

Strangers Wear Masks of Your Face

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Strangers Wear Masks of Your Face was first published in 2008 in Theaker's Quarterly Fiction, Number 25, and reprinted in 2009 in my short story collection, Remove the Eyes.

He was helping a black woman with a flat tire when he woke.

In that moment between coming out of his dream, and just before opening his eyes, he realized there was someone in his bedroom.

Someone standing in the darkness, near him, looking down at him.

Philip kept his eyes shut, breathing regularly, pretending to still be asleep, not knowing what to do.

As he carefully exhaled through his nose, terrified, he realized there was more than one person in his bedroom. All of them standing around his bed.

Bending over, trying to determine if he were really still asleep. Or just pretending.

He kept breathing in and out, slow and deep, heart pumping violently below his ribs.

Eyelids closed, he sensed one of them bending closer.

Slip!

The right side of his head rocked against the pillow.

He had been punched in the face.

Was it a punch?

Eyes shut, breathing in through his nostrils, breathing out through his nostrils.

He tasted metal.

His tongue rolled around his teeth, tip lifting, tapping against something tall and sharp in the middle of his mouth.

Knife blade.

Stabbed down through his maxilla, point resting on the soft pink tissue behind his bottom teeth.

Breathe in! Breathe out!

He kept his eyes closed.

Whoosh. The blade withdrew upwards, out of the right side of his face, lifting his head off the pillow.

He let his head flop back down.

His tongue tip lifted to the roof of his mouth, feeling a soft slit that hadn't been there when he went to sleep.

The tip of his tongue explored the slit, tasting warm, sticky liquid.

"Are you awake?"

Instinct told him to pretend he was still asleep.

He stayed on his back, limbs out in imitation of sleep, pain from the knife stab starting to burn.

“I guess you must still be asleep.”

With a crunch, the left side of his face sunk down. Hard knife blade stabbing into the left side of his cheek, through his maxilla, popping down past his pink gums, past the Novocain bumps of dental work.

The tip of the blade scratched across the fillings in his molars, fingernails on a blackboard.

Tears slid out the sides of his eyes, into his ears. He kept his lids closed, sensing that if they knew he was awake, they would do far worse.

The one who spoke before said, “Let’s go.”

Philip felt the top sheet peeled off his body, his pajama pants pulled down, thrown sideways, exposing his genitals, his back lifted as his pajama top was pulled up off his abdomen, his deliberately limp arms, and thrown sideways.

He was bundled up in the bottom sheet from his bed, as if in a hammock, carried down the stairs of his apartment building.

Outside, he could feel on his face it was still dark.

Lots of car doors slamming, engines starting

They threw his sheet-bundled body on the floor of an automobile’s back seat, down around shoes.

With a backwards jerk, the car drove away.

No one spoke.

His body rolled forwards, backwards, the car twisting around tight curves at a high speed.

After another roll, he snaked his right hand out of the bedsheet, reached up, banged his knuckles around until they hit the back door’s lever, pulled up on the lever, and before the shoes around him had a chance to

react, flung himself, in his wrapped-up sheet, out of the car, onto the fast-passing pavement, body bouncing across the road, down an embankment, as farther up the pavement the car’s brakes screeched.

His body landed with a splash in the cold waters of Lake Michigan.

He started swimming, throwing one arm over the other, left, right, trying to get as far from shore as possible.

Shouts coming from far away.

He swam half a mile out, then followed the coastline, for an hour.

Paddled his body vertical in the dark green water, alongside the ripples of the moon’s reflection, looking behind him, looking at the shoreline.

No one.

He splashed to the shore, stood up wearily, cold water dripping off his body.

At the top of a grassy hillock, bright pink lights.

He staggered towards the pink lights, arms swinging in front of him.

Freddy’s Fish Fry.

He padded barefoot across the parking lot, only a few cars left.

Pushed open the heavy wooden doors.

Inside, a lounge with leather booths, wooden tables, ceiling lights, lots of them, orange, pink, red.

He made his way over to a gleaming curve of the long, deserted bar.

From a door behind the bar a tall man appeared, dark hair, black moustache, white shirt. He walked over slowly, passing the bottles beside him, carrying in both hands a silver martini shaker. Once he reached the curve of the bar where Philip stood, he leaned over the polished wood grain, to see if Philip was wearing pants. He was one of those men with regular features, who should look handsome, but doesn’t. The too-tall forehead, or something. “How’s it going?”

Philip was still trying to catch his breath. “Not so good.”

"You get mugged or something? Have a seat."

He put a small paper napkin in front of where Philip pulled his naked ass up onto a stool.

"I was attacked. In my bedroom."

The bartender tilted his head left, examining Philip's face. "Fuck, man. They cut you up."

"Yeah."

"You don't have any money, right?"

Philip used the small paper napkin to blow his nose. "No."

The bartender shrugged. "I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

He drifted back a minute later, cup of hot coffee, small plate of buttered toast.

Philip took a sip of the coffee, its heat hurting the two slits below his eyes.

"You want me to call the cops?"

Philip thought about it. "I really don't know. I guess...I don't know. I'm not sure what I want to do."

"You're still in shock, man. You're fucked up."

"Philip? Is that you?"

A woman walked over from one of the tables, shoulder-length dark hair, eyes narrowed under the bar's ceiling lights.

Philip dropped his right hand to his lap, covering his genitals.

He turned on his stool towards her approach, shoulders going back with the shock of realizing that, incredibly, it was Ileana Walker.

"It is you!" Her dark eyebrows scrunched, but her eyes stayed good-natured. "Why are you naked?"

"He got attacked in his bedroom. Look under his eyes. They cut up his fucking face. It's The Path. See the horizontal cut under each eye? That's the fucking Path."

"Oh my God, are you okay?"

Philip added his left hand to the right hand in his lap. "Yeah. I mean, I'm in some pain, my head's messed up, but...Is it really you? Jesus!"

Ileana nodded her head, dark eyes glowing. "I can't believe I'm seeing you again! What's it been? Ten years?"

He nodded, both hands covering his cock and balls. "Yeah. About that." He looked at her face. The same big, beautiful dark eyes, black eyebrows, wide cheekbones with freckles. "You look great. You really do." His right and left hands stretched further apart in his lap, rising.

She let out a happy breath. "Would you bring us..." She reared her head back, embarrassed, innocent, silly. "What do you drink?"

"I don't know. A Manhattan?"

"Do you still want the buttered toast?"

"No, I guess not. Thanks for bringing it."

They watched the bartender walk away.

She sat on the bar stool next to his, leaning towards him with those big eyes. "This is incredible. Are you still living with..."

She knew his girlfriend's name, but pretending not to remember it, that his girlfriend was so inconsequential she was not worth remembering, was one of the flirtations Ileana had done back then.

He remembered the time Ileana lifted the phone away from her ear, holding his eyes, telling him his girlfriend was on the line, knowing his girlfriend could hear what she was saying, asking if she should tell her he was too busy to speak to her, and he normally said no, out of loyalty, but this one time, to please Ileana, to acknowledge there was something between them, an office flirtation, although an innocent one, never consummated, but so powerful nonetheless, he said, Yeah, tell her I'll call her back, and he watched as Ileana, with this new power, this new permission he had given her, casually bent her wide lips back to the black telephone's receiver, saying in an exaggeratedly polite voice, eyebrows raised, Philip's too busy to speak to you, listening another moment, enjoying that his girlfriend lost this round, gently hanging up the phone

without another word. His allowing Ileana to treat his girlfriend that way, with his cooperation, even if only once, was something that still gave him a sexual charge, years and years later. That evening, Priscilla had raged at him, stomping around in her t-shirt and bare legs, snatching up the book he was reading, tossing it across the rumpled bed they shared. "Don't ever let her treat me that way again!" And he hadn't. He didn't want to be the type of guy who cheats on his girlfriend. But he always remembered that one time, when he chose Ileana over her, and the way Ileana had so casually spoken into the telephone receiver, big dark eyes swung up to watch him as she said what she said into his girlfriend's ear.

"Priscilla. No."

"Someone else?"

"No. I'm free."

"She was such a bitch." She looked at him.

"Yeah. I admit it. She was a bitch. She always figured I had a crush on you."

"Yeah?" She shut her eyes inwards.

"Which I did."

She looked down at her black shoes.

"A girl can tell."

"Did you...did you have a crush on me?" He realized how pathetic that sounded, but also, with a stab to his heart, understood how important her answer was.

She gave him the soft smile he remembered from back then. "Yeah. Didn't you know? Sometimes, after we'd talk, during break or in the halls, at the photocopier or whatever, I'd go back to my cubicle and type on my keyboard, Mrs. Ileana Benton."

He ducked his head. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"I've thought about you a lot over the years since you moved to Milwaukee. Wondered how you were doing. If you were still with Brent. I kept seeing you in the local stores, except it wasn't you, it was just women who looked like you."

Her face turned solemn. "We were living in Milwaukee, where he had been

transferred, I found a job, things were going okay, so for New Year's Eve I thought, why don't we have a special meal? To, you know, kind of celebrate and everything. So I bought this rib roast, right? USDA Prime. It was beautiful, Phil. But. I cook the roast, it's got a meat thermometer stuck in it, it's finally done, he sits down at the kitchen table, I put out the mushrooms I cooked, au jus sauce from a package mix, mashed potatoes, Brussel sprouts. I'm carving the roast, one red, juicy slice after another falling forward, I'm sawing down the next piece, and my carving knife rubs against something hard in that slice. So I pull the knife up, fold down the top part of the slice, see there's something dark in the meat. That's never happened before. I'm thinking, oh my God, we spent so much money for this roast, and it's contaminated."

