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## Little people

Angela Adair Fowler

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LITTLE PEOPLE

By

Angela Adair Fowler

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of  
Mississippi State University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in English  
in the Department of English

Mississippi State, Mississippi

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2007

LITTLE PEOPLE

By

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*Little People* is a collection of short fiction preceded by a critical introduction.

The stories share a loose thematic bond of being about people who consider themselves flawed or unimportant. The introduction, "The Importance of Plot," explores how Robert Olen Butler and Stephen King have influenced me as a writer struggling to write interesting, resonant plots in my short fiction. I also explore how King's advice in his book *On Writing* helped me improve my prose and become a more disciplined writer.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Heath, who is always there to keep me sane, and my mother and father, who are the reasons I became a writer.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Becky and Brad for all their time, effort, and encouragement in workshops. I thank Dr. Lyons for telling me not to write poetry as soon as I turned in my first story. Finally, I thank my husband, Heath, my parents, Doug and Brenda, and my friend Dustin for calming me in course of all my panic-stricken phone calls.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. THE IMPORTANCE OF PLOT.....	1
My Early Character Studies .....	1
Robert Olen Butler’s Yearning .....	6
Stephen King’s Situational Fiction .....	10
The Discipline of Writing .....	18
Conclusion .....	22
WORKS CITED .....	23
II. BIG MEN.....	24
III. MEG.....	45
IV. PERVERSION.....	56
V. SCREW-UP MOM .....	81
VI. WRITE JUNK. HAVE KIDS. ....	101



## CHAPTER 1

### THE IMPORTANCE OF PLOT

#### My Early Character Studies

When I was a sophomore taking my first Creative Writing class, I read something on the professor's syllabus that shattered all my preconceptions of writing fiction. Embedded within the classroom policies was a small clause, not even a sentence, that negated all of my story ideas. That clause was "No genre fiction." Flabbergasted, I listened as my professor, Dr. Richard Lyons, explained how fantasy, science fiction, and murder mysteries were all prohibited, all of which had been most of the fiction I'd read. These genres were plot-driven, not character-driven, and we were only to write character-driven stories in that class. The terminology of character-driven and plot-driven stories was completely alien to me. I had always read genre fiction with the same ferocity as literary fiction. I barely knew these distinctions existed.

Ever since I learned this painful lesson, I have ignored my initial mental anguish of choosing between genre and character-driven stories. I still enjoy reading science fiction and fantasy, but I have kept away from these genres in my writing. Instead, beginning with my first story, "Big Men," I have stuck to writing about characters. Dr. Lyons taught me in that initial class to write good characters—not "good" as in heroic or altruistic like heroes in the fantasy books I read, but "good" as in interesting, dynamic,

and flawed characters that push the story forward. And that is just what I did. I would form a good character, put him or her in some sort of internal conflict, and have him or her walk around for a while in my story, hoping some meaningful plot rose from that action.

For years I thought that plot means “what happens” in a story. After all, whenever I had discussed plot in literature classes, we discussed the sequence of events. However, plot is much more complicated than just “what happens.” As E. M. Forster defines in his book *Aspects of the Novel*:

Let us define plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. “The king died and then the queen died,” is a story. “The king died, and then the queen died of grief” is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: “The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.” This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development. (130)

I understood how to tell stories. All people do. However, the major task in developing a plot is to work out the causality of all the events. Often in workshops my fellow students and I questioned each other on character motivation or story plausibility in each other’s stories. Of course, character motivation just means, “Why does the character do this or behave in this way?” Plausibility just means, “Why did this event happen?” Both terms we used in workshops were branches of causality, which leads to stronger plots. Although I thought I was just learning to develop characters and write realistically

through these questions, I was really learning to strengthen causality and how to build stronger plots.

Before I gained a better understanding of plot, I was writing character studies, i.e. plotless stories with interesting characters. I created characters with inherent character flaws, thus making them more interesting. I made sure the character went through some sort of change by the end of the story, thus making them dynamic characters. In my first story for Creative Writing, “Big Men,” I wanted to form the main character just right to prove that I was a good writer. I heeded the words of Dr. Lyons by stepping outside of myself and not writing about a college-age girl or a young girl in Mississippi. I was too close to those situations for the stories to be interesting, which Dr. Lyons knew, of course. Instead, I wrote about a man in his 30s who teaches his elderly mother how to drive. He does not know where he is going in life, and he wants to get away from his mother’s influence while being haunted by his own unimportance in relation to his father. My original concept of the character was interesting enough to keep in the revised story. However, the plot needed work. I had been reading Flannery O’Connor when I wrote the original version, so it included a trashy, loud-talking woman as in the bus scene in “Everything that Rises Must Converge” and a car crash similar to the one in “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” I knew what I wanted to do in the story, which was to have Jerry achieve one moment of being a “big man,” or an adult. However, I did not have a strong sense of causality in the story. I did not explain why Jerry is so insecure in his manhood. I also did not explain why he was teaching his mother to drive. I thought his character would carry the story through. I was wrong. Most of my revisions have dealt with causality. Jerry now has more of a past by in a messy divorce and horrible job, giving

him a reason for living with his mother. I have also made him do more to get out of the situation of living with his mother, a situation he detests. Along with teaching his mother to drive, he also looks for an apartment and almost rents one. Therefore, “Big Men” has become a more interesting story with a definite plot.

In my first fiction workshop a year after writing “Big Men,” I wrote two stories that were character studies. The first one was called “Meg,” a very different story than the one included in the following collection. In its original version, “Meg” was the worst story I have ever written. The story is set at a festival resembling the Amory Railroad Festival celebrated near my hometown. The story includes an older woman, Delpha, whose granddaughter, Meg, lives with her. Delpha is in a booth selling painted magnolias. That is the extent of the story. There is a little tension because Delpha doesn’t get a good booth that year for selling her magnolias, and she is afraid of what Meg may be doing with some boy, but the story is otherwise a long, plotless reverie, encompassed in a single scene.

While writing the story, I felt trapped, and, in my inexperience, had no idea how to make the story more interesting. I included a black character with ridiculous dialect, and I made Delpha get up and walk around. I used that walk to provide setting, but Delpha ended up going back and sitting at that accursed booth. I was concerned so much with character and setting, thinking that anything that happened at the Railroad Festival had to be interesting, that I trapped my characters in one place with nothing to do. What they did didn’t even make sense, since there was no causality driving their actions. Why would Delpha get up from the booth to walk around other than to provide setting? Why

would Meg live with Delpha, her grandmother. No reason. Their actions are pointless. I felt that even Delpha was getting bored.

My next story in that workshop suffered, to a lesser extent, from a similar problem. That story, "Written on a Toilet," was the first story I wrote in first person. I utilized an unreliable narrator and spent most of the time outlining that character and her infatuation with a distinguished history professor, Bill. The narrator, Flora, had many idiosyncrasies, including mild OCD. With Flora, I could have written an interesting story. I could have gone into the reasons for her character flaws. I could have shown her, as an English instructor, grading papers obsessively. I could have made her do more to win the love of her life, Bill. That would have led to an interesting and rather funny plot. However, I confined my character again. She barely has a life and speaks only of a few meetings with the object of her infatuation. She refers to several of her habits and speaks a little about her job teaching freshman composition classes, but I never allowed her to experience any of that. While I thought it interesting she writes in a bathroom, as shown by the title, I effectively trapped the poor woman in there. The story is so lacking that I have not yet brought myself to revising it.

Character without plot is static and rather boring. Bloom, the main character of *Ulysses*, is arguably the most interesting character in the literature of the English language. However, if Bloom simply sits at home or in a café all day instead of walking around Dublin actually doing things, no one would really care about him. If Joyce had not included why Bloom does what he does, the character would be inane and not worth reading about. I feel that many beginning writers suffer from character stagnation, leaving their stories motionless and without momentum. During the past year, I have

been worried about my lack of attention to plot. Most of these worries have stemmed from my desperate attempts to fix my sluggish stories. It wasn't until a few months ago that I stumbled across a way to work through plot from two very dissimilar authors. These authors are Robert Olen Butler and Stephen King.

### Robert Olen Butler's Yearning

When writing character, I have both wittingly and unwittingly utilized parts of Robert Olen Butler's concept of yearning over the years. According to Butler, if fiction is to be memorable, it must be about the character's most inmost desires. While in genre fiction, the desire is to solve a problem, "a literary desire is on the order of: I yearn for self, I yearn for an identity, I yearn for a place in the universe, I yearn to connect to the other" (Butler, "Dynamics"). As a beginning writer, I understood that my characters must desire something on a level deeper than mere accomplishment of goals. In "Big Men," the character Jerry yearns for identity in that he yearns to be as strong and accepted as his father was. In "Written on a Toilet," Flora yearns for self in that she yearns to be more important, educated, self-assured, and accepted. However, just writing about characters with yearning who do not do much to fulfill those desires does not push the story forward. It was not until I read Butler's "The Dynamics of Desire" that I finally understood the harmony between developing character and forming a good plot. In this article, Butler says:

Desire is the driving force behind plot. The character does something in pursuit of that yearning, and some force or other will block the attempt to fulfill that yearning. The character will respond to the force in some way,

go round or through or over or under it, and continue the pursuit. This dynamic beneath the story is plot: the attempt to fulfill the yearning and the world's attempt to thwart that.

A character, and especially what he yearns for, generates plot. If a character desires something, that character will refuse to be trapped. He or she will do whatever it takes to achieve that goal, even if the character does not know how to go about it, or even fails. That's what was missing from my short stories, and that's what I have been attempting to include in my new stories and revisions of old stories.

For example, I wrote my short story "Perversion" when I was just beginning this new understanding of the relationship between plot and character. This story is centered around a yearning main character, Lisa, who is looking for a meaningful sexual relationship. A closet sexual submissive, she writes a book about S/M relationships in order to fulfill her need for such a relationship. Unfulfilled, she tries to have a stereotypical romantic relationship with a Frenchman. The relationship fails because she does not enjoy the sex. Throughout the story, she indulges in fantasies by reading and writing erotica on the internet and daydreaming about her vision of a perfect male Dominant. In the final scene, a male Dominant offers to teach her about his lifestyle, an offer she accepts. She gets what she wants, yet she reaches the haunting conclusion that what she wants is rape, thus undercutting any satisfaction the reader can have. While the first draft had a fairly simple plot, the story in subsequent drafts emerged with a much more interesting and complicated plot than I had ever written before. Lisa actually goes out and does things with a purpose. She is not trapped by anything. She goes to see her publisher, spends time writing, and goes on dates. Even when she is in her apartment or

daydreaming, she is doing something to fulfill the object of her yearning. Her actions are always to fulfill her purpose, which is, as Butler would call it, “to connect to the other.”

In this story, I finally intertwined plot and character through causality.

In the first Robert Olen Butler story I read, “Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot,” I was struck by the simplicity of the plot. In this story, a man returns to life as a parrot and is subsequently bought by his wife. He was a jealous husband as a man and in fact died as he was spying on a man he thought was his wife’s lover. He must now, as a parrot, endure her dating and sleeping with various men. He tries to communicate with her and, as a parrot, can form few words, but he is frustrated in his attempts to say what he really means. He yearns for something, a connection to his wife, and his desire is frustrated by his being a bird and locked in a cage with limited understanding.

One may think the plot of this story is limited by the fact that the narrator is a bird locked in a cage. It is a big cage, yes, but it is still a cage. One may think that the plotline is trapped, just as this character is trapped. However, many things work in this plotline. The narrator needs to be in a cage for practical purposes and to represent the barrier between himself and his wife. The story would not have worked as well if the story was called “Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Cat,” since the narrator would have free reign of the house and the ability to scratch his wife’s boyfriends. Even though, if he were a cat, the narrator could have a greater range of movement, the story does not need any additional movement. One thing that gives this story energy is the strangeness of the situation. A man has been reincarnated as a parrot. His thoughts are a strange mix of flashbacks, human desires, and parrot desires. He thinks very clearly of his life as a man; although forgetting momentarily about such things as glass, he also has the desires of a



parrot: “That dangling thing over there with knots and strips of rawhide and a bell at the bottom needs a good thrashing a couple of times a day and I’m just the bird to do it” (73). He uses this toy to vent his jealous frustrations, but he is still a bird with a toy. The strangeness of all of this gives the story energy and, along with flashbacks in which half of the plot comes into play, the story is in no danger of becoming trapped. In that cage lies an entire world of possibility for creative fiction.

Another thing that makes Butler’s simple plotline work is that there are several small moments that resonate for the reader. One such moment involves the parrot saying “peanut” when one of his wife’s boyfriends walks into the living room naked. This is a very small point in the story toward the end, but it stands out as important in a simple plotline. In my revisions, I have striven to achieve this technique of resonance of small detail in my stories. My above-mentioned story “Meg” has changed tremendously in its revision as I have tried to utilize this technique. As I was trapped in the setting of a Railroad Festival, I in time threw away that part of the story. I already had the characters fleshed out and ready. That was never my problem. Delpha, the main character, even already had a strong desire to protect her granddaughter, Meg. But I still needed a more interesting, or resonant, plotline. I fleshed out Delpha’s and Meg’s situation; instead of Meg mysteriously living in her grandmother’s house to take care of her, I made Meg’s mother dead and Delpha receiving guardianship. From there I complicated the plot by making Meg’s mother, Carol, an unstable drug user. I reveal over the course of the story how Meg has had to take care of herself. In the end, Meg ends up taking care of Delpha. I set the story a week after Carol’s funeral. Delpha wants to take Meg to Carol’s trailer to collect her things. Delpha observes as Meg furiously packs and finally vents her grief.

Delpha cannot initially feel grief for Carol's death but finally experiences this grief when she finds a dead cat in the bathroom of the trailer. That moment seems small, but I have tried to make it resonate throughout the story, making the moment larger and mean more than simply a dead cat. The dead cat humanizes Carol as someone who would care enough to keep a cat, brings Delpha face to face with her own grief, and gives Meg an opportunity to show her strength as she buries the cat and takes care of her grieving grandmother. This small moment resonates as the climax of the story in a very simple plot.

#### Stephen King's Situational Fiction

Ironically, my other literary influence is Stephen King. I say ironically because Robert Olen Butler, my first literary influence, mentions Stephen King in one of his interviews in a rather negative light:

Stephen King, Danielle Steel, even people like Jean-Paul Sartre understand ahead of time what effect they wish to convey, what ideas they wish to get across. Then they construct an object to do that. The artist responds to the world directly. He has some deep vision of order, but has no idea what the vision is until the object is created. The artist creates the object as much to explore as to express his vision. That is the fundamental distinction between what artists do and what entertainers or ideologues do.

(Butler, "Interview" 88)

Obviously, Butler does not hold a high opinion of Stephen King's writing. However, Butler seems to treat King unfairly. He wants to lump him in with other supposed "hack"

writers merely because his novels are automatically put in the horror genre and sell really well in supermarkets. At first glance, especially if one forgets how many of his novels and short stories have been nominated for and won many prestigious writing awards, many of Stephen King's stories may seem plot driven rather than character driven. A group of people have to battle an evil clown. There's an evil dog. A town of vampires. A girl with telekinetic powers. The characters respond to an outside force and try not to be killed. One would be tempted to write off all these novels as supermarket horror books and not worth learning from or emulating. The resonating quality of these plots has inspired me as a writer, but in a different way from Butler.

Over Christmas, and as I was stewing over this question of plot, I read Stephen King's *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. Many parts of this book inspired me as a writer, but the thing that affected me most was his discussion of plot. He says, "I distrust plot for two reasons: first, because our *lives* are largely plotless, even when you add in all our reasonable precautions and careful planning; and second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible" (163). This is far from Butler's vision of the hack who just makes up a plotline and, as Butler implies, sacrifices character.

King goes on to say, "Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world" (163), which the writer uncovers and changes while he or she is writing the story. Stories, to King, are like fossils that a writer unearths. These fossils can be buried in the writer's past, in things that he or she has read, or even just in the writer's imagination. King talks about how he got the idea for his novel *Misery*. He was on an airplane and had a dream about a woman, who owned a pig named Misery, keeping a writer prisoner with

his leg broken. From this dream, which he wrote down upon awakening, he created a short story and revised it into a novel, fully uncovering and improving on the story. He dreamt of a situation and characters, eventually creating a successful book.

That's when I realized I was in a mental quandary over nothing. I realized I had a very different concept of plot than both Stephen King and Robert Olen Butler. The plot King disregarded is story-outline plot. He rejects the idea that writers can outline what characters do throughout the story in a formal outline, akin to preparing for a formal essay. Of course that's true, and I've always known that. A writer cannot have a particular ending in mind, constructing the causality of the plot to lead to that ending. This technique produces a story that feels artificial, with the characters forced to do things out of character just so the writer can get what he or she wants. In the original concept of *Misery*, the woman plans to make the author write the final book of his series and bind that book with the skin of her pig. King imagined, as a short story, that story would end in the pig's living and the book's being bound in the writer's skin, with the pig possibly feasting on the writer's flesh. Anyone who's read *Misery* knows that's not what happens. As King puts it, "Paul Sheldon turned out to be a good deal more resourceful than I initially thought, and his efforts to play Scheherazade and save his life gave me a chance to say some things about the redemptive power of writing that I had long felt but never articulated" (168). He goes on to say, "none of the story's details and incidents proceeded from plot; they were organic, each arising naturally from the initial situation, each an uncovered part of the fossil" (168-69). Notice what Stephen King says. He allows the characters to govern plot. He had a rough idea of where the story was going, but he

abandoned those ideas in the creative process. And he is able to represent and “explore,” as Butler would say, his vision of the “redemptive power of writing.”

No, King’s best fiction is not plotted in advance, although he does mention some works that were plotted, which he calls “stiff, trying-too-hard novels” (169). Instead of plotting, what King uses is situations, usually expressed initially “as a *What-if* question” (169). That is what I was looking for, and what I had been doing unconsciously all along. That’s really what any writer does. A writer must have well thought out characters but also must have a situation for the character to work in. One of my favorite Stephen King short stories is “The Man in the Black Suit,” the story that won the O. Henry Award. I imagine this story began as a What-if question (What if a boy met the Devil in the woods?). In the story, the man in the black suit, an obvious supernatural creature which the boy dubs as the Devil, torments the boy, Gary, with lies about his mother’s death by bee sting. The man finally decides to eat him, and Gary, moving from terrified grief to just plain terror, works his way out of the situation by feeding the man fish and running for his life. The story resembles a fairy tale, with a child in the woods chased by supernatural evil. The story is also framed by the narration of a much older Gary, which does take away from the suspense since we know the boy will survive the attack. Yet the story is not about finding out what will happen to the boy. The story is about how this encounter changes the boy. Initially Gary is rather casual about religion. When he takes the family Bible to go with his father to retrieve his rod and creel, he says, “I’d set out just to bring my New Testament, which I had won for memorizing the most psalms in the Thursday-night Youth Fellowship (I managed eight, although most of them except the Twenty-third had floated out of my mind in a week’s time” (102). This is, of course, the

attitude most children would have to Sunday School functions: participating without trying to become personally invested. After the meeting, and at the end of his narrative (the older narrator is on his deathbed), Gary gains a less certain view of Christianity. He thinks he'll go to heaven because he's been good enough, but he knows he was just as good as a child and the Devil came after him anyway. While one would almost call this short story E. M. Forster's definition of a story, especially since the narrator seems to be telling a narrative without causality, the short story definitely has a plot with tight causality and character movement. King also uses for his situation a legend that resonates in American folklore: someone meets the Devil at a crossroads or, in this case, the fork of a stream. The boy does not sell his soul, as Robert Johnson is said to have done, but he does doubt the safety of his soul.

