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The Things We Never Talk About When a Girl Takes Off Her Clothes

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the University Honors Program

University of South Florida, St. Petersburg
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I'm really not qualified to talk about the writing process. I'm not even sure there is such a thing. What I do know is that writing is something my mind is peculiarly suited to do, and that the process by which the machine running in the background is as mysterious to me as it is to an English Lit professor who can't perform cunnilingus without researching journal articles first. I often don't know where the things that occur to me originate, or even sometimes what they mean. I can't describe in concrete terms the difference between an idea that is worth scribbling in my Moleskine and the ephemerma good for little more than chewing a bit over a cup of coffee and spitting out like gum. I can only describe the experience, and the process I've developed to make the quirky mis-fires of my brain into a product.

There is something inherently "wrong" with writers. The Machine I mentioned seems separate and distinct from the other activities of my mind, something over which I have no control. If this seems odd to you, then try to have a good idea, right now. Go on, tell your brain to spit out something brilliant. I'll wait.

Couldn't do it? Me neither. I'd wager no one else can, either. One of the problems in cognitive science is explaining where "inspiration" comes from. We all know that the best way to solve a problem is usually to stop thinking about it, to go do something else. This takes the mostly inept conscious mind out of the equation and allows the more intuitive and clever Machine to chew on the problem awhile. When the Machine has generated a product, it spits it out onto the assembly line and into your lap.

For me, however, as for most writers, the Machine is always on, and doesn't seem connected to anything I'm doing or anything I'm thinking about. Sometimes something I heard years ago, that seemed innocuous at the time, and something about which I've nearly forgotten, gets reprocessed and presented to me as something other than what it was, something new. This is the "idea," and in a certain sense I can't really claim credit for it. Other life experiences, which I'm sure are emotionally packed and sure to generate ideas of heartbreaking genius and poignant resonance, are ignored by the Machine, which concentrates on details which the conscious "I" might have barely noticed. Every writer has attempted to wrangle idea out of these large, looming emotional experiences without the aid of the Machine, and wound up wasting time trying to hammer The David out of a pile of dried dog-crap.

So there's a Machine in everyone's head. For writers, more so than visual artists, musicians, or any other type of artist, the Machine is closer to the surface. We can listen in as it hums along, evaluating input for potential material, listening as it births and discards plots and phrases, characters and lines of dialogue. This is a passive process, and has the strange side-effect of distancing the writer from the life experiences from which he is supposed to be gaining material. Every writer has a story about a situation where he has a reasonable expectation of full involvement - a mother's funeral, during
sex, important job interviews, and especially while driving - where behind the polite, wooden smile is a Machine diligently ginning, separating out the seeds from the cotton. No matter where a writer is, a writer is never really “there”.

My inspirational process is even more distant. I’m only obliquely inspired by my own experiences, and have never written about the events and experiences of my life. Not being prone to introspection, I don’t really understand writers who do - it seems like being fascinated by my own bedroom, or inspired by a landscape I see every day. What drives my writing is curiosity, especially regarding life experiences about which I will never have any direct knowledge. I write a lot of females, because I see women do things and the Machine finds a door into a world I will never understand. What’s it like to be soft? What’s it like to be watched? To be afraid? How do you write desiring something you fear? To be simultaneously proud and ashamed of your body? Or what is it like to be a sexual sadist? How do you sell people, then go home to your family? I’m not interesting in judgment, or in making the world a better place. What I appear to be obsessed with, though, is understanding.

I am not a prolific author, and my stories do not come quickly or easily. Sometimes it can take three drafts just to discover what a story means. I also seem to build stories that require a great deal of research, so many of the stories in this collection have holes which I will have to fill as I collect information. One thing I need to inform each of these stories is an intimate knowledge of New Orleans. I need to physically travel there and find the places where these events occur, the nooks and crannies along the river, the run-down mother-in-law suites in the Marigny, as well as nail down an actual location for the nightclub, as well as a better title.

At first glance, it would appear that a trashy club in a shitty part of town like the West Bank or the Ninth Ward might provide more colorful material, and during the original genesis of these stories this was exactly the kind of place I had in mind - strippers giving blowjobs in trucks behind the building, drug dealers beating people on the stoop, girls drugging each other to steal winnings, or even drugging each other to charge admission. There are a nearly infinite number of these stories, and they are fairly easy. This kind of club, though, restricts the kind of stories that can be told, because there are a few characters and situations that simply would not fit with such decrepit, ghetto surroundings, so I had to elevate my club more to the level of Club Penthouse, the kind of place that uses tasteful lighting and leather couches to cover the fact that it is, essentially, a place where people go to pretend. In this setting, the shitty people doing shitty things are still possible, while allowing more creative play and believability to the less Welsh-like stories I want to tell.

I can’t at this point say what this book is going to be about, because it isn’t clear to me. You have an idea, and it’s either worth chasing or it’s not. This project has already evolved way past my original conception, because intentionally pulling out a theme yields the same dog-crap results as trying to intellectually force an idea. So far, I can say that a strip club is interesting because it is, at the same time, the most honest, and the most dishonest, of our social institutions. Dishonest because everyone involved
in the transaction is pretending: the girls pretend to be interested in the men, and the men pretend they have a chance with the women enough to fork over some money. On the other hand, though, it is more honest than most marriages because everyone involved knows the score. It is a communally generated illusion in which everyone knows the score. I've heard it said that conflict makes great art, but that's not true. Contradiction makes great art: when something is, and simultaneously is not something.

As I said, I'm not prolific, and none of these stories are finished. I write in layers, adding in one element at a time. Writing for me is a process of construction, of building something from the bottom up. My rough drafts are often narratives of plot, with notes about where to include elements of imagery, character, and style as I re-read and -redraft. Following are some notes about where things are, and where things are going.

WHAT IS HERE:

THE OLD MAN - This was the first of the stories, and I honestly have no idea where it came from. I was sitting in Washington Square Park with some friends, who had all brought things to read or work on. Getting old, I forgot to bring anything and wound up sitting there staring into space for an hour and a half. Something about someone walking by, I suppose, inspired this, because the idea was fully formed by the time we went back to the train. The rest of the book came from the necessity of seeing this character first through many other eyes. I do need to go through and add in a self-consciousness to Max, a feeling of ridiculousness and futility to give him some depth. I may also add some more nastiness on the part of Roxie the bartender and maybe another bit character to create some friction between Max's motives and his surroundings.

NOLA - This is the oldest of the stories in this collection, and has been drafted more times than the Florida constitution. This is also the furthest from being finished, because I still am not quite sure what this story is. I was on a streetcar going down Canal, looking at the clapboard Victorian houses twisted beyond recognition, at the rust and water lines, when I realized that this town is perfect for magical realism. Later that same day, I was in the art gallery of Shakur, a master of that New Orleans jazz style of painting, with the ubiquitous musicians and bright colours and elongated bodies. Something about that style characterized New Orleans, and I wanted to blend that visual art style and the clichés of New Orleans with a style not usually associated with the culture. It isn't there, yet. There are many places where the clichés are flat, and where important elements are missing. I need to finish taking out the commentary from previous drafts, and write in the little thematic images of fire associated with Katie. The middle of the story also needs to be fleshed out. I will also flesh out the clichéd character of Sammy by giving him a job in the strip club. New Orleans musicians in the fables normally don't have day jobs. (Case in point re: inspiration.
The day on the streetcar, I went to a concert and saw a trombone player named Big Sam. The name stealing was totally unconscious.)

**THE IMPOSTER** - This is the most skeletal of the stories here, and the one which will require the most research. I won't lie: I stole this plot from a bit character on Law & Order, but it was such a minor character I don't think no one would notice. What intrigued me was the idea of a cultured, educated woman performing sexual acts as part of a research assignment. What if she liked it? I wondered. What if she “went native?” This story went through many drafts because I was looking for a big “aha” event that could represent, to the character and the reader, Ashley “going native.” After speaking with some anthropologists, I came to understand that these things are the cumulative effect of smaller events slowly drawing the researcher into her adopted world. I will need to read a lot, to know what the character knows. Her personal hero will be Naomi Wolf, who she will reference heavily. She will also reference Foucault and some other thinkers with whom I am not terribly familiar. These technical points will have to be layered in later as I discover them and brush up on Susan Sontag. These relics of her “real” life is what I’ll use to create the friction between the two worlds, layers of her personality, or whatever, as she starts to identify more with her adopted society than her native. One of the main problems is that there are too many stories to tell: putting off a visit from a fiancé and the engagement ring she’s forgotten about, what she does with the money she earns but doesn’t need, picking up smoking, flirtations. The dancing sequence at the beginning was a mistake and will probably go - I sat down and intended to write another beginning, and the dancing thing just happened. I’ll take the best aspects of that and start the story in the dressing room after the show.

**THE BOUNCER** - I introduced two of my friends for the first time and left for another beer. Coming back to the table, I was struck by the visual of the two of them standing together, talking. She is a statuesque beauty of a woman, 6’2”, perfect posture, but clumsy and child-like in her movements. He is a tight, controlled ball of human energy - 5’1”, brash, and arrogant. Both are accomplished martial artist, and I would even go so far as to call him “deadly”. It occurred to me that the pair would make perfect bouncers. Bar and nightclub owners live in fear of a bouncer exerting too much force in subduing a rowdy patron and losing their business in a lawsuit. Few men, however, would be willing to go into a police station and admit to having their arm broken or ribs bruised by a woman or very short man. A shrewd business owner would do well to hire security who can do what they like with relative impunity. That’s when I came up with the owner of the club, James Ivey, who might exist in the stories more as legend than character and may never actually make an appearance. Kai’s story, though, is the weakest in the collection so far; she needs a lot of fleshing out, much more of the randomness and oddity of the world in which she lives, and she needs, more than anything else, a history. The difficulty in working in her experiences and back-story is
that she, as a character, wouldn’t reference them directly, so they will have to be worked in one element at a time. The old, original story, from which I stole a lot of the dialogue was first-person, and I think that might be a better POV from which to do this character.

THE MINX - (I am not certain that this is going to be her name). This is the newest story in the collection, and the easiest to write. There is not much in the way of subtext in this story, as Rebecca herself is not a very deep or complex character, although she thinks she is. I attempted to write this story dryly, shying away from the imagery to which I am so hopelessly inclined, because this character’s world isn’t measured that way. The Minx is celebrated for the way she oozes natural sexuality when she dances, but from her own perspective the reader finds that she sees sex as a tool and her sexuality is a purely fallacious projection. So far, this is the story I think came out best, and the closest to being finished.

