of whom she is and what she really wants from you? Before you ‘Next’ her?”

I gave it some thought.

“I know you, Corky. You’re hoping that someday, somehow, Mindie will be nice to you and love you like you deserve to be loved. And you do deserve to be loved, my dear. But wouldn’t it be better to find someone who already likes you—maybe someone you already like, as well?”

Did love work that way? Two people genuinely interested in one another with no ulterior motives? Hard to imagine. But if it did…?

I looked down at my own toes digging in the gravel, then stopped, looked up at her and spoke with a confidence that surprised even me.

“How can I find her?”

Helena sighed a heavy breath of relief, nearly laughing. Why was she so certain about Ms. Nuckeby?

“She lives near the town where you’ll get the car repaired. The Duesenberg gets you to her without alerting or upsetting Mindie. Anything you do beyond that will undoubtedly anger your—quote— ‘fiancée’, quite a lot.” She said ‘fiancée’ as if it were a nematode that lived parasitically off other creatures.

After a moment, she took my face firmly in her hands. “You have to decide if it’s worth that risk,” she told me.

“Short of preventing the deaths of millions of people, it’s hard to imagine anything worth upsetting Mindie.”

“Really?” asked Aunt Helena. “Not even true love?”

The drive down was long and hard for all the men in the car—including the pastor—in every sense of the word. We were in the front, the pastor and I, Morgan in the third, far-rear seat, with the ladies in the middle seat between us. I missed having Morgan closer to me. He was a far better distraction than the pastor, and when disaster struck—as it inevitably would—I would feel better about using him as a human shield than I would a man of God.

“When you said ‘lap snorkeling’, Mindie ventured of Ms. Waboombas, her voice dropping into a near-silent register so she could give the pastor the option of pretending he couldn’t hear, “you meant like—oral sex on a man’s thingie—that type of thing, right?”

Just by the way she said it I could tell I was never getting any in my lifetime. Another dream shattered on the harsh and forbidding shores of the Mindie Islands.

But now Ms. Nuckeby’s gentle sands lay only ten miles or so ahead, and with them—hope. I found myself looking forward to this trip more than I ever could when it was just a comics convention, or a chapel shopping expedition. Helena was right. I needed to give Ms. Nuckeby a chance. I mean, really. I already knew she looked good naked. We were ninety-nine percent there.

“What did you think I meant?” Ms. Waboombas asked. “Oh, well, that is what I thought you meant, of course,” Mindie said. “I was just confirming. I had always assumed actresses might be confronted with that sort of thing, anyway, even though they claim the casting couch is no longer an issue. I just wanted to make sure that it wouldn’t hurt my chances if I decided—you know—not to engage, as it were.”

“Not really. As long as you do the job on camera, skipping the rest just costs you money is all. Some don’t wanna and make less. It’s all good.”

“Well, that’s excellent news,” Mindie laughed. “Excellent.” She hesitated, then leaned closer to Ms. Waboombas. “I take it you do engage? Sexually, I mean?”

“Sure. But only with the hot ones, or the ones who are hung.” “Hung? You mean like—with large weenies—that type of thing?” “Is there another meaning of the word?”

“Well—I suppose not. But…how can you tell? I mean, before.”

“You can see it. When you’re dancin’, guys get into it, and—boom. If you can’t, it’s a good indicator he’s not worth squattin’ on. Then you pass. And lemme tell ya—the stereotypes? S’all true.”

“Is that right? Interesting,” Mindie said, not the least bit interested. “So at these—I don’t know, parties or whatever—where you’re dancing with the—what are they? Executives?”
“Really? Hmm. I guess they have to keep the unions happy,” Mindie laughed. Ms. Waboombas didn’t. “So… um… you dance with them, and then you…what…find a back room?”

I couldn’t believe Mindie was even curious. Why would she be curious? Sex for her had always seemed to be on equal footing with major dental work; if she ever had it, she’d put it off as long as possible, prefer it with Novocain, would cry and struggle the whole time and want a lollipop afterwards.

“Back rooms are usually provided by the clubs,” Ms. Waboombas said.
“Oooo. Exclusive, eh?” That seemed to appeal to Mindie. “Like the Viper Room?”
“I don’t know. Never danced there.”

“You have to be somebody. Sooooo—you make a connection, you go into a back room—how do you know whatever the executive is going to honor his end? After things are—you know—complete?”
“You get it up front.”
“Oh! Before you even start!”
“Yeah. Maybe a tip after. Can’t do it any other way.”
“Aaaah. That makes sense. Then isn’t the pay from the movies themselves any good?”
“It’s all right. Some girls become stars and make a lot more, obviously.”
“Well, obviously. But in the meantime…”

Was Mindie considering this? I couldn’t imagine. Then why was she asking so many questions?
“…dancing rounds out the income,” Ms. Waboombas finished for her. “Yeah.”

“Interesting,” Mindie said, contemplating. “I’d never heard of this ‘dancing’ thing. I suppose they think it makes the industry look bad.”

“Some girls pretend they never have to do it, yeah. But it’s the main part of the business. It’s been around longer than the movies. Though the movies are what bring more guys to see you. Like advertising.”

“Oh, of course.”
“And myself? I like the one-on-one of a live performance.”
“Oh, you perform at these as well?”
“I consider dancing a performance.”
“Ah! Of course. You treat it all as a performance then.”
“Even the sex sometimes, yeah.”
“Ha, ha! Of course! So you don’t mind that then?” Mindie said, obviously surprised. “The, em…sex…part of it, I mean?”

“Nah. That’s fun. I like sucking and fucking, and…”

“So—Mister Wopplesdown,” Pastor Winterly interjected— loudly—to eradicate whatever else Ms. Waboombas enjoyed in the back rooms of strip clubs. Apparently he could no longer be satisfied with pretending not to hear. Now he had to actually not hear. “Haven’t seen you in church since you were a little boy. We’ve missed you.”

“You have?” I asked, genuinely stunned.

“Of course we have. Church is our communal family. God brings us each together because—combined—the parts of us form a whole that is greater than any individual. The family is the most important unit in civilization. When one of us isn’t there, it diminishes the rest.”

I had a hard time believing my absence diminished anyone, but I supposed anything was possible. “I’ve meant to come, really, but…”

“Mindy is there every week, and often during Wednesday evening sermons. Right in front. Singing loudly.” He paused, as if remembering a bunion. “So, I suppose you’ll be accompanying her regularly from now on.”

“I suppose,” I said, assuming he knew I was lying.

Ms. Waboombas voice cut in. “If I didn’t like to fuck so much, I’d never do the movies.”

“HAVE YOU HAD ANY THOUGHTS ON CHILDREN, MISTER WOPPLESDOWN?” the pastor said, entirely too loudly, as if he wanted to make certain God could hear that he was talking about something not sexual in this blasphemous car.

“Eventually,” I said, only half-listening and trying to hear the conversation he was talking over in the back seat as I feared it was beginning to unravel, and wanted sufficient warning so I could leap to safety.

“So there are nude scenes then, in these movies,” Mindie concluded, annoyed, but amazingly still apparently willing to make the sacrifice for stardom. “I suppose that’s to be expected for a newer actress.”

“Well, duh,” Ms. Waboombas sneered. “That’s kind of the point. You can’t fuck anybody if you’re not…” she held up her hands, and made quotation marks in the air with her fingers, “…nude.”

“DO YOU LIKE CHILDREN, MISTER WOPPLESDOWN?” The pastor screamed, his voice cracking. He was
making it more and more difficult for anyone to hear. We had to hear! Didn’t he realize the imminent danger we were all in?

“So it’s not just…nudity?” Mindie asked. “You also have to pretend to engage in, you know—intercourse—as well?”

“What do you mean, pretend? There’s no pretend. They roll the film. You fuck.”

“I THINK CHILDREN ARE TRULY A GIFT!” Pastor Winterly said, apparently deciding he could no longer afford to allow the silence of waiting for me to answer. “A GIFT FROM GOD! GOD THE ALMIGHTY!”

“You mean to say,” Mindie said, her tone darkening, “they expect me to have actual sex—on camera?”

“ONE CAN SEE THE DIVINE IN THEIR INNOCENT FACES, WHEN THEY PLAY AND…EM…PLAY AND…EM…WHEN THEY…YOU KNOW…”

“That’s what they’re paying you for, lady, to have actual sex…”

“CHILDREN ARE GOOD! THE WAY THEY LOOK UP TO US FOR COMFORT AND GUIDANCE…”

“They’re PAYING YOU to have SEX on CAMERA!” Mindie screamed.

“…GUIDANCE AND PROTECTION! PROTECTION IN A FRIGHTENING WORLD!”

“You MAKE PORNOGRAPHY?”

Silence.

The car fell absolutely silent except for the sound of the wind rushing past, the thrum of the engine, and a dead squirrel I had trapped somewhere in the undercarriage that thumped the floor occasionally. I focused on the road with the pastor, and in the rearview mirror I could see Mindie, flushed and steaming, staring in fury and horror and revulsion at Ms. Waboombas, who stared right back at her with equal venom.

“Yes, I make ‘por-nog-ra-phy’,” Ms. Waboombas said. “What do you think I’ve been talking about here, bitch?”

“Bitch? You called me ‘bitch’?”

“It’s an expression.”

“You’re a…a stripper. The dancing,” Mindie squeaked. “The dancing is in strip clubs.”

Ms. Waboombas looked at Mindie as though there were ugly bugs crawling out of my darling fiancée’s ears carrying picket signs. “They don’t let you out much, do they?”

Mindie simply continued to stare at, what was now her greatest adversary—fuming, lips quivering. Then without looking at me, she said “Corky. Stop the car.”


“Stop the car.”

“But we’re only ten miles out of town. Can’t we…”

“STOP - THE - CAR!” she howled.

I pulled to the side of the road.

Mindie still hadn’t taken her evil-eye off Ms. Waboombas.

“Get out,” she said.

“What?” Waboombas asked, annoyed.

“Get. Out.”

“Fuck you, bitch, ‘get out’.”

“I am not riding any farther with a pornographer. Especially one that calls me the ‘b’ word.”

“So you get out,” Wendy told her.

“No, you get out.

“You.”

“You.”

“This is my car!” Mindie said.

“Fuck if it is,” Wendy responded. “This is that hot old lady’s car. Corky’s aunt.”

Aunt Helena was hot? What a disturbing thought.

“And I am Corky’s fiancée. That makes this my car by relation.”

“Fuck if it does.”

“Would you please stop using foul language?”

“No. Fuck.”

“I asked you to…”

“Fuck.”

“Please stop…”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“This is entirely…”
“Fuck, fuck, ass, cock, shit, fuck, fuck.”
“Get out of the car!”
“Make me, bitch! Fuck!”
“Corky, make her get out!”
“Corky’s not gonna make me do shit. Corky’s afraid of me.”
How did she know? I thought I’d hidden it remarkably well.
“Corky!” Mindie demanded. Now—of course—the question was: whom did I fear more?
“Mindie,” I tried. “We’re miles from anywhere.”
“I don’t care! Make her get out!”
I hesitated.
Mindie became incensed. “It’s her, or me, Corky!”
For some reason, not seeing the out, I still hesitated.
“Keep in mind, Corky,” Ms. Waboombas said, her voice filled with giddy confidence. “I fuck. She doesn’t.”
Mindie gasped, then turned on me.
To me. Turned TO me.
“Corky! Did you have relations with this woman!”
Okay, maybe ‘on’ was the better word.
“Relations?” Ms. Waboombas asked. “Hell, no. We fuuuucked!”
“CORKY!”
“Mindie…”
“Wendy!” Morgan threw in. I think he was just tired of feeling left out.
“Get out of this car!” Mindie snarled. “Both of you!”
“Yeah,” Ms. Waboombas said, not even trying to be helpful, “Let’s get out, Corky. You, and me. We can do it in the road till someone else comes along and picks us up. Then we’ll do it in their car with them.” She grinned at Mindie. “It means ‘fuck’, by the way.”
Mindie leaned over Ms. Waboombas, and opened her car door. “Out,” she said flatly.
“Make me,” the stripper/pornographer/sadist said, grinning.
“Out!”
“Make me!”
Mindie did. She surprised us all by shoving Ms. Waboombas so hard they both tumbled out of the Duesenberg, and onto the side of the road.

The car was parked on a long stretch of two-lane country highway with ocean on one side and trees on the other. Both sides sloped downward slightly, one toward the sea, the other into a drainage ditch between us and the rising tree line beyond. Mindie and Ms. Waboombas now struggled on the edge of that ditch, and as they did, Morgan, the pastor, and I sat up and leaned out to watch. Morgan snacked on popcorn and offered me some. I declined, realizing it would be highly inappropriate to eat while the girls fought. Ogling, however, was somehow entirely acceptable.

Mindie and Wendy tussled angrily for a moment—slap-fighting like the girls they were—when Ms. Waboombas shoved Mindie’s breasts away rather viciously with Mindie still attached to them. “Hey!” Ms. Waboombas said. “Those are real.”

“Told you,” Mindie said, smiling smugly, then growled and dove right back at the other woman.

The two went over together and rolled, screaming, down into the drainage ditch that flowed there with a muddy splash. They tussled and struggled, ripping at one another’s hair, clothes, and appendages. It all seemed to move in ultra-slowmotion from my perspective, and I’d guess Morgan’s as well—maybe even the pastors—and before long they were both muddy, soaked, and their shredded clothes had begun to stick to them like wet paint. It was like one of those three a.m., Showtime, Women-In-Prison movies that men—and possibly lesbians—watch through Tivo the next day so they can fast-forward past any pointless attempts at actual story and get to the naked bits.

Morgan chewed popcorn, wide-eyed. I gave up all semblance of decorum, took a handful and joined him, as did the pastor.

Mindie shoved Ms. Waboombas savagely backward; again exhibiting the surprising strength she had displayed the previous night on the closet door. Proving herself up to the task, though, Ms. Waboombas grabbed Mindie as she fell, the two tumbled back, rolled completely over and back onto their feet like some perverse Cirque du Soleil moment, only muddier and less professional. Stunned into immobility, they looked down at themselves in shock at what they’d just done and laughed. But when they each noticed the other laughing, they stopped instantly, the hate welled again and, snarling, they tackled one another, fiercely and wetly.
Pastor Winterly reached into the cooler for a soda and handed me one. Clearly, this was all part of God’s plan to draw us closer together as a family.

We popped our cans and slurped as Mindie and Ms. Waboombas snagged handfuls of one another’s chests, then yanked for all they were worth. The front of Mindie’s austere garment became instantly sexy as it came away in strips, revealing more of Mindie’s bra and pale cleavage to the raw, naked power of the sun than any epidemiologist would recommend as safe.

“Whooooaaa,” Morgan and I admitted simultaneously, shielding our eyes from the glare. Then: “Jinx, you owe me a coke.”

Mindie retaliated by ripping away Ms. Waboombas top, which, thankfully—I mean unfortunately—wasn’t all that difficult. Ms. Waboombas just stood there smiling, then motioned to her dark breasts—a topless ‘Vanna White’—nodding as if to say ‘look what you’ve won by pulling on curtain number three!’

“Pflemmels,” she said brightly.

Her lack of humiliation clearly enraged Mindie, who stabbed out her hands and brutally nipple-twisted the taller woman. Ms. Waboombas screamed, batted away Mindie’s pinching claws and covered herself defensively. Then—cradling her surgically enhanced massiveness—Waboombas surged forward to head-butt Mindie in the stomach, and both women fell out of sight with a splash behind an irritatingly large bush.

We three men groaned together in disappointment then scrambled around the car, jockeying for better positions as the roadside brawl continued. For some minutes—our view entirely obscured by jiggling leaves, and dancing branches—the battle raged, accompanied by howls, shrieks, and bits of occasional free-flying clothing.

“Goodness,” the pastor said, wolfing down the last of the popcorn. “I hope no one gets seriously hurt.” Not seriously. But a little might be okay.

Suddenly the bush shuddered violently, and a pasty white breast, still half-covered in dirty bra, shoved forth through a hole between the leaves and a woman shrieked.

“Uncle!” cried Mindie’s voice. “UUUNCLLLLE!”

After a moment, the breast slowly sagged, receded into the shrubbery, and all became quiet. Ms. Waboombas—wearing only high-heels and a g-string—strode around from behind the bush with all the confidence of a real winner. She was followed by a somewhat cowed, though still defiant Mindie—now bereft of shirt and skirt—tucking one loose white breast back into its mud-smeared container. Wearing only the one shoe, panties and a bra, she stumbled her way up the slope toward the car, glowing at me with every lurch and fall.


“You should go down and help her,” the pastor offered sympathetically.

“Yes,” I said. “I really should.” I took another sip of Coke, and stayed right where I was.

Ms. Waboombas retrieved a half shirt—one of mine, from the looks of it—from the trunk of the Duesy and began drying herself off. As with everything she did, she made a show of it, and Morgan—who had popped another soda, and was drinking deep on all counts—watched her attentively. When she’d finished, she took a pair of filmy shorts and a half-shirt from her suitcase and—much to Morgan’s disappointment—put them on. The bottoms of her breasts still peeked out from under the insufficient fabric, and Morgan moaned a bit with approval.

Text across the shirt read—falsely (though I’ll bet no one complained)—100% NATURAL.

Returning to her seat in the car, she laid her head back and relaxed, smiling in the afterglow.

Mindie stepped up beside me, breathing deeply, her demeanor calm, as if she had just returned from a mildly exerting stroll to pick wildflowers. Very heavy wildflowers that fought back.

“Give me your shirt,” she said.

“What?” I asked, and then noticed her facial temperature rise violently. “Oh. Of course. Absolutely.”

I got out of the car, stripped off the shirt, and handed it to her. Ms. Waboombas cat-whistled. Mindie glared at her. I smiled, a bit, and blushed.

“I work out,” I said.

“No, you don’t,” Mindie snapped, and sneered at my lack of muscular definition. I covered myself, shyly, as Mindie turned away from me then wrapped my inadequate shirt around her massive breast area, stretching it across the muddy bra, grass, and effluent that still stuck to her skin.

“I…uh…I guess you’ll be wanting to turn around and head back now?” I asked.

Mindie sniffed. “Don’t be silly. I don’t believe for a moment you had sex with that slut.”

I was stunned. “You don’t?”

“Honestly, Corky. You couldn’t handle it. That woman would kill you.”

Waboombas nodded once in agreement. “She has a point.”

She does not!

“And after giving it some thought,” Mindie continued, “I don’t even believe you had sex with that model in the
closet last night.”
I gasped. Ms. Waboombas opened one eye, apparently somewhat surprised by this. Morgan had kept a secret? What was this world coming to?
“Why not?” I asked, offended. Didn’t anyone believe I was capable of bedding an attractive woman?
“Oooh, Corky,” she said, as if the answer should be obvious—*which it was not.*
Mindie chuckled as she began buttoning her new Ralph Lauren shirt/dress, and moved to the passenger side where she smiled brightly at Pastor Winterly.
“Minister,” she said sweetly. “Might I impose upon you to switch seats with me? I’d like to ride in front, beside my fiancée.”
“Oh,” the pastor said reluctantly—clearly as close as he ever wanted to be to Ms. Waboombas. “It would be...em...my pleasure,” he said with an insincere smile and stepped out.
He moved, tentatively, to the back seat, where he climbed in with Ms. Waboombas, who pinched his bottom as he sat down. He shrieked, much as Mindie had done behind the bushes.
Mindie, meanwhile, took her seat next to mine. I stared at her a moment, rattled, waiting for some other shoe to drop (about size twenty-four, capable of bashing my brains out), but none did. She simply smiled at me sideways and chirped, “Shall we go?”
I studied her for a moment more, certain this couldn’t be all there was.
“Will you go!” she snarled.
Still nervous, and very afraid, I did.
We traveled a good long while in silence until we reached a fork in the road. To the left was the way to the comics convention, to the right the county of ‘Green Valley’, and the direction Aunt Helena had indicated we would find the little town and its Duesenberg repair shop. Green Valley was now so near, I found myself quietly thrilled to be heading toward it, still nervous about friction between Mindie and Wendy, and somehow deluded into believing we might, actually, make it the minimal remaining distance without further incident.

The new two-lane highway headed toward the coast, dipped down and descended into the deep shadows of immense, old growth trees that grew thickly on either side of us. We wound downward some distance, passing occasional cottages nestled serenely up along the ridges, or down along the slopes on either side. No other people or cars were to be seen. It was all rather sedate and peaceful, the sort of tranquility doomed teenagers usually enjoy
during the first few minutes of your average horror movie.  
The road bent and curved this way and that, when, out of nowhere, a large low cloud descended to obscure the
path ahead and whatever lay beyond.

“Where did that come from?” Mindie asked.

“Duh,” Waboombas sneered. “It’s the coast. You never been to the coast, before?”

“Shut up,” Mindie snapped.

Mindie shifted uncomfortably. She likely never had been to the coast. It had annoyances like heat, sunshine,
insects, other people—some having actual fun—and as she had already pointed out, there was also a good deal of
sand to be found near beaches, and Manolo Blahniks were expensive.

Slowing the Duesenberg to a safe speed, I drove right into what quickly became a heavy bank of dense fog.
Mindie moaned a bit, fearfully, as the shroud of gray enveloped us. She was making me even more nervous. The
way she was behaving, you’d think there was something sinister about a simple, everyday, natural phenomenon
appearing out of nowhere on a bright sunny day.

Suddenly it began to rain very hard.
Morgan leaped to his feet and desperately attempted to jerk the convertible top up and over us, when out of
nowhere—BOOM!—lightning struck somewhere very close to one side, throwing off intense, hideous light and a
strong smell of ozone. The power of it rocked the Duesenberg to one side.

Everyone in the car jumped. The girls and the pastor all shrieked. It was nice to know there was something Ms.
Waboombas could be startled by.

Then—CRACK, again, on the other side this time!
Mindie cried out in horror and fear. The reverend prayed loudly. Ms. Waboombas suddenly laughed
uproariously. I shuddered and drove on as lightning continued to strike on all sides, jostling the car and shaking
everyone to their bones. I truly expected Satan to rise before us at any moment and offer all us little boys and girls
some candy.

“GET US OUT OF HERE, CORKY!” Mindie shrieked. “GET US OUT OF HERE!”

As hot, summer lightning continued exploding all around us, Morgan finally gave up on the car’s top and
leaped from the vehicle. He then started running in circles around us before just as abruptly diving back inside,
collapsing into his seat, cowering and whimpering, and praying feverishly, right alongside the pastor. Mindie cried,
Waboombas laughed, and suddenly the lightning exploded on all sides of us at once. It went over us, through us, and
into us, raising hair, drying skin, heating clothing, and generally giving us all a nasty tingle.

Then, just as suddenly as they had appeared, the clouds, rain and lightning dissipated into the breeze. The skies
were clear and the sun shone down upon us, warm, comforting, and glorious once again. Other than the gentle
sounds of songbirds that sang charmingly from every direction, the world had fallen silent and calm. The pavement
wasn’t even wet.

I glanced quickly to the pastor, who had apparently seen me praying with him. We smiled nervously at one
another. Maybe I would drop in at church again sometime, soon.

Just ahead of us, a sign indicated the turnoff to Green Valley, pastoral and serene, and very near, only a few
miles farther down the road.

Relieved, and somewhat giddy, we each settled back into our seats and laughed with grateful relief, kidding and
joking briefly about how strange and scary all that had been. It was a nice bonding moment during which we seemed
to grow much closer, the end of our journey at hand, all past sins momentarily forgiven. Right up until Ms.
Waboombas decided she had left well enough alone for far too long already.

“I love the rain,” she began to no one in particular. “Usually, when it’s raining, my favorite thing to do is stay in and
fuck.”

The rest of the car went deathly silent. I hit the accelerator, hoping to make town before her next sentence.
Unfortunately, lightspeed hadn’t been invented yet.

“Of course, if I had a rich guy,” she continued to the back of my head, which I knew because I felt the scalp
there grow suddenly warmer. “We’d stay in and fuck eeeevery night.”

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

“We’d lie by the fire—naked—”
Now everyone shifted uncomfortably—except Ms. Waboombas of course.

“Can’t you talk about anything else?” Mindie demanded. “No. Then, as we lie there rubbing nakedly against one another because we were both so goddamn naked, I’d slowly bend over—my sexy, naked ass rising up near his face…”

“What a glorious afternoon!” shrieked the pastor. “God truly loves us to give us such a day!”

But Ms. Waboombas insisted on being heard this time.

“…I’d take his naked little cock into my mouth…”

“IT’S NOT LITTLE,” I corrected, far too loudly.

Mindie slowly turned her head toward me, steam rising off her forehead. Well, maybe not ‘steam’. No. Wait. Yes, it was actual steam.

“I mean,” I said, beginning to sweat, “what makes you think rich guys have…em…small penises?”

“I think the plural is penii,” Morgan said between chews on something. His brain most likely.

“It’s possible they don’t have little ones,” Ms. Waboombas shrugged. “They got money, so you just sort of assume life has to balance out in some way. But okay. So, then I’d take his massive cock into my mouth…”

“Oh, dear God!” Mindie howled. “Would you please?”

“Please, what?” Ms. Waboombas asked in mock-innocence.

“Please stop trying to offend us,” Mindie said. “I know your little game, and it won’t work now. You can’t get to us anymore.”

There was a moment of silence. Mindie scrunched down in her seat and folded her arms, sulkily. Waboombas looked out the side of the car at nothing in particular.

“If I had a rich girlfriend,” Ms. Waboombas said, “I’d take her pasty white tit into my mouth…”

“You think that’s funny?” Mindie demanded, turning around in her seat—seemingly unaware that she had been ‘gotten to’—and leaning threateningly toward Ms. Waboombas. “You think you’re being funny? Better lesbians than you have tried.”

I wondered if she meant Mimsi.

“I am not a lesbian,” Ms. Waboombas said definitively. “I am bi though, and I love to suck on pasty white tits.”

“You’re nothing!” Mindie howled, then got up on her knees—in clear violation of all known seatbelt laws—and leaned down over her chair back to get even more into Ms. Waboombas face. “You’re a worthless little slut who takes money for sex, and will sleep with anything. But you couldn’t even get my hard-up fiancé into bed with you!”

“Your what?” I asked, stunned.

“And you’re a pissy little prude who needs to get laid,” Waboombas sneered back at Mindie. “I’d rather be me.”

“And I’d rather be me! I HAVE a rich man!”

“For now,” Ms. Waboombas corrected.

“We’ll be married in just a few hours. We’re here to elope, you know.”

“We’re what?” I screamed, jerking the wheel so hard as I turned to her I nearly toppled her from the car. She really should be seated and properly belted in.

“We’re what?” I asked again, trying to sound less terrified about the prospect of being married to my fiancée.

“Why do you think I brought the pastor?” she asked, smiling, more at Ms. Waboombas than at me.

“But your small, intimate, thousand-people wedding…”

“Oh, we’ll have that too,” she smiled. “Later.”

Ms. Waboombas put her legs up on the back of my seat and spread them.

“Last chance to get it for free, Corky,” she said. “Take it now, or afterward you gotta pay like everybody else.”

Mindie knocked Waboombas’ legs to one side and onto the pastor’s lap. He reacted as if someone had thrown something hot onto his crotch, which—in a way—someone had. He spasmed around in his seat, trying to be free of Waboombas’ legs, but she made every effort to keep them right where they were while continuing to rub them into the affected area. After a moment, he forced himself to relax and—moving slowly and deliberately—lifted her legs off himself using his Bible as a shield to avoid any actual physical contact. I was surprised it didn’t burst into flames.

Moving cautiously, as if her limbs might attack again at any moment, the pastor placed her ankles back on the seat behind my head, one strapped high-heel on either side, then gently replaced The Good Book securely in his lap. It didn’t help. Everyone had already seen he wasn’t ‘dinky’.

Ms. Waboombas smiled at him—or more at his crotch—then returned her attention to me and began rubbing
her toes against my ears.

Mindie, not to be beaten, grabbed Waboombas feet and lifted them high, and hard enough to yank the stripper to the floor between the back seats. Wasn’t anyone wearing a seatbelt in this car? Ms. Waboombas sat there a moment, apparently enjoying how this action had pulled her half-shirt up to reveal most of her breasts, and wedged her shorts and underwear deep into her…

Well…you know.

She looked up at Mindie and slowly grinned that evil smirk of hers, then let her legs fall apart, again, to reveal all. For a brief moment, I thought I could see a hot, radiant light from down behind the seat somewhere, as if the gates of hell themselves had cracked open. Mindie could see how this was affecting both Morgan and the pastor, and grabbed Ms. Waboombas legs once more—bending the knees, shoving the leggy woman over, and pressing her down as if crumpling an irritatingly large cardboard box down into a too-small trash can.

Ms. Waboombas seemed remarkably timid about all this, and folded up rather efficiently, probably realizing that this only put other of her clothing wedged ‘assets’ on absolutely fabulous display. Morgan began to drool. The pastor crossed his legs and abruptly decided the view outside the car needed his immediate and undivided attention.

All Mindie had done was roll Ms. Waboombas over to reveal just how far a pair of shorts, shirt, and underwear, when the proper force is applied, can wedge up a woman’s well shaven thingis and whatchamacallits. I realized this a moment later when the tall stripper stood behind me, and I could see—pretty much everything—as she turned her backside toward me and made a grand show of bending over to brush nonexistent crumbs from her former seat. As she leaned, she managed to give the pastor a good hearty sniff at just how efficiently she practiced personal hygiene. He, on the other hand—in trying to save himself from just such an experience—likely snapped all seven cervical vertebrae.

Mindie didn’t help matters when she decided this was ‘all just far too much’, and began to shove, repeatedly, on Ms. Waboombas prominently displayed nether-regions in a futile attempt at forcing her to take a proper seat. Instead, all Mindie managed was to knock the por-nog-ra-pher’s ample behind—repeatedly—into the side of my and Ms. Waboombas seemed remarkably timid about all this, and folded up rather efficiently, probably realizing all just too much. I turned away from the insanity and tried to focus on the road. But as Ms. Waboombas finally situated herself—only marginally returning her shirt to its manufacturer’s recommended position—I, like the pastor, began to hyperventilate.

“See that, pasty-tits?” said Ms. Waboombas, returning her attention to Mindie. “I got him breathing hard. Bet you never even got that much hard.”

I could feel Mindie’s fury explode from within her like flames engulfing the Hindenburg. Oh, the humanity. I so wanted to be elsewhere.

Then I saw the sign indicating the city limits. I could just make it out in the distance. We were close. All I needed was to reach that town, find a toilet, put my head inside, repeatedly slam the lid and this would all be over.

“I’ve made more than his breathing—hard—plenty of times,” Mindie said, returning to kneeling backward in her seat and facing Ms. Waboombas, yet again tempting fate in oh-so-many ways. “I just pretended not to notice.”

“Breathe hard like that?” asked Waboombas. “Like he wanted to fuck you so bad he…”

“MISTER WIGGEN!” The pastor yelled. “HAVEN’T SEEN YOU IN CHURCH LATELY!”

“And you never will!” replied Morgan.

Between the approaching sign and us was a woman wearing a pretty, violet sunhat walking away from us along the edge of the road. I’ll bet she was calm and demure, and obeyed seatbelt laws.

“He wants to—as you so eloquently put it—fuck me very badly,” Mindie said, losing some of the ‘in-your-faceness’ by lowering her voice at the dirty parts. “I mean, really. What do you think you’ve got that I haven’t?” Mindie asked, glancing down at her own fleshy adornments.

“Oh, please,” Ms. Waboombas said, spreading herself out on display. “Look at me.” She paused as if it should be self-evident. Mindie’s expression said otherwise. “I’m long, lean, and hot. You’re tubby, saggy, and pale!”

“I am NOT!” Mindie shrieked.

Near the sign, I could see that the woman in the sunhat was heading towards some old, wooden stairs near the sign that led down to the beach. Would that I could be there beside her that I might throw myself down them.

“I am young, and firm,” Mindie howled. “And naturally so because I am in the prime of my life, unlike you! You’re old! You’re plastic. You’re fake. From your eyelashes to those phlegms on your chest…”

“Pflemmels. And they’re nicer than your droopy boopies.”

As we drew closer to the woman on the side of the road, I began to imagine myself walking beside her, sharing
the tranquility of the ocean scenery. Maybe holding her hand and not throwing myself down the stairs.

“\'I doubt that,\'” Mindie sneered. “\'Phony is no substitute for real. You said so yourself.\'”

“\'I was lying to make you feel better,\'” said Ms. Waboombas, lifting her shirt and exposing her truffles. “\'I mean, come on! Look at these!\'”

I could see the pastor do so, slyly out of the corner of his eye in my rear-view mirror. Morgan had never stopped. Personally, I had seen enough of them. I refocused on the woman in the sunhat and let myself get lost in the calmness of her. We were very close to her now, and I could see she had a lovely walk—a beautiful figure—

—And she was naked.

**NAKED? Oh, dear God, what ELSE could go wrong this day?**

“I’ve seen them,” Mindie said, becoming irrational. “Most of the western hemisphere has, undoubtedly, seen your boobs. It’s not like you hide them or anything.”

“Because they’re worth seeing!” Ms. Waboombas said. “\'Why do you hide yours?\’”

“I don’t hide them! I simply show some personal restraint! Unlike YOU!”

“You’re afraid to show them! Afraid people wouldn’t be as impressed if they knew how saggy-baggy and pasty they were.”

\"They are NOT saggy-baggy and pasty!\"

I could no longer hear them. I was riveted in every way by the nude woman on the side of the road. I studied her intently—her gentle curves, her delicate features, her tight, naked ass (Hey, I’m a man not a poet). I watched, unblinking, as she turned and began to descend the stairs, completely unaware of how desperately I needed her to stop where she was and just continue being lovely.

\"Even Corky likes mine better than your saggy-ass tits,\" Waboombas shouted.

\"He does NOT!\” Mindie yelled.

\"He does TOO.\”

\"Does NOT!\”

\"Does TOO!\”

\"CORKY?\”

\"Hard, and fake!\”

\"Saggy, and pale!\”

\"Better than yours.\”

\"In your dreams!\”

\"These are real!\”

\"Oh, come on! LOOK AT THESE!\”

Waboombas lifted her half-shirt farther and squeezed her Waboombas originals together for maximum effect.

\"OH, YEAH? WELL, LOOK AT THESE!\”

Mindie stood up in the passenger seat, ripped open her own blouse, popped her bra, and released the hounds.

The pastor nearly fell out of the car. Morgan shot coke out his nose. Ms. Waboombas lifted an eyebrow as what God had bestowed upon Mindie exploded forth to be fruitful, multiply, replenish the earth, and have dominion over every living thing that moveth.

They really were quite large.

\"I mean, HONESTLY!\” Mindie yelled, turning left and right to display God’s many blessings with righteous indignity. “\'Yours are just tacky compared to these.\’” Mindie sniffed haughtily—like a female Moses having returned from Mount Sinai carrying a holy commandment in each hand and proclaiming to all beneath her that they were blasphemers for worshipping false gods.

\"Go on, Corky,\” Mindie demanded. “\'Tell her what she already knows: MINE are better than HERS.\’”

She began massaging and kneading the leavened loaves to display their authenticity and superiority to future buyers. Morgan moaned—loudly. The pastor wheezed—explosively.

I was too busy trying to catch a last, fleeting glimpse of the nude woman on the side of the road to hear or see Mindie, or anyone else for that matter. My first and likely only chance to view Mindie’s massive, untethered breasts with her full consent and witting approval, and I didn’t even notice—or care.

All I saw was her—the naked woman in the sunhat.
As we drove past, she was just stepping down, below the rise of the slope, her perfect face turned ever so slightly my way, and I knew before I saw…

Ms. Nuckeby.
Gloop.
My eyes went wide with shocked delight. I slowed the car and unbuckled my own belt, beginning to stand in the seat and trying to see over the edge of the stairs as Ms. Nuckeby descended beyond my view.

Apparently Mindie thought I was going for her exposed womanhoods and screamed, horrified.

“Oh, my God, you really CAN see their penises!”

With a wicked roundhouse, she punched me backward, and I fell over, landing on the steering wheel and accidentally jerking it hard to one side. The car lurched, skidded, and flew off the road, slamming into a tree at the bottom of a ditch. The impact sent Mindie flying with a shriek—ass over teakettle—shirt flapping, bra flipping, breasts flopping—into a small clump of bushes. Ms. Waboombas rammed into the backside of Wendy’s now vacant seat with a scream. Morgan and the pastor slumped forward, held securely by their safety restraints. Seatbelts really
do save lives.

As the rest of us slowly gathered ourselves, ahead in the foliage Mindie lay moaning. All we could see of her were two feet sticking into the air, one shoe dangling from her toes.

“Everyone all right?” I asked, lifting my head from the steering wheel and checking for damage, either to me or the other passengers. There didn’t seem to be any. But after what I’d done to Mindie, there was sure to be.

All around there were general nods and groans as everyone pulled himself or herself together. I leaped from the car and went to see about my betrothed. I rounded the bush she’d disappeared behind and gently lifted her, as she was attempting to close my now buttonless shirt over her reattached bra. Once on her feet, she slapped my hands away.

“Get away from me, you disgusting pervert,” she said, then really laid into me, slapping my arms, face, chest, clothing, and aura. “Where did you learn how to drive, in a Cracker Jack box?”

“I think you mean, where did I get my license…”

Mindie goggled at me furiously.

“Are you correcting me?” she asked in a tone that would freeze fire.

“Not intentionally.”

She swatted my sternum, then winced and grabbed her fingers, massaging away still more pain I’d caused her.

“Are you hurt?” I asked, reaching out to support her.

“I’m fine. Leave me alone.” More swats. “Catch a glimpse of a few boobs and you lose all control.”

“What boobs?”

“Mine! The one’s you were grabbing at, you retard.”

“I wasn’t…” I stared, lost. I hadn’t seen her breasts, even in my peripheral vision. I was too busy looking at…

I tried hard not to show any sense of guilt. But she caught something in my eye and studied me like a lioness stalking a tasty gazelle with a limp. “It was mine you were reaching for, wasn’t it? Or were you going for that slut’s?”

Which slut’s? Had she seen Ms. Nuckeby? Not that Ms. Nuckeby was a slut—though she could be, I do hardly know her—but to Mindie’s mind, any woman who didn’t button her collar all the way to the top should be marked with the scarlet letter ‘S’.

“I…uh…” I stopped short, coming to the obvious realization that staying in port was likely the best course of action given the coming storm.

“As disgusting as it was,” Mindie continued when I didn’t, “you’d better have been going for mine, because the last thing I want is a husband who loses control like that over another woman’s…” she paused, “…you know.”

“I…uh…”

“Maybe that kind of thing happened before we got engaged, but I won’t allow it, now that we’re to be married. It would be highly disrespectful of me, you know, for you to be interested in other women’s…stuff. Especially some slutty, African prostitute.”

Aaah, I finally realized. NOT Ms. Nuckeby.

“Particularly if you were to become—aroused—like that again,” Mindie continued. “I don’t want a husband who can become—aroused—by other women’s boobs. Or any other body parts for that matter.”

She wanted a husband who was gay? Given her level of sexual interest, maybe she did.

Wait. What did that say about me?

“I wasn’t looking at either of you,” I said. “I was looking at the road actually.”

“Really? And how was it ‘the road’ made your…thingie…swell up like that? Hmm?”

I paused, thinking fast, or rather, fast for me, which meant we might be here all day. What could I say had caused it? Trees? Nature’s beauty? Two gophers humping by the side of the road?

“I, uh…that is…uh…” I glanced down at The One-Eyed Thing With A Mind Of Its Own, and realized Odysseus’ escape from the harbor had been blocked by the Cyclops. Soon, Poseidon would be involved. I saw no other course of action except to change tack, quickly, before my boat was swamped by Mindie’s boulders.

“I’m sorry, Mindie. I just…I couldn’t help myself. Your…em…your…tit…are so magnificent. They overwhelmed me. Took me completely by surprise. Unlike that woman…” I nodded toward Ms. Waboombas, who was digging a finger in her ear with one hand, while the other hand was shoved down the back of her shorts and scratching her ass like it had five-pound fleas.

Wow. Who would have thought that could be sexually attractive?

I hitched, a bit; as little Corky visibly reared his ugly head yet again, damn him.

Mindie gasped. “Stop that!”

“I…uh…can’t be helped…my…eh…my darling.” I glanced at her chest area, now covered in mud, leaves, and rumpled Corky-shirt, and she tightened her grip on it as if she feared I was a closet candy connoisseur who might
suddenly feel the need to sample her white chocolates. “They’re just…your boobs, that is, as opposed to her boobs—they’re just sooooo nice, and…”

“Eeww,” she scrunched up her face in disgust. “I mean, yes, they are. But, oh, my God, you say it like you’re thinking about licking them or something.”

And that’s revolting, why?

Before last night, Ms. Nuckeby wouldn’t mind my thinking about licking hers. Or actually licking them for that matter, I’d bet.

Bloop.

Mindie gasped again at my expanding crotch, then looked around to see if anyone else had noticed. They were all too busy recovering from the impact with the ditch to care what my penis was doing.

“Can’t you control that?” she asked.

“I keep telling you…”

“What do I have to do, Corky? Stab you with a letter opener?”

“Um. No,” I said, surprised, and wondering how often she’d considered that.

“They’re just…breasts, Corky.”

“Oh, but they’re not. Your…breasts, they’re just so amazingly…” I glanced at them again, and she flinched again.

“…amazing. Really. Magnificent. So much better than anyone else’s.” I lied, struggling not to think of Ms. Nuckeby, then nodded toward Waboombas. “Especially hers. Yours are just so…”

My hands involuntarily cupped outward in the universal gesture for ‘massively endowed’, and searched through my mental thesaurus, which apparently contained only three adjectives.

“…magnificent—is the word I’m looking for, here—again. I think. And not pale. Not pale in the slightest. They’re like two very large mountains—with no snow on them. And when you revealed them that way, in the car—so abruptly—it was like when one drives into Yosemite, you know, through that tunnel? At first, all is darkness and obstructed, narrowness of vision, and then—boom! You explode out the end and see Half-Dome rising up, there, right before you. You’re just overcome with the immenseness of it. The glory. The not-pale magnificence of the thing. It was like that. Seeing Half-Dome. Only—in your case—Full-Dome. Or FullDomes. Because there’s two of them.”

“Driving into Yosemite gives you an…erection?”

“No!” I said, stunned at her thickness in things sexual. “Your tits do!”

I glanced down at them again, then quickly away, to reassure her of my inability to control myself.

“Stop looking at them,” she said, studying me and calming. “And don’t call them ‘tits’. It’s rude.” Rude perhaps, but clearly moderately acceptable if they were her tits I was enthusing about and not Ms. Waboombas.

“I guess I can’t blame you,” she said. “I did sort of lose control and expose them rather suddenly there. And people are always telling me that ones such as mine can have that effect on men. I just never cared before.” She glanced down at my crotch with disgust. I’d bet money she still didn’t.

“It’s just…‘I said, seeing them loose like that. Wild, and free—and not pale, I just wanted to…”

“Enough,” she said, and held up a hand to silence me. “You really are becoming quite vulgar.”

She looked down at my crotch again, her face screwed up with loathing.

“You’re going to have to learn to control that, you know. I don’t want people seeing it every time you happen to think of my…boobies. You’ll be a laughing stock. Can you imagine how embarrassing it would be if father saw you do that? For him it would be like it was for me the time I caught him having sex with the maid on the snack platter during my thirteenth birthday party. It traumatized me for life.”

She paused, looked off into the distant past and shuddered a bit at the memory.

“And even then,” she said, a sad, faraway look in her eyes, “they still served the cheese.” After a brief moment of melancholy she sighed, her annoyance with me returned, and she glared at me once more. “So learn to control it. Especially around father. You know he has a heart condition, and he doesn’t much like you as it is.”

“He doesn’t?”

“You know he doesn’t.”
“No, I really had no idea.”
“I figured you must have known by now.”
“First I’m hearing of it.”
“Why do you think he has your picture on his dartboard?”
“He has my picture…?”
“He invites all his friends to throw at it.”
“All his friends?”
“Your grandfather enjoys it especially.”
“My grandfather.”
“It’s improved his game immensely.”
“My grandfather’s game?”
“No, my father’s. Although your grandfather really does rise to the occasion.”
“I imagine he would.”
“No one’s ever told you?”
“That your father despises me and likes to throw sharp objects at my face? No. Somehow that’s never been mentioned.”
“It’s kind of an obsession with him actually. He mutters to himself about you while doing it.”
“Charming. So, how does he feel about our engagement?”
“He’s fine with it.
“You haven’t told him.”
“Of course, not.”
“Do you plan to?”
“Eventually.”
“While he’s walking you down the aisle? After we’re married? When the grandchildren are born?”
“Eeeewww!”
“Eeeewww? Grandchildren are Eeeew?”
“Oh course! Aren’t they to you?”
“Not really.”
“Well, you’re just not thinking it through. And father hates the thought of them as well. Though he expects an heir.”
“Which will be difficult to provide without procreating.”
“Don’t be gross!”
“So, for ‘dear old Dad’, then, what would be the upside of us getting married?”
She paused, thinking hard.
“I don’t know,” she said finally. “But I’m sure there is one. He’ll understand. You’re the least irritating person who’s proposed to me so far.”
“I feel so special.”
“I said ‘yes’, didn’t I?”
I avoided reminding her that I had never actually asked.
“So—those things you do to annoy him,” she said. “You’re not doing them on purpose?”
“What things?”
She stared at me blankly for a moment, her eyes wide with surprise.
She paused and studied my face, obviously shocked that whatever strange, irritating things I did as a matter of course weren’t planned simply to drive her father insane, and were, possibly, in some way, just my natural state of being. The thought made her shudder.
“Well, suffice it to say,” she continued, “if you had one of your— you know—swelling episodes—in front of him, it would not go over well. He might actually use that gun he’s always threatening to shoot down your pants.”
“He threatens to shoot a gun…?” I choked off the rest. Darts were one thing. But guns?
“One can hardly blame him, the way you are sometimes. So you don’t want to provoke him further by letting yourself get…em…erectsions in front of him. I mean, my goodness, Corky. You have to be the one to show some self-control. It’s not as if I can have these removed!”
Well, actually…
“So get hold of yourself!” she said. After a beat, she realized the double entendre and blanched a bit. “In a manner of speaking.” She glanced over at the car steaming in the ditch. “I mean, imagine if something like that happened every time you had a dirty thought about me. We’d be ostracized from society.”
“What society?”
“Decent society,” she snarled. “Are you correcting me, again?” she asked, the natural anger in her returning and rising to its traditional resting place.
“No,” I said. “Not at all.”
She glared at me as if looking for the lie to seep through my pores and announce its very presence in song. After likely deciding I was too weak-willed to truly display any kind of controlling behavior, she turned away from me and headed back to the car.
Then she abruptly stopped.
“You’re not a gold-digger,” she said without looking at me.
“What?”
“That’s the upside for father in you marrying me.”

She turned to me and smiled; apparently pleased to have found at least one reason for her father to despise me one or more dart throws less. “You’re not after his money.”

Suddenly it struck me that the best possible reason for marrying Mindie was her membership in our exclusive club. Rich people really couldn’t marry anyone who didn’t already have their own fortune. Look what happened when John Seward Johnson, eldest son of one of the three founding brothers of Johnson and Johnson, married the upstairs maid. Scandal, dueling lawyers, and half the money gone. And for rich people, there was nothing more humiliating—or unavoidable—than scandal, dueling lawyers, and the loss of money. Sex on cheese platters was one thing, but actual marriage? Even a loveless union came much farther down the list of bad things that could happen to you, somewhere just above severe blood loss, beheading, and dismemberment. Any sane, wealthy person who married a maid, even one with a bachelor’s degree, and then had the insensitivity to die before she did, would have to expect horrific anger, contested wills, and family infighting to be the obvious outcome—even Mister Johnson himself. So why did he marry her?

Go find a picture of her on the Internet. I’ll wait.
Come on! You don’t even have to look! He married her because she looked great in a swimsuit! And based on the swimsuits she wore, clearly out of one as well.

Now, it is conceivable that Mindie herself might look somewhat fetching in fashionable swimwear, if you discounted her refusal to be seen in the sun, her aversion to the two-piece, and her permanent Pillsbury Dough Boy complexion that is.

Ms. Nuckeby, on the other hand, would undoubtedly look amazing in a swimsuit. If she ever wore one, which I was beginning to doubt. And that only lent credence to the idea that she was in it for the money. She was hot!

And yet, some nagging nagging little something was still trying desperately to tell me I was wrong. Not that Ms. Nuckeby wasn’t hot, but that she was truly loveable, and more genuinely interested in me than Mindie ever could be. It was an insistent thought that kept scratching away at the back of my mind like an irritating little Chihuahua that wants to be let in, even though nobody’s home.

It must be my libido. You can’t trust the libido, you know. On some level, the libido wants to be poor so that it never has to wear clothes.

As I turned to follow Mindie, I looked at her very full and exceedingly well rounded behind and tried to picture it naked. But the image wouldn’t come, even though it was barely covered in thin, matronly underwear, and already fairly well exposed. Probably because all I could think of was Ms. Nuckeby’s entire nude body from all sides—touching me—rubbing against me…

Gloop.
DAMN YOU, LIBIDO!
As if she had a sense for it, Mindie turned around, right on cue, and caught the rising of my tides.
“Dammit, Corky, stop that!”
Irritated, she covered her rear end with her hands, picked up speed and hurried away from me as though I were giving off radiation.
“Just don’t look at me if that’s going to keep happening,” she said.
I watched her storm up the rise toward the car; absorbed in the way her panties quickly rode up the crack of her muddy, wiggling ass, and found myself not the least bit aroused by the image.
In fact, just the opposite happened.
Well. At least I might have found a way to prevent erections, and thereby keep us from being ostracized by decent society.
All I had to do was look at my wife.
We returned to the Duesenberg, which was fairly well smunched in front, and rather deeply embedded in the tree trunk and muddy ditch. It was leaking coolant and spewing steam, and I couldn’t be less interested. Unable to control my feelings and desires, I kept looking away to see if Ms. Nuckey might have heard the accident and come running. The thought of her sprinting, naked, invigorated me like Mindie’s bunched undies and Ms. Waboombas endlessly exposed breasts could never do, and little Corky sprang forth again, rather overenthusiastically.

If I ever did want to have children with Mindie, I would clearly have to spend a lot of time reminiscing about
Ms. Nuckeby beforehand.

“You were right,” Ms. Waboombas said to me, eyeing the evidence. “It ain’t dinky.”
“CORKY!” Mindie snarled. “What did I just say to you?”

(ﬁ  )

With the pastor’s, Ms. Waboombas’, and Morgan’s help, we got the car out of the ditch and back onto the road, while Mindie sat in the moist grass shredding leaves and offering guidance. Safely back on the edge of the highway, I left the others and walked the few hundred feet back to read the road sign I’d missed moments earlier due to Ms. Nuckeby’s gloriousness.

Before even glancing at whatever was written on the marker, I checked the wooden stairs for any signs of life, naked or otherwise. The wooden planks twisted and turned their way downhill through the various shrubs, stones, and bushes for maybe a hundred yards until they reached bottom, disappearing into a grove of trees that blocked any view of the beach.

Ms. Nuckeby was nowhere to be seen.

The temptation to race down there and find her was near to overwhelming. The need to look at her, to be near her, to smell the purified air around her, ran like hot razor blades through the soft meat of my heart. It had my attention, certainly, and at that moment, I finally understood how Duke Orsino felt at the beginning of Twelfth Night when every, stupid question reminded him of Olivia, the woman he desired most in the world and he just wouldn’t shut up about it.

A Verbatim Moment from Corky’s Memories Of His Education in The Classics:

RANDOM LORD: Hey, Curio. We need to get the Duke’s mind off Olivia.
CURIO: No prob, Random Lord.
(To Orsino)
Hey, Duke. Wanna go hunting?
ORSINO: Hunting for what, Curio?
CURIO: I dunno. Deer?
ORSINO: Sure. Of course. The best deer I have, or ‘hart’ as we call them in this day and age. And, you know what hunting deer—or hart—makes me think of?
Olivia.
CURIO: Oh, Jesus.
ORSINO: The first time I ever saw her, she smelled great! It was like she killed the germs in the air or something.
CURIO: A girl who’s basically disinfectant. Nice. Listen…
ORSINO: At that moment, I became like a deer myself, you know? Or hart, as we call them. I want her so bad, it’s like my needs have become cruel, yappy little hounds—Chihuahuas, if you will—chasing me around everywhere I go, and they won’t shut up.
CURIO: Oooookay.
(To Random Lord)
Let’s go without him.

I too felt like a skittish little deer whose desires had become cruel hounds trying to run him down and eat his ‘hart’ alive. It was scary, and at the same time kind of thrilling, like a love roller coaster, yow.
Roller coaster of love. Say what?
Suddenly, I understood how Mister Johnson must have felt. Dying, naked, on top of a hot maid—or in my case, a hot Ms. Nuckeby—now seemed worth all the scandal, dueling lawyers, and money it took to get me there. I mean, really. Who cared? I’d be dead anyway, right?
I glanced toward the Duesenberg, where everyone sat slumped in his or her seat, waiting for my return. Mindie eyed me intently. There was no way I could casually race down the hill and get away with it. But perhaps if I really did throw myself down the stairs…
Good Lord! Was I insane? I couldn’t believe I had actually considered doing such a thing. How cruelly hound-like had my needs become? Was I really so desperate, lonely, and overheated with desire that I might do something so idiotic as to toss myself down a mountain just to see a pretty girl?

“CORKY! STOP DAWDLING!” Mindie screeched. “GOD! YOU ARE SO ANNOYING, SOMETIMES!” Her face was twisted with irritation and rage, and flushed red with hot, asexual blood. It was a face that—within hours—would be staring at me day in and day out as my beloved, my companion, my one-and-only wife.

I threw myself over the edge. Next to the hairless monkey, this may have been the stupidest thing I’ve ever done. The idea had been to ‘pretend’ to fall, then right myself and race for the bottom. Unfortunately, the pretending part very quickly took on a life of its own.

Mindie screamed. Amazingly, I could hear her wails of horror even over my own. Fortunately for me, the shock left me with very few memories of the incident, which I will share with you here for posterity, just in case—for reasons, either of stupidity or love, which often seem to be interchangeable—I’ll grant you—you feel the need to attempt such Jackass-like lunacy at home.

My first memory is of me taking flight, then impacting that first stairway landing and sailing from those—relatively—painless planks of wood out into nature’s harsher punishments.

That part was kind of fun. The second memory is of broken branches, twigs, and pointy leaves stabbing enthusiastically into pretty much every one of my body’s most tender tissues.

That I didn’t enjoy so much. The fourth memory was of a particularly large and rugged bit of stone attempting to remove one side of my skull, and the brain matter contained therein without sufficient anesthesia.

Not gonna do that again ever in my lifetime if I can help it. Fifth: random, flickering images of a bird which somehow became entangled in my hair, and really seemed quite put out by it, as if I’d done it on purpose. Kind of an Alfred Hitchcock moment, and not many of you would want to experience Alfred Hitchcock in real life, trust me. The pecking, flapping, clawing little beast did, however, keep my mind off some of the other more painful moments during the remainder of my fall. So for that, I thank him. Or her. It.

Whatever. Eventually I bounced repeatedly to a stop, somewhere—oh—ten or so feet above the beach, and only a few yards from certain death on a fallen tree stake. I lay for a long moment, staring up at the sun, and trees, and sky…and just hurt.

Eventually, my eyes closed, unconsciousness licking at the corners of my brain like a lonely Labrador until I heard the voices and movements of people all around me, some up near the top of the hill and a few closer by, down toward the beach.

The voices on the beach were approaching, and eventually came very close to me. Each was tinged with gentle sympathy.

The ones above were like nails on a chalkboard, and were hard to distinguish from the screeching bird still struggling in my hair. Inwardly, I hoped for the sources of the lower voices to reach me first, and I was surprised when they actually did. The god who spends his days ruining my life (bastard) must have been too busy laughing his ass off over my fall to intervene negatively, at that particular moment.

Tender hands gently freed the bird, then lifted my head from the anthill I had landed on and brushed away a few of the stinging insects as they were making a concerted effort to pull me into their hole. I suppose they would get some considerable street cred around the colony if they succeeded in feeding me to their queen. In my delirium I somehow missed them when they were gone.

“Mister Wopplesdown?” a voice asked. A lovely, mellifluous voice. “Mister Wopplesdown, are you okay?”

Slowly, I opened my eyes. The exceedingly naked Ms. Nuckeby and her handsome sunhat held me in their arms. I was in heaven. A heaven with stinging ants, but never mind.

“Ms. Nuckeby,” I wheezed, managing a smile. “How lovely to see you again.”

“Are you all right, Mister Wopplesdown? My God, the way you flew down that hill—like someone had thrown you. Are you hurt?”

“No. No. I feel quite wonderful actually.”

“You’re bleeding.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve never had sex.”