He felt jealousy at her using the word, 'We'.

"So I poke at the dark circle with the tip of the carving blade, it feels hard. Metallic. You're not going to believe this. I pinch at it with my thumb and forefinger, pull it out of the meat. You're never going to guess what it was."

He raised his bare shoulders, so incredibly happy to be talking to her again. "I don't know."

She rested her right hand on his forearm, like she used to, ten years ago. "A bullet!"

"What?"

"A bullet! I'm serious! I held it in my fingers, thinking, How did a bullet ever get in the rib roast? And he says, Maybe someone shot the cow while it was still grazing in the field, and the butchers just never noticed." Her face turned solemn again. "The bullet was really hot, you know? I mean, it was made of metal, it had been in this roast that was in the oven for a couple of hours, so while I'm examining the bullet, it gets too hot to hold..." She started crying, big tears rolling down those wide, freckled cheeks. "So I toss it out of my hand, it's burning my fingers, but I toss it really, really lightly, like a...soap bubble or

something, and it lands on Brent's dinner plate..." Her face collapsed. "And, and, it went off, the bullet went off, he was leaning over to look at it, and as it hit his plate it exploded..." Her voice got higher. She waved her arms. "And the bullet went right up into his forehead. It smacked, the force of it, smacked his head back, he fell off his chair, sideways, and he's dead."

"What?"

"I know! I couldn't believe it." Her eyes teared up again, glistening. "The police couldn't believe it. I was under suspicion for months."

"That's awful." He looked at her teary face, touched the back of her right hand, thin tendons and blue veins, as it rested on the bar near her Manhattan. Felt a sexual tingle.

"But...If the bullet, if someone shot it into the cow...there's two parts to a bullet. I'm not a bullet expert, but there's the casing, where all the gunpowder is stored, then there's the bullet itself. If someone shot the cow, the casing would stay in the rifle or revolver or whatever. Only the bullet itself would go into the cow. And that's just a piece of metal. There's nothing in that piece of metal that could cause the bullet to fire a second time. There's no gunpowder behind it."

"That's what they said! The police. But what I pulled out was a whole bullet. I'm not a bullet expert either, but it had the tip plus the casing."

"But then...did they ever figure out how the bullet got in the cow in the first place? If it was an intact bullet, with the casing, that meant it had never been fired from a gun."

She shrugged. "They never figured it out." Her dark eyes went inwards, returned. "One of the cops, he was nicer than the other one, he confided to me people find all kinds of weird things inside rib roasts. He said he'd heard of cases where people, just carving up a cooked roast at the kitchen table like I did, had found necklaces, gold watches, and once, a complete set of false teeth with a ruby

embedded in the front of each tooth. I have to pee."

Philip watched her walk away, eyes dropping to her shapely rear end, just like he used to do, so long ago, when she'd walk away from him.

She turned around unexpectedly, stopping, arms by her sides, looking over her left shoulder, catching him. "Be right back."

He raised his right hand.

The bartender floated over. "So, you know her?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds like you and her..."

"It was one of those situations where we worked together for years, we flirted with each other all the time, but nothing ever came of it. We were both living with other people at the time, we both felt it would be wrong to cheat."

"So the two of you never..."

"Hmm? No. It was three years of foreplay."

"She was the girl who got away."

"Yeah. I've never met anyone like her. The way we connected, could talk to each other for hours. I felt so good, so happy whenever we were together. Each day, when I got to work, I always looked forward to seeing what she'd be wearing. We never kissed, not once, never even hugged, but I've made love to her thousands of times, in my mind. I always wondered how my life would have been different, if we had less of a conscience."

"You got a second chance now."

"Maybe."

"She's a real whore."

"What?"

"I'm serious, man. She'll fuck anybody."

"Why do you say that?"

"She's got a reputation." He raised his eyebrows. "Yeah."

"That's bullshit."

"I'm telling you. She puts her legs up in the air for everybody. Buy her a drink,

she'll go down on you in the parking lot. Guaranteed."

"Hey, I appreciate you gave me the free coffee. But fuck you."

The bartender held up both big hands, lined palms. "I'm just saying."

"I don't believe you. Fuck off."

He rapidly swirled his bar cloth over the wood grain in front of Philip, wiping away the circular rings of moisture from their picked-up, put-down, Manhattans. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Yeah. Whatever."

Ileana came back, tilting her head to one side, a decision made while she was sitting on the toilet. "So where are you going to sleep tonight?"

He felt his heart thump. Still cupping his cock and balls in his lap, he raised his bare shoulders. "I don't know."

"I'm on my way back down to Milwaukee." She shrugged, one of those shrugs that try to be casual, but betray nervousness. "If you want...why not stay with me? You know? I have a green blanket in my trunk. My apartment has a guest bedroom. You can't go back to your old place. They might be waiting for you. Do you have anything of value there?"

He pretended to do a mental catalog, but knew the answer already. "No."

They drove through Bailey's Harbor, past the cherry and apple orchards, ghostly and black-limbed at this quiet hour, to Highway 57, then down the peninsula, towards Milwaukee.

Her apartment was downtown, on West Wisconsin Avenue. She parked out front, at the curb.

Leaning across the glowing blue dashboard, she whispered conspiratorially to him. "We have to hurry, so no one sees you're naked. I could get thrown out."

He followed her across the sidewalk on bare feet, in the moon-filled silence of the world, clenching his green blanket around his

shoulders, up the stone stairs to her building's tall glass double doors.

No one in the lobby, at this hour.

She pressed for the elevator, looking around nervously, turning her beautiful face back to him, smiling.

Once they were on her floor, the old fashioned elevator doors pinging open, she ducked her head out, dark hair swinging, to make sure the coast was clear.

They hurried down the carpeted hall, her key already out, to her door.

Her apartment surprised him. It was really nice, white walls, high white ceilings, crown molding, dark oak frames around the doorways and windows.

She tossed her hair, proud. "It's an historic building. Pretty cool, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I have a balcony."

He could see, beyond the french doors at the opposite wall of the living room, the dark iron rails. "I probably shouldn't go out on it in this blanket."

"Are you hungry?" There was a small kitchen unit on the right side of the living room, separated by a sternum-high black counter, small orange pots of basil, thyme, oregano.

He realized he was.

He sat in his wrapped-around blanket on her living room sofa, while she pulled a can of Campbell's Chicken and Noodle soup out of an overhead cabinet, rinsing the round metal top off under her kitchen sink tap, popping the lid, dumping the spiraled yellow noodles into a stainless steel pot.

She didn't eat herself, just watched him while he spooned the soup up to his mouth.

"Be careful how much you put in your mouth, so it doesn't ooze out those two slits below your eyes."

Once he was finished, she made them both a Manhattan.

He took a sip, green army blanket still around his shoulders. "I can't believe I'm actually in your apartment."

"Do you like it?"

"Yeah, I really do."

She lowered her dark eyes. "The apartment comes with two bedrooms. I had to rent a two bedroom in order to get a balcony, but I only have one bed. You can sleep in my bed with me. But I don't want to do anything tonight."

He sat back on the sofa, rearranging the army blanket to keep himself covered. "It's so weird we met."

"Yeah!"

"Like a second chance."

Her voice got soft. "Yeah."

"Do you go to that bar often?"

"Hmm? Sometimes, when I'm traveling up north. We're trying to find funding for some of the lighthouses up there, to restore them."

"That bartender? Do you know him pretty well?"

"Roy? No, not that well."

Eyes bright, she took his hand, led him down the hall, to an ajar door, pushing the door open.

It looked like a girl's bedroom. The bedroom of a girl who lives alone, decorates her walls to be surrounded by things that make her feel happy, and safe.

The bed they'd be sharing was a twin.

She bent over in front of her bureau, pulling, out of the bottom drawer, a pair of pink pajamas.

She went across the hall, to the bathroom, to change. Shut the bathroom door behind her. All the way. The doorknob went, Click.

He pulled down the left side of the floral bedspread, picturing her making the bed each morning before she left for work. Every other girl he knew just left the bed unmade, day after day.

He let his green army blanket fall. He had an erection. He was going to leave the blanket on the white carpet, thought better of it, picked it up. Folded it against his chest,

placing it in a neat bundle on the carpet near the bureau.

Heard the bathroom door opening, hurried into the bed on its left side, pulling the top sheet and blanket up over his chest.

She came into the bedroom in her dark shoulder-length hair and pink pajamas, her body's outlines obvious under the cotton. She looked nervous. "Are you naked?"

He cleared his throat. "Yeah."

"I'm going to turn off the light on my side of the bed before I get in, okay?"

"Sure."

In the darkness filled with gray, unfamiliar furniture shapes, he felt her side of the bed lower as her hourglass weight lay down on the mattress. More mattress bouncings, her rolling over onto her right side, facing him. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he could see her wide, freckled-cheek face grinning at him. "Is this weird, or what?"

"You and me in bed together?"

Saw her upper teeth gleam. "Yeah."

"I used to fantasize we had to go to a client meeting out of state."