WHAT IS NOT HERE -

While sketching out lists of characters, (The Imposter, The Bouncer, etc.), I started a new note: THE ARSONIST. I left it alone for awhile because, while I knew there was something there, I didn’t at the time know who he or she was. I don’t remember exactly where it came from, but The Arsonist is a pimp who hangs out in front of the club, selling prostitutes to the sexually frustrated men. There is a rumour going around that he set a girl on fire, hence the Arsonist [the rumour is true (arson is the destruction of property.)]. He procures his girls by setting forth something that looks like a legitimate business, then hooks them on heroin. Some of his terminology will be disturbingly distant (someone asks for a certain girl, and he says, “no, I retired that one,” etc.). I don’t want to show the warehouse on the West Bank where he keeps them, but imply that it’s there. The simplest story would be The Arsonist (name will probably be Edward, “Don’t fucking call me Eddie”) being chased from the front of the club, turning a corner to find a young woman vomiting into a garbage can. The reader will already know that he’s a pimp, so listening to his friendly, polished sales pitch might be creepy enough. I’m still indecisive on this one.

There will also be THE POET but, at this point, I don’t know who he is or why he is there.

Much of this project thus far has already got one leg into romanticized sentimentality; there will be shorter stories, sometimes just vignettes, of the terrible things that do go on in an environment where anonymity is the rule and there really are no others. Girls stealing each other’s earnings, drugging one another and charging men to have sex with her, beatings, etc... I haven’t written any of these yet because, honestly, they’re easy and therefore not as interesting to me. I wanted to tackle the complex characters first, because I can write these others at almost any time.
I will also have to write in the character’s perception of one another, as many of these people will know one another. But this will be one of the last steps in the process of creating this collection, when the characters are fully developed and I know for sure who they are and who they are trying to project. These perceptions will have a dramatic influence on story order in the final collection, as the reader will be introduced to characters either through their own eyes and then see them through another’s or vice versa. Ashley seems like a dumb southern girl in The Minx’s story, but in her own story she’s revealed to be a very calculated actress. However, it remains to be seen whether it would be more interesting to read Ashley’s dialogue in Minx’s story knowing she was an educated rich girl, or to find out later.

There’s a lot I still don’t know about this collection, such as where it begins. THE OLD MAN was always intended as the conclusion of the collection, and I think it performs that function well. However, I don’t know which story should come first, but I don’t think any of the stories I’ve written so far serves the purpose. Whether the collection should begin on something light, something dark and shocking, or a cornerstone piece reflecting the themes of the book. What that will be, however, I can’t say. Claire, the waitress, was always intended as a background character, but she is beginning to develop a personality of her own, so there may be a story there. When the collection as a whole develops, I’ll be able to name it. These titles, also, are not the intended titles of the final product - just a way for me to keep track. When they grow up and I can tell what they are, I’ll be able to give them names.

Just as I’m not sure where these kinds of things come from, I’m also not sure where it is going. There may be some larger plan, a kind of emergent property that will emerge as the stories get more developed and their contrasting elements take shape. In writing this analytical essay, and reflecting upon my frustration with the pointlessness of literary analysis, I was reminded again and again of something a friend once said to me, which I would like to put forward, by way of conclusion, as my thesis statement.

“The greatest of life’s mysteries,” he said, “is what goes on inside our own heads.”
At the bar during the break, ordering a drink, Sammy felt a warmth at his elbow, and caught the faint scent of smoke. *(breasts of devils line?)*

"Man, the way you play could steal a girl’s heart," the woman beside him said.

Sammy smiled. A lifetime later, waiting for her on the neutral ground, Sammy would remember nursing at the breasts of devils. "Stealin’ hearts is easy," he said. "I’m out to pick locks on souls, now."

She laughed in bright shard. "We don’t all keep our souls under lock and key, sugar. Try playin’ to blow off a girl’s underwear. That’d be something."

"It’s a deal," Sammy laughed, turned back through the bar, the crowd swirling apart for him on his way back to the stage. He glanced over his shoulder and felt something sealed. The girl was beautiful – relentlessly, the kind of beauty that just won’t leave you alone. A beauty that clings like wax. Spiced, insistent – and relentless. Looking back, walking away, he was a pillar of salt.

Sammy leapt up onto the stage in a rain of cymbals. The shouts of the audience crested, blended, and fell. Sammy LeGrand smiled and tamped it down with a wave. He was tall, lanky, and the light rode his shaved head like tarnished brass. He was a
conjurer, bringing to life the vibrant and wordless things hidden in the sticky bar and wallpaper stained with generations of smoke, cracking open the door between the pocket-change world of day jobs and dollar drink specials and the world of insanity. That's how he saw it, anyway. He looked out over the audience, at the dim lights glinting off smiles and lost in the blank stare of sunglasses. For the rest of the set, Sammy's audience shrank to one, and to a single pair of eyes and a single smile. The clink of drinks and perpetual steel-blue aura of cigarette halos disappeared behind the music, that smell of smoke and rain. He pulled music from beneath the stage and tossed it out to her, nets of notes so intricate a breeze began to blow across the dance floor, trailing its fingers through the smoke. The audience cheered as the wind wove through their hair, and the girl got up to dance.

She danced like she laughed, raw and flinty and fertile, all whipping hips and trailing hair. The girl was trouble down to her mitochondria – she was caution cones and Spanish-Fly-laced mango margaritas and her anagrammed name spelled trouble in a dozen secret languages. And, as encore, Sammy LeGrand stood alone in the spotlight, jacket draped over a stool and sweat pouring down his neck, playing to an exhausted room and the girl nodding along by the bar.

The morning after Katie first slammed into his life and he first fell into her bed, Sammy walked back to his apartment through the buzzing in his head. Maybe it was the bourbon, or the death cocktail she'd mixed, standing in her panties by the window, pale breasts glazed in pink neon and a dusting of coke. Maybe the joint they'd shared – Lord only knows what a girl like that'd spike it with.

Dazed, Sammy wandered into Big J's.

"Hey, Sammy!" a strong voice slurred. He found his friends in the back, faces blurred in a cloud of cigar smoke and gin. "What the hell happened to you last night?"

"Nothin', man", Sammy said. He kicked his trumpet case under the chair and collapsed.

"Last I saw a' you, Sammy boy, some sweet blue-eyed thing was debauchin' you all over the dance floor," Eddie laughed. He slid a beer across the table. "Drink up, son. Musta been a helluva night."

He told them of the tropistic effect she'd had, like gravity or fate, how they'd drunkenly wandered the drunken streets together and he told them, finally, of waking up beside her and kissing the hair away from her cheek before leaving her there, asleep. (this should be dirtier.)

"You didn't leave her a note or nothin', man?" Robbie asked. "That's some cold shit."

"It ain't a big town," Sammy lit a cigarette. "She'll find me again. Or I'll find her. Either way, I ain't worried about it."
"Look, man," Eddie said, suddenly serious. "If it was me, I'd just let it go. Women like that, they fire, son. And only one a' two things gonna happen to ya if ya play with fire. Ya either get burnt, or ya get really fuckin' burnt."

"You forget one thing about playin' with fire, Eddie," Sammy said. He slammed his drained mug with a belch. "It's fun."

She was there again at the next show a week or two later, and again at the show after that, appearing first as a spice of smoke, hair standing electric on the back of his neck, and eyes in the shadows, glittering hard and blue. He wound up again and again at Katie's apartment, where she mixed him drinks, hidden by the bar and the distractions of neon glaze.

"What's in this?" he asked once, as the drink settled into his nerves.

"Just a White Russian," she shrugged, all innocence.

In Sammy's years as a bartender, he'd made his share of White Russians, and knew what they could and could not do.

"Maybe if you made it with the breast milk of she-devils," he said.

She smiled at him in the darkness. "Maybe."

The ruffles of wind he'd sent through the audience grew and, quickly, Sammy learned to control them. Before long, he came to feel the music as a tangible thing, something responsive and alive. He knew which trills would swirl through the hanging smoke, which (musical language) would throw a girl's skirt up around her waist, to her surprise and feigned embarrassment, and, within a few months, which (more musical stuff) would gather small clouds at the ceiling.

The first time Sammy made it rain, the summer lay suffocating and damp over the city, and every surface oozed sweat. That afternoon, Katie had served him one of her drinks, from a little hip flask hidden in her skirt.

"You've got to tell me what's in these," he said as the world's colours brightened.

"It's Dumbo's Magic Feather," she said. "You'd think a bartender would learn his drinks."

Sammy looked into the small clouds he'd collected, grown dark and pregnant. He (musical) and they split - first heavy drops fell, one by one. Sammy played on until rain fell across the crowd in light, crisp sheets. Some scrambled for napkins to cover their drinks and glasses, which quickly overflowed and ran down the bar. A few in the audience left, complaining of ruining hairdos already unmanageable in the heat and summer damp. Most, though, jumped up and danced, exultant in the cooling rain that seemed to materialize out of nowhere. Katie stood in a little clearing in the crowd,
wearing her curls wetted to her cheeks and a smile that saw right through to the back of him.

Word traveled quickly and soon Sammy's shows were the busiest in town. These evenings, the bartenders learned to stop serving beer in drafts and martinis arrived in covered glasses. The band bought waterproof electronic equipment and had it shipped from Hawaii, cell phones, PDA's, laptops, all the intrusive electronic pocket tethers had to be left at home or risk ruining their warranties. Men stopped wearing leather coats. Women chose their underwear carefully, gauze and colours and lace, and practiced the surprised expression they'd feign when Sammy blew their skirts up over newly shaved legs. Some of the boldest wore white, so they finished the night dancing wearing little more than translucent film.

Sammy stood at the graveyard gates (which one?). He'd slipped away from the party, was wandered down an alley, and found himself following a string of music: the rattle of an old city shaking its many bones, snatches of song and distant, echoing laughter, and somewhere in the darkness a woman moaned, desperate and breathless. Sammy leaned against the iron fence, lit a cigarette, and listened.

Across the street (which street?), though, bulldozers hulked, target barricaded in malevolent orange. The squat little building sat on the corner, paint peeling, wrought iron rust falling a flake at a time. Still beautiful, but doomed.

"It's a goddamn crime, ain't it?" the man's voice shook him. The couple stood by the gate. A ring shined on the young man's finger and the girl wore a beaten fedora like Sammy's pulled low over a still-vague smile.

"I used to play there," Sammy said, tapping Jezebel's case with his foot.

"I made a fortune in there," the young man said. "Come to think of it, lost it in there, too." Sammy nodded.

"I think I lost my underwear," the girl giggled as they walked away.

Sammy crossed the street and headed home. Traffic growled by, and in the passing flare of headlights he read the developer's sign — "Magic in the Gardens Condominiums." Below that, a watercolour of some architect's daydream, filtered, no doubt, through marketing studies and focus groups, committees and zoning boards. White, with purple and gold fleurs de lis on the walls. "Clean, affordable living in the heart of America's oldest Bohemia!" it promised in friendly, Bohemian text. "Starting in the 100,000's." Sammy flicked his cigarette at the artist's rendering, the sudden burst of sparks showered down into darkness as they drifted to the sidewalk.
Later, Sammy awoke to a chaos already underway. It was a comforting sound, letting everyone within earshot know that, downstairs, in the alleys and gutters and the inescapable heat, something was happening. He brushed his teeth in the old, encrusted sink, listening to the broken music snaking through the shouts, laughter, bottles clinking down the brickwork streets. Sammy grinned into the mirror, checked the light shining smoothly off his head, and grabbed his lucky hat, and headed out into the street.

