

# HIRED BODIES

*as honest and politically incorrect  
as reality can be*

CLAUDIA SUZANNE

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Santa Ana, California

*For Tom and Ilona  
With thoughts of Squeak and Moe*



# ERIC

*Los Angeles, circa 1990*

**Y**OU ARE NOT GOING TO THE PARTY WITH ME tomorrow night, and that is final!"

Ah, yes, the picture-perfect end to yet another picture-perfect day in the carefree, glamorous life of "Hollywood Stud" Eric Baker.

Ha.

Fade in some eighteen hours earlier on my number one fan and lover, Gregory "You're Not Going To The Party" Souster, flipping me out of bed in his usual attempt to wake me before leaving for the brokerage house. I like to open my eyes and see all the blood rushing into his face—it gives me the illusion I have something on him. Besides, how can anyone hope to have a great day without somebody else growling, "Get up twit," at them first thing in the impossibly early morning? As soon as he left, I crawled back under the covers and slept until about seven o'clock, when I had to jump out of bed and make a mad dash for the studio. I barely had time to brush my teeth.

Gregory says I purposely oversleep every morning just to spite him. What a ridiculous idea! Suki says I do it to throw my weight around—also totally absurd. The simple truth is, I like to sleep.

The other stuff is just the sprinkles on my daily donut.

Even starting out semi-late, I still got to Doug's studio in time to get the first cup of hot coffee from the giant urn in the corner of the dressing room. I cradled it in my hands and let the steam rise in my face, which allowed me to ignore the other people filtering in. More importantly, the mist gave me a great excuse to close my eyes again. I was almost totally out when I was body-slammed by a blast of cheerfulness.

"Eric Baker, right? Howard Gordon. We met in Suki's office once, right after I'd signed with her? I'd grayed for a gig? You said too much around the crown? Course, it's mostly videos these days, though I've been looking forward to this shoot somewhat. I've always wanted to work with you. Didn't think you did this kind of gig anymore. Usually don't, myself."

I cracked one eye. The overly energetic voice belonged to a black-haired man whose promo just had to read "honest brown eyes" and "well-packed muscles under a rich, smooth tan, sub-category Native American." I let the eye slink back down—I had absolutely no desire to talk to this clown, who I knew from Suki's purposely indiscreet hints was well on his way into "real" show biz, i.e., TV. Besides, he was taller than me.

"It'll be good working with all pros this time," he went on, apparently unaware of the plan brewing in the back of my head to rip off his eyebrows. "I did a gig last week just short of 'Star Search.' Not to mention names, but the lady being shot did the directing, choreography, star bit, *ad nauseam*. 'I cannot work with all these (pant, pant) long-limbed, long-haired looonng ...bodies around.' She must have changed signals half a dozen times, like that was helping, finally put a Bic lighter to the script. You've got to wonder how many times she's pulled that act. I remember reading about the same play in some rag last year. The producer decided to start over, already had substitutes handy. Had to have all new faces, butts, a whole new line-up. She took me aside, wanted to, uh, well, you know. I'm still waiting for my check, I guess she didn't buy the line that I was married. You know the bit. You should hear her without all the effects. She sounds like Minnie Mouse."

By now I had both eyes open. He was such an eager little puppy; I had to suppress the urge to pat his head so I didn't tell him that, no, I don't "know the bit." I think the idea of my showing up in a music video would send Suki into heart failure, and as for waiting for my check!

Suffice to say, my contracts always state I get paid whether the shoot gets finished or not, whether the product is any good or not, or whether the final stuff—print, video, film, voice-over, personal appearance, guest shot, whatever—goes public or not. All money is paid up front and held in escrow to assure that I show, which is essentially the full extent of what I’m contracted to do, especially in a non-speaking role, certainly in a bunch of stills. No, I didn’t think all that up; I’ve got a good lawyer, a greedy agent, and a highly protective business manager.

I’m not much into dirty talk—I only do it with Greg, because it gets him mad and that gets him yelling and that means we have to make up and that means—anyway, even so, I was a bit amused by the blush that went along with the end of Gordon’s story. How had this guy lasted in the business so long? Still, I had to admit to a grudging amount of respect for the man, who was still talking as if I were listening. He did a damn good imitation of the rock star in question. The problem was, he wasn’t supposed to be here. I knew better than to mention that, though. All I said was, “Hopefully, this will be a better day for you.”

It always amazes me how little I have to do to get a positive reaction from some people. This innocuous remark earned me a massive grin and a friendly punch on the shoulder. I gave him half a smile and closed my eyes. His teeth were too white—the glare was blinding.

Cut to door slamming open, enter one hulking, muscles-stuffed-into-clothes ape strongly reminiscent of King Kong, only stupider-looking and just a little smaller. His name was Jeff Portman with the emphasis on the “man” as in “Shit, *man*, I dunno what ya mean, *man*.” This may not be brain surgery we do, but I’ve never met anybody before who was this dumb and actually managed to get work anyway. He looked more like a prop than a model—not for me, God forbid! I tried not to think about it. As Greg says, these things are really none of my business—quote, You are not responsible, Ricky, for the physical and emotional security of every individual you encounter in this business, end quote.

He talks like that. I stay with him anyway. He never complains when I try to fluff his shoulder.

As it was, Portman turned out to be too obnoxious to describe. He monopolized the airspace for a few minutes by directing a recital of his physical, sexual, and professional attributes toward one of the more attractive design assistants, who reacted with perfectly reasonable disgust

at his offer to “pose any way ya want, honey, right down to shavin’ my bush, if it turns ya on.”

Contrary to TV opinion, most people I’ve run across aren’t usually so blatant with their repulsive behavior—not even actors, although I have run into one or two similar idiots, mostly before I allegedly moved up out of that league. Ha! I especially remember being confined with one crude, lewd asshole on another such stupid, meaningless gig long ago. He was as full of piss-and-vinegar as they come, cocksure that Hollywood—it’s always “Hollywood,” as if the town were an entity in-and-of-itself—had fine things in store for him. He didn’t need any advice from some “fuckin’ throwback from the eighties, dude.” I guess they all only have the one script to work off—they might even all work through the same agency for all I know, Scum Incorporated, I suppose. Anyway, “Asshole A” had spent the entire day bragging about an upcoming video with some big-shot producer whose name he didn’t know, and how it was going to make him a star, whereby he’d pass me up as if—excuse me, “like as if”—I were standing still. I told him to get a new writer.

Much to my regret, I ran into him again a few days later as I was making my way down Hollywood Boulevard toward my favorite newsstand. He was totally strung out, covered with raw, oozing sores—or were they welts? He clutched at me, spouting some kind of gibberish about claws and cameras and drugs. I got the idea. He offered me his body—or what was left of it—if I’d just not tell his mother. I got away as fast as I could. Of course when I brought it up to Suki, she said she had no idea what he was talking about, that he wasn’t even her client, she’d never heard of him. She sounded very sincere.

I almost believed her.

In my attempt to put such grisly images out of my mind, I re-focused on what was going on in the dressing room since this was obviously not going to be the gig I’d thought it was. A dozen or more people had come in shortly after Jeff’s flamboyant entrance, none of whom had anything to do with the lousy movie I’d just finished and for which I thought I was shooting stills even though it would probably never get released. They were all standing around transfixed as ad-man-from-hell Elliott Biddley gave one of his famous, incomprehensible pep talks.

“...and I do mean an entire campaign to skyrocket Mr. Deane and his new concepts of men’s body coverings smack into the world-



renowned position he rightfully should have had years ago, if he'd have come to us first, although then, of course, we weren't part of Hankwith and Forsette even though we didn't need to be and besides, this, (sweeping gesture) this initial spread is just the very beginning, only the strictly first step toward developing public excitement over the new and innovative manly styles which will catapult the modern man out of the dreary twentieth century he's been stuck in all these years and into the truly Masculine era of today and tomorrow, which hasn't even begun yet but is just around the corner, we can't very well sit and wait for it! I mean we're talking a whole new way of life for most of the ordinary, man-on-the-street-type-nobodies, who might almost be somebodies when they can finally secure their sexuality and thrust their force upon the world when they see not only the usual book spreads, naturally, but still, we're going to do a brilliant TV blitz, and I do mean TV as in Oprah—don't think Smithfield & Marmon has no effect!—and soap opera, we're talking game show, we're talking sitcom, we're talking ....”

Five minutes later he was still talking. I know, because I roused myself long enough to glance at my watch, catch Gordon's face with its appropriately attentive expression complete with sheet-of-glass-behind-the-iris glaze, and check out Portman looking stupefied, not a tough stance for him. Exactly how long Biddley talked altogether I don't know, because twenty seconds or so later I turned my auditory sense off again, rearranged my own facade of interest, and surreptitiously went back to sleep. Designer schlock, for God's sake! Damn that bitch, she'd suckered me again.

Fade out, fade in to Portman, meatball extraordinaire, deciding to gum up what I'd come to hope would be an old-fashioned CPX3L day—change and pose times three and leave. With a modesty unheard of in a professional hired body, he first refused to get undressed and then, with a perverse kind of logic, to get RE-dressed. What's more, the child had opinions, many opinions, all of which he apparently thought the rest of us were simply dying to hear. Most of his pearls of thought, at least initially, had to do with Mr. Deane's clothing, which, as he put it, was “already made outta the wrong kinda stuff to start with, ya know, for really bitchin' dudes, ya know what I'm talkin 'bout?” Mr. Deane apparently neither knew nor cared, but his bevy of assistants did. They sniffed and tittered around Portman until he agreed to disrobe and climb into

costume just to get them away. After all, as he so delicately put it, “Hey, I don’t want no fuckin’ homos puttin’ their germy paws on me.”

Having finally condescended to be “prepped”—a term that made me feel I was being readied for surgery—Portman allowed his delightful personality to expand on the set. This was an error. I hadn’t quite figured out yet what was really going on, but I did know that none of us—Gordon, Doug Wilson, whose studio we were in, or me—normally did this kind of tacky, penny-ante gig anymore. Besides, there were at least twenty people too many milling about to make sense. I also knew the bitch had all three of us under some kind of contract. The name on the door says “Management,” but she still keeps her license—God forbid somebody else should take that extra five percent. She was in that never-never land of having not totally cut off the one enterprise yet because she wasn’t fully established enough in the other and I, as usual, was caught somehow in-between.

Either she had personally put money behind Deane—give me a break—or something stupid (read “makes-money-for-Suki”) was going on. Considering the two possibilities there was only one possibility, and since I’d long ago figured out there’s always more going down than I know about—even when I’m sure I know exactly what is going down—I wasn’t about to waste any energy trying to figure out what the hell it was. It was just one more reason to give serious consideration to that career move Greg wants me to make, especially since the guy from MCA must have “dropped around” the set of my last stinko flick about a dozen times. “He’s just being friendly,” I told Suki the one time she bothered to show up. I hope she’s worried.

Yeah, right.

Cut to the set, where Doug was trying to maneuver around too many people to get a few simple shots. I like Doug. He’s a total professional, which means he’ll make the pix work no matter how ludicrous the gig or how little the pay. He doesn’t take any shit, though—definitely not someone to fool around with. Either no one had informed Portman of this fact, or he was just too stupid to comprehend it.

My money was on the stupid.

Obviously intent on perfecting his boorish technique, Portman simply wouldn’t stand still much less shut up. At one point I considered taping his lips together to see if it would stall his motor, but he was big-

ger than me—everybody’s bigger than me—and I don’t get paid extra to get beaten up. By eleven forty-five Doug’s jaw was so tight, his ears were white.

“Mr. Portman,” he menaced, “I realize my short experience of only thirty-two years in the photography business cannot compensate for your overwhelming youthful knowledge, but I must point out that I have a schedule. All these good people have schedules. Even you, believe it or not, have to perform on schedule if you wish to be reimbursed for your time today. Therefore, please put your right hand on Mr. Gordon’s shoulder, like so, your left hand on the top of your thigh, like this, lean back slightly and smile.”

Cut to comic interlude, keystone-cop style. Portman starts to protest. Doug tells him to shut up. Portman spins around to relay this command to the multitudes. Doug starts for Portman’s throat. Portman sidesteps him neatly, calls for everyone to let the photographer through. Close-up on Doug’s face turning purple.

By this time most of us were doubled up laughing, always the last straw for Mr. On-The-Clock Wilson. Throwing his hands in the air—maybe to keep them off Portman’s neck, I don’t know—he bellowed, “Lunch!” What followed was like a stone dropping into a pool. The waves of humanity spread outward from the center toward the various doors until, in less than a minute, all that was left was the stone. I, of course, was part of that stone, as were the other two models, we being the only toys-sold-separately. The rest had melted away into the sunlight to find liquid, powder, or chocolate fortification, depending on their wont. It was just me on my own with Mr. Teeth and the walking lobotomy.

I realize I could avoid this if I would just gather together my own entourage—and I would, too, if I could ever figure out what other use a bunch of goof balls slobbering over me all the time could possibly be.

In any event, Gordon and I retired to the dressing room—he to read some book, me to sack out—while Portman stood in the middle of the set looking confused—and trust me, he’s got the look down. At that point, I probably should have latched the door behind me and left him safely locked in the studio, but the thought hadn’t occurred to me.

Yet.

Just as I settled my weary body onto the softness of Doug’s wonderfully luxurious feather lounge and was about to drift off, Portman loped

through the door and set up a racket with a large paper bag he'd hidden in his duffel. I propped myself up on one elbow to witness him pull out two corned-beef sandwiches, a full-size bag of potato chips, a liter of Coke, and a sackful of Famous Amos chocolate-chip cookies. Before I could even find my voice, Gordon piped up. His eyes were as wide as Frisbees.

"You're not gonna down all that, are you?" he asked in an awed whisper. "You do realize you can't possibly go back to work with so much crap in your gut?"

"Fuck off," came the well-thought-out reply.

Cut to dream sequence. Doug walks onto set, sees Portman blown up into a Macy's parade balloon, seams straining, chocolate dripping down one corner of his mouth. As Mr. Deane faints at the sight and his gaggle cluster around him cutting off all air, Doug throttles Portman, then produces an Uzi and sprays the crowd. Every time one asst.'s ass goes down, two more spring up until there's blood everywhere and Gordon sits laughing hysterically in the corner. In the background, Biddley's voice drones ever on: "...accessory to murder, I saw the whole thing, Officer, he never once tried to stop him, he was the star, he makes movies, it's all his fault, he's sucking all the money out of all of us, all of us, there he is, it was all that actor's fault!"

Cut back to dressing room. I decided to speak up in Gordon's defense.

"Jeff," I started. "Uh, it is Jeff, isn't it? What Howard's trying to say is, with your build, the suits are already kind of snug. If you eat all that food, there's no way you're going to squeeze back into that jacket—and the pants aren't going to hang too well, either."

"It's like eating during the fifth inning," Gordon picked up. "You gotta go into the game pretty empty, sport, and eat after the wrap. You know, when the fat lady sings?"

"Fuck off, asshole. You too, fruitcake. Only in California could either one of you assholes have a chance. Back home my boys woulda cut you two fags up in pieces and brung me the livers. I ain't stupid, ya know, I've been doin' this kinda shit for years, fuckin' years, and I get all the fuckin' trades, so it ain't like I gotta listen to anything either one of you fuckheads got to say."

“Really?” I countered, although why, I’ll never know. “Exactly what fucking trades do you read?”

“Well, shit, man, if you don’t know, it just goes to show ya.”

Gordon and I exchanged looks as I considered Portman’s point, or lack thereof. Gordon was beginning to disturb me; he’d been watching me so closely all morning I felt like I was under a microscope. It couldn’t be sex—the vibes were wrong. Was he a spy for Suki? I shook the thought out of my head and turned back to the brainless brute. “You know,” I said, “I follow the trades myself—*Billboard*, *Variety*, *Hollywood Reporter*, and such. And I read the advertising rags, most of the photo trades, weeklies like *Opportunities for Actors & Models*, that sort of thing, plus the fashion and salon monthlies like *GQ* and *M* and the rest. Any of those sound familiar?”

Portman’s eyes looked rather glassy at the end of the list; I’d hoped the length would have given him an out without having to cry uncle, but obviously, I “don’t know nothing, man.”

“Yeah, well, like that ain’t the fuckin’ kinda stuff I’m talkin’ about,” he spat, “cause I don’t read no California shit.”

I turned to Gordon. “That ain’t the fucking kinda stuff he’s talking about, Mr. Gordon. He don’t read no California shit. What kind of fucking shit do you suppose he is talking about?”

Gordon didn’t answer, because Gordon was laughing so hard he couldn’t talk. I hadn’t thought the line was quite that funny, but as they say, when life gives you lemons.... Besides, it was a refreshing change from his dissecting stare and good audiences are hard to find in the trenches. Since I couldn’t talk any sense into Portman, I decided to keep Gordon in stitches. “I’ll bet I know what kind of fucking stuff it is—he must read beyond me to the more sophisticated stuff, like *Teen Beat*.”

I had another semi-hilarious line I was going to use to keep Gordon howling, but I didn’t get the chance. Portman, it seemed, had apparently had all he was about to take from us “homo slimepits.” He plunged into a tirade on the “fuckin’ facts of life,” to wit: doing this spread was just pocket money “onaccounta” he was “inked in” to do the “TV strip” which would so “fuckin’ dazzle” the “Hollywood power Jews” that soon after, evidently without prompting, he’d be offered—that is, “fuckin’ covered”—with “more than hundreds” of highly lucrative—excuse me, “mondo buck”—roles in either TV, motion pictures, or that apex of all

aspirations, MTV. Furthermore, he knew all this to be true “onaccounta” he had “what it takes and lots more, too” and besides, he had his “she-agent” wrapped around his cock to make him a star, so just what the fuck did we think of that?

Frankly, I didn’t think much of it and as Gordon seemed to be speechless himself, Portman, in what I know in my heart had to be his version of utter disdain, tromped deliberately over and shredded one of his corned-beef sandwiches on my chest, turned on his heel, and walked out. I looked at Gordon, he looked at me and it was all over.

By the time the rest of the bozos came back from lunch, Gordon and I were so weak from laughing neither of us could stand up. It was worth the dressing down Doug gave us, it was even worth missing my nap. We were both so totally out of control that when Biddley demanded to know where Portman was, we lost it again.

The shoot never really got going again—as if it had ever started. Not only were we (mercifully) one body short, one of the techs had gotten so wasted at lunch that he knocked over the scrim as he zigzagged toward the john. I wasn’t sure if he was looking to hide out or puke, but it didn’t matter because by then Gordon was literally on his knees laughing and the tears were rolling down my face, screwing up all the new makeup I’d just had plastered on. Doug eventually declared the whole day hopeless, hissed at Gordon and me to “Get out, goddammit!” and “Get a grip goddammit!” and “Be on time for once tomorrow, goddammit!” and stomped off toward his office muttering something that sounded like a death plot against Suki. Within micromoments, the place was deserted again save for one tech who stayed at least another three or four nanoseconds to secure the set and some girl who was “helping” the guy who’d tossed his cookies out to her car—to drive him home, she said. Uh huh.

Cut to the dressing room, where Gordon and I were supervised by one of Deane’s creatures until we’d relinquished possession of his master’s creations—incredibly ordinary dark-blue worsted suits, to tell the truth—and then left alone to “handle” ourselves. I didn’t need to be anywhere in particular and since Gordon didn’t seem to be in a hurry either, the two of us took our time pulling on our own pants and washing our faces. As I was lounging against the far wall waiting for him to tie his Reeboks, who should appear in the outer doorway but Mr. Jeffrey

Portman himself, back from wherever he'd gone and sporting the same glower as before.

"Too fuckin' lazy to get back on the set?" he sneered. "Fuckin' lazyass California faggots!"

"Yup, that's right," I said with a straight face, interrupting Howard, who I could see was itching to tell the cretin off. "Out here, our motto is 'surf and sand over sweat and slave any time, every time.'"

"Actually," Howard added quickly, "since you weren't here, they called the game. What else was there to do?"

Nicely phrased, I thought, and not entirely untrue. Portman, of course, took it exactly as expected.

"Assholes," he gloated. "Fucking California homo fag dickheads!" With that, he strode across to the studio door, threw it open and presented himself—to a dark, empty studio. At that precise moment Howard, his shoes finally tied, lost his balance as he straightened, thereby accidentally throwing his full weight against the closing door.

"Oops!"

"You ought to be more careful," I said as I helped him lean against the door. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"No, no, I'm fine, thanks," he said. Somewhere—it might have been from inside the studio, I'm not certain—a voice was yelling and a fist pounding.

"Do you hear ...what's that?" Howard said, making his eyes go wide. "Sheesh, it sounds dangerous, maybe even violent."

"This can be a bad neighborhood," I countered with a straight face. "We'd better get out of here and make sure everything is locked." I reached down and flipped the deadbolt, securing the door from bulging outward as it had been attempting to do. "That should do it, don't you think?"

"Won't Doug be proud," Howard said. "Every time I work with him, he gets on my case about being responsible. Maybe he'll treat us to a ballgame tomorrow."

"Even better—maybe he'll fire us."

"Even better."

As I watched Howard jog around the corner toward the back parking lot, I climbed into my own car right out front with a feeling of great relief and contentment. I'd gotten the primo parking spot. The stupid

gig had been canceled. There was still plenty of time to get in a decent workout before Greg got home. All in all, this was turning out to be one fine, Baker-comes-out-on-top-for-once day.

Ha.



# HOWARD

SO WHAT'S HE LIKE?"  
"Who, the kid? He's an idiot."

"No, Eric Baker."

"Just a guy, I guess."

Actually, I'd memorized about half a dozen of his expressions and reactions for my own use later, but I wasn't about to tell that to my star-struck wife.

"He wasn't funny, like on the talk shows? I always figured he'd be even more gorgeous in person than on TV."

I thought about the way the day had ended, both of us laughing so hard Doug had called the shoot. I thought about what he'd looked like when I first walked in the door, eyes closed, leaning against the wall, every female in the place watching, watching. I thought about the way Mr. Biddley, who I think might be a homosexual, had almost drooled when he took his shirt off.

"Nah, nothing special, just like the rest of us. Puts his pants on one leg at a time."

“You saw him with his pants off?!”

I looked at my wife dolefully. I had my own mixed emotions about Baker, a guy who hadn't really made the big time but that every man, woman, and child in America had seen. A lot of people had seen me, too, but I never got stopped on the street by women trying to tear my clothes off. I'd probably done more straight acting than him—plays, walk-ons, that two-week soap part—but I'd never been nominated for an Emmy as Best Actor in a Mini-Series. I'd done my share of provocative poses in ads and commercials, too, but I'd never gained instant national recognition by doing nothing more than staring into the lens. What did he have that I didn't, as if I didn't know. His eyes were blue, his skin tanned but white, not red. I couldn't think of any other answer.

Well, I was going to change all that. I've always known, deep down, that one day I'd take a walk and not come back. All this family stuff's probably what's holding back my career, keeping me from making my mark like Baker and Stava and all those others. Maybe this was the day.

“Oh, yeah, there is one thing about him I didn't expect.”

“Yeah? Yeah?”

“He's short.”

Sharon made a face at me, turned back to cleaning carrots. I don't know why she makes cooked carrots all the time. None of us likes them. I moved across the kitchen, slid my hands up her shoulders.

“Umm, right there, rub. A little harder. Umm, that feels good.” She stopped with the carrots to luxuriate in my massage. I let my hands wander down her chest for a little nipple rub. She leaned back into me, tilted her face back to be kissed. I picked her up, was just about to carry her to the bedroom for some long-overdue privacy time when our oldest came crashing in from outside.

“Mom, can we have some cookies?”

“Go outside and play; your mother and I are busy.”

“I was asking Mom. Just two apiece, okay?”

“No, not okay. Put those back. Howard, please.”

I put my wife down.

“No cookies, I'm making dinner, it'll be ready in a little while.”

“What's for dinner?”

“Turkey burgers, carrots, and mashed potatoes.”

“Ugh! Carrots! I hate carrots. Do I have to eat the carrots?”

“Go outside, Neil. You’re supposed to be watching your brother.”

“I am watching him. He’s not going anywhere. I tied him to the back fence with the dog chain.”

I didn’t wait to hear Sharon’s answer to that one. I ran out to the fence to find Jake on his hands and knees, scampering back and forth in a little circle, barking. Around his neck was the choker collar we use for our big German Shepherd. The dog, freed from his tether, was nowhere to be found, of course. With every turn the line got more twisted, the collar a bit tighter. Thank God he has a small neck. “What’s going on, sport? How come you’re in the dog house?” I kept my voice calm, fumbled with the links, finally managed to slip the collar off my smiling three-year-old’s throat.

“Neil’s gonna get me a dog cookie if I’m good and stay in the yard.”

“Neil’s gonna get a whopping if he chains you up again. Where’s Mutt?”

“He went to visit his girlfriend.”

“Great.”

I carried Jake to the house thinking how much lighter he was than the last person I’d just had in my arms, it felt an eternity ago. I set him down in the kitchen. “Tell your brother to help you get cleaned up for dinner.”

“What’s for dinner?”

“Turkey burgers and mashed potatoes. You don’t have to eat the carrots.”

“Oh boy!” He took off chanting, “I don’t hafta eat the carrots!” at the top of his lungs all the way upstairs. Sharon’s sigh drowned him out.

“Why did you tell him that?”

“Neil had him in the choker collar. Couple more times around the yard and he would’ve choked himself. What did you do to Neil?”

“I told him you’d be up in a minute to give him a beating.”

“Great.”

I didn’t beat my son, I never beat my son. That may be his biggest problem, he probably needs it. I know Sharon thinks I’m not really helping because I don’t ever clobber him, but I wasn’t brought up with it, I wouldn’t know how to do it. I suppose she was, but I can’t put that on her. She’s carrying enough weight on her shoulders already. Instead of tanning his bottom, I had a heart-to-heart with Neil about the dangers

of what he did and how precious his little brother is to us and how bad he'd feel if anything ever really happened to Jake. Neil was five. Long ago he had figured out how to let me go on and on without ever being affected by what I say. By the time Sharon called out that dinner was ready, I'd gotten a promise that he wouldn't chain Jake up again, but I could see the wheels going around in the back of his head, already planning what to do to his dutiful little brother next.

Maybe I ought to get Jake karate lessons, I mused. Or just leave. Maybe I actually have gotten to that day, maybe it really is time to leave. Or teach Jake how to kick his brother in the balls. One or the other.

I'll bet Baker doesn't have these kinds of problems. I'll bet he lives all alone in complete peace and solitude, gets any woman anytime he wants her, goes back to blissful quiet and calm. If I had all that, I probably could be up for an Emmy, too. It's all this stress, the kids, the lack of sex, the depression that's constantly draped around my wife like a shroud. If I changed my life, my career would probably take off. I'd be the one in constant demand, the one dictating where and how much and when. I'm better looking than him, and taller. A lot taller. He's not such a big deal. I'll bet half of Neil's problem is that he's half-breed, never really knowing who he is, where he belongs. He'd be better off among all whites. Besides, Sharon'd handle Jake better without me hanging around anyway. I'm probably a lousy role model.

That's it, then. After everybody goes to bed tonight, I'm out of here.

I sprang out of my daydream at Jake's blood-curdling scream. Coarse white muck was dripping out of his nose, hanging off his fingers. His face was contorted to go along with his howling as Sharon squatted by his side to help.

"I said I wonder what it would taste like, I didn't tell him to do it!" Neil managed to yell his protest loud enough to be heard even over Jake's wailing.

"What would what taste like?"

"What it would taste like to stick mashed potatoes up your nose. But I didn't tell him to do it, I just said I wonder."

"Go to your room!" my wife and I said almost in unison.

"All-in-all, that was a pretty quiet dinner, better than most." It was later, the kitchen was a battlefield of dishes, pans and cutlery. Jake and Neil were both upstairs, pounding and jumping around, making the

house shake, nothing to worry about, Neil does his worst under cover of whispers. Sharon was hunched over the table muttering inaudibly to herself, her head in her hands. She'd been doing a lot of that lately, too much stress from the kids, her job. Maybe it would be better if I took Jesus' offer after I passed the bar exam. I wrapped myself around her from behind, trying to recapture the mood we'd lost light-years ago. We were almost there when Jake's voice rose again.

"Mommy, Neil's making me jump off your dresser and it's too high!"

There went that massive sigh again. I started for the stairs but Sharon called me back, said she'd go. The set of her face made it pretty plain we'd just lost our last chance for the night. I started rinsing dishes. I'll leave a note, I decided. "Goodbye. We had a good run, but all gigs end. I'll send money when I can." In the middle of the kitchen table, on top of all those law books. I never really wanted to be a lawyer anyway, not now, not with my career just about to break wide open.

I sneaked one last peek at the boys before I left. It was late, after ten, my eyes were blurry from studying, the house was incredibly quiet. Neil looked like he was making a snow angel, arms and legs flung everywhere. I worked the crumpled sheet and comforter from under one leg, got them up over both legs and half his chest before he flipped in his sleep to uncover again. I gave it up, knelt to kiss the top of Jake's head poking out from under mounds of blankets. His tightly curled body made a little round lump in the precise middle of the bed. He answered a dream with a murmur, curled a little tighter, smiled into his fist.

A twinge started in my throat, made its way down into my chest. I saw Jake's eyes wide, staring at Sharon in the morning as she explained that no, Daddy wasn't home for breakfast, and he wouldn't be home for dinner either, not today, not tomorrow, not the day after that. I saw Neil's face twist to stop the tears, saw him start throwing things around the living room, pummeling his brother to get out his fury.

He's really a good kid, I reasoned, he's just got too much of my grandfather's spirit. He needs more guidance, a firmer hand. It's the father that makes the difference, Dad had said when I'd called him for advice once.

I crawled into bed next to Sharon. She was on her side, facing the other way. I squirmed under her like a spoon, stroked her breasts, kissed her neck. Her body came alive, nipples up, skin warm, soft heavy breath-

ing, little murmurs. She squeezed my balls at just the right time, gave a wonderful sigh, settled back into her pillow, heart-melting smile, so snug. Waves of guilt rolled over me. She worked so hard, had such a tough time with the kids. I wasn't helping enough. It's the father that makes the difference. I'd have to do more, take a firmer hand.

I fell asleep looking out over a sea of faces, hundreds of people standing and applauding, a golden statue heavy in my hand. Suddenly the statue exploded, the people ran from the hall in every direction screaming, screaming, drowned out only by the blaring sirens. I opened my eyes. My hand was sticky and gooped up. Sharon was still asleep, the house still quiet. It was four o'clock; I knew without looking. I always woke up at four o'clock, if I woke up at all, ever since that night. I could leave now, I realized, just like then. Sneak out just like I'd done that four o'clock in the morning with Monty.

Monty. Talk about going from one extreme to the other. I had met him during my last vacation as an undergrad. I had a part-time job in Newport Beach, down in Orange County, standing around the men's section of a Fashion Island store twenty hours a week, helping rich executives decide what shirt to buy. It covered the rent. Three other guys and I had a tiny apartment right on the beach, white sand, blue skies, bikini heaven directly out the front door. It was supposed to be my last shot at having the ultimate good-time summer.

A female executive came in the second Thursday I was on the job. She had lots of cash to spend on her rich hubby, just about my size. "Try on a few things for me, young man, I'll make it worth your while." She fingered a twenty-dollar bill. I stripped down in the changing room, turned around to find her standing there. She smelled like "Charley," tasted like champagne, laughed at how far down I blushed. I tried on four suits, she bought them all. My boss came strolling by just as I rang up the final sale.

"Kevin, you've got quite a find in this young man. I'd keep my eye on him if I were you. He's been a ...marvelous help."

At the end of my shift, Mr. Crupp took me aside. "I've decided to have you represent the department in our next fashion show, a week from tomorrow. You'll get time-and-a-half. The audience is usually top-heavy with women. Keep up the good work." He slapped me on the

back. It wasn't until I got home that I realized I'd never gotten that twenty dollar bill.

The audience wasn't top-heavy with women, it was all women. Only one man besides my boss showed up. Halfway through the show Mr. Crupp took me aside again, told me to be careful afterwards. I didn't know what he meant, then found a three-pack of condoms in my hip pocket. The show ended at three, I couldn't get out of the store fast enough, but this guy from the audience, Montham Weitzer, caught up with me. "I've been shopping for some new material, I think you can help me." He offered to take me to dinner. It was a free meal and I needed food, badly.

"Kid, I've been in this business a long time, and I know talent when I see it. And I saw it today." He winked a lot. Later I found out it was nervous, not symbolic.

"Listen, kid, you've got a great future ahead of you, a great future. Legit, yeah, don't worry about a thing. Especially with me, kid, I know the ropes. All you gotta do is put in some time, that's all, just trust me. Hey, you start by doing a little modeling here, a little posing there, then it's on to the big time, acting, Hollywood, all that stuff. Only one in a million's got it, kid, and you're that one, not too ethnic, but what a build, what cheekbones! The girls are gonna eat you up. I'm always looking for new talent, kid, what's your name?"

Monty offered to keep me busy all summer long. "You only have to take it as far as you want, kid. We'll know within a few months if you've really got what it takes. In the meantime, we're talking a hell of a lot better deal than the, what, \$5.65 an hour you're making now?"

"I'm not interested in anything risqué."

"No problem! I only do legit stuff. Takes you farther, anyway."

"I have to think about it. Is there someplace I can call you in a couple of days?"

"Sure, kid, sure. And while you're thinking, here, mull over this \$200."

"What's that for?"

"Well, frankly, kid, I already got a job for you. Saw an old friend of mine at the next table today and told her I'm your agent. This is just an advance. She needs you to show up at her photographer's studio wearing shorts and a print shirt, you know, a surfer's shirt, flaps open, I can get

you one if you don't got one already. All you gotta do is make nice with a surfboard, understand? You're plugging the wax. Do you surf? You don't gotta, of course. All you gotta do is smile at the camera, point at the board, that sort of thing. The job pays four hundred twenty-five dollars altogether, less my ten percent, less the two hundred I'm fronting you. The shoot's day after tomorrow in Costa Mesa. Here's the address. I can get work for you till you're crying for a break. Whaddaya say?"

In my heart I was sure it was a con, but in my hand he'd counted out \$200 in \$20 bills.

"Congratulations, kid, you're an actor."

Monty was true to his word, kept me busy all the time. I did industrial shoots, I filled seats at televised benefits, I did some more floor shows. The surfboard wax people liked me, had me do a local cable spot but it got scrapped. Monty said not to take it personally.

"Listen, kid, you need acting lessons. You're okay in the stills, but when you gotta say something or move, you stink to high heavens. It's not worth putting money into now. Take some drama classes next term. We'll keep you away from video for the rest of the summer. Couple, three, four months, I'll know if you can cut it. Otherwise, hey, you got plenty of good years in the rags ahead of you. How old are you? Catalogs, business rags, industrial stuff, you can keep it up 'til you're old and gray, at least long enough to make some decent cash. Besides, if you age craggy, think of the possibilities! Put your dough away, get your degree, you'll have a bankroll to start another career. Keep this up on the side even if you never learn to talk. Meanwhile, I got plenty work for you."

His honesty was a blow. I was used to doing everything easier, faster and better than anyone else around. I resolved to prove him wrong, spent whatever time I wasn't working reading up on how to act. I must have memorized a dozen books before the end of the summer. Between the two activities I had no time to catch my breath, no chance to do anything a healthy, virile young man thinks about doing during summer vacation spent at the beach, blush or no blush. My roommates were either living off their parents or their own morning jobs. They spent their afternoons lying on the beach laughing, talking, drinking, swapping sun-tan lotion with every girl in sight. I fell asleep nightly to the sound of them making it with one sun-baked bikini after another. As the weeks went on, I was



having less and less of a good-time summer and feeling more and more uncomfortable lying to my parents in my weekly letter.

My parents are as mismatched as they come. Mom must have white in her background somewhere, maybe Irish or Greek or Italian or one of those ethnic types that rush out to meet life. She's the one who said leave, get out of North Dakota, try everything at least once, make a new kind of life, get away from the stodgy attachment to tradition. Dad is stodgy tradition. He'd take me for long walks every couple years, a mile out, a mile back, always at night, always in the freezing snow. We'd stop in the middle of nowhere, he'd fix me with a long, steely stare, and he'd issue his profound wisdom.

"White men say strange things."

"Stay away from Grandfather when *nonsíh'ebí* (drunk)."

My favorite: "Guard your *be3éés* (testicles)."

The last time, we walked two miles out, two miles back to make up for it being summer. The situation was so grave it warranted a hand on my shoulder.

"We need a lawyer."

That was it, that was his goodbye. I always thought I was 70 percent him, 20 percent her, and 10 percent my father's father, whose spirit was too big to be tamed. He showed up as I waited for the bus, same steely stare as his son, same intonation.

"Go live. Do it all. Do everything."

But Grandfather never got involved with much of the white world. He never met anyone like Sharon. Or Monty.

Things with Monty came to a head one particularly sticky night toward the end of the summer when the photo session for a line of tuxes for the next year's prom season finished particularly late. Monty offered to let me crash at his place. "Hey, kid, no need to go all the way down to Newport, I got a huge place in Santa Monica. It'll do you good to get away from all the frustrations of that beach house. It's gotta be tough getting to sleep surrounded by all those orgasms. I've got lots of room."

All the way out to his place Monty talked about his business. He'd just signed Cynthia Teje, "a real comer. She can move, you know, not like you, she doesn't go Frankenstein on me. You don't have to worry about that, though, because you've got class, lots more class than her. She'd never have gotten out of the double X's if I hadn't stepped in, I'm

not even sure now what I can do with her. Her rep's all smeared at this point. If I'da gotten her earlier, well, who knows! Still, you never can tell, I'm keeping her in work. She wants more money, doesn't everybody? But what the hell, you do what you can. Not like you, kid, you got class, I can push that and the face and the teeth and the build for years yet. Keep working out, kid, that's the answer, only don't go rippled on me. I don't do that kind of stuff."