"Really!"

"Yeah. And there was this problem at the hotel, all their rooms were booked, we couldn't have separate rooms, we had to share the same hotel room, we're standing at the hotel check-in desk, kind of thinking, Well, what should we do? And the clerk is saying, You have to decide, we've got other business travelers bidding on that one room already, so in a panic, we don't want to sleep on the street, it's a strange city neither of us has been to before, we say, Okay, we'll take it. And the hotel room we get is really small, the bed is actually a single..."

"Oh, okay."

"Plus our baggage is lost, it's in Nome, Alaska, or Siberia, or it accidentally got put on a moon rocket, it's 140,000 miles away from Earth, floating in a space capsule, so all we have are the clothes on our backs, which we have to keep crisp for our client meeting the next morning, so that means we can only

sleep in our underwear in this narrow bed, but the air conditioning isn't working, so we have to sleep together naked, in a bed about a yard wide, which means our arms and legs are intertwined, and I am...so engorged."

"Gee."

"Really. Like I've never been in my life."

Her invisible hand touched his invisible cheek.

He went on. "And this fantasy?" Her fingertips felt the wetness on his cheeks. "It doesn't end with me 'fucking' you. It ends with me telling you something I never had the courage all those years to tell you. That the first time I ever saw you, you took my breath away. That I love you."

She leaned over in the dimness, kissed his tears. "I knew," she said sincerely. "I always knew, and I always felt the same way. All those talks we'd have, at my cubicle or yours, or in the hallways...I fell in love with you."

They didn't kiss. They could have, but they didn't. She rolled over in the darkness, so she had her back to him. He sensed, in invitation. He put his arms around her, but didn't try to touch her breasts, or rear end, or between her legs. She put her small hands on his. He fell asleep smelling her hair.

When he woke, her side of the bed was empty, sunlight on the rumpled sheet.

"Ileana?"

He walked warily down the apartment's center hall, bare feet, green army blanket around his waist.

She was at the stove, still in her pink pajamas, happily stirring yellow and white eggs around in a skillet.

She twirled around. "I'm making you breakfast in bed." Her eyes glanced down. She giggled, cheeks blushing. "Guess you're glad to see me, sir." She turned back to her scrambling. "Very impressive."

He repositioned his hands to have the blanket hang less tightly around the front of his thighs.

Her right hand kept circling the wooden spoon in the skillet. "I thought once we eat, I'd go to Johnnie Walker's and buy you some clothes."

"I don't have any money."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't worry about that. You can pay me back once you get a job."

On the counter, a folded Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. He slid the warm black and white sections apart, looking for the want ads. "Someone told me once, when you're looking for a job, start off by going for an interview at a place you don't want to work, just to get over those 'looking for a job' jitters."

"Oh, I didn't mean you have to look today. I just meant, you know, whenever." She carried two steaming white plates over, each with a big pile of yellow egg curds, curled bacon, triangled toast.

While she was out shopping for him, he went through the ad columns, glumly circling with blue ink the few places he thought he might get accepted, all of them entry level.

At eleven he heard a key in the lock of her front door, hastily threw the army blanket over his body, turned the sound down on the TV.

It was her, both hands holding shopping bags. She bumped her hip against the door, until it shut and clicked. She looked happy, cheeks flushed. "I want a fashion show!"

He slipped his fingers through some of the handles, taking the bags from her, following her into the bathroom.

"You can try them on here, see how they look, in the mirror, then come out and show me."

He modeled the different outfits for her, casual clothes and two sets of striped pajamas.

She sat on the edge of the bed, grinning. Slid her dark eyes sideways at one point, when he was standing in front of her in a pair of canvas slacks, gray shirt. "I think it's

incredibly sexy I get to dress you up, however I want.”

He spread his hands apart at his hips. “Whatever you want me to, I’ll wear.”

After he had dressed up in the bathroom the final time, bare knees lifting, hands fastening shirt buttons, he went in his new blue and white striped pajamas to the kitchen, picked up the want ads. “I found a listing I thought I’d try.”

She raised her shoulders. “You don’t have to find a job today, Phil. I know you’re a sincere person, you’re not going to ‘sponge’ off me. Wait until your face heals.”

He smiled at her. “I want to pay my share.”

“Is it a, ‘I don’t really want this job, the interview is just to get me over my first interview’ type job?”

“Yeah. It’s in Wauwautosa, which I guess is just north of here.” He looked at her, embarrassed. “It’s for a bouncer.”

She reared her head back happily. “Wooo! I’ll get to feel your biceps every night, while you tell me about all the ass you kicked.”

The ad read, Apply in Person, so the two of them got in her car, drove over.

Wauwautosa had a neighborhood feel to it, the main street filled on both sides with taverns, bakeries, bridal shops.

The place they were looking for was Krushing’s, a German restaurant.

It occupied the corner of a block, the outside of the building done in Bavarian style, white mortar with dark wood beams.

“I’ll wait in the car.”

He pushed through the tall wooden door, entering into a short hall with autographed black and white pictures of celebrities on the walls, Liberace, Ralph Bellamy, McLean Stevenson, Tom Smothers, a polka band leader with piano keys on the lapels of his tuxedo.

Inside, the place looked deserted. Bar to one side, lots of silent wooden tables, an unoccupied stage in the center.

He tilted his head back to be heard in the emptiness. “Hello?”

A woman in her fifties came out, beauty parlor blonde hair, frilly black and white waitress outfit that ended at mid-thigh.

“We’re not open until five.”

“I’m applying for the bouncer job. It said to apply in person.”

She turned her head to the left, raised her voice. “Florian! That’s a nice pair of pants. Florian?”

Florian, presumably the owner, came out, a tall balding man in a puffy white shirt, black vest and shorts, hard face, handlebar mustache.

They sat at one of the empty wooden tables.

“So what makes you think you got what I want to be a bouncer?”

Philip should have felt nervous, but he didn’t. In fact, he was surprised at how calm, how in control, he felt. “May I call you Florian?”

Florian, resting both wrists on his big bare knees, ducked his head. “Sure. Of course.”

Philip started speaking, not knowing, after each word came out, what word would follow, but follow they did. “I figure you’re a businessman.”

“Sure.”

“So it’s All You Can Eat night, you got a full house, moving a lot of drinks and food, and there’s a table where the folks are getting a little too rowdy. The men are talking loud, they’re ordering new drinks almost as soon as the latest are set down, they contented themselves with a few ‘hells’ and ‘damns’ earlier in the evening, over the appetizers, but now they’re up to ‘bitch’ and ‘shit’, and you know ‘fuck’ and ‘cunt’ aren’t too far away. They’re trying to catch the eyes of the girls at all the other tables, even the tables where it’s not just a guy with a sports jacket, it’s a guy with a sports jacket and his parents or in-laws.”

“I get those types of fellas every All You Can Eat Night.”

"You're trying to provide good food, good service, happy times, I guess some entertainment, seeing that stage over there, and these guys are guaranteeing the people at all the tables around them will never come back to Krushing's again. Plus, you know about word of mouth. Is Krushing's any good? How's the food? Krushing's? I went there once. That's it. A bunch of drunks ruined our meal.

"So what do you do? You watch them from the waitress station for a while, hoping they'll straighten out, but they never do. Finally go to their table, bend over, talking quietly to them, asking them with a smile to please watch their language, there's kids and grandmas here. And what do they do? They look back at you bleary-eyed, food stains on their shirts, treat you like you're an asshole."

"I lose a lot of the old-timers, that's for sure. I'm almost at the point where I'm taking veal off the menu. So what would you do?"

"What would I do? I'd march right over to that table, early in the evening, before anyone but you and me know there's a problem. I'd put this hand here on the shoulder of the ringleader, and you know what I'd say to him?"

Florian looked back at Philip, lips pursed under his big black handlebar moustache.

"I'd say, Guess what? You won our door prize. We're gonna name a Krushing's drink after you! Come on back behind the bar so you can sample it. Then I'd get that motherfucker behind the bar, out of sight, in the storage room, and I'd kick the living shit out of him. I'd get everyone at his table to go back there, for a group photograph, and once I slammed that door shut, I'd show them what their piece of shit hero looks like, crawling on the knees of his torn pants across the concrete floor, lettuce on his head. I'd put my hand against the chest of each and every one of them, male and female, shove them against the wall, and tell them, You ever come back to my restaurant again, or go to the police, I'm gonna split your fucking head apart."

Florian leaned back in his wooden chair, bare legs stretching out of his black shorts, dark eyes looking at Philip, considering what Philip had said. Finally, he tilted his head to one side. "Okay. Probably, that would work. But just shove the ringleader around some behind the bar. Don't kick the shit out of him."

"I can do that."

"I got another question. What about those two slits under your eyes?"

Philip felt his confidence falter.

"I figure, The Path did that to you. Am I right?"

"Probably."

"And The Path, from what I read in the Journal-Sentinel, once they do that to a person, stab down twice in his face like that, that person, he eventually wants to stab down into another person's face. The Path's victims, or converts, or whatever you want to call them, the paper says they start to get a real anger building up inside them. So how do I know, one night, you're not going to go crazy and stab one of my waitresses in the face, or try to stab me in the face?" He pointed his thick index finger at Philip, smiling under his handlebar moustache. "This is a restaurant. We got knives everywhere."