He'd half-expected to wake as a vampire. Despite the tooth-scrubbing and shot of gin, each drag of his cigarette pulled up a lingering aftertaste of the night's cocktail, something like smolder, cranberry, blood. Sammy followed the stairs to the river and stood, listening. (Specific place required)

"Hey there, Rain Man." A throaty voice. Even under the wind driving in off the river, Sammy caught a hint of smoke, like burning paper just put out.

He didn't know how she found him, but she always did. The river just seemed to wash them up in the same places, on the (where?) or in the shade of the Café du Monde. He was right, a man with fate on his side doesn't need to ask for a number. He would come to take comfort in this rhythm of losing and finding again, the motif of unexpected discovery. Sammy leaned against the beaten rail, hands in his pockets, and tried to seal an air of permanence around the sight of her smiling out over the water.

Over the rooftops, glass towers in the financial district stared, unblinking.

"Can you make it rain out here?" she asked. "Nice night for rain."

Sammy eyed her gauzy white shirt. "Would be nice," he said. "But it's little like love. Can't make it do nothin'. All you can really do is strike up a tune and hope she feels like dancing."

"Wanna go find some trouble?" she asked.

"Think I smell some around the corner over here."

They linked arms and went after adventure, where was trouble real and mud-streaked and waiting, always, just around the corner. Something in the nooks and crannies, something in the worn-down cobblestones not even the feet of a million tourists could scrub clean. (fuck). Staring into his coffee, Sammy thought about maggots burying into the flesh of beautiful drowning victims (specific?).

"Funny," he said to his friends. "Had an industrial revolution, so we can be bugs." His friends snorted absently to the line they'd heard before. But there was something pestilential in the way the bulldozers and backhoes and wrecking balls hovered, circling sometimes on the horizon, sometimes just overhead, like buzzards dangling at the end of their patience.

The groan of the small building dying into itself shook the whole quarter. The horses outside Jackson Square Park nervously whinnied, rolled their eyes to the sketch
artist’s displays trembling on the grate. Full glasses trembled, unnoticed by most, in dozens of bars, even in the Hard Rock Café. Its dust settled into the gutter, soaked up the spilled beer, hurricanes, and vomit on Bourbon, and blotted out the smell of beignets on Decatur. The dust hung in the air into the night, when the Friday night partiers spilled out of their hotels to find a night blotted, the frozen Pina Coladas turning grey and ash. They tripped on the busted sidewalks and wandered with forced smiles beneath darkened streetlights. The dust hung in the air for days, settling into sax keys and between the cracks on wooden stairs. Riverboats on the water puffed histories of dust into the air, their pilots peering through dirty glass. Waiters at the Café du Monde donned bird flu masks and served café au laits that tasted, faintly, of death.

"Fuckin’ feels like Da Nang," Eddie said. His friends snorted again to a line they’d heard before.

"Nah, man," Sammy said. "This is what took out the dinosaurs." He felt scraped-out and dried.

"Takes awhile for a couple centuries to go down the drain," Katie said.

They left the bar and headed toward the river. He pulled a cigarette from his pocket, put it to his lips, and started when it lit itself. The mysterious something he’d been accustomed to suddenly seemed out of place, incongruous with the distant sound of construction and dust. Suddenly, they could have been anywhere. Katie looked at him, smiled departing and faintly.

“How we supposed to party all night when the sun never sets?” she said. “That’s what I want to know.”

And, finally, a week later, the dust blew out and a clear dawn broke, spreading yolk behind the office buildings across the Interstate (I-70?). From the rusted and slanting balcony outside his apartment, he watched, feeling empty. In the thin light, the city just looked run-down, its clapboard shells held together by ghosts and the charmless stench. He’d lain awake through the night, tuning out the hollow sound and fury and counting the minutes until he could rouse himself and watch another day approach, newly lonely. It was the third since she’d left, no easier than the others.

"Now don’t get me wrong," Eddie said. They wandered the art gallery, each piece worth more than Sammy made in two years. "She was a helluva woman. But you pour your heart into someone and they walk off, you gotta realize they didn’t leave with nothin’ of yours.” Sammy listened patiently to the obligatory string of advice, appreciating the intentions, aware of the futility. Outside, a homeless wanderer walked by; Sammy watched him through the window and felt a moment of distant affinity, then shook his head in self-disgust. Between the main gallery and a smaller room adorned with intimately detailed nudes they crossed a courtyard. Once, there had been a staircase attached to the wall. Above, the door remained - Sammy wondered how
many people had tugged on the handle, all frustrated curiosity, not knowing on the other side was nothing but a twelve-foot drop to mossy paving stones.

"Whatever you say, Eddie."

That night, the crowd sat silently as Sammy played. The air hung stagnant and perceptible. The girls, who’d worn their prettiest panties, moved listlessly across the dancefloor, their hearts and skirts unmoved by Sammy’s best efforts. Sweat traced through the stubble on his head and, between sets, conversation bubbled up immediately like large bubbles in cheap champagne.

"Ain’t lookin’ like rain tonight, eh, Sam?" said the bartender.

Sammy knocked back his bourbon – the drink of choice for men left in the lover’s dust of a wild woman. Since the night of the river, he’d felt her slip further away. The night the dust fell over the quarter, she was gone, and he knew it. They’d stayed out with the boys and girls, gone home and made love, but through it all Katie was far away. And as she’d mixed her cocktail by the window, her eyes held her mischevious light inward.

"Don’t look like it, kid," Sammy sighed, drew a circle in the dust filming the bar. When the dust cleared and the night finally fell clear, it fell without her. Sammy turned back to the stage – really didn’t feel like his anymore – and finished his set.

He’d gone to wait for her on the neutral ground, sat in silence between the crawling traffic and streetcars screeching by on rheumatic rails. In the way of abandoned lovers, he caught visions of her rounding corners seconds before she didn’t, heard her voice. Also in the way of abandoned lovers, he felt like a fool. The night loomed brittle and dark over the river, the few stars out empty and aloof, like squatter’s candles in the windows of vacant houses. He got up, shaking his head, and dragged himself down Royal. Splashing through the dusty streams of neon-glazed flux, Sammy thought about the mysteries he’d thought he’d find in the alleys and nooks and crannies of his city, the magic, he’d thought, that had come to rest its head on his shoulder at night.

So what if he could still play, he wondered. He’d still find himself, like everyone else sitting alone on a bench in the middle of the road, waiting for someone who wasn’t going to show. So what if he’d made it rain, once upon a time. The dust still hung in the air, impervious to his most passionate notes. Now he couldn’t move a plastic beer cup in the gutter. The passion in the decadence he now saw for what it was; college kids from private schools taking their partying to an exotic backdrop. The ironwork, the steps where Sammy had taken Katie against the wall a few feet from howling spring breakers, the balconies where he’d tried to bring down the tears of God, were just backgrounds in some tourist’s photo album. Flat, like a movie set.

Some time passed before Sammy played another gig and he may not ever if money hadn’t run short. Word spread through the street, through the guys at the
Preservation Hall, that Sammy LeGrand had lost his edge, that some blue-eyed cliche' had come and gone and taken back with her something vital. Some shook their heads sadly and said something about him getting old before his time, something else about the era dying. Playbills went up over all his posters, posters for fund-raisers and political rallies, and Sammy drowned briefly beneath glue and lost dogs.

It was a solid set and, and the crowd brought a tepid enthusiasm. One of the secrets he'd learned early on, though, was technically sound wouldn't keep people dancing. They looked to him for heart and soul, to bring back the insanity they knew waited just below their feet. Sammy smiled and played and danced his jig between the solos, but he felt the stage. He felt it was solid and still, vibrating with the bass. Between the notes was only silence.

Sammy stood on stage alone after the show, looking past the floodlight's glare. The audience stared back, everywhere beneath the smiles and intoxicated blurs the same barely endurable sadness. This was the stuff the world was made of, then. Pulling on locked doors with nothing but a drop on the other side, holding your breath in case someone laughed or coughed or exhaled hard enough to blow something precious down. He put his trumpet to his lips and paused.

Then he caught the whiff of smoke, somewhere in the crowded bar. With the stench of sweat and stale cigarettes, a faint curl of woodsmoke cut through. He scanned the crowd, Jezebel held to his pursed lips. The audience looked at one another, shifting uncomfortably in their seats and exchanging grumbles. From somewhere, the smell of smoke persisted. The boards beneath his feet smoldered.

A splinter of light from the shadows in the back, a dusky, familiar smile. Sammy took a deep breath and held it. In the silence, he heard a song, the sound of smoke hovering in the bar, the music of expectance, the sound of life pounding away outside. Across the room, a cigarette burst into flame. Sammy sent a note into the brief flash, a delicate trill like a lover's hand that ran its fingers through her hair.
The Minx

It was August, but she was cold. Rebecca rubbed the gooseflesh prickling her arms and watched time crawl forward, willing it to stop, or slow, or at least have a conscience. If it was sorry, she could understand - everyone had a job to do, and she didn't have crow's feet spider-webbing out from the corners of her eyes, but she could see where they would be when she squinted. And the "smile lines" already threatening, like thugs in an alley. Her mother's brow was permanently creased at 30, and Rebecca was already a few days shy of 28. She lifted her breasts and watched them fall, folded her arms and measured the distance between them and the firm-for-now bottom curve. Age is watching gaps close. Luckily, she still had perfect posture, but she watched until they were empty; they could have been anyone's tits, a model approaching obsolescence. But maybe that's how it was supposed to feel, how everyone felt, watching themselves in bathroom mirrors, fluorescent light smirking down on every imperfection. It was August, and she was not alone, but that only made her colder. Rebecca shook her head, saw the light creases in her neck, and turned out the light.

The morning was a little better. She awoke and stretched, early dawn sunlight splashing through the window. This was going to be a good day, and Rebecca jumped into her routine. (ballet stretches and exercises. What is she listening to?) Hanging onto the stretching bar running across her living room, left leg vertical and steady, she evaluated in the floor-to-ceiling mirror on the opposite wall. Rebecca hadn't danced in public since her audition at Julliard (too much?), but still prided herself on the length of her lines, the grace in (arm-sweeping thing), and the hour and a half of practice she forced herself through. In the mirror, she looked powerful and still, head high and toes pointing like angry fingers, her ass high and powerful. Working out was one of the few times she could avoid thinking about the wasted skills, using the command of her body to satisfy stupid fantasies for dollar bills.

But she smiled gave the diminutive bouncer a more natural smile than usual when she walked into the club. During the week, she avoided the dump like the ghetto it was but she'd left a scarf that matched her dress so well, and, once in awhile, when she felt spiteful, she liked to flaunt herself in front of the tramps - dressed, with makeup the way it was meant to be worn, a member of the guild of people who could look themselves in the eye and go out in public without apology. The club was barely open, populated sparsely so early in the day, with one of the weekday workers Rebecca didn't know on stage and only a few men languidly sipping drinks.

