

THE FIRST EIGHTY-TWO PAGES OF
THE
OBLIVION 
SOCIETY



MARCUS ALEXANDER HART

THE END OF THE WORLD IS JUST THE BEGINNING OF THE ADVENTURE!

What would you do if you slept through the apocalypse? What if everything you knew about disaster survival came from old B-movies? What would you do if society as you know it suddenly became *The Oblivion Society*?

After an accidental nuclear war reduces civilization to a smoldering ruin, grocery clerk Vivian Gray joins a comically inept bunch of twentysomething survivors, and together they try to ride out Armageddon on little more than scavenged junk food and half-remembered pop culture.

When the contaminated atmosphere unleashes a menagerie of deadly atomic mutants, Vivian and her friends take to the interstate for a madcap cross-country road trip toward a distant sanctuary that may not, in the strictest sense of the word, exist. But can they get to safety before the toxins get to them?

Marcus Alexander Hart is a master of character and dialogue, as well as being deeply steeped in both pop culture and hard core geek lore. His world is populated by well conceived, believable people whose strengths and weaknesses make them both unique and real, and he gives a respectful nod to the great examples of the horror, disaster, and science fiction genres.

— Michael Gallant
Author of *The King's Foresters*

Of all the independently published books I have ever read, I believe that *The Oblivion Society* is by far the best. I strongly recommend it to all those who enjoy science-fiction with a comedic twist.

— Christopher Andrews
Author of *Pandora's Game* and *Dream Parlor*

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PRAISE FOR *THE OBLIVION SOCIETY*

Hart's prose is electric and probing, and his scenes stay with you long after you've put the book down. Sweet and brutal in equal measure, *The Oblivion Society* is by turns a bright and bouncy pop song, then as ruthlessly cruel as Celine Dion. Post-apocalyptic survival has never been so much fun!

— Austin McKinley
Senior Editor, Flying Car Comics

The Oblivion Society [demonstrates] a sly understanding of geek culture. [...] Basically, if you like Christopher Moore, you will like this novel.

— A Betterment Worker
Working Towards the Betterment of Publishing

What hooked me was the quality of the writing and the ability of the author to tease me on from one page to the next. [...] Literature? That's a hard label to justify, but I think so. [...] I'm glad Marcus Alexander Hart wrote this story. I'm glad that someone still writes books that champion the finer qualities of being human, even if he spills a lot of blood and guts in doing so.

— Glynn Compton Harper
Author of *A Perfect Peace and Arise Beloved*

This fast-paced novel combines one part sci-fi B-movie adventure, one part foul-mouthed slacker comedy, one part post-apocalyptic road movie, with just a pinch of chick-flick to create an explosive read.

— Alistair Hoel
nyquil.org

[Check out *The Oblivion Society*] in preference to most of Tom Holt's later efforts, most of Terry Pratchett's later efforts and, despite the comparison, in preference to anything by Robert Rankin. He doesn't beat Douglas Adams but there's no shame in that.

— Leo Stableford
LeoStableford.com

The Oblivion Society is a work of fiction. Any references to elements of the real world (including but not limited to people, places, events, and other works) are used solely to lend a sense of setting and historical context to the story. All characters are fictional and are not meant to represent any person living or dead.

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www.WillDeRooy.com

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For more apocalyptic fun, visit OblivionSociety.com.

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This second edition would not exist without Jacob Kier at Permuted Press. You'll notice that there are many words afore the story starts. A foreword if you will. Thanks to David Wong for writing that.

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Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I would like to thank *you* for reading. All of the work that these folks put into this book doesn't mean anything if nobody is reading. So thank you for completing the circle. I hope you enjoy your initiation into *The Oblivion Society*.

— Marcus Alexander Hart
August 18, 2007

FOREWORD

BY DAVID WONG



If you were reading this book in paperback, this spot would be full of a hilarious foreword by David Wong, author of the horror comedy sensation *John Dies at the End*.

But since you're reading an online preview, all we can put here is a picture of his book staring at you. Creepy, huh?

At any rate, when you're done reading this free preview, you can head right on over to Amazon.com and pick up [The Oblivion Society](#) and [John Dies at the End](#) together to score yourself some free shipping.

Sound like a good deal? Great. Now let's get on with it...

On the northern tip of Norway, an obsolete *Wormwood-132* long-range missile pointed into the heavens from the launch pad of the Fimbulvetr Astronomical Institute. Stripped of its atomic warhead and retrofitted with daytime auroral imaging instruments, it was ready for an exploratory voyage deep into the heart of the northern lights.

The nations of the world had commended the institute for repurposing wartime technology for the betterment of mankind on the brink of the new millennium. Or rather, they would have commended the institute, had they bothered to read its launch announcement. But the world's leaders had much more important business to attend to than some dumb Norwegian science experiment.

The president of the United States stuck his nose into his armpit and took a sniff. He recoiled and re-buttoned his navy-blue suit jacket.

"Hoo-boy, Bubba," he thought, *"you smell like the McDonald's fryer at the end of a long day."* He shrugged. *"Well, the coat's not coming off tonight anyway."*

He leaned against a white oak and let his gaze drift through the tree cover and into the Maryland sunset. For a so-called "presidential retreat," Camp Bravo afforded him precious little privacy. It had taken him hours to ditch his Secret Service escort, but now he was finally alone in this secluded corner of the compound.

He smiled as his eyes scaled the unbroken, twelve-foot-tall barrier of chain link and razor wire that protected him from the heathens of the outside world. Unbroken, that is, except for the huge rusted gash directly in front of him.

The Secret Service didn't know about this place.

The first lady didn't know.

The Camp Bravo groundskeepers didn't even know.

Only one other person did.

The president pulled a cigar from his breast pocket and put it in his mouth. He almost never smoked cigars, and when he did, he didn't inhale.

The sun slipped below the horizon, and he looked at his watch eagerly. Perhaps his signal had been too subtle? No, it was fine. Unmistakable. He daydreamed about what he could do with the cigar if he wasn't going to smoke it.

Footsteps pounded through the brush on the other side of the fence, step by weighty step. When the president's anticipation had fully filled out his trousers, a jet-black mound of hair emerged from the foliage, followed by a round, female face.

"Good evening, Mr. President," it purred. "Are you alone?"

The president grinned back at her from his side of the fence.

"It depends on how you define 'alone,'" he said flirtatiously.

The president's relationship with this particular White House intern had become somewhat sticky in recent days, literally before figuratively.

"I see you caught my speech this afternoon," he continued.

"I know you were addressing the entire nation, but I felt like you were speaking only to me," the intern cooed. "I especially liked the part about *breaching the walls* at the *darkest twilight* to meet between the *tall trees*."

The president's impossibly wide grin grew wider.

"Well, if you like trees, come on in and I'll show you the *executive branch*."

With a squeal, the intern shoved her way through the scar in the fence. As the intern's bosom pushed through the decayed steel, it also pushed through the beam of an invisible laser grid, shattering the air of Camp Bravo with an earsplitting security klaxon.

The air was calm in the People's National Strategic Control Centre just outside of Beijing, China. Chairman Qian leafed listlessly through the evening's state-sponsored newspaper. It was full of the same old propaganda touting China as the most powerful nation on Earth. He sighed and took a sip of his oolong tea.

If only it were true.

He looked around the room at the thirty sharply uniformed young men and women working quietly at their computer terminals. Actually, just young men. The chairman couldn't remember the last time he had actually seen a young woman. He sighed again.

One of the officers turned to him with an expression that completely

failed to be alarm.

“Mr. Chairman, we’ve just received an urgent communiqué from one of our operatives in the field. There’s been an international incident, sir.”

The chairman stood up and smiled hungrily. It was about time. What good was being the leader of the largest standing army in the world if you never got to do anything with it? Finally, this old dragon was going to get a chance to roar! He put down his paper and teacup and issued a terse order.

“Identify.”

The officer’s short fingers clattered over his keyboard.

“It’s from one of our agents in the United States, sir.”

The smile dropped from the chairman’s face, and he threw himself into his chair petulantly. Of *course* it was the Americans. It was *always* the Americans. He sulked. What good was being the leader of the largest standing army in the world if it was only the *second* most powerful? Contempt dripped from his voice as he issued a second command.

“Clarify.”

“The personal fortress of their president has gone to a state of heightened alert, followed by several other military installations in the area. We do not know the reason.”

“Classify,” the chairman grumbled.

“There seems to be no specific threat, sir, but it would be prudent to raise our own alert level accordingly.”

The chairman nodded his head. Sure. Raise the alert level. Just like always. He sighed. He could already see that he was in for another long, dull night of follow the leader.

Two technicians waited out another long, dull shift in the control room of a radar tracking station somewhere in northern Russia. A smattering of faded maps clung to the walls, each depicting the former Soviet Union marked with red pushpins that no longer signified anything at all. The station’s gigantic radar dish still scanned the skies twenty-four hours a day, although exactly what it was looking for these days was something of a mystery.

Kurchatov leaned back in his chair and took a swig from a half-empty bottle of vodka. He was bored. Bored bored bored. He took another drink and glanced dully at his co-worker, Sakharov. Sakharov’s face was tensed in concentration as he pounded the keyboard of the station’s main computer. A bead of sweat welled on his forehead as he chattered to himself anxiously.

“No more of the stupid Zs! Come on, you piece of junk! Give me the long one! The long one!”

Kurchatov stood and glanced over his comrade’s shoulder just in time to see him lose yet another game of *Tetris*. Sakharov smashed his fists into the desk in frustration.

“*Govno na palochkee!*” he cried. “I hate this stupid game!”

He rammed two fingers into the keyboard, closing the game window and revealing a monochrome screen of green text. In all the years that the station had been in operation, the dish’s readout had never changed:

Radar Tracking Station 99

0000 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles detected.

0000 Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles detected.

Kurchatov slouched back into his chair.

“If you hate that stupid game so much, why do you sit there and play it all day?”

Sakharov tapped his finger on the desk in an impatient fury for ten full seconds before starting another game.

“The high score is 200,000 points,” he muttered. “I’m not quitting until I beat it!”

“Well, how close have you come?”

“199,999.9999899.”

“Well, why don’t you just round off, *dolboëb?*” Kurchatov snapped. “That’s not even a real score! It’s just a computer error!”

“*Nyet!* There’s nothing wrong with the computer!” Sakharov said, tapping the sticker on the front of its case. “Intel inside. American technology. No mistakes.”

Camp Bravo’s mistaken sirens smashed into the president’s skull like an auditory sledgehammer. Between the trees he could see a distant commotion of soldiers rushing between the buildings, trying to identify and neutralize a threat that did not exist.

He pulled out his cellular phone, punched a speed dial button, and clasped it to his head. Even with his palms crushing down on his ears, he could barely hear the voice on the other end of the line.

“*Camp Bravo Command Center.*”

“Listen, kid! This is the president!”

“*Mr. President?*” the officer gasped. “*There’s been a breach of the outer wall, sir! You may be in danger. What is your location?*”

“It’s a false alarm!” the president screamed. “Turn off the klaxons!”

“*Yes, sir! Er ... no, sir! I’m sorry, sir, but a trigger of the perimeter alarm*

automatically puts every base on the East Coast on precautionary alert. I can't just turn—

“What do you mean you *can't*? This is the president of the United States giving you a direct order, soldier! Pull whatever plug you have to pull to cut off these damn alarms!”

“B-but, there are procedures, sir,” the officer stammered. “There's no way to just cut them off without completely resetting the emergency CommNet! It would be a huge breach of security, sir!”

“Lieutenant, I don't care if you have to shut down the whole North American power grid!” the president screamed. “I want those alarms off *now*! Understood?”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Against his better judgment, but on the direct orders of the commander in chief, the officer hammered the security codes into his computer, gaining access to the nation's emergency communications systems. Within a few minutes, he had manually reset every circuit that carried some small part of the security network's data with a blatant and mandated disregard for any other traffic those nodes might have been carrying.

Somewhere deep beneath Cheyenne Mountain, every computer screen at NORAD went blank. Admiral Jack Teller dropped his Big Mac and leapt to his feet.

“What in the corn hell just happened, boys?”

A husky slab of officer poked at his keyboard.

“I don't know, sir. Every base on the East Coast went on alert, and before I could ask about it, all communications were completely cut off.”

“What do you mean ‘cut off?’” the admiral yelled. “What in the name of Sam Hill is going on out there?”

The top-heavy switchboard operator tapped on her headset and looked at a panel of dark bulbs. She snapped her gum and twisted a finger through her platinum hair.

“We've got like, nothing here, sir. No lines in or out,” she reported. “Computers, phones, even the satellite links are like, totally dead.”

“Impossible!” the admiral roared. “That's impossible! All this Captain Kirk crap down here is connected to the outside with redundancy out the ying-yang! The only way we've got nothing is if the whole damn comm network is down, and the only thing that could take down that network is a full-scale ...”

A troubled look stormed the admiral's face.

“What was the last thing we got before we lost the world, boys?”

The husky officer reviewed his logs and answered numbly.

“Satellite intelligence says the Chinese military just went on heightened alert, sir.”

The admiral glared into the screen for a long moment, angrily cracking his knuckles.

“Scramble my knights of the air,” he said. “I want nukes in the bellies of all my bombers, and I want those beautiful bastards ready to fly on my order. You got that?”

“Um, yes sir,” the officer coughed, “but if you’ll recall what Private Babs just said, we don’t have any outgoing communications.”

The admiral wrung his massive hands into fists.

“Why, those filthy yellow bastards ...”

Kurchatov picked irritably at the filthy yellow upholstery foam crumbling from the arm of his chair. The clucking digital melody of Sakharov’s never-ending game of *Tetris* cut through his sanity like a bandsaw. He wrapped his fingers around the neck of his vodka bottle and imagined smashing it over the edge of the desk and letting fate take its course.

His homicidal fantasy was interrupted by a crackling voice.

“Radar Tracking Station 99, come in! Come in, Station 99! This is Moscow!”

Kurchatov’s heart hammered against his ribcage as he leapt to his feet.

“What the hell was that?!”

Sakharov didn’t look up from his game. “The radio. Pick it up.”

Kurchatov looked at the buzzing two-way radio and felt very stupid. Right. The radio. It had been a while. He picked up the dusty microphone and wiped it on his shirt.

“This is Station 99,” he said. “Go ahead, Moscow.”

“The Americans and Chinese are rattling their sabers. Are you picking up anything unusual up there?”

Kurchatov glanced at his comrade, and Sakharov reluctantly minimized his game window, revealing the dish status screen and its usual, burned-in announcement.

Radar Tracking Station 99

0000 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles detected.

0000.899 Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles detected.

Sakharov drew a sharp breath.

“What is it, Station 99? What are you reading?”

“Nothing,” Kurchatov said. “It’s just a computer error.”

“It’s not a computer error!” Sakharov gasped, grabbing the microphone. “It’s a nuclear attack!”

“An attack?! Are you sure?! How many missiles?!”

“Almost one!” Sakharov yelled.

Kurchatov snatched the microphone from his panicked associate.

“Disregard that, Moscow. It’s just an error with the—”

“Thank you, Station 99. We’ll take it from here.”

With that, the radio went dead.

“But it’s a false alarm!” Kurchatov repeated. “Moscow? Do you read me? Hello?”

He pounded the microphone on the top of the computer bank in frustration. The ominous digits on the screen flickered and blinked before finally resolving themselves back into four harmless zeros. He crossed his arms and glared daggers at Sakharov as his face turned a furious shade of red.

Chairman Qian lowered his teacup as the standing yellow alert level raised itself to red. His gaze snapped to his second-in-command as if to ask the question his mouth couldn’t be bothered to form.

“Russian high command has armed their nuclear missiles, sir. There have been no launches, and no warplanes have taken flight.”

The chairman rubbed his hands together hungrily. Russia. Now that was more like it! These days China could occupy Russia without even waking up the reserves. The junior officer continued.

“Sir, all available intelligence suggests a unified Russo-American attack.”

The chairman cringed. The Americans. It was *always* the Americans.

“Put the nuclear deterrence on standby alert,” he grumbled. “Remind them both that they’re not dealing with terra cotta warriors over here.”

As the circuits of the American armed forces’ communications network cleared their alerts and completed their reset sequences, computer screens and telephone consoles blinked back to life under Cheyenne Mountain. Admiral Teller broke from his frantic pacing and rushed to a bank of reawakened monitors.

“What’s happening?” he barked.

“Everything just came back up, sir,” the husky officer said. “We’ve got phones, radar, satellite, everything! It must have been some kind of network glitch.”

The admiral breathed a sigh of relief and gave the officer a hearty clap on the back.

“Whew!” he laughed. “That was brown-trouser time for a second there, huh boys? Ha ha ha! Somebody get my wife on the phone—tell her it’s a real slow day at the office and I’m coming home early!”

The younger officer didn’t return his superior’s joviality.

“Um, sir. I think you should see this.”

“What’s that, Junior?”

“While we were offline the Russians and the Chinese both armed their warheads, sir.”

The smile whipped from the admiral’s face like a window shade, revealing a countenance of betrayed rage.

“Those Sun-Tzu-reading savages,” he seethed. “They knocked out our communications long enough to catch us with our pants down, and now those commie bastards are double-teaming us!”

“Actually, sir,” the officer noted, “the Russians aren’t commies anymore.”

The admiral scowled.

“Dust off the missiles. Go to DEFCON 1. Oh, and somebody get the president on the line.”

The wailing alarms fell silent over Camp Bravo, and the president and the intern peeled their sweaty palms from their ears. The only sound that remained was the tinny chirp of a patriotic ringtone coming from the president’s pants. The intern clapped her hands to her face and started to cry.

“I’m sorry, Mr. President, I’m sorry!” she squealed. “I never should have come! You shouldn’t have either!”

She turned to dart for the fence, but the president grabbed the back of her blue dress.

“Wait! Don’t leave!” he shouted.

His cell phone screeched for attention from his front pocket, vibrating provocatively against his already agitated manhood. He yanked the phone from his pants and pitched it into the woods.

“It’s alright, it’s okay, hon,” he continued. “Don’t you worry about anything. It was just a little alarm. Absolutely no harm done. You didn’t even blow our cover.”

The intern wiped her running eyes and smiled impishly.

“Well, sir, to be honest, *our cover* is not what I came here to blow.”

The president closed his eyes and grinned smugly as the intern

lowered herself to her carpet-burned knees in the wet grass.

“Hail to the chief, baby.”

With a great, heaving surge of hot, explosive force, the long, white shaft of a single science rocket slipped from its pad at the Fimbulvetr Astronomical Institute and sailed into the stratosphere.

“Radar Station 99! Confirm your report! Are we under attack or not?”

Kurchatov stared at the computer screen in a wide-eyed panic, his former skepticism replaced with outright terror. The number of missiles detected was suddenly a solid 0001, and no amount of pounding on the computer would make it change its mind.

“Station 99! Come in! What do you read?”

“I ... I think it’s a Chinese missile, sir! It’s headed straight for Moscow!”

“It appears to be an American missile, sir. It’s headed straight for Beijing.”

“It’s definitely a Russian missile, sir. It’s headed straight for Walt Disney World.”

“Dear, sweet Jesus.”

Admiral Teller marched up to the command center’s enormous digital world map and watched the smooth arc of a missile slowly advancing into the sky. As the harsh light of the red alert sirens flashed across his stony features, he took off his hat and saluted the American flag with a broad grin.

“This is what we’ve waited for. This is it, boys. This is *war!*”

Shortly thereafter, the world came to an abrupt end.

EARLIER THAT DAY...

CHAPTER ONE

The morning was hot, and moist, and thick, and it smelled like a foot. The sun's rays scorched through the atmosphere like a blowtorch, scalding the earth and boiling translucent ripples into the heavy air. This weather was beyond oppressive. It was outright *combative*.

In short, it was a typical summer day in Stillwater, Florida.

Somewhere on Bayshore Boulevard, lost within a creeping armada of tourists' rental cars and retirees' French-vanilla land yachts, was a rattling '83 Volkswagen Rabbit convertible. Years of exposure to the seaside air had turned its gray paint job into a Jackson Pollock of flaking orange rust, and the tattered remains of its canvas top hung from its trunk like Spanish moss.

The driver pulled off her thick, Buddy-Holly-style eyeglasses and ineffectually mopped her perspiring face with her perspiring palms. If she had been a movie star, Vivian Gray would have been crossing the threshold between being typecast as "the nerdy eighteen-year-old high school student" and "the bitter thirty-two-year-old high-school teacher." But Vivian Gray was not a star. Not at all.

Her car radio kicked at her ears with an irritating cacophony of brass and slide-whistles.

"We're back and you're in the middle of another Wacky Wednesday with the Mooker and the Fox Morning Zoo!"

A doorbell rang, followed by the sound of a bugle, two gunshots, and a mewling cat.

"Whoops! Bad news for Fluffy, but good news for you! That sound means we're going to be kicking off another twelve-in-a-row megamix ..."

(The word "megamix" echoed a dozen times, each iteration deeper and slower than the last.)

"... of good-time oldies for the Gulf Coast! But first let's check in with Art Anderson over in the WOSU News Center. Hey Artie boy, what's big news in Stillwater?"

"An oxymoron," Vivian muttered.

A different voice chirped from the radio, speaking in a calm, rehearsed monotone that sounded uneasily out of place among its jabbering companions.

"State health officials have closed all Stillwater area beaches due to an unusually strong"

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bloom of red tide. Bacteria has been discovered within the bloom that researchers warn cannot be killed by cooking, freezing, or irradiation. A temporary fishing ban has been instated in all coastal waters, and it is imperative that no local seafood be consumed, especially by the elderly."