I began to use King's technique of situation plot (keeping in mind, of course, Butler's concept of plot), in my revision of "Meg." I had created characters and setting in the original version of "Meg," but what was missing was a situation. Delpha wasn't really uncomfortable and had no problem to work through. In my recent edit of "Meg," I gave my characters a situation that actually began as a what-if question, rising organically from my own experience and imagination. My mother is a junior high math teacher. As the child of a teacher, I grew up hearing about her students: their triumphs, errors, hardships, and occasionally their crimes. One hardship I heard over and over throughout my childhood was children being raised by their grandmothers. The situations were usually very similar: the father was never in the picture, the mother was recently out of the picture, and their mother's mother had to raise them. The gone mother was usually involved in drugs and/or verbally or physically abusive boyfriends. I've always had one

question about that that never received a satisfactory answer. How does the grandmother feel now? She has raised one child and, in most cases, the child did not turn out right or follow a good path. I imagined the grandmother wondering if she could do a better job this time around, or what she could do differently. I really had no clue how Delpha or Meg was going to handle this situation. I merely wrote what I thought them likely to do. And just as Paul Sheldon surprised Stephen King by his resourcefulness, the girl Meg surprised me by her independence, self-reliance, and maturity. Even the one element that would seem plotted—the encounter with the dead cat—sprang from my vision of Carol, Meg's mother. Carol has the ability to love, as shown by her insistence that she keep Meg even when Delpha wants to raise Meg. However, Carol is unable to care for those she loves: she must rely on her mother and daughter to work behind her back to put food on the table. She does the same thing with the cat. She loves the cat, but closes the cat up in the bathroom. The cat dies because there is no one to take care of it and it cannot leave the bathroom to take care of itself. The cat starves to death, a chilling view of what might have happened to Meg.

I was also influenced by Stephen King's concept of situational plots in my edit of the story "Slide Trombone," which is now renamed "Screw-up Mom." When I wrote the original draft of this story, I still thought interesting characters plus interesting setting equals a good short story. I wrote about a woman jealous and bitter about her plain daughter. The mother character, Joan, was well thought out and had plenty of yearning. I even thought I did a good job of plotting the story, since I made the characters move around and do things. However, my situation was uninteresting. Joan is divorced from her husband and has custody of her daughter, Kelly. She pushes Kelly into a small-town

beauty contest, wanting to make Kelly one of the “pretty girls,” as well as to involve herself in the community, feeling out of touch with the other mothers. My mistake with this story was that I plotted too much. I wanted the father to come in during the beauty pageant and “rescue” his daughter by bringing her trombone when her mother insisted on her playing the piano. In order to achieve this, I made the father too likeable and the mother too hateable. The first question people had when I workshopped this story was, “Why does Joan still have custody of Kelly? She’s awful!”

I let the story sit for about a little less than a year and then read the written critiques on the story I received from the other people in the workshop. Most of the best critiques advised me to improve the situation of the story. Therefore, in my edit, I changed the situation. I decided the father, Steve, had custody of Kelly, with Joan getting visitation on weekends. That switch, seemingly so simple, livens the situation by making it unusual. Mothers usually gain custody of the child. What does that switch say about Joan? As I continued to edit, I decided Joan was emotionally unstable and had difficulty connecting with her husband and even with her own child. She loves Kelly, of course, and probably loves Steve. She just blames both of them for problems she incurs herself. With that switch, I was able to flesh out my character more, show Joan in a more sympathetic and humorous light, and push the plot into other places than just a beauty pageant and a controlling mother. In fact, she never takes her daughter to the beauty pageant and finally finds a way to love her by being a screw-up mom. She finds triumph in embracing her faults. I could move the story out of the realm of the Lifetime network and more into the realm of interesting fiction.



In an aforementioned quote, Robert Olen Butler makes a distinction between artists and entertainers. As I grow as a writer, I'm beginning to question the fairness of this distinction. What separates literary fiction from popular fiction? How does one treat a writer who spans both of these imposed categories? In *On Writing*, King uses the example of Raymond Chandler, one of the masters of short fiction: "Raymond Chandler may be recognized now as an important figure in twentieth-century American literature, an early voice describing the anomie of urban life in the years after World War II, but there are plenty of critics who will reject such a judgment out of hand" (143). These critics, as King explains, denounce Chandler for coming from the pulp tradition. Writers can get stuck in the category of literary or popular fiction, especially when they are young and first starting to write, wanting to be published anywhere so they can get that one cherished publication they can put on their resume. Placing writing prescriptively into categories tends to trap "literary" fiction into unprofitability. After all, literary fiction is not meant to entertain, but to instruct. By instruct, I do not mean that literary fiction is supposed to teach us any great lesson. Rather, literary fiction is supposed to make people better informed, cultured, and educated. While literary fiction is certainly entertaining, it becomes primarily a mental exercise for critics and literary students. While treating the works as mental exercises, many critics forget that the works are supposed to entertain as well. And popular fiction, of course, is supposed to entertain but not instruct, no matter how good the writer is. According to Dryden, in his establishment of a definition of a play in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, "a play ought to be, 'A just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours and the changes of fortune to which it is subject for the delight and instruction of mankind'" (42). The idea of literature

instructing and entertaining at the same time was prevalent in the eighteenth century. However, in the twentieth and twenty-first century, with the modern critical tradition being well-established for more than a century, the two aims of literature have been polarized. I have come to the realization that the categories of literary fiction and popular fiction are false and imposed. Good writers transcend these polarizations, even when critics will not acknowledge it. Isn't "Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot" entertaining? Of course it is. What about *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood? It's a science fiction story, so it's popular fiction. But it still transcends that stigma placed on science fiction. Good writing will always transcend any categories people try to impose upon it. Therefore, my goal has become to be a good writer and not worry if my fiction is literary or popular. If I get really good, my fiction will be both.

### The Discipline of Writing

A year ago, as a requirement for a fiction workshop, I submitted one of my stories, "Perversion," for publication in various literary journals. I did this mostly because it was a requirement. I had not decided to become serious about writing fiction. I was too involved in my literature classes and learning to write articles for publication. Yes, I enjoyed writing fiction, but I didn't realize how serious I wanted to be about it. So I waited until the last minute and bundled up my 27-page story to send to any of the journals who accepted simultaneous submissions and did not have a word limit. Over the following six months, I received six polite rejection slips. They are now posted on my refrigerator. These slips may reject my story, but they have also changed my life.

In *On Writing*, King relates the difficulty of young writers trying to get published. He speaks of his own difficulty—being rejected everywhere, taking bad jobs wherever he got them, and writing during lunch breaks and late at night. I’ve heard that a lot of writers get rejected for years before getting that one publication. As editor of Mississippi State’s literary journal, the *Jabberwock Review*, I send those rejection slips for most of the submissions, only to get more stories or poems from those people I rejected. A writer’s life is one of frustration, constant self-doubt, and constant self-improvement. But when I received my first rejection slip, I realized I wanted that life. It was exhilarating to take that first step in the life of a writer. That’s when I also realized I needed to get serious about my writing.

The first thing I did was learn to revise. The years before, when I was just playing around with fiction, I would wait until the last possible second, usually the night before the revision was due, and then add sentences and paragraphs here and there while keeping the same structure, plot, characters, and practically everything else. Yes, this is the type of revision composition and creative writing professors preach against, but I was young and I was doing it with just a little shame. However, when I started finally taking my writing seriously, I realized I would need to change my revision process. The stories in my thesis were my first tests of my newfound dedication. I reviewed the workshop critiques of all the stories I workshopped. I fully read those critiques from the professor and all the students from the workshop, underlining important parts and making notes. Then I read my stories and made notes on what to change. Then, I made friends with the delete key. In “Big Men” I deleted an entire character. In “Meg” I deleted the entire story, keeping only the characters and some of the situation. In “Perversion,” my 27-page

monster, I deleted five pages. I deleted and rewrote, transforming my work and honing my craft.

I also realized that I could not just write in big spurts right before something was due, and only when something was due. As most writers find out, I needed to keep a strict schedule of writing. In *On Writing*, Stephen King talks about how a writer must write every day. Even holidays. I at first thought that I had no time to write. I was a student and teacher. I had to grade papers and do homework. I had to do the dishes, do the laundry, feed my cat, pay bills, cook, and spend time with my husband. I couldn't just take a few hours of my already strained time just to write. That's what I thought. However, after figuring out how much time I spent surfing the internet, playing video games, or watching television, I realized I had the time. I just had to sacrifice a little amusement to do what I loved to do: write.

Since I have purchased a laptop, I have now established a space in my house to write. I have established hours during which I write every day. I may still need some more willpower to adhere to my schedule, but I have been for the most part successful. When I don't have any ideas or anything to write about, I pick up a book of writing exercises and work on those. In high school I played the flute for the band. For this instrument I had to put in hours of practice, working on scales, fingering exercises, breathing exercises, sight reading, and the music for the band. I already knew how to discipline myself. I just had not transferred that knowledge to my writing. In writing, I was working on the music for class, but I was not doing scales or finger exercises. Hence, I was not improving at the rate I could have. Now I feel myself just getting better at writing: generating ideas and putting words on paper without staring off into space.

I have also improved my style of writing. In *On Writing*, Stephen King tells about common prose mistakes that most writers have learned but I had just never noticed. One of my problems was my flagrant use of adverbs. I just didn't know they were amateurish. After reading that, I read my early work and noticed the adverbs dotting the pages, making my prose clunky and, in some places, downright funny. I also used dialogue attributions with words other than "said." Since reading *On Writing*, I have read three other books on writing denouncing the practice of using words other than "said," advice that I have heeded in all my writings and revisions since. Moreover, reading some of my early fiction, I realized how long and awkward my sentences were. Sometimes clauses would lose sight of the rest of the sentence. For my latest story, "Write Junk. Have Kids.," as well as my revision of "Meg," I have experimented with using shorter sentences. With the shorter sentences and lack of adverbs, my prose has become less flowing but more concise and readable. I felt a flush of triumph when, while discussing my story in workshop, the professor praised my prose. My fiction teachers and fellow workshop students might praise my ideas, insightfulness, or characters, but never my prose until then. Of course, I will not use such choppy prose all the time. For "Write Junk" the prose is fitting. My main character is detached from other people and spends much of his time working at a newspaper, where he uses a shorter, journalist style of writing as a copy editor. He also participates in Instant Messenger and role-playing games, which introduce short, fragmented, and abbreviated writing. Again, the shorter style fits "Meg" because of Delpha and Meg's being uncomfortable around each other, as well as detached from their own grief after Carol's death.

## Conclusion

Recently I attended my first AWP conference. As a young, unpublished writer, I was definitely intimidated. However, I was also inspired. I realized that this was a community I belonged to. One morning in the coffee line, I looked in front of me and saw Robert Olen Butler. I looked behind me and saw John Barth, one of the founders of postmodernism. I realized this was a story I would keep with me and tell throughout my career. I also realized, that, while I am certainly less successful and famous than either of these literary greats, and I was only with them because we happened to want breakfast at the same time, as they talked over my head I wanted to be considered their equal.

My fiction has changed considerably over the past few years. My first stories were character studies and Southern caricatures, written after reading too much Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty. My fiction has, through several edits and complete rewritings, changed into something closer to my own voice. That is my continual quest, to borrow a word from my early fantasy genre reading. Each story, revision, and line edit leads me closer to a better, and hopefully more successful, style.

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## CHAPTER II

### BIG MEN

The white '83 Oldsmobile took up the entire driveway. It no longer fit in the garage, which was still crowded with boxes of junk from the auto parts store Jerry and his mother had been unable to sell. A sports car swerved to miss the bumper.

Jerry watched the near miss from the window of his mother's old beauty salon connected to the house, which he used for an office. He was up to his elbows in tax forms. It was getting close to April and people had finally figured out they might need to do their taxes.

It was the first unseasonably hot day of the year, and of course the air conditioning had gone out in his mother's old hair salon, which Jerry had converted into an office when he'd moved from Oxford. The repairman, Dub, hadn't come that day, so the office was unbearable. But Jerry couldn't work in the main house. He'd rigged up two fans and grabbed everything resembling a paperweight in the house.

"Are you sure that's all, Mrs. Hill?" he heard himself saying.

"Just what I usually do, Jerry," she said. Mrs. Hill was in her fifties, which on her was an unpleasant age. Jerry remembered when she once babysat him. She'd been young and let him eat two ice cream sandwiches instead of one. Now she seemed to be sniffing the room, as if something had crawled up in the vents and died. Her sweat was yellow.



“You know that with a few receipts, you could write off...”

“I never keep receipts,” Mrs. Hill said. “I’m very busy today, if you don’t realize.”

Jerry looked around. A stack of forms he had to send off was falling, finally losing the war against the constant breeze of the fan. He tried to smile. “I realize you’re busy. I was just asking if you were interested in saving money. It wouldn’t have taken any time.”

Jerry realized he’d made a mistake immediately.

Mrs. Hill pretended he hadn’t said anything. She pulled a yellow checkbook out of a monster of a purse and filled out the check with jerky, precise lines. Without asking him what he charged, she put the check on the table and left.

Jerry looked at the check. It was for the same amount tax assessors had charged five years ago. Damn.

He wondered what Carrie, his ex-wife, would think of him now. She’d probably get in a violent argument with Mrs. Hill and then berate him for letting her do that. Then she’d apologize for her behavior and blame the outburst on stress at work.

Jerry heard his mother walk uneasily down the stairs to the front walkway, her cane thudding against the concrete. She used to only use that cane on stairs, but she was carrying it further every day.

The storm door to the beauty shop creaked open as Jerry’s mother, Vee, pushed in with her hip. “Jerry, I’ve got some lemonade for you.” She was using that sing-song voice that reminded Jerry of second grade.

Vee put down the cane and wiped the glass over her forehead dramatically.  
“Jerry! What are you still doing out here with it being so hot. You’ll just melt away.”

Jerry tried to keep looking down at his work. “If I go into the house, I’ll want to watch TV, and then I’ll never get anything done.”

Vee set the glass on Jerry’s desk, wetting a corner of paper. Jerry held the paper up to the fan as Vee sat in the hair-drying chair. Jerry sighed. Shouldn’t she be watching *Matlock*?

“Bernice called today,” Vee said. “Her Fred is in the hospital again. They just never can figure out his heart. If it’s not one thing, it’s another. She said they’re planning to cart him over to Birmingham if this doesn’t work.”

Jerry grunted in reply. He barely knew some of these people. He vaguely remembered Fred from when he was little. He’d been nine and picking cotton with all the other older kids, his first time. At the end of the day, Fred had laughed to everyone that he’d picked the least amount of all the kids. That was the last time Jerry had picked cotton. Soon after, he started keeping his mother’s appointment book and, much later, finances. Jerry decided he didn’t care that Fred was in the hospital.

“Was that Thelma I saw just leave?” Vee said. “Well, she’s not keeping herself up. Used to be she looked like she spent time in front of the mirror. Doesn’t even put on lipstick now, when she *really* needs it.”

“Mama, I really have to work,” Jerry said.

“Well, all right, honey, I know you do,” Vee said. “I just missed you.” Vee picked herself up with her cane. “Seems like you’re always working nowadays. Never get to see you. I’ll get out of your way, though. I didn’t mean to bother you.”

Jerry closed his eyes. “Mama, I’m not that busy. You can stay if you want.”

“No, I need to start cooking supper anyway.”

It was 3:00.

“Mama, stay. I want you to stay. See? There’s no one here right now.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Vee said. She sounded cheerful. She always sounded cheerful. The screen door banged behind her.

Jerry couldn’t work; the numbers were turning into gibberish. He found himself almost wishing for his life back in Oxford, where he’d stayed for seventeen years after graduating from Ole Miss. He’d had less money then, he knew that, especially after the divorce. Carrie was fairly affluent, mostly because of her inheritance from her father and partially because of her book deal. She’d written several self-help books that had been fairly successful. She must be rolling in it now, Jerry thought. He’d seen her on Oprah the other day, one of her book having been picked up by Oprah’s book club.

It had been good when they were both students and had first met. Carrie had gone out with Jerry and eventually accepted his proposal because she thought she was getting back at her father. Her father ended up liking him because he liked rhyming names (Jerry and Carrie) and blessed the marriage before he died. After the death, Jerry had wanted to wait on the wedding, but Carrie would hear none of it.

Jerry had liked being married to Carrie. It afforded a certain lifestyle he hadn’t been used to. He didn’t have to work, for one thing. He just stayed at home and managed his wife’s money. They went to parties. Even tailgating was the best Oxford could afford, complete with crystal chandeliers. The marriage had lasted for five years.

Carrie had called the divorce amicable to save face. Fact was, it had become, within three years, impossible to live with her. She drank too much and claimed that the counseling office she had established with some of her book money gave her so much stress. She berated Jerry every chance she got, making fun of his poor family and calling him a gold-digger. She hit him sometimes, feminine slaps like the ones in romantic comedies. He hit her only once, but it was a pathetic little slap, so feeble that Carrie fell over laughing. The day after that, they decided to divorce.

Jerry had nothing. Housing in Oxford was expensive. And people did their own taxes at the computer now, so his degree meant next to nothing there. Everyone was college educated and felt like they were smart enough to do taxes. Jerry had ended up getting a small, one-bedroom apartment and working at Copy Cow for much less than he was worth. He'd made manager, but that didn't mean he could move out of his crappy apartment.

Jerry honestly wondered why he came home after all that, even though it seemed at the time to be his best option. It certainly wasn't to take care of his mother. That's what he'd told all the people at church who'd asked, with some surprise, what he was doing back. The people his age seemed to feel he had squandered his chance to escape from the small town. The only excuse he could use was filial duty. Everyone at church and around town had bought that, but he didn't really believe it. His mother had always been independent. The only thing she couldn't do was drive, and she always went with one of her bridge buddies to Wal-Mart anyway. She didn't really need him.

No, he'd moved here because the old tax assessor, Bill, had died. Suddenly, the people of the town with one computer to about twenty houses would have had to drive to

Tupelo to file taxes. It was the first stroke of luck Jerry had had in a long while. So he'd moved back home and set up shop temporarily in his mother's house, moving back into his old room.

Jerry groaned. That had been a year and a half ago. He was about to turn forty. He hadn't found an apartment. He hadn't found an office. And he couldn't move out of town and away from what money there was. Yes, he had to take another job for part of the year, but that was a nice job in the local furniture factory doing finances. He couldn't move away.

But the only thing more depressing than a forty-year-old Copy Cow manager is a forty-year-old divorcé living with his mother.

Jerry pulled out the classified section of the newspaper and started looking for an apartment yet again.

By supertime, Jerry hadn't gotten as much done as he needed to. The classifieds as usual advertised no decent housing. He'd already known that, and this recent search had been a desperate attempt. Any decent landlord wouldn't advertise in the paper. They asked around to find other decent people.

Jerry put more meatloaf on his plate. The yellow kitchen light flickered overhead, making the white linoleum look dirty no matter how much Vee mopped. The rest of the kitchen was better. The cabinets were carved by an old black man when Jerry's parents were young. The multiplicity of curlicues made the cabinets difficult to dust (a difficulty Jerry knew from his childhood chores), but beautiful nonetheless. The only thing Jerry

would change about the kitchen was the sink. It was too low and the faucets turned the wrong way from when his father had first installed them.

The rest of the house was neat. Too neat. Old lady neat. Jerry never felt like he could be at rest. He kept even his bedroom neat, replacing the blankets on the bed every morning, the blankets he was too hot-natured to use. The room held most of his possessions, but it seemed like a stranger lived there.

“I think I’ve found you a place to stay,” Jerry’s mother finally said.

Jerry looked up from his mashed potatoes, which was making the bonneted girls on the plates look like they were walking in snow.

“Tom said that young couple who’s been living in that apartment above his office is planning on moving. The man’s got a job in Jackson.”

Jerry didn’t care about the man. “Who lets that apartment?”