Old-fashioned dressing tables lined the walls of the dressing room, romantic affectation straight from boudoir photos - tarnished brass and exposed bulbs framing
mirrors full of nude women primping, adjusting, and some of them even reveling in dressing themselves up like turkeys to be served at a dinner of slobs. Desiree and Laura sat together on big ottomans in the furthest corner, giggling behind their hands and half-naked. Rebecca sometimes felt sorry for them — girls like these who would never go anywhere, had nowhere to go now, but today she couldn’t. Rebecca pulled her scarf from the back of a chair, not in the drawer where she’d left it, of course, but she’d learned to let things like that go.

“Hey, Minx,” said Ashley, who rocked back in a chair beside the door, feet propped up on a dressing table, in her jeans and a frilled pink bra.

“Ashley,” Rebecca nodded. Ashley’s cheeks were flushed, but her eyes were attentive and sharp. Something about her gaze sometimes made Rebecca uncomfortable, and the way she insisted on using her stage name stirred an almost constant resentment she sometimes couldn’t hide. Today, though, she let it slide and smiled pleasantly.

“What are you up to? Don’t see much a you weekdays.”

“Came for this,” Rebecca said. “And I have a date, if you must know.”

“Oh! I must!” Ashley widened her eyes and leaned her chair further back. Feigning surprise, she was sure, but the girls around here did gossip.

“Not a customer, I reckon,” Ashley drawled. She was pretty enough, breasts a little smaller than hers, Rebecca noticed with satisfaction, and defined abs that probably came more from coke or speed than dedication. Her legs were well-muscled, but a little thin, and her eyes clear like that, so maybe the rumours that she never touched the stuff were true. One lesson a strip club had to teach, though, was that anyone can hide anything.

“Of course it’s not a customer,” Rebecca snorted. “A man I met (where?) Third date.”

“Nice!” Ashley grinned. “Fuck ‘im yet?”

Rebecca sighed. Something about Ashley made her sad. There was intelligence in there and, sometimes, she gave Rebecca the feeling of being disassembled and put back together. Maybe with a better up-bringing she could have made something of herself. But she’d been here too long. Once, Ashley had carried a little black notebook around with her, and everyone assumed she was writing a book. But that notebook hadn’t been seen in awhile. Every bitch came in here with dreams.

“No,” she said. “This is an actual person, not gutter trash you pick up off the floor in bars.” She adjusted the scarf around her neck and a little smile escaped. “He took me to the opera.”

“Well, I’ll be damned...,” Ashley gaped.

“Woo! Next stop, Paris! And then kickin’ it with rock stars and divorcin’ Mr. Moneybags!” Inwardly, Rebecca cringed. She hadn’t noticed the other girls fall silent, wasn’t prepared for Laura’s interjection.
“You know what your problem is, Laura?” Rebecca said, icicles growing on her voice. “You are exactly where you belong. How’s the singing working out for you? Meet any agents lately, or can you not get a good look from down there?”

The smiles died on their lips and Rebecca smiled. Desiree glared and leaned in, the murmur of offended girl-talk burbling across the room. Although she knew it was no credit swatting a fly, she let the coldness blowing between them warm a neglected corner of her heart. The real joy, she thought, was that someday, perhaps soon, these bitches and this life would be just a repressed memory.

“Later, sweetheart,” Ashley drawled as Rebecca turned away. Her smile faltered at that scalpel look in Ashley’s eyes, suddenly so sharp again.

As she passed the bar, Roxie, the decrepit bartender who smelled like an ashtray and looked little better, gave a low, rasping whistle. “Lookin’ good, Minx,” she called.

“Roxie,” Rebecca nodded. Roxie’s voice grated on her nerves, too many years of too much whiskey. Rebecca hated her, deeply, hated that sallow skin, the sagging tits that could hold a office’s worth of pencils, hated that men had once thrown dollars at them, too. Hated the trademark sneer that had long ago carved her face into a permanent mask of bitterness and surrender. Most of all, Rebecca hated that Roxie’s name had once been at the top of the marquee, that she looked at every one of them like a story she’s memorized. When she finally got out, Rebecca would find some cutting phrase, say the perfect thing to wipe that impudent smile off Roxie’s lips.

As soon as she was outside, though, the day opened up to her again. The wind grabbed her dress and flapped it against her legs, the sound like wings flapping. She smiled as she walked down (street) and, for once, didn’t mind the smell; even the August heat subdued. The cute little bistro she’d chosen was just a few streets away, so she walked, but in her mind she ran through a choreographed routine that surely would have gotten her in. (ballet things). Soon, perhaps, she’d be normal again. She looked up into the rusted ironwork of the balcony above her and saw, for the first time in months, the charm in this flaking and aged city. Perhaps she would miss it. A little.

At a little hole-in-the-wall café, she stopped for a cup of tea, just to be a few minutes late, so Derek would be there, waiting and hopefully a little anxious, when she walked in, a sunflower bursting in the doorway. She would time it perfectly, never a step, like a real dancer again. Sitting by the window, watching the crowds stream by, she indulged in a little fantasy of opening a dance school, at least dancing It went according to plan. He looked up as soon as she walked through the door, steps lengthened to sway her hips in a sexy but not vulgar way. Even though it was still daylight, she thought her heels clicked with mystery, with promises that might not be kept. Those were the most interesting kind, how a real woman catches a man. She felt the dress clinging to her thighs and, in Derek’s eyes as she neared the table, saw her hair blown back, saw herself walking in slow motion.
"You look lovely," he said as he rose to greet her, with a peck on the cheek. Lovely, now that was a word she hadn't heard in a while. She'd almost forgotten what chivalry sounded like and giggled like a girl as she thanked him.

"How was work?" he asked.

"Oh," she shrugged. "The usual." Of course, he believed she worked in an insurance office across town. Lies at the beginning of a relationship were supposed to be a curse, she'd heard, but whoever said that had never been a stripper. Whether it worked out with Derek tonight on the crux of the third date, he'd never have to know.

"What about you?" she asked, the quickest way to divert a man asking uncomfortable questions. She smiled, coyly, lowered her lashes. "Did you make anyone fabulously wealthy today?"

"Well, not as wealthy as I used to," he laughed. "It isn't easy, but I'm getting by. Yeah, wealthy enough."

She hadn't asked about his income, of course; there wasn't a faster way to chase a man off than by labeling herself a gold-digger, but his title and the cut of his suit told her everything she needed to know. Normally, she hated when men in suited lounged around with their jackets unbuttoned and ties hanging loose. The middle-management guys at the club in their cheap Sears suits reminded her of fast food employees with untucked shirts, but Derek wore the comfort of a relaxed bodybuilder filled with power waiting to be flexed.

"So what are we doing tonight?" she asked. "The symphony? Go and have ice cream in Paris."

"I thought we'd keep it simple, he said. "Giselle is hard to top, so I won't really try. Paris is an idea, though."

"Rain check, then?" she arched an eyebrow and played mischevious, leaning forward on her elbow so the front of her dress fell open, just enough to dart his eyes downward.

"I'll take that check," he said. "Venice is the place for ice cream, though."

Slightly stung at her mistake, she played it cool through the rest of the meal. She should have said crepes, or Venice. Sitting and flirting with a genuine man, that subtle exchange of signal and innuendo that could lead to something real, was so refreshing that she even forgot to worry about giving herself away and, when she caught the waiter looking down her dress, Rebecca laughed when he looked away.

During the movie, something clicked. The film was a romance, a boy-finds-girl or girl-finds-boy story with the typical title and typical ending. She didn't care, though. In fact, she barely watched and, ten minutes after they left, she couldn't care less. What she did care about, though, was the way Derek slid his arm over her shoulders, as easy and intimate as if they'd been together for years. As the couple on the screen pretended to fall in love, Rebecca curled into Derek's side, and settled into the weight of his arm across her body, the smoothness of his shirt against her cheek,
and memories of his the lingering kiss he’d left her with on the doorstep after their last date. He hadn’t invited herself up, and if he had she would have let him, after the night at the opera, with the important people speaking to her like a person, and the champagne. They were nearly alone in the dark theatre, and she slipped a little closer to love.

After the movie, Derek drove back to back to her apartment. Rebecca ran her finger along the leather interior of his Mercedes (model). I could get used to this, she thought. The respect, the doors held open, the stolen glances at her cleavage, the way he never mentioned money like the poor, who talked of it constantly, and the subtlety of his innuendos. A man who acted like he didn’t expect sex on the third date would probably get it.

“So what’s in Paris?” he asked as the car penetrated the warren of tangled streets.

“I went on vacation there with my parents. And I almost went to school there.”

“Really?” he asked. “What for?”

“Ballet,” Rebecca said, quietly. She rarely spoke about anything so personal, but the third date is a milestone, even if it was just a movie.

“Changed your mind?” They were stopped, stuck in one of those hopeless traffic snarls that had, at its center, nothing but a drunk tangle of idiots and tramps stumbling across the street.

“Didn’t get in,” she mumbled. “Almost, but almost isn’t good enough.”

“That’s okay,” he said. “My parents wanted me to go to Notre Dame. Things don’t always turn out the way you expect.”

Traffic unsnarled and the car inched forward. Smiling despite herself, Rebecca placed her hand over his on the gear shift. “Sometimes they do.”

They drove a few moments in silence. Closer to the apartment, the crowds thinned out. “Park here,” she said when they could get out with the illusion of being alone.

“You’re the boss,” he said, and pulled over to the curb.

Walking past the restored antebellum houses, holding hands, felt like a movie. Derek was amusing and intelligent, successful and good-looking. Like a movie character, Rebecca suddenly wondered why it was her on this date and not some glamorous socialite.

“Are you married?” she asked, suddenly.

Derek laughed. “Direct. I like that. No,” he half-heartedly shook his left hand.

“Divorced last year.”

“Was she evil?”

“No,” he said. “Just stupid. I found out she’d slept with half the men in my office and still expected to ‘live in the manner to which she had become accustomed.’”

“Well, then,” Rebecca said, feigning sympathy but toasting within. He wouldn’t worry about that from her. Sex was a way women sought attention from men, and she
didn't need much attention. For the right man, though, it was a service she was willing to provide.

“What about you?” he asked, just as pointed. “Ever married?”

“No,” she shook her head, her hair swinging against her ears. “A few serious relationships, but they never went anywhere.” Another lie he’d never have to know about.

“Where do you live?” she asked.

“You going to stalk me?”

“A girl should know who she’s taking home, that’s all.”

“Well, then you should know that this whole city is mine!” he turned slowly, sweeping his arm across the Market District skyline. “Not really,” he said. Standing behind her, he pointed to one of the taller buildings. “See that one? Green lights?” Breath trapped in her throat, Rebecca nodded. “Top floor. Stalk me whenever you like.” He had the life. She imagined sitting by a glass wall, watching lights burn and burn out in the city below. She could sunbathe nude on the roof, a quarter mile above the nearest set of eyes, host parties attended by the important society types she’d met at the Opera House (name?). From that window, the club and even the wide, quiet boulevard they walked down now would be insignificant specks and lines in the distance.