"All right, you sexy seniors, you heard Doc Anderson! Lay off the bouillabaisse!"

A sound bite bellowed "No soup for you!" no less than six times.

"Speaking of silver foxes, in today's celebrity birthdays, Shelley Winters turns 79 years young—"

Vivian snapped off the radio and eased her vehicle into a smoldering parking lot. As usual, the lot was populated with an assortment of barge-like seniormobiles, but today there was something different. A collection of tall, impossibly orange bottles lay scattered between the white and chrome street mausoleums like colored eggs on Easter Sunday.

Vivian rattled her car into the first available space, ground the shifter into first gear, and turned off the ignition. She didn't bother to set the parking brake. Much like its roof, the Rabbit's brake had long since rotted into uselessness. As soon as the roar of the engine fell away, Vivian's ears were pummeled with a melody that had recently become all too familiar. The commercial parodies of The Artist Formerly Known as Prince's "1999" had begun the moment Dick Clark dropped the ball in Times Square, and it hadn't let up in the seven and a half months since.

*I keep dreamin' of a beverage, forgive me if I go astray,
but your body needs a boost, and your cells are all in disarray ...*

Vivian got out of her car. As her sneakers touched the scorching pavement, she could feel their rubber soles liquefying like sticks of butter being shoved into a hot skillet. With a slouch of defeat, she pulled on a powder-blue uniform vest and adjusted her nametag.

*Your body needs a tune-up, vitamins are runnin' everywhere.
Time to maximize absorption, and make your food do its share ...*

At the end of the parking lot sat a long, dreary fortress of cement blocks that looked like a defunct prison, but without the charm. Across its front, pigeon-infested block letters spelled out the words "Boltzmann's Market."

*They say two thousand calories a day is plenty for a slammin' time!
So Fusion Fuel will load and lock you like it's nineteen ninety-nine!*

Vivian covered her ears as the jingle thundered through her skull. Rendered in a palette of rough guitar and angsty vocals, the music was grunge, but grunge reduced to a sterile, soulless formula.

It was marketing grunge.

"Oh no," Vivian groaned. "Not another one of these."

Flanking the store's entrance were two huge stacks of speakers bookending an AM General Hummer. The vehicle had an aggressively promotional orange-and-black paint job, making it look like a jack-o'-lantern designed for a combat

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air drop. Vivian groaned. This happened every time the soft-drink companies introduced some all-new variety of liquid sugar to pour down the nation's gullet. The beverage industry assumed that Americans would unquestioningly drink whatever a pair of pretty faces standing next to an expensive car and an overblown sound system told them to.

If she was lucky, she could make it to the front door before ...

"Ring-a-ding-ding! Somebody call the fire department, we've got a red hot redhead burnin' up over here! This grrrrrl needs refreshment, stat!"

Vivian blew a long, resigned breath through her fiercely red bangs as she turned toward the voice. Today's mouthpiece for Big Beverage was fairly typical of the genre. He was a glimmering Adonis, standing six feet tall, with a leanly muscular build and unnaturally blond hair. He wore a complete "extreme sports" ensemble that was to extreme sports what his theme music was to grunge. Although he talked the talk of extreme sports, the salesmodel looked about as hardcore as a spa treatment.

"So where's the other one?" Vivian asked.

"The other what?"

"Usually your kind comes in two-packs," she shrugged. "You know, Ken *and* Barbie."

"It's Nick, actually," he winked. "And I'm gonna single-handedly kick a full-throttle recharge into your tired body battery with a hardcore blast of Fusion Fuel!"

He tossed Vivian a tall, slender club of orange glass with a graphic of a spongy sort of molecule branded in bas relief on its face, identical to the dozens that littered the parking lot. She tossed it back.

"I don't drink energy drinks."

"*Energy drinks?*" Nick said with disgust. "It's not an *energy drink!* It's so much *more* than that! Fusion Fuel is a diet enhancer that makes your food work harder for *you!* It uses the hidden power of lignite and sulfated castor oil to increase absorption of nutrients by up to 110% for maximum power and stamina on and off the field!"

Vivian smirked.

"I don't drink snake oil either."

A red-faced old woman shuffled past the Hummer. Nick multitasked marks without missing a beat.

"Stop staring—they're free! Haha! Just kidding with ya! Fusion Fuel piledrives vitamins into your hard-working muscles with an intense super-reactive catalyst-altered power punch!"

The way he said "catalyst-altered power punch" seemed to hang a tiny superscripted "TM" in the air. He grabbed a six pack and shoved it into the woman's unreceptive hands.

"Take a sixer to pound down with your whole team! It's an energy

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absorption explosion!”

Vivian attempted escape into the store, but before she had taken two steps the model was done with the flustered oldster and back on her again.

“Seriously though, Red,” he said, “why don’t you take this bottle of Fusion Fuel now, and I’ll take you out for proper drinks when you get off work. Whaddya say?”

Vivian’s cheeks flushed as red as her hair.

“If I say I’ll think about it, will you get out of my way?”

“Now that wasn’t so hard, was it, Red?” Nick grinned, stepping aside with an overblown sense of chivalry. “I’ll be out here all day. Promise you’ll come back out and see me later, okay?”

Vivian opened her mouth to make an excuse, but before any words came out, another customer caught Nick’s attention. He pounced on the wrinkled old man like a cheetah taking down a Shih-Tzu.

“Fusion Fuel loads up on nutrients and locks them into your hard-working body cells! Load and lock, baby!”

The second Nick’s back was turned, Vivian bolted for the entrance. Her feet squeaked onto the worn rubber pad that opened the automatic doors, blasting her with a gale of air conditioning and the acrid stench of red tide.

Vivian covered her nose. “*Ugh! What the ...*”

Adjacent to the front entrance was a pile of soggy wooden crates filled with ice. The makeshift display was populated with a selection of massacred fish, each oozing a pink gravy that reeked of rotting cabbage. Vivian covered her nose and looked at the chalkboard sign hanging over the carnage.

Today’s fresh catch - Any 2 for \$5!

“Fresh catch,” she muttered. “There are parts of the fossil record that are fresher than this.”

She closed the first crate’s lid, then the second. Before she could close the third, a squeal of feedback preceded a growling voice from the store’s public address system.

“Vivian, please come to the office. Vivian, to the office immediately.”

Vivian grimaced as she cast her eyes skyward. From the ceiling, a pair of motorized security cameras shook their heads at her disapprovingly. She looked past them and into the dark windows of the enclosed loft that loomed over the store like an Alcatraz watchtower.

She dragged herself up the narrow stairway and pushed open the office door, entering the inner sanctum of the store’s owner, Verman Boltzmann. Boltzmann was grotesquely, morbidly obese, and to see his enormous girth packed behind his desk was like looking at a water balloon pinched under a brick.

“God damn it, Vivian! What the hell are you doing to my seafood display?! You come waltzing in here *four minutes late*, and the first thing you do is start

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messing up the place!”

“*Cleaning* up the place,” Vivian corrected. “You’re going to have to send that shipment of fish back. The red tide is—”

“Hey! Who the hell do you think you are, coming in here and telling me how to run my own goddamn store?!” Boltzmann wailed. “Don’t forget, *you* work for *me*, missy!”

Vivian rolled her eyes. “Only until the county health inspector comes and locks you up.”

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head about him,” Boltzmann said. “That guy’ll approve a dogshit casserole for a hundred bucks and a bottle of gin.”

Vivian slipped her fingers under her glasses and rubbed her eyes.

“You are a shining paradigm of business ethics, boss.”

Boltzmann leaned forward in his chair with a movement like tectonic plates grinding together, shoving a carbon-copy invoice across his desk. Vivian picked up the paper and squinted at its blurry dot-matrix print.

“Listen up, smart-ass,” Boltzmann growled. “We just got in another shipment of those bodybuilder vitamins. The Beta Burns. Tag ’em \$10.99 and get ’em stocked as fast as your dainty little hands can. For some reason that shit is selling like hotcakes. We can’t keep it on the shelves!”

Vivian pointed to a row of smudged numerals on the invoice.

“Well, here’s why. That’s a six, not a zero. Retail price is supposed to be \$16.99.”

Boltzmann ripped the paper from Vivian’s hands and slapped it face-down on the desk without a glance.

“Just get down there and tag those goddamn pills \$10.99. I’m not paying you to stand here and bitch.”

“But the price is ...”

Vivian jumped as Boltzmann slammed his fists on his desk like an enraged gorilla.

“Today, Vivian! Move it! Before I bend you over and shove a pink slip up your sweet little ass!”

Vivian leapt out of the office and slammed the door. As she stomped down the stairs, she could hear an altercation brewing at checkstand two.

“Back when I was your age,” the customer crackled, “potted meat used to cost ten cents a tin! And the tins were bigger back then!”

“Gee, history is really swell,” replied the cashier. “Today it costs \$2.99. Same as your suit.”

“That’s too much. I’ll give you a dollar for it.”

“Look, this is not Mexico. We do not haggle prices here.”

The cashier was Sherri Becquerel, the queen of friendly customer service. Slouched behind the register of checkstand two, Sherri looked about as out of place as a vampire at a beach party.

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Although she couldn't have been long out of high school, Sherri's translucent white skin was pulled tightly over her bony skull, making her look as if she had gone through one too many discount facelifts. She was short, flat-chested, and waiflike, and her gaunt figure made her average-sized head appear larger than it really was. Smudges of black eye shadow punched in her oversized eyes, and a smear of black lip gloss blotted out her small narrow mouth. Her appearance and demeanor had earned her the nickname "Scary Sherri" among her co-workers, though nobody dared say it to her face.

For that matter, her co-workers rarely dared to say *anything* to her face.

The enraged senior slowly counted change from his pocket onto the stained rubber of the checkstand's conveyor belt.

"A dollar and fifty cents. A dollar and seventy-five cents. A dollar and seventy ... *six* cents."

Sherri idly brushed some lint from the front of her blood-red *Black Rain* concert tee. Where there should have been a powder-blue uniform vest, Sherri wore a black leather trench coat that was shaped more like a girl than she was.

"Two dollars and eighty-nine cents. Two dollars and ninety-nine cents. There."

The old man grasped the plastic bag and pulled it off the counter.

"Whoa there, Gramps," Sherri said. "Where's the rest?"

The old man's face twisted into a look of distrust.

"You said two dollars and ninety-nine cents!" the old man snapped. "That's two dollars and ninety-nine cents right there. Do you want me to count it again? I can count it again for—"

"Jesus H. Chri ... Sales tax," Sherri interrupted. "It's this new thing you might not have heard of. It was introduced somewhere around the *dawn of time*. I need another twenty-eight cents, Methuselah."

The old man looked into Sherri's eyes, and his anger seemed to melt away into troubled indifference. He reached into his heavy, jingling pocket in surrender.

"Three dollars and nine cents. Three dollars and *ten* cents ..."

Sherri slouched behind the counter and dropped her head into her hands. When he had finally piled enough warm, dull coins on the belt to complete his purchase, the old man snapped up his bag of potted meat and turned on Sherri.

"This store is too expensive. I'm never coming here again."

Sherri rolled her eyes.

"Yeah. See you tomorrow, you senile old fart. If you don't die first."

The man looked into Sherri's eyes again, blinked, then shambled away.

Vivian watched with a jealous smile. She had spent long hours wondering what gave Sherri this license to speak her mind without consequence, and she had only been able to come up with one theory. It was because of her eyes. Her dead, expressionless eyes.

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Sherri's eyes were a whispered shade of blue so pale and empty that she looked like an alien, or a heroin addict, or both. Something about them masked any hint of a living soul beyond their glassy surface, and when she insulted you, it felt like the television had just called you a crazy bastard, and to argue would only prove it right.

Sherri leaned back on her register and took a long, hard swig from a half-empty bottle of Fusion Fuel. She noticed Vivian looking at her and gave her a nod.

"I heard the Verminator taking a big hunk out of your ass up there, Powderpuff."

Vivian hated it when Sherri called her "Powderpuff," but she had given up on trying to get her to stop.

"Working here makes me want to slit my wrists," she moaned. "Sherri, you've been in here day in and day out longer than I have, yet you never go homicidal. How do you do it?"

Sherri reached into her coat and pulled out a silver hip flask. She unscrewed the skull-shaped stopper, held it up in silent toast to Vivian, and dumped the remainder of its contents into her already polluted energy drink. Vivian just rolled her eyes and gestured at the leaking fish crates.

"I mean, can you believe that?" she continued. "He's trying to sell the maritime equivalent of roadkill."

Sherri nodded.

"This country is seriously messed up. You can *sell* nasty meat and nobody gives two shits, but you let someone *go down* on your nasty meat and you're public enemy number one."

Vivian opened her mouth, but no words came out. She closed it again and squinted at Sherri. Sherri gestured with her eyebrows.

"It's all over the tabloids."

The checkstand newspaper rack was stuffed with an assortment of wilting tabloids, each sporting its own grainy photograph of the president of the United States embracing a full-figured intern in the White House rose garden. The headlines screamed such off-color remarks as "Oval Office Becomes *Oral* Office! Nation Outraged!"

"Apparently the president has been shoving the little commander in chief into one of his favorite interns' pie holes," Sherri said. "They've got a dress covered in his man gravy and everything."

Vivian winced. "Sherri, have you no filters at all?"

"I can't believe this bullshit is supposed to be *news*," Sherri continued. "It's not like somebody sucking off the president could possibly have any effect on the rest of the world. But the sensationalist press jumps all over this irrelevant shit instead of telling us what a good job he's doing."

Vivian raised an eyebrow.

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“So you think the president is doing a good job?” she asked.

Sherri paused.

“How the fuck should I know? The only news I’ve heard this whole year has been Nostradamus-Y2K-End-of-the-World bullshit. So how about that Hummer?”

“Okay, seriously. Can we just change the subject already?”

Sherri tapped her bottle.

“No, I mean the one in the parking lot. Fascist Fuel, or whatever.”

“Oh, that guy,” Vivian groaned. “I wouldn’t take his stupid energy drink, and then he tried to ask me out.”

“So what did you say?”

“Well, what do you think I said? I said no!”

Sherri drained her spiked beverage and wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

“Well, if I were you, I’d fuck him.”

“Hey! What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Vivian scowled.

“You know. You with your cute little Airwalk sneakers, and your cute little Old Navy capri pants. You two are so *Dharma and Greg*. You could have cute, capitalist children together and you could all sit at home and listen to Len CDs and watch *Third Rock from the Sun*. You’re the American fuckin’ dream.”

Humiliation burned through Vivian’s cheeks.

“If you like him so much, why don’t *you* go have sex with him?”

Sherri recoiled.

“Oh, shit no. A pretty boy like him couldn’t find my G-spot with a flashlight and a copy of *Gray’s Anatomy*.”

A snarling voice crackled through an interruption in the Muzak.

“This is not a sewing circle, ladies. Quit yakking and get to work!”

Sherri’s eyes darted back and forth between the camera enclosures in the ceiling. She spotted the one that was staring her down and extended a pair of bony middle fingers to the lens.

“I saw that, Becquerell! Don’t you push me today!”

Sherri held up her hands and wiggled her fingers in the air as if to say, “Ooooh, I’m *shaking*.”

Vivian looked into the spying cameras with a dull sigh. She didn’t know if there was a God, but she knew that there was always a colossal being watching her every move from on high.

Schlunk.

The glue-encrusted nose of a price gun scraped over the surface of a Beta Burn jar, depositing a sticker marked “\$10.99” in its wake. Vivian set the tagged jar on the shelf. She reached into a large plastic-swaddled shipping crate and picked up another jar. She tagged it too with a *schlunk* and set it on the shelf.

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Then she repeated the process.

This is how Vivian had spent the bulk of her morning.

“Oooh, look out! Red’s got a gun!” a voice boomed. “Put down the gun and step away from the shelf. Don’t make me have to get physical, because you *know* I will. Hahaha!”

Vivian’s shoulders leapt to her ears as she swiveled toward a perfectly cut statue of marketing-man-meat in the aisle behind her.

“Aren’t you supposed to be bothering people *outside?*” she muttered.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, foxy,” Nick smiled. “I get a ten-minute break every four hours. I just came inside to *feed the rush!*”

He held up a two-liter bottle of SURGE and smiled, and for just a moment he looked exactly like a Coca-Cola-sponsored print ad, but with less personality.

“Listen, Red, on a day like today a girl as hot as you needs a dude who is cool to the core. How about when you get off work I take you for a ride in the HumVee? Give it a try and I think you’ll get hooked on cruisin’ in one of those bad boys.”

Even though they were sheathed behind the reflective gold lenses of his wrap-around sunglasses, Vivian could tell that Nick’s elevator eyes were stopped three-quarters of the way to her penthouse. She crossed her arms violently across her modest chest.

“Sorry, I can’t tonight. Real busy. You know, washing my hair and whatnot. So ... bye.”

She bent down and began collecting an armful of jars from the crate with a blunt shove of body language that said, “Move along, folks. Nothing left to see here.” Nick caressed her chin in his broad hand and gently pulled her upright, turning her head until their eyes met.

“Washing that beautiful red hair, huh?” he smiled. “That’s cool by me. After you’re all clean and pretty, why don’t you come out with me for dinner? I’m dying to know if you’re a natural redhead.”

Before Vivian’s knee could appropriately respond to Nick’s proposal, a barking voice boxed her ears.

“Vivian! What the hell are you doing?!”

A winded Verman Boltzmann waddled heavily into the aisle. In a flash, Nick took his hand from Vivian’s face, stuffed it in his pocket, and leaned against the shelves with an innocent grin. Vivian’s eyes darted back and forth between the two men as her tongue tried to find its words.

“What am *I*—This guy keeps trying—”

“Shaddup, Vivian,” Boltzmann said, waving his hand in her face. “Jesus Christ, I swear you just talk to hear the sound of your own voice.”

Vivian’s face screwed itself down against her skull as Boltzmann put his beefy hand on Nick’s shoulder.

“Is this girl bothering you, son?”

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“No sir, not at all,” Nick said. “I just came in to slam a SURGE. I always like to shop in the stores where I work. You know, give a little bit back to show my appreciation.”

“That’s great; that’s really great,” Boltzmann oozed. “That pop is on the house, just to thank you for coming over here today.”

“Hey thanks, Mr. B!” Nick beamed. “Just another perk of being a promo model. I love going to new places and meeting new people like you and Red. And that’s what makes me a champion!”

Without warning he balled his hand into a fist and threw it at Vivian’s face.

“Bam!”

Vivian’s shocked recoil was just a second too late, but it didn’t matter. Nick’s knuckles stopped two inches from the bridge of her glasses, proudly displaying a thick gold ring.

“That’s right, I’m solid gold, baby! There’s only platinum level above me, and that dude is nailing the boss’s daughter, so he doesn’t count.”

Boltzmann grabbed Nick’s fist and pulled it toward his face, squinting at the glimmering ring.

“*Gold Level Sales Champion 1998*,” he read aloud. “That’s pretty goddamn impressive! You should be proud of your achievement, son!”

“I am, sir!” Nick gloated, tapping his ring. “This little lady means the world to me. She’s not coming off my finger till death do us part.”

“Oh, give me a break,” Vivian said. “That thing is just a meaningless reward given in lieu of actual compensation.”

“You shut your mouth, Vivian,” Boltzmann hissed. “Keep up that crap and I promise you you’ll *never* be employee of the month!”

Vivian rolled her eyes.

“Whoa, no *way!*” Nick said, noticing the shelf for the first time. “You’ve got Beta Burn for \$10.99?! I’m totally stocking up here! They’re charging seventeen bucks for it over at Publix. This stuff is incredible! Feel those guns.”

Nick curled the bottle of SURGE as if it were a thirty-pound free weight. Boltzmann squeezed the bulging bicep and nodded enthusiastically, but Nick’s gaze was fixed firmly on Vivian, who wasn’t watching.

“No shit,” Boltzmann said dreamily, not lifting his paw or his eyes from Nick’s firmly flexed muscle. “Seventeen bucks, eh? Vivian, what are we charging for these things?”

“\$10.99,” Vivian muttered.

Boltzmann’s voice hardened.

“Speak up, missy.”

Schlunk.

Vivian extended the price gun and tagged “\$10.99” on the side of Nick’s perfect arm in front of Boltzmann’s nose. He released Nick and turned on her with a low boil in his eyes.

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“Don’t you get smart with me,” he seethed.

His voice had a forced calmness to it, like a mother who didn’t want to beat her own children in front of company. With a gasping effort he bent over, tore the packing slip from the side of the Beta Burn shipping crate, and gave it a once-over.

“God *damn* it, Vivian! It says clear as day that the price on these things is supposed to be \$16.99! What the hell is wrong with you? Can’t you follow simple directions?”

“I *can* follow simple directions,” Vivian growled. “And apparently that *is* what’s wrong with me.”

Boltzmann leaned his glistening face as close to Vivian as his prohibitive circumference would allow.

“Vivian, if you like your job, I suggest you quit your bitching and moaning and start taking a little responsibility for your own screw-ups.”

Vivian raised an eyebrow.

“If I *like* my job?”

“Just shut up and retag the goddamn pills \$16.99,” Boltzmann snarled. “It won’t kill you to actually do a little work around here for a change.”

Vivian slid her fingertips under her glasses and slowly rubbed her eyes, as if trying to erase reality.