Vee was busy trying to pour herself some tea from a heavy jar. Jerry pulled the jar from his mother’s hands and poured it for her.

“Who lets the apartment, Mama?”

Vee took a sip of tea. “Tom does. Tom Broker, you know, that lawyer from church? He said he’d talk to you tomorrow about it.”

“When did you find out?”

“Oh, he called today,” Vee said. “Just a little after lunch.”

Jerry groaned. That’s what she’d come out to tell him. “Why didn’t you call me to the phone?”

Vee looked offended, but Jerry knew she really wasn’t. “You were with people. Don’t worry, I told Tom how busy you were these days. Of course he understands.”

Great, Jerry thought. What if he thinks I have money now? He'll charge whatever he wants.

“Did he say how much he wanted for it?” Jerry asked.

“He didn't really say,” Vee said, “although he did mention 325. I don't know. Jerry, I don't want to talk about it any more. Mama doesn't want to see you go again. Mama's gotten used to you being around the house.”

Jerry sighed. “Mama, I'll still be around. It'll only be a ten minute drive. I can come over whenever you want.”

Vee smiled. Jerry could have killed himself. Whenever she wanted? What was that about? She'd be calling every day for Jerry to unstop the toilet and stuff like that. Things she could do by herself, but, as she said, *Mama's gotten used to you being around the house*. He'd spoiled her. She'd have to go to Wal-Mart three times a week now. And Jerry *hated* shopping in Wal-Mart with his mother. A quick trip always turned into two hours, especially since the big Wal-Mart had come to town. Groceries. Clothing. Medicine. Light bulbs—all on opposite sides of the store. And Vee walking slowly behind a shopping cart, stopping to talk every few minutes about whose kids were dating whose and who had a grandchild now. And the pity those other women had for Vee's childless son.

“Actually, Mama,” Jerry heard himself saying, “I was wondering if you wanted to learn how to drive.”

Vee looked up. “I'm too old, sweetie,” she said in a pitying voice, as if Jerry was the one who was old and wanted to drive.

“You’re not old, Mama,” Jerry said. “You’re barely past 70. All your friends drive.”

“All my friends have been driving all their lives.”

“Come on, Mama. I can teach you. I can teach you starting tomorrow. Haven’t you ever wanted to take yourself to Wal-Mart... or anywhere... without calling someone?” Jerry remembered using this same voice asking to stay out late for the prom.

They were silent for a while. Jerry was about to resign himself to a lifetime of waiting in the chair outside the Wal-Mart pharmacy. He knew she never wanted to learn how to drive. She was independent in everything but that. She wanted someone to take care of her. She wanted *him* to take care of her.

Jerry remembered back to high school. When other guys were playing sports and going out to the field to drink beer, Jerry was constrained with that damned filial duty. He never seemed to be able to go out without his mother finding something for them to do together. She wouldn’t allow him out on weeknights because he had to do homework. He couldn’t go out on the weekends because he’d been doing homework all week and hadn’t spent enough time with his family. Also, the weekends were for visiting old relatives, ones in nursing homes and ones who should have been in nursing homes.

It seemed to Jerry to be a cycle between women. He’d left his mother and found Carrie. Then he left Carrie and ran back home to his mother. Did he actually *need* a woman to control his life? He may have always controlled the money—he was good at controlling money—but what good did that do when Carrie and Vee controlled everything else?



“You know,” Vee said, “I remember wanting to learn to drive several years ago. It was when we got the new car and Pete was down in his back. I knew you’d be starting to college soon... but your father didn’t see the need.”

They were both silent again. Jerry was thinking about Pete’s old belongings from the auto parts store in the garage, taking up all the space. He knew his mother was thinking about the same thing.

They planned to go out before lunch the next morning. They would meet with Tom before going home.

“Are you ready to go, Mama?” Jerry asked, taking the last gulp of his coffee and folding the Sports section neatly.

“Just a minute,” Vee said. She walked into the small living room connected to the kitchen and steadied herself uncertainly on a rocking chair to pull on a short-heeled black pump. She was short of breath. Her dress was a mixture of dark hues and bright red arranged in an indecipherable pattern, all set off with gold trim. It was made with that stiff rough material that Jerry could never remember the name of, but seemed to be the primary material for old lady dresses. Jerry had only seen his mama wear that dress to funerals.

“Mama, you’re not wearing that, are you?”

Vee smoothed the imaginary wrinkles out of her dress. “Oh, come on, Jerry, loosen up. An old lady has a right to get dressed up every once in a while.” She took the keys to the car from a wooden key-holder adorned with painted ducks. “Well, let’s get this over with.”

Jerry stood up from the heavy wooden chair at the kitchen table. He opened the screen side door for Vee and carefully held her hand for the two steep steps. They walked to the huge car. Jerry had to give Vee a little push to the driver's side to remind her who was driving.

Vee was deliberate in everything she did, to the point of clumsiness rather than accuracy. Vee carefully put the key into the ignition. She missed it five times before the key slid in.

“Alright, Mama. Crank her up and put her in reverse.” Jerry automatically adopted an officious voice, speaking slowly and clearly so Vee wouldn't miss a word.

Jerry watched in pain as Vee fumbled over the keys. First she didn't crank it hard enough, and then she got the ignition stuck, so Jerry had to reach over and fiddle with it to turn the key back. This time he turned the key himself. The car jolted to life, and Vee made a startled sound. We've had this car for too long, he thought.

The car had belonged to Jerry's father, Pete. He had been a patriarch of the town as owner of the auto supply store, the man who supplied Juicy Fruit to all the kids in church, and the announcer in the Civitan's horse show for twenty years.

Jerry had never really understood why people loved his father so much. He was caustic. He drank. And his prayers went too long in church. But no one mentioned any of that at his funeral, or even during his life.

Jerry remembered being perched on a red leather stool when he was 10, playing with Matchbox cars on the counter in Pete's Auto Supply as his father talked with the big men of the town about carburetors and hamburger steak and what Ms. Lacy gone off and done. Jerry remembered the big men laughing when he sagely nodded along with the rest.

Pete just sent Jerry to the back room, supposedly to take inventory. Of course, Pete didn't allow him to touch any of the stock, besides the few kids' toys around. Jerry just acted like he worked there for show. He never could understand his father's system of running things. He wasn't even allowed to do the books when he was older.

The car they were riding in now had just been a replacement car. Jerry had wrecked Pete's old car, a '67 Chevelle-Malibu, on prom night. The frame was non-salvageable, so they sold the engine and bought the new car and a little Ford for Jerry to go to college. But no matter how long they had it, Jerry and Vee called the Oldsmobile the new car, and thought it vastly inferior to the old car, a belief that had stuck from Pete's constant lectures.

"Mama, turn on your turn signal," Jerry said as they were pulling out of the driveway. Jerry held his breath as Vee slowly inched her way onto the narrow street, knowing people went way too fast on their road.

"There's no one coming, sweetie," Vee said.

Jerry sighed. "You need to get into the habit, Mama. You don't want to become one of those who don't put on the signal anytime."

"I know what I'm doing. I'm not some senile old woman who's going to forget that she's behind the wheel."

Jerry scrunched his toes as Vee shifted the car into drive and slowly accelerated, still talking. "If I was some senile old woman, I wouldn't have let you talk me into this. You know how much I hate old women getting behind the wheel, propping themselves up with phone books. It's just embarrassing. I may be old, but I'm still young-looking and I'm still tall."

Jerry knew Vee was rather proud of how she looked. Her skin wasn't dark and wrinkled like most of her friends who'd worked on their family farms since they could crawl. Instead, she was fair and smooth from spending every day indoors. Only her hands belied her age, wrinkled from the damage only years of water, shampoo, and permanents could inflict.

The sudden whoosh of a sporty-looking car passed them, recalling Jerry's recurring dream of his mother forced off the road and her thin legs gunning the gas into the trees of the adjoining orchard.

The car inched toward town, starting and stopping every time Vee thought of something to say. She talked of hospitals and relatives who'd died before Jerry was born. Jerry prayed for deliverance.

The car slowed down and swerved to the right.

"Please, Mama, keep control of the car," Jerry said. His knuckles were white.

Vee pulled over onto the curb and stopped the car. Her lips were pressed into a thin line. "I'm doing the best I can, Jerry." Her voice was quavery, as if she were close to tears.

Jerry was silent. His stomach clenched. "Mama, I know you're doing..."

"Why did you want me to drive in the first place?" Vee said.

The side of the road was lined in tiny white flowers that always popped up at the end of spring. It looked like it had snowed, the thin crust of snow that is all Mississippi ever gets. Jerry remembered he used to gather those flowers and give them to his mother in tiny bouquets.

“I’m sorry you have to worry about an old woman,” Vee said. “I’m sorry that your father is dead and can’t take care of me.”

Jerry felt like holding his breath. His mother always said this when she wanted to win.

Vee shifted the car in drive. They were headed to town again.

The loose grouping of buildings signifying “town” finally came into view. The only thing that made it different from Jerry and Vee’s backwoods neighborhood was the presence of a post office, a city hall, a school, a few restaurants, and a main street with half of the businesses gone. There was almost no traffic on the road in the late morning, most people being at work or in school. The bells in the Baptist church clanged out 10:00.

“I’ve always loved these lovely morning drives,” Vee said, reclining her head in the warm sun. “Do you remember those drives Pete used to take us on? Isn’t this just like that?”

Jerry didn’t say anything.

“You know one thing Pete told me?” Vee laughed. “I probably told you about this. You know those little flowers on the side of the road? Pete once told me that they couldn’t cross the Tombigbee River—that it was a fluke of nature. He fed me this whole story. Then a few years later, I told him those flowers had crossed over because I’d seen them. He just looked at me and laughed and said, ‘Vee, I was just lying to you.’”

“I don’t remember that.” Jerry wished his mother would pay attention to her driving, but he didn’t want to bring it up again.

“You were in college at the time.”

They parked at a gas station. Vee had to circle the gas pumps five times, each time getting the car too far away from the pump. Jerry got out to pump the gas.

When the tank was almost full, Jerry stopped the pump, knowing if the tank got all the way full the gas would slosh out. As he was heading to the register to pay, he heard, “Jerry, could you get us some Coca-Colas from the store? My throat’s a little dry.”

Jerry stared into the old window of the quick-stop, where some big men sat at a few ashtray- and newspaper-covered booths, drinking coffee. He suddenly felt sick. “Yes, Mama,” he said, practically stumbling out of the car.

The Christmas bell attached to the door rang loudly as Jerry tried to push the door open as carefully as he could. He could hear the men talking about the football game the night before, and when Coach Bary was finally going to retire. Jerry shuffled over to the glass doors displaying soda and fruit drinks.

Jerry tried not to look at the men. A couple of the men were of his father’s generation, but most of the men were closer to Jerry’s age. None of them had been his friends when they were kids. Jerry didn’t have many friends from high school. These were the ones, though, who’d made his life miserable in school up through junior high. They’d made fun of him for... actually, Jerry never could figure out why they made fun of him. In high school, he’d finally figured out that there was a rumor going around that he was gay, but he didn’t think any of the boys would have thought this in elementary school.

Jerry smiled at himself. He was still worried about what people thought about him in high school.

Jerry pulled out a 20-ounce coke for himself and a Diet Coke for Vee. He paused. He had to walk past the men to get to the counter. Jerry squared his shoulders and began to saunter past them.

“Why, isn’t that Pete’s boy?” one of the big men of his father’s generation, Sammy, halted him. “How’s your Mama, Jerry?” He crushed his cigarette into the tacky yellow ashtray and grinned.

Jerry voice seemed to catch in his throat. “She’s just fine, Mr. Sammy. She’s out there waiting in the car.”

At once the group of men turned to see Vee sitting out in the car. She waved at them, smiling, and they all waved back.

“What’s Aunt Vee doing in the driver’s seat?” David asked. Jerry bristled. He was Jerry’s age and had been one of his chief tormenters. He was a basketball coach now.

“That’s right,” Sammy said. “Vee told my wife this morning you were going to teach her to drive. How’s that going, boy? You about got her out of your hair?” The big men roared.

Jerry plastered a smile on. “She’s doing just fine, Mr. Sammy. Well, she’s waiting for her drink, so I better go. You know Mama.” He moved quickly to the counter.

Jerry heard one of the men say something, but he couldn’t tell what or which one it was. He had his back to them, waiting behind a kid counting out change for gas and buying his Mama some cigarettes.

Jerry heard some hushing noises, and he didn’t even look in the eyes of the red-headed high school cashier, counting out his change boredly. He grabbed the change and hurried out of the store with a quick “see y’all.”

Jerry pulled himself back into the passenger side, having to shut the stubborn door twice. He handed the Diet Coke over to Vee and took a swig of his own coke.

“Mama, why don’t you go ahead and pull us out... and watch out for that truck.”

“I see it, Jerry,” Vee said, craning her neck over the seat. He held Vee’s drink between them as she slowly pulled away from the gas station.

Jerry had Vee drive around some back roads for a while, not confident enough to take her through town anymore. Around lunchtime they ate a plate lunch at Hamburger House. Vee didn’t want to get back into the car, so they sat there for a while. They didn’t talk when they were eating, and Jerry felt too uncomfortable trying a conversation after they ate.

At 1:25, Jerry was ready to go see Tom about the apartment. It was only two doors down from the restaurant. Vee, however, had spotted one of her friends and waved. So Jerry left her, not wanting to hear the layers of depression that always characterized Vee’s chats with other old ladies.

The apartment was above Tom’s office. It was actually just a few doors down from Pete’s old store. Not seeing Tom through the window at his desk, Jerry mounted the flight of metal stairs around back leading to the apartment. The door was open.

The apartment smelled faintly of gas. Tom was inside vacuuming. “Hey!” he cried as soon as Jerry walked in.

Jerry walked tenderly over the creaking floorboards of the kitchen, avoiding the big pile of insulation gathered in the middle of the living room. “I thought people still lived here—that family.”



Tom cut off the vacuum. He was forty and out of breath. “Sorry about the insulation. Some rats must have gotten into the walls. I’ve already had the exterminator over. That was all in a corner.”

Jerry tried to ignore the cotton-candy pink insulation. “I thought someone was still living here.”

Tom waved his hand in denial. “They’re visiting parents in Alabama before they move. Decided to send everything to their new place already. Convenient for me.” Tom smiled. “And I hope convenient for you.”

Jerry considered the area. “Needs a little work.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” Tom said. “It’ll be fixed up. I’ve been looking forward to this project, actually. Gets me away from Sheila for a little while.”

Jerry sneezed. The dust was thick in the air.

Tom walked into the kitchen and sat at a table. “This table comes with. So does the bed and microwave. You’ll have to come up with the rest of the furniture.”

Jerry nodded and sat across from the man. He remembered when they went to high school together. Tom never really talked to him then. And now he was trying to rope him in. Jerry felt too hot in the apartment, even though the air conditioner was going full blast.

“So, Jerry,” Tom said, “what’s brought on the big move? I thought you were going to inherit the house. That’s what’s in Aunt Vee’s will.”

Jerry wanted to say that Tom, as his mother’s lawyer, wasn’t allowed to tell him that.

“I’m not worried about money,” Jerry said. “I’ve always been able to manage money just fine. I just need a little space.”

Tom laughed. “Don’t get much here. Bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, living room. Pretty small.”

Jerry tried to laugh with him. “Big enough for an old bachelor like me.” Jerry guessed divorcés could be bachelors.

Tom nodded. The telephone rang. Tom crossed into the living room, leaving Jerry alone without a word. Jerry looked at kitchen sink. It looked to be just the right height. He wouldn’t have to stoop over to do the dishes. The kitchen was roomy, but Jerry could see washer and dryer hookups along the bare wall.

“Jerry,” Tom called, “I need to go downstairs and take care of some business. You just have a look-see around the place. Just watch out for the bedroom. The mice got in there, too.”

The door slammed, making the living room shudder. Jerry got up from his seat and opened all the cabinets. The mice hadn’t gotten in there, but the cabinets needed cleaning out. The last family left Gladware containers and old cookware. Pipes took up a lot of the space in the cabinet underneath the sink, and the wood directly under those pipes was black with mildew. Jerry could already tell the washer would block up one cabinet.

The bedroom was bare, lacking even wallpaper. There were scuff marks along the walls. A hole in one wall looked like a gaping wound.

Jerry tried to be interested in looking. The whole place was old and small. He tried to imagine the young, pregnant couple living there.

It looked too much like his old apartment in Oxford, that was the thing. He could hear Carrie laughing. It was the cycle all over again. Jerry suddenly wanted to remain right where he was, no steps forward and no steps back. He couldn't decide if this apartment was a step forward or back.

And he'd lied to Tom. Yes, he was good at managing money. Other people's money. Never his own. He couldn't manage anything of his own.

Jerry left without closing the door. Clouds had started moving in, bringing humidity along with them. Jerry rounded the corner to Main Street. Tom was in his office, talking on the phone. Jerry kept walking and found himself in front of the old auto parts store. It was an antique mall. Jerry walked inside.

No one was there. The store was filled to capacity with tagged merchandise from the 40s and 50s. Metal coca-cola signs lined the walls.

Jerry remembered the night of the prom. He'd been with his cousin's friend from Tupelo, who'd smiled at him when he opened the door for her.

The wreck broke her leg. She also had nerve damage, fixed by a surgery funded by Jerry's college fund he'd saved with years of allowance. He'd had to get by on student loans, which he'd paid off with Carrie's money.

They'd crashed at the end of Main Street at the four-way stop. The other car involved held the mayor and his wife just coming back from eating at the steakhouse. Jerry forgot to brake and crashed headlong into a building. Jerry didn't know why his father was in the store so late that night. Pete pulled Jerry by his shirt collar from the wreckage into the store. He told him to stay there until his mother picked him up. Pete

took care of everything that night. Jerry went home with Vee and slept for the entire next day.

Jerry heard someone walking in the back of the store. He left before anyone could notice he'd been there.

Jerry went back to Hamburger House. Vee was sitting at the table with a full glass of tea. She offered it to him. Jerry took a sip but indicated he wanted to go.

They walked outside. Jerry helped his mother down two steep, broken steps.

"How did it go with Tom?" Vee said, panting.

"He wanted too much for it," Jerry said.

They struggled to the car over the uneven sidewalk. Vee put her hand on the corner of the car. She was obviously suffering in the thick dress.

"Do you want to drive home?" Vee said. "I'm just not sure I'm up to it."

Jerry nodded. He helped his mother into the car and took his place behind the wheel.

## CHAPTER III

### MEG

When Meg finally moved in, Delpha decided not to love her too much. Love had been what killed her daughter. Too much love, but a sickly, weak love that couldn't control or tame. She wouldn't make the same mistake with Meg.

Delpha's daughter, Carol, was a wild child. Whore of Lee County. It had taken Delpha a long time to accept that. Now that she'd come to terms with her own daughter's whorishness, she was ready to raise Carol's daughter.

Carol was dead. She'd died in a meth lab raid. The policeman told her it was an accident. Yet Delpha knew Carol had a way with self-inflicted accidents.

Delpha knew Meg's father, or at least who Carol had said was Meg's father. He lived in Verona, near Tupelo. No family or job to speak of. He'd shown up at funeral visitation with a Cooper Tires cap pulled over his eyes. He spoke to Meg, looked at the body, and then left without offering anything.

People had cried over Meg, the tragic almost-orphan. A few of her friends had shown up, but had stayed in the background. One had come with her mother and offered Meg a peace lily. Meg had always hated lilies, Delpha knew.

Meg had been living at Delpha's house for a week. A week of unreality, in Delpha's opinion. No school, being Spring Break. They'd lived on casseroles, cakes, and desserts people had brought. And they'd watched lots of TV.

It was Saturday, a week and one day after the funeral. Delpha woke up early that morning. She'd been sleeping in lately, but she was starting to feel the effects. Whenever she allowed herself to get off a schedule, her blood sugar went off. She had to start getting up at 6:00 again anyway if she was going to get Meg to school.