Philip looked around at the empty tables, sat up straighter in his seat. "Don't believe everything you read. I was affected by being stabbed in the face. There are...spirals in my head now, that never were there before. But it's good. I see possibilities I never saw before, like applying for this job. I'm a level-headed person. I'm not going to do anything I don't want to do."

Ileana was sitting behind her steering wheel, listening to the car radio, Bachman-Turner Overdrive, not noticing his approach until he was almost at her rolled-down window.

She raised her dark eyebrows, right hand twisting down the volume. "How'd it go?"

He stood by her driver's door, in the clothes she bought him, head feeling like it stretched all the way up to the blueness in the sky. "I got it!"

She raised her dark eyebrows. "Wow! But, did you want it? I thought this was like..."

He shrugged. "It's a job."

They decided to celebrate. He could have anything he wanted for dinner. He chose a USDA prime rib roast.

After dinner, dirty plates still on the table, candles melted halfway down, yellow flames flickering, she poured him more wine. "Do you remember the first time we ever talked?"

"Yeah. The first word I ever said to you was, Two."

"I asked what floor you wanted. I remember. I saw you around the office, wondered who you were. One of my girlfriends told me your name. I really liked it. Philip. It sounded like a good name."

"I always noticed you when I was walking through the halls. It was like...at the beginning of a crush? Where you think, Hey, there's that girl again! And I'd watch you as long as I could, walking by, trying not to get caught."

"I noticed you watching me. I liked it. You were shy though."

"Maybe a little."

"Yes, you were. Don't be embarrassed. I liked it. There were a couple of times, like when we happened to be standing next to each other, waiting at the security check to get into the building in the morning, or to leave at night, when you could have said something to me, even something like, Boy, it's cold this morning! I even half-turned in your direction a couple of times, to encourage you. But you never did."

"It's true. I was shy. I tried to think of things to say, but they all sounded really stupid."

"A lot of times, it doesn't matter what you say, just that you say something. A girl doesn't care if the first words out of your mouth aren't really clever or original. All she

cares about is, you're trying to speak to her. You're showing you like her."

"I guess I was a real dork, huh?"

She bent her beautiful face forward, laughing, leaving her mouth open afterwards. She reached through the halos of candlelight, grabbing his hand, holding it. "You weren't a 'dork', Phil. Do you remember the first time we had a conversation?"

"Yeah. It was on the company intranet."

"God, you do remember!"

"I sent an e-mail, my first important e-mail, to about thirty people in the company. It was on quality control, new protocols I was going to establish. I spent a long time polishing it, because it was going to a lot of department heads who had probably never heard of me before, and I wanted to make a good first impression."

"It was Friday evening, about four-thirty."

"Close to the end of the work week, yeah. I raced to get it finished in time to be able to include it on my weekly status report. You remember, back then, everyone's computer was set up to where when you got an intranet e-mail, your computer would let out a beep."

"Yeah."

"I had all the e-mail addresses in place, text in the body of the e-mail, and I held my index finger over the Send button, thinking, Here goes!, then pressed the button. Nothing, for about two seconds. Then all over the floor, beyond my cubicle, I could hear, traveling farther and farther away from me, Beep! Beep! Beep! That was so cool. Knowing all these different 'movers and shakers' had just received my protocols, including you. Especially you."

"I saw your return e-mail address in my inbox, but I knew right away from the title it wasn't a personal note, it was business-related."

"But you replied to it."

She propped the right side of her face on her palm, elbow on the table, looking

dreamily at him. "Yeah. I wanted to see if you'd e-mail me back."

"You wrote something like, It looks like you put a lot of hard work into this, Philip!"

"Which was kind of stupid, but I wanted to talk to you."

"I e-mailed you back. Something like, I appreciate your compliment. I tried to think of something to add."

"You added something like, Your opinion means a lot to me."

"Then you e-mailed me, saying, You deserve a great weekend for all your hard work. By then, a lot of people were standing up in their cubicles, turning off their lights. I pictured the two of us almost alone in the building, on separate floors, having this e-mail conversation. I have to admit, it gave me a sexual charge."

"Oooh!"

"I e-mailed back, I don't have anything planned. How about you?" After I sent it, I was nervous, staring at my computer, the long list of answered e-mails in my inbox, wondering if you'd reply. I got ready to leave, then Beep! The bolded font of a fresh e-mail, from you."

"I said I was going out of town. Actually, Brent and I were going north to stay with his parents, but I didn't want to say that, because I thought it would discourage you."

"Then the next time we saw each other, I asked how your weekend was."

"You asked me a lot of questions. If I had seen such and such a movie, was I from Wisconsin originally...a whole bunch of stuff. You really opened up after that."

"I wanted a lot of information about you, so it didn't turn into one of those situations people sometimes get into where every time we ran into each other, we only talked about the same subject that had originally connected us, like, Oh, what did you think of my revised protocols, or, Did you go out of town this weekend, too?"

He poured them some more white wine, tilting the circular mouth of the bottle

up after the level had risen halfway up her glass, but then, as an indulgence, like waking up in the morning and deciding to sleep another fifteen minutes, he tilted the mouth of the bottle back down, filling her glass, and his, to just below the rims.

She lowered her head, dark eyes mischievous. "Phil, can I ask you a question? A personal question?"

"Sure."

She bit her luscious lower lip. "Did you...those years we would flirt with each other, confide in each other, did you ever masturbate thinking about me?"

He grinned. "Yeah. A lot."

She sat up. "Really? Like what?"

"What were my masturbatory fantasies about you?"

"Yeah! If you don't mind sharing."

"I'd...masturbate wondering what your legs look like, your breasts, what it would be like to kiss you, to be on top of you, to go down on you. Everything. Really, everything."

"When would you do it?"

"After Priscilla fell asleep. Or early in the morning. Or when she was out shopping, or taking a shower, to where I could tell by the sound of the water hitting the shower curtain it was safe. I used to masturbate a lot thinking about that time she called me at work, and you answered the phone, asked me if I were too busy to talk to her? Remember that?"

She lowered her chin. "Yeah! I told her you were way too busy to talk to her, then lowered the phone back on its cradle while she was still whining away. I masturbated to that, too."

"Honest?"

"Sure. That was the day you chose me over her. I masturbated to that a lot. Still do." She puckered her wide lips, puffed out both candles, the extinguished wick smell sharp. Her dark eyes regarded him.

He got into his striped pajamas in the bedroom, while she changed again in the bathroom.

Since he had pajamas on, he stayed standing, waiting for her.

She came out in pink pajamas, reached behind her, turned off the bathroom light.

Walked across the hall into the bedroom, eyes lowered, hips moving up and down, smile on her face. "Just so you know, these are different pink pajamas. They're not the same ones I wore last night."

"You like pink, huh?"

She lifted both hands to her temples, pushed her dark hair away from her face, in control, lips pushed out. "So...you want to kiss me?"

The front of his striped pajama pants sagged forward with the weight of his erection. "This is our first kiss. I want it to be in bed. First kisses are almost never in bed."

He got in on his side, she on hers, both pulling down their side of the bed cover, bringing the cover back up, once they slipped under, to their shoulders. He slid over, put his arm around her shoulder, tilted his mouth down to, tilting up, her mouth.

Her lips were softer than in his daydreams. Her tongue wriggled into his mouth sooner than he expected.

He moved his mouth to the warmth of her throat, kissing and nipping under the wishbone of her jaw, holding onto her shoulders, struck at how delicate she was, her hands encircling his head, keeping him in place, their bare feet brushing against each other.

She grabbed his forehead, holding him still. "I want to kiss those beautiful, beautiful blue eyes of yours."

He lay back, hands on her pajama'd hips, not wanting to rush things, knowing he still had all her luscious body to touch and hold for the first time ever, feeling the moist heat of her mouth on his left eye, blinding it, his eyelids instinctively closing, the pink tip of her tongue sliding between the lashes, licking

open the lashed lids, carefully licking his eyeballs.

They broke.

Her face was flushed, front of her pajama top rising and falling with her breaths.

She reached under the sheets, invisible knees poking the blanket up left, right, elbows hiking. Grinning like a naughty kid, she yanked her pink pajama bottoms out of her side of the sheet by its long legs, as if by the long ears of a magic trick, tossing the bottoms in the air, sideways.

She settled her dark-haired head on her white pillow, large, sly eyes sliding right, naked under the sheets from the waist down, every soft, warm, round inch of her from the hips down ready to be looked at, caressed with his sliding palms, kissed. He pulled off his pajama top, bare arms lifting, biceps and triceps flexing. Lifted her pajama top, pink flannel exposing her belly button, ribs, unexpectedly wide breasts, dark nipples poking straight up.

Her right foot snagged the elastic waistband of his pajama bottoms, pulling them down to his ankles. He kicked them off under the sheets, with a muffled violence.

Climbed on top of her, fronts of their bare bodies touching for the first time ever, after all those years of flirting, him rubbing his tall cock against her cunt, both of them curling their heads back, groaning, with the incredible, joyous physical pleasure of their genitals touching.

He slid his cock halfway up her slick cunt, where it met some tightness, took his time to slowly pump it up another inch, another, another, her beautiful, dark-framed face rolling back on the white pillow, fingers gripping his bare ass, until the big head was all the way up inside her, and her cunt's muscles, accommodating, gave in to the fat length.

He looked down, into her eyes.