“I gotta get back to work too,” Nick said. “So thanks for the SURGE, and—”

“Oh, it’s no problem at all,” Boltzmann interrupted. “Here, I’ll walk you out to your Hummer.”

“My *HumVee*,” Nick corrected. “The civilian models are called Hummers.”

“Oh, yeah yeah. Right, *HumVee*,” Boltzmann agreed. “Come on, Vivian, pick up the pace! I’m not paying you to loaf around here ogling boys!”

Boltzmann clapped his porcine hand on Nick’s back and escorted him to the end of the aisle and out of the store.

Vivian slowly raised the gun to her head and shot a price tag into her right temple.

Checkstand two was packed four deep with dangerously popular-looking Stillwater High School cheerleaders, and Sherri was price scanning an endless parade of nail polish bottles with an overstated boredom. Each bottle had the name of a different shade printed on its cap, but to the layman they were all indistinguishably “pink.”

“Oh my *Gaaaaaamd*,” one of the girls mewled. “So, I was talking to Kevin in homeroom, and he was all ‘Do you want to go to senior class beach party this weekend?’ and I was all like, with *you*? As *if*?”

For reasons that were not readily apparent, all of the girls ripped into a peal

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Hell, motherfuckers.”

Without another word she exhaled a long yellow blast of smoke and exited Boltzmann’s Market for the last time. A fat purple vein throbbed in Boltzmann’s forehead as his gaze fell upon Vivian.

“Vivian!” he barked. “Quit screwing around with those goddamn pills and come work the register! Unless you want to get your ass shitcanned too!”

A thousand sardonic one-liners flashed through Vivian’s mind, any one of which would have ensured her permanent liberation from Boltzmann’s Market. Before she could stop them, a series of words clinked together like train cars in her mind, racing down the tracks of her central nervous system, through her voice box, and out of her mouth.

“I’ll be right there, sir.”

“That’s what I thought,” he said. “Now if you think you can keep your head screwed on straight for five minutes, I’m going back up to the office. *Somebody’s* got to actually get some work done around here today.”

With that, he executed a turn like the *Queen Elizabeth 2* coming into port and squeezed himself up the creaking staircase to his office. Vivian leaned back against the register, closed her eyes, and thought for a long, hard moment about where exactly she had gone wrong in life.

“Are these the right kind of plugs for this?” an ancient voice croaked.

Vivian blinked twice and tipped her head downward. A hunched old woman barely taller than the checkstand counter was piling D-cell batteries on its belt.

“Plugs, ma’am?” Vivian asked.

“For this machine. Are these the right plugs?”

Vivian looked at the large box filling the woman’s shopping cart. Judging by the diagram on the side, it contained some sort of cyclopic robot head. She scanned the single row of English text adrift in a sea of foreign characters.

Hibakusha Electronics 5-in-1 Camping Lantern

“It’s for my grandson,” the old woman said. “He said he can hook it to his satellite machine and watch the ball games when he’s on his class trip.”

Vivian felt the need to intervene. She wanted to save everybody the trouble of a return visit.

“Ma’am, I don’t think you can watch a ball game on a lantern. I’m pretty sure he was talking about something else. Would you like me to put this back for you?”

The old woman raised a brittle, shaky hand and looked at a crumpled note.

“Five to one camping lantern. That’s what he wants. You kids, you all think that all us retired people are all stupid, right?”

“No, ma’am,” Vivian said. “I was just trying to—”

The woman looked at her note again. “Five to one camping lantern. It says so right here!”

Vivian sighed.

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“All right. Whatever.”

She leaned awkwardly over the checkstand and grabbed the heavy box by its corners. With a wrenching of her lower back muscles, she hauled it over the side of the counter and across the price scanner.

BLEEP!

She turned to put down the box, but her hands slipped against the cardboard, dropping the heavy load on the price scanner and jamming its corner harshly into her left breast.

BLEEP!

“Ow! Son of a . . .” Vivian seethed. “Here, let me take care of that.”

She punched the key on the register that would negate the next entry and ran the box over the scanner a third time, neutralizing the errant scan.

BLEEP!

“You did that three times,” the old lady said. “Are you trying to rip me off?”

“Not at all, ma’am. I’m sorry, I just made a mistake. It’s okay now.”

The old woman shrugged.

Vivian scanned all of the batteries. “Your total is \$98.73, please.”

The woman pawed through her purse and exhumed a one-hundred-dollar bill. When the transaction was completed, the old woman rolled away with an unspoken sense of dissatisfaction.

Vivian glanced at the large clock clicking away all too slowly on the wall above the entrance. There were only fifteen minutes left in her shift. She was in the home stretch now.

She lowered her eyes and peered dreamily through the glass doors and into the outside world.

An elderly woman with a puff of snowy white hair drove a gigantic and equally white Buick into the parking lot. She scrutinized the orange Hummer nervously before turning her attention to Nick and his one-man party.

Sensing the fresh meat, Nick bounced up to the side of the Buick and began rocking out to the corporate grunge music, pointing rhythmically to himself with the index and pinky fingers of both hands and wagging his tongue like a lunatic.

Smoke poured off of the Buick’s whitewalls as the terrified woman peeled out of the parking lot and onto Bayshore Boulevard, fleeing for her life in a squealing reverse.

Vivian smiled.

“Well, that’s one less for me to deal with,” she thought.

“Vivian!” Boltzmann barked.

Vivian jumped out of her skin. How could he always sneak up on her? It was like being snuck up on by a dump truck full of barking dogs.

“Vivian, could you please explain why you charged this nice young woman three times for this camping lantern?”

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Behind the enormous bulk of the manager, Vivian could see the old lady with all the batteries glowering with disapproval.

"I didn't," Vivian explained. "I made an accidental scan, then I took one off."

"I can see that," Boltzmann said, waving the receipt in her face. "But there's *three* charges here, each for \$79.99. You need to refund her money *twice*. She only bought *one* lantern."

Vivian shook her head.

"No, I'll show you," she said, reaching for the slip. "One is a *negative* scan of \$79.99; it's all taken care—"

"Oh no you don't! Don't try to confuse this nice lady by talking nonsense. Just open your drawer and give her back the \$159.98 that you ripped off from her. Or should I say, open your *purse*."

"But it's not ... I mean, there's the two *positive* scans, and one *negative*. One plus one minus one equals one. It's all taken care of."

"Vivian," Boltzmann said, "I'm going to count to ten, and if you don't ..."

"Fine," Vivian boiled, opening her register drawer, "here's the hundred dollars back that she gave me, and here's another sixty just for being so good at math."

"That's more like it," Boltzmann said. "You're lucky she's such a good sport." He snatched the bills from Vivian's hand and gave them to the old woman. "There you go, ma'am. Keep the change. I hope we'll see you in here again real soon."

He turned with a knifelike glare at Vivian.

"I'll be watching you, missy. You watch yourself."

With a humanity that he reserved only for customers, Boltzmann escorted the old woman to the front door before shoehorning himself back into his office.

Vivian slipped her fingers under her glasses and rubbed her tired eyes.

There were only four minutes left in her shift.

Nothing else could possibly happen to her in only four minutes.

"Ripping off old ladies. Ouch, that's a real hit on your karma points, Red."

Vivian pulled her fingers from under her glasses to see Nick leaning raffishly on the end of her checkstand next to four jars of Beta Burn.

"This lane is closed," she said.

Nick's eyes floated to the illuminated sign above the register. Vivian clicked it off.

"Aw, come on now. You know I'm just kidding around. I saw that whole thing go down," Nick said. "Don't sweat it. That fat bastard just ripped off his own store, you know? No skin off your ass."

"There's not a lot left to take," Vivian sighed.

"Okay, so you've had a rough day working point of sale," Nick smiled. "I

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can definitely help with that. You know what you need to pick you up and get you back to the top of your game?”

“Oh, let me think,” Vivian said airily. “Could it possibly, *possibly* be an ice-cold bottle of Fusion Fuel?”

“Is that what you think of me?” Nick asked. He grabbed her hand and cupped it between his own smooth fingers. “You think I’m all work and no play, huh? Well, you’ve only seen the parts of me that come out when I’m on the job. Let me take you out tonight and show you my private parts.”

Vivian blinked.

“I’d rather have the Fusion Fuel.”

“You got it, Red!”

Nick plucked a six-pack of Fusion Fuel from the floor at his feet and hung the cardboard handle over Vivian’s outstretched fingers.

“Why don’t you slam a coupla bottles of Fusion Fuel and then tell me what you think of its extreme blast of citrus flavor over dinner tonight? We can grab some chow around nine. I know a place up in Port Manatee that you’ll go totally mental over.”

Vivian blew a long breath through her bangs.

“Okay. Nick. Listen. Let me put this into phrases small enough that they can be absorbed through the dense filtration of your frighteningly minute attention span. You are not my type. I am not going out with you tonight. I am not going out with you *ever*. I would not go out with you *if you were the last living man on the planet Earth*. Do you understand?”

Nick nodded.

“So would ten o’clock be better for you? Because I’m totally flexible.”

Vivian’s throat caught a scream and hammered it back down into her lungs as the clock’s minute hand finally pointed to freedom.

“My shift is over,” she said calmly. “Goodbye, Nick.”

Without another word Vivian stormed out the front door.

Once outside, she was relieved to see that the blistering sun had disappeared behind a cover of thick black clouds. She kicked her way through the debris field of shattered Fusion Fuel samples only to find her tired old Rabbit sagging against the pavement. Jutting from the flaccid heap of a flat driver’s-side tire was a jagged shard of orange glass branded with the image of a spongy sort of molecule.

“*Well, that’s it then,*” Vivian thought. “*Today officially can’t get any worse.*”

At that precise moment, the storm clouds overhead tore themselves open, letting fly the kind of Florida thunderstorm that makes God Himself unplug His electronics from the wall socket. The rain was thick and sticky, and it gave off a faint odor of evaporated salt and stale cabbage.

Vivian slouched in utter defeat as the filthy water enveloped her.

“Correction: Things can *always* get worse.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Do you think that Obi-Wan Kenobi changed his name to Ben Kenobi out of convenience?” Bobby asked.

“Convenience?” Erik replied.

“Yeah, like can you picture him on the phone trying to order a new droid from QVC or something? He’d be all ‘Send that to Obi-Wan Kenobi. No, I’m sorry, not *Joey* Kenobi, *Obi*. Obi-Wan Kenobi. No! Not *Juan* Kenobi! Do I sound Colombian to you? Look, just send it to *Ben*, okay? Ben Kenobi.”

Erik shook his head.

“Come on. Everyone knows that Obi-Wan changed his name to Ben when he went into hiding after the Clone Wars. It had nothing to do with convenience; it was for security.”

“Security?” Bobby laughed. “The man is trying to lay low from the most powerful evil empire the universe has ever known, and he doesn’t even bother to *change his last name?*”

“Well, maybe ‘Kenobi’ was a common last name in their universe,” Erik shrugged. “I mean, there’s a Captain Antilles and a Wedge Antilles who aren’t related, right? Obi-Wan probably didn’t change his last name because he knew the rebels would come looking for him someday. Luke would have never told R2-D2 about him if he was ‘Old Clark Kent who lives out beyond the Dune Sea.’”

“Wait—so let me get this straight,” Bobby argued. “Because he only changed his *first* name, Darth Vader—the meanest, most powerful, most dark-side-of-the-Force-havin’ bad-ass in the galaxy—can’t find him for twenty years, yet it takes only five seconds for a whiny, dumb-ass teenager to get from ‘You belong to Obi-Wan Kenobi?’ to ‘Oh, you must mean Old Ben?’”

“Uh ... yeah,” Erik nodded. “Pretty much.”

“Okay then. That’s officially the most retarded thing that I’ve ever heard.”

Although they’d had their share of differences over the years, there was one thing that Bobby and Erik always had in common.

They were geeks.

Geekhood surrounded them and penetrated them. It bound their galaxy together.

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As was typical for a weekday afternoon, the two friends were making themselves at home: lounging on Bobby's couch and watching Bobby's TV in a tiny living room that was not, in fact, Bobby's.

This living room was part of a cluttered one-bedroom apartment. A battered coffee table sat upended with a sweaty *Microsucks* T-shirt and a *Free Kevin* baseball cap hanging from its outstretched legs. Under a dog-eared stack of *Wired* magazines hid a small white TV/VCR combo with a "sad Mac" face drawn on its dusty screen.

While these simple furnishings cowered in the shadows, a titanic wide-screen TV asserted its total dominance over the space, extending out of the living room and into the hallway by a good seven inches. In front of the TV was a makeshift coffee table composed of a life-sized resin cast of Han Solo frozen in carbonite lying across four chipped cinder blocks.

Bobby Gray drained the last foamy remains of his beer and set the empty bottle on Han's forehead. He slowly rolled back his head, tipped open his mouth, and released a low, thundering belch from the deepest regions of his gut.

"BrrrrAAaaaa.AaaAaaaAaaaaammp!"

"Jeez, Bobby," Erik sighed.

"*There is no Bobby, only Zuul,*" Bobby belched.

Bobby was Vivian's fraternal twin brother, but he had definitely received the short end of the genetic stick. In contrast to Vivian's tall, reedy body, Bobby's physique was comically short and pudgy. He shared his sister's red hair, although his was long, stringy, and perpetually pulled back into a limp ponytail. An orange goatee hung from his chin, looking as if it may have evolved just to hide Cheeto stains. Although they were technically twins, the one thing that made Bobby and Vivian look most alike were their identical Buddy-Holly-style eyeglasses.

"I'm getting another beer," Bobby said, separating his massive backside from the crater it had formed in the couch. "You want one?"

"Boy howdy. Thanks."

"You want a real beer, or another queer beer?"

Erik smirked and clutched his half-finished bottle of Tequila.

"Shut up. It's real beer," he muttered. "Plus they say it tastes just like going down on a beautiful Mexican *señorita*."

Bobby paused.

"Okay, you know what? Now *that's* officially the most retarded thing I've ever heard."

Erik pouted as Bobby lumbered into the tiny kitchen.

Physically speaking, Erik Sievert was little more than a skeleton accented with bulbous knobs of knee, elbow, and Adam's apple. An Atari-branded polo shirt masked both the humiliating xylophone of a visible ribcage and the doughy pouch of a sedentary midsection. His troubled blue eyes always made him look

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as if somebody was laughing at him and he had no idea why.

He finished his Tequiza and leaned back on the couch, lethargically watching a string of commercials. A disquieting, rapid-fire disclaimer concluded an ad for menopause drugs, dissolving the scene to a living room decorated in football paraphernalia. A dumpy character actor sat behind a coffee table full of large, empty bowls. Hungry muscleheads closed in all around him, pounding their meaty fists together in a caricature of intimidation.

"It's five ... minutes ... to the Super Bowl, and all you've ... got ... are empty bowls!"

The scene cut to an exterior ambulance bay and onto the lumpy countenance of a bad William Shatner impersonator.

"This ... is ... a Grocery911!"

Erik threw a nervous glance at the kitchen door as he began searching for the remote control.

On the screen, the jocks backed their host into a corner and up against a computer. With something vaguely akin to terror in his eyes, he sat down and began clicking away at a conveniently pre-loaded website.

"When you have ... a grocery ... emergency, log on to Grocery911.com!"

Erik spotted the oversized remote control and yanked it free of the couch cushions. It was an intimidating rectangle of titanium with a hundred electro-luminescent buttons and a small LCD screen. He stabbed it toward the television and pushed the "channel up" button. The tiny digital screen scrolled the words "INSUFFICIENT ARGUMENTS." He pushed the "channel down" button. The screen replied, "SYNTAX ERROR."

The staccato voice-over continued as the scene cut to an ambulance squealing away from a grocery store.

"Just place your order on the World ... Wide ... Web ... and our Emergency Meal Technicians will ... deliver ... in thirty minutes or ... less! Guaranteed!"

Bobby came back from the kitchen empty-handed.

"We're all out of—"

He stopped dead.

"Change it!" he barked.

"I'm trying!"

On the TV, the ambulance screeched to a stop in front of a suburban house. The driver kicked open the car door, leapt from the vehicle with two full bags of groceries, and bolted for the front porch.

"Oh, now look at that," Bobby said. "I had to go through five levels of firewall to log in, and that idiot just leaves the door open and the keys in the ignition. Talk about a security breach."

Erik sighed.

"Bobby, you *do* realize that this is all staged, right?" he asked. "That guy is just an actor."

"Whatever," Bobby grumbled. "The drivers really do that shit. They're that

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stupid.”

He snatched the remote control away from Erik and continued.

“The only people stupider than the drivers at that company are the suits.”

He changed the channel. Erik tried to change the subject.

“Hey, where’s the beer?”

“We’re all out of beer,” Bobby snapped. “*We’re having a Grocery911!*”

Before Erik could offer his shopworn consolations, the front door swung open, throwing a hot, moist gust of air swirling through the living room. Vivian stood pathetically in the open doorway, a handful of soggy mail in one fist and a six-pack of Fusion Fuel in the other. She was soaked to the skin, and her face and arms were streaked with black grease and rusty grime.

“Damn, Viv,” Bobby said. “You look like you’ve been making out with the thing that killed Tasha Yar.”

“I had a flat tire. In the rain,” Vivian muttered. “Thanks for asking.”

Her wet skin erupted into goose bumps as she stepped into the air-conditioned apartment. Erik leapt to her side and grabbed the six pack.

“Let me take that off your hands for you, Viv.”

“Thanks. That’s very consider—”

“Hey, what is this stuff?” Erik whined. “I thought you brought us some beer!”

A drop of cold, dirty water fell from the tip of Vivian’s nose.

“Go home, Erik.”

Countless repetitions had turned this phrase purely rhetorical to Erik’s ears. He slumped back down on the couch and popped open a bottle of Fusion Fuel. Vivian dropped her mail on Han Solo’s groin and retreated to her bedroom. Bobby lifted a casual eyebrow toward Erik’s drink.

“That stuff any good?”

“No,” Erik replied. “It tastes like Ecto Cooler mixed with turpentine.”

Bobby nodded.

“Gimme one.”

Somewhere the Spirit of Marketing smiled as Erik and Bobby sat there watching commercials and drinking free promotional beverages. A moment later, a towed-off and pajama-clad Vivian returned and dropped into the only available seat. It was an uncomfortable wicker lawn chair that creaked and pinched at her skin. She leaned forward between Han Solo’s toes and retrieved the mail from his lap. It was all junk and bills. She dropped it sleepily in her own lap.

“Oh, man,” she yawned. “I am definitely quitting my job. For real this time. You guys don’t even want to hear about the day I had today.”

Bobby and Erik didn’t look away from the television.

“Nope,” Bobby agreed. “We don’t.”

Vivian stared at Bobby for a long, empty minute before returning her tired

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eyes to the mail. She opened the moist newspaper to the classifieds and smoothed it out over the bills in her lap.

“So, Bob, did you find a job today?” she asked.

Bobby rolled his eyes.

“Man, it’s never ‘Hey, Bobby, how are you doing?’ or ‘Did anything interesting happen to you today?’ It’s always ‘Did you find a job today?’ Am I right, Erik?”

“Don’t look at me,” Erik said. “I *have* a job.”

Vivian blew a long breath into her damp bangs.

“Hey, Bobby, how are you doing?”

“Can’t complain.”

“Did anything interesting happen to you today?”

“Not really.”

“So did you find a job?”

“Hey, Chatty Patty, can we do this later?” Bobby bristled. “We’re trying to watch TV here.”

Somewhere deep in her subconscious, Vivian punched Bobby in the mouth. In reality, she pulled a bill from her lap and stuffed it into Han Solo’s outstretched fingers between her brother and the television.

“Well, enjoy it while it lasts, sofa spud, because I can’t afford to pay your cable bill this month. I’m sorry, but the electricity bill is just too high from you running the AC full-tilt all day, and with your beer tab added in on top of that, I just don’t have the money to—”

Bobby grimaced.

“Jeez, Viv, let’s stay civilized, alright? You know that it won’t be long until I’m payin’ the bills with my mad programmin’ skills. I mean, this is a wonderful age we’re living in. We’re almost exactly halfway between *Back to the Future* and *Back to the Future Part II*. The dot-com economy can only get stronger from here.”

“Bobby, you’ve been saying that since last fall!” Vivian snapped. “I thought we had an unspoken agreement since birth that we’d never share a living space that cramped again!”

Bobby picked up the translucent keyboard of a Bondi Blue iMac sitting on an end table next to the couch.

“Relax, Viv. The offers should be pouring in,” he said, patting the top of the eggshell lovingly. “I posted my résumé online.”

“Oh joy,” Vivian deadpanned. “Our troubles are over.”

In Bobby’s mind, any career worth having could only be found, and executed, via the World Wide Web. His last, and best, job had been in online database management for a little upstart company by the name of Grocery911.com.

The concept behind the business wasn’t terribly original. At its core it was

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little more than another grocery delivery service that had been branded with an “emergency” theme and an ad campaign ripped off from *Rescue 911*. The thing that made Grocery911’s system unique was the fact that it was only accessible via the Internet. There were no telephone numbers, no switchboards, and no operators. Just a low-overhead digital network transmitting orders directly from the fingertips of agoraphobic computer nerds to the teamsters at the warehouse.

As the popularity of the website spread, new distribution centers began springing up all along the East Coast. Government auctions were saturated with young entrepreneurs buying up obsolete ambulances and pressing their disintegrating hulks into service as delivery trucks. When Grocery911.com came knocking on the door of Stillwater, Florida, Bobby Gray was there to answer.

