

Broken

J. Matthew Nespoli

A World Audience

SAMPLER

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Broken

By

J. Matthew Nespoli

January, 2010

A World Audience Book

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*This novel is dedicated to all the beautiful women who inspired it;
especially my bride, Rea..
In the end, when we die,
if we've loved and been loved,
we will die knowing our life was important.*

October 1996
Skye Garucci, 17

Some women whored their orifices for drug money. After my childhood trauma, I swore I'd never use sex for money. Sex was a consequence of getting stoned. I didn't care about it, and I couldn't remember the last time I'd had it. So today, when Momma Honey revealed that I was pregnant, I was shocked. My insides knotted. I felt like I might die. An hour later, Momma Honey was between my legs helping me push out a little baby girl. I took her. She fit in the palm of my hand.

She was dead.

Momma Honey cut the umbilical cord, separating my dead baby from my dead soul. I couldn't peel my eyes off her body. I wanted to cry but I was dry inside. Momma Honey tried to take my baby away so I didn't have to look at her, but it wouldn't matter. I knew I'd see my dead baby girl, my little Tara Jane, in every smoggy-red Los Angeles sunset; every night when I closed my eyes, I'd see her in my dreams.

Life on the streets was tough. Simple things such as finding food and a place to relieve my bowels were problematic. I'd get so hungry I'd become delusional, and the hot sun would look like a Little Debbie snack cake I could pluck from the sky and eat.

"You're going to be something special," said Momma Honey, the homeless women whose throaty voice reminded me of a retired Jazz singer who'd smoked too many cigarettes.

"Yeah, right," I replied.

Momma Honey smacked her lips, "you will," she said.

I wanted to believe her but had no reason to.

Momma Honey looked 120 years old, but she was only half that. Her matted hair resembled a snow after it had been plowed to the side of the road, and her green-hued skin made her ethnicity indeterminable. She smiled often, and her toothless mouth reeked of decay when she pushed out a laugh. On her left breast, she pinned a heart-shaped broach, which she never removed despite its missing red stones. She had penetrating Mona Lisa eyes, never evasive and never revealing. Looking at her sometimes terrified me; I saw my future in her eyes.

She didn't mess with drugs. Most of the homeless were junkies or crackheads. For me, drugs were a thick gray storm to wash away my pain. I didn't have a drug preference; I'd binge on anything, and my only goal was to forget. With a couple dollars in my pocket, finding decent drugs was easy. But when I was broke, I resorted to rat poison, spray paint

fumes, gasoline, glue, or whatever I could get my hands on.

Give me anything then give me more.

Drained of the baby who had wanted to become my daughter, I felt an emptiness inside me that would never be filled.

I killed my baby by abusing drugs, and I hated myself for it. I wrapped Tara Jane in my Ramones souvenir concert T-shirt. Momma Honey put her in a discarded Pick Up Sticks take-out container and buried her under a palm tree in the Santa Monica knoll that overlooked the pier we slept under.

What happens to the souls of all the babies who never see the world? Are they lost in some parallel universe? Do they go to heaven? Are they on the other side waiting to get their vengeance?

The only way I could make myself feel any better was to get high.

Drugs were my slow-metered suicide.

T.J. Martini, 23

This is going to hurt.

My body was airborne, hurtling toward a brick wall.

I needed a weekend escape from my boring-as-hell accounting job at a bank in Bunker Hill, Oregon. Even more, I wanted a mini-vacation from my roommates, who also happened to be my parents.

I called some of my college buddies from Pittsburgh, and we all agreed to meet in Miami to see the Steelers battle the Dolphins. Not one in five of us brainiacs gave a thought to Florida's latest hurricane warning.

"These seats are great!" yelled my buddy, Craig.

"They sure are," I said, as a hard, loud rain pelted the empty plastic chairs surrounding us.

In the near-empty stadium, we'd moved from the nosebleeds to the lower level, fifty-yard line, and then proceeded to drink ourselves warm.

After the game, we hit South Beach in search of women and more alcohol. By four a.m., Craig and I had separated from the other three. We ended up in a club that played loud trance music accompanied by irritating flicking lights.

"I'm gonna have a seizure. Let's leave!" I said, fifteen minutes

after getting inside. Craig, as is typical, had already met some ladies.

“Are you crazy? We just stood in line for an hour.”

“Yeah, but I can’t handle this music. The bass is making my balls clang together.”

“That’s the most action you’ve seen all year,” said Craig. “Enjoy it! Anyway, I can’t leave. Did you not see the ass on the girl I was dancing with?”

Craig’s girl returned from the bar and handed him a drink. They talked while bopping their heads to the music like teenage lovers on speed.

Craig had movie-star good looks, rugged but warm, like a young Robert Redford, and a mellifluous voice that had women swooning when he said hello. He was my best friend.

I hated his guts.

I made my way to the bar and ordered two beers, one for each lonely hand. I downed them quickly and ordered another beer and a shot of Jaeger. Something rammed me from behind.

“Shit!” I spilled beer down the front of my shirt.

A large, meaty hand clamped on my shoulder. “Sorry, buddy. I didn’t see you,” said the owner of the hand. My eyes, which were still adjusting to the flickering lights, began to focus on the man’s face.

Holy crap, it’s Jerome Bettis!

This was going to be a pivotal moment in the life of this diehard Steelers fan. I’d say hello, and he’d say hello. He’d assume I was just another irritating fan, but I’d surprise him. I wouldn’t say stupid things like some star-struck groupie. I’d ask the right questions. We’d talk, and I’d dazzle him with my knowledge of football, life, and women. Well, maybe not women.

“Jerome! Great game today!”

“I fumbled twice, and we lost by eight.”

“But you fumbled with pizzazz.”

What the hell did that mean?

Jerome didn’t respond.

“Umm, hey, what do you think about_”

“Hey, buddy, I owe you a drink. Hey Bartender!” Jerome said. The bartender tended to him in about two seconds, which is about half an hour less than it would have taken me to get another beer on my own.

“Hey Jerome, I wanted to tell you something about me you

probably don't know. I mean, of course you wouldn't know it, because you don't know me. I meant that_”

“Good meeting you.” Jerome slid me a beer and then went upstairs to V.I.P. where all his teammates would be drinking, eating, and partying with beautiful women who never talked to guys like me.

I had to get up there.

“Kicker coming through,” I said to the large bouncer guarding the red velvet rope.

The bouncer, whose forearms were the size of my head, didn't acknowledge my presence. So, I stepped over the rope. I took two steps forward before Popeye dropped his humongous forearm on me. I crumpled like an empty can of spinach.

“Punter?” I said, looking up at him.

He didn't smile. The guy had the personality of a cheese sandwich.

Back downstairs, I began to suffer an unbearable headache from the pulsating lights. I closed my eyes, but I could see them flashing through my eyelids. The thumping music worsened the pain, so I tore off the ends of a napkin, rolled them into balls, and stuck them in my ears.

A sexy girl pushed through the crowd to get to the bar. I stood firm to make sure that I could get some good brush up action.

The girl wore a skimpy tube top made of material so thin her nipples pressed through. Whenever the lights pulsated, her large breasts cast a shadow over her diamond-studded bellybutton. A chain ran from the belly stud and disappeared under her tube top.

Wow.

The girl's friend tried to squeeze between us to get to the bar. She wore one of those J. Lo dresses with a plummeting neckline miraculously manages to stay on.

Another brush-up opportunity.

“Thanks, Larry,” said the J. Lo wannabe to the bartender. She leaned over the bar to kiss him, revealing a clear view down her dress to the South Pole.

Then, from out of nowhere, a plan popped into my brain. “Hey, ladies,” I said.

In 1980, Bobby Bonds, father of Barry, set a single-season MLB record with 189 strikeouts. Although I'd already broken his record tonight, and these two girls were way out of my league, I decided to take

another swing.

“Having fun?” I asked.

J. Lo flared her nostrils. It reminded me of the way a puffer fish blows up to scare away its predators — a factoid I learned on the Discovery Channel.

“My good friend, Jerome Bettis, asked me to come down here from V.I.P. to escort you ladies upstairs.”

“Really?” said bellybutton-nipple girl.

The girls were impressed enough and three of us headed upstairs. With an arm around each girl, I looked Popeye the bouncer dead in his eyes and said, “Can you please unhook the rope? My hands are full.”

Popeye unhooked the rope.

It’s rare when beta-male personalities like me get to be arrogant to gorilla-sized men like Popeye the bouncer and live to tell the tale, so this was pretty cool. However, seeing the look on Craig’s face, watching me as I walked into V.I.P. with those girls, was even better.

There were about forty people upstairs in V.I.P. and at least fifteen Steelers, and the girls ditched me for players in about two seconds. Drunk and happy, I helped myself to the appetizers and alcohol lining the tables and chatted with players. I did a few shots with the three-hundred-pound captain of the offensive line, Dermonti Dawson, who found me humorous for some reason. We chatted for maybe half an hour and then did a few shots together.

After the fourth shot of Tequila, I made my way to the dance floor. “Hey, wanna dance?” I asked a particularly lovely young lady.

“Su-ure,” she said, stretching the word into two syllables. She was probably the only person there more drunk than I.

We danced. We grinded. We shook, jiggled, and bounced. We could really freaking dance. Everyone watched, wishing they could dance like us.

“Hey, pal, you’re dancing with my girl,” some guy yelled over my shoulder. His strong, alcohol-soaked breath wilted the hairs on the back of my neck.

I ignored him. My partner and I continued to dazzle and amaze everyone with our sensational skills. We went from the bump and grind to the robot. Actually, I did the robot, and she was jumping up and down and head banging. She built quite a bit of momentum, and I worried her thrashing head might fly off her shoulders.

“Uhh, like, why do you have those napkins in your ears?” she

shouted.

“What?” I asked, and then—

Boom!

I'd been blindsided, vaulted toward the wall.

Splat!

I hit the wall, stuck to it for a second, and then gravity dropped me to the floor. I sprang to my feet and assumed combat position. The large man who'd hit me laughed. Embarrassed, I lowered my head, and escorted myself out of V.I.P.

This type of humiliation was nothing new; in fact, it's pretty much the standard for beta-male losers like me.

Defeated, I rejoined the common folk downstairs.

“How'd it go up there?” Craig asked.

“Shut up.”

Jackson Rockenberger, 28

“Joanna, get my pills,” I said.