They started fucking each other, nice and slow. Looked down to watch his wide cock slide effortlessly in and out of her cunt.

He cleared his throat. "I've never felt such a perfect fit."

She nodded, looking up at him. A tear appeared in her eye. "Phil?"

"Yeah?"

Her lower lip trembled. "I've been really lonely."

He bent his face forward, kissed the rolling tear. Looked down into her eyes.

"You're never going to be lonely again."

"Really, Phil? Honestly?"

"Yeah."

She shut her eyes, smile on her face.

He grinned. "I want to make love to you a hundred different ways. It's so frustrating I can only do one position at a time." He reached down with both big hands, palms on the outsides of her soft breasts, putting his thumb and index finger around the base of each nipple, pinched them as hard as he could, lower lip pulling down from his teeth.

Her throat, hips, reared up gratefully.

With his left hand, he grabbed the back of her neck, angling his cock up even deeper, her bare knees jerking up mid-air with each more violent pump, his fingertip sliding through the moist black hairs of her cunt, slipping down into the wetness below, tickling her swollen clitoris, tickling it, vibrating his fingertip over its swell, tickling it, slapping it left, right with his top fingerpad, pinching it, tickling it, pinching it as hard as he could, her spine rising off the soaked sheets. She grabbed onto his left shoulder, mouth opening, eyes closing, thighs jerking up, up, up, ass banging down on the bedsheet, throat letting out a sharp, violent moan.

He slowed his pumps, waited for her eyes to reopen.

When they did, they were soft, dreamy. "Mmmm."

"You liked that?"

"Mmmmm. Yeah. I always figured. You knew how to fuck me. Really, really fuck me. All those years...didn't you know what I was saying to you, standing so close to you when we talked, laughing at all your jokes, reaching

out and touching your shoulder? I was telling you, you can fuck me. I want you to fuck me. Girls get so frustrated."

He kept sliding his stiff cock up inside her cunt. "I was stupid. But I'm not stupid anymore."

She rested her dark-haired head against her white pillow, shutting her eyes for a moment, enjoying his continued pumping. Chuckled. "God, you sure aren't." She let out a sigh, swung her legs up, feet over his head, plumping the undersides of her thighs on his chest.

The wonderful weight of her bare thighs against his chest made him even harder. He ran his hands over their smooth skin, muscularity.

She popped her eyes open, smirk on her lips. "Ready?"

He wasn't sure what she meant. Nodded.

With a surprising grace, she swung both white calves around his neck, small feet sticking up elegantly behind his head, underside of her right calf pressed against his throat.

Ankles crossed behind him, she lifted her shapely ass off the sheets, tightening the underside of her right calf against his Adam's apple.

He reached his hands up instinctively, to pull her tightening calves off his throat, but stopped his hands midway, letting them hang, veins and tendons.

Her bare ass lifted off the sheets again, ankles tightening behind his head, soft, plump underside of her right calf closing off more of his air. He started seeing white pinpoints.

His palms slid up and down the warm fullness of her thighs, giving in.

They kept fucking.

She looked up lazily at his distress, in control. Her bare ass lifted again, underside of calf shutting off all his air.

He went somewhere else, palms feeling the strength of her thighs.

"Almost there?"

He couldn't talk, since her calf shut off his vocal cords. He nodded.

Gripping his neck with her calves, she pulled his spine forward.

Sun! Burst!

He slapped his cock up into her, riding his orgasm, rows of teeth stretched apart.

Once he was down, she casually unwound her calves from around his neck, stuck her big toe between his lips. He gratefully sucked its round joint.

He fell on his back, stomach sucking in. "God."

She snuggled next to him, one lovely knee drawn up. He glanced down at the forty-five degree angle of her calf, the one whose underside had pressed against his throat, cutting off his air. Felt a stomach-turning wave of lust. "God."

She swung her dark eyes up to him, smug smile.

"Did...I don't want to bring up past lovers, but am I right in thinking Brent taught you that?"

Her smugness changed to a concerned look. "Yeah. I mean, we don't have to do it anymore if..."

"No. That's fine." He looked again at her angled calf, remembering how good it felt across his throat. "It really turned me on." He felt himself getting hard, even though he had just come. "I hate to ask, but...what would he do for you?"

"Really? You want to know?"

He felt embarrassed. "Yeah."

Using both small hands, she pushed her dark hair away from her face. "I probably look really messy right now."

"No. I like you messy."

She grinned. "Okay, well, usually, he'd go down on me. He'd go down on me, I'd have my orgasm, you know, then he'd get on top of me and, you know, have intercourse with me while I put my calves around his throat."

He met Brent at a company picnic at Ridges Sanctuary. Didn't like him one bit, wouldn't have liked him even if he weren't Ileana's boyfriend. Ivy league blond hair,

smile that's always a sneer, showing too many teeth, habit of talking over everyone else's words. Pictured him, without wanting to, on top of Ileana, cock up inside her, holding her feet, showing her how to criss-cross her ankles behind his head, this younger Ileana practicing how to get her calves just so around Brent's throat until she had them the way it pleased him, because back then, she wanted to please him.

"Did he have a big cock?"

She did an exaggerated blinking.

"Excuse me?"

"I know. It's an asshole type question, but granting that it is, whose cock was bigger?"

She looked flustered. "Gee, Phil. Okay. Well, yours."

"Are you just saying that, or...I know. It's a horrible question."

She put her right hand against his cheek. "No, honey. Really. Yours is bigger."

"I'm an asshole."

"No, you're not. I understand. But I guess, it's like me asking, whose 'pussy' is tighter."

"I know."

She raised her dark eyebrows. "No, I mean, I'm asking you, whose pussy is tighter?"

"Oh! Well, yours, of course. Maybe since he didn't have intercourse with you so much, just went down on you. I read somewhere, it was an article by a psychiatrist, he said when a man's preferred method of sex with a woman is cunnilingus, that usually means he has homosexual tendencies, since cunnilingus doesn't require him to have an erection, and he can't get a full erection with a woman because he's gay. It was all based on some big, authoritative study they did."

She took in a breath to say something, stopped. Rearranged her expression. "So while we're talking about the past, what would you and her do?"

"Just straight fucking. Mostly, to be honest, make-up sex. We'd fight all the time." He could always tell, in the middle of an

argument with Priscilla, when she'd start getting horny despite herself, that haunted look she'd get, eyes dropping in her sockets like she was checking something internal, unhealthy flush on her cheeks, little lips giving out shorter answers until she'd pull off her t-shirt, lay on her back, legs spread. He always thought her springy, light brown pubic hair, the natural pattern in which it grew, was pretty.

An hour later, while the rest of the city slept on, they took a break from the nose nuzzlings and gentle smiles of their conversation to make love again, Philip going down on Ileana this time, telling her ahead of time, since she'd see the top of his head, that he suspected he was developing a bald spot, her puffing out her lips, waving her left hand, saying, "Don't worry about that," Ileana strangling Philip again with her calves. An hour after that, the radio on top of her dresser playing, at a low volume, old Beatles songs, they finished telling each other about everyone they had fucked in the past. She had had more partners than him. Half an hour later, after several beers, Philip held her sobbing upper body in his arms, feeling her tears drop on his bare chest, while she talked about how guilty she felt about Brent's death. Twenty minutes later, two beers later, they had their first fight, about why Roy the bartender would call her a whore, she insisting she barely knew him, nothing he said was true, then once that was settled, he told her about the masturbatory fantasy he had for years, imagining her and Priscilla settling down on a mattress in a sixty-nine position, kissing each other's inner thighs, cupping each other's bare asses, tonguing each other's cunts. A while after that she told him she had once, as a kid, thrown a rock at a neighborhood dog, hitting him on his snout, causing him to run whimpering down the street, and he told her about the time, when he was fourteen, after a swim meet, he sucked another boy's cock.

She touched herself between her legs while he told her. "Did he come in your mouth?"

"Yeah. But I didn't swallow it. I tilted my head, let it spill out on the shower tiles."

She kept touching herself, eyes glassy. "I want to give you a blowjob, but I want it to be exactly like the blowjob Priscilla would give you, okay? Tell me exactly what your former girlfriend would do with her lips and her tongue and her fingers while she sucked you, and I want you to close your eyes during it and picture yourself in bed with her instead of me, okay? Like you're coming in her mouth instead of my mouth, okay? Was her mouth really warm?"

He stood up from the toilet seat, finished wiping, glanced down at the front of his bent body, noticed how pronounced his abdominal muscles had gotten the past month, working out on Ileana's home gym.

Stopping in front of the full-length mirror in their bathroom, he looked at his naked body.

Ileana wandered in, nude except for a white bra. "Ooooh!"

He bent her over the bathroom sink, her small hands on the hot and cold water spigots as he slid his long cock up inside her cunt, bumped her ass up, up, up a thousand times, fingers pinching nipples under her lopsided white bra, until her lips burst apart, spittle on the mirror, knees caving. He lay on the bathroom floor, closing his eyes as she locked her plump calves around his throat, lifting her left hip, lifting it, lifting it, until his cock shot.

When they were fully dressed, she went up on tip-toe, kissed his forehead. "I'll buy some shrimp on the way home, okay?"

"Yeah, sure. There it is." He bent over, picked up a bar of Irish Spring from the bathroom floor. "This fucking thing was under my back the whole time you were choking me." He flung it angrily at the mirror. It bounced off its rapidly approaching reflection, ricocheting around their bathroom.