After being hired as the chief e-commerce guru of the local distribution “hospital,” Bobby soon found himself pulling down an annual paycheck with more trailing zeros than a securely wiped hard drive. He was making big bucks doing a job that he loved in an environment that offered all the free snack food that he could pilfer. It was the perfect job.

Then came the memo.

The memo came down all the way from the CEO, the twenty-two-year-old college dropout who had conceptualized the business while watching reruns of *E/R* and jonesing for munchies at four o’clock in the morning. In the memo, he called the Stillwater office a “financial burnout,” noting that it was the only Grocery911 distribution center in the country that was not turning a profit and suggesting that the local team “couldn’t sell a dime bag to Tommy Chong at Woodstock.”

The executive board launched a demographic research study of the Stillwater area, and discovered that the town contained more collapsible walkers than home computers at a ratio of almost ten to one. Further inquiry showed that eighty-seven percent of the local retirees harbored a fanatical loyalty to the local grocery store, which was peculiar, given that ninety-eight percent found the salespeople there to be “inexplicably rude.”

It didn’t take long before Stillwater’s Grocery911.com distribution center became a brick-and-mortar 404 error.

Soon after the “hospital” had cut off his life support, Bobby and his bleeding-edge electronics were evicted from his beachside bungalow. With nowhere else to turn, he found himself at the door of his sister’s unfashionable inland apartment, begging for a place to crash until he could get another job.

Vivian had reluctantly agreed to the temporary arrangement.

That was nine months ago.

Bobby pushed the hockey-puck mouse across the table and clicked open his email.

“Let’s see ... spam, spam, crap, spam, crap, spam. Ah, here we go. I got an email from a guy I used to work with at 911. ‘Subject: FW: Y2K programmers.’”

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I'll bet that's a job lead right there. See, no need to get your panties all in a bunch."

Vivian looked up from her paper.

"Can you *do* Y2K programming?"

"Sure, how hard can it be," Bobby said. "All you've got to do is look through a bunch of code and find a date."

"Ha!" Erik laughed. "You haven't found a date since the junior prom."

Vivian rolled her eyes.

"Oh, man, this isn't about a job at all. It's just a list of crappy Y2K jokes," Bobby moaned. "Yeah, this is a hoot. Listen: 'Microsoft announced today that the official release date for the new operating system Windows 2000 will be delayed until the second quarter of 1901.'"

"Oh, that's a *burn!* Bill Gates is gonna be feeling *that* one in the morning," Erik said. "Hey, is that by any chance from the same loser who had that bumper sticker on his car that said 'At Intel, quality is job .999999998?'"

"Yep," Bobby said. "Same loser."

Erik leaned over to Vivian.

"You see, a few years back, Intel had this defect in some of their chips that would cause rounding errors in their calculations, and so—"

"Oh, hey, Erik," Vivian interrupted. "I don't want to sound like I don't care, but ... I've got a headache like you wouldn't believe, and ... well, I don't care."

Erik slumped back into the couch and took a swig from his bottle.

"I wonder whatever happened to all of those defective computers," he pondered.

The endless stream of TV commercials was suddenly cut off by a solemn voice.

"We interrupt our regularly scheduled programming to bring you a WGON News special report. Live from the Oval Office, an address by the president of the United States."

The graphic of the presidential seal slid off the screen like a squeegee, wiping away swirls of patriotic graphics to reveal the commander in chief sitting at his desk in the Oval Office. He wore the sharp navy-blue suit and powerful red tie that were requisite for a serious televised address. His eyes expressed the kind of guilt that comes not from breaking the rules, but from getting caught doing it.

"Good evening, my fellow Americans. This afternoon, in this room, in this chair, I stand before you accused of engaging in inappropriate relations with a certain White House intern. In response to these allegations, I issue this solemn promise to the American people: I did not make contact with that woman with the intent to arouse or gratify her sexually. Legally speaking, I did not have sex with that woman."

"So, to recap the conclusions of our nation's finest legal minds," Bobby noted, "*gaggin' ain't shaggin'.*"

"Turn it off," Vivian groaned. "If I wanted to hear lame excuses for infidelity I'd get myself a boyfriend."

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Erik picked up the remote control and clicked a button, but the TV failed to respond.

“Your remote control sucks.”

“Nope,” Bobby said, “that remote is top of the line.”

“Then why can’t I work it?”

“Because *you* suck.”

Erik sighed.

“That being said,” the president continued, *“indeed, I did have a relationship with that woman that may not have been entirely appropriate. In fact, some of my critics have gone so far as to call it inappropriate. I am sorry that these people feel this way, and I vow to attempt to refrain from engaging in this behavior in the future.”*

Bobby shook his head.

“I’ll bet that intern is under the desk giving him oral sex right now.”

“Cut it out,” Vivian snapped. “I got enough of that today from Sherri.”

“Oral sex?!” Erik choked.

Before Vivian could issue her standard reply, the room was filled with a shrill, ululating battle call. It was the ring of Bobby’s princess phone. His *Xena: Warrior Princess* phone.

The phone consisted of a plastic cliff face with the warrior princess straddling a numeric touch pad. Vivian grasped the life-sized chakram throwing disc embedded in the stone, detaching the half of its circumference that served as a receiver.

“Hello? Oh, hey, Sherri. Speak of the devil, and she calls you.”

“This matter is between me, the two people I love most—my wife and our daughter—and our God,” the president continued. *“I must put it right, and I am prepared to do whatever it takes to do so. Tonight my family and I will retire to our private retreat at Camp Bravo to begin the process of healing as a family.”*

With these words, the president’s eyes almost seemed to grin to themselves. He blinked, and the brief sparkle was extinguished. He made a conspicuous adjustment of his necktie and continued.

“Together in this darkest twilight of our interpersonal lives, we will breach the walls of blame and meet one another between the tall trees of forgiveness and pity.”

“Man, he gets caught committing adultery and all of the sudden he thinks he’s a Successory,” Erik quipped.

He tossed the remote control to Bobby and spoke in a high, crackly screech.

“Change it, Butt-head!”

“Sherri, I’d love to help you celebrate your liberation,” Vivian said, “but nothing on Earth or in Heaven is keeping me from getting to bed early tonight. Why? Because *I* still have to get up and go to work in the morning!”

“I am honored to lead the American people in this time of great peace and security,” the president said. *“And I ask you to turn away from this spectacle and return the nation’s attention to the challenges and promises of the next millennium.”*

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“So help me,” Bobby groaned, “if he says ‘Because as a nation, we’re gonna party like it’s nineteen ninety-nine ...’”

He flicked a button and replaced the image of the Oval Office with the digital cable system’s menu grid.

“I’m hanging up now, Sherri,” Vivian said firmly. “I’m hanging up. I’ll see you at wor ... uh ... I’ll see you around.”

Vivian hung up the phone and creaked back into her chair.

“What was that all about?” Erik asked.

“Hide your virgins,” Vivian replied. “Sherri’s going downtown to drink her last paycheck tonight.”

She returned her gaze to the classifieds page and ran her finger down the columns.

“Hey, this one actually sounds good,” she said. “‘Bluestone Books is hiring full-time staff. Flexible hours. Competitive salary. Must be well read and knowledgeable about literature.’ Hey, that’s got ‘me’ written all over it.”

She pulled a length of knotted phone cable from behind the couch, grabbed Xena around her waist, and headed for the kitchen.

“I’m going to call about this ad,” she said. “Bobby, turn off the TV and get a job.”

“You got it, chief!” Bobby chirped, grabbing his keyboard eagerly.

As soon as Vivian had disappeared into the kitchen, Bobby dropped his keyboard and picked up the remote control and whirled through the channel previews.

“Crap, crap, commercial, crap, infomercial, crap. Ah ha! Score!”

The cable menu flicked away, leaving the screen filled with Mel Gibson in *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*.

Erik grinned. “I used to know this movie by heart, but I haven’t seen it in years.”

“Bueno, dijiste una pelea limpia. ¿Qué propones?”

“Como manda la ley.”

“El Thunderdome.”

Erik blinked.

“Somehow it’s not exactly how I remember it.”

Bobby nodded.

“Spanish channel.”

He took a long drink from his Fusion Fuel.

“It’s still the best thing on.”

“Dos hombres, mano a mano, sin jurado, sin apelar, sin escape. Entran dos pero sale uno.”

“Haha! I got that!” Erik said. “‘Two men enter, one man leaves.’”

Bobby chuckled.

“I wonder how you say ‘Bust a deal and face the wheel.’”

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“Bartertown has the most awesome constitution,” Erik said. “All of its laws are like bad song lyrics.”

“Well, what do you expect when Tina Turner is your mayor?”

Erik shrugged.

“She’s cool in this movie, but I never understood her nickname. I mean, ‘Master Blaster’ I can wrap my head around. It sounds bad-ass, like the old Amiga game. But ‘Aunty Entity’ I just don’t get. Is it supposed to be like ‘anti-entity,’ like she’s *not* an entity? Or that she’s *opposed* to entities? It’s meaningless. They could have come up with something better. *I* could have come up with something better.”

“You think so?” Bobby challenged. “Okay, Harlan Ellison, if you were living in post-apocalypse Australia, what would your nickname be?”

“Well, let’s see. It would have to be something that sounded tough, so that nobody would want to mess with me. Something like ... Erik the Barbaric.”

“Ha!” Bobby snorted. “You’re about as barbaric as Bob Saget.”

Vivian returned from the kitchen with gloom hanging from her face. She set the phone down, picked her paper up, and came to rest in the prickly grip of the wicker chair.

“No luck?” Erik asked.

“They said that I was under-qualified,” she frowned. “Apparently their definition of ‘knowledgeable about literature’ is ‘Can name the last ten books by Danielle Steel.’”

She noticed the TV.

“Are you two actually sitting here watching a movie that you’ve already seen a hundred times, in a language that you can’t even understand? I wouldn’t ordinarily make this kind of a demand, but seriously, you two, get a *life*.”

“Ooh, you better watch yourself,” Bobby said. “You don’t want to enrage *Erik the Barbaric!*”

“Alright, smart guy,” Erik snapped. “If you’re so clever, what’s *your* post-apocalypse name?”

“Okay, brace yourself for this,” Bobby grinned. “In the world of the post-nuclear holocaust ... I would be known as ... *Atomic Bob!*”

Erik shook his head.

“That is *so* lame. Did you actually *think* of that, or did it come *directly* out of your ass?”

Bobby smirked and turned to Vivian.

“What about you, Viv?” he asked. “After society has collapsed and humanity has been wiped off the face of the planet, what would they call you?”

“Grateful.”

“That’s worse than Aunty Entity,” Erik muttered.

“Oh, come on, you’re not even trying,” Bobby said. “You’ll never survive unless you come up with a name that’s scary enough to intimidate a horde of

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savage bikers. Think tough.”

“Bobby, I’m busy!” Vivian roared, slamming down her paper. “I don’t want to play this game! In fact, *you* don’t want to play this game. You want to get off your lazy butt and find a job already!”

She yanked a page of damp classifieds out of her paper and thrust it at Bobby.

“Here! Just call a number!”

“Bah. Number,” Bobby said, brushing her away. “You’re so twentieth century.”

He picked up his keyboard and toggled off his *Matrix*-inspired screen saver.

“How about this: If you can come up with an end-of-the-world nickname better than the ones we’ve come up with, I’ll get on an online job board right now and apply for as many jobs as you do, one to one. Deal?”

Vivian rubbed her eyes with her palms.

“Do you *promise*?” she said bitterly.

“Cross my heart,” Bobby grinned.

Vivian looked at the ceiling and sighed.

“Okay, how about ... Vivian Oblivion?”

Bobby’s eyes grew wide. Then he squinted.

“Not too shabby,” he conceded.

“Not too shabby?!” Erik squeaked. “Oh, come *on!* ‘Vivian Oblivion’ kicks your sorry ass, *Atomic Bob*.”

“Alright, alright. Fine.”

Bobby clicked defeatedly through the online job listings.

“Crap, crap, scam, crap. Okay, here we go. ‘Major technology firm seeks qualified candidate for chief executive officer. Minimum five years experience in a similar position.’ There. Consider me applied.”

“That’s great,” Vivian said dryly. “I think perhaps you are not taking this seriously.”

“That’s not true,” Bobby said. “If we don’t aim high, we’ll never know what we’re capable of achieving, right?”

“Very inspiring,” Vivian muttered. “Would you mind aiming a little lower with your next application? You could try to aim for—oh, I don’t know—a job that you could actually get on this plane of reality.”

She picked up her newspaper and tapped her finger on the page.

“Like this one, for example. ‘Waffle House seeks graveyard shift waitress. Competitive wages. Uniform provided.’”

“Wow, that sucks,” Bobby said.

“Reality sucks,” Vivian snapped.

She gathered up the phone and retreated to the kitchen.

“Why do you always do that to her?” Erik asked.

“Do what?”

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“You do everything you can to avoid getting a job, and you don’t show your sister any appreciation for what she’s done for you.”

“Oh, jeez,” Bobby moaned. “When did you turn into our mom? Next you’ll be telling me not to sit so close to the TV and to finish my peas.”

Erik took a sip of his drink and pointed his bottle at Bobby.

“All I’m saying is, I think this R2 unit has a bad motivator.”

“Look, Erik, you’ve got it all wrong,” Bobby sighed. “It’s not that I’m lazy, or that I don’t appreciate Vivian letting me crash here, or whatever. It’s just that she’s so ... I don’t know, *inexperienced*.”

Erik raised an eyebrow. Bobby continued.

“I mean, she’s just gone from one meaningless, thankless job to another her whole life. She’s been doing it so long that she forgets that there is actually something better out there. A career is like a parking garage with those ‘severe tire damage’ strips all through it. Once you advance up a level, you can never go back to a lower one again.”

Erik squinted at Bobby and crossed his arms.

“Okay, look, it’s like this,” Bobby explained. “Remember the first time you used a 56K modem after years of using a 28.8? It seemed like Buckaroo Banzai’s jet car by comparison. But now that we’ve got DSL, 56K is intolerably slow. Once you’ve tasted broadband, you can never be happy going back to your old modem. It’s the same thing with jobs. I’ve had the T1 line of employment yanked away from me, and now she expects me to just go back to 9600 baud. It’s not that I don’t want a job. As soon as I find the right one, I’ll be on it like Pepé Le Pew on a striped cat, but in the meantime, I can’t be expected to degrade myself by flipping burgers or pumping gas for tourists, right?”

Erik clapped quietly.

“Nice reading. Very spontaneous and non-rehearsed. So what did Vivian say when you laid that on her?”

Bobby sighed.

“She said she wouldn’t pay my Internet bill anymore.”

Vivian shuffled back into the room and dropped the phone, spilling its receiver across the carpet. She fell into her chair with a *crunch*.

“They said I was under-qualified when I admitted I didn’t know what was meant by the phrase ‘scattered, smothered, and covered,’” she said. “They actually told me that I was *under-qualified* to be a *Waffle House waitress*. That’s like being under-qualified to be a car accident victim.”

She shook her head and turned to Bobby as he clattered away at his keyboard.

“What did you find, Bob?”

“Wanted: volunteer video game testers for new next-generation console,” Bobby said. “That sounds awesome. I just sent in my *résumé*.”

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Vivian looked at him with disbelief.

“Bobby, you do realize that ‘volunteer’ means that you don’t get paid, right?”

Bobby squinted at his screen.

“Hmm, well, it looks like the job was in Tokyo anyway.”

Vivian shook her head.

“Okay, Bobby, how about a ‘safety’ application, just in case the CEO thing doesn’t work out. Could you apply for something lowly and *possible*, like janitorial or food service, please? Just to humor me?”

“Alright, alright,” Bobby griped.

Vivian returned to her paper, scanning the columns with an increasing sense of despair.

“This city is an employment wasteland,” she said. “There’s not a single worthwhile job within twenty miles of here.”

“Hey Viv,” Erik said, “if you’re already resigned to working as a waitress anyway, you might as well apply at the Hooters out on Songbird Key. It’s right on the other side of the bridge, and I’ve heard that those girls make tons of money in tips, plus they have full benefits.”

“Oh, right,” Vivian snorted. “Can you picture me in little orange hot pants with my breasts all bunched up in a tight tank top like some Lamborghini poster girl from 1985?”

Erik stared blankly through Vivian’s abdomen as a smile spread dreamily across his face. Vivian scowled.

“Go home, Erik.”

Erik’s face flushed red. Vivian crumpled her newspaper and threw it at him.

“All right, I give up. I’m just going to apply over at Publix,” she said. “Sure, it’s a lateral move into the same lousy job, but at least their seafood doesn’t require a garnish of antibiotics.”

She picked up Xena and shuffled off to the kitchen, dragging the beeping receiver across the carpet behind her. The boys turned their slothful attention back to the dubbed film on TV.

“You know, there’s something that I’ve never understood about this movie,” Bobby said. “If everybody in Bartertown is drinking water laced with radioactive fallout, how come they’re not all zombies?”

“Well, that’s because radiation doesn’t cause zombies,” Erik explained. “Zombies are always caused by toxic waste or some sinister biological agent that the military accidentally unleashes on the general public.”

“I call bullshit on that,” Bobby countered. “In *Night of the Living Dead* the zombies rose from the grave because of radiation coming off of a space probe.”

“They *allegedly* rose from the dead because of radiation coming off of a space probe,” Erik corrected. “They never give a definitive explanation for what happened. It’s like the writer knew that his science was crap, so instead of giving concrete facts he just let the characters take batshit guesses as to what was going

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on.”

Vivian came back into the room, set Xena on the coffee table, and numbly dropped into her chair.

“Well, what about *The Hills Have Eyes* then?” Bobby continued. “The radiation from a nuclear test site spawns a bunch of whacked-out cannibalistic mutants.”

“Well sure. But that’s *mutants*, not *zombies*,” Erik said dismissively. “Apples and oranges. Zombies and mutants are completely different things.”

“Oh, they are *not*,” Bobby said. “They’re all the same genre of irradiated, flesh-eating freaks.”

“No they’re not! There’s a world of difference! Zombies are nothing but rotting, reanimated corpses! They have no thought processes! All they do is shamble through the night, infecting people and eating brains. They’re *always* an evil menace and a threat to humanity. A mutant *can* be evil, but it doesn’t *have* to be. Look at the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, or the X-Men, or the Fantastic Four, or even the Toxic Avenger! All mutants! All heroes!”

Vivian ground her palms into her throbbing forehead.

“God, Erik! Shut ... *up!*” she snapped. “You sit here blathering on and on in these endless tirades of B-movie nonsense as if anybody *cares!* None of that is real! It’s just fanboy gibberish!”

Erik’s soft eyes took on an abused puppy-dog quality.

“Oh, come on, Vivian. We’re talking about *mutants* and *zombies* here. Outside of ‘fanboy gibberish,’ what else is there to know?”

Vivian took a deep breath.

“Well, Haitian legend says that a zombie is created when a *bokor* performs a voodoo ritual upon a person, turning him into a mindless slave. According to scientific studies, however, the ‘zombie’ trance is actually a psychological state caused by a combination of tetrodotoxin powder and various hallucinogens. Voodoo zombies do not eat human flesh. Mutants, on the other hand, come from damaged DNA strands improperly spreading their genetic code into newly forming cells. An extreme dose of radiation can cause grotesque mutation but, more often than not, it also causes early death. It *never* causes super powers. And for the record, mutants *also* do not eat human flesh.”

Erik’s lips pursed into a pout.

“Oh *yeab?* Well, what about mutant *sharks?*”

Vivian closed her eyes.

“Go home, Erik.”

Bobby nodded toward the phone.

“So I’m gonna guess by your showers of sunshine that you did *not* get the grocery job?”

Vivian sighed.

“After my years of tireless service at Boltzmann’s Market, the good folks at

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Publix consider me vastly *over*-qualified for employment. Bobby, please tell me that you've applied for something reasonable."

"We're three for three," he said, pounding the Enter key. "I applied in food service, just like you asked."

"Thanks, Bob. I appreciate that. What's the job?"

"Waitress at the Hooters out on Songbird Key," he said. "I've heard I can make tons of money in tips, plus I'd get full benefits."

Vivian pulled off her glasses and pressed her palms over her eyes.

"I give up," she moaned. "I just give up."

She dropped her head and fell quiet. Erik scowled at Bobby, who was now clicking through online galleries of Hooters waitresses. He reached out consolingly for Vivian's knee, but when his hand was halfway there, he thought better of the idea and pulled it back.

"Hey, it's not all that bad, Viv. Seriously," he said. "Listen, it's not the end of the world. Okay, so you've got a crappy job that you hate, but you've got a lot of good stuff going on in your life too, right? It's like I always say: Life is like a box of Smilex."

"Don't give me that *Up With People* crap," Vivian grumbled. "I'm not in the mood for smiling."

"No no," Erik said. "Not smiling, *Smilex*. You remember. The chemical from *Batman*."

Vivian looked up and glared at Erik in disbelief.

"Please tell me that you're not actually trying to cheer me up with your bogus movie pseudo-science."

"Just listen," Erik said. "In that movie the Joker terrorized Gotham City by putting toxic Smilex into the city's cosmetics and toiletries."

"So nobody could wear eye shadow? Oh, the humanity."

"No, you could wear eye shadow, if you were *lucky*," Erik corrected. "No single item contained the entire formula. There might be elements of Smilex in your eye shadow, and some in your lipstick, and some in your soap. If you used any single one of those you'd be fine, but use all three together and they form Smilex, and you become one very happy corpse."