There was some laughter behind her, and I noticed naked body parts of various other individuals just beyond hers. Was everyone naked? What had I interrupted?
“I’m not worried about that,” Ms. Nuckeby said. “I’m just concerned that you’re okay.”
“You have no idea how perfectly okay I am.”
“What are you doing here?”
“I came to see you.”
“Me?” Her expression melted, and she sounded deeply and genuinely pleased. My heart jumped.
“CORKY?”
It was Mindie’s voice, digging into the chalkboard of my brain and scraping its way down the hill. My heart stopped jumping with pleasure and fell over, curling itself into a fetal position.
“CAN ANYONE SEE HIM THROUGH THE TREES? OH, MY GOD, CORKY, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?”
Other voices joined her, calling my name in faulty harmony as they raced down the stairs towards us. Ms. Nuckeby looked up, trying to see through the foliage herself.
“Who’s that?” she asked.
“Um—why, that’s Mindie,” I said, my voice rising, trying to make her sound fun, and exciting, and welcome—as if she were bringing gifts, food, and champagne for the needy.
Ms. Nuckeby’s expression darkened. “The one from last night. The girl with the giant bazooombs who made you stiffen up.”
“And not in a good way. Yes. That would be her.”
“Why is she here?” There was a tension in Ms, Nuckeby’s voice I’d never heard before. It startled me, and I wanted it to go away and let the nice voice come back to play.
“Well,” I said, smiling, “this is going to make you laugh, but…”
“Does she know you’re here to see me?”
An ant stung my eyeball. Twitching, I replied, “Em…no.” “Why does she think she’s here?”
I laughed. It didn’t even sound like a genuine laugh to me. “Well…see…that’s an amazing story. She…of all things…thinks she’s here to…em…”
She waited.
She stopped waiting.
“Yes?”
I swallowed. “Get…um…married,”
“Married,” she said flatly. She wasn’t seeing the amazing part. “To whom?” The ice in her voice said she already suspected that particular answer.
“Ummmm…” I said. “Excellent use of grammar there. Most people would say ‘to who?’ I like that you use…”
She glowered at me, and I paused for far too long, making the answer blazingly obvious. “To…em…me.”
“To you.”
Her face hardened. I didn’t like it that way. I preferred it the way it had looked when she’d first heard I had come to see her. I wanted that face back. I tried thinking of amusing jokes I might tell her, but for some reason all I could think of was Opus.
“She thinks she’s here to marry you,” Ms. Nuckeby said, as if she were speaking to a three-year-old.
“See, that’s the fascinating part,” I said. “Last night, after you left…”
She dropped my head back into the anthill, stood and looked at me with disgust.
“Men and big tits,” she snarled, then turned instantly and walked away.
“What? No!”
I sat up and called to her, but she wouldn’t turn around. Not that I minded looking at her from this angle, naked as she was, but I really wanted her to come back to me.
“Ms. Nuckeby!”
I considered calling out how great her tits were, that this had nothing to do with Mindie’s tits, but reconsidered for various reasons, none of which had anything to do with common sense, believe me.
Ignoring me completely, Ms. Nuckeby passed between the other nudists who had clustered behind her and headed back down through the bushes toward the beach. Her friends all looked at me sadly, some of them confused, then slowly pulled themselves away and turned to follow her. I tried to stand, but had some difficulty owing to the fact that I had a rather large tree branch stuck in my pants. By the time I removed it, Mindie had arrived with the others, and Ms. Nuckeby was long gone.
Mindie ran over to me, genuine concern in her voice.
“Dear, God, Corky!” she said. “What happened?”
“I…uh…I slipped on a…uh…rodent or something,” I lied.
She moved to help me up then recoiled when she got a good look at me, apparently fearing ants, disease—or ants with disease.
“Help him up,” she said, backing away and gesturing to Morgan and the Pastor, who had followed her down. Ms. Waboombas was actually the first one to reach me, and lifted me off the ground almost entirely by herself, though the others vaguely helped her as she supported me. They all brushed away ants, and I tested my limbs. Nothing broken, apparently, other than my will to live.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“Well, that’s something,” Mindie said. “But you look horrid. You need to get cleaned up before anyone sees you.”

I stared at her, dumbfounded.

“Who’s going to see me?”

“People,” Mindie said, as if it were bad enough that she had seen me. “Besides. I want you to be presentable for the wedding.”

There was a sudden, sharp snarl from the bushes near the shore, and for a moment I thought I saw a woman’s face in the leaves. But it disappeared quickly into the shadows and went silent. Everyone in our group turned to look around for the source of the animalistic sound, and Mindie moved behind me for safety. I’m not sure how she thought I would provide any. Maybe she just hoped it wouldn’t be hungry for her once it had eaten me.

“We should be going,” Mindie said nervously. “Who knows what wild animals live in these woods.”

Suddenly, several ‘creatures’ with very human voices barked, and woofed, and growled from the shadows of the nearby foliage. Mindie and the others jumped and began hurrying back up the stairs toward the car, leaving Ms. Waboombas to lift and carry me by herself, which seemed to be no problem for her. I had to get the name of her personal trainer.

“In all honesty,” I said, turning to yell over Ms. Waboombas shoulder and into the bushes. “I PREFER WILD ANIMALS TO DOMESTICATED BEASTS!”

Ms. Waboombas looked at me like beans had begun magically spilling from my nostrils, but she couldn’t deny that the bushes suddenly became very quiet and still.

“It’s why I came here,” I said, still more to the bushes than anyone near me. “Not because I’m a fan of…” I paused, considering, “…overabundant milk! I prefer normal amounts of milk, believe me! Just enough and no more!”

“Come on,” Waboombas said, glancing at the shrubs along the shore. “You must have hit your head harder than you think.”

“Hopefully I knocked some sense into it,” I said.

She stared at me for quite while, then shook her head, hefted me and began the journey up the long staircase, cradling me like a baby.

I continued to smile into the bushes all the way to the top.

The sign I’d never read said:

WELCOME TO GREEN VALLEY
NIKKID BOTTOMS—1 mile
NOTTYNGON—4 miles

There was an arrow pointing off toward the coast.

“Nottyngon,” Morgan said. “Isn’t that where Robin Hood lived?”

No one saw the need to correct him.

Someone—‘wild animals’ probably—had used fluorescent paint to turn the first ‘I’ of ‘NIKKID’ into an ‘E’ so that the sign now read— in a very juvenile attempt at humor in reference to the nude beach below no doubt—‘NEKKID BOTTOMS’, a joke no one over the age of seven could possibly find amusing.

“HA!” Ms. Waboombas said, laughing and setting me down. “Someone changed the sign! Nekkid Bottoms! Get it? Like ‘Na-ked Bottoms’.” She shoved me hard, as if we were both in on the single greatest joke ever, and then collapsed in a spasm of laughter, which lasted a good several minutes. She eventually finished, wiping tears, stifling aftershocks of giggles, and breathing heavily. The rest of us simply ignored her as we returned to the Duesenberg.

“What are you in a condition to drive?” the pastor asked.

I just smiled weakly, climbed behind the wheel as the others settled themselves, and quietly drove off.
We trundled along—steaming and spewing, sputtering and clunking, in the direction indicated by the defaced road sign—down what had become a one-lane dirt path toward the coast, and—hopefully—the repair shop.

As I drove the winding road, shifting about painfully, joints aching, wounds throbbing, I still couldn’t stop thinking of Ms. Nuckeby. Damn those cruel hounds. If I hadn’t ruined things last night, this most recent meeting had certainly driven several nails into some kind of coffin—probably mine. The worst part was: I was having a difficult time reconciling her behavior with that of a gold digger. She seemed genuinely distressed by Mindie. She had last night in the closet as well. And if all she was interested in was money, why not stay and fight it out? I had told her I was here specifically to see her. That should give her strength of mind to stick it through and do battle if all she wanted was cash and comfort.

Instead, she had reacted as if she were jealous of all things. As if she might actually be somewhat interested in me. Or entirely interested in me. Was that possible? Was the gold digger idea a nonstarter, so to speak? And besides, how much gold would she need to dig if she never spent any on clothes? Isn’t that the primary reason women become gold diggers in the first place? House, cash, clothes. What kind of woman was Ms. Nuckeby anyway?

Convinced I had likely ruined any and all hopes of ever finding out, I decided it was best to just stop agonizing about things. I turned my attention to the scenery and attempted to get lost, somewhat meditatively, in its beauty. I’d never spent much time—if any—in the country, and I was surprised to find that it was—as so many who have spent actual time in it have often said—potentially quite relaxing. Trees rose up majestically on all sides, songbirds did their thing, and the air was crisp, and fresh smelling—like newly cleaned floors. The area was lovely, no question. Were I a normal person, I might have actually enjoyed it.

But instead—as my fiancée and imminent wife sulked beside me, and Ms. Nuckeby’s anger at me continued to haunt—painful emotions roiling around inside me like the chest-burster from Alien—I began to absently wonder if wild bears, or other untamed animals, really did live in these woods. If so, would they be dangerous to us? Was it possible they could, at any moment, come leaping from the dense undergrowth, tear me limb from limb, and eat me viciously right here, alive, in full view of Mindie and the others.

One could only hope.

Out of nowhere, we found ourselves on a charming old stone bridge leading across to a pastoral little island, and the tiny village that had been built along its shores.

The place was a vision leading me out of the darkness of my thoughts.

The Island of Nikkid Bottoms was surrounded by beautiful blue sea. It had fields of green, and sandy yellow beaches. There were rivers and streams, and lots of trees where birds sang. There were windmills and a coalmine, and docks where visitors to the island could arrive, and there were lots and lots of railway lines. I half expected Thomas the Tank Engine to come around a bend doing something useful and reliable.

A sign read: ‘Welcome to the island of NIKKID BOTTOMS. Pop. 954.’

It was a lovely place—very Old World English in its charm, with some eclectic bits thrown in. There was a little Roman architecture, a bit of English country, and some French provincial. From the bridge on, all the roads were cobbled stone, not asphalt, and sprinkled everywhere were well-maintained public gardens. It was a very inviting little place, all wrapped around a cozy little bay. It reminded me of that town—what was it? Port Merion—where Patrick McGoohan was trapped and couldn’t escape from in ‘The Prisoner.’

Just ahead, beyond a banner that read: ‘NIKKID BOTTOMS SUMMERTIME SOIREE’ with this weekend’s dates, and a little dancing Pilgrim who seemed to be on fire, there was a small gas station that was currently empty. I couldn’t imagine it was ever anything but. At 954, the population of this place was microscopic, and there seemed to be no tourist trade to speak of—even with the impending ‘soiree’. It was serenely quiet and tranquil, and I found myself warming to it instantly, looking forward to our stay here, however brief.

“God, what a vile little town,” Mindie sneered. “What’s that horrible smell? Is that the sea?”

Discouraged yet again, I pulled into the service station, drove forward to the main pump and waited.

“Why are you stopping?” Mindie demanded. She was scratching an armpit with both hands. Very unladylike. Apparently her recent travails had led to her give up any effort at personal decorum.

“I don’t know how much farther we can go,” I said, “with the car like this.”

“This isn’t the repair shop.”

“No, but maybe they can tow us or give us directions.”

“Helena gave you directions.”

“But I don’t see any street signs. Could it hurt to ask?”

“You really aren’t much of a man, are you?” she said dismissively.

“What does that mean?” I asked, getting angry. It had been a long day, and contrary to popular belief, I could get angry. I just had difficulty maintaining it.

Mindie didn’t respond. She just stared at me, wide-eyed.
“What was that supposed to mean?” I asked again, folding my arms and demanding an explanation to what I felt certain was an insult to my dubious manhood.

In answer, she simply pointed, and I realized she wasn’t staring at me, but over my shoulder. So was everyone else. I turned to see what they were focused on and wound up looking right into the solitary ‘eye’ of a rather large and hairy penis.

I screamed. Again in a disturbingly feminine way.

Sadly, Mindie may be right.

The penis was attached to a man. The man was tall, muscular, greasy—and entirely naked, other than a dirty baseball cap with the service station logo on it. The cap and logo did nothing to obscure his penis, however, and owing to the fact that the gentleman had stepped up to my side of the car, it was still staring me right in the face.

I leaned back, trying to get out of striking distance, and almost climbed into Mindie’s lap. She, apparently, would have none of it and shoved me back, directly toward the thing, clearly not understanding that it was hungry.

“Can I help you?” tall, dark, and naked asked.

“No, but you can help me,” Ms. Waboombas offered, rising from her seat. The attendant was in no way dinky.

“We’re looking for the repair place,” I interjected before Ms. Waboombas could pounce.

“For a Duesenberg?” the naked attendant asked, looking over the car, taking in the steam, dents, and spewing coolant.

“Duh,” Mindie said, annoyed, not entirely up on the concept of etiquette to one’s perceived lessers. Of course, we were all perceived lessers to Mindie.

“I’m not sure where you could get it repaired,” he said, scratching his pubic hair and looking around. Every eye in the car was on his penis as it turned with him, flopping madly with every vigorous scratch. The pastor held up his good book like a fly swatter—just in case.

“I have an address,” I offered, pulling the slip of paper from my pocket and not losing eye contact with his pet snake.

I handed it to him, and he read it with some difficulty. His lips silently sounded out the words.

“That’s the address to the diner,” he said, pointing down an adjacent street. “I never heard of them doing repairs, but could be. I know River likes cars. You can ask. Just through town, on the right. Little place with a blue sign. Can’t miss it. It’s called ‘Nuckeby’s’.”

My heart skipped a beat, and was, once more, on the run from wild dogs.

I glanced around nervously. No one else had caught it. Likely they didn’t remember her name—not even Mindie, who had been so distraught at everything about ‘the model’ just twelve hours earlier. I felt a sudden rush again, and I was glad, at least, that I was wearing pants, as little good as they seemed to do me in obscuring things.

The attendant waited as my mouth moved silently for a bit due to my shock at the nearness of Nuckeby’s. One Nuckeby in particular.

“Anything else I can do you for?” he asked.

“Can you check my fluids?” Ms. Waboombas asked.

“Thanks!” I said, getting my voice back and cutting in. “Really appreciate it,” I said, and put the car in gear.

“Not a problem,” he said, smiling and waving as we drove off. His pet snake, Yardstick, waved too.

Ms. Waboombas stood to watch him recede in the distance continuing to smile broadly and hungrily. I pulled onto the cobbledstone road and headed in the direction he had indicated, while she continued staring behind us. Eventually he walked back into the station office, and she couldn’t see him any longer. At least not with her eyes.

“Let’s stop there on the way out and get filled up,” she said, plopping down in her seat and smiling. “If we need it, we can get gas too.”

No one responded. In fact, no one said anything as I continued driving into the sunny little village. The things we were seeing interfered with all higher brain functions. I was lucky I could drive. Apparently Ms. Nuckeby and her friends on the beach should have been more of a warning than a curiosity.

First, there was the statue at the center of the town square. It was a classic, bronze, full-figured statue of the town’s long-dead patriarch, a man in a three-pointed hat circa 16 or 1700, wearing a thigh-length overcoat, knee-high stockings, buckle shoes, and holding out one hand in a welcoming gesture—like so many similar statues you’ve likely seen of Benjamin Franklin or George Washington in their youth.

Except that Homer wasn’t wearing any pants.

The sculpture had been exquisitely tooled by a master artisan, and, in fact, Homer’s bronze member was truly a thing to behold. Richly detailed, it hung far below his knees and was as thick as a redwood. If the real Homer’s was anywhere near that size, it must have taken him only one or two seconds to relieve a full-bladder. After downing a few beers, he would have become a one-man volunteer fire department.

The inscription on the golden plate attached to the plinth the statue rested on, read:
HOMER NIKKID

FOUNDER
BE HONEST * BE MORAL * BE COMFORTABLE

Throughout the square, people of equal, or greater pantslessness had converged to take in the sun, visit with friends, and do some afternoon shopping. We cruised past an older couple on a street corner—both naked save for sandals. Farther on, we saw a man on a bicycle, wearing nothing but a hat. Just past him, a mother and children crossing the street, all wearing shoes.

Just shoes.

A pair of naked old men played checkers in front of a barbershop.

A nude man painted a sign. A naked family tossed a football around. A group of teenagers talked about something hormone-related. A couple carried groceries. A farmer rode a tractor. A man walked his dog. Someone near a pay phone talked on her cell.

All naked.

The town was filled with naked people. As we steamed through, it became nakedly obvious that this place was some sort of nudist resort where people wore no clothes. Which is, one supposes, the very definition of a ‘nudist resort’, now that I think about it. ‘Nekkid Bottoms’ indeed. Other than footwear and occasional hats, there was not a stitch of clothing to be found anywhere within the city limits—neither on people, nor animals, nor on pictures of people and animals. Not even a clothing store that I could see.

I noted there was a couple of shoe stores though.

“Clothes For The Naked,” Morgan said.

We all looked that way, and I saw that I was apparently wrong. There was one clothing store, although their ‘clothes’ looked more like our lingerie.

Each of us stared goggle-eyed at the sea of nudity surrounding us, disturbed and amazed.

Everyone except Ms. Waboombas.

“What a great place,” she said.
Before long, I’d passed through town and reached ‘Nuckeby’s Bar and Grill’, a quaint little English pub kind of place, the type you rarely see, even in England. I pulled into a small parking lot that was fairly well filled with cars, and stopped beside a Harley Davidson, wondering about the rider. Would he be wearing just a helmet? Chaps? Boots? Would he be naked on the bike, but have to wear clothes inside a place of business? Or vice versa?

What the hell were the rules in a place where wandering around in public with nothing on was rule number one?

I got out of the car, as did the others. A few people were coming down the street and heading toward the entrance of the restaurant—all sans garment. I was still shirtless, but now felt overdressed. Mindie came and stood near me, apparently uncomfortable enough to need the reassurance of closeness, if not actual physical contact. The pastor looked around nervously, as if expecting at any moment for Saint Peter to show up and toss him into Hell just for looking around. Morgan was smiling like a horny schoolboy—which, come to think of it, is pretty much Morgan in a nutshell—and Ms. Waboombas was naked.

Ms. Waboombas was naked?
Why should that surprise me?
The pastor gasped. Mindie gasped. Morgan smiled appreciatively and popped another coke.

“When in Rome,” Waboombas said, smiling and dropping her panties into the back of the Duesenberg.

“But we don’t know if it’s clothing optional, inside,” I said. “Are you kidding?” Mindie asked. “Look through the window! Everyone in there is stark, raving, naked!”

I’d just noticed that myself. You really couldn’t avoid it.

Nuckeby’s Bar and Grill was—well—I guess the gentle way to put it would be—a slightly common diner-style restaurant with basic fare, simple décor, and large, clear windows on all sides to show off all the naked people. It was the kind of place old folks visit to have their arteries hardened—the kind of ‘family’ restaurant parents with a minimum of two-dozen feral children frequent so someone else will have to clean up after them.

Through the glass, partially obscured by brightly painted specials and lunch deals of various organ meats, we could plainly see roomfuls of happy, naked folk joyously ordering, receiving, or dining upon extravagant portions of food that would never have been approved by the surgeon general except under the Bush 2 administration, and only then for purposes of torture. Lunchtime among the common, and the bare.

Despite this, I was eager to go in. Somewhere inside, someone had to know where to find Ms. Nuckeby. Or rather, Wisper, to be more specific in a place potentially filled with both Mister and Ms. Nuckeys. I felt tingly again, though quite nervous. My direction in life was becoming clearer, but in a hazy, foggy, uncertain kind of way.

“I don’t know,” I said, and turned to the others. “You want to wait out here while I go in?” I hoped they’d say ‘yes’. I wanted privacy to track down my nude model.

“Not me. I’m hungry,” said Ms. Waboombas, apparently this time actually meaning ‘for food’.

She strutted away from us toward the door wearing nothing but high heels, ragingly comfortable in her own skin. I looked at the others—who, thankfully, all rapidly shook their heads ‘no’—and I hurried to follow her lead.

The stripper and I arrived at the door together, and with some aplomb, she threw open the entrance and framed herself conspicuously in its opening. She put one hand on her hip, leaned the other against the doorjamb and slowly looked around. Or, rather, slowly waited for everyone else to look around and see her.

No one did more than casually glance. They all went about their naked business. Ms. Waboombas became a bit agitated, strode forward, and—coughing loudly—did a slow pirouette near the cheesecake display.

No one even turned her way. It surprised us both.

Becoming annoyed, Waboombas cleared her throat, threw out her chest, and with some aplomb, she threw open the entrance and framed herself conspicuously in its opening. She put one hand on her hip, leaned the other against the doorjamb and slowly looked around. Or, rather, slowly waited for everyone else to look around and see her.

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No one even turned her way. It surprised us both.

Becoming annoyed, Waboombas cleared her throat, threw out her chest, and suddenly, out of nowhere, a brass band began to play. Now all eyes turned our way.

Still standing in the doorway, I turned to look back at the street and saw a local marching band of some kind, complete with nude, fuzzy hatted drum major and clothes-less baton twirlers, parading down the street and playing to…uh…beat the band. I supposed they were rehearsing for some nude-centric festival event later in the weekend, though it was possible they did this all the time just for fun.

I mean, again, who knew the rules?

The overall effect on Mindie, Morgan, and the pastor would have been the same if a sniper had opened fire on them: they all scampered about like cockroaches escaping Raid. Skittering here and there, desperately trying to find cover, they eventually gave up and ran over to where Ms. Waboombas and I stood in the open door of the restaurant. Frantic, they pushed past the stately stripper and I, into the diner, holding their ears as if—somehow—just hearing the music would seduce them, Pied Piper-like, into racing off a cliff so they’d fall to their deaths atop a pile of naked people.

Ms. Waboombas and I followed them up to the hostess station, and I moved to the front as everyone else stood
to one side trembling—paralyzed with fear. A carved wooden sign nailed to the podium read: ‘No Shirt, No Pants, or No Service.’ I waited patiently for a moment, then noticed a bell on the hostess station podium and dinged it gently.

A pretty young girl (naked) talking to a cook (naked) near the counter began backing our way (naked) as she finished her conversation. He laughed at something she said that I couldn’t hear, most likely a joke about a minister, a stripper, a comic book fan, and a clothing executive lost in a nudist colony. As the hostess backed toward me, I managed to drag my eyes, as though wrestling with alligators, away from her shapely rear-end, and somehow note that she wore a cute little choker-bowtie, wrist cuffs, and an apron. Aaaand—that was pretty much it.

“How many?” she asked, turning to smile at me brightly.

Both our smiles fell like snow off a roof in springtime as we each realized whom the other was. I was myself, and she was my Ms. Nuckeby.
“Mister Wopplesdown!” Ms. Nuckeby said.
“Ms. Nuckeby!” said I.
I could feel Mindie’s body temperature rise to dangerous levels behind me.
“You know this woman?” she asked.
My mouth flapped uselessly.

Ms. Nuckeby glanced over at the others. She wore the sort of expression you’d find on someone staring at an oncoming train while trapped inside a gasoline tanker and tied atop high explosives, as someone carelessly attempts to light a cigar with a blowtorch.

“You don’t remember me?” Ms. Nuckeby asked Mindie, clearly stunned.

“I do not associate with nudists!” Mindie sneered, dismissively. “Why would I remember you?”

Ms. Nuckeby’s fear was bussed away, then quickly replaced by a heaping helping of anger, and a side order of disdain.

“No reason,” she said and turned to me. “Lovely woman,” she said, not meaning it. “Your fiancée?”

“I am,” Mindie announced.

“Excellent,” Ms. Nuckeby said, her eyes never leaving mine. “How wonderful for you both. How many?” she asked, clapping menus, her voice filling with courteous distance, as if she had never, ever rubbed her breasts against my back or squeezed my whatchamajigger, and I shouldn’t try to convince anyone otherwise, or else.

“Five,” I said. “But some of us are still dressed.” I nodded toward the sign.

“And we are not eating here,” Mindie snarled.

Our hostess turned and looked at her carefully, sizing her up. After a moment’s assessment, she scanned slowly over the rest of my little troupe, and eventually returned her furious attentions to me. She looked at me for so long that I furtively brushed my face to make sure there wasn’t something stuck there, sucking blood.

 Abruptly, a smile popped back onto Ms. Nuckeby’s face, and she said, overly cheerily in some kind of bizarre, hick accent: “Yew folks’ve never bin to Nikkid Baw-dums buh-fore, have yew?”

“Yew kin tell?” I asked, smiling. I’d lost the war; I may as well enjoy the final battle.

“Well, I can see some of you are trying to fit in,” she said in her normal speaking voice, looking at Waboombas and Mindie. “But the rest...”

“I am not trying to fit in,” Mindie snarled, interrupting. “This is the last place I’d try to fit in.” She folded her arms and half-lidded her eyes in an attempt at superiority. “We had a clothing accident. I fell in a ditch.”

“I pushed you in a ditch,” Waboombas corrected.

“I tripped.”

“Because I kicked your pasty white ass, you tripped.”

“Really?” Ms. Nuckeby cut in, glaring at Mindie. “I can’t imagine anyone would ever want to kick your pasty white ass.” I’m not sure why she said she couldn’t imagine it. Her voice told us all, distinctly, that she was doing so —repeatedly —right this second.

“So, if you’re not here to eat, then why did you come to our lovely establishment?” Ms. Nuckeby asked me, rather pointedly. And was that a hopeful note in her voice? Probably not.

“Um...well...” I began. “It’s difficult to explain. The simple answer is: we’re looking for a repair place. A Duesenberg specialty shop.”

“Duesenberg? Is that a car?”

“It is.”

“Foreign?”

“No, it’s American. Old, though. Built in 1934.”

“That is old.”

“Older than me.”

“Older than most people. What was that name again?” “Duesenberg. Sound familiar?”

“No. It’s just a funny word. I wanted to hear it again.” “Duesenberg.”

“That’s enough.”

“I’m done anyway,” I said. “My tongue isn’t what it was this morning.”

“Maybe because you were chewing on fire ants?”

“That’s a distinct possibility.”

“Distinct is a funny word, too,” she said. “It’s sorta got ‘stinked’ in it.”

“Sorta,” I replied. “Hadn’t realized that before. Any reason that’s occurred to you at this particular moment?”

“No. It just did. Sounds German.”

“Distinct?”

“No, the name of the car. I’m back on that.”

“Oh, right. The brothers who made them were German, but they lived in America.”

“They don’t anymore?”

“I believe they’re dead now.”
“How sad,” she said with seeming sincerity. “Got lost somewhere and couldn’t find a repair place?”
“I think I saw their skeletons just outside of town.”
“Were they heading this way? Because we don’t have any Duesenberg repair shops. Or cemeteries.”
“If I see them, I’ll let them know they can’t be buried here. Do you have any car repair places?”
“No,” she said and paused, fighting a grin. “We have a bike shop.”
She smiled slightly, in spite of herself. She was warming to me again, and I had to keep the thaw going. But that required charm, and I wasn’t sure I had any.
“A bike shop? Do they repair cars?” I asked, returning her grin. Her personality was just so damned infectious.
“Just the kind you pedal. For kids.”
“If I buy a Flintstone-mobile, I’ll keep that in mind. How about cars that run on gasoline?”
“Not for kids. What are you thinking?”
“Who said I was thinking? How about gasoline cars for grownups?”
“Do you know any grownups?” she asked, twinkling.
“Only the Duesenberg brothers.”
“And I hear they’re dead.”
“So there’s no Duesenberg repair shop at this address?”
“This address?” She was genuinely surprised. “No. What crazy person told you that?”
“As a matter of fact, my crazy Aunt…”
“Your Aunt Helena told you there was a Duesenberg repair place here? At this address?”
“Wrote it down and everything.”
“Why would she do that?”
“She really wanted me to come here.”
“Only one reason I can think of.”
She fixed me with a stare. I could feel her thaw spreading, and I sensed, for a moment, that we were back in the closet. But only for a moment.
“Well, I can’t think of any,” Ms. Nuckeby said, recovering quickly and closing that emotional door in my emotional face with an emotional slam. “This is not now—nor has it ever been—a Duesenberg repair shop. We’ve been here since the town began. Nothing but food.” She stopped and looked at a menu, then grinned again. Clearly, she couldn’t deny her own nature. “We do sell sauerkraut though.”
“That’s not a food?”
“No in my opinion.”
“Is it a foreign car?”
“No. It’s rotten cabbage. But it is German. We put it on hot dogs.”
“But not on Duesenbergs.”
She giggled, then caught herself. She shook her head. The closet door beckoned, and it was becoming harder for her to fight coming back inside with me. Apparently I did have charm.
“No,” she said. “We don’t put it on Duesenbergs. A guy asked for it ‘to go’, once though. Maybe he put it on a Duesenberg.”
This time I laughed. I felt lighter and happier than I’d felt in a very long time. I could have continued this pointless conversation for hours. But Sheriff Mindie of the double D ranch cleared her throat and reminded me that my life could not be fun. Ever.
“Are you two planning on getting to any kind of a point, anytime soon?” she asked.
“Not really,” I said, as Ms. Nuckeby giggled and tried to stifle it. Mindie glared at me. “Why are you talking to this woman?” “Because…”
“How about car rental places?” Mindie cut me off, asking Ms. Nuckeby directly. “Anything like that around here?”
“No rental cars anywhere in town,” said Ms. Nuckeby, not looking at Mindie, her grin slowly expanding. “But the pedal cars are cheap.”
“Well,” I said, turning to the others. “It seems we’re stuck here until Aunt Helena arrives.”
There were moans and groans from everyone except Ms. Waboombas. Ms. Nuckeby looked intrigued, so I wasn’t at all sorry for that particular news.
“I’m sorry,” I said to them. “I don’t see that we have any options.”
Everyone looked at one another, hoping someone had an answer to this horrifying dilemma. Thankfully, no one
“And if Helena doesn’t come for some reason?” Mindie asked, seeming genuinely frightened.

“There’s a nice hotel just down the street,” Ms. Nuckeby offered. “You could even stay for the Festival.” She glanced up at me—was that hope I saw in her expression?

Mindie sneered at her and sniffed derisively, then turned to the pastor to ask him if he knew anyone at the chapel who could come get us; as they discussed the idea, Ms. Nuckeby leaned closer to me and spoke softly—so Mindie couldn’t hear.

“Your aunt is coming?” Her low tones forced me to get very close to her. Close enough to smell her alluring scent, which excited me and made me, once again, glad I was wearing pants.

“Part of her plan,” I said, turning away from the others and lowering my own voice.

“What plan?”

“To bring us together.”

Her breathing deepened. We were back in the closet, door closed, lights dimming.

“Because she knows you’re not a fan of…” She paused, stifling a laugh, “…overabundant milk?”

“Nor the containers it comes in,” I said.

“By ‘bring us together’ you mean you and me, right? Getting you and me together? As opposed to you and your aunt? Or you and ‘Mindie’.” She said ‘Mindie’ like the word was something hairy trying to crawl up her nose.


A smile slowly spread across her entire face. The look had returned. The one that said, ‘You threw yourself down a hill, and onto a pile of stinging ants—for me?’

“Then why does Mindie think she’s getting married to you?”

“Long, weird story. But trust me. You’re the one I’m here for.”

“Is it possible?” she asked, profound hope in her voice. “I mean, us? Now that you know?” She glanced around at the restaurant and all the naked people contained therein.

“Corky!” Mindie interrupted. “Why do you keep talking to her?”

I became angry. Surprise, surprise. “Because…”

“We were just discussing whether you would like something to eat while you wait,” Ms. Nuckeby said, diving in to defuse my irritation, gathering menus and becoming Super-Cordial Woman. “Would you?”

Everyone hesitated, clearly hungry but not wanting to dine in the midst of so many nudists. What if they accidentally touched one? And stuck?

“We need to eat,” I pointed out.

And I needed more time with Wisper. I longed for her in a way that surprised me. Oh, Orsino, thou wise and knowing fictional character.

Trust your feelings, Aunt Helena had said, Obi Wan Kenobi-like. Well, Wisper knew I came here for her, yet had dropped me onto an anthill out of jealousy. A gold-digger would have lifted me up and fought Mindie for the money. Here—in spite of herself—Wisper had been as warm and funny to me as she had been in my closet. Perhaps she was genuine. Just a charming, small-town girl who liked being naked. And really, I thought, staring at her breasts, what was wrong with that?

Clearly, my reptilian brain was now in complete control. Maybe I should…

‘Trust your feelings, Luke.’ A ghostly voice called to me from the beyond, startling me. I looked around nervously, a little scared, and saw a naked kid watching Star Wars on a video iPod. I shoved him away from me.

Returning my attentions to Ms. Nuckeby I warmed with hope.

“Isn’t there somewhere else to eat?” Mindie asked. “Where people have the decency to wear clothes?”

“Not in this town,” Ms. Nuckeby shot back, uninhibited, and motioned to the exit. “Feel free to look.”

“We really should eat,” I said, pressing the issue.

“I’d rather starve,” Mindie said.


Slowly, reluctantly, the others agreed to sit down to a meal and moved around Mindie—the rock, and the hard place. I heard her stomach growl, and she flinched, apparently annoyed that people might know she required food like normal human beings.

“Sure you won’t join us?” the pastor asked, seemingly more comfortable in Mindie’s company than ours. There was no accounting for taste.

“Oh,” Ms. Nuckeby said, “don’t force her if she doesn’t want to.”

“No,” Waboombas said. “Please don’t force her if she doesn’t want to.

“I don’t want to.” Mindie snipped.
There you go.

“Who knows how long it will be before we can get to another restaurant?” the pastor encouraged her, not really helping at all.

Mindie sulked silently for a moment. Then her stomach roared again. The beast demanded to be fed and would not be denied.

“All right,” she said, defeated, and stepped forward. But Ms. Nuckeby would not be so easily trumped. She held up a hand, pointing to the sign.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “nudity—is—required.”

Mindie was momentarily caught off-guard.

“What?” she said, finally. “But…but that’s outrageous! You’re letting them in with clothes.”

“They weren’t rude to me.”

Everyone looked at Mindie. For a moment, she was cowed. It couldn’t last, I knew, my life couldn’t be that easy. But for now, at least momentarily stunned and revolted by the very thought of naked strangers looking at her naked body, she appeared to feel even more exposed in her underwear and buttonless shirt-dress than if she were actually in the all-together. She clamped the shirt fronts so tightly over herself that her breasts rose fully under her chin, making her head look as though it were sticking out of an ass.

Eventually the fear receded, as I knew it must, and her face darkened with a scowl that took on an almost demonic deepness. Her godfather, Satan, would be very proud.

“I would sooner die.”

“Okay,” Ms. Nuckeby said. “But die outside. Otherwise it’s a health violation.”

Mindie huffed furiously. She stiffened—defiant—her head turning several shades of red (many not on any color charts I’d ever seen) until finally she turned and threw open the restaurant’s entry door expecting to exit dramatically. But her stomach growled again— like a pride of wild male lions on the veldt insisting that their women bring down a gazelle or two, and do it now, bitch. Like Mindie’s stomach, lions are sexist and mean when they’re hungry. Visibly embarrassed, she turned one last time to scowl at the rest of us before striding ferociously out of the building.

Ms. Nuckeby smiled, the proud and satisfied victor.

Grabbing the stack of menus and several towels from a bin— presumably for anyone who might be hungry for ribs—she turned, inviting us into the dining room and toward a booth. It took serious effort on the part of all us males not to stare at her lovely bare behind. The pastor averted his eyes so far upward he seemed to be looking directly to the source, saying prayers that were obviously going unanswered.

I, on the other hand, took in our surroundings—which, upon second glance, were not as tacky as I had earlier assessed. Except maybe the rotting old moose-head that appeared to be a prime centerpiece. It hung over the center of the room, threatening at any moment to fall upon the naked herd of humans grazing at the salad bar beneath it. Other than that, however, the place was rustically charming. Obviously a ‘Nuckeby’ family trait.

As I absorbed the ambience, I noticed Morgan succumbing to his baser nature—okay, his only nature—by blatantly ogling Ms. Nuckeby’s backside. I shoved him, wagging a finger at his rudeness. He glared at me and went right back to ogling, so I had to move in front of him to block his view. He leaned around me to see, and I jumped back again to screen him. It was a weird dance we did all the way to the table, and it made me wonder how this kind of lifestyle could possibly work.

How did people avoid endless ogling and constant arousal? What was proper etiquette in this world? Would a woman be offended at a man’s sudden erection upon seeing her exposed bits? Would she be more offended by his lack of arousal? I already didn’t like the idea of other men becoming stimulated by Ms. Nuckeby. How did feuds and death-matches not spring up constantly all around us? Had people just gotten used to the random excitement of others and the drooling over one’s mate in this world? It was hard to imagine, and yet…I supposed this is what Ms. Nuckeby might have really meant when she talked last night in the closet about our different worlds.

Whether ogling was acceptable or not, I was insistent with Morgan, refusing to let him take visual advantage of something that I was coming to think of as mine. I was obviously, as they say, smitten. Which is really a funny word when you say it out loud.

As all this progressed around her, Ms. Waboombas, seemingly oblivious—as naked as anyone there, save for her ‘come-fuck-mehard’ stilettos—sashayed through the restaurant like a runway model, wanting attention, looking around with expectation and hopefulness, and waiting for someone to ogle her. Oddly, no one did. A few people stared intently at the pastor and Morgan, but the towering, ebonskinned, bare-assed stripper drew barely a glance.

I, clearly, just didn’t understand this place. Perhaps all the folks here were naked because they were actually blind, and didn’t care how other people dressed. Or were we ‘sighted’ outsiders simply the only ones rude enough to stare shamelessly? I was lost. I could only hope our menus came with some kind of instruction booklet.
Our hostess reached our booth—far in the back, away from any windows—and ushered us in, handing out menus. To Ms. Waboombas she also offered a towel.

“What’s this for?” Waboombas asked.

“To sit on,” Ms. Nuckeby answered. “You know, for hygiene.”

Ms. Waboombas looked at the towel, then around the room at everyone seated at their tables. Each person sat with a towel between their naked bottoms and their seat cushion. It was like some perverse, *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* moment. I checked around for a twoheaded president of the universe, but supposed he was in the men’s room negotiating a peace treaty with the toilet. Waboombas scrunched up her face, as did the rest of us, and we all grabbed for a towel, frantically placing them over our own prospective seats.

“The specials are on the inside front cover of the menu,” Ms. Nuckeby said as we sat, then grinned at me. “I recommend the sauerkraut dogs.” I returned her smile. “One note,” she continued, “we’re all out of vanilla ice cream. There’s been a run for some reason. Hope that’s okay.”

“Damn,” Ms. Waboombas said, rubbing a hand on my buttocks. “And you promised to spread vanilla aaaaall over me.”

“We still have chocolate,” Ms. Nuckeby offered, seemingly unaffected and ever helpful. A woman had grabbed my ass, and she didn’t seem the least perturbed. Was that a clue to the local etiquette, or just her knowing it was all a joke. My head spun.

“Chocolate’s always better,” Waboombas said delightedly, and sat beside the pastor, who squeaked in fear.

“Your server will be along shortly,” Wisper said. “Her name is Petal.”

“Petal Nuckeby?” I asked.

“Family business,” Wisper smiled. “She’ll take your drink orders.” She glanced down meaningfully at her perfectly proportioned breasts, then back up to me. “Though I assume you’ll be wanting milk?” she asked me, rather seductively. “Not in overabundant quantities or anything.”

She glanced down meaningfully at her perfectly proportioned breasts, then back up to me. “But *normal* amounts of milk.” She pau, staring at me a moment to see if steam exited any of my pores. “Just enough, and no more.”

Pssssssss…

“Just enough, and no more,” I repeated, breathily, suddenly overwhelmed by her.

“I’ll be happy to get that for you,” she said, almost as breathily.

“Oh, happy day,” Waboombas stuck in, scowling a bit into her menu. Her expression made me nervous.

“So,” Ms. Nuckeby said. “If you’ll excuse me.” Then she spoke more to me than the others, “I have some things to do in the storage room.”

She paused.

“Which is just beside the restrooms,” she added.

Another pause.

“Customers often go in there by accident,” she continued. “And we understand. It’s not a problem. It happens.”

She paused again and looked meaningfully at me. “Because it’s right next to the restrooms, so it’s very easy to make that mistake. Thinking the storage room—right next door to the restrooms—is also a restroom. Which it’s not. It’s a storage room. So that’s where I’ll be.” She paused. “In the storage room.”

“Which is right next to the restrooms,” Waboombas said with sinister intent, still staring at her menu but seemingly seeing something else.

“Just beside the restrooms,” she added.另一次暂停。

“Customers often go in there by accident,” she continued. “And we understand. It’s not a problem. It happens.”

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She paused for another moment, still staring at her menu but simply seeing something else.

“If anyone needs me,” Ms. Nuckeby said. “Right.”

Ms. Nuckeby stared at me for a moment longer, then smiled, shifted once nervously, and darted off.

I watched her go, feeling warmer all-of-a-sudden, and darted off. She paused again and looked meaningfully at me. “Because it’s right next to the restrooms, so it’s very easy to make that mistake. Thinking the storage room—right next door to the restrooms—is also a restroom. Which it’s not. It’s a storage room. So that’s where I’ll be.” She paused. “In the storage room.”

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She paused for another moment, still staring at her menu but simply seeing something else.

“If anyone needs me,” Ms. Nuckeby said. “Right.”

Ms. Waboombas grinned at me darkly.

“Sorry,” she said, “you gonna be heading to the restroom, then? I hear it’s next to the storage room.”

“In a minute,” I said, avoiding her taunt.

“Sorry,” she said, “you gonna be heading to the restroom, then? I hear it’s next to the storage room.”

“In a minute,” I said, avoiding her taunt.

She looked momentarily disappointed, then regained her smile and suddenly wiggled closer to the pastor than she needed to. He scrunched over as far as he could toward the wall, extremely put out by the thought of being in contact with her bare, black skin, though he tried not to show it. I sat opposite him, and Morgan was sitting next to me, staring at Ms. Nuckeby’s ass again as she hurried away. He was about to fall from our booth while leaning out to catch the last possible fleeting glimpse of her before she rounded the corner. I shoved him to make sure he did.

“Hey!” he said, after hitting the carpet.

I stood up beside him and prepared to follow Ms. Nuckeby.

“What’s with you?” Morgan demanded, climbing back into his seat. “She walks around like that—she’s gonna get ogled! It’s part of the deal!”

“It’s still rude,” I warned him.

“Not when someone runs around naked. When they run around naked, there is no ‘rude’. That’s a neon
invitation.” He looked at Waboombas. “Right?”

Wendy scooted the pastor into the wall. He groaned and placed his menu against it, reading intently as if every word counted.

“Sure,” Waboombas said finally.

“Right,” Morgan snapped, opening a menu, but not really seeing it. “And I am here to oblige. I’ll stare at that all day if I want to. And I do. What an ass!”

“It’s nothing special,” said Waboombas, annoyed. She turned a dark eye to me, and when I said nothing, she moved her gaze to Pastor Winterly, leaning closer to him. “What did you think, Reverend? About the hostess’ ass, I mean—compared to everyone else’s ass that is.”

He mumbled something about all God’s gifts being equal and hid deeper in his menu.

“Yes,” Waboombas said, smiling at me. “See? Nothing special.”

“She was not equal,” Morgan said. “She was HOT! She could be a model, that girl was so hot.” He paused for a moment as if remembering something, and I froze. He looked skyward, as if reading something on the ceiling then shook his head and let it go. “She’d look awesome dressed like Supergirl.”

Morgan didn’t seem to make the connection he, himself, had just made, and I thought I’d skated past it, when suddenly his face contorted like a white grape becoming a raisin in time-lapse—as if a memory were struggling to be recognized for admittance into the ‘by invitation only’ area of his conscious mind, and he was asking for its ID.

I tensed and waited. But apparently the memory became annoyed and went looking for another party. He shook his head again and returned to looking at his menu.

“Yeah, Supergirl,” he said.

“…uh…” I began.

“…need to use the restroom,” Waboombas blurted, finishing my sentence and glancing up at me from her menu with only her eyes. Slowly, she turned her attention back to the printed page and smiled. “It’s right next to the storage room from what I hear.”

“Yeah?” I said, and fidgeted nervously for a moment. “I hear that too.”

Everything was quiet as Waboombas continued smiling and pretending to look at her menu, occasionally glancing up at me. After a moment or two of silence, I began to realize she wasn’t going to rat me out and I backed away.

I was feeling home free and thrilled at the prospect of more confined spaces with Ms. Nuckeby, when suddenly Mindie bolted around the corner, completely naked and carrying a towel.
The amply endowed Ms. Butterwycke was running very fast, holding her largesse in her hands as best she could. But there was far too much loose, fleshy material to be contained, and it flopped everywhere with tremendous slapping sounds.

By the time she reached us, pale, white, fleshy things were sticking out between pressed hands, fingers, and
arms. She stopped and stood beside me at the end of our booth, hopping around from foot to foot as if she were standing on hot coals. The overall effect was that of dancing, gelatinized mashed potatoes with legs. There were still blades of grass and splotches of mud stuck to her from the earlier freeway altercation with Waboombas, and they didn’t do much in the way of making her look less pale, or less naked. Incredibly, the lack of eroticism was mind-boggling.

The rest of us stared at her with stunned expressions. Morgan smiled a bit and stared right at the shaggy fur of her crotch, for which she smacked his head.

“OW!” Morgan cried, covering himself to avoid further attacks.

“Let me in,” Mindie demanded, glaring at Ms. Waboombas.

Waboombas sneered at her as if she were a fly trying to land on her shit.

“Whataya mean ‘let me in’?” Waboombas asked, nodding to an empty spot beside her. “Sit there.”

“I want to sit on the inside!” Mindie screeched, apparently very near to losing it.

“Fuck you. Sit there.”

Mindie, still hopping, turned to Morgan and slapped his head again.

“Stop staring at that and let me in,” she demanded.

“What’s the big deal, Mindie?” Morgan asked. “Just sit…"

With the strength of ten Mindies, she grabbed him and yanked him out of the booth, throwing him to the floor and nearly ripping his shirt off in the process. I was beginning to think she really should be tested for steroid abuse.

Taking the hint, I moved aside before she could try any World Wrestling Federation moves on me. But she, apparently, couldn’t wait for me to get clear. She shoved me aside, hopped up on the seat and walked across it, dropping down into the spot I had just vacated moments earlier. She then positioned herself precariously with her towel in her lap, clamped her legs together and hunkered in against the wall as if she needed protection from an imminent nuclear blast.

She glanced around nervously, continuing to scrunch down, seemingly afraid someone she knew might come by and see her, apparently not realizing that people she knew already had. Morgan was looking at her with undisguised lust, and even the pastor—still pinned against the wall by Waboombas—couldn’t help glancing her way rather frequently.

We were in a room full of naked people—men and women—one already sitting at our table—but even I had to admit there was something transfixing about seeing someone publicly naked who would ordinarily never be seen without shoes, let alone clothes, someone who still desperately wanted to remain hidden. As long as I’d known Mindie, she hadn’t so much as exposed more than a little cleavage and her legs below the knees. What had possessed her to get completely naked here—now—in front of Morgan of all people, and the pastor of her family church?

“I refuse to starve to death out in that car,” she snarled, piercing us with a terrifying glare, “while the rest of you stuff yourselves sick and talk about me.”

She acted as if we had all, personally, locked her in a cage and poked her with sharp sticks.

She grabbed a menu and tucked it in around her like a bra, then stretched her face out, oddly, attempting to read the food choices trapped between the laminated plastic, and her voluminous breast tissue.

“And there’s no way I was going to leave you in here all alone with that chatty, brazen, food-service person, Corky. You were entirely too friendly with her.” She snapped a nasty look up at me, then returned to looking at the top edge of her menu.

“I’ll have a salad,” Mindie said suddenly, and looked up at the others as if they were all losers for taking so long.

I swallowed hard, and choked a bit. She’d picked up on the attraction between Ms. Nuckeby and myself. Was I being too transparent? Did it matter?

“Soossoo…” Ms Waboombas said in that tone that bespoke the coming of unspeakable horrors, “What are you going to get, Reverend?” I knew there must have been a reason she wanted to sit next to him, one that likely involved considerable pain and suffering for us all. “I was thinking I’d take the waitress’ hot dog recommendation,” she continued. The way she said hot dog, it clearly meant ‘pastor’s penis’. “Nothing like a good, old-fashioned wiener to fill you up and make you feel all warm inside.” She smiled at him meaningfully—though I’m not sure he understood that meaning. After all, he didn’t run screaming for the nearest exit. Then I saw one of her hands disappear under the table, and the pastor suddenly jumped.

Now he understood her meaning.

Mindie slapped at Waboombas, shrieking.

“Get away from him! GET AWAY!” Mindie continued striking at the taller woman with anything handy—napkins, menus, salt, and pepper shakers—trapping the unfortunate pastor between Waboombas and her fluffy of
attacks, apparently unaware that she had now drawn the attention of the entire restaurant.

“Sit on this side!” Mindie demanded. “Now!” She shoved Morgan. “Morgan, trade with her!” Morgan hesitated, and Mindie swatted at him too. “Move! Move! MOVE!”

Smiling, apparently satisfied that she had achieved whatever perverse goal she had set out to, Ms. Waboombas stood—regally—stretching herself out like a cat that won’t get off your lap, and then moved—with interminable slowness—toward the opposite side of the booth, and the spot Morgan had already vacated. Waboombas lay her hands on the table, pivoting on them so she could more easily swing her behind out and up, unhurriedly, toward the seat opposite her, thus putting it on full display for the roomful of intrigued patrons. As she did so, she took a few quick glances around, apparently satisfied that now—at last—all eyes were upon her. Or at least an important part of her.

Morgan—lost in the show—had to be reminded by Mindie with a saltshaker to the head that he needed to take the seat Waboombas had just risen from. He dropped into it, apparently weak in the knees, then slowly looked down at the seat beneath him, smiling drunkenly.

“It’s warm,” he said, as if orgasm were imminent.

Meanwhile, Waboombas placed herself gently beside Mindie, smiling and staring at her, reopening her bill-of-fare, and again pretending to read. Incredibly, she could make even that seem sexual.

With a huff, Mindie shook open her own menu and glared into it, her eyes darting around as if they were lasers trying to burn patterns through the plastic-coated paper. Then she remembered she was naked, slapped the menu back onto her breasts and scowled around, apparently certain that at least one of us had tried to steal a look at them, maybe even photograph them for distribution on the Internet. Unfortunately, I had stolen a look, and earned a peppershaker to the head for my foolishness. Brains spilled out the opposite side of my skull.

Really. Brains.

Wishing for an aspirin, I watched as the others also began to scan their menus. Quiet settled over the table. Now was the time.

“When our waitress gets here,” I told Morgan. “I’ll have the tunamelt and fries.”

“Where are you going?” Mindie asked. This would have been so much easier if she had stayed in the car. Which is probably why God hadn’t made her.

“I need to use the restroom.”

“Which is near the storage room,” Waboombas said.

I shot her a look. I wanted to hit her. But only if she couldn’t hit me back.

Mindie goggled at me, disgusted. “You’re going to use the restroom? Here?”

“I’m certainly not going to hold it in until Aunt Helena arrives and takes us somewhere else.”

The realization that she, too, might not be able to hold out that long clearly horrified Mindie.

“Dear God,” she whispered. “What are we going to do?”

“Use the restroom,” I said and turned to run away.

“I’d rather explode,” she said, defiantly.

“There are plenty of towels to clean up afterward,” I said over my shoulder.

“That’s not funny!” she snarled. “Corky! WAIT!”

Knowing I really shouldn’t, I stopped and turned back to her.

“You were getting awfully friendly with that waitress, person,” she said intently.

“Hostess.”

“What?”

“Just being polite,” I laughed. “You catch more flies with honey…”

“Why would you want to catch flies?”

“It’s just a figure of sp…”

“They’re disgusting. They carry germs.”

“I was just trying to say…”

“What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing. I have to use the rest…”

“You’re not going off to see her, are you?”

My face flushed, and I cursed the genetics that gave me excellent blood flow. I glanced at Waboombas, who smiled, but remarkably said nothing.

“Of course not,” I lied. “Why would I want to see…?”

“You were awfully familiar with her, up front, and she seemed to know your Aunt Helena, which doesn’t surprise me, but…”

“Know my aunt? Noooo. She was just being fresh. Smart-alecky. Pretending she knew her. Wait a minute.
Why wouldn’t that surprise you? What…"

“Were you attracted to her?”

“Who? The hostess?”

“No, your Aunt Helena. Yes, the hostess, dim-bulb. This is why father throws darts at you!”

“Mindie!”

“Did you find her attractive? I saw you looking at her breasts you know. You think I didn’t see that?”

“Not in a sexual way. That was merely a curiosity thing.”

Waboombas laughed. Or burped. I ignored her.

“I mean,” I continued, “they were right there. Exposed!”

“I know,” Mindie agreed. Calming a bit. “It’s so revolting. How people can allow themselves to be seen that way in public is beyond me.”

Each of us glanced over at her nakedness, but said nothing.

“I suppose you can’t help yourself. You are a man after all. But I don’t want you becoming—you know—aroused. You know how I feel about that kind of thing. We’ve discussed it.” She glanced down at my crotch and scowled warningly.

Waboombas smiled sinisterly, and started to say something. I prayed for her to be struck mute. God visited all kinds of nasty wrath upon Job, and he was a good person. Was a little laryngitis so much to call down on a stripper/pornographer with implants?

“Let the man use the toilet,” she said. Which shocked me.

“Butt out,” Mindie said.

“You said ‘butt,’” Waboombas snickered in an excellent Beavis impersonation. Or was it Butt-Head?

“Are you going to see her?” Mindie asked me again, ignoring the stripper, her eyes now squinting at my face.

Suddenly her eyes jerked again down to my crotch, as if she would catch my penis off-guard trying to sneak itself erect.

“See her? Mindie! Why would I want to see anyone else when you’re here? Your breasts are larger, and…and you’re naked, I might add!”

That caught her off-guard. I think she had forgotten she had stripped for her meal. She pulled the menu tighter against her breasts, and nodded once slowly as if to say, ‘excellent point’.

“I mean, look at you,” I said. “You’re…”

“Don’t be common,” she sniffed, then waved a hand. “We don’t want your—you know what—becoming all…you know again at the thought of me. Remember what happened to the car.” She paused a bit, staring at me like a child you just can’t make behave no matter how hard you try. “All right. Go on, then,” she continued. “Just be sure to use several of those paper ring thingies for the toilet seat. One could never be enough in this place.”

I smiled, nodded agreement, and turned away without another word. The last thing I needed was for my poor language skills to get me into deeper trouble.

“While you’re in there, think of ways to get us OUT of here!” Mindie called to my back. “CORKY?”

I didn’t acknowledge. No time for any more delays. Ms. Nuckeby beckoned.

I rounded the corner, out of sight of the others, and ran into our waitress. I know this because the nametag hanging from her chokerbowtie said ‘Petal’.

“Oh! Petal!” I said, startled and trying not to let on that I had been able to read her nametag in the first place because I’d been looking at her breasts. “Hello. I’m sitting at one of your tables.”

“Yes. I’m sorry,” Petal said, smiling and chirpy—if a bit harried. “I’ll be there for your drink orders as fast as I can. We’re a bit busy today. We have this festival thing all weekend, you know, and people actually came for it. Are you here for the Summertime Soiree?” “No, I…”

“It’s a lot of fun, but it turns into a zoo here with so many people—though, I suppose you’d think we’d be used to it by now, we get quite a run every year, but this year—whoo! I can’t remember when we’ve had so many people—except of course when we had the summer Olympics that one year, and all those athletes, they just ate so much—I guess they need their nutrition, so who can blame them—and it’s only the first day, though I guess that’s good for the community, but on the whole—my God! I’ll need a week to recover—I was just talking to the cook—Jeraldo—and he can’t remember a time when they were this busy—except, as I said, for those Olympics—which I wouldn’t know because I haven’t worked here as long as he has, and I know what you’re thinking—it’s a family business—but I only started two years ago when I turned seventeen because my parents wanted better things for me than to be a waitress at first because they felt it might become a bit of a trap for their kids, and they—like most parents, I suppose—had bigger plans for us—but in the end…”

“I was looking for the restroom!” I yelled, feeling certain it was the only way to get a word in edgewise.
“You don’t have to snap,” she said, visibly hurt and making me feel like I’d just kicked a puppy. A naked puppy.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I just have to go rather badly.”

“It’s all right,” she said, not meaning it. “I understand.” Also not meaning it.

She pointed, I glanced that way and saw the universal symbol for man-with-full-bladder.

“Down the hall, and to the left,” she said unnecessarily. Then added, even more unnecessarily: “It used to be out back when they first built this place, but we got a lot of complaints over the years, especially when it was cold because you had to go out front first then out and around to the back of the entire building to use the toilet, and sometimes the seats would freeze—only in the winter, of course—which—as I’m sure you can imagine, would cause problems—the toilet seats freezing, not the entire season, itself—especially when you’re in a hurry, though it’s more a problem for women than men because we have to sit down for everything, you know, which can be awfully irritating, how you men just have it so much easier in that way, and you have no idea how I envy that, how I often think about how nice it would be to just stop and go like you do—hang something out there and let it fly—I mean, it’s so much quicker and simpler, and you don’t have to check to see if some other guy has left the seat up first, or peed all over it, which is totally disgusting how some people can just leave it like that, isn’t it? And imagine if it gets frozen, which was part of the problem, especially when you’re rushing—and who isn’t rushing these days, because time is so short, and there are always so many people wanting something now, now, now…”

As I knew all too well. With Wisper waiting, and Mindie already suspicious, I had to get away. But Petal continued on, oblivious to the existence of periods. So I just smiled and nodded while backing away, looking for a break. Any break. Any break at all.

“…that was before we even had a paved road down the main street, if you can imagine…”

“Hard to believe!” I said, then turned and ran.

I dove between tables, tripped over a chair, recovered, and headed for the storage room.