Krushing's closed at ten, so they usually ate dinner around midnight. He could sleep late the next morning (Krushing's didn't open until five in the afternoon). She had to be at work by eight o'clock in the morning, but she never complained.

He always called their apartment between eight and nine, from the bar, while Florian was on stage in his white shirt and black vest and shorts with the house band, doing his shtick and cajoling all the diners to put down their forks, stand up by their tables, and do the Chicken Dance.

Greta, the fiftyish waitress with the mid-thigh black and white serving costume he met when he applied for the job, came over to him after he hung up the phone, took his finger out of his left ear. She had a good figure, but her face looked old, wrinkled mouth and jaw like a steam shovel. Once, she pressed her surprisingly soft body against his front, to whisper in his ear above the general noise that Florian was really pleased with him. After that, he always turned his body sideways when she approached.

"Florian wants you should talk to the people at table nine. College kids."

He shouted over the din of the Chicken Dance. "What's the problem?"

"They say they don't have the money to pay for their meals. Doris asked them if they could postdate a check, and the lead one, he with the blond hair, he just laughed and asked for another round of drinks." She grabbed his right shoulder. "You know what all the waitresses are calling you?"

He shook his head, looking over at table nine.

"Mr. 3 Cool."

"What?"

"That's right. Mr. 3 Cool. All of them think you're so cool, you're three times the regular cool guy. Even Ingrid calls you that!"

"Okay."

"I want to show you something."

He took a step back, cautious around her since that time she pressed her body against him.

Steam shovel mouth grinning, she reached both hands up to mid-face, fingers wiping away her makeup, exposing a thin, horizontal red scar under each cheekbone. "I'm one too! Just like you."

He felt a chill.

Her fingers smeared her makeup back over the two knife scars.

Philip walked down the aisle between the tables, side-stepping waitresses carrying trays of steaming knockwurst and sauerkraut, wondering why Greta singled-out Ingrid, a black-haired waitress of eighteen from Germany who wore her long hair in side braids.

He stopped by table nine, letting his hands hang from his sides. Before The Path, he would have nervously put his hands in his pockets. No more. Two boys, two girls, all around twenty. "What's this I hear about a problem paying your bill?"

The blond-haired, wide-faced boy at the back of the table shrugged good-naturedly. "We don't have any money We're poor college students." He looked at the other three, rolled his eyes at them so Philip could see the eye-rolling.

"If you eat, you have to pay."

"Yeah, well, we don't have the money, Adolf. Didn't I just say that?" He sat back, glancing at the others, who snickered.

The Chicken Dance finished, to wide applause. The dining room got quieter, so Philip didn't have to raise his voice. "Your bill comes to eighty-eight dollars. Not bad, to feed the four of you, with plenty of drinks. We'll figure a tip of twelve dollars. That means you owe one hundred dollars. Let's have it."

The college boy leaned even further back, enjoying himself. "Bring us another round of drinks. We'll think it over."

Philip gave him a tight smile. "I want you to remember one thing."

"Whatever."

"I want you to remember that when I asked you to pay the money you owed, I first asked you politely."

The college boy shrugged. "Whatever." Then, testing, someone who had gotten away with a lot in life by testing, he said, "Hey, you know what? Fuck you."

Philip turned towards the stage, where Florian, microphone to his mouth, was watching.

Philip brought his curled right hand up to his mouth.

On stage, Florian spoke into the microphone, his voice magnified. "Guess what we gonna be doing now, ladies and gentlemen?" He called three of the black-clad band members over, talked to them a moment off-microphone. They reached over their heads, lifting an incredibly long alpine horn off the hooks it hung from, among the glass beer mugs dangling from the ceiling. The horn was twenty feet long. "We gonna do a song with one of the longest alpine horns in the world."

As all the people at the different tables swung their heads forward to watch this incredibly long horn get carefully lowered from the ceiling by three band members, steadying it along its length, Philip reached across the table, grabbed college boy by the front of his shirt, enjoying the look of privileged outrage in college boy's face as his head bent down, seeing the fingers wrapped around his buttons, and hoisted college boy out into the aisle, stepping behind him, puppet-walking him down the row of diners distracted by the alpine horn to the back kitchen.

Once in the kitchen, he propelled college boy forward, until his face bounced off the stainless steel overhead shelves, and the punk fell backwards onto the floor.

"Stay here."

Philip returned to the dining room, hustled the other three college kids out from behind their table, marched them to the back kitchen.

When he had all four of them in the back kitchen, college boy with a bloody nose, he stood in front of them, hands hanging from

his sides. "If you eat food you can't pay for, you have to clean dishes. Pedro?"

Pedro carried out four stacks of dirty dishes, set them on the stainless steel counter.

"Clean them."

College boy got off the floor, wiping his bloody nose. "Where's the fucking dishwasher?"

"We don't have one back here."

College boy looked around, didn't see a sink. "So how are we supposed to clean the fucking dishes if you don't got a dishwasher or a sink?"

Philip put the first dirty plate in front of college boy. There was a smear of gravy on it from the veal oscar, some uneaten egg white, leftover spaetzle, a few green broccoli flowerets. "Lick the plates clean."

College boy reared his head back, eyes fierce. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

It turns out, Philip wasn't kidding.

"So, I thought, I don't know, maybe we could get away after your shift at the restaurant Sunday, take an overnight vacation."

Ileana's face rested on Philip's chest, profile between his nipples.

He stroked her dark hair, combing it away from her features so he could see the freckles on her cheeks, remembering how often, years ago, he had fantasized about kissing those freckles. Now he could kiss them anytime he wanted. "Okay."

She looked up again into his eyes. "I think a vacation, a mini-vacation, would be good for us." She lowered her eyes again. He saw the black pupils switch left, right, as she phrased the next sentence in her mind, worry in her pupils. "I guess, I don't know. It just seems like lately, we've kind of not been spending a lot of time with each other."

He kissed the top of her head, smelling her hair. "I know. It's my job. Florian really believes in me, he's the first boss I've had that does."

"I know."

"Yeah, maybe get away for a night. But not a big city. Every night in the paper, there's more and more stuff about The Path. They're in all the big cities now."

"I know."

"It used to be, their ideas were universally rejected. People spoke out against them. But now, it seems like more and more people are saying, Well, their ideas aren't that bad."

"We could go to Madison."

"What's in Madison? I was thinking maybe the Dells, for the fall foliage."

"My mom and dad live in Madison."

"Oh." He couldn't think of anything to say.

"We wouldn't stay with them, we'd get a hotel room in town. Just maybe, have dinner with them, so they can meet you. Then after dinner, we go back to our hotel room, have some drinks, maybe watch some porno on TV..."

"Yeah. Okay."

"Could we?"

He lifted his head off the pillow, kissed her freckles, her lifting lips, her happy eyes.

It turned out the college kid came from a wealthy family.

A few weeks after Philip made the kid pay his bill, a mailman showed up at Krushing's with a certified letter for Florian.

It was from a legal firm in downtown Milwaukee.

The letter informed Florian, in long paragraphs that included parenthetical references to state statutes and case law, that Drew Stilton's rights had been violated during his visit to Krushing's, and that although Mr. Stilton had offered several times to pay his debt with a personal check, Mr. Philip Benton, who is in the employ of Krushing's, had rejected Mr. Stilton's offers and had willfully subjected Mr. Stilton to grievous physical and emotional distress in front of three witnesses willing to testify to that effect. The lawyer wanted fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000.00) in

damages from Florian, and threatened to file a complaint against Krushing's if that sum was not forthcoming with ten (10) days from receipt of the letter.

Florian waited until Philip finished reading the letter. "This is bad, Philip."

"It's bullshit."

"Yeah, but I can't afford to pay no lawyer fifty thousand dollars. I told you, push them around a little to get our money, but don't rough 'em up." He let Philip see the disappointment in his eyes.

Philip took the letter from him. "I'll handle this, Florian."

"How you gonna handle it, Philip? Look at the paper this letter's written on. This is a big time lawyer, Philip."

"It's fine. I'll handle it. I'll meet with him."

Florian raised his black eyebrows. "With who? This lawyer? You're not a lawyer, Philip. You're a bouncer."

Philip felt a shaft of shame go through him. He could tell his cheeks were red. "I'll handle it." He swallowed. "I won't let you down."

Philip and Andrew, one of the cooks at Krushing's, were having a late night smoke outside the bright entrance, overhead street lights picking up the grain of the sidewalk. Philip, as usual, leaned his back against one of the Journal-Sentinel newspaper dispensers, the type of metal box on legs where you drop in a quarter, lift the front clear plastic lid, take out a paper.

"Oh!" Andrew raised the hand that held his cigarette. "Meant to tell you. I'm up for a speaking part in a new movie."

Philip exhaled. "Really? Is it a black man part, or an any man part?"

Andrew wrinkled his forehead. "Black man part. But, hey, you know. Next time it won't be, if I get noticed this time."

"What's your speaking part? Do you want me to read lines with you again?"

"It's just one line, man."

"So what's the line?"

Andrew laughed, shaking his head.

“Are you ready for this?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re sure? You’re sure you’re ready for this?”

“What’s the line?”

Andrew ducked his head. Raised it, pausing a moment to get the reading right.