In his living room, Monty showed me a picture of Cynthia. She had long hair, kind of copper blonde, tear-drop eyes, a cartoon-perfect face and shape. "She did a layout for Playboy, but it didn't get picked up. Which just shows you what I'm talking about. She wasn't being handled right. You need an agent, kid, that's the only way to get anywhere today. No more freelancers left. You'll wind up doing this kind of stuff." He passed over some different pictures of Cynthia, winking all the while. I stared at them, grateful that the intensity of heat I felt was always somewhat dimmed by the color of my skin. My mouth was very dry, though, and the bulge in my pants was getting uncomfortable. When I shifted around in my chair, Monty caught the move.

"You know, kid, this man's efforts have taken you from nowhere and put you into some pretty exciting and profitable situations. I've got plans for you, real plans, big plans, even if you stay worthless when the red light goes on. I can still make you a star of the stills, get you on every cover in the rack! But look at you, you're already starting to look run-down! Run-down gets me worried, kid, it'd make any agent worry. Your health is important to me, now that makes sense, does it? Strictly a matter of dollars and sense. A happy model is money in the bank, but a tired model is like a limp dick at an orgy. What's the point?"

"Now, if you're having trouble obtaining adequate release from the frustrations of young manhood, an obviously important part of maintaining a healthy physique—well, kid! Yours truly can see to it that you are well taken care of in a most satisfying manner. You just say the word."

He winked at me sideways, gestured with a handful of Teje. I'd gotten this same kind of speech once from a frat brother during my sophomore year. Reading for mid-terms, I'd found out one instructor was testing off his lectures instead of the book. I hadn't gone to any lectures. I completely stressed out. Chuck only laughed, found me somebody's notes and offered his own brand of relaxation therapy, in a cat house.

Monty's got to be talking about something along the same lines, I figured, what else? Over some very sweet, very potent wine, he showed me his bedroom. It looked like something straight out of a smut magazine, mirrors over the bed, a blown-up poster of Cynthia Teje at the head. She was naked with her knees up and open, her breasts hanging between.

"Get comfortable, I gotta go make a phone call." I still hadn't realized the truth about his wink. My good-time summer fun is about to begin, I congratulated myself, getting braced to go through with it all, no matter what. It's about time I grew up. Try everything at least once.

I kicked off my clothes, took a timid hit on the joint Monty'd left in the ashtray, crawled between the sheets, took a couple more not-so-timid hits, and waited.

Later, I realized I could have left at any time. I just couldn't believe it was really happening. This kind of stuff only goes on in books, I kept telling myself. But whatever had been in that joint—or in the wine, or in the strange-looking water pipe, or in that other stuff I gulped down—made me, uh, well... compliant...that is, uh... willing, no, I mean-

Aw shit.

My nose was practically on the clock's face when I woke up on my belly. Four AM. A stray feather flicked and leaped in time to Monty's snoring. I had to get away, get back down to Newport before anyone saw me. I grabbed my clothes, crept out of the house, hot-wired his car, took off down the freeway at ninety miles an hour. Two blocks away from the beach, I parked his pristine 1973 Triumph classic on a side road thinking it would be inconspicuous enough nobody'd notice. I ran to the apartment, locked the door, closed and locked all the windows, flung myself into the shower. I stayed in there scrubbing at my organ until somebody started to bang on the bathroom door.

I couldn't feel my dick. My dick was dead. I'd let him kill my dick. This is what happens when you get involved with white men, how could I let him do that? Oh, Dear Jesus, Great Spirit, please, please, let it come back to life, I'll never experiment with anything ever again, ever, I swear. Just let it come back to life.

Things got pretty weird after that. I lost my job at the department store. My roommates thought I wanted the time to bikini hunt, but I couldn't even look at the sand without throwing up. I got away from

them in the bathroom, ended up taking one long shower after another all day, into the night. It was still two weeks 'til summer was over. I drove up to see Chuck at his folk's house in Santa Barbara. They were in Europe. I got to his place around noon. He opened the door wearing nothing but pajama bottoms.

"Howard! What the hell are you doing here?"

"I let this guy...I let this guy..."

"Mug you?"

"No."

"Hit you?"

"No, no."

"Uh, fuck you?"

"Well, more like, uh, like..."

"Suck you off?"

I must have been glowing by then, he knew he'd hit the mark. "Oh yeah? How was it?"

"I...that is, I...well, I...came."

"Oh yeah?"

"Like a volcano."

"Really? How'd he do it?"

My face was so hot I had to be bright red.

"He tied me up with velvet ropes, poured wine on my balls, and licked it off."

"Hey, I gotta remember that for tonight with Lila. Thanks for the tip. Anything else?"

"I think I'm queer, I had an orgasm with a man."

"Right. You wanna suck my cock?"

I shook my head.

"Then give me a break."

He closed the door in my face. I drove back to Newport, took a shower.

# SHARON

I KNEW WHAT MY HUSBAND WAS THINKING. That I don't have any control over the boys. That I shouldn't have left them alone together, especially not out in the yard. That I'm not a fit mother, that I don't take care of my children properly. He didn't have to say it, I could see it in his eyes. And that little joke about beating Neil, he took it seriously, I just know it. I've never hit either of my kids, he knows that, but still, he thinks I'm a violent mother. I was only trying to bring a little levity into what had gotten to be a very heavy situation all of a sudden. Is that so terrible?

I guess I should be used to it by now, seeing as I've lived with this kind of condemnation all my life. My mother used to say I wasn't fit for scrubbing floors. Papa wasn't that generous. Susie just said I was a liar, that I never told the truth a day in my life. Well, hell, I was taught by the best. Is it my fault if I've never known how to stop?

I am a good mother. The boys just get out of hand sometimes. How was I to know what Neil would do to Jake out in the yard? I don't have a mind that works like that! I was thinking about the project on my desk. I was thinking about when I'd have time to scrub the walls, they

get so dirty with fingerprints. And Howard was distracting me. All he ever thinks about is sex. I didn't want him to think I wasn't interested, so I went along, which I suppose was a kind of lie. Although actually, I wouldn't have minded if we could have pulled it off. We always do so much better out of the bedroom. He's wonderful when it isn't the middle of the night. He makes me feel so...well, it wasn't that much of a lie.

I've tried not to lie to him so much anymore, anyway. I didn't start out lying to him. From the very first time I saw him, I was as honest as honest could be. Hell, I let him know I wanted his body, that he could have mine for the asking, how much more honest could I get? He was so different from anyone I'd ever been with, so bursting with charisma, I could barely keep my hands off him. Unfortunately, I fell right back into my old groove as soon as the fun part was over and we started to talk. I lied when I told him I hadn't been with a man for a year, of course, and that I knew I was pregnant because my period was late. Hell, I knew I was pregnant because I knew what it had felt like before—and it wouldn't have been my first abortion, either. And I knew the baby was his because I'd been sick for a few weeks before the party where we met, so I hadn't done it with anybody since my last period—which had been right on time and heavy, no first-month spotting nonsense. I never do it when I have a cold because any virus you've already got makes you all that much more susceptible to the HIV virus. Angie told me. She does transcription for a surgeon.

Since I knew I wasn't pregnant when Howard and I got together and I definitely was after, it had to be his. Not that I ever really expected him to marry me; that was just one of those lines I thought would sound good. I don't even know why I told him at all. Probably because I'd gotten too comfortable and was caught off guard. It wasn't exactly a familiar sensation. In fact, that was how I knew for sure Howard was too dangerous to see again. In the first place, there was his body, which I couldn't get enough of. Hell, I still can't, except for that middle of the night stuff, which I've had about as much as I can take. I didn't know about any of that then, of course. What I knew was he could match me drink for drink, no mean feat. I'd never met a guy I couldn't drink under the table. But the real kicker was him hanging in for three weeks. Three weeks! Hell, I'd lost weekends before, but the guy had always petered out somewhere around Sunday night, Monday morning at the latest. Once,

I made it all the way until Tuesday morning with a guy. I'd thought, "This is the one." But then his wife came home.

Howard was single, inexhaustible, had looks to die for, and made me feel real good, real comfortable, almost safe. I crept out of his apartment the day it was over, crying from a strange mixture of familiar relief and unfamiliar dejection. He was still in the shower and never heard me go. I guess one of the reasons I gave in and married him was 'cause when he showed up on my doorstep, he wasn't the only one confused. And then he said he loved me!

I'm not the kind of person people love. I've always known that sooner or later all my "stories" would catch up with me and I'd have to pay. I didn't know what else to do, what with everybody making one excuse after another for my mother. It just seemed natural to fall in line. So I never told Howard the truth about my past. Hell, nobody's ever called my mother a drunken bum, either, what's the difference? Everybody always had a million excuses why it was okay that she was drunk, just this one time. She used to call Papa a drunken bum, but Papa wasn't the one who came to my Brownie meeting so loaded that he spilled all the juice cups. Papa wasn't the one who showed up at my gym class in seventh grade to publicly announce I'd finally started menstruating. I thought I was going to die. Papa wasn't the one Susie and I found sitting on the floor of the basement crying and bleeding from a bad abortion and cuddling a bottle of Jim Beam like a baby.

I don't care what my shrink says, Howard wouldn't even stay around to turn off the lights if he knew who I really came from.

I remember staying with Grandma and Grandpa once when Susie was five. I must have been about nine. My mother was in some hospital drying out. I don't know where Papa was, probably at the union hall waiting for work. One night, over dinner—it stands out in my mind mostly because I didn't have to make it—Susie asked when we'd be going home. I guess we'd been there three or four days already. Grandma put down her fork and smiled at us in that grandparent-ish way. She said we all needed to have a little chat.

"I think it's time you girls were told what's going on. You're going to have to try to have a little patience with your mama right now, because she's very sick. She's probably going to be away for quite some time. But when she comes back, she'll be all better. Life will be better for all of you

then. In the meantime, Grandpa and I want you to feel right at home here. Anything you need, you just ask.”

“When are we going home?” Susie repeated.

“When your mama’s all better,” Grandma said, smiling wistfully.

“Mama will never be all better,” Susie said. “Mama isn’t sick at all. She just drinks too much. She always drinks too much. Papa says she’s a drunk. He says he doesn’t know what it’s going to take to make her stop.”

Grandpa took a sharp breath. He and Papa didn’t get along, I don’t think I ever knew why.

“Now, Susie,” he said sternly, “sometimes there are reasons why people drink too much. Your mama isn’t a drunk. Your mama is just having some trouble getting over the death of the twins. You’re too little to understand, child, but it’s very hard on a woman when she loses a baby. Your mama is having a rough time bouncing back from the experience, that’s all. But she will, she will. You’ll see. Everything’s going to be just fine. It’s just going to take a little time, that’s all.”

Of course no one mentioned that the reason mama lost the twins was because she’d drunk too much while she was pregnant with them. Full-term, they were less than two pounds each. But that wasn’t her fault either, see, because she was only drinking because she hadn’t quite gotten over the abortion she’d had before she’d gotten pregnant with the twins. Which she’d had because she thought she’d been drinking too much for that baby to turn out right.

I don’t ever remember feeling like a child.

For every drink my mother took, someone came up with one hell of a nifty excuse for why she took it. It was “she drank too much last night”—as if last night was the only night—or “she’s just trying to drink away the tears”—but never, never was she an alcoholic. Everyone reserved the word drunk for Papa.

I honestly don’t ever remember seeing Papa drunk, but then, for some reason, I honestly don’t remember having a lot to do with Papa, at least not as a kid. I have a vague impression of him being gone a lot, working or waiting for work at the union hall, I guess. My shrink keeps saying there’s something I’m blocking about him, but I guess I’ve blocked it pretty well.



I don't remember talking to him, don't remember seeing him naked (a favorite shrink question), don't remember him hitting me or molesting me. I have no trouble remembering our conversations when I got older, of course, when I got into junior high and he started calling me slut and bitch and saying I was just like my mother.

In her case, I thought he was way off the mark, at least the slut part. She was never sober long enough to do it with anyone. It's a wonder they ever had Susie. I had to get her into the big double bed she and Papa shared if she got home before we went to sleep. Otherwise, Papa would do it when he got there.

If he didn't make it home, she'd sleep in the can all night—then we'd have to step around her when we got up in the morning. I don't know how she managed to show up on the job every day and get her work done. I could never pull it off. As for being a slut myself, well, I figured if I was already paying, I might as well play.

I left home when I was fourteen, lied about my age, got a job sling-ing hash, worked my way through continuation school and junior college and never looked back. I don't have any patience with people who claim they can't get on with their lives because of what their parents did to them. It's a crock. That's why Susie and I never talk anymore.

"Poor, pity me" Susie lost her grasp on reality when she was still little. She's convinced it was from watching our mother slosh in the door every other night and roll to a stop on the bathroom floor. Being the baby, I guess the crap affected her more than me. I never felt the "abandonment" Susie claims she experienced from watching our mother pass out with her head in the toilet night after night. I don't see where her trauma came from. I'm the one who had to do all the cleaning up. Hell, if you go to enough of those phony self-help groups, you'll believe anything.

Susie had started out a normal-enough baby, although I remember my mother drinking pretty good through that pregnancy, too. I forget the excuse that time—I was too young—but I remember being aware even then that it was a crock of shit. It didn't take long before my little sister began showing signs of emotional damage. Anybody could see she wasn't all right in the head. She would literally freak out every time she got a cut or a scrape. The sight of her own blood made her frantic. Somebody else's blood didn't seem to bother her at all, though. In fact,

she liked to bite people to see if she could get them to bleed. Then there was the diaper problem. It took forever to potty-train her. I think she was four-and-a-half before she stopped wearing a diaper to bed. I know she was still wearing one that time at Grandma's. Even that didn't help. She kept wetting her pants for years and years. Every time somebody yelled—at her, at anybody else in the house, at the dog that lived next door—she wet her pants. She kept it up all the way through grammar school, that and the blood thing. It's a wonder they didn't kick her out.

Finally, she lost it completely. She developed this deathly fear of being touched. No one could hug her or even put a hand on her arm. The tiniest physical contact would send her into screams of terror. I was the only one who could hold her. I seem to remember Grandpa wanting to get her special help—I wanted to have her put away, myself—but my folks wouldn't hear of it. I don't remember why; just another one of those little things that sends my shrink into ecstasies of psychobabble joy. I do remember when the whole thing exploded, though.

It was late, late one Tuesday night. Papa had gotten home after we went to bed, as usual. My mother was home from meeting her friends and had passed out in the bathroom, as usual. Susie started screaming, another one of her endless nightmares, not incredibly unlike Jake's, now that I think of it. I guess Papa decided it was time to take things in hand with Susie himself. I remember hearing him go into her room. I remember hearing the quiet murmur of his voice as he tried to comfort her. Pretty soon, she stopped crying. Then he stopped talking. Finally, I fell asleep.

The next morning, I woke up to a lot of yelling and commotion. I didn't think much of it; it just sounded like Susie was at it again. I followed the noise into the kitchen. Someone might have been trying to brush her hair, and she'd need me to make it all better. Sure enough, Susie was crying and gulping and screaming hysterically, but no one was touching her, no one was even near her. Papa was turned away, staring out the window. My mother, too hungover to handle the noise, was alternately shushing Susie and screeching at Papa in a whisper. The whole thing was kind of tough to follow, but the long and the short of it was, Susie was accusing Papa of raping her the night before.

She said he held her down and laughed the whole time, and tried to make her think it was a game, but she knew better, and it had hurt, just

like always. She said she was tired of it, she couldn't stand it anymore. My mother told him he had to get out.

That was the last time I saw Papa alive.

He walked out of the kitchen and left the house, never even came back for his clothes. Two weeks later, the police called my mother in to identify his body. He had gotten blind-drunk and driven his car into a concrete embankment. My mother told the police that he was a habitual drinker and probably didn't know what he was doing. With that statement on the police record, we got the Accidental Death benefit from his union life insurance, a double premium. I don't know why, but I never believed it, and I don't think my mother or sister ever did, either. I think he only wanted it to look like an accident.

His father had killed himself, too.

Susie, never one to be outdone, developed a terrible guilt over the whole thing. She thought he had committed suicide because of what he'd done to her, and she felt terrible about the whole thing. How's that for logical reasoning? My mother got self-absorbed, too. She thought he had done it because she had rejected him. I don't remember what I thought or felt about it. Looking back, I don't really think I cared.

I still don't care.

To this day, Susie goes to two support groups: one for Incest Survivors and another one for Adult Children of Alcoholics. She's firmly convinced that everybody in the family is alcoholic, not just our mother, but Papa and her and me, too. That's another problem with those phony self-help groups. The leaders are all miserable themselves and they want to make everybody else out to be miserable so they don't feel so alone. Hell, when you're that wimpy, you'll grab at any straw. Just leave me out of it. As it is, this group is only the last stop on a long trail of trying to keep "little sissy" out of an institution.

It must have cost a fortune to dry her out from the coke, heaven only knows if she's really kicked the stuff. She still claims Papa raped her, that night and for years before. Maybe he did, I don't know, I wasn't there. I know he didn't rape me that night. My shrink says he probably raped me other nights, but I sure don't remember any of that. He says I'm blocking. He says that's why I'm depressed all the time, not because Howard has gone two-dimensional on me. I say my shrink needs to meet Howard, then he'd know I'm not crazy. I am a highly competent

woman, self-educated, strong, resourceful, resilient. I took control of my life when I was very young and have never let down the reins. I have a good career as a marketing tech with a fine future and consistently excellent reviews. I keep a remarkably clean house, feed my children nutritious meals, and make my husband happy in every way. We actually have a very good marriage, or we would have if everybody would stop trying to convince us we don't. Maybe what I really need is a new shrink, or no shrink at all. Hell, I'm probably fine, but what shrink is ever going to admit that a patient with insurance is okay?

Howard played with the boys all evening after dinner, just about the only way to keep them out of trouble. He's such a good father. He'll get right down on his hands and knees and play with the Gobots or Sesame Street characters. He does a great job of talking for them; what an imagination. When he's playing with Neil and Jake, he acts so natural, so loving, it's almost painful. But then, of course, he'll take it out on me in the middle of the night. I had been asleep for hours and hours. I remember thinking this was one night we wouldn't have any problems. He crept in stinking of beer and whispering all those disgusting, vulgar things. He held my arms down, real rough, told me I was nothing but a slut so I might as well just lie back for him. Then he...marital rape, that's what the book Angie gave me called it. It always happens real late, when I don't want to make noise, don't want to wake up my little sister. Something must have happened to him when he was a kid. I've never said no to him. He doesn't have to batter me for what I'd willingly give. Nobody else knows what he's like in the middle of the night. They only see him during the day, when he seems so normal, and we make love everywhere we can and it's wonderful. I don't know how much more of this I can take. I should kick him out, the way my mother kicked Papa out. Only it's not the same. My mother was a drunk. And a slut.

I remember the first time Howard called me a slut. I had come home after trying out for the debate team. I was smart and one of the first picked. I've always been good at seeing both sides of an issue, so necessary if you want to wage a convincing argument either way. I don't know why he was home. He must have already picked up work for the next day or maybe it was so late the union had closed. I don't remember. He asked me where I'd been. I told him, at school.

"At this hour?" he said. "You expect me to believe that?"

“I was trying out for the debate team. I had to go up against Ronnie Steffle, and we went back and forth it seemed like forever.”

I never saw it coming. His hand hit me so hard and sudden, I didn't have a chance to not cry out. I stood there looking up, dry-eyed.

“Slut,” he screamed. “Going back and forth? You don't think I know what that means?” He sent my books flying across the room with one swipe of his giant, callused hand, tore off the front of my shirt with the next. “You're just like your mother, you worthless little slut! Get up to your room and stay there and don't come down again! I don't want to see your foul, disgusting face again! Get out!”

I ran upstairs. I remember the feel of the buttons pressing into my hand as I clutched the ripped material. I collapsed on the bed; not mine, Susie's, her room was closer. She was sitting on the floor in the corner. I remember her looking at me kind of funny. “Are you bleeding?” she said.

Fortunately, Howard is out of town a lot. He's always getting a last-minute call from some agent or client and flying off across the country or to Europe or South America or somewhere. The house is very quiet when he's gone. I especially miss him evenings. So do the boys. What Neil actually needs is for Howard to be home more. He's really a wonderful, wonderful father. And a great listener, I've never known anybody I can talk to like Howard. Except Angie, of course, but Angie is a total nut case. She listens, but her answers are as useless as a dried-up fountain pen.

“I think he's going to regret getting out of show business,” I said to her just the other week at lunch. “I think he's going to miss it. He just needs to relax more.”

“Sharon, put the wine down. You haven't touched your salad. Besides, Howard stinks,” she said, as if that had anything to do with anything. “Howard couldn't act his way out of a paper bag.”

“What a clever remark, Anj. Did you think that one up yourself?” I answered. “What the hell do you know, anyway? It just so happens that he's up for a long-term part on a soap, a major soap, and they seem to think he can act pretty good, or he wouldn't even be auditioning for it.”

“Yeah, you've been telling me that now for two months. When's the audition?”

“That's really none of your concern now, is it?”

She's my best friend, but really.

“I’ll tell you what is my concern, Sharon Ables Gordon, and that’s your little dream last night.”

“What dream?”

“The one you sneaked downstairs to call me about at three-thirty in the morning, the one where Howard slapped you and raped you and held your wrists so tight it left marks.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. You must have been dreaming yourself. What makes you think I’d have a nightmare like that? And why would I call you about it, of all people?”

“Probably because you don’t have your shrink’s home number.”

“For your information, dear, I do, and if I ever needed it, I would use it. But I haven’t, because I’ve never had that kind of nightmare, and even if I did, I’d know it was nothing more than a dream.”

“Not at three-thirty in the morning, you wouldn’t. At least you didn’t, not last night.”

“Angie, I don’t know why I even talk to you at all anymore, you’ve gotten so far out into left field you don’t know what’s real and what isn’t.”

“Excuse me, but I know when I’ve been called at three-thirty in the morning!”

“Excuse me, but you said the same thing when you thought Marvin was going to leave his wife!”

“Excuse me, but that’s not the same thing!”

“Oh, really? Well, I’d like to know the difference.”

“Are you telling me you didn’t call me in a rage, crying and whimpering and begging me to come pick you up, you just had to get out of the house, and then you changed your mind, because you didn’t want to leave the kids alone with Howard?”

I took a long, hard look at my poor, bewildered friend before taking a long, hard swallow to finish the last of the wine. “Seriously,” I said, trying to sound calm as an example. “Do I look like the kind of woman who would perform the kind of hysterical scene you just described?”

She didn’t answer. She obviously didn’t know what to say. She just finished eating her taco salad with extra jalapeños. The interchange had ruined my appetite. I ordered another glass of wine and nursed it until Angie was done. Then I picked up the check. We still hadn’t said another word.

“What does my half come to?” she asked.

"I'll take care of it," I said.

"I don't like it when you do that, Shar."

"You paid last time."

"No, I didn't. You did."

"Your mind really is playing tricks on you lately, isn't it?" I said.

"Apparently," she answered, but her lips were so tight they were turning white.

"Maybe what you need is some professional help," I said.

"Like you've had?"

If the sarcasm had been any heavier, it would have dripped down her chin.

"I'll see you next week," I said.

"Fine," she said. "Call me if you have another nightmare."

"I know a good shrink," I said. "I'll leave his name on your machine."

"Don't bother. Just give me the name of yours."

I don't remember any nightmare, and I can't believe I called her after Howard did one of his attacks on me. I've never told anybody about them, certainly not Angie. My shrink says I have a highly refined, selective-blocking mechanism that is perpetuating a depressive state and is aggravated by excessive alcoholic intake, about which I am in denial, and that's why I have these nightmares, which aren't nightmares, and which I don't ever remember telling him about.

If I thought about it, I'm sure I could figure out what the hell all of that means, but I have a boss who expects me to cover for his lapses when he's out screwing his best friend's wife, a husband who is having trouble making a career decision I don't even think he should be considering, a house that needs perpetual cleaning, my own projects to take care of, and two children, one of whom seems determined to annihilate the other. Frankly, I think if I had gotten that manager's position this time, none of these problems would matter at all. That's the real answer.

I don't need to keep seeing a shrink, I need to get a better job!

# ERIC

**T**O MY UTTER, ABYSMAL DISMAY, GREG WASN'T HOME when I got there. I needed sympathy. I needed understanding. I needed serious opiates. The gym had been crowded, the Jacuzzi had been broken, the sauna had been cold. I craved a double bourbon, no ice, and the solace of a firm, masculine hand stroking the lower portions of my firm, masculine body. Instead, I was greeted with an answering machine that showed ten messages, all from Suki in various degrees of pissed-hood. Since I wasn't about to call her back just to ream-or-be-reamed, I flopped down on the couch to stare out the window and sulk at our filled-in swimming pool, complete with diving board. It had already been sodded over when we bought the place. Greg keeps saying we ought to dig it out again, but I won't hear of it.

"Anybody can have a pool," I always tell him. "We've got a diving board."

Something crackled as my head hit the sofa. Greg had left a note on the throw pillow, of all places, telling me he'd finished off the last of the food and was now out replenishing supplies. He had work to do when



he got home (it continued), and oh, by the way, had I gotten it through my thick skull that he couldn't very well take me to the company affair at his boss' house tomorrow night without compromising every security precaution we had spent the last seven years building?

To Gregory, "security precautions" mean all those stupid, elaborate devices he uses to ensure that no one knows he's gay, which, by the way, is utterly absurd—everybody knows. He just doesn't know they know, or if he knows, he doesn't believe they know. Okay, maybe his parents don't know. But I know his boss knows, because I've been to his office—on business, of course, otherwise I'm *persona non grata*—and I knew right away by watching old man Cranley watch Greg that he knew and obviously didn't care.

But Greg cares. Greg cares so much, he can't admit that Mark Towner, whose cubicle is next to his, is also gay; he says Mark is shy. Shy my ass—if that bitch isn't a drag queen, I'm somebody's father!

Greg's note got me so completely teed off that when the phone rang, in my distraction, I answered it. It was Suki.

Cut to close-up of horror-stricken visage.

"Eric Caldwell Baker, you asinine imbecile, have you lost your mind?" she thundered. "Do you realize what might have happened because of your inane, addle-brained stunt, you dimwitted, walking mannequin?"

Was she upset because the day had been a total bust? No. Was she mad because Doug didn't get a single decent pix in the can? Nuh uh. Was she pissed about all the money that had been wasted getting absolutely nothing whatsoever accomplished? Spare me.

Her sole bone of contention was that I shouldn't have locked Portman in the studio, because he might have caused untold damage, which would have cost her a lot of money; or he might have sued me for assault or some other such thing, which would have cost her a lot of money; or he might have somehow gotten me arrested for being rotten, stupid and irresponsible (and, I suppose, shorter than he thought I should be)—which would have cost her a lot of money. I gathered that none of these things had happened, so I tried to calm her by explaining myself, always a mistake.

Granted, I said, I'd noticed on my way out that Corky wasn't at her desk, but it was early, and I'd figured she just went out for a late lunch. I really thought she'd be back to let him out. My arm was sore, and I'd

wanted to get some time in at the gym. Besides, I'd been emotionally drained, and Gordon's teeth shining in my face all day had given me a headache. I figured Doug was still somewhere in the building. I thought the door could be unlocked from the inside. I was afraid Portman would get violent, and I'd have to take him out. I forgot he was in there altogether. I didn't remember there wasn't another way out. Portman who?

I would have kept going, but she started in with her shit about coddling me and growing up, so we got into one of our knock-down-drag-outs about who had made whose career and which one of us counted on the other for their fortune and on and on and on and on. Somewhere in there I called her a blood-sucking bat. She called me a two-bit queer. I said she was a money-grubbing prick-teaser, she lobbed back with "squeaky-voiced diseased faggot." She put me on hold to yell at her secretary, I put her on hold to take another call.

Another mistake.

The other caller turned out to be Doug, who had responded to a police alert of a break-in at his studio by rushing back only to find Jeff locked in with all his equipment and sets and expensive paraphernalia and just what the fuck was I doing, going for the stupid-plastic-doll-of-the-year award?

Doug's language was more colorful than Suki's, or at least what he managed to hiss out was. He was so furious I could only catch every third or fourth word. With my usual brilliance of once again coming up with exactly the wrong remark at exactly the wrong time, I told Doug it might not have been such a bad thing if the imbecile did break up the place, since it would finally have given him an excuse to upgrade some of his stuff.

Fade out. Please God, fade out.

Many moons later, with no hearing whatsoever left in either ear, I rang off with my stereo fan club by pulling the plug out of the wall. Exhausted and misunderstood, I dropped my limp body into a chair, assuming as pathetic a pose as I could muster in the hopes Greg would find me shortly and shower me with sympathy and sex. A mere fifteen minutes later, he spotted me the second time he walked through on his way to the kitchen.

"What is with you?" he sighed with his customary exasperated tone. "Get off your ass and help me with the groceries."

“Alas, I am too worn to move,” I emoted. “I need the restorative powers of Jack Daniels and your clinging arms.”

He dropped a bag of food in my lap.

“Please, Ricky, spare me the stereotype for once. I lost two clients today and discovered a third was investing with phony money. I could use a little compassion myself. Get up and give me a hand with the rest of the stuff, would you please?”

Feeling oh, so much better now, I dutifully arose and shuffled behind to help empty his trunk, all the while not really listening to his inane grumblings about some stupid office politics, and how he had half a mind to not show up tomorrow night, that’s what he thought about pinning a promotion on such sophomoric social antics. It wasn’t until the third reference to “tomorrow night” that I remembered how thoroughly pissed I was with him.

“Speaking of tomorrow night,” I started angrily, but he cut me off.

“Leave it alone, twit, I do not have time for your nonsense. Laurie canceled out on me, I have to find another date, I have to track down Kortner’s computer manipulations. This predicament is going to take forever to clean up. Put the food away, will you please? You are not going with me tomorrow night, so stop asking, stop mooning—just stop! You are truly driving me nuts.”

And he was gone. He disappeared into “his” room, the one where he stock brokers or investment counsels, or whatever the hell it is he does in there with the money I bring home. I ended up pouring my own drink, making my own lousy dinner, and nursing my own resentments. Close-up on angry scowl at the camera, then fade out.

At times like this I try to concentrate on the simple facts of life, like the one that Greg would never be up for any promotion at all if it weren’t for me. Okay, so maybe I am just a plastic doll, a walking mannequin, a clothes horse, a frame for hanging, a hired body—there are a million putdowns for what I do. Maybe I had turned down that big-money role last month, maybe I wasn’t ready for that high-paying, high-pressure career everybody seems to think I’d already have if I’d just get off my duff. What the hell did I need with being a box-office draw, romantic lead, film stud, no-talent actor, anyway? Well, okay, I guess I’d already made it to that last one. But, hey, so what? Millions of...hundreds...well, whole bunches of people already recognized me wherever I went. Window-

dressing, that's what I am, and that's what I'll always be—I've known it all my life—just ask my aunt, or my high school drama coach, or any of my dance instructors. I hadn't signed up for all this responsibility and advancement shit when I'd gotten into the business, “lo those many years ago,” and it certainly wasn't what I expected the first day Gregory Cornwell Souster came into my life.

Flashback. It's almost eight years, and I'm still doing grunt modeling as a matter of course. A break in that day's shoot gave me the chance to step around the corner to my friendly neighborhood, too-many-names-on-the-door, money-juggling place, and check out a not-so-hot lead I'd been given from my former business manager under less-than-ideal circumstances. I probably noticed Greg because, in noticing me, he opened those dazzling grays of his so wide. After listening all the way through my sad story without stopping me even once to point out I was an idiot—the normal course of my conversations about money—he actually took a good deal of time to explain why the deal in all probability wouldn't work out, and how I'd fare significantly better by investing in a substantially less risky venture, which he would certainly be pleased to research for me if I was interested in the particulars.

Like I said, he talks like that.

What's more, even though he was obviously gay—obvious to me, anyway—he didn't swoon, proposition me, lick his lips—Biddley does that, it's so repulsive—or give me the feeling he thought I was nothing more than a piece of meat. I went back to work, but I couldn't get him off my mind. He'd given me a funny feeling.

I debated with myself about casually showing up at his office again after work, an argument between reason and lust. On the one hand, he was awfully smart. He was probably only trying to be kind. On the other hand, he had incredible eyes and the kind of slightly chunky body that made my throat dry. Back to the first hand, he was a lot older, too, and might already be in a relationship. Even so, he'd looked kind of lonely—or at least I managed to convince myself he did.

The other hand was the better hand, so as soon as we wrapped for the day, I fairly flew around the corner. I didn't realize his office would be pretty much shut down by four-thirty; I hadn't yet spent years living with his weird East/West Coast schedule. By the time I got there, it was already six fifteen. Luck was with me, or so he said; he'd stayed late to

catch up on some paperwork. The only other person still there was an older man, just leaving.

Greg has since admitted he hung around hoping I'd come back. But at the time, he managed to look shocked as hell to see me, not to mention nervous as all get-out. The older man, who turned out to be Cranley, his boss, walked out the front door about thirty seconds after I walked in, but that didn't stop Greg from looking around the room before he said anything, even standing up to check the cubicles behind him, as if he'd been caught with his dick in his hand.

"Uh, Mr., uh, Baker? Uh, have you forgotten something? May I be of some, uh, that is, assistance?"

Nervous, squared. I flashed him my it's-okay-I-don't-bite smile. "I just had a few more questions I thought you could clear up for me," I said gaily. "Do you have the time?"

He said he would make the time, trite but effective. Keeping to the cliché-ridden script, I said that, since it was getting dark, perhaps we could go somewhere for a drink?

Cut to a bar he knew on Sunset. Not exactly my style, but it seemed to make him much more comfortable. After listening to him talk, finding him connected to this joint was a shock. The place was so frighteningly dark—its most attractive feature, to be honest—I couldn't even see him across the table, I had to listen for his fidgeting. I ordered a shot and a beer. He ordered a double Kamikaze.

Slow dissolve as the minutes ticked by. There seemed to be no common ground between us. I really didn't remember—or care—enough about what he'd told me earlier to ask any questions, so I tried to get him to talk about himself. All I got were monosyllabic answers.

"Have you been with the firm long?"

"Yes."

"What kind of music do you like?"

"Any."

"Do you want to dance?"

"No."

In the gloom of the rear corner table he had immediately steered us to, I couldn't even gaze into those gorgeous grays. After about a dozen attempts at light conversation, I mentally gave up. "I guess I'd better be getting home," I said.

He suddenly came to life.

“Where?” he demanded.

“What?”

“Where? Where do you live?”

“In Studio City. In an apartment. Why?”

“Alone? Do you live alone?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said, slowing down. “I live alone, in a security building. Gates and a doorman, the whole bit. And good neighbors—I know all my neighbors real well.”

It had suddenly occurred to me that the funny feeling I had might just as easily have been my unaccustomed Winchell’s breakfast. After all, I’d been taken in by beautiful eyes before.

“That must be nice,” he sighed. “I live in an extremely disreputable area. My neighbors arm themselves with guns or knives, oftentimes both. Undoubtedly, you have no difficulty entertaining company at your residence, whereas I would be ashamed to allow any decent person to view my premises.”

Aha! I thought. So that’s how it’s broke.

“My neighborhood is actually very nice,” I said, picking it up. “But it’s real fluid, too. We get vacancies around there all the time. There’s something in every price range, lots of places that aren’t real expensive. I could show you around—if you don’t mind feeling your way in the dark.”

Okay, so it was a stupid line. So I don’t do seduction very well. So sue me—it worked. Once I got the man out of his clothes and into my bed, we had no trouble at all figuring out where our common ground lay, a tremendous relief. After all, I’d been late in getting started. I was almost fifteen by the time I lost my virginity in what had to be the most mechanical, meaningless three-and-a-half minutes of my life.

A series of girlfriends didn’t rectify the situation and after finding I couldn’t even get it up again with Rachel—well, I couldn’t keep it up, anyway—I went straight to the Bruiser, whose concept of sex was slam it and scam it—that’s a quote. Suki—she’d been more than just my agent/manager at the time, almost a Mrs. Robinson, but platonic, if that’s possible—had encouraged my subsequent relationship with Bryan, but his mushy meat hadn’t offered a whole lot of instruction. There I was, practically nineteen by the time I met Greg and I felt like I still hadn’t been let in on the secret.

Thank God, he knew a hell of a lot more; that first night was a revelation in more ways than one. But that's not what made me fall in love; at least, that wasn't all that made me fall in love. What came after was what really pushed me over the edge.

Cut to silent montage of childhood scenes while the narrator explains that people don't usually talk to pre-adolescent models-slash-actors except to tell them where to stand, what to say, and how to smile—unless, of course, they're “stars.” I wasn't a star. I got the message real early that I was basically just too dumb for most people to be bothered with unless they needed me in a shot. I suppose I should have been grateful to be needed at all, since I didn't start attracting real monied attention until the last couple of years. Sometimes, though, I used to get lonely. Suki always said the remedy was another gig, that this was the way life was.

Greg didn't see it like that. Afterwards, that first night, when I moved away so he could get up and leave, he pulled me back to lie against him instead and started talking. Talking! He told me about how long he'd been with his company, about the house he'd fallen in love with, about his dreams of traveling. He talked about his brother, the only one in his family who'd ever loved him, and how he'd been killed in the service. He talked about happiness being a dangerous thing because the payoff was always deadly. He talked about a lot of other things. Then he did something even more remarkable.

He asked if I liked what I did for a living, and when I just shrugged, he gently pushed and prodded until I had to actually think about it and answer. And he listened! Then—get this—we *discussed* it. Discussed, as in I said something, he responded to what I said, I answered him back, he asked something else. Needless to say, a guaranteed Oscar role couldn't have dragged me away from him, and it still can't, I don't care how much we fight, I don't care how deep in the closet he is. The only time I ever really thought of leaving was that one morning when he hit me.