“Like I said: People these days are in such a hurry,” I heard Petal say as I zoomed off. “Don’t rush so much you leave pee on the seat!”

I was almost there. I could almost see the light of Ms. Nuckeby as if she were some kind of personal homing beacon just for me. But as I approached the restroom, a tall, handsome man stepped in front of me. He was, of course, naked save for a bowtie and cuffs. Very Chippendale’s, completely devoid of pubic hair to—one assumed—more appealingly display a penis he was clearly quite proud of. And why shouldn’t he be? It could easily have been used to model sexual aids for very happy women. Not too big, but still pretty damn big! And as if that wasn’t enough, he looked like Tarzan. Or what Tarzan would look like if he were as staggeringly handsome and in shape as this guy.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“No, thank you,” I said. “I just need to get by to use the restroom.”

“Restroom’s right there,” he said, pointing to the wrong door. Wrong for me anyway.

“Right,” I said. “Right. See, the thing is, I need to get into that room.”

He looked at the door I indicated, and it had a sign that said—quite plainly—‘EMPLOYEES ONLY’.

“Not gonna happen,” he said flatly.

“Look,” I said. “I know this seems unusual, but there’s someone in there I need to talk to.”

“I know. Not gonna happen.”

He folded his arms across his chest and stood defiantly before me, his penis swinging beneath him like Poe’s pendulum of death.

Somewhere overhead, on a bust Pallas quoth a raven, “Nevermore.”

I looked at Tarzan for a long moment, wondering what was going on. I felt as though I’d missed an important detail somewhere, and looked around to see if there was some kind of joke being played.

No one seemed to be laughing.

Most of the customers in the general proximity were looking at me; one in particular was an older, gray-haired gentleman sitting at a nearby table with what might have been an appendix scar above his very thick penis. Not long, just thick. Like a doorstep. Those gray, commercial ones that are fat, and small, and round, and can stop a heavy, metal fire door in its tracks. I’d never seen anything like it. His penis, I mean. Not even stopping doors—and it manhandled my ability to think clearly, as I suppose you’ve figured out by now.

Beside him sat a younger man, perhaps my age or a bit older. A tad doughier than me, with a less noticeable penis—dinky, in Waboombas-speak—and anger in his face that made me physically flinch. For some reason, there was an almost pure kind of hatred in his eyes for me, yet I was positive I’d never seen him anywhere before now. What had I done to him? Was it just naked loathing for a clothed outsider? Did he have something personal against pants?
Between all the unexpected attention, and the human roadblock, I was thoroughly confused.

“Did I miss something?” I asked Tarzan. “I’m not planning to steal anything. I just need to get into that room so I can see…”

“My sister,” Tarzan said.

Oh.


“I know,” he continued. “I heard you at the front, and I heard you at your table. Let me repeat myself again for the hearing impaired. Not…gona…happen.”

Her brother. Things made a little more sense now.

I noticed others near us had—like the gray-haired old doorstop, and angry ‘hates pants’ man—had stopped talking and begun paying very close attention to our conversation. This was a very small town. But was it possible Ms. Nuckeby’s business would be town business? Suddenly I remembered Wisper’s brother—or parts of him—as well as one or two of the others here from the bottom of the hill near the beach. They were the other naked people who had been standing behind my favorite waitress.

Then it struck me that they must have all been heading here. Of course Wisper’s business was their business. I was standing in Nuckeby’s.

Duh.

“I know why you’re here,” Tarzan said.

“You do?” I asked, surprised. Because I didn’t.

“You extremist out-of-towners are always coming into Green Valley—horny and pushy—thinking the local girls are an easy mark just because they’re not repressed like you and wearing clothes.”

Wait. I was the extremist?

“Prudes like you think nudity means we’re all free and loose, and will just do it in a storage closet with anybody who comes along.”

“No. You misunderstand. That’s not why I’m here. I’m here to…”

What was I here for?

I looked around and considered things. This answered some questions really. If this was her home—how she had grown up—it explained a lot about her behavior, and her comfort with being naked. But it also meant any relationship between us was utterly impossible. This was not my lifestyle, and I couldn’t imagine learning to be comfortable with someone for whom it was. I manufactured clothes for God’s sake. How could we reconcile such a chasm of difference? How would we raise the children? Where would we spend Christmas? Who would provide the towels?

Was I just looking for some quick sex in a storage closet with his sister? If he thought I was, I guess I could understand his hostility—although I still resented him for it.

“I’m just here to…” I said, still trying to figure it out, “…apologize to her.”

“In a storage closet.”

“It was her idea. I thought you listened to our conversation.”

“Why do you need to apologize? What did you do to her?”

“So many things. But mostly…” I hesitated, fearing their reaction, “…it’s my fault she lost her job.”

There were a couple of gasps around the room, and—oddly—pants-hater smiled.

Smiled?

I turned back to Tarzan. Whatever pleasantness may have been lingering around in him fell out of his face, and he glared at me more intently.

“You Wopplesdown?”

His anger carried, and two more men sitting at a nearby table stopped talking and listened in.

“I’m a Wopplesdown.”

“What does that mean?”

“There are several of us. I’m Corky.”

He considered that for another moment. The two men listened more intently, the older one turning our way a bit and leaning out of his chair. Pants-hater really began to seethe.

“You the one called her agency?” the older man with the doorstop asked.

“No.”

“Then how did you make her lose her job?” wondered Tarzan. I looked him up and down, drawing out all my reserves of manhood. It was a quick draw.

“By not defending her when she angered my grandfather,” I answered, hating his penis, “who did call her agency.”
He thought about that a second, then nodded, seeming to understand, and tilted his head as if waiting for more of an explanation. Everyone else waited too.

“You’re the one she liked,” Petal, the waitress, said, coming up from behind.

Liked. I had hoped this, of course, but it still sent a thrill through me to hear it confirmed. And a chill to hear it in the past tense.

“My grandfather thought she was a gold-digger,” I said.

Suddenly the room erupted in sneering laughter from everyone except pants-hater, who turned bright red. I looked around at them all, confused—which seemed to be my natural state of mind since arriving in Nikkid Bottoms.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“You obviously don’t know Wisper!” Tarzan said.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“If you don’t know, then you don’t belong in that closet with her.”

After a moment, I lowered my head, ashamed and distressed. Everyone sat silent, watching me. Waiting.

“I’d like to talk to her,” I said.

“Then why can’t you talk to her out here?” Doorstop asked.

“Because he’s got a fiancée who might see them together,” Tarzan said.

The room Ooooh’d and Aaaahh’d, and I felt about four inches tall—and shrinking fast.

The room fell quiet again, and I wasn’t sure anyone was going to say anything for the longest time.

“I think it’s best you just eat your food and leave,” Tarzan said finally.

“That’s not for you to decide, River,” Petal said, finally finding a great place to put a period.

“This is none of your concern, Petal.”

“It is my concern, River. You planning on running block on any guy wants to talk to me, too, because I think I got a say in that, and I’m pretty sure Wisper feels she’s got a say, as well, and she wouldn’t like it if she knew you were out here stepping on her love-life like a bug, which is what you always do no matter who’s showing interest, and anyway, on top of that, who do you think you are, selling my car like you own it, like you’re the boss of me...?”

He held up a hand to silence her, and it worked. Apparently he was the boss of her.

“I can get her modeling job back,” I threw in.

The very wide ‘River’ hesitated. “How?”

I had no idea. “I’ve got some ideas. My name is on the company too.”

“Can you really do that, or are you just trying to get past me so you can upset her more?”

Upset her more?

I sighed. I hadn’t considered she might have been upset. Being, primarily, a wealthy layabout, I had never had to think through how potentially devastating it might be for regular people to lose their jobs. For me, there was always the assumption that I’d have money to do—well—whatever I wanted. For others, I imagined, it was a lot like Grandfather making good on his threats to throw me in the gutter. I shuddered. Ms. Nuckeby must have been deeply hurt.

Whether I could or not—whether I could be with her or not—I had to at least get her job back for her.

“Yes,” I said. “I mean, no. I’m not intending to upset her any more. I can get her a job, or at least I can offer her another option.”

“What kind of option?”

“I think I should discuss that with her.” Right after I figured it out for myself.

Petal urged him. “Let him talk to her, River. She’s a grown woman.”

But Tarzan wasn’t swinging with it. “No. I don’t think so.”

“Shouldn’t she decide that for herself?” I demanded.

“Probably. But she won’t.”

“You’re just going to let her think I never came to see her in that closet.”

“Bingo.”

“Screw you, Tarzan,” I said, my voice deepening and growing louder. This was apparently more important to me than even I realized.

He just stood there, refolded his arms, and smiled sternly. Large penises must give you confidence or something.

I moved forward and shoved him aside. Or, rather, pushed against him and wound up shoving myself aside. He was sturdier than he looked, and he looked pretty damn sturdy. I tried to get around him, but he just leaned to one side and pinned me against a wall, where I squirmed and flopped like a fish waiting to be gaffed.

All in all, kind of humiliating really.
“Let me through,” I squeaked.
“No.”
“I’ll get by you.”
“Not in your lifetime,” he laughed. “Which is looking pretty short.”
“Is that a threat?” It was hard to take threats seriously from a naked man. Even one who looked like several of the more formidable Greek gods bundled up into a handy value-pack.
Suddenly, a couple of other diners were on either side of me.
“Need some help there, River?” One of the surprisingly tall, surprisingly muscular, not-so-surprisingly naked people asked.
“This gentleman was looking for the door,” River said, pressing me flat between his stone-like shoulders and the drywall that was still several feet shy of Wisper.
My eyes flicked back and forth between both of my attackers— my head jammed into immobility—and I sneered, remembering their exposed ‘soft-targets’. “Listen,” I said, confidently. “I don’t want to hurt you, but— WISPER!”
“Drop him, Vincent!” a voice said. One of them popped me in the side of the head, and I went down like my ears were made of iron and there were magnets in the floor. Petal gasped and yelled at Tarzan, the Penis Man.
“River! Was that really necessary?” she demanded.
“We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone,” River said, smiling.
As I lay there contemplating unconsciousness as a concept, the nude-man assault squad dragged me out by my heels. I forced my eyes open, and through a haze saw pants-hater laughing, and he kicked me in the temple. As I jerked with the pain, I heard a jingling sound like the faraway ringing of tiny bells, and thought briefly of Paris. I love Paris. They have bells there. A door opened and there was more jingling. They had doors in Paris too. Pretty-prety doors, and bells.
As I struggled with time, space, and reality, the nudist antidefamation league tossed me out into the parking lot, then returned inside to—I’m sure—laugh at my expense.
“Oy,” I said through the gravel of the parking lot. Are you allowed to say that if you’re not Jewish? “Oy,” I repeated.
It was a good word. I grokked its usefulness.
“Ooooyyyyyyy.”
Humiliated, I sat on the curb holding my throbbing head in a towel.

Behind me, I could hear the sounds of Mindie and the others being shown their way out of the restaurant with only a tad more gentleness than I had been afforded. Apparently they had all been asked to leave as well after my brief, and misguided, foray into the wonderful land of courage.

“Let go of me!” Mindie yelled. “LET GO OF ME!”

As a naked man shoved her away from him and toward the street, the others exited behind them more-or-less
under their own power. Mindie, covering herself as best she could manage, shrieked at them in a voice that could shatter glass.

“You have no right to lay hands on me! Do you know who my father is? MALLIKIN BUTTERWYCKE, that’s who!”

Her naked ejector turned and walked back into the restaurant, apparently not an avid Fortune 500 reader.

“He won’t appreciate that you’ve degraded his daughter in this way! DO YOU HEAR ME?”

Neighboring planets could hear her. I returned my head to the towel and counted throbs.

“I took my clothes off for FOOD, and I didn’t even GET ANY!”

Ms. Waboombas moved over to the Duesenberg, climbed into a back seat, and—still naked save for the shoes—dropped, sulking, onto the cushioned upholstery without a word, and without deploying a towel. She put her head back, closed her eyes, and set her feet upon the seat in front of her. Morgan was trying to talk to her, but she was mostly ignoring him, which he seemed to have gotten used to by now. He kept touching her leg as he spoke, and she continually swatted at him, like he was a bothersome insect that spends most of its day dining in landfills.

Pastor Winterly moved a discrete distance away from us all and began vigorously reading his Bible as though his life depended on it. Perhaps it did. At the very least he believed it had answers to the test for getting through the pearly gates afterwards. I imagined the man’s intense study was mostly to keep his eyes from wandering to and fro, and accidentally seeing naked people—of whom there were now many more wandering up and down the street—likely having arrived for the festival. I supposed ardent Bible reading beat plucking out thine eyes, no matter how much they offend thee.

Mindie walked past me, still trying to hide her naked self while savagely scratching her stomach. It had become red and raw from all her endless itching. On the plus side, she had color at last.

“What did you do in there?” she screamed at me as she moved to the Duesenberg. “Why did they throw us out?”

Still holding herself, she began searching through the car, possibly for clothes. More probably a weapon.

I had been trying to think of an excuse to give her and the others—Mindie in particular—ever since I’d been kicked to the curb, knowing with certainty I’d need one. I wasn’t sure that what I’d come up with would work, but it was better than telling the truth. That would be like feeding meat to hungry lions with my face as the plate.

“I told them their treatment of you was abominable,” I said, “and that they shouldn’t have forced you to come in there naked just to get food.”

“What?” Mindie asked, sounding horrified rather than proud. I wondered for a moment if I’d suffered brain damage and was speaking in a foreign tongue.

“I told them their treatment of you…”

Waboombas snorted a laugh. Or burped. Mindie looked at her for a moment, confused, then turned back to me.

“Are you insane?” she snarled. “The damage was done! I was already naked! At least you could have waited until I had eaten!”

She was rooting through the Duesenberg more furiously now, turning things over and looking under car seats.

“Obviously,” I said, “I didn’t think th…”

“You never do,” she snapped. “Where are my clothes?” She glared at Waboombas. “Are you sitting on my clothes?”

“No,” Waboombas said, neither moving nor opening her eyes. She swatted at Morgan, who wasn’t doing anything. Preemptory, I suppose.

Mindie put a fist on her hip, momentarily revealing her pubic area, then remembered and re-covered herself.

“Can you move so I can look?” She snarled.

“No.”

Mindie seemed prepared to start another argument, when Waboombas opened her eyes—just a crack—and threatened to release the boogieman.

“Corky,” Mindie said tersely, turning to me. “Give me your pants.”

“What?” I dropped the towel and looked at her, in amazement. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am your fiancée. Are you saying you’re going to just make me stand here—naked—in public—with everything I own exposed to God, and everyone?”

The pastor coughed and turned a page.

“You exposed it in the first place,” I said, taunting the monkey in the gorilla cage; stupid, I know.

“CORKY!”

“My suitcase is in the trunk,” I said. “Feel free to help yourself to whatever’s in there.”

“Get something for me.”

I groaned, losing patience, but stood anyway and stepped toward the car, reaching into my pants pocket for the
keys.
   Which were gone.
   I checked the other pocket.
   Nothing.
   Back pockets. Wallet.
   No keys.
   I patted my chest, but I doubted they were in my lungs. I still wasn’t wearing a shirt.
   Then I remembered the jingling sound as I was being dragged out. I looked toward the doors of Nuckeby’s, and
   saw the naked-man assault squad standing there watching, arms folded, just daring me. Something told me they
   weren’t going to let me back inside to look for personal effects.
   Slowly I turned to the others.
   “I’ve lost my keys,” I told them.
   “WHAT?” Mindie shrieked.
   Ms. Waboombas opened her eyes.
   “My comics are in the trunk,” she said, clearly with differing priorities than the rest of us.
   “I…uh…” I glanced at the door. Naked men still stood guard there. One shook his head as if to say ‘I’ll eat
   your brains.’
   I slowly turned back to the others and smiled weakly.
   “Aunt Helena will likely have a spare,” I told them, hopefully.
   “But I need clothes!” Mindie yelled. “NOW!”
   “Mindie,” I said, losing patience again, “it’s a nudist colony. People only stare at people who are wearing
   clothes. No one cares that you’re naked but you.”
   Right at that specific instant, Iran’s nuclear capability endangered far fewer lives than Mindie did. My life
   flashed before my eyes. If I survived this, I would never again say anything forceful to Mindie in a language she
   could understand.
   “Give-me-your pants,” she said between locked teeth, her lips not quivering even slightly. After we got out of
   this, she should consider ventriloquism as a career. There was obvious aptitude.
   “Mindie…”
   Sparks ignited from the pressure between her upper and lower canines.
   “It’s-anudist-colony, Corky. No-onecares-ifyou’re-naked.”
   Hoisted on my own petard. Whatever a petard was.
   Petard. Pshaw. Irony. Add it to the list.
   I sighed heavly and gave in.
   Slowly, I unbuckled my pants. Ms. Waboombas whistled porn music as I slid the zipper down. After a beat
   glaring at Mindie, I quickly dropped the trousers to my ankles, revealing my maroon ‘tightie-whities’.
   “Haines?” Morgan sniffed.
   “I like them better than ours,” I said.
   “Come on!” Waboombas cheered. “All of it!”
   “She only needs the pants,” I said, and started to pull the slacks over my shoes, but then Mindie—for the first
time since the turn of events on the freeway—smiled and agreed with Ms. Waboombas.
   “I need all of it,” she said sadistically.
   “What do you mean, all of it?” I asked.
   “All of it. Pants, shoes, underwear. I can’t cover my top with just the slacks.”
   “You can’t cover your top with tents and parachutes.” Morgan said, chuckling, apparently very amused by his
   ability to recklessly stick his tongue up death’s nose.
   Mindie glared at him, and he jumped back as if her eyes had physically struck him. I thought I heard his skin
   sizzle from the heat of her withering gaze, and he whimpered. Then she returned her loving attentions to me.
   “I want all of it,” she said, and smiled again, darkly. “Even your socks.”
   I stared at her for a long time, but her expression never changed. This was clearly intended to humiliate me.
   Apparently I had dialed some dark button in Mindie that governs deeper, human behavior, and ratchets up one’s true
   nature, Lord of the Flies-like. I wondered how long before one of us finished life like poor Piggy, broken and dead
   on the rocks, or worse, with our head on a pike. This was a side of Mindie that was very unattractive, as opposed to
   the normal side of her, which was…um…very unattractive, also, but not to the point of making me strip in public.
   I reached for the front of my underwear and gripped firmly as Mindie smiled her evil little smile.
   Refusing to be ‘gotten to’ I confidently ripped down the Haines, then kicked them off with the shoes and pants
   as if I had been doing this all my life. I had, but usually alone, and getting into the pool or shower. So now I was in
the largest, co-ed shower in the world, right? Big deal. Who cares?

“Oh, no, that ain’t dinky,” purred Waboombas. “Not the biggest I’ve ever seen, but definitely a filling meal, that’s for sure.”

Mindie seemed to tense at her words, but held in any comment. This had been her idea after all.

“Get your own,” she finally said under her breath.

Unaffected, I removed the wallet, and cell phone from my pants, folded everything neatly, and—like treasured pieces of art—carried my clothes over to Mindie, handing them to her with a deep bow. Hungrily, she snatched the items from my hands and dove into them as if she were a starving Terrier set loose on the all-you-can-eat bar at Sizzler. I suppose she had SPF concerns given the glaring sun. At least I hoped so.

Once dressed, she looked as if she belonged center ring at the circus. The pants were saggy and baggy, the shoes three sizes too big, and she had ripped my tightie-whities, and squeezed them around her capacious boobs like some makeshift bra of the damned. It looked as though it belonged on one of those cave women in the Jean Auel books, Mammary Hunters, or whatever. But this ‘brassiere’ clearly belonged on someone with far more modest proportions. Mindie’s over-ample breast tissue leaked through various gaps and holes as if being forced out by an X-rated Play-Doh machine, and her nipples were hardly obscured given the severe limits the tensile strength of the fabric had been pushed to. Nevertheless, Mindie smiled, relaxed, and seemed like a new woman.

“Now,” she said, turning to me, “tell me you’ve got something more than one of your usual, useless ideas for getting us out of this mess.”

Nope. Same old woman.

“I don’t know,” I said, trying to look as if I wasn’t naked, or was at least indifferent to the fact. “I tried my cell phone but couldn’t get a line out. We’ll just have to wait until Aunt Helena arrives.”

“We can’t just stand here in the middle of a nudist colony!”

“Where else can we go? Even if we had keys, which we don’t, the car won’t make it a mile, and we’re at least thirty from the nearest anything.”

“Thirty? Miles? Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“I am not walking thirty miles.”

“I never asked you to.”

“That’s too far.”

“And it may be farther. Thirty is just a conservative estimate.”

“Walking thirty miles is like exercise.”

“Very similar.”

“There’s nothing closer? Not one place we can get to easily?”

“Wisper said the hotel is nice.”

“Wisper? she asked, her voice becoming an acid-bath for naked fools. “Is that a name?”

“The hostess. The hostess said the hotel is nice.”

“You said ‘Wisper’. Do you know her?”

“I thought we went through this. We’re trapped in a nudist colony. There are naked weirdoes as far as the eye can see!” A few of them scowled at her as they passed. For some strange reason, they seemed to not like being called ‘weirdoes’. Imagine that. “It is disgusting!” Mindie shripled. “We have to get out of here! Funnybooks have no place in this conversation!”

“They’re not ‘funnybooks’,” Morgan said petulantly.

Mindie rushed over and punched him—hard. Groaning, he fell backward into the Duesenberg and onto Ms.
Waboombas’ lap. The stripper looked at him as if he were a leaf that had fluttered down from a nearby tree that she couldn’t be bothered to brush away. I heard Morgan whimper. I wasn’t sure if he was crying or—lying on a naked Waboombas without even having to stuff a fiver in her gstring—delirious with joy.

“Being here doesn’t bother some of us as much as it does you,” Waboombas snipped at Mindie. “And, besides. Corky’s hot Aunt will be here in a few hours. Show a little patience, tight-ass.”

“Naked slut,” Mindie growled. “Easy for you to say. Someone like you belongs in a place like this.”

“I feel pretty comfortable so far,” Waboombas said, smiling and settling in.

“I’m surprised you’re not spreading yourself far and wide—having sex with every man you see.”

“The thought had occurred to me.”

“I’m sure it had.”

“It often does.”

“Just ‘cause they’re naked doesn’t mean they fuck in public,” Waboombas told her, sagely.

“That’s rich!” Mindie scoffed. “A prostitute worried about what’s legal!”

A tense silence fell—and hurt itself.

“Was that supposed to insult me?” Waboombas finally asked, and smiled, though not at all sincerely. “I’m proud of my moneymaking skills. Some of us have to earn our cash. As opposed to your fat lazy-ass being birthed out onto a bed full of money.”

“At least my money was acquired legally.”

“Not by you.”

“Your particular form of income earning happens to be against the law.”

“And yet—you were considering it.”

“I was not!”

“We were too. I think you were even liking the idea.”

“That is a lie!” Mindie screeched.

“You play the prude, but inside—you’re a hornier slut than me, sister.”

“I am nothing of the kind!”

“You popped that bra pretty easy back on the freeway there. Right in front of the reverend too.”

“I was proving a point!”

“That you’re a slut.”

“That I’m better than you.”

“We’re exactly the same.”

“I am nothing like you.”

“Okay, you’re right. I’m honest about what I am. But I know a user when I see one, bitch. You feel a little neglected, or a might peckish…”

“I was starving!”

“…and the clothes just flyyyyy off.”

“Corky!” Mindie yelled, apparently feeling lonely in hell. “Get us out of here!”

“I told you…” I began.

“We can leave her here.”

“What?”

“Morgan, too. Maybe there’s a way to get out, if it’s just the two of us. And the reverend.” She paused, glancing at him. He was lost in his good book. Clearly it was a real page-turner. He couldn’t wait to see how it came out. “Maybe the reverend.”

“There’s no way,” I said.

“THERE HAS TO BE!” Mindie squealed. She moved over to me and actually touched me with some exposed boob-flesh. Little Corky perked up. God, I was easy.

Mindie, of course, noticed and waved at it like it gave off an odor.

“Stop doing that!”

“It’s not intentional!”

“It’s this place! We have to get out of here!”

“How?”

“I don’t knooooow!” she whined, her face scrunchsed up like wet laundry. Suddenly it softened and lit up as an idea struck. “Bicycles!”
“What?”
“Bicycles! That tramp in the restaurant said there was a bicycle shop!”
Hearing Ms. Nuckeby called a tramp set something off in me.
“You’re on your own,” I told Mindie.
“What?”
“Buy a bike and go. Have a safe trip.”
“But you have to come with me.”
“Why?”
“We have to get to the chapel!”
“The chapel? Whatever else happens, we definitely won’t make it to the chapel.”

**But we were supposed to get married!”**
I stared at her, amazed. “Who says?” I asked flatly.
Mindie snarled. “I made plans!”

“Plans you never discussed with me,” I snarled back, showing a surprising amount of backbone. Someone must have slipped me some when I wasn’t looking.

Mindie was devastated. She scratched an armpit, and I thought she might cry. I was convinced her apparent emotion wasn’t real—I’d never seen her cry, nor heard of anyone who had—but it softened me, nonetheless.

“Listen,” I said. “Let’s just all calm down, all right? What I’ll do is get you a room at the hotel.” I looked around at everyone. “All of you. Nudist hotel or not, I’m sure you can each have a private room where you can relax and be clothed—get away from each other and all these naked people—at least until Aunt Helena arrives.”

That seemed to perk everyone up. The pastor even stopped reading and looked at me, puppy-dog-like, a tiny, hopeful smile dancing across his lips.

“Think about it, Mindie,” I continued. “You can take a nice, hot bath, and get that itchy, muddy ditch water off you, order some food. Pastor—you can sit in—I don’t know—silent contemplation or something, while the rest of you just unwind over room service. And while you do, I’ll make some calls and get this thing sorted out.”

Everyone looked at me with tiny smiles and calm relief.

“That sounds reasonable,” Mindie said, clearly wondering how I’d managed it. I suppose she was complimenting me, as best as she could. It didn’t seem to cause her any pain, but inside I’m certain blood vessels were rupturing left and right.

“I want a bath too,” Ms. Waboombas said as if she were expecting company.

“Great,” I said. “Then we’re all agreed.”

Everyone seemed pleased with a definitive plan of action, a potential bath, and the growing realization that we could be in a room where we wouldn’t have to look at anyone—naked or otherwise.

We gathered what few personal items and pieces of luggage we had originally piled beside Morgan in the back seat at the beginning of our journey, as Ms. Waboombas stood to get out of the car and stretched in a way that was apparently intended to elicit a ‘rise’ out of the men. We were all too worn and too used to her by now to react, and she slumped, dejected from the lack of response.

Mindie looked at Waboombas with disdain as the large, nude, black woman climbed out of the car, then noticed some wadded fabric pressed flat on the seat where Waboombas had been sitting.

“My clothes!” Mindie called.

“Oh,” Waboombas said, mock-surprised. “I guess I was sitting on them.” She shrugged expansively. “Who knew?”

Mindie snatched the bits of fabric from the seat, and turned, holding them out to me. “Well, at least now you have something to wear.”

I looked at them as if they had been expelled from the anus of a wombat, then looked at her in much the same way.

“You wanted me nekkid? I’m nekkid. Get used to it.”

“I was forcing you to be chivalrous,” Mindie snipped. “Something you should have been without my prodding. Now take these wrinkly clothes…”

“No,” I said, turning and starting to walk in the direction of the hotel.

Mindie stood where she was, astonished, and put her fists on her hips indignantly. “I am not going anywhere
with you until you show some common decency and put my pants on!”

“Okay. Then you’re not going anywhere with me.”

“CORKY!”

“MINDIE!”

She stomped a foot. “Don’t mock me!”

I ignored her and continued walking. The others seemed unsure what to do. Mindie huffed.

“At least wrap the shirt around yourself.”

I kept walking.

“All right! I’ll wear the wrinkly shirt, and you can have your damn pants! Just give me a minute to change.”

She thought this was because I didn’t want to be seen in a something with wrinkles?

I stopped and turned to her as she pulled on my Waboombas mangled Ralph Lauren shirt, stunned that she believed my response to her was more a fashion choice than a reaction to her as an alleged person.

With the cave-woman underwear-bra still in place, and the crinkly shirt/dress now sufficiently covering her nether regions, Mindie wriggled out of the slacks, gathered them up and walked over, holding them out to me.

“I hope you’re happy,” she said, annoyed. “I look like I slept in a hamper.”

I just stared at her. I had no idea what to say. I was angry, shocked, and amazed all at the same time. I looked at the others—as if for guidance—and really didn’t expect, or get, any. What should I do next?

A breeze flowed over my skin—over all of my skin—lingering in places no wind had ever touched in my short lifetime, and the feeling was wonderful. Very sensual. Pleasant. Nothing bound me. No stitching slipped into uncomfortable crevices. No underwear crept up where it shouldn’t. No fabric pressed hostilely into innocent, bended flesh. Nothing pinched, tugged, twisted, hung, chafed, itched, or blistered. I felt free. I felt comfortable.

I felt good.

I looked at Mindie, holding the wrinkled shirt before her, and noticed she also held out the panties she had been wearing earlier in the day. She probably expected me to put those on as well. Heaven forbid anything should be hanging loose.

Heaven forbid indeed.

My world was—entirely—upside down. I felt, in more ways than one, that I was somehow standing on another planet surrounded by aliens. I no longer liked Mindie, but I would probably still marry her because her attitudes toward life were ‘normal’. Wrinkled clothes, sensuality, and nudity annoyed her. I really liked Ms. Nuckeby, but I could never be with her because her attitudes toward life were ‘strange’. She would think wrinkled clothes were no problem because she wouldn’t go near them. Yet, here I was, naked in her world and wanting to stay that way—but out of spite, rather than pleasure or comfort. My world was wrinkly clothes, binding fabric, and snotty Mindie. Not comfort, and pleasure, and Ms. Nuckeby.

I took the pair of pants and began to slide them on.

“Finally,” Mindie said.

“Aaaaaaww,” Waboombas pined, genuinely distressed.

“What about the underwear?” Mindie asked.

“I prefer to be unconfined,” I said, feeling a small, returning sense of victory, like the smell of napalm in the morning. I may have to live in my world, but I could retain some of what I’d learned here.

“That’s just disgusting.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

I stood with my pants around my thighs, taking a last moment to feel the warm breeze and lack of constraint, when someone called from near the restaurant.

“Mister Wopplesdown! Decided to come over to our way of thinking, I see!”

I turned and saw Petal running toward me, her lovely young flesh bouncing and rippling in indescribably magnificent ways. Suddenly, still exposed to the world, little Corky leaped embarrassingly to life, which caused Petal, and everyone else, to stop dead in their tracks.

“Oh, my,” the waitress said, looking down at it, surprised.

“Corky!” Waboombas purred.

“CORKY!” Mindie howled. “I warned you about that!” And she slapped my Pechanga Indian Casino so hard I thought for a minute it had come off.

“Eewwww!” she shrieked. “I touched it!” Then she ran away to wipe her hand. “There’s something wet on my fingers!”

My penis—and everything it was attached to dropped like a rock. I lie there on the ground, and through hazy vision began counting pebbles in the parking lot. I hoped it might take my mind off the pain. Instead it just reminded me how bad I was at math. What comes after twelve?
As I lay there, Petal knelt beside me and gently touched my arm.
“Are you all right?” she asked, seeming genuinely concerned.
“Fine,” I gasped, smiling at her with my eyes closed. “Why do you ask?”
“That’s the woman you’re going to marry?”
“Isn’t she lovely?” I said, my voice partially returning to normal.
“You could do better,” Petal said and leaned closer, speaking low enough so no one but me could hear. “Like Wisper, for instance.”
In answer, she handed me an envelope. I could feel something jingle inside.
“You forgot your keys,” she whispered, and winked.
I looked down at my hand and realized all our luggage, and clothes, and comic books were now within immediate reach. Mindie was wiping her hands on the Duesenberg seat, and no one else was looking at me, or had seemed to notice Petal’s gift. Defiantly, I slipped the envelope into my pocket and said nothing.
Petal stood and helped me to my feet. After seeing that all my various exposed parts were okay—if startlingly red—she smiled again at me, then turned away intending to return to the restaurant. But before she did, she shot one, last, angry glance at Mindie, who had finished wiping her hand and returned Petal’s sneer with equal, or greater, contempt. Petal then turned and walked off, shoes clicking, apron flapping, ass bouncing.

I keep telling you—I am a man!
Mindie looked at me, then quickly down at little Corky—who was very angry about being punished—to make sure he remained lifeless.

“It better not,” she said.

“It couldn’t possibly,” I said furiously, and pulled my pants up to refasten them. Mindie smiled menacingly at me, and shook her head in disbelief.

“How you could find that woman in any way appealing is beyond me,” she sniffed derisively, and tucked a breast back inside her wrinkled shirt and shredded underwear-bra. She looked like a dried apricot that had burst open in the sun.

“She looks just ridiculous in that outfit.”
Possibly because I held out some distant hope of being able to see Wisper again, but more likely for reasons centered more around some form of passive-aggression, I said nothing about the keys.

Consequently, we only had the things from the back seat to bring with us: the pastor’s briefcase, the cooler full of snacks, and Mindie’s purse. Once in hand, we moved our way across the hot asphalt parking lot and toward the main entrance of the hotel.

Before long, I had to hop from tuft of grass, to brick, to anything even resembling shade, since I was still barefoot and because the ground couldn’t have been any hotter if it had open flame under it. After several minutes of bounding, ‘ooching’, and ‘ouching’, I finally just gave up and ran ahead of the others, past the concierge, under the awning, and into the air-conditioned lobby of the rustic little lodge. I stood in the cozy foyer and breathed a silent thank you to the god of cool for providing soothing, hardwood floors.

After a moment of relief, I shook my head at the insanity of recent events. This had been quite a wearing day, and it was barely half over.
As the others staggered out of the growing afternoon heat to join me, I shuffled up to the counter, where waited a spunky, blonde, female clerk—naked as the day she was born—smiling cheerily as she asked for our reservation numbers. She had a nametag stuck to her chest just above one of her smallish breasts—don’t ask me how—that read: ‘SOPHIE’. She had two. Breasts that is. And every time she spoke, she bounced a bit on her heels, which made them jiggle delightfully. Little Corky thought seriously about springing to life, throbbed a moment, painfully, then reluctantly gave up and went back to sleep.

“We don’t have reservations,” I said. “Do you have anything available?”

“We do!” Bounce! “You’re in luck!” Bounce! The clerk was as enthusiastic as if we had just struck gold in a diamond mine full of million-dollar bills. “We have two rooms left!” Bounce! “Fortunately for you, since it’s the busy season!” Bounce, bounce!

I looked around at an empty lobby that contained only one, naked, bellman sleeping in a corner. If this was the busy season, I couldn’t imagine what the slow season must be like.

“Do you have smoking rooms?” Ms. Waboombas asked.

“Only non-smoking, I’m afraid!” Bounce! She said it as if there couldn’t be anything better, even for smokers! “But there are designated smoking sections in several small buildings along the beach—all within easy biking distance!” Bounce!

Ms. Waboombas looked as if she wanted to strangle the poor woman—something that would undoubtedly thrill them both—but instead the stripper simply grinned an irritated smile and retreated.

“Is everyone okay with sharing rooms?” I asked.

There were general moans that told me ‘no’, but they’d do it anyway.

“We’ll take both rooms,” I said, handing over a credit card. “And we have a of couple bags here as well.”

“All right, Mister Wopple-see-down…”


“Really? I’m so sorry. But…it is spelled Cor-CAR-an Wopple-seeDOWN.”

“Strange, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” She bit a lip and looked devastated. “Terribly sorry, Mister Wopple-less-duhn.”

I sighed. “Not at all.”

She made an interesting face, then shrugged and smiled, and slid the card through her machine, punched some buttons, and waited. After a moment, everything seemed fine, no matter how my name was pronounced. She bounced delightedly, then slammed a bell on the desk so hard it rang like Westminster Abbey in my ear. The naked bellhop awoke slowly, and looked around, bleary-eyed. He adjusted his hat (how did you think I knew he was a bellhop?), stood and walked towards us.

One couldn’t help but notice that the elderly gentleman would have given Woodruff some heated competition in the testicular Olympics. His enormous family jewels hung so low, they bounced around between his shins like a pendulum as he walked. It was like watching a human grandfather clock hobble our way. Here was a man who clearly needed pants for his protection, and the protection of those around him. Imagine if he had to run! Nudity could be a hazard for anyone within striking distance.

“What car are you driving?” the perky clerk asked, bouncily.

“A Duesenberg. Old-style car. But we had to leave it at…er…Nuckeby’s.”

“Well, let me give you a parking pass anyway!” she said, handing it over as if I were Augustus Gloop and it allowed me entrance to Willy Wonka’s Chocolate factory and all the wonders contained therein.

I handed the old man what little of our luggage we actually had, and he tottered off to grab one of those luggage rolley-things, his legs spread wide to avoid tripping himself. The clerk handed me our room key-cards, a receipt, an actual key to the minibar, and a questionnaire to be filled out upon our departure. I looked at the first question.

1) How could we have served you better?

   With pants.

   ( unmanned ) ( unmanned ) ( unmanned )

The rooms were beautiful. Tastefully decorated with a fireplace in each, immense beds, comfortable seating, lots of space, and balconies overlooking the ocean. I stepped over and absorbed the view, along with a cool, ocean
breeze. It was impressive, deeply relaxing, and really quite lovely.

“What a dump,” Mindie said.

I turned and glared at her.

“What?” she asked. “Think of all the naked people who have been in here before us.”

“People are always naked in hotel rooms. At least occasionally.” The thought seemed to horrify her, and she looked around with newfound revulsion at the room, the bathroom, the amenities, and the tub—which could be opened to the main room by swinging aside louvered shutters—the chairs, the beds…

“Eeeewwww,” she said, finally.

I looked at her as if she’d suddenly sprouted horns. She sneered her way through the little apartment, lifting her shirt as she did so she could scratch her stomach like some hillbilly farmer. I wondered—not for the first time that day—if marrying Mindie was really preferable to being single. Ms. Nuckeby might be an impossibility for me, but was Mindie really a necessary part of my future? With her, or alone— either way, the foundation of my sex life would largely be masturbation. Did she really bring anything else to the relationship table?

Suddenly she turned to me with unexpected kindness in her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t mean to complain.”

Smiling slightly, she took my hand and squeezed it for a brief instant, then let go. I softened a bit, and realized everyone needed contact of some kind, even if it was only cold, distant Mindie. It really did beat the hell out of being alone. At least lots of people had told me it did. Usually people who were alone and desperate.

“It’s not your fault this place is disgusting,” she said, artfully killing the moment.

“There’s a con-ti-nen-tal breakfast every mornin’ at ten,” the bellman said, startling me, and reminding me he was still there, swinging wild and free. He moved over toward the minibar—which Mindie happened to be standing next to —his immense testicles bobbling. Mindie dove out of his way as if he were on fire. He took hold of the minibar’s handle and opened its genuine, oak-veneer door. There were cokes and cookies, and various other allegedly edible items inside. I noticed a bag of mixed nuts, and felt as though it described the situation perfectly. Mister Peanut was even dressed much like Ms. Nuckeby had been—hat, bowtie, and shoes. Fortunately, peanuts were apparently sexless. Or perhaps unfortunately if you were Mrs. Peanut.

“Minibar,” the bellman said, quite unnecessarily. He said ‘bah’ instead of ‘bar’ with some sort of New England accent. I supposed naked people came from all over. “Take ennything, and it chah-ges yo room au-to-matic-ally, even if yo-ah just lookin’ ‘round in there.” ‘There’ was pronounced, ‘they-uh’. “So don’t take items out to refrigerate things of yo own, figurin’ you can just put it back, unless you want to pay for owah stuff ennyway.”

He moved toward the desk, and Mindie—who was again everywhere he wanted to be—had to leap aside to avoid touching any of the air molecules that might have come in contact with his wellhung nakedness.

“Compu-tah hook-up,” he said, pointing to it. “Fo the Inta-net.” He smiled and revealed crooked teeth in his cauliflower face. “In case you want to download pick-chas of nekkid people,” he said, and laughed—or kind of barked actually, then fell into a coughing fit, which did startling things to his clock pendulum.

After a moment’s hacking, he slowly recovered, leaning on the desk, red-faced and taking several wheezing, deep breaths. When next he spoke, his voice had gone faint and high-pitched, and sentences were clearly difficult to complete.

“Over he-ah…” he wheezed, “we hahve…” wheeze, “…we hahve…yo-ah telephone…” his voice faded, his face reddened, and I feared he might collapse, which meant I would have to perform mouth-to-mouth in order to save him, and the poor man would die. Fortunately for all concerned, his face color quickly returned to normal, he recovered, smiled crookedly, and continued moving around the room, pendulating slowly, showing off the other amenities—thermostat, extra blankets, map to the fire escape, his saggy ass—and each time Mindie was directly in his path, which forced her to leap around the room like a thick-legged frog escaping a French chef—bounding over chairs, up on the desk, rolling over the bed. Eventually she settled behind me, using my body as some kind of antiballistic, naked-man defense system.

At last the bellman finished his tour of the room, I tipped him, and with a nod and a grin, he turned and wobbled out. Once he had closed the door behind him, Mindie let out the breath she’d been holding since we’d entered and walked into the bathroom to run water.

I sat down and grabbed a phone, as somewhere behind me curtains were drawn, faucets cranked, and water splashed. I began to dial, and Mindie stuck her head through the bathroom doorway.

“You’re not staying in here, are you?” she asked, rather pointedly.
“I was going to call…”
“You can do that later. I want some privacy.”
“But…I’ll be out here.”
“I’m not going to be naked in the same hotel room with you.”
I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.
“You were just naked with me in a restaurant.”
“No, I wasn’t!”
“Yes you…”
“That story never leaves this town, you understand?”
I goggled, silently for a moment, then sighed heavily and nodded toward the bathroom door. “Fine. Whatever. Just close the…”
“Is that going to prevent you from imagining me in here naked?”
I sat there, moon-faced, wondering what was going to start me imagining her naked. She took my silence for something else.
“No,” she said significantly. “I didn’t think so. Now that you’ve seen them, the temptation is simply going to be too much for you. You go find something to do. Maybe order the roll away.”
“Roll away?”
“Corky, there’s only one bed.”
“We’re engaged.”
“But not married. And may I remind you whose fault that is?”
Mine, apparently.
“And besides,” she said. “I’m still annoyed with you. Even if you didn’t sleep with that model in the closet, or that black tramp, I think a term of abstinence is still in order after all you’ve done.”
I continued to stare blankly.
“And for your attitude,” she snarled. “Which I must say isn’t improving as time goes on. Give me about an hour, then you can come back and do your phone things.”
I stood up.
“And bring me some chocolates when you do,” she said. “A good kind, like Godiva. Not whatever that crappy stuff is you keep around your house. It’s been a trying day, and I need some pampering.”

Outside in the hallway I stood silently and wondered what to do next. I sighed heavily (something I seem to do a lot), thinking hard, but came up with nothing, and in frustration I jammed my hands into my pockets.
The envelope crinkled.
I pulled it out and removed the keys Petal had braved the naked hit squad to return to me. I began to wad the thing up when I noticed something green still inside.
A note.
I slipped it out and unfolded it.
My heart jumped. Ms. Nuckeby. And her handwriting was terrible.
I looked at my watch. 1:45.
My heart jumped again in the other direction. It was doing calisthenics. I only had fifteen minutes to find out
what the Little Giant Head was and get behind it.
Ms. Nuckeby.
Wisper.
The hounds were chasing my deer again!
But should I go? Did this have any chance of working? Ms. Nuckeby had been a model. Clothes couldn’t be
entirely foreign to her. Maybe she could be comfortable living in my world. We could still be naked most of the time
if we stayed in a lot.
Gloop.
But what about her brother, River the Roadblock?
Damn him. He really had my dander up. Whatever ‘dander’ might be. Add that to the list. I refused to be
bullied…by man, or penis. I was going to see her in spite of him. It. Them.
I ran toward the exit, and within seconds I was far enough away that I could no longer hear Mindie’s voice.
“Corky?” she called from inside the bathroom. “Are you out there? I’m going to undress now, and I don’t want
you anywhere nearby when I do. Your lack of self-restraint is appalling.”
She waited a moment, and then haltingly began removing my shirt/her dress as if afraid I might, at any
moment, burst back into the room and unleash my erect penis on her.
By the time she got all her clothes off and saw the hideous thing behind her, I was too far away to hear her
bloodcurdling scream.

Two floors down and still naked, Ms. Waboombas was jumping on the bed, and eating her drippy, room service
food.
The pastor was sweating profusely and loosening his collar. He looked as if he might be diving headlong into a
heart attack. Morgan was beside him, looking much the same, but happier about his own impending engine failure if
it meant Waboombas might give him mouth-to-mouth, or mouth to…whatever.
The stately black woman inhaled the last of her meal, spilling juices all over her ample Pflemmels, leaped one
last time high into the air, and flopped majestically down onto her back. Eventually all her jiggly stuff stopped moving, her drippy stuff stopped dripping, and the pastor collapsed on a chair, weak and spiritually challenged. Waboombas looked down the length of her body at him, then slowly spread her legs to give him a full-view of her internal reproductive organs. He gasped, flushed, and turned quickly away, choking on something. His chastity, no doubt.

Between chews, she asked, “Anyone want to take a bath?” Apparently hoping they all would. *Together.*

In Jell-o.

The pastor abruptly leaped from his chair and ran for the door, saying something about “God in His infinite wisdom...” was out in the hall, and through the lobby before anyone could ask him to speak up and repeat himself. Their room—fortunately for him—was very near an exit from the hotel.

In his mad rush, the poor man of God had left the door open, and Waboombas looked up at Morgan expectantly. Morgan smiled down at her.

“Close the door,” she said, and Morgan practically flew to it.

“Yes, ma’am!”

“From the outside,” she amended.

“What?”

“I’m gonna take a bath.”

“But you just said...”

“I asked if anyone else was going to take a bath.”

“That’s not what you said. You said...”

“Get out.”

“Let me stay and watch.”

“Not happenin’, little man.”

“But why can’t I...”

She threw the television remote at him. That’s how I nearly ran into him as he stepped out into the hall to dodge the thing, while still calling back inside to Ms. Waboombas.

“At least let me stay and read comics. It’s my room too.”

“You just want to leer at me in the tub.”

“Can’t I do both?”

“**Fuck no!”** she yelled.

“You’ve been naked since we got here! What difference does it make if I...”

“Get lost!”

“I bet you’d let Corky watch.”

I backed away from him and stopped short, just out of sight of the door.

“He’s cute,” Waboombas purred.

“I’m not a bad-looking guy.”

“But you ain’t rich. **CLOSE THE FUCKING DOOR!”**

Reluctantly, he did, mumbling something incoherent about ‘not being fair’, and ‘I deserve a little something’. As I tried to slip past him he finally noticed me.

Drat. Foiled again.

“Hey, Corky.”

“Hey, Morgan,” I said, once the door was safely shut and Waboombas couldn’t see or hear me. Skittish and jumpy, I glanced at my watch. Thirteen minutes.

“What are you doing down here?” Morgan asked. “I figured you’d be up there banging Mindie left, right and center.”

I studied him to see if he might be blind. But no, his face simply held that gentle innocence one usually finds on the faces of the very young, or the recently deceased, or the completely stupid. Facts rarely made it all the way through his senses and into the cognitive areas of his brain. Morgan’s world was that of a perpetual teenager, where all his thoughts were sense-oriented, and all his motivations were hormonal. He thought Mindie’s surliness was ‘foreplay’ as he would have thought any woman’s actions—negative, positive, or lethally violent—were ‘foreplay’.

“Hardly,” I answered simply.

“Damn,” he said. “Too bad. If you’re anything like me—after that road trip—I could fuck holes through sheetrock.”

It was a disturbing visual, all the more so because I could actually imagine Morgan trying it.

“I’m gonna wander around a bit,” I said, and moved off.

“Okay,” he said, following.
I stopped and looked at him. He stopped and looked at me. “I, uh…” I paused. What could I say?
“What?” he asked.
“I was thinking of going down to the beach,” I said. “Alone.” “Okay. Why?”
I paused. Should I just tell him?
“Naked girls.”
That was sort of the truth.
He looked at me as if the thought had never occurred to him. His face brightened more than when we’d watched the girls fight. Which was considerable.
“That’s right,” he said. “I forgot about that.”
“How could you forget about that?” I asked, checking my watch and hurrying toward the lobby. He turned and paced me.
“I don’t know,” he said, lost in the thought. “It’s just such a strange thing. It hasn’t really sunk in yet, I guess.” He slowed down to consider it. “Wow. Naked girls everywhere. It’s like the Playboy mansion.”
Not quite.

Though, I have to admit, I was surprised at the general attractiveness of everyone we saw. Being naked all the time apparently made people want to take greater physical care of themselves. But still, the bodies were wide (and by that, I mean the range, not the actual bodies) and varied, and very few of them were actual centerfold caliber, though—interestingly—still largely attractive in their own way. Somehow clothes make you think the worst of what’s under them. But mostly, a little extra weight and bit of natural sag—not really all that unpleasant. And if it was on a woman, and you’re a heterosexual (as I keep telling you I am), it could be quite appealing indeed. And often surprising. People whose faces wouldn’t have given you pause back home, often had bodies that would stop you in your tracks. And people with amazing looks sometimes had bodies that were somewhat lacking.

Of course, we immediately passed an elderly man whose skin looked as if it had once held three or four extra
people inside it and now had no idea what to do with itself other than sulk. He was apparently distantly related to the Shar Pei family. Honestly, though, clothing wouldn't have made him much more appealing to look at. So—other than him—most people were more attractive than expected in all their various, unadorned glory.

“Wow,” Morgan said, visibly impressed with the increased quantity of feminine nudity. “I wonder if it’s okay to whack off in public, here?”

”Not if you’re anywhere near me, it isn’t,” I told him.

“How do we get to the beach?” Morgan asked me without taking his eyes off the women around us.

“Bike would be the easiest I imagine. I saw, out front, that the hotel rents them by the hour.”

“I wonder if that cute receptionist gives tours?”

He insisted on stopping to ask, and so, needing directions and not wanting to seem as though I had someplace to be, urgently, I stopped with him, fidgeting nervously and continually checking my watch as the minutes raced away.

The receptionist did not ordinarily give tours, but bouncily said she’d be happy to make an exception for us if we wanted to come back when her shift ended at six. Morgan convinced me that that was a fabulous plan of action.

“Do you know anything about a giant head on the beach?” I asked her.

“Which one?”

“I don’t know. The giant one.”

“There’s a big giant one, and a little giant one.”

“Oh,” I consulted my note. “The little giant one, I guess. You know where it is?”

“Sure!” she bounced. “Take the main path in front of the hotel toward the beach. There’s a fork about a half a mile down that leads to the right. Follow that fork until it ends. You can’t miss it!”

Bounce!

“The head?” I asked.

Ba-Bounce!

“It’s a little giant head?”

“Right next to the medium-sized giant head. Both made of stone and left by aliens. The Big Giant Head is in Shining Fields on the other side of town.”

I smiled thanks and moved off. Then I stopped short and slowly turned back to her.

“Left by aliens?”

“That’s the story!” Bounce! “Some guy wrote a book about it once. Scientists dispute his ideas, of course, but they don’t live here!” Ba-bounce! “Personally, I believe it.”

And I have no doubt that she did.

Outside in the valet area I went up to the concierge—a cheerful, rosy-cheeked, naked man wearing golf shoes and a colorful beanie—and asked about bike rentals. He had two-wheelers, three-wheelers, and several types of pedal-carts. I noticed his member, and was pleased to see that not everyone around here was hung like a rogue elephant during mating season.

“Like to take a little ride?” he asked cheerfully.

“I think I would,” I responded with equal brightness. “Down to the Little Giant Head.”

“Oh, of course. That’s quite the tourist attraction around here. But keep in mind that to get there, you have to go through a part of town that’s primarily for the locals, and they prefer that visitors stay away. It’s the one place where we natives can avoid being ogled by the clothey types,” he said, and glanced meaningfully at Morgan, who was drooling over a lovely young brunette in sunglasses and tennis shoes with low-slung breasts who was naked to her deeply tanned and flawless skin, waiting near her car for a valet.

“I understand,” I said, signing off on the receipt with a substantial tip. “I understand completely.” Of course, that didn’t mean I wasn’t going anyway.

“Thank you, sir,” he said, eyeing the tip with surprised eyes. “Thank you very much.”

“My pleasure,” I said, mounting up.

Morgan climbed onto his bike but wouldn’t stop looking at the brunette long enough to pay attention to what he was doing and fell over the concierge’s collection of vehicles. As my clueless friend flopped around like a dying fish
desperately trying to return to the sea, he knocked over every rental vehicle in the man’s arsenal as if they were dominoes set up for just that purpose.

I put my kickstand down, walked over to the concierge, gently took the receipt, and doubled the tip.

“Thank YOU, sir,” he said to me.

Then—as Morgan and I finally pedaled away toward the beach—he told someone else to pick up the bikes.

Along the way, we kept passing naked people. I suppose you’d think one might get used to it eventually, but not really. Morgan had several near fatal accidents by continually turning to look behind him at the fronts, or behinds, of various attractive women we passed.

“Is it just me,” he asked, “or are there a lot more people here now?”

I had noticed it, too. When we’d arrived, the town seemed deserted. Now it was beginning to overflow with people—and contrary to what the concierge had seemed to imply—Morgan and I were the only two even remotely clothed. There weren’t too many ‘gawkers’ other than us. Everyone else was very naked, and comfortably so. One or two wore partial clothing—belts, knapsacks, bikini bottoms, or small shorts. But no one was as completely clothed as we were—even without my shoes and shirt.

“Getting toward the end of the workday,” I said. “They must all be arriving for the Summertime Soiree.”

I noticed more banners and festive displays—several with the dancing, burning, cartoon Pilgrim, and I wondered absently what that signified.

“Yeah. I guess so,” Morgan said, staring at everything but the road ahead. “It’s just so weird. We’re a couple hours out of the city, and I’ve never even heard of this place.”

“Yeah, me neither,” I agreed.

“It should be legendary.”

True. Jokes about it should be rampant, Fire Island-like.

“Where’s this beach you wanted to see?” he asked.

“Down that cobblestone path. We just keep heading to the right.”

“Why do you want to go to this particular beach?”

I considered telling him, then decided against it. It’s not that I didn’t trust Morgan, it’s just that I…

No. It’s that I didn’t trust him.

“I overheard a hot girl in the restaurant say she was heading down that way to meet some of her friends.”

“Aaah. Good plan then,” Morgan said, getting visibly excited, his bike wobbling as we turned down the indicated path. “Hey. Maybe that hot hostess with the incredible ass will be there.”

I checked my watch and sighed.

For at least one more minute.

As I pedaled like a madman down toward the beach, the pastor was trying to walk through the town center of ‘Nekkid Bottoms’ with his Bible attached to his face, and not having much luck with it. The increased number of people made it quite hazardous for him to be anywhere outdoors, and he bumped into more naked flesh than he likely had in his entire life.

After a few minutes of pointless pinball-like wandering, he stumbled across a church and decided it had to be a safe haven for a man of God trying to avoid temptation and obscenity. He bounded up the stairs two at a time, then had to swerve wide right to avoid any kind of contact with a naked couple exiting the building and coming down the stairs toward him. Trying not to glance at them as they hurried by—and failing—‘I am weak, Lord, give me strength’—he skittered to the church door and pulled it open.
Immediately upon stepping through, the brown tones and colorful stained glass on all sides greeted him warmly, invitingly, like a dear, beloved old friend, and he breathed a heavy sigh of relief (apparently catching my habit). The place was empty and, for all he could tell, looked exactly like any other old church he had ever seen—though perhaps a bit more friendly somehow. Maybe because here, for the first time in these past hours of nudist hell, there was no one running around distracting him with their sinfully exposed privates.

Simple wooden pews lead up to a wooden altar, religious icons, Bibles, and statues of Mary, Jesus, and others he would recognize, even if I wouldn’t. Statues that were in no way false idols. He knelt at the head of the aisle and lowered his head in brief prayer. After he’d finished, he sat in a pew and breathed out the grateful thanks of the reprieved.

“Thank you, Lord, for this simple haven.”

“Hello?” a female voice asked, echoing through the chamber. He glanced around and saw a woman’s head pop up from behind the lectern on the dais. She was an older woman, blonde, in her fifties perhaps, but with a young feel to her. She wore a minister’s collar with black tunic, and smiled when she saw him.

“Oh, hello, Father,” she said pleasantly. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I’m not a priest. I’m a minister,” he said, only mildly annoyed. “Sorry to disturb you. I was just looking for a little refuge from the outside world.”

“Oh, of course, of course,” she said, ducking back down to pound nosily on something obstinate. “Take as long as you need and don’t mind me. I’m just trying to fix my audio system. I never installed it properly the first time, and now I’m paying for my haste.”

“If we don’t attend to the little things as if God were watching,” Pastor Winterly said, “he will eventually remind us that we have fallen short in His eyes.”

She popped her head back up and looked at him blankly. After a moment, she smiled, then returned to her work. “I suppose that’s true. Hadn’t thought of it that way. I tend to think the Lord has better things to do than make my speaker wires come loose and annoy my parishioners with feedback. But perhaps I’m not thinking it through completely.”

Pastor Winterly stood and walked toward the lectern where the lady minister continued to pound.