“That dog sure do like toothpaste!”

“What?”

“That’s it. That dog sure do like toothpaste!”

“You’re kidding.”

“Hey, it’s another credit on my resume.”

A man walking by on the sidewalk reached in his pocket, pulled out a quarter, stood in front of Philip. “You want to move out of my way?”

Philip stood up from leaning against the newspaper dispenser. “What?”

He was an inch taller than Philip, thinner, in an expensive black overcoat. “Get out of my way so I can buy a paper?”

Philip looked at Andrew, moved away from the dispenser.

The man dropped his quarter in, pulled down the square front lid, reached in.

“Make sure you only take one paper.”

The man pulled a paper out, glanced at Philip. “What was that?”

“I said, make sure you only take one paper. That’s all you paid for.”

The man let out a chuckle, thin handsome face, folding the paper, tucking it up under his left armpit, looking at Philip like Philip had no idea who he was talking to. “You want to say that again?”

Philip tugged the paper from the man’s armpit, staring him in the eye, scanned the headlines. The Path were holding a rally.

“That’s my paper.”

“Fuck you.”

“You want some trouble?”

Andrew walked over, spreading his hands apart. “Hey, come on. My friend’s just saying, you have to show some respect. Don’t

just order someone to move out of the way. Use the magic words. Please. And Thank you.”

“Give me my paper.”

Philip let the paper fall out of his hands to the sidewalk, the sections, in the fall, separating. “There’s your paper.”

The man looked down at the separated sections of the paper spilled around his expensive black shoes. “Pick it up.”

Philip held the man’s eyes. “I got a better idea. Have your mother pick it up, after she finishes sucking the cocks of every dog in your neighborhood, the dogs afterwards committing suicide over the shame of having sex with such a worthless shit whore as your mother.”

The man stared into Philip’s eyes. Philip stared back.

The man turned on his heel, walking away. “Fucking Path psychotic.”

Andrew put his hand against Philip’s left shoulder, stopping him. “Let it go. He’s an asshole. Let it go, man.”

Philip went to the lawyer’s office on a Monday, since Krushing’s was closed Mondays.

He stepped out of the elevator into a hushed, carpeted space, floor to ceiling windows showing panoramic views of Milwaukee skyscrapers.

Walked over to the receptionist’s counter, soft pings of incoming calls behind her. She looked too young to have such an important job.

“I’m Philip Benton. I’m here to see Dan Barton for a ten o’clock appointment.”

She looked up at him, blue eyes below blonde bangs. “Have a seat, please.” She turned sideways in her chair, pressed a button. “Your ten o’clock is here.”

He flipped through the color photographs in Milwaukee Today, different food festivals.

A man in a dark suit, balding head came out, stopped by the receptionist’s desk a moment, placing his hand on the counter, walked over to where Philip was seated.

“Mr. Benton?” He held his hand out.

Philip put the magazine back on the table beside him, stood, ignoring the outstretched hand. “You’re Dan Barton?”

He followed Barton down a few quiet hallways to a glass-encased room.

Three men were already sitting around the conference table. He recognized the college kid, Drew Stilton, his male friend from that evening, and an older man with angry blue eyes, white hair, who was obviously, by his nose and chin, Stilton’s father.

A black camcorder had been carefully positioned on its silver tripod, its one large glass eye pointed at where Philip was directed to sit.

“We’re recording this discussion. I assume you don’t mind?”

Philip took his seat. “Actually, I do mind.”

Barton spread his hands out. “Fairly standard procedure.”

Philip put the tripod and attached camcorder on its heavy side, pushed tiny buttons until the blinking red light winked out.

Barton shrugged. “Okay.” He put his elbows on the table, pointing with both index fingers at Philip’s face. “Just for the record, those cuts under your cheekbones, those are marks of The Path, right?”

“They are, but I escaped from them.”

“What do you mean, You escaped from them?”

“They were transporting me when I rolled out of their car. They marked me, but they didn’t have time to influence me.”

Barton looked around at the others. “Well, the way I understand it, the marking in and of itself is all that’s needed. The process may be slower, but—”

“Have you been marked?”

“No. You’re a...” He consulted his notes. “A bouncer, right?”

“Yeah.”

“When did you become a bouncer?”

“When I moved to Milwaukee.”

“Before or after you were marked?”

“After. But that doesn’t mean anything.”

“What were you before you were marked?”

“An auditor.”

“Kind of a desk job, right?”

“What’s your point?”

“That transition you made, from sitting behind a safe desk all day to becoming a bouncer, isn’t that a fairly typical transition for someone who’s been marked by The Path?”

“Being an auditor can be confrontational.”

“To what degree? When you were an auditor, Mr. Benton, did you ever force someone to lick dirty plates?”

“I didn’t audit dirty plates.”

“Isn’t it true you forced my client to clean a large number of dirty plates, plates that had been dirtied by someone other than himself, by people who were strangers to him, with his tongue?”

“That’s what it says in your letter.”

Philip pulled the letter out of his jacket pocket. Slid it across the conference table to Barton. “Did you write this letter?”

Barton sat back. “I prepared it, yes.”

“I know someone else actually wrote it, you get paralegals or clerks to do all your work for you, yet still bill your clients at your own hourly rates, but I’m asking you if you basically composed this letter, putting together a few ideas on a yellow legal pad.”

Barton glanced at the senior Mr. Stilton. “That’s the way it works.”

“Are you right-handed or left-handed?”

Barton allowed himself a smirk. “What?”

“You heard me. Are you right-handed or left-handed?”

The senior Mr. Stilton spoke up, old hands folded on the tabletop. He looked sideways at Philip like Philip had a bad haircut and a big Adam’s apple. “You

humiliated my son over some negligible incident—”

Philip swiveled his head in the old man’s direction. “Shut. The fuck. Up.”

The old man popped his eyes. “I don’t know who you—”

Barton sat up. “Let’s not use that language.”

Philip glared at him. “Are you right-handed or left-handed?”

Barton spread his hands apart. “Right-handed. What does it matter?”

“So in other words, your right hand wrote this letter to my employer.”

“If you want to look at it that way, yes.”

Philip reached across the conference table, grabbed Barton’s right wrist, twisted the wrist, smashed the ganglia of fingers down, big college ring on one of the fingers, smashed the fingers down on the hard wooden edge of the table until he heard a satisfying crack that told him he had broken Barton’s right hand.

Once his wrist was released, Barton pulled his mangled right hand up to his mouth, tears in his eyes.

Philip leaned across the conference table. “If you write another letter to my boss, I’ll chew your right hand off. If you dictate the letter into a microphone, I’ll reach my teeth into your mouth and pull your tongue out.” He turned to the senior Mr. Stilton. “If you hire another attorney to pursue this complaint, I’ll chop off the hand that writes the check for the retainer.” He looked at Drew Stilton. “And as for you.” He reached over, grabbed Stilton by the back of his neck, tilted his face up, bounced his fist off Stilton’s face once, twice, three times, four times, five times, six times, until the kid was sobbing, blood flying.

Ileana stared at him. Her drink on the kitchen counter by her right hand was unsipped.

“So anyway, that’s what happened.”

She finally roused herself. “How did you get out of the building?”

“Just walked. Left the conference room, found my way back to the main reception area after a couple of wrong turns, even waved to the receptionist as I left. There was blood on my hand. She may have noticed, she may not have.”

Her dark eyes looked worried. “But Phil, don’t you think he’s going to report this to the police? You assaulted him. He’s a lawyer. And you assaulted the college kid.”

He put his left forefinger back in his mouth, wetting it, rubbing away more of the blood on his right knuckles, turning the red to pink. “They won’t. I put the fear in them.”

She touched the cold side of her glass, unhappy, still didn’t lift it. “Yeah, but...I don’t know.” She let out a sigh. Raised her thin shoulders. “I never understood why you went there in the first place. Florian hired you, he expected you to use some force. You’re a bouncer. If he gets sued, why not let him handle it? He must have liability insurance.”

He scrubbed furiously at his bloody knuckles, not looking at her, ears rising on the sides of his head. “Tell me you’re not defending this college kid.”

“No! Of course not.”

“You weren’t there. You didn’t see the arrogance on his face, tilting back in his chair, looking at me like I’m just hourly help while he’s got all these connections, and his rich little daddy.” His mouth twisted down.

She put her hand on his forearm.

“Phil, honey, I’m on your side. Come on!”

“Then be on my side! Defend me! Say, You know what? I really admire what you did! You had to deal with this fucking asshole, this worthless piece of shit, and you smashed his fucking, arrogant face in. You taught him. You punished him. Are you saying that?”

Ileana’s eyes glistened. She reached out her hand. He violently moved his arm away, still rubbing at the blood.

“Come on, honey. I am on your side.”

He stood up. "Then say it, for once! Say, Don't think about it, Do it!"

She screwed her face up. "What?"

He thumped at his chest. "No one takes advantage of me. No one."

"Phil? Honey? Those are Path sayings. Why are you repeating them?"

"It doesn't matter what they are. They're the truth."

"They're not. Come on."

He swallowed his drink in a single Adam's apple bobbing gulp, slammed the empty glass down on the counter. "I know who I am. I'm not afraid."

"Darling? Sweetheart? You're getting too caught up in the Path. You're letting their ideas influence you too much."