Cut to a rainy Saturday morning. We'd been seeing each other for a little while, and I was still exploring, still happily overwhelmed by his attention. I don't think I'd ever seen him without a shirt before, though, because the scar on his back wasn't something you could easily miss, even though it was old and skinny. Like the lick of a whip, the white

thread went the length of his torso, diagonally. It couldn't have still hurt, but when I ran my finger down the slight curve, he exploded.

"Get your hands off me, faggot," he roared at the top of his lungs as he spun around and pushed me away. I stumbled backwards over the clothes we'd dropped on the floor earlier. "And shut up," he growled.

I snapped my lips together, instinctively. It was like he'd just turned Jekyll on me, or Hyde—whichever.

"Come on, asshole," he snarled, "you've been asking for it. Let's see what you're made of."

At that point, I was made of amazement. Where the hell had all this ferocity come from, not to mention the sudden change in language? Unfortunately, my vocal cords kicked in before my brain figured it all out.

"Look, Greg, I'm sorry. I didn't know you were sensitive about your back. I never saw the mark before. Where did it come from, a football injury?"

I didn't know much about football, but the horrendous expression on his face made it pretty clear you couldn't get hurt like that from playing any kind of sports. He started ranting—I don't remember all the garbage he said—and then started taunting me, pushing me farther and farther back, until I was as much against the wall as I could be without becoming a toon, and his fury was right up at my nose.

"Come on, come on, give it your best shot," he kept repeating.

Greg's got a pretty powerful body. He's not only taller than me—everybody's taller than me—but wider and thicker, too. He came from a sports-oriented family. Bryan had been kind of slight, always a little fragile—I wasn't about to get into it the same way with Greg. Besides, I didn't have a knife handy. I ducked and tried to slip out from between him and the paint, but he caught my arm with one hand and clopped me across the jaw with the other, sending my head back to collide against the edge of the window frame. Then he stepped back and panted.

Slow dissolve as the seconds passed and the stars circled. I propped against the wall with one shoulder, rubbing first my jaw, then the back of my head. I wasn't really hurt, but I used the take to try and come up with a decent ad lib. He stood in front of me, shoulders hunched, fists clenched—although I suppose the smoke coming out of his ears was my imagination. I started to edge toward the straight-back chair two feet



away, but, miraculously, figured the scene out before I got there. This wasn't a schizo mutation from a horror movie—he'd made no move, taken no posture to stop an oncoming attack. No, what we were playing out was a crime-and-punishment plot! B&D without the B, S&M turned around backwards. All of a sudden, the scar made sense.

"I'm not going to fight you, Greg," I said, picking up on the silent cue. "I'm not going to beat the shit out of you, either, if that's what you're looking for. Is this what you meant by paying for it later? Not that you'd make me pay for it, but that you'd want me to make you pay? Do you really think I'd hurt you, just because I make you happy?"

That was the first and still only time I've ever seen Gregory Souster cry. I've never met anybody who really thought it wasn't okay to be loved without being clobbered. It still crops up from time to time—that's a tough connection to break—but nowadays, I just let it pass. He's never tried to hit me again, which is just as well. I'd never let him.

I hope I never meet his parents.

Fast forward to the present. Greg still talks to me, not at me. He also still has the strongest set of lungs I've ever heard, but he's always sorry afterwards, so I don't really mind. Actually, I kind of like it. I get to yell back—especially when he's mad about something I'm doing or not doing with my career—and then we get to make up. Even Suki never lets me yell at her like that; she always has to have the last word. I can just picture how my mom and dad would have reacted!

As far as they were concerned, it wasn't my career, it was ours—the three of us. I don't even know if they knew I could read. I don't think they cared as long as I could somehow memorize whatever lines I had. They'd read them to me, record them for me, draw them in pictures if they had to, anything to make sure I got the part, did the part, got paid for the part. In fact, I don't think we ever had a conversation that didn't have something to do with the gig I was on, the gig I'd just finished or the gig they wanted me to go for. Of course, I was pretty young when mom died, but not so young I wasn't already supporting the family.

I was all of four months old when my folks got me into the biz. They sent my photo into one of those baby picture contests. With First Prize came a blue rattle for me, money for them—well, ostensibly for my education—and a new life in front of one camera or another ever since. Everybody's focus centered on me being a child star. I did my first

major catalog at eleven months, was doing diaper commercials before I was two, and have hardly had a decent day off since. I was the brat that said “Ooh, mommy, so shiny!” in that obnoxious Shiny Shower spot that ran for 150 years.

By the time mom got killed by a drunk driver when I was six, I was an old pro. Dad quit his regular job to devote himself full-time to me, since mom refused to keep up the stage-mother bit from beyond the grave. Auntie Fay, mom’s fat, ugly older-sister-from-hell, tried to get me away from him, but no Judge in his right mind was about to argue with the over \$100 grand he had me pulling down, especially since I also managed to pull down mostly average grades (except for math) and always got at least eight hours of sleep every day, even if it wasn’t necessarily all at once or at night. When dad finally lost his two-year-long cancer battle, I was left so well covered I could have taken the rest of my life off if I’d wanted. But I was too accustomed to working; I wouldn’t have known what to do with myself if I stopped. And even though at the funeral Auntie dear swore on Dad’s grave that I’d never set foot in a studio again if she had anything to do with it, she really didn’t have anything to do with it. Dad had actually given formal custody to this young, dynamic, hungry agent who was just getting her teeth into the business—Suki, in case the description doesn’t ring a bell—and while she paid my aunt and uncle to house and feed me, she also never let the phone stop ringing. I was about thirteen.

It took maybe six months, but eventually even Fay the Fool had to admit that one, I was never going to rival Einstein, and two, Baryshnikov could still sleep nights. Auntie, see, didn’t want me to be in show business, she wanted me to be a dancer. Trying to follow her explanation of the difference between the two was mind-boggling but inconsequential because dancing was one of the two things we agreed on—the other being that since I couldn’t seem to comprehend even the simplest of math facts, I’d obviously never get anywhere with an academic career.

Oh, I could read, I could write, I could dissect, I could memorize foreign phrases, but in my freshman year of high school I still had to go around both hands and then some to make seven plus five equal eleven. Since I assumed I would eventually go through that awkward stage between childhood and adulthood where I couldn’t work as a model, dancing in dinner theaters and such seemed a highly sensible, temporary

alternative. After all, I'd started tap and jazz when Mom was still alive and had been diligently going to class and practicing an hour a day ever since. The only problem I ever encountered was having no talent whatsoever for the art.

None. Not any. I could move, but I couldn't "flow." It was not a delight to watch me. My instructors, who either didn't want to be cruel or didn't want to lose the monthly tuition, would use me at the beginning and end of whatever production was being staged to lend "class" and "glamour" to the line. I was all of one step up from the moveable scenery. Of course, when they wanted to shoot the poster, I was top dog all the way. These experiences, Auntie insisted, built character.

After a while, I gave up the dancing idea altogether and tried straight acting, with the idea that even an awkward teenager can get screen time as part of a gang of awkward teenagers. Cut to Sullivan High and a tall, overly thin drama coach with a tiny, dreadfully wimpy mustache. I met him for the first time when he stopped me in the hallway to marvel at my "incredibly photogenic face." He wanted to learn how to use his new camera, he said, and thought perhaps I would pose for him.

I said okay—hey, I was a kid—and agreed to meet him at his studio after school. I didn't call Suki because it was time, I decided on the spot, to learn how to handle business matters on my own, despite the fact that I had just flunked yet another math quiz and had absolutely no idea what I should charge for a session of "learning to use my camera." I was being clever, don'tcha see, thinking that if I helped Mr. Mayers, he might give me some inside pointers about acting. I was going to do something smart for a change, all on my own.

Dissolve to his studio, which turned out to be his bedroom. Let's be kind and say I had led a relatively sheltered life and still had reason to be naïve. Mr. Mayers wasted no time asking me to pose this way and that, take off this and that, hold or stroke this and that. It didn't take long for the this and that to get down to mostly skin and some pretty weird props, although it did take me a while to figure out he planned to be one of those props. I turned him down, politely; at that point, I still had Rachel. He didn't take it well.

That may be something of an understatement.

Quick cut to the auditions for our semi-annual school play, which friendly 'ole Mr. Mayers happened to be directing. I was going for the

second lead, a part it just so happens I was born to and could have pulled off in my sleep. No killjoy he, he stopped my audition in the middle of a sentence to deliver a scathing speech in front of the entire auditorium of nervous and hopeful student actors. I was using up his time and the time of the whole student body, he ranted, when I obviously had “less than no talent” —which ain’t easy—and was nothing more than a “simpleton mannequin who can’t even dress himself,” not to mention a general “blight” on the tryouts, the play, the school, and, from what I could tell, motherhood, baseball, and apple pie. He lashed out at me nonstop for a good fifteen minutes, managing at some point to call down God as a witness to what a pitiful excuse for a human being I was. Unfortunately, I suddenly remembered, I was already late for a shoot and couldn’t stay to hear the whole thing. Even more unfortunate, everyone else did stay and all my “good buddies” were more than willing to tell me what I’d missed the next day.

Auntie called this one a “growing experience.”

It was my first bout of malicious public humiliation, as opposed to mere apathetic humiliation, and I vowed it would be the last. I was wrong, of course, but who knew then that people like Bryan would come into my life?

Bryan, Bryan, Bryan. Of all the mistakes I’ve made, probably Bryan was the worst. At least he was the bloodiest.

Bryan wasn’t the first, of course. I don’t even remember that guy’s real name, but there was little question why he was known around school as the Bruiser.

“Ricky, I don’t like the looks of that boy,” Auntie Dreadful complained for the umpteenth time that fateful Thursday afternoon. “You know, the older one you’ve been playing with so much lately. There’s something about him, I’m not sure what, but ...does he go to school with you? He’s so big! He’s much too old to be in your class, unless he failed a grade. You know I don’t want you running around with a B.I.”

B.I. was Fat Fay’s expression for “Bad Influence,” a concept so horrible she couldn’t even bring herself to pronounce the words. I gave her a typical teenage answer—a sullen glare and half-hearted shrug.

“Who are his parents anyway, do I know them?” she droned on and on. “Surely he’s not someone you know from that awful work you do, is

he? I don't think it would hurt for you to try to find some other, younger boys to play with, someone you have more in common with."

I sighed my why-doesn't-anybody-ever-understand-me sigh, which had been so effective in that pilot I'd made just a few weeks earlier, even though it hadn't sold. Auntie wasn't moved.

"I give up," I said in one of my best teenager-taxed-to-the-limit voices. "I might as well tell you the truth. I don't play with the Bruiser, I sleep with him, although actual sleep has never formally entered the picture. It's the truth, Auntie Fay. I'm as queer as a three-dollar bill."

"Ricky, I won't have you using such filthy language right here in the kitchen. Who do you think you're talking to? Go to your room!"

Like talking to an assistant director, no point to it at all. I went to my room, but two days later, I went to the Bruiser's place—he had a sleazy apartment a couple blocks from school—and frankly, I never went home. I had no idea when she noticed and I really didn't care if she ever did, because it was at just about this point I realized that despite feeling like an awkward teenager, I'd never stopped doing commercials, pilots, and bit parts. I suppose having a lot of things on my mind—most of them just below the belt—I simply hadn't been paying attention. I mean I was at that age where the most important thing was to get laid, and I was completely focused on coming to terms with why I could keep it up with the Bruiser but couldn't manage to stay hard enough to penetrate Rachel Leukman, even though she certainly wasn't my first and had gabanzas that wouldn't quit.

Fortunately, Suki was there to tell me I'd picked the right time to be gay, that Dad would have approved, and to get over it and show up for an audition she had lined up. Callous but candid, not to mention pragmatic. I did exactly what she told me—I went to work, tossing school, Auntie Fay, dirty-nailed Uncle Bud, and my juvenile-delinquent cousins all in one fell swoop. I started in on life—that's another quote.

Cut to me in a store, spending, spending, spending. Life had turned out to be more than I had bargained for, especially without somebody like Dad or even Pigface right there to take care of my money. I knew I made a bunch of it, but I didn't know what to do with it except buy stuff. So I did.

Over Suki's signature I got an apartment, which, of course, had to be furnished "my way." Bruiser was the one who took me shopping. It

was great; everything I liked, I bought. Everything. Everything he liked, I bought. I worked, I ate, I slept, and I shopped. It wasn't long before a lot of people were calling me on the phone, asking me to pay for things I thought I'd already paid for when I gave them my credit card. I'd like to call it naiveté again but this time I think Greg's interpretation of too-dumb-to-be-let-loose-alone would probably be closer to the mark. Probably nobody needs to have their own private, free-standing gym complete with weight room, Jacuzzi, lap pool, sushi bar, personal trainer and full-time masseuse, all of which the Bruiser, very cooperatively, allowed me to keep at his place. Before long, Suki took me in hand, so to speak, by turning me over to a lawyer, Mr. Sevens, who, as a matter of course, turned me over to a business manager and personal financial director.

Exit Bruiser, enter Bryan.

Bryan, Bryan, Bryan. Bryan was in distress about my tax liability and high-interest debt. I was in distress about Bryan's deep, deep brown eyes. After much discussion on his part and mooning on mine, he decided it would be best if he moved in with me, the better to protect my interests. I'd been away from home for less than six months, I'd already done the cover of *GQ* twice, and my hideous relatives were a thing of the past. I bought the whole package.

Unfortunately, Bryan wasn't the world's greatest business manager. Most of his investments were like his dick: limp. I suppose the losses were a boon for the IRS forms, but they weren't so hot for having anything left to spend, my third favorite occupation, right after sleep. Bryan turned out to be better in bed than he was at the bank which, to be blunt, was a pretty sad commentary on the man. Poor Bry, he couldn't seem to get a rise out of anything. Eventually, even those chocolate browns of his couldn't make up for not getting any and not having any money, either. With my usual flair for timing, I told him he had to get out while he was sawing on a watermelon with the largest, sharpest knife in the house.

"You miserable faggot!" he screeched as he lunged at me. The knife was serrated. And sharp. Very, very sharp. It got sharper as it got closer.

Pull back to the two of us rolling around on the floor as I struggled to take the knife away from him before he ground the tip into my throat. Fighting off a desperate attacker is a lot more choreographed in the studio; it also lasts longer on the screen, thank God. My brief adventure

into the world of grunt-and-stab ended with Bryan in the ER and me spending a night in jail. Aunt Pus-Puss wouldn't even bail me out, the bitch. By morning, the DA had decided it had been self-defense, and I'd decided to go see Bryan in the hospital, either because I am soft-hearted or soft-brained, I never quite figured out which.

"I'm really sorry, Ricky, I don't know what came over me," he said, looking meek and pitiful under those white bandages. "I've never done anything like that before in my life. Say you forgive me, say you'll take me back! I only want to make you happy!"

Oh please, I'm not that dumb. I found a new business manager.

## GREG

SINCE THE DAY I FIRST MET ERIC, I have been torn between an overwhelming desire to possess him and a shivering horror that he might inadvertently “out” me through his nonchalant disregard for propriety. Ergo, I take great pains to avoid being seen with him in public. I sometimes think he takes equal pains to annoy me with requests to do so. Hence, our quarrel over my company’s fiscal year-end dinner: he was determined to accompany me, I was similarly resolved he would not.

“So, who are you taking this time for Cranley’s review now that Laurie’s decided she has to wash her hair?” he started as soon as I had made myself comfortable in bed.

We had barely spoken since I arrived home, as I had a good deal of paperwork to prepare for the following day and had remained sequestered in my office for the better part of the evening in an attempt to forestall what was now about to occur. I was feeling rather pleased with myself, having not only accomplished that goal but having also analyzed and found excellent my prospects for the rumored upcoming promotion. I was therefore not about to rise to Ricky’s puerile baiting, not an easy



feat. I have great difficulty maintaining any measure of distance from or objectivity about Ricky; his very proximity generates an affection I only dimly recall from my earliest childhood, and his smile liquefies my fortitude. In short, he has my heart. At times, I find it necessary to consciously ensure he does not similarly overwhelm my wits.

“Chelsea?” he went on, despite my lack of reaction. “Chelsea, who thinks it’s ‘sexy’ that you’re gay? Chelllllsea, who keeps asking why you won’t let her watch?”

Although he does not often have a foul mouth, Ricky will condescend to this kind of verbiage when he is trying to antagonize me, which, apparently, he was. I was not about to yield, though, just to avoid being aroused. Rather than respond, I turned onto my side, leaving him to stare at my pajama’d back.

“Or how about Leslie? Leslie’s always a good date. She’s so damned dyke you’d have to be dumber than me to miss it.”

“I would prefer you not call yourself dumb,” I said over my shoulder, with a finality I hoped would put an end to the discussion. “I certainly never said you were. I merely said taking you would constitute a dumb idea. There is a difference in the two remarks that even you, Ricky, should be able to detect. The first refers to your mental capacity, the second to the intelligence of following through on a ruinous idea.”

Thankfully, he was silent, but lamentably, that state did not last.

“No, no, you’re right. You never did say I was dumb. That must have been my other good friend and benefactor, Suki. You said I wasn’t bright enough to hold my own in a conversation. I’m so sorry. I get the two of you mixed up sometimes, I don’t know why. You’re both such major fans of mine.”

Now I was angry. This little maneuver he has of comparing me to that gold-digging woman—manager, my eye! One short step above a common garden slug. Had I not intervened, she would have pushed Ricky beyond the point of exhaustion after squeezing every last ounce of income out of him, never encouraging him to venture beyond B-grade movies, never urging acceptance of a single decent script. If not for me, in fact, he would not have even considered the role for which he is currently being judged; Suki all but openly discouraged him attempting such a part, yet she now talks as if it had originally been her inspiration! I controlled my natural impulse to respond to his jibe with anger,

however, knowing, as we had traversed this path numerous times before, that my self-control was the most effective weapon I had in this type of battle.

“I never said you would have difficulty engaging in conversation, Ricky. What I said, if you will search through the detritus of your memory, was that I doubted you would encounter a likely topic of conversation, as most financial professionals are not generally interested in what Princess Di is either wearing or doing.”

“What’s the matter with me?” He had now risen to his knees and struck a dramatic pose, always his last resort when he’s trying to infuriate me into having sex, during which, much to my chagrin, I habitually acquiesce to even his most asinine demands.

“How could I have forgotten Denise? ‘Gee, I’m sure I didn’t realize it wasn’t that kind of party, Gregggy poo, or when the red light came on I wouldn’t have taken off all my clothes.’”

“Goddamn it, Eric, don’t you see why I have to make a decent impression this time? Don’t you think the snide remarks have already started at the office, the little jibes about last year? How can you possibly think I would want to follow up that performance with you! From the fat into the fire? Are you crazy? Are you trying to destroy me? Have you lost every shred of decency, every ounce of your fucking famous compassion? I’m not even taking a date this year, that’s how bad it is, that’s how much I want this promotion. Laurie was my only hope. Jesus Christ, I was ashamed to show my face at work for three weeks!”

“Oh, give me a break! You didn’t miss a day—”

“Oh, really? And how would you know, Mr. I’m-Off-to-Italy for one of those ridiculous gigs That Woman insisted you do even though it was an absurd waste of your time and talent. When you knew I needed you here! Do you realize the only person I’m up against this time is Jack Doohan and the only way he can beat my play is by a rout tomorrow night?! Do you think I’m so stupid I’d let him vanquish me by taking you—you!—a piece of talking beefcake who can’t remember the difference between a savings account and a CD!—when I’m so close to a private office with my name on the door?! Now shut up and let me go to sleep! You’re not going with me tomorrow night, and that’s it! No, don’t touch me!”

I flung his hand away. "You're not getting around me with that, either, not this time! I'll sleep on the couch if I have to! I'm warning you!"

Fortunately, the grandfather clock in the living room took that precise moment to strike the hour. Ricky conceded the field by sticking his tongue out from across the room and, after climbing into the rattiest-looking shorts and T-shirt in existence, slamming the front door hard enough to make the house rattle as he took off on his midnight run. I recomposed myself. I had won the battle but, again, at the cost of my equanimity.

Frankly, I do not know why I bother. I never really had a chance in this war. I lost that the day Eric Baker, sex symbol, reluctant celebrity, and rising young star, walked into Merchan, Doef, Watsman and Cranley.

He was looking for a financial advisor to replace the business manager he had fired, thrown out of his apartment, and stabbed, all in one swift action. To his credit, the stabbing was a matter of quick-thinking self-defense rather than pre-meditated violence, an accomplishment which afforded him high regard in my rather warped state of mind. I myself often sought violence as a means of self-flagellation since I was, to use Ricky's lyrical phrase, "totally fucked up." Even so, I had come a long way to get there. I had started life under the distressing handicap of being "sensitive."

"He'll outgrow it," Mother would say.

"He had better outgrow it fast," Father would warn. "Sensitive boys grow up to be sissy boys. Better he had never been born than my son become such a disgrace! What the boy needs is discipline."

"What he needs is just a little more love," Mother would counter.

In the battle over the territory of my psyche, Father won. Where battles were concerned, Father always won. Three weeks and two days before my fourth birthday, he laid down the law.

It was time for me to become a "little man." I was to "engage in rigorous P.T." every morning. I was to "stiffen that backbone," not to mention my upper lip. No more being rocked to sleep at night—why, that was for weaklings! Had he known it was still going on, he would have beaten it out of me ages ago! No more hot chocolate after coming in from the snow; what did I think life was, a sluggard's holiday? It was time to get used to hardship. No more crying when I lost a fight or

someone called me a name. Good heavens! Whose son was I, anyway? Did I intend to behave like a whimpering infant for the rest of my life?

“Sousters do not hug!” Father lectured as he paced back and forth in front of the troops. “They politely shake hands. Sousters kiss their mothers on the cheek before going up to bed; they do not throw their arms around her neck and demand lullabies! Sousters address their father as Sir, or, in extreme cases, Father. I never want to hear *that word* out of your mouth again!”

The sin that had abruptly ended my childhood was my use of “Daddy.” To be exact, I had said, “Oh yeah? Well, my daddy is a Captain,” in answer to one of my enemy’s bragging about his father becoming a First Lieutenant. Father overheard us as he shaved at the sink upstairs. He still hadn’t stopped shuddering at the very thought. I am not sure I have yet stopped shuddering at the consequences.

“A Souster,” Father went on after several deep breaths, “learns to toughen up, fights to win. He takes his lumps silently, studies his adversary so as to outmaneuver him. Sousters are leaders, Gregory! Strong, independent! We show no weakness! We take no prisoners! It is high time you fell into formation! Don’t look to your mother—she will not be coddling you anymore. Do you mean to disgrace me to my face?! I tell you, there is no place in this squadron for a pansy!”

Did I neglect to mention that daddy dear was a Marine? Pilot. Korea and Vietnam. He finally got shot down one time too many, ended up being transferred from one training post to another. We changed locations so many times I can no longer separate the base-housing units in my memory. Twice I was left behind with my two older brothers while my mother and father “toughed it out” on the new base alone, allegedly scheduled to remain a mere “couple of weeks.”

“A couple of weeks” in militarese translates to eight or ten long, lonely, frightening weeks without my mother. Although my brothers were all of two-and-a-half and four years older than me, they were much better equipped genetically to cope with the rigors of military life. Matthew and Tom had not a single recessive gene between them, nor had either the slightest hint of difficulty rising to the old man’s expectations of manly perfection. Being flawless, Tom was always ready, willing, and available to drive the point home to me in father’s absence—physically, if necessary. Brutally, if possible. Matthew would intervene when

the blood became too copious. I was the only chunky, brown-haired child in a family of brawny, muscular blonds.

I suppose I should be grateful Father did not expose me as an infant on a mountaintop.

In the end, of course, both brothers came out all right, meaning they joined the Marines and made it their lives, as commanded. Matthew got himself killed in some stupid training exercise in the precise, orderly, military fashion to which he had been taught to adhere. Tom went on to earn the rank of Major, thereby making the Old Man proud despite all that earlier nonsense about those two underage girls on Guam who were doubtlessly lying through their teeth. I expect he will continue to garner glory and promotions until he tops out at General, one rank higher than the previous two generations and two ranks higher than the two generations before that. We Sousters are a Military Family dating back to the Revolution with nary a break in the chain, until I came along.

While it is not considered a total disgrace that I did not join the traditional Souster ranks in the service of my country—although both uncles have mentioned I might at least have had the grace to become a priest—it is understood and expected I will produce an heir to stand in my stead. I am, quite literally, the last Souster male. Matthew did not have the opportunity to beget before he made the irrevocable error of being blown to bits. Tom, much to his shame-faced horror, cannot seem to produce anything but girls, although the Good Lord and his wife will attest to his having given his all to the effort. After five pink-bootied babies and a stillbirth that was also female, Dina declared she had had enough of the attempt and underwent an irreversible surgical procedure to put a halt to Operation Grandson. Sousters neither divorce nor commit murder except under orders from a commanding officer, and to Dina's fortune, truncated motherhood does not qualify. However, as both my uncles persist in remaining unmarried and presumably, or at least liably, childless, the baton is in my hand.

Comedian to the end, Ricky insists this is the one area in which he will not accommodate me.

Were Tom to have the slightest idea that I am homosexual—an aberration and abomination, according to Souster scripture—he would consider it his patriotic duty to shoot me down in the street and burn the body before Father and his failing heart became exposed to such

loathsome knowledge. Were Father to make the discovery, I doubt my death would come so easy. Of course, it would be a boon for Dina; she would end up looking like a saint. My poor dear mother, after acquiescing to Father until at least two grandchildren had arrived, now exists in a debilitated state in a home for the aged and infirm. She still corresponds with me regularly but, safe from her mate's vigilant oversight, is in the process of releasing her grasp on the ugliness of this world. Her last few attempts at written communication have been essentially unintelligible scribbblings with "married," "baby," and "waiting" the only legible words.

Against this duress I am supposed to allow Eric Baker—clothes horse, extrovert, flamboyant actor, model, and television personality—to accompany me to a blatantly public event in full view of my superior, my co-workers, and, quite probably, the senior partners? For what? For love?

I beg your pardon.

While I do, indeed, truly love Ricky—and he is unquestionably the only person about whom I have ever been able to make that statement with the obvious exception of my mother—it must be remembered this is the same adorable lunkhead who voted for Reagan both times simply because "he used to head the union, for God's sake." He meant it, too. Considering himself an intellectual, he adamantly refuses to have anything to do with politics or political demonstrations because it is all "beneath" him, yet had no trouble whatsoever justifying his performance at a benefit thrown for the Democrats, to wit: "Benefits are for charity—I thought everyone knew that!"

This is a man who, in the spirit of love, bought the house we live in as a gift for me shortly after we moved in together—quite the loving gesture, to be sure. It had been up for sale on and off several times since I had first walked through it, approximately three years before my first contact with Ricky. Although I found the house prior to finding the house-mate, I knew better than to entertain the idea of purchasing it, as it not only lay in a rather exclusive section of Beverly Hills, a redundancy if there ever was one, but required major repair as well. While undoubtedly a good investment, it was also unquestionably out of my financial league.

At the time, I was residing in an embarrassingly disheveled duplex which, unfortunately, matched the quality of my life. Ricky saved me from an existence of gay-bar hopping and furtive park meetings; I had

never felt secure enough to chance a bathhouse. Moving in with him was an extraordinarily difficult step for me, requiring all the psychological and emotional strength I could muster. I do not mind admitting I leaned heavily on him for the first few weeks. Perhaps a more realistic estimate would be months. Consequently, as part of an apparent attempt to provide an additional measure of comfort, one afternoon he appeared with a canary-eating grin in the front door of his old apartment, which we were then sharing.

“Greg,” he said, his eyes shining in that way that tends to muddle my thought processes. “You’ll never guess what I got you! I’ve been worried and worried about your birthday coming up and I finally found the perfect present. You’re gonna love it! And you’ll be so proud—I handled all the arrangements by myself!”

As it was still relatively early in our relationship, I had no idea what sort of calamity this heralded. I was totally absorbed by his radiant face and eager expression. When he handed me the envelope thick with papers, the thought truly never crossed my mind that he was handing me the deed to my dream house.

The deed.

He had bought the house outright.

In cash.

Excuse me, by check. The “arrangements” he was so proud of had been to cash in as many of his assets as he could understand in order to facilitate his writing one, solitary check to the real-estate agent for \$489,450.

I experienced a variety of emotional responses to Eric’s “gift” over the course of the next several weeks. First, of course, a period of utter disbelief, for it was beyond my ability to conceive of any individual who could possibly be so dim-witted. Moreover, it amazed me that the legal authorities taking part in these proceedings would have allowed such an obviously incompetent dolt to pursue and complete such an unorthodox transaction.

The better part of a week’s phone calls and County Record research forced me to come to terms with the fact that they had. Apparently, any damn fool with enough cash in hand can buy a house outright, and I was indeed intimately entangled with just such a fool. Furthermore, there was no provision other than common sense to prevent the depositing

of such a sum into one account, nor to preclude the writing of a single check—a personal check, mind you, not even a bank note—for almost half a million dollars. I lapsed into shocked silence for another week.

After that, I yelled.

I yelled while we moved. I yelled every night when I came home to find workmen leaving their mess “just until tomorrow.” I yelled as the new wallpaper went up, the new furniture came in, and the new dogs took up residence.

“Get over it, Greg,” Ricky finally yelled back. “It’s only money; I can always make more.”

They say one’s true colors come out under fire, that relationships are made or broken in battle. Our relationship was definitely made: the arguments fiercely increased the pleasure and, despite my outrage, drew us into a closer, more frighteningly interdependent affiliation from which I doubt I ever can or would want to extract myself. But my consciousness snapped into place as well. Subject my security, my carefully structured safety, to the likes of Eric Baker? Love or no love, the very idea was patently absurd.

Love, before Ricky invaded my life, was a completely theoretical concept to me, coming essentially from the mushy, illicit books I hid from Father. The beatings I endured for “sensitivity” would have been nothing compared to the ones I managed to avoid for reading such heretically “weak-sister trash” as *The Secret Garden*, *Wuthering Heights*, or *Touch Not The Cat*—not to mention the *Fandango* series and all those Harlequin romances! Sweet Jesus, thank you for libraries. Early on, I developed an intricate strategy to prevent such dolorous consequences. My bookshelves were filled with *Captain Courageous* and *I, Robot*; my underwear drawer, where I knew Father would check, hid appropriate copies of *Catcher in the Rye* and *Mad Magazine*, reading material that would never betray me into misfortune, but would, in fact, provide evidence of my being a “Normal Healthy Red-Blooded American Male” instead. *Hoo-rah*.

As the years passed, I carefully maintained that image. Watching the progress of my classmates, I made the switch on cue to *Playboy* and *Penthouse* in the drawer, textbooks and biographies on the shelves, and Plato and Mary Renault in the library.



Mush and the philosophy of mush. Subtle tales of Greek lovers. Endless poetic stanzas describing the beauty of love, physical and lyrical. How I fed on it. How I thrived on it. How I fantasized of it. How I buried it.

Every librarian doted on me. I was such a faithful after-school attendee, one of the few who would actually sit quietly and read, not engage in lascivious interchanges behind the resource shelves. The only complaint ever voiced had to do with my selection of the most peculiar spots in the building in which to closet myself. I had a quite reasonable rationale for this mysterious habit. I was protecting myself against the minuscule but terrifying possibility that my strong-armed brother would chance to walk into the library and strong-arm me back to Father, whose strong arm had a frightening habit of inadvertently breaking some of my not-so-strong bones. Even Matthew would not have been able to save me then.

Father always said a man should put his heart and soul into his work. Any x-ray will attest to his willingness to live up to that creed. Is it any wonder I sometimes wish Ricky were invisible?

## JEFF

**W**HAT A BUNCH OF DUMBFUCKS they got out here! Take this gig I'm doing, even though it's low-life. I got this chick agent type wrapped around my cock. Major babe, I mean major babe. So I'm doing these shitass threads, working with two of the oldest cocksuckers they could resurrect, a photog who sounds like he's breathing his last, and old, old, like stone-age equipment, right? And the guys doing the grunt work are fucking super queers, which really just turns my gut. I had to let one of them put his fingers all over my face with his faggot germs to do my make-up, which he fucked up anyhow. Asshole! If that motherfucker gave me AIDS, I'm gonna cut off his balls and stuff 'em down his throat.

So here's the thing: none of these assholes know what the hell they're doing! You'd think they'd been living under a fucking rock. Everything in the place is so old, all the equipment, the johns. Everybody, and I mean all of them bozos from the ad man on down, had to be pushin' thirty at least.

So the whole day was a disaster, a dis-ass-ter on top of which I ended up getting stuck in the dark while these two limp-dick fuckin'

useless mannequins walk out. And I'm still locked inside the fucking studio! So I'm yelling "Hey ya motherfuckin assholes, you locked me in here, ya stupid dumbfuck jerks! Lemme out!" but do they come back? Hell no. They just fuckin' take off. Talk about morons! The whole state's like that, bunch of fucking fruits and nuts. They must be givin' asshole lessons in public school. Shit.

So by the time granddad comes around to open the door, I'm almost late getting to where the tits that got me the gig is probably gonna get dinner, onaccounta she likes the wine or the pizza or somethin' only don't make me laugh, they wouldn't know decent pizza out here from a manhole cover. 'Course it's okay 'cause I'd rather have the pussy hanging than me, right? Only it turns out she's not even there yet so I hang for a while, and I'm leaning against the wall 'cause this place is nowhere around anyplace happening, just stuck in a bunch of office buildings and parking lots, only it starts to get dark after a couple hours, so I figure she ain't eatin' here tonight. And then she shows!

So she sees me, and she tries to pretend she don't wanna see me, only she can't get away from seeing me, if ya know what I'm talkin', so then she's talking a mile a minute, some trash about big meetings and Diane Bloodsworth Somebody and who knows what. By then everybody's looking at us, so I keep my mouth shut and just follow, right?

Okay, so, but then we get to the table, and all of a sudden she's not talking, she's asking questions. But they don't make any sense, and she don't give me a chance to answer anyhow. So the waitress takes our order—I don't even catch the size of her tits, that's how much this bitch is yammering off at the mouth—and all of a sudden she's Dr. Demento, totally schizoid.

What's wrong with me, she wants to know. So I go, "What the fuck do you mean, what's wrong with me? I just spent the whole fucking day with a bunch of bozos, lady, and I been waiting on you for over a hour! What the fuck's wrong with you?!"

So she goes, "I got bad reports on you."

So I go, "I don't know what the fuck you're talking about, I'm the only one who was doing my fucking job right, and you're damn lucky I didn't just walk, little dudette, and leave all your faggot dumbfucks alone to screw up totally."

So she goes, “Eric says ...” but I stop her right there. I go, “Listen, about your buddy boy Eric, I think you ought to know, the asshole is a flaming queer, he’s got prick juicer writ all over him, and all he wanted was to get his hands on my meat, babe, so you know where that shit is coming from.”

So then she kind of looks at me funny, like she’s amazed to find out her “big name” is a big queer, which just goes to show you, she can’t be doing as good as she puts on, or she would of had the smarts to know already. Shit, I hate doing everybody’s thinking for ‘em. But I don’t want her to worry about her new prize client, the man here, ‘cause I’m probably the only money she can count on now that she’s gonna have to get rid of that faggot, who’s too old to be in front of the camera anymore anyhow. Fer Christ’s sake, the asshole’s got to be twenty-five already, I mean over the hill big time. Besides, women always find something to worry about—it’s like part of their pussy stuff. So I say, I go, “Don’t worry, Sugar, ‘cause I put him down, and he ain’t never did and ain’t never gonna lay so much as a tongue on this sweet cock, I’m saving all my love juice just for you.”

So then she goes, I shouldn’t even go back tomorrow, onaccounta they don’t really deserve to be working with somebody like me, which is true, but what the fuck, hey, nobody’s perfect, and I know she needs the dough. I can tell, ‘cause she drives an old MG, which is okay, but she doesn’t keep it up, it needs a lot of work. ‘Course, that could be just ‘cause she’s a cunt, but another thing, she’s never got any money on her. I keep meeting up with her in this one place, which I found out about onaccounta I followed her a couple times ‘cause she wouldn’t answer my phone calls but shit! I always fucking end up paying. She always says she don’t have any cash on her, like I’m not supposed to know what that means.

So what the fuck, I could see she’s real embarrassed about what I’d been through and didn’t want me to have to go back. Then she tells me she’s got something else lined up, like an audition for the TV part of the gig. Now we’re gettin’ to the shit, ‘cause I know if I do the audition I’ll get the gig ‘cause I’m what they’re looking for—even this shit looks good when I’m wearing it. So she says to lay low in the morning and she’ll call. I tell her I’m up for it, and she gets the message, but she’s too embarrassed to cozy up, even then. Here I’m getting hot ‘cause that’s normal,

and I know what she wants even if she is old enough to be my mother 'cause she still looks good, and 'sides, it always settles 'em down, no matter how old they are. And it don't hurt me none, neither.

So I can tell she needs her hole plugged real bad 'cause she's all over worried too much, that's the problem with every cunt I ever met, and the only way to put 'em down is to ram it home. They all worry. You'd think I was still seven years old and they're all afraid I'm gonna fall off the barn or something, and we didn't never even have a barn.

Back in Illinois worrying's got to be the state cunt occupation, right after lying and cheating. Just look at momma and Cats, my little sister, Cats, short for she loves cats and her name is Caroline. They're always worried about me being way the fuck out here in California, like it was someplace on the other side of the moon or something. Momma frets am I doing drugs, am I getting diseases—like I wasn't doing the same shit back there! Get real. I've been doing blow since ninth grade, and it's no different out here than back there, except maybe a little more bread so I give it up 'cause it cut into my car money, man, a guy's gotta have wheels, and I ain't no stupid fuckin' addict. 'Course if you've got some it's easier to find some pussy, which ain't too tough to start off with, especially for me, so what the fuck.