“I find God’s message rather consistent,” he said. “If you’ve failed at something, He will remind you to be more diligent.”

“I tend to think of God in more positive terms. More as a rewarding kind of God than a punishing kind.”

“But that would be only half the story.”

“If you say so.”

“You disagree?”
“I’ve known a lot of criminals who get away with it,” she said, straining at something.
“Only in this life.”
“But if God has time to pull my wires free, then why can’t he drop a dime to the cops about where to find the crooks?”
“He works in mysterious ways.”
“That I’ll give you.”
“Like, for instance,” the pastor said, looking around, “how he brought us both to this place and why.”
She didn’t reply. He heard her grunting again as she pulled hard at something.
“What punishment are we suffering by our being stuck here?” she continued.
“Punishment?” she asked. Her tone became tense and less pleasant. “What do you mean, ‘stuck’ here?”
“Stuck here. Abandoned in this sin-filled place of nudists and…”
She stood up, and Pastor Winterly gasped.
The woman’s collar and ‘tunic’ only covered her neck and shoulders. Everything else about her was as God had made it.
“I don’t feel abandoned. I feel privileged,” the female pastor said indignantly—absently brushing dirt away from her bare breasts. “I happen to love this place.”

The cobblestones were smooth and well worn, and made for a surprisingly pleasant ride down to the sea. All along the shore dozens of naked people spanning every age were enjoying the evening sun, still full, warm, and comforting. With the mild temperature, gentle breeze, and sounds of the ocean, the whole experience was deeply relaxing right up until Morgan rode into a tree.

He fell to the ground, his face so covered in tree bark that he looked like a raisin with teeth, and I leaped off my bike to help him.

“You okay?” I asked.
“I’m fine. Just feel like an idiot is all. But did you see those tits?”
“No. I must have missed them.”
“Jesus, are you blind? I wanted to do laps on them!”

As I tried to help him up, I noticed laughter coming from very near us over toward the shore. A group of college-age kids and teenagers were playing football and had stopped to watch Morgan’s humiliating display. They were all laughing hysterically. It made me a bit angry; then one of the girls—a pretty little thing with auburn hair who wasn’t laughing—shushed them with a scowl and ran over to us.

“That’s the one,” Morgan whispered excitedly. “Look at ‘em. Her tits are perfect. And did you see her ass? Like the Bowen statue of Marvel’s Black Widow, only flesh-colored.”

As we watched the pretty girl hurry toward us, let me just say this: men were never intended to see women—especially pretty ones—run naked anywhere, except maybe on television with all the lights dimmed and the shades drawn, in the privacy of their own bedrooms. The overall effect of watching a very attractive woman bounce and bobble her way toward you is like having someone autoflate your penis with a leaf-blower. Both Morgan and I had to shift about rapidly so as to avoid painful pinching and embarrassing exposure for even more, hilarious, teenage amusement.

“What are you okay?” the girl asked, finally reaching us.
“I don’t know,” Morgan said, sounding far more pathetic than when I was the one offering support. “I think I may have broken my nose.”

She knelt beside him and leaned his head back giving him gentle, soothing attention. He soaked up the sympathy like a disposable diaper soaking up—what disposable diapers usually soak up—when she asked him to show her where it hurt. I noticed he made a point of moving both hands to show her the exact location, and ‘accidentally’ brushed her breasts in doing so. She didn’t seem to notice, and he did it again on the way down.

“Did that make your hands feel better?” she asked.
Oops. Apparently she had noticed.
He looked only mildly embarrassed. “Made everything feel better.”
“I have been told my breasts have miraculous, healing powers.”
“I bet they’d work great on blind men.”
“Only if they asked permission first.”

She dropped his head on a rock, and stood up rather abruptly as he squealed in pain. She turned and spoke to her no-longer laughing friends.

“He groped me!” she said, jabbing a finger at him. “I come over here to help him, and he gropes me!”

Her friends all scowled and sneered, then a wave of angry, naked flesh rapidly descended on us. I knew I had to think of something fast, or both Morgan and I would be pummeled senseless by this angry mob of bare-assed attackers. The muddled mind kicked into violent overdrive as I sussed out our situation and a solution presented itself almost immediately.

I jumped on my bike and rode off.

Not looking back, I heard the sounds of Morgan howling, naked fists raining down upon him, and the slapping of bare feet pursuing on the path behind me—which fortunately receded quickly as I pedaled like a man possessed.

Come to think of it, I was a man possessed. Possessed by Ms. Nuckeby.

“Corky!” Morgan called after me. “CORKY, HELP!”

Ignoring his pleas and desperate cries, I checked my watch and continued on without looking back. Sorry, Morgan. Ms. Nuckeby awaited; her siren’s call, and my need to bash myself against her rocks, were simply too intoxicating for me to ignore.

Pastor Winterly stared, open-mouthed and horrified at the lady minister before him. He had been wrong on first glance. She wasn’t completely naked save for the ministerial collar. She also wore simple, black, canvas, slip-on shoes.

But other than that she was most definitely naked, and so, the pastor averted his eyes.

“Madam…” he began.

“I’ve been here twenty-five years,” she said, annoyed, “and I’ve never been happier. If that’s punishment, please, God, give me more.”

“Madam. You’re naked.”

“You’re kidding!” she said and looked down at herself, as if stunned. “Goodness. I’m getting so absentminded in my old age. I was in such a hurry to get to work this morning.” She looked up at him and smiled pleasantly. Not that he could see her, since he was studying the filigree work on a nearby statue of Mary who people sometimes pray to for guidance but was not, in any way, a false idol. “Thank you for pointing that out to me.”

“You’re welcome,” he said.

She looked sternly up at the older man, amazed that he hadn’t recognized the sarcasm. For a long moment she said nothing—simply stared and waited, figuring it would eventually sink in. But he continued on merrily, not getting it.

“Would you like to go put something on? I’ll be happy to wait.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

“Madam,” he said, turning to her and sounding as if he were speaking to a small child. “It is highly inappropriate for you to be seen without clothing, especially in a house of God. The United Methodist Church would never condone such behavior.”

“Why should they have a problem with it? God didn’t seem to mind when He made me this way.”

“If God had meant for us to wander around in the nude, madam, He…”

The pastor hesitated and rolled his eyes heavenward, suddenly realizing he had trapped himself.

“She would have made us this way?” she finished for him.

“Madam…”

“Reverend.”

“Yes, madam?”

“No you. Me. Reverend. I have an official title. I earned it. I would appreciate being addressed by it.”

“You cannot possibly be a legitimate…”

“Would you like to see my ordination certificate?”

He seemed to become angry. He turned to look at her and found his eyes wandering over her body to get a
firmer, mental grip on the situation—or so he told himself.

She was a handsome woman. A little heavy, a little loose, but still hanging together nicely. He was already becoming somewhat uncomfortable with studying her—as it seemed to be arousing certain long-unused areas within him that he would prefer remained dormant—when he noticed that her pubic hair had been perfectly trimmed into the shape of a cross.

“Good, Lord! I cannot believe—woman, are you mad?”
“Not at all.”
“You have trimmed your…em…the…um…pub…” he paused and drew a breath. “That is the symbol of our Lord!” he said with angry dignity.

“Which is why I did it,” she responded shamelessly.
She continued to stare at him, and he continued to stare at…it.

“Is it still there?” she asked.
“What?”
“Did it move?”
“Did what move?”
“You can stop staring at it now,” she told him, annoyed.
“What?”
“I said, you can stop…”

“I wasn’t staring!” he said, shivering, realizing he had been staring, and turned his eyes heavenward, though his mind’s eye still only saw that part of her which some men have also named, quite poetically, ‘heaven’. “I was just…agog.”

“Agog?” she asked.

“Agog. Stunned, flabbergasted. It’s as though you are taunting the faith you supposedly serve. I mean, it’s bad enough that you’re a minister, if you truly are…”

“Bad enough that I’m a minister? Why? Because I’m a nudist?”
“No, because you’re a wo…” he paused, and seriously reconsidered what he was about to say. Those comments had gotten him into trouble before.

“Because I’m a wo…? Wo…what? Wo…man?”
“We both know that women don’t truly belong in the clergy…”
“No, we don’t both know that…”
“But if the Church knew you also conducted yourself in this way…”

“Why do you assume they wouldn’t know? They do. They’ve been here. I have pictures that were taken during their visit hanging on a wall in my office. Would you like to see them?”

He hesitated again. He had nearly said ‘yes’, fairly certain she was lying, then thought better of it. What if they had ordained a nudist? Was it really so farfetched? They had allowed, and promoted, homosexuality. Anything now seemed possible. Good lord, animals might be next. After homosexuality, animals were always next.

He shivered as more horrific thoughts occurred to him. What if they had come to visit and then decided to partake of this ‘naturism’ themselves? Could he handle seeing his elders smiling and chummy, and ‘hanging out’ as the young people so aptly put it these days? He shuddered more violently.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.
“Fine. Bit of a chill.”
“Did you want to see the photos?”
“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Why is this such a problem for you? This is my parish. My flock is comfortable and happy living this way. I am comfortable and happy living this way. And so is God after all. Genesis 1:27 ‘So God created man in His own image.’”

He looked at her blankly. She looked at him, stunned. Could he be this dense? Apparently so.

“Naked,” she concluded.

“Are you insane? God is not naked.”

“Of course He is.”

“Madam!”

“It’s true. God is a nudist. He didn’t become angry and kick Adam and Eve out of Eden until they began all that nonsense about being afraid and ashamed, and covering themselves. Prior to that, He couldn’t have cared less what they wore.”

“You take liberties with the word of God.”

“Do I? Genesis 2:25. ‘And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.’ It’s not the
nudity the Lord objected to—it was their thinking they knew more than Him, that pissed God off.”
“‘Pissed God off.’ Pissed God off?”
“Do you need further examples?”
“I need some decorum. God and…” he paused. “…pissed, in the same sentence. Really. Madam…”
“Reverend.”
“Madam! However you may interpret Genesis, God has made it plain that nudity is a sin.”
“No, He hasn’t.”
“Of course He has. First of all, there is the issue of temptation…”
“I’ve never known a man who felt less tempted because a woman’s body was obscured beneath layers of fabric.”
“Women can be tempted too.” He sneered.
“I won’t deny that. Doesn’t change my point. We’re primarily tempted by a man’s mind, though,” she said, smiling. “Which you men flaunt shamelessly.”
“However sexual temptation may originate, that in no way makes the behavior either acceptable or correct, and to, additionally, fan the flames of lust by flaunting yourself, publicly…”
“James 1:13 through 15 plainly states that God never tempts anybody. How can you say that the image of God—which Genesis 1:26 and 27 clearly explains that we are—tempts? Perhaps our actions, or our expressions, or our fertile imaginations—the way we interact as women and men—might be tempting. But our bodies, by Biblical definition, cannot tempt.”
“I can see this argument is pointless.”
“Interestingly, so can I.”
“If you’ll excuse me.”
“I would be delighted to excuse you.”
He turned and walked down the aisle without another word, his footsteps echoing hollowly throughout the large chamber. As he neared the exit, the nude woman in ministerial collar called out to him. “You’re welcome back anytime, Pastor.”
He didn’t bother turning to look at her.
“Not until you learn how to become closer to God,” he said.
“I told you,” she said. “God is a nudist and unashamed of it, as we should be. In that regard, if no other, I am closer to Him than you will ever be.”
He pushed through the outer doors and let them slam behind him. She shook her head.
“You get one every year,” she muttered under her breath, kneeling again behind the lectern and returning to her Heaven ordained, audio-equipment difficulties.

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As Morgan lie somewhere far behind me under a pile of angry, naked people, I was pedaling my little heart out toward what I hoped would be someone I could spend time with besides him. Not that he wasn’t often entertaining, but you couldn’t have sex with him and feel good about it afterwards—no matter what your sexual orientation.

So for those of you thinking I left Morgan behind out of cowardice, keep in mind that a beautiful woman was—hopefully—waiting for me, wanting to see me, and she was naked. Cowardice may have, in some small way, played a part in abandoning my one and only friend, but overall I think you can go with me on the idea that there were other more important considerations at play here. Like—she was naked.

Over the tops of some coastal cottages and the nearby tree line, I could see some tall, dark stones, which looked vaguely forehead-like. There were eyebrows and ear tops, and one particular stone was tall enough that I could see most of a nose, and one entire eye in profile. The Medium Sized Giant head, I presumed.

As I rounded the last cottage still obscuring my view, I saw two immense Easter Island-like heads a hundred or so yards in front of me and just seaward of the path I rode. They must have been, on average, a good twenty or more feet high and were rooted deeply in the sand, their backs to the ocean as they stared unblinkingly into the front of a little chalet nestled between them and the sharply rising hills beyond. It was almost as if, one distant morning long ago, they’d strode majestically out of the sea intending to conquer the world, only to be distracted by some very attractive naked person in one of the windows. Captivated, they’d stayed and continued to ogle, not realizing that in this town—whatever it was—was not likely to ever get dressed.
World domination put on hold due to prurient interest. One of the immense rocks—the Little Giant Head, I presumed—leaned over oddly, as if time, weather and unsatisfied sexual urges had made him realize he needed a bit of rest.

I knew how he felt.

The cobblestone path ended beneath me, and the bike refused to roll over sand, so I jumped off, dropping it where it was, and raced toward the smaller of the stone idols. I checked my watch, and saw that I was seventeen minutes late, and cursing, threw myself behind the immense, stony sentinel.

But she was gone.

I breathed deeply for a moment, winded from my exertions, staring at the empty space between the stones and the sea. I cursed myself for being an idiot, for waiting for Morgan, for talking to Sophie, for not looking at the envelope sooner. Petal had winked at me. She was trying to give me a clue. But she clearly underestimated my utter cluelessness. I’d thought she was showing me some kind of appreciation for my exposed penis. Clearly, I was not the smartest truck in the garage. Even Bob The Builder would lose patience with me, and he could tolerate Spud.

Personally, I would have done a Lizzy Borden on Spud years ago and fed him to Farmer Pickles’ pig, Deadwood-style. Bob built Spud his own room. But I digress—which is part of my problem in the first place! I had lost valuable time getting the others into the hotel, talking with the receptionist, tipping the concierge, tolerating Morgan, talking with the receptionist again—

I was an idiot.

I sagged, pitifully, and turned back to my bike, dreading the long ride uphill for more reasons than just my own poor, physical condition, when suddenly, she was there, riding toward me on a Palomino horse, bareback, and fabulously naked, a modern day Lady Godiva, sparkling in the sun like a jewel, her beautiful smile showing just how pleased she was to see me.

Ms. Nuckebey.

Wisper.

My goddess on the shore.
“I’m so sorry I’m late…” Wisper said, stepping down from her valiant steed.
“You are so incredibly beautiful,” I told her.
She blushed, and a smile erupted all over her face. She turned from me, shyly, and tied the horse’s lead to a nearby tree branch.
“The sun wishes it were as radiant as you,” I said, more or less stealing from Shakespeare.
“Oh, my God!” she said, disbelieving, walking back toward me.
“No, really,” I said, moving closer, grateful for my dim memory of the bard, but running low on material. “I’ve never seen a more amazing woman in all my life.”

Man, even without the assistance of the man from Stratford, I was on a roll.

“And you’ve seen a lot of amazing women.”

“No, I haven’t. I’ve seen pretty faces. You—are truly lovely.”

She looked shyly down at the ground, still smiling. I had embarrassed her, but she liked it. So did I.

“You came,” she said.

I looked down at my slacks.

“No!” she said, and laughed. “No, I meant you came down here. To the beach.”

“I couldn’t stay away. I had to see you. I needed to see you.”

“What about Mindie?” She said ‘Mindie’ again as if it were something with too many legs crawling out from under wet compost.

“What about her?” I asked.

“You’re engaged.”

“She’s engaged. I was never consulted on the idea, and had other plans.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a weird story. I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

I took one of her hands in mine. She looked down at it nervously.

“You’re not going to let go of it this time, are you?”

I winced. “Only if I get run over by a semi.”

“We don’t get many semis on this beach.”

“The way my luck runs...”

She laughed, and as she did I watched every inch of her move with that joyous sound. For the first time I realized she wasn’t actually entirely nude, as she had given over her magnificent body to display a delicate gold chain about her waist, a matching anklet, necklace, toe rings, finger rings, and other complementary jewelry. It made her bare skin all the more beautiful and unimaginably sexy.

I leaned closer to her and wanted to kiss her. She wanted it as well, but we both hesitated, knowing there was still something between us. And this time it wasn’t my penis.

“I need to apologize,” I said.

She put a gentle fingertip to my lips. “Shhh,” she said. “You need me to explain a few things.”

“Yes,” I said, showing my confusion.

“I figured you might.”

Smiling at me, she turned and walked toward the ocean. I went with her, and not just because she was still holding my hand.

“You’re a nudist,” I said flatly.

“Is it that obvious?”

I looked her over, enjoying every sun-kissed skin cell. “I’m afraid so.”

She laughed. “Good a place as any to start, I guess. Yes, I am a nudist.”

“I imagine it would make the transition to lingerie modeling a bit easier.”

“Easier than being full-on clothed, yes. Don’t pants and underwear get uncomfortable after a while?”

I had to admit, sometimes they did. I just never thought about it. In my neighborhood you had to wear them, and that was more-or-less the end of it.

“When it’s cold. But still not in the amount that you do. A coat. Some shoes...”

The idea of her nude under a winter coat excited me, and I imagined Christmases walking around town, just giddy with knowing what others would not.

“I need to apologize,” I said.

“Does it get cold here?”

“Does it get cold here?”

“Clothes For The Naked.”

“Yeah,” she chuckled. “Clothes For The Naked.”

“How do you feel about wearing clothing on a daily basis?”

“Not a fan of it.”

Damn. Strike one.

“Hard to imagine, I know, that it would actually be a problem that a beautiful woman wanted to be naked
around me all the time, but it’s a funny world we live in.”

“A funny world you live in.”

“Point of view is everything I suppose. This place really is different from what I’m used to. Where did those stone heads come from?”

“I don’t know. They were here before this place was settled.”

“Settled by whom?”

“Homer Nikkid. You probably saw his statue on the way into town.”

“The pantsless 76er. He seemed quite proud of his enormous schlong.”

“Oh, he was. Some wonder if pride is the main reason he went without pants, more so than comfort. I suppose it doesn’t matter. The end result is the same.”

“Pride would be my bet. I’d find a way to expose mine too,” I admitted, “if it were that big. I’d want everyone to see it, envy it, and bow down before it in worship.”

“Kind of like a woman where you come from who wears the tightest clothes when she has the most impressive body.”

“Yep. Just like that. The way things are lately, it practically is nudism at times, isn’t it?”

“At least where women are concerned. Men seem more reserved.”

“I’ve heard stories about guys who call impromptu meetings in private places and somehow ‘forget’ their pants—about this one Hollywood actor in particular—so they can impress people with what dangled between their legs, but yes, mostly it’s women who reveal—men who conceal.”

“Seems more honest, somehow,” she said, “the way we do it. Have everyone on equal footing. Homer may have had weird reasons or hang-ups that led him to go around with his all exposed, but in the end, I think he was more honest and right than the people where you come from.”

“If you say so.”

“You disagree?”

“Well, from a purely practical standpoint,” I said, “if someone had a wang that enormous, I imagine he’d have trouble finding enough cloth to cover it anyway. But mostly, you have to admit, it’s a pretty radical direction in life when all of history has been more sensible.”

“Sensible?” she bristled. “Not all of history. Just recorded, supposedly civilized history. Clothing optional has been more the norm in the overall arc of human existence. And, otherwise, what parts of the human body can reasonably be revealed, or needs to be concealed, has been fluid to a large degree.”

“Really?”

“Sure. Sixteenth century codpieces. Exposed breasts. Exposed asscrack. In the last hundred years alone you’ve gone from full body suits and hats at the beach to topless with thongs. In olden days a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking.”

“Now, heaven knows.” I had to agree with her. “Anything goes.”

“From cavemen and women up through the ancient Mayan, Egyptian, Spartan, Greek, Etruscan, and even into the Roman civilizations, when things began to take a more prudish turn—largely among followers of some restrictive force of authority, like a religion or something.”

“People of the ancient world were all nudists?” I asked, surprised. Had I known, I might have paid more attention in history class. At least to the pictures.

“No,” she said, correcting slightly. “It was just more clothing optional and since then people have often tried to reclaim their right to be naked publicly. From the Indian Jains, to Pyrrho of Elis, to the Carpocratians to the Pifles, to the Turlupins and the Anabaptists and the Adamites, men and women have historically wanted to feel the air and the sun on their skins. Whether it’s public bathing, social events, athletic competitions—hell, the Greek root word for gymnastics means ‘naked’."

Suddenly something occurred to me.

“Is there a…a college around here?” I asked her.

“Community college, yeah.”

“Nudist college?”

“Of course.”

“Men’s and women’s athletics departments?”

“Sure. Why?”


She looked at me, puzzled, then shook her head and went back to explaining the history of public nakedness.

“So, anyway, people were more clothing optional earlier in world history. But, of course, all that changed heading into the Dark, and Middle Ages.
“Power—which has been entirely about control since the dawn of time—began to be acquired through managing, or restraining natural human emotions and desires, usually culminating in some form of Puritanism as a method of attaining spiritual perfection. Control of emotion. Control of behavior. Control of others in general by whatever means necessary. But that’s only been a couple thousand years, or so. Before that, it was much more a free-for-all.”

“And Homer was just looking for a return to that lack of control?”

“Or what he felt was a greater form of personal control. Honesty, and understanding of what was natural within us. Listen to your emotions. Trust your feelings. Seek joy in all things. If you like it, do it. If you desire something, look to attain it, or understand your need for it. If it doesn’t hurt others, try it. If it’s not someone else’s, go for it.”

She paused and stared at me, smiling slightly. “If it’s warm, get naked.”

“Hedonism.”

“I suppose. We think of it more as joyful living. Guilt is often so misguided. More neurosis than genuine repentance for harm done.”

“Be honest, be moral, be comfortable,” I said, remembering the plaque. At first it seemed like a joke. Now…

“Like so many,” Wisper continued, “Homer came to America to escape persecution for his attitudes, for his beliefs…”

“…for his refusal to wear pants in public…”

“For a lot of reasons,” she said, sounding a bit annoyed. “He was an acolyte of Hythloday, and had notions of creating a utopian society similar to the one created by his mentor here in the New World.”

“A society centered around being naked.”

“Partly. More centered on freedom. Freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom to wear clothes or not.”

“Who’s Hythloday?”

“Some guy in Europe hundreds of years ago who built a community of like-minded people…”

“…who liked to be naked.”

She stopped walking and looked at me with some sadness.

“You seem kind of hung up on only one particular aspect of what I’m saying,” she finally said. “I don’t mean offense. It’s just such a major change from what I’m used to. I’m trying to get my head around it.”

“The easiest way to do that is to experience it.”

She saw my hesitance.

“If you tried it,” she said, smiling, “you might like it.”

“If I tried snails, I might like them, but—…”

A pained expression filled her face, and I felt immediately as if I was losing her, and the Chihuahuas began yapping at my heart, again.

“I’m working my way into it,” I said. “You’re fighting against years of repression here. Honestly. Just give me time.”

She studied me for a moment, sadly, then forced an uncertain smile, and we continued walking.

“So has it become the utopia Homer wanted it to be?”

“No, not really. It’s nice. I like it. But the essential requirement of ‘utopia’ is homogeny—and people are never homogenous—even when they’re basically the same. Brothers, and sisters often can’t even get along, and it doesn’t get any more homogenous than that. Married couples may have a commitment to one another but can still see the world very differently.”

I saw her point, and it bothered me. Not because walking beside her on the shores of this not-quite utopia—gloriously naked as she was, while I still wore pants—proved our own differences were visibly obvious, and potentially insurmountable, even though we genuinely liked each other. But because with her thoughtful history lesson and deep understanding of the moral, philosophical, and religious origins of society, along with her view of the overall direction of the world, she was clearly smarter than me. Than I? Than…

See! She would know! And when a woman is smarter than the man, that is a recipe for disaster! Unless you’re creating a sitcom. Then it’s gold.

I’d never even considered what the word ‘homogenous’ meant anywhere outside a carton of milk, let alone how it applied to utopian civilization. I felt like a frog listening to the goddess Athena—wise, beautiful, independent, even-tempered, and logical Athena, obviously hoping to commune with me in some intellectual way—and all I could think of was jumping on her nakedness. She continued on, blithely rubbing her mental superiority in my face, while I wanted to rub other things in hers.

“In utopia,” she continued, “everyone thinks the same, and agrees all the time because they’re wise enough to
see ‘truth’. But ‘truth’ is always different things to every individual, and being given the freedom to do what you want to do, no matter what anyone else may want to do, creates conflict with someone else’s truth. So, ultimately, any utopia requires a benevolent dictator to keep the peace on those—supposedly—rare occasions when people will disagree. Homer understood that, and with the founders managed to build a working society, but it’s far from perfect, and entirely reliant on the leader of the day.

“Other than my parents,” she continued, a bit sadly, “I don’t know anyone who’s particularly benevolent, and I can’t get two people to agree on the same movie, let alone major life decisions. Some people like film as art—other, lesser intellects, or mental escapists, may prefer ‘high-octane, big-screen’ entertainment. Some people are smart. Some people are dumb. Some smart people do stupid things, and some dumb people are amazingly savvy.”

“So,” I said, “it’s basically just a community like any other.”

She smiled, sarcastically. “Of people who like to be naked.”

I eyed her, sarcastically. “You seem kind of hung up on that,” I kidded, grateful she still hadn’t recognized I was an intellectual frog.

“This is going to sound strange, Wisper,” I said, a little afraid to finish my thought. “But why are you attracted to me?”

“What? What a question! Because you’re handsome, and nice, and...”

“I am?” I was genuinely caught off-guard.

“Why does that surprise you?”

“I don’t know. No one’s ever said it before.”

“Which part?”

“The handsome part. Well, either part actually. Wait. I take that back. Morgan says I’m nice, sometimes. Actually what he says is ‘you’re a chump’, but in Morgan-speak that means ‘is considerate, and will do things for others’.”

“You are considerate. Remember the first time we met?” she asked.

I did. It was a couple weeks before the water bottle incident. Manschingloss had introduced her to me as one of his choices for the fashion show. Part of my job was approving the models, which was entirely perfunctory as all final decisions were the purview of Manschingloss’, and I normally did it without much interest. Manschingloss was never overruled. But, contrary to many of the models I might have preferred not to hire, Ms. Nuckeby had been a delight. Polite and charming, and I, of course, had been immediately struck by her startling beauty, and so, did my best not to look at her in a desperate effort to cling to my job description.

“You were so shy,” she said. “You wouldn’t even look at me. But when you did, you looked into my eyes, not into my boobs, and made me feel comfortable. You asked me if you could get me something to eat or drink—you made me laugh,” she recalled, smiling at the memory. “The boss, wanting me to be comfortable and offering me a drink.”

“Maybe I was just hitting on you.”

“You never hit on anybody. Even before I met you, everyone said you were the perfect gentleman.”

“Well, contractually, I’m required to be.”

“I know men, Mister Wopplesdown. That rarely stops them. You can’t fake genuine kindness.”

I felt a bit of a glow. Apparently there was an impression of me in the general world of which I was not aware. People thought highly of me. How had that happened? But then, people thought highly of George W. Bush. Half a nation had elected him to our highest office because they thought he’d be fun at a barbecue.

“So, I already knew you couldn’t hit on me,” Wisper continued. “And we had to sign those papers at the agency, so I knew I had no chance with you. But then you asked me questions about myself, about my family, and made me laugh. Here I was, a new model—basically used to being treated like a glorified coat hanger—and you’re looking into my eyes and treating me like a person. A human being. A woman. I wanted you right there on the floor.”


“Sure. It’s not that big a deal when you’re raised around here. Sexuality is more open, as you can imagine. If you’re attracted to someone, you do it. Il n’y a pas de quoi fouetter un chat.”

“What? What was that? Was that French?”

“Yes. It’s an idiom. Literally it means: ‘It’s no reason for whipping a cat.’ But the real translation is more: ‘nothing to fuss over.’”

“So you can be smart in two languages.”

“Well—five. But I’m only really fluent in three.”

“I can walk and chew gum at the same time.”

She laughed, and the sound jiggled things that thrilled me in stupendous ways.
“So you just have sex anywhere you feel like it? In public?”

“Nooo,” she laughed again. “That’s frowned on, even here— although it does happen, now and again, and people really don’t get too worked up about it.”

“Inny pass decoy feather the cat.”

“Okay. You should never speak French.”

“I should never speak English. So, you were telling me why you can’t have sex with me in public, even though you desperately want to.”

She laughed. “Right. Well, we still prefer our intimacy in private, or semiprivate, because it can disturb others. Like chewing with your mouth open. Not world ending, but not the most pleasant thing to be around either, sometimes. But even then, it’s kind of Etruscan, as you can imagine.”

“Oh, I can imagine,” I said, chuckling. Which was true. All I could do was imagine. I had no idea what the hell she was talking about, other than that it meant we might still be able to have sex around here somewhere. Wasn’t ‘Etruscan’ a kind of bread? Whatever. The ‘wanting sex’ thing now made this an extra base hit. The count was starting over. It was time for the next pitch.

“What if someone becomes—you know—aroused in public?”

“What? You mean like you did with Petal?”

I gulped. Blushed. Looked at my feet. Apparently, the Nuckeby sisters had no secrets.

“Um, sort of like that.”

“It’s all right. She’s a pretty girl. It happens. Just don’t do anything about it.”

She smiled. I smiled. I couldn’t imagine ever finding anyone more attractive than she already was to me.

“How could I?” I said. “As long as you’re around.”

“Even when I’m not around.”

“Promise,” I said. “So, then, monogamy is still important here.”

“It is with me.”

“Good enough.”

“So what else do you want to know?” she asked.

“Wow. So many things.” I lost my smile and looked away. “But before I ask anything more, I really need to apologize,” I said sadly. She looked at me blankly. “For costing you your job.”

She looked suddenly hurt and turned away. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“No. It was. Grandfather feared my attraction to you, and yours to me. He got you fired. He thinks you’re a gold-digger.”

She laughed. Very hard. I glanced at her breasts as they bounced with her chuckles, then away again when she caught me staring.

“It’s all right. You can look at them now. I want you to.”

She posed provocatively in front of me, and I nearly fainted. She had to grab me to keep me from going over.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine,” I squeaked.

“Sorry. I forget sometimes that you outsiders get more worked up about a bare body than we do.”

“It’s quite a body.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem. Soooo…em…not a gold-digger?”

“If you only knew.”

“That’s…” I coughed. “That’s not the first time I’ve heard that today.”

“Well, it’s just that a very rich man wanted me—but I didn’t want him. It’s how I wound up in the city and working as a model. I was escaping.”

“And now I’ve driven you back home, to him?”

“Near him. Not to him. Modeling paid very well, and it allowed me to live in an apartment away from here. Having worked my whole life in the family restaurant, I don’t have many job skills that could pay the kind of salary I’d need for a place of my own. Being seminaked was overdressed for me, so I had no qualms about the work, and I’m pretty enough…”

“More than enough,” I said.

“See?” She blushed. “You are nice.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“You haven’t given me any reason to think otherwise. Other than the hand-dropping incident.”

I winced again. “Am I going to have to live with that for the rest of my life?”

“I hope so,” she said, with deeper meaning.
I warmed. I wanted to kiss her again, but I wasn’t sure everything was settled between us yet.

“Now I want to ask you some questions,” she said, letting me know not everything was.

Rats!

“All right,” I said. “Shoot.”

“How do you feel about being with a nudist?”

That was the million-dollar question. I looked off into the distance. We were a good ways past the Easter Island heads now, heading toward a cluster of large rocks on the shore, and there wasn’t another soul in sight. We were well and truly alone, and I didn’t want it to end. I wanted to give her the right answers.

Instead I told her the truth.

“On a purely animalistic level, I think it’s great. But on other, more realistic levels…”

“How will the family react, that kind of thing?”

“Yes.”

“I have similar concerns,” she said.

I goggled at her. “Your family would object?”

“Oh,” she said, sadly. “Well, I’m not the only one, you know.”

“Really?” I was floored. “Who else?”

“None of your business. Why are you afraid of being poor?”

“I don’t know how to live poor, and my grandfather threatened me with being disowned if I continued, in any way, with you.” “He can do that?”

“He’d give it a damn good try, believe me. He holds my money in trust until I’m thirty. He even got me engaged to Mindie without my knowledge so I wouldn’t be available to you, or anyone else.”

“That’s what happened? My, God! He’d break you just because you wanted to see me?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m interested in you, Corky Wopplesdown, your money means nothing to me, so your grandfather ultimately has no power here, but …so…” she hesitated, and bit a lip, “…well, what does all this mean then? Your family, my family, our differing lifestyles—there are still lots of obstacles here.”

“Apparently,” I said sadly.

We walked for a minute or more in silence, and just listened to the singing of the sea. I’m sure a million things were going through her mind, but mostly I was thinking about her breasts; I am terrifically unevolved.

“Do you want to do this?” she asked hopefully.

“What?” I asked, nervous and a bit excited.

“See me,” she said, as if it should be obvious, and wondering where my mind was.

“Like…a relationship?”

“Yes.”

“More than anything.”

“So what are the rules, and what are the consequences?”

I chewed my own lip. Sucked my teeth. Hummed.

“Well,” I finally said. “The consequences are, our elders hating us, disowning us, and making us outcasts from both societies.”
“Pretty serious.”
“Frighteningly so.”
“What are the benefits?”
“Being together.”

She sighed, clearly moved by my words. “Good answer. Okay. Suppose this works out and the two of us fall deeply, profoundly, and passionately in love…” she paused and glanced at me meaningfully, as if waiting, and when I said nothing, “…or just…um…at least continue wanting to be together—but you get kicked out of Wopplesdown Struts, your home, your money, and have all your credit cards taken away.”

I shivered.

“Could you live here?” she asked.

“Here?” I looked around nervously. “I don’t know.”

“There’s one way to find out.”

“How?”

“Take off your pants.”

“What?”

“Take off your pants. If you can’t do that and be comfortable with no one else even around, then you could never live here.”

I hesitated, melted a bit under her electric gaze, then slowly reached for my snap and zipper. As I did, I glanced up, and down the beach again, even more nervously.

“Don’t look around. You have to not be worried about it or it will never work.”

I stared at her and hesitated. Her eyes showed concern, but also support and understanding. They were complex eyes.

“You were naked outside the restaurant.”

“Not by choice.”

“Is it really so different?”

I looked at my zipper.

“I was also—a bit more flaccid then.”

She laughed.

“It’s not really a problem here, Corky. Women’s nipples get hard…”

Gloop!

“…men’s penises get hard. It happens. It only becomes a problem when you do creepy things with it or it’s just chronic.”

I glanced at her, suddenly disturbed.

“It’s chronic?” she asked, surprised.

“Around you!”

“Oh. Well. I assume that’ll pass eventually.”

“You assume a lot,” I said.

“All right,” she said, waving it off. “Well, for now, no one’s around. So it’s okay.”

I looked at her askance, not convinced, but still opened my fly slowly—uneasily—only to stop and involuntarily glanced around again.

She sighed heavily, then reached out and stopped me, looking into my eyes sadly.

“Okay. So you living here is not an option. I suppose I could live in your world and wear clothes.” She shuddered, violently. It was really sexy. “I was willing to do it before, I could do it again. What kind of work can you do?”

“I can look at semi-naked girls and not get sued.”

“Not a lot of demand for that kind of job skill.”

“I guess not. I might manage entry-level in a restaurant, or something like that.”

“You?”

I was offended.

“It’s possible. If I had a benevolent boss.”

“Benevolent? In the city?” She seemed to have her doubts. “I don’t know,” I said, tending to agree with her.

“You think your family couldn’t accept me—even as a busboy—if I wore clothes?”

“Could your family accept me at parties, and gatherings, and social events if I didn’t?”

I said nothing. I didn’t need to. They already hadn’t.

We continued walking in silence, then arrived at a large rock where she sat quietly, looked out across the sea, and took her hand from mine. I missed its touch immediately. With growing despair, I turned and looked out over
the ocean myself, putting my discarded fingers and their partners into their respective pockets. I liked pockets.

When she spoke again, after some long, deep thinking, her voice sounded distant, with none of its natural buoyancy.

“I might be able to find work with another modeling agency. So you might not need a job.”
“I don’t think I could be comfortable living off you.”
“There’s no shame in it.”
“It’s not the shame, it’s the burden. Life is expensive. I’d want to do my part, and modeling is a finicky business.”

“That’s true. I might only have a few years of earning potential, and then…”
 “…there’s two of us with no job skills.”
“Well, I can run a restaurant. You’re more problematic. You’re used to having everything you want—up to and including a butler.”

“He’s not much of a butler.”
“He’s more than you’d have if you were disowned. And suppose we lost everything, on both sides, and then things didn’t work out between us. Where would we be then?”

Neither of us said anything as we stared off at the horizon a while longer. I turned and looked at her, and saw she was deeply miserable, her eyes wet and misted. Finally she spoke, her voice low—hollow, lost.

“This is supposed to be the most romantic part of the relationship. The beginning, when everything is magical and all problems can be overcome. But it feels more like the end.”

I kicked the sand absently.

“You’re such a sweet man, Corky,” she said, so sadly.
The words wounded me in some physical way. They sounded not so much like a compliment as a goodbye.

“Such a gentle soul,” she said. “I never thought I could meet anyone like you.”

“Wisper, there has to be some way…”

“Ssshhhh,” she said, and studied me in silence for a moment, her expression one of profound loss.

“Take your pants off,” she said.

“What?”

“Take your pants off. Please?”

“I thought we had already established that I…”

“There’s no one around, and I’m not asking you to live this way. I just want to look at you.”

Her sadness-filled smile grew, and a tear formed in her eye.

“Take your pants off.”

Unbelievably, I still hesitated.

“Please?” she asked again.

With sudden, unexpected confidence, I opened the pants, and dropped them to the sand. She calmly sat there, pleased, as her eyes wandered up and down my body. She made me feel attractive, worthy, and proud, like maybe I actually looked good naked. I suppose anything was possible. The rules were very different here.

“Wow,” she said softly.

“Wow?”

“You’re so handsome.”

I looked down, surprised.

“Thank you.”

“I love your penis.”

“Um—thank you.”

“It has a really nice shape.”

“Glad you like it.”

“Good color, too.”

“You think so?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Thanks.”

“It bends a little to the left.”

“I know. Sorry.”

“No. It’s cute. Did you hurt it somehow?”

“No. It does that on its own.”

“Oh,” she said, studying it further. “It’s really very hard, isn’t it?”

“Pretty much since meeting you. Yeah.”
“Wow.”
“Like it was injected with concrete,” I said. “Men here don’t get like this?”
“Not like that.”
“Desensitization probably. Nudity overdose.”
“Maybe. I just love the way it gets so big around me, so fast. Like I really, really excite you.”
“As no one else possibly could.”
She looked up at my eyes, and there were more tears in hers.
“You are the sweetest man.”
She held out her hands and beckoned me.
“Make love with me.”
“What? Wisper, I…”
“Make love with me. Stand between my legs, push yourself inside me, and hold me like you’ll never let me go.”
I stood for a minute longer than I should have—because it was a minute I could have spent touching her. Finally, I stepped out of my pants and over to her, taking her shoulders, pulling her against me— —and, finally, we kissed.
It was as though she were making love to my lips. My brain began to melt, as our skin, and hands, and bodies exploded into one another. The contact was dazzling. My teeth, tongue, and mouth felt as if they were being cattle-prodded with unconditional love, and the energy spread out from there to every other part of me, hot, tingly, and intense. She took my penis in her hands and began to move it between her spreading legs. I could feel the heat of her on its tip as she began to guide it in, when out of nowhere a voice ripped my skull open and pissed on my brains.
“CORKY!”
I looked up, and Morgan was running my way, chased across the sand by an angry mob of naked teenagers with sticks.
“YOU SON OF A BITCH! YOU LEFT ME BACK THERE!”
“NO, YOU IDIOT!” I screamed! “MORGAN, GO AWAY!”

He was still about fifty yards from us now, but I could see he had taken some severe punishment. Body bruised, hair wild, clothes hanging off in rags, no longer concealing much. His pants were gone entirely, and I could see why Ms. Waboombas didn’t think much of him.


He got closer and scowled, slowly taking things in.
“HEY!” he snapped. “WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING?”

He got right up beside me, stopped, and fidgeted nervously while staring at us with confusion. Feeling violated, I stood back from Wisper. The mood, as you can imagine, was somewhat dimmed. Morgan stared down in disgust at my erection.

“Dude! Put that thing away! What is wrong with you?” Embarrassed, I reached down, and began pulling my slacks back on.

“What are you doing?” Wisper asked.

“I’m…” I said, confused by the question. “…getting dressed. People are coming.”

She stared at me blankly as I yanked my pants up over my angry penis. It was so focused on the idea that it might actually, finally, experience its intended purpose in life, that it fought like a special forces soldier to be free so it could complete its mission properly.

Wisper looked at it, tearfully, then back up at me.

“What?” I asked, dumbly.

She said nothing. Just stared.

“Whoa,” Morgan cut in. “You’re the babe from the restaurant. Anyone ever tell you, you’ve got an amazing ass?”

“Yes. Why are those people chasing you?”

He turned and looked back at the onrushing crowd. One of his attackers pointed right at me. It was River, Wisper’s brother.

“YOU!”

“IT’S THE OTHER ONE!” another angry nudist yelled.

And suddenly everyone’s speed through the sand increased. Testicles, penals, and breastals flapped, slapped, and clapped their way towards us at a horrifyingly rapid clip. I gasped and coupled my pants together over my struggling member.

“THE LITTLE ONE GROPED TAMMY,” someone yelled to Wisper.

“What?” Wisper turned on Morgan. “You did what?” The sensual mood was now completely eradicated from all parts of her body, especially the important ones. “What is wrong with you?”

“She was naked! I couldn’t help myself!” Morgan said, squealing, and began running away again, past us, around the rocks, and down the beach.

“This is why we hate it when your kind comes here,” Wisper yelled after him.

It deeply disturbed me the way she said ‘your kind’. Like a Southern Baptist saying ‘homosexual’, or a Palestinian saying ‘Jew’.

“My kind?” I said.

“Clothists,” she said, directing her anger toward me. “Textiles.”

“You mean, normal people,” Morgan yelled from fifty yards off.

Wisper scowled at him, then back at me.

“Wisper. What’s going on? A minute ago…”

“A minute ago, you were ready to walk out on any chance we might have to be together because you couldn’t take your pants off in public. But the minute I offered sex…”

It was a test!

It was a test?

“You said you could be happy with me wearing nothing,” she said, tears, again, filling her eyes. “Was that a lie?”

Had I said that? I frantically rushed through my memories of our brief time together. Everything had seemed so etched in my brain, but had I said that?

“I suppose you just meant when we were in bed together. Or heading there,” she said angrily. “Why are you here, Mister Wopplesdown? Really?”

I looked at the fiercely approaching crowd, with River pacing the pack. It was clear I needed the right answer, fast, and I was too confused to think linearly.

“Wisper, be realistic…”

Her expression darkened. Wrong answer. Realism and the heart are rarely dancing to the same song.

“Better run,” she said sadly. “The natives really don’t like it when an outsider comes on to one of the local women.”

“I know. When Morgan…”

“I meant you.”

“But…” I said, stunned. “I’m not ‘coming on’ to you. I’m with you…”
“No, you’re not.”

I was shocked. What had happened? What had I done wrong? Where was the Wisper who liked holding my penis? Moaning in frustration, I reluctantly ran off just ahead of flying sticks and sailing rocks.

As I dashed away down the beach, I looked back over my shoulder to see River and some of the others stop near Wisper and check on her condition to make certain I hadn’t done her any harm, which I hadn’t.

Had I?

As her brother touched her shoulder and questioned her with gentle concern, she sat there silently, her eyes filled with tears, watching me furiously as I got farther, and farther, and farther away.

While Morgan and I ran for our very lives, Pastor Winterly wandered calmly through town without hiding in his Bible and actually looked at things. He still clutched his Good Book tightly to his chest as though it worked on nudists the way a cross might work on vampires, or soap would work on a small boy, but at least it was no longer attached to his face and he’d stopped walking into walls and sharp objects. He was still having a difficult time doing more than just glance at the local populace. But having his vision unobscured at least allowed him the opportunity to be charmed by his surroundings, if not the actual naked people contained therein.

As far as his eye could see Pastor Winterly was encircled and enchanted by a gently waving ocean of verdant trees and sherbet colored wildflowers. Unexpectedly captivated by their tranquil beauty, he gratefully accepted the serenity they offered and meandered almost undisturbed through and around several of the unclothed locals.

Delighted by the playful sound of water dancing across time smoothed stones he strolled over a charming, weathered, handcrafted bridge that seemed ancient enough to have rested across the lazy, crystal waters flowing beneath it since somewhere around the dawn of naked people. Lush grasses spread out from the cobbled stone path leading to and from the overpass into more orderly rows of Impatiens, colorful Poppies, and Baby’s Tears that soothed his senses in a surprising way. Someone had put great care into their disorderly order, and he couldn’t help but admire that person’s handiwork, even if they had probably done it naked.

Lost in an array of strikingly purple Asters he wandered into a section of town that was more suburban and less touristic, and therefore considered only for the residents of Nikkid Bottoms. But he was too involved in the familiarity and comfort of the flora, architecture, cobbled paths and beautifully tended grounds to be aware of any tenseness from the locals, and so he had no idea of the potential danger he had placed himself in by coming here.

He was, truly, a Christian who—having searched innocently about the Coliseum for a restroom—had wandered into the arena and was so busy admiring the architecture he had not yet noticed the grounds were filled to the brim with cranky lions, and tigers and bears—oh my—all looking at him as though he were the last creamfilled donut in a police station break room.

He was, as they say, blissfully living on borrowed time. As he courteously nodded to a passing nudist couple, each wearing only sneakers, he was plainly unaware of the thinly veiled hostility in their responses to him. Instead, he was too focused on his rustic, French provincial surroundings; letting the ambience of the neighborhood fly him away mentally from this place and carry him back gently to another, where he was young and naïve, and traveling abroad. As opposed to being old and naïve and traveling nowhere in particular.

He had thoroughly loved his decision to tour other parts of the world in those post-college days. Before being given a parish of his own, he was much more open to new ideas and interesting, divergent points of view—and there had been a great many divergent points of view along his many journeys down streets like this, oh yes there had—in France particularly.

He remembered once in Bordeaux meeting an especially lovely young woman from nearby Toulon. They had spent a few nonsexual days with one another and on their last morning together she asked him to accompany her to a nearby seaside resort. He, of course, had been more than willing—enthusiastic even—until it had come out in the course of explaining the place and her relationship to it that the oceanfront village was ‘clothing optional’.

She had giddily told him—with absolutely no shame whatsoever—that she had, all her life, been what was
referred to as a ‘naturiste’. She was clearly somehow deluded by their previous conversations into believing that he was of like mind and was thrilled that the ‘handsome American’ would join her in partaking of this unique and extraordinary form of sun-worship.

After a quick look through his French/English dictionary, and taking several minutes to collect himself, the young Winterly had informed his breakfast companion in no uncertain terms that he believed her to be a sinner of the highest order and felt confident she would spend all eternity roasting in Hell. Or at least being uncomfortably hot.

She, of course, was completely stunned.

At first she laughed a bit, nervously, then went suddenly silent as she quickly realized this threat of eternal damnation and torment was no joke. For a brief moment she had stared at him, heartbroken. Someone she’d begun to care deeply for truly thought she would burn for all time because she enjoyed being naked outdoors.

After a brief, tense silence, the French maid stood and walked quickly away from him, never looking back, and hiding her face in hopes that he wouldn’t see the tears that shamed her far more than her life of public nakedness ever could.

He watched her go, trying desperately not to show his guilt and pain at having hurt her. Why should he feel anything but proud? He was, after all, right, and she might be saved because of his blunt honesty. No sense feeling bad for offering such a gift. Let it go.

And yet, to this very moment he’d found it impossible to forget that instant and those feelings, or more importantly, forget her.

There wasn’t a day gone by that he hadn’t at least once remembered with some regret both his decision to not join her, to not be with her in every way she wanted, but instead insult her and cause her pain. His feelings of remorse were usually followed by vigorous prayer and self-recrimination, fervent pleas to the Lord that He remove the shameful memories and ugly desires from His loyal servant’s heart.

And yet, to this very moment, God had still not answered any of those prayers; perhaps it was his cross to bear.

In point of fact, God seemed now to be taunting Winterly—outright laughing at his requests even—by dumping him in this place; the stern pet owner reaching down and holding the scruff of His puppy’s neck, rubbing the animal’s nose in its own filthy thoughts and needs.

“If we don’t attend to the little things as if God were watching,” Pastor Winterly said, quietly to himself as he checked the time on the town clock now so far behind him, “He will eventually remind us…that we have fallen short…in His eyes.”

Winterly had not gotten over the girl from Toulon, and so God had brought him here. With some purpose. For some lesson. To test him.

Was he passing? Was he failing?

He looked around at the few people near him. A man gardening the flowers near the edge of the creek. A woman carrying groceries from her car. Two small children playing near their thatch roofed home.

Surely these children could not be damned for their sins.

He thought about their shamelessness. Or more correctly he thought about their lack of shame rather than some intentional flaunting of what they knew to be wicked. He wondered if he’d ever been so comfortable in his own skin as these innocent children were now, playing delightedly unencumbered in the gentle pleasures of warm sun and cool grass. He tried to remember a time when he was so unconcerned with the looks and the size and the shape of God’s first, true gift to the souls He calls His children—their very form and substance—and felt suddenly saddened that he could not.

His mother would never have allowed such memories to exist. She would never have permitted him to feel anything but shame about his nakedness. She didn’t even like the possibility of accidentally seeing him—or rather parts of him—in the tub. To avoid it, she had sat on a stool near the bathroom door, averting her eyes and scrubbing him with a sponge on the end of a long stick. Beyond that, she made the infant Winterly cover himself with a washcloth whenever she had to bathe him, which was once a day, every day, until he was old enough to be trusted in the tub alone.

And even then, isolated and unobserved, knowing his mother’s distaste for what existed between his legs, he still carefully covered it.

Winterly watched the woman unloading her groceries for a moment and only looked away when he realized he was making her nervous with his stares. Why should she be nervous? He was obviously a chaste man of the cloth. She was the one parading herself in an unacceptable manner, wasn’t she?

As if in answer to his unspoken question a small, wind-up airplane smacked Winterly in the side of the head and snapped him back into the moment. A bit shocked, he looked over as one of the children—a small girl—ran toward him to retrieve the errant, balsawood projectile.
“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m really sorry.” Then she paused, waiting for the minister’s reaction. When Winterly said nothing, she quickly pointed to her friend standing near a tree. “He did it.”

The pastor smiled warmly at the child and kneeled down to pick up the now slightly skewed toy as the girl continued to apologize. Winterly unbent the wing of the little, rubber-band-powered Cessna and shushed her gently.

“It’s all right,” he said. “It just surprised me. Didn’t hurt at all, really. Here.” He fished in his pocket for the candy he usually kept there for the children of his parishioners and found one still there from last week’s sermon buried under some change.

“Here,” he repeated, offering her the sweet. “See? I’m not mad, in fact…” Suddenly a woman began screaming.

“NOOOOOOO! LEAVE MY GIRL ALONE!”

Winterly looked over and saw a terrified woman, nude save for an apron and some slippers, racing toward him as fast as her fluffy, baby-blue feet could carry her. He furrowed his brow and wondered what could possibly have upset the woman so severely, then abruptly realized.

He was the outsider. A ‘clothist’.

Offering candy.

To a naked little girl.

“No,” he said, more to himself than anyone else, and then turned to the distraught mother. “No! You don’t understand!”

Then he saw the man who’d been gardening moving quickly toward him with an open pair of shears.

“No, I’m not…” Winterly began, then thought better of it, leaped to his feet, and ran.

“Stop him!” Yelled the gardening man.

“Stop that clothed pervert!”

Morgan and I fought our way through shrubs, weeds, and undergrowth, over hills, and fences, and yards, to eventually stumble—exhausted—back to our hotel. Quietly slipping around the building and in through a side door, we finally allowed ourselves to relax for a few minutes and catch our breath.

Morgan used his valuable breathing time to whine about being half-naked. All along the way he was so afraid someone would see him pantsless, he just wouldn’t shut up about it, and I couldn’t muster the breath, or energy, to make him understand that this was the one place where nobody would ever care.

I guess I really couldn’t blame him. Plainly, I hadn’t entirely grasped the concept myself.

With things now obviously, and distressingly, ended between Ms. Nuckeby and me—whether I understood the reasons or not—I was eager to get out of this town and back to my world, as Wisper was always referring to it, as if it were—literally—some alternate dimension. I suppose in many ways it was.

Something deep inside me ached, savagely, for Wisper, and I figured distance was the first step toward killing the sensation before it killed me.

As Morgan and I were sneaking through a hallway, undetected, heading for the stairs, I remembered Mindie’s chocolates and cursed to myself. It didn’t really matter to me if I made her happy or not, but I figured I should at least do everything in my power to prevent conflict. Lord knows I’d have enough of that for several lifetimes. And now, of course, she was the only other woman in the world who had ever even shown visible interest in me. Minimal interest, asexual interest, but interest nonetheless. I mean, there must be some reason she wanted to marry me. Best to keep things comfortable between us. Or at least less agonizing.

“I need to go to that little store they have in the hotel lobby. I have to get chocolates for Mindie.”

“Why?”

“Because she asked me to.”

“She won’t even have sex with you.”

“I’m not really sure I want her to.”

“Then why are you buying her chocolates?”

“Are you coming with me or not?”

“I haven’t got any pants!”

“Morgan. We’re in a nudist village, in a nudist hotel, surrounded by nudists who don’t fucking care!”

He hesitated, wounded by the anger in my voice, looking at me like a deer who’d suddenly realized that those bright things coming toward him are attached to a hood, a metal grill, a heavy engine, and eighteen deer-grinding
wheels.

“I have a small dick,” he whined.
I stared at him, stunned, and, as tears moistened his eyes, sympathy gradually welled within me.

“People will see,” he whispered sadly.

“Oh, Morgan. It’s not that bad,” I lied.

“A girl laughed at it once. We were about to have sex. She asked if it belonged to Ant Man.”

Suddenly, the true story of the lost night with Nightcrawler-girl began to take shape.

“She called it a flea trying to escape the hair on a barbershop floor,” he said, almost breaking down.

“Wow. That’s really...um...even when it was...you know...erect?”

“It’s just small,” he said, a sob escaping his quivering lips.

“Oh,” I said. “Man. Well—you go ahead and go on up to the room then.”

“Wendy’s there.”

“I’m sure Ms. Waboombas will...”

“...laugh at it, too. Guaranteed.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. So what do you want to do?” “I don’t know. Buy me some pants.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.” He bit a lip. “Let me have your pants.”
I looked down at them. I wouldn’t for Ms. Nuckeby; I sure as hell wouldn’t for Morgan.

Yet I had when ordered to by Mindie. Apparently fear and pride beat out love and lust as the overriding human emotions. How truly sad.

“We’re in a town full of nudists,” he prodded.

“Come with me to the shop,” I said, ignoring him. “Maybe they’ll have something there.”

With his hands and shirt remnants blocking all possible views of his crotch, we walked down the corridor, through the lobby, and into the little gifts/sundries shop near the entrance to the hotel. Morgan kept turning away from anyone who passed—girls in particular—spinning madly as he walked, as if his penis were magnetized, and everyone else had been charged with opposing polarity.

“Are you gonna tell me what you were doing with that waitress on the beach?” Morgan asked, rotating, top-like.

“What did you think I was doing?” I snarled.

“Wow,” he said, clearly amazed. “Yeah, that, actually. Man, right there on the beach too. Cool. Sorry I screwed the pooch, so to speak. But, dude, you can’t blame me for not knowing. You got your game on fast.”

“Not really. She was also the model in my closet last night.”

“Holy, SHIT, are you fucking kidding me?”

“No, I’m not.”

“How did I not notice that?”

“Maybe because you never looked at her face.”

“Yeah. Maybe that’s it.” He thought about things for a minute. “Dude. What are you doing with that bitch Mindie if a hot piece like that waitress—model—whatever—wants to have actual sex with you?”

I stopped short in the hallway and turned to look at him.

“Morgan,” I said. “She’s from here. She’s a nudist.”

Morgan snorted, shocked at my apparent stupidity. “So?”

“My grandfather would disown me, I’d have no money, and her parents would never accept me because I could never live here naked all the time as they do.”

“Why not?”

“Are you kidding me? Live this lifestyle? And on top of that, I’d be broke. With no idea how to support myself, or her, and no family to help us.”

“Welcome to the club.”

I stared at him for a long minute as the shock slowly sunk in. I’d been whining endlessly about my fears, about the life I’d lose, the things I’d miss, the money I would no longer have, not realizing it was a life Morgan—and most people really—never even had to begin with. Everyone else had to find a way to survive in the world. So what if I had to as well? Welcome to the club indeed.

“At least you’d have her,” Morgan said, driving it home. “Someone who wants you. That’s more than I’ve ever had.”

He stepped past me, and through the doors into the hotel store.

Lost in my own fears, I hadn’t given any thought to what I’d gain, as Morgan just had. Something potentially so meaningful, so much deeper, and far more lasting than mere ‘things’.
I stood there a very long moment before entering, frozen with horror at the thoughtless choice I’d made.