I felt a pop in my neck when I hit the little punk. When I sat down, the room started moving around me. I became lightheaded, and my nerves felt like raw copper wires dipped in acid and plugged into a nuclear power plant.

I'd survived thousands of collisions with three-hundred-pound linemen, but they'd worn out my body. My joints were frayed, and my muscles moaned with a permanent ache. Years of using steroids to build strength and shorten healing time had, ironically, left me weak and unable to heal from minor injuries. I was hurt nearly every game; every injury lingered into the next game, and then I'd tack on another.

My neck had been surgically repaired two years ago. Now, after six years as a linebacker for the Pittsburgh Steelers, I'd re-injured my neck hitting some pasty, pot-bellied dork in a bar.

I knew I'd just ended my career. And I'd done it by getting territorial over a girl I'd been sleeping with since high school that I wasn't even in to.

Amber Johnson, 19

Kimberly pulled nourishment from me until she got her fill. I lifted her from my breast and laid her down. Anxiety overwhelmed me

as tears flooded my eyes.

I'd failed my daughter, Kimberly.

And I was sorry. Sorry I screwed up my life, sorry for destroying my mother, and sorry the love of my life, my daughter, would someday learn she was the product of my most horrifying moment.

Kimberly would turn two soon, and I feared not being able to provide for her. I didn't have a job, and black high-school dropouts don't have employers banging on their front doors.

Kimberly began crying, bothered by her teething. I rubbed Nyquil on her gums.

"Momma, book?"

"Yes, love." I smiled and picked up my dirt and blood-stained copy of *Beloved*.

Kimberly couldn't understand the story, but she liked the sound of my voice. And despite the constant parade of police sirens roaring past our apartment, she eased into sleep. *Beloved* is about the invincibility of the mother-daughter bond. Believing in that bond comforted me. I hadn't spoken to my mom in four years.

We just moved to Compton, and I didn't know anybody yet. I had nineteen dollars in my pocket and couldn't afford a sitter. Needing work fast, I set a worn blanket on the floor in the closet and laid Kimberly on it. I prayed, "God, Buddha, Mohammed, Allah, Jesus, and anyone else who's listening, please take care of my baby."

If anything happens to her, I'll kill myself.

I kissed Kimberly and locked her in the closet. It was a stupid thing to do, but it was the only idea I had. I left her and hit the dark streets. Reluctantly, I left her and hit the dark streets. The type of work I qualified for could be found most easily at night.

I kept a brisk pace while passing crackheads and whores, and in my haste, I bumped into a prostitute. "Watch it, Bitch!" she growled.

Startled, I jumped. She and the two hookers with her laughed at my reaction. Laughing feels good. Mine have been few and far between. I wondered how these prostitutes would feel when their laughter stopped. I wondered if they were as scared as I was.

It was the time of year when my most horrible memories felt as fresh as yesterday. I was constantly on edge. I knew I'd never escape him, and one day he'd be the shadow on my grave.

Tell anyone, and I'll kill you, he'd said.

So I didn't tell. I wrote Mom a note, left home, assumed a new last name, and began a second life. I lived in constant fear. At nineteen, a

legal adult, I still behaved like a kid. I couldn't go to sleep without a nightlight because, in the dark, I was back in the barn in Naples where my innocence was murdered. I feared men, the dark, and failing Kimberly. My biggest fear was some day he'd learn about my daughter and come after her.

I saw it happening all the time. I'd see him during my bath, when I slept, and while grocery shopping. Over and over again, in slow motion, I saw that green T-shirt, the dark shadowy outline of his body, his hand extending, snatching Kimberly, and disappearing.

Compton was the newest in a long line of cities we'd squatted in since leaving Florida. Kimberly and I arrived there with a backpack, four changes of clothes, a couple of books, and six hundred dollars. I got the money in Tucson by pawning diamond necklaces I'd stolen from Mom's bigoted boss in Naples. Though Compton was rough, it was the only section of Los Angeles where six hundred dollars would cover rent plus security deposit.

Minutes after bumping into the prostitutes, I met their pimp, Tyrone.

Besides pimping, Tyrone dealt drugs. He carried a lot of pent-up anger on his two-hundred-and-fifty pound frame. Word on the street was he'd framed his little brother for a murder Tyrone committed.

"I'll take good care of you," he said, grabbing my arm.

I stepped back. "I'm not here for that kind of work," I said. My knees felt wobbly.

He smiled. His yellowed teeth were chipped and splintered with spider web fractures.

Tyrone's phone rang. "Wait," he said and answered it.

I waited because I was scared not to.

Tyrone screamed into the phone, "You're a fucking dead man!" He hung up. Tyrone looked down, cussed under his breath, and then looked at me. He picked at a scab on his bald black head and spoke to me. "My boy bailed. I've got an important delivery," he said. "The job's yours."

Tyrone pulled a pen out of his back pocket, grabbed my arm, and wrote an address on the back of my hand. "You're going there to pick up some shit. I'll kill you if you steal from me."

So I had a job.

Becoming a drug runner in a dangerous neighborhood wasn't going to win me Mother of the Year, but it paid and was better than

letting my child starve to death.

It was temporary. I'd save money, get Kimberly and I to a better part of town, get my G.E.D., and send myself to nursing school.

All I had to do was make sure I didn't get us killed before all the good stuff could happen.

May 1997

Skye

For the past six months, since my baby Tara Jane died, I'd dreamt frequently of her, inside me, singing happy songs. And every time I woke and realized she was dead, I wished I could trade my life for hers.

Last night, I set up shop and performed on the Santa Monica Promenade. I had a territory carved out for myself between the Mexican Michael Jackson impersonator and the teenage break dancing squad. Holding territory was a battle, and any night it could become a life or death fight. This night was a busy Saturday night; the streets filled with chatty Asian tourists toting cameras and wearing Mickey Mouse ears. I played guitar and sang stupid cover songs as my new friend, Adaku, a Kenyan immigrant turned Santa Monica vagrant, played bongos. To maximize our earning potential, we tried to look pathetic and cute. Looking pathetic was easy; cute was much more difficult; Adaku pulled it off easier than me.

Adaku's drumming was off the beat; she hadn't played well in weeks. After an hour of performing, she disappeared. When I took my break I found her in a restroom filling her syringe with toilet water.

"Don't look at me that way," she said. "The sink isn't working, and security won't let me in the mall."

"You're out of control," I said.

"Hypocrite."

"Whatever," I said. I left Adaku to her vice. The call of the drug had her beaten. The dope got inside her, grew like a weed, and choked the music out of her.

The next morning, when I woke, I found Adaku lying next to me beneath the pier.

"You ready to play?" I asked.

Adaku didn't respond.

"Get your bongos."

Nothing.

I shook her. She didn't budge. Then I noticed the needle sticking in her purple foot.

"Wake up, Adaku!"

I shook her harder. She was cold. I rolled her over. The back of her head was dark red from dry, crusted blood.

My friend, Adaku, died two feet away from me as I slept.

I lost my baby six months ago and now my best friend. There's no coping with this grade of tragedy. I did the only thing I knew how. I dug through her stuff, found the dope that had killed her, and cooked up the biggest shot I'd ever had. I was determined to numb the part of my brain responsible for my pain and suffering — permanently.

Amber

Six months after going to work for Tyrone, I'd managed to save a little money, but not quite enough to leave Compton yet. Nights there were the worst. Gunfire kept me awake with worry a stray bullet would find its way to my daughter; we had to get out soon.

When blessed with a night free of local gang activity, our neighbor's rap music kept me up. Our paper-thin walls vibrated like giant woofers as *fuck, shit, pussy*, and *bitch* seeped through them. Their music, like their gunfire, was another way for the gangs to flex their muscle.

Kimberly and I were neck deep in the trenches of these noise wars.

I feared if Kimberly grew up in that neighborhood, she'd end up like the rest of them. We were still at least five months away from being able to afford a move.

Tonight, like every other, I read *Beloved* to Kimberly. I loved books. When Mom and I lived and worked as housemaids in Florida, I spent much of my time in the boss lady's personal library, reading. Surrounding myself with characters in books helped me feel less alone.

Kimberly fell asleep, my babysitter showed up, and I left to pick up the cocaine from one of Tyrone's grunts. He instructed me to make two deliveries near the beach. I arrived at the bus station about ten minutes early, a situation I always tried to avoid because sitting there under the dim yellow glow of the street's single light terrified me.

This night was cool; the streets were quiet; the air was thick with dirt and held an acrid smell of gunfire and gasoline. There wasn't a single star in the sky.

The bus arrived, I got on, and it belched a thick plume of smoke as it pulled out. I sat in the back across from an elderly Mexican lady. Her head bobbed with palsy, which agitated my already unstable nerves. An oddly familiar looking middle-aged white guy with long dreadlocks sat two rows behind me. Every time I looked at him, he was glaring in my direction.

“Why you be lookin’ at me?” I asked. I wasn’t raised to talk way, but using street lingo helped me blend.

“I ain’t looking at you,” he said.

We had no more dialogue, but he kept staring. When the bus stopped, the Mexican lady got off. I considered going with her, but the next bus to Venice Beach wasn’t for another forty-five minutes, and I didn’t like sitting alone in the dark. When the bus pulled back into traffic, the white guy got up and approached me.

I kept my eyes focused straight ahead. He sat down next to me and put his hand down his pants, digging at himself.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” I responded.

“So. You gonna share?” he asked, softly.

“Share what?”

He pointed over his shoulder at a black guy wearing a backward lid. “You see guy back there? He’s a cop.”

“Fuck off,” I said. I hoped he was lying, but I didn’t necessarily want to find out.

“Give me half of what you’re holding, and I won’t rat.”

I was screwed. If I got busted and went to jail, I’d lose Kimberly. But if I gave the guy half of the dope, Tyrone would kill me.

“I ain’t got shit,” I said.

“Is that so?”

“Yep.”

The guy stood up, and walked toward the cop.

“Wait,” I said.

He came back, sat down, and grinned. I hesitated, considering my options, and then discreetly opened my purse and slipped him one of my two bags. Asking for only half my stuff was smart. With me holding the other half, he knew I couldn’t go to the cop.

Eventually, I made it to Venice, which was quiet and peaceful at night. The ocean’s fragrance typically calmed me, but tonight I’d passed the point of being pacified by simple pleasures. I went to the customer’s

home, which sat on Ocean Front Walk. I knocked, and he let me into his beachfront paradise. I gave him his drugs, he gave me nine hundred dollars, and then he asked me to stay and party. I declined politely and left.