That's why I don't call them no more, they're such a pain in the ass, Momma and Cats. They're so fuckin' small town, they still live in the same house I grew up in, in this hell hole town that's famous for Capone, but its mostly just shit. There's only room for one town drunk and, hey, my old man's got the job covered. He doesn't live with them any more. At least he didn't when I left, and I fuckin' put the fear of God in him so he'd never even think 'bout coming' round again. 'Course he don't usually sober up enough to figure out shit much less where the house is, but if he did and he did, well, that'd be just 'bout the only thing could make me go back, 'cause I'd have to finish beatin' the crap outta him, which I started last time, and he's lucky I didn't rip his fuckin' cock right off, which I prob'bly shoulda.

See, I had to pick up some shit this one night, so I come in around eleven or so, and I hear this noise out in the kitchen. So I go out there, and momma's whimperin' and she's got her hands up to keep him from hittin' her. Only he's already hit her so much her mouth is bloody, and her eye looks real strange and crooked, and she's crying and trying to

get away. Well, I wasn't 'bout to get into that shit again cause the last time my old man really kicked my ass and besides, you gotta figure he's been slappin' her 'round all these years, what's it to me, right? Only I see something off to the side, and I look and there's my little sister Cats all crumpled up in a ball on the floor and kinda wet. Her clothes are pulled on all wrong, and she's crying and I figure maybe the asshole's been slappin' her around too, except then I notice she didn't have anything actually covering her bottom! My little fifteen-year-old baby sister is all huddled up and cryin', and my old man's pants is still open and his dick's still swingin' out and dripping and that cocksuckin' motherfuckin shit-head asshole has just got off my little sister, the goddamn motherfuckin shitass sonofabitch!

So then the shithead looks at me looking at Cats and looking at his dick, and he's so smug and he's like sayin' to me only without saying, he's goin', so what the fuck you gonna do 'bout it boy? Like there's nothin' I can do 'cept turn 'round and split. So I look over at Cats, my little sister Cats, who never hurt nobody and who's all crumpled up and wet all over her bottom and her mouth is all bloody too, and I show the cocksuckin' asshole sonofabitch just what the fuck I'm gonna do 'bout it, and I put him down, that ass-sucking bastard, I mean I put him down, and he didn't never come up again. I thought I done him in and for what he did to my sister, I wouldn't give a fuck if I had 'cept to cheer.

Only I didn't. He took off the minute he come to, so I go out lookin' for him, only some of my boys see me, and they spread out, only we run into another enemy what needed dealing with and one of 'em takes him out 'stead. Only he's got his own bros, and they come lookin' for me and five days later there's a whole lot of cryin' mommas and a whole bunch of fresh six-foot-deeps around town 'cept my old man ain't in one, which is okay 'cause he's gone so far underground I can't find him with a shovel, and 'sides, I took out two of the enemy 'stead. Only I got 'em up real close, and I'd never actually done it before. Momma cried about me gettin' rid of the piece but I ain't touched one since, not even out here where every other bozo on the street's carryin' 'cause it's too much of a temptation, and I don't like still lookin' at them two faces. Shit, they was just kids.

So they didn't have nothing on me or my boys 'cause the guns went deep and nobody was talking, only I hadda get outta there onaccounta

I didn't wanta stay there no more. So I got Eddie to promise he'd look after Momma and Cats, only prob'bly nobody's gonna mess with them again but with me there, that's different, 'cause I was the man in my 'hood and now my price was jacked.

So I left. I told Momma and Cats if anybody gave them any shit they should call, but they never did. I used to call when I first got here, but now I don't. It's just so much of a fuckin' pain. And besides, what the fuck am I supposed to do, just stick round and watch over them my whole stinking life and never do nothing or get nowhere? I'm too young and besides, I got my own rod to cock around. I already used up just about every decent pussy in that fucking little town except Beth's, but Beth is off limits anyhow. She's not the right kind to be doing that kind of shit with a prick like me, even if she really did want to that one time, but I didn't let her 'cause some things just ain't right and that's one of 'em. So that's the way it is, so what the fuck. I wasn't sorry then, and I'm not too sorry now, except I kind of miss her.

Fuck that.

But now with this Hollywood bitch, that's different. Getting into her pants is something I've been whacking off to ever since I first saw that tight little ass of hers. And thinking about Beth, and all kind of put me in the mood, which ain't too tough anyhow, so I get to talkin' kind of soft and sweet about how I'm gonna make it all better and everything, and I make my meaning about all better real clear when wham, bingo! She's all of a sudden outta her chair and moving down the road. I mean she oozed right outta that joint without even waiting for her food, and shit! There's me with the check again! 'Course, I don't really blame her, the ones worth gettin' take a lot of greasin' first. She may be a cunt on the outside but I can tell, she's pussy soft on the inside. My rod's pretty obvious by then and the plain simple fact is, she got scared. Fuckin' shame. Next time, I gotta move in slower but faster, if ya know what I'm sayin'.

So I go over to see this new bunch I hang with, only they're not a gang or nothing, they all got straight day gigs, and I'm the only one with something goin' in my life, again! Just like back home. Most of 'em couldn't get any for theirselves if their dicks was made of solid fuckin' gold. They're all talk, and they spend their nights sweet talkin' their left hands.

So we're kicking back doing kamikazes, and Chad is trying to cop a feel off this Chicano waitress who looks like she's gonna throw his ass through a wall, it's that kinda place, right? I mean I gotta wash the smoke outta my clothes every time, and it takes me most of an hour to hear again, but they pour heavy so what the fuck. So anyhow this blonde chick who I've seen there maybe two, three times, comes over all of a sudden and waves her size forty-twos in my face and just about spreads out on the table for me. So I take her on the dance floor, and we're tight on this slow rap with the guy selling some shit and the girl buying it all the way, I mean corn like they grow in the fields back home. So I make sure she's feeling the rod up against her real good, and she's starting to breathe and lick her lips, so I say, I go, why don't we go someplace? and she goes, do I have any blow, and I go, yeah, at the place, and she goes, okay, so we go.

So like I know what she really wants 'cause she's suckin' me off in the car, and I almost pile it up, but I don't, so we get upstairs and right away she wants the blow. I already got my hands underneath and her clothes are just sliding off, so I start lickin' her ear and movin' my fingers 'round to get inside her ass which is just so fuckin' tight I almost cum right then but she tries to push me away and keeps saying, so where's the blow? But I'm not looking for blow and neither is she really 'cause she's already so hot she's super wet, right?

Only she keeps saying so where's the blow, and I don't give a shit and I'm pushin' her down on the bed, and she's tryin' to get up, and I figure what the fuck, so I just hold her down, right? So then I see she ain't wet 'cause she's oozing pussy juice she's wet onaccounta she's already been 'round once tonight, and I get super pissed 'cept it makes me burnin' hot so I just fuckin' flip 'er over and ram it home, I mean I put her down and she's got the tightest ass I've ever had in a long time, and who the fuck cares what the fuck she wants anyhow.

So now she's screamin' her head off about the blow, which I ain't about to give this bitch onaccounta I ain't got any, but my prick is still hard 'cause that's my thing, and I still got it in and she's still squirmin' 'round trying to get loose, only it just heats me up more, so I grab both her melons tight and ram in harder and by the time I whack, this bitch knows she's been fucked, and I mean and good.



So now she's like whimperin' and whinin' how she wants her blow, only I don't give a shit 'cause if that's all she wants she's come to the wrong man, and I tell her so, and she's lucky onaccounta if I'd had any I'd snuff her with it, one less pile of shit in the world. So then I throw her fuckin' ass out and I do mean just like that, she didn't have nothin' on at all, and I just fuckin' kicked her up against the fire dog in the hall.

So okay, then she starts crawlin' over and I'm standin' in the doorway, and I tell her she's not gettin' her fuckin' rags back 'less she comes in and licks my ass 'cause I know what she wants is only to put me down 'cept nobody puts me down and I'm fuckin' gonna put her down, right? So then she's all scared and whimpery and she goes, she's hurtin', which don't mean shit to me onaccounta all bets are off only I let her back in and she licks my ass real good and I make her go deep and I get hard again and I make her eat my cream even though she starts to gag, I make the bitch swallow 'cause nobody puts me down and it feels so good I just go all the way down her throat till she's chokin' and I cum like forever. Only so now I'm startin' to get tired, so I kick her ass out in the hall again and throw her shit on top, and it don't matter that I don't kick women 'cause she was just a strung-out cunt of no account, just a piece of shit that tried to put me down, she's lucky I don't carry no more. So I just fuckin' put her ass down instead, and she ain't never gonna forget it, dumbfuck cocksucking bitch. She ain't even worth blowing away she's that lucky.

# SUKI

**H**I DARLEEN, IT'S SUKI. IS YOUR HUBBY HOME? Still at the dentist, huh?.... Yeah, I know what you mean, it can lay you up for days. Listen, honey, when he gets home, have him call me, okay? It's important now, so I'll wait while you get a piece of paper and write it down.... Have him call me.... That's right.... No, he doesn't have to do another audition, he's got the soap part.... Okay, dear, take care. I'll talk to you later. Be sure Max calls, okay? All right. Goodbye."

"Marsha, get me Eric Baker, will you? He should be home."

"Hello, Greg, how are you?.... Oh fine, fine. I need Eric just for a few minutes.... Well, this will only take a second of his time.... Oh, all right, then. Just tell him to call me when he gets out of the shower, will you?.... Well, I want to talk to him about a few other things.... No, no, I don't care about that. It wasn't his fault, the whole thing was a mix-up in the first place. Tell him not to worry about it, I'm not going to yell at him.... Yeah, okay. Well, tell him to just forget it anyway. It's incredibly non-important. Listen, while I've got you on the phone, Greg, maybe you can help. I have a dynamite script here I want him to consider....

Yes, I know, but we're going to have to move him on this. I want to make sure he...oh, don't let him do that, Greg, he'd ruin Ricky's career. They don't really care about anybody over there. They have so many clients, they don't need to...well, that's just not true. Now, Ricky knows that. The grass always looks greener, but it isn't really...well, talk to him about it will you, dear? I'm not worried about him as a client, I'm worried about him as a mother would worry about her son.... Very funny, Gregory, but you weren't around when I had to practically tie his shoes.... Well, let's not argue about it. Have him call me.... When, tonight? Ricky's going, too?.... Well, that's wonderful. I'm sure he's thrilled.... No, now, Greg, don't be so touchy. I didn't mean anything by it, just have a good time, both of you. Listen, have him call me tomorrow then, you two go have a great time tonight. Just be sure to tell him about the script, I'll send it over by messenger in the morning, not too early.... Oh, Greg, you've been living with him too long, you're starting to sound like him...(chuckle) Well, just don't let him drown in that shower. And have a good time tonight, both of you.... No, I think it's great.... Oh, come on, I'm sure he won't do anything to embarrass you. Greg, the man is a consummate pro and besides, he adores you.... All right. Well, have a good time. I'll talk to you later. Bye."

"Marsha, I need Howard Gordon. He should still be home, too. And get me him, I don't want to have to talk to his wife if I can avoid it."

"Howie.... Oh, hi Sharon. Listen, I really need to talk to.... Oh. Well, do you have any idea when he'll be back.... What? Did he say that?.... I'm shocked, honey, I really am. I didn't realize you two were having so many problems.... Well, I didn't know that...oh...oh...uh huh.... Oh, honey, I'm so sorry. I have to admit, I'd never have thought it of Howie, he's so mild-mannered! Not that it's any of my business, of course, but... uh huh.... Oh, uh, I wanted to talk to him about the video shoot and that audition next week.... No, actually, it fell through.... No, it has nothing to do with that, actually they wanted a native-looking type. Just between you and me, honey, the director wanted to see him, but the producer already had, that was the problem.... Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say that, but.... I don't think they're actually hurting him. It could be just that he's got the wrong instructor. I mean when he did that first commercial, he certainly showed a lot of promise...uh huh....uh huh.... Well, I'm really sorry, Sharon. I still have to reach him though. Do you have

any idea where he might be now?... Oh, no, he's still got the video, he doesn't have to do any acting, all he has to do is move, just a little, and smile, no words.... Uh huh, well, that's what I say, too, and he does have one of the most luscious smiles I've ever.... Hm, well, if you hear from him, will you please let him know I'm looking for him?... Thanks, honey. You take it easy now.

Marsha, get me Elliott Biddley at Smithfield and Marshall. He's probably still there, he usually works late. And while I'm talking to him, call around the emergency numbers we have for Howard Gordon, see if you can't find him."

"Elliott? Suki. Okay, I've re-arranged Howard Gordon's schedule so he can do the commercial. I want you to know it took a bit of doing, but.... Yes, I realize he's the one you wanted in the first place, but I thought the test might be good for other.... No, you don't have to worry about Max, he's out. You've got Howard Gordon and Steve.... No, honey, Eric is off limits, I told you that before, there's not enough money in the world for him to do...uh huh...who? Jeff? You mean Jeff Portman, the boy from yesterday? For what, specifically?...uh huh.... Well, I guess I can find him if you really think he's the type, but frankly, I don't know. I mean, I have actors who can play ferocious, if that's what you need.... Yeah, but...yeah, but ...okay, okay! I'll call John and set up a screen test sometime next week.... Oh, good God, Elliott, I'm not even sure I can find him, much less on such short notice! I mean, Denny Corrin is big, he can play heavy, he can play belligerent...but...but ...Elliott! Okay, I'll see what I can do. Eight o'clock at the community college studio. Now, let's get back to business, okay?... Yes, yes, but about the commercial.... Well, keep me informed, will you? And we do have a definite "go" on the Jean Klive account, right?... Good.... Well, we'll talk about all that when I see the contracts and the guarantee.... Please, Elliott, let's not get into that again, I could spend a week listing credits ...uh huh.... Well, it worked out just about the way I said it would.... You know, I usually do know what I'm talking about. Doug doesn't go in for those kinds of ...fine, fine, good...it doesn't matter.... No, that's why the money went into escrow up front, I can't.... Very cute. Listen, we'll talk again later.... Oh, Elliott, leave the boys alone while they're working, will you? He probably acted surprised because it was the farthest thing from his mind at the moment. You know, Howard is a total professional, he concen-

trates on what he's doing at the moment. The books are just to take off some of the tension.... Well, so what? He's probably read all the novels in the library by now. Forget it, Elliott, he's definitely set for Monday, don't worry about it.... Steve Viner...uh huh...uh huh.... Elliott, my other line is buzzing, I have to go.... What!?...no, honey, forget it. He's very married, the same guy for ten or twelve years.... Yes, I'm sure, I'm positive, I've known him since he was a child star.... No, really, not a snowball's chance in hell, it's a lost cause, just forget it...yes, a shame. Listen, I have to go. Talk to you later, okay? Bye.”

“Marsha, get me a couple of aspirin, will you? Make it three and a couple of Tylenol, too, okay? And see if there's any of that wine left? Then get me Jeff Portman, the kid that's been hounding me. You've got his number somewhere, he's the one who dropped off the five dozen eight-by-tens so we wouldn't run out? You're not going to believe this, Elliott Biddley told John Ainsworth about him and they want him for some young tough role. Who'd of believed it? Messenger a contract to his place, if he gets a part I want that commission. At this point, I've earned it a hundred times over. Oh, and if Elliott calls back, tell him I've gone home for the day, will you?”

“...Jeff, that message is disgusting. It shouldn't be on your business phone. This is Suki. I got you a screen test with an important director, maybe even a chance at a small film role. It's all set up for later tonight. Mr. Ainsworth likes to do his testing in the evening, because his days are so busy. Call me as soon as you get home and I'll tell you where to go and how to act when you get there. If you can't make it tonight, you might just be out of luck. I'm messengering over a contract, I expect you to sign it and return it to me before you go for the test. Call me as soon as you get this message. That means immediately.”

“Hello...Eric! I told Greg not to have you call me back until tomorrow. He told me about the party tonight...yes, I think it's wonderful! Are you excited? Don't get carried away, Ricky, you'll get in trouble. Stick to the script, this is a big step for him, just having you there at all.... Oh, he's hot for your ass, my friend, as if he were the only one, but I told him.... Well, I'm not really worried, I know you can take care of yourself. Besides, I told him that your lover keeps you on a tight rein, I mean why not? He's never likely to meet him and I thought it was the easiest way....uh huh...uh huh.... Look, Ricky, don't start that with me again, this

man is just blowing smoke up your.... Well, it's a personal thing between him and me, ever since I took that one client away from him.... I don't want you to get screwed, I.... Ricky, this is beyond business, I'm your.... I don't care how old you are, I still feel responsible.... Well, I do, so live with it. If it were someone who could actually do something more for you than me, okay, I'd give you my blessing, I really would, but this guy...uh huh ...uh huh.... Well, now, listen to what you just said. Does that even sound logical to you?... Honey, I use a dozen different agents, too, just like him, we all do.... That's right...that's right...have I ever... Well, okay then. Look, why don't we talk about it tomorrow, I'm sure Greg's got to be jumping out of his skin by now.... Oh, don't worry about that, honey, you should never have even been there in the first place, the whole thing was a foul-up.... Oh, I just wanted your opinion on some stuff, but we can talk tomorrow.... Well, okay, I wanted to know what you thought of Howard Gordon, now that you've worked with him.... uh huh...uh huh. I agree...yes. Well, that just confirms what I've been hearing around, but I knew if there was anything to pick up, you'd.... Oh, that's on, but it doesn't amount to a hill of beans, it'll never make it to the airwaves.... Well, I can't explain the whole thing, Ricky, it's all very political. Greg would understand it better than you.... Fine, let's argue about it some other time, shall we? Listen, I'm sending over a script by messenger tomorrow. I can get you the sweetest deal in the world. The producer wants you so bad he'd lick your ass if he thought it would help. Please, please, read it. Please. Think about it. Please.... Oh, Ricky, for God's sake, read it with an open mind, will you?... I'll tell you after you read it.... Thank you. I appreciate you giving me the chance to make you filthy rich and incredibly famous. I think.... Well, have a good time, and be nice for Greg.... I know, I know. Enjoy. And don't drink too much. I'll talk to you in the morning. Bye.”

“Hello? Jeff! I'm glad you caught me, I was just about to leave...uh huh...uh huh...uh huh...look, Jeff...uh huh.... Look, Jeff, I was just on my way out the door, let me just...uh huh...uh huh...good. Did you sign it?... Good. Did you give it back to the messenger?...Okay, hold on.”

“Marsha, did the service call yet about the Portman contract?...Is it signed?...Thanks.”

“Okay, Jeff, here's the scoop.... That's fine, dear, no problem. That's why we have a beach here. Now look. John Ainsworth, a very influential

director is looking for a young tough-guy type, and has agreed to shoot a screen test for you tonight. I had to pull a lot of strings to get this for you on such short notice, but I knew you'd...yes, but...uh huh, but... I know, Jeff, that's all fine, but please, John Ainsworth is not the kind of man you want to be explaining things to, okay? He's very influential, even more than Doug, because you really want to get into film, don't you? Well, one of the Vice Presidents at Paramount is John's brother-in-law and John carries a lot of influence with him.... Exactly, just like in the mini-series. Now, I want you to be on your best manners. If you see something you know you could do better or the equipment isn't up-to-date enough, just remember to smile and play along, that's part of the business, too. Don't tell him he's not as sharp as you, because it could have serious consequences...uh huh...uh huh.... Well, Jeff, just this once, okay? I got you a test didn't I? So you could maybe just this once lay back and enjoy the shoot without.... It's a California expression, Jeff, lay back, which means to relax. Just relax and do the best you can. Don't get nervous and try not to say anything that might be misconstrued.... Well, we'll see how it goes tonight, okay? If the test comes off well and they want you, I'll get the best I can.... Didn't you read the contract before you signed it, Jeff? I take fifteen percent, just like everyone else in town, check around. Now stop interrupting me, I want to give you directions to the studio.... No, it won't be at that one. John is going to be working late tonight at a studio down in Orange County where he sometimes teaches.... Orange County, down the number five freeway.... Well, you have a car, don't you?.... Honey, California is a big place, everything is not specifically located in.... Jeff, do you want to do this test or not? I'm...I'm raising my voice because you won't listen! I have no time for this kind of crap. I'm doing you a favor here, so shut up for a minute, will you please? And if... fine. Then let me give you the directions.... I'm on my way out, Jeff, I don't have time for all.... Look, it's cable station fifty-one in Santa Ana. Look it up in the phone book. Be there at eight o'clock tonight sharp. Wear a solid white shirt and a decent pair of pants.... Jeff, at this point, I don't care if you wear jeans. I don't have time to argue with you. Be there at eight o'clock or you can forget the whole thing.... No, don't worry about that, I'm sure John will get the best out of you. He's very good at that.... No, Jeff, I'm not going to give you my home phone number—I don't give

that out to anyone.... Oh, good God, just go for the test. Everything else will take care of itself, all right?... Yes, yes, yes. Goodnight, goodbye.”

“Good grief!”



# GREG

I AWOKE IN A DISAGREEABLE TEMPER, my sleep disrupted by familiar scenes that had not intruded on me for years. Appearing sporadically through the ghastly sequences was a sword I recognized from my father's collection, whose flat side had made stinging contact with my rear echelon more than once. I blamed Ricky for my consequent lack of rest, as his parting shot before exiting the house to run had been, "Your life balances on a doubled-edge sword, and I'm getting tired of it."

This is one of his favorite statements. The imagery is rather difficult to sustain, but I cannot fault his insight; the meaning is unnervingly accurate. And to belabor the concept further, I readily admit he and he alone provides the ballast that maintains whatever stability I enjoy.

Eric insists my lack of equilibrium arose in response to Father's bifurcated philosophy toward education, my haven and my hell—and that scene, of course, took the point in my nightmares. I saw again my father lecturing the three of us on how a bachelor's degree was mandatory for all Officer Candidates, a status for which we were all naturally expected to aspire. College provided the necessary training for our fu-

ture of receiving, interpreting, obeying, and giving orders. But to waste precious time with one's nose buried in a book that offered no concrete or compulsory material, he continued, his glare now entirely focused on me: disgraceful. The very definition of a sluggard. An affront to all for which the Souster name stood. Hoo-rah! Semper fi!

Oh, I educated myself early in what I realized to be the essential art of covering my ass. While Father double-timed his men around endless fields and mother joined one mind-numbing committee after another, I took care to follow my brothers' examples of appropriate behavior. No one could really blame me when I simply was unable to fill their shoes. Matthew, for example, was a football star. He played junior grade in elementary school, was a first-string quarterback in high school, and held the field all four years at the Academy. He was scouted by the majors, but, of course, turned them down to attend to the more honorable occupation of being butchered during combat training. I, on the other hand, could never make it past the team's first cut.

"I tried, Father, I truly did," I would say with tears manfully held back.

"I believe you, Son," he would commiserate. "Perhaps next year." And I had the rest of the school year to breathe before Father recalled me to his intensive pre-game training schedule. Despite his most vigorous efforts, though, I fared no better the following year, as I had carefully arranged to accidentally sprain my ankle a mere two days prior to tryouts.

"Tough break, kid," my brother Tom sympathized in the unacceptably colloquial language he was nevertheless allowed to use because of his superior R.O.T.C. ranking and otherwise exemplary lifestyle.

"Maybe Father can talk Coach Edwards into giving you another shot in a week or two when you've healed."

Goddamn! A possibility that had not occurred to me. This change of events forced me to purposely exasperate Coach Edwards during P.E. the following day by ineptly spotting one of the school's best gymnasts, thereby causing him to tumble from the high bar rather than properly dismount not once but three times. Although no one was in fact injured, egos were bruised and irritated. By the time Father arrived, the coach was no more inclined to afford me special treatment than he was to put a girl on the team. The truth be known, my presence would have

amounted to practically the same thing, highlighting just another of the myriad problems I faced.

Females both confused and terrified me. I desperately wanted to like them as compensation for my voracious reading appetite and non-existent sports enthusiasm. I considered having a constant girlfriend essential in order to prove my manhood was indeed finally budding—or, at least, to provide that illusion for Father. Unfortunately, the more desperate my desire became, the more violent the aversion grew. I was able to disguise this disinclination in the latter years of grade school when the boys around me began to respond to our mutually opposite sex by ferociously concentrating on my schoolwork in what appeared to be the exclusion of all else. Fortunately, another two relocations had given rise to concerns that I might fall behind academically; ergo, my apparent absorption in schoolwork was greeted with tolerant relief. I was able to continue this subterfuge through the mid-years of high school, but by that juncture I had been forced to acknowledge at least to myself that something was drastically wrong. I could not, of course, allow Father to become cognizant of this situation, and therefore found myself taking alarming steps to verify my normalcy to him with the hopes that in the process, I would somehow arrange to correct nature's error and "get back on the right track," a phrase supplied to me later in life by a college counselor.

I consequently dated dozens of girls, doing my best to have a sexual relationship with as many of them as possible, all to no avail. We snuggled, we kissed, we fondled, we partially disrobed...only at the last conceivable moment would I suspend my pursuit with a restraint so obviously forced that I soon developed a reputation for being the last true gentleman on earth. My father, though unable to overtly complain of my behavior, grew impatient waiting for my constraint to lapse. As both my eighteenth birthday and my graduation toward college loomed—Sousters never graduate from, always toward—the pressure to prove my manhood by proving my ability to ejaculate with, or preferably into, a female became overpowering. With my choice narrowed down to, as Matthew so eloquently put it, "use it or lose it," I decided the best defense was a good offense, and mapped out a strategic campaign that would have made the old man proud, had it been devised for strictly military purposes.

First I persuaded my “steady” of the previous two months, with whom I had an unusually strong rapport, that it was pre-ordained we should relinquish our mutual virginity at the symbolically significant farewell senior dance. Then I deployed my allies, all of whom knew their individual missions, but none of whom, theoretically, knew mine. Finally, I arranged for an appropriate base of operations. Come Prom night, I would effectively put to rest all questions regarding love, duty, and manhood—if not for Father, at least for myself.

Despite my best efforts to keep the matter a clandestine affair, Barbie and I soon found ourselves surrounded by such an abundance of well-wishers and sources of “indispensable” advice that we were left with no way out had we wanted to abort. Excitement in our circle ran so high, in fact, that Father’s intelligence system had full knowledge of the entire maneuver within days. His face literally shone with pride at the expected outcome, and he let it be known—by a punch to the arm that left a bruise for two weeks—how thoroughly he supported my endeavor. His heretofore relentless lectures on the definition of Souster males were suddenly preempted by equally adamant orations on the responsibilities of precautionary measures and establishing the field of battle so as to prevent a problematic aftermath. It took me a while to get past the battle-ground verbiage, but I finally realized he was instructing me on how to get laid without indenturing myself to eternal child support or having the girl’s father pounding on our door the next morning.

As the day grew closer, I grew more excited myself. Surely, I repeated to myself in an endless mantra, I would arrive at the Prom a Boy, and leave the motel a Man. A package and letter arrived that very morning. The contents included an intimidating “weekend-retreat” sized box of condoms from my brother Tom and a rather oblique note from Matthew, telling me not to be too hard on myself when it was over. I had no time to mull over the significance of his concern, however, because evening ambushed my thoughts all too soon, and I suddenly found myself—tuxedoed, boutonniere’d, candied, and flowered—standing outside Barbie’s door.

After a round of photo-taking by her parents, we drove back for a session in front of my mother’s camera. I don’t know how Ricky does it; all that phony posing and frozen smiling left me drained, bewildered,

and terrorized, although the latter was, no doubt, in anticipation of the night to come.

Our plan, meticulously detailed to our shared concerns and requirements, called for us to put in an appearance at the dance before adjoining to the field of contest. There we were supposed to be greeted with encouragement by our confederates. To my mind, their performance was altogether too effervescent.

“Greggy, baby! Whoo, whoo, whoo!”

“I’ll take over for ya, Greg, if you wanna back out—Barb won’t mind, will ya, sweetheart?”

“Greg! Hey! Over here! Yeah! Whoo, whoo, whoo!”

Barbie fared no better, although her cohorts managed to be more articulate and at least a bit more discreet, wrapping around her like a noose to ask questions and offer God-only-knows what advice. Needless to say, we left the party far sooner than intended. Once outside, Barbie let out a long breath, which she followed with an obtuse remark. “We’d better not screw up, or we’ll never be able to show our faces again.”

Up to this point, I had not given much thought to what Barbie might feel about the evening’s planned activities. She had readily agreed to the tryst when first approached, and had subsequently focused wholly on arrangement details, as had I, rather than the act itself. Now, faced with nowhere to go but the motel, her face seemed set in silent determination as I held the car door open for her. We drove to our destination without speech, a highly unusual occurrence. She stared at the blackness out the window as I registered, paid, ignored the innkeeper’s winking leer, and drove around to park on the side of the motel. Standing back to let her into our room, I felt compelled to speak, if only to break the almost unbearable tension that had grown between us in the last twenty minutes.

“If you really don’t want to go through with this, you know I’ll understand.”

I was backed up against the closed door. A few feet in front of me, Barbie stood transfixed by the large, turned-down bed encircled with exotic and obscene virility offerings supplied, no doubt, by our mutual well-meaning friends. Whether to herself or to me, she finally stage-whispered, “What choice do we have?”

With Barbie as resolved to copulate as I, we disrobed, laid down, and commenced.

The details of that night have never left my mind, nor will they ever escape my lips. Suffice to say we took turns, afterwards, holding each other's head as we filled the toilet, happy, in spite of our intestinal trauma, to have at least fulfilled our quest. Moreover, an unbreakable bond was created; we keep in touch still, albeit less frequently of late. When last I spoke to Barbie, she and Marie were fighting to adopt, having both decided neither could abide the distress of heterosexual insemination.

Notwithstanding having left the motel a non-virgin, I felt myself a dismal failure, more able to accept Barbie's circumstances than my own. At summer's end, still not aroused by women or athletic contests of any type but more and more needing to forcibly refrain myself from being aroused by certain masculine physiques, I embarked on my college career with the portentous knowledge that awaiting my return four years hence, in a far more competent and conventional state, was one rather frightened and one rather angry parent. Without knowing how, why, or exactly what my problem was, Father had managed to ascertain that all had not gone quite the way he desired, and that he had begotten only two All-American love-'em-and-leave-'em playboy sons, not three. The morning I boarded Amtrak for the final leg of my journey to the University of Illinois Champaign/Urbana campus, my father's parting words were, "It is my intense hope that college life will succeed where I have failed in whipping you into proper shape. Pay heed to your R.O.T.C. instructors."

My mother said, "Good-bye, darling. Don't forget to eat well. Write often. I love you, sweetheart."

Father was not pleased with Mother's farewell speech.

College. ROTC. Special housing on Rantoul Air Force Base accomplished by special arrangement for then Lt. Colonel Souster's errant son in gratitude for the Lt. Colonel's many years of exemplary service. Accounting. Economics. Business Administration. Principles of Finance. Business Law. The stuff of anti-mush.

Out from under Father's omnipotent eye, I became charming. I learned to talk more like other humans, made friends, joined the swim team. Within a matter of two or three months, I succeeded in displaying such virtuous behavior that the Gunnery Sergeant personally oversee-

ing my progress for Father recommended I live on campus, the better to complete my well-begun assimilation into proper society. For the first time in my life, I had approval from another male, at least for a while.

“I guess I had to leave home to blossom,” I wrote to Father. “I’ve even found a sport I really love.” His responding letter ignored all positive input, remarking instead on the disgraceful colloquialisms I had lowered myself to use.

Why don’t I love my father, doctor?

The doctor, who, in reality, was merely a counseling Ph.D., did his best to persuade me that I did indeed love my father, but was responding to the guilt that came with loving and desiring him in an inappropriate manner. I accepted a lot of the other theories he proposed, but never could quite swallow that one. Having done his doctorate on some aspect of “borderline personalities,” the good doctor was determined to fit all of his patients into this preconceived category of psychosocial dysfunction. Hence, my problem was not that women inspired brotherly concern in my chest while men inspired lust in my loins, but rather that I was essentially incapable of existing in civilized society in any capacity. The bottom line, according to Dr. W. Phillips, Ph.D., denoted that I was an anti-social individual with borderline-personality character traits and an inability to establish or maintain any significant, much less genuine, personal relationships. Not so much a freak of nature, as Ricky later put it, as merely a freak. I was not to blame and therefore had no reason to harbor guilt, but could I possibly understand what this diagnosis meant?

It meant we had a great deal of work to do at forty-seven dollars and fifty cents per hour, student rates, which I made bussing tables in a pizza joint for a good many more hours in an attempt to once again put me back on the right track and overcome my many handicaps, the most prominent one being, as far as I could tell, my not having arranged to die young.

Ricky has repeatedly requested the man’s full name and address. Ricky has a history of attacking disreputable people with serrated knives. I love Ricky very much.

Despite my intent to participate in Dr. Phillips’ sessions with complete honesty, in the end I had no choice but to mislead him as I had Father, expressing what he wanted to hear rather than what I wanted to say. Original impressions to the contrary, the doc was wholly uninter-

ested in assisting me in developing a healthy desire for women. Indeed, he proceeded with the assumption that I would remain dysfunctional regardless of any efforts put forth to correct this status and added the distinction—which I have never quite shaken off—of perversion to my diagnosis. On the credit side, though, he did have a plan for revamping my goals, objectives, and tendencies. When the therapy finally ended, more due to my departure from college than being discharged from treatment as ready for society, I was left with many of the same feelings of anger and frustration, but had rearranged my thought processes to direct those sentiments toward men, not women. To enhance that rather questionable advancement, I had also acquired a significant amount of social adeptness at constructing a cocoon for myself.

“The better to protect myself from the world, my dearie,” I thought as I set about finding an apartment, a job, and a circle of women friends, thereby becoming the perfect bachelor of whom society and my parents could be proud—provided, of course, society did not telephone my apartment at one o’clock in the morning, for the man who answered might not be me.

No, that is not true. I never took another man back to my apartment, knowing the value of cheap motel rooms, not to mention the always-available park urinal. “Curbside sadomasochism,” Ricky subsequently labeled my lifestyle of choice, which I carefully disguised via my now-perfected “Phillips Facade.” I was a time bomb waiting to explode on some poor bastard seeking enough cash to accommodate his habit or searching for a quick, discreet release, although I somehow managed to always be on the receiving end of the violence despite my furious desire to be the one meting it out.

I cannot recall how long I lived this way; it felt like forever at the time. I do remember concluding that eventually my sole recourse must be suicide, were I only able to overcome my cowardice. Delay tactics aside, death continued to loom inevitability. No matter what rationalization I posed, I was persistently confronted with the fact that somehow, someone had to rid the world of me.

And then, as they say in the songs, along came Eric.

Ricky strode through the front door of MDW&C one ordinary day, sent the receptionist into shivers with a smile, surveyed the room, and walked straight to my cubicle. He held out his hand as he intro-



duced himself, just as if he hadn't been in the previous month's *Fitness Plus* showing off the aesthetic difference between his smooth pectoral development and that of a weight-builder's vein-popping physique. The only thing I can say to my credit is that I remembered to shake, not kiss his hand.

Love at first sight is certainly one of nature's more embarrassing absurdities; as I had never before experienced any fervor as remotely overwhelming, my entrapment was all the more *fait accompli*. From that moment on, life with Ricky equaled bliss and sanity; without him, misery and perversion.

And yet, the equation is not proportionate to total contentment, for he was and is, after all, Eric Baker. Each time I see him fawned over by this woman or that—as though he were available for the taking, always with an eye to the camera—I cringe and fume. A staunch advocate of his advancement, it is I who invariably urges him toward the higher-profile movie and TV roles his so-called manager has been loath to arrange, even as I realize that the more he is seen, the more he is adored; the more adored, the more fawned over. At times, I fear my reason will give way to my jealousy.

For his part, he has on more than one occasion volunteered to divert his career from before the camera to behind the barbell, pointing out the profusion of rich offers he turns down regularly from various health clubs that would gladly pay for his endorsement, not to mention his uninterrupted presence. I cannot allow the sacrifice, though, for the relief would not only be superficial, it would come at the expense of what little self-regard I possess. I may not be much of a man by Father's standards, but the concept of honor was ingested with my mother's milk. Can an individual exist so base as to demand his mate's soul in exchange for his own composure?

No, any obstacles to Ricky's career will come not from me, but from himself. He is in constant motion, working, reading, going to meetings, smiling, making appearances, taking business calls, lifting weights, catching planes, smiling, smiling, smiling. I don't know how he does it. He runs seven miles every midnight to relax, he claims; to calm down. He then showers and prowls the house until collapsing at two-thirty, only to reawaken of his own accord a few hours later when I get up for work. I imagine he keeps the same schedule when he is on the road,

although, of course, I have never accompanied him on any of his business journeys. When he is not involved with gainful employment or attending meetings, a rare occurrence, he retreats to the sanctity of a totally unstylish gym, where he spends the entire day maintaining one of the world's sexiest physiques. "Total dedication," is what he calls this frenetic pace; "fear of failure" would no doubt be Dr. Phillips' term.

If truth be told, I think this is the only way he's ever been allowed to live.

Ricky's parents transformed him into a money-making enterprise before he could walk; henceforth, they never treated him as anything but a commodity. Mommy wanted a little girl, Daddy wanted a meal ticket, and the rest of his guardians were even worse. I am sure the alter ego he subsequently developed for public consumption was a mechanism to defend what remained of the human portion of his psyche from complete ravage. The difference, though, between my beloved Ricky and Eric, celebrity extraordinaire, is truly bizarre. Happy-go-lucky and complaisant at home, his face sets as he puts his hand to the doorknob and transforms before my eyes into a wise-cracking, domineering professional force, an egocentric, not-to-be-hassled-with star. The reverse permutation occurs as he enters his car at retreat. I deem myself lucky to be on the home end, although no one outside our small intimate circle is the slightest bit aware of my existence as part of his home life, nor he as part of mine. On the two occasions we have been confronted by fans at public facilities—both restaurants, if it must be known—he introduced me as his broker as a matter of course, an admission which was barely heard, much less acknowledged, in the intruders' eagerness to secure his autograph. I found myself irrationally delighted to be seen with him if as nothing more than a business associate, even as I struggled to forestall the impulse to swat away their grasping hands.