“Nice place,” she mumbled.

“Well, it has its perks,” he said. “But they do say it’s lonely at the top.”

“You’ve got a stalker now, remember?” she dropped a smile full of mischief, not an ounce feigned. “More company than you can stand.”

“I doubt that,” he said.

Under a streetlight, they stopped. With long, lingering eyes, she stepped in to him, hands placed delicately on his shoulders to give him access to her body. She tilted her head up, blinked slowly, the international invitation for a kiss. Derek was good, a delicate kisser - his tongue slid just barely between her lips. A good kiss is like a promise. She liked this part, the kissing and even the way his hands slid down her back to cradle her ass. It was just when a man stiffened against a woman’s thigh things usually went wrong, when he forgot to be a man and turned into a dog in heat. But she played along, ran her hand through his hair and kissed him harder, exploring his mouth, watching his eyes flutter, pressing her tits against his chest.

“Come on upstairs,” she said.

He bowed, comically, she thought, considering the erection with which she’d just been poked. “My dear, I thought you’d never ask.”

Although she rarely had guests, Rebecca kept her apartment tidy, and the décor was tasteful enough. She’d spent enough time and money installing the stretch bar along the wall under the window and the giant mirrors opposite to make them seem like natural aspects of the design. After following her up the stairs, though, trying to glimpse up the breezy yellow of her skirt, she didn’t expect Derek to notice.

He didn’t. “Nice place,” he said, after a cursory glance around.
“Well, it’s no penthouse,” she shrugged.

Like the anonymous lovers in the movie, Derek teased a stray hair from her cheek behind her ear, and leaned in for another kiss. Knowing where this was going drained Rebecca’s romance, but she leaned in and made herself inviting. At least he didn’t attack her like pigs at lunch-time. She looped her arms around his neck and felt him hard against her, again. Quick to get up, quick to get down, she thought. For all the time men spent on sex, most of them never lasted more than a few minutes, which was fine by her. Rebecca hoped her adage was true and this would be over with soon.

Not that she minded too much, and it was such a small thing to make so much over. Every man had a monkey in him, and to feed the beast is to keep the man happy. If all he wanted was her body, she would let him have that.

His hands slid down over her tits, down to her stomach, and gathered the dress in his fists. She held her arms over her head and let him pull her dress off, arching her back in a long, fluid wave, head tossed and hair flying.

He looked over her shoulder and a slow, impish smile spread his face. “What’s that for?” he asked, nodding to the mirror.

She glanced behind, and saw herself, standing in her bra and underwear. Boyshort panties stretched over a dancer’s firm, rounded ass with still no sign of orange peels, well-muscled thighs with hints of germinating cellulite starting to appear. Twisted this way brought a fold to crease her side just below her bra - she would have to work on that. In the mirror, his eyes, too, crawled slowly up her body.

Rebecca licked her lips. She ran her hand down his chest, his stomach, firm and tight, and down to his crotch, to the stiffened cock now throbbing in his pants. “How curious are you?” she asked, squeezed once, gently.

Derek swallowed and closed his eyes. “Pretty curious,” he managed.

She was surprised, but also surprised that she felt the urge to share with him something more. It was funny that something as silly and animal as the engorged organ in her hand served as the gate-keeper to a possible relationship. The sex would be impersonal, it always was. He would want to fuck, of course, but first she could give him something personal before going through the ritual. She smiled, suddenly, brightly, and squeezed his cock one more time before lowering him down onto the couch.

In the pallid streetlight diffusing through the window, he looked like a movie star.

“Stay here,” she said. His breath was shallow, his hands tense and eager, but he swallowed hard, licking his lips as his eyes strayed up to hers, and nodded.

“Sure thing.”

“I haven’t done this in front of anyone in...awhile,” she said, suddenly nervous. Her voice and hands shook as she started (ballet research), but soon her muscles took over, and her body moved on its own. The years spent shaking her tits and ass in front of the horny and mindless - that wasn’t dancing. This was dancing, and as she swept across the floor, she lost herself in the movements of her body, even lost her anxious
edge when she looked at Derek, who reclined, arms stretched over the back of the couch, his face in shadows. Under her breath, Rebecca hummed (part of Giselle). She glided, she flew, and, finally, let the momentum carry her into a bow, breathless.

“That was nice,” he said as soon as she was over, clapping enthusiastically.

That wasn’t nice, Rebecca thought. That was wonderful. She stood there, and suddenly felt vulnerable and silly.

“Now stop being a tease and come back,” Derek said, patting his thigh. His tone was playful and light, and the enthusiasm lingered, but she could see that he was a man drumming his fingers through the previews.

“Just stretching out,” she shrugged. “You should, too. You’ll need it.” She heard her voice sultry and warm, but the words felt like cheap wood flooring. She went back to the couch and Derek looked up at her, eyes wide and childish. With a fixed, plastic smile, perfected at work, Rebecca ran her hand up his thigh to his still-hard cock, and cupped it gently.

“Good,” she grinned, heard him gasp as she abruptly let go and walked toward the bathroom. “Don’t leave me hanging too long,” he called after her.

She went into the bathroom for the bottle of lube she kept in the medicine cabinet. She could feel his eyes riveted on her ass, knew what boyshorts did for her hips, and swayed a little more as she walked into the hall, just enough to keep his attention.

“It’s worth it,” she answered from the bathroom. “Don’t worry.” Rebecca hoped again he didn’t last too long. She’d heard women talk at the club, on TV, in magazines about how much they loved sex, but she always thought their interest was for the benefit of the men. Men wanted women to like it, to want it just as much as they did, which was an easy enough game of charades to play. Women had been playing it for millennia.

She grabbed the lube and a towel from the shelf, in case this turned into a longer session. It was hard to tell. That guy in the Jag who’d picked her up (where?) had seemed easy enough — but he pumped away for hours, grimacing and grunting above her, while she learned to hate those little blue pills. After that, not so much as a phone call, not even a friend request to make the animal grunting and ache worthwhile.

As she turned, she caught herself in the mirror and stopped. Rebecca unhooked the clasp of her bra and dropped it into the hamper. A couple of years away from the failed pencil test, from the smooth skin at the corner of her eyes crackling like old plaster. She lifted her breasts and dropped them, and measured the gap between where they’d been and where they were. And where they were going, but maybe that wouldn’t matter.

“Rebecca!” Derek’s voice shattered her reflection. “You’re killing me.”

“Anticipation is half the pleasure,” she called back, sing-song and cheery.

Earlier, she’d left a pair of the trashy heels she wore to work, 5-inch stilettos, under the
sink. She slipped them on and fluffed out her hair, but left the panties on so he’d have something to unwrap.

“Showtime,” her reflection said.

“You ready for a real dance now?” she called out to Derek. Rebecca walked out into the hall, all swaying grace and invitation, and turned out the light behind her.

“A pedestal is also a cage,” Sontag had said. Obviously, Sontag had never been on a pedestal like this. Ashley certainly doesn’t feel like (Sontag quote). She is run wild and free, wresting fascination from the hundreds of eyes following her every move, showering in the deafening cheers and vulgarities even louder than the music. She doesn’t feel dull and frozen, like an (line from that modeling poem). She’s a rock star, with the stage light burning out the most distant faces and giving the impression of shouts echoing from far, distant places. Every pair of eyes in the place is here; she held every man in the room by the throat. Ashley throws her hands over her head and grinds her hips into the beat. The rhythm starts in her feet, travels up her garish heels and flame-licked thighs. Her hair swishes against her back and spins around the pole. She arches her back and imagines, can almost feel, the world around her shake. On her hands and knees at the end of the pedestal, she presses a leering face into her cleavage and feels the desire wiring the man’s body as he slips the inevitable bill into her thong. His friends shout approval, but the submission in his fingers as he gives up the bill summons goose bumps to her skin. She smirks and arcs away. The room reeks of desire – desire for her, and Ashley rides the power for the rest of her set (is there a term for this. Routine?).
Later she sat in front of a mirror and brushed the sweat tangles out of her hair.

"Nice job," Desiree said. "You'll have to show me some of them sometime."

"I could, Sweetie," Ashley said. "But I'd have to charge." Once, she'd had practice her lazy dawl, but now it was natural and smooth. Here she was from a small Alabama town. No valet parking, no Central Park view, no doorman on Park Avenue W, just minimum wage and warm, canned beer by the lake. She eyed Desiree in the mirror, her olive skin and dark, cascading hair, wet brown eyes and fake tits. Breast implants, she corrected herself. "You know nothing around here comes for free."

Ashley knew she was pretty, maybe a little sharp in the nose, a little gaunt in the cheekbone, but nothing like Desiree's Pacific Island beauty. She claimed to be Samoan, but as with anyone else, no one knew for sure. With a silver laugh, Desiree hunched her shoulders, pressing her breasts together, and blew a kiss. "Well, maybe we can work it out in trade."

"What? You gonna give me your salt-bags now? No thanks. 36C is fine by me."

She remembered being uncomfortable with the emphasis on breast size, something she'd only considered when shopping for bras in the boutique stores (where?). Had even been inspired to write a chapter on Voluntary Objectification (or something equally obnoxious). Now, though, after a year or so, she was used to the parlance and hierarchical structures, the delicate trade-off between the labels "D" and "natural."

Desiree eyed her own in the mirror. "Well, when you're ready to trade up, let me know. My doctor will cut you a deal. A cup or two bigger and you'll be able to buy a Jaguar." Ashley had to admit that the augmentation suited Desiree; the generous hips and equally curved behind balanced nicely. Fingers twiddling in a casual wave, Desiree disappeared through the side door, out into the alley.

Ashley dressed in her thrift-store tatters, a style popular with certain girls in New Orleans. A flowing short skirt faded to grey and black-and-white striped knee socks for which she was probably too old. Ashley didn't care, and neither did anyone else. Here she was another pretty girl in dime-store chic, another abused beauty undressing for dollar bills, and, in the street, another militant individual in a city of clashing colour. A researcher could likely do an entire anthropological study on the clothing styles of the destitute artists of this city and its non-monetary value system. Outside, Ashley stood there, blinking in the suddenly harsh light. It was easy to lose track of time, and she still forgot that daylight waited outside.

Walking home, she rolled the conversation with Desiree back and forth in her mind. It wasn't the sexual innuendo - she was used to that by now and even licked her lips a little at the memory of Desiree cupping her surgeon-granted gifts. Of course, she wouldn't get implants; she was proud of her body, of the curves and unblemished skin and natural contours, but wondered at the attention Desiree must get from the audience, and from the other women. How many palms itched to slide the sides of those ... she stopped herself and shook her head. She herself could have, if she'd taken
the joking offer another way. So far, Ashley had steered clear of the girl’s “games,”
together, lesbian trysts after all-night binges, renting themselves out as bachelor party
favors, but she could, and no one would know. (Quote about anthropologists keeping a
certain analytical distance”), but she could do anything. She kicked a beer can down
the cantilevered sidewalk and heard the hinges of a bird cage door in its rattle. Today
the day just breaking, she’d determined to work on her paper and write but, first she
had to meet some friends at a bar on Frenchmen. Before that, sleep.