I skipped the second drop in Santa Monica because I was out of drugs.

On the bus back to Compton, I grew more and more nervous. Tyrone would cause me serious harm if I shorted him on the cash. I'd flee, but he had enough information about me that he'd be able to find and kill me. I had only one option.

I stopped in at my place to check on Kimberly and grab what I needed. Then, I walked the dark streets to Tyrone's beat-up, dirty house in the absolute worst section of Compton. He lived in the kind of neighborhood where the colors you wore could get you killed. Tyrone could've afforded a nice house in Baldwin Hills, but he liked his thug life and gang-infested neighborhood.

"What up, Nigga?" Tyrone asked.

I handed him the eighteen hundred dollars he expected, making up the difference with our moving money. It was the only way he'd let me live.

Tyrone snatched the money out of my hand. "Larry called," he said. Larry was the customer I'd skipped. I was fucked.

"Tyrone, I gave you all the mon_" Tyrone punched me in the face. I dropped.

"You fuckin' nigger junkie bitch! You doin' my drugs yourself? Huh? You fucking junkie cunt!" He cocked to hit me again.

"No, I'm not, Tyrone! I_"

"Fucking junkie whore!" Tyrone hit me again; his punch sent a pulsating ring through my head. He picked me up by my neck and slammed me against the wall. "I told you never to use my shit! You fucked me, now I'm gonna fuck you! Or maybe I'll kill you, then fuck you!"

Tyrone had me pinned against the wall with his hand wrapped tightly around my neck. I tasted blood as I gasped for air. Tyrone raised his fist again. I kicked him in the balls. He doubled over. I was shocked at my action, but still managed to get my legs under me and run.

Tyrone quickly jumped to his feet and gave chase. "You're dead, bitch!"

I cut through the night air as fast as I could, but I couldn't outrun my fear.

“You’re fucked, bitch!” he yelled. The sound of his voice became fainter, I was out-running him. I kept running, too scared to look back. Though I’d lost him, he knew where I lived, and he’d surely be there soon.

I ran deeper into the dark, passing landmarks I knew were there but couldn’t see. I burst into my apartment and grabbed Kimberly. The babysitter looked startled.

“Leave!” I said.

She bolted without question.

I grabbed the little money I hadn’t given Tyrone, slung Kimberly over my shoulder, and ran for at least twenty minutes without stopping. With Kimberly’s added weight, my knees felt like two sandstones grinding together. Kimberly screamed the whole time, and my pulse sang in my ears.

I’m a horrible mother.

Finally, I stopped to rest. My breaths were short and painful, and my legs were numb. I wanted to cry with Kimberly, but I couldn’t. I had to be the parent.

“Shhh, love, don’t cry. Momma’s gonna make everything okay.”

“I scared, Mommy.” Her words broke my heart.

“Don’t be scared, love. Mommy will take care of you.”

Afraid of the darkness, I started running again. It took all my effort to make it to the shelter. Once there, and before one of the volunteers, Beth, could finish telling me the house rules, I collapsed on an empty cot. When Beth left us, I sat up long enough to shed my shoes and peel off my socks.

“Mommy, you feets bleeds.”

“I know, love. It’s okay. Mommy’s okay.”

But I wasn’t okay. My bloody feet were the least of my worries. I was a scared and battered nineteen-year-old kid with a baby and no place to go in the morning.

Men who hit women know where the shelters are. We had to move before Tyrone showed up.

But where would we go? And would Tyrone find us?

Jackson

I’m no homophobe.

I’m comfortable with my sexuality. So the massage didn’t bother

me because he was gay; it just bothered me he wasn't a woman...

"How's your neck?" Joanna asked.

"Same as always," I said. "It hurts."

My pain is incurable. I've tried acupuncture, chiropractic, metaphysical healing, reflexology, suction cup therapy, heat, ice, yoga, meditation, reiki, chakra balancing, tantra, colonics, physical therapy, hypnosis, DNA intuitive healing, and everything else anyone has ever recommended. Nothing worked. Pills and massage were the only temporary reliefs I'd ever found.

Today, I was out on my forty-foot trawler, about twenty miles east of Catalina Island, fishing for swordfish with friends. Joanna brought four of her beautiful actress friends; they all sunbathed naked. I should've been having a great time, but I felt guilty about leaving Mom with a sitter on the day we typically spent together. Guilt, combined with my regular smorgasbord of pain, gave me enough reason to pop extra OxyContin.

I was stoned as can be when I got a bite. I yanked the rod hard. Too hard. Cold white light shot through my neck, head, and eyes. I knew the pain would get worse, but I'd deal with it after I conquered my fish.

Fight! Beat him! Destroy!

And I did. I fought the fucking fish to his death. It took two hours, but I did it.

By the time we headed back to dry land, pain had its merciless claws in my flesh and was grating my raw nerve endings. My head was pulsating; I felt a dull rusted handsaw cutting the cords that rooted my eyes to my head. So I popped pills until the pain quieted to a soft murmur just loud enough to let me know it was there.

Two hours closer to shore, I was finally able to get a cellular connection. I called for a massage. Wendy, my masseuse, had magical hands and always made me *happy* at the end.

"Hello, Jackson Rockenberger here. I need Wendy. Now."

"Wendy's not in today. I can fit you in at five thirty with Dave."

"No."

"How about Louise at six o'clock?"

"Umm. fine. Whatever."

At home, I showered the fish stink off me. I put on jeans but no underwear, which helps me communicate to the therapist that I want her to make me "happy". Then, I threw on a Steelers T-shirt so Louise

could place my face.

By the time I climbed on my Harley, the effects of the pills had worn off. Lightning was shooting throughout my body, and there was dull thunder in my brain. When I arrived for my appointment, I was in so much pain I could barely hold up my head.

“I’ll be with you in a couple minutes, just let me wash up,” said some dude.

“Oh, no, no, no. I’m here to see Louise.”

He gave me a goofy grin that was missing a tooth. “I’m Louis. There’s no Louise here.”

“No problem, Louis. I’ll sort this mess out.” I approached the receptionist. “I need a female masseuse.”

“I’m sorry, but nobody’s free.”

“Tomorrow?”

“We’re closed.”

My only options were to stay in severe pain until Monday or get massaged by Louis. I examined him. He had good posture, but it wasn’t overly perfect. He wore jeans and sandals, nothing too fashionable. His remaining teeth were bad, and gay guys have perfect teeth.

“Okay, Louis, give me two minutes. I forgot something.” I shook his hand; his grip was firm.

I went to a clothing store across the street and bought a pair of boxers. I strapped on the cotton armor, which would be the only barrier between Louis and my penis.

Back at the clinic, Louis escorted me into the massage room, and I did my best to focus on pain relief.

Ten minutes later, Louis did something seriously wrong. He ran his hands up and down my thigh to squeeze out the tension, but he went too high, and the back of his hand grazed my scrotum.

Was that on purpose?

While I contemplated, it happened again.

I rolled to my side. “Could you focus on my ribcage area?”

“Sure,” Louis said. He took my hand in his, which was odd to me, and then, even worse, he rested the back of his hand on top of my crotch! I’m 100% positive the back of a man’s hand doesn’t fall unknowingly into another man’s crotch. I yanked our hands north, and scratched an imaginary itch. I was about to put an end to the massage, but before I was able to speak, the most horrible thing in the history of my life happened. My little Jackson, in defiance, grew some — not a lot — but enough to notice. I jumped off the table, practically threw Louis

across the room, hopped into my pants, and fled.

“What happened in there?” I screamed at my penis, speeding away on my Harley. “How could you do that to me?”

Okay, calm down. Analyze the situation; there’s got to be a logical explanation. Maybe my penis and brain weren’t communicating. Maybe my penis thought it was a woman’s touch. Maybe I got so relaxed by the massage I fell asleep and was dreaming. Yeah, that’s it. *No, I couldn’t have fallen asleep.* I wasn’t relaxed. I’d never been less relaxed! Louis was gayer than a dozen sweaty naked men in the YMCA steam room.

So *now what?* How does life go on? I’m not gay. I played professional football. I know I’m not gay. *I’m positive I’m not gay!* It must’ve been a random event. Yeah, that’s it. My mini-erection and the ball grazing were two separate, unrelated events that coincidentally happened at the same time.

The Laws of Randomness applied, that’s all that happened. Shit happens. I swallowed this philosophy with a shot of Rockenberger Rum and three Vicodin. Then, I took a scalding hot shower. The rum, Vicodin, and shower were to combat my neck pain; they had absolutely nothing to do with the fact I got an erection after a man grazed my balls. I was fine with it because it was all just complete randomness.

Case closed.

Later that evening, I met up with friends for drinking and male bonding during the Lakers’ playoff game. Testosterone was flying. We shot the shit about football, fishing, and sex conquests, but I couldn’t get Louis and his toothless grin out of my head.

I needed a woman to set me straight.

Beth Crawford, 21

Birthdays suck my fat butt.

While I was on summer break from Santa Monica Community College, my high school boyfriend — whom I stayed faithful to despite never seeing him — dumped me the day he came home from Princeton.

I’d made a pathetic total of two college friends, and they had both returned to their respective hometowns for summer. I didn’t want to spend my birthday celebrating with my two dads, and I couldn’t stay home on my birthday. Though I rarely drink, it was my twenty-first birthday, so I felt obligated. I went stag to the nearest bar, Double Dribble, in Santa Monica.

The dank sports bar reeked of stale beer and pretzels and had

more televisions than patrons. One TV was tuned to a surfing show, and all the other TVs were showing some basketball game, the Lakers maybe. The bar stools had red vinyl coverings; the stool I sat on had white stuffing peeking out of a hole. I examined the rows of liquor lining the shelves; I didn't recognize most of them. I knew vodka, gin, rum, and tequila, but their brand names meant nothing to me. The bartender was gorgeous and hateable. She was tall and busty and wore a tank top with strategic tears that made it look like she'd been attacked by a clawed animal or a gang of horny men.

Just once I'd like to be attacked by men.

I ordered a Long Island Iced Tea because it was the first drink that came to mind. I sipped it and tried to make a sound of deep satisfaction like men make when drinking a cold beer after working in the backyard. I wanted to like the drink, but it was strong and nasty.

Two attractive girls sat next to me. The one girl blabbered about her *wonderful* boyfriend, their *incredible* weekend at Lake Tahoe, the *splendid* people they met, and the *exciting* places they made love. Her friend *oohed* at the appropriate places in the conversation. Brats.

