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Tales of Forgotten Innocence



UNFINISHED TALES
Fragments and Memories

UNFINISHED TALES

Edited by Kristy Leigh

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A SEASON OF DARKNESS

CHAPTER ONE: ARRIVALS

1.

One of the oddest things about change is that you rarely see it coming.

It sort of sidles up to you all silent and unannounced, like the rising of the sun or the turning of the seasons. For me, it happened on a bright, cool morning at the beginning of summer; not long after my ninth birthday. Must've been around the same time my Dad went off to Chicago with his girlfriend. Mom and I never saw that one coming either. Looking back, I suppose I shouldn't have been so surprised at what went down over the next few months; a lot of weird stuff was going on that year.

I was sitting on the front steps of our Fairmont home, listening to the radio and absently playing with a *Whipper-Snapper*. A Whipper-Snapper is one of those toys that fall in and out of fashion; a small blue ping-pong racket with a black rubber ball attached to it. They have about a dozen different names; Hip-Zipper or Bee-Bopper or something equally inane, but you know what I mean. You probably had one yourself when you were a kid.

It would have been about ten in the morning when the Tracker Brothers moving van pulled up in front of the house next door. I watched their arrival with considerable interest; the Old Stewart Place had been vacant for about two years and had half a dozen realty signs decorating the front yard. My mother secretly hoped it never sold, because you could never tell what kind of neighbors you were going to get. Guess we were about to find out.

Anyway, a couple of fat, sweaty guys got out of the truck (the Tracker Bothers presumably) and started unloading furniture onto the front lawn, grunting and wheezing with exertion. Leaving the radio on the veranda, I stood up and walked over to the edge of the yard. Even at my age, I knew you could tell a lot about people from their possessions. There was a fence dividing our properties, a low, red-brick wall maybe a foot high. I stood to one side, casually zocking the Whipper-Snapper up and down. If the Trackers noticed my presence, they didn't give any indication.

Surveying the chaos, I figured that the new neighbors had at least one kid; most probably a girl by the looks of things. Most boys would have been disappointed to see all the dolls and pandas and bunny-ruggles, but I was the only kid living up on Fairmont Heights at the time. Most of my friends lived out in Greendale, way over on the other side of town. Any change would have been an improvement as far as I was concerned. Glancing back towards my house, I sat down on the fence, settling in for the morning. Mom wouldn't like me annoying the movers, so I decided to keep a low profile.

The neighbors themselves appeared five minutes later, rolling up the driveway in a late model ford (a Thunderbird, if I remember correctly). The doors cracked open and two people got out: a tall, dark haired woman and a little blond girl I judged to be about the same age as me. I was too far away to get a close look, although I thought the mother was probably quite good-looking. As for the daughter, she scooted into the house carrying an armload of stuffed animals faster than it takes to read this sentence. The woman walked over to talk to the moving-guys, both of whom were struggling with an antique European chaise-long, the sort you see in old Frankenstein movies. A lot of her furniture was like that; all vintage lamps and statuettes and

vases from mysterious lands. I later found out that that was her job; she used to be an agent for some auction house in upstate New York.

The morning proceeded for about an hour until the Trackers took a coffee break (the older sibling kept a thermos in the van), by which time most of the furniture had been relocated inside. The lawn was still littered with tea-chests and hampers, but most of the work had been done. The little girl had spent most of her time darting in and out of the house collecting toys, books and assorted knick-knacks; now she was ready to explore her immediate surroundings. Or more precisely, she was ready to investigate me.

Gingerly mounting the brick fence, she held her arms out for balance and started walking along the top, pretending she hadn't noticed me. I did much the same thing, hammering idly away at my paddle-ball until she was about ten feet away. We both looked up at the same instant, cued by that obscure sense of timing all children seem to possess. She paused for a moment, then tight-roped forward a few more steps.

"Hi. I'm Chissie," she informed me, cutting through all the social protocols without a backward glance.

"Hi, I'm Billy. You're new here." I'd been on an unending quest to state the obvious for some years now.

"Yeah," she confirmed offhand, "we just moved in this morning."

"Where you from?"

"Longridge Bay."

"Where's that?"

She shrugged her answer; very few nine year-olds can point out their hometown on a map. That was no big deal, though; I sometimes had trouble finding my way home from school, so she was probably doing better than me.

"You live *there*?" she asked, pointing to our modest little colonial bluestone.

"Yeah," I nodded, "I live here with my Mom."

"I live with my Mom too," she commented, still working on her balance (although the fence was only a foot off the ground), "but not my Dad. He went away a long time ago."

"Where to?" I enquired, surprised that we were both single-parent kids.

"I don't know. Canada, I think."

"Mine's in Chicago." We spoke with the unselfconscious curiosity of very young children, communicating more with looks and glances than anything else. I think that's where it all began, in those quiet moments between each sentence. We talked and we listened, and somehow, in the brief pauses punctuating our words, our lives had become inextricably linked. Of course, neither of us could have realized that at the time. At the end of the day, we were just two kids chattering away in the warm June sunshine.

About the only thing I really noticed was how pretty Chrissie was much prettier than any of the girls I knew from school. She had the delicate bone structure and milky complexion of a new born infant. I think her most captivating feature was her eyes. They were a pale shade of violet I'd never seen before; violet ringed with turquoise, if you can believe that. Whenever they caught the sun, they seemed to glitter with some strange purple light, though that was probably my imagination.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" she enquired, pirouetting around on her right foot. Her little pink sun-frock ballooned out around her thighs as she turned.

"No, I don't," I answered, thinking she probably studied ballet or something. She reminded me of a music-box dancer.

"Me neither," she said, patting her skirt down, then added: "my Daddy left when I was really little."

I thought of mentioning that my father only ran off two months before, but decided I didn't want to talk about it. Instead, I returned my attention to the paddle-ball, whocking it towards the grass in short, elastic loops.

"What's that?" Chrissie demanded, spinning anti-clockwise this time.

"It's a Whipper-Snapper. I got it for my birthday." I gave the ball an extra hard zock, stretching the string out to around three feet. Chrissie's eyes widened as if she'd never seen one before. The ball streaked out half a dozen times before I dropped the pace back to more normal parameters.

"Can I have a try?" Chrissie asked.

"Yeah, sure," I shrugged. Chrissie jumped off the wall and her dress ballooned up again, this time around her waist. I stood up and handed her the paddle, talking her through the intricacies of holding the grip. Chrissie nodded along for a few seconds, then started zocking away like a world class champion. My eyes widen in vague astonishment: it had taken me nearly two months to perfect my technique, practicing every day since my father flew the coop.

"You've done this before?" I asked in near disbelief.

"No, this is my first time," she corrected, literally beaming with pleasure. She turned her shimmering, purple eyes in my direction, and somehow, I knew she was telling me the truth.

2.

In the weeks that followed, I would discover that Chrissie was something of a prodigy. She could pick up new skills in the blink of an eye and usually without any practice whatsoever. Mastering the paddle-ball in a matter of seconds was probably the least of her abilities, though it sure impressed the hell out of me. At times, I found it downright spooky, but on that lazy summer morning at the beginning of June, it was the proverbial mystery of the ages. I never had the opportunity to ask her about it, however. Just at that second, Chrissie's mother appeared on the front veranda and called out to her.

Both of us turned towards the voice, Chrissie a fraction of a second earlier than me (and without losing her rhythm for so much as a second). The woman standing at the top of the steps was tall and willow-thin with jet black hair slicing down the left side of her face. She was wearing a plain blue house dress that somehow rippled against her figure like liquid silk. She looked to be in her late twenties, though at that distance I couldn't be sure.

"That your Mom?" I asked, squinting for focus.

"Yeah," Chrissie confirmed, taking me by the hand and tugging me towards the house, "come over and say hi." We set off across the lawn, dodging between miscellaneous crates and packing cartons. I was suddenly a little shy of meeting her, knowing she was probably incredibly busy with everything. If I'd been a few years older, I would have made some excuse and come back in a day or two, but I was still too young for such complex social rituals. Needless to say, I had nothing to worry about. Chrissie dragged me to the foot of the steps, and her mother came down to meet us.

And my eyes widened for the second time that day.

Chrissie's mom was the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life. There's simply no other way to describe her. It wasn't conventional beauty, like you see in fashion magazines or TV shows. No, it was much more subtle than that, sort of like the tones of a Renaissance painting or

the scales of a classical aria. I stared at her with a child's unaffected wonder, and she rewarded me with a smile that could have shamed the sun.

"Who's this?" she asked, touching my face with her luminous gaze. I felt my heart stall in mid-beat.

"Momma, this is *Billy*," Chrissie said, indicating me with a sweep of her hand, "he's my new friend."

"Well, pleased to meet you, Billy. My name's Evelyn Reinhart. My friends call me Eve."

"Hi, Mrs. Reinhart," I managed after an incredibly long pause, "I'm Billy Campbell. I live next door. More of my unending crusade to pinpoint the obvious. It never occurred to me to call Eve by her first name (even if it had, I knew my mother would never stand for it). The social niceties being concluded, Chrissie grabbed my hand and pulled me a few steps closer.

"Mom, can Billy help us move our stuff inside?" she asked, fidgeting with excitement. Eva regarded her daughter with just a hint of amusement.

"Certainly," she nodded indulgently, "if he *wants* too, that is."

"You wanna?" Chrissie chimed.

"Well, sure," I agreed without paying that much attention to the question. I was peering up at Eva in a daze, taking in the perfect contours of her face, the thick, black curtain of her hair. There was no denying the facial resemblance; mother and daughter shared the same perfect features, right down to the clipped button nose and the dimples on either side of the mouth. The same haunting, violet eyes too.

"Come on, then!" Chrissie exclaimed, yanking me up the steps and breaking the spell. "I'll show you where my my room is!"

We spent the remainder of the morning scampering around the house and yard without actually doing anything (the Trackers did most of the heavy lifting, cursing like marines because everything seemed to weigh a thousand pounds). We were too excited be of any use. Exploring the Old Stewart Place was like discovering some exotic, fairy-tale world. Every doorway led to a dozen more; there had to be at least a hundred rooms under its gabled roof. Or so it seems when you're nine years old.