"Erik, I'm begging you," Vivian moaned. "Either make a point or stop talking."

"My point is that life is like a box of Smilex," Erik repeated. "It'll only kill you if the right combination of your life's toiletries are bad. I mean, sure your job sucks, but without it you'd switch to 'Unemployed' brand toothpaste, 'Homeless' brand hairspray, and 'Starving' brand shampoo. Next thing you know Batman is finding your bloated, grinning corpse floating in the Gotham River."

Vivian sighed.

"You're right. You sure took the scenic route to get there, but you're right. It

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could be worse. I guess as long as I'm working, we'll be all right."

"That's right, stay positive," Erik beamed. "And hey, you never know when the phone is going to ring with a job offer."

As if on cue, the warrior princess erupted in her ululating ring. Vivian grabbed the receiver.

"Hello. Vivian Gray speaking," she said hopefully.

"*Vivian!*" a guttural voice screamed. "*What are you trying to pull?*"

"Mr. Boltzmann? I—I don't know what you mean."

"*I don't know what you mean,*" Boltzmann squeaked in mocking imitation.

"*Don't try to play innocent with me, missy. You're not that good an actress.*"

Vivian didn't know where to go from there.

"I'm sorry?"

"*You'd better be sorry! Your drawer came up a hundred and sixty dollars short today. Did you think I wouldn't notice? Do you think I'm stupid?*"

Vivian suddenly understood.

"No, I don't think you're stupid," she lied. "Listen, there was a misunderstanding with the refund that I gave to that woman with the camping lantern. You see, it cost eighty dollars, but you made me refund her twice, so she got one hundred and sixty back. That's where the missing—"

"*So what you're trying to tell me is that the woman paid you for the lantern three times, so you had an extra two hundred and forty dollars, and then somehow when you refunded one-sixty, your drawer came up one-sixty short?*"

Vivian put her hand on her pounding forehead.

"That's *not* what I'm saying at *all*. Listen to me—I'll go through it *very slowly* so you can understand."

"*Oh, I understand! I understand your little scheme just fine!*" Boltzmann screamed.

"*You charged that woman for the lantern three times and pocketed the extra one-sixty for yourself. Then, when you got caught, you took another one-sixty from the register to cover what you had already stolen!*"

Vivian's head spun with the pure mathematical illogic of it all.

"Listen, tomorrow when I come in I'll explain the whole thing, using diagrams," she said. "Puppets if necessary."

"*Shaddup, Vivian!*" Boltzmann wailed. "*You're done explaining. And don't bother coming in tomorrow. You're fired!*"

Vivian's throat closed up.

"W—what?!"

"*And I'm taking the three hundred and twenty bucks that you stole out of your last paycheck, smart-ass!*"

With a harsh *click*, the phone went dead. Vivian's mouth continued to work at forming words, but only a dial tone remained to hear whatever she would come up with.

"Is that so?!" she finally yelled. "Well, you can't fire me, because I *quit!*"

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She slammed the phone down in its cradle. Bobby and Erik stared at her in quiet disbelief.

“Vivian, I’m all for telling the Man where to shove it,” Bobby said, “but didn’t you just totally Smilex our asses?”

Vivian glared at him.

“I hope you saved the box that television came in, because as of the end of the month, we’re both going to be living in it.”

A long, tense silence fell over the apartment. Erik looked at Bobby, then at Vivian. His eyes had a faint glimmer, as if his mind was pulling together the words of wisdom that would make everything all right.

Finally he broke the silence.

“Well,” he announced, “I’m gonna go home.”

“Right behind you,” Bobby agreed.

In the blink of an eye the boys had vanished, punctuating their disappearance with a slamming door.

Vivian sat alone in the darkness. The stack of unpaid bills on the table seemed taller than it had just a moment before. After considering all other possible courses of action, she grabbed a long loop of phone cable and considered wrapping it around her neck.

Before she could take action against her own windpipe, the phone released its warbling ring.

“Hello?” she answered weakly.

“Hija, Red! It’s me, Nick. We met here at the store today.”

Vivian closed her eyes tightly and started hammering her head with the earpiece.

“How did you get my number?” she croaked.

“Easy! I got it out of your employee file when ol’ Verm pitched it in the trash. Man, you sure pissed him off something fierce. I’m not even going to tell you the things he said about you after he hung up! It was totally obscene!”

Vivian’s hands rolled into fists, then slowly relaxed.

“Well, I’m glad you enjoyed the show. Now I have to hang up and see if I can find a job cleaning bedpans at some senior assisted-living home. Goodbye.”

“Hoo, barsb,” Nick laughed. “Hey, before you do that, why don’t we see if I can get Verm to give you your job back? I could totally do it. That guy loves me. Plus I saw the whole thing with the old lady go down. I’ll explain it to him man-to-man.”

Vivian thought the proposition over. As sad and twisted as it was, it could actually work.

“That’s ... well, that’s very nice of you. I’d actually appreciate that a lot.”

“It’s no problem,” Nick said. “No problem at all.”

“Well, okay then,” Vivian smiled. “Thanks, Nick! Thanks a lot. I’ll see you at the store tomorrow.”

“Actually, I was thinking you’d see me tonight. On that date that we talked about.”

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A chill streaked down Vivian's spine.

"Oh ... I, um ... I'm really not available tonight for a date. I'm ... going out with a friend," she stammered.

"*Aw, that's too bad,*" Nick said. "*I was going to talk to Mr. B about all this in the morning, but it looks like I might be scheduled at a store over on Songbird Key tomorrow ...*"

Vivian frowned.

"I see—so this is about extortion. In that case, forget it. I'm not the kind of girl who trades evening companionship for career advancement."

"*I know you're not,*" Nick agreed. "*You're the kind of girl who cleans bedpans in assisted-living homes. Come on, Red! Am I worse than that?*"

In her mind, Vivian flicked through all of the cards in her hand, weighed her options, and decided to fold.

"Okay, okay, fine," she conceded. "You know what? I'll go out with you tonight. *If, and only if,* you can get Boltzmann to give me my job back. Deal?"

"*You got it, lady,*" Nick said. "*I've already got us reservations at the Banyan Terrace for nine o'clock.*"

"And let me make this abundantly clear right now," Vivian added. "I am only agreeing to dinner, and that's only for the sake of my job. This is not an all access pass. Understood?"

"*Don't worry, I won't hurt you,*" Nick laughed. "*I only want you to have some fun!*"

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Missile after missile streaked through the sky in impossible numbers toward the oblivious cities below. In response, a single antiballistic missile blazed up from the ground, intercepting three of the incoming warheads and vaporizing them in a ball of yellow light. Seconds later another ABM managed to eliminate two more attackers, but even with the missile defense operating at full speed, saving one city invariably meant sacrificing all the others.

“God damn it, there’s just too many of them!”

“Make every shot count! Use some strategy!”

“I am! They’re too fast! And this stupid joystick sucks ass!”

With the sound of a gravelly digital explosion, the TV screen flashed through a cycle of apocalyptic 8-bit color. Bobby threw down the Atari 2600 joystick in defeat.

“*Missile Command* sucks,” he barked. “Frickin’ Reagan-era, SDI bullshit.”

Erik was working his usual night shift at the Planet Packrat Collectibles Emporium, and Bobby was keeping him company in the sparsely trafficked junk shop.

Within its cracked walls, Planet Packrat held the remains of a thousand forgotten childhoods. Hundreds of mismatched toys and tchotchkes haunted its dusty shelves like ghosts of an era not long passed. Abraded *Star Wars* action figures gathered in heaps in shallow plastic bins. Two Voltron robots looked down from a shelf behind the counter, one complete, one missing the yellow lion that would have formed its left leg. In the corner of the front window sat a stuffed Mogwi with a plastic knife and fork rubber-banded to his hands, propped up against a cardboard sign reading “Open Till Midnight.”

Erik sat on a stool behind the checkout counter. He was holding a butterscotch-colored alley cat, stroking her matted fur like a cut-rate James Bond villain. The cat thrashed her tail back and forth angrily.

“Who’s the good kitty? I think you’re the good kitty! Such a good kitty kitty,” Erik cooed. “*Be-de-be-de-be-de!* How’s it goin’, Twiki?”

Twiki’s attention was fixed on a mouse scurrying toward a hole in the worm-eaten baseboard. She made a desperate leap for the floor, but Erik caught her in

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mid-leap and continued to cuddle her lovingly.

“Oh no you don’t!” he scolded, raising a finger to the cat’s face. “No more killing mice! It’s a filthy habit! Do you understand me?”

Twiki answered by sinking ten claws into Erik’s forearm. He dropped her with a pained squeak and she darted away, disappearing under a shelf of *Jem and the Holograms* dolls.

“I don’t see why you don’t just let her go ahead and exterminate the place,” Bobby said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s worse things than mice living in this shitbox building.”

Erik shook his head.

“Don’t you know how dangerous it is for cats to chase mice? Haven’t you ever seen a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon?”

Their exchange was cut short by the roar of an ill-maintained engine pulling up outside. It belonged to a rusted-out Ford Aerostar sporting a bumper sticker proclaiming, “I still miss my ex ... *but my aim is improving!*”

“Oh no. No no no,” Erik stammered. “Not again. Not tonight.”

In the passenger seat of the minivan was a woman oozing an aura of spent sexuality through a thick screen of exhaustion and ennui. She adjusted her sagging breasts in her worn halter-top and took a long, sultry-cum-suicidal drag on an unfiltered cigarette.

But Erik didn’t notice her.

The driver of the Aerostar was a rugged, sun-beaten man whose hair seemed locked in a struggle between “Young Elvis” and “NASCAR enthusiast.” The rawhide of his cheeks stretched tightly across his jawbone as his teeth worked over a mashed toothpick.

Erik didn’t notice him either.

No, Erik’s glare was focused on the minivan’s rear door as it slid open to reveal two grimy, doe-eyed children.

“Well, gotta go,” Bobby said. “It’s beer o’clock!”

“No!” Erik chirped. “Come on, Bobby, don’t leave me alone with them again!”

Although he had never actually met Richard Stokes, he had become all too familiar with the children of his failed marriage. As an ostensible toy store, Planet Packrat served as Stokes’s primary child-care facility as he introduced himself to every lady of the night south of the Mason-Dixon line.

“Don’t go! Please, Bobby!” Erik pleaded. “I can’t take another night alone with the gruesome twosome! I’m begging you. As your best friend. *Please.*”

Bobby looked out the window, then back at Erik. Finally he let out a long sigh.

“Okay, I’ll stay,” he said stoically. “After all, you *are* my best friend. I would never leave you when the goin’ gets tough.”

A relieved smile spread across Erik’s face. “Really?”

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“Nah, I was just messin’ with ya.”

With that, Bobby yanked open the front door, allowing the two abandoned children to scamper inside. He threw a salute at Erik and slid into the street.

“Catch you tomorrow, chump. Have fun baby-sitting.”

Erik fumed as his alleged best friend bobbed past the front window and off into the sunset. He was now alone.

Alone with Debbie and Harry.

As a connoisseur of ’80s music, Erik had initially found their names amusing. That was before he had discovered that one way or another they were going to get him. To get him, get him, get him, get him.

Harry Stokes was a five-year-old kleptomaniac, perpetually wrapped in an oversized Army jacket full of hungry pockets. Debbie Stokes was twelve. She was the kind of girl who said things like “girls are made of sugar and spice and everything nice” to cover up the fact that she was, in fact, completely horrid.

They strolled into the store as if casing the joint. Debbie immediately spotted her favorite thing in the store.

“The kitty!” she yelled. “I see you, kitty kitty! I’m gonna get you!”

Twiki seized up in terror before scrambling for safety. Debbie pursued with a giggling squeal, and the two of them disappeared into the shadowy fringes of the store. Harry toddled over to a shelf of *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* toys and picked up a Batty Koda doll.

“Ooooo, cuuuuwl! Lookada cwazy bat!” he jabbered. “I wannda havea cwazy bat!”

Erik watched Harry stuff the doll into his coat pocket. He sighed. He knew that as long as Harry Stokes was in the store, its inventory was in jeopardy.

The monolithic screen of Bobby’s TV flickered a game of *Jeopardy!* in front of Vivian’s half-lidded eyes. She sat in a deep slouch on the sofa with her feet on the makeshift coffee table, jabbing Han Solo in the gut with her bare heels. Her chin pressed drowsily into her horizontal chest, and her limp arms sprawled out across the cushions. To look at her, one might imagine that Vivian had been relieved of her entire underlying bone structure.

Although she had already cleared most of the board, Vivian’s mind wasn’t really in the game. She couldn’t stop thinking about Nick. Or rather, her date with Nick. Or more specifically, how to *get out of* her date with Nick.

“Instead of spark plugs,” Alex Trebek droned, *“a diesel engine ignites its fuel mechanically by using this to create heat through the properties of Charles’s law.”*

How had she gotten herself into this situation? All she wanted to do was go to work, come home, and go to bed. She didn’t need this kind of stress. She didn’t need this kind of ...

“Pressure,” she said.

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“What is pressure?” the television contestant answered.

“That is correct.”

“I’ll take ‘To Your Health’ for three hundred, Alex.”

“As esophageal cancer cells multiply at an uncontrolled rate, they pose a threat to their host organism through this unrelated biological process.”

Maybe she just wouldn’t show up. After all, what was the worst that could happen to her if she lost her stupid job?

“Starvation,” she grumbled.

“Starvation is correct,” Alex Trebek confirmed. *“Potentially leading to death.”*

Vivian crossed her arms and glowered as her stomach let out a low, rolling growl. Reluctantly, she grabbed the only edible thing within her reach.

A warm bottle of Fusion Fuel.

She pulled out her Swiss Army Knife, pried off its cap, and took a hesitant sip. The flavor was overbearing and foul, which she found somehow poetic, as she felt the same way about the person who had given it to her.

“I’ll take ‘Basic Instincts’ for one hundred, Alex.”

“Contrary to popular belief, this colorblind mammal is compelled to charge by erratic motion, not by crimson hues.”

Even if she *wanted* to go on this date, she couldn’t. She was too tired to get off the couch, let alone drive all the way up to Port Manatee. Plus she didn’t have the right kind of clothes for a fancy restaurant. And she hated wearing makeup.

“Bull,” she sighed.

“Absolutely,” Alex Trebek agreed. *“It is ‘bull.’”*

Vivian raised an eyebrow, then shrugged. All right, she conceded this point: Her excuses were complete bull. She just didn’t want to go. She didn’t need to justify herself to Alex Trebek.

She took another hardy swig from her bottle and realized that she had finished it. She smacked her lips. Huh. Fusion Fuel actually wasn’t too bad if you just gave it a chance. Her nose wrinkled.

Oh, was this supposed to be symbolic or something?

Nahh. It was just another stupid coincidence.

“All right, Alex Trebek, you’ve got all the answers,” she said sarcastically. “What do you think? Should I go on this stupid date or not?”

“This three-word slogan has been used by Nike since 1988.”

Vivian poked a button on the remote control and the gigantic screen went black.

“Okay, okay, fine. I’ll go on the date,” she surrendered. “At least he’s not taking me to one of those crummy tropical-themed places downtown.”

The setting sun blazed in the shuttered shop windows of downtown as

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Bobby made his way down the abandoned sidewalk. Unfortunately, Stillwater's businesses catered to the "Early to bed, early to rise" sleep schedule of the elderly. The faint melody of a lousy reggae cover of "1999" led him to the only thing outside of Planet Packrat still open at this hour: the Bikini Martini.

The Bikini Martini was an overdone theme bar designed to draw in the kind of tourist who was not aware that Florida was not a Polynesian island. The open-air building was made of logs bolted together and cosmetically tied with coarse rope, like *Gilligan's Island* with a building safety code. The bar itself was a freestanding island of bamboo poles and thatched palm fronds, but the surrounding tables were white plastic patio furniture sprouting Budweiser umbrellas. Behind the wood-planked barroom was a large outdoor lot filled with white sand and errant cigarette butts.

On one side of the "beach" was a cabana stage where lousy bands played, and more tables where people who hated themselves could sit to listen. On the other side was a submarine the size of a short bus with its keel buried in the sand. The sub wore a peeling coat of cheery yellow paint, complete with cartoonish blue waves permanently cresting along its sides. A carved wooden plaque identified the vessel as the *Stillwater Sunfish*, but decades of erosion had rendered the rest of its history unreadable. Not that anyone seemed to care.

Bobby sat down on a creaking bamboo barstool. A girl behind the bar slid up to get him a drink.

"Heya, Bobby," she smiled.

Sunny Sasaki was the kind of bartender who knew every person on the continent on a first-name basis. She had a genuine, easy-going charm that made you feel as if she was an old friend even upon first meeting. But her personality was only half of the reason she was the highest tipped bartender in Stillwater County.

"I'm glad you came in here tonight," she said. "I've got something that's going to get you all hot and bothered."

"You seem to think I haven't already noticed," Bobby grinned.

Sunny was, to put it mildly, an Asian goddess. Her perfect feminine curves were wrapped in nothing more than a green bikini top and a sarong slung low across her inviting hips. Regardless of one's gender or sexual preference, it was a challenge to look at Sunny and not immediately picture her naked.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful," Bobby swooned. "When did you get it?"

Sunny smiled into Bobby's captivated eyes, which were staring straight over her shoulder.

"We just got it installed this afternoon," she said. "It gets over three hundred channels in perfect digital clarity."

She pulled a remote control from beneath the bar and turned her gaze to match Bobby's. Attached to the corner pillar of the bar, above a TV showing

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some boring Norwegian rocket launch, a tiny satellite dish pointed into the clear night sky.

“What happened to the *big* dish?” Bobby asked.

“The big dish is yesterday’s news. Analog. Crap,” Sunny said. “This digital service carries all kinds of obscure stuff like this, and you don’t ever have to rotate the dish to find different satellites.”

“That’s all true, but the big dish isn’t subscription based. It can pick up all the wild feeds of newscasters picking their noses and yelling at their cameramen. I mean, you just can’t put a price on that kind of entertainment.”

“Well, you’ve got me there,” Sunny nodded, pulling a mug of beer. “The big dish is in the Dumpster out back. You can always fish it out and take it home with you if you need to see newsies farming nose goblins.”

“You know, I might just do that. It looks like I’m about to get my cable cut off next month, and I’m sure as hell not using rabbit ears.”

Sunny laughed and touched Bobby’s hand as she slipped him his drink.

“You’ve always got a scheme cooking, Bobby Gray. And that’s why I love you.”

Bobby knew this declaration of love was just a part of Sunny’s routine chatter, but he made a mental note to leave her a big tip nonetheless.

“Well, I’ve got to get back to work,” she continued, sticking out her pinky and her thumb. “Hang loose, channel surfer.”

She slid the remote across the bar to Bobby and disappeared toward the thirsty mouths on the other side of the bar.

As Bobby annoyed the other patrons with his incessant channel-flipping, a new face slipped through the thatched doorway behind him. The dark stranger pitched a set of rental-car keys to the valet and strutted toward the bar.

The man’s skin was a nondescript shade of mocha, and his unusual features could have passed him off as a member of any race on the planet without taxing the imagination. Over his broad chest he wore a wifebeater covered with a silk rockabilly shirt—black with blue flames licking their way up its sides. With his greasy black hair, his sculptured sideburns, and a beaming smile of hubcap-sized teeth, the guy looked like the poor sap who didn’t get the callback for a GAP commercial. He swaggered up to the bar and leaned across it.

“Excuse me, miss?” he called.

Sunny turned, sending a wave through her onyx hair that seemed to linger in a sensual slow motion. Her eyes danced over the new guy’s face as she approached.

“Heya, stranger,” she said. “I don’t think I’ve seen you around here before.”

“You haven’t,” the newcomer smiled. “The good Lord only cast me in a cameo in this tiny town. I fly back to Los Angeles first thing in the a.m.”

He said “Los Angeles” in the same tone of voice that someone might use to casually name-drop the Queen of England. To his obvious disappointment,

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neither Sunny nor Bobby looked the slightest bit impressed. He lowered his voice confidentially and continued.

“I’m just in town for a bit of *personal enhancement*. Tracked down the same guy who did Affleck. For real. Sometimes you gotta get down with the small town to get the job done right, you know?”

He waggled his eyebrows and gazed into Sunny’s almond eyes with a grin as broad and toothy as a great white shark’s. Again, whatever impression of awe that he was trying to create completely failed to congeal.

“Well, good for you, tiger,” Sunny said noncommittally. “What can I get you to drink tonight?”

The stranger leaned in and raised an eyebrow.

“Girl, if you’d get me some milk, I’d pour it over you and make you a part of my complete breakfast.”

Bobby burst out laughing, spitting beer on the bar.

“Very subtle, Casanova,” he said, wiping his chin.

“We don’t serve milk here,” Sunny noted coolly. “How about I get you a beer?”

“How about you get me your name?” the stranger smiled, patting a gold cross hanging from his neck. “So I know what to write on the thank-you card I send to God.”

Sunny rolled her eyes.

“It’s Sun, but everybody calls me Sunny.”

“And I can see why,” the stranger nodded. “You light up this whole place with your radiance.”

Bobby turned and drew an invisible line on an invisible tote board on the side of the bar.

“I can see why, you light up the place’ gets another point,” he said dully. “Now it’s only three behind ‘They must call you Sunny because you have a heavenly body.’”

“Damn, look at Mr. Smart Guy over here,” said the smooth talker. “If he was any more nosy, we’d have to call him Pinocchio. Why don’t you keep it to yourself, homes?”