"He gave me this goooorgeous tennis bracelet," the brat said, launching her decorated arm at her friend. "I love him."

Though she was a ditz, she was an excited ditz. I wanted to be excited about something like she was. I searched my heart and mind. There was nothing. I lack passion.

I finished my drink faster than I expected. I tilted my glass, tapped the side to get the last of the ice from the bottom, and got up to use the bathroom. As I passed a table of four guys, I noticed one in particular was very handsome.

But, as is typical, I was having a horrible hair night.

Jackson

She gave her hair a flirty flip as she came out of the bathroom. She was practically begging for it.

"Guys, you'll have to excuse me," I said to my three dorky friends.

My buddy asked, "You're leaving us?"

"Yeah."

"Good, your cologne is starting to irritate me."

"Who you leaving us for?" asked buddy number two.

"Her," I said, pointing.

“Oh. She’s kinda cute in a Rene Zellweger/Bridget Jones sort of way,” said number two.

Buddy number three chimed in, “Dude, you can do better.”

“It doesn’t matter if I can do better, which, of course, I can. What matters is she’s lonely and needs me to cheer her up. I’m a philanthropist if nothing else.”

The truth was I was in need of re-establishing my manhood after the massage incident.

“What makes you so confident she wants you?” asked dork number two.

“It’ll be like taking candy from a baby,” I said.

“I don’t know, man. She looks like she really likes candy.”

Beth

I stood to order another drink, and when I sat back down on the stool, a fart noise came out of the hole. The two girls looked at me.

“Umm, wasn’t me. It was the stool.”

Neither of them responded.

“Never mind,” I said.

I sucked down another Long Island Iced Tea and made as much noise as possible to drown out the babbling girls.

“Sex under the pier was just soooo, like, amazing,” said one of them, drawing out the O in an annoying, loopy-O way.

I looked at the handsome guy by the bathroom again. He was the dark Italian type, or maybe he was half black. Regardless, he was beautiful. His face was sculpted, and his cleft chin was big and strong like two marbles in a sack. He had a rugged five o’clock shadow, a thick muscular torso, and confident posture.

He approached the bar. I wanted to talk to him, but knew I wouldn’t.

I wished I was one of those girls who always has something snappy to say, the person with the witty comeback or the clever putdown. I want to be the chick at the bar who makes all the guys laugh with her recycled jokes.

But I’m not that girl. In fact, sometimes I don’t feel like a girl at all. I don’t feel like anything. I’m invisible. I could walk down the street pulling an alligator on a leash and nobody would see me. I feel like I don’t have a heartbeat; I breathe no oxygen; I’m nothing to anyone; I’m

not real. And yet I'm cursed with a brain that won't rest; it torments me.

The beautiful man sat between me and the annoying girls. "Hey, gorgeous. Why so sad?" he asked the girl next to me.

She ignored him. Irritated with her cool disposition, I gulped my beverage.

"Yeah, that was a lame line. Let me try again. Hi, I'm Jackson. I couldn't help noticing such a lovely girl sitting all alone."

Hub? There are two of them.

"Excuse me, did you hear me?"

Holy crap, he just touched my shoulder and mumbled something that sounded poetic. Oh my God, his voice is so sexy. Okay, don't say anything stupid, don't say anything stupid, don't say anything stupid.

"My boyfriend dumped me."

"What? He must be an idiot," he replied.

"Why?" I asked.

"Umm. Because. Never mind. I was trying to give you a compliment."

"Oh. I'm sorry. Please, compliment away."

"Okay, well, you're pretty."

"You think I'm pretty?" I nervously twirled my hair.

"Very. May I join you for a dri_?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then, what are we drinking?" he asked.

"Long Islands."

"That's a stiff drink."

"I'm alone on my twenty-first birthday. I need a stiff one."

Jackson

I bet you do honey.

I called the sexy bartender over. "Can I get two Long Islands?"

Zellweger was already drunk; I almost felt bad about buying her another drink, almost.

"I was having a bad day until I saw you looking at me. Fans always cheer me up," I said.

"Huh?"

"I said I love my fans."

“Fans of what?” she asked.

“Umm... you didn’t recognize me, did you?”

“I’m sorry, no.”

“Oh. I’m Jackson Rockenberger,” I said and waited for a response. None came. She didn’t recognize my name. I’d hit a dead end. Louis and his gay massage had defeated me. I couldn’t even score with a lonely chubby girl on her twenty-first birthday. “Never mind. I’m sorry I bothered you.” I tried to stand up, but Zellweger forcefully pulled me back into my seat.

The small talk began. We conversed for the longest half hour of my life. Her name was April or Tammy or something. She was in college, blah blah blah. I should’ve hit on one of the two babbling idiot blondes sitting next to her.

Beth

We talked for a few minutes and had good chemistry. Jackson played professional football for the Pittsburgh Pirates or something.

“It’s getting pretty late, and I have to be up early, so I should get going,” he said.

“No! I mean, ahhh, that’s too bad. Do you have to leave? It’s only eleven, and it is Saturday night.”

“Yeah, but on Sundays, I get up early to take my sick Mother out for breakfast,” Jackson said. “Hey, you shouldn’t drive.”

Offer me a ride, offer me a ride, offer me a ride. Open your eyes and uncross your fingers, stupid.

“Do you have a way home?”

“I’ll catch a cab,” I said, trying to be nonchalant.

“I drove my Harley, but I could take you if you’re okay with bikes.”

“Yes!” I blurted.

Half an hour later, I was on my back at Paradise Beach in Malibu. The bright moon sat on the horizon and cast long shadows across the white sand. It was right out of one of those cheesy romance novels with a bare-chested man with long flowing blond locks on the cover of it. I was completely taken.

Jackson was nothing but tight cords of muscle on thick bones. His chiseled body pressing against mine made me feel even fatter than usual. He slid off my panties and tried to insert his manhood.

“Oooh, no, no, no. Not there,” I said. I assumed he went for the wrong hole, unintentionally.

“Sorry,” he said, then regrouped.

Jackson moved like a cheetah going after his prey. He was fast and strong and moved inside me like a jackhammer. I tried to find pleasure with him between my legs, but I couldn’t. Jackson was only the second man I’d ever slept with, and guilt was killing my good time.

He doesn’t think I’m a slut. He’ll call. Stop thinking. Relax and enjoy this beautiful man. But what if he doesn’t call? What if he’s using me? Stop thinking! Freaking enjoy it!

Jackson rapidly pumped in and out of me. I wanted to be kissed again, but after my panties came off, he was all pelvis. Jackson put his hand in the back of my hair and pulled tight, making me his prisoner for a moment.

“Ouch.”

“Sorry.” He let go of my hair but continued to hammer away at my insides. It’d been a long time since I’d been with a guy, and my Patsie had apparently shriveled up.

Relax. Breathe. Enjoy.

So what if the sand in my crotch is painful? Enjoy the fact this incredibly perfect guy, who’ll probably never speak to me again even if I literally run into him, is making love to me on this beautiful SANDY beach! Enjoy it! *Enjoy! Enjoy! Freaking enjoy!*

“You’re amazing,” I said to Jackson, trying to talk myself into the mood.

“You aren’t too bad yourself, kiddo.”

Kiddo? What the hell does mean? Forget it. Stop thinking! He’s probably being playful, that’s all. Why can’t I have fun? Have fun. Have some f-ing fun!!! *Fun! Fun! Fun!*

Was that a raindrop?

“I’m gonna come, Becca!”

What? Who the hell is Becca? And it’s only been three minutes! How can he come so soon? It’s my freaking birthday!

“You’re never going to call,” I said, not meaning to say it out loud.

Jackson

I erupted in a volcano of manliness, proving my semi-erection

and Louis' massage were separate, unrelated, random events.

"It's starting to rain. We should go," I said, pulling on my pants. Luckily, the rain killed any potential post-coital snuggling.

There's truth in the old maxim about sex and love; men use love to get sex, and women use sex to get love. Neither is wrong or right; they just are. I love all women, including this one. Being attracted to women purely for physical reasons is not adolescent. It's natural.

"I'll call you," I said.

"Ummm. Yeah. Okay," Becca replied.

I grabbed paper and pen out of my Harley. She scribbled her name and number.

BETH, it read, in big letters.

Whoops.

The next morning, in a comfortable state of semi-consciousness, the haze of the sleeping pills wearing off, I felt good. Then Joanna started barking in my ear, questioning me about the previous night.

Joanna was residing in my guesthouse while contractors remodeled her place. She'd have preferred to stay with me, but that would feel too much like being married. But on some nights, I'd stay with her because I was too tired to put my clothes back on and walk to the main house.

My house is an odd, one-of-a-kind mishmash of world history. There's a theme room of ancient Egyptian kings, an Italian Renaissance art gallery, and one room dedicated to historical navigators of the sea. There's an all-purple smoking salon, even though I don't smoke. There's a functional kitchen with bisque marble flooring and stainless steel appliances, and there's another kitchen that's just for show. It has teak wooden flooring and valuable antique appliances.

Somehow when my dad had this home built, his interior designer convinced him the historical theme was a clever idea. To me, it feels like I live in a museum.

From outside, the architecture makes my home appear to be an old castle from some extinct kingdom. I'm surprised they didn't build a fucking moat around it.

After I got Joanna to chill out, I went to check on Mother. She hadn't been out of bed in six weeks. My maids help, but I take care of most of Mother's needs. I bathe her, feed her, and dress her. I empty her catheter and wash her soiled bed linens. I take her coffee and cake every morning and tuck her in every night. I make sure her electric wheelchair stays charged in the event she wants to go anywhere, which she rarely

does. I do everything I can for Mother because I can't bear to watch other people do for her.

Sometimes I wonder whether my actions came from love or if they're because I need her to know I took care of her.

People who visit my house are blown away by its size. Six bedrooms, eight bathrooms, indoor and outdoor pools, a two-lane bowling alley, a full gym, two Jacuzzis, a steam room, and a dry sauna. It's got cathedral ceilings, marble floors, spiraling staircases with crystal railings, three balconies, and a steeple towers above my dad's old prayer room, which I now use for storage.

Mom's depression and confusion had gotten worse since her stroke. Sometimes she didn't recognize me; sometimes she'd confuse me with Father and shower me in obscenities. The doctors said anger is part of her dementia.

But what about my anger?

The landscaping on my estate is postcard-worthy. Tall rare sago, howea, and coccothrinax palms form an expensive organic wall around my property. A rare orchid garden, a vegetable garden, and my father's empty horse stable fill the landscape leading all the way down to the sand.