The movers finished about one in the afternoon. Eve paid them both an extra twenty for their services, then set about putting the kitchen in order. Chrissie and I stood on the front lawn, watching the Tracker's van rumbling off down the road and wondering what to do next. We couldn't play inside; the house was a chaotic sprawl of unopened boxes, even Chrissie's attic bedroom.

"You wanna play hide and seek out back?" she suggested, kneading her skirt between her fingers like a four year old, almost dancing with anticipation. I have to admit I was sorely tempted. Like any boy of my generation, I would have stayed out playing until the sun went down or the world came to an end, whichever came first. Trouble was, I knew I had to get going. My mother had been kinda moody since Dad left, and I wasn't sure how she'd react to me spending so much time with a couple of total strangers, even if they were our new neighbors.

"No, I better go home now," I explained, hoping I wouldn't hurt her feelings, "my Mom'll be calling me inside for lunch soon."

"OK," she said, hardly disappointed at all, "you want to play again tomorrow?"

"Well, sure. There's a playground over on Wentworth Drive, I'll take you there if you want."

"Good! That'll be fun," she answered, hitting me with that 250 volt smile she'd inherited from her mother. For a split second, I saw a ghost of the woman she'd eventually become, and

my heart did another somersault. Then it was gone and she was just Little Chrissie Reinhart, the girl next door.

"All right then. I'll see you tomorrow morning." I raised a hand to signal goodbye and started walking towards the brick fence, smiling at the thought of taking Chrissie to the park tomorrow. We'd had such a wonderful day together, I was honestly looking forward to seeing her again.

I'd gotten less than ten steps before she called out to me.

"Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"Want me to get your Whipper-Snapper?"

I paused, looking back over my shoulder at her. We'd left it upstairs in her bedroom when we came down to wave goodbye to the Trackers.

"It's yours," I said after a micro-second's consideration.

"Really?" Chrissie asked, her expression almost comically surprised.

"Yeah. It's yours. Keep it." Hell, why not? It was a lame excuse for a birthday present in the first place – even if it was the last thing my Dad ever gave me. Chrissie, on the other hand, was utterly delighted. She ran over in a haze of flying skirts, pigtails whipping about in the slipstream. I braced for impact, thinking she was going to kiss me.

"Thanks, Billy," she trilled, hugging herself in undisguised pleasure, "you're *really* nice." That flickering purple light was back in her eyes again.

"You're welcome," I smiled, more than a trifle embarrassed by her boundless enthusiasm. Part of me was hoping she really would kiss me – although I would have blushed the color of a ripe strawberry if she had.

"See you tomorrow then?" she demanded, still hugging herself around the middle.

"You bet." Nothing short of a mass extinction would have kept me away.

We said goodbye once more and I stepped over to my side of the fence, glancing back over my shoulder as I walked up to our front door. Chrissie was spinning across the lawn like a pink tornado, hands lifted to the skies. I halted on the porch to watch the show, half-expecting her to lift off the ground and go soaring off over the trees. It was impossible not to like her, she was sweet and funny and...well, *magical* in ways that I couldn't define.

Giggling at the top of her lungs, she trailed out of her spin and fell over on her back in a flail of knees and elbows. She lay there staring up at the sky, panting for breath and happy as a cloud; I stood watching her for a few more seconds, feeling a warm glow spreading through my midsection. I had no idea what I'd set in motion that day, no idea what was approaching or how my life was about to change, but none of that counted at the time. All I knew was that I'd made a new friend.

And in the end, that's all that ever matters.

CHAPTER 2: DEFINING MOMENTS

1.

Much to my relief, Mom never said a word about my morning with the neighbors. Truth be told, she didn't say much about anything; she was too far gone by that stage. As I said, Mom had turned a little weird after Dad left. She'd quit her job and taken up drinking as an occupation,

parking herself in front of the TV most days. That was the main reason why I'd been sitting out on the porch the morning the Reinharts turned up. She tended to wake up with a mean hangover, and I had no wish to risk her razor-edged tongue that day.

Mom didn't have too many friends here in Fairmont; no one she could confide in or open up to, anyway. Worse still, her drinking was alienating her everyone who may have been able to help. Don't get me wrong, she wasn't abusive or neglectful – at least not at first. Dinners still got cooked and the shopping always got done (one way or another) but the woman sprawled on the living room sofa was slowly becoming a stranger to me. It was like standing on a shore watching a boat drifting out to sea and knowing that it would never, ever return.

In the meantime, Chrissie and I started living in one another's pockets. In the first month after she moved in, I gave her a whirlwind tour of our neighborhood. I took her first to Wentworth Park, where we spent most of our afternoons, then introduced her to all the local attractions. We followed the trails through the Wildlands; tossed coins into Memorial Fountain; and checked out the concrete tunnels running beneath the old railway station (that was kinda scary – the place had been abandoned for decades, and everyone said it was haunted). We played and talked and read comics in each other's bedrooms, and somewhere along the way, we forgot we'd only known each other for a couple of weeks.

"Whatcha doing?" Chrissie called out from the tree-swing.

We were playing in my back yard that morning: Chrissie had commandeered the old rope-and-saddle and was currently trying to touch the sun with both feet. I was perfecting my gym routine over by the back porch, standing on my hands and turning the odd flip whenever my balance shifted the wrong way. I picked myself up off the grass, extravagantly tucking my T-shirt into my jeans.

"Gymnastics," I replied, making a rolling gesture with my right hand, "I'm going to join the circus."

"Gymnastics?" She arched her back for greater height, aiming her feet towards the heavens. Her skirt-tails streamed out behind her in a billowing scarlet mass.

"Yeah, gymnastics," I repeated, "you know: backflips, cartwheels, somersaults." I was vaguely surprised that she hadn't done any tumbling at school, but I was getting used to that now. It was sort of like the Whipper-Stripper: she'd never seen one until she came to Fairmont. I was getting the impression that she must've lived on a farm or something back in Longridge Bay.

Realizing she had no idea what I was talking about, I leaned over and demonstrated a better than average handstand, wavering on the brink for around five seconds. Chrissie's eyes snapped wide with understanding: I wasn't just horsing around (as she'd originally thought); this was something she could actually *learn*.

Launching herself off the swing, she hit the ground running and scrambled across the yard. I recognized her expression; I'd seen it at least a thousand times over the last month; every time I introduced her to anything new or unusual, something she hadn't experienced before. Her pretty, round face was radiating delight as she halted before me, eyes glittering like purple diamonds.

"Do it again, Billy!" she twittered impatiently, "show me how to do it!!" Her fingers spidered down her dress, kneading and twisting the hemline. I was getting used to that, too.

"All right," I laughed, swept up in her childish exuberance, "it's easy, you just bend over like this..." I flopped onto my hands and waved my feet in the air. Chrissie watched in round-lipped delight, absorbing every detail of my performance. The curve of my spine, the spread of my palms, the tilt of my skull. The span of my fingertips, the shifting of my tendons. Every microscopic detail, in the space of a heartbeat.

"Let me try now, Billy!" she trilled excitedly, "tell me if I'm doing it right!"

"Want me to hold your legs?" I offered hastily, though it was only a precaution. I knew from prior experience that she'd be perfect from the very first try. She always was.

"Yeah," she answered, barely hearing the question.

Drawing in a calming breath, Chrissie raised her arms over her head and swept over into a perfectly controlled handstand. Her sheer red sunfrock immediately peeled inside out, revealing her white nylon panties, all the way to her tummy-button. Tensing her thighs, she brought her heels together, pointing both feet toward the sky. It was a most impressive performance for an absolute beginner: balanced, graceful and confident. Her stance was tighter than an exclamation point.

Not that I really noticed. Her fresh, white pants were poised less than a foot from my face, and they seemed to fill my entire field of vision. I'd seen Chrissie's underwear before – she was always spinning about and playing with her hemline when she got excited – but I'd never seen them so completely uncovered. The breath caught in my throat as she shifted her hips. Liquid shadows flowed across the fabric like waves of silver.

"Billy!" she piped from under her dress, "how do I look? Am I doing it right?"

"Geat," I told her, truthfully. My eyes wandered over her pants once more, taking in the folds and curves and silken outlines. There was a little red tag on the waistband. A rush of gooseflesh covered my arms and shoulders; a storm of butterflies erupted through my belly.

"I wanna do it again!" she yelped, squiggling her bottom from side to side.

"Okay," I agreed, feeling my pulse accelerate like a trip hammer: she was going to do it again. I backed up a few strides, allowing her room to descend. She dropped lightly onto her feet, grinning from ear to ear. Her face was flushed with exhilaration; wild cherries bloomed on both cheeks. She reached out to grab my hand.

"What else can we do, Billy? Show me something else!"

I stared up at the swing for a few seconds, mentally cataloging all the stunts I'd learned at the youth center last year. There weren't many – mainly rolls and basic matwork. What could I teach her next? It would have to be something which would get her upside down and show off her panties, that was an absolute necessity. But couldn't be anything too easy, or she'd lose all interest in a second; I knew that much at least. No, it had to be something complicated, like a handspring, or a cartwheel or a –

"Step-over!" I yelped in sudden inspiration, "you know how to do a step-over?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, it's sort of like a handstand, except you go over and land on your feet."

"Show me," she said, gesturing towards the grass.

"No, I'm not very good at it...but *you* could do it easy. Just start by standing on your hands."

"Okay," she nodded, and flipped onto her palms in a swirl of red cotton. Her dress fluttered down her bare thighs, falling over her head and torso. Placing a steadying hand on her waist, I leaned in for a closer look at her panties. Literally everything was on view this time. The frock had no real waistline, nothing to hold it up, and was inching steadily down her torso.

Chrissie's pants were white satin briefs, the kind that covered most of the tummy. There was a faint floral pattern decorating the front and bottom, almost invisible against the snowy white material. I found myself wondering how they must've felt, clinging to her supple, creamy flesh. How she must've felt, standing upside down with her undies on clear display.

"What do I do now?!" she warbled, kicking her feet in mid-air. Her legs were long and slim

and sleek with puppy-fat.