Delpha went into the kitchen, put some coffee on, and went to take a shower. She tiptoed—not from courtesy—she didn't want Meg awake yet. She needed to think.

Delpha took off her clothes and laid them neatly in the sectioned hamper. It was already full. Delpha felt down experimentally and found a layer of damp towels, probably already mildewing. She decided to buy another hamper.

Pausing before stepping into the shower, she surveyed herself in the wide bathroom mirror. She was getting old, she knew that, but she looked older. Far older than 56. Her face betrayed her more every year, and she'd given up her hair to white. Her skin kept loosening around the edges. Delpha could almost imagine herself turning into one of those stooped old women.

She didn't look like a mother. She looked like a grandmother, and that was that.

The door opened. Meg walked in, yawning and scratching the back of her head. Delpha froze, and Meg stopped short when she opened her eyes.

"I'm sorry," said Meg. "The door wasn't pulled to."

Delpha made herself speak. "It's my fault. I've been living alone for too long."

Meg just stood there. Delpha waited for her to leave. She stopped herself from covering herself with her hands.

"I have to pee," Meg said.

“Oh,” Delpha said.

Delpha didn't know what else to say, so she got into the shower and turned it on, closing the sliding glass door. The glass was a little glazed, but not enough to completely cover. Delpha could see Meg's pajamas and long, brown hair as she sat on the toilet. Delpha imagined what she looked like through the glass to Meg, all wavy and pink.

The toilet flushed, and Delpha winced in the cold spray. Meg didn't wash her hands.

When Delpha had dressed in a purple windsuit, her usual Saturday outfit, she walked to the kitchen, determined to make breakfast and conversation. The coffee cake the preacher's wife had brought was finally finished. Delpha decided to make waffles. She hadn't made waffles in three years, but Carol used to love them. Delpha just hoped Meg wouldn't mind the sugar-free syrup. It was all she had.

Meg was already at the table. She was curled up on her bare feet, perched on the chair like a cat, and drinking coffee. She was medium height, but extremely skinny, like her mother. Her fingers, arms, and legs were long and bony. Her angular face was spotted with freckles. Delpha tried to remember back to when Meg was short and cushioned with baby fat. The memories were like pictures in a photo album—fake, idealized, and with the background too bright. Meg had apparently gone out to get the newspaper. She had pulled out the funnies and thrown the rest of the paper on the floor.

Delpha kept herself from picking up the paper and walked over to the coffee pot. Her old coffee pot had gone out, and the new one made only enough for two cups. Perfect

for one person, and almost enough for two. Delpha poured the coffee into her red teacher mug and added some powdery creamer. She took a sip. It was too weak.

“You didn’t have to make coffee,” Delpha said.

A pause as Delpha got out the waffle mix. “Huh?” Meg said.

“I said it was really nice of you to make some coffee, but you didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to,” Meg said. “I used to always make it at home.”

With the mention of home came the thick silence Delpha was almost used to.

Delpha pulled the waffle iron out from underneath the cabinets and plugged it in. She gave it a spray of Pam and closed it, letting it warm up. She emptied some mix and poured some milk into a bowl, stirred it a few times, and cracked an egg into the mix. She did all this mechanically while looking out the window above the sink. Buttercups had come out the third time and were there to stay, finally free from the tricks of late winter. Birds her late husband would have known the name of hopped from limb to limb on the pecan tree behind the house. The day looked right close to perfect if it weren’t for the humidity. Past the deep back yard, Mr. East’s cows stared over the fence into Delpha’s quickly growing back yard. Delpha reminded herself to hire a new lawn service. Her old one had retired.

The waffle iron clicked, and Delpha filled the sections with thick batter. Too thick. After closing the iron, Delpha reached for the milk.

“I thought we might go get your things today,” Delpha said.

Meg remained silent. With nothing to do but wait, Delpha finished stirring the mix, picked up her coffee mug, and sat adjacent to Meg.



Delpha was about to repeat herself when Meg said, “Yeah. I need some clothes and stuff.”

Meg never looked up from the funny pages. She was now reading the teen advice column along the side.

“Are you okay going back there?” Delpha said. “I can probably find all of your things, if you don’t want to go.”

Meg looked up and shrugged. “I don’t mind. Really.”

Delpha almost pushed for more but then stopped herself. If Meg said she was fine, she was fine, even if Delpha didn’t believe her. Carol had always complained of her pushing too much, asking too many questions.

The waffle iron clicked again. Delpha pulled herself up to take up the waffles.

The car ride in the old Taurus was silent. Delpha thankfully needed no directions to Carol’s old house, having driven up there earlier in the week with directions from the police. She’d wanted to clear up the house before taking Meg there, but it was too big of a job. Besides, Delpha figured that Meg might be more upset if the house was clean, with no evidence that her mother had lived there.

Delpha kept thinking house, but it was an ancient, rusted trailer. The lawn was dead around the trailer, and thick tire marks showed that the lawn became muddy if it rained. Sunken stepping-stones led from the mailbox to the concrete blocks serving as stairs to the front door.

Delpha gingerly walked across the yard, humming “Tiptoe through the Tulips.” Meg was right behind her. Delpha dug through her purse to find her keys.

“I should have brought some Wal-Mart bags,” Delpha said.

“We have bags in the house.” Meg had her thumbs in her pockets. She wasn’t looking around at all.

Delpha had to twist the key several times before the door opened with a plastic smacking sound. She flicked the switch, but the lights didn’t come on.

“Where do you keep the light bulbs?” Delpha asked. “We need a little light in here.”

Meg was already crossing the living room to her room. “Don’t bother. Power company got tired of not being paid.”

Meg disappeared into a room adjacent to the kitchen. Delpha could hear her opening windows. She didn’t dare ask Meg how long they’d gone without power.

Delpha sat at the kitchen table to wait. She could barely see into Meg’s room. The trailer was stuffy, but Delpha refrained from fanning herself. She heard drawers being pulled out, their contents stuffed into a bookbag Meg had brought along with her.

Delpha stared at the table. It was old and cheap, the veneered top scratched in more places than not. Delpha didn’t look up from it. She didn’t want to look at the rest of the trailer. She wished Meg would hurry.

It wasn’t that Delpha was afraid of what she might find if she ventured into the bathroom or Carol’s bedroom. She knew exactly what she would find. She’d seen it all, not only earlier that week but in all of Carol’s rooms and apartments, the places Delpha had to find her to carry her to the hospital. She knew of the dirty clothes, the mirrors, needles. She had seen all types of drug paraphernalia, even if she didn’t know how they were used.

And she knew she would find a framed picture of herself and Jack, her late husband. And one of Meg. Next to a full ashtray.

Earlier in the week, Delpha had rushed to the bedroom. She'd told herself she was in a hurry to get back home, and she wanted to see what she could do, but she knew better than that. She wanted to see the scene again, a scene Delpha couldn't save Carol from.

She'd wanted to gloat.

How many times had Delpha told Carol what would happen to her? Ever since she was Meg's age, and she'd given her first lecture on boys and drinking. The lectures, of course, never worked. Delpha never expected them to work. She knew Carol would keep doing what she was doing until she killed herself. And she'd told Carol just that.

It had worked out exactly as Delpha predicted. She wanted to make sure Carol got the message.

Delpha looked up and watched Meg pull posters off the wall. She was stomping through her room, making the whole trailer shake. A small stack of belongings had piled up just outside the door without Delpha noticing.

Delpha felt the urge to get up and help her granddaughter, but she kept her seat. She would just be getting in the way. And she didn't know what Meg wanted to take. Meg wasn't taking everything.

Meg was angry, too. Her face was red as she tore up a poster. Meg threw some shoes that had nearly divided from their soles. They hit the wall hard and left a mark on the white paint.

Delpha felt a sacredness to this moment, sacredness that she herself was marring just by her presence. Meg was grieving for the first time all week. She'd been quiet at the funeral and hadn't let anyone see her cry, although she'd holed herself up in the church bathroom twice. She'd spent the week watching syndicated sitcoms or reading Delpha's romance novels. She talked very little and ate very little. She said she didn't eat a lot anyway. It was like living with a ghost. But now Meg was alive and livid, if not glowing.

Delpha didn't want to watch Meg anymore. She got up and walked to the bathroom, a vague idea of getting Meg's hair products stirring her on. She walked across the matted carpet to the dingy hallway leading to the other few rooms in the trailer.

She hadn't looked in the bathroom earlier that week. That wasn't why she'd come.

The door was closed and resisted opening, as if wet towels lay on the floor. Delpha pushed harder. The door gave way. Delpha stepped over what was blocking the door to the medicine cabinet. She surveyed the collection of deodorant, toothbrushes, and medicines and wondered why she'd come. She had already bought and replaced all of Meg's toiletries. There was nothing in there she needed. The mirror was clean. So was the sink. Far from Carol's sense of housekeeping. The only thing that belied the dirtiness of the place was a sickly sweet smell of decay.

There were men's things mixed among the regular toiletries. A man's razor, shave cream, and Old Spice deodorant. No one at the funeral had given any indication that he cohabited with Carol. Delpha wondered if any man actually did live there or if Carol kept necessities for her transient lovers. Delpha had always told her to be prepared to receive guests.

Delpha had been prepared for Meg for years. Every year she went shopping for Meg, buying sheets, a few clothes, and everything she would need for the bathroom. She'd even replaced the mattress in Carol's old bed and hired a cleaning service for the old room to forever dispel the lingering odor of cigarettes. She'd wanted for many years for Meg to come live with her. She'd begged Carol to the point that Carol stopped bringing Meg over for Christmas. Delpha had switched to sneaking Meg money, which she sent care of her school. Delpha's cousin Susan told her once she'd seen Meg alone in Piggly Wiggly with a cart full of groceries after school let out for Christmas. Delpha started sending a check every month. As for Carol, she hadn't seen her in nearly a year.

Delpha stepped back on something that squished dully. She looked down to see an orange cat.

Delpha nudged the cat with her foot. It didn't move. She bent down to touch it. It was cold.

Delpha looked closer at the bathroom. A full litter box was behind the toilet, giving off the smell Delpha hadn't been able to place. Food and water bowls, long empty and dry, sat underneath the sink. The door was scratched to the height of the doorknob.

Delpha felt something break within her. Her throat closed up and she sat hard on the floor next to the cat. She cried out loud. The sobs hurt in her throat.

She felt arms go around her, pulling her up. She offered no resistance and no help. She only vaguely noted Meg half-pulling, half-carrying her. Meg forced her to sit on a bed. There was a tinkling sound as Meg pulled the blanket off the bed. Delpha felt herself again being forced to lie down on the bed. A clean blanket covered her.

Delpha didn't remember going to sleep. The sun had gone down by the time she woke up.

Meg was there. She'd lit a candle beside the bedside, and everything flickered in the candle light. She smiled, holding out water in a plastic Hardee's cup. Delpha pulled herself up and took the water. It was lukewarm and bland, like it was from a jug. It probably was, Delpha reflected.

"I'm all packed when you're ready to go," Meg said. Her voice was strangely normal.

Delpha's legs felt shaky, but she wanted to leave. Her mouth still tasted horrible and she had a headache.

She looked around. Even in the candlelight, the room was cleaner than she remembered.

"The cat..." Delpha said.

"Don't worry," Meg said. "I took care of everything. The cat's in a shoebox out back."

Delpha grabbed Meg to her. "I didn't want you to do that." She felt tears well up again.

Meg held Delpha close, rocking. "It's okay, grandma. I'd been staying over at a friend's house, and Mom only got the cat recently. I didn't know her."

Delpha pulled away and looked closely at Meg. Her face was red and blotchy. She didn't say anything.

Meg helped Delpha up from the bed. Meg picked up the candle, and Delpha held her hand and felt the walls down the hallway. Meg picked up both of their purses as they left the trailer.

## CHAPTER IV

### PERVERSION

After an hour at the club, Lisa felt distinctly uncomfortable as the beads on her dress dug into her arms and ass. Her body had melded to the barstool, but she was afraid that if she got up she'd leave a sweaty butt-print on the black leather stool. Her face and neck were red and splotchy from too many little blue drinks. And she was horny as all hell.

The music flashed pink and purple in beat with the rhythm. The club was some sort of '90s throwback. Its one peculiarity was a fish tank built into the bar, with glass strong enough to take the daily punishment of glasses, bottles, and drinkers. Some idiot worker had put two male beta fish in the same section. Lisa had watched until the old graying beta fish was circling the bottom of the bar and severed eyeballs floated in the green water.

Lisa caught the bartender's attention and wagged her little glass. The bartender gave her a water. She slumped in defeat. "At least put a fucking lemon in it."

Lisa asked herself again why she was there in the first place. She preferred more bookish places, where the artistic elite stood around drinking scotch and wishing they were drinking absinthe. But you couldn't get laid in a place like that.

"You are bored, aren't you?" a foreign accent broke the solitude around her.



Apparently someone else had smelled her desperation. Now she wasn't so sure she wanted to fuck anyone who frequented this bar. But her neglected vagina wouldn't shut up. Don't screw this up, kid, it told her. As long as you're careful, any dick's fine.

"A bit," she said, taking a drink of lemon water. "This is just not my scene."

The foreign man sat on the stool beside her. "I did not mean that. I meant you looked bored in general. Is life so filled with ennui?"

French: that's what he was. Lisa almost laughed out loud.

"I suppose that's hard for you to understand," she said with what she hoped wasn't a smirk. She was making clever banter with a handsome, romantic Frenchman. He might as well have been on a horse and holding her, his rippling chest failing to cover her artfully ripped bodice.

The Frenchman sipped a clear drink that was obviously not water. "My name is Andre. I am on a three-week business trip," he said, as if he'd said it several times that day.

Lisa held out a hand to him, wincing at her formality. No wonder she never got laid. "I'm Lisa Rider."

She tried to cover a shudder by taking another drink. His hands were cold and clammy and had reminded her of the fungus growing on wet tree branches.

"I am a bit out of practice with this," Andre confessed, apparently oblivious to her disgust. "I find you very attractive and plan to take you to my hotel with me tonight. I haven't done this in a while, so could we stay here and acquaint ourselves first?"

Lisa swallowed hard. “Sure,” she answered, although conversation was the last thing on her mind at the moment. She imagined the hands slithering sickly up her legs. But she needed this so much.

“So, as the Americans say,” Andre continued, “are you in town for business or pleasure?”

“Living, I guess. Though, if you’re trying to ask me what I do for a living, I’m a writer.”

“Oh, really. What have you written?”

“Recently? A book called *Tales from Bed 13*.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

Lisa was starting to feel better about the whole thing now that she wasn’t touching him. “Well, you’re not from around here, are you?” She coughed. “I suppose it may be a little out of your circle. It’s a story cycle based loosely around a group of sexual deviants... mostly around the BDSM crowd.”

Andre smiled in confusion. “B...DSM?”

“Oh,” Lisa said quickly. “It’s an anagram. B for bondage, BD for bondage and discipline, DS for domination and submission, and SM for Sadism and Masochism.”

Lisa felt very much like a fish on display. She’d recently been so into *Tales from Bed 13*, with the book signings and promotions and the occasional visit to a BDSM group, that she’d forgotten how normal people reacted to such concepts. From his facial expression, Andre was very much a normal person.

“Not that I’m a freak,” Lisa laughed. She winced as the laugh turned a bit shrill. Why had she just called all those nice submissives she’d met earlier that day freaks?

“It is certainly a different topic,” Andre said.

Thankfully, the banter from there continued comfortably and predictably, all mentions of sexual deviance seemingly forgotten. Andre told about his work at a company Lisa had forgotten about ten seconds after he mentioned it. She was too caught up in the sound of his voice and the way he sipped his drink. He was nice to look at. The hair around his temples was graying, making her think he was either married or a confirmed bachelor. No wedding ring, though. His hair was otherwise dark and full, and his mouth curled around each word, making English sound much more exotic.

He actually reminded her of a character in one of her stories. It was about a Frenchman, although more of a weasely sort, that searched the town every night for a Dominant woman willing to do medical scenes with him. He finally gave up after numerous refusals, trying to break up a monogamous relationship, sleeping with a prostitute, and contracting HIV. He spent the rest of his life dying and worrying about the hard-ons he got at the doctor’s office.

All right, maybe Andre didn’t remind her of the French medical fetishist, but she hadn’t known very many French people in her life.

“What made you want to write about sexual deviants?” he asked.

Inwardly Lisa cursed. “I’d just been playing around with a few stories I’d written in college – mostly writing assignments. When I was an undergraduate I thought I had to write shocking, erotic stories to be a good writer. You know. Literary stuff. Stuff like... ‘his hand on her felt like the death of an age.’”

“Literary sex,” Andre repeated, laughing.

“Yeah,” Lisa grinned. She felt like maybe he was getting her. “Of course, the stories sucked and I learned better. It wasn’t until a few years later that I was able to pick up a few of those early stories and make something of them. Lesson learned: you have to be experienced to write smut.”

She was on her game. Her conversation was “sparkling,” as a reviewer once called one of her short stories. Now she was just wondering how much longer Andre wanted to get to know her.

“Excuse me,” Andre said after finishing his drink. “I must speak to this one person, but I will be back. Would you like to go soon?” he asked.

Lisa wasn’t sure if she was cool or not when she said yes.

As he walked off, Lisa crunched her ice from her glass cheerfully. Sure, she was doing the cliché, like sex with whipped cream and black lingerie. But her vagina was practically screaming to be filled with something that didn’t run on batteries. And he was open with his intentions: one night stand, no problems afterward.

“You certainly bagged one tonight, didn’t you?” a voice interrupted her fantasy.

Lisa looked around, annoyed, until she realized it was the bartender who spoke to her. He was handing her the bill.

“Excuse me?” Lisa still wasn’t even sure he was speaking to her.

The bartender gestured with his head. “The frog over there. You looking to get warts?”

Lisa tried to cover the look of horror by pointlessly rummaging through her tiny purse for her card. She couldn’t walk away. She wasn’t going to let some peon of a bartender deprive her of good sex that night.

Finally Lisa pulled out her card and figured out something brilliant to say. “No, but you’re looking to get reported if you don’t stay out of my business.” All right, it wasn’t that brilliant.

The bartender swiped her card and laughed. “Yes, Miss Rider. Whatever you say.”

For the first time Lisa really looked at the bartender. He was average-looking, leaning toward cute. His face was roughly shaven. His brown hair was slightly wavy, though it was almost too short to tell the difference. Lisa thought she’d seen the man somewhere before.

“What’s your name?” Lisa snapped, hysterical all of the sudden. She doubted there were other bartenders, but she wanted to be sure she had the name right if she needed it.

“Tom Jones,” the bartender said nonchalantly. “You don’t want to go home with him.”

Lisa snatched her card back when he gave it to her. “And why the hell not, not that it’s any of your business.”

Tom shrugged. “He’s normal. Not what you’re looking for.”

Before Lisa could even form a retort, Andre was back. Lisa forced herself not to look at the bartender while Andre took care of his bill.

Andre was staying at an upper-level hotel befitting an upper-level businessman on a business trip. The room was mercifully spacious as Lisa stumbled in. Drink always

seemed to affect her motor skills while leaving her mind clear. She lurched into the bedroom.

*Finally*, Lisa thought as Andre began to slowly remove her dress for her. She hoped he didn't notice the deep imprints the material of the beaded dress left in her skin. She remembered a story she'd written about a woman trying to hide the fact from a new boyfriend that she wore a chastity belt. Her previous boyfriend, a tyrannical yet flighty Dominant, had taken the key with him. Although the woman in the story was understandably horny after several months of no sex, she couldn't let her new boyfriend know and was too embarrassed to go to a doctor or locksmith.

"Why are you laughing?" Andre breathed in her ear.