"Mom, I got your coffee cake." I put the cake under her nose for her to smell. No reaction. "Mom, wake up." Nothing. I tickled her feet. "Mom, time to get out of bed." Still, she didn't wake.

Is she dead?

Sadly, the thought gave me relief, but only for a brief moment.

I felt for a pulse. She had one.

I wanted to tear down the whole gaudy house and construct something normal, but Mother says the house makes her feel like she's in a fairytale, and she likes that. For me, it's more nightmare than fairytale, but living oceanfront in Malibu does have advantages.

In the morning, the sun greets my property with the first color of day; I sit back and enjoy the morning storks as they dive through the fog, disappear beneath the ocean's surface, and emerge with breakfast. At sunset, I numb myself with painkillers and lie in my hammock with a glass of wine, watching the purples, pinks, and oranges reflect off the clouds as the sun dips under the ocean. It's the singular peaceful thing in my life.

"Mom, wake up. You can't sleep all day."

"Leave me alone," she grumbled.

I shook her. She lashed out and caught the side of my cheek with her fingernail. It stung.

I'd become used to my parents hurting me. When I turned twelve, he told me I was too old to hug. When I was fourteen, my Jewish father told me I was too black to be his son.

I play a lot of golf; it's a good distraction from thinking. I have a cigarette boat, a fishing trawler, scuba gear, water-ski equipment, and a few jet skis. I inherited my father's hotel empire and sold it; then I made even more money playing professional football and parlayed that into Rockenberger Rum. Later, I opened Rockenberger Records with Joanna.

I have every luxury imaginable: acres of land and enough money to buy the moon were it for sale. Though people think I have everything, it sometimes feels like my possessions own me; towering over me and reducing me into a small bundle of insignificance.

Blood trickled down my cheek; a sliver of my flesh was beneath Mother's fingernail. I left her room, called the Board and Care, and made arrangements to take Mother there tomorrow. Though I wanted to be the one to care for her, it just wasn't worth it when she wasn't even aware of my sacrifices and love. Over the past few months she'd become 100% demented, and now there was no longer any validation of my love and effort.

I sorted through my thoughts in my Italian art gallery. Looking at a Rembrandt, I remember Father telling me a painting from a famous dead artist is more valuable than money. Father painted. He thought when he died his paintings would become valuable.

And then he died.

And Mother threw all his paintings away.

My light skinned Jewish Father was dead; my black Catholic Mother was confused. That made me 50 percent black, 50 percent light skinned, 50 percent Jew, 50 percent Catholic, and 100 percent messed up; guilt comes at me from all over the place.

I love you Mother, and I'm sorry I'm sending you away.

Would my child so easily discard me to a place to wait for death?

August 1997

Skye

Adaku's drug stash wasn't enough to kill me.

Momma Honey found me in the following morning in a puddle of my own vomit. She begged some Japanese tourists to take me to the hospital. There, when I woke, my first words to the doctor were, "Give me drugs. Take away my pain."

In the hospital, I met a sweet bath nurse named Flora who was full of life. The two of us shared long conversations about music. Layered in those conversations, I felt a lot of pain coming from her. Her pain helped me to feel less alone.

When I was released from the hospital, I went back to the streets. I knew I had to either fix my life or end it. In talking with Flora, my love for music was re-ignited, as well as my passion to pursue it. I thought about what Momma Honey had said, how I would be something special. I don't believe in omens, but maybe my cheating death had been one.

I decided to try to prove that theory right.

I put on the cleanest outfit in my backpack and went to an overcrowded shop on the Promenade. I took five outfits into the dressing room, put them all on beneath my clothes, walked out the front door, and ran like hell as the alarm sounded. Then, I grabbed my guitar, headed south, and hit up every coffee shop or luncheon spot from Santa Monica to Venice in search of a job.

Two days later, I was hired to bus tables at Steaming Steve's on the Venice boardwalk.

Sometimes on lunch shifts, my manager let me play guitar and sing to entertain the guests. And though I was usually stoned, I rocked. Performing, and being paid for it, made life tolerable.

Then came the break of my life. Jackson Rockenberger, owner of Rockenberger records, and producer of one of my favorite bands, Shag Carpet Treasures, came into Steve's. I knew his face from his picture in *Rolling Stone* magazine. I begged my manager to let me perform while he was there, despite that we had only two other customers. He saw how excited I was and allowed me to play. I gave the three song set everything I had. Mr. Rockenberger never took his eyes off me, and I was feeling good about my chances, but after he finished his coffee, he got up and left. I chased after him.

"Mr. Rockenberger!"

He turned.

I summoned up the most manipulative smile I was capable of producing, and after some small talk, and the luck of a relatively small miracle, I got Mr. Rockenberger to come back inside Steve's and sit with me for a piece of pie

"Please, call me Jackson," he said after ordering a slice of pumpkin pie.

Jackson was a total flirt, and once I realized he was more into my body than my music, I started using my best sultry speaking voice and

touched his hand or knee every time he said something even remotely humorous.

And then he signed me.

That was two weeks ago. Tonight, one of Jackson's small acts canceled a gig at the last second because of a family emergency. It was a tiny venue, and Jackson used the opportunity to showcase me.

My first real gig.

"I have faith in you, Skye. Don't be nervous. Just go out there and kick some ass," Jackson said, backstage at the Prince O' Whales in Playa Del Rey.

"I'll try my best."

"After the show, we're going to a little party. You should join us," he said before taking a seat in the back with his partner.

I bent over my Jane's Addiction, *Ritual De La Habitual*, CD. Traditionally, I always do my blow off this CD case before I play anywhere in public. I relate to the two women on the cover; they're naked, hard, and afraid, and their empty gaze peers into my soul. I put the straw to my nose, sucked in, and my lungs filled with soft white heavenly powder. I felt ready to take the stage.

The curtain pulled back, and as it happened, as the faces in the crowd appeared, I felt as if I was announcing my musical birth to the world. I ripped a wicked guitar riff and then let loose on a love-hate song about street life, my life, the life I was about to leave behind. I pushed out the lyrics with all the voraciousness of a priest exorcising demons from the possessed. The lyrics burned as they left my mouth. It was a cleansing.

Inside a song has always been the one place I'm comfortable. Music never abused me, never made me sick, never tried to kill me. Music was all I had and the one thing I couldn't afford to lose.

Jackson

Skye finished her first song. The sparse crowd applauded politely.

"This won't sell," my business partner and part-time lover, Joanna, said.

Joanna was the only girl I'd had sober sex with in the last ten years. Sober sex used to be my barometer for whether or not I liked a girl, but sobriety was no longer a place I frequented so the barometer no longer applied.

“I think she’s great,” I said.

“She’s too tragic, too 1992. People don’t want to hear depressing bullshit anymore. They want to party.”

“She’s sexy. Sex sells.”

Joanna scowled. “Is that why you signed her? Do you have to fuck every bitch on the label?”

“I didn’t sleep with her,” I said.

Joanna turned her back on me. “So you signed her because she shot you down and you can’t let one get away.”

“She didn’t shoot me down.”

“So you did fuck her!”

“No! Look, Skye has a rare, intangible quality that’s going to work for her,” I said.

“If you fuck her, I’ll kill you!”

“Relax Joanna!”

Joanna took in a breath, tried to calm down, and spoke. “Her voice isn’t bad. If we could make her more Britney and less post-rehab Courtney Love then we might have a chance. Otherwise, we’re fucked.”

“Well, we advanced her a year’s rent, so we better have something.”

“You shit!” Joanna pounded my chest. “You’re to discuss those things with me. Stop thinking with your dick!”

Amber

The bible says the meek shall inherit the earth.

When the hell is this supposed to happen?

For years, Kimberly and I shared beds in dirty, roach-infested apartments across the country. The kind of places always smelled like cat piss, even after they’re cleaned.

In St. Louis, we lost our hot water because I couldn’t pay the bill. Nothing hurt me worse than the sound of Kimberly’s cries when I’d wash her in a cold bath on a cold night.

So no, I do not feel ashamed for how I make my living now.

Most of our money went to rent, the rest to food. Just the basics: milk, bread, jam, peanut butter, noodles, tomato sauce, eggs. In Dallas, our electricity was turned off; we couldn’t refrigerate our food, and it went bad. We had no lights and were forced to use candles. It felt like constant nighttime in our apartment, but not in euphoric bedtime kind

of way.

So no, I do not feel ashamed for how I make my living now.

Rarely did we have money for clothes or medicine. Kimberly grew fast, and buying her new outfits was pointless. I usually bought her used clothes. But then “used” became “*vintage*,” and even those became too expensive.

In Atlanta, our situation was so bad I had to beg for money. Old white ladies would look at Kimberly and say to their husbands, *Oh, she's such a doll. Black people have the cutest babies.* They talked about Kimberly like she was a puppy. They'd give her a couple dollars and smile. Their proud smiles made me feel small.

After escaping Tyrone, we moved to Culver City. Our rent tripled, but at least we were able to sleep without being disturbed by gunfire.

I worked a manual labor job at IKEA and got my G.E.D.

Then I discovered my G.E.D was worthless.

Tonight, I watched my beautiful Kimberly sleep. Such a pretty child. She didn't have a single mark on her lovely face. Kimberly was the kind of pretty that caught stranger's eyes and held their attention, her bountiful smile filling them with happiness.

I knelt, kissed my baby, and stood. My eyes met the medallions hanging above her bed. I'd grown to hate those medals. I wasn't able to give Kimberly a father, so I invented one for her. I bought the medallions at a garage sale and told her the army awarded her father the medals for saving another soldier's life. I lied because, more than anything in the world, I wanted Kimberly to be happy.

I bent over to give her one more kiss goodnight.

Kimberly awoke. “Hi, Mommy.” Her sweet breath tickled my nose.

I picked a stray eyelash from Kimberly's cheek. “Make a wish,” I said, holding it between two fingers.

Kimberly scrunched her face into a tight ball, held her eyes shut, and concentrated on her wish so hard I could nearly hear it. Then, she opened her eyes and blew the lash away.

“What'd you wish for?”

“I can't tell,” Kimberly said.

“Yeah, you keep it secret. I love you, baby. Goodnight.” I stood to leave.

“I was dreaming about a bike. Can I get a bike, Mommy?”

“Someday, baby.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

I was tired of talking to Kimberly about the *someday* when we’d live in a big house with a dog and lots of toys. *Someday* wasn’t going to arrive unless I made it happen. So, last month I did what needed to be done.