"Uh ... bend your leg backwards," I instructed, already picturing the move in my mind's eye, "yeah, that one ... now let yourself –"

And over she went, executing a perfect two point dismount that would have impressed a gold medalist. Her frock was still hiked up at her shoulders, leaving her pants and tummy fully visible. She had one of those belly buttons that poked out too far, it looked like a little pink raspberry. I couldn't help giggling a little; she honestly had no idea how cute and pretty and funny she really was. I covered my mouth with both hands, laughing through splayed fingers.

"This is FUN, Billy!" she giggled, eyes twinkling with innocent joy.

Before I had time to reply, she twirled round on the spot and launched into another step-over. Paused at the height of her arc, she aimed her toes allowed her dress to fall away a third time. She scissored her legs as she went into free fall, offering me a generous view of her silky white gusset. The moment was scored onto my memory; time seemed to stretch out towards infinity. Everything suddenly leapt into sharp focus: the pink, elastic trim of her panties; the tiny lace butterfly over the gusset. She whirled to the ground, voicing a shriek of pleasure – and then she was shaking me by the shoulder with both hands.

"C'mon Billy! Let's do it together!!"

"I can't," I laughed, "I'm not as good as you."

"Yes you are!" she insisted, dragging me forward. And incredibly, she was right. A moment later, we were both careening across the yard, bounding and plunging and flying head-over-heels with pure summer madness. Chrissie dipped and swirled almost faster than the eye could follow, skirts and pigtails flailing in her wake. We were utterly possessed. It was like a force of nature, sweeping us along like a gale through the trees. I have no idea how long it lasted. Could've been two minutes, could've been twenty.

We finally found ourselves stretched full-length on the lawn, gasping and exhausted under the slowly revolving sky. It was like the first day we met, that morning when I saw her spinning around her yard like a human top. I'd seen her panties on that occasion too, though I hadn't taken much notice. It had been pretty funny, watching her collapse in a boneless heap over by the fence, but now I understood the simple, child-like joy she'd experienced. Understood ... and *envied*.

I looked across at my little friend, enjoying the high, tinkling chime of her laughter. Chrissie lay giggling beside me with her skirt flung up to her chest. I roamed my gaze over her girlish figure, my eyes constantly returning to her underwear. The sight of those shining gossamer wisps made me tingle all over. They were so different from what I wore under my jeans, so soft and pretty and dainty.

Just like Chrissie herself.

She turned on her side, panting with helpless mirth, oblivious of the show she was putting on. That was part of her magic, I guess. Catching her breath by slow degrees, she sat up and started smoothing back her pigtails. Her dress flopped back into position, cutting off my view of her little white panties. It couldn't have been more than 11.30 in the morning, and we still the whole day looming over us.

"Whatcha want to do now?" I asked, secretly hoping for another panty show.

"You wanna walk up to the Crest?" she suggested, absently smoothing the wrinkles out of her sunfrock.

"Yeah, okay," I nodded, biting back my extreme disappointment. The Crest was the highest point in Fairmont, a grassy summit with lots of trees and picnic tables. We often went up there lie on our backs and watch the cloud-animals drift by. On a good day, you could see clear across to

the Pacific Ocean (or so we imagined). It was one of Chrissie's favorite places. We rose at precisely the same moment – juvenile telepathy again – and walked around the side of the house, brushing the grass from each other's clothes without exchanging so much as a glance. It never crossed my mind how strange that might have seemed to an outsider.

We ambled up to the footpath, our feet avoiding the cracks our eyes picked out in unison. As we reached the corner, I felt her fingers slipping into mine. I suppose any other boy on the planet would have pulled away.

That never crossed my mind, either.

2.

I got home around four-thirty that day, bristling with grass-blades and smelling of pine needles, most of which came off at front door. Disposing of the evidence had become a daily routine over the past four weeks: I couldn't give Mom an excuse to cut Chrissie out of my life. No matter how tanked she got, Mom had eyes like a hawk and was always aware of the hours I was keeping. She'd also begun to notice whom I was keeping them with, and I wasn't all that certain she approved.

As I'd expected, Mom was still camped out on the sofa, watching *The Price is Right* with the remote in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She didn't appear to have budged since I left that morning, but I knew that couldn't be right; there was a bottle of Jim Beam on the coffee table that hadn't been there before. Next to that was a half eaten bag of Doritos, original cheese flavor. Last night it had been Johnny Walker and pineapple pizza. Don't ask me how she could afford all the whiskey, she'd been out of work a good two months. Heck, I didn't know how she could afford the rent, the way things had been lately.

Hearing my step on the floor boards, Mom shifted around on the sofa, a ponderous, grey woman overflowing slightly at the hips. The first lines of age had taken root in her face around the time I'd been born, so I'd never known her as a young woman. The last few traces of beauty had disappeared along with my father, and the gaze she turned on me now was heavy with exhaustion.

"You been spending a lot of time with that little girlfriend of yours," she commented in a gravel voice, "what's the deal, Billy-boy? Her mom a better cook than me?"

Eve most certainly was a better cook than Mom, but I thought it prudent not to mention that to her.

"No, Mom. I just like playing with Chrissie."

"Yeah, right," she drawled, "the golden child and her gilt-edged momma. You been *inside* next door yet?" She knew I had, but she interrogated me on the subject at least once every afternoon.

"Yeah, a couple of times," I nodded.

"Rich, aren't they?" she asked.

I shrugged. Maybe they were, who knows? I was a kid, I didn't notice that sort of thing.

"Lots of fancy furniture?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Pictures on the wall?"

"Yeah."

"Silverwear on the tables?"

"...yeah." I had to think about that one.

"Like it better over there?"

"No," I replied immediately. Mom fixed me with a level, measuring stare, silently estimating the truth of my answer. I couldn't understand my mother's growing hostility towards Eva Reinhart. They'd spoken maybe twice since she moved in, and Eve had never been anything but polite and friendly on both occasions. I'd learnt very quickly never to praise Chrissie's mother under any circumstances, it was like waving a red flag at a bull.

The resentment slowly drained from Mom's eyes, replaced by a sort of dull apathy. Apparently, she'd decided I wasn't lying to keep the peace (or maybe she'd decided I was, Mom's expressions were impossible to decipher these days) Turning back to the TV, she waved me off with a careless gesture.

"Left-overs in the fridge," she said, bringing the cigarette to her lips, "I didn't feel like cooking tonight."

Dinner was a slice of cold pizza with some three day-old ravioli and diced ham. As I dished it onto a plate, Mom told me to come and eat it in the living room; she didn't want me tossing it out the window while her back was turned. She knew I wouldn't have done that, but evidently she wasn't done with me yet. Odd thing was, she didn't say a word as I scraped down the sad remains of three slaughtered meals. Barely looked in my direction, as a matter of fact. Guess she just enjoyed hearing me choke on every succulent mouthful.

The evening progressed in this manner until about seven-thirty, when I asked her if I could stay up and watch TV another hour. The only answer I got was a blue-grey stream of Marlboro. I recognized the signal instantly: silence was lethal in the Campbell household, as I'd discovered all too often in recent weeks. Standing up as quietly as possible, I headed out to the hallway without a sideways glance. I made it as far as the door before she called me back.

"Hey."

A cold finger traveled the length of my spine. Her voice sound strained, terse. Not quite venomous, but I already knew she was angry. The fact I'd done nothing to antagonize her made no difference. Like I said, it was impossible to predict her moods. I walked back through the living room and halted before the sofa, hoping she just wanted to kiss me goodnight.

She didn't.

Reaching out a hand, she touched my hair, flicking it back from my face several times. It wasn't a caress; there was something dismissive – almost contemptuous – in the gesture. Eyes slitted in cold detachment, she studied me with a vaguely troubled expression, as if seeing some alien child she didn't quite recognize. An unwanted and rather unpleasant child, perhaps.

"I'm taking you to the barber's tomorrow," she croaked, turning back to the TV, "you're starting to look like a girl."

3.

I lay on the bed in my pajamas, watching the curtains exhaling the cool evening air. Despite the breeze, it was too warm to sleep under the covers; almost too warm to be wearing PJs. Our house wasn't as big as the Old Stewart Place; the rooms were yellow, peeling sweat-boxes straight out of an Alabama work-farm. Well, I suppose that's an exaggeration of titanic proportions, but that's how I remember it to this day. There were huge damp patches on the ceiling and the walls were yellow and warping from the annual humidity. The climate was turning sultry as the great summer heat descended; in a few weeks, a good night's sleep would be close to impossible, even with the window open.

Still, it was early days so far, and the mercury was yet to climb past eighty most days. I moved my legs around on the bedcover, looking for a cool spot to put my feet. It was a wasted effort needless to say, I'd already used up most of the available positions over the past twenty minutes. In all honesty, however, it wasn't the heat that was keeping me awake. Slipping my hands behind my head, I stared into the streetlit darkness, recalling my mother's parting shot.

You're starting to look like a girl.

She wasn't the first person to say that. It was a popular taunt around the school yard, usually accompanied by such time honored favorites as *I Know What I am But What Are You* and the classic playground retort *I'm Rubber You're Glue*. All the same, I seemed to get that particular insult more often than anyone else in the fourth grade, especially since Josh Hogan and his goons had elected me last year's scapegoat, alienating me from my small number of friends and making me a target for every meathead with an ego problem (Josh Hogan had been the sixth grade's resident demon for two years running, the sort of kid you change continents to avoid.).

Strangely enough, Mom's sneering comment hadn't bothered me all that much. Quite the opposite: vindictive though her tone had been, I'd felt a brief flare of surprised pleasure – almost exaltation – at her words. The implications made my head swim with feelings I couldn't put a name to. Emotions; strange, exotic, arousing, began to cascade through my mind faster than I could process them.

Was she right? Did I look like a girl?

Did I look like *Chrissie*?

Sliding off the bed, I turned on my old Elmo nite-lite and padded across the floor, avoiding the loose boards with a practiced tread. There was a small dressing table on the other side of the room, a yard-sale knock down equipped with a three-quarter mirror. At nine years old, I must have seen my reflection at least a zillion times, but tonight, I was looking for something different. *Someone* different, perhaps. Stepping closer to the mirror, I scrutinized my face through narrowed eyelids.

My hair was straight and thick and chestnut brown: longer than most boys' my age, hanging down past my shoulders. The sun had bleached it a shade lighter over the past month or so, lending it some striking blond highlights. A little wild at the moment, but I doubted I'd be getting it cut tomorrow. Mom's hangover would keep her in bed until midday and she probably wouldn't leave the living room after that.