Lisa tried to keep herself from freezing up, knowing he'd take it the wrong way and stop. "Nothing. You were just tickling me a little."

Andre nodded and continued. Lisa relished each sensation. However, what had begun as slow and seductive was beginning to become slow and methodical. A quick look at an alarm clock told her it was past 2 am. Lisa had never been a fan of sweet seduction after midnight. She was getting the attention she'd needed, but at a time she wanted to just go ahead and orgasm, get it over with, and go to sleep.

Finally, Andre moved into position and rode her. Suddenly, she wasn't sleepy. Instead, she felt sudden disgust. The bartender was right. She was miserable. She closed her eyes and imagined a giant frog fucking her.

After a nicely performed fake orgasm, Lisa waited for Andre to go to sleep after he'd rolled off her before she allowed herself to go to sleep. She was glad he didn't want

to hold her or talk or fuck again after that. As she drifted off to sleep, she noted with almost satisfaction that he snored like a frog.

Lisa slumped into her apartment after an early morning walk of shame, maneuvering a cup of Starbucks in one hand as she unlocked the door with another. She instantly blocked her cat's usual escape, almost tripping over the fat gray cat in the process.

"Morning, Mal," she yawned to the cat. The cat, named Malificent after the Disney villain, yawned back at her and waddled into the kitchen.

"Why do I do these things to myself?" Lisa asked aloud when she saw the still-smudged eye liner the hotel soap hadn't been able to get off her face. After a proper face scrubbing, Lisa finished her latte in one gulp and dumped out her purse on the couch at the same time. Purse-dumping was a ritual she'd been cultivating for several years, ever since she'd gotten out of her big purse phase. Lisa started cataloguing her receipts in a small 5x7 organizer kept in the end table. Anything to keep from thinking of the disastrous night. She'd expected something a little more exotic, although she wondered what exactly that was. It wasn't as if just because he was French he would have known the entire Karma Sutra.

Lisa stared at a receipt from The Fish Tank. There were letters shining through: "MOT." Lisa flipped the paper over and realized Tom had written his number on the receipt when she wasn't looking.

Lisa wanted to crumple the number right away and let Mal play with it. She also wanted to call the number and shout at someone. Instead, she threw her laptop on her bed

and started writing an angry (and, as she would find out later, bad) story about bad sex with a bartender.

“I was thinking about you last night.”

Lisa couldn't believe Andre actually had the gall to call her. Didn't he realize how bad the sex had been? Or had he only had bad sex in his life and thought the experience with her was worth repeating? Lisa shuddered.

“Where have you been keeping yourself?”

“I've been working,” Lisa stated. “Once I get started writing, it gets hard to quit. I end up ordering Chinese food every night and never leaving my apartment for a week.” Lisa didn't know why she was telling him all that. She tended to babble when she was uncomfortable.

“If you are not too busy I want to see you again,” Andre said. “I'm sorry we did not have more time, but I will be leaving soon.”

“It's fine,” Lisa cut in. “How about tonight at...” she pretended to check her schedule book, “8:00.”

Andre suggested a restaurant. Lisa readily agreed just to be able to hang up.

Lisa hadn't been bullshitting about spending the week eating Chinese food. She had, on the other hand, been lying about spending the week writing. After the bartender story, she'd drawn a blank. All the creative energy that had pushed her for years just wasn't there anymore. Sure, she might write something, but she'd take another look at it and realize it was shit. Unredeemable, lamentable shit. In fact, it most reminded her of the type of stories she'd written in college: “literary” smut. The folder on her computer



labeled “bad stories” now had 33 files. She’d added three Word documents of half-formed stories just that week.

She took a bite of caramel rice cake. The bite turned to ash in her mouth. She threw the rice cake on the floor and stared at the wall. She was beginning to panic.

A couple of days before, Lisa had gotten the call she knew had been long in coming. Her editor, Janie, had finally caught up with her.

“I’m working the best I can,” Lisa had said, uncomfortably perching on an overstuffed leather armchair. Her editor’s office seemed to change motifs every time she went there. Then it had been casual and homey. In a month it could be Edwardian.

“Believe me, I understand the writer’s plight,” Janie continued. “And I’m glad you’re supplementing yourself with news writing. You would cringe to know what I’ve had to go through just to pay the bills. And I know that writer’s block can happen. But you’ve got to get yourself together.”

Lisa had felt like she was in the principal’s office, being scolded for slipping grades.

“Listen,” Janie had continued, “your first book was amazing – inspired. For what it was, it was also an unqualified success. Perhaps you were just riding on the racy topics – I don’t know. But you said you were planning on staying a success. Not a lot of authors can do that. Unless you’re, like, J. K. Rowling or John Grisham, you’ve got to get that second book out soon, even if it isn’t as good as the first one. Just... write something.”

That night, Lisa had dreamed she was back in the office, this time taped hand and foot to the leather armchair. Janie had been waving a riding crop at her, telling her she’d receive 33 licks.

The receipt with Tom's number was still taped to her desk (she decided Mal didn't need another toy). During her time of nonproductivity, she'd stared at it. Stared at it like she would usually stare out a window. She didn't understand why she continued to think about him. He'd meddled in something that wasn't his business, as if he knew what was best for her. But he'd been right. That's what made her so frustrated.

Lisa closed down her Word document. It had nothing in it, yet she still named it Document1 and put it in her bad stories folder. 34 lashes.

After a few clicks on the Internet, Lisa found herself at [BDSManthology.com](http://BDSManthology.com). The new stories section was completely unfamiliar, and Lisa almost felt proud of herself for not venturing to the site for a week.

She'd first stumbled onto the site when she was doing research for the book. Not only did the site have an FAQ about different aspects to the BDSM lifestyle, the site also had an extensive stories section, where anyone could post a short story. It was, of course, porn in story format, much in the vein of smutty romance novels, except even less well written. The grammar was usually atrocious. The stories were extremely formulaic with almost no character development and even less originality. The big draw was the different fetishes included in the story, which were indicated by shorthand codes. There was even a search engine that sorted out stories by fetishes.

Lisa bit her lips and clicked the link to the search engine. She didn't want to admit to herself that she wasn't doing research. She didn't want to admit to herself that this would end in her lying on her bed masturbating, all the while imagining a faceless man, giving her orders and debasing her until she came. She didn't want to think about herself imagining that she was being forced to suck off the faceless man.

Instead, she told herself she might want to write a story involving M/m spanking with possible exhibitionism, and she had to do the research.

“Have you thought about not writing about sex?” Andre asked pleasantly.

Lisa ate her parmesan-encrusted steak. Her legs were still sore from that afternoon. “I have written about things other than sex,” she said lightly. “I have two failed books full of not sex. But the sex brings in the money. That’s what my editor wants me to write about, so that’s what I write.”

The food was good, but the date was going horribly . Every time she looked at Andre all she could think about was the awful sex. She didn’t know what had made her go out with him again. She wasn’t sex-starved – she’d taken care of any and all itches that afternoon on her own. Maybe she was just too nice. She’d rarely ever been able to say no to anything. It just didn’t seem to be in her nature.

Lisa could just imagine what her mother would say. “If you don’t know how to say no to a man, you leave yourself open for rape.”

Lisa downed her wine and tried to concentrate on Andre. She failed.

Lisa rarely got along with her mother anymore. Her mother didn’t approve of her moving into the city. She’d cited higher statistics of violence and crime in Lisa’s particular neighborhood. Lisa just said, “Helen, shove it.” That was the first time she’d called her mother that.

Since then, Helen had taken to waiting until she knew Lisa was out and leaving messages on her machine. They usually involved some kind of atrocity that could happen to her while she was out.

Helen hated men. Lisa understood that now. Lisa's mother had been raped twice in her life: once by a teenager when she was in junior high and once during a frat party. Her mother was militant about self-defense and prosecuting sex offenders. She'd gone on to law school and specialized in the rape cases that most male attorneys would not take, always ready to defend a victim of rape. She was so strong, rising above her circumstances and making a difference in the world. She was too strong to love men. Too strong to love Lisa's father. Even though her father understood that Helen had clear inhibitions about sex, all his love and understanding still wasn't enough. When Helen divorced Lisa's father, Lisa stopped really believing her.

Lisa thought of that night with Andre a week before. She remembered lying there like a dead fish, letting Andre ride her. The only way she'd participated was a few fake orgasmic moans, like a 50's housewife. No wonder she hadn't enjoyed the sex. She hadn't done the slightest thing to make it better. She'd been just like her mother. She couldn't imagine her mother ever enjoying sex or having a real orgasm. Helen hated dick too much. Lisa understood that, but she didn't want to be like that. She wanted to be free.

She knew Andre would want more sex that night. It was in the way he held his glass and moved his lips. It turned her stomach to have another bad experience like that. But she wanted to prove to herself that she didn't hate men.

Lisa responded to conversation automatically, but all her consciousness was turned to the faceless man. She imagined him standing behind her chair, controlling arm

on her shoulder, whispering in her ear. “Listen, slut,” the faceless man said in a commanding growl. “You are nothing, and you will do exactly as I tell you. You don’t want to know the punishment if you don’t follow my instructions. Do you understand me?”

Aloud, to Andre, she made some witty comment about musical theatre. Inwardly, to the faceless man, she said, “Yes, Sir.”

“Right,” the voice growled again. “Listen carefully, slut. You will stop drinking. As soon as the frog is finished with his meal, even if you are not finished, you will follow that frog to his hotel. You will seduce him, suck him, and ride him. And you will enjoy it. You will moan like the bitch you are.”

Lisa felt her body throbbing. She did as the unseen master told her. She took him to his hotel, practically pulling him the entire way. She rode Andre, throwing him on the bed if he tried once to take control. He was as disgusting as usual. His kisses were too passive. His hands stayed clammy. Lisa came hard anyway, fucking him and screaming herself hoarse. All the while, the faceless man looked on. She could never tell if he approved of her. Perhaps he never would.

*You have one new message... BEEP...* “Oh, hi honey. I guess I caught you while you were out. When do you find time to do any of your writing? Are you finally giving that up? I wish you would... at least change your subject material. Lisa, you have absolutely no idea what men will think of you. They’ll think they can tie you up and do whatever they want with you, and you know that’s not true. I don’t want you to be as careless as I was in college.”

Helen went on until the time ran out. By this time, Lisa had dropped her purse, grabbed a yogurt from the fridge, and, grinning, flipped her mother off. What did Helen know? Lisa had had a few amazing orgasms the night before. She suddenly felt superior to Helen.

Lisa never saw Andre again. She spent the next few weeks revising old stories. Suddenly she felt some of the old magic coming back. She finally got around to revising a short story she'd written three years before about a man with no feet. Instead he had bicycle wheels. She was a little excited about writing something other than a sex story.

Gradually, though, her interest in writing waned. She'd already sent a few previews to Janie, who was excited about her progress. That would satisfy her editor for a few more months.

Lisa went out rarely. Once she went to The Fish Tank, thinking maybe she would feel better if she gloated to Tom the bartender about her delicious sex. When she got there, though, Tom wasn't there. The bartender that night had never heard of him. That wasn't all that unusual, since the guy admitted that turnover at The Fish Tank was rather high.

She spent a lot of time at her computer. Some of that time was spent staring at Word documents, erasing pages. Most of the time was actually spent at BDSManthology. She would often stay up late into the night, disrupting her internal clock by regularly reading until four in the morning.

Since she stopped going out as much, she started talking to her mother more. She thought about calling Helen "Mom," but she'd been calling her Helen for five years now. Instead, Lisa earned favor with her mother by not going out in the first place. She started

describing a few of the non-sex stories and even sent her mother a couple. Helen especially loved one story in particular. It was about a mother and a daughter. The two go on a road trip together, trying to find deals on furniture for the daughter's new house. They begin with different tastes but ultimately learn to compromise with each other. There were no men in it.

She began writing a story for the website. Nothing literary, of course. Literary stuff wasn't meant to get anyone off. The story was almost boring compared to the others she'd read. Other stories, no matter how badly written, usually included a dynamic, interesting dominant. She, however, used the faceless man. She now understood him to have no identity. He was like a rapist. He had no attachment to her – could use her as he pleased and come and go as he pleased. He was the conglomerate of all dominants without the inclusion of love.

“Are you alone?”

Lisa screamed as the text box popped up, covering the story she'd been reading. She'd forgotten that she'd signed up to be on the site's IM and message board. She'd spoken to a few people back when she was writing her book, but she hadn't participated in the IM in ages.

“I asked you a question,” the text box insisted.

The number 1253 denoted the name of whoever was chatting. Every member of the IM had the option of only revealing a number, and some people never went by their own screennames. Lisa had that option, but she'd never used it. She had nothing to hide.

A quick look at the stats, voluntarily given, showed that whoever was chatting was a male dominant. She knew her stats showed her to be a female submissive. I guess it was just a matter of time, she thought.

“Yes, I am alone,” she sent back.

The text box paused, possibly punishing her for taking so long to answer him. She waited, curious as to how this would turn out. She’d written a story about a BDSM relationship that played itself out only on the Internet. The dominant would give orders, trusting that they were obeyed. The submissive typed back, pretending to follow the orders. The relationship fell apart when the dominant ordered the submissive to handcuff her hands behind her back. The submissive immediately typed back that she had done so.

“Remove your clothing.”

Lisa froze. This was just how the faceless man began every fantasy.

The phone rang.

“Look...,” she typed back. “I can’t do this right now.”

“Your profile states that you are open to any dominant.”

Lisa cursed. When had she written that?

“I still can’t,” she wrote back.

“My mistake,” 1253 responded after a pause. “I thought you were the real deal, especially after your story. I didn’t realize you were a poser.”

1253 logged off. By this time, Lisa’s machine had picked up.

“Oh, I didn’t realize you were out,” Helen said. “Well, it is in the middle of the afternoon. Anyway, I’ve been talking to this publisher I know. He wasn’t sure about you at first – he knows about your first book – but I told him you’re getting away from all



that. He's excited about meeting you... Lisa, this is a really good opportunity. I know you want to be a respected and... I don't have to tell you more... safe writer. You need this. Call me back as soon as you can."

Lisa stared at the text box on the screen. Then she looked at Tom's number, still taped to her desk with a coffee ring around it. She picked up the phone.

Tom had been surprised to hear from her. He'd probably forgotten about the night he'd given her his number. However, he seemed to jump at the chance to go out with her. That meant Lisa would probably get sex that night.

Lisa took a taxi part of the way to the restaurant they'd decided on and started walking. She was plenty early and her shoes didn't hurt that much to walk in. She was wearing cheap shoes, anyway. Her hair was slicked back into a ponytail. She looked like shit, but she didn't care. All she wanted was to get laid. Besides, she didn't feel like looking "respectable."

Lisa adjusted her bracelet nervously. She tried not to study the faces of those who passed. She usually wasn't so paranoid, but it was something about the guy she chatted with earlier. She felt like he'd laid her bare, even though she hadn't done what he wanted. He was another faceless man, and she hadn't obeyed him. She felt like he would spring out at her and punish her in front of everyone. Show all the people around her – and in her fantasy her mother would be right there – what a pathetic slut she was.

"Are you alone?" a rough American accent sounded inches from her ear.

Lisa screamed and threw her purse as hard as she could at the voice. A second later she realized she recognized the man who'd spoken. It was Tom, and he was

probably taking the same route as she to meet her. Another second later she realized her purse was not the best weapon she could have thought of.

Tom laughed, propping a hand on his knee and holding the purse out to her with a shaking arm. Lisa snatched it out of his hand before he could recover. She hoped she looked more angry than frightened.

“Do you handle all your attackers that way, Miss Rider?” Tom gasped out.

“Only the assholes,” Lisa retorted, realizing too late that was a stupid comeback and only left Tom laughing harder. Especially since it was she who’d arranged their date. She started walking to the restaurant, trying to hide her shame. Thankfully, he kept up with her.

“You got me there,” Tom said. “I know I shouldn’t sneak up on women. It’s a flaw of mine. But you don’t have to be so paranoid. It’s not like anyone is going to come up and rape you in the middle of the street.”

Lisa couldn’t think of anything to say. She knew it was illogical, but Tom seemed to be reading her right then, just like he must have done the last time she’d seen him. That was it. He was the one who’d been watching her. Not in the way she’d been thinking. Not like a pervert masturbating to her image. Tom was actually seeing her, reading her, like he’d done at the club. She couldn’t fool him. It was the way he looked at her. He knew what she was thinking and feeling. He knew her soul and she couldn’t reclaim it. Yeah, that was a stupid thing to think and something she read in practically every single BDSM story she’d ever read, but, dammit, it was true.

Lisa realized they’d walked right past the restaurant. Tom hadn’t said anything. She looked at him in confusion. He just kept walking.

“Forget the restaurant. There’s a club I want to show you,” Tom finally said.

“It’s not The Fish Tank, is it? I thought you didn’t work there anymore,” she tried to joke.

Tom didn’t smile, so Lisa remained quiet and followed. Lisa didn’t know him. She didn’t know where he was taking her. No one knew where she was and no one would notice if she turned up missing for at least a week. Everything she was doing was completely against her mother’s advice and her own common sense. She walked beside Tom anyway.

A simple door made of a dark wood graced the side of a brick building. It looked like it led right into a bedroom. The door wasn’t even marked, and there were no signs on the wall.

Lisa shivered. “Is this the place you wanted to show me?”

Tom had been silent for several blocks. Lisa’s feet were starting to hurt, but for some reason she was afraid to complain. For the last block Tom had placed a commanding arm on her shoulder. “Understand this,” he said sharply. “We’re a tight-knit group, so don’t go blabbing about this place to anyone else. You think you can handle that?”

Lisa should have been offended by that. Her brain was screaming for her to slap the guy and hail a taxi right then and there. But she really wasn’t offended. She was intrigued, and not in the “French guy” way. She blamed the way Tom could read her.

“Understand?” Tom warned when she didn’t answer.

Fuck yeah, slap me down, she thought. “Yes,” was what she actually said.

Tom immediately knocked on the door. A man in a tuxedo opened the door and bowed to Tom, who was obviously recognized.

Run now, Lisa almost thought she heard her mother say. It was what her mother had always told her to do if she ever expected danger. But Lisa realized now the real danger was her own mother. She'd always felt that danger a bit – a danger that could rob Lisa of what she craved and what could make her happy. Now she knew. Helen would kill her if she knew what her daughter craved.

Snarling at the memory of her mother, Lisa followed Tom into the club.

They passed a foyer, where a girl took their jackets and Lisa was asked to give up her shoes. Lisa couldn't help but stare. The girl, who couldn't have been older than 22, was wearing a tight, button-down shirt and a short skirt. Lisa could see a silver chain leading from an attachment on the wall to her throat. The chain was held there by a small collar.

Everything came into clarity right there. Tom was a Dominant. He might have met her at a book-signing. Or he could have been one of the people she interviewed online. In fact, he could have even been 1253. She knew his job at The Fish Tank was probably a cover. Since he could afford to have a membership at a private club, he could afford to follow her and bribe his way into any position.

Past the foyer was an intimate dining room. Waitresses dressed much like the shoe-check girl were already setting a table and pouring a chilled white wine into crystal goblets.

Lisa sat and let Tom order for her. She had a feeling that was the custom in that place. "I didn't even know a place like this existed," Lisa said quietly, sipping the wine to

steel her nerves. She was lying. She'd heard of places similar to this, but never as high-class as this. It was a BDSM club. The girls worked there and possibly participated in the goings-on. She knew that the tuxedos on the men may or may not hide nipple-clamps, cock-rings, or even full-body harnesses. The walls were covered in classy erotic art with the predictable theme.

“Liar. You had a place a bit like this in your book,” Tom answered. “It was a bit of a juvenile rendition, but still entertaining.”

Lisa tried to act surprised. She'd guessed as much. “You read my book?”