Months ago I was slinging dope for a gang banger and worried any given night would be my last. Now, I make good money in a relatively safe environment. Soon, Kimberly will have a bike, and I’ll be able to put myself through nursing school.

I take off my clothes and dance for men.

No, I do not feel ashamed for how I make my living.

Anyone who looks down on me should walk in my shoes.

Beth

Plus for positive. Minus for negative.

The next minute would set my course for the following eighteen years.

I pulled down my panties and peed on the little white stick. I wiped, flushed, pulled up my panties, and put the stick face down on the counter. Then I ran into my bedroom and buried my face in a pillow.

My phone rang. I hoped it was Ed McMahon calling to tell me I’d won ten million dollars. Or maybe it was Jackson calling for a second date. It’d been about ten weeks, but maybe he’d been busy until now.

“Hello?”

“Beth, you’re crying. Does that mean_”

“I don’t know yet.”

“You can’t avoid this forever, Beth.”

“What am I going to do if I’m pregnant? I’ve got no money, no job, and no man. I’ll have to get an abortion.”

“No! Having Kimberly was maybe the only good decision I ever made. You won’t get an abortion. I’ll help you through this,” Amber said.

“It won’t feel right without Jackson.”

“Beth, you don’t need some misogynistic asshole ordering you to get him another beer while he lounges in his recliner watching some stupid televised sports thing.”

“But I. I waaaaaant hiiiiiiiiiiiiim,” I said, hyperventilating.

“Beth, calm down_Shhh. Stop crying. C’mon baby, you can do this.”

I threw my favorite pillow, the one with the silky white tassels hanging from its corners. It hit the wall with a soft thump that did nothing to relieve my anger and fear. I needed to smash something significant. I picked up the bedside lamp, then I put it back down. I’m just not that person.

“But you don’t understand. I’m scared. What if I can’t do it? What if I’m a terrible mother? What if I resent my baby?”

“Maybe you’re getting all worked up for nothing. I bet you’re not even pregnant.”

“But-I’m-soo-scaredrightnow,” I babbled, fighting more tears.

“I’m coming over. Don’t do anything until I get there.”

Amber hung up, and I went bonkers.

I met Amber at the woman’s shelter where I volunteer. There had been a frantic knocking on the door, I opened up, and there was Amber, panting and sweating, with her daughter slung over her shoulder. I gave them a bunk. And later, when I checked on her, I found Amber leafing through Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which is my favorite. So I struck up conversation about the book, and we became instant best friends.

Amber and I are the same age, but her life experiences make her more mature. She became somewhat of the mother figure I never had. My dads’ various lady friends always fussed over me and taught me girlie things to try to fill the gap of my motherless childhood, but none of them made any real difference in my life.

Besides the lack of a mother figure, with two gay dads, I didn’t exactly have a strong father figure either.

If I have a baby boy, I won’t have a clue.

What most terrified me was I didn’t know my birth parents or anything about the potentially defective genetics I could be passing on to a growing fetus inside me.

I got up and went to the kitchen, fixed a pot of coffee, returned to my cluttered room, and tried to drown my anxiety in caffeine.

My body has an odd relationship with caffeine. Unlike most people, I find my nerves are eased by the chemical; without it, I’m a bigger neurotic mess than usual.

After polishing off the last cup, I cuddled with one of Amber’s old sweaters, and for whatever reason, I felt slightly better.

Amber

Part of me wanted Beth to be pregnant so she'd need me.

I sound more like a drug dealer than a friend.

I ran to my apartment, where Beth was camped out, and I became a sweaty mess by the time I got there. I heard her crying through her bedroom window.

I followed a trail of tissue paper from the downstairs bathroom to Beth's second level bedroom where I found Beth lying across the width of the bed. Her limbs were flung out like a fallen ballerina, her pudgy, pinkish feet were sticking out from under the down comforter, her head dangled over the side, and her brown hair looked knotted and greasy. But even in her tousled condition, she was beautiful.

Beth's a little bundle of love. Barely five feet tall, she has the heart of an eighty-foot woman. Her porcelain white face is soft and round. Some people would say Beth's a few pounds overweight. But those are the same idiots who think the anorexic, pill-popping supermodels in *Cosmo* define beauty.

I lay next to her. "Beth, honey. Hey, baby." No response. "Beth! Give me a hug!"

Beth sat up and hugged me. She held me extremely tight and started crying. Her powerful grip made it difficult to breathe. "Beth." I said, forcing out her name.

"Am...ber." She replied in the same cadence.

"Beth. Let. go." I felt faint. Beth released me, and I sucked in air. Nobody besides my mother had ever hugged me like that.

"Oh child, things are gonna get easier," I said, realizing I'd quoted a Five Stairs Step's song. I put Beth's head on my shoulder and became a human tissue for the mucus coming from her face.

"No, it's not. It's not going to get easierrr." Beth sustained the last syllable so long it became a sentence by itself.

"I'm going to help you, Beth."

"Thank you, Amber. I love you." Beth often told me she loved me. She meant it, but never in the way I wanted.

"Now go pee on little white stick," I said.

"I already did."

"And?"

"And I haven't checked it. I'm too scared."

"Do you want me to do it?"

“Why would I want you to pee on the stick?”

“Do you want me to check it?” I asked. Beth let out her bottom lip and nodded her head up and down like a little girl. It was adorable. “Everything will be okay, I promise.”

I liked having Beth lean on me. I felt important and needed, and I wanted Beth to always need me.

I’m the mother kangaroo who doesn’t want her baby to leave the pouch.

T.J.

I couldn’t handle another day in my father’s perfect house. I didn’t want to be an accountant anymore; I didn’t want to marry some pale homely girl from Bunker Hill, Oregon, and have two point five kids. I didn’t want to be Tacey Jonco Martini anymore. In fact, I never really wanted to be that guy.

I started introducing myself as T.J. in college, but Dad didn’t like that, so I was still Tacey at home. I’d been living my whole life to please my father, and it made me miserable. Because of Dad, I played basketball instead of football, majored in accounting instead of film, and went to Pittsburgh University, his alma-matter, instead of Florida. I couldn’t be what my father thought I should be anymore. I decided I’d start living for myself even if meant fucking up my life.

So, for the first time, I stopped thinking and acted on instinct. The spontaneity made me feel free. I quit my job at the bank, emptied my account, packed some clothes, kissed my mother goodbye, shook my father’s hand, and told him I was moving.

Where? he asked. *I don’t know*, I said. *You’re in over your head. You won’t make it six months, you’ll be back.*

I drove to the airport. I wanted to be somewhere warm, and somewhere busy. The best options were New York, Miami, and Los Angeles. I chose Los Angeles partly to pursue my dream in Tinseltown, but also because it wasn’t as far from home as New York, just in case.

A week later, today, I had yet to find a job and I barely had any money. I was about to buckle and call my father for cash when I lucked out and got a night job in communications that paid well and kept my days open for auditions.

I answered my first call. “Hey big boy, this is Myron,” I said, punctuating my voice with the stereotypical lisp the coaches taught me during my phone sex training. “What can I do for you?”

“I want you to strip. I’m gonna tie you to a tree with my belt. Then, I’m going to coat your cock in peanut butter and creamed corn and watch Bruno go at you.”

Click.

I quit. For months, I had nightmares about what Bruno was.

Tomorrow, I’d look for new work, but today I’d explore and unwind. I took myself to the infamous Venice Beach.

A crazy old Middle Eastern dude in a turban was rollerblading toward me while simultaneously playing electric guitar with an amplifier strapped to his back. He caught up to me, put weight on his heel brake, and went into a performance of Hendrix’s *Purple Haze*. I tried to get away, but he followed me, still jamming. Somebody gave him a dollar, and then I realized he’d continue stalking me until I did the same. After I paid him, he moved on to another tourist.

Five minutes later, in an open-faced beachfront store, I saw a postcard of the Middle Eastern Hendrix. Apparently, he was a local celebrity. This was highly encouraging. I felt a new surge of confidence. If the turban-wearing Hendrix could make it in L.A., then I could. I bought the postcard and a stamp, addressed it to my parents, and wrote, *I love you, but I’m staying here forever. I fit in with the other misfits.*

I took a taxi to Beverly Hills to explore the place I’d only imagined from my life-long obsession with the show *90210*. The cab dropped me off on Rodeo Drive, which sounded familiar. I did some window shopping, stumbling upon a cool art store with a beautiful blond girl behind the counter. She looked like she should be in paintings rather than selling them. Inside, I pretended to examine some pieces while trying to work up the courage to talk to her. I randomly grabbed a Picasso lithograph; it was three simple pencil lines on a piece of paper with no rhyme or reason. I didn’t understand it, but I thought I’d look smart if I purchased it. I took it to the counter. The girl made eye contact with me, and when I saw her big, beautiful, brown doe eyes dilate, I felt I had a chance with her.

“Hi,” I said.

“You aren’t supposed to take those off the walls,” she said.

“Oh, it’s okay. I’m going to buy it.”

She looked me up and down. It made me nervous and excited. I wasn’t used to girls like her showing an interest in me.

“How much?” I asked.

“Umm, twenty-two.”

“Cool. I’ll take it,” I said. I fumbled with my wallet then dropped

it like a total dork. I bent to pick it up.

“Okay,” she said and smiled. “What’s your social security number?”

“Why do you want that?”

“I need to check your credit to see if you qualify for our payment plan.”

Odd, a payment plan for twenty two dollars?

“Oh, I’ll pay cash,” I said.

I pulled twenty two dollars from my wallet and pushed it across the counter. She smiled big.

I am so in.

Her smile got bigger and bigger until her mouth couldn’t contain the tickle in her throat, and she broke out into laughter.

“Umm, what’s so funny?”

“The. Sketch. Is. Twenty_” she was squeezing out words between her cackles. I was embarrassed, but wasn’t sure why.

“What’s so funny?” I said, joining her in laughter.

She put her hand over her mouth, closed her eyes, took in a breath through her nose, calmed herself down, and spoke. “It’s an original Picasso. It’s twenty-two thousand.” Suddenly, I remembered why Rodeo Drive sounded familiar. “You’re not from here, are you?” she asked, still laughing. Mortified, I shook my head no. “Welcome to Los Angeles, love,” she said, then patted me on the head like I was twelve-years-old.

In a cab, on my way home, I realized my father was probably right when he told me I’d be in way over my head in Los Angeles.