Inside the shop, I felt feverish with loss and lunacy as thoughts of Ms. Nuckeby now began to obsess me more than ever. Somehow, still unable to let go of my fears and just race back to her, I vaguely wandered around the tiny store more-or-less looking for Mindie’s chocolates, but mostly just beating myself up with a mental stick.

Aggravating me all the more was the fact that there were far too many kinds of chocolate for such little a store. Decision making at this point was difficult at best, so I simply grumbled, picked up the smallest, least romantic box available, and stood staring at it, wondering if Ms. Nuckeby liked chocolates, and if she’d prefer eating them, rolling naked in them, or smashing them in my face.

Probably the latter.

As I stared blankly, unable to think or move, Morgan—in another part of the store—continued looking for anything that might even marginally be considered pants, or could in any way cover a man’s crotch unobtrusively. That’s when he noticed a comic book spin-rack in a corner.

“Hey!” he said. “Comics!”

Suddenly he was happier than I’d seen him at any point during the entire trip.

“Get some,” I said. “As many as you want. I’ll buy. You can hold them low, and when we’re back in the room, read them in your lap.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “That’s a good idea.”

He went over to the rack and began spinning it, carefully checking grade, cover gloss, and spine-damage.

“Morgan! Just grab some! They don’t have to be in mint condition to hide your dick!”

“Oh, yeah. That’s true,” he said and pulled a bunch from the wire holders—making sure not to get duplicates—then noticed the regular racks nearby. “Hey. Can I get some magazines, too?”

“Sure. Whatever you want.”

I saw him grab Playboy, Perfect 10, and other breast-related glossies. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

“Morgan. You can go sit out on the street corner, and watch naked girls for free.”

He glanced at the door, then at the magazine, and finally back to me.

“Yeah,” he said, holding up some glossy porn, “but the girls in here aren’t supposed to be naked. That makes it—I don’t know—more fun somehow.”

I remembered Ms. Nuckeby’s comments about my erection on the beach, and I wondered if clothing actually did more to feed lust than nudity. If I were a scientist, that would be a great way to spend lots of government research money.

“All right,” I said, “whatever. Bring them here.”

I put my chocolates on the counter, and Morgan dropped his collection of magazines on top of them. A short, round woman with large, pendulous breasts glided over to us, rosy cheeked and perky. She seemed a genuinely happy person, and given my experience with Sophie, the receptionist, and the bellman, I supposed that’s what the hotel strove for in the hiring of their employees. A nametag stuck just below her collarbone, far above her dangling left nipple read ‘SANDY’.

“Will that be all?” she asked pleasantly. Her smile was sincere and quite catching.

“I think so. Can you put that on a room charge?”

“Oh. Well, you can still enjoy it anyway, as long as you’re in town, right?” She laughed and patted my hand sweetly as she took our things, and I found myself taking an immediate liking to her.

“There’s a dance and party tonight, you know,” she said, bouncing again, her voice lilting as she grinned at us, knowingly. “Lots of pretty girls.”

She glanced down at Morgan’s pet flea. “There’s even a few won’t mind a guy with a little one.”

Morgan gasped and moved a comic to cover his minimal groin. She hadn’t meant it as an insult, but for a man, it’s hard to take that kind of comment any other way.

“We also have the auction,” she said, “and that’s always a lot of fun. But you know about that already I imagine.”
“Actually, no, we don’t,” Morgan said, sounding hopeful. “What kind of auction? Like toys? Comics?”
“No, people,” she said. “It’s one of those charity things. Some of the locals and a few out-of-town regulars auction themselves off to the highest bidder, and they have to stay with the winner, and do whatever that person says throughout the rest of the weekend.”
“Oh, right,” I said, wincing, remembering painfully how I’d done that once myself. My sister finally bought me when no one else would. Seven bucks.
“Some of the out-of-towners even get up on stage for a laugh, and go for at least a few bucks. Especially if they’re cute.” She grinned at me with significance, and I worried that maybe she was bidding on me already.
“I don’t know if that kind of thing appeals to you,” she continued, “but it is for charity, and it can be a lot of fun. My kids are doing it this year, although I wish my oldest wouldn’t. It’s only going to stir up trouble. But she’s so headstrong, that one.”
I wondered if Sophie was the oldest, or if that might be one of Sandy’s other children, Biffy, Miffy, or Rex.
“Why’s it going to stir up trouble?” I asked.
“Because she’s pretty, and a lot of men like her, and one in particular is going to bid up the price until only he can afford her. Then he’ll make her miserable for two whole nights, and days.”
“So, why does she do it?” Somehow other people’s personal drama was always so fascinating when it took your mind off your own.
“Because she knows he’ll bid up the price, and she’s willing to suffer because she believes in the charity.”
“What’s the charity?”
“Dickens Home for Abandoned Children.”
“Ah. Sounds like a worthy cause. Very generous of her.”
“It is. She’s a wonderful girl, and I don’t want to see her suffer.”
“I understand,” I said, honestly. “I’m sorry.”
She smiled at me and patted my hand again. “Oh, it’s all right. I’m just being a nervous mother. It’s not like it’ll kill her. And anyway, I should probably feel more sorry for Washburne. She’ll make him suffer in the end. I told you, she’s headstrong.”
“Well, good for her.”
She looked at me, surprised. “Not many men like a strong-willed woman.”
“Their loss.”
“Well, aren’t you the rarity. That’ll be forty-seven fifty.”
I signed the receipt she laid before me, and she studied me rather intently. I added a small tip, and she gasped, delighted.
“Oh, that’s not necessary.”
“Nice people need to be rewarded,” I said. “That’s a rarity too.”
“Well, aren’t you the sweetest thing. Thank you.”
As she bagged up the goods, she continued to eye me, carefully. Perhaps the tip had been a mistake, and she had taken it as a flirt of some kind. I was so bad at this interpersonal, human-to-human communications stuff. She finished stuffing and handed me my things.
“You like girls?” she asked, clearly referencing the magazines.
“Um…those are his,” I said, annoyed. Then, startled, I threw in: “But I do like girls!”
Realizing the tone of my first answer might be taken completely the wrong way.
“Oh, well that’s good. You in town for business?”
“No. Um…pleasure, of a sort.”
Morgan snorted. I pretended not to hear.
“But…” she said, seemingly struggling to get to something, “…you’re a businessman or something? I mean—you have that clean cut look about you, like you must have a job, right?”
“Um, yes. I have a job.”
“He’s rich,” Morgan said, once again proving how utterly useless he could be in almost any situation.
“Not that rich,” I said.
“Then you should go to the auction!” Sandy chimed. “I think you’ll get a kick out of it, and there really are an awful lot of pretty girls there.” She eyed me with purpose. “My daughter, for instance.”
Ah! So it wasn’t her she wanted me for, but Sophie. I glanced out through the glass wall toward the reception desk, where the child in question was bouncily helping other customers, and probably telling them aliens lived in her head.
“Well, you see, I really…”
“She’s awfully pretty,” Sandy pressed, overstressing the ‘awfully’ part, and not catching the linguistic
contradiction, “and if you buy her, she has to stay with you the whole weekend. Those are the rules. Follow you wherever you go—the street-fair, the carnival, the fireworks. She could even show you around if you want. We have some very beautiful scenery here in Nikkid Bottoms. The Big Giant Heads. The Singing Caves. The Indian Village. The Druid Altars. The Hanging Gardens of Freilichtpark. Very unique. Very romantic.”

I could already imagine what was hanging in those Hanging Gardens, and the thought wasn’t terribly romantic to me.

“I’ve seen some of it. And it is quite lovely, but…”

“Of course, tonight’s just a kind of a ‘get-to-know-you’ thing, so you don’t have to be naked, if that makes you uncomfortable.” She glanced at my ruined pants. “But by tomorrow, sunrise, nudity will be required everywhere in town. Would that bother you?”

Around her, and alien Sophie? Yes.

“Thanks,” I said. “You’re very sweet. But it’s really a moot point. We’ll be leaving—even before tonight, I’m afraid.”

“Okay,” she said, seeming genuinely disappointed. “Well. It’s our loss, isn’t it?” She handed me my freshly bagged smut. “And I suppose Washburne’s gain. I hope you at least enjoyed your stay.”

Morgan snorted again. I glared at him. Having the true size of his penis on display had made him unforgivably rude. I turned back to Sandy and smiled.

“I did enjoy my stay,” I told her. “Truly. Thank you.”

Heading for the door, I gave it some thought, and suddenly realized I hadn’t lied to her. I had enjoyed my stay—even the being chased with sticks and rocks, and being thrown out of the restaurant part. How was that possible?

Was I a secret masochist? It’s possible as I was considering marrying Mindie.

But maybe it was because for the first time in my life, I realized, I had been pursuing something that made me happy and living. Doing things. Facing consequences.

I let my mind wander back through the day’s events, and it all came around to Ms. Nuckeby. She had thrilled every inch of me, and motivated me, even when things went wrong. I had never really been motivated before, in my young life, and it had all been exciting. Exhilarating.

Fun.

And in the midst of it all, I had learned that she was—truly—only interested in me, for me. While that may have left her tastes in question, it was nonetheless true. She was even willing to live with me and be poor. My fears really were all that had held me back, and she hadn’t become disheartened until I couldn’t find my way clear to either live off of her, or run around without pants.

What the hell was wrong with me?

I looked at the chocolates in my hand. And now I was going back upstairs to Mindie?

I needed a shrink!

I looked around at Sandy, and she smiled again. She was a lovely person, and while I wasn’t interested in her, or her daughter, she seemed willing to accept me because she felt I might be good to Sophie. Might not Wisper’s parents be the same? And if not, wouldn’t it be worth learning how to feel good without clothes to have someone as magnificent, and caring, and beautiful as Wisper? I’d done it to annoy Mindie. Why not to show appreciation for Wisper?

My thoughts seized. What was to learn? I had already felt good without wearing clothes.

First, in the restaurant parking lot, the sensations were sensual and pleasant. Then on the beach with Wisper—that was, of course, beyond all description. Her appreciation of my nudity was—well, there were no words—and it was again only my ridiculous fears that had interfered. Even before I’d come to this place, while still at home, I preferred to swim in the nude rather than in a suit, and here, ‘this is the one place no one cares if you’re naked’. If I had said it once, I’d said it a hundred times since arriving, and never once processed the words myself.

No one cared.

No one but Wisper.

Morgan had a point. I liked the way it felt. Enjoyed the sensations. Why couldn’t I manage it for as glorious a prize as her?

Because I liked the way it felt.

Like being chased with rocks and sticks, my life had been spent running and hiding from feelings of all kinds. If one never reached, one never missed, and thereby never suffered the pain of missing. Better to slog through life in an endlessly dull, unchallenged state than to fly, get too close to the sun, and suffer the fate of Icarus. No matter that you might get an island named after you.

And yet, even at that, I was constantly failing. In the eyes of a family who didn’t understand me, of a friend who wanted me to come back to our adolescence and be who I no longer was, of a fiancée who only wanted me
for...

For what?

Why did Mindie want me if she didn’t really ‘want’ me? And why was I willing—even now—to live a life of endless rejection with her rather than acceptance with someone as intelligent, and discerning, and incredible as Wisper?

Especially when Wisper hadn’t rejected me. I had rejected her.

Because she felt too good, and I didn’t think I deserved her. Couldn’t come to terms with the fact that she wanted me, and knew she would eventually leave me so that—again, like Icarus—I’d end my days floating on an empty ocean of pain, surrounded by a gooey puddle of waxy feathers and pointless aspirations. A dull, unappreciated existence was far less frightening than losing something I might be emotionally unequipped to survive losing. Even now, the pain of missing Wisper was almost debilitating. Imagine if I had actually fallen in love with her.

Imagine? Did I really need to imagine?

I sighed heavily again. This was how it had to be, clearly. Mindie was all I could handle emotionally. If she left me, it wouldn’t hurt. Eventually, I would only disappoint Wisper, and she would rip my heart out. So we were both better off with someone else. Me with Mindie, and Wisper with—anyone else. Even the rich man who had wanted her so badly, whose interest had made her flee Nikkid Bottoms in the first place would be a vast improvement over someone like...

I froze as my brain finally stopped moving like a limbless frog struggling to escape a bowl full of tapioca and began functioning as it was generally intended to. I turned to the woman behind the counter and looked at her intently. I could see no family resemblance, but...

“Mrs. Nuckeby?”

“Yes?”

My heart skipped a beat. I gasped for breath and must have looked like a goldfish that had gotten above its station and learned— drying out on the carpet—that he really does need water to breathe. I felt jolts of anger flash through me, and they made my testicles— Grinch-like—grow to three times their size that day.

Wisper was putting herself up for auction.

To Washburne.

Even in my mind, his name sounded like a multi-legged, garbage-dwelling creature that needed stepping on.

I was jealous. Ragingly so. And I couldn’t contain it. Sandy’s real genetic affiliation had changed everything.

“You just want your daughter to be happy, don’t you, Sandy.”

“Oh course,” she said, as if it were self-evident.

“So do I,” I said and ran out the door.
With Morgan close behind, magazines flapping over his crotch, I raced to my hotel room and found a naked man with white hair, glasses and a satchel waiting outside with the equally naked Ms. Waboombas.

“What's going on?” I asked.

“Hey, Corky,” Waboombas said. “Mindie’s in a snit.”

“Why?”

“I'm Doctor Wedgwood King,” Doctor Wedgwood King said, as if I'd been expecting him. He could see by
my expression that I hadn’t. “Someone called me?”
“Is this your room?” he asked me.
“It is, yes.”
“Someone rang my office. Said it was an emergency, but the woman inside won’t let me in.”
“Why does she need to?”
“I don’t know,” he said, exasperated, and pointed toward the door. “But she admitted she needs a doctor, and
she won’t let me through. Should I just leave?”
“Mindie needs a doctor? Why?”
“I just said, I don’t know.”
My brain was finally beginning to catch up with the actual conversation in the hallway and disengage from the
one in my head. Talking to naked people often meant needing an extra few sentences to stop the internal dialogue of
‘look at his dick’. ‘Stop looking at his dick’. ‘Look at his ass’. ‘Stop looking at his ass’. Before you could actually
pay attention to the sound coming out of their mouths, far, far north of your unintended point of interest.
Rather than try any more actual attempts at speaking, I pulled the key-card out of my pants pocket and slipped
it through the slot on the door. It beeped, and I pushed.
The room was dark, curtains pulled tight, and Mindie began screaming almost immediately.
“GET OUT! GET OUT!”
“Mindie, it’s me! What’s the matter?”
“Corky?”
“Yes. And I’ve got the doctor here.”
“DON’T LET HIM IN! HE HASN’T GOT ANY PANTS ON! I SAW HIS THINGIE THROUGH THE
PEEPHOLE!”
“Mindie, we’re in a nudist resort,” I said, honestly tired of saying it. “Even the doctor is a nudist.”
“I’m not going to have a man touching me while his thingie is out.”
“Why do you need a doctor anyway?”
“I’m sick,” she said pathetically.
I moved farther into the near-blackened room and tried to see where she was.
“Sick, how? What’s the matter with you?”
“STAY OUT!”
“Mindie, this is ridiculous,” I said.
I turned on the light and screamed myself. I was really going to have to take some vocal deepening lessons.
Mindie lay in bed, under the covers, and wearing someone’s pajamas. Every bit of her exposed flesh—and, one
had to assume, her unexposed flesh, as well—was covered in boils, welts, and red splotches. Her head looked like a
bubbly pomegranate with spiked hair. She was scratching like a dog trying to dig fleas from its internal organs.
“Dear, God,” I said.
“It itches!” she wailed.
“Don’t scratch.”
“IT ITCHES!”
I moved over to her and grabbed her hands, but she struggled to get away.
“What are you doing? Let go of me!”
“Doctor!” I called. “Please come in!”
He moved quickly through the door, and Mindie yelped. “Oh, dear God, doesn’t anybody hide their uglies in
this vile little town?”
“She rolled in some bushes,” I said. “It must be Poison Oak, or Poison Ivy, or poison…Oak,” I repeated, not
able to think of another poisonous plant.
“Wow. That’s what Poison Ivy does?” Morgan asked, opening Mindie’s chocolates. “No wonder she’s evil.”
I wasn’t sure if he meant Mindie or Batman’s arch villainess. Evil could aptly apply to either.
“Oh, my heavens,” the doctor said with profound concern upon seeing his blistered patient. “I have some
calamine lotion. But the best thing is a hot shower. As hot as she can manage. It releases the histamines.”
“Are you sure?” I asked.
“I am a doctor.”
True. He even had a bag to prove it.
He moved to the other side of Mindie, her eyes following his loose penis everywhere it went, and we began to
lift her from the bed. As he raised her, she leaned away from him and into me, whimpering and wailing.
“Oh, God. Oh, God, Oh, God, don’t let it touch me. DON’T LET IT TOUCH ME!”
We restrained her as best we could and dragged her toward the bathroom. As we stumbled and struggled, Mindie noticed Waboombas and Morgan in the doorway, eating her chocolates while he read a comic.

“Oh, my GOD!

HIS thingie is out, TOO!” Morgan quickly covered up. “What is WRONG with you people?”

Inside the bathroom, the doctor pointed to the shower.

“Turn it on. As hot as she can handle, then a little hotter.” Mindie’s struggling had subsided. She was weak and tired, probably from her endless scratching and whining. So I could operate the faucets, we set her on the toilet where she sat still and calm, though continuing to scrape away with her nails.

“Stop itching,” the doctor warned. “You’re making it worse.”

He then began to undo her pajama buttons, and she slapped his hand away. He tried again, and she slapped again.

“Miss. You have to…”

“Absolutely not,” she said.

“I’ll do it,” I said.

I had the water running—just the hot until it could warm up—and moved over to where Mindie sat, once again scratching madly. I reached for a pajama button. She stopped scratching and swatted me.


I sighed and turned to the doctor. “Can she just shower like this?”

“The water needs to touch the skin, so it can open the pores and wash away the histamines.”

“What happens if we leave her alone?”

“She’ll continue to open her skin with all that scratching. This looks like a very serious case. It might even be in her lungs. Perhaps I should hospitalize her.”

“NO!” she said, horrified, then softened and looked at me pitifully. “They’re probably all naked there too.”

I sighed heavily and became angry.

“Whatever. It’s your skin, Mindie.”

“Which could scar, terribly,” the doctor said, trying a different tack, “if you damage the skin with all that itching.”

She looked at him with concern, still slowly scratching her stomach. She looked sad and defeated for a pomegranate. “I don’t want to be scarred,” she whined.

“No, you don’t,” I said.

“I’m young and pretty.”

I hesitated. “You’re young…” I said.

The doctor, apparently seeing an urgent need for the powers of his Hippocratic oath, dove in to salvage things.

“… And very pretty. And you should stay that way.”

She looked at him, then at me. “He is a doctor.”

“As far as I know.”

Reluctantly, she acquiesced and moved her arms away.

“All right,” she said bravely. “Take them off. I’ll try the shower.”

We both reached for the pajama buttons, but Mindie pulled back from the doctor.

“Let Corky.” I felt momentarily touched. “He has pants on.” And I shouldn’t have been.

I slowly unbuttoned her shirt, and found the skin hidden behind the clothing to be far worse than anything we had seen so far. Her breasts were malformed, blistered melons, mottled with strange hues of inflamed red and pus yellow. She groaned as I slipped the light fabric from around her shoulders and off her arms, all of which were worse than her breasts. The cloth stuck to open sores in a few places, and she squealed a little with each tiny tearing of flesh and material. I reached for the pants, and she slapped me.


She stood to allow me easier access, and I slipped the pants slowly down from her waist, trying to avoid sticking sores and split skin, for as with the shoulders, it had adhered in places where wounds had broken open and fluid had leaked. Mindie moaned a bit, and just as I got the pants down around her pubic area, she suddenly screamed, and slapped my face this time.

“DON’T LOOK AT MY KITTEN!”

“Your what?”

“JUST DON’T LOOK!”

“Mindie…”

She stared at me for a long moment, then softened.

“I’m overreacting again,” she said.
“Somewhat.”
“I mean: we are going to be married.”
“No, we’re not,” I said firmly.
She looked like she’d been poked with a hot stick.
“What?”
“We’re not getting married, Mindie. But we can talk about that later.”
“But we have to get married. What will I do if we don’t get married?”
“I’m sure you’ll be fine, Mindie.” And I pulled again, gently, at her pajama bottoms.
“I won’t be fine!” she screamed. “GET OFF OF ME!”
She cuffed me in the side of the head, and I went down, ripping her pajama bottoms with me.
“RAPE!” she howled. “RAAAAAPE!”
She slap-slap-slapped at me, and grabbed the pajamas, still screaming, and trying to pull them back on.
Tripping over the torn fabric, she fell onto the toilet seat, struggling, wriggling, and squirming, all while trying to hide her exposed private parts. Her body was hideous. Every inch of her flesh resembled photographs of Hiroshima bombing victims, only less attractive, and in full color. Things burst and oozed everywhere. The doctor and I tried to control our revulsion, and I fought the need to vomit.
“Eeeeewww,” Morgan said through a mouth full of chocolate, having walked down to stand in the bathroom door with his comic. Ms. Waboombas was looking over his shoulder.
Mindie stopped screaming and glared up at them with absolute horror, and absoluter fury.
“HOW DARE YOU LOOK AT MEEEEEEE!”
An otherworldly growling sound launched itself from her, and she leaped off the toilet, slamming me backward into the shower and under its spray of scalding water. Rebounding off my flopping body, Mindie hopped over the doctor, plowed through Morgan, and knocked him flat, stepping on his face as she scrambled past Waboombas, scratching, clawing, and snarling her way out into the hall.
Screaming in my girlish way because of being boiled alive, I rolled in the tub, yanked down the shower curtain, and managed to scalp myself fairly evenly on all sides. After hours, and hours of rolling and screaming which really lasted only seconds, I finally managed to pull myself out from under the murderous spray of death, leaped out of the tub, over Morgan and the doctor, and ran after Mindie.
Stopping near the bed in the hotel room, I could see my naked former fiancée through the doorway, out in the corridor, looking like some partially cooked animal trying to escape its own barbecue. She snorted and grunted, glaring up and down the hall, considering what to do next.
“Mindie,” I said calmly. “Come back inside. You need to…”
She snarled at me, scratching her stomach, baring her fangs and hissing like a cornered snake, before she bolted off toward the stairs.
I chased her, but was hampered by sticking, wet, clingy pants, and roasted skin. On top of that, Mindie was faster than she looked—a woman possessed—escaping in a blur, out through the exit and down the stairs.
By the time I got to the ground floor, she had disappeared somewhere, either into town or the surrounding foliage, completely naked and covered with boils, where she would likely become an urban legend.

I wrote Doctor King a check for his services and thanked him profusely. He told me if Mindie returned, I should get her to a hospital immediately, and I promised I would, knowing innately that it would never happen. She was running wild now, running free, and likely wouldn’t stop until she’d made it home.
“Good riddance,” Waboombas snarled.
I couldn’t agree more. I felt sympathy for her pain, but not much. I was now a man with a mission. Meeting Wisper’s mother in the lobby shop had changed everything for me. She could accept me if I made her daughter happy. So I would make her daughter happy. Somehow.
And given time, I might even become comfortable here. Or—if not—her mother would still be a potential ally, and that made the situation immensely more promising. I could handle being the weird son-in-law if it meant I were sleeping with Wisper every night, and seeing her naked, a lot.
As Ms. Waboombas sat on one of the twin beds, still nude, cleaning her toenails, I began cobbbling together a plan. I paced back and forth across the room and thought things out. Morgan—carefully hiding his anchovy beneath
the stack of comics and magazines—sat on the other bed and read. Suddenly something struck me. “Where’s the pastor?” “In our room,” Waboombas said, as something flicked out of her toenail and hit me in the eye. “Taking a bath. He made me leave.” “He made you,” I said, stunned. “You.” “All right, he asked me. Nice. He seemed kinda upset, was breathing hard, all wild-eyed and shit, so I came up here and found the doctor trying to get in. The rest you know.” “Are you okay, here?” I asked her. “You in a hurry to leave town?” “Not really. The convention’s pretty much over for today, and tomorrow’s the better selling day anyway. And I kinda wanted to look around the place. It’s interesting here. Why? Are we staying?” “I am. And I need your help with something.” “It have something to do with the hostess from that restaurant?” “As a matter of fact, it does.” “I figured.” “She’s also the model from the closet last night,” Morgan said, not looking up from his girlie magazine. “I knew you knew her,” Waboombas said to me. “You were too cute together.” “Will you help me?” “Of course!” “You will?” “I’m a stripper. I know true love when I see it.” That’s why she hadn’t ratted me out to Mindie in the restaurant. Why she’d stopped harassing me. “You’re a romantic.” “Shut up!” “You are!” “I could tell you never really wanted pasty-tits. But when I saw you talking to that honey in the restaurant— whoo! Splendor in the grass, baby!” “Really?” “I told you. I’m a stripper. I’m trained in the arts of love.” “And you’re okay with it?” “What? You think I’m hurt somehow? Get over yourself. You ain’t even my type, Corky.” “But all those comments…” “I’d marry ya, ‘cause you’re rich. I’d even fuck ya, ‘cause you’re cute, and ya got a nice wee-wee. But I ain’t in love with your ass!” “I need you to go with me to this Summertime Soiree auction and party tonight.” “Okay.” “You’ll go?” “Sure. Looks like fun. I hear they’re going to sell white people. Maybe I’ll buy one.” “I was hoping you would actually.” “You were?” “Remember that tall, dark, Tarzan looking guy at the restaurant?” “The one with the great dick?” “Um…yeah.” “Thought a lot about him in the tub,” she said steamily. “I’ll bet. How would you like to buy him?” “Buy him? I don’t now. Guy like him—could go for a bundle.” “I’ll pay.” “You’ll pay?” “I’ll pay. Whatever he costs, I’ll cover it for you. Just keep bidding and win him.” “Whatever makes you happy. How about that gas station attendant?” “I want you to focus on the restaurant guy.” “Okay. It’s all good.” She studied me. “This is probably gonna cost you. The Nuckeby girl worth it?” She knew her name. She really did pay attention. “And more,” I said. “Just her ass alone is worth it,” Morgan said, still not looking up from his magazines. “So what’s it all about, Corky?” Waboombas asked, curiously amused. “What’s going on?”
“I want to buy her at the auction tonight, and her brother wouldn’t like it.”
“Tarzan?”
“Yep.”
“So you want me to keep him busy.”
“I do.”
She licked her lips. “Works for me.”

Two floors down, the pastor was in the tub, naked save for with a washcloth over his crotch, devouring his Good Book.

He was skimming chapters that memory told him contained God’s word about how nudity was bad, evil, or—at the very least—generally frowned upon. But he wasn’t having much luck.

Unfortunately he had the King James Version of the Bible, so his search was taking some time. There were about 104 references to the word ‘naked’, and its derivatives in approximately eighty-seven verses of that translation. If he had been reading the New International Version, a translation preferred by many conservative Christians, things would have gone faster. There were only forty-nine references to nudity, and its various forms in forty-seven verses of that version of God’s unalterable word.

The pastor had blown through the first eight verses of Genesis, looking for anything concrete to help him correct that blasphemous woman’s point of view, and it’s perverse, Biblical interpretation. Damn her. Or, rather, darn her.

Genesis 9 told of Noah drunk and naked. Noah passes out, one of his sons, Ham, tells his two brothers about it, and they cover their father’s genitals with a rag.

He glanced down at his crotch.

“All right, then,” he said to himself, and went back to reading.

Noah awakes, and curses Ham’s offspring—presumably because Ham ridiculed his father to his brothers. But Noah isn’t punished for getting drunk and lettin’ it all hang out. God doesn’t even give him a stern reprimand or a time-out.

Amazingly, in what should have been the perfect place to let it fly, there was not one word about an angry God who hates the exposed bodies of His most perfect creations and punishes those who flop around freely.

Pastor Winterly skipped up to Exodus and found Moses punishing the 3,000 men and women, some of who were dancing naked. But he seems to have punished them only for the false idol worship, and not for the dancing naked part. Maybe that verse had been accidentally edited out during the council of Nicaea. Well, then it wouldn’t be official, would it?

Still no help.

Didn’t God ever get righteously angry over the things that truly mattered?

1 Samuel 18. Jonathan gets naked in front of David. No cursing or damning there. The pastor skipped past that passage without a thorough read. It had always made him a little uncomfortable because it could be interpreted to mean that Jonathan leaned a little to the ‘melikey-men’ side.

1 Samuel 19. Saul prophesizes in the nude. Okay, we’re going backward here.

Isaiah 20. God makes Isaiah take off all his clothes, and walk around naked and barefoot for three years.

God made him? What was He thinking?

The pastor closed his book and set it on the sink. He looked into space and thought deeply for a moment. Why was nudity a sin? There had to be a specific reason. A pertinent passage. A footnote.

What was he forgetting?

He removed the washcloth from his lap and laid it carefully over the side of the tub. Then he stared at it for a moment, thinking of his mother. After a moment’s unpleasant reminiscing, he turned and looked at his penis, studying it for a long time.

It seemed…ugly. Withered. Like it didn’t even belong there between his legs and should be removed. A bit of dried flesh, like a leftover umbilical cord that hadn’t completely detached. Or a twig that had become lodged there.

Or a cancer.

Then he flashed on the smiling face of the girl from Toulon and wondered if she would have agreed. Maybe not then.
After too long contemplating the existence of his organ, Winterly stood from the water and stepped out of the tub, toweling himself, lost in thought. As he held the soft cloth to his moistened lips, he lowered his head and continued searching his mind, quietly dripping onto the floor. He felt he was just on the verge of remembering something of significance, but it was too deeply buried beneath the clutter of his mind for him to dig it out.

Making matters worse, disconnected memories of his ex-wife’s complaining had begun to swirl in and out of focus, further obscuring his search. He kept hearing her anguished remarks about how he’d changed, how he’d lost the essence of what she’d loved about him, how he’d retreated too much into dogma to be helpful, either to her or his parishioners, in today’s changing world of new ideas. She hadn’t understood that ‘dogma’ was the only thing that had held him together during every difficult moment in his turbulent life, up to, and including, the failure of their marriage.

Very early on, she had angrily given up trying to convince him that she had liked his penis. And now, this woman, this supposed minister in the buff, had taken the comfort of his dogma away from him. She had challenged him. Stumped him. Embarrassed him. And for the first time in his life, the answers he needed were not readily at his fingertips in the one resource that trumped all other forms of wisdom.

If she was right about nudity not being a sin, that naked pastor had upset the delicate balance of his life by knowing more about ‘dogma’ than he did, and turned his certainties into uncertainties. If he had seen something in scripture with such clarity, such absolute conviction, only to be shown he’d seen nothing of the kind, where was he? What did that mean about his other ‘beliefs’? His other ‘truths’?

His harsh words to the girl from Toulon?

What was God trying to teach him by bringing him to this place? By tempting and testing him so? Where had the pious man fallen short?

Perhaps it hadn’t been in denying, or obscuring, or eradicating his feelings. Perhaps it had instead been in trying to deny, and obscure, and eradicate.

Was it possible that God was trying to tell him that He—as the nude, lady minister believed—had no problem with the human body being publicly unadorned exactly as He had made it? That His real feelings and intentions and ideas about the naked form had been hidden under layers and layers and layers of detailed tapestry woven from the beliefs and the teachings and the interpretations of others who could not and did not know the truth as well as He. Perhaps God was trying to remind him that His will superceded the will of his mother.

The precipice of doubt loomed and the abyss of unexpected possibility lay below. Would he fly through it, angelically, or fall to his death?

Is this what Eleanor, his wife, had meant when she’d once asked him ‘Why must you always look for what’s “wrong” and never for what’s “right”?’ The parallels here to his arguments with her were so similar. His firm belief in something scripture said, and her firm belief that it meant something else. Being the minister, though, his supposed learning could more readily steamroll her.

But not, apparently, this naked woman in the church.

“If we don’t attend to the little things as if God were watching,” Reverend Winterly said, again, only to himself, “He will eventually remind us that we have fallen short—somehow—in His eyes.”

He sensed, in some profound way, that how he chose to face this crisis would change him for whatever might be left of his life. Whether for good or ill was entirely up to him. Though God seemed intent on hitting him in the head with lessons if he chose incorrectly.

This is why he had preferred Mindie’s company to the others. Mindie never challenged him. Mindie’s arguments were often his own—though perhaps more strident and rude. He had once felt certain that Mindie would have made a comfortable wife for him. But on this trip, she had been continually thrown up before him as a fool, almost as if to show him, in no uncertain terms, the wrongness of her point of view. More importantly, he now saw with looking-glass clarity that no one liked Mindie.

So what did that say about him?

While reflecting deeply on that disturbing thought, he turned and was caught off-guard by his reflection in the mirror. At first he was horrified to see a fat old man standing in his bathroom. Then he realized with even greater horror that he was the fat old man. His rumpled hair didn’t look as his mind remembered it. No longer blonde and wind-blown, instead, it was thinning and somewhat gray. His body held no familiarity to him. His stomach, arms and neck had become thickened with overeating, sitting, and watching sports instead of participating in them. And was that cottage cheese on his thighs? How had he not noticed that before now? Sometimes the ministerial robes and collar hid things a little too well.

Or perhaps he’d stopped noticing that he even had a body.

Feeling a sudden urge for a return to clarity, he dropped the towel to the floor and studied himself in full.

Once he had been so proud to see himself after a shower. He had been an athlete in High School—a runner—
lean and trim. The ‘Handsome American’. Now he pinched his flab—far more than an inch—and thanked the Lord for those ministerial robes and collar.

How had he not noticed this deterioration before now? How had he seen things so clearly—and not seen them at all?

Then he thought of her. That woman in the church, and the way she had trimmed her…

He felt a part of him spring to life that had been dormant since even before his wife had left him. It surprised him, yet felt comforting and familiar. It reminded him even more of those younger days when he’d looked good in a mirror, when women had eyed him with smiles and interest, and unspoken invitations instead of indifference.

When a pretty young French girl had become excited about the thought of seeing him naked. In public. Before others.

When he’d been hopeful. And happy. And Alive.

The sensation of desire for this female minister was warm, and exciting, and welcome—but it made him a little afraid. Could God want him to feel this way about such a woman?

The same way he had felt about the girl from Toulon?

Because—Lord help him, Lord tell him if this wrong—he still liked it, just as he had in Bordeaux, and ever since. The excitement, the uncertainty, the thoughts of her—that minister—nude. All the time. In public.

Okay. If he was going to be honest with himself about what God had lain before him and seemed to be testing him with, he liked it.

He really, really liked it.

“These magazines suck,” Morgan said, as Waboombas put on make-up for the evening.

“What’s wrong with them?” I asked.

“Look at this centerfold,” he said, holding it up.

It was a typical Playboy image—a beautiful ‘girl-next-door-toplastic-surgeons’ type who never lived next-door to me, and had unbelievably white teeth, perfect hair, and an overly developed body. Only she wasn’t naked. I had been so inundated by naked people for the last few hours, that there was something rather jarring and sexually attractive about it.

“She’s wearing a dress,” Morgan said, annoyed.

He put the magazine down before him and leafed through it with irritation.

“It starts out good, she’s hot, and naked, and then she starts to put clothes on. And then—in the centerfold—she’s fully dressed. I mean, what the hell?”

I took the magazine and looked through it. At first it was hard to see the difference. All the women were partially clothed, or nude, but the preponderance of images seemed to be centered on women putting their clothes on, and not taking them off. Hiding their intimate bits, not revealing them.

“This is bizarre,” I said.

I flipped further and noticed the cartoons. All of them were of naked people in nude situations, when unexpectedly dressed women suddenly showed up and threw a monkey wrench into the works. Naked women sneered at clothed women. Naked men ogled fully dressed women in evening clothes. Naked people were accosted by an old lady in an evening gown.

It was all backward.

Something began to seep into my consciousness, but it only nipped at my brain, and didn’t seem hungry enough to take a full bite.

I reached down and took some of Morgan’s other magazines. They were all essentially the same. At first glance you might not realize it because women were partially clothed in some of the images, and could be interpreted as partially naked. A glass half full kind of thing. But the goal was definitely to see them ultimately reach a complete state of dress.

I took some of the comics.

On the cover of the first, Spiderman wore a mask, gloves, and boots—and nothing else other than—apparently—body-paint. Dangling between his legs, you could clearly see his blue Spider Wang. Look out!

The X-Men wore leather and spandex like always, but mostly the kinds of clothing that left them swinging pretty free, and loose, like Polk Street bondage outfits. More like Polk Street bondage outfits than their normal
costumes already looked that is. Interestingly, Nightcrawler had two penises.

Penii?

Superman had a logo stuck on his bare chest, wore a cape, and boots, and rescued naked people. Like Nuderman, only it actually said ‘Superman’ on the cover. Batman wore a mask and a codpiece, and punched a nude bad guy. Wonder Woman had head and wrist bands, her pubic hair trimmed in the shape of a ‘W’, and wrestled a nude woman painted with leopard spots who had a tail attached— somehow—just above her bare ass.

“Do you suppose these are special editions just for this town?” Morgan asked, becoming nervous. His lip quivered, and a few beads of sweat were creeping down his forehead.

I felt bad for him. His world was coming out from under him in the worst kind of way.

“No,” I said, trying to be gentle. “They’d never. If these got out to normal channels, the stockholders would freak.”

I opened another comic. And another. It didn’t matter which one I picked, everyone in them was, primarily, naked.

Ms. Waboombas came out brushing her teeth and looked over my shoulder.

“Cool,” she said, spitting foam. “Where’d those come from?”

She grabbed one of the comics and started leafing through it.

“Wow,” she said. “I should have done my comic like this. It would sell more.”

For many years, during the peak of comics production back in the forties, fifties, and sixties, there were cheaply produced little books called ‘Tijuana Bibles’ that crudely imitated popular comic strip heroes and characters of the time, only naked, and having copious amounts of sex. Mickey Mouse, Flash Gordon, Superman, Wonder Woman— you name it. These could have been something like that, but the quality was too high, the production values too expensive, and you didn’t usually find Tijuana Bibles in classy hotels. Even nudist hotels. Also, there was no sex in these comics. Or at least not much to speak of. It was more like whatever alternate universe they were based in just didn’t bother wearing clothes.

The thing in my brain finally took a bite. Ms. Nuckeby kept saying ‘your world’ as if it were an entirely different planet. None of us had ever heard of this place, in spite of the fact that it should be legendary. An entire town of nudists just south of the city…

A chill ran through me.

I dropped the comics and magazines onto the bed, and grabbed the television remote, clicking on the TV.

As it warmed up, we heard the president giving a typical speech. It was our president, no doubt. I would recognize that arrogant voice and lack of linguistic skill anywhere.

Then the picture emerged, and Waboombas gasped.

The President of the United States of America was naked.

Standing at a podium, positioned so we could see only his torso, stood George W. Bush. Naked. Behind him, all the loyal partisans clapped, and cheered, and smiled, nakedly.

Very, very, nakedly.

I nearly fell over onto the bed. Ms. Waboombas sat beside me, and we both continued watching with wide-eyes and open mouths.

“We are facin’ our greatest enemy!” the president said. “People who don’t like our way of life! Bad people! People with clothes, who want to see us in ‘em. Who want to see our women in ‘em. Bad people. Not good people. And God made it clear when He kicked Adam and Eve out of the Garden and said—basically, He said—don’t come back till you’re naked! So we need to bring democracy and freedom to the world, and make those people take off their clothes!”

The group behind him cheered, clapped, and held up signs that said ‘THE NAKED WAY IS THE AMERICAN WAY!’

“It’s another dimension,” I said.

“You mean the whole country is like this?” Waboombas asked.

“I think so.”

“Nobody wears clothes.”

“Apparently.”

“I’m out of a job.”

We sat silently for a moment, absorbed by the immensity of it. Morgan looked up from his magazines.

“Hey,” he said, pointing to the television. “That looks like the president.” He squinted at the tube. “Is he naked?”
Waboombas and I sat for over an hour clicking through stations, checking channels, watching movies, and taking it all in.

Sporting events, reality shows, cooking shows, newscasts, soap operas. All the people wore little or no clothing. Though politicians wore ties.

There were some ‘adult’ channels where people put on clothing and had sex. But you couldn’t see it. It was always hidden under the folds of fabric.

I kept flipping through the stations, hoping that at any minute the channels would right themselves, and we’d be back to normal television—like Oprah.

Then I found Oprah, and she was naked. Tom Cruise was jumping on her couch, and he was naked.

“Wow,” I said. “Who knew Oprah was so hot?”

“Just turn it off,” said Waboombas.

She lay on the bed, massaging her head as if Hades, Poseidon, Hestia, Hera, and Demeter were having a massive slam-dance party inside her skull, and her fingertips were trying, Zeus-like, to squeeze them all out.

Morgan had gone back to reading.

“Ha! Spiderman had a little dick,” he laughed, and chewed on a muffin. “Then he got bit by the spider, and it swelled.” He took another bite, and said more to himself. “Man, I gotta get bit by a spider.”

“This doesn’t change anything,” I said, shaking it off and gathering myself. “It just explains a few things. Let’s still go to the Festival and the auction.”

“But…” Waboombas wondered, “…are we stuck here?”

“I don’t think so. Wisper came to our world. There’s got to be a way for us to get back too.” I was amazed at how calm I was. Years of Star Trek and comic book reading had obviously well-prepared me for just such a trauma as this.

“But what am I gonna do if we can’t get back, Corky?” Waboombas moaned.

It was unsettling to see her off-balance this way. I was used to the confident Waboombas who controlled everything and everyone with a word, and a bend, and a strut. Apparently this turning upside down of the rules had left her—like all of us—a bit lost. Even her crazy sense of reality no longer applied.

“I make my living off people who want me to take my clothes off. No one’s gonna care here.”

“We’ll get back,” I assured her. “Even my Aunt Helena did, when she dropped off Ms. Nuckeby.”

“Hey. That’s the same name as the restaurant,” Morgan said between chews.

“What a weird coincidence,” I said flatly.

“Yeah.”

He looked at me for a moment, as if waiting for something more. Then the hamster lay down and went to sleep again, and Morgan returned to his comics.

Waboombas sighed, heavily. “All right. If you really think so. But I’m gonna be pissed off if we get stuck here and I have to put clothes on to make a living. I like getting naked.”

Then a light seemed to go off in her head, and she smiled suddenly. I frowned at her, curious as to what she was thinking.

“What?” I asked.

She thought for a moment more.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Then—you’ll still do this?”

“Absolutely,” she said and smiled, a little menacingly. The Great Black Shark, Waboombimus Maximus Dominatricus, scented fresh blood in the water, and was circling her prey.

A little bird was telling me I should be worried, but other than in cartoons, who listens to little birds?
Mindie ran through the bushes for what seemed like hours. Breathing hard and terrified beyond words, she couldn’t manage to bring herself to stop no matter how much her legs ached.

She was slashed, cut, bruised, and boiled, and her skin itched insanely. Once or twice she thought she had seen or heard animals in the undergrowth, but fortunately, they always seemed to scamper off in a direction other than toward her, and nothing had yet attempted to dine on Butterwycke a la Poissone Oake.

The sun was going down in the late evening summer sky, and through the shadows of the foliage it was difficult to see farther than a few feet in front of her. Eventually, she decided she could no longer tolerate the leaves and branches abrading her skin, so she staggered out of the local plant-life and onto the beach, moaning loudly. She nearly collided with a nude young man, and nuder young woman walking along the shore. They screamed at the sight, and sound, of my former fiancée and ran away back toward the village.

Slowly, steadily, Mindie shuffled in the opposite direction, away from them, me, and naked civilization in general, and was minimally comforted when the going became much easier over the damp sand. Not, of course, as
easy as it might have been had she spent less time trying to cover her various exposed naughty-bits, but far quicker than rumbling, bumbling, and stumbling through the darkest jungles of Nikkid Bottoms had been.

She came to a large mound of rocks that resembled the droppings of some long-dead, Brontosaurus-sized horse, which had likely sat there for centuries, petrified near the waterline. Deciding she needed a rest, she ran around the pile of stones to squat and hide, and nearly fell over an elderly, naked couple making love in the sand. The pair was considerably older, though fit (if a bit worn), and had apparently decided to take full advantage of a beach that was supposed to be deserted while everyone made their way to the first night of the Summertime Soiree.

All three of the surprised individuals in question, Mindie the Monster, Old Naked Man, and Old Naked Lady, shrieked in horror. Scared and revolted, Mindie whimpered pathetic sounds of anguish, disapproval, and disgust, grabbed tightly to her crotch and boobs, and hurried away as if terrified the aged nudists might leap up from the sand at any moment in an attempt to have old-people sex with her. She lurched off, far into the distance, crying, stiff-legged, and faltering now, due to massive influxes of lactic acid. The aged couple watched her go, panting heavily with their own rush of adrenaline.

As Mindie receded down the beach, staggering, groaning, and moaning, the old man and old woman looked at one another, shocked and confused, each shaking their head ‘no’ to indicate that neither of them knew what the hell that was. After a moment of staring into each other’s eyes fearfully, they suddenly leaped on one another again, and began kissing passionately, returning, undeterred, to nature’s timeless, siren song of lust.

Farther along the beach, Mindie saw the stone bridge leading off the Island, and—breathing a sigh of relief—hurried that way.

At last she could get away from this crazy place and make it back to the real world where people had the common courtesy to keep their nudity hidden under clothes.

(The) (__) (___)

The crowd at the Summer Soiree was immense. I hadn’t seen so many naked bodies outside Hieronymus Bosch paintings of hell. The scene was decidedly more pleasant here though than in old Boschie’s twisted imagination. For one, there were no demons prodding people over flames with wicked-looking instruments of torture, only aproned chefs prodding roasting animals with barbecue forks.

Really, it was just a party like any other: People eating, drinking, and hitting on each other, families with children, couples of all variations, sugar, salt, fat, and cholesterol sprinkled with tall tales, jokes and laughter. People just happened to be doing it without being separated by layers of clothing, which—when you think about it—really saved time in the ‘what does this person look like naked’ department. The lack of knowing often plagues people seeking romance—particularly those who don’t want to get shortchanged when the evening is otherwise going so well—by bras stuffed with socks, or jeans stuffed with salami.

“All right,” Ms. Waboombas said, moving away from me and wading into the naked ocean, still wearing nothing but high heels. Morgan had decided to stay in the room, alone, possibly forever. “I’ll see you at the auction.”

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Got things to do. Don’t worry,” she said, sensing my nervousness. “I’ll be there.”

Apparently, she could see I wasn’t convinced.

“I want to be there.”

“Okay,” I said finally.

She stopped and focused on me.

“I can’t help but notice, Mister Wopplesdown,” she said, pronouncing it correctly with mock formality, apparently teasing me over my constant referrals to her as ‘Ms. Waboombas’. “That your solution to this problem is money oriented.”

“Not money, no. The money gets me next to Wisper, sure. But the rest is up to me.”

“Mmm,” Ms—Wendy said, nodding slowly, apparently not convinced.

“I understand what you’re getting at…Wendy. But I do know not all my problems can be solved with a simple outlay of cash.”

She still didn’t seem to be buying it. I looked off into the distance to give it some thought, and immediately regretted doing so as my eyes fell on a particularly large and incredibly hairy man happily lumbering and swinging my way. He looked like a naked Hagrid.

“Money can be the easy answer, sometimes,” I said, quickly returning my attention to Wendy. “It’s hard to get
away from. Sometimes you feel trapped by it. Like a tar baby.”
Her tone and expression suddenly became more focused, and a bit stern.
“A what?” she asked.
“A tar baby. Haven’t you ever heard those fairy tales?” I asked, missing her change of mood and expression.
“When you were a kid?” “Why don’t you tell me about them,” she said quietly.
“Well, there’s this fox, right? And he wants to trap this rabbit that’s bothering him. So the fox, he makes a baby
out of tar, right? And leaves it on the side of the road. So when the rabbit comes by, he tries talking to the baby—
which, I guess, isn’t really a baby, it’s more like a kid—and when the kid doesn’t respond, the rabbit gets annoyed
and starts pushing on him and roughing him up a bit, and before long, he’s wrapped up in sticky goo, and there’s
nothing he can do to get out.”
“And what makes br’er fox know br’er rabbit is going to get rough with the tar baby, Corky…?” she asked,
smiling, though her voice felt measured, restrained. “…Just because the baby won’t talk to him?”
“Well,” I said, never having given it a moment’s thought before, seeing as it was just a children’s story, and I’d
been just a child listening to it. Even as an adult, I hadn’t always bothered with why things happened the way they
did. That’s why I liked Michael Bay movies. “I don’t know, I suppose he…”
It was then that I really took in all of Ms. Waboombas, or rather, all of Wendy. Tall, stately, her dark skin
standing out in stark relief against the crowd. Here and there behind her I could see other, darkskinned bodies, but
mostly the majority of the crowd was pink and pale, or at best evenly tan, though very few were anywhere near as
dark as she. It made her stand out plainly for obvious reasons.
And hit my like a brick.
“Because…he was…black?” I asked. Not really asking, more realizing and dropping an insincere question
mark in at the end to show I’d just learned something unexpectedly profound from a stripper.
“Could be,” she said, obviously not thinking there were any other possible reasons.
“It’s a racist story,” I said, horrified at my own ignorance.
“Most of Uncle Remus’s tales are.”
“I’m sorry, Wendy. I didn’t mean anything…”
“I know you didn’t,” she said, smiling. “I got a pretty good idea who you really are by now, Corky.”
“Still…”
“Still,” she said. “The thing you need to take away from this moment is this; that sometimes the reason people
from different worlds prefer to associate only with other people from those same worlds is: you don’t get them
accidentally saying stupid shit like that.”
I swallowed hard, supremely humiliated.
“And if people want to cross into other worlds, then they need to see that sometimes shit like this is going to
happen, and you have to have the strength to step back and see the intent. See if whoever said it is really a jerk
racist, or just a dumbass.”
“I’m just a dumbass,” I told her.
“No, you’re not. You’re just not too deep. But I think we’re starting to move out of the shallow end of the pool
now with you, aren’t we?”
I nodded rapidly.
“Yeah. And I can see how embarrassed you are by what you said. My momma always told me…”
“You have a mother?”
“Okay, now we’re movin’ into real dumbass territory.”
“Sorry.”
“You should be. Yes, I have a mother. And a sister, and three brothers.”
I held myself in check to avoid asking if they were all strippers.
“And they ain’t all strippers,” she said pointedly.
Damn. She could read minds!
“My mom’s an ER nurse, and she always says, ‘everyone’s a racist. It’s what we do with that fact that makes us
good or bad people.’”
She studied me for a minute, looking intently into my eyes.
“I like you, Corky. I think you got potential as a human being. The question is: can you reach that potential, or
are you just going to stay a bigot, and have to keep living only with people like you in your own little world?”
With that she backed away into the crowd, smiling sagely.
“Or worse,” she added, fading Cheshire Cat-like into the fleshy world of Nikkid Bottoms. “All alone in an even
smaller world?”
I said nothing, but smiled at her, to show her ‘lesson learned’.
“See you at the auction,” she said, smiling again, then turning and melting into the sea of multi-colored skin.

I stood for a moment and continued smiling at where she had vanished, pleased to have gotten to know Ms… Wendy. Through her, I’d learned a valuable lesson this day.

Too bad it didn’t apply to my more immediate situation.

With that, I turned and wandered off myself into the strange, nude world surrounding me.

(underline) (underline) (underline)

If you could drag your eyes away from the sea of exposed flesh, the town itself was immensely charming. There was a warmth to the buildings that I had only seen in the little towns of the midlands counties of England, like Bourton on Water, Minchinhampton, and Chipping Camden in Gloucestershire. The paths and many of the buildings appeared to be constructed of Cotswold stone, a beautiful material that gives everything a warm, honeyed glow—particularly at times like this, under a clear sky and the soft amber of a late evening sun.

The downtown buildings were all either connected or fairly close together as most small towns usually are, separated only by tiny, pretty little gardens and comfortable outdoor dining areas. The throughways themselves weren’t designed for car traffic, so there were no impatient drivers to fight your way around, which was good because it allowed you more space to avoid any accidental physical contact with naked people.

Everywhere, weathered stone was the predominant look, but dotted throughout was a nice contrast of half-timbered buildings constructed from raw wood; tidy little inns and relaxing pubs beneath shake-shingled roofs that beckoned you through their painted, wooden doors, each entry gently shaded beneath Tudor-style, jetted, upper stories. Every welcoming entrance displayed swinging, oldstyle, hanging placards bearing names that sounded more like steamy romance novels than places of business. ‘The Blacksmith’s Arms’, ‘The Matrons Table’, ‘The Swan’s Bed’, ‘Bridle and Harness’.

You have your notions of romance. I have mine.

I gratefully took all this warmth and coziness in as I walked alone through the naked crowd. I was truly appreciative of the private time as I really needed to think, and that was tough enough by myself, let alone distracted by the stripper and the gipper. I had to decide what, exactly, I was going to do once the auction was complete. Buying Ms. Nuckeby would be the easy part. Regaining her heart, and her trust, would take considerably more effort, and a weekend might not be enough. Especially given how completely I had seemed to sever our personal connection.

Unfortunately—as I said—independent thought comes hard for me, particularly given that I’m a bit hypoglycemic. Remember, I’d only had a little buttered newspaper for breakfast, and nothing else since. So I decided it was best to recharge the old batteries before tonight’s potentially taxing event and consider things over a hot meal. The last thing I needed was for my plan to come off beautifully, once I had one, then pass out due to low blood sugar as soon as I’d gotten Ms. Nuckeby all to myself. I imagined fainting, or even general lassitude, held very little romantic appeal for a woman already inclined to throw me to the wolves—or an angry mob of nudists—whichver came first.

As my stomach growled a snappy tune, I entered a small pub named ‘The Headless Horseman’. Not exactly the most appetizing of titles, but the menu pinned outside had some tasty sounding options on it, and they accepted credit cards, which was a plus since the driver carried no cash.

The place was mostly empty, given that the dinner hour hadn’t really started yet, so I took a prime seat near the weathered, stone fireplace at the center of the rough-timbered room. A waitress glided over, handed me a menu, took my drink order, and left me to decide on a meal. She made no comment on the fact that I wore clothes, and I made no comment on the fact that she didn’t.

Life in balance.

Once I’d decided on bangers and mash—apparently an old English favorite because it sounded like something a nude waitress would do in your lap—I settled back and took in my surroundings. Quaint and charming. Rustic and weathered, but not dirty. Interestingly, there hadn’t been one place in this town where I hadn’t felt captivated and comfortable. If not for all the nudity, I could have lived here quite happily. Or at least bought rental property.

I watched the chef prepare my food, while the waitress cleaned and re-stocked napkins, silverware, and condiments for the expected evening rush. Even though he should have been used to seeing her sans undergarments, I was pleased to note that the chef still snuck a glance at her bare behind as she bent over to tuck menus between salt and pepper shakers at each table. It was comforting to know that some truths remained universal.
Content that my food was in the capable hands of a fellow lech, I turned my attentions to the restaurant’s only other occupants, a pair of elderly men—one wearing a hat and both wearing penny loafers—as they played chess beside meals that had long ago gone cold. The hatless player kept reaching for pieces as the other would shake his head and say ‘Nh.’ ‘Nh.’ ‘Nh.’ Apparently warning him off various potential moves. This went on for a few minutes before the player in the hat doing the warning got annoyed and reached over to move some piece the first man had never even gone near. Then the hatted man would slowly and deliberately take his time selecting his move and repeat the process of being annoyed when it was the other guy’s turn.

Bored of this, I gazed out the window at the passersby in an effort to relax and adjust to the openness of it all. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t get past such a sheer volume of humanity so comfortable with its own bare-assedness.

Men, women, children, black, white, yellow, brown, red, and one man who looked a little green. It just wouldn’t sit with me. My brain refused to wrap itself around the idea that public nudity was something you should ever feel comfortable with. And for Wisper’s sake, I desperately wanted to. Private nudity—okay. But I’d been raised in an environment where most of our contemporary morality plays end in the violent death and/or dismemberment of openly sexual teenagers at the hands of stinky men in hockey masks. Stay repressed or die. It was a guiding truth as old as the Puritans.

That’s when I noticed another of the dancing, burning Pilgrims. Was that the turning point in this world’s history? Had all the Puritans died in some fire that changed the course of history and led to a world of no clothes, no shame, and—perhaps even more surprising—no Thanksgiving?

As I continued staring through the glass, I noticed, in particular, the children. They seemed happy. Playful. Undamaged. In our world, one of those ‘Great Truths’ is how much ‘nudity’, and ‘sexual openness’ will destroy the minds of the innocent.

Not here.

Was the potential damage a lie? Or was there something about this world and how they raised their kids that helped them cope with whatever damage had been inflicted?

These were questions too weighty for me to answer. I needed someone smarter to help me sort it out.

I needed Wisper.

As I, again, lamented ruining my chance with her on the beach, I noticed Morgan skittering nervously down the street, leaning against each darkened pane of glass he came to and peering in. When he at last reached the window I was staring out of, I watched as he slapped himself against the casement, and—after a good, long, lingering look at the waitress’ exposed bits—spotted me sitting at my table drinking my tea. He waved vigorously for me to come out, obviously very agitated, so much so that I got up immediately. If it had been anyone but Morgan, I would have been afraid of what might have happened that had him so plainly agitated. But with him, the trauma could have been
as simple as he’d read on some website that Marvel was planning on making Toad an X-Man.