Tom nodded. “Before it became so popular. Reading about alternative lifestyles is a hobby of mine.”

“Did you like it?”

The waitress brought out a meal of oysters, a chain swinging behind her. Tom picked up a shell and expertly flicked the meat onto his tongue. Lisa reminded herself to be patient and began prying at an oyster with a fork.

“I thought the book was fine,” Tom said after a few more oysters. “It was very well-written. There were a few weak stories in which I didn't like the characters, but your prose was entertaining enough to carry the stories.”

Lisa tried not to feel bad about the dispassionate opinion of her book, but failed. “I think you read that in a book review.”

“No, the reviewers raved about it. But they're all idiots anyway, and you know that.”

Lisa remained silent.

Tom sighed. “Lisa, you want to know the truth?” He didn’t wait for her to answer. “It’s all that talk about perversion. It was all such bullshit I had to have a shovel to get through it.”

“I don’t... think I understand you.” Lisa was near tears and she didn’t know why.

Tom sneered. “I bet the closest you ever got to BDSM was through movies and a few internet sites. In fact, you said in an interview that a lot of your... “research”... came from an Internet site. You wouldn’t know a collar from a harness and you still think that everyone uses whips and chains and gets off on blood. You claimed to be an expert and sounded like a high school girl in a chat room.”

Lisa was openly crying by now. He was laying her bare and wouldn’t stop. Still, she had never been more turned on in her life.

“But you know what the clincher is, Lisa?” Lisa shivered at the sound of her name. “You want it. You may not want the blood and whips, but you want the feeling of being under someone else’s control. And you had the nerve to make each girl in those stories sound like a rape victim. You want the fantasy, but it disgusts you, so you insulted the reality.”

Tom finished off his oysters and wiped his hands. Lisa was trying to stifle her tears in a cloth napkin. She knew her makeup was running, but she didn’t care.

Tom leaned close and whispered in her ear. “Understand this: I’m not attracted to you. I don’t go for the naïve submissives. I’m just doing this for educational purposes. If you’re ready to wake up, ask a waitress and she’ll point you to the right door.”

Lisa looked at the door Tom obviously meant. She knew where it led. She’d walked through a BDSM club during the daytime. Each room had a full array of

equipment, and the back rooms were probably outfitted for dungeon fantasies. Only members were allowed back there. And all submissives had to be collared.

As if in answer, Tom motioned to a waitress. The woman quickly grabbed a pillow from the corner and laid it on the table. A pretty silver collar gleamed in the candlelight. It was a little nicer than the collars the waitresses were wearing. Tom put the collar next to Lisa, but made no other moves. “If you want to leave, just go. You must have noticed no one is guarding the doors. You can come and go as you please,” Tom concluded, wiping his mouth and rising. “But don’t call me.”

Lisa sat there for several more minutes before she realized she was alone. She’d only eaten half of her oysters, but she wasn’t hungry anymore. She shook with disgust of herself and her body. She had hit her lowest and had been derided publicly, and she’d gotten off on it. She’d never been publicly humiliated like this. Sure, she enjoyed the idea in stories, but she’d never thought she’d savor the reality.

Her tears dried. She couldn’t imagine where Tom was right then. She thought she knew what was behind those doors, but what if she didn’t? Tom had told her she didn’t know anything. Maybe she didn’t. But she couldn’t stand the idea of wanting to know.

Whenever she spent an afternoon reading BDSM stories, she always pulled herself away from the reality. After all, it was just a fantasy. The man had no face. He couldn’t hurt her. Nothing could harm her in a fantasy. And when she’d researched the book, she’d carried that belief. The couples she’d talked to were all taking part in a fantasy. They weren’t really submissive or dominant to each other. It was safe. It didn’t really happen.

She couldn't escape now. The man had a face now. He wasn't just some imaginary man she could control. He was Tom.

She thought of the pictures Helen had shown her when she was deemed old enough. The one that stuck in her mind had been a copy of one used in testimony against her attacker. Her mother was much younger, naked, and had been tied to a fourposter bed with duct tape and rope. She'd only been partially conscious, but even the photograph had shown her eyes, pleading for help.

Lisa's hand closed around the collar.

Lisa remembered how wet she'd gotten in junior high. Once, when her mother had been gone for the evening, Lisa had stared at photograph until she couldn't help but play with herself.

Lisa didn't believe Tom. No matter what else it was, it was a perversion and it wasn't just a fantasy. One that Lisa yearned for. If she was going in that room with Tom, she knew what would happen. She may be consenting, but she would never believe it wasn't rape. And she would exult in it and hate herself forever.

Lisa put the collar on. The latch snapped closed with a satisfying click.



CHAPTER V  
SCREW-UP MOM

Joan didn't want to go to the PTA meeting that night. She didn't know what was on the agenda. She'd also planned to spend the evening watching sitcoms, eating a mini-pizza, and finally ending with a full bubble bath and cucumber scrub. But her ex-husband had a meeting he couldn't back out of and had given her proper notice, as per agreement.

Joan threw her big purse into the car, tripping over her heels as she did. She got in, started up the car, rolled down the window, and lit a cigarette. It was her last one. She told herself to remember to go to the gas station for more.

The school was fifteen minutes away, since the house Joan rented was really in the suburbs of the next town. She'd told Steve she didn't mind. She minded. But Steve had brought up her promise to go to any of Kelly's school functions if he couldn't make it.

Joan smoked her cigarette down to the filter and threw it into the wind without putting it out. As she neared the school, she wished she had an entire pack of Marlboros. She wished Kelly were there, too. But Steve had told Joan she was at a friend's house. Joan didn't recognize the name of the friend. Kelly had apparently gotten an entirely new set of friends over the past two years.

She parked in the broken parking lot near the gym. She didn't want to go in, so she stood outside the school, her arm crooked as if holding a cigarette. She felt like an

intruder, though she'd gone to PTA meetings while she'd still been married. No one would recognize her, or, if they did, deign to talk to her.

Joan had never been to her daughter's high school building. Or the junior high building, for that matter. Her daughter was fifteen and just beginning high school. Joan looked across the street and remembered Kelly after her elementary school "graduation." She was leaving the little kids' building and going to the big building across the street. At least, that's what Kelly had called it. That's what everyone called it. A graduation. Joan couldn't get over how ridiculous the paltry ceremony was, with the purple robes, sans mortarboards. It was like the kindergarten graduation. A graduation that didn't count. They weren't leaving. In August, Kelly just went back to the same place in another building. No big deal.

Joan looked at the elementary building across the street. It looked small. It was probably the same size as the high school, but it looked so much smaller. Joan remembered the tiny desks and how Kelly had always gotten the smallest desk in the room. She was always so tiny. She barely looked thirteen, much less fifteen.

Joan wanted to stop remembering. That honors program had been a disaster. Kelly had gotten the science and English awards, yes, but, according to Steve, Joan hadn't acted happy enough. What was she supposed to do, jump up in the air like the other parents? Or like Steve? That just wasn't her thing.

Her heel dug into the gravel, crunching grittily and giving way. She could show love for her daughter just fine in her own way. She would. Court ruling be damned.

It was a few minutes past time for the meeting to start. Joan had to go in. She knew the sight that would greet her, the sight that had always faced her before the

divorce. At the front of the room, the old library with empty bookshelves lining the walls, all the pretty mothers would sit in a row with their pretty girls. The pretty girls would have full hair and would be fresh from cheerleading or softball practice. They would have ribbons in their hair and the mothers would have husbands waiting at home. They were strangers to strife, people in pink bubbles. The mothers had normal arguments with their husbands.

Joan thought about how Kelly looked during her visit last weekend. Before the divorce, Joan had taken care to make sure Kelly always had good clothes and did her hair correctly. She'd tried to teach Kelly how use hairspray to keep her hair from lying flat. In seventh grade, Kelly had been beautiful and popular. She was with the right crowd, the pretty girls. Now her straight, brown hair was perpetually in a messy ponytail. She wore jeans and T-shirts everywhere, even when Joan took her out to someplace nice. She wore as much black and red as possible, making her pale skin look ghostly. Joan thought about how she could look so much better if only she let her mother help her. Some makeup. A little instruction in hair care. A slight change in wardrobe. She could be one of the pretty girls again.

Joan heard a woman with a high-pitched voice clear her throat. She clutched at her purse as she entered the stifling hot room. The meeting had already begun, so Joan tried to tiptoe to the nearest plastic chair, wincing as her heels clicked loudly. A black-haired woman in a sensible business suit was making announcements.

Joan sat next to the fat sixth grade science teacher in the only chair left. She wished she'd gone in earlier. As people pointedly looked away, she felt like jumping up and saying, "No such luck! The divorcee hasn't forever disappeared."

Then Joan realized she hadn't put on any lipstick.

She had already fixed a smile on her face on entering, and she felt it tighten. Why hadn't she checked herself in the rearview mirror before getting out of the car like she always did? She knew what she looked like: her lips were lined from smoking for fifteen years and felt chapped. Little pieces of dry skin were sticking up, slightly red from the morning application of lipstick. The red was most faded in the prominent areas, and her lips looked that much thinner.

She knew what she looked like. She looked like a tired old woman.

"And we want to congratulate our basketball girls for their victory over Saltillo..."

Joan thought about how to discreetly correct her makeup blunder. Everyone was trying not to pay attention to her, but that just meant that they would notice every little thing that she did. She could excuse herself, as if to use the restroom, but how would that look? The door was too far away, and she'd just come in. People would think that she should have used the toilet before coming in, or that she had bladder problems. She could also prop her purse up to pretend as if she were looking for something, and instead use her makeup mirror and lipstick, but that would be too awkward. It would never work.

She gritted her teeth. There was no way she could do this. She steeled herself against any judging glances.

People started getting up while Joan was still thinking. Joan looked around. Everyone was gathering around a little snack table, where punch and cookies were being served by children with junior Civitans' vests. A tall boy with a crew cut was ladling the punch, looking as if he would have gladly died at that moment.

Joan quickly reapplied her lipstick and relaxed.

“Joan? Is that you?”

Joan looked up. A smiling blonde woman was holding two Dixie cups full of pink punch. The woman looked a little nervous.

“Joan, I haven’t seen you in so long! Not since Kelly and Andrea were still together in dance,” the woman said as she sat next to Joan.

Joan remembered who the woman was. Andrea’s mother, Karen. The girls had been in Girl Scouts and the local dance school. She and Joan had been friends as much as their daughters had been friends, meaning they saw each other and talked at various functions.

“It has been forever, Karen,” Joan said to prove she remembered the woman’s name. “How have you been? How’s little Andrea?”

“Not so little anymore.”

Joan looked around. “Where is she? I bet I wouldn’t recognize her.”

Karen laughed. “Do you think Miss Fifteen Going On Twenty would *ever* be caught with her mother? Those days are over. She’s at the mall, same place she was last night.” Karen tossed her hair and sighed dramatically.

Joan laughed, as if she got the joke. She knew mothers of teenagers always mocked their children’s new sense of self-importance. But Kelly wasn’t like that yet.

One of the teachers handed Karen a sign-up sheet. She looked at it like it was a menu. “So, is Kelly going to be in the pageant? Do you know?”

Joan took offense at Karen doubting she knew her own daughter. However, she didn’t know if Kelly was going to be in the pageant. She didn’t even know that there was

a pageant. “Oh, you know these girls,” Joan said. “Kelly never tells me anything. Everything is ‘fine’ and ‘whatever.’”

Karen finally chose and marked her name down. “You know, I’ve always thought Kelly has the prettiest eyes. Most girls would kill for eyes like hers.”

“I guess they are pretty,” Joan said. After she said it, she realized this was one of those moments she had to brag about her daughter. “You know,” she said as cover, “Kelly placed in a pageant a few years back.”

“I remember that.” Karen handed Joan the sheet. “She played the piano. I believe she was the best on talent. Andrea insisted on singing... but she never could carry a tune.”

Joan remembered Andrea’s attempt at “Wind Beneath My Wings.” She’d made snarky remarks to Steve, who hadn’t laughed. Steve had long since stopped laughing at Joan’s jokes. “Is Andrea participating?”

“Couldn’t keep her from it,” Karen said. “A lot of her friends are going to be in it. Looks like I’ll have to get another dress. They stop wearing poofy dresses in high school. I won’t miss those hoop skirts, though.”

“If Kelly’s not participating, I really wish she would,” Joan heard herself saying. “I did enjoy working with her for that last pageant.”

“That’d be great. It would give you some time to spend...”

Karen broke off. More time with your daughter, Joan knew she had meant to say. Joan realized people weren’t used to dealing with her situation, and even really nice people, especially nice people, made mistakes.

Joan looked down at the sign-up sheet. It hadn't gone completely around the room, so she knew people wanted it. They were just too afraid to come up to her and ask for it. Even Karen, initially so nice and forward, obviously wanted to leave her. Joan kept her eyes down, hoping Karen would take the message and leave. Joan couldn't stand her nervous shifting anymore.

With a flourish, without really paying attention to what she was doing, Joan signed up to work room security for her daughter's age group, the high school kids. She didn't sign her husband up for anything. After all, pageants were all about mother-daughter bonding. She and Kelly had gotten so close at the last pageant before the incident. She wanted to try it again, but without Steve there to make her nervous and self-conscious.

Joan got up, waved goodbye to Karen, handed the sheet to the president of the PTA, and walked out before anyone could challenge her. If there was any more to the meeting, they should have taken care of all business before the snacks anyway.

Before she left her car, Joan put out a cigarette and said a desperate prayer. It lasted three seconds. It was the only praying Joan ever did. She didn't believe in bothering God if there was nothing to say.

She had called Steve that morning to ask him for lunch. She could tell over the phone he was suspicious. Of course he was. Joan only ever ate with him if she wanted something. She did that on purpose. For one thing, she didn't really enjoy his company and hadn't for a long time. For another, she wanted to codify their relationship with certain rituals. Lunch meant she wanted something. Supper meant she needed something.

If she kept those straight, she knew he could always prepare for her request, which ended up making him more amiable.

Joan walked into the Tin Lizzy. It was a restaurant particularly designed for truck drivers. The smoking section was larger than the nonsmoking section. The fare was country cooking and breakfast. It was the only place Joan knew that served tomato slices as a side dish. The walls were decorated with old Coca-Cola signs. A poor man's Cracker Barrel.

Steve was already there, sitting squarely in the middle of the over-crowded nonsmoking section. He was usually merciful on her in that regard, but sometimes he had to go to meetings and didn't want to smell like cigarettes. Joan knew he was going to a meeting because he was wearing a nicer suit than usual. His blond hair looked muddy in the lighting. He looked like he had lost some weight.

"Joan," he said as she sat down. He never said "hello" or "nice to see you" to her or anyone else. Just an acknowledgement of first name. It was his usual address of acquaintances. Joan had always found this impressive; she made conversation to mask that she usually didn't know anyone's names.

Joan sat and put her purse in the extra chair at the table. "Hello, Steve." It came out a bit harsher than she wanted. She knew she couldn't smoke, so she was craving a cigarette sooner than usual.

"I'm sorry for the short notice last night," he said. "About the PTA meeting? I know that was a drag."



Joan gave a genuine laugh that still sounded forced. Sometimes Steve tried to sound like a surfer dude or something. The effect used to be cute, but now it was just pathetic.

“It wasn’t a drag,” Joan said while picking up a menu. She already knew what she wanted. The tuna salad was the best thing on the menu. She just liked to hide behind menus. The rows of entrees and prices were a comfort to her in a place where the menu never changed. “It was fine. I didn’t mind, really. I didn’t have anything else I needed to do.”

“Joan, you didn’t have to go.” Steve sounded tired to Joan. She wondered if he was getting enough rest. She always wondered that before she remembered she didn’t have to care.

“It was good I did go,” Joan said. She was trying to sound all happy and light. She did what her therapist said, imagining herself on a pink cloud while talking. That usually worked, except it made her voice sound breathy. “Is Kelly participating in the beauty pageant?”

The waitress came up, a dirty blonde college girl named Linda. She was wearing a Spring Break ’05 T-shirt under her apron. Her eyes looked red from crying. Young adult angst. Probably some guy. “Can I get y’all something?” she said. Her voice sounded too high.

Joan looked away from the girl. “Tuna sandwich and tomato slices, with a water.”

Steve, as always, looked dead into the girl’s eyes. He smiled and said, “I would just love a double cheeseburger with everything and waffle fries.”

“What would you like to drink, sir?”

“Unsweet tea. I’m sweet enough,” Steve said. His usual drink order joke that somehow got them every time.

The girl brightened noticeably. Steve had that effect on girls and women. Little girls loved him. Women were always pressing their phone numbers into his palm and giving too big smiles. That’s what had attracted Joan to him in the first place. She didn’t know if it was his handsome features or his kindness, but it eventually became a combination of both for most women.

Joan used to be more attractive, in her 20s. Yet she’d watched her features harden as she stayed behind the secretarial desk and watched her husband get promotions. The congratulatory grins burned wrinkles into her face. The years of tanning salons finally caught up with her until the doctor began to warn her of skin cancer along with the usual warnings of lung cancer. Joan had stopped going to the doctor, even when she was really sick last year with pneumonia. She didn’t like another person telling her about herself. She’d stopped going to the therapist, too. Now no one could analyze her correctly, not even Steve anymore.

As the waitress walked off, Joan’s stomach clenched into the usual feeling of tightness. Steve just continued smiling.

“I want to enter Kelly into the beauty pageant,” Joan said. “If she’s not already in it. And I want another afternoon every week until the pageant to help her prepare.”

Steve finally brought his eyes back to Joan’s face after watching the waitress retreat. “Yeah, sure.”

Joan blinked. Just like that? She’d already drawn breath to defend her position further, but, finding she didn’t need it, she expelled the air in a great whoosh.

Steve laughed, as if guessing what she was thinking. “Okay, yeah, I know. The last pageant was a major disaster, and I’m not saying I wouldn’t jump on you and Kelly doing something different together, but that was a different time. We were different people, and we were in a bad situation. Everything is much better now.”

If you say so, Joan wanted to say. But she didn’t. Instead she smiled as the waitress brought the food. The waitress’s hand lingered on the edge of Steve’s plate a little too long. Joan felt the edges of her mouth harden again.

When the waitress left, Joan said, “Just tell me again. Do you think I’m a good mom?”

Steve rolled his eyes. Joan knew she had asked that question so many times that it had become a ritual for them. “Like I’ve said, I never thought you weren’t a good mother. It’s just that Kelly and you never really got along. We’ve been through this. Can you honestly say you feel up to taking care of Kelly by yourself?”

Joan shook her head slowly as she ate the tuna that now tasted like cardboard in her mouth. There was another question that Joan had asked once, but never again. Shouldn’t a mother be able to get along with her daughter?

Later that day, Joan sat at her desk running payroll through the computer. The workers were getting more overtime lately, and every form had to be filled out correctly and double-checked or else Mrs. Stanford would have her hide. She could see the aged woman, a secretary at the factory for practically fifty years, peering over at her from her desk. The woman didn’t know what to make of computers, so Joan had been hired as a second office worker to handle everything on the computer. Pretty soon, Joan had replaced Mrs. Stanford for all practical purposes. The old woman stayed until retirement

and handled all the older workers. And she bossed Joan around, pretending like the middle-aged Joan was a mere sprig out of high school.

Joan felt her throat tighten. She pressed Save on the computer and got up for the bathroom. In the tiny toilet the two women shared, Joan washed her face with a brown paper towel soaked with cold water. Her face burned.

Joan put the lid down on the toilet and sat, still rubbing her eyes. In front of the toilet, covering the door, was a full-length mirror that Joan hated. She couldn't understand why anyone would put up a full-length mirror in front of a toilet. That was just not a position she ever liked to see herself in.