I hate when he’s right.

Dylan Slade, 21

Standing outside my place, on the beachfront Ocean Front Walk at the calm end of Venice, I watched women blow by on bikes, rollerblades, and skateboards.

“Hey,” she said as she passed.

She was pretty enough to fuck, but girls like her don’t fuck guys like me. They like to tease.

I wasn’t always this crass. Allison made me this way.

I first saw Allison six years ago, as a high school sophomore, in English class.

I stared.

I forgot my name, forgot what I had for lunch, forgot what planet I was on. I couldn't avert my eyes, not because Allison was the most beautiful girl, but because she was so interesting to look at. She had big brown eyes and awkward eyebrows that made her appear deep in thought. When she walked, she was moonlight on legs, striding gracefully and lighting up the faces of everyone she passed.

For the first time in a long time, I felt sure about something; I wanted Allison to be my girlfriend.

Our first year together rocked. The conversations were nearly as good as the sex. Once, during our junior year, we snuck out of a class taught by Allison's dad and had sex in the back of his van. Afterward, Allison fell asleep on my shoulder, and I watched her sleeping until my arm went numb. I carefully slid my arm out from beneath her and turned onto my other side. Without waking, Allison instinctively rolled toward me and slung her arm around me.

That moment was the only true love I'd ever known.

A month later, Allison hit me with the news: "I have to break up with you."

"Why?"

"Because you've become a weirdo."

And that was the end of us.

I knew I was different, or a weirdo, long before Allison's revelation. Years prior, while my classmates at Lincoln Middle School in Weirton, West Virginia, tried to decide whether to pledge their allegiance to Def Leppard or glam rockers Poison, I spent my nights alone in my room listening to the Stooges, Velvet Underground, and MC5. While the popular kids spent their weekends in the Pizza Hut parking lot mastering the skill of shooting tobacco juice between their two front teeth, I hid out in my bedroom and read the bible because I wanted to dissect it and find its contradictions. But what I really loved was literature. My favorite was Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*. I read it over and over until I had it memorized. Then, I started writing my own stuff; I wanted to pen the next great American novel.

Part of me wanted to be like the other guys at school. I wanted to be simple. People who think less are happier. I wanted to play football, talk about pussy in the locker room, drink beer in the back of somebody's pickup truck, and take target practice on the empty Budweiser cans with the hunting rifle from the truck's gun rack. I

wanted to be like all the other guys because the other guys were having more fun. But I couldn't be like those guys because I hated everything they stood for.

The first time I ever put on make-up was Halloween of my junior year in '91. Allison dressed as a butterfly, and we went to a party hosted by one of Allison's popular friends. I didn't have a costume so I raided Allison's make-up kit and did the Goth thing: black eyeliner, black lipstick, and black mascara on top of white foundation. I used almost an entire can of hairspray to spike my hair, which I dyed purple and pink. I wore Allison's fat sister's black denim skirt, a fishnet top, and army fatigue boots. I won two hundred dollars for best costume, which was nice, but the self-discovery I made was even more valuable. I felt like a different version of me in those clothes.

I started dressing that way on some weekends, then every weekend, then random weekdays when the urge struck. I started mixing it up; Goth, eighties glam rocker: sometimes I'd throw on an old muumuu and a wig just for the fuck of it. There wasn't anything Goth about me; in fact, I hated industrial Goth music. I wasn't gay, and I wasn't doing it to be anti-conformist; I just did it because I liked it.

Some people, like Allison, pretended to know things about me because of the way I dressed. People like to label other people because labels comfort their simple minds.

Jock, Nerd, Goth, Weirdo, Preppy, Fag, Cheerleader, Brainiacs, Skateboarder.

I like wearing make-up and dressing up, so I guess I'll always wear whatever label society decides to give me. I have no idea what my clothes say about me, but I know they don't define me.

The first high school party I attended after Allison dumped me was horrible.

"Hi," said Sara, the head cheerleader of the high school squad.

"Um, hi," I returned, shocked she'd spoken to me.

Her alpha-male jock boyfriend, Chad, got so pissed testosterone practically shot out his ears. "Hey, fag!"

"I have pink hair and mascara. Is fag the best you can do?"

"Fuck you, faggot!"

You're nothing. You're less than nothing; you're a chasm, an abyss of randomly bonded molecules of waste. That's how I wanted to respond.

"Fuck you, too," I replied.

The surrounding crowd looked at me like I was on drugs.

I wasn't, unless you count pot as a drug, which I don't.

“You’re fucked,” Chad said. He tore off his t-shirt that read *1. God 2. Family 3. Football*, and threw it at Sara. Chad was so hairy I couldn’t tell where his pubic hair ended and his belly hair began. He pounced on top of me and started punching.

“That doesn’t hurt because I can’t feel it. Because you’re nothing!”

Chad rolled me over, straddled me, put my arm behind my back, and mashed my nose into the floor. “Say *Uncle* or I’ll break your arm!”

The agro-locker-room-towel-snapping-ape was calling me a fag, yet he wanted me to call him Uncle while straddling me.

“Uncle,” I said.

Things like this happened to me frequently throughout the rest of high school. I couldn’t have cared less about those people, so it didn’t really bother me. But I did care about Allison, and when she judged me, it hurt.

Today, after watching a few dozen more beautiful women pass by who, predictably, ignore weirdoes like me, I went inside. I washed off the weird purple eyeliner, took off my weird outfit, combed out my weird hair, and got ready for work at my very normal job.

At work, I found myself surrounded by Prada bags, Versace suits, and shoes that would cost me two paychecks. Every car was a Jaguar, Lexus, or Porsche with stupid vanity plates the owners felt were clever. All the men had perfectly manicured hands, and the women could identify each other’s designer labels from a hundred yards away.

Inside, they dip their lobster in melted butter, chew their steak with their bleached teeth, and wash it all down with a two hundred dollar bottle of wine. They pretend to enjoy each other’s dull conversation — the same conversation that’s happening at the table next to them and the one next to that. They check their Rolexes to make sure they’re not running late for their red-eye flight to Paris. Then they excuse themselves to the bathroom to pop antidepressants and snort blow.

Nobody’s impressed by anybody else because they’re all too consumed with trying to cover up their own shortcomings. Here, at Crustaceans, in Beverly Hills, is a microcosm of our world of lazy moral ideals and social indifference where every man is trying to convince himself he’s a king.

Two couples entered. “Reservations for four for Rockenberger,” said one of them.

“Follow me, please.” I escorted them to a table.

The guy who'd addressed me is a big, athletic looking, black guy in a fitted suit. His date wore a full-length red dress that would've been considered extravagant at the White House inauguration dinner. She looked familiar. I'd seen her in some movie or something. Joanna something, I think. Whatever.

The couple with them was equally obnoxious. The woman had that rich, white-woman, anorexic look. The diamond on her finger was so huge; it wouldn't have surprised me to see smaller moon diamonds revolving around it. An elaborate string of emeralds hung around her neck and disappeared into her cleavage. I imagined her to be the type of person who defined herself by her clothes and jewels; she was nobody without them.

"Do you think he spent more money on her tits or the jewels around her neck?" I asked the other host, Nate.

"The jewels. The tits are real," Nate said.

"There's no way they're real. You're stoned."

"Yeah, but so are you," he said.

"Whatever. These pompous assholes are gonna make me lose it one of these days."

"Lose what?" Nate responded. "You've got nothing to lose."

"Screw off."

At the table, the athletic black guy talked loud enough for everyone to hear. "So, I told him I'd just buy out his company and fire him." The others laughed in a mechanical cadence.

I went to the bathroom and took a drag off my one-hitter; the weed was smooth and full. I took another hit and then returned to my station. I wasn't gone for more than a minute.

"Where were you?" my manager, Stephen, asked.

"Disneyland. I just love Goofy."

He didn't even acknowledge my witty retort. "I saw you come out of the bathroom."

"Then why'd you ask?"

"Listen, smart-ass, you're not scheduled for break for another hour."

"Dude, I had to piss. I could've done it here, but I figured you'd prefer me to do it in a urinal."

"You were in there for ten minutes. I sat two couples for you. You know you only got this job because I went to high school with your father. Don't make me fire you." He stepped closer and whispered, "No more pot."

“Okay, I won’t smoke if you don’t,” I whispered back. And with that, manager Stephen was off my back.

The woman with the giant diamond ring laughed hard about something. She clapped her hands, kissed her husband on the lips, and finished chewing the fat piece of lobster in her mouth. He smiled and touched her hand.

“I seriously hate rich people,” I said.

If I ever get to the point in life where I judge myself by the amount of money I make, how many people work for me, or what kind of purebred lapdog I own, then I’ll do the world a favor and jump from the highest building in L.A.’s financial district.

“I can’t do this job. I’m not a restaurant host. I’m a writer.”

“Yeah, well, I’m an actor. Combine your earnings from writing last year to my earnings from acting, and we still couldn’t afford a cup of Top Ramen soup,” Nate said.

He was right. And that’s why I’d gotten stuck in Crustaceans, working the kind of job unsuccessful writers work.

Another idiot got out of his obnoxious SUV with a long-legged gold digger perched in the passenger seat.

“He must have a little pecker. Why else would a guy living in a city that never snows buy an SUV?” I said to myself, but loud enough to be heard.

The guy handed the valet his keys and approached me, holding hands with his expressionless mannequin. “Table for two,” he said.

“It’s a forty-five minute wait for walk-ins,” I replied.

“Don’t you know who I am?” he asked. I knew who he was, everyone knew. So what?

“Let me think,” I said then paused. “Yeah, I know you. You were that guy in the movie *Blind Date*, right?” It was Bruce Willis, maker of some truly awful action films that I have zero respect for.

“Yeah.”

“I hated it.”

His face boiled with anger. “Where’s your manager?”

I pointed at Stephen without breaking eye contact with the big shot. “There,” I said.

The actor approached my manager. Everyone in the restaurant watched him while trying to appear like they weren’t. Stephen looked at me, and I shrugged my shoulders. I’d probably be fired later; and to be honest, I was okay with that. Every second I spent working this job was wasted life I’d never get back.

Stephen escorted the actor and his long-legged, large-breasted, tan, slim, blond groupie to a table.

I hate celebrities, and wouldn't want to be one, but I wouldn't mind having groupies.

Kelly Dampier, 24

I was exhausted. Thinking my workday was done, I switched off the overhead lights. But then my fax spit out another doctor's order.