Balancing on a double-edged sword.

Oh, good Lord in heaven, the man is starting to make sense to me! God forgive my wretched soul. All is lost.

# ERIC

**I**KNEW THE SHIT I WAS IN WAS ABOUT TO GET DEEPER as soon as I heard the tone of his voice on the phone.

“I apologize for my neglect this morning, Eric,” he said in that way he has of not sounding the least bit sorry.

“I was still perturbed when I awoke, and wanted to accentuate my point. Later, it occurred to me that perhaps I overreacted. Corky mentioned you were noticeably late this morning, even for you. I hope I did not cause you too much misfortune.”

Greg’s phony remorse wasn’t cutting any mustard with me. It had already been one helluva lousy morning. His not waking me before he left the house had just been the beginning.

In all the years we’ve lived together, Greg has never let me sleep in, not even when I didn’t have to get anywhere that day. It’s an obsession with him, like washing every single dish immediately after each meal, or lining his socks up neatly on the right-hand side of the drawer with his shorts on the left. I’ve never had to bother with an alarm clock. Greg doesn’t need winding, batteries, or even a wall socket. He’s a perpetual

machine. Of all days to start being normal! Since I hadn't fallen asleep until almost three because of our fight, I didn't wake up until almost nine, a full hour after I was due at the studio.

Fortunately—or so I thought at the time—no one except Corky had noticed. In fact, no one had managed to accomplish anything yet, except to get some kind of an argument going between the powers-that-be. I listened at the door just long enough to make sure I wasn't the point of contention, then presented myself to the real heroes of the biz: the artists who transform guys like me into what you see on magazine covers.

“Shit, Baker, you look like shit,” Ron, another one of my fans, assured me. “Why the fuck can't you get in ahead of time if you're gonna need this much work? I didn't have to spend more than fifteen minutes on Gordon.”

I let the abuse roll off my back by clinging to the fantasy that it was all good-hearted, and spent my time in the chair daydreaming about how I was going to rip Howard Gordon's perfectly burnished fucking skin off his well-packed fucking muscles and cut down his goddamn legs at the knees so he wouldn't tower over me in every goddamned fucking shot. Not that I would ever use such language out loud. Image, you know. The only thing standing between me and the slimeballs of the world, after all, is my sterling image of composure and gentility. Ha!

Naturally, therefore, Biddlely himself soon appeared to let me know exactly how well that image functioned to my benefit.

“Good morning, Mr. Baker, or can I call you Eric? Although I know Suki calls you Ricky, but I wouldn't take that liberty at this point, ha ha, maybe later, one never knows, does one, ha ha. I didn't see you come in although I was trying to watch, but I guess you slipped past me. Well, I've been in a meeting and you can't be everywhere at one time, can you, of course not, but there are matters that take priority, nothing to be done about that. It's just I'm so glad I caught up with you before you undressed because I really want your opinion on this line, in confidence, of course, and I thought perhaps we could have a little chat while you, ha ha, changed, all in the interests of Mr. Deane, of course, and also maybe on the concept, after all, since you have been involved in so many of these types of presentations, and I would just simply love to tap into uh, ha ha, your real, shall we say, you know, feelings about the whole matter, if you follow my drift.”

Subtle.

I don't remember what I said to Biddley, but, damn, I wish I could, because it apparently cut him to the quick ("To the quick, Mr. Baker, to the quick!"), and he walked away in a huff. All was not well that ended well, though. Having struck out with me, he turned his grubby attention on Howard, not, I suspect, to get him into a clinch as much as to put him into shock.

"I hope you understand, young man," he projected to Gordon in a stage whisper you could hear down the hall, "your already having the main part for the video campaign, which you know will be seen not only on television, but will be incorporated into several, and I do mean quite a few MTV and, yes, and VH1 videos, not to mention the ones that go directly through the mails, plus the in-store overheads and counter displays, is, of course, absolutely top secret, of the darkest mystery in the business. Everybody wants to know but no one, absolutely no one outside myself and a few very select, extremely chosen utterly important individuals know, and certainly, you weren't supposed to know yet yourself, so don't go spreading it around, for God's sake! I can't conceive of what was on Suki's mind to let you know prematurely, it could be the ruin of the entire surprise element since, after all, you know we have to take all those others into account..."

I held my breath, hoping against hope Gordon wouldn't use the opportunity of Biddley's pause to ask any asinine questions like, "What others?" but Gordon isn't Portman, thank God. I decided to let him keep all of his teeth—well, most of them, anyway—when the extent of his blank-faced reaction to Biddley's macabre announcement amounted to, "Uh huh."

Biddley's face turned almost purple as he glared first at Gordon, then at me in the mirror, then, when I wagged my fingers at him with a smile, back to Howard. I steeled myself for a major explosion, but it never came.

Still, if anybody ever asks my opinion, California has so many earthquakes because Hollywood is filled with so many door-slammers.

Dissolve to a moment of silence for the departed. Gordon made his way over to the coffee pot. I joined him when I was released from the chair, looking "as good as I can do when you come in dragging your ass like that." Ron snapped up all his cases, told me to "keep your damn

hands away from your goddamn face, huh?” and took off through the magic door that separated us from reality.

There we were, Howard and I, alone again. No one else in the room at all. Nobody to tell us what to take off, what to put on. Even Portman had apparently disappeared into the Hollywood ozone layer and was nowhere to be seen, not just late like me, but gone, gone, gone. We checked the set. It was still dark. We checked out in the hall. Utterly quiet.

Bring up eerie music.

“They couldn’t have closed up already. It’s not even noon.” The hallway echoed slightly. I dropped my voice. “Besides, Portman isn’t here, there’s no fun to it.”

“Did you ever see that Twilight Zone where everybody disappeared?” Howard asked almost in a whisper. “One minute they’re all there, the next minute everyone’s gone, just like this. Coffee cups still steaming, hanging lamp still wobbling, nobody anywhere around.”

He did one of those “ooh OOH oohs” under his breath. I gave him my best withering grimace. “I’ve never seen the Twilight Zone,” I said dryly. “Let’s check out the conference room. I heard a lot of arguing in there before. Maybe everybody’s doing lines in the johns before they go back at it.”

We checked the conference room. Empty. We checked all the rooms on both sides. Nobody, anywhere.

“Spooky,” Gordon whispered, darting his eyes around without moving his head.

“I’m sure there’s a logical explanation,” I started, when suddenly the music swelled, the lights snuffed out, and a horrible shriek filled the air.

Well, maybe not.

“What’s with you guys?” Corky was staring at us with her arms folded.

“Where is everybody?” I demanded too loudly, feeling like the worst kind of fool, an absolute one.

“They’re in the far back room, hammering out details. What’s the matter with you two? Jeez, Howard, you should see the look on your face. I didn’t think Indians could blush. What’re you guys doing out here, anyway? I just came to tell you, Eric, you have a call. You can take it at my desk if you want, or you can use the phone in the lab. Don’t touch anything, okay?” She backed away toward her office, shaking her head.

“Thanks,” I called feebly after her. “Prison matron,” I said under my breath.

“Coffee,” Howard intoned as he slunk back into the dressing room.

I used the phone in the lab.

“In any event, Eric,” Greg’s voice went on in my ear, “it has occurred to me, despite my misgivings, you may indeed prove to be of value were you to accompany me this evening. In the final analysis you are, after all, a bona fide celebrity, one whose substantial portfolio is handled exclusively by MDW&C, no small point of regard. On further reflection, in fact, I recall that Jack Doohan brings a client, not a date, to nearly every event, which is undoubtedly the only weapon he has for undercutting me as his account portfolio is certainly pitiable compared to mine. From a client-relations perspective, your presence could very well be the final grain of sand to tip the scales in my favor for that promotion about which I have been telling you.”

Well, well, romantically speaking, who could ask for more? I’d moved up a whole notch from nonexistent entity to political prop. Still coming down from my imaginary fright, I was more focused on the insult than Greg’s acquiescence and started to tell him just what he could do with his damn client relations, not to mention his grains of sand, when what he’d really said hit home and I cut myself off mid-sentence.

“Gregory Aspen Souster! Are you actually saying you want me to go with you? You’re not just saying yeah, it would be okay if I go, you’re asking me to go?”

Was that exasperation or capitulation in his sigh? “Mr. Baker: I formally request you accompany me to the Merchan, Doff, Watsman and Cranley social function being held at Mr. Cranley’s home this evening. It would be my.... It would greatly please me if you would attend.”

“Mr. Souster: in deference to the gastric juices that have got to be ripping your stomach to shreds at this very moment, I most humbly accept.”

There was a pause. I heard a blurred voice in the background, answered by his own, equally blurred. Then he was back on the line.

“I have a great deal of work on my desk at the moment, Ricky. I cannot continue this conversation at this particular moment. Nevertheless, please do attempt to get home early this evening so we have ample time to review a number of extremely important details about your behavior

tonight. To facilitate your preparation, I have drawn up a few notes for you to study.”

There’s always a catch, isn’t there? I thought, as he went on to “briefly outline” some of the “more consequential points” he wanted to “discuss” later. But I wasn’t about to let Gordon outdo me. I waited until I heard his other line ring for the third time before I said, “Uh huh,” and hung up.

I’m not a complete fool. Greg’s change of heart could just as easily change back, especially with me there in front of him. I worked it around in my mind as I headed back down the hall to the dressing room and met Howard on his way out for a walk. Doug, he said, had called lunch early again.

“Biddley’s an idiot, I’m going to break that bitch’s neck, Deane’s an imbecile, Suki’s dead meat, be back in thirty minutes, if you’re late I’ll have your balls.’ That’s a quote. I need air.”

It was all of eleven-fifteen—what a stupid, botched-up, incredibly idiotic gig. Rather than go out myself, I spent the time pacing around the uninhabited set, trying to nail down the exact right attitude, the exact right approach so I wouldn’t be caught up short—oh, not for the gig, and not for the party, either! The infighting was none of my business, and the party was certainly no problem; I was practically born in the spotlight. No, no, no, the challenge was to come up with the exact correct response, just the right state of mind to counteract Greg when I got home and he started drilling me.

I didn’t care how many notes he made, how much blood I pledged, how many Librium he took, or how many Anthony Robbins *Personal Power* tapes he played in the background—by the time I got home, his second, third, and fourth thoughts would’ve set in. I needed to somehow remain invisible enough that after he talked himself out of taking me again, he’d talk himself back into taking me again without my having to take an active part in the discussion.

Doug’s thirty minutes lasted almost sixty. By the time people started filtering back, I had a plan.

Actually, I had two plans. Simplicity was the key, so Plan B called for me to simply not answer anything, stick to Ray Charles’ favorite line—uh-huh—which would leave him with no one to talk to but him-



self, thereby allowing the Greg who was resolved to go forward win out over the Greg who was determined to hold back.

Plan A was even safer: shower at the gym, get home fifteen minutes before we were supposed to leave, throw on a nice conservative suit, and get both of us out of the house before we had the time to get into an argument. Plan A couldn't fail, because Greg has an obsession about not changing things around at the last minute, thank God. My only concern was making sure I definitely did not get home early.

No problem. Photo sessions that run like clockwork absolutely positively always run late, and we hadn't even gotten off the mark on this one. There was no possible way I could be done before six o'clock, my contracted cut-off time, unless somebody walked out again. The chances of that happening two days in a row were non-existent. It couldn't happen. There was no way. To use Greg's verbiage, the battle was won without a hitch.

So, naturally, someone supplied a hitch.

Cut to the multitudes gathered on the set while I brought my consciousness back to the task at hand, or, more specifically, to the task not at hand. It wasn't a pretty sight. I'm not sure who was on what side or exactly what the argument was about, but it seemed to be centered somehow on "the concept." Everyone, it seemed, was milling about the now-lit studio while some of the techs played with the backdrops and some of the others threatened to play baseball with the equipment. Howard and I—suited up in what one assistant had pointed to and another, apparently from the opposing party, had sneered at—were trying to look disinterested and nonchalant, respectively. Poor old Mr. Deane stood emoting on the sidelines. I think it was finally dawning on him just how superfluous he was. Pretty soon, the "animated discussion" turned into a full-blown shouting match which very quickly turned into an ugly fracas.

The book rep snapped at Biddley. Biddley squawked at Doug. Doug growled at Donna's assistant who, in turn, whined at Deane's two techs, both of whom were grouching at more or less everyone in a general sort of way.

There were too many of Deane's people—not to mention Donna's, whoever the hell she was—to figure it all out, but some of them were yelling in one direction and some in the other. One guy I hadn't seen

do a damn thing from the get-go and whose title I'd never heard was yelling at one of the others in his own group. Two of the techs defiantly stationed themselves, one to protect the lights, the other to cover the camera, both with over-my-dead-body grimaces on their faces. Greg should be here, I thought; look at all the life-sized toy soldiers he could play maneuvers with.

I gave Gordon one of my Lord-get-me-thru-the-day looks. He responded by hanging his head and falling theatrically back against the wall. Poorly done, but I got the message. Picking up on my action, he followed as I inched my way toward the dressing room door in a don't-bother-with-us-we're-just-scenery casual manner. If anyone did notice, they didn't care. They were all too busy accusing each other of sabotage.

As we slipped through the door, I heard snatches of "two-bit, heavy-handed, paint-by-numbers mentality," and "brain-damaged, over-coddled moronic idiot," followed by "half-baked, asinine, insipid fecal matter you and your gang of cretins call creativity".

"Fascinating," I said as Gordon gently let the door latch catch.

"Hey, that's good," he said, reacting to my Spock-like intonation. "I'm not great with imitations myself. Besides, I always end up either the dead Injun or the romantic lead, everybody's scared to death to cast a native as a heavy. I get so tired of the 'Angela, I want you, I need you, you must find a way to get out of the house tonight, you must!' I envy your range."

"Really?" I don't give much thought to my acting ability; it always surprises me when other people do. "I don't know about that. I think most of the roles I get are based on my musculature, not my talent. I figure I've got another couple of years, then I'm gonna have to find something honest to do for a living."

Gordon opened his eyes so wide, they looked like they were going to pop out of his head.

"Are you okay?" I said.

"Are you nuts?" he replied. "You? With that face? My drama coach makes us study your tapes for the emotions: anger, fear, sexuality. Good heavens, there've been times we've all wanted to use your picture for a dart board, we've gotten so tired of having to watch your clips over and over. What about that mini-series, aren't you up for an Emmy for that?"

And you're just a kid! Suki's always talking about your mega TVQ, your natural talent, calls you her 'goyisha golden goose.' You can't be serious!"

We stared at each other for a while, he with his mouth open, me probably the same way. I guess everybody's entitled to their own perspective, but, jeez, talk about swallowing a line of bullshit! I didn't want to tell him that if his coach was using me for an example, either he was getting ripped off or he was missing the point of the lesson.

After a little more head shaking and mutual disbelief, I picked up on the opening he'd provided and steered the conversation to Suki. We got through the rest of the time tearing down our charming manager/agent and the wonderful gigs she continually gets for us, like the one we were on now. Every once in a while, he'd say, "I can't believe you don't believe you are who you are."

I think the inactivity must have been warping his brain.

Suddenly, there was a loud crash followed by a tinkling shatter as though something breakable had hit the connecting wall. Everything got very hushed. I got very queasy.

"I don't like it so quiet," Howard muttered, echoing my thoughts. "You think maybe somebody killed somebody?"

"Maybe Doug's pulling one of his famous up-against-the-wall-ass-hole routines," I started to say, but I never got a chance because just then the door crashed open and Mr. Deane and his entire gaggle poured into the dressing room.

"You don't have to stand for this, Mr. D," one of the gagglites (I think it was an asst.'s asst.) was saying with a definite tear in his voice. "After all, *G.M.Q.* isn't the only rag on the rack and *S&M* isn't the only game in town." Emote to camera, sniff manfully.

Okay, so it would have been funny—Gordon was doing his control-the-face bit again—except that what the fruit was doing while he was talking wasn't funny at all, it was absolutely tragic. This mealy-mouthed, short-crotched, over-affected china pussy was totally ruining my well-laid Plan-A strategy. He and the rest of his sorority sisters were pulling down every stitch of clothing from the racks and flinging them into the transport cases that had been stacked in the corner. One of them came over and snapped his fingers at Howard and me several times so we'd release custody of the outfits we were wearing.

I also roll over and beg, but you have to know the right whistle.

Bad jokes aside, the message was clear. They were closing up shop. They were taking their marbles home. They were calling the game on account of rain. In other words, the gig was over.

Excuse me for not dwelling on the woes this must have caused Mr. Deane, not to mention Doug, Biddley, and behind-the-whole-ball-of-wax-somehow Suki, but I had woes of my own. It was barely two-forty-five!

What was I supposed to do now? Go home?!

Oh, I suppose I could have killed time going for a drink, but I figured it wouldn't be such a great idea to get home with booze on my breath. I might have taken the scenic route to Beverly Hills via side streets instead of the freeway—which, with the way my luck was running, would probably be wide open at this time of day—but I tend to get lost whenever I try that. Anyway, it was all academic; I've never played devious well. I'm basically a work-and-sleep kind of guy. I don't even lie well, try as I might. The dressing room cleared almost faster than it had the day before. Peeking in, I found the techs had already struck the set and disappeared into the bowels of the storage area. Gordon had taken off like somebody'd lit a fire under him and even Doug, who was still around, growled that he was going to go do some real goddamn work and vanished into his lab.

So much for Plan A.

I didn't have enough time for a real work out, so I headed home at as leisurely a pace as I could. I even managed to get pulled over for obstructing traffic because I was driving too slow on the freeway. Chalk up another thirty minutes to the old walk-this-line-let-me-smell-your-breath bit. The CHIP concluded I wasn't a drunk, merely an idiot. He didn't know the half of it. I would have punched him out if I thought it would have taken up just enough extra time without landing me behind bars again.

Cut to me hardly inside the front door where Gregory was already present and accounted for, Sir! He had a list. He read me the list. I let the screen door swing shut.

“First of all, Eric, I want you to remember that this is a delicate situation in that my peace of mind as well as my employment are dependent upon your behavior tonight, so for God's sake, do not screw up and allow anyone to become aware of how acquainted you already are with these

people because if you do, someone could well deduce that you and I are, in fact, intimate and I would have to end both our lives on the spot.”

I put my keys down on the foyer table and turned to look at him. He stood gaping at me, as if waiting for an answer. I repressed the thought that he was starting to sound like Elliott Biddley and just said, “Uh huh” with a kind “go on” tone to the “huh.” He looked relieved.

It was going to be a long evening.

“Good. Point Two: Eric, please, for God’s sake pay as much attention to Mrs. Cranley as you can. I will introduce you to her as soon as we arrive, after which you can pick it up on your own. I would appreciate your dancing with her as much as possible, for Mr. Cranley always confers with Mrs. Cranley and if she likes you—and how can she not, providing you refrain from acting like a fool or a drag queen or in some other way totally embarrassing yourself, me, the firm, and all of rational humanity—that will be half the battle. For me, that is, which is for you, also, of course. Please do not make me have to remind you, but by the same token, do not lose sight of the fact that you must be cautious with regard to your conversation with her. Mrs. C. quite naturally harbors the impression that I am an eligible bachelor, and it is of the utmost importance she not receive the slightest hint that we spend time together for any reason other than business, especially since she will undoubtedly assume you are queer right off the bat.”

“Uh huh,” I said, this time with more of a you’re-pushing-awfully-hard emphasis on the “huh.” However, I didn’t ask why the boss’ wife would assume I’m queer right off the bat, so I gave myself a mental point for self-control.

“Number Three,” Greg continued, as I knew he would, “I realize I did instruct you to wear something conservative, but upon further consideration it occurred to me that if you are indeed something of a celebrity, and if your celebrity-hood is at least in part a result of a large number of beefcake photographs, and if you are, in fact, attending a social affair, it would stand to reason that you would wear something that highlights your physique.”

“If I’m known for what?” I bristled. “If I am indeed what?”

He didn’t hear me. He couldn’t very well have, because he wasn’t listening, having never stopped talking.

“Ergo, I propose you wear a suit, but not necessarily an actual suit, perhaps a fine sport jacket, but not too casual but definitely not tuxedo quality. Something that is merely, uh, perfect for the occasion. Something that will fit all aspects of what I need without compromising what the public will expect. You certainly have enough clothes, you can do that, can you not?”

He had kind of a wild, pleading look in his eyes, as if he were in actual pain. Well, I'd had a pretty crummy day myself and, frankly, Greg's nerves were getting on my nerves. Pushed to the wall by the stupidity of the gig and the aggravation coming off my loving partner, I resorted to my most comfortable self-defense mechanism.

I said something stupid.

“How about if I just borrow whatever Denise wore last time?” I said with what I hoped was as much exasperation as he was emitting. “It'll be a new face; they probably won't notice it's the same dress. And if it was tight enough, like it usually is with her, it'll show off all my ripples without being too revealing. After all, my lumps are in different places from hers. The effect should be rather provocative.”

The camera pulls back to show the two old cowpokes who used to ride together but are now on opposite sides of the law, squared off, face-to-face, hands poised over their guns.

“Goddamn it, Eric,” Greg exploded at the top of his lungs, “if you can't be serious about this, then you can forget the whole goddamn thing! I'm not putting my entire goddamn career on the line so that you can strut around like a fucking drag queen and spend the whole goddamn night telling my boss fucking fag jokes! I've spent a long time building a reputation in this company, a good reputation, a reputation I can be proud of, you two-bit numbnut asshole. I am proud of it, it's the only goddamn thing in my life I can be proud of, and I sure as hell don't intend to have the whole fucking thing shattered into pieces just like that in one evening just so you can exercise your goddamn stupid little twit of an ego!”

In the end, we were both a little hoarse. The whole thing finally settled down into a blur of promises from me and a flurry of threats from him. I swore on my father's grave that I'd be careful about what I said, who I talked to, how I looked at him, where I said I lived, who did my taxes, and God only knows what else. I lost track and just kept

promising. He swore on his brother's grave—it was a very grave conversation—that he'd tear me limb from limb if I so much as intimated that he was or might be or could even possibly be thought to be gay, if I breathed a single word about my being gay (or even happy-go-lucky, I suppose), or if I even thought about admitting out loud that we might know more about each other than name, rank, and serial number, which was as intimate as one man is supposed to get with another.

All this came down after I'd brought him back to earth—well, at least within atmosphere—via Billy Ocean's "Suddenly," the one tune guaranteed to land him on his back, figuratively and literally. Lying in bed afterward with still forty-five minutes to go before we had to actually move, I took his mind further off matters by pouring out my tale of woe from the last two days, and getting just what I needed in return: compassion, comfort, and caresses. I even got gossip.

"Are you certain this entire project was arranged by Smithfield and Moske, Inc.?" he asked when I'd run out of breath. "I'm surprised."

"Why?"

"One, because it was obviously meant to not succeed. Two, because the expense of that nonsuccess had to be substantial. Just getting you there, after all, Ricky, costs a considerable amount of money. Add to that Howard Gordon, whom you admit is established enough to command a generous fee, plus Doug Wilson, whose reputation alone dictates a sizeable price, plus the overabundance of techs and assistants. Did you not say there were more people than normal, certainly more than necessary? Even before you include the other model, if he was indeed paid at all, you are talking a appreciable sum for a single day, much less two non-productive ones. And three, because Hankwith and Forsette just went to extreme lengths to absorb S&M. In point of fact, I went to the mat with Darren Forsette Jr. as an intermediary on behalf of S&M, off the record, as a friend of Harry Moske, but their counter-offer was insufficient and we lost. Darren took me to lunch just last week, you'll recall, to gloat over his victory. I suppose the possibility exists that the entire venture had been pursued merely to offset H&F's assets with a deductible company, but I cannot for the life of me surmise what profit Suki could hope to realize from the entire episode."

"I don't know anything about all that," I yawned. "All I know is, Suki had her fingers in this one real good. She even sent in Portman-

the-Prick, although from what I gleaned yesterday, it was mostly to get him out of her hair. Apparently this guy Biddley had seen him hanging around her office and personally requested him. She only signed him for the one gig. She said it would almost have been worth not taking a commission just to get rid of him. Almost—but then, you know Suki.”

All he said was, “Hmmm.” Plan C, which I had made up on the spot, had worked. Greg was relaxed and happy. I was relaxed and happy. We were headed for a wonderful evening.

Even Suki’s inevitable phone call—a kickback to the days when she was playing quasi-mother-to-rebellious-teen and felt she had to check on me nightly to make sure I’d had at least one meal during the last twenty-four hours—didn’t quench the cozy mood Greg and I had gotten ourselves into. Suki didn’t have anything urgent to talk about, just a few logistical updates and a little general gossip. She never mentioned yesterday’s fiasco and didn’t seem to give a fig about today’s total disaster, either. She spent most of the conversation plugging her new pet project of getting me to accept a film role I thought would do nothing more than prove to the world, once and for all, that there is no such thing as natural talent. She didn’t even care about the mix up between Gordon and Biddley. In fact, she said, she was pulling all her people out of the Deane project completely because she had decided it was an amateur production. I asked what her first clue was, but she ignored me—as usual. She went on, even though I hadn’t asked, to say that she hadn’t talked to Jeff since yesterday afternoon and had to assume he’d caught the bus home to wherever it was he came from. For some reason, I took the news as an omen that the whole evening would turn out just fine. When I hung up with Manager Mom, I really felt I had nothing to worry about.

I never was very good at reading tea leaves.



# HOWARD

FIVE MINUTES INTO MY SHOWER, Jake woke up from a bad dream about dinosaurs. Probably one of his brother's benevolent bedtime stories, told after lights out. Maybe what Jake needs is his own bedroom, I thought. *If I pass the bar and take Jesus' offer, we could sell this place, buy something bigger, get Jake his own space away from his brother. 'Course, if I leave he can sleep in our room with Sharon. He'd prefer that, anyway. It'd probably be better for everyone if I just take off, do what I have to do to make the big bucks, get where I want to go with this career, which I can figure out once I don't have so much pressure. Besides, when I make all that money, I can send more to Sharon and the kids. They'll have a better life without me.*

I stepped out of the shower to let Jake, still wrapped in the warm smell of sleep, into the bathroom.

"Daddy, I have to frow up here. Neil won't let me in my baffroom."

"You don't have to throw up. You just think you do because your brother told you to."

"I really gotta frow up! Really, really!"

"Fine. Just do it in the toilet, okay?"

I got back in the shower, let the pounding water cover the sound of Jake's forced gagging and coughing. By the time I turned it off and threw back the curtain, Neil was straddling him from behind, trying to pry his little mouth open with soapy fingers.

"Throw up already, stupid!"

"Get off your brother," I said wearily, disentangling the tormentor from his wriggling victim. The entire bathroom was fogged; they had turned off the fan so they wouldn't get cold so I had to shave in the reflection off the towel bar. Sharon came in to assure that Jake wasn't going to vomit even though Neil argued that he could make him do it. She let out another of her numbing sighs. *I could go to the prep class this evening. If I don't come home afterwards nobody will really notice until morning, maybe not even until tomorrow night. Sharon'll think I've gotten caught up in a case, stayed in town, went directly to work. I can be back in North Dakota before anyone knows I'm gone. I haven't seen the folks for the longest time. I could take them pictures of the kids.*

Somehow both boys were fully dressed and at the table by the time I got down to breakfast. Sharon was just putting cereal in front of them.

"I thought you had today off. You were going to take that prep class."

"Yeah, but things kind of got out of hand yesterday, they want to take more shots. I don't even know who's going to be there, I can't imagine everybody rearranging their schedules for this layout. The stuff is lame, but I think the designer has some big bucks behind him. The class isn't until one. If I'm the only one there, I should make it."

"Eric Baker won't be there today?"

"I doubt it. He's worth too much money for this kind of rubbish."

Another massive sigh, like it came up from her toes.

"I set up a meeting with Neil's pre-school teacher this afternoon around five-thirty. Could you try to make it?"

"Maybe."

"Howard, this is important."

"I'll try."

As I backed the car out of the garage I heard a crash from the house, Jake's familiar high decibel wail, Neil's all-the-louder protesting whine. I could just see Sharon hunched over the table, head in hands, one more mammoth sigh. *It's better this way*, I concluded as I sped down the street

toward the freeway and the blissful chaos of the studio. *For all of us. I'm just another drain on her emotions, anyway. I'll simply have to figure out a time when I can come back to get some clothes and things. Today is the first day of my new career. Sharon had been a mistake in my life from the start, I knew it then, she knew it, too. This is what comes of giving in to my baser instincts.*

I'd been doing a series of layouts for her company's new product, some computer gizmo that was obsolete within a year. Good money, nice people. They'd invited me to their holiday reception, we'd all gotten along so well. I'd been there long enough to get a little loose and was getting ready to leave. I made one last sweep of the place, looking for somebody to take with me. Sharon wasn't too hard to spot. She was the only one sitting with her back to the crowd. She had on a shocking green, really tight dress. I couldn't see her face, but her dress was so tight, like just another layer of skin, it left nothing to the imagination, nothing. I went over to try my luck. She waved me into a chair.

"You're the hunk, aren't you?" Her head was propped up on one arm. "Yeah, you're the hunk. Tell me, hunk, do you look that good naked?"

I consciously fought down the blush. "I do okay."

I'd gotten a look at her face by then. Not great, not bad. It didn't really matter. I couldn't keep my eyes off her breasts, just barely still inside her dress. I remember wondering if she'd planned it that way.

"Huh. That's not what I asked." Her voice was slurred, her body leaning across the table. The dress wasn't the only thing that was tight, but boy, was it tight. One nipple, hard, was peeking around the cloth, trying to push out. I had a crazy desire to give it a hand. I looked around. No one was watching.

"I said, how do you look without all those clothes covering up your body?" "Body" came out like two words. By this point, she was leaning so far over the table she was practically in my hands without any help.

I said, "Like your dream come true, sweetheart," or something like that. I don't remember the exact words, I was concentrating on oh, so delicately tucking that stray nipple back inside. She smiled at me and rose to the occasion. We both did.

"Well, why don't we just go someplace, hunk, and check it out? Your place or mine, hunk? Why don't we go peel you out of those clothes so I can see for myself?"

The way she said “peel” destroyed my control and I felt the heat spread across my face. By now we were standing, almost merged into one. One thumb was fondling the errant nipple, its companion fingers making circles on her incredibly soft, soft breast. She took my other hand and put it on her rear, tilted her head back. I swear her tongue waved me in; the pounding in my chest was audible. We couldn’t do any more in public, so I took her back to my place.

I’m amazed I didn’t pile us up on the way, her warm skin, hot breath, searing tongue was everywhere while I tried to keep at least a couple fingers on the wheel and one eye focused. I blew a tire slamming into the curb at my place, had to manually disentangle to slide her out of the car. I finally hoisted her just to get a free hand to fumble with the keys. She took off my clothes as we walked in the door. I took my time getting rid of hers.

I gave her wine. She gave me the most incredible blow job I’d ever had.

We drank more wine, had more sex. A shrill, insistent ringing sounded far off in the distance. Sharon yawned and stretched across the bed. I pulled the phone plug out of the wall.

Eventually we ran out of wine. We drank bourbon. When the whiskey was gone, we drank scotch; ran out of scotch, drank vodka. The vodka bit the dust, we drank Drambouie. Finally, we ran out of every drop of liquor in the place.

It was three weeks later.

I don’t remember one single thing either of us said the entire time. I don’t remember using the toilet, shaving, eating, checking the mail. I just remember her touches, her taste, her lips sticky with liquor, her long legs, flashing green eyes, carnal pout, thick masses of hair...the whole thing was incredibly bizarre, a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. Surreal and superficial, exhausting and enjoyable. And over. Once the booze was gone, it was over.

I felt no emotional attachment or undying love, only that it was time to get my eyes refocused, drink some coffee, give my appropriate appendages a rest, read a newspaper, go to an audition, find a gig.

We took a shower. Sharon wanted to talk, I wanted to resurface. My nose feels fuzzy, I thought, what’s wrong with my eyes? Her voice barely cut through the haze.

“What do we do now?”

“Huh?”

“Where does our relationship go from here?”

The sides of my head reached my shoulders, a very odd sensation. My vocal cords moved.

“How about breakfast?”

“I’ve done a lot of thinking about it.”

“Okay, good. What do you want?”

“I guess we’ll have to make some decisions.”

“How about steak and eggs, toast and hash browns. And coffee. Lots of coffee. We’ll have to go out, nothing’s left. Do you suppose it’s still raining?”

“I’m talking about us. I’m talking about my period. I’m late. I think I’ve missed it. I’m never late, Howard. Never.”

I didn’t care enough to say who cares. The bottom half of my body was jelly, my legs were having a hard time keeping me vertical, and the shower floor kept trying to grab me.

“I haven’t slept with another man for almost a year.”

You’ve certainly made up for lost time, I thought but didn’t say. The terrible throb behind my left ear made me miss her next remark.

“Well?”

How can she stand so straight, I wondered. And why isn’t she helping me hold back the walls, they’re trying to fall in on us. Good Lord, this shower’s loud. Don’t they make them muffled?

Sharon was still talking, something about she guessed she must be pregnant with my baby. She guessed we’d have to get married, guessed it’d have to be right away.

I said, “Guess again,” or something like that. I’m not sure, I only remember the back of my neck trying to push through to my nose, my eyes hanging down my cheeks, my jaw wired in a vise.

“Oh, Howard!” The sound was so head-shattering loud, it and the water finally managed to knock me over. The faucet fought back but I somehow managed to turn it off so I could die right there on the shower floor.

Sharon was gone when I came out, maybe an hour later, maybe ten or sixteen, I’m not sure. I plugged the phone back in, made coffee, took the gig Suki had waiting for me, and got on a plane that day to do a

shoot in Mexico. From there I went to Italy, then New York. I didn't get home for over a month. By then I'd decided to just forget about Sharon altogether. I was better off without her, one less complication in my life. It wasn't like I even really knew her; I only knew her body.

Intimately. More intimately than anyone else's I'd ever known. 'Course, beyond that, she didn't really matter to me.

The only hitch was this pregnancy thing. What if she really was with child, my child? She probably wasn't. It'd been a pretty strange situation for both of us. Even if she'd been pregnant, she might have miscarried from all the liquor. 'Course, then she'd probably need a friend. Not that I wanted to be that friend, I just wanted to make sure she was all right. I decided to find her, not to actually see her again, just to talk.

It took me a while to find her number. I called every Sharon or "S." listed under "A" in the phone book. I'd forgotten her name was Ables, don't know how I remembered the "A." I knew it was her when I heard the machine. Sharon's got a distinctive voice, very tight, very sensual, somewhere between purring and coddling. I didn't leave a message, went to the address instead, spent the whole day on her apartment steps. I'd gotten there around eleven in the morning because I knew she took the five-fifteen bus. How I knew was pretty fuzzy. Had we talked?

When she finally got there, she told me she had a doctor's appointment in the morning. She was going to have an abortion. She was going to abort my baby. She was going to murder my child, pure and simple, her mind was made up, something about not having heard from me.

So I proposed. What else could I do?

Five years later, I don't really remember if all the stuff I said came from my heart or head. It's not like I was feeling desperate or anything, I just said the first thing that came into my mind. It was a mistake, I see that now, but she was going to murder my baby girl, only it turned out to be a boy, dark like me with big eyes, a wonderful laugh, a runner, he learned to climb to the top of the high slide at the park by the time his brother was out of diapers. It didn't take too much to get Sharon to say yes. She cried, my eyes got wet, probably from relief about the abortion. I couldn't let her commit a mortal sin and murder my child. We held each other until it got to be something else, went up to her place, had sex, came down, and got married. We've been living together ever since, five years, it's some kind of a record in my business.

Too long. She'd be better off without me now.

Going over it all in my mind, I almost missed the exit to Doug's studio. To my surprise, there was still a space open in the back lot. To my even greater surprise, Baker showed up on the set after all, just another anomaly in my preconceived portrait of him. He wasn't as pliable as he looked, or as superficial, unfortunately, but he sure was a mess in the morning, just like anybody else. *He doesn't have anything on me, I could do the same parts. So he's white, so big deal, stereotypes are meant to be broken.*

I spent the day reading his face instead of Torts, since I wasn't going to take the bar anyway, now that I'd left. I stored a few more reactions for future reference, made a few more mental notes. Once you got up close, past all the media hype and stuff, he wasn't anything so much. I had charisma, I had presence. My face was expressive, I'd had casting directors and photographers go gaga over me. They'd pulled me for that soap from over fifty different actors, didn't they? And Suki'd said I could be up for another spot, this time for more than to just be killed off in three weeks. And I was taller, a lot taller. I worked out, my body was in just as good shape as his, maybe even better. I'd certainly never walk into a gig, or even out of the house, looking as bad as he had that morning. I had better cheekbones, my hair was easier, my shoulders broader. He was really pretty slight, over all. I'd bet anything he had to work at that tan, something I never have to worry about.

Now that I'm a free agent, I realized, I can make the most of all those opportunities I probably haven't even noticed 'cause I was too caught up with Sharon and the boys to pay any real attention to business. There's nothing so special about Eric Baker—or any of the others, for that matter. I could have been in their place by now, even without being white. I just haven't been concentrating on career to the exclusion of all else, like they have. Well, they'd all better stand back now, or they're going to be eating my dust. The year of the red man is about to commence.