“I’m sorry, maestro,” Bobby conceded. “Go on with your work.”

“So what do they call you, slick?” Sunny asked, feigning interest for the sake of a bigger tip.

“The name is Terence Trent DeLaRosa, meaning ‘of the rose,’” he said, rolling the R with a flourish. “My friends call me Trent, but you can call me whatever you like.”

“How about Terence Trent DeLaMerde?” Bobby suggested. “Meaning ‘of the bullshit.’”

Terence Trent DeLaRosa’s eyes narrowed.

“Look, friend,” he said, planting a heavy hand on Bobby’s shoulder, “I don’t

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need you making a running commentary over here and disturbing this lovely young lady.”

Bobby stiffened and spoke in a low, threatening tone.

“I think that you should take your hand off of me now.”

“And why is that, dawg?” Trent said, puffing out his chest.

“Because it’s really starting to turn me on.”

Trent let go of Bobby and turned back toward Sunny.

“What a comedian this guy is,” he said to the empty air.

Sunny had long since left the two bickering egos in favor of a cuter guy on the other side of the bar.

“Keep it up, Romeo,” Bobby said. “I think she really likes you.”

Without a word, Trent sat down and stared at Sunny’s perfect, apple-shaped bottom, imagining exactly what he would like to do to it.

The rigid hose slipped into the snug opening and began vigorously pumping away.

At a twilight gas station just off of Stillwater Bay, Vivian was filling her Rabbit’s tank. Through the magic of a long shower and a short reconnaissance mission into the back of her closet, she had metamorphosed from a weary wage slave into a budding wallflower.

A black polyester cocktail dress hugged her long, minimal curves, terminating two conservative inches below her knees. The gown’s neckline hovered above her modest chest in a manner that would have been suitable for a funeral. She was waiting until she got to the restaurant to put on her high heels—the Rabbit’s clutch was difficult enough to operate as it was. In the meantime she wore her sneakers. Her hair was pulled up in a knot impaled with a pair of take-out chopsticks.

There were many things that Vivian Gray could do well. Dressing with flair was not among them.

She leaned on the fender and waited while the gas pump chugged away. The sun had finally disappeared behind the horizon, making the temperature balmy and comfortable for the first time that day. She had a secret place where she liked to go to be alone on nights like this. Unfortunately, tonight she would not have the opportunity to enjoy solitude.

She pulled a backpack-style purse from the back seat of her perpetually open convertible. After a moment of fruitless rummaging within, she pulled out a tiny flashlight and shined it inside. In the deepest, darkest depths of the purse she finally found what she was looking for: a dried-out tube of lipstick.

She twisted out a crumbling pink shaft and applied it to her lips with a clumsy, unpracticed stroke. This face-painting was just to fit in at the Banyan Terrace, she reminded herself. It was all just a part of the blackmail process. It

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was to get her job back. It was not to impress Nick.

"I hope you don't have to go too far with that fella tonight."

Vivian jumped and spun around guiltily. The voice belonged to an avuncular man fueling up an age-beaten Winnebago with Pennsylvania license plates.

"Excuse me?" Vivian asked, wiping an errant streak of pink off her chin.

The man ambled over and pointed to the Rabbit's comically undersized spare tire. "That fella there. The donut. I hope you don't have to go too far with it," he repeated. "You better get that replaced or it'll blow at the worst possible time. Believe me, I know what I'm talkin' about when it comes to cars."

"Oh, right. Thanks," Vivian said. "I know. Don't worry, I won't go too far. Ever."

The man nodded.

"If I were you I'd never go too far neither. Every time we come down to Florida the wife gets to wantin' to close up the farm and move here permanent. Stillwater is just like paradise, ain't it?"

Vivian flashed an insincere smile and nodded. She didn't want to get into it. The man looked her up and down with a twinkle in his eye like a proud father on his daughter's wedding day.

"You're all dressed up mighty purdy, if you don't mind me sayin' so," he said. "You goin' someplace fancy with your fella?"

"I'm going on a date with a guy that I don't like in order to save a job that I don't want so that I can afford to pay bills that aren't mine."

The man let out a long, low whistle and leaned up against the Rabbit next to Vivian. Apparently he was in as much of a hurry to get back to his motor home as he was to get back to his farm.

"Well, that don't seem fair, does it?" he said. "Listen, I figger I can help you out a little."

He wrestled a misshapen old wallet from the back pocket of his shorts.

"Oh, no no. I'm okay, really," Vivian said. "I couldn't take your mon—"

Before Vivian could complete her protest the man pulled a wrinkled photograph from his wallet and shoved it under her nose.

"What do you think of that?" he said reverently. "Ain't she a *beaut*?"

Vivian struggled to focus her eyes on the picture hovering inches from her glasses. It depicted a bright yellow classic convertible with the man behind the wheel wearing a leather jacket and smiling from ear to ear.

"That there's a 1953 Cadillac Eldorado," he said proudly. "Beautiful, beautiful machine. I restored her myself."

"That's ... nice?" Vivian ventured.

"She's more than nice! She's an absolute gem!" the man said, stabbing his finger into the photo. "*That's* the kind of car you drive to paradise!"

He sighed and tucked the picture back into his wallet before continuing.

"But the wife, Lord love 'er, she don't like to stay in hotels. Says she don't

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like Bernice sleepin' on unfamiliar beddin'. Not that there's much of a chance of that happening, if you know what I mean."

He shook his head heavily and looked at the dilapidated motor home. Through its windshield, Vivian could see a lanky, underweight teenage girl with dirty blond hair and the most homely face that she'd ever had the misfortune of laying eyes upon. The girl's mouth hung open like the leaf trap on a motel swimming pool, displaying two rows of teeth that seemed to be arguing about directions. She had a nose like an overripe radish and her eyes were neither the same size nor color. Vivian suppressed a horrified gasp, which collapsed into a feeling of overwhelming shame in her stomach.

"It's like I always say," the man said solemnly, "some people are the Caddy, and some are the motor home. Do ya see what I'm sayin' here?"

"I uh ... I think so," Vivian stammered. Her pump had clicked off ages ago.

"Let me explain myself. On the one hand you've got people like the '53 Eldorado. They're flashy and slick, and everybody wants a piece of them just because they're so damned beautiful. But a lot of these classic cars are all chrome and polish with nothin' under the hood. All glitter and no horsepower, right? Then on the other hand you've got folks like the ol' mobile homestead here."

He threw a glance at the motor home, though his mournful eyes were obviously focused on its passenger seat.

"Sure, the motor home here ain't a looker, but it's real reliable. It's got all the comforts of home on the inside, so it don't have to be beautiful on the outside. Smart people know better than to just buy the Caddy because of its looks. They think about what's really important and hold out for the real deal. Anyone would be damned lucky to get a solid, down-to-earth motor home like that instead of some flashy, troublesome Caddy. Damned lucky. Do you see what I'm sayin'?"

"I think I may have picked up your deftly woven subtext," Vivian muttered. "It's what's on the inside that counts."

"That's right," the man nodded. "So don't you go turning this boy of yours away just because he's the motor home and not the Cadillac."

Vivian blinked.

"Oh, no, you misunderstood. This boy *is* the Cadillac."

The man's eyes widened, and he took Vivian by the shoulder with a confidential whisper.

"Shoot, missy! If you've got the goods to get yourself a Cadillac, quit yer whinin' and go ride it to paradise!"

A vision of paradise jiggled in front of Trent and Bobby's eyes as they waited for their third round of drinks. Sunny vigorously shook a silver cocktail

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shaker, causing her physique to bounce in the most pleasing way imaginable. Trent continued trying to talk her out of her sarong.

“Girl, it’s a sin seeing an angelic creature like you all penned up behind that bar. You should be out dancing under the stars from which God dropped you. How about after you close down this dive you and I hit the beach, yo?”

“I’d really love to,” Sunny lied. “But after work the only thing I’m going to be hitting is the books. I’ve got a lot of studying to do if I intend to pass the summer term.”

“Oh, so you’re a little schoolgirl, eh?” Trent said. “What institution of higher learning would be so cruel as to keep a sassy little co-ed like yourself all cooped up in the school house all summer long?”

“It’s just community college,” Sunny said. “I’ve been taking classes to become a nurse.”

“In that case, I’d be more than happy to help you with your homework,” Trent grinned. “What do you say you come back to my hotel and we play doctor for a while, girl?”

“Well, with my grades, *playing* doctor is about the best I can do. I’m thinking about quitting school and just working the Martini full time. After all, I’d still be giving shots—I’d just be trading in needles for glasses.”

She poured her shaker into a pair of shot glasses and pushed them across the bar toward Trent and Bobby. Before she could retrieve her hand, Trent took it in his own and spoke reassuringly.

“Don’t give up on your dreams so easily, girl. If you’re half as smart as you are sexy, I guarantee you’re gonna be the best doctor in the world before you know it. For real.”

Sunny returned Trent’s hand to the bar.

“Well thanks, but a *whole lot* of doctors are going to have to die before I can claim that title.”

With a glimmer of sadness in her eye, Sunny excused herself to the other end of the room. Bobby’s gaze drifted past her and onto the disgustingly familiar scene unfolding near the submarine. A stout frat boy with a red face staggered toward the sub, escorting a drunken co-ed who had lost the ability to stand unsupported. A table full of his Greek brothers were cranking their arms in the air, barking and making deeply unintelligible catcalls.

The frat boy slipped a wad of sweaty bills to the bouncer stationed beside the sub, and he pulled open the watertight hatch. The frattie swung his date inside and then stepped in behind her, making one last bellowing call to his friends before the bouncer closed the door. As the portal clanged shut, yellow siren lights on the sub flashed weakly, and crackly speakers emitted a fake diving klaxon mixed with a sound bite of Steven Tyler crooning, “*Goooooiiiiiiiiing dooooooown.*”

The fraternity brothers exploded into testosterone-charged hollering. Bobby

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shook his head and returned to his unfinished beer.

“Hey, B-Dawg,” Trent said, apparently addressing Bobby. “See that fly honey over there?”

Bobby looked across the bar and spotted a full-figured vixen in a red leather dress. She was making a good show of herself, despite the fact that she was obviously in denial about her actual age.

“The burned-out Loni Anderson chick?” Bobby asked.

“Yeah. I bet you twenty bucks I can get her phone number before you do.”

Bobby burst out laughing.

“Why would I want her phone number? She looks like Brett Butler in a porno movie!”

“Older women just have more experience in *knockin’ da boots!*” Trent said, leaning back and banging the chunky heels of his wingtips together in the air.

“Okay, you’re on. I could use your twenty bucks to buy some better drinking buddies.”

“I’ll use *your* twenty to buy that hoochie some breakfast!”

Trent jumped off his stool and strutted over to the woman. She noticed him coming and smiled. Trent returned her smile and oozed an introduction.

“Damn, girl, is your daddy a thief?”

“No, why?” asked the woman, sounding suspiciously as if she was trying to hide something.

“Because I just wanted to know who stole the stars from God and put them in your eyes.”

The woman laughed the hoarse cackle of a seasoned smoker.

“That’s cute; I like that,” she said, running her fingernails up Trent’s neck and around the back of his head. “But you know what I would like more?”

“A bottle of fine merlot, my hotel suite, and a ‘do not disturb’ sign?” Trent offered.

The woman grabbed his ear and slammed his head down on the bar with an empty *thud*.

“I was thinking more along the lines of four steel shackles, my fourteen-inch strap-on, a tube of Astroglide, and your sweet virgin ass,” she growled, flicking her tongue stud against her teeth. “But we can forgo the lube if you like, slave.”

From the other end of the bar, Bobby could see the color drain from Trent’s face as he wriggled free of the savage grip and hurried back to his stool.

“So where’s her number, hotshot?” Bobby asked.

“I don’t want none a’ dat ass!” Trent said, staring blankly into the bar.

“I didn’t want any either, but you wanted to make the stupid bet. Pay up.”

“I don’t think so, home-dawg! I don’t have to give you nothin’ if you can’t get the digits.”

“Alright, alright. I’ll be right back.”

Bobby’s barstool creaked a sigh of relief as he stood up. Trent watched in

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anxious anticipation as his rival strolled with casual indifference toward his fate. From this end of the bar, he couldn't hear what the two of them were saying, but he could see every move that they made.

Bobby tapped the woman on the shoulder and said something, thumbing at the door. The woman nodded and looked slightly alarmed. Bobby made a comforting gesture and continued. The dominatrix pulled out a pen, which she promptly used on a cocktail napkin.

Trent's jaw dropped to the bar. Not only had the husky loser managed to get her phone number, but he didn't look at all alarmed about the unholy reaming that would ensue when he used it.

When the woman was done writing her number, Bobby apparently wrote his number on a napkin and gave it to her in return. The woman left the bar, and Bobby returned to his weary stool.

"Here's her number," he said, tossing the napkin in front of Trent. "Knock yourself out ... or let her do it for you."

"Daaaaamn, B-Slice! How did you work that so fast?"

"I told her that I ran into her car and we should exchange numbers so my insurance company could pay for the damage."

"Oh, shit no, dawg! That's not cool! You tricked her! You didn't convince her that she wanted to blast off on your love rocket!"

"The bet I made was twenty dollars for a phone number," Bobby shrugged. "You'll have to raise the stakes if you want to go medieval on my ass."

"Whoaaa, cuuuuwl swowrd!"

Erik turned to Harry Stokes to see him hauling a theatrical sword out of a *Superman III* garbage can. This bin contained an assortment of wooden and plastic costume weapons, but Harry's discriminating eye had gone straight for the only steel blade in the bunch.

"Izaawesome! I'ma Powa Waynja! I'ma Powa Waynja!"

"Harry, no! Put that down!" Erik squealed.

Harry bolted across the store, brandishing his heavy blade in a lurching, off-balance swing. He teetered down an aisle, coming to a stop next to his sister's upturned backside. Debbie was on all fours with her head stuffed under an eight-foot-tall shelving unit.

"Don't be scared, kitty! I'll get you out!" she called. "Come here, kitty! I love you!"

The shelves teetered menacingly as Debbie attempted to cram her tiny body underneath them. Rows of ancient Looney Tunes and *The Great Muppet Caper* drinking glasses tipped over and rolled in bouncing arcs, but a mewling hiss stabbing from beneath the shelves suggested that Debbie was in greater danger from feline-related injuries than from falling glass.

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Erik leapt between the siblings and threw a skinny hand on each of them.

“Harry! Give me that!” he snapped, yanking the sword out of Harry’s fist. “Debbie! Get out of there before you kill yourself!”

He grabbed Debbie by the belt of her little pink jeans, hauled her out from under the shelf, and dropped her on the carpet.

“Alright, you little mother fu—”

He took a deep breath.

“Alright, you little *monsters*,” he revised. “This is a place of business. This is not *Romper Room*. You can’t just hang around here all night and play with Do Bee and wait for me to look at you in my magic mirror!”

The children looked at each other quizzically. Erik continued.

“So either buy something or get—”

He noticed that Debbie was clutching a tiny object to her chest.

“Debbie, what’s that?”

“Nothing.”

“Give it to me.”

“No!” Debbie snapped. “It’s mine!”

“Whatever it is, it’s not yours,” Erik argued. “Now give it to me.”

“No!”

Erik thrust out his hand.

“Debbie Stokes, you give that to me *now!*”

“Fine!” Debbie screamed. “Take my baby away! See if I care!”

She unclasped her hands and slapped a dead mouse into Erik’s outstretched palm. His face bleached white as the mangled rodent’s blood leaked through his fingers.

“Eeeeaugh!” he screamed, dropping the carcass with a tiny, wet *splat*.

He grabbed a box of tissues and frantically wiped his palm. He continued to wipe long after the blood had been cleaned, as if trying to erase the stain from his mind.

“Ew, ew, God,” he chattered. “Oh God, ew. Ew.”

When he had exhausted the entire box, Erik turned on Debbie.

“Debbie, what’s the *matter* with you? Where did you get that?”

“The kitty gave it to me!” Debbie cried. “The kitty gives me presents because she loves me!”

“Twiki gave this to you? Well, she’s a bad kitty!”

He reached his long arm under the shelves and grabbed Twiki by the scruff of her neck, pulling her out and thrusting a finger at her bloody mouth.

“Twiki!” he snapped. “I told you to stop killing mice! It’s disgusting! No more dead mice, Twiki! Do you understand? No. More. Dead. Mice!”

In a flash of feline muscle, all of Twiki’s front claws were once again planted in Erik’s forearm. He dropped her with a yelp, and she darted away, closely pursued by a giggling, bloodstained Debbie.

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“Man, I’ve gotta stop doing that,” Erik whimpered.

“You can’t stop doing that, can you, baby?” Trent grinned, making goo-goo eyes across the barroom. “That business-suit beauty can’t stop checking out the T-man’s goods.”

Bobby glanced over at a bony, straitlaced woman perched like a crane behind a nearby table. She noticed the boys staring at her and turned away with a fierce scowl.

“Ally McBeal with PMS?” Bobby asked. “Yeah, go get her, stud boy.”

“Oh, I’ll get a piece of that,” Trent nodded. “But first how about another friendly wager? Double or nothing you can’t get her phone number.”

Bobby squinted at Trent.

“You don’t even have my twenty, do you?”

“Don’t be dissin’ my greenbacks, Heavy B! I got the dollars if you got the digits.”

“Alright, alright,” Bobby sighed. “Let’s do it.”

“None a dat insurance scam bullshit this time, yo. She has to give you her phone number because she wants to do a little naked bed wrestling. Are you down?”

“Yeah, yeah. You want to try first again, Mr. Smooth?”

“Damn straight, and this time your sorry ass isn’t going to *get* a turn!”

Trent strutted across the room, approaching his mark from behind. He leaned in over her shoulder and trickled a hot, moist whisper into her ear.

“Did it hurt?”

The woman recoiled, choking on a sip of her drink. She twisted in her chair and sized him up furiously.

“Did *what* hurt?” she snapped.

“Did it hurt when you fell down from Heaven?”

The girl gave him a fiery scowl.

“*That’s* not the direction that I came from. Get lost, asshole.”

She crossed her legs tightly and returned her stare to the bar.

“Oooh, feisty!” Trent said. “I love the women down here in Florida. Y’all keep it real, yo. I hate it when people try to act fake and pretend they’re something they’re not, you know?”

“Bullshit,” the woman spat. “You’re the stereotypical fake asshole poseur male. Look at yourself. You’re a mess. Your skin is a fake bottle-bronze, your fake gold jewelry looks like it’s out of a box of Cracker Jacks—even your big, fake, shit-eating grin looks like it’s made out of toilet-bowl porcelain.”

Trent covered his conspicuously white teeth with a conspicuously bronze hand.

“Damn, baby, why so harsh?” he said, investigating her cocktail. “You must

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be drinkin' the Haterade! I came here to get myself enhanced, not beat down!"

"Well, I came for the view," the girl snarled. "Not to get harassed by every asshole tourist looking to show off his newly enhanced fake dick."

"Oh no, I assure you, little Moses is all natural," Trent said, adjusting the lump in the front of his trousers. "And he's ready to raise his staff and divide your Red Sea, girl!"

From across the bar, Bobby saw Trent take a whiskey sour square in the face. Dampened and downtrodden, he returned to his loser stool at the bar.

"You must have really scored that time!" Bobby said. "She bought you a drink!"

"Shut up," Trent growled. "You're not gettin' none a' dat. She's got da itch wit' da capital B."

"Well, at least she's already spent her ammo on you."

Bobby set down his mug and waddled off toward the boiling feminist. Trent called after him in a forced whisper.

"Remember, the number has to be for *sex*?"

"Yeah, yeah ..."

Bobby approached the girl's table, and she gave him a look that suggested she was ready to smash her tumbler on the table and ram a shard of glass through his throat. As if completely oblivious, Bobby just sat down and started talking. Trent was impressed: If nothing else, his adversary had balls. It was a shame this chick was about to tear them off.

He took another sip of his drink and glanced at the submarine. To chaotic applause, another frat boy climbed out of the hatch and held aloft a pair of red satin panties as if they were the Holy Grail. Trent looked back at Bobby just in time to see the skinny girl grinning from ear to ear and handing him a folded napkin. She continued to beam as Bobby returned to the bar.

"Oh you are so bullshit," Trent snapped. "Quit frontin'. I said that the number had to be for *sex*?"

"It is! I don't know how you didn't catch the vibes she was throwing off, but that girl is horny as hell. I assure you, this number is for sex."

"You're lying!" Trent bawled. "You're such a big liar they call you Simba the lyn' king! If it's for sex, then prove it, fat boy!"

"Alright, alright. Keep your shorts on."

He gestured over the bar to Sunny.

"What's up, Bobby?" she asked.

"I don't know how open you are to experimentation," he said, pushing the napkin across the bar, "but that girl with the bad attitude over there *really* wants to get up your skirt."

Vivian's Rabbit skirted the ornate fountain that stood in the center of the

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traffic circle, welcoming her to Port Manatee. Although she was only ten miles north of Stillwater on the map, she was a million miles away financially. There were no roadside tourist traps in Port Manatee, no cut-rate rental cars or seedy hotels. There were only seaside manors, private beaches, and a harbor full of yachts so sprawlingly gargantuan that they threatened the very laws of hydrodynamics.

She turned off of the main street and onto a white concrete driveway that swerved between rows of perfectly manicured miniature palms. With a lingering press on the brake, the Rabbit scraped to a halt in front of the valet counter at the Banyan Terrace.