She recalled lunch: his condescending words about how much better *she* had become. She'd had to ask *permission* to see her own daughter. And he, successful, sporty, and caring dad, had enjoyed every minute of her *debasement*.

Joan slid to the floor and got the lid up just in time to spew the tuna sandwich into the toilet.

The wooden door was open when Joan got home, with only the screen door closed. Joan pulled mace out of her purse, thinking that maybe those lawnmower thieves had decided to branch out into breaking and entering. She quickly put the mace on the kitchen table when she heard the Disney Channel playing in the living room. She brightened.

“Kelly! What are you doing here?” Joan said brightly as she entered the living room.

Kelly looked up. She was lounging on the couch, looking at one of Joan's fashion magazines. A badly-made preteen comedy was playing on the television. Kelly smiled. "Hi, Mom."

Joan sat in an old, brown armchair she'd found second-hand. Most of her furniture was second-hand or from Wal-Mart. The floor needed vacuuming. Paper plates and glasses stained tan with Diet Coke littered the end tables. She'd been planning on cleaning up that night for Kelly's weekend visit the next day.

Kelly blew a big pink bubble and gathered the gum back in her mouth with some activity and skill. Her mousy brown hair was slicked back into a pony tail. She had inherited Joan's muddy brown eyes and brown hair. The only thing she had of her father's was the killer smile, which she always knew how to employ, Joan reflected, to get her way.

Kelly sat upright and pushed some strands of hair behind her ears. "You wouldn't believe how much trouble I had to go through to come here," she said dramatically. "Daddy wanted to cook Mexican, but I couldn't stand the thought of that much grease. Besides," Kelly smiled, wrapping her legs into a yoga position, "Daddy said you wanted to talk to me about something."

Joan tried to think of something else to do with the hamburger meat besides the burritos she'd planned. She decided to take Kelly out to Subway or something. "I usually have to pry you away from home on the weekends," Joan pointed out. "And you love Mexican food."

Kelly sighed. “You’re absolutely right, Mom. All of that was complete lies. And Daddy already told me about the pageant. I just wanted to tell you I want to do the pageant. In fact, I already signed up before.”

There was something suspiciously brisk and dutiful about Kelly. She was usually so laid-back, not really wanting to interact with her mother all that much. She’d go for the good meals and relative quiet of her mother’s house, but the truth was she and Joan were not all that close. Joan tried, but she just didn’t understand what Kelly was talking about most of the time. Kelly talked a lot about music Joan had never heard of and movies she never had the money to see until they were out on video. Joan absently looked over at the stack of movies from Blockbuster, reminding herself to take them back and exchange them.

Joan suddenly realized that Kelly had lied about working so hard to get away. Her father had ordered her there. Steve probably knew Joan would be in shambles after their lunch today. She usually was. So he decided to play along with her whims, no doubt.

Joan was starving after having lost her lunch, so bypassed renewed plans of burritos and took her daughter to the newer Subway in Tupelo. Kelly forgot all complaints of grease and ordered a pizza sub. Joan got a club salad and picked at it, slowly losing her appetite.

“I have some requests,” Kelly said after she’d finished half her sandwich. Her breath had gone from bubblegum smell to garlic.

Joan stopped forcing herself to take a bite of lettuce and allowed her fork to drop. “I’m listening.”

“I call the shots,” Kelly said. “You can help me and all, but I call the shots this time around.”

Joan pulled herself upright. She found she was not a big fan of Kelly’s new assertiveness toward her. She missed the indifference. “I don’t think I understand what you mean.”

“I’m playing the trombone.”

Joan bit her lips as Kelly dug into the rest of her sandwich. She knew there was going to be a catch.

“It’s not a very feminine instrument,” Joan said. It was Kelly’s favorite instrument, Joan remembered. She’d always been something of a musical prodigy. She’d taken to piano very easily at a young age when her father taught her some cute little jazz tunes. Yet she’d let her study of piano go in favor of the large, manly trombone. Joan remembered Kelly lecturing her on the trombone’s great qualities: the range, the difficulty, the opportunities as opposed to flute or trumpet. Joan supposed Kelly was pretty good, not being a fan of the instrument herself.

“It’s my instrument,” Kelly said through a mouthful of salami. “I’ll work up my own song and you won’t have a say in that.”

Joan reflected that if anyone else had been listening to this girl, that person would have been shocked. No girl talked to her mother like that. It was just unnatural.

But Kelly was right to be cautious. The last pageant had gone awry in so many ways. It was the day when Joan realized she was not a good mother.

They had trained for months for the pageant the year of the divorce. Joan had a crazy idea that maybe if she could show everyone how much she loved Kelly by pushing her to win the pageant, she and Steve could do something to preserve their faltering marriage.

They trained every day in talent, interview, and poise. After many loud arguments between mother and daughter, Joan had confiscated Kelly's new trombone. With her early training in jazz by her father, Kelly could already play a few simple tunes. However, she was better at the piano, a more feminine instrument anyway.

The age group was 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> graders. Kelly obviously had a disadvantage compared to the older girls, but Joan knew with some training she could compete.

Kelly had always been plain, but that was a simple obstacle to overcome. Makeup, the right dress, and some hairspray did wonders.

Yet nothing was ever truly right. The more Joan got involved with her, the more Kelly resisted and Steve frowned.

Finally the night of the pageant arrived with Kelly in an enormous dress and makeup put on wildly by a nervous Joan. Kelly was third to walk out. She walked exactly as they had practiced, being sure to give the judges an extra, private smile. Joan remembered how much Kelly had bloomed and had congratulated herself. This time, while so many other girls smiled painfully through their sweat, Kelly smiled naturally and graciously, as if she'd been on the stage her entire life. She moved with grace and confidence, slowing down at the right times, turning her head in the exact way.

However, in the interview category, Kelly's performance had fallen. She got a question Joan hadn't anticipated – something to do with how small businesses could



handle the new bypass. Kelly froze for a moment and sputtered out something about everyone should support small-town business instead of driving all the way to Tupelo.

Kelly's answer was on par with all the others, but her delivery was stilted and nervous. Gone was the new-found confidence. Joan knew what the others, especially the judges, were thinking, "The girl can walk just fine, but just don't ask her to use her brain."

Joan stormed out of her seat, ignoring the dirty looks from the ushers. She didn't care if some little elementary school girl thought she was driving out the audience. She found her daughter crying in the bathroom. She knew that she should have comforted the girl then, but they had been so close and Joan had gotten her hopes too high. She was in that place that her therapist had called simply "beyond."

"What the hell was that on stage?" Joan said. "Is that all the diction you can muster?"

Kelly just glared at her.

"Oh, so you're not going to say anything? I wouldn't want to be cut down by your speaking ability." A few children were sticking their heads out of various doors. Joan knew she needed to stop, but she couldn't stand the silence anymore.

"I knew you couldn't do this," Joan grumbled.

"Then why?" Kelly said. "Why did you get me into this in the first place, if you knew I couldn't do it anyway? Why did you drill me for a month?"

"I did it so I might stop hating you."

After that, Joan spent the rest of the evening smoking in the school bathroom. She heard later that Kelly and Steve had secretly worked on a trombone solo: a simple jazz tune Joan had never heard of. Steve had run up the aisle with the trombone, handing it to her on stage to the laughs of the audience. Steve had run back to the auditorium, acting like some kind of Olympic athlete. Joan had seen it on a taped version of the pageant.

And Joan had moved out the next day.

Joan had always wondered why she said what she said: *I did it so I might stop hating you*. She'd never in her life hated Kelly. She'd never hated anyone. Sure, she'd never been as affectionate as Steve or any of the other mothers. But it wasn't like she hated.

But why had she said that?

"Kelly, we don't have to do this," Joan said.

"Do what? Get cookies? Cause we have to do that. Make mine macadamia nut," Kelly said.

Joan got up with her billfold, not fooled in the least. Kelly knew exactly what she was talking about. This cookie errand was just avoidance.

But it was really better for Kelly. Kelly could do all the beauty pageants she wanted. Joan really didn't care.

Joan smiled at the cashier, looking him straight in the eye as she ordered and paid for the cookies. A wave of good feeling was coming off her. She felt like she had just done something dramatic, but not painful for once. She felt like she thought Steve felt all the time, loving happily and indiscriminately. The boy behind the counter smiled back at her, though it looked like one of those smiles people give crazy people. Joan didn't care.

Joan sat down and handed the package of cookies to Kelly. The girl opened the package and tore into one.

“Let’s be straight with each other, Kelly,” Joan said in a firm voice once Kelly had her mouth crammed with cookie. “You don’t want me to help you with any darn beauty pageant, and we both know that.”

Kelly’s eyes grew wide, like the time Joan had caught her stealing quarters from her father’s dresser.

“Your father set you up to this. You’re not in the beauty pageant and never were. There’s a jazz ensemble competition that night, and you and your father never miss that.”

Joan had, in fact, just noticed that. It was on the poster over Kelly’s shoulder. They used to go to the ensemble competition as a family, but Joan had given up the pretense of liking it since the divorce.

Kelly finally cleared her mouth. Gone was the controlling smart aleck of a few minutes ago. “I’m really sorry.”

Joan could tell she was. Joan wondered if that mattered or not.

“Listen, Kelly,” Joan said, “I’m a screw-up mom. I’ll admit it. How many other mothers failed to get custody of their children, or have ever said they hate their children? Yeah, I’m a screw-up mom, and I’ll continue to be a screw-up mom, because you’ve got about as much nurturing as you can stand in your father.”

Kelly looked like she was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Joan was flying. She’d never really said it out loud like that. She felt her stomach unclench after years of tightness. Steve could play as much jazz, go to as many meetings, and flirt with as many waitresses as he wanted. Joan was going to do things her way. The

only thing that would change was the jealousy, because she honestly didn't care who loved her anymore. She didn't care about Steve's coaching and condescension about how to love her daughter.

"Wanna skip school tomorrow?" Joan said. "Let's drive to Memphis and go shopping. If your father pitches a fit, just tell him to shove it."

Kelly's other cookie laid forgotten on the table. "Can I go to Victoria's Secret? Daddy never lets me go in there."

"Darling," Joan said, stealing Kelly's other cookie, "I'll buy you whatever you want."

## CHAPTER VI

### WRITE JUNK. HAVE KIDS.

It was late April and the north Mississippi weather was already sticky hot outside the corporate bookstore. The sun was glaring in the windows that covered the front of the store. Management had once gotten special permission to put up adhesive tint to dim the place a bit, but they took it down when a customer said it made the store too dark. Jeremy sat at a wobbly table in the coffee area. He sipped his latte and scowled. Lukewarm. Too sweet. Clarissa was staring at the back of the Clancy novel propped on the table by a wire holder. They hadn't spoken in three minutes.

Jeremy was on his first date since graduating from college three years ago. Finally caving in to his mother's worries and demands, he'd asked out a woman from ad sales at the newspaper where he worked copy desk. Everyone thought she was beautiful, with short, curly hair and a Pilates figure, but Jeremy couldn't look away from her big teeth. She occasionally pulled out a hand mirror and rubbed them.

Not versed in dating etiquette for the working adult, Jeremy had chosen a lunch date for a Saturday. It had made sense to him because he worked Saturday nights. So he took her to a steak house. For lack of anything else to do afterward, he chose to take her for coffee at the bookstore where he'd worked in high school. Now he realized that was a mistake. She was obviously trying to be polite, but that didn't keep her from frowning at every loud teenager and table waggle.

A group of middle-school boys pushed their way into the store. They all wore T-shirts and spiky hair. They were running to the back. One knocked down a Sudoku display. Jeremy groaned. He had forgotten about Saturday afternoons, when the bookstore hosted a time for children to gather in the back to play Japanese card games.

Clarissa had been staring at the faded Clancy novel between them. She looked up. “Lunch was nice.”

“Yes, it was,” Jeremy said. She was again trying to be polite. The place had been awful. Jeremy liked it because the glasses were shaped like cowboy boots and they served margaritas in mason jars. But the whimsy of the place seemed to fall flat around Clarissa, even when she laughed at the stuffed raccoon above their table.

“You know what the best thing about that place was,” Clarissa said. “It was the little steaks. Everywhere else only sells these big-ass steaks. I can never finish them and feel like such a hog when they bring that big piece of meat to my table. I like 6 oz. steaks. Not eight. Not twelve... six. And they didn’t even overcook it. Now, that’s what I call a steak.”

“It was good,” Jeremy said. He wanted to ask her if she ever thought of taking the leftovers home. That seemed classless.

Clarissa stared at him.

“I’m glad you liked it,” he added.

Jeremy waited for it. The weird look. That look always told him he had done something wrong. Or merely that he existed. Now, he knew that he had done something wrong. He was continuing to do something wrong. The whole date had been wrong.

But he couldn't help it. He knew that now. Those few, uninteresting sentences were all he could do. He just didn't know what to say or how to act. Everything he did seemed forced and awkward. Just sitting there was taking all of his energy.

Clarissa didn't give him a weird look. She just smiled. "This is a train wreck, isn't it?"

Jeremy nodded. "Only nobody's watching."

"Good," Clarissa said. "That's definitely good. There's nothing more uncomfortable than a whole bunch of people staring at you, especially when you're already uncomfortable."

Jeremy didn't respond.

She took one last drink of coffee, grimacing at the grounds and sugar at the bottom of the cup. "Goddamnit," she said, "and I liked you, too."

Jeremy didn't watch her as she left. She had really been a good sport about the whole lame date. She would, of course, regale everyone in ad sales about whatever inadequacies of his had spurred the date to failure. Thankfully, ad sales and the copy desk rarely socialized. He could go back to work in peace for the next couple of days. And he didn't have to admit his failure to his mother right away, either.

He looked at his watch. 1:15. He didn't have to be at work until 3:30. Tupelo was the biggest city around, but smaller than Memphis. That meant traffic would be manageable at 2:30 and it was only a little over a ten-minute drive to his job across town. That was fine. He could waste time in the bookstore. He'd done it enough when he worked there in high school, holing himself up in the comic books when he needed to be stocking magazines.

He threw his half-full cup into the garbage and walked toward the back of the store. He turned into the sci-fi/fantasy/horror section. It was always darker than other sections, with its blacks and deep reds. It was the forgotten cousin of the bookstore, ignored by the polite bridal section, the manic self-help section, and the usually kind and welcoming Fiction: Author A to Z section.

There was nothing new in the weirdo section except the fantasy had expanded. All the sci-fi was shoved into four shelves. Star Wars was still popular, but Star Trek had dwindled to almost nothing. If you can't sell the series, he thought, you can't sell the books. No one read sci-fi anymore anyway. Life now was too much like sci-fi for people to be remotely interested.

The fantasy section, though, was booming. The shelves were lined with on-going series of bible-thick books. Jeremy read a lot of fantasy, but not as much as there was on the shelves. Ignoring all the Tolkien wannabes, Jeremy turned and picked up the latest issue of the Dark Ship series. It used to be called a trilogy. Then an evil empire had invaded, forcing the heroes to retreat in the land of Noblin, where the chosen one, Kiren, could learn to use the Sword of Destiny against his brother, who had switched sides midway through book four. The most recent was book seven. The author hadn't published in two years. Jeremy was getting worried. Sometimes an author just quits. Maybe he picks up the series in another ten years, but that would be long enough for most people to lose interest.

Jeremy left the aisle, wandering further back in the store, where the comic books lined a section of the wall. Kids were there, on the floor with their glossy cards stored in the Deluxe Card Saver notebooks sold on aisle five. The kids, not even the same kids



anymore since he'd been gone, had switched from Pokemon to YuGiOh. A few of the younger ones were yelling in overwrought, melodramatic voices about trap cards and life points, mimicking the cartoon. Jeremy tried to ignore them and turned to the comic books.

“Well, hey, Jeremy,” a voice rough with cigarettes called behind him. Jeremy turned around to see a woman in her late fifties with a snake tattoo on her arm. She was pushing a large cart of graphic novels.

“Una. How've you been?” Jeremy said. He smiled as an afterthought.

Una coughed as she settled her cart near Jeremy, avoiding a child's absently kicking leg. “Just fine. You still working at the paper?”

Jeremy picked up a Fantastic Four comic and nodded. “You're still here.”

Una laughed. “With this thing?” she indicated her tattoo. “No one else'll hire me.”

Jeremy knew better to say that she could cover the snake up. The girl who used to work customer service had said the same thing. Her car had been keyed the next day.

“What are you doing here? You haven't been in here since the last Harry Potter party. I thought you were looking into another job.”

“Just killing time,” Jeremy lied. “Job didn't pan out.”

“Well, you've still got a good job at the newspaper. What are you doing at the paper again?” Una asked.

“Design and layout,” Jeremy said. “Sometimes book reviews. Same as always.”

“You know,” Una continued as she began restocking, “I always thought you should get into writing. You were always reading on breaks – all those fantasy things – and your book reviews are good. I always read them.”

“Always,” Jeremy repeated.

“You should write one of those fantasy series. I bet you could write rings around some of the shit we get in here every day. Robert Jordan? Forget about it.”

Jeremy smirked. “Forget about it. That’s what the guy teaching my creative writing class told me.”

“And what the hell does he know?” Una said. “He probably wants you to write good stuff that nobody reads. Nah. Write junk. That’s what in these,” Una gestured at the comic books, “and they’ve always sold. Ever since I was a little girl they always sold. Even those Japanese ones where the girls show their titties sell. Especially those.”

“I have to get to work,” Jeremy said. He was starting to feel sick to his stomach. And it would make his day if he hurled on some kid whose mom decided to press charges for whatever harassment puking was considered.

“Don’t let me stop you.” Una smiled. “Just remember what I said.”

“Thanks, Una.”

He was almost at the door when he realized he still had the comic book in his hand. He didn’t want to go back there, wade through the kids, and talk again to Una. He bought it.

A little past eleven, Jeremy trudged into his apartment. It was frilly, as if an old lady had lived there before. A potpourri wreath The apartment had come like that. Jeremy imagined that the old lady had died in there and no one had bothered to drop by and get her stuff.

Jeremy's one major piece of furniture, besides the cheap bed from his first apartment, was a black leather recliner. It was slashed in the back from one of the times he'd moved. It smelled like beer and one armrest stayed sticky no matter how many times his mother tried to clean it.

One day last spring, Jeremy had felt like he should spring clean with the bright sun and the barking dogs intruding on the dark apartment. He passed through the apartment with a garbage bag, borrowed a vacuum from his mother, and mopped for the first time in his life. After he'd worked up a sweat, he took down some of the potpourri wreaths on the walls and pulled out some of his college posters. A huge Dragonball Z poster was in the bedroom, while the living room was reserved for Blues Brothers and a Scarface poster in a heavy frame. He'd always meant to put up more posters, but he got tired that night he'd decorated and hadn't done it yet.

Jeremy grabbed a beer and a box of vanilla wafers from the kitchen. He sat at his computer and logged on. He had worked hard to get off work early. He'd finagled Sarah into staying to check second edition. His role-playing group was doing a scene that night, and he had to be there.

The group wasn't there yet. It wasn't 12:30 anyway. Jeremy checked his various message groups, answering a short question from a guy in Europe about his walkthrough of Final Fantasy X. He deleted a spam message from someone talking about Warcraft.

Warcraft. Idiot newbies. They thought they were reveling in nonconformity or whatever, but they were just trapped by a corporate giant. That's what World of Warcraft had become. It may have had its ties to good role-playing, but now it trapped people into buying more stuff just to be able to participate. You had to buy every upgrade and spend

your life working up to playing in bigger and bigger groups. Groups in Warcraft now could go to 60 people. Jeremy played Warcraft the first time it came out, but after that? He couldn't stand it anymore. How could you have fun with 60 people? You couldn't get to know everyone. All you could do was take orders from someone, not have ideas of your own.