"Wow, VH1. What more could a guy ask for?" Baker said. We'd just been treated to a breathless speech, the only kind Mr. Biddley ever makes, something about me doing some video or film spots. I hadn't really caught most of it. I couldn't help seeing that he'd given it pretty much just for Baker's benefit, with one eye on him across the room all the while he'd been talking to me. I wasn't about to let on to Baker that I noticed, though.

“That’s okay, I can always use the exposure. It doesn’t really matter what for. I don’t have scripts coming to me right and left to choose from.”

Why did I say that? I hadn’t meant to open up so much. Baker just smiled and I made another mental note: build mystique by not talking about myself. Might as well steal from the best. Not that he’s the best, not by a long shot.

“Yeah, well, if I were you, I wouldn’t sit by the phone. I’d lay odds this project dies in committee before they do anything more than the stills. If we ever get started. I can’t believe they got anything yesterday that was salvageable, what with that idiot screwing up every shot. None of it makes any sense, anyway—yesterday all those people, today the place is a ghost town, you and I sitting around twiddling our high-priced thumbs on the clock. Biddley’s up to something, Biddley or Suki. I’d put my money on Suki. Besides, he’s a dangerous guy to take your pants off in front of, or hadn’t you noticed?” Baker laughed. “Of course, so is Suki, when you come right down to it!”

*I have better teeth, too. I bet those side ones of his are capped.*

“So why are you wasting your time? What are you doing here?” I tried to make it sound casual, could only hope he hadn’t noticed the incredulity that had crept into my voice against my will. In answer, he tilted his head back to drain the last drop from the personalized mug that had been waiting for him, poured more coffee into it, added sugar and creamer and stirred methodically. He started to lean against the counter, caught himself, pulled a couple of paper towels from the dispenser, wiped off a few invisible specks of water, balled the towels and made the shot to the trash basket, all very deliberate. Then leaned back, raised his filled hand in a salute, nodded slightly and smiled.

“Drinking coffee.”

My first impulse was to put my fist through that oh-so-charming smile of his, but something in the back of my head tugged at my consciousness, some old quote, the difference between talent and genius, the disparity between teachers and doers. I slapped the thought down, concentrated instead on why everything in my life had to be like this, a mixture of admiration and angst, nothing simply straight on.



*Congratulations*, I consoled myself, talking to him in my head, *you just made the top of my shit list. 'Till now, I'd never dreamed how easy it would be to really despise you.*

I actually don't hate well, or easily. I've never hated a lot at all. In fact, I have to work on it to get a good loathing going most of the time. I think outside of Baker, my only other real object of derision was Professor Grodeman, my English 105 professor. He made me detest him, on purpose I think, getting on my case all the time because I could remember the passage had read "the flowers were heavy with the dawn dew" instead of "the flowers were heavy with the dew of dawn."

I'd already told him I was a speed reader with an eidetic memory. Reciting obscure passages from obscure books off the middle of the reading list was hardly a problem. He'd bait me almost every class and get furious when I got it right. I was having enough problems in school, being so much younger than everybody else. He made my first year at college intolerable, especially since I was majoring in English Lit and had him for two courses. The whole thing culminated in that term paper for Greek Mythology. Either he had to take a hike, or I had to stay out of his way quote-wise to get an A.

I was on a scholarship, I needed that A. I spent a lot of time on that stupid paper examining the psychological symbolism in *The Iliad*, making sure I put absolutely nothing in it to get him mad. I didn't use a single quote, in fact. I just referred to specific passages in a vague, general way.

The day before the paper was due, Grodeman actually did take a hike when some relative died in South Carolina and he took off for the reading of the will. The sub gave me a C minus.

"Your thesis is good and your writing lucid, but your argument is weak. Next time, employ more primary-source quotations, less general analysis."

Grodeman came back but wouldn't change my mark. It pulled my final grade down to a B+ and I had to challenge the class over the summer and write another paper. Thank God, I had a different teacher. I got my A, talked to the Dean and managed to keep my scholarship.

The first day of the next term I got up real early, went to Grodeman's house and painted all his windows black. He never showed up for classes that day. I was hoping he'd get fired, but he was too valuable.

I never thought my mouth would taste that kind of bile again and it never did, until Baker.

Despite my newfound animosity, fortune shone on me. I managed to catch the important part of the prep class, even though I wasn't sure if I'd get paid for doing nothing except standing around, drinking coffee, and wishing Baker dead. I stopped thinking about the gig altogether less than five minutes into class. We got involved talking about a string of precedents, I was able to recite a few the original attorneys hadn't found, and the time flew. Before I knew it, the instructor was promising to stick around for a few more hours to continue the discussion in the lounge. I checked my watch; it was five already. Without thinking, I hightailed it over to Neil's pre-school.

Just as I realized what I'd done, Sharon pulled up. We went in together to see Neil's teacher.

"Really, Mr. and Mrs. Gordon, Neil is a model pupil. He listens well, he plays nicely with the other children, he always puts away his toys and books. He does have a problem at nap time. I usually have to give him a book to look at because he just can't settle down. Other than that, we have no complaints. He's doing very well. He knows his alphabet and his numbers up to 100, and he's putting words together by himself. I think he'll be more than ready for kindergarten next year. He could really have gone this year, if it weren't for his birthday being on the wrong side of the cut-off date."

Mrs. McKay smiled at us both, so pleased to be able to give a good report on one of her students. Sharon's sigh was like a five-ton blanket; my shoulders drooped from the weight.

"In other words, he's really a good boy, it's just with his brother that he's impossible."

"He has a brother? He's never mentioned him."

I'd have laughed, but Sharon's exhale claimed the air.

"He has a brother. He hates his brother. He says he loves his brother, but he keeps trying to kill his brother."

Mrs. McKay's face was somewhere between blank and astonished. We got up to leave, Sharon held out her hand.

"Thank you, Mrs. McKay. Please keep Neil away from books about torture and poisonings and Indian massacres and such."

“Mrs. Gordon! We don’t have any books like that around the children.”

“Of course not.”

I took my son home. Sharon picked up Jake from the babysitter’s. The boys ran upstairs together as soon as they got home. They were real quiet for a while, then crash, Jake’s howl rang out. Sharon slumped down at the table, her head in her hands, muttering. I headed for the stairs. Tonight, I told myself more firmly than ever. *I leave tonight after they all go to bed. For this I gave up a Ph.D.? For this I turned my back on my parents, my almost fiancée, my tribe, my home state, my carefully planned academic career? For this I endured Monty Weitzer?*

I came down into the kitchen after chastising Neil and wiping off Jake’s bloody nose. Sharon was at the stove. I wrapped my arms around her from behind, she squirmed out of my grasp.

“Howard, we have to talk.”

“Okay, sure, fine, we’ll take Neil to a child psychologist.”

“Not about Neil. About us.”

“Oh, come on, Shar, don’t start with the family counseling thing, not now.”

“I don’t think counseling is the answer.”

“What? You’re worried about me taking the bar? Really? You know I’ll pass. And if I take Jesus’ offer, we’ll have medical coverage in three months, even before I get the results.”

“I don’t care about the bar right now!”

“Well, what’s the matter?”

She turned to look at me, her whole body one big sigh. I knew what was coming, I realized—the same conversation we’d had a million times. She doesn’t think I can make it. She wants me to call Jesus, tell him I’m taking the bar exam next week, I’ll take his offer to clerk until I get word, join the firm after that.

God, how many times do we have to go over this? This is exactly why I’ve gotta get out of here. How can anybody get anywhere with so much non-support? I was there for her when she got pregnant with Neil. Why can’t she be here for me now, just when my career is about to take off?

All we've really ever had was the sex. It's so obvious. Now even more than ever. She's just going to have to learn to live with it. I'm an actor, I'm going to stay an actor, and that's final.

"Howard, I want a divorce."

# JOHN AINSWORTH

WHAT A PERFECT NIGHT, JOHN AINSWORTH THOUGHT as he walked briskly across the parking lot toward the dark cable TV studio. He noted with satisfaction that no one else was around at all, not even on the lighted tennis courts at the other end of the vast Orange County park. He slowed down, though, as he approached the door. Someone was there waiting for him, which certainly wasn't perfect.

John Ainsworth was a very careful man. He'd gone to elaborate measures, like he always did, to ensure that no one from the community college knew he was using the studio on a non-instruction night. He'd left different messages for both girlfriends so neither could trace his whereabouts. And he'd paid some street junkie twenty-five bucks to get him hot but not jerk him off so he'd be in the perfect mood for the evening.

"You have to get up pretty early in the morning," John Ainsworth always said, "to put one over on John Ainsworth." But now, all his preparations might be for naught. It was never good for the boy to get there

before he'd had a chance to set up. Too damn much time for too damn many questions.

"John, is that you?" said a voice near the door. He breathed a sigh of relief and picked up his pace. It was only Biddley, on time for a change. Biddley had a bad habit of coming late (and then, when things got going, coming late). John liked to have everything worked out between them before the boy came, although he never sampled any of the goodies Biddley brought, some of which he could swear had been made up in Elliott's kitchen sink that morning. A person can't be too careful, after all, and the fact is, Biddley's elevator didn't quite go all the way to the top. Still, he added a nice touch to the proceedings, and he could always be counted on to help keep things under control, if it came to that.

"Elliott, I'm glad you're here." John shook Biddley's hand warmly before letting them both in and snapping on the lights. "I think we're going to make a good one tonight. Did you remember to bring something extra-special for our star?"

"Oh, nothing to worry about there, my friend," Elliott answered. "I chose the boy myself, and recalculated just for him. He's got a wonderful body and a good attitude, he's overpoweringly crude and almost as offensive as that blond last year, but this one's even better because he's naturally brutal and nervous and built like a brick shithouse. I'm telling you, when he goes down, you're going to sleep well for a month, I've been looking forward to this all day," he finished with a smile as they started opening up the studio and warming up the equipment.

Sometime later, Jeff Portman cautiously knocked on the outside door of the studio. He looked again at the piece of paper in his hand and checked, again, the address on the side of the building. It was the right place, but it sure didn't look like any television studio he'd ever imagined.

Inside, John and Elliott had finished setting up and were laughing over a glass of the wine Elliott had thoughtfully brought. John came to the door and let Jeff in. He put his arm around Jeff's shoulders and smiled into his eyes.

"Good evening, son, I'm glad you could make it," John said in a kind voice. "It's not always easy to find this place in the dark. I hope you didn't have any trouble."

Jeff had gotten so wound up and nervous about the screen test that he was beyond fury and was consequently caught totally off guard by

John's fatherly manner. He visibly relaxed as John took him around the studio and showed him the equipment they would be working with, calling it all "state-of-the-art." Jeff loved state-of-the-art equipment. He even loved the sound of the phrase. John used it several more times, even when showing Jeff the six-year-old control room, cut off from the actual studio by a hallway and two doors, and the eight-year-old panel and monitors the college had salvaged from one of the half-dozen bankrupt studios in the area. By the time they'd made their way to the filming area, marked off with white tape and focused on by two visible cameras, Jeff had relaxed all the way down to terror.

Suddenly, John took Jeff by the shoulders. "Son," he said, "I want this to be a good screen test for you. I want this to be a great screen test for you. I know you may be a little nervous—oh, I know how it is, I've been there myself! And you may not fully understand everything that will be going on here tonight. But trust me, I know what I'm doing. I want to help you make one magnificent screen test. I want this to be so good, you'll never do a test again. Will you trust me to do what's right? Do I have your faith, Jeff?"

Jeff's face broke into wide, cocky grin. "Well, shit, yeah, Mr. A, you got my faith. I ain't gonna fuck around onaccounta it's 'bout time I come 'cross somebody what knows his shit, after all the fuckin' assholes I been workin' with, you wouldn't believe."

Back in the control room, Elliott was adjusting the sound levels for Jeff's voice. He and John had brought a non-directional mike up from the floor since they wanted to capture Jeff and only Jeff. Elliott made a final check of the monitors and noted with satisfaction that both cameras were aimed level with the boy's face. When the platform was in place, the shot would be perfect. Elliott gave John the all-clear signal over the loudspeaker system.

"Who the fuck is that?" Jeff demanded, startled out of his superficial poise.

"Why, Jeff," Ainsworth said, "you didn't think we were the only ones here, did you? I can't do this whole thing myself, this is a major project we're putting together. Besides, if it was just you and me, you might feel compromised, and I wouldn't want that."

He winked at the boy.

“Yeah, right Mr. A,” Jeff smirked. “No offense or nothin, but if I hadda put you down, one more dude more or less, it don’t matter, ya know what I’m talkin’?”

John laughed and clapped him on the back as Elliott gushed into the room.

“Hi, Jeff, Elliott Biddley,” he said, holding out his hand. “I went out of my way to make time to be here tonight to help with your screen test, and I’m glad I did because when I saw you yesterday, something inside of me said yes, this boy has something, this boy has something that should be captured on film, and I don’t mind telling you that I was instrumental in getting you this test because I foresee great things from you on film tonight, great things, I can feel the electricity already. Don’t you feel it, John?”

“Absolutely,” John smiled. “Jeff, I think it’s time we got started. Why don’t we begin by you telling us something about yourself while we let the cameras roll? They’re all set, so just stay on this mark while Mr. Biddley and I go back into the control room to work the remotes. After we get some tape of you more or less naturally, we’ll have you change and see what you look like in something different, all right? And Jeff,” he patted Jeff’s shoulder once again, “loosen up, boy! Let’s have some fun with it all.”

John and Elliott left Jeff on the set and went back to the control room, talking quietly between themselves. Over the intercom speaker Elliott said, “Jeff, why don’t you tell us a little bit about your home town? Just look into the camera on your left, that’s right, that’s good, and tell us where you come from.”

Jeff considered the request for a moment, then remembered how Suki had said these people could really make his career. “Yeah, well, like I come from right outside Cicero, man,” he finally answered. “Back home, I got my own ‘hood, I was The Man.”

“What did you do for a living back home, Jeff?” Elliott prompted.

Jeff snorted. “Shit, I didn’t need no living back there, dude, like I said, I was The Man. I took what I needed, you know what I’m talkin’? I got everything I need, people give me shit just to keep me happy. Only I wasn’t into the stuff onaccounta too many of my boys died and I ain’t stupid or nothin’, I ain’t no junkie.”



“What about a girl, Jeff? Did you have a girl?” came the disembodied voice.

Jeff sneered at the camera. “No, man, I didn’t have A girl—I had all of ‘em, plenty of girls, all the girls I wanted. I had pussy everywhere, had to rest up on Sundays just to keep my health. I musta fucked every cunt on my turf, one time or other and three times on Saturday. Man, I was The Man.”

“Tell us how you got laid, Jeff,” came over the speaker. Jeff started to get angry, then stopped. This wasn’t going the way he’d expected, but he didn’t want to blow his whole future just for the pleasure of hearing a few bones crack. Suki had said, out here, lots of fruits have power.

“What the fuck do you wanna know, man?” he asked.

“Just give us as much detail as you can remember,” John’s voice came over the speaker for the first time. “We’re trying to get a feel for you here. Bear with us, all right? Your words can always be edited, but if we can get the right expressions, it’ll give the test more life, and we’ll have a better idea of what you can do. We’ve found this kind of discussion to be most helpful in bringing out the masculinity I’m looking for. You know, I have other projects to cast besides just clothing commercials! You just might be right for a major movie role I have open. Just answer the question, with as much detail as you can remember.”

That was more like it! “Okay, you asked for it,” Jeff grinned. He’d give these cocksuckers an earful, make ‘em sorry they had a left hand. He settled himself into his standard he-man pose, arms behind his head, ample chest fully displayed. How about that for masculinity?

“Okay, so like, there was this one pussy who useta follow me ‘round all the time, right? So I’d have to pump her hole every coupla days just to fuckin’ get her off my case, ya know what I’m talkin’? She was a okay lay only she was too fuckin’ used, like she was too loose, and she wouldn’t let me slam her tail without a lot of bitchin’ and bitin’, so finally she just got too borin’ and I passed her on, I give her ass to my buddy Kirby, man. He’ll screw anything, it don’t make no matter to him.”

“But it matters to you, doesn’t it, Jeff?”

“No way, man, a cunt is a cunt,” Jeff laughed, then he stopped. “Whoa, wait a minute, I’m no fuckin’ homo, dude, if that’s what you’re talkin’, that kinda shit just fuckin’ turns my gut, like I wanna puke, you got it? That kinda shit for sure fuckin’ matters, whadda think?”

In the control room, John had to close the mike. "Lighten up, will you, Elliott? Shit, you're practically drooling."

The ad man stretched his neck and took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm okay,"

Over the opened mike he said, "Have you ever had sex with a man, Jeff? Were you ever molested as a child?"

Jeff could no longer control his natural instincts. "What the fuck kinda shit is this!? I don't suck no fuckin' cock, man, and if any motherfuckin' asshole ever tried to fuckin' touch me, I'd rip the sonofabitch a new asshole, you got me, sucker? I'd fuckin' tear that motherfucker apart end to end and leave him in a bloody lump, you just fuckin' watch me! It ain't like I ain't never took no one out before, 'cause I done it and I don't take no asshole shit from no cocksucker, get that straight right now."

Once again Elliott switched off the mike. "God, he's fantastic, isn't he?" he raved to John. "Look at that face, look at those fists! God, this is going to be great!"

John threatened to hose Elliott down if he didn't chill out. Over the mike, he said, "Take it easy, Jeff. Remember, we're just trying to get some good shots; nobody's going to bother you."

Jeff glared at the camera in front of him. He was trying to decide if he should stay or not when Elliott's voice came back over the speaker. "Tell us about being The Man, Jeff," he asked. "Did you ever bully anybody, beat somebody up, just for the fun of it?"

Jeff snorted again. "Well, shit, for sure, man. That's how I got my rep, that's how I got to be The Man! I'm the strongest of the strong, bud, nobody fucks with us, onaccounta like nobody fucks with me, ya know what I'm talkin'? I used to pick like just any asshole up on the street lots of times and put him down, man, just kick his balls up through his fuckin' teeth, cause you gotta do that to show the cocksuckers they can't mess with you when you gotta protect yours and everybody wants a piece of your turf. That's the way it is, man, it's just necessary, man, that's all, like just totally necessary."

John reached over to close off the mike. "I've had enough, haven't you?" he asked Elliott. "I think it's time we changed Jeffrey into something more comfortable."

"No, wait, I want to hear more about whoever it was he took out."

“Elliott, give it a rest. We don’t need him spouting blood and killings. We’re not here to take his confession. It’s enough to know he’s not an innocent bystander in life.”

Elliott argued for a bit more, but John insisted, so the ad-man left John to reset the tapes while he went in to shake Jeff’s hand.

“Well done, well done, Jeff,” he gushed. “That was simply marvelous, we got some great footage, and don’t worry about the verbiage, that’ll all be edited out, but the body language, the way you hold yourself and move, well, that came over loud and clear, just what we were hoping for. You were perfect, really perfect, I can’t believe you haven’t done this before, you certainly are a natural, what power, what strength, what screen presence!”

“Hey, what’d ya expect?” Jeff said with a shrug, beaming under the praise. Elliott kept it up as they walked and had no trouble at all leading Jeff through the studio, down the hall, and out the front door toward the parking lot. When they hit the cold air, though, Jeff instinctively knew something was wrong.

“Whoa! Shit! Where the fuck are you taking me?” he demanded. “Is that it? I come all the way down here and answer your shitass questions for nothing?”

“No, no, Jeff, don’t be ridiculous,” Elliott soothed. “The thing of it is, we don’t really have access to all the rooms in the building at night, just the studio and the control room, actually, well, sometimes one or two of the other rooms, but John forgot the master key back at his apartment and he lives all the way in Chatsworth, you know, so, you see, it wouldn’t really be feasible to go back for them, but don’t worry, it’s no big deal, it’s happened before, a man like John Ainsworth has more important things on his mind than to worry about every little key to every little door, so usually what we do is, when we need to do a change of clothes, we have to improvise, so to speak. Where’s your car?”

Since there were only three cars in the lot and Elliott knew which one was John’s, he had guided Jeff towards the third vehicle. Now he showed Jeff the clothes he’d had in his other hand all the time, and motioned for him to open the car door.

“What am I suppos’ to do, change in the fuckin’ car!?”

“That’s right, don’t worry, no one’s around, no one will see.” Elliott handed over the clothes. “Here you go, just put these on, okay? I know

they fit, because they're the same ones you wore at the photo session yesterday and you did look so marvelous in them, in fact, that's what made me sit up and take notice to begin with, which is why I called your agent to arrange for this test, because I think you're going to be great, just simply great on film, I really think you are."

"I'll hold your things for you, it's getting chillier, hurry up now. After the session, you may want to just change back in the studio, I'll hold your stuff, nothing's going to happen to it. Here, give me your keys."

It took some time for Jeff to struggle out of his things and squirm into the suit Elliott had brought. True to his word, it was the same one Jeff had worn first thing yesterday morning. It had been too tight then, and now, after a day's worth of heedless eating and drinking, it was even tighter.

"Shit, dude, these fuckin pants are cutting off my balls, man, I can't hardly stuff it in!"

"Oh no, no, Jeff, they look fine, they're just right, the tight look hits this coming spring, it's very hot, and they show off your masculinity perfectly, it's very now," Elliott assured him. Jeff got out of the car and nonchalantly posed against it.

"Just perfect," Elliott said. He waited until Jeff had walked past him toward the building, pulling at the seam up his butt, so the boy couldn't notice when Elliott left his street clothes in the car and pocketed the car keys. Elliott caught up to him just as Jeff got to the studio door.

"Look, Jeff, let's get serious for a moment," the ad-man said, looking around as if they were being spied on. "It's really, really important to me that this test go well, I've put myself and my reputation on the line for you because I could see you really are something special, that's my job, spotting talent, I know what I'm talking about. Now, I can see the pants are just a little tight, and I can see that you're just a little uncomfortable, and I know that being uncomfortable can make a person just a little nervous, and being nervous can just destroy what would otherwise be a really excellent screen test that could not only get you this commercial but a lot of other work, too, if I know this business at all, and I do."

"Okay, well, now, I'm not trying to talk you into anything, but I've got a bottle, just a little whiskey here, with me now, right inside. Mr. Ainsworth will never have to know, but sometimes, you already know this I'm sure, just a little shot could very probably help you clear your

mind of some of these annoying frustrations, and put you in a maybe, shall we say, calmer state of being, if you will, so that when you go back in there, back in front of those cameras again, and the real work begins, well, maybe you'll have a little edge over the next guy, if you know what I mean. Because we're not talking about any small potatoes commercial here anymore, not hardly, not with the talent I just saw in there, please, I know my business and I heard what John, that is, Mr. Ainsworth, had to say. We're talking that movie role now, a major movie role, possibly no doubt the biggest major movie role you could ever hope to find on a night like this, I mean, I can only be honest with you, after all, you deserve that much when you're going for this kind of a major movie role, which you could have, it's already practically in the bag if I know my business, unless you make a mistake when you go back in there, which you could if you're too nervous or not settled down because the pants are tight, which I can see they are. Do you want a shot?"

Jeff readily agreed, and was so excited by the repeated enticement of the words "major movie role," which Elliott took care to repeat several more times, that he didn't notice exactly how much he was drinking, or what it tasted like. He didn't even find it suspicious when Biddley advised him to walk around the courtyard for a few minutes to let it "work into you for a while."

Whatever was in the liquor worked in pretty well; the last time around the courtyard, Jeff found himself climbing the stairs in the studio, even though he didn't remember there being any stairs earlier, and, in fact, didn't remember coming back inside. He was alone again on the set, but the lights seemed to have moved—instead of being overhead, now they were shining right in his eyes. As he squinted toward where the camera should be, a voice came from the control room.

"Good, Jeff, you're looking real good," John boomed over the speaker. "Boy, those pants are pretty tight, though. Are they too uncomfortable to work in?"

Jeff looked down in surprise. He had forgotten all about the tight pants. In fact, he'd forgotten about his legs altogether. They were there, though, and he spent some time looking at them, until he realized he was still bent over. What was he supposed to be thinking about, again? Suddenly he jerked up.

“Hey,” he said out loud, “what’s going on?” He slapped his hip where he used to keep his gun, but it wasn’t there, and he couldn’t remember why he’d hit himself.

Jeff heard voices, but they were too vague to understand. It didn’t matter, they seemed friendly enough. One of them, in fact, was right in his ear. He flopped his head to one side and found John Ainsworth smiling next to him, Elliott Biddley’s face bobbing somewhere in the background.

“I said those pants look awfully tight, Jeff,” John repeated. “I’m worried your balls are going to get crushed.”

“Yeah? Shit, ‘sokay,” Jeff said swaying slightly, “I don’t feel nothin’ down there now.”

“Why, that’s terrible!” John’s face swooned away and back rhythmically, like a snake. Jeff grabbed at it and started laughing when he missed, but his laughter sounded silly, almost like a ripping noise. He doubled up, giggling and stumbling. It felt wonderful to laugh, wonderful and warm—warm on his balls, warm on his ass. No, wait, that wasn’t warm, it was cold—and painful!

“Fuckin’ tight pants,” Jeff thought almost lucidly, but when he reached behind to pull them loose they were gone and something with a dozen arms pushed him back over, farther and farther. He struggled to straighten up, but that made the pain worse. When he opened his mouth to yell, an awful taste swam over his tongue. In desperation, he grabbed for his gun again but it still wasn’t there. He threw out his arm to thrust whatever was attacking him away, but it was stronger and faster, or he was weaker and slower. It caught his wrist and shoved his hand into something wet.

Jeff jerked his head up. John Ainsworth’s face was in front of his with a wild grin on it. With his last shred of focus he screamed “NO!” A blinding pain exploded in his face, and his rectum burst into a thousand pieces.

“A beautiful, beautiful shoot, wouldn’t you say?” Elliott chuckled gleefully as he and John cleaned up in the men’s room. “Just as perfect as perfect can be. When we edit this one down, I want an extra copy for my brother-in-law. I can probably get close to a grand if I play it up right, which, of course, you know I can.”

“Jesus, Biddley, what did you give him?” John answered, snapping back from his own pleasant musings. “He was so far gone he didn’t even feel it when I pulled his balls out, I thought he was never gonna get hard. Are you sure he’s gonna wake up? I’ve already got a buyer, but I told you, it had to be straight SM.”

Elliott shrugged. “What difference does it make? Who’s going to miss him? Who’s even going to notice he’s gone? You can cut it both ways, take the money from both ends. I can get ten times the amount for a good snuff, and this one was certainly good, at least it was for me and I know you had a grin on your face a mile wide, too bad the camera didn’t pick that one up! Besides,” he finished drying his hands and leaned back with his arms folded, “the stuff should wear off in twenty-four hours, more or less, and probably won’t kick back on him more than two or three times, although, of course, I did use a little bit more than my pharmacist friend recommended. We can peddle it as a snuff either way, I’ve got a commitment for ten G’s if I can prove it, so I’ll take a few snaps when I dump him just in case, who’s to know?”

After a last check of the reordered studio, John and Elliott walked over to stare down at Jeff. He was stretched out naked on a tarpaulin, his unseeing eyes only slightly open, his breathing strained as if he had just run a marathon.

“Well, if he dies, let’s let him do it somewhere else,” John said. “If he bleeds too much more, it’s gonna go right through.”

“Seems a shame, doesn’t it?” Elliott mused aloud. “One brief bit of fun and then.... Oh well.”

He and John each grabbed two corners of the thick mat Jeff was laid out on. Slowly, they lugged him out of the building and dumped him in the back seat of his car.

“You’d better leave it somewhere near the county line,” John told Elliott, who was already getting behind the wheel. “Try to make it somewhere near a bus stop, so you can get back here before dawn.”

“I won’t be long, get to work on those tapes,” Elliott answered. “I can’t wait to see the finished product.”

Elliott drove out toward the freeway while John went back to rewind the tapes. He’d do the editing later, after he’d lived with it for a while.

“Never try to do a mix-down the same day,” John always told his students. “It’s too fresh, you’re too eager. You get sloppy and make careless mistakes.” Besides, it would be more fun to wait for Elliott so they could work on it together. He did watch the tape from the third camera, though, the one he always hid to the side of the platform when Biddley wasn’t around. Sometimes, he could get some really good shots of the ad-man’s abundant cock going in and out, in and out—one good close-up could make the whole film.

Five minutes later, John Ainsworth took all the tapes out of the machines, checked to make sure there was nothing left in the computer memory and shut down the equipment. He closed up the control room, turned off all the lights, secured all the inner doors, then left and locked the outer door behind him. He stowed the briefcase with the tapes in it in his trunk, got behind the wheel and headed for home.

“Biddley, you idiot, I got you this time!” he thought gleefully as he slowed for a light. “That third camera finally came through! A perfect, clear shot of your face, my friend. What I can do with this!”

Actually, he didn’t really know what he could do with it, at least not at that precise moment. But John knew somehow, sometime, it was going to come in handy. In the meantime, he wasn’t about to wait around for Elliott Biddley to come back and see the film. No sense showing his hand before the game was played. He’d work on these babies alone, and not at his office, or Julia’s, or Susie’s or any of the other places Biddley knew about. He wasn’t taking any chances with this prize.

“I always knew there was a reason to keep that place,” he said to himself, referring to the rundown apartment he’d been holding onto for tax purposes in what was now a highly questionable, if not downright dangerous neighborhood. “Who’s going to look for me on Berendo?”

*You have to get up pretty early in the morning to put one over on John Ainsworth!*



# SHARON

“WHAT?”  
I’d hoped for some kind of reaction, but as usual, his face was impassive.

“You heard me, Howard, I want a divorce,” I said, only a little less firmly than before. From long exposure to his practicing, I knew the clenched hands and rigid body were supposed to mean he was disturbed, but whether it was because he was upset at the thought of losing me or just irritated that I’d beaten him to the punch wasn’t clear. With Howard, nothing is ever clear. You could get more expression out of a plate pattern.

“No. Out of the question. No. It’s not going to happen.” The clenched hands were starting to show white around the knuckles, his portrayal of great passion. It’s a wonder to me that it’s a wonder to him why he can’t land a real acting job.

“I want you out of here,” I said. “I can’t stand to have you around anymore. Do you understand? Get out! I know what you think of me, shrew, bitch, liar, slut. Well, I don’t have to take it anymore. Go. Get your

stuff and leave. I'll explain to the kids in the morning, in my own way. I want you out of here, now, tonight."

"No. Absolutely not. You can't kick me out, this is my house. I'm not going anywhere, I don't have to go anywhere. This is my house."

His needle seemed to be stuck. His back was so arrow straight, if I'd put a match to his feet he'd probably have shot into space like a rocket. For some reason, it strengthened my resolve and my voice got stronger.

"Get out, Howard. I've already contacted a lawyer. I'm going to file in the morning. I don't ever want to see you again."

"I'm not going. You can't kick me out." He stared at me a few seconds longer, then marched across the kitchen to the back door.

"Don't slam the door, please. I don't want the boys to wake up."

"You can't kick me out," he said as he left, swinging the door violently, but catching it before it had a chance to rattle the house. Gravel crunched as the car pulled out of the drive a few moments later. I was left alone with my husband's denial and Angie's echo in my ears, "Howard slapped you and raped you and held your wrists so tight it left marks."

I should have known this was coming, his leaving me. I'm amazed we ever got married, although at the time, he was much more vibrant, much more demonstrative. I blame it all on those stupid acting classes. They've stilted him. They've made him into a caricature of himself. He tries so hard to emote all the time, he's thought himself into a straight-jacket. He figures he has to get out or he'll have to become a lawyer. He hates the kids, I think he hates all kids. The only time he comes alive nowadays is when he forgets himself like he used to, when he's talking about some legal precedent or case. Back then, at the beginning, he was more than alive, he was vivacious. The night he proposed, in fact, he was downright chaotic, he even wanted to be a father. How could I have been so wrong?

We'd had a wonderful time getting to know each other. He has a birthmark just under his hairline at the nape of his neck, and another one at the very bottom of his back on the right. I found them both sometime during the second week, while he was nosing my bottom half and I was rummaging around his top. But then I told him I was pregnant and he was gone. I mean really gone. He didn't call, he didn't answer his phone, he didn't take messages through his agent. If I hadn't been so insistent on going to my own doctor and had simply gone to

the clinic Angie told me about, we wouldn't have Neil today. That very Wednesday I came home from work to find Howard on my doorstep with some cockamamie story about having so much trouble finding my address in the phone book.

"So why didn't you just call the office?" I asked him. "You have the number."

"I didn't want anyone to know I was calling you," he claimed. "Didn't think you'd want anyone to know we'd been together. I've had a hard time thinking at all, can't get you off my mind, can't sleep. I'm miserable."

He looked as miserable as he sounded. Not the kind of miserable where the guy is disheveled and needs a shave and hasn't changed his clothes in a week. The real kind of miserable. He kept turning his back so I wouldn't see him swipe at the corner of his eye, and he kept wiping his nose with the base of his thumb. He was dressed impeccably, of course, Howard always is. But his clothes didn't seem to fit, because he was all scrunched up like his stomach hurt, or his chest. I sat down on the stoop. He stood over me. What followed was like something out of Monty Python's Theatre of the Absurd.

"I'm just not ready to get married," he said in a whimper that sounded just like his youngest son does now. "This whole father thing is out of my league, I'm not ready for it. Why should I have to change? I just got accepted to acting school, I can go places. I'm not going to be modeling much longer. I've got an audition for a TV spot, a good part, a speaking part. I can't put all my plans on hold for you."

All I said was, "Okay." I mean, I already had the appointment. I was going to take half a day off work. I'd be back to normal by the next morning. I wasn't about to get sentimental about a slightly enlarged seed planted by a guy whose middle name I didn't even know. I tried to tell him all this, but he'd gotten stuck on the "okay." Suddenly, he got real tough, like he was taking charge.

"What are you going to do?" he demanded, standing up straight with his arms folded.

"Get an abortion, of course. It's legal. What did you think?"

If he'd never taken any of those dumb acting classes, he'd still be able to show me what he showed me then. I can't even describe all the emotions I saw flood over his face: relief, horror, pain, terror. I thought he was going to scream because he was waving his arms around and

pacing frantically back and forth, but when his mouth started moving I could barely hear the words.

I finally figured out he was saying, “Don’t kill my baby.”

“It’s not a baby yet, it’s not more than a fingerful of tissue,” I told him. “There’s nothing to kill.”

“Don’t kill my baby, please don’t kill my baby,” he kept whispering, or at least mouthing while he stormed around furiously. “Please don’t kill my baby.”

I was at a loss, something that should have prepared me for the years to come if I had only known. The Incredible Hulk and that other guy Bill Bixby played, both at the same time, frantic and quiet. I told him I wasn’t about to be a single mother, and I wasn’t about to carry a baby full term just so I could give it up to somebody else.

“I’m not Catholic,” I said.

“Neither am I,” he said. “I’m tribal. But I’m not ready to be a father.”

“Okay, so it’s all settled. I’ll have the abortion.”

“I’m just getting going on a career. It takes a long time to break into TV and the movies.”

Like I said, Theatre of the Absurd.

“Right, right, so I abort, I go back to work, you go back to Hollywood. Everybody’s happy. It’s been nice knowing you.” He was blocking the doorway. “Can I go in now?”

“You’ll have to marry me,” he said. “We’ll have to get married and have the baby, we’ll have to live together at least for a while, for show if nothing else, then we can split up later, I’ll keep supporting you, we can both have our lives. There isn’t any other choice unless you can figure out how to not be pregnant without having an abortion.”

“What?!”

“Marry me. Please. I want you to, really, it’s the only way.”

“Mister, you’re losing it. I’m not going to marry you. I’m going to have you committed. Now let me get to my front door...”

“Marry me, Sharon! I can’t let my baby girl grow up without a mother or father! I might even love you! Why not? I could, if I wanted to. Yeah, okay so I do, I know I do. There, I’ve said it. Marry me, Sharon, I love you, I have a tribe, I have roots. We need each other, we’re a perfect match.”

I must have been losing it myself, because something in all that started to get to me. It might have been the passion. It might have been whatever was in his touch that sent shivers up my spine when he clutched me. It might have been all that confusion that somehow managed to come across endearing instead of insulting. He kept talking in circles, first saying he didn't want to give anything up for me or the baby, then insisting we get married. It was getting dark and we were getting loud and the neighbors were starting to shout obscenities from their windows. He had stopped trying not to cry and was shaking my shoulders. He tried to kiss me. He threw himself around like a madman. He fell at my feet and begged me to marry him. Tears ran down his face the whole time.

No man had ever cried in front of me before, much less for me. I ended up crying, too. I could hardly believe it. We went upstairs for a drink and fell into bed, which is how we've finished every argument or discussion we've ever had since. I said I'd marry him and he danced. He actually danced around the room, like you see in the movies.

He called his parents to tell them we were getting married that weekend. They came in, even though we did it at City Hall, nothing fancy. I couldn't believe it. And they were nice people, really nice, not phony nice. They didn't seem to mind a bit that I was white. Pretty heady stuff. The judge who did the ceremony called me Mrs. Gordon. I thought I had either died or was just about to wake up to find I had my period. The only catch was when the Gordons wanted to meet my parents.

Papa had been dead for years. I remember wishing I had told Howard my mother was dead, too. I didn't want to expose him to her, or tell her I was pregnant again. Thank God she kept her mouth shut. I almost died when she showed up at the front door in that same ratty old house-dress.

I told her Howard and I had known each other for years. I said I'd talked about him a hundred times before. She had no memory left so she believed me. Howard was outraged at the lie. I said it was necessary because my mother was very religious and wouldn't accept him any other way. I said she'd been real sick so we were lucky to still have her with us at all. In those days, it was all so easy. The Gordons were either incredibly gracious or incredibly dumb.

“Mrs. Ables, we’re so delighted to meet you,” my new mother-in-law said. “I know it all happened so fast, but I think Howie and your daughter are going to be just wonderful together. We want you to know we have no problem with the intermarriage.”