A green-vested valet rushed up with smug look pulled tightly across his pimply teenage face. He glowered at the disintegrating Rabbit as if it were a pile of freshly skinned kittens.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said curtly. "The Banyan Terrace's parking structure is full to capacity this evening. You'll have to park your ... *vehicle* someplace else."

His mouth and tongue formed the word "vehicle," but his voice clearly said "piece of shit, unworthy of our accommodation." A second valet pulled a long black Mercedes around the rattling convertible and into the garage, as if to literally drive this point home.

"Perhaps you could check again," Vivian said, digging into her purse. "I think there may be a space you've overlooked."

The valet held out his hand knowingly, and Vivian slipped him the contents of her wallet. Three dollars and a losing lottery ticket. The oil on the valet's face rippled with insult.

"Oh, come on," Vivian pleaded. "I'm already half an hour late for my reservation. Work with me here."

The valet looked at the row of impatient luxury sedans queuing in the acrid smokescreen pouring from the Rabbit's back end. After a long pause, he stuffed his tip into his pocket and opened Vivian's door.

"All right," he muttered. "I might be able to squeeze it in under a ramp somewhere, but I can't guarantee that it won't get scratched."

"That's fine," Vivian sighed. "Just leave it in gear when you park it. The hand brake doesn't work."

"I would expect nothing less," the valet sneered.

Vivian wrenched her sneakers from her feet and replaced them with heels of a timeless design that any generation would have found bland. She started to toss her ragged sneakers in the back seat but then thought better of the idea and set them on the dashboard instead.

When the valet slipped behind the wheel, he found himself face-to-face with two mangled tongues effusing a foot odor so noxious its use in warfare would have been banned by the Geneva Convention. Vivian gave him an innocent

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smile as he covered his nose, put the car in gear, and wrestled it up the driveway and into the parking garage.

Vivian proceeded up the sidewalk toward the restaurant. Her awkward, stumbling steps betrayed how long it had been since she had been given an opportunity to wear high heels. Even so, the scenery made up for her inconvenience.

The Banyan Terrace was straight from the pages of a fairy tale. The hanging root systems of a pair of two-hundred-year-old banyan trees had been carefully braided over a series of arches for generations, forming a knotty wooden tunnel that led to the green glass front of the building. When Vivian reached the end of the path, a doorman greeted her wobbling stride with restrained doubt and ushered her through the entrance.

The main foyer of the Banyan Terrace was nothing short of spectacular. A rock face towered the full height of the two-story interior, spilling a champagne-like waterfall into a serene goldfish pool below. The whole room smelled of fresh bread and clean linens.

Maybe this wasn't going to be so bad after all.

"May I help you, miss?"

Vivian looked to her right and saw a narrow, balding maitre'd posted behind a lectern.

"Yes, I'm supposed to be meeting with a friend," she said, turning the word over in her mouth as if trying to make it sound true.

"The gentleman's name, please."

"It's um ... Nick."

"The gentleman's *last* name?"

"I, uh ... I guess I don't know his last name," Vivian admitted.

The maitre'd gave her a glare that made the way the valet had looked at her car seem like true love.

"If you don't have a reservation, miss, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to—"

"Check under Aspen. Nick Aspen."

Vivian turned to find Nick standing behind her, grinning at the annoyed maitre'd and holding a drink in each hand. A spectacularly tailored suit had transformed his image from faux extreme to actual class. His green eyes caught Vivian's, delivering a friendly wink. Despite all efforts to the contrary, she blushed.

"C'mon," he said, gesturing with a broad shoulder. "We've already got a table over here."

Vivian shot a victorious glance at the maitre'd before falling off of her heel, bumping into Nick, and splashing his drinks onto the carpet. The maitre'd put his fingers to his forehead in a gesture that screamed, "There goes the neighborhood."

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Nick led Vivian to a table overlooking the outside gardens. A tall white candle stood in its center, flickering its light as if to demand that romance transpire in its presence. He set down his beverages and escorted her into her seat before taking his own.

“Where you been, Red?” he smiled. “I’ve been here for like, an hour. I just hit the bar and picked up some drinks while I was waiting for you to show up.”

He pulled a tall glass of light beer toward himself and pushed the other glass toward Vivian. It was a stemmed fishbowl the size of her head, filled with a frosty pink beverage and ornamented with a fat strawberry. He continued.

“I got you a strawberry daiquiri to match those beautiful strawberry locks of yours, Red.”

“All right, stop calling me Red,” Vivian snapped. “My name isn’t Red—it’s Gray. Vivian Gray.”

“Vivian Gray,” Nick said dreamily. “Vivian Gray. That’s a pretty name.”

“No it isn’t. It sounds like one of the suspects from *Clue*.”

Nick smiled and raised an eyebrow.

“Well, with a tight little body like yours, I’m sure that you could get away with murder.”

He threw her a wink and magnificent grin. Vivian rolled her eyes.

“So, have you talked to Boltzmann about my job yet?”

“That’s no way to be, Vivian Gray!” Nick laughed. “You’re in the most expensive restaurant in Port Manatee! And just look at the rockin’ dude you’ve got on your arm! That bogus McJob of yours should be the last thing on your mind right now. You need to loosen up for a while.”

He took a sip of his beer, smiled his centerfold-perfect smile, and put his hand on her knee. She politely removed it.

“So, shall I assume then that you have *not* yet talked to Boltzmann about my job?”

Nick’s smile faded.

“Alright, you got me. I haven’t,” he admitted. “And, to be totally honest, I was never really going to.”

“Oh, come on! Extortion is a very simple process! I go on a date with you; you get me my job back. What part of this transaction don’t you understand?”

“The part I don’t understand is why you’re so anxious to get that heinous job back when you could be doing something so much more intense with your life!”

“Oh right,” Vivian huffed. “Like what? Selling Fusion Fuel like you?”

“I was thinking more like selling Fusion Fuel *with* me,” Nick said. “Vivian, I want you to ditch that grocery store job and come join my modeling agency. That’s the real reason I wanted to take you out tonight.”

Vivian burst out in sour laughter.

“I can’t believe I wore lipstick for this,” she grumbled, wiping her lips on a

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napkin. “If I’d have known that you had no intention of getting my job back I never would have come here.”

“Seriously! I *know*! For some reason you’re so dead set on living at the bottom of the retail food chain you won’t even give a dude a chance when he wants to kick your career up a level! I could make it so that the next time you walk into Boltzmann’s Market that fat bastard would be kissing your ass instead of the other way around. Doesn’t that interest you at *all*?”

Vivian’s scowl softened as the thought poured through her mind. She took a long, contemplative pull from her daiquiri before speaking.

“All right, I came all the way out here for this; I may as well hear the pitch.”

“Rockin’ cool! That’s the way to be!” Nick grinned. “I’ve had my eye on you ever since I saw that fiery hair of yours this morning, Red . . . er, Vivian. I’m tellin’ ya, you could be the Angie Everhart of the Gulf Coast if you just joined up with my agency. Nobody can ignore a natural redhead! You’d get the top-dollar jobs just banging down your door!”

Vivian peered over her glasses.

“I see. So you’re just looking to make sure that I exploit my follicles to the fullest? I suppose there’s nothing in it for you?”

Nick’s smile wilted as his eyes shifted to his drink and lingered there for a long moment.

“Well, I guess you *would* need somebody to show you the ropes,” he said. “And, you know, I guess I *do* need to find myself a top-shelf partner if I’m ever going to make platinum level . . .”

Vivian nodded.

“Ahh, yes. Perhaps I should take this opportunity to remind you that I’m not the boss’s daughter,” she said, drawing finger quotes in the air. “*Nailing*’ me isn’t going to provide you with anything but disappointment.”

Nick shook his head defensively.

“It’s not like that. The boss’s daughter isn’t just *sleeping* with Mr. Platinum, she’s also *working* with him. They’re a promo modeling team. No, that’s not even fair—they’re a promo modeling *force*. But you and me, Vivian, if we teamed up we could totally kick their asses, hardcore!”

“Oh, we could *not*. Have you even bothered to look below my scalp, Nick? I’m not exactly supermodel material here. I’m just a tall, skinny goon with no fashion sense. I’m not even pretty!”

Nick tipped his head and a smile blossomed across his face. He put his hand on top of Vivian’s and spoke in a voice like warm honey.

“You are so pretty, Vivian. I know you’ve got the soul of a model. All you have to do is let down your hair and take off your glasses.”

He gently grasped Vivian’s glasses and pulled them from her face. Her eyes turned toward each other, leaving her staring at her own nose in a blind, cross-eyed goggle.

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“Okay,” Nick conceded. “So maybe just let the hair down then.”

Vivian snatched her glasses and planted them back on her face, straightening out her vision with a series of quick blinks.

“Just forget it, Nick. Nothing you can do or say is going to make me want to be your partner. End of discussion.”

Nick sighed and picked up a tall green menu. Vivian did likewise.

“Alright, you win,” he said. “I guess I’m on my own for this tour. I just thought you might like to get out of Stillwater for a while.”

Vivian’s eyes flicked over the top of her menu curiously.

“What do you mean, ‘get out of Stillwater?’”

“Oh, you know. New York, Chicago, San Francisco, wherever,” Nick said matter-of-factly. “The Fusion Fuel promo blitz is gonna hit all of the big metro areas.”

Vivian blinked.

“Wait, wait. Do you mean to tell me that they send you all around the country just to be obnoxious and peddle your quack remedies?”

“Oh sure,” Nick shrugged. “My agency is the big time, baby. We only take national-level gigs. You didn’t honestly think that I just worked Stillwater, did you? None of us models are ever in Florida for more than a few days a year.”

Vivian took a long, quiet sip of her daiquiri.

“So,” she said casually, “tell me more about this agency of yours.”

“I’ve never earned so much money for such easy work,” Bobby said. “Do you want to just fork over the forty you owe me, or shall we go for eighty?”

“Okay, B, we’ve had our fun. What do you say I just buy the next round and we call it even?” Trent said. “Let us not forget what the Bible says: ‘Money is the route to all evil.’”

Bobby snorted.

“Well, the Bible’s never seen my sister when the rent is due. Pay up, sucker.”

The amiable smile on Trent’s face collapsed into a scowl.

“Whatever, homes. You been scammin’ all night,” he muttered, gesturing at Sunny. “Hey beautiful barmaid, you gonna let this punk straight-up rob your customers right under your fine little nose?”

“Oh no, don’t drag me into this,” Sunny said. “I have a strict policy of non-involvement in bar bets. You two work this out yourselves.”

Their conversation was interrupted by another chorus of frat-boy cheers as the bouncer pulled open the submarine’s hatch. A jock in a crushed cowboy hat stepped from the vessel, still fastening the oversized buckle of his belt. He strode into the swarm of his brothers, and they greeted him with a thunderous round of congratulatory slaps delivered to his thick back and arms.

“Hey, Sunshine,” Trent said, gesturing to the sub. “What’s that all about?”

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“Some bars have a mechanical bull. Some bars have karaoke. This bar has a lawsuit waiting to happen,” Sunny sighed. “The guy who owns the Martini picked up the *Samfish* at auction when the Stillwater Oceanographic Institute lost its funding back in the ’70s. Since then it’s gone from ‘deep sea’ to *Deep Throat*.”

When the crowd’s focus had long since left the darkened sub, a narrow co-ed stumbled from its door, rubbing a nosebleed on her limp forearm.

“So it’s like some kind of make-out room?” Trent asked.

“Wow, nothing gets past you, eh Sherlock?” Bobby grumbled, sliding off his stool. “Okay, it’s been real. Time to cash out, big shot. My work here is done.”

Trent put his hand on Bobby’s shoulder and pushed him back onto his stool.

“Whoa whoa, hold up, homes. What do you say we make one more friendly wager? Go for an even hundred bucks.”

Bobby sighed.

“You’re lucky I need the money. Alright, whose number do you want this time, Valentino?”

“Uh uh—when you play for the big bucks it’s high stakes,” Trent said. “For the Benjamin, you have to get a girl into that sub.”

“Oh, screw you!” Bobby spat. “If I wanted to sit in a puddle of frat-boy spooge, I’d go to a House of Pain concert.”

“S’cool with me, bro. S’cool. I respect a man who knows his limits,” Trent gloated. “Scamming numbers is one thing, but there ain’t no way a butterball like you could get something sweet down on his meat.”

Bobby’s freckly cheeks prickled into redness. He settled back on his stool and cracked his knuckles.

“Alright, smart-ass, any girl in the bar. Pick one.”

Trent turned back to the barroom and profiled the few remaining beauties. He picked apart every shapely young girl in the room, trying to anticipate any loopholes his unscrupulous competitor might exploit. He needed to find a girl who would humiliate Bobby as badly as Bobby had been humiliating him ever since he walked through that bamboo doorway.

And then in that same doorway she appeared. A drunken savage stumbled into the bar on bony legs wrapped in torn fishnets. One hand clutched a forty-ounce malt liquor in a wet paper bag, the other an unfiltered cigarette, belching out black fumes like a ’73 Plymouth Duster.

“Right there,” Trent said. “There’s your girlfriend, B. Go get her.”

Bobby glanced at the newcomer.

“Forget it. A hundred bucks isn’t worth it.”

“Bullshit,” Trent said. “You just don’t have the goods.”

Bobby looked the girl up and down.

“A hundred bucks?” he confirmed.

“Yep.”

“To get her in the sub.”

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“Right.”

“And you’ve got the money?”

“Right here,” Trent said, patting the bulge in his back pocket.

Bobby chugged the remaining half of his beer.

“Alright,” he said, wiping his mouth on his forearm. “You’re on.”

He creaked off his barstool and met his mark halfway across the planked floor. Smoke blasted from the girl’s pierced nostrils like steam from the pits of Hell. She stared Bobby down with scalding menace.

But it’s hard to intimidate somebody after you’ve bagged his groceries.

“Hey, Scary Sherri,” Bobby said. “You look more like a corpse tonight than usual.”

“Pissh off, Gray. I’m schelebrating,” Sherri slurred through an almost visible haze of alcohol. “If you like your teshticles where they are, I suggesht you step out from between me andza booze.”

She threw a pill into the back of her throat and washed it down with a nip from her bottle.

“Look, this is going to sound strange, but I promise my intentions are pure,” Bobby said, holding up his right hand. “There’s fifty bucks in it for you if you’ll just sit in the sub with me for five minutes. No sex.”

Sherri rolled her eyes skyward and tapped on her lips.

“HmMMM, innsheresting offer, but I think I’m going to go with *Fuck you!*”

She resumed stomping unsteadily toward the bar.

“Fair enough, fair enough,” Bobby said, blocking her path. “But what if I told you that this simple task would not only earn you fifty bucks but would also completely humiliate that smarmy *Swingers*-lookin’ asshole at the bar?”

Sherri glanced over Bobby’s shoulder.

“Cheshire cat with sideburns?”

“That’s the guy.”

Sherri blinked and took a long, hard swig out of her forty-ounce.

From across the bar, Trent’s stomach plunged into his empty wallet as he saw Sherri take Bobby by the hand and lead him down the boardwalk to the submarine. He looked at Sunny with desperation.

“How? How did he? How *could* he?”

Sunny looked at Sherri and Bobby climbing into the sub and shrugged.

“You know what they say,” she mused. “Nobody can ignore a natural redhead.”

Vivian raised her hand and drew in a breath, but before she could push it through her vocal cords yet another waiter had swept past her table without so much as a curious glance. He slid a silver tray of exotic coffees onto a neighboring table to the delight of a sexy young Latina with a high giggle and a

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low décolletage. Vivian dropped her extended hand on the table next to a fishbowl containing nothing but a shallow pink froth and a nibbled strawberry stem. Her head wobbled across her shoulders, and she propped it up on her elbow.

“Did you see that? That’s the fifth waiter who’s totally ignored me,” she muttered. “How many waiters does Charo need over there? At this rate we’ll starve before we even place an order.”

Nick laughed.

“You can’t give up that easy. If you want to be a promotional model, you’re going to have to learn to get people’s attention.”

“By doing what?” Vivian said. “Wearing a low-cut dress and giggling vapidly? I’d rather starve.”

Nick waved a dismissive hand.

“You’re looking at it all wrong. You just see a girl busting out of her dress over there. I see a girl using what she’s got to command every waiter in this restaurant. I’ll totally bet she’s not even getting charged for that coffee. I’m telling you, Vivian, if you ever want to succeed you’ve got to learn to use your assets.”

“I *do* use my assets,” Vivian snapped. “The assets I choose to use are right here.”

She tapped her index finger on her cranium.

“Well, in a perfect world that might actually get you somewhere,” Nick said. “But in reality, you’d get a lot farther in life if you just got yourself a low-cut dress and a push-up bra.”

Vivian’s eyes went narrow with disgust.

“Spoken like a true model. How can you even *suggest* that physical beauty is more important than intellect?”

“I guess there’s a time and a place for everything,” Nick shrugged. “But if brains are really more important than looks, then how come Miss Teen South America over there has five waiters and you have a big round zero? I’m tellin’ ya, Vivian, you just need to find the self-confidence to use your sweet little body to your advantage for once. Smarts are all fine and good, but there’s no way in a million years you’re gonna out-flash a girl with assets like hers using nothing but your big brain.”

Vivian’s eyes blazed.

“You want flash?” she snarled. “Just watch me, pretty boy.”

She leaned over to the giggling Latina’s extravagant coffee set and gestured at the sugar and creamer.

“May I?”

The girl gave an affronted nod as if Vivian was a vagrant who had just climbed out of the sewer and asked for her underpants. Vivian leaned back over to her own table and tore open five purloined packets of non-dairy creamer,

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pouring them into her slender palm.

“So what, you’re just going to start begging for food?” Nick laughed. “That’s the best plan your big brain can come up with?”

Without warning, Vivian blew the powder through the candle’s flame, producing an enormous flash of fire. A cacophony of falling silver and china cascaded through the room as every waiter dropped what he was doing and whirled toward the scorched air. Even the spicy Latina stopped her giggling to pay homage to what had, if only for a second, eclipsed her as the hottest thing in the room.

“Whoa! That was *intense!*” Nick gasped. “What did you put in that?!”

“Just science,” Vivian smiled. “The entire surface area of each granule is exposed to oxygen, so it burns quickly and spreads the flame to its neighbors exponentially.”

Nick’s gaping mouth twisted into a grin. Vivian continued.

“I’d like to see you out-flash *that* with a Wonderbra.”

Before Nick could reply, the maitre’d rushed across the room, surrounded by a gaggle of whispering waiters. He stepped up to the table and cleared his throat.

“As you may or may not be aware, the Port Manatee fire codes expressly forbid pyrotechnic displays in places of business.”

“Sorry, I was just trying to get your attention,” Vivian said. “We’re ready to order.”

“The Banyan Terrace does not oblige take-out orders,” the maitre’d replied.

“Oh, we’re not leaving,” Nick smiled.

“Yes,” the maitre’d said, “I’m afraid that you are.”

The watertight door of the *Sawfish* slammed shut with a harsh, rattling *clank*, blotting out the sound of the fake klaxons and whooping fratties outside and leaving Bobby and Sherri in a dark, stale silence. Although the sub was the size of a short bus on the outside, its thick walls gave it the same interior dimensions as a Ford Festiva. A string of Christmas lights threw a light wash of illumination over a squalid chamber containing nothing but a graffiti-tagged wooden bench bolted to the wall. Sherri dropped heavily onto it and took a drag of her cigarette, making the claustrophobic interior of the sub that much more unpleasant.

“Judging from the condition of the floor,” Bobby observed, “it looks like this thing has seen more ‘spit’ than ‘swallow.’”

Sherri pulled her legs onto the bench, pressing her knees against her chest and leaning her back against the entry hatch. Bobby plopped down on the other end of the bench, making a conscious effort not to make contact with Sherri’s boot-clad toes. She popped another pair of pills into her mouth and drowned

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them in malt liquor.

“What’s the matter?” Bobby asked. “Got a headache?”

“I don’t *get* headaches,” Sherri said, “I *give* headaches. Ish Special K. I scored it offa shum guy over at the Gator Club.”

Bobby looked at her skeptically.

“Isn’t Special K a liquid?”

“Yeah, when ish raw. You gotta evaporate it into powder.”

“Okay. Sure. Those are *pills*.”

Sherri fumbled another pill between her numbed fingers.

“The dealer saysh he presshes the powder into capsules.”

“Even if that was possible, which it isn’t, you would have taken enough by now to kill a rhino.”

“Who are you, McGruff the fucking crime dog? Shudda fuck up.”

She threw the pill at Bobby, and it bounced off his belly and landed in his lap. He held it up the to the light and then burst out laughing.

“What’sh so funny?”

“You might want to see your dealer about a refund. I think you’ve been ripped off.”

“Tell me about it. This schhit is *weak*. I’ve taken like, twenty of theesh bitches and I’m not even gettin’ a buzz—I just feel like ...”

“A natural woman?”

“Huh?”

Bobby held the pill in front of Sherri’s empty eyes.

“These aren’t Special K. They’re those estrogen pills for old ladies. I’ve seen the commercial on TV. *Don’t treat menopause like a lady ...*”

“Bullschhit.”

“Look, the name is printed right on there. *Menoplay*.”

“Aw fuck *me*,” Sherri moaned. “That asshole told me it was hard-ass street talk! ‘Me no play.’ You know, like it’s hardcore shit that doesn’t fuck around.”