The hair framed a pudgy, heart-shaped face with dark blue eyes and small, rose-petal lips. Like Chrissie, I'd never completely lost my baby fat. My features were soft and round slightly infantile. A spray of freckles across my nose completed the image of childish innocence; people often mistook me for a six year old (another reason why I had trouble finding friends my own age). A six year old of either sex.

You're starting to look like a girl.

Backing up three steps, I took off my clothes and stood before the mirror, running my gaze up and down my naked body. I was more than a little surprised by what I saw. While I wasn't *precisely* a girl, I seemed to have the same supple limbs and rounded proportions. I even had a little girl's protruding belly and dimpled bottom-cheeks. Strange I'd never noticed it before. There was only one part of my body that wasn't female, and that was a very small part indeed. If it wasn't for that ...

Kneeling down before the dresser, I opened the top drawer and started sorting through the piles of shorts and socks and t-shirts, pulling out several items and taking them over to the bed. Again, I avoided stepping on the loose floorboards. Mom had probably passed out by now, but I

couldn't afford to take any risks. I had to keep this a secret from her, a secret from everybody, for that matter. I couldn't have said why, I hardly even knew what I was doing at that point. Somehow, I understood that there couldn't be any witnesses to this particular game.

I pulled on a pair of cotton underpants; white hipster briefs with a tight elastic waist band. They weren't exactly the same as what Chrissie had been wearing today, but they were close enough for what I had in mind. Turning back towards the mirror, I froze in mid-breath. With my hair spilling over my shoulders and my panties drawn up to my belly button, I was no longer a boy. Raising a hand to my throat, I regarded my image in round-lipped silence. My mother had been right.

I looked just like a girl.

Sitting down on the bed, I reached for the next article of clothing. Chrissie normally wore frilly pink ankle socks (the ones with the strip of lace running around the top; I'd always found them unbelievably sweet). They were an essential part of her wardrobe, as pretty in their own way as her little satin panties. I didn't own anything even half as cute, but a pair of white nylon school socks would serve the same purpose. I slipped them on one foot at a time, watching myself closely in the mirror. It was easy to picture Chrissie doing precisely the same thing every morning before she went out.

I stood up in my socks and panties, posing in the mirror. My pulse began to quicken; a rare, fine color invaded my cheeks. I ran my fingertips slowly down my torso, raising hum of goose flesh over my bare tummy. Fluttering my eyelids in gasping response, I reached down for the last piece of my costume. It was time to finish the illusion.

I didn't have a short red sunfrock, but I did have an outsized cotton t-shirt of the same color. I dropped it lightly over my head, allowing it to hang loosely down to the tops of my thighs. And somehow, as it molded itself against my girlish shape, it became a dress. Not like the one Chrissie had been wearing today: it didn't have a bow on the back or small yellow buttons running down the front, but it was a dress all the same. A high-waisted scarlet shift so sheer I could almost see the ghost of my underwear through it.

A child's imagination is a wonderful thing.

4.

I'm standing on the lawn on a glorious summer morning when the cicadas call from tree to tree and the sky seems to go on forever. A light June mistral whispers through leaves and branches alike, lifting my skirt with teasing, invisible fingers. Squealing with surprise, I push down on the blossoming fabric and lift my face towards the wind. My veins are flooded with liquid joy, the kind of joy only a child can experience on a morning like this.

Sweeping along in the thrill of the moment, I canter about the yard with my head thrown back in the breeze. My long blond hair whips out behind me, platinum curls blazing in the sun. I skip and dance across the turf with my dress kicking up to my thighs, tracing a broad circle beneath the trees. The world streaks by in a riot of greens and blues and lavenders, all of the colors of summer thrown together in a single glance

Raising my hands over my head, I launch into a long, spiraling cartwheel. Gravity snatches at my dress, and a moment later, my pretty white panties are staring at the sky. I scream an embarrassed protest as the skirt falls over my face, cutting off my view, but I know my pants are still on full exposure. I can feel the breeze fluttering over my bare tummy. I splay my legs apart and tilt my center of balance. The dress slips down a few inches, disclosing more of my

pale midriff.

I complete the cartwheel and immediately sweep into another, star-rolling across the lawn with my hemline flipping topsy-turvy. My hands and feet scarcely touch the ground; it's as if I'm soaring through the endless blue skies. The ground rushes up at terminal velocity then plummets away, over and over again.

I finish the performance with a handstand, holding position for maybe ten seconds. The dress instantly flutters inside out, dropping over my waist and torso. Handstands are even better than cartwheels; you get to show so much more. I arch my spine and wriggle my bottom slightly, allowing the frock to peel away from my body, inverting all the way down to my shoulders. Warm, fluid delight bubbles through my bloodstream as I imagine how I must look. And for one breathtaking moment, I can actually see myself: a petite little girl suspended upside-down with her long, sleek legs waving in the air. My dress pools on the grass in a soft red heap, covering my head and arms; pristine white panties flash in the bright June sunshine. The image fills my heart with unvoiced laughter.

Dropping lightly to my feet, I glance around the yard, grinning from cheek to cheek. A high, fine color darkens my features. It was time for the spinning game.

Drawing in a deep breath, I pirouette on my right foot like a ballet dancer: like Chrissie on the very first day I met her. My skirt begins to balloon around my hips, rising slowly up my thighs. The thrill of showing off my panties is utterly irresistible. They're so pretty; so dainty and girlish. The hem inches up by tantalizing degrees: a hint of gusset, a dash of lace, a delicate satin frill. A mischievous zephyr whickers over lawn, sweeping irresistibly up my legs. The dress billows above my waist, revealing everything in a flash of white satin.

I cyclone across the grass in a crimson blur, spinning so fast that my skirt threatens to fly away completely. I'm giggling with delicious, girlish rapture: my panties are on display to the entire world, and I've never felt so unashamedly NAUGHTY in my life. A vast surge of pleasure overwhelms my nervous system; it strikes me like a bolt of summer lightning. I swirl the dress ever faster, ever higher, until the hemline is standing out at right angles from my body, an undulating scarlet disk flying level with my ribcage.

Then suddenly, it's over.

I'm stretched out amongst the dandelions, watching the vast, lazy clouds circling overhead. I seem to be floating inches above the ground; gliding away without actually moving. It's a strange, dreamlike sensation, one I've felt before but had almost forgotten over the years. And I feel something else too, something I've never known before. It courses through my body like waves of electric fire, making my nerve-endings buzz and jangle. Parting my lips in wordless bliss, I inhale a draught of sweet morning air, listening to the frantic beating of my heart.

Far away, like a voice in a distant memory, I hear my Mother calling my name ...

5.

I opened my eyes, staring up at the blistered yellow ceiling. My body was still humming with that strange tingly feeling. My entire nervous system lit up like Times Square on New Years Eve. It seemed to pulse and flow like a static charge. The images were still tumbling through my mind's eye: memories and fantasies and scenes that never happened and yet somehow felt completely real. Real enough to make my heart thunder like a steam locomotive, real enough to dilate my pupils and darken my complexion several shades.

I was lying on the bed with my t-shirt thrown up to my midriff, casually exposing my

white cotton briefs. The room was still a little on the warm side, but I was covered with a thin film of sweat, cool and moist in the evening breeze. I barely noticed the humidity anyway. Something had happened to me, some change had occurred – and, once again, I hadn't seen it coming. For a few minutes I'd become someone else. No, that wasn't right. I hadn't become someone else.

I'd become my *real* self.

I got off the bed and walked over to the mirror, unconsciously adjusting my t-shirt to a more modest position. Even now, it looked more like a girl's shift than anything else. I leaned in to study my reflection once more, knowing that what I was thinking was impossible. Such things only happened in the realm of Long Ago and Ever After, and I hadn't put much stock in fairy tales since my seventh birthday. It was silly, really – crazy, in fact – but I honestly couldn't help myself. I *had* to see.

Needless to say, there was no change whatsoever. For a second I thought maybe my face was a little fuller than I recalled, but that was just my imagination. And while a child's imagination was a wonderful thing, it had its limitations. It could turn a t-shirt into a sundress, but it couldn't change a boy into a girl. Even at nine, I understood that wishful thinking didn't get you anywhere. Look at how my parent's marriage had turned out. Placing a hand on the top of the dresser, I bent forward in to study my features at extreme close up – and froze.

There were footsteps coming up the stairs. Heavy, slumping footsteps; the sound of a drunken woman hauling herself along the banister. It was *Mom!* She was awake. I stood bolt upright, staring at the door. Had I woken her up, cartwheeling across the floor like a lunatic? Was she coming up to investigate? Leaving my face in the mirror, I padded back to bed, pulling the t-shirt over my head. I couldn't let her catch me wearing it, she'd know I was playing around when I should have been asleep.

I flung the t-shirt aside and all but dived under the covers. I was frightened. Mom had a mean temper this time of night, but that wasn't the extent of my fears. Illogical though it was, I was sure she'd work out what I was doing. And if that happened, she might make (what I imagined was) the obvious connection; that this was all somehow tied in to the girl next door. She'd be absolutely furious, banning Chrissie from our home and forbidding me to see her.

And that simply *could not* happen.

The footsteps approached my bedroom door. Reaching over the side of the bed, I flicked off the nite-lite and snuggled down against the pillow, forcing my breathing to slow to a snail's pace. Then she's standing in the hallway right outside, I can almost feel her hesitating by the door, looking down at the knob. I lie in knife-edged silence, waiting for it to turn ...

Five seconds pass. Ten.

I heard her footsteps receding down the hall towards her bedroom. Returning my gaze to the ceiling, I remembered to breath, realizing for the first time that I was trembling under the sheets. It took me several minutes to relax completely; for some reason, I'd been close to all-out panic. I ran my fingers through my hair in a calming gesture, unable to explain my near-terror. Mom had a mouth that could gut a fish, but even in her worst moments, she'd never done anything to really hurt me.

A sort of midnight quiet began to descend over the house, broken only by the odd rustle and creak of settling foundations. I wanted to get out of bed and play the spinning game again, but eventually decided not to risk fate twice in the one evening. Pushing the covers to the bottom of the bed, I found one of the few remaining cold spots on the mattress and made myself comfortable.