Jeremy had reverted back to old-school role-play. He limited his online group, conducted through instant messaging, to himself plus three others. Dungeons and Dragons was his template, but over the years he'd written his own situations. He, as dungeon master, controlled the world his players had to navigate, as well as constructed the characters for his players. The game he had going now was something he'd written in high school. This game was actually pretty good. Coach, a college-age black guy from Texas U who really liked Rurouni Kenshin, was a swordsman. Aqua18 was an elf-thief with high dexterity. All Jeremy knew about aqua was she was in high school and probably a goth chick. Finally, there was Rosefire, the newest member of the group.

Jeremy shook his head. It had been a mistake bringing Rosefire into the game. She was a newbie in the purest form and only did D&D because her parents wouldn't buy her video games. Jeremy had spent an entire Saturday afternoon once just teaching her the rules.

Still waiting, Jeremy opened the group window and scrolled up through the earlier chat. "Write junk," he muttered as he read through Rosefire's contribution. She wouldn't tell her age, but it seemed like she was a kid. Older people still spelled correctly.

"Write junk," Jeremy said again.

Jeremy was in creative writing in college. Dr. Thurston hadn't let them write anything "genre" because he said all that shit was plot-driven, not character-driven. So Jeremy wrote a short story. He didn't remember what it was about. It sucked, anyway. The next semester, Jeremy brought Dr. Thurston what he'd always been working on: his epic fantasy series. It was 200 pages long, single-spaced.

"I don't understand what you want me to do with this," Dr. Thurston said.

"This is what I write." Jeremy thought it was self-evident.

"You want me to read it?"

Jeremy kind of did.

But Dr. Thurston didn't. "I'm sorry... Jeremy. I know you are in journalism, and I love your movie reviews in the newspaper. I think you should stick with what you're good at. If you bring this to me again, I'll read it, but the way you acted when we workshopped your short story, you may want to ask yourself if you want my honest opinion."

Jeremy had walked out in the middle of workshopping his story, and, as Jeremy remembered it, there had been some cursing. But they were all sucky writers anyway. What did they know?

When Jeremy didn't say anything, the appointment with Dr. Thurston ended. Jeremy had taken his manuscript with him. He didn't go back again. A year later, he'd burned the novel in the wastebin when his roommate wanted to roast marshmallows.

"r u there?"

Shit. Rosefire was the first one there. He never knew what to say to her.

": )."

“Hey,” Jeremy wrote.

“ltns.”

Jeremy threw his head back. Long time no see. “We talked yesterday.”

“were were u b4?”

That was it. “Get your headset on already,” Jeremy wrote.

“cant.”

“Why not?”

“cuz the rents won’t get me one. When’s the nxt scene?”

“Tomorrow,” Jeremy wrote. “You’re gonna have to do something more than just sit there and shout spells.”

“I no.”

“Because it doesn’t matter how much you shout sleep spell, we can’t do anything if we’re all unconscious.”

“I no. ur bitchy.”

Jeremy took a deep breath. “Hell of a day, that’s all.”

He felt old. God, he felt old. Here he was, writing to a 13-year-old girl.

“Where are the others?” he wrote.

“they shud b here.”

His computer rang. Coach had just logged in.

“Sorry Im late,” Coach wrote. “Had 2 finish a paper.” Coach was a closet role-player who was also on the basketball team. Jeremy often wondered how such an odd combination happened. Jeremy had once asked him what his roommate thought of him.

Coach told him his roommate was addicted to pain killers and had usually passed out by 8.

“S’okay,” Jeremy wrote. “We’re still waiting for aqua. Have your stuff ready.”

Jeremy pulled up the number randomizer. While he still enjoyed the feel of the many-sided dice used to decide the various decisions in role-playing, especially fights, they could never assure the dice roller would be absolutely honest about the numbers. As such, he’d downloaded a simple program that handled these situations and tied it in with the IM so everyone could see and access.

In the meantime, aqua logged in. “hey guys,” she typed. “what’s up?”

While the others typed the usual “not much” (or nm in Rosefire’s case), Jeremy was ready to get down to business. “We’re not using headphones yet because Rosefire doesn’t have them,” he wrote.

“Sucks, kid,” Coach wrote.

“i hav headphones,” Rosefire wrote. “just not a mike.”

Jeremy was glad. He didn’t feel like typing for all that long. He did that too much during the day.

“Headphones on, then,” he wrote. “And Rosefire will just type everything.”

If Rosefire talked like she wrote, Jeremy was glad he didn’t have to listen to her. Ever since she joined the group, everything had been going downhill.

“Where did we leave off?” Coach said. He was a deep-voiced black guy.

“We have to figure out what’s been causing all those troll deaths,” aqua said.

Jeremy didn’t know much about aqua. She was in high school and liked Inuyasha a little too much. She had a high voice that cracked like a boy going through puberty.

“i say we leve em,” Rosefire commented. “there trolls. bad guys. if we find teh killer, we can thank em and keep on tryin 2 get 2 Dragon Fortress.”

“Not a bad idea,” Coach said, “But what if troll-killer is anything-killer? Do you really want to go up against something that can kill every troll they meet?”

“Can I have your decision?” Jeremy prompted.

“Yeah,” aqua said. “We’re investigating the troll deaths.”

Jeremy flipped a page in his book. “Very well. You’re walking through a pine grove...”

Jeremy read what was in the book. He’d recycled this scenario he’d half-written, half lifted from books when he was in high school. He knew how it went. People died or they didn’t. The troll-killer was a red herring. All roads would lead back to the castle, where they would battle their way through several monsters. Jeremy kept the number-randomizer in the screen for the fights.

Last time we’re doing this shit, he thought. I’m disbanding the group. They can do whatever they want. God, I’m 26. What am I doing?

Around 3:00 the game stopped. The group had gotten to the door of the castle and Rosefire needed to look up some spells to get the door down. They called it quits.

“gud game,” Rosefire said after everyone else logged off.

“It was okay.” Jeremy really wanted to go to bed. He had a headache.

“u hav a nice voice,” Rosefire said.

Jeremy snorted into the microphone. “Is that supposed to be a compliment, Rosefire? Nice voice?”

“well, i cant c ur face, can i?” Rosefire typed. “u no, i shudnt b up this late.”



“Then why are you?” Jeremy wrote.

“my rents stopped tellin me wut 2 do. they sed if i wanted 2 make myself sick, i shud just go rite on ahead. like they dont even care bout me or something.”

Jeremy wanted to laugh. When Jeremy was 12, he stopped taking baths for two weeks. He’d figured he was old enough to make his own decisions. He’d expected his mother to rag on him all the time, but she’d kept quiet. Occasionally she sprayed him with air freshener, but that was it. After two weeks, he wanted to go to a sleepover at a friend’s house. His mother let him, but the kid holding the sleepover didn’t want him there. He learned the importance of hygiene and the concept of laissez-faire parenting. It looked like Rosefire didn’t know what her parents were up to yet.

“its realy hot here. of course, arkansas is always realy hot. i’ll be glad wen scool is out. were do u live again?”

“Mississippi, the northern part of it.”

“ive never ben 2 miss.”

“Not missing much,” Jeremy talked on. He’d ditched his headset and was glugging a Coors. It was his third one that night. He wasn’t drunk, but he felt beer-tired.

“I have to go.”

“u cant b sleepy.”

Jeremy wiped his eyes. They were watering from tiredness. “I’m old,” he wrote.

“ur not old.”

“I’m 27.”

Rosefire didn't write anything. Jeremy could almost see her tapping the keyboard lightly, trying to think of a response. Of course, she probably wasn't doing that. She was probably calling her parents to save her from the creepy old man.

"thats not old," Rosefire wrote. "i nu this guy who married a 17 year old wen he wuz 26."

Jeremy didn't write anything.

"i wish i wuz 17. im so sick of all these botches at skool. i wish i cud do w/e i want."

"No one's stopping you," Jeremy wrote. "Your parents aren't telling you to go to bed. What's stopping you from doing whatever you want."

A pause. "dunno," she wrote.

Jeremy was suddenly very tired. He yawned. "brb," he wrote.

"k," Rosefire wrote.

Jeremy threw the rest of his beer away and went to bed.

Jeremy had a dream. In this dream he had a sword. He was hacking away at a newspaper forest. Rosefire was at his side, female and 20 and buxom and beautiful. She looked like She-Ra from the He-Man cartoons.

"Why would your brother do such a thing," Rosefire whispered. "It's not like him. He was never like this before."

"He just never grew up," Jeremy said. "He's only doing this to spite me – just like when we were kids."

He woke up. He was Jeremy again. He'd been dreaming he was Kiren from the Dark Ship saga. He always did that when he read those books.

Jeremy liked Kiren. He trusted him. Kiren was one of those likeable main characters that were so rare for fantasy series. Jeremy usually read those books for the supporting characters. Heroes bored him after the first book. They were like Luke Skywalker – ugly as all hell and way too skilled for the two seconds of training they got from the old wizard.

Kiren from Dark Ship was different. Yes, he followed most of the usual tropes of a fantasy, but he wasn't so damn annoying about it. He struggled. And he was an adult. Not some 17-year-old dirt farmer with inborn powers. He'd won the sword in a card game and inadvertently bonded with it. And he was a good 30 years old. He wasn't some whiny kid.

Jeremy decided not to shave that day. Instead, he ate a pizza and read a book until he had to go to work.

The book was awful. He had to read it for a book review. It was from some no-name. It had a bunch about coal mining in it. The whole thing was some coming-of-age garbage, but the kid didn't seem to have come of age after all that. He was still the whiny brat he began as.

There was something to the whole writing genre thing. The tropes of genre writing were cool in the right hands. Even a bad writer could spit out a good story with the right tropes and characters, especially with kickass abilities thrown in. Non-genre stuff – literary stuff – if it sucked, it just sucked. The bad tropes sucked, too. Coming-of-age? Who even wants to read that? Unless you stick a big alien in the middle of it, or

maybe a phallic sword, it's just no fun. Jeremy tapped out a bland review before he took a shower.

Before work, he checked his email. The window for the room was still open – he hadn't shut it off the night before. No one was in the room. Everyone else was in class.

Rosefire had continued to write. “ur not coming back. not suprising. i didnt buy a headset cuz my parents think ur a weirdo pshyco killer. ur good, tho. bet u think im a dumb little kid, tho. im not. what if i said my parents beat me. what wud u do. im lyin’. next time i see u, i tackle-hug u.”

Jeremy erased all the text from the night before.

It was Sunday night. There was only one other person, Pete, working at the copy desk. Except for the sports guys, they were the only ones in the office.

Jeremy felt his mind slip away as he designed the pages. Unless he had to do a photo-illustration or a complicated design, everything about designing was intuitive. The pages designed themselves almost, especially in the Nation section. Those stories were all from the AP anyway. He ate a hamburger on the corner of his desk. The people at Wendy's had forgotten the onions.

Jeremy liked working after normal business hours. For one thing, there were rarely any bosses past five. They all went home two hours after he got there. There were usually meetings or whatever before five, but after five he could work at his own pace and do his own thing. It was so quiet. Jeremy had considered putting in Messenger to his work computer, but he knew he would never get any work done, then. Since the sports

guys weren't there, he and Pete had turned the TV to a badly edited showing of Ferris Bueller. Pardon my French, but you're an idiot.

"How'd your date with Clarissa go?" Pete was eating a bowl of popcorn for his supper. He was thirty, had a wife and five kids, and loved to find and show funny videos on the internet.

When Jeremy didn't respond, Pete continued. "Why'd you screw it up? You won't get many hotties like her."

Jeremy sighed loudly. "How do you know I screwed it up?"

"She's friends with my wife."

Jeremy got online, trying to find AP photos of the president that didn't make him look like a duck.

"I don't know," Jeremy muttered. "I used to be so good at that."

Pete laughed. "When was that?"

"In college."

"Dating doesn't matter when you're in college," Pete said. "Life doesn't matter. It's not the real world."

"You're calling *this* world real?"

That usually got people to shut up.

Pete laughed again. "Work? Real? Nah, it's the stuff we do outside of work. It's kids. Yesterday I had to clean the poop out of my daughter's bed. Apparently she dreamt about using the bathroom, cause *man* it was everywhere. I washed her sheets. I gave her a bath. My wife had a 5:00 meeting – she couldn't have done it. Then I dressed her in a

nightgown and put her in bed with me. She could have shit all over me and I still wouldn't have cared."

Jeremy found himself staring at Pete in utter fascination. He could see Pete doing it: scraping the shit into a toilet – bleaching the sheets. "There a point to that story?"

"I'm just trying to tell you what real life is. I don't know anything realer than that."

Jeremy laughed. "You saying I need an incontinent kid?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Have kids. Poop and all."

"Have kids," Jeremy muttered. "Write junk."

Jeremy's cursor passed by a small news article in entertainment news. He sat up. He felt a fist clench his stomach, that feeling that always accompanies unexpected news.

Pete noticed the change. "What is it, man? Somebody die?"

Jeremy nodded. "J. Carole. A guy... a writer. He wrote the Dark Ship trilogy." Jeremy felt like throwing up as he said it.

Jeremy pulled the story and a good photo. He also pulled a picture of the latest Dark Ship book jacket. He began working on clearing out some space for the story.

The house was clean when Jeremy got home. His mom had come in and cleaned. The soda cans were all gone. The two weeks worth of dishes were done. His sheets were clean. Glade plug-ins were in every electrical socket. The fridge had salad and apples in it. A note was on the fridge: Don't forget you're having lunch with me tomorrow at Red Lobster. Love, Mom.

Jeremy wanted to rip the note from the wall. He wanted to throw something. J. Carole was dead. A heart attack, of all things. He would never even get to finish the series. And his mother wanted him to eat apples. It shouldn't matter to him, he felt that, but it did. He felt like something should have changed.

He was late, having had to redesign the pages to make room and argue with Pete that the story was worth the amount of space he was giving it. He'd missed deadline by five minutes. He knew he was going to get several emails that day. He was glad it was his day off the next day. He wouldn't have to face meetings until Wednesday.

Jeremy was also late for role-playing. He watched them without logging on.

“So where the f is he?”

Coach was talking to aqua\_66.

“u no his work scedule.”

“That's not good enuf. He won't tell us when he working.”

Rosefire broke in. “i talked 2 hi last nite. he seemed all wonky.”

Jeremy'd had enough. He logged on. “Guys, I'm here.”

Everyone stopped typing.

“hey ges wut i bot a headset,” Rosefire wrote.

There was crackling on Jeremy's speakers. “What's up, guys?” a chipper voice rang out. Rosefire sounded younger than Jeremy had imagined.

“Where you been?” Coach said, having put on his headset as well.

“Work,” Jeremy wrote. He didn't trust his voice to be cool.

“You're usually not this late,” Coach said. Aqua didn't say anything. She usually zoned out unless they were playing.

“Somebody died,” Jeremy wrote. “I had to take care of stuff.”

The room was silent again. “I’m sorry,” Rosefire said. “Was it your mom?”

“Shut up, Rosefire,” Coach said. “How are you feeling, dude? Who was it?”

Jeremy realized they thought it was his mom. “No, nothing like that,” he wrote.

“It was J. Carole.”

“Oh, yeah,” aqua said. “That was on CNN. Didn’t he write some series?”

“Yeah,” Jeremy wrote. “Listen, I’m beat tonight. Let’s reschedule.”

They couldn’t meet until Tuesday night. Coach left in the middle of discussion, his usual reaction to one of his friends visiting. Aqua left soon after, promising to email Coach. Only Rosefire was left.

“Who’s J. Carole?” Rosefire said. She sounded like she had no inclination to leave.

Jeremy just wanted to go to bed. “He’s a writer. He wrote the Dark Ship series. He never finished it.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s on your list of favorite books. That sucks.”

Jeremy didn’t write anything.

“Put on your headset. Please?” Rosefire said. “This feels weird.”

In that moment, Jeremy wanted to know more about Rosefire. “So, you’re from Arkansas,” he said into his headset. He was starting to sound cool again.

“Yeah,” Rosefire said. “Not really far from Mississippi.”

Jeremy didn’t really know how to talk to someone so young. “Do you like school?”



“Heck, no,” Rosefire said, laughing. “They’re all botches. I’m not really good at anything, either. Why do I have to take social studies, anyway?”

“Social studies is useless,” Jeremy wrote. “Everything is useless before college. And even then most things are useless.”

“Yeah,” Rosefire said. “I guess I can see that. I just want to do something different. But there’s nothing to do. No one really likes what I like. I try to talk about this kind of stuff—role-playing—and everybody looks at me funny.”

“It gets worse,” Jeremy said. He got up, knowing his wireless headset had enough signal to get him to the fridge. He found a few beers hidden in the back his mom hadn’t gotten to.

“What are you doing?”

Jeremy flipped the can open and took a big swallow. “Drinking a beer.”

“My mom said that beer tastes like horse pee.”

Jeremy sat down. “It takes some getting used to.”

“I always ask my mom how she knows what horse pee tastes like.”

Jeremy was starting to feel really good about everything. He hadn’t been able to talk this freely to someone in a while.

“Your screenname,” Rosefire said, “does it come from those books?”

Jeremy felt like he could talk about the books now. “Yeah. Kiren is the main character. He’s my role model.” That was something Jeremy never said, but he could say it around a kid.

“Listen, my name is Bailey. I’m thirteen.”

“And?” Jeremy was starting to feel uncomfortable. She should have been in bed hours ago.

“So I want to know your name. I can’t just call you Kiren all the time. It sounds dumb. And, besides, I know you’re a good guy.”

Jeremy wanted to protest that Kiren was not a dumb name, but he felt his voice go high-pitched even as he thought about it. The conversation was starting to bother him anyway. “You know I’m a good guy. How? I could be that weirdo psycho killer.”

Rosefire paused. “Listen, my parents are real a-holes. My dad threw me in the bed and took my laptop one time when I was online late. I still have bruises. You and the group are the only people keeping me from going completely crazy.”

“Rosefire...”

“I’m thinking of getting a webcam. Do you have one? So we can see each other? Then maybe we can dress up for the role-playing. I’ve got this old Halloween costume for a mage’s robe. That would really kick ass.”

Jeremy stared at the screen. His wallpaper featured a picture of Kiren, who was leading his friends up Mount Sharn, where the wise old ogre lived. He remembered the scene. Kiren had been hindered by a fear of heights, which, through magic, manifested into a swarm of fire-breathing bats. Kiren had hidden until he knew his brother was in danger of being eaten alive. He took out all the bats in one great swoop of his sword. On the picture, Kiren looked afraid and exhilarated, as if he could fly up the mountain.

“Go to bed,” Jeremy heard himself saying.

“Right. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Rosefire said.

“You won’t. I’m closing the group. If I were you, I wouldn’t give my name out to anyone else,” Jeremy said.

Rosefire paused. “What? You’re serious?”

“You’re thirteen...” Jeremy began.

“Assface,” Rosefire whispered. “You’re just like my dad.”

Jeremy closed the group. He took the group’s name off the register.

He walked over to the fridge for a beer before bed. The beer was cold and fizzy and gave him the hiccups. He decided to blow off lunch with his mom tomorrow.

Jeremy wondered how the series would have ended if J. Carole had lived, or at least had written faster. Kiren would have won... maybe. Or maybe Kiren would have lost. What if the sword turned out to have no magic at all? What if the enemy was too strong? What if Kiren lost interest and went home back to gambling?

He wondered what would happen if a fantasy hero like Kiren was just a regular guy. No magic, no medieval times. Just living in an apartment going to a crappy job. Would he date? Would he fight with his brother? He probably wouldn’t tote around a big-ass sword, but does that mean he’s not a hero?

Jeremy laughed and grimaced through a hiccup. He imagined bringing a huge sword to work. One that strapped crossways across his back. Maybe a bow and quiver along with it. No games with thirteen-year-olds. No battle between life and death or any of that shit that he’d read and written. Just designing pages with that sword.