“*Me no play?!?*” Bobby laughed. “Who’s your dealer? Tickle Me Elmo?”

Erik sat behind the counter, thumbing ticklishly through a dog-eared 1968 copy of *Criswell Predicts Your Future From Now to the Year 2000!*

“Oh Criswell, you loon,” he smiled, “none of these predictions were even *close*.”

He glanced up from his book to see Debbie squeezing and hugging the Batty Koda doll. What had formerly been a mint-condition collectible now hung from her arms in a limp and mangled heap. Erik sighed as he approached her.

“Alright, Debbie, give me that before you completely ruin it.”

“No,” Debbie sulked. “It’s my baby.”

“It’s not your baby. It’s the physical embodiment of a spastic Robin

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Williams voice-over.”

“It’s my baby!” Debbie shrieked.

Erik shoved his palm under her nose.

“It’s not your baby until you pay for it! Now hand it over!”

“I hate you!” Debbie screamed. “You never let me have anything the kitty gives me!”

She reared back and clapped her baby into Erik’s palm, and a pair of limp membrane wings unfurled, revealing the mangled body of a dead bat. Erik’s blood-spattered arm spasmed involuntarily, sending the deceased on a final flight across the room.

“Ew! Ew, God! No,” he stammered, wiping his hand on the carpet. “Where did you get that?!”

“The kitty gave it to me!”

Erik looked past the tip of Debbie’s pointing finger to see Twiki darting away, leaving a trail of red paw prints in her wake. His eyes followed her past Harry, who was trying to stuff an Inspector Gadget doll in his coat pocket.

Erik shook his head heavily and looked at his wristwatch. The arms of a cartoon Mr. T indicated quarter to midnight.

“Look, your dad is going to be here any minute,” he sighed. “Why don’t you kids just go wait outside so that I can lock up? I’m too tired to play *Charles in Charge* any more.”

“Okay! I mago outside!” Harry said, running for the door.

Erik dropped a hand on his shoulder.

“Whoa whoa, not so fast, Captain Kleptaroo.”

He turned Harry around and began patting down his coat, relieving it of its misbegotten treasures.

“Oh look, it’s Optimus Prime,” Erik said, pulling the robot from a bulging pocket. “And who’s this playing backup? Why, it’s the California Raisins!”

Debbie stepped up behind Erik and spoke sweetly.

“Can I go wait outside?”

“Yeah, sure,” Erik said, pulling a handful of pink M.U.S.C.L.E. figures from Harry’s pocket. “Your brother will be out in a second.”

The bells on the front door gave a jingle as Erik continued his inventory control.

“Leonardo, Donatello, Raphael, and *two* Michelangelos.”

Erik sighed and searched Harry’s innocent-looking little eyes.

“Why do you do this, Harry?” he asked. “Why are you constantly trying to steal stuff?”

Harry shrugged.

“Debbie ses I godda beeda virgin.”

Erik blinked uncomfortably.

“Well. That’s a ‘very special episode’ that I’m not going to get into tonight.”

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He stood up and pushed open the front door.

“Alright, get out of here. Your dad oughta be showing up any minute.”

Harry shuffled out the door and Erik closed it behind him. As he glanced out the window, he saw Twiki spinning around and swinging back and forth like a disoriented feline pendulum in Debbie’s loving arms.

“Debbie!” Erik snapped. “How did she get Twiki out of—”

He smacked himself on the forehead as everything suddenly became clear.

“A *diversion*. Harry was a *diversion*!”

The bells on the shop door chimed wildly as Erik exploded into the street, shouting at the top of his lungs.

“Debbie Stokes, you give me back my cat!”

“You can’t have her!” Debbie wailed. “She loves me! The kitty loves *me*! Don’t you, kitty?!”

Pleased to add her two cents to the debate, Twiki lashed out her claws and drew a long red gouge across Debbie’s cheek. With an earsplitting scream, Debbie dropped her stolen pet and planted both hands on her wounded face. Twiki landed dizzily on her feet, took two reeling steps, and fell down the mouth of a curbside storm drain.

“Let me see your face!” Erik squeaked, dropping to his knees. “Are you okay?”

“My kitty!” Debbie wailed. “Harry, catch my kitty!”

“Owigh, Debbie!”

Erik stumbled to his feet.

“Harry, no!”

But it was too late. Erik’s eyes had barely focused on the narrow drain by the time Harry Stokes had disappeared down its throat with a scream and a shallow splash. Erik ran over and peered into the eight-inch-tall opening.

“Harry! Harry, are you all right?”

Somewhere in the blackness below, Harry was crying.

“Aaaaah! No! No! I don’ wanngo swimmies. I don’ wanna, I don’ wanna. I wanngo home. I don’ wanngo swimmies, I wanngo home.”

“Hold on! I’ll be right down!”

Erik impotently scrabbled his fingernails around the edge of the manhole cover above the drain, trying to pry it loose. Debbie stuck her head into the opening and shouted.

“Harry! Stop crying and find my—”

Before she could finish, Erik yanked her out of the drain and dropped her on the curb with a furious impatience.

“Stop it! Leave him alone! You just sit here and be quiet, or else!”

“Or else *what*?” Debbie said petulantly.

“Or else! Or else ...” Erik raised a bony finger as a long string of nothing ran through his head. “Or else you don’t even want to *kenom*, okay?! Now just sit

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still for five seconds!”

With that, he tore off across the street and back into the shop. The second Erik was out of her field of vision, Debbie was back on her hands and knees in front of the grate.

“Find her, Harry! Find my kitty!”

“Debbie Stokes!” Erik bellowed. “What did I just tell you?!”

Debbie looked over her shoulder and screamed in terror. Erik loomed over her with the blade of the heavy sword hoisted above his head.

“Move it!” he barked. “Or *else!*”

Debbie scrambled over the top of the drain and pressed herself against the nearest building. Erik jammed the point of the sword under the manhole’s lid and pried it up and onto the sidewalk. He dropped the blade and gave Debbie a stern look.

“You stay here and don’t move, you understand? I’m going to go save your brother.”

Debbie nodded nervously.

“Please, just find my kitty.”

Erik climbed down the short ladder of iron bars that protruded from the wall of the cement cube. The floor appeared solid and slick, but as he jumped off the ladder he realized the bottom of the chamber was shin-deep in murky water.

“Ack! Jesus,” he hissed, pulling his waterlogged sneaker out of the muck.

“I ... I don’ wanna finda kitty. I don’. I don’ wanna. I wanngo home.”

Erik’s eyes quickly adjusted to the dim light, picking out Harry’s shivering form hunched in a corner. He was soaking wet and nearly paralyzed with shock, but otherwise he appeared to be unharmed.

“You’re okay,” Erik said. “Come on, let’s get you out of here.”

He pulled Harry to his feet and helped him climb the wet, slimy ladder. When Harry was safely on the street, Erik squinted into the corrugated steel tunnels that branched off from the chamber.

“Twiki? You in there?” he called. “Here kitty kitty.”

A pair of reflective eyes peered at him from the shadows. He grasped his lost pet by the scruff of her neck and lifted her up.

“That’s a good kitty kityaaaAAGH!”

As soon as Erik pulled the creature into the dim moonlight he realized that it wasn’t his cat at all, but the fattest, most virulent-looking sewer rat that he had ever seen. He screamed like a girl, dropped the rat, and tumbled backward into the tunnel on the opposite side of the cube. He splashed himself back onto his feet, wiped his rat-dirtied fingers on his runoff-dirtied pants, then wiped his pant-dirtied hand on the wall.

“Ew! Ew! Gross! Gross! Gross!”

His jabbering was interrupted by the sound of an Aerostar pulling up on the

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street above, followed by a slamming door and a furious shout.

“Holy Christ, Debbie! You’re bleeding! What happened to your face?!” a burly voice hollered. “Harry! You’re soakin’ wet! And you’re dirty as shit! What in hell is going on around here?! Where’s that toy geek at?! I’m gonna drive a fist up his pansy ass!”

“It was just *one strawberry daiquiri*,” Vivian moaned. “I still think I’m okay for drive.”

“You’re okay for drive?” Nick asked skeptically.

“I’m okay *to* drive,” Vivian corrected. “I’m okay for *driving*.”

“Lady, I don’t think you’re either one,” Nick smiled. “Look, we’re already halfway there, so there’s really no point in arguing about it anymore. Just give it up and relax for once in your life. I’ll have you home in like, five minutes.”

Vivian crossed her arms and pressed herself into the passenger seat of the Fusion Fuel Hummer. Although Nick was in the driver’s seat, the two of them were separated by a two-foot-wide tower of steel that housed the vehicle’s elevated drivetrain. The car customizers had attempted to hide this barrier beneath black leather upholstery and a plethora of Fusion Fuel bottle holders, but it still divided the Hummer’s east and west sides as subtly as the Berlin Wall. This was just fine with Vivian, as she was in no mood to be any closer to Nick than she had to be.

“Well, how am I supposed to get my car tomorrow?” she asked.

“Don’t sweat it. I’ll swing by and pick you up.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Vivian grumbled. “You haven’t stopped trying to pick me up since we met.”

Nick shook his head with a long, patient sigh.

“Tell me, Vivian Gray, what are you going to do when we get back to your apartment?”

“Go to bed. Alone.”

“And that’s going to make you happy, is it?”

“Well, I’ll be happy to have this day over with, that’s for sure. It’s been nothing but miserable from start to finish.”

Nick threw her a sideways glance.

“I had a really good time with you tonight too.”

His disappointed tone cut through her.

“I’m sorry, Nick,” she backpedaled. “I didn’t mean it like that. The date was fine. I’m really sorry that I got us kicked out of the restaurant. I was having a really good time.”

“No you weren’t.”

“No,” Vivian admitted, “I wasn’t. Everyone in that restaurant treated me like dirt just because I didn’t drive the right car or wear the right clothes. They

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judged me entirely by my appearance.”

Nick nodded.

“And you wanted them to look past all that and just appreciate you for your mind?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“And so you tried to use your mind to blow up their restaurant?”

Vivian sank in her seat.

“Touché.”

She looked out the window and down the shallow bluff toward the bayside below. A shadow of longing passed over the back of her mind.

“So taking you to the Banyan Terrace wasn’t exactly your kind of scene,” Nick acknowledged. “But what exactly is your scene, Vivian?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you didn’t go out with me tonight, where would you have gone?”

Vivian glanced at Nick, then back toward the moonlit beach. She bit her lip.

“Are you speaking hypothetically for the sake of conversation, or do you actually want to know?”

“I actually want to know.”

“Then make a right turn up here.”

Nick squinted.

“Um ... do you mean *left*? There’s no road to the right.”

“Yes there is,” Vivian said. “It’s not paved, but if my little Rabbit can handle it, your big Hummer certainly can.”

Nick slowed down and peered into the periphery of his headlights.

“It’s a HumVee,” he said distractedly. “The civilian models are called Hummers.”

“I hate to break it to you, Nick, but you *are* a civilian model.”

She pointed into the darkness off the side of the road.

“Here. Pull off at the break in the guard rail.”

Nick turned the wheel and coaxed the behemoth off the shoulder of the paved road. Its broad wheelbase was wider than the two strips of packed dirt that ran down the bluff, and its studded tires flattened the grass all the way to the white sand below. He parked on the beach and silenced the brutish engine.

“You’d rather be *here* than the Banyan Terrace?” he asked skeptically. “What is this place?”

He leaned toward the windshield and looked at the colossal hulks of steel and concrete that loomed out of the darkness. The Hummer was parked under the mainland end of the Skyshine Causeway Bridge, the titanic elevated thoroughfare that linked Stillwater to its island neighbor. A broad black swatch of humming asphalt soared above them in a graceful arc that traversed the bay and touched down on the end of Songbird Key. From this vantage point, the lights of the distant luxury condominiums and premium hotels of the key were

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putting on a better show than the architecturally blotted heavens above.

“This used to be a construction road years ago when they were building the bridge,” Vivian said. “Sometimes I come down here to be alone. The tourists never come this far down the beach.”

“I can see why. Is there some kinda sewage plant nearby or something?”

Vivian looked through the Hummer’s headlights and into the gently rolling waves. The water was as lumpy and pink as her Banyan Terrace daiquiri, but instead of strawberries it was garnished with clusters of dead, rotting fish. Nick looked at her and spoke soulfully.

“How can you possibly be happy in a place like this, Vivian?”

“It’s not usually like this. This freak red tide just rolled in a few days ago.”

Nick shook his head.

“No, I mean here in Stillwater. How can you actually be happy living in this bogus little corner of Heaven’s waiting room?”

Vivian frowned and stared into the filthy surf.

“Oh, I’m far from happy here. Some days I can barely get out of bed knowing that it’s just going to mean facing another identical, humiliating day in this dead-end town.”

“Well then why won’t you team up with me? You could get out of this place and never look back.”

Vivian sighed.

“Thanks for the offer, really, but ... I *can’t* be a model.”

“Don’t kick your own ass like that! You *can* be a model!” Nick argued. “You just need to start believing in yourself and put your assets to work for you. I’ve known it since the moment I saw you.”

“Oh, get real, Nick!” Vivian snapped, tugging on her copper bangs. “You wouldn’t have even given me a second look if it wasn’t for a potentially lucrative genetic quirk in my sixteenth chromosome. Believe it or not, my head holds more valuable assets than red hair.”

“I never said that it didn’t! But you’re so intent on getting everyone to bow down before your big brain that you totally shut out every other good thing that you’ve got going for you. And there’s a lot of them. I mean, look at these beautiful assets right here.”

Nick leaned over and gestured to Vivian’s bosom like a spokesmodel on *The Price is Right* romanticizing a blender. Vivian crossed her arms and started to voice a syllable of indignity, which Nick silenced with a manicured finger over her lips.

“Don’t get all embarrassed; I’m just speaking professionally,” he said pleasantly. “You’re obviously unhappy with the size of the twins, but let me tell ya, reedy girls like you are the hottest thing right now. The days of the double-D melons are history. Even Pamela Anderson just got her implants taken out. Don’t you see? You’re sitting here thinking you’re *sooooo* ugly while one of the

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most successful models in the world is trying to make herself look *more like you*.”

Vivian rolled her eyes and took a breath, but Nick interrupted her before she could protest.

“And of course there’s the asset that gets you fired up so easily,” he said, tucking a stray lock of red hair over Vivian’s ear. “You know the redhead Spice Girl? The alleged ‘Ginger Spice’? You know that hot chick from *Will & Grace*? Both out of a bottle. How can you not believe that you’re beautiful when top-shelf hotties are doing dye jobs just to look more like you do straight from the factory? You can cry about your looks all day and night, but your physical assets aren’t what’s holding you back, Vivian.”

“So, in your expert opinion,” Vivian glowered, “what, pray tell, *is* holding me back?”

Nick leaned over the drivetrain wall and tapped his fingertip on her forehead.

“You think your big brain is so great, but it’s the one and only thing you’ve got working *against* you. For some reason you think that something terrible is going to happen if you let down your hair just one time. If you would just believe in yourself long enough to take a chance, this could be the last night that you ever spend in Stillwater. You and me and this HumVee could be heading out across the country in search of extreme fun and adventure tomorrow morning. Don’t let your big brain talk you out of it.”

Nick stretched his arm over the wall and took Vivian’s hand.

“Nobody in this town can see that you’re platinum level, Vivian,” he whispered. “Not even you.”

Vivian felt the warmth of Nick’s hand running through her fingers as his words absorbed into her tipsy brain. Promotional modeling wasn’t exactly her dream career, but neither was Boltzmann’s Market. She was being offered a real opportunity to change her life, and the only thing keeping her from taking it was her own self-doubt. After all, she reasoned, she had been failing to get out of Stillwater by using her brain for her entire life. Maybe it *was* time to use, as Nick said, all of the assets at her disposal.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll try it. I’ll join your agency and tour the country with you. I’ll be your partner.”

A smile passed over Nick’s face that was so glitteringly perfect it could have stood twenty stories high on a Times Square toothpaste ad. His enthusiasm pounded off of his body in glowing waves, evaporating Vivian’s skepticism and pushing the corners of her mouth into a reluctant grin.

“You see? Nothing but good things happen when you just believe in yourself!” he cheered. “We’re gonna be the new platinum team, baby! Platinum! You’ve made the right choice teaming up with me, Vivian Gray! C’mere and sign the papers!”

He twisted in his seat and leaned toward Vivian, closing his dazzling eyes and putting his lips into a pucker so beautiful that it seemed sinful to describe it

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with a word as ridiculous as “pucker.” The drivetrain pressed numbly into his side as he craned his neck and continued to lean over, thrusting out his inviting, pouty lips. Vivian looked at the uncompleted kiss hanging in the air in front of her.

“Ah, what the heck,” she shrugged.

She leaned over the barrier, stretching her long neck to give Nick a tiny peck on the lips. Vivian dropped back into her seat and bit her lip. Guilt trickled through her brain. Her body, for once, told her brain where to stick it.

“See, now that wasn’t so bad, was it?” Nick smiled.

“No, the kiss was okay,” Vivian admitted reluctantly. “I’m not keen on the hump though.”

“Oh, come on, I wasn’t even going to try to go there on the first date,” Nick said defensively.

Vivian shook her head and tapped her fingers on the hump of the drivetrain.

“The hump,” she clarified.

“Oh, right, right, the hump. Well, there’s not a lot I can do about that.”

“No, I guess not,” Vivian agreed.

“Luckily there’s plenty of room for both of us on your side!” Nick grinned. “Don’t move a muscle, partner. I’ll be right over!”

Before Vivian could argue, Nick threw open the driver’s-side door and leapt into the powdery sand. A fetid, overpowering stench of rotting cabbage and decaying fish rolled off the churning bay and into the car. Nick took a reeling step backward and covered his nose before slamming the door and prancing around the back of the vehicle.

Vivian’s heart pounded in her chest; her mind was racing a mile a minute. What just happened? Yes, she was excited for the opportunity to get out of Stillwater, but this was very unlike her—she didn’t kiss boys in cars—she could barely remember the last time she kissed boys at all, yet she couldn’t say that she didn’t enjoy the kiss, and she certainly couldn’t say that she wouldn’t like another. What was she going to do?

She caught a glimpse of Nick in the rearview mirror and turned to face it, seeing her own reflection. She angled the glass toward her anxious face and gave herself a long, hard look. Two chopsticks stuck out of her messy librarian’s bun perpendicular to each other, like two street signs bolted together at a crossroads. Vivian recognized that she was at a sort of crossroads herself. One road led an intellectual introvert back to a wasted life in Stillwater, the other led a physical extrovert on to a life of adventure.

In one decisive movement, she grasped the chopsticks with both hands and unsheathed them like a pair of swords, dropping a wrinkled cascade of fiery red hair around her head. She shook it out and took a deep breath.

“Nothing terrible is going to happen if you let down your hair just one time.”

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She bent over to stuff the chopsticks into her purse, but before she could reach it the Hummer was blasted with a flash of hot white light. Two seconds later Vivian was knocked unconscious by seven tons of steel rising to meet her forehead.

“Menopause pills?” Sherri raged. “Shit! If you tell *anyone* about this, I swear to God you’ll be dead in a—”

“Hot flash?”

Before Sherri could wallop Bobby in his smart mouth, the bouncer swung open the door of the sub, flooding the cabin with a blast of barroom noise and fresh air. Sherri had been leaning against the door, and when it suddenly went missing she tumbled out of the sub and onto the boardwalk. The gathering of frat boys began their ceremonial round of catcalls and dog barking, and Sherri threw off her coat and raised her bony fists with a snarl.

“Okay, that’s it! None of you fuckers are leaving this room alive!”

Bobby started to exit the sub in a more traditional fashion, only to be stopped short by a wall of teeth. Trent shoved him back into the sub and slid into Sherri’s vacated spot on the bench.

“Oh no you don’t,” Bobby said. “I don’t care how much you want to bet, I’m not letting you go down on me.”

“No no, the T don’t swing that way,” Trent chattered, glancing back over his shoulder. “Hey, no shit now, did that pretty little kitty with the itty bitty titties just make a withdrawal from your sperm bank?” His eyes flitted around the cabin as if looking for some evidence of the dirty deed.

“A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell,” Bobby smirked. “You draw your own conclusions.”

He made another move for the door. Trent pushed him back down, took another glance outside, and whispered.

“Do you think she’d do me next?”

Before Bobby could answer, the bar was bathed in a fiery blast of light. The Bikini Martini was well distanced from ground zero, but the flash was still hot enough to make the fraternity brothers release their bellowing screams one last time.

Blinded by the flash, Sherri staggered backward toward the sub, flailing her bare, sizzling arms. Her wrist connected with the open door, catching its interior handle on her bracelets. The heel of her boot caught the edge of the hatchway and she tumbled inside with Trent and Bobby, the weight of her body slamming the watertight door behind her.

“Hey! Toy freak!” Richard Stokes bellowed. “Quit dickin’ around down

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there! Hiding out in the sewer ain't gonna save you now!"

At that moment, a shaft of sparking blue light blasted through the manhole. A few brief, chaotic seconds later, a thunderous shockwave rolled through the street above, buckling the tunnel and knocking Erik unconscious on his back in the shallow, dirty water.

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Marcus Alexander Hart is the author of *Caster's Blog: A Geek Love Story*, the tale of one improbable year told as an online journal; and *Walkin' on Sunshine*, a quantum physics sex farce. He was the editor and movie critic for the comedy website *misinformer.com*, and is a writer for *Geek Monthly* magazine.

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