I looked towards the darkened window, remembering how it had felt, twirling across the yard with my dress soaring over my tummy-button. I could recall everything: the glaring of the sun through the leaves, the roaring of the trees overhead. The scent of freshly trimmed grass, the rush of the wind through my outstretched fingers. The gentle waving of the dandelions as I drift off to the place where dreams are born...

Dozing lightly on the lawn, I hear my Mother calling from the veranda.
Her name is *Eve*.

CHAPTER 3: CLOUD ON THE LANDSCAPE

1.

I have this pet theory that adults and children come from different planes of existence. I mean, they occupy the same cartesian space and everything, but they seem to inhabit totally separate realities. You probably couldn't write a dissertation on the subject, but if you think back to your own childhood, you'll realize it has to be true. A child's world is huge and bright and wonderfully unpredictable; a place where the laws of physics are constantly rescinded as a matter of course. Time has a fluent, malleable quality unknown in the adult realm. A minute could last for an hour, an hour could stretch out to a year. A good summer could literally scroll away into eternity, sort of like those old-fashioned barber poles you used to see down in your main street. That's the thing I remember most from my childhood: the days seemed to go on forever.

I think it was because we're experiencing everything for the first time. There was so much to see and touch and know from one heart-beat to the next, we have to squeeze the life out every last meandering second. A simple walk to the park could take you to some crazy, Technicolor land where cats could fly and trees could dance and every rainbow led to a pot of gold. As you grow older, you lose touch with this world of gnomes and sprites and Puff the Magic Dragon. You're taken to a room where you forget the wondrous lessons of infancy and learn the insurmountable truths of life in the Real World. And finally, you descend into some lifeless gray limbo of loans and paychecks and mortgage repayments, where nobody lives happily ever after because all the fairytales are politically correct.

And the worst part is this: you go there of your own free will.

Well, *most* of us do, anyway.

For those of us who never quite abandon Alice or Pooh or Dorothy, there are the memories of an endless, golden season in the middle of the year. Looking back to those fine, still mornings I spent playing in the Reinhart's front yard, I realize that they were amongst the happiest in my life. There were shadows, needless to say (including the one I faced every afternoon around 4.30), but they seemed to take up only a tiny portion of each day, like the passage of a single cloud over a vast green landscape. If the cloud signaled the presence of an oncoming storm, it seemed too low on the horizon to pose any serious threat. The days were long, the days were warm, the days were beautiful. And whenever I recall the casual miracles of that everlasting June, I know that I'm seeing the world once more through the eyes of a child.

I'm seeing the world the way *she* did.

2.

I tiptoed down the stairs with a hand touching the banister, listening for sounds of movement down in the living room. Mom usually slept until about twelve, but she occasionally woke up early and staggered round the house in a rambling stupor. It didn't happen very often, but I knew better than to draw attention to myself when she was tanked to the gills. Last time she'd awoken in that state, she'd gone on a minor rampage, smashing glasses and screaming at the top of her lungs. I spent the next two days hiding in my room, listening to her cursing my father to hell.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, I crept down the hallway towards the front door. I was dressed very simply; blue spandex bike shorts under a Hard Rock t-shirt four sizes too big. This was a radical departure for me, but there wasn't much else to choose from. Everything else was in the laundry, had been for the last fortnight.. Still, the new look suited me in some respects. I'd taken to wearing oversized t-shirts over the past week, ever since the night I played the spinning game. The one I had on now hung almost to my knees, so I'd hitched it up with a knot at the right hip.

I glanced back over my shoulder, making sure she wasn't standing at the top of the stairs. That was how these things always work; it was kind of like those Wes Craven movies where you think the hero's finally safe and then the monster appears out of nowhere to rip his face off with a rusting garden hoe or something. They always get you when you're not looking. Fortunately, there was nothing lurking on the first floor landing, so I continued down the corridor, glancing into the living room as I slipped past the doorway.

Mom was lying on the sofa.

No, that's not the right word. She wasn't lying; she had collapsed like a landslide, like an imploded skyscraper. The sofa was surrounded by the wreckage of her disintegration; a chaos of upturned furniture, broken bottles and cast-off pizza cartons. Shattered glass and scraps of refuse littered the floor; a trail of chicken bones and KFC boxes led out to the kitchen. The whole downstairs area was a wasteland stinking of garbage and cigarettes and three-day old vomit.

But worse than all this was my mother herself.

She was sprawled half off the sofa with her knuckles grazing the floor, her lank, matted hair pasted to the side of her face. A thin runner of drool hung from the corner of her mouth, threading its way tenuously to the floor. Her face was puffy and bloated, the skin tinged with a faint yellow cast. I studied her features, trying to see the woman she'd been only a few months before, the woman who used to cook me flap-jacks for lunch every weekend; flapjacks with sugar and maple syrup. There was no sign of her. She'd been submerged beneath a torrent of rancid, melting flesh. Her body had fared no better, she seemed to be overflowing around the midsection. Her loose-fitting jogging pants had worked their way down her hips, exposing a sweeping vista of pulpy cellulite.

Despite my fear of her drunken rages, I still felt some degree of compassion. Even at the age of nine, I understood that she was lonely and hurt and depressed, that she wasn't entirely responsible for her actions. There were things I didn't understand, of course. I didn't know that Dad had managed to drain most of her bank account all the way from Chicago. I didn't know about the unpaid bills, the repossession waivers or the eviction notices. I had no idea how desperate our position was about to become. No idea whatsoever.

I stood at the doorway staring down at her, wondering what I could do, how I could help my mother escape the gray, swollen mass bulking out the sofa. Even now, I ask myself if there was anything I could have done, any words I could have said; something that might have brought her back from her self-constructed purgatory. But I was a child, barely three months past my

ninth birthday. What could I have done?

She stirred on the couch, grunting under her breath and fluttering her eyelids. I backed quietly down the hallway, holding my breath in case she heard me and woke up shrieking.

A moment later I was stepping out into the wide, cool morning, shutting the darkness behind me as I trotted down the porch steps. A green haze of dragon flies darted across the lawn, their multi-faceted eyes glinting like emeralds. I watched them swarm off towards the street, then walked over to the fence dividing the Reinhart's yard from ours. The sun had barely cleared the trees, the day was unfurling before me, and the cloud had passed over the landscape.

At least for now.

3.

Perhaps I was asking for trouble. I was old enough to understand that my mother wouldn't take this desertion lightly. At best, she'd see it as a criticism of her parental abilities (such as they were); at worst, a defection to the enemy camp. But as I said before, what else could I do? I was nine years old, I was hungry, and there was no food in the house. Eve's generosity was a godsend. Unfortunately, none of this would make any difference to Mom. The moment she discovered I was eating my meals next door and this was inevitable she would give in to a fury that could melt lead.

Mom had come to loath Evelyn Reinhart with a passion that bordered on the irrational. There was no logical reason for her hatred; she hardly knew Eva, had traded maybe a hundred words with her, and most of those had been at their introduction. But Mom despised her all the same. During her less lucid moments, she held, long, rambling monologues with herself, attacking first Eve and then my father with equal venom. Sometimes, she imagined that Dad had run off with Eve, or at least someone like her. Times like that, I either got out of the house or hid in my room, as her delusions often signaled the onset one of her frenzies.

Most evenings, however, she spent comatose in the living room, and I frequently prayed she'd stay that way. Much as it pains me to say this, Mom had grown so unpredictable that I was avoiding her as much as possible. Fortunately, she was usually unconscious when I sneaked in through the back door at four-thirty. This afternoon I'd found her half-submerged into the couch, clutching a bottle of cheap wine in a death-grip. Evidently, Johnny Walker had been slashed from the budget, along with the pizzas, the corn-chips and Colonel Sanders. Staring around the room at the fall-out of our lives, I fancied we'd sunk about as low as we could go. I couldn't have known how far we had left to fall. How very, very far.

But all of that lay in the future. For now, the oncoming storm was an insignificant blur, betraying not a hint of the havoc it would eventually wreak in our lives. As the temperatures climbed, I played in the sun with the girl next door; oblivious of the Darkness gathering on the horizon. How long did we have together? How long before the dogs began to howl around the streets of Fairmont? Three months, I realize now; little more than ninety days to run and shout and revel in the joy of her company. It seems impossibly short, a fleeting interval in the passage of years, but as I noted earlier, time moves differently for children.

And a lot can happen in three months.

3.

The Old Stewart Place was a colonial-style homestead with a veranda running all the way

'round the outside. Easily the most picturesque house on Lakemere Avenue, it had bay windows out front and attic sleepers in the roof. The front garden had erupted into full bloom almost the same day Chrissie arrived, erupting with violets, carnations and geraniums as the season progressed. You had to follow a footpath through the rose bed just to reach the veranda. Maybe that's why sprinting up the Reinhart's front steps always felt like coming home. By definition, every home should have a garden.

The front door was open (Eve didn't believe in air conditioners, said they caused insanity or something), but I paused to knock all the same. Even in a place like Fairmont, you don't just go waltzing into someone's house all unannounced, everyone knew that. I waited with my hand on the doorframe for a few seconds, then I heard a clear, warm voice inviting me inside. It was Chrissie's Mom, calling out from the living room.

"Come in Billy."

Evelyn always knew when it was me, probably because I arrived around the same time every day. I walked into the long transept hall, figuring Chrissie must've been up in her bedroom (as she didn't come scampering out to answer the door like she usually did). Probably playing with the Whipper-Snapper I gave her a few weeks back; she never got tired of zocking it back and forth.

As I headed down the corridor, I noticed a trail of tiny footprints leading from the staircase to the living room. Tiny wet footprints. For some reason, this fact didn't quite register on my consciousness. I turned into the archway, raising a hand in greeting, oblivious of what I was walking into.

"Hi, Mrs. Reinhart, is Chrissie – "

That was as far as I got. Freezing in mid-sentence, I dropped my eyes to the floor, my cheeks igniting with sudden embarrassment. All at once, I realized what the little footprints had meant. Chrissie wasn't up in her bedroom at all. She was down in the living room with her mother, standing in front of the sofa. Her moist blond hair trailed down the middle of her back, and there was a soft blue bath-towel lying at her feet.