Ashley climbed the canted stairs to her apartment and threw herself into
The heels made her calves burn, her thighs ached and her abs burned. She laid
satisfied, savoring the aches and pains like those won through a soccer game or truly
worthwhile fuck.

The day already half over, Ashley sat down in front of her Mac, staring grainey-
eyed at an open document which had, lately, become more and more nebulous and
distant. Not that she wasn’t smart enough anymore. She lit a cigarette and squinted
through the smoke. Something always needed development, something else needed an
anchor. But the higher the page count climbed, the harder it became for Ashley to
remember what she was writing about. She’d even stopped taking her notebook to
work. She’d meant to analyze the interaction between herself and Desiree, but only sat
there with the image of Desiree’s butt, the tightness of her faded jeans, the rock and roll
of her hips as she walked away.

Instead, Ashley checked her email and Facebook, the first resort of foundering
writers. It had been exciting, once, like a cloak-and-dagger game, keeping her separate
identities—different emails, social networking, even a new Amazon account to keep her
address from her parents. Now it was also second nature. She blew into her cup and
checked her ashleyunleashed@gmail.com account first.

“Something About Stripping.” Field research overdue and she didn’t even have
a serious title. Not that she hadn’t tried. “Power Plays in the Objectification of
Underprivileged Women” (steal other academic titles). Nothing descriptive and clinical
even, nothing that could wrap up the experiences, being devoured by ravenous eyes
and the wetness in her panties when she walked offstage. It had been a week since
she’d added anything new, and that only a paragraph she’d deleted later.

In her “real” account, Ashley Kurtz’s University of Chicago account, she found
another message, one of the notes she’d come to dread. Dr. Kaiser, (title?) her thesis
advisor, inquiring again on the progress of the “difficult project,” expressing her
worries regarding the “lack of meaningful progress,” and encouraged her to “check in
more frequently.” These Ashley sometimes deleted without responding, but this had a
flyer attached, a Call for Papers for the (conference name). (What kind of timelines are
required? What does an advisor say when a candidate falls behind? The note must
mention the title of her paper, an old title she finds ridiculous.) Ashley stubbed her
cigarette and leaned back with a groan. “I’ll call you tonight, 9 P.M. sharp. We’ll
discuss then the progress you have made and discuss the future of your thesis.”
“Bitch,” Ashley sighed. She could prevaricate, but she wasn’t in the mood. She remembered the last time she’d called home, a few weeks ago, when she’d been unable to drop the adopted Southern accent. At first, her father had laughed and accused her of “going native,” but then her mother had asked, in her delicate motherly way, “you are going to speak like a normal person when you come home, aren’t you, dear?” Ashley ran her hands through her hair, grease-stained and clinging with smoke.

In the shower, she thought about her paper, about the Ashley who wrote it: Ashley with the eyeglasses and ponytail, who liked a good romp in the sheets as much as any girl, but couldn’t admit to liking one too much, accustomed to viewing her good looks as an obstacle to being taken seriously as an intellect. Soon, though, she lost her train of thought and sank into the feeling of the water splashing down her body, sheeting from her blonde hair down her back, running from the tip of her nose and splashing down her breasts. With one leg on the bathtub rim, carefully working the razor around her lips, she chuckled. (quote about shaving, old feminist stuff). Out of the shower, she admired the stubble-free little mound of her pubis, the little peek-a-boo "V" of the crease inside her legs (what’s this called), like a child’s drawing of birds. (a little more of her admiring herself in the mirror. Strippers work out, do coke to stay thin. Leave contrast with previous unspoken).

The afternoon waned on and, already late, Ashley grabbed her purse and hurried down the steps. This place is infectious, she thought. She ran later and later and nobody seemed to care. Les Bon Temps were always Roulez-ing. She thought about her paper as she crossed Elysian Fields, dodging traffic and waving off catcalls. She was comfortable, now, getting nude on a stage. But if a stranger walked in on her in the shower, would she scream and try to cover herself? In the context of the club, the casual exposure of female flesh and unabashed pinkness was celebrated. But would she comfortably walk down the street naked? Probably not, she decided, watching the thin early-afternoon crowd of noisy revelers scatter down the street. But she did find the idea vaguely hot.

Outside the Apple Barrel (place where the strippers congregate), she met Chloe and Claire. Chloe was pretty in a clichéd Maybelline kind of way, like rhyming poetry. Claire, with her bright eyes and child-like freckles, was a server who the owner had been trying to get onto the stage since her first day on the floor. She was a little short for a dancer, but those pert nipples pressing through her tank top and the caramel mop of messy hair would lure at least a few men to their deaths. A few more, she decided, as Claire turned to her and smiled.

“How’s tricks?” Ashley drawled, arms open for a hug. It was hard not to imagine or notice the reactions of the people around them, of men half-entertaining daydreams and women watching the three of them embrace with mingled contempt and envy.

“Tricks is turnin’,” Chloe replied.

“Bum me a smoke,” Claire asked. A twinge of regret surprised Ashley as she let her arm fall from where she’d let it linger across Claire’s shoulders. She pulled an
American Spirit from her pack and their fingers brushed, so slightly. A spark jumped between Ashley and Other. (anthropological Other quote.)

"Thanks," Claire said. "I'll get a pack from the machine."

"Touch me like that again and I'll buy the whole night," Ashley smirked. Up and down Frenchmen, the bar bands were firing up as evening crept up into the sky.

"Looks like Goody Two Shoes is finally loosening up," Chloe laughed.

The women went into the bar, where Desiree and a few other girls had already found a table. At work, they were surrounded by men. Off duty, they stuck to one another. Of course, many of the girls dancing in the club, the typical subjects with daddy issues about whom Ashley had long grown tired of writing, craved the company of men and didn't know who they were unless they were surrounding by grabby hands and frustration. But others, like Chloe and Desiree, men were nearly impossible to respect - whether a King or a lowly street sweeper, each would eventually throw that dollar down.

"Can't stay long," Ashley said as she fell into a chair. "Got some shit to do tonight, y'all."

"Workin' overtime, sweetie?" one of the girls asked. Ashley always forgot her name, but had written an paragraph or two about the stretch marks on her hips.

"You could say that," Ashley smirked, and let the girls rain down jokes about masturbating frat boys. She'd written about the forces that drove women to that without participating, but found nothing to say anyone reading would want to hear.

She herself only danced in the private lounges and had only gone so far as dry-humping businessmen and birthday boys through their clothes on the red wrap-around.

The music piped in and the liquor started to flow, as it only can in New Orleans. Claire left the table and came back with a pack of cigarettes, which she tossed onto the table in front of Ashley. She sat down, a mischievous smile playing her lips, and ran her fingertips up Ashley's thigh under the table.

"What can I get for this?" she breathed into Ashley's ear. The other girls were involved in a loud conversation about someone's boyfriend, or the father of someone's baby, or the size of someone's implants, calling each other "whore" and "slut". Ashley felt herself flush, the hair on her arms stiffen.

"I'll buy your drinks, for starters," she said evenly. "What else you got?"

"Oh, I've got plenty else," Claire said. "You stick around and see."

Ashley did, drinking with the girls, turning and ordering a round for the table when the dumpy waitress with the pierced nose hurried past. Another round came quick on its heels. Then another. Outside, evening fell and a live band began tuning up.

"Come on," Claire was attempting to bribe off Chloe's shirt. "I'll give you $200. And you can sleep with my boyfriend."

"Ho, I can do that when I want!" Chloe laughed. Claire threw back her head and let out a shrill tinkle of a laugh; her hand landed on Ashley's thigh. Ashley chewed on
her straw and watched as Claire, animated and bright, upped the ante. Such a delicate neck, she thought, and such perfect and small breasts.

"I'm goin' to the bathroom," Desiree pushed her chair back from the table, roughly and drunk. "You bitches are crazy."

The back of her chair bumped a woman standing by the bar, the professional and prude type who wore their business suit to the bar after work - professional hair and professional shoes, professionally middle-aged.

"Hey, watch it, slut!" the woman cried as the drink sloshed over her hand down the front of her slacks.

"Sorry," Desiree began, waving her hands, suddenly subdued.

Claire opened her mouth, but bit down hard on whatever she intended to say.

Ashley saw the contempt in the affronted look the woman threw around the room, as if to say, "who let this trash in here?"

"Hey, fuck you and your rusted cunt, bitch!" Ashley shouted over the drummer's clattering snare. The woman stared, exaggerated disgust twisted her lips as she looked Ashley up and down. Ashley lit a cigarette and blew the first cloud of smoke in the woman's direction.

"Why don't you get back in your Volvo and get out of my goddamn face before I find your husband and show him how a real woman fucks."

The Banker, as Ashley had already dubbed her, stood mute and shocked, eyes widening. In the constant noise and hubbub of the bar, a heavy silence fell over the table until Claire shattered it with a drunken giggle.

"You probably do drive a Volvo, don't you? Jesus."

The tension broke, and all four women burst into laughter. All but Ashley, who stared flatly at the Banker. Finally, the suit dropped her eyes and turned back to her friend, flinging booze from her hand and gesturing at the table, saying something into her friend's ear too quietly for the girls to hear.

"Seatbelts!" Chloe called as the women moved to the other side of the bar.

"Drive safe, now!"

In the mirror, Ashley could see the woman and her friend, eyes hard and contemptuous, lips set in firm lines, shooting looks at the girls.

"She's not rusted shut, though," Desiree snorted. "Does it missionary with the lights out."

"Schedules play-time with the hubby in her Blackberry," another girl said.

"Christ," Claire said. "Bitch reminds me of my mother. 'Look how trendy and with-it I am, hanging out in the Quarter. Still an uptight bitch.'"

The band kicked up, an uptempo fusion of jazz, rock, and electronic, flooding out conversation like a storm surge. Claire leaned in close, bottom lip stuck out in a cute pout. "Aw, don't be mad!" she shouted into Ashley's ear. "Come on and dance with
me." Ashley's anger broke on the girl's eagerness; she tried to hold onto it, but gave up and smiled.

They danced - close and hard, moves that belonged in a nightclub rather than a jazz bar. The girls were the first two on the floor, so all eyes were, for a moment, on them. Ashley felt a thrill at all those eyes, all those conversations suspended hung on her. Claire danced wildly, sensual, with flailing arms and thrusting hips. Hair fell into her face, stuck there in the sweat. Novice dancing, but pretty enough. Dancing with the unconscious ease of a professional, Ashley watched sweat trickle down Claire's neck. She wanted to grab a handful of that damp next and pull her head back, sink her teeth into the softness of her neck. Shocked at the vividness of her own impulse, Ashley shook her head. Then her eye fell back to the women at the bar, who pointedly ignored her now, and remembered her own Volvo, in the garage at her parent's house. And she'd once worn suits like those to meetings with professors and recruiters, pretty and professional and perfectly harmless. Now, looking at the way they sipped their drinks calmly, cocooned in superiority, she indulged in another rush of brightly vitriolic disdain.