“Susie’s always had a few problems in her head,” my mother said with her eyes at half-mast. “She’s going to need help for a long time yet. I don’t know if your Howie knows about that, does he?”

“Susie?” Howie said.

Who could blame him?

“My sister,” I jumped in. “Mom worries a lot about my sister. She was the baby. Susie’s fine now. She lives in Florida. She has a wonderful boyfriend and a dog. Mom’s been real sick. She sometimes gets confused. You know, that awful memory problem...” I let my voice trail away, hoping they would think I was talking about Alzheimer’s so I wouldn’t have to go too far out on the limb.

The Gordons were great. They picked it up right away. I never saw people smile so much, although, thinking back, I don’t remember Howard’s dad ever actually saying anything.

“Well, Mrs. Ables,” Howard’s mom said, “I’m sure everything will work out fine.”

We all sat there, looking at the floor and each other: three grinning Gordon faces, one grimacing Ables-Gordon smile, and one bored, hung-over facade of humanity. After a few more minutes, we got up to leave.

“You going now?” my mother said from her chair.

“Yeah, mom, it was so good to see you,” I prattled before anyone else could say anything. “Now, you keep taking your medicine. And don’t argue with the nurse anymore. She knows what’s best.” I turned to my new family. “She just stepped out for a few minutes so we could have our time alone.”

“Nurse?” my mother said.

“No, she’s not back yet. She’ll be here any minute,” I said, trying to hurry everybody out.

“Maybe we’d better stay until she comes back,” Mrs. Gordon whispered to me. “I wouldn’t want to leave your mother by herself like this.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” I said. “She’ll be fine. She’s alone all night, anyway. The nurse is only here during the day. She’s really not as bad as she looks right now. She probably just got up from her nap.”

“Nap?” my mother demanded. “I don’t take no nap.”

“Maybe you should help her up to bed,” Howard said. “Maybe she’s ready to take a nap now.”

“I really don’t think we should leave until the nurse gets back,” Mr. Gordon said.

Ables are always able, Papa used to say. Able to rise to any self-made crisis, that is.

“She doesn’t sleep upstairs anymore,” I assured them. “It’s too hard on her lower back. In fact, if we’ll just tiptoe away, she’ll probably fall right to sleep in that chair. It’s her favorite. We can hardly get her out of it anymore.”

“But we shouldn’t leave her alone.”

They were so damned considerate!

“Really, it would be best. She doesn’t do well when her routine is interrupted.”

I don’t know how I managed to get them all out of there. Fortunately, my mother obligingly dropped off. We could hear her snoring down the block at the car.

The Gordons took us to dinner at the Four Seasons, where Howard and I were honeymooning until he had to fly to Venice for a shoot a few days later. I was going to stay in town and find a new place for the two, soon to be three of us. Mrs. Gordon spent the time between courses offering one kind of help after another. While we were waiting for our dessert, she made some kind of gesture to Mr. Gordon. He passed it on to Howard, sort of a round-robin smoke signal, but with teeth. My new husband leaned over to me.

“Maybe you ought to call the house, make sure the nurse got back and your mom’s all right,” he whispered.

“That’s a good idea. I think I will,” I whispered back. “Do you have a quarter?”

“Thanks a bunch for the wonderful show,” I said when my mother answered on the sixth ring. “You really did me proud today.”

“Who is this?” she demanded, sharp and thick. We had been just in time, I realized. We’d caught her between drunks.

“It’s your daughter, Sharon. The one who didn’t fry her brains. Remember me? The one who came by this afternoon with my new husband and his parents? You almost convinced them to have the marriage annulled on the spot.”

“I don’t know where you get this shit, and I don’t know why you ever come around here. You’re not getting a dime from me.

“So you married that Injun, huh? Well, that’s just about all you’re good for, a lying, thieving squaw to a lying, thieving, drunken Injun. They all drink. He’ll end up a no-good bum, just like your father. And you can tell your kissy-ass in-laws that if they ever show their ugly red pussies around here again, I’ll pull out the sawed-off. I told you you’re not welcome in my house ever again, you disgusting little slut!”

My shrink says this episode was significant. I say it was par for the course. I went back to the table and told everybody that my mother was fine; she’d fallen asleep just like she was supposed to and, yes, the nurse was there. She would be spending the night, just to be safe. Everybody gave a little sigh of relief and flashed those big white teeth again.

I once asked my mother-in-law about them. She didn’t know what I was talking about. I’ve asked Howard, too but he doesn’t know. Neil has the exact same teeth. Gordon teeth I call them. Jake has normal teeth, like mine. Here’s hoping that’s the only Ables in him. Of course, at that point, I didn’t know there would be a Jake. I didn’t even know there would be a Neil. I thought there was going to be a Clarisse. Howard was convinced of it, too, only he thought her name would be Kathy. I certainly never thought our marriage would end with him walking out, just like my mother predicted.

“You did what?” Angie sounded aghast when I told her. Angie always sounds aghast after eight-thirty at night.

“I told him to get out. Why shouldn’t I? He was going to leave. I just said it first. He hates me. You know that. He thinks I’m a terrible mother. You should have heard what happened at Neil’s preschool today. It was all I could do to not make a scene right there. I don’t have to take this, you know.”

“I know you don’t have to take anything, I’m just not sure what it is you think you’ve been taking,” she came back.

“Good God, Angie! Don’t you ever listen? What have I been talking about all these years?”



“You mean the stuff about him playing with the boys past their bedtime? Or making love to you in the back seat of the car, out in the garage, so you two can have two seconds alone? Or about how much you hate being in the house alone when he’s on the road, how you sit up and wait for his call every night?”

“No! About—”

The boys had just gone down for the night. I put the phone down to make sure the bedroom door was closed. “About the lies and the rape and the names and all that,” I hissed into the phone. “About all the awful stuff he does and says.”

“But that’s all been a bunch of nightmares,” she hissed back. “You’re always telling me those things are nightmares, then you tell me you never had them at all.”

“Honestly, Angie! It’s a wonder we’ve been friends all these years,” I said. “What fantasy world are you living in today?”

“Me?? Sharon, have you been drinking again?”

I sighed. “No, Mom,” I said as sarcastically as I could. “You’re thinking about Susie again. I don’t have a drinking problem.”

“No, you don’t have a problem, not as long as you’ve got another bottle.”

“Angie, it’s past your bedtime, isn’t it? I think you need some sleep. You’re running off at the edge again.”

“Look, Sharon, I don’t care what you say about the wine or the nightmares or any of this shit, but I think you better think twice before you screw up a perfectly good marriage over a bunch of repressed hallucinations. I’ve known you for a long time, Shar, and I don’t think Howard’s ever done any of the things you accuse him of.”

“He left me!” I said.

“Because you told him to!”

“Because he was going to anyway!”

“No he wasn’t!”

“How the hell would you know? You don’t live here! He hates it here. He hates the kids. He hates being tied down to the house and the family. He wants a different woman. He thinks I’m a slut and an unfit mother. He was just about ready to leave. He already had his bags packed when I told him to just go ahead and take off. I can get along without him!”

“Sharon!”

I jerked the phone away from my ear. Her voice was so loud.

“What?” I said calmly.

“You’re losing your husband, a man who loves you to death and would do anything for you and his kids because of a bunch of freaky nightmares that you can’t separate from reality.”

“You’re nuts,” I said. “Everything to you is backwards since Marvin started talking about leaving his wife again. And here you are, swallowing the same bunch of crap for the umpteenth time.”

“Have you talked to your shrink about this?” she demanded.

“Marvin? No. Howard? Yes, a hundred times,” I answered. “He knows perfectly well it was coming to this.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“And what did he advise you to do?”

“He said...”

I couldn’t remember what he’d said. For some reason, I couldn’t come up with a glib line right then, either. Then I got it.

“He said, ‘Do it.’”

“Bullshit.”

“Angie, face it. Howard has left me and that’s that. Marvin is married and that’s that. Neither is ever going to come through for us the way we want them to. That’s life. I’m probably better off without mine. Yours should be taken out and shot in the groin. Are we meeting for lunch tomorrow?”

“I can’t, I have to get a project done. Besides, tomorrow isn’t Tuesday.”

“Fine. I’ll see you next Tuesday. Try to get a grip between now and then.”

“Doctor, heal thyself,” was all she said. She hung up. I got ready for bed and checked on the kids. They were sound asleep with dreamy smiles. I crawled between the sheets, exhausted. I was so totally worn out, emotionally and physically, I didn’t fight back even a little when Howard wormed his way on top of me in the middle of the night and savagely forced my legs open.

“Slut,” he seethed in my ear. “Dirty, disgusting, vile little slut, you’re just like your mother, you filthy, putrid, stinking slut.”

# ERIC

I USED THE EXTRA TIME GREG SPENT STARING at the Cranley's doorbell to straighten my cuffs and smooth down my tie. Again. Patience not being one of my many virtues, though, I finally reached past him to ring the damn thing myself. His hand shot out even faster and grabbed my wrist.

"Now, Ricky, you promise? None of my superiors is even slightly moderate, much less liberal. All I ask is that you do not attempt to discuss anything that has anything to do with those subjects about which you know nothing, and that you refrain from imparting any information on the one subject about which you know a great deal too much."

Keeping in mind Greg had recently spent \$1,700 on dental work, I forced my fists to relax.

"I swear," I spat for the 200,000th time, not even trying to figure out what the hell he'd just said. "I won't call any of the men bitches, the word dyke won't cross my lips, and I'll keep my fucking cock in my pants all night. Is that gonna be good enough for you? You think my intellect can handle that?"

“I never said you were dumb,” Greg said absently. “And please try not to swear.”

He looked bleak. I could feel the steam rising along my back.

“Ring. The. Bell,” I said, not swearing.

The bell was rung. The silence was deafening. The door was opened. And then, of course, I pulled out a gun and put a bullet through my brain.

Okay, so that’s not exactly what happened, but it sure as hell is what should have. What happened instead was Mrs. Cranley recognized me.

To say the least.

“Oh my God! It’s you!” she screamed. “I know you! You’re him, aren’t you? You are, you are, you’re the Achilles man! You’re Eric Baker! Right here in my house! Oh my God!”

She was so fucking excited—and loud—that of course all of the other guests in the vicinity turned around to look since, after all, it was me. I thought Greg was going to stroke out on the spot.

Mrs. C. didn’t notice, though, because she was too damned happy with her discovery. “You’re him! You’re him! I’ve seen you a million times! I bought my husband Achilles for Christmas last year! I love it! He loves it! I can’t believe it’s you! It is, isn’t it?! Oh my God! Come in! Come in!”

Achilles. I should have known. The gig Greg means when he calls me beefcake. The most wretched and sickeningly successful stupid photo layout of my entire career. It was one of those non-acting, bring-him-in-for-the-poster deals. They’d draped me in a Greek tunic that hung down to my navel and only just—and I mean only *just*—covered my nuts. I was leaning tough—the script said “tough”—against a spear shoved into the ground and “radiating” into the camera with a broken shield at my feet.

The copy read, “Achilles. Make Her Defenseless.”

Somebody got paid for that copy, too.

In case you couldn’t tell, it’s a cologne, a perfectly awful-smelling men’s cologne. Being that corny, I was sure the piece would never even make print much less have staying power, but it did, and sales for Achilles skyrocketed beyond the client’s wildest and my worst dreams. Women followed me down streets and parked themselves outside our front door, waiting, endlessly waiting. I did that mini-series and copped a nomina-

tion, did a bunch of guest shots and even a real strong cameo in a major film, but everybody remembers that stupid, fucking Achilles ad. This is my life. Do I get typecast as a starship captain or a doctor or a cowboy? No, no, I get stuck forever being the guy who plugs puke-in-a-bottle.

With Mrs. C. calling all her lady friends over to verify that it was indeed me, I didn't even have a chance to gawk at the rather palatial foyer I was being drawn into, with its ridiculously high ceiling and long, movie-set staircase that ended, no doubt, in room after room too magnificent to describe. Gregory had been here before and said he couldn't find words to do the house justice, but a few leaped to my mind without any problem: garish, ostentatious, tacky, pretentious. Nevertheless, since I wasn't gawking ("gawk" was Greg's word. "Don't gawk," he had said. I wasn't gawking), I tried to signal that none of this was my fault, but he was already wrapped in deep conversation—or at least that was the impression I was supposed to get, I'm sure. Mrs. C., on the other hand, seemed to think I'd been a personal gift just for her and my, wasn't she grateful, she didn't know how to thank Gregory but she'd think of something, this was so wonderful, I looked just like on TV only so much more handsome, and oh, dear, she didn't know what to say, did I want something to drink?

I let her get me something to drink. It seemed to make her happy. I was starting to think Greg had been right, after all. I should have spent the evening at the gym.

Slow dissolve as the hours simply flew by. I looked down at my watch, ready to mention it was getting late and discovered we'd been there for twenty minutes. Despite the opening scene of this B-grade movie, I was a perfect gentleman all evening and as much of a star as they all seemed to need me to be. I smiled at everyone, complimented the women, joked with the men, and never once let myself be caught checking out the guy with the liquid brown eyes or crinkling my nose "in that swishy way of yours, Ricky" at the hideous dress the senior partner's wife was wearing. I looked at everyone straight on instead of sideways, I dropped the word "queen" from my vocabulary, and I held my glass with a manly grip.

These were all on Greg's list. He'd made me memorize it.

He'd also made me promise to not try to talk sports, to subtly change the subject if I came across a MEGO (My Eyes Glaze Over) business

discussion and to absolutely not let on that I already knew Steve Cassey had just lost forty-five pounds or that Rob Tahara was hitting the booze more than usual since his wife dumped him for a much younger (read richer) man. Actually, I had a feeling it was more a matter of doing lines than upending a bottle, but I kept my mouth shut about that, too. Hell, when it comes to standing around like an idiot and looking pretty, I'm your guy.

Cut to the dinner scene where a last-minute seating rearrangement put me at the head table between two women and across from Mrs. C. They all looked like they'd rather eat me than the food, but that was okay, too. So far I hadn't had to do anything more than flirt a little here and drop double entendres there in answer to such thought-provoking questions as, "So, Mr. Baker, just how eligible are you?" Still, it wasn't all elegant dinnerware, imported crystal, and well-trained servants who discreetly looked the other way when my neighbor's hand started to creep toward my zipper and I, just as discreetly, raised it—the hand—to my lips and kissed it, thereby averting not only an uncomfortable scene, but an incredible slew of embarrassing explanations. The resulting break in conversation gave one of Greg's serious young colleagues the chance of a lifetime to expose me as a phony by asking what I really knew about my own stock portfolio.

Not only did I know absolutely nothing, I was under strict orders not to reveal that fact.

He was an ugly cuss before he even opened his mouth, with two grotesque moles showing between beard and mustache. My first instinct was to stare the bitch down, but remembering Greg and his intestinal fortitude, or lack thereof, I decided to simply ignore that side of the table. Having already lost one golden opportunity, though, when someone else had piped up during a pause with, "So, what's Cindy Crawford really like?" he was not about to let another chance go by.

"Mr. Baker," he squinted at me. "I have to ask."

I steeled myself.

"How do you get that look on your face? The one in the Achilles ad? My wife keeps showing me your picture. She claims I never look at her that way. I have no idea what way she's talking about. Besides, I told her it's all in the camera work. I'm right, aren't I? It is, isn't it? You don't have

that look now. You haven't had it once tonight. It's all camera angles and lights, right?"

I think I blinked twice in my effort to suppress the smile, then leaned toward him, ever-so-slightly. "Actually," I said, "it's part make-up, part lighting, and part, uh..." I cleared my throat pointedly, "mood, if you get my drift," I finished in a just-between-us-he-men voice while glancing pointedly toward the women.

He seemed lost for a moment, then took a short breath as the camera closed in on one confused puppy. Then he smirked. "Ohhh! I get it."

Having dodged that bullet, I caught my bunkmate's eye and casually scratched my right cheek, our private signal that everything was going fine. He smiled back rather darkly, but turned away so fast no one else could have possibly noticed.

And I believed that, too.

Cut to a ridiculously large room that looked as if it belonged in some hotel. Apparently the Cranleys like to entertain, so after buying a huge house they knocked out a few walls here and there and created their own ballroom, complete with spinning disco lights and DJ booth at the far end, occupied as we all filed in after dinner by—why not?—a DJ. Ever obedient, I looked around for Mrs. Cranley. Surprise, surprise, there she was, right behind me, being studiously nonchalant. She even managed to act as if she were caught unaware when I asked her to dance. Too bad the whole thing wasn't televised; we could have both pulled off this Emmy.

We glided to the slow fox-trots that started things off, then we sambaed to some faster Latin stuff. When the music got into your basic rock 'n roll, we boogied to that, too. Mrs. Cranley—Eddie, to me—loves to dance and since she had to be a good fifteen years younger than Mr. C, maybe even twenty, she'd apparently decided I was her partner for the evening.

I didn't mind. Several of the other women kept huddling around, looking to snuggle up on the slow ones, but no, no, no—maybe I'd never survive on Wall Street, but I know how to keep my skin in the jungle. Eddie's was the only husband in the room not glaring at me. I heard some guy mutter, "Break that damn bottle when I get home, never liked the stuff anyway." I stuck with the leading lady.

And just where was Greg during all of this? Well, every now and then I noticed him glaring at me, too, but I chalked that up to his usual I-hate-it-when-you're-in-public jealousy. Not that it mattered at this party. As far as his world was concerned, I was nothing more than a big-name client, invited (theoretically) to give me “the opportunity to hobnob with the movers and shakers in the financial world”—not to mention giving him the chance to make points toward that promotion he wanted. No matter how much he squirmed watching me with Edie, I knew I didn't have to worry about Greg saying anything.

At least not until we got home.

I guess Edie and I had been going at it for almost two hours. She'd sat out a couple of tunes, I'd taken as many leaks as I could get away with, and now we were back on the floor with some Top-40 hit, a Springsteen tune, I think. It was getting late, I was getting tired, things were getting blurry. It was time to go home, I didn't want to miss my run. And the DJ put on Billy Ocean's “Suddenly.”

“Suddenly.” My ace in the hole when I'm in heat and Greg's not in the mood. I really didn't want to dance to it with Edie—that wasn't supposed to be part of the deal—but as we started to walk toward the sidelines, I saw Greg motioning frantically from across the room. I've been taking direction all my life, I know what “get back on the dance floor, you idiot” looks like, so I obediently took Mrs. C. back in my arms—excuse me, my “strong, virile arms”—and did just that. Edie apparently had a special thing for the song, too, or maybe it was just me; she cuddled up like she was trying to get under my chest hairs, her head on my shoulder, the fingers of one hand mashed against my crotch. The meat isn't dead and the song has attachments; things got a bit uncomfortable. As we came around a turn, I tried to catch Greg's eye over her shoulder so he'd know that, even though I didn't want to be doing this, nevertheless, I was hanging in there, giving one for the gipper.

His face was bright, bright red, and his hands clutched each other so hard the wrists were white while the knuckles were crimson. It seemed like a real good time to excuse myself so we could leave.

I just wasn't fast enough.

Before I could utter a single syllable, Greg was at Edie's elbow.

Obviously, he wanted to cut in.

Obviously, she was willing to oblige.



We moved apart, obviously.

She turned to face him. I held out her hand to him.

He didn't take it.

He took *my* hand.

Then he took the rest of me firmly in his arms as if we were home alone, fixed his eyes on mine in a mad, hypnotic glare, and started to dance.

Pan to show one face after another aghast with disbelief. I don't know who was more flabbergasted, me, Edie, the guy whose wife cut out my picture, or the other dozen faces I didn't see so much as felt. Greg looked—well, he'd definitely crossed over that thin line from nervous to mad, and I do mean stark, raving insane mixed with a liberal dose of fury. He never spoke a word, never took his eyes off mine, never changed expression. In fact, he held me in a death grip the whole time.

The song ended abruptly—we had cleared the dance floor, thank you—and the DJ picked it up mercifully with something very fast and very loud. Greg clamped onto my arm and dragged me across the room to where Edie had taken refuge behind her husband. Her eyes were very wide and frightened. His looked rather amused.

“Okay, there it is, motherfucker!” Greg roared as only his lungs can. “I hope to God you're happy! I'm not taking anymore, damn it! I've had it with all of you! I'll be in in the fucking morning to either clean out my desk or work at it, make up your own goddamn mind! I've got enough fucking problems of my own!”

The last image I have of the party is poor little Edie with her hands over her mouth. I could almost swear the old man was laughing his head off, but I was probably hallucinating. I have no idea how we got to the car or what the hell I was thinking when I let Greg get behind the wheel. The only thing going through my head was that line from the song: “Suddenly, life has new meaning to me.”

“Are you satisfied, asshole?” he snarled. We were speeding along a totally unfamiliar street, going, my sixth sense told me, in the wrong direction if our goal was to get home, which was my goal, anyway.

“Listen, missy, don't blame me for your behavior,” I started, but Greg's incredible lungs cut me off. Hunched over the wheel, his eyes riveted on Lord-only-knows what, he totally ignored the traffic lights as we sped down the road, his foot glued to the floor. Pretty soon there

weren't any traffic lights and it occurred to me vaguely, as in a dream, that we were going up into the hills. It also occurred to me that we were going too fast for me to unload out the door. The scenery changed to a narrow mountain road—there may have been more to look at but my attention was rather focused—where Greg kept swinging the car out toward the edge of the cliff, then jerking it back at the last minute toward the mountain wall, then swinging wide again. Why we didn't flip over or pile up is beyond me. Maybe it was all that intense praying coming from my side of the car.

Eventually, somewhere out in the darkness, we slammed to an abrupt stop. Greg sat panting, working his mouth, darting his eyes back and forth. For once, I had enough brains to keep my mouth shut. I slid my fingers quietly toward the handle but, again, I wasn't fast enough. Greg snarled and spun the car around. At least now we were heading in the right direction.

Cut to two or three days later—okay, maybe forty minutes or so—back at our place. We slammed to another stop. Greg wrenched himself out of the car, slammed the door, and stomped into the house. I followed, but he disappeared into the bedroom and slammed that door in my face, too.

This was an awful lot of slammings for one evening. I figured he didn't want to talk.

I'd started to feel better once I'd escaped from the proverbial death seat. Home has always had a very soothing effect on me. For one thing, I don't have to worry about it crashing into the side of a mountain. I shed my jacket and settled on the couch. It takes a lot more than a closet queen outting himself to keep me from sleeping, and I was sure we'd work it all out in the morning, like we always do. After all, his father hadn't been there.

I'd almost drifted off when Greg came pounding back down the hall, stark naked, glowing with a psychotic aura. He stalked to the stereo where "Suddenly" was still in the tape deck. He turned it on. I sat up and took off my belt, not sure if I should continue undressing or have it ready as a weapon. The song ended. Greg began panting again, and I heard a snarl that sounded like it came up from his balls. There we were, frozen in what I hoped was just a really bad script, when all at once he lunged at the poor machine, tore it from its bed, and flung it—flung it, mind you,

a combo cabinet piece that weighs upwards of seventy-five or ninety pounds—across the room and not into but through the wall.

We both looked at the crumpled mess and pieces of hanging lamp it had taken out in flight until the plaster stopped snowing down. Then Greg spun back to the couch and glared at me. I gave him my best melt-her-heart smile, but Gregory isn't a her, he's a him, and the thought of his original threat to tear me limb from limb if I messed up at the party lashed through my mind.

We'd never really tested our strength against each other; that wasn't part of our play. This didn't seem like the most advantageous time to check it out, but I instinctively tightened my grip on the belt.

They say God looks after drunks and idiots, and it must be true. Instead of attacking, Greg just threw his hands over his head, screamed at the top of his lungs like a flaming drag queen, and stomped back into the bedroom, slamming the door once again.

Nobody's that stupid, not even me.

I slept in my car.

## GREG

**B**ECAUSE I SEE HIM UNSHAVEN AND BLEARY-EYED every morning, the impact Ricky has on the average female is more a matter of abstract conversation for me than something with which I have to deal on a physical level. He takes pains when we venture out together to not only obscure or disguise his easily recognized visage, but to also maintain his true, more restrained demeanor. I had, in reality, never been present when “Eric Baker” was among his public before the night of my firm’s semi-formal dinner-dance. Yet for reasons I cannot now comprehend, these very salient facts never came to mind at the point when I finally decided that, rather than fulfill my most horrid dreams, Ricky’s presence at my side could instead constitute the supreme *coup de grace*.

I had also neglected to remember that his parasitic bitch of a manager calls every evening, thoroughly aggravating me. Once our shared part of the day starts, I dislike having to yield time to her or anyone else, but especially to her. I do not trust her, she is too slippery, too manipulative, too smooth. She could talk a snake out of its skin. Her only saving

grace, as far as I can see, is that she is at least cognizant, if not accepting, of the fact that Eric is mine.

She calls at the same time each evening with no apparent purpose other than to agitate Ricky with her petty complaints and unreasonable demands. Because in person I do not allow him to be manipulated by such devices, she uses their phone conversations to tie his stomach into knots with information he prefers to not have, consuming his time without regard for my needs or desires or Ricky's personal schedule.

She kept him on the phone for a small eternity. From what I overheard of their conversation, the discussion was completely superfluous, and could easily have waited until the next morning when my career and mental stability were not on the line. I refused to play into her hand, though, and occupied myself instead with the matter of scheduling. I did not wish to arrive at the Cranley's early, as I felt it would be non-productive to confront Eric with the task of contributing to an excessive amount of small talk among my superiors. Nevertheless, I did not wish to be overly late, for our entrance would then be far too conspicuous.

By the time Ricky finally disconnected and dressed, my intestines were in an uproar. After starting the car, I needed to sprint back to the bathroom. Fortunately, despite my distress, I was lucid enough to order Ricky to wait by the car so we would not waste any additional time.

Although at this point I am willing to admit what happened next was not truly Ricky's fault, I was not that amenable during the journey. We got lost. He was supposed to be reading the map and navigating. As it turns out, he had been pointing us toward the wrong street because he allegedly could not read the address. He claims I had written Elmhurst rather than Oakhaven. This assertion is ridiculous. Having attended previous affairs, I was already familiar with the exact location of the Cranley's house, even if I was having trouble recalling the precise route. My only intent in having Ricky read the map was to put him at ease, by allowing him to believe he was aiding me. I should have known better than to pay him any attention. Next time I shall disregard his advice entirely.

Next time? Oh, God.

Needless to say, we were the last to arrive, which should have worked to my advantage. Instead, it afforded me the dubious privilege of seeing "Eric Baker" perform.

Mrs. Cranley answered the door and said politely, "Oh, my, you're Eric Baker, aren't you? How nice to meet you," or something along that line. Much to my dismay but certainly true to form, that was all Ricky required.

He responded to Mrs. Cranley's gracious notice like the goddamn peacock he is, fluffed out all his feathers and strutted about sucking in everyone's attention, totally forgetting all my painstakingly developed instructions. This was simply one more factor I had forgotten to take into consideration. When all is said and done, nothing can ever stop Ricky from being Eric Baker.

Nevertheless, I contrived to redirect the fiasco to my advantage. Crowded out of the doorway by Ricky's ever-growing throng of admirers, I discovered my immediate superior watching from the side of the room, and endeavored to get in a few good words for customer relations.

"I hope you are not put off, Sir," I fairly shouted to be heard over the din. "I thought some of the ladies might enjoy meeting one of our more well-known clients. I am hopeful that introducing him to some members of our corporate family will constitute the final persuasion necessary to get his signature on the dotted line of a new, extensive package I've prepared for him. I realize he is somewhat outrageous, but he does appear to be enjoying himself."

I was right on the mark. The old man beamed at me as if I'd just handed him the proverbial golden goose. I managed a mental pat on the back, and glanced around the room to see if Jack Doohan was noticing my coup.

Jack did more than notice. He launched a counterattack at the first available opportunity. I had managed to extract Eric from his fan club long enough to introduce my boss and a few other company officers when, barely five minutes later, he was back playing footsies with the brasses' wives, especially Mrs. Cranley. Everyone could hardly help but notice the way he fawned over her. I should have known Jack would use the interval to initiate an offensive.

"How about that, Mr. C., looks like Souster's poster boy is going to give us all a run for our money," he said as Mr. Cranley handed me a scotch on the rocks. "I'd watch out, sir. You never know with that kind."

Naturally, I bristled. What exactly did he mean by “that kind?” Before I had an opportunity to confront the S.O.B., though, Mr. Cranley started to laugh.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it, Doohan,” he chuckled. “I’m sure my wife can fend for herself. I’d be more concerned for the young man. She seems to have taken quite a fancy to the lad, and you know my Edie—what she wants, she usually gets! I don’t think she’s ever had a star before. Think of the notch! Of course, he looks pretty resourceful himself!”

He was really whooping it up now and Jack was laughing along, the sycophant. I admit I was at a loss for words, but apparently Mr. Cranley wasn’t.

“Nice touch bringing him here, Souster, I’m familiar with the account. I can always tell when he’s been to the office. None of the secretaries gets anything done for the rest of the day; some of the brokers, too! Although Lord knows, I’ve seen his face enough anyway!” He broke himself up, only stopping long enough to slap me on the back.

“Nice touch, nice touch,” he repeated to himself as he moved away to another little group. Jack stared after him for a moment, then stared at me as if he were seeing me for the first time. I believe it had just occurred to him that he had been out-manuevered. The victory felt almost shamefully good. A little strange, perhaps, but good.

My elation was short lived, however. Despite the fact that the battle had already been won and it was obviously now time to key down his behavior, Ricky continued as Eric Baker all the way through dinner. He preened and flaunted like a goddamn queen even while everyone else was attending to their food. Of course he barely ate anything, he rarely does, which gave him more time to show off. Even more outrageous, he had the nerve to give me the hand sign as if to tell me everything was under control. Under control! Only for him! Fortunately, however, it appeared that most of the party attendees had never actually met and interacted with a celebrity before. Ergo, no matter how excessive he got, I still had reason to believe the field was mine.

There was simply one more element I had not taken into full consideration, to wit: just how excessive Ricky can get when the mood is on him.

In my defense, I had never seen him go to such extremes before.

Following dinner, the guests were ushered into the ballroom to dance. Ricky already knew the layout of the room, as I had described it to him countless times. There was no reason, therefore, for his act of surprise and amusement during which he regaled the clustered women with supposedly hilarious remarks. And at the expense of Mr. and Mrs. Cranley! With Mrs. Cranley standing right there! I am sure she could not help but overhear, and I have no choice but to attribute her laughter to flawless courtesy rather than actual mirth. No doubt Eric believed he was amusing the general audience, but the fact is no one was laughing except for the women. Most of the men found him unfunny in the extreme.

And, of course, this is how the trouble came about, for people were beginning to approach me with remarks about him. Not a few men were having difficulty retrieving their wives from his circle. All of the women seemed determined to dance with Eric Baker regardless of how long they had to wait for a turn.

And Mrs. Cranley! I realize I suggested he pay some small attention to her, but he goddamn monopolized the woman all evening long. No one else was able to grab an opportunity to dance with her. He stuck to her even when she tried to beg off. He practically drove the poor woman into the ground. It was plain enough to us all, certainly to me. I fail to understand why she did not simply walk away from him—her manners definitely went far beyond the standard call of duty—but the bottom line remained that my moment of triumph was giving way to utter despair. Eric was completely out of my control.

Mr. Cranley, of course, is not such a strict adherent to the values of Amy Vanderbilt, and shortly after eleven-thirty I decided I had taken quite enough for one evening. To salvage any of the good from earlier required saying our good-byes now. It was at that precise moment, however, that my boss motioned me over to him. Steeling myself for the worst, I got a fresh drink and studiously sipped at it as I moved through the crowd. Mr. Cranley gestured at the dance floor which was filled with rock 'n rollers of a variety of age groups.

“Your young client certainly seems to be having a good time tonight,” he shouted in my ear over the din.



“Yes, sir, I believe he is enjoying himself. You must realize, though, that he is not all that young. He appears a great deal younger than his true age,” I shouted back. Everyone seemed to think he was a mere boy.

“Still, I think we’ve made a positive impression on him, or at least Edie has. He’s danced just about every dance with my wife,” Cranley went on loudly.

My chest suddenly felt tight, my teeth on edge. I looked at the man, hoping to read some meaning in his words other than the one I thought I heard, but his face gave no information, bearing what I can only describe as an enormous grin. He leaned over again to make himself heard.

“I’m not sure if he’s being generous, or if he’s just gotten caught in her web, but why don’t you give the boy a break, and get him out of here? I have a feeling he’ll thank you in the morning.”

The room started to spin. I had trouble catching my breath. Obviously Mr. Cranley had caught Ricky flaunting himself at me even while dancing with Mrs. Cranley. This is so typically Eric Baker. I have never been able to get him to understand that the world-at-large does not need to know his thoughts or emotions. I struggled to find words to fill the void but could not calm myself sufficiently to speak. In the meantime, Mr. Cranley’s face continued its amused eruption. I felt the entire room staring at me.

The final blow came as the music changed to “Suddenly,” a song Ricky and I often share to set the mood for our lovemaking. I could not believe my eyes when I saw Ricky begin to walk off the dance floor in what could only have been a prelude to approaching me. Then, to make matters worse, he abruptly turned back to Mrs. Cranley and engulfed her in his arms. As they moved around the floor, Ricky beckoned to me over her shoulder. Oh sure, it was only a smile, but I know what his smiles mean! Next to me, Mr. Cranley was also smiling. I looked around. People were smiling or talking to each other all over the room.

What a fool I’d been! I had completely outfoxed myself. Everyone knew, everyone was in on it! They were all waiting, watching to see me squirm. And there was Ricky, coming around the room once more, holding Mrs. Cranley so tightly she looked as if she were going to crawl into his shorts.

He had done it to get even with me, I saw that now. This was his revenge for all his imagined hurts at my hand, this was his payback. He

knows how I hate to see him holding someone else! He knows how it infuriates me to have other people think that he is free for the taking!

They were coming around the floor again. My chest was still tight, my heart pounding so hard I felt my shirt move with each beat. The room spun faster. I had to sway to keep up with it. My tongue was numb. I approached the dancing couple to demand that Ricky leave with me immediately. Mrs. Cranley turned to me in a clear indication that she wished to dance. I should have known it was a trap! As I reached out to extract Ricky from her grip, I made the error of touching his hand.

I am afraid I blacked out at this point. Apparently, I'd had too much to drink. I really don't remember much more about the evening, other than making some casual remark to my boss on the way out. Ricky must have gone quite mad after driving us home, though, for when I entered the living room the next morning, I discovered that he had demolished the far wall with our stereo equipment and broken one of our cassette tapes into small pieces. It was, in fact, the very song that had preceded my blackout, "Suddenly."

I was quite shocked, as I did not think he had it in him to be so violent, although, of course, I've always known he could. Even more, I was amazed at how I had slept through the racket. Stranger still, Ricky was not on his side of the bed when I awoke, admittedly rather late, nor was he on the couch, where he has been known to retreat. He was asleep in his car! An expert strategist was unnecessary to comprehend that the destruction of the living room was his way of conveying the fact that he was through with me and mine, and had simply not wanted to leave in the middle of the night.

By the time I left for the office, he had driven off.

# HOWARD

**S**HE SAYS SHE WANTS A DIVORCE.”

It was five-thirty in the morning, I was sitting in Chuck’s office, where I swore I’d never go. He’d come in early just to see me. I knew he’d helped Sharon a lot, she’d always said he did, but he’d also always been pretty blunt, pretty cold-blooded. I just didn’t know where else to go.

“So, Howard. Do you want a divorce?”

“No!”

“Every time I’ve talked to you in the last eighteen months, my friend, you’ve talked about wanting to leave your wife and family.”

“But I didn’t, and I wasn’t going to, not really, not now, not like this. I love Sharon, I really do, I just wish she wasn’t so depressed all the time. And the boys, I could never walk away from the boys, she knows that. You know that.”

“I know it, but you’ve spent most of your life denying it. Remember before you got married, when you weren’t even sure Sharon was pregnant? That was an afternoon I’ll never forget. First you love her, then you don’t, then you want to get married, then you don’t, then she was a bigot

who wouldn't look at you twice, then she wasn't. Nothing I said made any difference to you. I don't even think you heard me. It's nice to see you finally come to terms with yourself like this. Maybe this was just the shot in the arm you needed."

"So you think she didn't really mean it?"

"Oh, I'm sure she did. I'm sure she's quite serious and fully planning to go ahead with the divorce."

"What?! How can you say that?"

"Because Sharon's been my patient for the past three years, and I've seen this coming for a long time."

"What?! A long time? Why didn't you talk her out of it? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because she is my patient, and you are not. It's as simple as that."

"But why does she want a divorce? What did I ever do? Is she having an affair?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to ask her that."

"Chuck, you're my friend, you've gotta tell me. Why does she want to leave me?"

"I can't tell you anything, Howard. Patient conversations are confidential."

"Well, did you talk to her about me, about that afternoon?"

"Yes, but then, you've never been my patient. You're just my friend."

"Chuck! How can you do this to me! You've set me up to lose my wife!"

"No, I haven't, Howard. No one has set you up. And I can't tell you any more than that. But if you want a clue, you might examine your own behavior toward your wife."

"Which behavior, what behavior?"

"The name calling, the roughness, the put downs, all the rest."

"What?! What are you talking about? I've never done anything like that!"

"No? Well, yes, I'm not all that surprised. I never could picture you quite that sweaty or beer-drenched."

"Beer drenched? I hate beer!"

"Really, Howard, I can't tell you anything more, it would be a breach of doctor-patient confidentiality."

“Just tell me this, is there anything you can think of that I can do to change her mind?”

“Well, it’s a long shot, Howard, but you might try actually talking to her for a change.”