And she was in her *underwear*.

4.

"I'll - I'll just wait... out here," I stammered to no one in particular, half-stumbling into the corridor. What was I supposed to do? I knew I shouldn't be here right now; maybe I ought to go home. Or at least wait out on the veranda until it was OK to come back inside. I peered out the front door, thinking Chrissie would probably never speak to me again. Gnawing on my lower lip, I started inching towards the door, unable to believe what I'd just seen.

(chrissies got no clothes on)

"Billy." Eva's voice again.

"Y-yes, Mrs. Reinhart?" I replied, still averting my gaze.

"It's all right," she told me reassuringly, "you can come in if you want."

"Really?" I asked in overt surprise. My eyes started to wander through the archway, but I yanked them back on a short leash.

"Yes, it's fine, honey," she replied in coffee-cream tones, "we'll be finished in a minute."

(but chrissies got no CLOTHES on)

Despite my mounting agitation, I turned and looked into living room once more, mainly to confirm that it was all right for me to enter. I thought maybe Chrissie had climbed into a dress or

was wearing the towel around her shoulders. Either option would have been okay, but it turned out that I was wrong on both counts.

Eva was sitting on the chaise-long in her jeans and t-shirt, hair tied back in a bushy black ponytail. Chrissie was standing to one side in her bra and panties, carelessly brushing the tangles from her hair, totally oblivious of her state of dishabille. She turned in my direction, eyebrows raised in silent inquiry, her posture completely relaxed. Well? Are you coming in, or what?

I looked hesitantly up at Eve, unsure as to what to do next.

"Come and sit here," Eve told me, patting the space next to her. There were some clothes laid over the end of the couch, along with a pair of spangled yellow sandals. Evidently, Chrissie had just finished bathing, and Eve had brought her out to the living room to get dressed. It was a big, airy space with light spilling in through the windows, painting the floor with long golden rectangles. Pushing myself forward through a supreme act of will, I walked across the room and sat down beside Mrs. Reinhart – and saw what little girls were made of.

5.

I guess I shouldn't have been so surprised. Chrissie and I were practically joined at the hip, I'd grown so used to the sight of her underpants that I barely noticed any more. But this was the first time I'd ever seen her this undressed. Heck, it was the very first time I'd ever seen any girl this undressed.

I stared at my playmate in childish wonder. She was so different to me, so totally different. Having no point of reference, I'd always assumed that we looked pretty much the same under our clothes, except that Chrissie was smaller and prettier and had longer hair.

Looking at her now, however, I realized she was somewhat taller than I'd previously imagined – taller and more mature, in fact. All this time, I'd thought she was around my age, maybe eight or nine, but that had all been a mirage, a ... glamour, for lack of a better word. It was just one of the countless illusions that seemed to surround her. She had the face of a child, true, but her body was blossoming. I could see that much, even at a glance.

How old was she really? Eleven? Twelve? Old enough to wear a training bra, at the very least. But that couldn't be right – only a month ago, I'd seen her almost completely disrobed, back when we'd played the handstand game. She'd looked no more than eight that day, and I could have sworn that –

"Billy," Evelyn said, snapping me out of my reveries. I practically leapt out of my flesh, staring at her in red-faced guilt.

"Sorry?" I replied after an uncomfortable pause. It was all I could manage.

"Could you hand me that *skirt*, please?"

"Yes'm," I replied, biting my lip once more. What had I been doing?! I knew it was rude to stare. She must've thought I was the biggest prevert in the space-time continuum, practically drooling over her half-naked daughter like that. I looked frantically around the room, not quite certain what she'd asked for. Had she said 'skirt' or 'shirt'? No idea. A single, rampant thought was flashing through my mind in glaring, neon letters:

(chrissies not wearing any clothes and they caught me staring)

Of course, I hadn't been drooling and neither of them considered me a 'prevert'. Eve was actually regarding me with considerable amusement, raising a comical eyebrow as I finally found what I was looking for.

Earlier on, I'd noticed a small pile of clothing neatly folded over the edge of the chaise-

long, although I hadn't paid much attention at the time. There was a sky blue mini with a big silver zip down the side, along with a short-sleeved blouse splashed with strawberries. There were no socks on this occasion, but a pair of spangled yellow sandals had been placed on the floor, ankle straps lying open.

"Here," I mumbled apologetically, averting my eyes as I handed the skirt over. Chrissie snatched it up with an exasperated sigh.

"About time," she clucked impatiently, shaking her head in evident disbelief: *you aren't a prevert, Billy. You're just an idiot.* I smiled sheepishly at her disapproval, then turned my gaze towards her long-suffering Mother. Eve shrugged a wordless reply, carefully maintaining a straight face. The day was just getting started, after all.

6.

I sat watching Chrissie dress for the next few minutes, silently recording everything I saw for future reference. It was like some magic reverse-striptease where the girl covered everything up rather than slipping everything off. Tonight, I'd replay the entire morning's events from start to finish, over and over on a continuous loop. It was the one thing I could look forward to when I went home: casting myself in Chrissie's role and feeling that familiar mix of shame, pleasure and excitement that accompanied my nightly 'dress up' shows. My emotions had become increasingly more complex since the Reinharts moved in. Part of it was the wonder of new experience, part of it was the joy of childhood friendship.

Part of it was sheer *jealousy*.

Chrissie had a Mother who cared for her, a Mother who loved and doted and fussed over her. Chrissie ate pancakes for breakfast and meatloaf for dinner. Chrissie had soap in the shower and towels on the rack. Chrissie had fresh bed-sheets and clean pillow slips and clothes that didn't smell like they were ready to crawl away and die in the corner.

Most of all, she had a Mother who *talked* to her.

I suppressed a deep stab of envy, knowing how all of this had been denied to me for reasons I simply couldn't fathom. It all seemed so desperately unjust. When was the last time my mother had bathed and dressed me? When was the last time she'd brushed my hair, stroked my cheek, told me how special I was? Five months ago, six? A year? I couldn't remember.

I shoved the darkness into the back of my mind, understanding how unfair it was to blame the Reinharts for my misfortunes. If anything, their presence was my final refuge from complete and abject misery. I looked over at my erstwhile playdate, suddenly grateful that we had the whole of summer ahead of us.

"Well? How do I look?"

Chrissie finished strapping on her sandals and stood up to face me with her usual quizzical expression. She was every bit as beautiful as I'd ever seen her – more so, in fact, than on the day we'd first met. It's hard to say how – it was like she was ripening as the season climbed into mid-summer. Eve looked her over once or twice, fiddled with her hair, then nodded to herself in approval. *Perfect.*

And so she was.

"Can we go down to the park now, Mommy?" Chrissie asked, kneading her hemline.

"Not 'til you've had something to eat, Missy," Eva said, rising to her feet, "can't go out with an empty tummy, can we?" She glanced over in my direction, placing her hands on her hips.

"Have you had breakfast yet, Billy?"

The question caught me off guard, and I hesitated several seconds, not sure how to answer. I hadn't eaten anything substantial for nearly two days – the fridge was empty and Mom had destroyed every plate in the kitchen during her last howling binge. I'd been surviving on a diet of potato chips and cheese-curls lately, and I'd left home without eating anything at all that morning. To say I was hungry would have been an understatement, but I was reluctant to let Eve know there was anything wrong.

"I...uh, I yah um – " I began, lapsing into the stream of gibberish I normally employ when my brain clicks into shutdown mode. Chrissie put a hand over her mouth and giggled, eyes rolling up to meet her Mother's.

(billys really funny mommy)

(no darling billys very hungry don't laugh)

"Already eaten?" Eve asked, reading my expression as much as my mind, "well then, why don't you come out to the kitchen for a snack? You ever tried French Toast?"

"No I haven't," I replied, intrigued by the name, "what is it?"

"Real *yummy* is what it is, Billy," Chrissie announced, scampering over to grab me by the arm, "c'mon, you'll love it!" She started yanking me off the sofa, regaling me with epic descriptions of her Mommy's culinary skills (all of which were totally indisputable, I should add).

In a span of minutes, we were seated at the kitchen table, chattering away in fluent childspeak while Eva tied on an apron and wove her motherly enchantments. Switching on the radio, she bustled about the breakfast bar, humming under her breath and filling the air with a floury haze. Call me old-fashioned, but the sound of a woman singing in the kitchen never fails to swell my heart with contentment. I think most people forget what a mysterious, magical place a kitchen is for a young child, with its jars and spices and secret, hidden spaces.

It goes without saying that Eva Reinhart's French Toast was the most delicious thing I'd ever tasted up to that point. I like to believe it had nothing to my being on the brink of starvation.

7.

Perhaps I was asking for trouble. I was old enough to understand that my mother wouldn't take this desertion lightly. At best, she'd see it as a criticism of her parental abilities (such as they were); at worst, a defection to the enemy camp. But as I said before, what else could I do? I was nine years old, I was hungry, and there was no food in the house. Eve's generosity was a godsend. Unfortunately, none of this would make any difference to Mom. The moment she discovered I was eating my meals next door – and this was inevitable – she would give in to a fury that could melt lead.

Mom had come to loath Evelyn Reinhart with a passion that bordered on the irrational. There was no logical reason for her hatred; she hardly knew Eva, had traded maybe a hundred words with her, and most of those had been at their introduction. But Mom despised her all the same. During her less lucid moments, she held, long, rambling monologues with herself, attacking first Eve and then my father with equal venom. Sometimes, she seemed to imagine that Dad had run off with Eve, or at least someone like her. Times like that, I either got out of the house or hid in my room, as her delusions often signaled the onset one of her frenzies.

Most evenings, however, she spent comatose in the living room, and I frequently prayed she'd stay that way. Much as it pains me to say this, Mom had grown so unpredictable that I was avoiding her as much as possible. Fortunately, she was usually unconscious when I sneaked in through the back door at four-thirty. This afternoon I'd found her half-submerged into the couch,

clutching a bottle of cheap wine in a death-grip. Evidently, Johnny Walker had been slashed from the budget, along with the pizzas, the corn-chips and Colonel Sanders. Staring around the room at the fall-out of our lives, I fancied we'd sunk about as low as we could go. I couldn't have known how far we had left to fall. How very, very far.