As I approached the door, the chef held out a plate and called to me.

“Your order’s just ready, sir.”

“Thanks. I’ll just be a minute.”

I went outside into the carless street and found Morgan wearing a hotel towel around his waist, staring at some girl’s pubic area. I literally had to pull his face away from her and back to me.

“What?” he asked.

“What do you mean, ‘what’? You’re the one who waved me out here.”

“Oh, yeah. Your credit card’s been declined,” he said, and turned back to the girl and her pubes. She had moved on, but fortunately for him, another had come along to replace her.

“My what? My credit card’s been what?”

“Declined. Cancelled. Sophie told me.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to know why I was being kicked out of the room. So she told me.”

“No, I mean why has it been cancelled? What happened?”

“I don’t know.” He paused a moment as the new girl moved on. Eventually she—or at least the ogle-able part of her—was hidden by other, I assume, less attractive nudists, because he sighed heavily and began looking at me again. “She said the company had called and said it was a stolen number. They had notified the owner, and he confirmed that he wasn’t in Naked Bottoms.”

“Nikkid Bottoms.”

“Whatever.”

“But I’m the owner. And I never…”

Suddenly it dawned on me. I wasn’t the owner. Not in this dimension.

Here, I didn’t exist.

Here, my fortune belonged to someone else.

Here—dear God—I was penniless.

A sensation exploded through my brain that must have been a stroke. Or at least a severe ice-cream headache. I grabbed my head and had to steady myself against a wall.

“What’s the matter?” Morgan asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

“My credit cards…”

“Use another one. You got—like—a gajillion of ‘em.”

“None of them will work. We’re in a different dimension, remember?”

“They don’t use credit cards, here?”

“Of course they do! But they belong to some other Corky Wopplesdown!”

“They do?”

“It’s a different dimension!”

“With a different Corky Wopplesdown? That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Morgan. Think of it as Mirror Mirror in Star Trek.”

He looked at me blankly.

“Earth Two,” I said, realizing my mistake. “On Earth One, there’s Superman. And on Earth Two, there’s…”

“Evil Superman.”

“Or a different Superman.”

“This Corky Wopplesdown is evil!”

“Or…just a guy who’s not happy someone else is using his credit cards.”

“That bastard!”

“Okay,” I said, trying not to hyperventilate. “What the hell am I going to do? I have no money.”

I looked through the window at the chef and waitress, both of whom were staring back and forth from me to the table where a plate of food I could no longer afford was patiently awaiting my return.

“I can’t pay for my meal,” I said, shocked.

“Wow,” Morgan said. “Really?”

“Really. What am I going to do?”

“What I do whenever I go to Denny’s,” he said, grinning. “Dine and Dash.”

Suddenly Morgan sprinted off, and I saw the chef through the window tense up, as if he’d been expecting this. He grabbed something behind the counter that looked like it could put rather large dents in my skull, and began moving around the counter in my direction.

I could explain this to him, I’m sure. He would understand. I was an honest man, who was wealthy in my
world, because—you see—I’m from another dimension…

I raced off after Morgan. It was easy to track him because he was the only one in the crowd who wasn’t flesh-colored. As I got closer to him, I realized this might also be a drawback.

“Morgan!” I said, once I was within earshot. “How are we going to hide? We stand out like…well…clothed people in a nudist camp!”

Morgan looked down at his shirt and towel, apparently for the first time understanding what I was getting at without having it spelled out with Richard Scarry drawings, single-syllable words, and large, block type.

“In there!” he said, and pointed to the clothing store we had seen earlier. ‘Clothes For The Naked’.

We both hurried that way, and as we got closer to the door, I saw that the sign actually read ‘Struts Clothes For The Naked’ and thought what an odd coincidence that was. That’s Pjuter’s and Aunt Helena’s name, and…

I jerked as though I’d been struck by lightning.

I looked at the designs in the windows. Most were, as you might imagine, various forms of sandals, shoes, or ornamental footwear, the kind that looked fabulous on trim, attractive, and mostly nude mannequins decorated tastefully with jewelry of the type Wisp had worn earlier on the beach. The rest were various forms of—I don’t know—here they might be considered outerwear, though where I come from they were primarily imagined as accessories for the boudoir, and usually given as gifts to unsuspecting ladies from the horny men in their life, gifts those women would likely never allow themselves to be seen dead in, no matter how stunning or chic the designs might be. And these were stunning designs. Designs I’d seen before, multiple times, on models at Wopplesdown Struts. Designs Pjuter had created, I had viewed, taken notes on, done sketches of.

Not that this was anything nefarious. Pjuter could sell his designs anywhere he wanted. The company was half his. But here? In an extra-dimensional nudist resort?

Wait. Maybe this alternate reality’s Pjuter created these, not mine. Something that mirror-mirrored his creations, while…

No. Helena had told me how to get here this morning. She had given Wisp a ride home last night, and so I had thought nothing of her knowing how to get me here. But perhaps I should have.

I’d given zero thought since arriving to how, and why, Helena had been so calm, so understanding, and so supportive of Ms. Nuckeby without really knowing anything about the woman other than that Wisp’s favorite pastime seemed to be running around after me without any clothes on. I imagine Helena could have learned a good deal more about my favorite model during the long trip to Nikkid Bottoms—and they would have arrived here early enough in the evening to get a clear idea of the place, its locals, and their prominently displayed founder. The nudist thing should have been a major choking point for anyone just learning it for the first time—anyone from a world where hiding your genitals was de rigueur that is—and probably worth mentioning to anyone you might send here, don’t you think?

Unless it was something you already knew about. Something you were already comfortable with. Something you wanted whomever you sent here to experience firsthand, without any warning, so as not to frighten him off before he’d been enticed by one or more of its sexy, and naked, inhabitants.

She knew! Of course, she knew!

Even more, it seemed likely that Helena had been here in the past. Possibly many, many times. And she was undoubtedly comfortable with it. Last night she’d run from the room immediately after trying to reassure me that there might be other, reasonable answers for Ms. Nuckeby’s comfort. She might have been intending to propose Ms. Nuckeby as a nudist, and it was obviously ‘okay’ with her. But then suddenly something more profound had struck her. Was it the realization that Wisp might be from this place?

And Pjuter. He’d quietly slipped away from the events last night. I thought it was embarrassment, but he designed lingerie for God’s sake! How could a naked model possibly embarrass him?

So wait. That meant…

My brain hitched at the thought that Helena might not only be tolerant of, but could actually enjoy public nudity herself—perhaps even participate in it—Dear God! Was that something I could handle? Strangers were one thing, but a woman who’d been your surrogate mother since early childhood—and more recent mental childhood—taking off her clothes and exposing her hidden things to you, and—well—everyone else? The nakedness of strangers was one thing, but Helena?

The ice-cream headache returned with a vengeance.

Maybe Grandfather’s cryptic comment last night had something to do with this! More pieces appeared to fit than not. I seemed to know nothing about my aunt. Or her husband. Suddenly Pjuter’s odd, regionless accent…

He was from here!

Helena must have sent me to this place, knowing it for more reasons than delivering Ms. Nuckeby! She was probably intimately acquainted with it because her husband—and maybe sometimes she, herself—had lived here!
Amid the dawning horror, as I reeled from the shock of Helena buying groceries in nothing but sandals, walking through town draped only in jewels and skin, dining, dancing, living a full and active life with her tits, bits, and ass showing, something else slowly rose through my mental fog.

She had given me money. To spend here. She must have known…

Of course!

“Morgan!” I yelled just before he entered the store. “This way!”

I turned and ran off in the direction of Nuckeby’s Bar and Grill, the Duesenberg, and, perhaps, salvation.

“What?” Morgan called after me. “Why? Where are you…?”

He turned, saw the restaurant chef along with a couple of naked cops running fast in our direction, yelped like a whipped puppy, and hurried after me.

According to the police report filed later, Mindie had fashioned a bikini of sorts for herself out of leaves, twigs, and mud. She was still covered in boils and splotches, and the sharp sticks and dried foliage were cutting into her harshly, but she still felt somehow better having them there than being fully exposed to the unpopulated world around her.

She was struggling uphill through dense shrubbery, over rocks and dried leaves, and through tiny rivulets of icy water toward what she hoped was a road out of this place. A different road than the one beyond the bridge, which she hadn’t long ago abandoned. Too many nudists had kept coming by asking if she needed help. She did, of course, but certainly not from naked people.

She reached the clearing she had been angling toward, and glorybe-hallelujah, it was a road. A two-lane highway, in fact. Carefully—being sure not to overexpose herself, even though all her most important bits were well enough covered—she cautiously stepped to the edge of the asphalt and looked first one way, then the other.

The paved street curved off into the distance in both directions and disappeared behind thick trees lining either side of the road. No signs were visible anywhere to help guide her back toward clothed civilization, so she pointed alternately each way, silently mouthing ‘eeny, meeny, miny, moe’ until she had at last picked a direction that appealed to her.

Then she changed her mind and went the other way. She’d only gone about a hundred yards or so when she saw a police car parked on the opposite side of the deserted highway facing her. A trooper sat in the front seat, head down and apparently making notations on a clipboard.

“Oh, thank God!” Mindie cried and began jogging quickly toward him, bits of handcrafted bikini being tossed off her body as her pasty flesh bounced and jiggled in all directions. Inside the car, she saw the officer lift his head from his paperwork, and widen his eyes with amazement and surprise. He put down his clipboard and practically leaped from the car, which—of course—stopped Mindie in her tracks.

Because the trooper was nude.

Oh, he wore boots, a hat, a gun, and had a badge hanging around his neck on a lanyard. But the parts that Mindie feared most in the world were swinging loose, wild, and free in the summer breeze, and she screamed at the sight of them. After scrambling randomly in various directions, unsure of where to go (or look), she finally dove back into the bushes on her side of the road and disappeared into the underbrush.

The trooper ran to where she had vanished and stared helplessly as the poor woman—screaming the entire way—tumbled, humped, and bounced her way down a surprisingly (to Mindie at least) steep hill to land on her back with a splash in a stream far below. The water, and friction from the fall, had dislodged her makeshift cover, and all her blistered skin was again exposed to the elements.

She was, however, mostly unharmed, and scrambled quickly back up onto her feet, turning her monstrous and blazing eyes several hundred feet back up the hill toward the trooper. Once she and the officer’s eyes connected, Mindie snarled like a beast and swatted at him as if his very gaze might be painful to her—like sunshine on a vampire. (Which is an apt metaphor in Mindie’s case.) Then she ran off into the dense foliage toward what only the great god Fockyoo knew for sure.

The trooper stared absently, frozen in stunned amazement, running his hand under his hat, scratching his head, and loosening a quarter pound of dandruff.

“What the hell?” he said.
I reached the end of the courtyard and its shops, emerged from the naked crowd and burst onto the street beyond. Morgan trailed just behind me, the chef and cops were nowhere to be seen. Had we managed to lose them somehow? Fockyoo could not be that kind.

There were no cars to speak of, so it was a clear path down the block to Nuckeby’s, where the Duesenberg was, just at that moment, being towed away at the owner’s expense. The naked gas station attendant was mounting up, and a naked River Nuckeby was waving him off happily.

“Hey!” I shrieked across the intervening distance. “That’s my car!”

“Is it really?” River said, the tone of his voice and the smile on his face telling me he knew damn well to whom the thing belonged. “Then why did you leave it in my parking lot? Go, Barney.”
‘Barney’ closed the door to the tow-truck, ground it into gear and hurried away. I was amazed the back end of
the Duesy didn’t come loose in the process.

“Hey!” I repeated. “HEY!”

“Hay is for horses!” River told me.

Great. I was dealing with an overdeveloped three-year-old.

I had no response. I’d been running a good three or four hundred yards by now, and a series of ‘hey’s’ was
pretty much all I could manage. Perhaps having a butler since birth wasn’t such a wonderful thing after all. Clearly
getting up to make things for myself once in a while would have kept me in marginally better shape.

I hurried as best I could after the Duesenberg and tow-truck, fully intending to say rude things to—and make
insulting gestures at— River as I passed. Instead I could only gurgle and flop my arms around like some inebriated
squid.

River just laughed, which caused me to gesture more wildly, and in return he laughed even harder. Between us,
we had generated a form of perpetual motion.

Morgan, still hot on my heels, called out to Wisper’s brother as he went by and managed a less wheezy insult.

“Ass…” Morgan gasped, taking in a few more deep breaths between syllables, “…hole!”

Which just made River laugh all the more.

There was no chance we were going to overtake the tow-truck, but I kept running nonetheless, all the way
uphill to the gas station. Once Barney had pulled to a stop near a cyclone fence, and what I supposed were a host of
other impounded cars, I leaped into the cab of the Duesy and began rifling under seats and inside door pockets,
trying to remember where I’d stuffed Helena’s envelope.

I found an odd assortment of items: gum, hairpins, an earring, some unused condoms (Eww!), and
Bare Britain, a book on nudist vacation spots in England (Ah HA!), but nothing that gave me a clue as to where I might
have stuffed that damned envelope.

Finally, I pulled out my keys, opened the glove box, and found it, thick with bills, just as Barney came around
the side of the car holding his baseball bat in both hands.

And by ‘baseball bat’, I mean an actual Louisville slugger. Not what you might be thinking after all my
ridiculous, double entendres.

I stood up quickly and put my hands out defensively, trying my best to look like a harmless, doughy, clothing
executive who was no real threat to anyone, least of all armed gas station attendants. Call it typecasting. As I waved
my hands to show I was unarmed, the keys jingled in my fingers.

“Hey!” Morgan said. “You’ve got the keys!”

“What?” I said, mock surprised. “Goodness. Look a that.”

“You had them the whole time, and you didn’t know,” Morgan sniffed, amused. “What a dick!”

“Get out of that car!” Barney snarled, and Morgan snapped his mouth shut so hard sparks shot out from
between his teeth.

“This is my car…” I began, then shut up too as Barney cocked the bat.

“This ain’t nobody’s car till they pay the fine!” Barney howled.

“Which I will be glad to do once I open this envelope and…”

“That’s impounded, too!” Barney cut in, and snagged the thing from my nervous fingers. Only a couple of
loose bills remained with me. “And we ain’t responsible for any lost nor stolen articles, neither!” Barney glanced
around furtively for unwelcome eyes, then opened the envelope and thumbed through the cash inside. His eyes
widened at the number and quality of illegal tender he found, and a breathless sigh slipped out of him, much the way
a satisfied lover slips out of bed, careless and content.

“Whooooa, mama.”

Ah. So Barney made a little on the side in the car-impound business. I wondered if River got a ‘finder’s fee’.

“Well,” I said, slowly and calmly, Mister Rodgers-like, “If you take all my cash, I can’t pay you to get my car
back, now can I?”

Barney looked puzzled. But not for the reason I’d hoped.

“So?” he said.

So, indeed. What did it matter to him? He could have the cash, and keep the car here forever. I looked over at
some of the other, dirty, dead, and sun-faded vehicles littering his ‘impound lot’, most of which appeared to have
been here since the dawn of the automotive age. Clearly, outfoxing even this simpleton would require some brains.
Where was Wisper when you needed her?

“Get out of that car,” Barney said again, threatening.

Slowly, I did as I was told, and Morgan, who had stood by watching in awe the entire time, moved closer to me
so I could shield him from any potential Barney thrashing.
Cautiously, with Barney making occasional threatening pumps on the bat, each of which caused Morgan and I to flinch as if we’d actually been struck, we backed away, out of the gas station, and into the middle of the street. Barney took one last threatening swing at us, we ducked, and he backed toward the Duesenberg so he could lean his bare ass against it, without even bothering to look around for a towel first. An obvious act of defiance. He continued to stare at us, bat at the ready—both bats, actually—and I turned to Morgan.

“That’s all the money we have here.”

“How are we going to eat?” he asked, again missing a few of the more pressing matters at hand.

“How are we going to do anything?” I asked him. Then I remembered the bills in my hand. Was there enough for…

Before I could even get a good look at them, the chef, and cops ran over to us, calling out angrily for Morgan and I to stay where we were.

“I’m sorry,” I said to them. “I’m really sorry. I left my money in my car, and…“

One of the cops snagged the cash from my hand and turned to the chef from the Headless Horseman.

“You should have stopped,” the cop said, without looking at me and counting through the bills. “We could have sorted this out without all the running. How much does he owe you, Denny?”

“Eleven fifty. Plus a tip for Nikki.”

The cop peeled off a bill and handed it to him. “Keep the change.” Then the officer turned and glared at me.

“Call it an exercise fee.”

He handed me my remaining bill, and the three men walked off back toward town.

“Is there enough left to buy some lunch?” Morgan asked pathetically.

“Who cares about lunch,” I said, shoving the crinkly cash into a pocket. “How are we going to get out of here, Morgan, if I can’t pay the impound fee, pay for repairs, pay for anything?”

“Whoa,” Morgan gasped. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“I could tell.”

“We’re stuck here!”

“Yes, we are. And on top of that, we have no place to stay, we’re obvious outsiders, nobody likes us…”

“Nobody?” Morgan whined. “Not even that girl you were going to have sex with?”

“Especially her.”

“Wow.”

He thought about it for a moment. “Not even Sophie?”

“The hotel counter girl?” I asked. “Why would she like us?”

“She seemed pretty nice.”

“She’s paid to be.”

“Really?”

“Really. Hotels give classes on how to be nice to people you hate.”

“Well, when she said she’d go out with me, I thought…”

“She said she’d go out with you?” I asked, floored.

“Yeah. When she came to tell me we were kicked out of the hotel for using someone else’s credit cards. I asked her out.”

“And she said ‘yes’.”

“Uh huh.”

“I’m astonished,” I said, astonished.

“Why?”

“A woman believes you to be a criminal, and then agrees to go out with you on a date, and you ask why?”

“Oh, yeah. I hadn’t thought of it that way.” Something delightful seemed to occur to him. “Hey. Maybe she’d go with us on our crosscountry crime spree.”

“I’m not going on any…there’s not going to be any…where were you going to take her on a date? You have no money either.”

“We were supposed to meet at the auction later. I told her you were going to buy the hot, hostess chick, and she got really excited. Said something about how it was going to piss somebody off, and she wanted a front-row seat.”

“Well, it’s not going to happen, now that—Oh, my God! Ms. Waboombas!”

“What?”

I said nothing. There was no time for a response. I ran off toward the town, and after an instant of confusion, Morgan followed.

“What?” he yelled. “What’s the matter? And why do you always call everyone ‘Ms.’?”
The town square glowed, warmly, in the waning minutes of evening sun and igniting streetlamps. A platform had been set up around Homer, decorated with festive oranges and browns, and lots of happy, flaming pilgrims everywhere. It must have been a joyous death they’d suffered, God’s angry will making them ecstatically happy in their final moments no doubt.

To one side, a giant, cheery, three-dimensional pilgrim had been set atop a pile of sticks, logs, and paper, presumably so he could be merrily ignited somewhere near the end of the festival weekend. A burning man, kind of thing. Or burning Duck, if you’re a Jimmy Neutron fan. And if you’re a kid, or just very much like one, who isn’t a Jimmy Neutron fan?

A crowd had gathered around the stage, and I could see several people getting ready for both buying and selling. Near the front, unaware that I was anywhere even close, stood River, proud, defiant, and hung (okay, I have issues), looking as though he would be one of the first put up for auction.

My original plan had hinged on this, figuring that Wisper, as one of the organizers, and possible emcee, would likely go last, particularly if she were intended to be a main attraction of the show. This would leave River available to be bought up early, and with Ms. Waboombas doing the buying, she could keep him out of my hair while I tried to work my magic on Ms. Nuckeby.

Now, of course, I had to find Ms. Waboombas and stop her before she began spending money I didn’t have. Whatever River might cost—and I presumed that damned penis of his would go for a bundle—I could no longer afford to pay it, and neither could my comrade in arms, Wendy.

She, unfortunately, was nowhere to be seen, and neither—I noted offhandedly— was Ms. Nuckeby.

As I continued to desperately scour the crowd, I eventually came across Reverend Winterly. It was the first time I’d seen him in hours, and I was amazed to note that he looked somehow more—I don’t know—comfortable in his surroundings. Not that he was nude and dancing or anything, but he was also not on the verge of heart failure either, or hiding in his Bible. In fact, he was moving quickly and apparently excitedly my way, and smiling as though I were a longlost friend.

“Hello,” he said, waving.

I tentatively waved back, but something seemed off. Eventually I realized he was looking just to the left of me, where stood a mostly nude, older, blonde woman in ministerial collar and simple black shoes. She scowled at the smiling Winterly and lifted a paper cup to her lips, so she could avoid greeting him.

“The first thing I wanted to say,” Pastor Winterly told her, “is, I’m sorry.”

She stared at him intently, measuring his honesty. Slowly, gradually, the scales tipped his way, the blonde woman softened, she lowered her eyes briefly, and when she brought them up again, they were shining with unexpected brightness.

“It’s all right,” she said, smiling. “I’m a bit sorry myself.”

“I did as you suggested, and I fear I came up short on anything in my Bible,” my erstwhile traveling companion said.

“Of course you did,” she told him.

“I must admit,” Winterly admitted. “I was amazed.”

“I knew you would be.”

“So—you truly think God is a nudist?”

My eyes went wide. Sometime later I was going to have to get the full, unabridged story on this from the pastor. And as you can likely tell from my earlier description of the scene, I did. Isn’t time a wonderfully unique and fluid thing in a novel? Perhaps that’s why it’s called—a ‘novel’. Because it is. Novel. One of the reasons anyway, and...yes, I know. I digress. Yet again.

“I like to think He’s a nudist,” the woman in the collar said. “But—really—honestly—we both know the story of Adam and Eve is simply a parable. A metaphor of sorts.”

“For what?” the pastor asked. The male. The one in clothes. Apparently not ‘knowing’ anything of the kind.

“For teenagers leaving the home,” the pastor without clothes said.

“What?”

“It’s a story to illustrate the inevitability of growing, maturing, and finding your own way. Didn’t you know?” Of course, he didn’t. Waasn’t that clear by now? It certainly was to me.

“It’s a fable,” the collared woman continued, “constructed to show how, at some point in our lives, we must
challenge the wisdom of the all-knowing parent and eventually leave, by choice or by force, the perceived utopia of our home where all our needs are met and all our cares are simple. Girls become fertile women, men become hunter-gatherers, and they must make their way in a harsh, unforgiving, and often seemingly barren world.”

She studied his flabbergasted face and chuckled a bit, surprised. “You really didn’t know that?” she asked again.

“No, but…” He paused, and briefly thought about it. He seemed, for a moment, about to say something else, then instead he said: “What a…useful story.”

“Indeed,” she agreed. “If you read it the right way, the Bible’s full of great stuff like that.”

The two continued talking, smiling and laughing, lost in one another in a way that seemed more than just two professionals sharing common wisdom. I would have been fascinated to stay and learn more about this turn of events in my pastor’s life, particularly if it meant they might have sex in public, but there was an urgent mission at hand.

“Morgan,” I said, finally remembering he was there. You forgot too, didn’t you? “We have to find Wendy.”

“Sure,” he said, seemingly incapable of touching his eyes away from the female minister’s ample bosom. “Why?”

“Morgan!” someone called, interrupting his focus and mine, and we each scanned around looking for the source of the voice.

It was Sophie, our bouncy hotel receptionist, and she was obviously delighted to see both Morgan and myself. Perhaps we should go on a crime spree together. After skipping from The Headless Horseman with the intent of not paying, we were sort of on our way to that promising new career anyway.

Sophie bounced up to us and took Morgan’s hand. He was as surprised as I was.

“I didn’t miss it, did I?” she asked. “I got here as soon as I could.”

“I don’t think it’s even started yet,” I said.

“Oh, grand!” she squealed. People use the word ‘grand’? “Then let’s get something to eat. I’m starved!”

Morgan hesitated, and she pulled him along with some force. Apparently ‘let’s’, which is the contraction for ‘let us’, didn’t include the singular ‘me’.

“Come on,” Sophie demanded of Morgan, bouncily. “I’ll pay. I know you’re broke.”

A smile spread rapidly across Morgan’s face. A girl who was touching him and intending to pay. He was in heaven. This could work out after all.

“You two go ahead,” I told them unnecessarily. “I need to find Wendy.”

“Is she going to bid on River?” Sophie asked.

“Er…yes,” I said, nervous that she was apparently better versed in the plan than Morgan was.

“Try check-in,” she offered. “Everyone who bids is supposed to register first.”

Morgan wandered off at the giddy urging of Sophie, she clearly delighted to have the interest of a boy—any boy—even if it was only Morgan, and he clearly delighted at the faintest glimmer of getting laid.

Meanwhile, I headed the other way. I saw Petal working a small sign-up table near the stage and Play-Doh’ed myself through the crowd toward her.

“Hi, Petal,” I said pleasantly. “Is your sister around?”

Petal looked up at me with an expression that told me I had stepped in dog shit, and would I please go somewhere far away and wipe it off. With my tongue.

“She doesn’t want to see you,” Petal said. “And I can understand why. A lot of guys would kill for a girl like her, and here you come along and treat her like you could find three more better than she is next week, which you could not, so don’t sashay over to me with all that mister charming, rich guy, isn’t my penis cute, malarkey, and try to cozy up to me like I should still think you’d make a fun brother-in-law or something, because you wouldn’t…”

“I know I could never find another like her, Petal,” I said, cutting in. “That’s why I came here. To bid on her, so she has to listen to me. Unfortunately…”

“Don’t,” a voice said from somewhere over my shoulder.

I turned and saw Wisper standing halfway up the stairs to the stage, glaring at me with more-or-less the same expression Petal had. Though with Wisper, I could practically taste the dog shit.

“Don’t even think about bidding on me,” she said. “I wouldn’t come with you, even if you won.”

She continued up the stairs without another word, or a second look.

“I thought this was for charity!” I called out to her magnificent bare back. “I think you should be more open to making money for a worthy cause!”

“So write a check and donate,” she said without turning around. “Then go home.”

I felt like I’d been stabbed in the hart. Or deer.

Pretty women dismiss men all the time. But there’s something profoundly devastating about having someone so
incredible show she cares for you first, then rip that interest away. It makes you want to fight for it. To do anything within your power to reverse the situation and put it back like it was. Like it should be, and I started to tell her that.

“Do what she says,” an unusually high-pitched voice said from behind me, stopping me before I could speak again. It was a voice that sounded eerily familiar, like I’d heard it somewhere before.

I turned around and found myself staring directly into the eyes of ‘pants-hater’ from Nuckeby’s Bar and Grill. The voice that had told ‘Vincent’ to ‘drop’ me. The man who had kicked me in the temple when I was down.

Washburne. It had to be.

“Why?” I asked. “Afraid you might lose?”

“He almost laughed. “You’re too afraid to even take your pants off. I can’t imagine you’d have the guts to stick it out in a bidding war against me.”

“Don’t be so sure,” I said, more confidently than I felt.

He stared at me for a long moment, then appeared to reach some sort of conclusion that might be very painful for me indeed.

“Fine,” he said, still stifling a laugh. “Feel free to waste your time. It’s only money.” He began to walk away. “And you’ve already lost, no matter how courageously you bid.”

I glared at the back of his head and tried to explode his brain, but I didn’t have any superpowers. After a moment of desperately trying to ignite his hairline, I turned to Petal, hoping for support. She offered none. Not for me anyway.

“Never thought I’d see the day that I was rooting for Washburne Boone,” she said harshly.

“What do I have to do to bid?” I asked.

“Register,” Petal said dismissively. “Then call out amounts when the time comes. You never done an auction before?”

I had, but I said nothing and reached for the form in front of her. She abruptly got up from the table.

“Miss Kent will help you,” Petal said, indicating the pretty blonde beside her as she walked away. “I’m taking a break.”

The lovely Miss Kent, her face beautifully framed under an explosion of wild, wavy, golden hair, smiled at me sweetly and slid over a pen. “You can call me Prudence,” Prudence said.

“Call her Miss Kent!” Petal said angrily, as she stormed away.

We both looked at the Nuckeby sister, surprised, then turned back to one another and shrugged. Without another word, I began filling in the blanks on the sheet of paper.

The first question after name, address, and phone number?

Method of payment: ________________________

Excellent question. Glad you asked.

“You’re about to sign a binding contract,” someone said behind me.

I turned and found myself looking directly into the face of a doughy, older man with an explosive shock of white hair that radiated out from his centrally located bald spot like an electrically charged feather-duster. He was smiling broadly, charmingly, and his voice whistled as he spoke through a distinct gap in his front teeth.

“I hope you’re aware of that,” he said, completing his thought, then held out a hand like a marshmallow with fingers. “Pizeley M. Boone,” he told me. “The ‘M’ stands for Mayor.”

He chuckled heartily at his little joke, and I smiled along with him.

“Of course I’m aware it’s a binding contract,” I said, not having been aware of anything, nor given it a moment’s thought. I wondered idly why the town’s mayor might feel the need to warn me personally, when I noticed Washburne standing off to one side, listening intently to our conversation.

Ah. So that’s how it was.


I thanked the mayor for his kind reminder and moved away to get a good spot near the front of the stage.

But suddenly I became a bit more concerned that I was now intending to bid freely, and madly, with money I didn’t have. I felt somehow naked, and ironically I was the only one for miles wearing pants.
The number of people auctioning themselves off seemed endless, which only gave me more time to vacillate about what I should do. Bid. Not bid. I had no money, so the answer should seem rather obvious, but your mind clearly functions at a higher level than mine.

Contrary to what I had first thought, River wasn’t one of the first off the block. Instead there were a good ten others who went ahead of him, all of them auctioned off by the mistress of ceremonies, Wisper. Some of those offered went for no more than a few dollars, and a couple of laughs. Prudence Kent was one of the early auctionees, and she raised several hundred dollars for the Dickens Home. Personally, I thought she should have gone for a lot more. She was a lovely woman—though almost plain when unfairly compared to Wisper—and had seemed rather sharp, witty, and genuinely very sweet during our brief encounter. She appeared a bit disappointed that I hadn’t joined in the bidding for her, but was also plainly delighted with the young man who won her as a weekend companion.

It was when Prudence was onstage beside Wisper and some of the others that I finally noticed I had stopped...
registering people by their privates—penises, breasts, butts, pubic hair, whatever—and started returning to
traditional modes of appraisal—face, height, hair color. I’d taken Prudence in as a whole and was entirely charmed
by her. Not that I hadn’t noticed her beauty, the length of her legs, the small, cuteness of her breasts, her overall
attractiveness—but no more than I would if she were clothed. Instead I had absorbed the entirety of her at once—her
presence, her personality, the way she smiled and laughed—and not remained locked in on the things you couldn’t
ordinarily see just because I wasn’t used to seeing them.

I could now recognize that there were very real advantages to this lifestyle. Everyone was on an equal footing,
no one was able to hide their physical secrets, and you couldn’t be separated by the arbitrary distinctions of fashion
—an odd thing to recognize for someone whose entire livelihood is based on that arbitrariness.

And from the purely animalistic side, I also preferred seeing women in the nude to seeing them in clothes. That
may seem rather obvious to anyone of a hormonal age, but for me it was a revelation that not all women were
Playboy models, yet were still quite enjoyable to look at. Not that women couldn’t be lovely in clothes, but after
years of looking at them in tiny shreds of fabric designed to entice one to want more, I just wanted the more without
all the teasing and falsity of enhancements. Honestly, there was nothing more appealing, or more attractive, than a
human body—a female human body in particular—unadorned, and I was beginning to see no need to embellish it.
And now, after only about a day here, public nudity did seem almost natural.

Almost.

Perhaps it was the fact that I was finally starting to see those around me as people rather than ‘nudists’, or
perhaps I had just become overwhelmed with the endless sea of unmentionables. Whatever the case, it nonetheless
surprised me that I was somehow becoming attuned with the environment around me. More comfortable, if not
entirely comfortable.

I took another scan around the crowd looking for Ms. Waboombas, when a chorus of delighted female voices
rose from those gathered near the stage, and I turned without much surprise to see that they were responding to
River. He strutted before them, confident, and hung (I said I was not entirely comfortable), and took a turn around
the platform to make sure anyone who hadn’t seen him before now would have their chance at a full, three-hundred-
and-sixty-degree view. As you can imagine, there wasn’t a woman in the crowd who wasn’t appreciative of his
thoughtfulness.

“Isn’t he wonderful, folks?” Wisper called into the microphone, receiving a boisterous response. Then she
turned to her other sibling, Petal, who smiled and shook her head in sisterly disbelief. “Our own, particular, little
brother. Fortunately, its only two days, and you don’t have to live with him.”

River smirked at her, and the women who now crowded the stage mockingly booed her. Wisper laughed and
stepped aside.

Satisfied with the reaction he had received, River glided over to stand proudly at the forefront of the stage, and
in the back, Wisper held out a hand to accept bids.

“What am I…” she began, but was immediately cut off.

“ONE HUNDRED!”

“TWO HUNDRED!”

“TWO-FIFTY!”

The bidding raced on like that, uncontrolled, and unprompted, until a particularly loud voice cut through all the
others…

“ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS!”

…and was followed by silence.

Every head turned and looked around for the source of the bid, and every eye in the place came to rest on Ms.
Waboombas. Tall, exotically brown-skinned, regal, Wendy stood near the center, back of the crowd, and it parted to
allow the new gunslinger a clear aim so no one in her path might accidentally be shot. With one bid, and four words,
she had contained the raging flow of River frenzy and drawn every eye in the town down upon her, and her alone.

Surprisingly, she wasn’t naked. She wore a stunning, red evening gown, matching shoes, and jewelry. Her
dress was elegant and tasteful, and cut in a style that showed only what needed to be seen and nothing more. She
smiled, supremely confident, as every man in the area with a clear view dropped a jaw and craned his neck for a
better view.

Even I had to admit, she was ravishing. Her make-up appeared to have been done professionally, and showed
enormous restraint. Colors blended, accented, and highlighted, rather than stood out. Her hair was pulled back
styleishly in a tight bun, and her lips were parted in a slight, knowing smile.

She was, once again, in complete control, and loving it.

Unfortunately, she was in control with my money—or rather, my nonmoney.

I scampered in her direction and tried anxiously to wave her off, but, of course, it was far too late. There was a
contract involved. Pizeley M. Boone had made that abundantly clear.

“We have a bid…” Wisper said quietly into the microphone, astonished, “…of one hundred thousand dollars.” She paused, not sure if she should even bother asking. “Do I have another?”

One woman started to raise her hand, then reconsidered. Another coughed. They all looked toward Wendy, surprised and deeply disappointed. Their fun had ended far too soon, and not with anyone they knew and could tease, admire, or joke with.

Who was this newcomer?

I moved over to Waboombas and stood beside her. Wisper caught sight of me and scowled. Knowing how smart she was, she had probably figured out that I was somehow behind this and was wondering what my game might be.

“Ms. Waboom—Wendy,” I said. “I’ve recently discovered that I…” I briefly hesitated, “…I don’t have any money.”

Wendy continued looking around at the wondering crowd, soaking up their attention, and didn’t bother turning to me.

“What?” she asked.

“I’m broke,” I said, more curtly. “In this dimension, my money is worthless.”

She turned directly to me this time, and her smile faltered.

“What?” she asked again, though her terrified tone told me plainly that this time she’d heard me perfectly.

I shrugged, not sure what else I could say.

“SOLD!” Wisper said firmly. “To the woman in the red dress.”

Waboombas looked as if she’d been shot.

“Corky,” she said quietly, her voice sounding desperate. “I don’t have any money either.”

“I know,” I said. “But don’t worry. I’ll find a way to get us out of this.”

“You sure?” she asked, clearly not buying it.

“I’m sure.”

“You positive?”

“I am positive,” I said, feeling nothing of the kind. She didn’t look convinced. Damn. The woman was far too insightful.

“I swear to you, I will make good on this,” I said, not explaining that it might be through my physical incarceration. “If I have to sell everything I own, my home, my car—everything—we will work this out, and nothing will happen to you.”

Wendy smiled, still a bit nervously, then pulled herself up to her full height and walked off to claim her prize. Confidence was, apparently—justified or not—her natural state of being.

“Let’s go, handsome!” she called out to River. “Your ass is mine for two whole days, and I ain’t wastin’ a second of it.”

River, for the first time since I’d encountered him—maybe for the first time in his life—looked nervous and unsure of his future. Good, served him right.

I had finally crossed some kind of personal line, or barrier, or Joseph Campbell threshold into a hero’s journey. I was going to get to Wisper, and I was going to make this work somehow, even if I had to go to jail to do it.

And now was the time. Petal stepped up on the stage and took the microphone from her sister, and Wisper moved, shyly, toward center stage. She had her head down slightly, then folded her hands behind her back and raised that lovely head, confidently, chin up, eyes out, lips smiling. Everything about her nude figure radiated magnificence.

What a girl, I thought.

“All right,” Petal began “You all know my sister, Wisper. The waitress with a heart of gold who organized this thing, and I must say, did an absolutely fantastic job of it because even the little hors d’oeuvres—she made those herself, you know, and they are sooo good, so if you haven’t tried them, you really need to, especially the little chocolate mousse—because this isn’t just ordinary food, we’re talking about here, folks, this is something that was delivered from the kitchens of the gods, and shows just how multi-talented she is, and how good at time-management she can be since she did those in her frickin’ spare time between mod…her…uh…day job and organizing this whole auction thing because not only is she the prettiest thing in Nikkid Bottoms by far, she has talents you’ll never get a chance to discover in just two nights, and two days—not talents like sexual talents, so don’t get any ideas, although I’m sure if she was really into you or something, anything is possible, but…”

As a delighted murmur rose from the gathering crowd of men, Wisper shot Petal a look, and her talkative sister finally discovered another fine place to put a period.

“Sorry,” Petal said, a little hurt. “I was just selling you, is all.”
Wisper’s look said plainly that additional selling would be severely punished.

“Okay, fine,” Petal whined, and as every available male in the place tensed for the frenzy of bidding to commence, she opened the floodgates. “Then, without further ado, which is such an odd thing to say really, especially if you don’t know what an ‘ado’ is…”

Wisper rolled her eyes and held up a hand.

“What am I bid?” she said, not needing a microphone to be heard.

“One hundred thousand dollars!” a voice shouted, closing any potential floodgates with a slam.

Wisper’s eyes went wide and she froze, hand in the air.

The entire audience, including me, gasped and turned to her bidder-slash-suitor. Washburne just smiled that cat-eating-my-girl’s-canary smile of his and stared unblinking at Wisper. She only stared back, though without the same feelings I noted. Washburne, apparently, believed a hundred thousand to be the magic number, given Ms. Waboombas’ instant success.

And from the looks on all the men’s faces, and the fact that I was broke, he was probably correct. I gritted my teeth and fumed. Dammit. How did ordinary people live without wealth?

“Oh,” Petal said. “Wow. That was fast. So. Okay. I guess we’re done. Going once, going twice…”

“Five hundred thousand!” I said.

If it was possible, this new gasp was even louder and more shocked than the previous one, and now every eye trained on me. Which really wasn’t a good thing because at least some of the eyes belonged to police officers and angry teenagers, possibly one or more of those who had been chasing Morgan and me earlier. And apparently Ms. Waboombas hadn’t quite gotten River out of the picture quickly enough because I saw their faces appear at the edge of the crowd, and River just couldn’t be less happy, no matter which part of him you studied.

“Withdraw your bid!” Wisper snarled.

“What?” I said, caught off-guard by her anger.

“I do not want you bidding on me!”

“Do the rules say anything about you getting a choice in the matter?” I asked.

She said nothing and continued glaring at me, then abruptly turned to Petal, who looked sheepish and could only shrug.

“Never been a problem before,” Petal told her older sister.

Wisper turned her attention back to me, speaking volumes without saying a word.

“My bid stands,” I said.

She glared at me, fixedly, as her expression slowly softened to one of hurt and sadness. It was unexpected, and I instantly wanted to do whatever it took to make her happy again. Except withdraw my bid.

Then Washburne went and made things even worse.

“Seven hundred thousand!”

I drew a breath to respond, but Wisper cut me off. “Let it go!” she said furiously.

“No,” I said, and began to speak again, but she cut me off once more.

“I don’t want anything to do with you!” she said. “Not now, not ever! Don’t force me!”

Now it was my turn to be hurt.

Every eye was on us, ping-ponging back and forth between her and me with expectation, and I could physically feel how everyone present wanted more—if just so they could understand what the hell was going on. Unfortunately for Wisper, I wanted to know too, and only stoked the fires of interest in the crowd.

“Why not?” I asked, genuinely not understanding.

“Why not?” She was plainly shocked at my ignorance. “Look at you! You’re the only one in this entire crowd, in almost this entire town, who’s wearing pants—if you can even call what’s left of them pants. Yet I know—inside—you’re thinking we’re the one’s who are weird.”

I started to respond, to deny it, but then abruptly realized she was right and only goggled, wordlessly, like a gaffed flounder. To my mind, even with the modest gains I’d made in my time here, on some level I believed that everyone in this town was weird. Ridiculous. Even laughable.

There was no denying my opposing point of view. No matter that I was in the clear minority. No matter that I might have become more enlightened as the day went on. No matter that on some level, I enjoyed aspects of social nudity—as long as it wasn’t mine.

I turned and slowly studied the various faces around me.

I was definitely the outsider, and every glaring eye in the crowd knew it.

“It may be interesting,” Wisper continued, sadness creeping into her voice, “a little exciting—kind of sexy and thrilling, on some levels. But ultimately, you are a foreigner to our point of view. You come from a world where people define themselves by what they wear, and only tease with their sexuality. Show it all, without showing
anything. You wear spandex and thongs…"

“I’ve never worn a thong in my life,” I told her emphatically.

“…run around braless, in low-cut tops, and see-through sundresses, and your men ogle your women in those
filmy garments and imagine them unclothed. Young girls develop websites so they can sell naked images of
themselves and make money from men who will leer at them with guilt-filled pleasure in isolation, secrecy, and
privacy.”

“Privacy is a relative thing. The Bush administration…”

“Where you’re from, lingerie is exciting because it’s almost nudity, because you’ve made the human body
something titillating, and dirty, and taboo, attaching a sense of wrongness to the most human of all human traits.
There’s an inherent self-loathing in the way you’ve twisted the most natural thing in the world into something
perverse, something shameful, something fearful that makes getting undressed into a dark, emotionally charged
‘event’. You…you personally, Corky—like to swim in the nude…in your own back yard.”

I gasped. She knew! “But the thought of doing it where others can see? Horrors. Even though you obviously prefer it to wearing a
suit, certainly because you enjoy it, probably because you get a kind of sexual thrill from being exposed, a kind of
naughty delight in doing something you consider, quote, ‘wrong’.”

“Delight may be a bit strong,” I said. And not very masculine sounding I might add.

“No, it isn’t,” Wisper corrected. “Hell, your society is so repressed and awkward that finding a willing woman
is so potentially nerve-wracking, difficult, and painful that you’d rather have sex with a water-pump than…”

“Three men in dark masks held me at gunpoint and made me do it,” I said to the nudists closest to me. “First I
slipped, and fell, then my shorts were viciously sucked off…”

No one was buying it; not surprising really.

“You’d rather have sex with a water pump,” Ms Nuckeby said more forcefully, “than someone who actually
wanted you, someone who might really, genuinely care for you.”

I winced, humiliated, and lowered my head to hide my shame.

“Yours is a world of private nudity, Corky. Where the society, the mentality, and even the economy, to a large
dept, depend on human repression and guilt, and deeply seated shame,” she finished with some intensity. “And
you, Corky,” she said, choking on more than a few tears, “you…sell clothes.”

The assembled crowd gasped with shock, revulsion, and surprise. I glanced around at them nervously.

Apparently, here, selling clothes was akin to marketing marital aids to children. Wisper was right. I might never,
truly, understand this place.

“This may be fun for you,” she said, her voice cracking, tears fighting their way free of her eyes, “and
something you’ll love to talk about when you get home. But you can’t be comfortable here. Not really. And so you
need to realize—as I have—that you and I will never be compatible. There will come a day when the newness and
the thrill of me being naked all the time will wear off, and you’ll need to get back to the place where you really live,
mind, body, and soul.”

Oh, God. She was right. After meeting her mother, I had imagined I could stay here as the outsider. But I was
too outside. More so than I ever realized.

This had been a delight—in a way the word ‘delight’ can be applied to manly endeavors—a joy, a pleasure on
many levels. But always my thoughts were of getting back, never of staying. I imagined myself with Wisper, true,
but only as something—someone—who had made me feel good for now. Not in a realistic way that took me beyond
the obsession of new love and into the unthinkable territory of the mundane. The routine. The day-to-day existence
of living with nudists.

She was beautiful. And sweet. And obviously cared about the world around her in ways I never had. She was
relatively poor, and the only time I’d seen her show any interest in money was for the benefit of underprivileged
children. I was rich and had never done anything with my money, except waste it on comics.

And wasn’t that her point? I’d never stepped out of my own, selfish worldview so that, other than the
temporary thrill of a moment’s sensual pleasure—plastic-covered memories to hang on my wall and remember
fondly from time-to-time without ever needing to touch them physically again—other than those, what was Ms.
Nuckeby to me?

I looked at her onstage. So lovely, even with her tear-stained eyes and damp breasts. Every inch of her a
physical and emotional thrill for me to be sure. And yet she did represent all my greatest fears. Openness. Honesty. Nakedness in all its many forms.

Faced with women almost as beautiful as Wisper every day, I was able to control any urges I might have had—
not entirely out of respect, or sensitivity, or courtesy to them, though that was there to be sure—but largely out of
fear for losing what I had. I imagined this was how it was for many men, faced with requirements to be politically
correct. But the understanding was a surprising revelation to me, and one that spoke volumes about me personally, as I had believed myself above that. Was I now merely succumbing to the baser male nature, confusing lust with love, and harassing an innocent woman, someone with whom I could never, ever, share a meaningful life? Had I become what Grandfather had repeatedly been sued for—someone who chased their urges without consideration for the pursued?

I’d spent my youth devouring four-color comic-book page after four-color comic-book page about the courage of heroes who make the right decisions in difficult situations, only to crap out all those lessons and sustain myself on stored-up fat deposits of fear. But as I watched Ms. Nuckeby’s distraught features plead with me silently, I knew now was one time I had to dig deep within myself—very deep, as deep as it took—find the hero inside, face my innermost demons, battle them down, and return to my tortured soul the elixir of an honest answer.

If I felt anything genuine for Wisper, I owed her that much.

I took another look at the faces and bodies around me. This was their lifestyle. It wasn’t a joke. If I made a similar choice to stay here, that decision would have to be sincere and internalized, or Wisper was right, I didn’t belong in this place—I didn’t belong with her. I would eventually return, again and again, to the idea that the people around me were strange, or outlandish, or bizarre, then probably, horribly, unbelievably, that Wisper herself was just as weird.

I closed my eyes for a moment and bowed my head again. I remembered the excitement and fear of being nude in my closet with Wisper, followed immediately by the humiliation and horror of standing naked before my family and friends in my foyer. I shuddered and pushed those anxieties away to let my mind, instead, drift back to more pleasant thoughts; the sensuousness of swimming in my pool; the luxury of lying nude in my bed sheets as I slept, and...did other things. The sensation of a breeze caressing my all in the Nuckeby’s parking lot.

I opened my eyes and looked down at my ragged pants, virtually destroyed after all I’d been through that day, and yet, there they still were. Binding me. Constraining me. Separating me from those around me.

And beneath those pants? Though there was nothing now, once there had been the underwear of another company, because they were more comfortable. But nothing was more comfortable than nothing.

I began to think of my life in general as something uncomfortable.

I looked over at Morgan, who had his arm around Sophie. She was delighting in his attention, and I could tell she was hoping he would stay. He gave me an enormous grin and a thumbs-up, and I knew he might—but not for long.

I thought deeply about Morgan, and about Grandfather, my family, my butler—all the things that made my life difficult, and began to see—very slowly—that my world was not all that wonderful. It was, in fact, deeply lonely and nowhere near what I’d once hoped it might become. It was more like a Tar Baby, to use that despicable racist term, and I was stuck in it rather than living because of it, and I realized that this is what Wendy must have been referring to in her private little lesson to me. Stay in your small, lonely world if you want. But if you choose to venture into the world of others...

I looked over at her as she readied herself to keep River in check, waiting with real concern for me to make the right decision. As I studied her sweet, troubled face, I realized that I had failed to see my existence as anything but better than all other options, because it was all I’d known, and so much what others—like her and Morgan—had desired for themselves. I had stayed within that life and fought desperately to keep it, even though it wasn’t really happy. Wasn’t really for me.

Be honest. Be moral. Be comfortable.

It wasn’t a joke.

Be honest. Be moral. Be comfortable.

It was a call to those who kept themselves apart with falsity.

Be honest. Be moral. Be comfortable.

Suddenly, in a flash, I saw the truth with perfect clarity.

“One million dollars,” I said.

The crowd erupted with a gasp, followed by a chorus of sounds, not many of them supportive.

“Corky,” Wisper began.

“I think you need a little daring in your life, Ms. Nuckeby,” I said. “A little spontaneity! A little fun!”

“What?” she asked, not understanding.

“One million, one hundred…” Washburne began.

“TWO MILLION!” I yelled, cutting him off.

More gasps all around. Petal and Wisper were speechless. River made a move to stop me, but Waboombas grabbed him by the penis. It surprised them both and stopped him in his tracks.

“‘You’re too damn repressed for someone so young and so cute,’” I reminded Wisper. “‘You said that to me.”
“I wasn’t thinking straight,” she said. “I didn’t know you well enough.”
“Or maybe you did. Maybe you knew me better than I knew me.”
“That was when I thought I could stay in your world. I thought maybe we could split the difference. But people don’t change. I couldn’t change. Not really. Not that drastically.”
“You could if it’s who you were all along and you just hadn’t faced up to it yet.”
“Two…eh…two million…” Washburne stammered, and I could tell his heart wasn’t in it.
But mine was.
“THREE—MILLION—DOLLARS!” I shouted.
Astounded gasps raced throughout the courtyard. I think a woman fainted.
“And worth every penny,” I told Wisper. “Life is hard enough not to take advantage of a little harmless joy when it comes your way.”
She was moved for a moment. But not quite enough. Not yet.
“Are you saying I hadn’t faced up to something?” Wisper asked, sounding annoyed.
“No,” I said, reaching for my pants. “I’m saying I hadn’t.” And I ripped away the trousers to reveal my all.
Aaaand, unfortunately, I was erect, again, and everyone stared.
“Dude,” Morgan whined. “Put that away!”
Wisper stared at it, and me, for a stunned moment, then slowly began to smile. But as quickly as the happy expression had reappeared, it faltered and I stepped forward so she could hear the sincerity in my voice.
“I love you, Wisper,” I said, and her smile blossomed in full. She took a step back in shock, then forward again, and really studied me.
“I know that much, at least,” I said. “And I know that this feels more right to me than anything in my short, bland, unpleasant life up till now. Be honest. Be moral. Be comfortable. Take however long you need to ‘be comfortable’ that I won’t change back, or hurt you, or ever, ever leave you.”
She stared at me a long moment, as did Petal and River, and the entire village of Nikkid Bottoms.
“Give me that chance at least,” I said.
Her happy expression faltered slightly, and for a moment I thought she might turn and walk away from me, but instead she leaped down from the stage, ran into my arms, and held me as though she would die without my touch, as I knew, in that moment, that I would die without hers.
After a long, sweet, passionate embrace, we finally pulled apart and smiled at one another, forgetting for the moment that everyone she knew surrounded us. But then they reminded us by breaking into sustained applause.
As I stood there, joyous, smiling, and erect (ho hum), I leaned toward her, her lips so close to mine, the kiss I needed to sustain me so near, and I knew I would never feel a happier, or warmer, or more perfect moment in my life.
Which is just about when Grandfather showed up.
“Dear GOD, are you insane?”

“Grandfather!” I said, absolutely floored by his presence. “What are YOU doing here?”

The crowd parted, pushed aside by the old man’s palpable fury, and opened a clear path between him and me. I said a quick prayer that he was unarmed.

He stood—fully dressed in suit and tie—with Manschingloss, Aunt Helena, and Uncle Pjuter. I could see Biddleby in the car, parked just outside the square and—was that Woodruff near the statue of Homer? What an odd and unexpected assortment of characters.

“Grandfather, let me explain…”

Wisper took my hand, so tightly I couldn’t have let go even if I’d wanted to, which I didn’t.

“There’s nothing to explain,” she told the elder Wopplesdown. “Corky and I are here—together—in my home town, and we don’t give a shit about your money.”

“Ooooh,” Grandfather growled, smiling slightly, a lion playing with his food, “is that so? Did I not hear him
just bid three million dollars for you? Is that how much you don’t give a…a sh*t, as you so eloquently put it—about my money?”

“Ah,” I said, suddenly more nervous. “So you’ve been here awhile apparently. Well, you see, it’s like this…”

“Has he got three million dollars?” Sophie asked.

I turned to see her, still beside Morgan, smiling and bouncing with giddy glee.

“Cause if he has,” she said. “He can afford to pay the hotel bill.”

She looked at me, smiling. “I knew you guys weren’t real criminals,” she said, snuggling in under Morgan’s arm. “Ya’ll are too sweet.”

“Hotel bills are one thing. But you are not giving this woman three millions dollars,” Grandfather snarled.

“It’s for charity, Grandfather,” I told him, helpfully, “and therefore tax deductible.”

“I don’t care if I get coupons, a hooker, and a plastic toy. There is a principle here, and you are not handing a dime of my money to these nudists!”

“It’s not your money. I have mother’s trust…”

“Which I control until your thirtieth birthday—unless I determine you are unfit—which you clearly are.”

There was a stunned silence during which my heart stopped beating. Wisper looked at me with serious concern, as I’m certain I went a little pale. A little. Like the arctic in winter is a little cold.

“Corky?” she asked.

When I said nothing, she touched my chest, and I came back to the land of the living as if I’d been zapped by one of those heartunstopping paddle-thingies firemen and calm doctors use.

“Fine,” I said. “I…or rather we…” I corrected, which pleased Wisper no end, “…don’t need your money. Or mine. Because it is mine. But I still don’t need it.”

“Really, Cecil,” Helena interjected. “Don’t be such an ass.”

In a fury, he turned to her, and I almost laughed out loud as his mind completely derailed. Caused by the fact that Helena and Pjuter were completely naked.

Waboombas was right. Helena was kinda hot.

“He’s old enough to control his own money,” Helena spat, “and nudists have rights. The boy made a legitimate bid, and he needs to make good on it.”

Grandfather’s lips quivered, his eyes tested their sockets’ ability to contain them, and for a moment he was rendered completely mute. But unfortunately, only for a moment.

“So,” he finally managed to say. “That summerhouse situation wasn’t an isolated incident.” He averted his eyes and sniffed in contempt. “Well, I have news for you, my dear sister: Corky is not the only one who is disinherited.”

He turned and stalked off toward the car.

“Like you have control over that!” she said, undisturbed.

“Wait a minute,” Manschingloss cried. “You need to rehire Wisper! I will not go to the fashion show with clothing cut for a specific model and have them hang wrong on some anorexic, wannabe substitute!”

But Grandfather ignored him and continued the mad rush toward his escape vehicle.

“Cecil!” Manschingloss called, bumbling along after the old man. “CECIL!”

On their way to the limousine, they passed Woodruff—who still stood near Homer’s statue, staring at it with a calm, almost beatific expression on his face—and Biddleby opened a door for them. They waited a moment for Woodruff, and when it became apparent he wasn’t coming, they leaped in and drove off without him.

Helena smiled and turned to Sophie.

“We’ll pay Corky’s debt,” she told her.

Sophie smiled and snuggled tighter against Morgan. Her innocent trust in the world was inspiring. Even I felt a bit more secure.

But then Pizeley M. Boone and the ever-lurking Washburne stepped through the crowd with two of Nikkid Bottom’s finest in tow.

“And what about your bid, son?” Boone asked. “I can’t imagine this woman intends to make good on the enormity of such folly, and I warned you, you signed a binding contract.”

I looked at Helena, hoping.

“Three million?” she asked.

“Three million, one hundred thousand,” Ms. Waboombas interjected, as she stepped through the crowd, still holding River’s branching tributary in one hand. Interestingly, he really seemed to be enjoying it.