Since I hadn’t gotten anywhere with Sharon’s psychiatrist, I spent the afternoon with Sharon’s friend, Angie. I’d taken her to lunch to pick her brains. I knew Sharon would have told her everything, I knew she wouldn’t give me any professional ethics bullshit. What I didn’t know was my own wife. Angie seemed more than happy to fill me in.

“To begin with, you know Sharon’s an alcoholic, don’t you?”

“What?!”

I couldn’t seem to stop being astonished. I’d even forgotten about calling up the proper reaction.

“Haven’t you ever noticed that she always has a drink somewhere handy?”

“Wine, just wine. She doesn’t drink, she just has wine.”

“Right. Constantly. She drinks wine constantly, like about a case of Zinfandel a week. What does that say to you?”

“She likes Zinfandel?”

“Are you being dense on purpose?”

“God, an alcoholic, I never realized. I can’t believe it!”

“Well, it’s not so amazing, what with her mother being such a total souse.”

“At least that I suspected. What else?”

“Sharon doesn’t really want to divorce you, she—”

“She doesn’t? Thank God!”

“You didn’t let me finish. She doesn’t really want to divorce you, but she’s convinced you want to divorce her because you think she’s some kind of a wanton woman who goes out whoring every afternoon and gets drunk every lunch hour.”

“What?!!”

“She says you call her a slut and a liar...”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

“You practically rape her every time you two go to bed....”

I could actually feel my lungs going in and out, they felt strained.

“You always come home stinking of beer...”

My shoulders tightened, the back of my neck started to burn.

“You lie to the boys about her and tell them she’s an unfit mother... Howard, are you all right?”

No, I wasn’t all right. Black spots swam in front of my eyes and my chest was pounding so hard I couldn’t hear. I loosened my collar, it was a v-neck, something was strangling me, there was no air. By the time my focus had cleared, I was sitting with my head between my knees, Angie was holding something wet and cold on the back of my neck, and people were crowded all around us.

“Hey, aren’t you that guy in the hemorrhoid commercial?”

“Howard,” Angie said, “let’s get out of here.”

We went back to her place. She called her boss, told him she wouldn’t be in for the rest of the day. I had my composure back by then, or at least my breath. Angie gave me some wine and said she wouldn’t tell me any more until I looked normal.

“I didn’t think somebody with so much color could go so white.”

I ranted for a while, but wanting to hear the rest, I forced myself to settle down.

“I get the impression this is all news to you,” Angie said.

“I’ve never done anything like any of that in my life, my entire life. I couldn’t, I wouldn’t know how. Rape? Calling her those awful names? And when did she ever lie to me? She doesn’t lie! I don’t accuse her of lying! She’s a great mother, a wonderful mother, I couldn’t ask for a better mother. She knows I think she’s a great mother! And I hate beer!”

“Of course, Howard. I tell her that all the time.”

The black spots were back. “Angie, I’m confused.”

“I don’t blame you.”

We sat for a while. I stared at the carpet. What good is an eidetic memory at a time like this, I thought. Then again, maybe it is.

I got up and started pacing along a thread of thought.

“You say she claims I’m the one who does all these things?”

“Uh huh. ‘He did it again, he really hurt me this time.’”

“I see. And when she talks about ‘him,’ or me, does she always speak in the present, such as ‘he’s doing’ or ‘he just did?’”

“Uh, I don’t know. ‘He did this, he did that.’ Is that what you mean?”

“Not ‘I had to call you right now, he’s doing it again?’”

“No, she never calls when it’s happening. She usually tells me the next morning about what you did the night before. Sometimes she calls

in the middle of the night and tells me she just had a nightmare. Then later she'll deny she ever even called."

"So, did she tell you about the night before last, when we made love? Did she say I raped her then?"

"I don't remember. I don't think so. Why?"

"Did she tell you anything about Neil? Did she say anything about what his pre-school teacher told us?"

"She said you called her a terrible mother because Neil's behavior was out of control."

"Aha!"

"Aha?"

I had it, or thought I did, but I wasn't about to give it to Angie. I got her to promise to pick up the kids and keep them 'til one of us called, then sped home so I'd be there before Sharon even left work. I set up the living room as a Court Room with Jake's Big Bird doll as the judge and Neil's Gobot collection for a jury. It seemed fitting, all imaginary.

Then I sat down to wait and prepare my case.

I knew Sharon didn't expect to see me again, at least not so soon. Angie was a good source. Besides, I'd lived with my wife as long as she'd lived with me. She paled when she walked in.

"Well, you're home."

I don't think it's what she'd meant to say, but she was caught off guard.

"Court is now in session."

Forget Baker and all the other acting rubbish, this was important. "The prosecution will now present its opening statements in the matter of the State of Peace and Sanity vs. Mrs. Sharon Ables Gordon."

Sharon has never been a fool, always a fast study. "I'm not interested in your theatrics, Howard. I thought I told you I never wanted to see your foul, disgusting face again. Get out, get out, get out."

I walked over behind the judge.

"The defendant will sit down, or be cited for Contempt of Court."

I pointed to the witness chair. "Sit."

She sat, reacting to my tone, maybe, my authority, the look in my eyes, which never left hers for a moment. Whatever. I'd never stood my ground against her before. It felt good. Her eyes had changed, though. They were wary, angry, confused, frightened. I was pretty sure I was right.

“Members of the jury, I intend to prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the defendant, Sharon Ables Gordon, has willfully committed Breach of Reality against the State of Family Harmony and even now as we speak is attempting to destroy the very foundations of One Happy Home.”

“Howard, you’re acting like an imbecile. Get your things and leave.”

“Objection overruled!” I nodded at Big Bird. “If I may continue...”

I started to pace, picking up that thread again from Angie’s. “Mrs. Gordon, is it or is it not true that, since the time of your father’s death, you have blocked all memory of your early childhood with him from your conscious mind?”

She jumped up. There was no confusion left in her eyes, it was all anger. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, Howard. I told you to get out. Our divorce has nothing to do with Papa or anyone else. It’s strictly a matter between you and me.”

“Your Honor.” I addressed the yellow bird rather than her. She made noises of impatience. “If you will permit me, you will see that my line of questioning is quite relevant to the charges in this case.”

“Objection overruled,” the bird answered.

“Howard!” Sharon kicked over her chair and threw the judge across the room.

“Mrs. Gordon, as your defense attorney, I must advise you to restrain yourself. You’re not doing your case any good.”

Sharon must have reached that point past her ultimate level of exasperation she’s always telling the boys about. We stood and gaped at each other with the nonverbal communication that comes with years of marriage. She let me know how much she hated me at this moment. I let her know that for once, I wasn’t going to budge.

“Sit down,” I said very quietly. I watched the air go out of her balloon. It took awhile. She sighed one of those monumental sighs.

“Oh, all right, I’ll play your game. Go ahead, go ahead.”

This time I didn’t let my astonishment get in the way. “The defendant will answer the question,” was all I said.

“The defendant does not remember the question,” she mocked.

“Is it not true, Mrs. Gordon, that when you were a child your father committed incest with you? Is it not further true that he called you a harlot, that he called his wife a harlot, that he bullied her and abused you



and made you feel you were a terrible person, that he said your mother was a terrible person and an unfit mother, and that you were going to grow up to be as worthless as her?”

Sharon’s mouth dropped open, and her eyes widened to the size of saucers. She jumped to her feet. “No! Are you crazy? You sound like Susie and her idiotic blathering! Papa never touched me, he never called me a whore, it was slut, he called me a slut.”

She heard herself, changed gears. Suddenly her hands were on the wheel again, her voice controlled, if slightly uneven. “That wasn’t Papa, that was you. Papa didn’t call me a slut, that was you.”

“Me? Howard Gordon, the model, the soon to be lawyer, your husband, the father of your two little boys? I called you vile names, words I won’t even repeat here, is that what you’re saying?”

Her bearing was still proud, but her lips were starting to tremble in time to her head.

“Wasn’t it really your father, Mrs. Gordon? Isn’t he the one who raped you, the one you wanted to throw out of the house? It isn’t your husband at all, is it? It isn’t me, me, look at me! It was him, then—not me, now. It was him, him, not me, wasn’t it? He’s the one you want out of your life forever, isn’t he? Not me. Look at me!”

I almost lost it as the tears poured down her crumbling face, her eyes looking far, far away. “He would...he would...”

“Yes or no, Mrs. Gordon,” I pressed on, softer but just as insistent. “Isn’t it your father you want a divorce from, not me? Isn’t he the one who called you all those names, the one who hurt your sister so badly she couldn’t...”

“He raped her!” The words exploded into the air. “He raped her! She was just a baby! Just a tiny little baby! I saw him do it! She wasn’t even six months old! The son of a bitch! He ruined her!”

Sharon collapsed into a heap on the floor. “He ruined her, he ruined her, he ruined me, he ruined everything! I was so glad when he died, I wish he’d died more! I want to kill him, kill him, I hate him so much!”

I stood motionless for a moment, bathed in disgust and anger. As her crying got louder, I knelt down to pull her shaking body to my chest, love her hair with my hand, her face with my cheek, kiss her pain away, so much pain. I wished he was alive, I’d kill him myself.

“It’s okay, baby, it’s okay, I’m right here, I’m not going anywhere. He’s dead. Dead, dead, dead. If he wasn’t, I’d scalp him for you, right now, right here. He’ll never hurt you again, never hurt Susie, never hurt anybody, I swear. I’m here, it’s all right, I’m here. No one’s ever going to hurt you again.”

She didn’t stop shaking for a long time. I’d called Chuck earlier, so I knew what to do: just let her cry it out if it finally happened. We sat on the floor and I held her the way I used to hold Neil when he was a baby, the way I still sometimes held Jake when he has a nightmare. I told her she was a good mother, told her I loved her, told her I was going to stand by her while she got help, told her I wanted out of the acting business, I wanted to be a lawyer, had already called Jesus, taken his offer. I don’t know how much of it she heard but it didn’t matter. I heard it all, meant it all, wanted it all, more than I had ever realized.

She eventually settled down, maybe from all my talking, maybe from exhaustion, it made no difference. I carried her upstairs, first time in I don’t know how long, no kids in the house, we could take our time. She cried, cried some more, we held onto each other for dear life.

Excuse my language, but growing up really sucks.

## GREG

Not knowing where Eric had gone or what else to do, I gargled to ease the pain in my throat and went to work. Four telephone messages awaited me: one from the home office about the Kortner account, one from Mr. Kortner's attorney, one from Mr. Kortner himself, and one from Ricky. Before I could get to my desk to call him, though, Mr. Cranley's secretary waylaid me to appear in his office.

Mr. Parkett, Vice President in charge of Personnel, was in the far left chair, Mr. Merchan, Senior Partner, in the close right one, leaving only the center seat available. The room seemed tense somehow, the air soggy with some familiar odor faintly reminiscent of wet athletic shoes. Then it struck me: Achilles—Make Her Defenseless. Ricky had been right, it was awful. It was unbelievable the potion was still selling.

As I sat down, flashes of the previous night began to wink in my consciousness. I recalled dancing with someone—could it have been Ricky?! No. And the scratchiness behind my tongue—had I been yelling? Someone cleared their throat and I returned my attention to the

men around me. All three seemed to be in shock. Damn! What happened after that song started?

Mr. Cranley took a deep breath. "Well, Souster, there's no point beating around the bush," he said. "Have you already signed, or are you still open to negotiation?"

I blinked once or twice before answering. "I beg you pardon, Sir, I neglected to bring my notes with me. I had no idea the firm considered this account so important."

Cranley looked at me, then at Merchan, who was shooting darts at me with his eyes. Parkett's brow was so furrowed it could have held syrup. It was he who finally broke the ensuing silence.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he snapped.

"The Kortner account." I looked from face to face. "Are we not here to discuss the Kortner account?"

"Goddammit, Souster! Talk sense," Mr. Merchan exploded. "Who the hell cares about Korman or Kortter, or whoever your idiot client is?! You've been with this firm for over ten years now. I think we deserve better than less-than-twelve-hours notice that you're leaving for some half-baked pirate outfit with no morals, no concept of decency at all! Why, they've practically ruined S&M already, and they haven't had them for six months yet! Is that the kind of racket you want to get into? I thought you had more integrity than that, I thought you were the one who said we ought to stamp this kind of crap out of the business. We're a dying breed, the honorable ones. I would have put hard money on you being one of us, after all this time. What did they offer you? Why didn't you come to us? Don't you think we deserve the chance to make a counter-offer? Good God, man, you had the vice-presidency in the bag, in the bag!"

I swayed slightly to keep up with the room as it shifted from side to side, an experience that felt altogether too familiar. Grabbing both chair arms, I managed to pull myself to a standing position, suddenly remembering what had happened after "Suddenly."

"Gentlemen, I think you misunderstood. We're simply good friends, nothing more. I assure you."

"You and Forsette?"

"Forsette? Forsette? Forsette who?"

“Darren Forsette, Jr.!” This thundered from Cranley as he jumped to his feet. “We know about the meeting with Forsette! We’re not stupid, for Chrissake! What was last night, if not your way of throwing it in our face that he’s made you a better offer, that you’re leaving without notice, without giving us a chance to even talk it over!?”

“Last night! Are you telling me you’re firing me?”

“Firing you!? Why? So you could slap us with a discrimination suit and bring the entire company to ruin?!”

We were all standing now, shouting, raving at one another. Only Parkett seemed to be abstaining from the fracas. Finally, he began laughing.

“You mean it wasn’t an act?” he sputtered between guffaws. “You mean that stud really does belong to you, he really is gay? Eric Baker, make ‘em defenseless, *Three Ships To Sea*, the who to watch for ‘89? Christ, no wonder Doohan was drooling all night! I thought he was pulling on a pipe dream! Who’d have believed it? And here we were all getting a kick out of Edie!”

“Edie?”

The fireworks having melted away, I had the chance to be truly bewildered.

“Worth the whole evening, Souster,” Mr. Cranley said as he settled back down in his chair, that same odd grin I now remembered from last night bursting across his face. “This has to be the first time she hasn’t pulled it off, and it’s about time. I had a feeling he was more than she could handle, although, hell! It never occurred to me why! Actually, I can’t remember when I’ve had more fun, watching her try so hard, fall so hard. Did you catch the look on her face?! Only thing that spoiled it was your exit speech. We were all sure you were just spitting in our eye, taking the money and stomping off.”

I gave that some thought before I answered. “I do believe I would have a case—”

“Forget it, Souster,” Merchan broke in. “No one wants to see you gone, we don’t give a damn what you do at home, we’re not going to fire you so you can sue. What we care about is, we know Forsette made you an offer. What was it? God knows, H&F has plenty of cash to spread around right now, but you’d be smart not to jump at the first bite. They won’t last long, not with their business practices. Here at MDW&C,

you're already established, you have seniority. Like I said, that VP position's yours for the asking. Maybe we can't match their money, but I'm sure we can work something out if you'll just calm down a bit and give us a chance to talk this over. We're all reasonable men here."

Pursing my lips, I looked down at the floor for a moment. Then I lifted my head, glanced at each of the waiting set of eyes and smiled. Ricky would have done it better, but I'm learning. When I spoke, I kept my voice even and quiet.

"Gentlemen, I'm sure we can work something out."

The meeting lasted through cocktails, which we did at the five-star restaurant down the street where Mr. Merchan has a standing reservation. By the time the talking was done, it was past close-of-business. I drove home slowly, one eye in the rearview mirror for the police, the other on the speedometer.

I forgot that Ricky would not be home when I got there. I never had a chance to return his morning call, not to mention the additional three notes I found on my desk before I left the office. My sadness deepened when, upon arriving home, a closer examination revealed that none of his messages listed a return number. The man who answered at his health club claimed Ricky had not been seen there all day. Doug Wilson's secretary insisted Eric was *persona non grata* at the studio, at least for now, and that the photographer himself was out of town on assignment. Even Suki had no clue to Ricky's whereabouts and sounded genuinely worried. She had spoken to him briefly before noon when he called from some bar, she didn't know which one. He sounded incoherent, looking for a place to crash for a few nights. No, she had not given him any suggestions; nor had she offered to let him stay at her place, past association notwithstanding. Still, she was concerned.

I could not tell whether or not she was lying or, if she were, whether or not she was doing it at his request. Truth be known, I've never quite understood exactly how deep their relationship was or is, nor how much of a guardian she had ever actually been. She asked that I have him call, saying the messenger had returned with the script she wanted him to read, and she was anxious for his "yes" and his signature. I said I would pass the message on.

The earlier tightness in my chest was nothing compared to the sense of panic rising in my throat at this point. I decided to search the bed-

room to ascertain if he had, indeed, moved out. Checking the wardrobe to determine if his clothes were missing, though, I suddenly realized how useless the effort was. Ricky has so many clothes he could easily pack for a month's journey and still leave enough behind to fill the closet.

Desperation led to inspiration. I checked the bathroom.

Seeing his toothbrush still in the holder allowed me to swallow the wad that had been blocking my airway. No matter what other possessions he might abandon, I knew Ricky would never leave without his toothbrush. I rechecked the closet. There on the floor, under a faded pair of shorts and that disgusting, hole-ridden T-shirt he works out in, were his favorite pair of running shoes.

Eric Baker will buy new shirts by the handful, purchase slacks a dozen at a time and shoes by the half dozen, but he has not changed his running outfit for the last three years. He is like a child when I try to wrest away the rags for laundering. I stretched my neck in either direction, felt the comforting crack of spinal realignment, and took a deep breath. He had not yet left me.

I returned to the living room to check his answering machine and made another discovery. Ricky had, in all probability, not been in the house since last night even for a few minutes. His message tape was full. He had long ago set the recorder to click off after the tenth incoming message; no one, he insisted, could possibly cope with responding to more than ten people at any given time. Playing back the tape, his rationale was not difficult to understand. One of the calls was from an agent, two were from a female fan who had somehow managed to get his number, five were from Suki, and the final two came from some horrid-sounding man who used his time to offer several lewd and disgusting invitations. I erased that section of the tape.

The indicator on my machine, not set to shut itself down, showed four messages. I ran them back.

"Greg, it's me. I'm sorry. I didn't know you were going to do that. I thought I was doing what you wanted. I'm so sorry. I swear I didn't mean to screw things up. Please, forgive me. Please. I'll never play that song again in my life, I promise."

"Gregory. I tried calling you at work, but they say you're not available. What's happening? Have they fired you? God, I'm sorry, Greg.

Look, I don't want to leave, can't we talk it over? Please pick up the phone and talk to me. Greg? Are you there? Okay, look, I'll try you later."

"It's me again. Look, Sandy or Shelly or whatever the hell her name is at your office doesn't know if you're in or out. She won't even tell me if you're still there or not. If you've come home since the last time I called, it's three-thirty now, please pick up the phone. I can't be any sorrier than I already am, and I want to take a shower in my own home. Our home. Can I come home? Whatever's happening, Greg, you know I'll back you up 100 percent, you know we can live on what I make. I'll leave Suki, I'll do her movie, I'll sign the damn three-film contract MCA wants, I'll commit to a dozen TV shows...I'll do anything I have to, I promise. Are you there? Greg? Shit. I'm at a bar, there's no number on this phone. I'll call you back later."

"Greg, it's a quarter to five. Where the hell are you? I've called every place I can think of and I can't find you. Please, please pick up the phone and tell me you haven't done anything horrible or stupid like try to kill yourself, which I know you wanted to do last night but you didn't and I hope to God you don't today because I love you, I don't care what happened at work. Please GREGORY! ARE YOU THERE? PICK UP THE PHONE! Shit."

I did not know whether to laugh or cry, so after walking through the house aimlessly several times, I decided to pack. The final package I had agreed to included not only the promotion, the office, the secretary, the substantial raise, and the quarterly override bonus, but an additional paid vacation, airfare and accommodations to be handled via company credit card, effective immediately. I'd had Elaine, my new secretary, book reservations for two to Tahiti the following morning, ever hopeful that I could find Ricky and work things out between us before another night passed. Since no matter how much he feared my mood, the odds were in favor of his returning home before midnight to get his running clothes, I reasoned I might as well begin preparing for the trip.

I do not own half the clothes Ricky possesses, nor, for that matter, does any other single human being on the face of the earth. Ergo, packing my suitcase was relatively quick and easy. Afterwards, I attempted to sit down and wait calmly, but I was too restless. I might as well, I decided, begin gathering Ricky's things, as I would end up advising him on what to take regardless. A grown man, Ricky can never pack for



a trip without me standing there prompting, “No, don’t take that, yes, take that,” even though he spends more than half his time on the road. If I saw to his suitcase now, I could effectively cut out the middle-man stance and accomplish the deed in half the time. I returned the bedroom and opened his closet to get down a suitcase.

The choices were overwhelming. I could not recall ever seeing the beige set before, nor the black leather. I extracted one piece from a lopsided pile of cases, and began sorting through the closet. For myself, I had selected four pair of slacks, a dozen shirts, underwear and socks for two weeks, one good suit, and a few other assorted items. I knew, however, that Ricky, being a world-class clothes horse, would require more than that. Two weeks on the beach would no doubt translate into ...twenty-eight, possibly even...forty-two changes?! Oh, Good Lord!

The more I pulled out of the closet and drawers, the more unsure I was of what he would want to have with him. No wonder he was always soliciting my opinion! How could anyone hope to make sensible decisions with so many possibilities to choose from? In almost no time I was hip deep in shirts, slacks, socks, shoes, belts, jackets, shorts, T-shirts, jeans, chains.... I never before realized how many socks the man owned—two drawers worth! We launder our clothes every week. How could he possibly make use of them all, even taking into consideration the amount of time he spends traveling?

I was startled out of my musings by a noise. Ricky stood motionless behind me, his mouth slightly open, his eyes glued to the veritable sea of clothing spread out across the room. As much as I wanted to take him in my arms, kiss away his fears, and very possibly wring his neck, I was trapped where I was, buttressed on all sides in the middle of the room. There was simply no way to ford the shorts.

“What’s going on?” he gasped, almost in tears. “You’re packing? You’re leaving?! Please, Greg, let’s talk, okay? Like two adults? You can’t just end it like this without even talking to me!”

My heart said, “I’d never leave you,” but for the love of God, my mind could not get past the two-foot cushion of haberdashery that had come between us.

“I am proud of you Ricky,” I said lightly, “your powers of observation are definitely improving. Yes, I am packing. I am going to Tahiti. My superiors almost insisted. They said I need a rest. I believe you can

empathize with my need for a rest. I am going to Tahiti to rest. Hand me one pair of those shorts, please. Any pair, it does not matter which you choose, provided you do not select the cut-offs.”

He passed over the first thing he touched, never even glancing at what was in his hand and obviously not cognizant of his surroundings, or he would have noticed that the clothing strewn around the room was all his, not mine. Moving through the piles without ever taking his eyes off me, he collapsed on top of several suits laid out on the chair. He rubbed his temples. His nose turned slightly pink.

“Look, Greg,” he said, his voice wavering. “Last night wasn’t the end of the world. I’m so sorry, I can’t tell you how sorry I am, but none of it matters. We can go somewhere else. You don’t have to go to Tahiti. We can move! We can make a new life. It doesn’t matter, who cares about the house? We can sell it if you want, we can move away. We can buy another house! We can even move the house, just pick the spot. You can get work again, another town, maybe another state. We could go to New York, wouldn’t that be better for you anyway? I don’t care where we live. I’ll never ask you to take me anywhere again. Last night took guts—a lot of guts—and I think you deserve a medal, really, I’m so proud of you. I don’t care about the stereo, I don’t care about the wall. Please, Greg.”

It was a scene to tear your heart out and it certainly tore mine. Not knowing how to handle the mush, though, now that it had literally leapt off the page into my arms, I turned back to the suitcase and tossed some clothes in. “I am going to Tahiti, Ricky, and that is final,” I said, shaking in spite of myself. “I have already packed and loaded my suitcase in the car. I am going. You have been to Tahiti before, have you not? Do you think the weather could turn cold enough to require a sweater?”

I held two handfuls of sweaters aloft.

He stared at me, wiping his eyes, sniffing softly. I nodded toward the Kleenex box and waved the sweaters at him once more. “Do you have an opinion?” I tried to demand. “Go or no go? Blue or tan? Cardigan or pullover? Lightweight or heavy? They are your clothes, for God’s sake, what do you want to wear?”

Once his eyes finally focused on what I was holding, he furrowed his brow, squinted, then slowly shifted his gaze to take in all the items scattered at his feet. He grasped a T-shirt clump that had been under

his feet, turned it over once or twice and dropped it back to the floor as he rose from the chair, slowly.

“Blue,” he said quietly after clearing his throat. “Pullover. Light knit. And the heavier one with the hood. It can get a little cool at night, especially if you’re right on the beach. I assume you’ll be right on the beach?”

“I certainly assume so,” I said. “If that is not the case, I will have no choice but to complain to the management. I have no intention of walking through a hotel lobby with you at my side. We will be inundated by Achilles fans, we’ll never even make it to the elevators.”

“So much for *Ships*, huh?” he said. “They thought it was a joke, didn’t they?” He suddenly smiled as though he had just gotten the punch line. “They chalked the whole thing up to your crazy client who was probably on drugs. Your secret’s still safe, right?”

I laughed out loud as I shook my head. His eyes got very wide.

“They know,” I said. “But they don’t care. They thought I was being absconded by Cratchit and Forsette, and that I’d take half their clientele with me. I got the promotion. Tahiti was thrown in as a perk. My only anxiety now with regards to Merchan, Doff, Watman & Cranley concerns the fact that Mr. Parkett, whom you apparently impressed last night, is unmistakably enamored of you. He thinks you are a Greek god; that is a direct quote. However, I am not going to spin off into another rage. Parkett knows you’re taken.”

“You got the promotion?”

“I got the promotion.”

“They don’t care that you’re gay?”

“They don’t want me to bring suit against them is more to the point.”

He picked up an accessories case and began happily dumping handfuls of clothing into it. The man packs like a two-year-old putting away his toys. I pulled the bag away from him.

“You’re such a twit,” I grinned, dumping the suitcase’s contents back onto the bed and refolding.

“Asshole,” he answered, but he was laughing. He threw the rest of his superfluous clothing back into his drawers and onto the bottom of his closet.

“Slob,” I said, overwhelmed with desire. “What the hell would you ever do without me?”

As he turned to answer, sunrise spread across his face. The grandfather clock in the living room struck midnight, but he followed my gaze and let it pass.

I had cleared a spot on the bed.

## SUKI

U H HUH...OKAY, HARRY, I'LL TALK TO MY LAWYER. I'm glad we could work this all out without having to go to court...yeah...yeah. Okay. Thanks, Harry. Talk to you later...okay. Bye.”

“Marsha, get me Howard Gordon, please. If he's not at his office, try him at home.”

“Sharon! Hi, it's Suki. How are you?...Good, good. And the kids?... Good. Listen, hon, I need to talk to Howard. Is he there?...Oh, good.... Howie? How are you doing?...good! Listen, I just got off the phone with Harry Bridge. He folded, just like you said he would, agreed to the whole thing, I can hardly believe it.... Yeah, I know, but you can't blame me for being concerned. After all, you've only been in practice for barely a year.... No, no, just like you said, he's claiming it wasn't his fault and all, but he's going to pay up just to make sure there are no hard feelings. How do you like that line of bull?...Yeah! Well, I can't thank you enough. The check will come to you, so you just go ahead and deduct your fee before you send it on...oh, well, okay, we'll do it that way, if you prefer. You obviously know what you're doing. Oh, and listen, I've got some con-

tracts I'd like you to look over, I'm having Marsha put them in the mail to you tomorrow, okay?...Yeah, isn't it?...What kind of a retainer?...Well, why don't we have lunch and discuss it, sometime next week.... Fine. I'm writing it down in my book now...great, so.... What do you mean?...WHAT?...You're kidding! Was this planned?...Well, Howie, that's great, congratulations. When is she due?...Oh, that's wonderful, I couldn't be happier for you. No wonder Sharon sounded so tired! I guess that means the therapy has helped.... You are kidding, aren't you?...Well, you know, if it isn't one thing, it's another.... Howie, come on, you know half of that is the pregnancy talking...Oh, Howard. I don't know about you two. This is the third time you've been on the brink of divorce. Frankly, I don't see it happening. You two are locked together spiritually.... Yes, I do too mean spiritually. I think you two have a strong underlying need for each other that neither one of you wants to admit to, so you keep fighting, even during the happiest times of your life!...I agree, it'll pass. I'm sure by the time she's into her fourth or fifth month she'll...exactly. I'm certainly not going to worry about it. I don't see you and Sharon getting a divorce now anymore than a year ago when you first started talking about it. In fact, I see it less. I think...well, Howie, like they say in Camelot, just love her. It'll work out somehow...yeah...okay. Good.... Okay, I'll talk to you later, hon. And I....

“Oh, Howie, before you hang up, I almost forgot. Do you remember a shoot you did about a year ago? Actually, the shoot never came down, it fell apart, something for a designer named Dinn or Dane or...yeah! Deane. Right. Well, do you remember the name of the young model who was there that first day? Jerry something I think it was...Jeff! Right. Jeff, uh...Portman. Thank you. I knew you'd remember.... Oh, no special reason, I just couldn't remember his name and I can't find it in my records for some reason.... Uh, well, he went back home, to Iowa or wherever, I think. Shortly after that session, in fact. I'm not sure what happened, I never really heard from him again, but...well, exactly. I wasn't going to waste anymore time, anyway, so I.... Okay, Howie, thanks for the help. Give my love to your wife. Tell her to put her feet up a lot.... Yeah, I know what you mean. Oh, by the way, I'm also sending over a script for that Neven production. Howie, they really want you to read for the older brother part, and I don't see how it can hurt to keep your hand in here and there. It's a small part, you'd only be needed on the set for a few

days, a week or two at the absolute most.... Well, read it anyway, would you? Just for old times' sake?...Well, he saw you in that little play. You've gotten so much better, hon, now that you're only doing it as a sideline.... Okay, so just read it.... Oh, who knows? I may be good, Howie, but I'm not that good.... Ha, ha, ha, very funny. I'll talk to you later. Bye.”

“Marsha, see if you can find Ricky for me. Try the house and if he's not there, try his club. If he's not there, call Greg at the office, he always knows where he is.”

“Ricky? Greg! What are you doing home at this hour of the day?... Didn't you just take a vacation?...My God, has it really been a year already?...So where are you guys going? Yeah, that sounds like our Eric! Poor Gregory. Well, you picked him! So, business is going good?...All right!.... Well, that's great!...Listen, hon, is he home? I need to talk to him about something.... No, no, nothing new. We still haven't heard yet. Of course, they don't usually come out with the nominations for another few weeks.... Well, I know the studio's certainly been pushing the hell out of it.... Well, if he gets the nomination, I can make plenty of hay out of that. Nobody expects him to win every award every time.... Yeah, well, so do I. How many years did I tell him he was a natural?...The way he pulled it off, he has just as good a chance of picking it up as anybody else, especially if he's up against.... Tell me! Why? Is he wetting his pants every morning before he reads the paper?...Oh, I'm sure Ricky can handle it, Ricky handles everything. Listen, if he's there, I really do need to talk to him...yeah, I'll wait.”

“Eric! Filling up with butterflies, huh?...Well, just hang on, hon, because nobody knows anything yet and...you're kidding! Where did you hear that?...God, there's something wrong when my own people have better sources than I do!...Yeah, Ricky, I know, I know. Well, whatever. You know I'm going to do everything I can to promote the hell out of... No, please, say publicist, okay? Or promoter or whatever you want to say, but don't say.... Eric Baker! Sometimes your sense of humor is just a little bit.... Oh, all right, all right, all right.... No, actually, I wanted to talk to you about something else.... No, no, I don't have the contract ready yet, I'm sending it over to Howard Gordon to do a little tweaking. I'll let you know when it's ready for you to sign, okay? This is about something altogether different. Is Greg still there?...no? Good. Listen, Eric, I need your advice.... Don't get smart, Ricky, this is serious, very, very seri-

ous.... Well, uh, well, oh God! I don't know where to begin. Remember that awful mix-up about a year ago? You went on a shoot that was supposed to be for that horrible film but actually you were doing stills with Howard Gordon, he was still in the business, and it was for a designer who...fine. He's fine. In fact, he just told me his wife is going to have another baby and...no, no, of course not. He's still married to the same woman! Of course, you've got to remember this is one of the rockiest marriages since Charles and.... Divorce? Never. They will never get divorced.... I don't care what you've heard, you can take it from me. These two wouldn't know what to do with themselves if they didn't have each other, the lustiest marriage I know...yeah, that kind.... No! Now, listen, Ricky, I really need to talk to you about this other thing now...yeah, yeah, that gig. You remember it now? There was some kind of trouble the first day, with a young model who.... Right. Right. Okay, so you remember him, right?...Well I don't have any idea, I never heard from him again and I certainly haven't seen him around.... Somewhere in the Midwest, I think. Maybe he went back there, I don't know.... Well, I don't know about that, either—uh, actually, I do know about that, but only just recently. Listen, Ricky, I really, really need your advice...Thank you for noticing! I am upset. And worried.... Well—now, you won't repeat any of this, will you? I need your word...okay, okay. All right. I'm not going to go into details, Eric, but I got a call asking for him to do a screen test for some minor role, a combative-thug-type thing for John Ainsworth, some film he was doing or thinking of doing or something ...okay, then, shut up and I'll tell you!...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I'm just very upset here and I could use a little understanding.... Okay. All right then. So I sent him to Ainsworth, they wanted him, they wouldn't take anybody else. Elliott had fallen in love with him, saw him hanging around my.... Yes, yes, Portman, Jeff Portman. He was supposed to have a screen test, but I guess John and Elliott did a number on him instead.... Oh, I don't know! How the hell would I know? I wasn't there, he wasn't even really my client, I only sent him out to get rid of him, he kept following me around.... Well, sweetheart, I can't call you for every little thing, there are a lot of nuts in this town.... No, I didn't see the tapes, I didn't ask any questions, I didn't.... Okay, okay, okay. Okay. I'm calm. Okay. Now listen for a minute, will you? Okay. A couple of days later I got a call from John. I think it was the next day or the day after, I don't really remember.



I didn't write any of it down, because, frankly, I didn't care and I was glad he'd finally disappeared from my.... Well, yes, okay, it hasn't happened since, but the next time I will. Now...well, whatever! Anyway, John called to tell me how wonderful the shoot had gone. I remember cutting him off a least a dozen times to ask if there was going to be a part out of it, because if there was I wanted to get down to.... Well, please, Ricky, I have to make a living!...Ricky, let me finish! I remember him telling me he'd gotten Elliott on tape...Biddley...from Smithfield and...yeah, him... on tape...with the boy, right, and...well, that's the point.

"I asked him if Jeff was okay, and he'd said the boy was a little shaken when he left, but was just fine. He'd kept talking about how well the shoot went, I really had no idea what had happened.... Uh huh. Well, now John has been found...yes! How did you know? And apparently it's been a while, they could barely identify him.... Oh no, I just heard about it today. They found him in some dinky little apartment in the Wilshire district.... Oh, days they said, maybe weeks, they only went in because the smell at the end of the hall kept getting worse and worse.... Well, as a matter of fact, that's what I'm getting at. The police called me earlier today, asking if I knew anything about this kid, Jeff, like did I know his last name. When they found John, he was covered with this film.... I guess it got split open. Anyway, he was covered with this film. It was all in pieces, but when they spliced it together.... I don't know, I didn't ask. I guess it must have been at least a couple of days ago, if they had time to splice it back together...yeah, well, who knows. Anyway, the point is, the film he was wrapped in was the one he'd made of Jeff.

"Oh, Ricky, you were right, I know I closed my mind to it, but you were right. Apparently the tape showed...exactly. I'm just sick thinking about it. I mean, he was obnoxious and all, but still, the biceps on that boy.... Well, so the police think there might have been a connection between.... That's the thing, I couldn't remember his name, so I told them I'd have to search my records and get back to them.... Oh, no, I got it from Howard...yeah, right. So anyway, this is why I need your advice. I really don't know what to do. The police say it looked like Jeff was dead at the end of the tape, but they can't prove it, because nobody ever found a body or anything. I mean, if he's dead, that would mean John and Elliott Biddley killed that poor kid, and then John must have tried to wring it out of Elliott. But suppose he lived, he might have come back to get....

“Well, the point is, the police never mentioned Elliott being on the tape, so if Jeff is dead, Elliott must have been the one to kill John, but I think I’m the only one who knows about the connection...so?! So, do I tell the police the whole story? I mean I don’t think I have any criminal liability here, because it’s all pretty much guesswork, but if I’m right.... Oh, I can’t ask him, Ricky. First of all, he’s not a criminal lawyer, and secondly, I wouldn’t want him to know.... Well, that’s different, you’re practically my son.... Hey, watch your mouth, you two-bit.... Well, I imagine if he really did kill them both, he was a horrible man but.... Good Lord. Do you really think so?... Oh, no, the police say it was definitely murder. They didn’t say how it’d been done, but nobody dies of a natural death wrapped in.... Oh my God, I think you’re right. You must be...well, no, why would I worry about that? Elliott can’t hurt me now!.... Oh, hon, no, no, no. If Elliott did kill him, it was probably because he wanted to take him with.... Oh, Ricky, please! Don’t you ever listen when I talk about anything besides your next role? Don’t you remember my telling you about Elliott the other day?...I’m sure I told you.... No, well, yes, I think you’re right and I think I will call the police. In fact, let me get off the phone with you and I’ll call them right now about it.... No, Ricky, that’s so sweet, but really, there isn’t anything to worry about....

“No, hon, no, he can’t hurt me. I was sure I told you before. Remember last week? When I had three funerals to go to, three days in a row? Ricky, Elliott Biddley died last Monday. He had AIDS.”

Claudia Suzanne is a professional ghostwriter with nearly 120 invisible nonfiction and fiction credits. She lives in Orange County, California with assorted other human and nonhuman folk and a computer that won't keep up with her.