But all of that lay in the future. For now, the oncoming storm was an insignificant blur, betraying not a hint of the havoc it would eventually wreak in our lives. As the temperatures climbed, I played in the sun with the girl next door; oblivious of the Darkness gathering on the horizon. How long did we have together? How long before the dogs began to howl around the streets of Fairmont? Three months, I realize now; little more than ninety days to run and shout and revel in the joy of her company. It seems impossibly short, a fleeting interval in the passage of years, but as I noted earlier, time moves differently for children.

And a lot can happen in three months.

8.

Later:

My bedroom offered some small measure of protection from the encroaching shadows – not much admittedly, but better than nothing at all. It was eight o'clock, the sun was setting, and I had the evening to myself. It was time to slough off my daytime identity and free my Otherself. I'd come to see myself in two different roles: the boy I played during daylight hours and the girl I became every evening. She had no name, no existence beyond the frame of my three-quarter mirror; yet, like any other child, she lived in a realm of dreams and fantasies. And – like any other child – she inhabited more than one plane of reality.

I kicked off my clothes and walked over to the dresser, every inch as nude as Chrissie had been the morning her Mom cooked breakfast for us. The image had been replaying itself through my head like a video set to short loop and I'd acted it out every evening for the past week. It was one of a number of games I played while my mother was asleep and the house was on silent running. All of them were highly arousing, a few of them left me breathless with excitement.

Sliding open the dresser drawer, I reached in to find my costume. The underwear situation was becoming desperate, but I always kept a pair of white cotton hipsters in reserve. They weren't as pretty as Chrissie's underthings (particularly her Days of The Week selection), but they smelled clean and served their purpose in every other respect. I kept them hidden under a stack of t-shirts, the most priceless item in my top-shelf collection (where were they anyhow? Must've pushed them to the back for safe keeping).

Leaning over the drawer, I glanced absently at my reflection – and *stopped*.

There was a *girl* looking back at me.

Straightening up to my full height, I studied myself in the mirror: my hair, my face, my pre-pubescent figure. Lifting my fingers to the glass, I shook my head in slow disbelief, still doubting the evidence of my eyes.

How was it possible?

I'd been denying it for weeks now, telling myself that it was just my imagination. Dreams never came true in the real world, wishes were never granted, I knew that for a fact. If they did, Prince Charming would never have run off with his secretary and Cinderella wouldn't be lying paralytic down in the living room. Life was no fairy tale, no matter how desperately I wanted otherwise; ducks didn't turn into swans, straw didn't turn into gold, and boys couldn't turn into girls. Yet here I was, staring into a face that only barely resembled mine.

I was changing.

A transformation had been taking place, just as I'd suspected; one so gradual as to seem virtually non-existent. What had been the first signs? A rounding of the limbs, a faint swelling of the tummy? That could have been anything – a change in weight, a trick of the light. Blonde streaks in the hair? Had to be the sun; I spent most of my time outside. Nothing dramatic, nothing inexplicable. No Hollywood CGI, no Terminator-style morphing. Just a slow, plodding transition from one state to another, as imperceptible as the growth of a child.

When had it begun? Back in June, the night of the spinning game? No, it had started weeks before that, right after school let out, not long after Dad had hopped an Airbus to Chicago. End of spring, around the same time the season turned and the flowers burst forth along the sidewalk. The day I sat listening to the radio on the front porch, idly tapping away at a paddle-ball while a huge blue moving van rolled up before the Old Stewart Place.

The morning Chrissie moved in, to be precise.

How long ago was that? Eight, nine weeks? The whole of summer, so far. As the days had grown longer, some bizarre metamorphosis had occurred; it was still occurring right now. There was no other explanation; the signals were all there, and they were far too obvious to ignore.

My hair had lightened by visible degrees. At first I'd thought it was common sun-bleaching, but it had also changed color somehow, going from a dark reddish-brown to a rich honey-blond. It had thickened and grown at an impossible rate, taking on a sumptuous wavy curl. How long before it was down to my waist? Three weeks, a month? By the beginning of fall, it would be longer than Chrissie's, perhaps even as blonde.

The changes extended to my face as well. The features had softened, growing steadily more feminine. My lips had folded into a sensuous pout, dimples appearing either side of my mouth, and my nose was melting into a clipped, round bump. The very structure of my face had altered; the cheeks padding up with puppy-fat, the jaw shrinking away to doll-like proportions. And while I hadn't lost any height, I had the open, blameless expression of a very young child – a girl of maybe five or six.

I moved my hands down the front of my body, examining the differences with my fingertips. My figure, lithe and rather girlish to begin with, was overflowing with lush, ripe curves, especially around the thighs and bottom. Even my belly button had changed. Back in May, it had been a shallow dip in the middle of my tummy. Now it was poking out like the tip of an impudent pink tongue.

Scanning myself closely in the mirror, I slid my fingers down to the junction of my legs. Despite my tender age, I was fully aware how different girls were from boys, how different *she* was from *me*. But that difference had been evaporating off my body for over two months. I hadn't noticed it until quite recently (perhaps because this was the slowest of all the transformations I was undergoing), but there could be no question now as to what was happening.

I touched it gingerly with the cusp of my index finger. Three months ago, it had been the normal length for a boy my age; today it was the size of a pea...and roughly the same shape as well. It had receded, withdrawn into itself by some inscrutable alchemy, leaving nothing more than this token nub. I prodded it again, careful not to slice it with a clumsy fingernail. It was unbelievably delicate, as if every nerve ending in my body was concentrated down there. It was sort of like stroking one of my nipples, except about a thousand times more sensitive.

Strangely enough, this particular modification hadn't frightened me in the least. Most other boys would have run screaming through the house, but I found myself accepting it with the same puzzled confusion I'd felt all along. In a way, it was no different to anything else that had

happened that summer. It was almost as if I'd been...well, *expecting* it, I suppose. That wasn't precisely right, but the sentiment was close enough.

However, that wasn't the full extent of the changes. There was still one more, perhaps the most significant, something I hadn't noticed until a few days ago. It was the most perplexing – and possibly the most alarming – of all the enigmas I'd encountered so far. In a way, it was the key to everything that had happened to me, although I wouldn't understand that for quite some time yet.

Bracing one hand against the wall, I leaned in towards the mirror, close enough for my breath to fog the glass. Gazing into that innocent, elfish face, I sought an answer to this mystery, a clue to this paradox. And there it was, the final proof I was seeking. There could be no doubt, no mistake. Somehow, it was all true. Against all logic, all common sense, I was evolving into a girl. And not just *any* girl, either.

My eyes had turned *purple*.

Purple, rimmed with turquoise.

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Winds of the Fall

1.

A storm was coming.

David Henson had known it the moment he'd opened his eyes that morning. He always knew when there was a storm drifting up from the south, just sort of sensed it brooding in the distance like an ugly black secret. His grandmother had been able to do the same thing; predict the weather, sometimes days in advance. She'd been a spooky old lady, his grandma. Eighty-nine years old with a mouth full of venom and a voice that could crack a mirror from sixty yards. The kind of woman who kidnapped little boys and cooked them into ginger bread. All the same, she was always dead accurate when it came to predictions (pretty scary in itself when he thought about it). Dave had secretly rejoiced when they'd finally packed her off to the nursing home last year, cackling like some geriatric hyena, but it later occurred to him that precognition might not be the *only* thing that ran in the family.

Be that as it may, Dave figured that dementia was still a long way off, and he had more pressing concerns for the time being. Despite the warmth of the day, he wanted to wear his waterproof parker; a dark blue rain slicker with an adjustable hood. It was about three sizes too big and weighed like eighty pounds, but Dave knew it would keep him warm through an avalanche if need be.

Dave's Mom had shaken a skeptical head when he'd told her; the skies were crystal clear aside from a couple fleece-backs skimming the horizon. Wasn't enough there to fill a tea-cup from what she could see. But Dave had been adamant: there was a storm brewing to the south, a big one judging by the ringing in his ears, and he wasn't about to get caught in a gosh-darn tornado without a slicker. His mother finally capitulated, not so much because his arguments had swayed her judgment, but because he sounded cute when he said things like "gosh-darn."

Dave had headed stoically into school, trudging along the pavement while the sun beat down from an endless blue sky. Upon arrival, he'd endured the sneering ridicule of his classmates

with almost superhuman patience, sweating bullets beneath half a ton of blue gortex. The morning lengthened to midday without a single cloud crossing the yardarm, but Dave stubbornly refused to remove his parker. Doubts were cast over his sanity by fans and critics alike (even young Janey Watson was puzzled by his behavior, although she made no comment RE his mental state). Back in the classroom, he sat gnawing the end of his pencil, watching the window the way others watched the clock.

And there it was, just as he'd expected.

A massive gray build-up along the southern horizon; obliterating the landscape as it crept imperceptibly along the Blaxland Ranges. Hardly seemed to be moving in their direction, would probably miss them by four zillion miles, but Dave knew better. This was going to be much worse than he'd anticipated. For a moment, he could almost hear his Grandma's shrieking laughter in the back of his head, high and shrill and razor sharp. For the first time that day, he started to feel scared.

The thunderheads circled Ridgewick most of the afternoon, driving cold autumn winds through the center of town. Doors and windows began to rattle, the classroom's corkboard walls began to 'breath' back and forth. Dave looked around in growing agitation, wondering why nobody else noticed the sudden change in the air. A static charge seemed to be crackling through his veins, a hundred times worse than the continual buzzing in his ears.

The skies were rumbling with purple anger when school let out around three o'clock. Most of the younger children scampered straight home trailing their backpacks, far too sensible to get caught in the rising gale. The older ones made a bee-line for Memorial Park, led by the malevolent Katie Prescott and her Minions of Darkness (that was how Dave actually thought of them: he'd discovered A.K. Rowland last year and tended to think in terms of Potterisms). Crumpled brown leaves chased them down the empty streets, streaking through fence pikes and power lines.

And still the thunderheads cycled overhead, bending the trees along Memorial Drive in their fury.

Dave tagged along in the rear guard, mainly because his friend Janey Watson had been roped into the exodus and he pretty much went wherever she did. He'd also been getting an odd vibe all afternoon, as if something black and ominous was approaching with the storm. Several times, he thought he heard dogs baying in the distance, but decided it had to be the keening of the wind. Unfortunately, this explanation did little to sooth his rising anxieties. When the short hairs on the back of his hands started to prickle, he knew the storm was almost upon them.