Maria Orlando: Half-hour breast massage, three times a week for four weeks.

Two seconds later, a well-endowed, beautiful young woman poked her head through the open door. "Hi. I'm Maria Orlando. I have a four o'clock appointment... Are you open?"

My eyes teetered from the order to her and back.

Wow.

"We're open. Definitely open."

She had perfect posture; long, wavy brown hair; a smooth, tan complexion; high, sculpted cheekbones; eyes as big as golf balls; and thick pouty lips. Her expression was slightly vague, but not an empty vague like of a supermodel in a perfume ad.

She approached me.

"Are you here for the brea _ umm, are you Maria?"

She cocked her head to the side, and her large silver hoop earring kissed her shoulder. "Didn't I just say that?"

"Yes, you did. Pleasure to meet you, Maria."

"You, too." Maria smiled; her mouth turned up at one corner and down at the other. Her beautiful crooked smile was like Melanie Griffith's before the plastic surgery.

I flipped the light switch back on. The light reflected off the freshly waxed linoleum floor, creating a mirror effect, and I could see the dark outline of Maria's inner thighs up her tiny brown skirt.

Stop staring, idiot!

"Have a seat. I'll be with you shortly."

Maria sat in the middle seat of our three plastic blue bucket chairs. She picked a *Cosmopolitan* magazine out of the rack, sat it on her lap, and turned pages while her other hand fiddled with the marble-sized pearls around her neck.

"I need to make a phone call. I'll be right back," I said. I

retreated to my office and called Maria's doctor.

"Hello, Dr. Nudelman's office. May I help you?"

"Yes, umm, hi. This is Kelly Dampier, PT. I just received an order from Dr. Nudelman that I have a question about."

"The doctor's busy. Would you like his voicemail?"

"No, that won't help. The patient's here and I'm slightly confused."

"About what, Mr. Dampier?"

"Well, it says I'm supposed to massage her breasts."

"And?"

"So, umm. Okay, I'll be frank. I've only been working here for two months, and I've never heard of this before."

"No problem, Mr. Dampier. We'll send the patient to our sister Motion Picture Television Fund clinic up in the Valley."

"NO! Err, no, that won't be necessary. Why don't you just brief me? I mean, I'd hate to make the patient drive all the way up to the Valley during rush hour."

The receptionist let out a heavy, annoyed breath. "I'll put you on with a nurse. One moment please."

The nurse picked up the phone, "How may I assist you?"

"I need a crash course in breast massaging."

"How sad," she replied.

"I meant I have a patient whose post-op breast implants, and I need to know the proper technique."

"Okay, it's very simple. You start around the nipples."

Thank you, Jesus.

"Massage gently in small circles, gradually working your way outward. The idea is to gently break up the scar tissue. When you finish the massage, lay a foam cylinder under her spine, have her spread her arms out at her sides, and gently stretch them toward the ground. Hold for thirty seconds, relax, repeat. That's all there is to it. Got it? ... Mr. Dampier? ... Mr. Dampier?"

I'd stopped listening after she said *nipples*.

"Huh? Oh, yes." I realized my free hand was inside my shirt rolling my nipple between two anxious fingers. I yanked it out. "Thank you. You've been helpful," I said and hung up.

Ninety-five percent of the population hates their careers. I'd lied my way into a dream job working for the Motion Picture and Television Fund, and I would've been willing, at that moment, to sign a lifetime

contract. Unfortunately, I had a feeling my fraudulent resume would eventually catch up to me.

Maria Orlando, 18

My breasts felt like giant water balloons one droplet away from exploding. The implants were exactly what I wanted from Daddy for graduation, and I thought I'd feel sexy after getting them. But I didn't. I felt bloated and fat and I couldn't wait until I could start jogging again to lose weight.

I took off my clothes, put on the robe, and called out, "I'm read_ "

"Okay, let's get started," he said, ripping open the curtain before I could finish my statement. The way his mouth hung open and his eyes bulged out of his head made him look like a retarded trout.

"Don't worry, I'll be gentle," he said. He sounded wiry. "I'll start around your nibbles. Umm, excuse me. I, uhh, went to the dentist at lunch and my tongue is still a little numb. Anyway, I'll start around your niPPles, and work outward. Let me know if it becomes too painful."

"Okay."

I lay on my back, lowered my gown, and waited. So many people had poked and prodded my chest in the past few weeks I'd become desensitized to it.

"Is there something wrong?" I asked.

"Wrong? No, I'm just sizing things up."

Curious choice of words.

"Okay, here we go, and please, call me Kelly."

Kelly began massaging me; soon he was sweating like a heavyweight prizefighter. The massage eased my pain, but I couldn't relax. I was worried about Daddy. He was having a *meeting* with Toni Scalesci at our restaurant. Daddy never told me much about his work, and for most of my pampered childhood in New York, I assumed he was just a successful restaurant owner. I was probably about thirteen when I started to notice how other men acted around him. Dad was fat, and he wasn't tall or muscular. However, he had a large presence; he could intimidate the most dangerous men with a simple smile and a wink.

We moved to Los Angeles when I was fourteen, and Daddy climbed the ladder rapidly. I'm sure the climb was bloody.

I worried any day could be my father's last, his life ending in

violence.

Kelly

*"I know some day you'll have a beautiful life
I know you'll be the sun
in somebody else's sky"*

Stuck in gridlock on the 405, after work, after my glorious day of massaging breasts, I sang into the unplugged microphone that I keep in my ride. Mr. Eddie Vedder belted the lyrics to *Black*, Pearl Jam's masterpiece.

My Saturn was in the shop. After the breast massage, I was riding a high, and it felt good to ride in the rented Jaguar convertible, top down.

*"But why? Why? Why-y, can't it be?
Why can't it be-e-e miine!"*

Black. I love that damn song to the point of pain. Eddie grabs my heart and twists it into a big meaty knot every time. The outro reminds me of my mother. I forced her out of this world on my way in; she died birthing me. She is the sun in the sky I can never have.

While singing, I noticed an incredibly sexy woman in another convertible singing along with Eddie and me. I smiled at her and we all sang, "*Do-dab-doot-doot-do-dab-do*," The hottie smiled back at me.

Typically in a situation like this, I'd blush, and then nervously stare straight ahead until traffic started moving again.

"I like your microphone," she shouted over the loud engines of the idling cars.

Is smog an aphrodisiac? Why is she talking to me?

"Thank you. Your harmony complimented Eddie and me nicely," I said.

"I'd say you and Eddie complemented me nicely," She countered.

Okay, Kelly, now say something witty. think. think. say something before traffic starts moving.

She beat me to it. "We'll probably be stuck in traffic long enough to get through *Jeremy*. Wanna try?" *Jeremy* was the next track on Pearl Jam's *Ten*. This knowledge made her even sexier.

"I'd rather spend the time trying to get your phone number," I said, doing my best impersonation of a cool guy.

“Oh.”

“Oh what?” I asked.

“We had a good moment going. But you ruined it. Too bad.”

Her car began to inch forward; mine was stuck behind one of those sixteen wheelers that take forever to start moving. I had to regroup.

“*Clearly I remember pickin’ on the boy,*” I sang with conviction, both hands wrapped around my microphone, my knee tending the steering wheel. She took my bait, and sang with me:

*“Seemed a harmless little fuck
Ennwe, but we unleashed the lion
gnashed his teeth and bit the recess lady’s breast,
how can I forget?”*

Her phone rang. She answered. I couldn’t let this call come between us; this was the closest thing I’d had to a date in months. I turned the stereo up a few notches and sang louder, trying to drown out whoever was talking to her on the phone.

*“Then he hit me with a surprised left
ennwe, my jaw left burtin’
dropped wide open, just like the day
ennwe, like the day I he_eard!”*

Her lane stopped moving. She tried to ignore me, but I knew the lyrics were trying to tickle their way out of her mouth. I turned the volume up even louder.

“Turn that shit down, asshole!” yelled some guy in a Mercedes. I turned it up full blast. Chatty Kathy continued with her phone call, but she was smiling at me.

*“Daddy, didn’t give attention, no
to the fact Mommy didn’t care_air
King Jeremy, the wicked, ruled his world.”*

The delicious girl pulled the phone from her ear, put it in front of her mouth, yelled obscenities into it, and hung up. Then she joined me in song, “*Jeremy spoke in cla_ass today.*” We continued through the entire chorus. A few others stuck in traffic joined in. It was a block party on the 405. Eddie would’ve been proud.

I mentally rehearsed a witty comment while we sang the final chorus. I was going to say, *We’re quite a team. Maybe we should sell everything we own and go on tour.* As I was about to deliver my line, her car pulled ahead of mine.

“Shit.” She moved, three, four, and then five car lengths ahead. I pounded my steering wheel. “Shit! Shit! Shit! Fucking truck! Go!”

This cat and mouse game continued for a few miles. I pursued her, at about five miles per hour, with my hands glued to the steering wheel, leaning into the windshield, eyes peeled open. I was supposed to get off on Culver Boulevard, but she didn’t, so I followed ahead on the 405.

Pearl Jam made it through *Oceans*, *Porcb*, and then *Garden*, and I still hadn’t caught her. I worried she’d met some jerk with a better voice and a sweeter car. We hadn’t even exchanged names, and already I was acting like a paranoid jealous boyfriend. Then again, that’s my M.O.

Finally, as *Deep* began to play, I caught up to her. “Hey, remember me?”

“Oh my God! Are you Eddie Vedder, the lead singer of Pearl Jam?”

“Can I have your phone number?” I asked. My desperation was obvious.

“I don’t give my number to guys I meet on the 405. You could be a stalker!”

“C’mon, do I look like a stalker to you?” I was already stalking her_ *dub*.

Her lane sped up. “Yeah, you do, but it kind of works for you. Meet me at Gold’s Gym in Venice Beach for racquetball. Eight o’clock!” she yelled from two car lengths ahead.

“What time?”

“Eight! If you beat me, I’ll give you my number!” Irritated drivers were honking. She hit the gas and stuck her hand in the air to wave goodbye. I put a hand in the air to wave back.

Crash! Pop!

The airbag exploded in my face.

“Shit! Shit, Shit, Shit!” I pounded the steering wheel. I’d mangled the front end of the rented Jaguar.

“Shit!”

Reece Brooks, 29

“Go fuck yourself!” I yelled and then hung up on Isaac again. “Where is this guy already?”

“How much longer you gonna give him?” The plump front-desk

Broken

J. Matthew Nespoli

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