He snorted. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

She gestured at the counter. "Look at all these tracts you bring home." She read some titles. "Who Are You? Can You Do It? Why Not Right Now?"

"They mean something to me. I wouldn't be where I am today if The Path hadn't stepped in."

"What are you talking about? They cut into your face, Phil."

"Yeah, and if it hadn't been for that evening, I never would have met you again. Did you ever think about that? Do you even care?"

She swallowed her drink, took both their empty glasses, made two more. "Of course I think about it." She drank about half her new drink, while he drank all of his. She went back to the side of the refrigerator, brought over the bottle of vodka, the bag of ice from the sink, placed both on the counter.

"Don't get my pamphlets wet!" He scooped all the pamphlets away from the dripping plastic bag of ice, dropped them to the carpet on his side of the counter.

Burrowed his right hand into the cold plastic bag of ice, getting blood on the ice cubes, pulling some ice cubes out, dropping them in his glass, upending the vodka bottle

over his glass. "A lot of this comes back to that same question."

Ileana's shoulders drooped. She drank the rest of her drink, poured another, going more into herself.

"Did you fuck him?"

"No. I told you."

"So, he just decided to say out of the blue, to a total stranger, Watch out for her, she's a real whore, she fucks every guy who comes in this bar. Why would he say that? Why would he say that, Ileana?"

She looked tired. "I don't know, Phil. I knew him, I used to stop there sometimes to eat on my way up or down the lake on business, but I have no idea why he would say that. Maybe he's just an evil person who likes to play with people's heads."

"Well, it's so easy for someone to play with my head, right?"

"I'm not saying that."

"Did you ever fuck anyone you met there?"

She lowered her head wearily, pouring a new drink. Looked up at him. "Why are we doing this, Phil? We could have a great evening together, like we used to. Make love, which we never seem to do anymore, fry up some flounder, watch a little TV..."

"As long as we fuck the way Brent taught you to fuck, right?"

"Shut up."

"Oh, I hit a sore spot, didn't I?"

She finished her drink, reached for the bottle. "Just shut up, okay?"

"Did you ever fuck anyone you met at that bar?"

"Cut it out."

"You did, right? I can take it."

Her shoulders sagged. She started crying. Looked up at him. "What do you want from me? Why can't we just have fun?"

He raised his voice. "Did you ever fuck anyone you met at that restaurant!"

She stepped back from her side of the kitchen counter, bent over, threw up. Threw up again.

He reached his hand out, contrite, to her shoulder. She shook her shoulder away. Poured a new drink.

They were silent for a while, that hurt silence between lovers where neither one is going to say the first word, out of pride, instead talking to the other in their heads, to a more reasonable version of the other.

Finally, after a few more wordless drinks, he broke the silence. "This is nothing, it doesn't mean anything, but I kissed one of the waitresses at work."

She shot her unhappy head up. "What?"

"It doesn't mean anything. It just happened. I kissed her, but that was it. I didn't put my hands on her breasts or anything. It was just a kiss."

She looked astonished. "Who?"

He hung his head. "Ingrid."

"Who?"

"I don't know if you ever met her. She's from Germany."

"How old is she?"

"She's like...eighteen, I think."

She slapped him across his face.

Started crying. He felt ashamed, seeing how much he had hurt her. "Why would you do that?"

He was crying himself. "I don't know. The thing is...she's been marked by The Path."

She stood up, furious. "The Path! The Path! I am so fucking sick of hearing about The Path!"

"I'm sorry."

She tilted her head, looked at him with glazed eyes. "You want to know something? I liked you." He cringed at the past tense. "I really did. Back then, years ago? I thought you were this really sweet, cool guy I could talk to. You read books, you were respectful towards me...I really liked you, Phil. I always thought, I always thought..." She started sobbing. "I always thought if you and me ever got together, it would be innocent. We'd both be innocent. There'd be no anger. It would just be good." She wiped her nose with the side of her right hand. "And

when we got together, up there at that stupid restaurant, I thought, you know what? My dreams have come true. And they did, they honestly did, for a while. But you're changing so much."

"Changing how?"

She shrugged. "Everything makes you angry now." She wiped her eyes. "We go to the supermarket, you think somebody looks at you the wrong way, and you're ready to smash their head in." Fresh tears rolled down. "I watch you while we're eating, or looking at a TV show, or whatever. I see your face contort in fury over I don't know what, all these interior conversations you're having. There's this tremendous anger in you that was never there before. You flip your middle finger at everything. I don't know how to deal with it, Phil. I don't know how to help you."

They moved to the bedroom, bringing the vodka bottle with them, passing it back and forth.

She put on her pink pajamas, got into bed next to him. "So who's this Ingrid?"

"She's just this stupid waitress. She flirted with me a few times. After a while, I flirted back. Once, when we were both in the back room, she did her version of the chicken dance for me. Except it wasn't a true version, where she bent her elbows and put her hands in her armpits. It was a version where she lifted her arms straight up in the air, and swung her hips side to side. About a week ago, she grabbed my hand, pulled me into the back corridor, and wiped the makeup off her cheeks to show me she was marked, too. She was the same as me."

"She's not the same as you, Phil! We're the same. Not you and her!"

"Well, she's marked."

She sat by herself in her pink pajamas on her side of the bed, head in her fingers, long black hair spilled over her face, crying. He reached out for her, but she violently shook off his hand.

Finally, she rose from the bed, stumbling, landing clumsily on the carpet.

Got back up, staggered out of the room.

Philip sat on their bed, head spinning, worrying about what he had done, if the police were going to come. He didn't give the lawyer his address here, though. He was sure of that. They wouldn't know how to find him until tomorrow, when they could go to the restaurant. Florian had his address on file.

Ileana came back in, holding a steak knife.

He cringed, but then she pushed it into his hands.

She swayed in front of him. "Mark me."

"What?"

"Mark me! Two strikes down under the eyes. Then we're the same. We'll think the same." Her eyes looked around stupidly. "I've got eighteen thousand dollars in savings. We'll leave the apartment early in the morning, get the cash, drive out of town. I have a sister who lives in Nevada. We'll stay with her until we're able to get fake I.D.s. Then we can go anywhere we want."

He looked down at the knife in his hands. "Are you sure?"

She nodded.

"You'd do this for me?"

She sniffled. "I love you, Phil." Raised her head, spoke sincerely. "Whatever it takes."

She lay on her back in her pink pajamas across their bed, dark eyes looking up at him. "This will solve our problems, right?"

He grabbed the knife, raised it over her face, blinking to clear his vision. "Yeah. You'll be part of The Path."

She twisted her face to one side, tears rolling out of her eyes. "I don't want to be alone. I don't like being alone."

He raised his hand. "You'll never be alone now."

He plunged the knife down.

She raised her head instinctively off the pillow, anticipating the pain, frightened.

With her head raised, the knife, instead of going in below her left eye, went in the middle of her forehead, with a loud slip! crunch.

Her tongue spilled out.

He unwrapped his fingers from the handle of the knife, keening.

Her dark eyes fluttered open, tongue going back inside, red bead of blood rolling down to her left eyebrow.

She scrunched her eyes, tears welling. Tilted her head to one side, black handle of the steak knife sticking up out of her forehead. "You missed, didn't you?"

"I'm so sorry!" He went to put his hand back around the black handle, to pull the blade out.

"Don't! Even more blood will come out." Her dark eyes looked up at him, glistening.

"I'll call 911."

"Don't! Don't leave me!" Her voice came out high, like a kid's. "I'm scared." Her mouth opened, mucus on her teeth. "I'm afraid I'll die while you're in the other room calling. I don't want to die alone."

He bent over her, sobbing. "What have I done? I'm so stupid. I'm so fucking stupid!" He closed his eyes, saw them soon after he moved in with her, walking into a supermarket together, such a novelty, him and her in a supermarket together, shopping for food for their shared apartment, she a head shorter, and he could tell by the way she walked next to him she felt happy and confident, she was drawing strength from him.

"I'm having trouble seeing."

He raised his head.

Watched her close her left eye, right eye. "Phil, I'm losing my sight."

"I'll call! Let me call."

"No! Don't! I want you to stay here." Her right hand fumbled forward, searching, found his hand. Her dark eyes switched left, right below the black handle of the knife. She tilted her head to one side, warm tears sliding

out. "This is so unfair." Her face got red. "So unfair."

His fingers wiped the tears from her eyes, reached up, wiped at the blood sliding down her forehead, tears mixing with the blood, turning her forehead pink.

"It would only take me a moment to call for help."

"Please don't leave me! I don't want to die alone."

"Is there a phone jack in here?"

She didn't respond.

"Ileana? Is there a phone jack in here?"

As he watched, her irises changed to orange, pink, red.

Her black pupils froze above the freckles on her cheeks.

He escaped from Milwaukee that same evening, stealing her car. Wound up in Mobile, Alabama, working for The Path, buying groceries for the local infestation.

Each day he went to the Piggly-Wiggly, makeup under his eyes, pushing his shopping cart down the bright aisles, checking off items on his long list.

Each visit, he'd see her at least once. Standing behind her cart at the check-out counter, airplane hanger height of the supermarket above her, that downcast look we all get in our eyes when alone; silently reading the ingredients on the tilted side of a cereal box; third person in a line of overcoats to rent a movie; holding a man's striped pajama sleeve against her own arm in the Men's Department, to see if the shirt might fit him.