I nodded to Helena to affirm Waboombas additional math.
“But…” Helena began.
“Think of the orphans,” Boone oozed.
“Three million, one hundred thousand,” Helena said, and from the tone of her voice, I already knew the answer.
“We don’t have that kind of cash available, Corky. Not on this side.”
Not on any side, if my grandfather intended to make good on his threats.
“How sad,” Boone said, not the least bit sad. “Arrest them,” he told the cops.
“Arrest them? Isn’t that a bit extreme?” Helena demanded. “Can’t you just negate his bids, and let the next
highest bidder…”
“No!” Wisper and I said simultaneously.
“Oh,” said Helena. “But Corky…”
“They signed a contract,” Boone snarled. “And for the sanctity of the auction, and in fairness to those trusting
souls who bid in honest and sincere good faith, we have no choice, I’m afraid. Arrest them.”
“On what charge?” the cop asked.
“Fraud,” Boone said, smiling. “False representation. Credit card theft. Parking for more than two hours in a
restricted zone. We’ll make a list.”
“This is ridiculous!” Helena snapped.
The cops stepped forward.
Then the auburn-haired stunner from the beach stepped forward and jutted an accusing finger at Morgan.
“That’s the jerk who molested me!”
Morgan flinched and moved behind Sophie, who looked confused.
“Goodness,” Boone said, smiling, “Well…arrest them all!”
He was now practically giggling with joy.
“No!” I said.
Handcuffs clawed open.
“Wait, wait, wait…” Wisper said, as they reached for me.
Boone laughed heartily. So did Washburne.
“Dammit, Washburne!” Wisper snapped. “You…All right! I’ll go with you!”
“NO!” I said, and began to struggle with the cops.
“Stop this!” Wisper demanded of the younger Boone. “You think this is going to make me love you?”
Washburne’s smile fell.
A policeman unkindly jerked one of my arms behind my back and prepared to snap a cuff on my wrist.
“HEY!” I said uselessly.
The situation was looking desperate, and I wasn’t seeing any way out, when suddenly screams exploded from
the other side of the crowd.
Two women ran by shrieking their lungs out, and a general cacophony rose urgently above the crowd near the
thing they were fleeing. The cops looked that way, and both moved a bit to one side to gain a better line of sight
toward whatever was happening, when suddenly the crowd burst apart, and we were given a full view of the horror;
the horror, the horror.
It was Mindie.
She had run in from somewhere and had apparently launched herself onto a food table, ravenously inhaling
anything that hadn’t fallen to the ground in her mad assault. Then she dropped on all fours and began eating some
of that.
She was mostly naked, except for the rags and leaves she still had wrapped around herself in a poor effort to
conceal the bits no one wanted to look at anyway as they were still mostly covered in boils, blisters, and rashes.
“I took off my clothes for food,” she howled, snatching a hot dog from an innocent—and naked—child, “so I
get some!” She bit away more than half the frank, and its bun, then shoved the poor, crying toddler over.
“I took off my clothes for food, SO I GET SOME!”
Ignoring the little one screaming on the ground, Mindie jammed the remainder of the hot dog into her mouth,
sliming her hands and face with remnants of bun, garnish, and meat. Growling, she moved on and continued to wolf
down everything she could reach. A man braved potentially serious injury and raced in to rescue the kid, as Mindie
the monster’s eyes darted about, wild and threatening, burning holes into anyone who might be contemplating the
bravery, or foolishness, necessary to stop her. She even took a few swipes at some of the closer nudists, who
squealed in fear, then withdrew as far as they needed to be safe, while still staying close enough to get a good, clear
view of the action.
To their credit, the cops broke free of me and ran over to take Mindie down. They encircled her, she swatted at
them, and when that failed to frighten them off, she threw food.
“How far the mighty have fallen,” Helena said, with only marginal sympathy. “Obviously, she is not handling her disinheritance well.”


“Turns out the main reason—maybe the only reason—she wanted to marry you is because her father kicked her out of the house. Felt she had some growing up to do.”

I looked over at poor Mindie, clawing at the policemen trying to restrain her with one hand while she reached for a pie with the other, and watched as the three sailed over a picnic table, through the potato salad, and into a fountain just beyond.

“I believe he was right,” Helena concluded.

Incredible how a little nudity had made everything more visible today.

Then, suddenly, it hit me like Washburne’s toe in my temple! This was my chance.

I grabbed my pants, Wisper’s hand, and called to Waboombas.

“COME ON!” I yelled.

And we ran.

Me pulling Wisper by the hand, Morgan pulling Sophie by the arm, and Wendy pulling River by the wee-wee.

It was several moments before Boone and Washburne tore their attentions away from the nude Las Vegas road show extravaganza starring Mindie The Monster, and noticed we had escaped.

“Hey!” Washburne said in that irritating voice of his. “Hey, they’re getting away!”

But no one pursued. The cops had decided there were more pressing matters at hand with Mindie, and they continued wrestling my former fiancée for all they were worth, pinning her down and lying on top of her. The way they struggled, you would have thought she was a loose, vicious crocodile, and not a doughy, pampered, rat.

“Your penis is touching me!” I heard her wail behind me. “YOUR PENIS IS TOUCHING ME!”

Had things progressed as she intended, those were likely the same words I would have heard on my wedding night, and far beyond.

Then, seeing no one else was coming after us, the auburn-haired girl and her coterie of friends lit out in hot pursuit, resuming the wild chase that had begun on the beach.

“Where are we going?” Wisper asked, astonished, somehow naïvely expecting that I had a plan.

But this time I did.

Barney was standing beside some woman’s car, absently cleaning her windshield and charming the pants off her. Which was pretty easy given that she was already bare-assed naked.

Wisper, Morgan, Sophie, River, Wendy, and I raced past him and scooted around the edge of the station office toward the impounded automobiles, one of which was still the Duesenberg.

“Hey!” Barney yelled, as we ignored him and the sights and sounds of angry, naked teenagers approached.

“What the hell?”

Not looking back, I raced to my aunt’s car and I pulled the keys from my pants as the others dove into their seats.

“You have the keys?” Wendy said in a voice that sounded not unlike the raptors hunting their prey in Jurassic Park.

“Oh,” I said, trying to think fast and nearly hurting myself. “Didn’t I…em…you know…mention that?”

“No,” Wendy said, scalding me with the hot oil of her voice. “You did not…em…mention that. All this time I could have had access to my clothes, my things, my comics…”

“You have comics?” River asked. Wendy stopped seething and softened with River’s obvious enthusiasm, and she turned to him, almost girlishly.


“Oh, my God. That is so awesome,” River said. “I’ve always wanted to self-publish. I have this idea for my own version of the XMen, except instead of mutants, they’re sewer people…”

Catching sight of the approaching wall of flesh heading our way, with Barney now in the lead, I leaped behind the wheel, jammed the key in the ignition and cranked it.

The engine turned over on the first try.

I shifted the thing into gear, and floored it just as Barney and some of the faster teens came skidding, flailing,
and flopping down on top of us.

The greasy gas station attendant bounded onto the running board as the others continued the chase, and his pet python smacked me in the side of the head a few times as I drove wildly through an oil can display, and sent the cylindrical containers flying everywhere. The naked, lady customer he'd been seducing had to dive into her car to avoid being run over as I sailed through the fill-up area, heading for the street.

Barney managed to grab me around the neck and jerked me from my seat, as if removing the driver of a fast-moving automobile careening insanely was somehow a good idea. We were just about to missile into a tree—which seemed to thrill Barney to no end—when River stood up (seatbelts!) and smashed my naked assailant right in the face.

Stunned, in several ways, Barney let go of my neck, but recovered quickly enough to grab tightly to the side of the car before falling to certain, skin-abrading doom on the quickly passing pavement below. Before he could get hold of me again, I accelerated into some oncoming traffic and scraped him off the Duesenberg with a lot of screaming on his part, but a minimum of additional fuss on mine.

Innee, and outey passoo defeather a cat! Or whatever.
I chuckled to myself as I imagined Barney would be feeling that one for several days. Nights and weekends too. Man is a truly terrible beast deep down inside, and will often laugh at the misfortune of those with larger penises. At least until our girlfriends give us the evil eye, as Wisper did now, and we make like we were just coughing.

After a moment of some genuine pretend-hacking, I turned and looked back at River in amazement. River, for his part, was looking at Wisper, almost embarrassed, and said nothing for quite a while.

“‘You love him,’” he said simply, finally answering her unasked question, then shrugged and felt the need to add. “‘Why...?’” He sort of shuddered and shook his head, then without another word, sat down again beside Waboombas.

Wisper and I absorbed that, then smiled at one another, and as we raced down the road, over the river and through the woods, she asked me—reasonably—where we were going.

“To the comics convention,” I said.

“All right!” Morgan cheered.

“Just one problem,” I said, looking at Wisper. “How do we get back to my dimension?”

We’d been sitting for several minutes, parked on the road a few feet from the place where Morgan, Wendy, and I had passed through the freak lightning storm on the way into town. The Duesenberg sputtered and steamed, not likely able to take us more than a few hundred more feet or so. But hopefully, that would be enough.

The air still seemed alive with energy, the hair stood up on the nape of my neck, and probably everyone else’s too. I looked at Morgan, and he seemed ready to jump out of his skin. Sophie was smiling and excited. The whole thing was like one growing, expanding adventure to her that just kept getting better and better.

“You’re saying,” Sophie asked, entirely too enthusiastically. “If we drive down this road, lightning will strike, and we’ll enter another dimension?”

What about being struck by lightning could in any way ever be considered appealing?

“More or less,” Wisper answered her.


“I have no idea,” Wisper said softly, staring at the empty space before us with more than a bit of fear. “We live not far from here—my family—and one day I noticed an old car driving this way. This road doesn’t get much use since they put in the 108, so I watched the car go, wondering what it was doing here. It had your Uncle Pjuter in it—though I didn’t know he was your uncle at the time—and he was just tooling along happily when suddenly there’s rain, clouds, and lightning, and suddenly Pjuter, the car—everything—just vanished. It scared the living shit out of me. There’d always been rumors about ghosts and things, down here, and I thought I’d seen one. Then one day I notice Pjuter in his store downtown, and I realized something else was going on. So I watched him leave that night, put on clothes, hop into this old car of his...”

“This Duesenberg,” I said.

“Yeah,” she answered. “He jumped in and drove off, and I followed him and watched him vanish again, right about there.”

She pointed to a dark spot on the asphalt.
“So the day before Washburne and I are supposed to get married…”
“What?” I asked, stunned.
“Yeah,” she said. “I didn’t want to, but someone…” she scowled in the direction of River, who rolled his eyes and ignored her “…kept pushing me, and convinced me it was a good idea. I knew I couldn’t go through with it, so I planned an out. Since there was nowhere in this world I could hide from him and his money, I thought about this place and where it might lead. I confronted your uncle and made him tell me what this spot was all about, and he explained how he’d found the opening, or whatever, years ago, and now went back and forth all the time.”
“He just drives through?” I asked.
“In a car that’s at least sixty years old,” she said—then seeing my expression, “Why? Neither of us knows. So I bought myself an old Rambler, filled it with food and gas, gathered my things and drove up here. It took me a while to work up the courage, but eventually…”
“You got through.”
“Found some clothes. Got a job…”
“You didn’t even bring clothes?”
“Your uncle mentioned I’d need them, but somehow it slipped my mind.”
“You started with nothing?” I asked, my mind totally blown, and drifting down the street I might add.
“It is possible, Corky.”
I stared at her, dumbfounded. I couldn’t imagine. But perhaps I needed to. Or perhaps I needed to do a lot more than imagine.
I looked at the others and got mixed reactions.
“Let’s do it,” Wendy said gamely.
“What if it fails when we’re in the middle and cuts us in half?” Morgan whined.
Sophie just smiled broadly and nodded.
River also said nothing and simply stared, absently. He seemed not to be listening, his glazed eyes looking off into space, as if he was lost in a world of his own. I wondered what he must be thinking, what horrors were coursing through his mind, when I noticed Waboombas moving her hand slightly in his lap, still with a firm grip on his ample, and now swollen, personal handle.
Ah. So his mind was preoccupied with the horror of the absentminded hand job. His expression now made perfect sense.
Behind us rose the sounds of approaching sirens and rubber tires squealing over asphalt, and I knew the decision had now been made for us.
I pressed down on the gas and, complaining all the way, the Duesenberg moved forward, slowly, to be gradually enveloped by clouds, lightning, and thunder that flowed purposefully out of nowhere. Morgan whimpered, Sophie squealed in delight, Waboombas laughed, and River turned pale, shuddering violently. Suddenly Wisper’s brother cried out, and I couldn’t tell if he’d finally realized what was happening or simply given the back seat of Helena’s car a new stain.
Either way, it didn’t matter. The result was the same.
We were gone from Earth Two.

Thankfully, the rest of the trip was relatively tame.
We made it to the next town and slept in the parking lot of a gas station where a cheery sign with a cute little big-headed cartoon service-station man happily promised:
Which I doubted.

But our options were limited, so we decided to stay the night and see if the little guy was a liar.

All of us were hoping for, and desperately needing to, sleep. But there were no motels nearby, so we were forced to bunk down in the crowded Duesenberg, each couple with a seat to themselves, though not much else to compensate our exhaustion given that Morgan refused to remove his pants for Sophie, and River forced me to keep a respectable distance from his sister. Highly unfair given his continual enjoyment of the Waboombas finger massage on his own manliness. But apparently hypocrisy wasn’t unique to ‘clothists’.

Despite this, we wound up talking, laughing, and dozing through the night, and after a while, I no longer cared if I slept, or did anything else for that matter, so long as I could continue to take in more, and more, and more of Wisper. She was exhilarating, even when she wasn’t touching me. Her mind was sharp, she was caring and sensitive of others, and her intelligence dazzled me. I began to wonder if maybe John Seward Johnson had found his upstairs maid similarly engaging. Maybe. Maybe not. But did it really matter?

By early morning, stiff in oh-so-many ways, still tired, and more than a little cranky, I slipped into my pants, met with the greasy station attendant as he arrived for work looking nothing like his cartoon counterpart, and convinced him to jury-rig the Duesenberg by offering wads of cash (my credit cards worked again here) if he could be done before breakfast and not ask any questions. He agreed, and amazingly, even though he spent more time looking at Wisper and Sophie than he did at the engine, I had to give him credit; the man brought the dead back to life. It made me wonder what he could do with a loaf, a fish, and a hungry crowd.

As the car idled in the service bay, I went into a small convenience store one block over, and bought enough sweets, and carbohydrates to feed a hyperactive army of kids on a Saturday morning, and before the sugar had even hit our bloodstream, we were on our way.

We arrived at the convention center before noon and stared in gaping awe at the massive lines leading out from the glass-walled main entrance of the building onto the busy concourse and down the crowded street for several blocks. There must have been a hundred thousand people, or more, waiting to get in.

Advertising trucks drove past the throng towing huge displays for whatever late summer, sci-fi, superhero, or fantasy blockbusters might be due out in the coming weeks. People wearing street clothes paraded down jammed sidewalks side-by-side with those more garishly displayed in wild and inventive costumes. Some carried boxes, others original art, many held bags, and quite a few lugged heavy artist’s portfolios. All looked happy, hopeful, and excited.
Every year I came, I was more amazed at how much the convention scene had changed since I was a wide-eyed youth, when only a few hundred people might show up for the entire weekend—all mostly young, all mostly fans of the actual comic books themselves. Now, very few of the attendees actually gave a rat’s fig about comics, or anything even affiliated with them. More people attended these conventions than actually bought comic books in their lifetimes, and why they came was a matter of some debate. It was my belief that their appearance here could—as with so many things—be laid squarely at the feet of Al Gore’s Internet.

Because of the World Wide Web, and all it’s many filaments, the comics convention had become more than just a sales opportunity, promotional tool, and tax benefit for the city. It had grown into an important, positive, and empowering experience for those who attended; the convention center itself, through transmitted imagery and stories, had reached a cult status as a common meeting ground where fans could socialize—no longer just digitally, but face-to-face—and in the process find even more like-minded friends who might want to touch them sexually. The Con was now a thrilling destination point—a Mecca, a Garden of Eden, and a journey’s end, all rolled into one; the fans looked upon it and saw that it was good.

And so they came, and saw, and in some cases even conquered. Keeping all that in mind, you also have to add into this rather heady mixture of social misfits desiring community, the interest of general sci-fi and fantasy fans, passive fans, people lost and looking for directions, the generally curious, couples with an afternoon to kill, aspiring artists, aspiring writers, innocent children who don’t know any better, and people who just want to come and gawk, because aside from just the hardcore weirdos and the chronically lonely, comic book conventions had also recently become immensely popular with the masses—and I do mean masses—due to all the recent superhero movies. Consequently, tons of people came every year to see guest actors, featured directors, and previews for whatever Hollywood was offering up next. Not that it was really any different from what had been in theaters the previous year, or the year before that, or the year before that—but to promote it, the studios gave away free stuff, and the masses love free stuff.

Owing to the enormous popularity of connectedness, voyeurism, and just general ‘wa’s up’ surrounding comics conventions (or ‘cons’ in attendee parlance), we had to park several miles away in a small lot somewhere very near the international date line, and paid the attendant with a credit card that, fortunately for us both, still worked. He let us in with barely a second glance, despite the fact that—with the exception of Waboombas and Morgan—we were all still extremely naked.

“Here for the comics convention?” he asked pleasantly, as if carloads of bare-assed people showed up for that every day.

“Yes, we are,” I said, equally pleasantly.

“Enjoy yourselves,” he said, handing us a ticket and waving us in.

“We already are,” Wisper said, smiling pleasantly and fanning her bare breasts to alleviate the heat from the man’s intense gaze.

Once safely parked, I opened the trunk, and it barfed out our luggage. All that crashing, towing, and wild driving had left things in a terrible jumble that took a few minutes to sort out.

I handed Waboombas her suitcases, tossed Morgan his, and grabbed mine from under the spare tire, turning it over to Wisper.

“See if there’s something in there that will fit,” I said.

She cocked her head and looked at me with irritation.

“Just for now,” I said. “Promise.”

She sighed, unconvinced, and opened the case. As she did, I grabbed something from inside and handed it to River.

“It’s likely to be a tight fit,” I told him, “but you can probably squeeze into this.”

“Are you insane?” he asked. “I am not wearing clothing!”

Waboombas laughed. Or burped, I still hadn’t worked it out. “I love this guy.”

“Then you’ll have to stay in the car. In this world, there are laws about exposing your privates in public.”

“What? I’ve never heard of anything so ridiculous in my life. Laws against the human body. Where are we? Nazi Germany?”

Why did everyone always pull out ‘Nazi Germany’ when they found something the least bit repressive? Things
must have been really bad there at one time.

By way of attempting an explanation, I took the bag I’d most been concerned with—the bag that would make everything better—and pulled it onto the asphalt, opening the zipper for River and the others to see.

“Comics!” River said excitedly.

He reached down and took a couple, then grimaced.

“What is this?” he said, holding one out like it was covered in Ebola virus. “Spiderman is wearing pants? I’ve been reading Spiderman my whole life! Spiderman is for kids, for God’s sake, and his penis is covered! That is just sick!” Then he noticed my sealed, perfect, mint copy of Nuderman. “Okay. Finally, something normal.” Then he noticed the title, searched the rest of the comics, and found an actual copy of Superman #1. “Wait a minute. Why is Superman wearing pants, and this one is called Nuderman? This is Superman—not the pervert wearing red nuthuggers.” He looked back and forth between the similar covers, and his scalp gave off smoke as the engine inside labored under the strain.

Finally, shaking his head to knock loose the unpleasant images, he handed me back the comics. “This is seriously wrong.”

Then, slowly, quietly, gradually, he became aware of all the people walking by on the street—most of them staring, pointing, and occasionally laughing, at our naked selves—and saw that they all wore clothes of some kind—everything from jeans, dresses, and shirts, to Star Wars, Star Trek, and superhero uniforms. It was likely the first time in history someone dressed as an Ewok felt they had the upper hand on another person’s fashion choice.

I gently took the comics from River, and he startled a bit, as if forgetting I was there. He studied me with frightened eyes, like a small child confronted by the real, live Mickey Mouse for the first time. And Mickey had his thingie out.

“Maybe you can explain things to him, Wisper,” I said, calmly. “He looks as though he needs a better understanding of what he’s gotten himself into.”

She took River to one side and began speaking to him in low tones. Other than the occasional “What?” Or, “You’ve got to be kidding me!” Or, “Even to BED?” I heard only enough of their conversation to know that I understood exactly how River was feeling—though in reverse.

His difficulty handling the situation had me concerned about poor Sophie. The shy little thing must be near to tears herself over all this insanity. I turned and saw her pull some of Waboombas easily strippable clothing from a suitcase, absorbing it in with eyes the relative size, color, and shape of boiled ostrich eggs. The item in question was more air than fabric, not even classy enough for Fredericks of Hollywood, and could only have been designed by Pjuter or Manschingloss on a very, very, randy day.

“Oooooh,” Sophie said, delighted. “Can I wear this?”

Interesting. Apparently, on her world, Sophie was ‘kinky’. Maybe things could work out between her and Morgan.

Eventually we got a few strips of cloth, torn from something of mine that used to be a shirt, and formed it into a makeshift loincloth to place over the parts of River that would have gotten him arrested. It took a surprising amount of cloth. When we had finished, men in uniform anywhere else but a comics convention still would have busted him. But here, he was just one of the interesting stories that even the cops tell their fascinated friends after it’s all over.

“...and there was this one guy, right, and he’s wearing just this loincloth, thingie, right? Walkin’ around proud as can be, and you could see his junk.”

How can that be in any way acceptable you ask? Here, in this specific environment, it would simply be assumed that River was paid model for some Tarzan, or Tarzan-like-related project. No one would ever imagine someone so handsome, built, and hung could possibly be just a fan, or pervert, or both, which is really kind of unfair when you think about it. Nicholas Cage was a fan. Got his stage name from Luke Cage, Powerman, a comic book hero no less. Oh, and me too! I’m a fan, though not named after a superhero. Stephen Root is a fan. Mandy Patinkin likes toy trains, and Shaquille O’Neal loves Superman, as does Joey Fatone, from N Sync, and…

But I digress. Aren’t you used to that by now?

Perhaps I should describe the situation visually a bit for those not entirely familiar with ‘cons’, and the people they attract.
Most comic book conventions are populated with relatively normal people who wear street clothes, eat with actual dining utensils, and speak in languages and dialects primarily found on the Planet Earth. It’s really a minority of folks who dress up in fantasy costumes, dine willingly on convention food, and speak only languages invented by followers of Gene Roddenberry. But the ‘minority’ at a convention is far more concentrated than it would be in one’s day-to-day living experience, and so these individuals claim a larger percentage of the notoriety, the photo-ops, and the video newsbytes generally associated with ‘cons’.

At this con in particular—one of the larger conventions in the country—two hundred thousand people could pay for admittance on a single Saturday. If only one percent of those dressed up and refused to speak English during their visit, we’re talking two thousand such individuals parading, babbling, and posing for cameras. In a place that’s approximately one square mile, that’s a considerable concentration of ‘unique’. And I suspect the actual percentage of costume-types to be much, much higher.

I mean, just consider the number of subcategories.

Star Trek fans. Star Wars fans. Manga fans—which are multiple and various. Battlestar Galactica fans. Stargate fans. Superhero fans, which in-and-of itself has many subcategories like Batman, and his fighting friends, Superman, Wonder Woman, Spiderman, Captain America, the X-Men, and even more obscure characters like Bishop, Moon Knight, Cloak and Dagger, Lobo, Savage Dragon, Mister Monster, and Sammy the Fish Kid. Then here are the fans of old pulp characters like The Shadow, Tarzan, The Spider, The Avenger, and Doc Savage. In addition you’ll find a significant population of Clive Barker fans dressed as specific, or interpreted, characters from his many horror projects such as Hellraiser, Nightbreed, and People Who Eat Things Off The Floor. Beyond horror, there’s ‘The Furries’, a sub category of fantasy fans who like to dress up as incarnations of human-animal hybrids, or just commission nude drawings of them. Foxes, wolves, cats, ferrets, mice, whatever. There are Fans of Harry Potter. Fans of Harry Dresden, fans of Harry Connick Jr., fans of Harry and David, and fans of Harry, Prince of Wales.

On top of that, throw in the professional models paid by the many companies to dress up as their characters in licensing-approved costumes for promotional purposes. The models wear clothing—or Waboombas-like, no clothing—that helps sell whatever it is the company wants pushed: movies, TV shows, comics, figurines, computer games, or even just the ideas for such things.

Now, imagine all these subgroups sprinkled in amongst the regular people, the average ‘joe’, and averager ‘jane’, many of those still displaying colorful T-shirts, hats, and bags of their own to proclaim appreciation of the same, or similar creations, only to a lesser degree.

Mix all this into a soup of brightly colored comics, eye-catching posters, twelve-foot stacks of toys, tables full of original art, obscure videos, collectible statues, collectible cups, collectible everything, struggling artists, struggling writers, struggling actors, professional artists, professional writers, professional sellers, Lou Ferrigno, and women porn stars selling pictures of themselves, nude, and otherwise. Pour it all into avenue after avenue of tables, and booths formed into a maze not unlike the one in the Shining. Make it thick, make it hot, and make it too much to get through in one sitting, and you have an understanding of the fine consommé that is ‘crème de la comic book convention’. Days and days of sumptuous entertainment with tasty fun to be had by all, leaving you sick, sleepy, and uncomfortable once you’ve consumed everything in front of you.

And so, given the situation, and the event at hand, River followed us through the front entrance of the convention center, penis barely covered, testicles dangling in the shadows of minimal strips of cloth, past several fascinated security people, lots of annoyed, and perhaps envious men, and dozens of appreciative women, without incident.

Sophie and Waboombas both had on bits of Waboombas-wear, and got more than their fair share of looks as well from both male and female attendees. Sophie was a pretty-enough girl, though nothing overly extraordinary. Yet here, dressed in six-inch heels, a thong, and a few choice pieces of silver-studded leather, with nothing more of her exposed than you’d find on an average beach, and she was the belle of the domination ball, basking in the much appreciated attention.

Waboombas was also clearly more in her element. She strutted proudly, pulling her suitcase full of comics, costumes, and body-paint behind her like an adoring puppy on a leash, and I was certain she could have sold the entire print run of War Woman right there to every male in line before even entering the convention center, provided it came with her phone number, or at least the first four digits of it.

Wisper wore one of my shirts, but remained pantsless and barefoot. She refused to wear either my slacks or my shoes after I’d laughed upon seeing her in them. If anyone asked, we intended to explain she was doing a scene from X-Men 174. I have no idea if there was a girl wearing nothing but a man’s shirt in X-Men 174, but interestingly, at cons people will generally buy whatever you tell them if it means the girl can continue walking around with no pants on.
I was woozy just thinking about it.

Myself, I was carrying my suitcase full of comics, wearing my ordinary, everyday clothes, and feeling oddly constrained by them. I kept pulling at the fabric and adjusting the folds for better comfort that just didn’t seem available. Wisper noticed my weird Dance Of The Uncomfortable, and it amused her no end.

“Only one day,” she said, “and already you’re a genuine nudist.”

“Believe me, if I could have gotten away with it, I’d be dressed more like you,” I said, smiling at her.

“That would be more fun for me too. Just tell me we won’t have to wear these things for long,” she sulked.

“We won’t,” I told her. “I’ve got only one destination, and then we’re right back to Nekkid Bottoms.”

“Nikkid Bottoms,” she corrected.

“Uuuh, right.”

“It’s an ‘i’ not an ‘e’.”

“I knew that.”

“What’s your one destination?” she asked.

“High Plant Comics. They buy old, rare comic books, and they’re going to want what I have to sell.”

“Oh, Corky!” she said, stunned. “All those comics that used to be on your walls? But you must love those!”

I stopped and turned to her. Unlike Mindie, she wasn’t offended by my collection, and would never force me to sell my comics. And so—for her—I would.

“Some things are more important,” I said simply.

She smiled warmly at me and took my hand again. “You’re sweet. How much will you be able to get for them?”

“Enough to pay what I bid for you and a little extra.”

“You’re kidding me! For comic books?”

“For comic books.”

“And how will you turn what you get into money from my world?”

I stopped in my tracks. I looked at her. My heart stopped in its tracks.

“Money…for…money from your…what?” I stammered.

“Our money is different.”

“How different?”

“Well, Benjamin Franklin is still on the hundred…”

“But he’s naked.”

“He was a nudist,” she said, as if everyone knew it. “Even on your world.”

“Well, apparently he kept a pretty good lid on it here and never posed for portraits that way.”

“The other bills are pretty much the same as yours,” she said, trying to be helpful.

I reached into my pants and pulled out the remaining bill Helena had given me. It had a woman on it. She looked like Queen Victoria, or someone very like her, and she was topless.

I turned my attention from the thing in my hand to Wisper and just stared at her.

“Well, maybe not quite,” she said sadly.

I considered it. My mind raced. Then got tired and lay down.

“So what now?” I asked no one in particular.

“Well…” she said. “We could sell the comics, then buy something that would have value on my world.”

“I’ve got only one destination, and then we’re right back to Nekkid Bottoms.”

Which means we’d lose even more of the value of the comics. As it is, to sell them fast, I’m going to have to offer them at about fifty percent of what they’re worth.”

I chewed my lip and thought some more.

“It might still be enough,” I said.

“How much are those comics worth?”

“About seven million to the right collector.”

“Oh, my God!” she gasped. “I should collect comics!”

“They’re not worth anything anymore, though most fans don’t understand that. There’s too many in bags and boards. Thousands. The ones I have are valuable because there are only a few of them left in the world—and especially in this condition—and the characters are iconic. Everyone knows Superman, Batman, Captain America,” I held one up to show her “Nuderman number one? Perfect, mint condition? Worthless.”

She took the comic from me and looked at it with strange curiosity. As she did, several members of an extremely overweight Green Lantern Corps walked by, and River grimaced. You just haven’t lived until you’ve seen six or seven fat people in tight black spandex, pale green gloves and boots.

“That is just so wrong,” he said.

I started to agree with him, then choked on the words when Wisper—who was still studying Nuderman—
asked, “Why do we always ridicule what we don’t understand? Even when the thing we deride brings pleasure to others?”

I kept my eyes intent on the jiggling backsides of the Corps as they receded happily into the distance, enjoying one another’s company and companionship, oblivious to what others might think of them, and held my comments.

“Lots of reasons,” I said quietly, almost to myself. “Fear. Jealousy. To feel better about ourselves by making less of others.”

“So, is this a good sign or a bad sign?” she asked, distantly, still looking at the naked superhero on the cover of my comic. “This makes fun of the perceived oddity of my lifestyle. And you found it interesting.”

I took her hand back. “Nuderman is a hero,” I said softly. “And I loved this comic.”

“Oh,” she said, and smiled. “The judges will accept that answer.”

I turned to the others and told them, “I’m heading to High Plant comics. You can come with me if you want, or we can meet later.”

“You going back to the nudist place?” Waboombas wanted to know.

“Once I’ve sold these,” I said. “Yeah.”

“Good luck,” she said. “I guess we can say goodbye here then. May as well get back to the real world.”

Right, I said. “The real world.”

“I got comics of my own to sell,” Waboombas reminded me, indicating her suitcase. She smiled at me, and I felt a twinge of sadness. She was someone I would have made fun of—did make fun of—and here I was already missing her. Funny how life is changed by experience, isn’t it? At least when you’re paying attention and open to it.

“Thanks for everything,” I said, moving in and hugging her tightly. She responded with warmth as sincere as my own.

“Remember the tar baby,” she said and squeezed me tighter, melting around me. As we finally separated, Wisper reached out and took Waboombas’ hand, smiling at the taller woman sweetly.

“And thanks especially, Wendy, for helping Corky and me,” Wisper said.

“Hey,” Waboombas replied, clearly feeling awkward. “No worries. Corky’s never been anything but good to me in all the twenty-four hours we’ve known each other, even if it was mostly because he was afraid of my ass.”

“More than just your ass,” I said.

“Don’t treat you right,” she said, smiling at me. “You know I got the goods.”

“I do know,” I said.

“I’ll treat him right,” Wisper promised.

“I’m sure you will,” Waboombas laughed. “Unfortunately.”

Then she leaned in and whispered to my Ms. Nuckeby so everyone could hear. “Be sure to give him head once in a while. He’ll never leave.”

“I will,” Wisper promised, and I felt my pants become even more uncomfortable.

“Come visit us sometime,” I said, shifting and adjusting.

“Oh,” Waboombas said, not meaning it. “Well, I’m off then.” And she gave more quick hugs all around. Then she moved to River and wrapped him up completely in her arms; they seemed to hold one another a lot longer than necessary.

“I’ll miss you most of all, Scarecrow,” she said softly. Eventually, after a long, interesting pause, she reached down, grabbed his ass, and squeezed. “Damn, boy. I could do gymnastics on that thing. We’re both gonna be sorry I skipped on the two days of slave thing.”

River said nothing, apparently embarrassed, though he did seem genuinely disappointed that a long, hard ride on the Waboombas express wasn’t in his future. The rising front of his loincloth was a dead giveaway.

“Dude,” Morgan said to him. “Put that thing away.”

“Mmm,” Waboombas purred and gave it one last tweak.

Then, smiling a final, sad grin at River’s actual face, she silently backed away, melting into the crowd of wildly dressed, fantastically colored fellow conventioneers.

Morgan and Sophie had decided to wander a bit while I did my business. Morgan said he couldn’t bear to see
me sell my comics anyway. They had become like old, dear friends to us both, and I’m sure, for him, it was akin to a
dog lover having a favorite pet put to sleep. He would miss them, and he might cry when I sold them.

Morgan also seemed anxious to be seen with Sophie in all her sartorial splendor, delighted as hell that the
woman on his arm was drawing so many stares. For him, that was the height of status: a hot chick drawing attention
to herself, and parts of him.

So Wisper, River, and I toured around looking for High Plant, and fortunately for River’s state of mind, found
it more quickly than I had expected. Just as we were about to step into their booth, I saw a place selling videos—the
kind that has everything, both legal and illegal—when something caught my eye.

Me.

Me and Mervin Wosserman.

Kissing on the cover of something called ‘Boys Gone Wild’. 
“You’re not allowed to sell this!” I yelled at the guy in the booth.
“I just work here,” the guy said.
“You cannot sell this!”
“It’s not my area,” he whined, stepping to another side of the booth and pretending not to see me any longer.
“Take them off the table!” I screeched, my voice getting louder and more hamster-like as people turned to stare, Wisper included.
“Oh, my GOD!” she said.
“It’s true. You and that guy from Men’s Briefs…?”
“Sssh! You’ve seen the video. Manschingloss said he showed it to you!”
“I never saw this!”
“Oh, my God.”
But now the onlookers were starting to glance back and forth from me to the cover of the box, and were—I had to hope—having difficulty noticing the resemblance between myself and the grainy cover photo that had been captured from the video. On the cover, my face was all puffy, sweaty, and reddened from excessive alcohol and misdirected lust, whereas live, and in person, my face was all puffy, sweaty, and reddened for entirely different reasons.

I stopped wheezing in anguish and saw that Wisper was also glancing back and forth from the cover to me, uncomfortably.

“So what?” I demanded. “You’re a nudist!”
Her eyes snapped wide and she threw on a look of horror, hurt, and astonishment. But she quickly returned that look to the ‘expression closet’, and tried on something more in the winter family—something sterner and darker, and delicately laced with a bit of the angry reds.

“Yes,” she said. “I am. But I’ve never made love to a member of my own gender before…”
“There was no lovemaking.”
“And would understand my companion’s discomfort at seeing a picture of me doing so!”
“There was no lovemaking!” I said definitely. “I’m pretty sure!”
“Pretty sure?”
“Well… I never actually watched the tape all the way through.”
“Ooooh, there’s lovemaking,” the dealer said, showing a sexual predilection that hadn’t been quite clear till that point.

I glared at him, trying to explode his brain. But I still hadn’t developed that particular superpower, or any others come to think of it.

“But that’s not my area,” he said, frightened by the murder in my eyes, and backed away.
As he moved off, I realized I could solve this whole, thorny problem, easily, and began snatching tapes off the table.

“Hey,” he said. “You can’t do that!”
“Yes, I can. And I am.”
“That’s one of our most popular sellers!”
“What? It’s what?”
“It’s one of our…”
“It was one of your most popular sellers,” I seethed. “Was!”
I took all the tapes I could find and started to walk away, then noticed a copy of the never-aired pilot episode for a live-action Justice League TV series made sometime in the early nineties.

“Oooh,” I said. “Is this the one with David Ogden Stiers as Martian Manhunter?”
“Yes,” the vendor said.
“I always wanted to see that,” I informed him, then grabbed one, walking off with it, and all the other videos, in hand.

“You can’t take that one!”
“Oh!” I asked. “Do you have the rights to sell this one, too? Either, I mean.” I shook my head. “I think. Are you paying the network royalties for this? I somehow doubt it!”
“You’re a jerk!” he snarled.
“I’m a…” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. This man was selling illegal merchandise, committing crimes in broad daylight, and he was calling me a… “Kiss my ass, you little wanker!”
“I’m calling security!”
“You do that! We’ll see who has legal right here to do what!” He pulled out a cell phone, and flipped it open like an arrogant Captain Kirk—which may be a redundancy—and feeling suddenly uncertain of what really was and wasn’t legal, I bravely turned and ran.

“Corky, stop!” Wisper called after me.
In my sudden rush of fear, I had forgotten her, for a moment.

“If I have to get these out of here!” I told her.
“It doesn’t matter!” she said. “Will you please, stop? You left your comics behind!”
I quit running and looked around. She was right. Millions of dollars worth of comics, and I’d forgotten them entirely. How could I…?

“This is illegal,” I told her, clearly more upset than I realized and unable to focus on the more important matters
at hand. “We had distribution of this video legally blocked in the United States…”

“It doesn’t matter, Corky. You can’t really stop that stuff anyway these days. And who cares? You did something stupid in your youth! You can’t undo it. So what? Welcome to the real world.” “I am not gay!”

“I believe that,” she said sincerely.

“Morgan tricked me! I thought Wosserman was a woman!” I said meekly.
She looked at me as if I’d just smacked her in the face with a fish.

“He has a beard!” she said.

“I thought he was Mindie!”

“Oh,” Wisper said, as if a tiny light had dawned. Somehow that seemed almost plausible to her. “She is a bit on the mannish side.”

“And I was really drunk! Look at the picture!” I held one out. “See?”

“I’d rather not,” she said, glancing away. “Corky, as long as you genuinely go for women, and not men, we have no problem.”

I stopped vibrating emotionally, and just stared at her in shock. How could she be so calm? Especially—I looked down at the videos—especially…

“Everyone makes mistakes, Corky,” she said. “And with technology the way it is now, more and more people are making them on YouTube.”

Slowly, I began to relax. Wisper had an amazing way about her. She could make something like this seem almost normal. Almost.

“Which is what makes the damn thing so horrible!” I whined, holding out one of the DVD’s with commentary and extras. “It’s like this thing is alive! Mutating! Spreading like a disease!”

“Only to people who go out without protection,” she said, laughing and apparently trying to defuse my anxiety. It wasn’t working.

“I don’t care, Corky,” she said, “so why should you? These things only have power if you let them.”

Again, I settled down a bit, though I just couldn’t get to complete calm. She obviously wasn’t really able to relate. How can someone who hasn’t been through something like this possibly understand what it means when humiliation, that is bad enough in private, suddenly becomes a bestseller on a table that several hundred thousand people walk past in a weekend? When strangers you meet for the first time say: ‘Hey, I’ve seen your video’, then laugh?

Then something stepped on my head. Figuratively.

“You said welcome to the…” I, choked, but had to ask. I didn’t want to know, was terrified to know, but I had to ask. “…welcome to the real world.” I finished. “Did you mean my real world, or our real world?”

“What?”

I swallowed, and tried to be clearer, which was difficult. “What have you done to be ashamed about?”

“I wore lingerie in public for money,” she said flatly.

“What?” I gasped. “That’s nothing! That’s less than nothing. In many circles, that’s something to be proud of. Especially male circles. Males who are in no way homosexual.”

“Yeah, here!” she said. “In your dimension! But it’s something where I come from. Believe me!”

“I just don’t think you’re taking in the whole picture,” I said, annoyed.

“Corky. Who’s the only person you need to worry about that might be upset with your past, right now? Right this moment?”

I paused, thinking about it for a little too long. “You?” I asked, hoping that was the right answer.

“Yes,” she said.

Ah. Good. Nailed it the first time, for once.

“Just me,” she continued. “And I couldn’t care less. I already knew anyway, it was just a shock to see it on the table like that, in all video formats, including PAL.”

“For me too.”

“But I know how you feel about me,” she said, smiling. “I’ve seen your erection.”

“Everyone’s seen my erection.”

“True. And some of them even paid money for the privilege,” she reminded me, smiling and nodding toward the pile of evidence in my hand.

That had never occurred to me.

“Interesting point,” I said. “So—you’re not upset? Or hurt, or confused about my sexual orientation?”

She shook her head.

“You’re not angry?”
She began to shake her head ‘no’ again, then stopped. She thought a moment, fixing me with her eyes, and her expression slowly turned a bit sour.

“You called me a nudist,” she said finally.

“I studied her for several seconds confused. “You are a nudist.”

“You said it with disdain.”

“I…” I paused and really focused on her. She was visibly pained by that earlier comment. This is exactly what she had feared most when she asked me not to bid on her. Me lapsing. And clearly, I was a lapsar. Like the dog.

Lapser Oopso.

Never mind.

“I’m sorry,” I said, finally. “I was upset, and…”

“Let’s just sell your comics,” she said quietly. “So we can make good on your bid.”

There was a distance and finality in her voice that hit me hard in the gut. I thought about what I’d said, and what I’d really meant, and it made me wince. I had slid off the slippery slope of stupidity, submerged into a river of fear, and while flailing around to save myself, had struck my savior in the face.

“Wisper, I’m really…” but I never got to finish my thought, because just then two familiar faces stepped through the crowd, one smiling with malevolent glee.

The Boones. Papa mayor and little Washburne. Both were wearing velour jogging clothes, sunglasses, and gold jewelry.

“Good, God,” I said. “What are YOU doing here?”

Wisper turned at my question, and the shock of seeing the two men she least expected, and least wanted to see, nearly knocked her over. River in turn looked the Boones up and down, repulsed to see them in so many clothes and apparently comfortable. At least the mayor, if not Washburne. Old Wash looked as though just being around so many unnaked people was making his skin crawl. He sweated and cast his eyes about nervously, avoiding physical contact with anyone who brushed too closely near him. At one point someone bumped him, and he whimpered like a lost puppy.

“What are you doing here?” Wisper asked, the words barely able to escape her throat.

“We’re here to take you home, my dear,” the mayor said, and then looked at me. “And see to it that you never return to Nikkid Bottoms.”

“You mean you’ll try…” I began, then noticed Washburne held what’s called a short box—a white cardboard container designed to hold small amounts of comics, and keep them protected from people who might want to touch them.

Apparently the thing could also keep a gun quite safely tucked away as well.

“Whoa,” I said, and nodded to the thing so Wisper, and River could see it as well. But they never did. Washburne pulled the pistol back inside the box, though I knew it was still pointed directly at me.

“What?” Wisper asked.

The mayor interrupted before I could answer.

“Let’s go somewhere more private, shall we?” The elder Boone said slimily.

Washburne stepped forward and pushed me to one side, separating me from the others, as the mayor took Wisper’s confused elbow and guided her along after me.

Yes, her elbow was confused! All of her was confused, actually!

Don’t get picky with my grammar at a difficult time like this!

Overlooking the convention floor were hospitality suites with large, glass windows facing outward over the chaos, specifically designed so publishers and distributors could quickly and easily get away from the madding crowd and mingle in highly visible privacy. The rooms were comfortably furnished, surprisingly quiet, and had tables of catered food available to any who found their way in, intentionally or otherwise.

The mayor ushered us up a flight of stairs, and into one of these pseudo-plush rooms, offering us seats in the plastic, and metal chairs. None of us took one, but the elder Boone made himself comfortable nonetheless, while Washburne moved over to a table and made grunting sounds as he attempted to open a can of mixed nuts.

“It’s so annoying the way they move the dates for this convention around, every year,” Mayor Boone said, looking out the glass windows and over the crowd. “I’d much rather be home for the Festival, but…business calls.”
Plastered all along the walls were covers of Nuderman, Flashyman, Nudegirl, and a host of others, all variations on popular superheroes wearing only masks and other kinky accoutrement, but very little actual clothes. An enlarged cover of my favorite comic, along with a dawning truth, stared me in the face at roughly eye level, mocking me.

“You brought these from your world,” I said, slowly sussing things out, “and sold them here.”

“That’s right,” mayor Boone oozed, obviously quite proud of his evil brilliance and his growing status as my arch villain. “All the work is done, and takes very little effort, or money on my part, to make it marketable here. I have the things re-lettered a bit for the dissimilar market, but mostly I simply convey it over as is. No unnecessary expenditure to creators, no royalties—cash for printing isn’t even required, if I use the exact versions as sold back home with new covers. Obscenely profitable, all things considered.”

“I imagine it’s pretty unlikely anyone will ever stumble through that dimensional hole and discover your secret,” I said, admiring his darkness.

“I’m certainly counting on it, as you might well imagine,” he agreed.

“Good money in stealing other people’s property?”

He shrugged. “Sales of what you people consider ‘porn’ in this world isn’t quite what I had hoped,” he sighed. “But it’s enough to turn a healthy profit and reinvest in other, more lucrative business.”

“Comics, as a business in general, isn’t really all the lucrative,” I said.

Sales on all the main superhero titles had dropped off significantly over the years for various reasons to a point where major characters like Superman only sold tens of thousands globally. Cat Fancy magazine sells more than seven million every month. Hell, Independent Sawmill, and Woodlot Management magazine sells almost a hundred times better than Superman. American comics, contrary to popular belief, were waaaaaay down on the bottom of the totem pole as far as return on investment. Their actual value, and importance in the world, is largely overestimated as the characters from inside their pages can be found on every cereal box, theater marquee, and television screen the world over. The comics themselves very few people really care about. Even the fans mostly hated them if you believe what they say online.

“Apparently,” Boone said, sighing. “I was sadly misled by the attention and notoriety the superhero enjoys in this world. Ah, well. It was still an evident opportunity, one I took advantage of. I certainly didn’t lose any money.”

“But you’re done now,” I said, getting a feeling from his general tone.

“I am. I’ve sold a significant percentage of my business, and created enough wealth from other areas of investment to continue the life of grand leisure I, and my children, enjoy.” And the next he said more meaningfully to Wisper. “Something I will share generously with my inevitable grandchildren.”

“When is enough ever really enough for a man like you?” I asked.

He stopped looking at Wisper and turned his lizard eyes back to me. They moved and blinked not at all; as each stared into me, unsmiling, dark and fearsome, straight through my flesh and into my meager soul. I was saved from shriveling into a little ball of blackened goo when his attention was thankfully diverted by Morgan, Sophie, and Wendy being ushered into the room at the urging of some muscle-bound types who rent themselves out by the hour to break heads, shatter bones, and open peanut butter jars.

“Hey, Corky,” Morgan said. “What’s going on? These guys said you were in trouble.”

“Yeah,” Wendy said. “Cause if you’re not, I’m missing valuable selling time.” She indicated the suitcase she still pulled behind her.


“Money?” he scoffed, as though I’d offered him poop-on-a-stick. “What does a man like yourself imagine he knows about wealth?” he asked me.

I nearly laughed. “What are you talking about? I’m one of the richest men…”

“You are nothing,” he said, so flatly and so positively that it chilled me to my marrow. “You’re a second. No…” he studied more intently. “No, more likely a third heir. An inheritor.” He said the word ‘inheritor’ as if it had slithered over his tongue and left a slime trail.

He stood again, walked over, and took one of the DVDs from my hands, chuckling at the imagery on both sides.

“I heard you down there, screaming about this video,” he said, obviously amused. “Leaving behind your collection of rare and expensive comics…” again he glanced at Wisper, and she withdrew from the touch of his eyes, “…and something of even greater value.”

He handed the video back to me, placing it atop the pile.

“A real man of wealth is a man with the strength of certitude in his own rightness,” he continued, “with the power, and the courage of his own, considered convictions, who will stand naked before anyone upon the center of the world’s stage, and say ‘I am right, to hell with you all.’”

I said nothing, though my mind was scampering about like a ferret searching for whatever ferrets eat, trying to
remember all the good one-liners and put-downs I’d ever heard in my lifetime. Instead, all the ferret found was Opus, and even he didn’t like Opus.

“You are a pseudo-man who wilts at the first sign of conflict,” Boone told me. “Ends any personal endeavor the moment someone criticizes.”

“Hey!” Morgan said. “Like your fan-fic!”

I turned and glared at my old friend, and felt, once again, the pain of not having brain-melting powers.

“You are the kind of man,” Boone continued, “who holds only the convictions others will allow him. Who freely gives one and all complete power over himself.”

“Wow,” Morgan said, helpfully. “Has he got you down.”

Boone simply smiled. He didn’t need Morgan’s reassurance. He already knew. “You do not understand wealth,” he said, stepping closer until he was scarcely inches from my nose, “nor could you ever begin to earn it for yourself. To someone like you, it must be given. Handed out. Doled.”

I seethed but said nothing. Behind him, Washburne finally opened his can of nuts, with more force than necessary, and sent them flying about the room. Mayor Boone closed his eyes momentarily, sighed, then reopened them, staring back into me.

“I know your type all too well,” he told me, a tinge of sadness in his voice. “Even now, you have not the strength of will to stand against ridicule, to fight for what you believe to be right, to raise yourself and crush those who would call you out for exactly what you are. A wimp. A taker. A sponge. Instead you prefer to allow me to define you, rather than take the risk of confrontation and define yourself. On the world stage, you are incapable of being a player. You are merely an extra.”

Apparently done deriding me, he turned on his heel, walked away from me, and began gathering his things. Some of them were what used to be my things.

“I’ll take these comics,” he informed me placidly. “They’re of no use to you anyway. Wisper deserves someone more than you will ever be, no matter how much money you might have access to.”

He stopped gathering and smiled at me.

“Don’t despair, young man. There’s really only one percent of this world that deserve all the money, fame, and beauty that it has to offer. The rest are Deltas or Gammas,” and smiling before his next line, he fixed me with a pointed look, “or Epsilons.”

“I was never in a fraternity,” I said.

“Oh, but you’re in one now,” he said, a light laugh in his voice. “The largest of fraternities, my dear boy. The fraternity of the common man. Wisper, my dear, might I take you home? Really, my lovely girl, you deserve someone so much more significant than this young man could ever hope to be.”

“I don’t want Washburne,” she said, and I took note of the fact that she hadn’t led with ‘I want Corky’.

“No, I see now that you were far too much woman for even my progeny. But certainly you don’t want this man,” he nodded disgustedly in my direction. “This clothist. He can’t even let go of his own fears long enough to be honest with you about how he sees you. He calls you a ‘nudist’ with—as you yourself noted—disdain.”

Damn him. How long had he been following us? Long enough apparently to know exactly how to use me against myself.

“The woman he supposedly loves,” Boone finally finished with amazingly sincere sadness in his voice. Even I almost believed him.

Right up to the point when Washburne moved closer and reminded me with a small cough that he had a gun.

Wisper could only look at me with growing anguish. He was getting to her.

“Corky…” she began, but seemed to have lost the strength to continue.

“Wisper, they…” I said, but stopped short when Washburne, pretending to rest a comforting hand on my lower back, instead rested the snub-nose of something else there in such a way that the others couldn’t see. Wisper took my inability to complete a sentence as something else entirely.

“Maybe it’s best I do go home,” Wisper said finally, more as a question. “With them?”

When I said nothing, she lowered her head to avoid my eyes.

“Right,” she said. “Goodbye, Corky.”

And with that—guided by the elder Boone doing a damn near perfect imitation of understanding and sympathy—she and River moved toward the exit.

“You gonna say anything?” Ms. Waboombas asked. “You just gonna let her walk outta here and let the bad guys make you out to be some kinda puss?”

Wisper stopped in the doorway as if she too hoped for something from me. I started to speak, but Washburne separated a couple of ribs near my kidneys.

“I know you love her,” Waboombas said. “You gonna tell me love don’t conquer all?” She sounded almost
desperate. As if this were as painful for her as it was for us.

All eyes centered on me. Mayor Boone smiled. Sophie pleaded with silently moving lips. Morgan seemed dumbfounded. Even River appeared to want me to say something.

But I said nothing. Waboombas said nothing and just glowered at me.

“So you’re a coward,” Waboombas snarled at me, then turned to Wisper, “and you’re a runner. What a pair you make.”

Wisper looked stricken, then scowled back at Wendy.

“What do you mean, ‘a runner’?” Wisper asked. “I…”

“…run,” Waboombas concluded for her. Then the taller woman gestured with irritation toward Washburne.

“Snake oil here wants to marry you. You run. Corky’s grandpa gives you shit. You run. You’re a smart girl. I bet you went to college, right?”

“I…yes,” Wisper said.

“And you quit.”

Wisper looked stunned, but by her silence I knew Waboombas had hit a nerve.

“Corky backslides a little….” Wendy snipped, and didn’t need to finish.

Wisper looked at her, then down at her feet. Finally she turned to me and stared, one last moment, waiting.

“No would be a good time for you to say somethin’,” Wendy told me pointlessly.

Washburne pressed the gun more forcefully into my back, and I obliged him by saying nothing.

“You see it as running,” Wisper said to Wendy, though she continued staring at me. “I see it as knowing when to cut my losses.”

Finally, the door to the suite closed, and Wisper physically vanished from the room, though my mind would hold that last, heartrending image of her despondent face burned into my heart for the remainder of my days.

Waboombas fairly snarled at me, “You stupid, son of a…”

Then Washburne stepped out from behind me and showed off his little toy.

“Whoo,” Wendy said, her eyes as wide as the sea.

“Corky, look out!” Morgan called to me unnecessarily. “He’s got a gun!”

I just stared at my semi-retarded friend, blankly.

“I’m not kidding,” Morgan said, more distressed. “Look.”

I continued to stare.

“No, I’m serious. Look at his hand. There’s a gun. For real.”
“All of you get undressed,” Washburne said coldly.

“Fuck you, get undressed…” Wendy said, raising herself to her full, towering height. But then Washburne waved the gun in her direction, and the two thugs-for-hire moved toward her. For a moment, I thought she might leap on them and perhaps sex them to death. But after a few deep breaths, and a moment or two to let her brain work through the reality of the situation, she settled down and likely realized killing them with her vagina wouldn’t be as much fun if she also died during the experience.

“I don’t want any of you following us,” Washburne said, as if I wanted to follow anyone but Wisper. “So take off your clothes, and…and get down on the floor, and stuff.”

We hesitated, and he waved the gun menacingly. Wendy, Sophie, and I were naked in moments, much to the
delight of the professional wife-beaters, who were obviously locals and not accustomed to nudity. They showed
tremendous interest in the ladies, whose tantalizing costumes had—oh, wait—nope, one was apparently getting off
on me.
Morgan was the least willing to undress and had to be prodded by Washburne a couple times before a fearful
Sophie started removing his clothes for him.
“What’s the big deal?” she said, not realizing that it might be the ‘little’ deal that was Morgan’s problem.
He resisted only a little, but squealed and moaned the entire time, staring longingly at each piece of clothing as
it fell to the floor, like a small dog just the other side of the fence from its food bowl.
Sophie finally got him down to his underwear, and Morgan struggled more seriously with her as she tried to
slip them off. Before long the minor struggle had turned into a full-scale battle as they each strained and complained,
one against the other. But it was only fabric—Wopplesdown Struts fabric, at that—so it was inevitable the undies
finally split, ripped, and tore away in Sophie’s hands. Morgan shrieked as if he’d been hit rather hard with an ugly
stick.
“Oh,” Sophie said, a little sadly, staring at Morgan’s exposed ‘flea’. Then, ever the effervescent optimist, she
rocked back on her heels and bounced—one, twice, three times. “Well,” she said, smiling pleasantly at Morgan.
“You’ve got a pretty long tongue, right?”
It took a moment for what she was saying to slowly awaken Morgan’s hamster, but once he was fully alert, the
little fellow fairly leaped into the wheel and sprinted madly, as if the finish line was finally in sight, and this time,
this time, he would get there. “Yeah,” he said—Morgan, not the hamster—smiling back at her. “I do.”
“Good enough,” she told him, and tossed aside the shredded briefs. Then she put an arm around Morgan,
crapping one hand on his bare ass. He perked up like I hadn’t seen since that day he learned Marvel had finally fired
that one writer he thought was ruining the XMen.
What was his name?
“Down on the floor,” Washburne said, refocusing my attention.
Slowly, we complied. Wendy and I got down last, and most reluctantly, staring through Washburne’s soul the
entire way.
“What’s in the suitcase?” he asked Henchman Number One?
“Nothing,” the thug replied. “Some paint, a couple a g-strings, and a buncha funnybooks.”
“Comic books!” Morgan, Wendy, and I said simultaneously.
“Shut up!” Washburne said. Then turned back to the thug. “Take the g-strings and the comics. You can leave
the rest.”
Then slowly and confidently, he turned back to us, a bit more relaxed in his moment of superiority.
“I’m telling security to be on the lookout for…um…whaddayacall…streakers,” he told us. “Streakers. What a
weird fuckin’ place this is. Anyway, so don’t get any ideas you can run through the convention and get out of here if
you’re fast enough.” Then the little toad laughed, though for the life of me I don’t know why, and he and the thugs
backed out the doorway.
Before closing it completely, Washburne stuck his sweat-slicked head back into the room and smiled the only
smile I’d seen him offer since I’d laid eyes on him. It looked completely out of place. Like a bowtie on a baboon.
“That door will be closed by the time you get there.”
Sophie’s head shot up almost as rapidly as mine.
“Sorry, Sophie,” Washburne told her, though clearly he didn’t mean it.
“Washburne, you bastardo!” Sophie spat, revealing a darker side that jolted me and excited Morgan. “If I can’t
get back home, I will rip your fucking nuts off and feed them to rats!”
And somehow, I believed she would.
“Not if you can’t catch me, and you can’t catch me…” he said in a weird, playground
singsong. “Because the door will be cloooooosed. Just like this one. HA HA HA!”
And as promised, he closed the door.
We were on our feet in an instant, but I already knew from the rumbling, and thumping, and clicking sounds in
the hall outside that we were pretty much sealed in. As Morgan, Sophie, and Waboombas struggled with the
doorknob, I paced the room like a weasel on a leash, looking for any way free, and more importantly, something to
wear once I had exited.
There wasn’t much in the way of either doors or clothing options. There were some plastic chairs, food
containers, a table, bottled drinks, hors d’oeuvres, posters, and a sofa. I checked the posters, but they were small,
rigid, and translucent, so they could be lighted from behind, and wouldn’t obscure anything that needed obscuring,
except maybe Morgan’s little gentleman. The plastic containers were a similar translucence, milky-clear, and equally useless, and the hors d’oeuvres were miniscule, and fairly flavorless to be honest.