"Hey, wanna do a line?" Claire asked as soon as the song was over. Ashley's first instinct was to demur - drugs were part of the extracurricular games she'd managed to avoid, something in which she'd only dabbled as an undergrad. But the straight, suited backs of the women at the bar sprung back to her from the crowd, and Claire's skin was so pretty. "I live across the street."

They spilled out into the street, where night had already fallen and the party was already underway. Claire grabbed Ashley's hand and led her through the crowd and the stench, that rotting-garbage-spilled-beer-something-indefinable that only came out at night.

"You're a pretty good dancer," Ashley said. "You should dance sometime."

"I just like the corset," Claire said. "I can carry drinks for drunks and get my ass pinched anywhere. Besides," she said, turning to face her and thrusting out her chest. "My boobs are too small."

"They look fine to me," Ashley said, mouth suddenly dry. From the corner of her eye, she watched Claire's breasts, small and floating, and the way they swayed ever so slightly as they crossed Frenchmen. She was small, and Ashley imagined pinning her down, hands over her head, helpless and gasping. (something about male sexual dominance). The dancing and the sweating always made her wet, but suddenly Ashley felt she could have sailed toy boats in her panties. Her hands, her body ached for something unexplainable, something else for which there aren't enough words. Claire led her down an alley and unlocked a small door into a darkened courtyard. Here, she'd found, the chaos and celebration in the streets sat a wall away from the cloistered inside where everything was dark and safe.

"Come on," Claire whispered, dilated and eyes wet. "I got some quality snow this morning and I've been dying to hit the slopes. We'll ski till the sun comes up."

"Okay," Ashley grinned. "Bunny slopes, though."
“No bunny slopes in my house,” Claire said. Ashley watched the swing of her hips and imagined her fingers there, sinking into flesh.

“Anything you say, darling.” The two girls crossed the courtyard, Claire still leading Ashley by the hand (HOD). I can easily overpower you, Ashley thought. She hoped Claire struggled, a little. In Ashley’s purse, her phone buzzed on silent, forgotten.
The Bouncer

The last ripples of music dripped from the speakers and echoed around in the empty places. Drunks wallowed in illusion by the bar. The lights were up and outside the first cracks were splitting the sky. Kai nourished the nervous tingle in her spine while the waitress wiped the counter and stressed her patience.

“You’re already ten feet tall,” Roxie was saying. “Maybe if you didn’t wear 40-inch heels so you looked like a tree and act like a lunatic, you wouldn’t be single. There was that nice-looking guy eyeballin’ you half the night and you just floated right over his head. Men hate that.”

Kai stretched and smiled warmly - a skill she’d learned. She was a projector with a thousand movies on tap, could make her eyes glitter like a Kindergarten art project.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said, sweetly. “Your opinion means a lot to me.” (ick) She meant every word. She wasn’t ten feet, but nearly seven in the stilettos, and liked seeing over the heads of the world. Women her height usually wound up bowed, trying to blend and hide, but Kai liked to arch her back in crowded rooms and feel the bubble of intimidation around her grow.

The stage was flanked by heavy red curtains, their shimmer softened with age, but long velvet waterfalls. Kai lost Roxie’s response. One day, she’d wait until the place was deserted and the lights put out and wrap herself in velvet arms - a velvet cocoon - and masturbate. (more) She was shiver and anticipate, a tunnel of impossibly soft hands, the darkness. Not one day, which was just one letter away from “no day”. Soon.

A light brush on her shoulder, a careless breeze finger through the refugee hairs from her ponytail, a brush against her hip, soft as imaginary. She closed her eyes - fingers in her hair. She closed her eyes and stretched the moment - dangerous as it was - of not knowing. The curtain’s shiver ran across her skin and Roxie everything fell silent and, for that moment, nothing in the world could have turned Kai around.

She’d known without tasting that it was perfect - Long Island, extra tequila, no vermouth. Her drink, and nobody here knew, but the bartender passed it down to the bar to her - a little mystery on ice, delivered with the ease and lack of fanfare as a pizza. The cute little bartender told her it was from the new bouncer, but Kai couldn’t figure out, for the life of her, how he’d known. It was her favourite. Apple martinis from the carpet-bombers, Jack & Coke from the ones attracted to the “one of the guys” vibe. A homeless guy had offered her the last of his Mogen David when she was under the bridge. Sometimes the suit attracted gin. But how did he know? She purred low in the back of her throat, too quiet for anyone else to hear, but caught herself and stopped. She’d waited out the night while he manned the door outside (is there a term for this?) to find out.
She turned, finally, and found nothing behind her. An empty space, still warm, but nothing she could have brushed against. She blinked, and put her hand through the empty space. Her imagination, maybe, or someone standing behind her now gone - this place was full of people waiting to steal something. She shrugged and waved goodbye to the (who's cleaning?) on her way to the door.

Kai stepped out into the gestating dawn and wasn't surprised to find the new bouncer leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette and watching the smoke swirl in the pallid light (ick). Although she was taller than him barefoot, and although she was nearly seven feet tall in her heels, she met his eyes. "Those motherfuckers are blue," she thought. "Psycho blue." Nothing tame or cliché like sapphires, either. The blue bled from Caribbean beaches and cobalt skies with the promise of monsoons. He was short and angular, with a detached amusement Kai knew from experience could signal a generous wit or Siberian savagery. She shivered a delighted shiver.

"Name's Rebecca," she held out her hand.

He shook it, lingering like a lover passing forbidden notes.

"Of course" he said. His voice was rough, forest-floor. "Name's Alex."

An interlude, dropped china plates, a moment of silence at this point and she's already regretting the story she's just told. Which is strange, she thinks. It's precisely the sort of story she loves, and precisely the way she loves to tell them - framed by the innocuousness of a coffee shop where an outrageous lie well-told will jump out, contrast with the hub and hub and the fragile privacy.

"Of course, there wasn't an investigation," she says into the silence. "Not way out there."

It had come out on impulse, something she couldn't explain in response to the any-game-any-rules look in his eyes. And those eyes, like the first blush of a gasoline flame frosted into crystals. She stares.

"Tell me something," he says, leaning forward, is that a smile? "Does it really taste like chicken?"

Of course he's kidding, but there's an undercurrent of seriousness, as though he's really curious. Or didn't believe her and wanted to see how far she's push the lie. Kai is used to discomfort, averted, but Alex is intrigued, and that intrigues her.

"Not really," she says, casually. "Leon really wasn't very good, but when you're absolutely out of everything else..." She trails off, as thought she'd made a terrible joke, as though embarrassed.

Alex purses his lips. "Can't really judge a person for what they do when they're desperate," he says. "I was a junkie for years."
She stares, unsure. Not sure whether to believe him. He could be in earnest and Kai wonders whether it was a fair exchange, whether she'd gotten an expensive gift in exchange for a gift card. He could be making it up. More interesting, still, was the idea that he'd smelt the bullshit in her story and decided to play her game.

“How’d that happen?” she asks.

“It’s another old, boring story,” he shrugs. “I was in love with a girl who was into the party scene. She went deeper and deeper into the hell hatch and I just followed along. Young and stupid.” Slowly, methodically or reflectively, turning his spoon through his coffee.


“Yeah,” he says. “Realized I’d hit rock bottom when I took a hammer to the mailboxes and stole Mrs. Bakers’ Social Security check.”

“You didn’t!” Kai gasps. For a moment, surprise overtakes suspicion.

“Oh, and worse,” he slips her a bitter smile. “I went into rehab when I shot my older brother.”

“Oh come on!” she cries in disbelief, victory, and a little disappointed. “You can’t seriously expect me to believe you’d killed your brother and would just tell me about it.”

“Of course not,” he replies, slick and iced. “That’d be absurd, like telling you I’d eaten somebody.” She cocks an eyebrow but cedes. “It was just a flesh wound, but enough to scare me sober.”

Kai remembers her coffee and lets a silent breeze blow between them. Alex, if that was his name, had the air of words carefully chosen, of a world carefully built. Had he caught her? It wouldn’t be the first time, but normal reactions were indignation, as if untruth automatically equals dishonesty, as if honesty equals knowledge. Kai doesn’t know whether to believe his story. A tremble shivers up her thighs.

“I once nearly killed a girl during sex,” she says. For a moment, she revels in the gunslinger air, the challenge, imagines frightened eyes watching from slatted windows, everything spur-clink and tumbleweeds. “She said, ‘choke me,’ so I did, then I held on…” Kai holds the little truth like a candle.

“What was that like?” he asks. Believer? No? Doesn’t matter.

“Terrifying. Beautiful.”

“The usual.”

“Yes.”

“I once won a thousand dollars in a kick-boxing match in Thailand,” he says without missing a moment. They are out on the street now, and this Kai believes. No
man of his height would get a job as a bouncer without intimacy with the geometries of pain, without recognizing the music in the cracking of bone, without surviving terrible winters in wind-bitten places. She imagines him hurt and sweat-slicked and knuckles bound in coarse rope. Victorious with beads of blood trickling down his jaw. She wants to attack him; throw a backfist at his head and see the reaction. She wants him to win, and a tremble settles in her spine.

“They locked me up when I was 13 because I thought all my friends were imaginary,” she confessed.


“Until my 38th birthday, when I realized I was the imaginary one.” Kai smiles - it’s obvious she’s 24.

He laughed, a sharp flinty sound like pebbles and gravel.

The morning is thin and fragile, sensitive and ready to collapse back into the night at the wrong word. Kai feels a sudden rush of love for the other people on the street, stumbling drunk or solitary over abused sidewalks, in conspiratorial pairs and raucous groups. People who knew, like her, the hard hours of cruel winters, the emptiness of holding handfuls of broken pieces. The others, tied hopelessly to the truth of their own stories, were still in bed or just now dressing for work, choosing suit colours by rote. Alex slips his arm through hers, easy intimate, and closed her eyes, focused on the pressure of his forearm against her hip. She chews her lip and her nipples sniffen.

“I fell in love with an Iranian organist,” he says after a long and easy silence. “I committed suicide outside her father’s house when he refused to let us marry.”

Kai sighs and imagines bleeding slowly in a pre-dawn date grove, a peeling and aged wall staring down, remorseless.

“I fell in love with a man I never met,” she tells him. Partly true. “He wrote poetry - the most beautiful! - on the sidewalks in Eugene.” How else to describe the many-citied back-alley wandering, those nights alone with Dumpsters and the terminally broken? “I wrote him some love poems on a record store wall, but he never wrote back.”

They pass the Café En Vie - she’d thought they were wandering a meander through the restless city, but realized now she was leading, oh so subtly, subtle enough to fool herself, to her apartment. And perhaps Alex senses her distracting smile as a turn was chosen, senses the long loops as they circumnavigate blocks. His smile writes something illegible. Kai falters and gave in to a moment to common sense, ponders that she barely knows this guy, that something in him might be dangerous, as dangerous as her. But she summons her smile and lets the night be her guide, steering Alex down Chartres with a nudge of her hip. A truth, she thought, will reveal itself.
"How did you know my drink?" she asks abruptly. She can't wait and, as they near her apartment, tension climbs up the back of her throat like acid.