But there were plastic knives.

And the sofa was made of fabric.

I began digging at the sofa like Freddie on a sexually promiscuous teenager, and immediately snapped the knife. I grabbed another, and shattered that. Then a third. A fourth. After nearly putting my eye out with the fifth, I finally gave up and screamed in anguish, throwing things, upturning tables, and knocking over folding chairs.

I was about to shatter a metal and plastic seat through one of the windows overlooking the convention floor when I realized the broken shards of glass would rain down on a cluster of innocent children below. The energy drained out of me as I watched them—laughing, giddy, little toddlers wearing Teen Titans costumes and striking poses for their parents, who smiled with pride and joy at their…eh…prides and joys while taking picture after picture after picture.

Stupid superheroes. They’d failed me in every way.

Superheroes really were for kids, not adults, like the ninety percent of the people out there on the convention floor right now. Not men, like me or Morgan, or—well, maybe Morgan. Superheroes were really designed with children in mind. Batman. Superman. The Hulk. The colorful costumes and simple morality tales spoke to young minds in ways they could understand, told tales that uplifted them, encouraged them, and, hopefully, in some ways, helped set them on a course toward being good, honest, and ethical adults.

Not that it helped. Lots of people who loved them as kids still grew up to be non-heroic—or worse, to take your comics, your girl, and call you one of life’s ‘extras’.

Of course, superhero comics now didn’t have the kind of clarity they once had. Maybe that’s where they had failed me. These days, the bright colors of our supermen were muddied with endless shades of gray. Good guys who weren’t really good guys, bad guys who weren’t really bad guys, problems without easy solutions.

Many of you may not know this, but within the last fifteen to twenty years, superheroes in printed form (and through osmosis some of the films based on them) have become a weird, hybrid form of adult/child entertainment aimed almost exclusively at grownups who—for complex reasons no one really cares about—have become virtually the only remaining audience for them.

These modern superhero readers don’t want to let go of their cherished supermen, their beloved paragons of virtue, their men-of-will who are always right; but as adults, these fans have now experienced the grays of the world, and therefore can no longer reconcile the multiple tonalities between dark and light, sort of right and maybe wrong, with simple tales of cartoon heroism. Yet, at the same time, they still want the happy ending, the good fight, the easy answers of childhood. They want their brightly colored, spandex-clad ubermen who violate civil liberties at will, with impunity, and government sanction, even though those tales are primarily only suited for the minds of the young—or Bush administration officials. In other words, comics fans today want their entertainment to reflect the grays and the realities, and the darknesses of the real world, but they still want someone to punch the bad guy and make it all better.

Hell, don’t we all?

I certainly did. Wisper apparently did.

Maybe that’s how superheroes had failed us all. Given us simple answers we still longed for. Still believed in, simple answers that blinded us to the complex solutions often needed for real-world problems like ‘love’, ‘fame’, ‘peace’, ‘wealth’, or ‘happiness’. Real-world answers don’t come in pure, undiluted forms of clear, pleasant-tasting liquid inside convenient, plastic bottles with no FDA warnings on the label.

Without some confirmation from me, Wisper couldn’t see through the thin mist of grays that hid the mostly good—mostly wanting to be heroic—man I felt was inside me. And could I blame her? Earlier, on the floor of the convention center, confronted with something stupid from my past, I couldn’t see through the even thinner haze of grays to the clarity of what she offered. What should have been the most important thing in my life. Freedom. Control. Love. Her.

Instead, I had insulted her. Fallen back on old ways and hurt the last person I ever should have.

Spent, sore, and deeply frustrated from everything that had happened to me this past few days, I lowered the chair I still held over my head, set it on the floor, and slumped down into it, feeling its cold plastic adhere to my bare ass as an unpleasant reminder that I was stuck here.

When I finally looked up, everyone was staring at me. Wendy. Morgan. Sophie. Perhaps a bit afraid of my rant, but more as if they believed I might have the answer to our dilemma.

Didn’t they know me? Hadn’t they heard everything Mayor Boone had said about me? Everything Morgan had confirmed?
I had no answers. No one did. Sometimes, there were none. Sometimes the bad guys won.

All good came with bad. Black came with white. Happy with sad. Asian cultures had long ago invented a term for this concept, and even created a picture to help explain the idea for the listening impaired.

Innu Dang it’s called, or something like that. The best you could do—the thing I needed, clearly, to do more of was to see the good, to focus on the good, to embrace the good, and accept that there would, occasionally, be some bad in life.

But never, ever, forget the good. Especially when she was right in front of you. Wisper.

The videos, the comics, the money, the loss of my mansion and my lifestyle were nothing compared to losing Wisper. The joy that washed over me when I was with her—hearing her voice, her breath, her laugh, being naked with her, touching her, experiencing everything she offered—was complete. Perfect. Without grays. None of life’s annoying, tonal gradations mattered to me as much as the clarity of Wisper and the love I felt for her, right now, right this second.

That was clear. That was vibrant. That was alive.

And now it—she—was going to be denied me forever, lost in another dimension when Washburne somehow destroyed the storm hole off US 108.

That bastard. He couldn’t have her, so he’d deny her me, and me her. Sometimes there were no grays. Sometimes there is the pure, stark, clarity of right and wrong. And the fact that the Boones were intending to deny me Wisper was wrong. Something a superhero could, and should, fight against.

So where were they? Where were the real superheroes to be found when you desperately needed them to stop villains, open doors, and bring you pants? Where was Spiderman, or Captain America, or even War Woman with her velour-splitting sword when you truly, and honestly…?

That’s when I noticed Wendy’s suitcase.

“What are we going to do, Corky?” Waboombas asked.

And the extension cords connecting the glowing, poster-signs to the wall outlets.

“Say something!” Morgan demanded.

And the fact that the windows opened without needing chairs thrown through them.

Sophie pleaded with me, silently.

I looked around at my fellow heroes and smiled a radiant smile. A courageous smile. A superhero smile.

“We’re going after them,” I said.

Within minutes, we were lowering ourselves out the window on several, twisted-together electrical cords, and dropping to the ground beside the Teen Titans kids.

“Mom, look!” one of the little boys said, pointing at me. “It’s Spiderman!”

“Oh, dear GOD!” his mother said, as you can imagine, a bit less enthusiastic about my ‘costume’ than her kid.

I had been painted with Wendy’s body-paint, head to toe in blue and red, with enough markings to pass as the worst Spiderman ever. Ms. Waboombas was War Woman, Sophie was a kind of Supergirl, and Morgan was Son of Satan. He really wanted to be Archangel, but we just didn’t have time to make it look right, or manufacture razor wings to his exacting specifications. We were, understandably, in a hurry. So we simply painted him up with red ‘pants’, yellow ‘boots’, and a sort of a pentagram thing on his chest that looked more like a crooked Star of David.

“I don’t wanna be Son of Satan,” he whined, for what must have been the thousandth time. “No cape. No pitchfork. I look like a tool.”

The rest of us ignored him and moved quickly off in the direction of the exits. I can only imagine from the looks we received that the men in white coats had already been notified.

Hair stuck out everywhere, including on the tops of our heads, though we had finally managed to rip free some of the sofa to fashion makeshift codpieces for the boys and thongs for the girls so at least that hair wasn’t visible. But on the whole, we were still barely passable as ‘clothed’.

“Sicko!” the Titan’s mother said, pulling her little one away as quickly as she could without dislocating any of
his important bones. “SICKO! THERE ARE CHILDREN PRESENT!”

Her reaction was pretty much the same one we got from anyone with enough brains or experience to know what freaks we were. But being that it was ‘all part of the show’ no one stopped us, and no security guards mistook us for the ‘streakers’ Washburne had undoubtedly made good on his promise to warn them about. In fact, far from impeding us in any way, most people were happy to get out of the road and run for the hills at the sight of us. One man did come up to Waboombas and ask her to pose with him for a photograph. She obliged, thankfully without breaking stride, reminding him to come by her booth later for a copy of her comic. Promising he would, he then scurried over to Sophie and requested a picture with her as well. She, of course delighted, obliged bouncily.

“Can I touch your tit?” he asked her.

“Sure!” she said, bouncily.

He reached for it, holding his camera to record the event for posterity and his website, no doubt, when Morgan finally caught on that something was amiss.

“HEY!” Son of Satan shouted, and felled him like a redwood. The punch shocked everyone, especially me, and every eye in the building was immediately turned on us as the stricken souvenir hunter shrieked, and bled, and rolled around on the floor in agony. Sophie turned to Morgan and grinned darkly.

“Wow,” she said, and grabbed his ass again.

All the fuss, unfortunately, drew the attention of security, and as a couple of larger gentlemen in blue blazers set after us, we raced for the exits. They were hot on Morgan’s heels, calling into walkie-talkies, and I knew there would be many more on us soon.

The good thing about dressing like an idiot and running for your life through a crowded convention center is that no one wants to be in your way. The downside about dressing like an idiot and running for your life through a crowded convention center is that when enough people try to get out of your way simultaneously, they end up displaying their poor athletic ability by falling over one another and creating blood clots in the venous system of traffic flow. Wendy and I had come to one of these now, as herds of people fell, and screamed, and rolled over one another between packed tables and jammed booths on either side of the aisle.

Behind us we saw Morgan nabbed by one of two approaching security guys, and Sophie stopped to kick the man in the shins. The second by-passed her and headed straight for us, knowing we were trapped against the fleshy bubble of conventioneers.

I nodded to Waboombas, and she knew what I was thinking without my having to say it. We leaped up on a nearby table and raced across several portfolios of artwork laid before review editors at the Marvel table, hopped over the heads of stunned artists and down into the booth beyond, not stopping to look back as everyone called after us angrily.

Behind me, I thought I heard Marvel’s Editor In Chief say, “I hope we’re not paying that guy.”

Skirting attendees and booth workers, Wendy and I dove across a second table on the other side of the Marvel area, scattering some giveaway items—buttons, posters, stickers—and sending them flying into an unsuspecting line of autograph seekers waiting patiently for one of Marvel’s more popular writers to sign their boxes full of comics. As the most recent, highly revered chronicler of Marvel’s most popular characters, the author was being fawned over, and spoke to the crowd from behind his table, absently signing his name one letter at a time. Many of the fans were clearly awed and inspired by his genius, listening intently to whatever he was pontificating about. Or at least they pretended to be.

“I have seen a vision,” the writer explained serenely, and in a British accent, “that showed me America’s world dominance will come to an end in the coming months, when the president and his minions declare martial law, eliminate congress, and take complete control of this country. This act will reduce your nation to chaos.”

Who cares, I thought. I’ll be in an alternate dimension.

Hopefully.

Not far ahead, moving more slowly than we super-powered superheroes through the massive crowd, I saw the Boones, River, and Wisper just reaching the exit. They were flanked by their rent-a-thugs who were paying more attention to the convention and its attendees than they were to their clients. I decided I would have to take advantage of their lack of focus. I jabbed a finger in their general direction, and Wendy snarled an acknowledgement that she too had seen them.

We picked up the pace, but it wasn’t fast enough for me as there was still a good distance between the escapees and us, and because the aisles were still horribly crowded. We decided the fastest way to get where we needed to be was to ruin some very valuable artwork at Mitzi Abromowitz Graphic Collectibles booth by leaping onto her tables and running over them with our bare, painted feet.

“Hey, hey, HEY!” Mitzi called out, understandably annoyed.

“Sorry, Mitzi!” I yelled, skipping over a Ron Garney two-page spread. “I’m in a hurry. Send me the bill!”
“Corky?” she asked, clearly startled.
So much for my secret identity.

“Yep. Loved the Whitcomb you sold me last month. You always have the best stuff!”

“I got a nice Joe Jusko piece over there if you wanna walk on that,” she said, her tone getting cheerier. “Sixty-five hundred.”

“Sold!” I called back, leaping across to the Slave Labor, independent comics booth and out again into the aisle on the other side.

The crowd was thinner here as we neared the exit, and I was able to reach Wisper and the others without further difficulty. I nodded to Wendy, indicating Thug #1, and Wendy—understanding me completely—shoved him over a trashcan and into a group of fans sitting on the floor just beyond, excitedly going through their day’s haul. They were not the least bit happy about his thoughtlessly deminting their purchases and began wailing on him as if they were children beating on an inflatable party game that gave candy if you popped it.

I took the other thug and clocked him on the back of the head. But given that I haven’t exercised since the president required me to in grade school, my fist simply rebounded off the man’s head and into my own mouth.

Instead of ‘defending my woman’ all I’d really accomplished was to make a very large, and very hostile professional pain-giver very, very angry.

He leaped on me in a way I’d only seen spiders do in Animal Planet specials about creatures that eat things that don’t want to be eaten, and my lack of physical prowess put itself embarrassingly on display. I flailed and screamed as we tumbled backward over fascinated onlookers, annoyed sellers, and tables full of carefully graded comic books about happy animals that don’t wear pants.

As the owner of the particular booth we were desecrating shrieked and howled, punching and kicking us both and trying to shove us into the next guy’s booth, I tried to remove my throat from the death grip Thug #2 had on it. But no amount of my thrashing, begging, or pleading would make the guy stop.

Imagine.

In desperation, the lack of vital air slowly fogging my vital brain matter, I reached into several plastic containers that had spilled around me and found some Jetsons Happy Meal toys in plastic-bags for sale at ten dollars apiece. I snagged one of the pointier, shurikenshaped ones and raised it over my head.

“Meet George Jetson!” I yelled.

And jammed the ‘determined safe-for-children’ item into the temple of my attacker. Blood spurted from somewhere inside him, and I couldn’t help but say, “Eewww!”

The mountain of a man squealed in apparent, actual pain, and rolled off me to thrash about in a pile of autographed, Lord of the Rings action figures.

“HEY! Who’s gonna pay for this?” The booth owner demanded in high-pitched squeals. Apparently, a bleeding, fellow human being came somewhat farther down his list of ‘important things to be concerned with’, than the perceived value of the items said loser was bleeding on.

“Talk to him,” I said, pointing to the thug. And the booth owner did.

“Who’s gonna PAY for this?” he demanded of the thug, who seemed not to hear him through his shrieks of agony, coupled with the sounds of crinkling cardboard and popping plastic. He just continued rolling around, crushing things and begging for an ambulance.

Yeah, I’ll get right on that.

I raced from the booth back in the direction of the Boones and Wisper. But they were gone.

Instead I found Waboombas trapped against a wall where she struggled with her thug—like Lazarus against his antimatter self in that episode of Star Trek—both evenly matched, refusing to give an inch, throwing off flares of radiation and energy so intense they threatened to destroy our universe.

I started to leap in and help, but was still relatively physically unfit, so instead I held back and scanned urgently about for more Jetsons toys. Suddenly, a flesh-colored blur shot past me, its jet stream so intense it knocked me into a five-foot Darth Vader, who apologized to me through a James Earl Jones voice modifier.

The flesh blur was River, flying to Waboombas’ aide—I kid you not, flying—and he’d somehow lost his loincloth during takeoff. Several women ‘ooohhhhhed’ appreciatively.

Fortunately for Waboombas, unlike me River had exercised endlessly, pretty much since in utero, and when he slammed into the guy, the guy really felt it. River punched him once in the side of the head, and he went over into Waboombas, who punched him once in the other side of the head. The cumulative effect was to make the man’s head visibly thinner, and far less conscious. He dropped to the carpet with a thud that couldn’t be heard over the noise in the convention center, much of it created by the crowd of folks who had gathered to watch.

Then something startling happened. Startling to me, at least.

River and Waboombas looked deeply into one another’s eyes, as if seeing something neither had dared believe
could happen in their lifetimes. Overcome, they passionately fell into each other’s arms and kissed so deeply I thought they might end up in crawling into one another’s internal organs.

“Um…” I said, not really sure I wanted to interrupt but feeling it was necessary before they began having sex on the floor. “I think we should…I need to go find…what about…?”

With strained effort, I finally pulled River away from Waboombas. It was a lot like pulling hot, soft gum out of gooey, melted caramel.

“WISPER!” I reminded them.

River stiffened up—and not in a good way—not for Waboombas at least—and awoke to concern for his sister.

“That way!” he said, pointing, and the three of us hurried off the convention center floor and into the front lobby. Through the glass windows, moving much faster in the thinner crowd outside the building, and more motivated since realizing we had escaped, the Boones were forcing Wisper into a waiting limousine. She looked scared but strong as she glanced back my way, and I was stuck with how beautiful she was, how much I loved her, how amazingly sexy she was in my old shirt, and I kicked myself for ever giving someone so fabulous any reason to doubt me.

It would never happen again.

Washburne forced her into the back of the vehicle before she could call out, and by the time we reached the convention center’s glass entry door, the limo was already moving off and away from us. Waboombas, River, and myself burst through the openings at the front of the building and raced toward the escaping vehicle, but we were too late. Security had held a way open through the crowd of people and cars in order to get the limo moving quickly and help ease traffic in the congested drop-off area. They were on the street and heading toward the freeway before we could even get off the sidewalk.

We stopped running and caught our breath for a moment.

Panting heavily we looked at one another, desperately trying to figure out what to do next. A commotion erupted behind us, and we turned to see Sophie and Morgan sprinting our way at full-throttle with a good ten, or more, security guards right on their tails. Sophie was holding a pair of dark slacks, and Morgan carried a walkie-talkie and a gun. Both were missing large portions of their body paint, and as Morgan gave commands to the walkie-talkie, Sophie randomly threw keys, wallet, and other items from inside the pockets of the slacks into the crowd.

A pantsless security guard veered off with one of his comrades-in-arms and tried to scoop up the discarded items, which some people were grabbing off the ground out of curiosity, politeness, or just plain greed.

Clearly, we needed to get going.

I scanned the area and saw one of those trucks designed to haul an advertising trailer. It had an immense promotional piece for the new Batman movie hooked to its hitch, advertising *Batman 16, Rise of the Ventriloquist Dummy!* Starring Matthew Perry, with Keanu Reeves as Robin!

Seeing that the driver was chatting up some girl dressed rather fetchingly as Princess Amidala, I took the opportunity, ran past him, snatching the keys he twirled absently, and leaped behind the wheel, locking the door immediately behind me. He, of course, was somewhat put out by the whole thing, as you can imagine, and began screaming and pounding on the driver’s side window. I apologized and thanked him, then turned the engine over and squealed off in an uncontrolled arc in the direction of Wendy, River and the others.

I slowed down only a little to pick them up. Morgan and Sophie were already leaping into the open bed of the truck, as Wendy and River dove into the seat beside me. Once they were situated enough not to fall out on acceleration, I left a stinking trail of rubber on the asphalt all the way down the drive toward a security guard who—I have no doubt—wasn’t paid nearly enough to become a bug on my windshield. He valiantly attempted to wave me off, apparently believing deep in that pretty place we all have somewhere in our souls that I would stop before harming him in any way.

What a dumbass. He obviously knew nothing about adrenaline, love, or their cumulative effects on the human brain. Consequently he was forced to dive for cover at the last minute, landed on a nearby hot dog cart and rolled down the street toward an oncoming trolley train filled with handicapped children.

Wow. Who could have thought that could go so wrong? Heroism has its price, I suppose.

I floored the truck out into oncoming traffic, where cars swerved, skidded, and dodged in all directions, knocking the hot dog cart into some bushes before the train could hit it. But now the guard was stuck on the hood of the car that had dislodged him, which was—unfortunately for all concerned—now driving right alongside me at just about the same rate of speed.

The guard looked frantically around for a few seconds in mounting terror, then collected himself once he realized he might not actually die. After a moment or two of brief calm, he looked in my direction and saw that I was the one who had started all this. That got his adrenaline going, and his love for violence apparently because both fogged his better judgment as he smiled a tiger’s smile and crawled over the hood of the old Pontiac he was lying
across toward me—as if that was going to do either of us the least little bit of good.

I edged the truck away from him, but we were now going up the onramp onto the freeway, so there was a barrier rail on the passenger side that would only allow me so much getting away space. Worse, for reasons I won’t pretend to understand, the elderly woman driver of the Pontiac—who was screaming like the lead singer of Linkin Park falling down a mineshaft—angled her car closer to mine, as if hoping the guard on her hood might leap off onto mine, and thereby rid her of her problem. Her husband was apparently on my side, or rather the side that believed she should stop the car right now and put an end to all this foolishness. Unfortunately, his yelling appeared not to be getting through any better than mine.

“Pull over!” he told his wife. “PULL OVER!” Then he grabbed the wheel and jerked it in the opposite direction. “If you’re not going to do it, let me!”

His rash decision abruptly dislodged the guard and tossed the poor man my way, where he grabbed my side-view mirror—I say ‘my’ as if I owned it, but you get general the idea—and held on for dear life, his feet still perched atop the other vehicle as we both careened back and forth in the narrow, two-lane onramp. As the frightened guard hung there, he looked at me with pleading eyes, begging me not to let him die.

Feeling as if I might somehow be responsible for his desperate situation, I took pity on the poor man, rolled down the window, and reached out a saving arm.

Which he viciously grabbed and started pulling in some ill-conceived attempt to yank me from the cab! I mean, really, twice in as many days? When is removing the driver of a fast moving automobile ever a good idea, people?

And so, clearly not having thought it through, the guard hung between vehicles as we entered the freeway simultaneously, forcing other fast-moving trucks and cars out of their lanes to do so.

“There they are!” River shouted.

I turned my head—now mostly outside the window—into the oncoming rush of the wind, and saw absolutely nothing as my eye sockets ballooned out like parachutes and filled with tears from overstimulated ducts.

“AAAH!” I screamed. “I CAN’T SEE!”

River took the wheel and Waboombas reached a foot over to accelerate. I felt her painted, bare toes press down on mine and suddenly the car lurched forward. Though I couldn’t see his face, I imagined that the security guard still dangling from my arm, mere feet above the racing pavement below, was, just about then, expressing a little concern.

“AAAAAAAAAAH!” he said.

“I said, ‘I can’t see’,” I told Wendy, “not ‘go faster’!”

“We have to catch them!” Wendy informed me. “You’re going too slow!”

She pushed harder on my foot, as if that would make the pedal go somehow beyond the floor. The increase in speed caused the guard’s fingernails to dig deep into the tender flesh of my arm as gravity, speed, and tension forced him slowly down, down, down, toward certain death on the ragged asphalt passing beneath him at just over eighty-miles an hour. I heard him praying to some god or other in a language I couldn’t understand. Possibly English, but it could have been Greek for all I knew.

“This is why I don’t let you drive!” I heard the old man scream to his wife, and I wondered how many other, unfortunate people had found their way onto the hood of her careening automobile.

The interesting thing about speeding down a crowded freeway while people dangle precariously from various sides of your vehicle is: no matter how fast or recklessly you may be driving, there is guaranteed to be another driver attempting to outdo you.

Case in point.

As the advertising truck sped along as I hung out the driver’s side window, as River steered, as Wendy gave it all the gas it had, as Morgan and Sophie did God only knew what in the truck’s back bed, as the security guard hung off me and the hood of the old people’s car, as the old people screamed, and complained, and drove erratically—as all that was going on in full view of anyone else on the freeway who was paying the least little bit of attention—a motorcycle, of all things, raced between our vehicles out of a desperate need to—I don’t know—cut precious seconds off his commute time perhaps.

It didn’t really work out as planned.

The most immediate effect was that, suddenly, the security guard was gone. The secondary effect was that, somewhere ahead of us, a surprised motorcyclist was wobbling and careening all over the road with a screaming man on his head, and that forced the limousine to slow its speed in order to avoid a collision.

As the long, black car backed away, the motorcycle veered off, drove up and over an embankment, and disappeared into a chickenplucking factory. This meant that—as the other car containing the older couple suddenly swerved off away from us and into a slowmoving ice-cream truck, splitting it open like a boiled cranberry and spilling its contents all over themselves and their car, they both let go of the wheel and careened hard right and into some yellow, waterfilled, safety containers—we were alone on the freeway and right up alongside the limo, pacing
Then the tinted passenger side window of the luxury vehicle suddenly whirred itself down, and I saw Wisper’s face, frightened and screaming.

“Corky, he’s got a gun!”

A flash erupted from near her head, she flinched, and I ducked. The front windshield of the truck shattered out, and River and Wendy shielded themselves from the bits of glass that escaped the plastic safety coating and flew in their directions. Breathing hard, and more than a little scared, I hunkered behind the driver’s door, debating my next move.

“You drive,” I told River.
“I already am,” he said.
“Oh. Right. Then stay close to them.”

He gave me a cocked look that begged me not to tell him stupid things, I nodded a kind of apology, pulled the handle and pushed outward, seeing the bottom edge of the limo under the bottom edge of my door and the blur of pavement below that.

What now? I wondered. What would Bruce Willis do in this situation? Something manly, no doubt, so I should discard that line of thinking. How about Matthew Perry?

Or Spiderman?

I thought about options and considered that there might be something in the back bed of the truck that could be of help. In fact, hadn’t I seen Morgan with a gun earlier?

I sat up quickly to look through the rear window and saw Morgan and Sophie having sex.

Dear, GOD! There was a time and a place for everything, and this was neither!

I dropped down again to avoid any additional gunfire, and before I had time to consider what a stupid idea it was, I opened the door, shimmied out and back toward the rear of the truck. Hanging on for dear life and realizing this was way scarier than when you see it in the movies, I leaned out and reached for the gun that lie beside the furiously rutting Sophie and Morgan.

“Look out!” I heard Wendy call, and I turned just in time to see the limo moving fast toward me, apparently with the intent of crushing my legs.

Son of a…!

I jerked my feet up, which threw me completely off balance, and when the limo slammed the truck, the impact knocked me onto the roof of the Boone’s black transport, as it immediately swerved away again, two lanes over from where we’d been.

Over in the truck’s bed, I saw Morgan and Sophie’s heads pop up in surprise. Apparently the earth had moved for them, and they knew it couldn’t have been Morgan’s lovemaking.

“What the hell?” Morgan said as he watched me scramble atop the swerving limo.

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“What the hell?” Morgan said as he watched me scramble atop the swerving limo.

“Throw me the gun!” I yelled to him.

“What gun?” he asked, clearly confused.

“You had a gun!”

Morgan’s hamster reluctantly got out of bed then fell backward into the wheel. “Oooh, right. That gun. What’d I do with that?”

He slowly reached over, apparently unwilling to get off Sophie long enough to do anything with any actual urgency, and searched through some things I couldn’t see. After a moment, he held up the dark pistol.

“You mean this one?” he asked.

“No,” he said missing the sarcasm.

“You have another one?”

“What are you gonna do with it?”

“I’m thinking of starting a collection.”

“What gun?” he asked, clearly confused.

“Don’t really need the history of the thing right now. I just need the gun. Will you give me the gun if I ask
nicely? Please? **Pretty please?**

“You don’t have to be such a grouch.”

Without moving off Sophie, he half-heartedly tossed the thing so that it dropped between our two vehicles and bounced its way, end over end, down the freeway and into a TV movie about someone who finds a loaded gun on the freeway.

I looked at Morgan as if he were a child who’d crossed that final line and now had to be given up for adoption.

“What?” he moaned. “I threw it as hard as I could.”

Then Washburne’s hand was firing at me again, and I realized this wasn’t the time to be petulant about Morgan’s lack of enthusiasm for my plight. I hunkered down on the roof of the limo and skittered about like the superhero I was painted to be, avoiding randomly fired bullets and trying to figure out what the real Spiderman would do if he were in my situation, riding atop a fast-moving limousine on a busy freeway. That is, if there were a real Spiderman.

He’d taunt his villains, I realized.

So I stuck my head down the opposite side from where the gun was for just a second, then withdrew it quickly enough to see the glass I hadn’t been able to see through explode outward in a burst.

That was effective.

And scary.

But I was going to do it again. First, though, I needed to talk to Wisper.

“Funny how you could call me a ‘clothist’ out on the beach earlier!” I yelled, loud enough to be heard through the broken window. “With genuine disdain, I might add. But I call you a nudist in a moment of weakness, and you’re off riding with the Boones!”

I glanced at the advertising truck, and saw River and Waboombas looking at me with serious concern as they paced us, moving in and out of traffic, working hard to stay close. I smiled and gave them the thumbs-up, which didn’t seem to ease their minds at all.

Unaffected by their lack of faith in me, I skittered to the other side of the limo and stuck my head down, reaching for the door handle. I knew it would be locked, but I was trying to give the idea that I was attempting to get in a little more authenticity. I rattled it once, then jerked quickly back up to narrowly avoid another glass-shattering gunshot.

“And a ‘textile’!” I yelled through the newly opened window.

“What’s that? I have to believe it’s somehow derogatory. Like, people who see themselves as what they wear, more than what they are?” Washburne’s gun appeared again and fired—more or less in the direction of my voice—and I rolled aside to avoid it.

How many bullets does that gun hold?

Maybe that wasn’t what I needed to be worrying about right now.

I scampered my way forward to the front of the limo, figuring it was the fastest, most likely way to end this insanity, and slowly stuck my head down in front of the driver.

Through the windshield I saw Mayor Boone, far back in the limo with his arms around a terrified and angry Wisper, restraining her. She was yelling at Washburne and struggling to reach him, as the mayor shouted to his son and egged him on. The younger Boone, meanwhile, scrambled all around inside the spacious vehicle, sweating, frightened, and panicky, looking desperately from window to window and trying to catch where I might turn up next.

“When you come from such different worlds,” I yelled. “There’s bound to be conflict!”

That helped Washburne find me, and I saw the barrel of the gun point right into my face.

Meanwhile, the driver reacted as you might if you saw a yelling, multi-colored man, his hair sticking out in all directions, suddenly in your face on a busy freeway. Kind of like that Twilight Zone episode with William Shatner on the airplane. Lots of screaming and hand waving, and as the driver lurched away, he jerked the wheel to one side and nearly tossed me from the car.

Thankfully, that caused me to tumble out of the way just as the safety glass shattered outward around Washburne’s bullet hole. The shot missed, but a couple of shards homed in on me and rocketed into my leg. I grabbed the torn thigh in pain, and nearly fell from the limo into the path of an oncoming semi.

With my free hand, I grabbed the antenna and nearly sliced my fingers off trying to keep myself from greasing the asphalt under the limo’s wheels. Just as I was about to get myself ‘securely’ back onto the hood of the car, Washburne leaned out one of the now open windows and desperately aimed his smoking gun right in my face. I was a trigger pull away from actually being dead.

Then Wisper cracked Washburne in the back of the head with an ice bucket from somewhere inside the limo, and he dropped the gun onto the freeway below me.
Two made for TV movies.

As Washburne slumped away, I looked up into Wisper’s beautiful face.


Her eyes misted and she melted.

“Can I think about it?” she asked.

Then she reached out to keep me from falling to a grisly death that likely would have ruined the romance of the moment, then leaned down and kissed me, passionately.

Being a man—and heterosexual I reassure you, again—I kissed her back.

Finally, gradually, gratefully, the limo came to a stop on the side of the road, and I stepped down into grass that was immeasurably soothing against my bare feet. I wanted to get down on the ground and kiss it, but I realized it would be much more fun to open the door and kiss Wisper again instead.

So I did.

“I’m sorry,” she said, pulling away from me.

“So am I.”

Having to part more quickly than we’d have preferred, Wisper and I stepped back from the limo, waiting for whatever might come next.

“I saw you struggling with Boone,” I told her. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” she said. “I was trying to stop Washburne from shooting you, and Mayor Boone was just trying to protect me.”

“Protect you?”

“Yes,” Mayor Boone said, shoving his erstwhile son Washburne to the ground as the two men exited their vehicle. I saw the driver step out and hold his hands up as if under arrest.

“He made me do it!” the chauffeur fairly cried. “I didn’t want to smash into you!”

“I didn’t know he had a gun,” the visibly angry and distraught mayor told me. “Didn’t know he was threatening you. I thought I was doing Wisper a favor getting her away from you. I was only looking out for her best interests. I’ve known her family for years.” Then to her directly, “Your father was the best man at my wedding!”

“So it was natural for you to assume,” I admitted, “that Wisper would one day be your daughter-in-law.”

“Yes,” he said, and the words slipped out of him like an exasperated sigh. “Yes, but…” and with this he turned to his progeny, moaning in the dirt. “He’s insane!”

“No kidding,” River agreed.

“But would anyone listen to me?” Wisper demanded. “Nooooo. Marry him, you all told me. He’s quirky, but he really, really loves you.”

River shrugged. Water under his bridge apparently.

Mayor Boone looked at Wisper sadly, then turned again with even deeper sadness to his boy, his child, his son, and said, simply, “You’re crazy!”

I couldn’t believe this was that much of a surprise. When someone lives under the same roof long enough with a loon like Washburne, there are certainly signs. Moody behavior. Erratic temper. A tendency to argue, to lose focus—to talk with plants.

Of course, Mayor Boone was, at best, ethically and morally challenged. Perhaps Washburne was simply the next evolutionary step—like monkey into man…only, more in reverse.

Washburne sat up, rubbing his head and looked around as if confused.

“Where are we?” he asked.

Good question. I turned and studied the terrain. I hadn’t realized that, at some point, we had gotten off the freeway. It took a moment to recognize that we were very near the dimensional hole. Not far down the road was the defaced sign that said ‘WELCOME TO GREEN VALLEY, NEKKID BOTTOMS 1 NOTTYNGON 4’. I stepped out into the road and saw the familiar scorch mark indicating the exact spot between my world and Wisper’s.

“So, what now?” I asked everyone.

River and Wendy turned and stared into each other’s eyes, as if asking the other to make the decision.

“I could help you sell your comics,” River said smiling.

“And I kinda liked Nekkid Bottoms,” Wendy said. “It’s worth another visit, after the convention is over.” She gently took River’s member in hand. “A good long visit.”

Morgan and Sophie finally stood up in the truck, apparently finished with whatever needed finishing, and leaned against one another, sweating and breathing heavily. Sophie seemed eminently satisfied, and tucked herself under Morgan’s arm happily.

“I think we’re gonna split the difference,” Morgan said, cheerily.
“And you?” the mayor asked me pointedly, obviously still unimpressed with me as a whole. “How will you survive on any world without your wealth?”

“I’ve got a few ideas,” I said. “I’m not the man you think I am. Not anymore.”

I looked at Wisper, kissed her again, and felt like I was reborn. “And besides,” I said to Mayor Boone. “I haven’t lost all my wealth.”

“True,” he said, and smiled that dark, sinister, ethically challenged smile again, that showed me just how utterly unashamed he was he hadn’t gotten away with it.

He waved me over to the limo, indicating to the chauffer to pop the trunk, which he did. Once open, the mayor reached in and pulled aside one of several fireproof security cases, dialed a combination he hid from my view and opened the latch.

There were several hundred gold coins, as well as a pile of diamonds and rubies the likes of which I’d seen only in movies.

“Wow,” I said. “So that’s how you transfer wealth from our world to yours? Those are still valuable over there then?” Boone shot another glance at Wisper. “Anything of rare and exquisite beauty is always highly prized,” he told me.

I was beginning to wonder who had the bigger thing for Wisper, son or dad.

I smiled and looked at my rare and exquisite beauty, feeling better than I’d felt at any point since two nights ago when she was holding my penis.

“Here,” Boone said, handing me my comics. “I never intended to keep them. I just wanted to get you away from her.”

“As you can see,” I said, “nothing you or anyone else can do ever will.”

Then something occurred to me.

“How were you planning to destroy the gateway between worlds?” I asked.

He stopped smiling and studied me with a ’bugs are doing trapeze-swings from your nose-hairs’ expression and asked, I believed sincerely, “What are you talking about?”

I returned his confused look. “Washburne said…”

Abruptly, Boone turned and stared intently inside the trunk, as if searching for something that frightened him. He found it. It was a small, silver box with a handle and a thick cable running from it to somewhere inside the main body of the black car. He reached in and tried to pull the thing out by the grip, but instead of coming free, it levered, clicked, lights blinked on, something hummed, and an LCD display ignited with red letters that flashed ‘ACTIVATED’ several times, then scrolled aside to be replaced by a numeric countdown.

Twenty, nineteen, eighteen…

Boone, Wisper, and I reflexively stepped back, our minds racing through options.

“Where would he get something like that?” Boone asked, mostly to himself. “Where would anyone find something like that?”

I was about to shout that everyone should run for their lives, when Morgan called over to us with what I hoped was a solution to our explosive little problem.

“Hey, look!” he said, and everyone turned his way. “This opens!”

He leaned down and showed how the rear window of the advertising truck could be slid to one side so people painted up as Spiderman could more easily get from cab to bed without dangerous, life-threatening maneuvers, and by the time I turned back to the bomb, Washburne was behind the wheel of the limo and racing off toward the dimensional hole.

“Don’t you feel stupid?” Morgan said to me, snidely.

I had underestimated Washburne, expecting him to be beaten, but I should have realized sooner that crazy people never believe themselves to be beaten, or wrong, or crazy. Unfortunately for him, he also didn’t know his father had apparently activated his explosive device.

Dumbfounded, I pulled Wisper, and we ran behind the truck, warning the others to do as we did, just as clouds began to form, thunder to roll, and lightning to strike. I didn’t see the explosion when it happened due to the sudden darkness, rain, fearful cowering and all, but the explosion must have been tremendous.

The advertising truck rocked up on its side, to the point where we feared it might actually roll over on us. But then it creaked, strained, and fell back onto the street, bouncing a few times on burning, flattening tires. The advertising sign it had been pulling didn’t fare quite so well. It was split in half by a rocketing limousine tire, piece of axel, and a section of the trunk. Ripped neatly into two, the pieces groaned over into a small ditch by the side of the road.

Once the sound of bending, shearing metal had died away, and the shuddering of vehicles and earth had receded, I checked to see that everyone was unhurt, then moved around the burning wreckage of our former chase
vehicle to find out how bad things might be.

Beyond the truck, the clouds were quickly rolling back, and the brief rain was already drying away to steam in
the heat of the afternoon sun. Near the heart of the fading storm, the asphalt of the road had been ripped away, as if
scooped by the hand of God Himself—a massive, gaping hole torn deep into the earth and mineral rights territory
beneath. As I approached, its depth surprised me, and I half expected to see Mole Man rising out of the smoke, and
dust, and fog at the center, ready to take on—first the Fantastic Four, and then the world.

I was shocked to speechlessness. Where had Washburne gotten such a bomb, and why? Why would he possibly
want the doorway between worlds sealed forever? The whole thing hit me—surprisingly—like a heavy shot to the
gut. When I could get there easily, I hadn’t given Nekkid Bottoms much thought. But now that it was beyond my
reach—beyond all our reach—I could think of no place I wanted more to be.

As I stared into the abyss, Wisper stepped to my side and put an arm around me nervously. I looked into her so-
lovely face and could see the horror distorting her beauty. The shock and pain of not being able to return home, of
never again seeing her family, of the death that Washburne must have suffered at his own hands. I pulled her to me
and held her tightly, knowing it was faint reassurance.

After a moment, we both stopped imagining the obvious and looked at old man Boone. He was clearly in a
state of shock. He hadn’t moved from near the truck, as he stood, frozen, staring toward the mess created by his only
son.

Wendy looked at River and said, “You can stay at my place.” Which didn’t seem to cheer him any.

“That fucking bastard!” Sophie snarled.

“Yeah,” Morgan said. “So…what does this mean?”

“It means we can’t get home,” Wisper explained. “We’re trapped in this world.”

“Well, that’s not so bad,” Morgan offered cheerily. He flinched when our reactions said otherwise, rather
pointedly.

“Not at all?” River asked. “But we can’t be stuck here! I can’t wear pants again! They’re uncomfortable! Confining! Perverse!”

“What pants?” Morgan asked. “You were wearing a washcloth!” “AND IT WAS AWFUL!” River said, and
began pacing in tiny circles. He looked terrified, as if just the thought of wearing clothes gave him actual, physical
pain.

“Maybe there’s another hole somewhere!” he said. “Or we could make one.”

He looked at me as if somehow I opened dimensional holes twice daily and three times on weekends. Then his
gaze moved over my shoulder, out over the steaming rent in the Earth.

“Or maybe the hole is still there,” he said, sounding truly hopeful. “Maybe just the street is gone.”

Instantly, everyone turned and looked at the dissipating mist and flashes of electricity that were the last vestiges
of the energy storm. They floated at near eye level, in the center of the place where Washburne had disappeared,
exactly where the street would have taken us if there still were a street to take us. As small bursts of energy
continued to crackle only a few feet from our faces, I realized River might be right.

I hadn’t considered that maybe the hole, itself, could have survived such an explosion, but then I didn’t even
know how it worked, let alone what could make it stop working. And how could Washburne know any more than
me?

That’s when we heard it. Just as the last bit of cloud, and boom, and flash disappeared completely, and the last
drip of misty rain fell. Washburne. Laughing.

Somewhere on the other side of the hole.


“Mayor Boone,” I said, “Your limo wasn’t an old car. How did it get through the hole?”

“An old car?” he said with the same, flea-circus on my face expression he’d worn earlier. “You don’t need an
old car. You need lead. Lead-based paint—which they no longer use on current cars, so I suppose I can see your
confusion, somewhat—and in significant quantities to hold the rift open.” He looked at me and laughed, amazed at
my ignorance. “Old car,” he sneered. “How would the age of an automobile have any relevance in this kind of
situation?”

How would anything have any relevance? We’re talking about extra-dimensional nudist colonies, and you’re
looking for reason?

Whatever, old man.

I ran to the back of the advertising truck and retrieved the coiled rope I’d seen Sophie and Morgan rutting on
earlier, then grabbed the piece of limousine trunk that had sheared through the billboard, took the hook we used to
lower ourselves out the convention suite window from Wendy, and ran back to the edge of the hole to stand beside
Wisper. Just being near the dimensional hole with the trunk piece was already causing the sky to roll once more with
Encouraged, I tied the hook to the rope, swung a few times, and tossed it into the limbs of a large oak whose branches hung out majestically over the road, just above the now slightly glowing dimensional rift. It hooked a branch on the first try.


“Take off that shirt,” I told Wisper.

“Yes, sir,” she said, and did so gladly.

I tugged the rope hard.

The actual rope, oh you of the dirty mind.

It seemed to be safely secure, so I held out an arm to my one, true love.

“Are you sure about this?” she asked.

“As sure as I am of you and me, and how happy we’ll be for the rest of our lives.”

“Sooooo…not very sure,” she said, and laughed.

Aaaah, that magical sound.

I laughed with her. “Got any better offers, today?”

She lost her smile and studied me with intense emotion.

“There are no better offers,” she said with profound sincerity, then leaned in and kissed me passionately.

“Ready?” I asked her.

She nodded, and I tugged once more on the rope to test its strength as she leaned in and kissed me sweetly on the cheek.

“For luck,” she said, and I felt an odd sense of déjà vu. “Thanks,” I told her. “But if you turn out to be my sister in the third movie, I’m gonna be pissed.”

She laughed again, and with that I held her as tightly as my minimally exercised arms would allow—then just a little tighter—and leaped off the edge of the asphalt and into the blazing maw of clouds, and lightning, and rain.
In case you’re wondering, I became a television producer.

I got the idea from the video of Mervin and me. If people would pay money for that…

I started small at first, buying the rights to the nudist dimension soap opera, *Warm Sun Over Port Charles*, which I renamed *Warm Sun on Nekkid Bottoms*, rewrote a bit, dubbed slightly, and added footage to, in order to make it more ‘textile-world’ oriented. I’d read somewhere about someone who had done the same thing with a kids’ Japanese action show and made a bundle. So I figured, why not me?

I sold it to Starz as a soap opera set in a nudist colony. The greatest, most expansive, most elaborate nudist colony anyone in that world has seen outside Cape d’Agde, France.

Given that the acting was really excellent, the actors themselves gorgeous to look at and constantly naked, it
became an instant cult hit that draws nearly two million viewers every night. More if you consider the after-premiere fans who watched it on Tivo, DVD, or iTunes downloads.

I also took a hint from Mayor Boone and created my own comics line because—for some reason—I still love them. I’d had enough of superheroes, though, so I created something with greater personal meaning for me: an ongoing comedy series about some idiots who get stuck in a nudist colony. It’s called Green Valley and it centers on a rich loser, a clueless comic collector, and a conservative minister. Oh, and I threw in a black stripper just to be ridiculous. Not that something like that could ever happen in real life.

Green Valley spawned an entire line of spin-offs about naked people and the wacky situations they often get themselves into: Spoodgie and His Frat House Pals, (I never said they were intellectual) Jezzebelle, Nikki The Nude Model, Nyna The Naughty Nudist, (alliteration is fun and easy!), and one superhero book called I Love A Girl In Tights about horny teenagers who dress up and don’t fight crime.

I then took the money from these and other projects I’d sold back on my world and started using it to capitalize original material here in Nekkid Bottoms.

Er…I mean Nikkid Bottoms. Wisper hates it when I do that, almost as much as she hates the way my artists draw all the women with big tits. Comic book guys. What can you do? It’s in the blood.

Wisper and I had our occasional difficulties, of course, but she learned to trust that I wouldn’t backslide, and I now actually prefer to be naked—when it’s warm—and have stopped being an embarrassment to her family. Well, her father anyway, doorstop man from Nuckeby’s. Her mother accepted me almost instantly.

Wisper, in turn learned to stop running, went back to college and got a degree in history, specializing in nudism and its historical trends. She now teaches at Nikkid Bottoms Community College and frequently gets hit on by her young students. I visit her often at lunch.

Wendy and River continue to be an item, and I’m continually amazed at how compatible they are. It’s fun to see her boundless, sexual energy so focused on someone other than me, and River certainly enjoys being the target of her unbridled lust.

Morgan had to do some Nikkid Bottoms community service, and a little jail time for his ‘wandering hands’ bit on the auburn-haired stunner from the beach—for which I acted as witness for the prosecution—as well as take an online course in sensitivity training. But I think we all know how that turned out. He and Sophie also broke up, as expected, but she still occasionally has sex with him, so he doesn’t actually mind.

Once the road in both dimensions was repaired and Reverend Winterly worked out the supposed attempted child-molestation thing, he began to make regular trips to our naked shores, got himself into fighting shape, gradually grew less stern, and although I’ve yet to see him naked, I’m fairly sure Reverend Summersby has.

Woodruff never left. He took the cue from Homer and got comfortable almost immediately. In short order he found a nice, older lady, who was neither revolted by, nor terrified of, the thing that lived between his legs surviving on a regular diet of birds and small rodents. Not surprisingly, she was a direct descendant of Homer himself.

Washburne, apparently, came back into town immediately after the car-blowing-up incident and spent a lot of money in a very short time on some frivolous things. Then he got word that we—and his father—had made it back in spite of him, and he quickly disappeared. No one’s seen hide or hair of him since.

Good riddance I say, especially if he stays gone and doesn’t come back with guns.

Oh, and no one knows what happened to Mindie. She’s eluded the police and anyone else who’s gone looking for her for over a year now. I can only assume she’s still living in the woods somewhere, and in the stories parents tell their children at night to scare them into behaving.
If you had happened by the Nikkid Bottoms First Methodist Church on Saturday morning, June the sixth, you would have seen a sign out front that read, in white letters on black:
The Wedding of
Corcharan Wopplesdown
and
Wisper Nuckeby

And just beyond that sign, you would have spotted several men, about half wearing tuxedos, while the other half wore ties.

Just ties.

You also might have seen my Aunt Hyapatia, and her husband Bernard, as they walked up to River Nuckeby and witnessed her nearly pass out with a combination of giddiness and renewed, postmenopausal lust as he took her arm and asked her the question every man asked each of the newly arrived.

“Friends of the bride, or of the groom?”

She waved her arms to indicate her rather puritan dress, shoes, and old-lady ankle-stockings. “You have to ask?” she purred.

As he guided her in, she ogled his substantial member, rippling muscles, and bare behind rather shamelessly, and smiled the smile of a woman expecting, imminently, to drink from the fountain of youth.

Uncle Bernard seemed not to notice, or more accurately, to care, as he followed them in through the church doors.

Within the hour, once inside, you would have seen a church divided into two equal halves. On the left, a set of pews for the uncomfortably clothed, and on the right, a set of pews for the comfortably nude—each side taking occasional glances at the other in either amazement, horror, or delight—and often various combinations thereof.

At the front of the church, once everyone had been seated, you could have watched my brothers and Morgan as groomsmen in their freshly pressed tuxedos paying no attention whatsoever to anything other than the naked bridesmaids standing opposite them. Their mouths and eyes hung open so widely they looked like a display case of elegantly dressed fish.

Opposite the men, you would have undoubtedly noticed the aforementioned maids—Sophie and Ms. Waboombas included—as they stood quietly and beautifully, their faces framed beneath the broad brims of dainty, veiled, hats. In their attractive, delicately gloved hands, each woman cradled bouquets of red and white roses accented with baby’s breath. Their lovely feet were adorned with high-heels, the straps of which wound provocatively up their calves almost to the knee, while the rest of their bodies remained ornamented only with the gifts God and/or genetics and Doctor Pflemmel had provided them.

Had you been studying the maids, you would also have seen that even Mimsi, who Wisper had graciously included as one of her coterie, had gone native, and didn’t seem bothered by all the male attention in the least—possibly because she was getting so much more notice from a rather stunning woman in the third row.

For the men, this must have seemed to them what it would be like living in the Playboy mansion—or even better—since they didn’t have to compete with an aging Hugh Hefner in his robe and slippers, carrying a seemingly endless supply of lotion bottles. The looks on their faces said bliss, coupled with rapture, wrapped in a blanket of joy, and I imagine they intended to make the most of it at the wedding banquet afterwards.

Fortunately, none of the ladies seemed to mind.

“I could tell they were made for each other the minute Wisper started talking about him,” Petal, the maid of honor, said, barely pausing to catch her breath. She might have been speaking to my brother Daniel, my best man, across from her. But it could have been anyone she was talking to—or no one. “There was just something in her voice, and I would know, because every man in town has always thought she was sooooo pretty, and been after her like ants on cookies at a picnic, and since we used to share a room together when we were little, she would tell me all the time everything she felt about every one of them, and it wasn’t until she met Corky that I realized, ‘wow, this one doesn’t sound like a total jerk’, and we would lie there at night, and she would be talking about him, and I would be talking about this guy I knew from school who was kind of cute, and I’d be disappointed as we masturbated that her guy was getting her so much more excited than mine was getting me…”

Daniel nearly fainted before the ceremony and had to be supported throughout by Morgan.
Had you been at the chapel, that day, no matter how hard you looked, you wouldn’t have seen Grandfather on either side of the aisle, since he had declined to attend. But of greater importance to me, Helena and Pjuter were there, seated happily on the bride’s side so as to be, as Homer Nikkid would have wanted it, comfortable. Even Mervin Wosserman had come, sitting on the groom’s side with Mrs. Abrososa and one of her many male children; one that, at nearly forty, had not yet married, nor had children, nor ever considered same, if you get my drift.

Had you come, as so many did, that day, and perhaps arrived a little late, you would have walked up the aisle, between the clothed, and the unclothed, toward the altar and seen Wisper’s fabulous, naked behind standing nervously beside mine as we faced both pastors, Winterly and Summersby—he clothed, she unclothed—each reading out their individual sections of the marriage ceremony.

“Do you,” Summersby said, finally nearing the end of the ritual, “Corcharan Wopple-see-down…”

“Whoop-ul-duhn,” Wisper and I quietly corrected simultaneously, then smiled at one another. “Jinx, you owe me a coke,” Wisper said.

“Oops,” Summersby said, looking genuinely embarrassed. “We went over it a hundred times and I still screwed it up.”

“You’re going to have to get used to that,” I told my future wife.

“I look forward to it,” she replied and smiled, reaching out to squeeze my hand with hers, which I dutifully squeezed back.

“Don’t let go of it this time,” she said.

I told you I’d be paying for that until the day I died.

If you had made it only to the very end of the service, you would have heard Pastor Summersby ask me if I would take Wisper, then heard Pastor Winterly ask Wisper if she would take me, and you would have heard each of us—as though there was no better moment in our lives—sigh out that single word, “yes.”

And then you would have seen us kiss—warmly—deeply—lovingly.

Bloop.

Damn.

And you would have heard everyone in the church either gasp, or chuckle, or both.

“Well,” Wisper said, smiling down at it, then back up to me. “Let’s go do something about that.”

“Okay,” I said.

And so, we did.
Later that evening, Mayor Boone, sitting by himself in bed—naked, pale, reading a Scientific American article about hyperspace and pretending to understand—was trying hard not to think about what Wisper and I were doing at that particular moment, when suddenly, out of the dark and the silence that his home had lately been filled with, he heard the faraway tinkling sound of breaking glass somewhere on the ground floor below.

Chilled and terrified, he grabbed the bat he always kept at hand since Washburne had gone off, slipped into his long-dead wife’s fluffy, pink slippers, and moved slowly down the stairs, creaking that damned third one more than he had intended to, and paused. Waiting.

No one seemed to hear.

After a few deep breaths, he finished descending and crept around the corner of the foyer, heading toward the dim, moonlit kitchen. His heart skipped a beat, and his breathing accelerated when he saw a shadow flit past the window above the sink, heading in the direction of the knives, forks, and other sharpened instruments.

Suppressing his fear and burying it beneath mounting anger, and a creeping sense of violation, he raised the bat over his head and moved quietly through the archway that opened into the kitchen from the dining room. His heart pounded like the deposit-covered piston of a car that doesn’t use the right fuel additive, and nearly seized when he heard a rubber seal break and watched light slowly, insistently, spread outward from the opening of his refrigerator door.

He was struck to the core at whom the light revealed.


Not Washburne.

Mayor Boone reached for the nearby switch and ignited the overhead recessed lighting, flooding the room with illumination and momentarily blinding the lady, who shielded her eyes and winced at its intensity.

The uninvited guest stood, slowly, and turned to him with no apparent fear, shame, or concern, continuing to chew on whatever she had taken from his fridge. As she looked him over, taking in his naked, aging physique, and poofy, pink slippers, she took another bite and chewed deliberately, almost defiantly.

For a long moment they stared at one another in silence.

She was dirty, smallish, and thin, but tough looking, rugged, and tan. She wore nothing more than smears of mud, and a revealing, makeshift bikini fashioned from what appeared to be wet, pungent, animal skin. Her hair was wild and filled with bits of dried leaves, grass, and twigs, and she smacked her lips as she finished the piece of what the mayor now saw was this evening’s brisket, tossing the bare bone back over her shoulder and into the sink.

As Boone stared in awe, she grabbed another hunk of meat from behind the door she still held open and ripped away another, brazen bite.

Slowly, apparently certain now that Boone was no threat, she let her eyes wander around, and over the opulence of the kitchen, taking in its expensive cutlery, cookware, and furnishings with practiced, discerning eyes.

“So,” she said at last, “You’re rich.”

Boone stared a moment longer, then shook his head to loosen the gears.

“Yes,” he said, and suddenly got nervous, squeezing the bat a little tighter. “You want money?”

The woman smiled and ignored his question. “You single?”

“I…what?” Boone asked, slowly, confused, and unsure where this was going. “I’m…yes. My wife died…many years ago, and I have a son, but…well…he’s…eh…moved away.”

“Ah,” the woman said, smiling. She tossed the second bone backward, without looking, into the sink, then wiped her greasy fingers on her enormous breasts, breasts Boone kept glancing down at with obvious interest—trying not to ogle, but failing miserably.
Eventually, she held out a marginally cleaner hand for him to shake.
“My name’s Mindie,” she said. “I’m single, too.”
If you enjoyed this book, and we’re assuming you did since you got this far without dustbinning the thing, (although it’s possible you could be one of those unique people who skips ahead to see the ending of every book they read just in case you’re hit by a bus, somewhere in the middle, and wouldn’t want to spend eternity not knowing how things turned out, in which case, all bets are off) you won’t want to miss Chuck’s next novel:  

**Satan’s Little Girl**  
The story of a young woman who dies, goes to hell, and ends up having the time of her life.  
Coming summer of 2008  
To be followed in record time by  

**Nekkid Bottoms By The Sea**  
The outrageous sequel to the book you apparently still hold in your hands.

You can put it down now. And thank you for your time.

Good night.
Chuck Austen wrote comic books for several years during the early part of this new millennium. He wrote some forty issues of various X-Men titles, more than a dozen Superman stories, *JLA: Pain of The Gods, Captain America, US War Machine*, and many, many others, including his own creation: *Boys of Summer*, a manga available from TokyoPop. He left the industry to write novels, and screenplays. Chuck also co-created the hit television series *Tripping The Rift*, which won the Playboy Animation Festival Grand Prize, and is the only comic book writer ever to win the Genesis Award for Outstanding Artistic Achievement. Before that, he worked for many years on the popular, animated television series *King Of The Hill*.

He lives in Los Angeles with his lovely wife, lovely son, two lovely daughters, lovely dog, and even lovelier birds. This is his first book. But not his last.

You can check out his current projects at:

www.nekkidbottoms.com
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