"Oh, come on," he cocks an eyebrow. "Let a guy keep a secret or two. Really want to know everything?"

She doesn't. She knows information is not intimacy, that knowing someone means more than the gathering of facts. She wants to share the stories carved into her soul, decipher the hieroglyphs etched into his, let him see the giant cinnamon candle in her bathroom and her toothbrush by the kitchen sink. She wants to let him test the fragility of her most expensive negligee, wear his sweat like rare French perfume.

"I ran away from home when I was 14," he's telling her. "And again when I was 25."

"I never had a home I didn't want to run away from." If he knew that she couldn't have children, that she ran away from an expensive college, would he know her any better? What he was getting into? Would he want her any less?

They tread fine lines back to her place, between daylight and midnight, fiction and fact. They arrive at the rickety stairs to her apartment, mysteries intact.

"Here I am," she says, gesturing with her chin.

"There you are."

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He squints, and she senses a flash of indecision. Kai sees a focus, of sharp things poking at tender things.

"Tell the truth," he begins. "Say one true thing before I go."

"I hate the morning sometime," she looks around at the climbing light. "Sometimes I wish it could always be dawn." He smiles, nods to himself, taking a note, collecting specimens, turns to go.

"How did you know about my drink?" she asks again.

"Good night, Becky," he calls over his shoulder. She would have grabbed him by the tie and pulled him up the stairs, let him see the scars on her belly and searched his body for tattoos and stories, but she climbs her stairs, alone, holding her hand and waiting for the next card.

She liked the feel of the crowd, aware of its eddies and flows that broke and foamed around her. She loomed; over the tables, over the heads of the patrons, her tailored black suit a shocking contrast in a room where most of the other women were nervous, drunk, or half-naked. The drunks, the loners, the strippers lap-dancing all bought and sold this illusion, and it was a dangerous one. She felt like she stood in an oil refinery, and the whisper of bared legs was flint scraping on steel - both sounds she loved. She was a long, thin black slash through the noise and excitement and illusion.
Kai weaved between the tables, looking for those sharp eddies that marked trouble about to start but, also, looking for Alex, or whatever his name was - working tonight? Adjusting his tie, maybe, in the men’s room? She thought about checking, had her hand flattened against the door above the gold-lettered “gents,” but stopped. Maybe she didn’t want to know just yet. Not yet. How he’d known about her drink, what he does when the daylight chased nonsense and mystery from the world.

She hadn’t slept; instead Kai spent the day scribbling in her sketchbooks and, later, climbing sun-drenched peaks of ecstasy alone. She’d tested the limits of her body, insatiable, arched and moaning with her face buried in the pillows. Her abs still hurt from the endless coming and she strutted through the club on liquid legs. Even after a shower she could smell herself, but everything had edges that were sharp and clear, even in the shadows, anonymous.

Finally, she spotted him, standing by the door and watching her with a smile playing cat-and-mouse games around his lips. She stretched, tall, and felt majestic as she strode through the audience. A girl disrobed behind her, clothes falling, hips angry and jerking. The crowd broke around her, she was effortless, holding the drink in her hand. (more?)

“Hi,” she said. “Black Russian?”

He looked at her like a mystery.

“How’d you know?” he asked, and took the tumbler.
"Here ya go, Max," Claire sang, clinking down his two fingers of JD, on the rocks.

"Thank you, dear." Once, he'd been known for the keenness of his 'eye,' but now, only a few feet away, but Max couldn't tell the colour of her eyes. He imagined them green like cities at the end of golden roads, startling in Technicolour. Or maybe green was too sharp. Maybe hazel. Or a lighter blue.

"Don't know why you're so chipper to him," Roxie said when Claire returned to the bar. "Orders cheap, tips cheap. Just sits there and drools." Old and worn, bile was the last thing Roxie could depend on.

"He doesn't drool," Clair sighed. On an easier night, she would have rolled her eyes and offered a disarming smile. "He's harmless, and a hell of a lot nicer than most of the assholes in here. You're just a bitch."

"Maybe," the bartender coughed a laugh. "But I earned the right to be." She nodded to Max, curled over his drink in the corner. "But post office walls are covered with creeps some dumb bitch thought was harmless."

"Whatever," Claire shrugged. She'd never seen anything on a post office walls but posters of lost dogs. She went back to her rounds. Nearing table 17, she plastered on an inviting smile as the frat boy who waved her down tip-toed her legs, stilettos to garters, with his eyes.

Finally, the vague ocean of red velvet behind the stage parted, and Ashley strutted out into the lights. Heavy techno thumped through the speakers, faintly trembling the ice in Max's glass. Handfuls of light ricocheted off the rhinestones of her G-string, shooting out and disappearing like beams riding ripples in a lake he'd once seen, high in the Andes.

He remembered those fields, waves of emerald oceans dropping into the horizon and flotillas of colour, armadas of wildflowers so remote and rare no one had yet given them names. Max would wait, watching the world through the viewfinder of his Nikon (more specific), waiting, blades of grass pressed to his cheek. This flower's stalk bending to a perfect angle, petals open like fingers catching the wind. A rare animal crouched in the treeline's shelter. And those moments he'd held the glossy captured moments, framed in gold on the cover of National Geographic.

Other dancers moved in motions too small, in fine details Max could no longer see. Or swept across stages in sequined blurs not very different from a car cruising down the street at night. Ballet was clockworks smeared. But this young Ashley, her youth and perk shining through Max's encroaching blindness - she was a snake. She was smoke curling up from an overfilled ashtray. There, too, the viewer was forced to fit so far back from the stage, anything to see lost to Max's failing vision. Here, though,
he could sit a few feet away, intimate. That glass wall between voyeur and voyed intact, but clouded.

Applause and “oh yeah”s rose briefly above the music – men’s voices, mostly, with a few women tinsel in. He knew the brief spasmodic noisemaking, partly feigned and a tinge desperate, marked the young Ashley dropping her top. Max couldn’t see, but imagined it falling to the stage like a discarded feather. He settled into memories of girls posing for his camera in low-lit apartments in the village. Caressing a woman’s breast with a finger on the shutter (technical term), teasing smiles from the shy ones, robes from the timid, curves and swells, delicate pools of shadows and hints of half-hidden things.

Max sipped his whiskey as the girl impressed herself across the stage. Frat boys and rowdy drunks hooted cat-calls from the dim. He felt the suspicious eye of the bartender lingering over him and, once again, Max considered introducing himself, explaining himself, and probably getting his drinks free. For that matter, he could probably get himself invited to the back room, a novelty for the girls – the mostly blind man who could only make out the dim curve of a woman’s back or the rustle of clothes falling to the floor. The thought of the pitying smiles, of the mockery when he was gone twisted his pride, just as the knowledge of how ridiculous he must look, sitting there blind in a carnival for the eyes, kept him quietly at his corner in the bar. Much different from the young man he was, introduced to (period art gallery or place), waving off compliments to his ‘eye’, to the subtle way he laid down shadows and chased perfect light.

Roxie didn’t know whether to feel sorry for the old man or find a reason for the bouncers to throw him out. He sat close to the stage, but didn’t talk much, drink much, or do much of anything else. She’d been around long enough to know those were the type - not confined to the movies - that showed up with a dozen roses and love letters and, eventually, a raging hard-on and a handgun when he found his favourite girl with a man her own age. And the way he stared, not particularly lustful or desperate, just vacant. Something about his eyes, faded and blue like old denim, the way he held his head cocked, like a half-deaf man listening to the memory of music.

“Think he’s really blind?” she asked when Claire returned.

“Of course he is,” Claire shook her head. “Just look at him, for fuck’s sake.”

“I think he’s after the sympathy fuck. Attention or something.”

“Of course you do,” Claire said and stacked drinks on her tray. “You’re a black hole of hate. Nothing gets in or out.” She spun away and swayed toward the stage.

“You’ll learn,” Roxie smirked. “Everyone’s after something.”

Ashley disappeared under the cover of a sudden darkness. Waitresses in corsets rushed between the tables, batting eyelashes, tips tucked into their garters. In the club a heavy humidity hung, gathered anticipation and frustration condensed into heavy red clouds, building a crescendo that never came. Max raised a finger and ordered another
drink, said "thank you" when a Claire-shaped shape appeared at his table. The drink turned up in his hand. Normally, Max nursed his one whiskey through the night, but he figured with age came certain allowances.

The DJ announced "The Queen of the Jungle," and Max settled back into the pleather sofa-seat, fresh drink cradled in his lap, eyes wide and easy. The music thumped louder as the lights fell to cover everything but the stage in an impenetrable darkness. Faintly, a tall, slender shape materialized from the background. For a moment, she stood still, then burst into motion - undulations like bamboo forests bending in thunderstorms, long crashes like waves on Pacific beaches where Max had stalked photos of rare Golden Plovers. Shed clothes fell like memories of half-finished thoughts. If he was too old to enjoy the feel of a woman without paying, and if his cherished equipment sat gathering unseen dust in a closet, he could still collect, however vaguely, this girl, blurred and indecipherable through smoked windows. Some features swam briefly to the surface. An out-stretched hand here, a violin hip, a flash of cornsilk as The Minx spun at the stage's edge. Staring this way at a woman at the deli or the park would result, at best, in an uncomfortable silence. In The Jungle, it was a privilege worth the drink minimum.

The next girl was softer, like Everglades grasses hinting at the underwater movements of alligators. Something about her the way dust spirals through stray shafts of sunlight, and wasn't it odd, Max wondered there, that only sunlight had that effect?

Max sighed, suddenly missing the days he could light a cigarette indoors and enjoy the women through a curtain of smoke.

The music fell and petered to the level of background static, almost lost in the drink orders, chatter, hoots, lewd suggestions and scripted responses, the clink of ice in tumblers that sprang up suddenly as soon as the lights came up. Max got up and dropped a single bill, a ten he carried in his shirt pocket - enough for the drinks and a dollar tip. He wanted to leave more, but that would mean counting money, an embarrassment Max tried to avoid in public.

As soon as he'd gone, Claire swept by and wiped the table. She returned with the empty glass to the bar.


Claire shrugged and leaned on the bar, watching her tables more than listening.

"I swear, sugar," Roxie continued. Sometimes I think there's nothing in here but low-lifes and pervs. The ones that aren't perverted are fucking cheap. You should get outta here while you're still tight enough to land a decent man. Stay here and you'll either wind up on that stage or in a Dumpster somewhere."

Claire rolled her eyes and shook her head and sashayed away from the bartender's unrelenting bitterness. As she approached the table of clean-cut young men, financial types, she fixed her winning waitress smile and put a little extra sway in her hip. Outside, Max listened to the traffic and crowd snarling by, lit a cigarette, and
blew a cloud of smoke toward the streetlight. He turned and counted the steps and corners home.