"We ought to go home," he told Janey, but knew she wouldn't want to leave until the game was finished. Katie Prescott had decreed an interclass tag marathon and when Katie Prescott called tag, no one left until the Final Game Was Played, not unless their parents had a comprehensive dental plan. So Dave stood inconspicuously off to one side while half the sixth grade stampeded round and round the Fountain in lunatic abandon. Sheet lightning seared the clouds several times and dogs wailed like ghosts in the background, raising the hackles at the base of his neck.

Something bad was coming.

The storm finally broke around three-thirty, blackening the skies as the rain lashed down in a literal torrent. Curbs were flooded, drains overflowed and lawns receded before the backwash. Long dead branches fell from denuded maples and were carried off to parts unknown. The One Last Game ended with a booming thunder burst that scattered the children to every point of the compass. They emptied the playground in a swarming mass, screaming to the indigo clouds.

Some of them lived close by and vanished within a matter of seconds, others bolted through the Wilderlands, emerging five minutes later into Westside Estates. A few spilled down Memorial Drive, heading towards the center of town.

Further out in the boondocks, traditional protective measures were taken by stern-faced adults. Curtains were drawn over a hundred picture windows; doors were locked and double bolted, as if this could somehow ward off the storm's howling ferocity. As a final precaution, mirrors were covered with white linen – an old superstition meant to ward off ball lightning, which was common this time of year.

Perhaps they should have painted ha'ants on the eaves as well. Who knows, it might have proven just as effective.

2.

Janey and Dave bolted along Memorial Drive, heads lowered against the downpour. They crossed the bridge at Braithwaite Canal (overflowing its banks already) and sprinted along the sidewalk, all but swept away in the tempest. Stumbling to the corner of Threadmont Avenue, David paused long enough to get his bearings, then grabbed Janey by the right hand, pointing towards a dim gray shape in the distance.

"Over there!" he yelled at the top of his lungs, "the BUS shelter!" The girl nodded in reply, although she could barely hear him over the wind. They scrambled down the footpath in a welter of knees and elbows, feet slipping on the wet concrete. The girl held a forearm over her face; the rain was hammering down hard enough to leave marks on her pale flesh. They'd never seen a storm like this, none they could remember anyway.

Reaching the bus shelter, they hunched off their backpacks and began shaking the chill out of their bones.

"I knew we shouldn't have stayed at the park so long," Dave said, looking out into the deluge. He was a lanky young galoot with a shock of curly red hair framing his face. Looked about as Irish as you got this far west of Lower Manhattan. He eyed the heavens apprehensively, hearing that odd wailing in the wind again. What the hell was it?

Janey picked up the hem of her red gingham dress and started wringing the water out of it. She was an unusually pretty child with melting blue eyes and soft, girlish features - although she wasn't precisely a girl, contrary to all appearances. Like many children born in Ridgewick over the past fifteen years, Janey Watson was somewhat...*unique*.

"You said it was going to rain this morning," she commented, her voice high and faint against the squall. Her frock was pasted against her body and she was shivering with the cold. Fall had come early; there was a threat of snow in the wind. "How did you know that?"

Dave shrugged. He got that question a lot, and he was never sure how to answer it.

"I dunno. You can smell it in the air sometimes." It was true: storms often carried an acrid, mineral scent. Strange that no else ever noticed it. "Rain has a kind of metallic smell, you know that?"

"No," Janey shook her head, spraying droplets everywhere. She dropped her hemline and hugged herself against the wind, teeth chattering. "How we gonna get home?"

"Wait for the bus, I guess," Dave answered, adjusting his hood and wishing he'd never left home this morning. He had no desire to stand around in this maelstrom, but didn't see what other choice they had.

"How long'll that be?" Janey demanded.

"About half an hour."

"I'm freezing!"

Lightning flickered to the south, remote and distant. A rail of thunder followed a few seconds later, just loud enough to set their hearts racing. Janey gnawed a lip, watching the horizon fearfully. The thunder was closing in, she could tell that much at least. Damn that Katie Prescott and her One Last Game of tag. If they'd left when Dave said, they would've been home by now.

"We can't wait for the bus," she said uneasily, "we might get hit by lightning or something."

"Aw, don't worry, this'll blow over in a while," Dave replied offhand, although he didn't feel as confident as he was trying to sound. The storm had him spooked so bad he was ready to run like a split streak. The skies were darkening almost by the minute, and that peculiar wailing was getting closer. Whatever it was, Dave didn't care to be here when it arrived. All the same, he didn't want to worry Janey with his fears, she looked scared enough as it was.

"We'll be safe here," he reassured her, waving a dismissive hand about in the air, "that lightning's about a zillion miles away. I mean, if you count the seconds between – "

His words were drowned out by a deafening concussion directly overhead. The entire sky flashed white for a fraction of an instant, and the ground literally shook beneath their feet. Janey tensed against him like a child afraid of the dark, he could feel her clenching her teeth to keep from screaming. No – that wasn't her: it was him. Any louder and he would have run shrieking into the downpour. He stared off down Memorial Drive, cringing in the bitter gale, feeling his knee-joints buckle and weaken.

Janey didn't look much better: she was trembling from crown to heel, her body a collection of tight little knots. It was mainly the cold, but Dave knew she was frightened too – terrified in fact. Nor could he blame her. A sense of urgency was slinking into his mind, a foreboding of impending disaster. They had to get out of this cyclone, right now, this minute, and they couldn't waste any more time waiting for some bus that may never come. Something bad was approaching, he was certain of that now. Something worse than the thunder, worse than the lightning, worse than anything he could imagine in his worst nightmares.

"Listen, my place is only two blocks over," Dave yelled, pointing across the road, "we can cut through Old Man McGinty's field, it'll take us around two minutes."

"Doesn't McGinty have a *dog*?"

David hesitated several seconds, startled by her choice of question.

"No," he answered finally, "I been through there thousands of times."

"Okay."

Shouldering their backpacks, they held their breath and plunged out into the rain. The storm engulfed them in a solid gray curtain, effectively limiting their vision to zero (but that didn't matter; they were kids, they were twelve and they frequently ran on instinct alone). Hauling themselves across Memorial Drive, they darted through to McGinty's Field, half-expecting the Hound of The Baskervilles to come slavering out of the chaos. No dogs were in evidence however (not even McGinty's fabled mongrel), although the clashing of the heavens added enthusiasm to their departure.

Somewhere along the line, Janey's fingers found his hand, and they ran the entire distance joined at the wrist.

Roughly five minutes later, they were standing in the front hall of Dave's house on Lancaster Avenue, kicking off their shoes and babbling in excited canary voices. Even with the door closed, they could still hear the banshees wailing around the gables. Dave sloughed off his parker, listening to the windows shake in their frames. It was already dark outside, and it couldn't have been later than four thirty. It didn't seem natural, even this late in September. None of it seemed natural, now that he thought about it – the clouds, the storm; the vicious, lancing winds. What was going *on*?

"Coming down like a machine gun now," Dave observed, looking out through the door's leadlight paneling, "sounds like its raining bullets." Hailstones the size of golf-balls had started impacting on the veranda, exploding into smaller fragments. Bad as the rain had been, Dave was glad they hadn't been caught in the hail; he honestly thought they mightn't have made it home. It was almost as if the storm had tried to stop them reaching the front steps.

Janey coughed beside him, bending over to cover her face with both hands.

"What time is it?" she asked, straightening up. She started wringing out her dress once more, pulling the hem up to the top of her thighs. Her legs were long and rather well-shaped for a girl her age.

"I dunno," he replied, then remembered he was wearing a watch: "it's about ten past four." He looked through the leadlight once more, his expression pinched with concentration.

"I never seen the sky go black during a storm before."

"David? Is that you?"

Roslyn Henson, Dave's mother, appeared at the far end of the hallway, a tall, slim thirty-something with dark brown eyes and chestnut hair tied back in a short ponytail. She came down the corridor wreathed in an aura of freshly baked cookies. Dave turned to answer her, hoping she wasn't angry.

"Yeah, Mom. Janey's here too."

"What happened, why are you so late?" she asked in a voice tinged with worry, "did you get caught in the storm?"

"Yeah, we were playing down at Memorial park when it started raining," Dave explained, hanging up his slicker on the coat rack, "then we got stuck in this bus shelter –"

"You should've called from the park," Roslyn fussed in obvious relief, "I would have come out to get you. Well, at least you didn't get too –"

She paused in mid-sentence when she saw Janey standing behind him, quivering like a shipwreck survivor. The girl managed to raise half a smile, but her cheeks were blue and her dress was streaming on the floor boards.

"Oh, Janey. You must be soaked to the skin, honey," Roslyn cooed, reaching out to touch the girl under the chin, "come on into the living room, we'll put you in front of the fire." She took Janey's hand by the fingertips and led her down the hallway.

It was an oddly affectionate gesture Dave had seen several time before. He knew his mother had grown genuinely fond of his friend over the past twelve months, seemed to regard her almost as a member of the family. He'd found their instant karma rather baffling at first, but at least it meant he could have her over anytime he wanted (and he knew there were many parents in Ridgewick who wouldn't have let a tranzi in through the back door).

Dave fell in behind them as they headed down the corridor, listening to their chatter but not really following their conversation. He was keeping one ear cocked towards the storm. That weird howling noise was somewhat muted now, but he could still hear it through the closed door

and it was setting his teeth on edge. God, he was glad they'd escaped the bus shelter when they had.

Janey coughed as they walked into the living room, doubling over in a rush of moist blond curls. Roslyn led her over to the fireplace, glancing down at her in some concern.

"That's a nasty cough you've got there, sweetie. Let's get you out of those clothes before you catch cold."

"OK."

Janey looked over at Dave to see what he was doing, but he was heading for the arm chair over by the TV, the remote already in his hand. As she watched, he sat down and started flicking through the channels, barely aware of their presence. Seemed rather *distracted*, as a matter of fact.

Arriving at the fireplace, Mrs Henson sat down on the sofa and drew Janey up in front of her, holding her by both hands now.

"No wonder you're coughing so hard," Ros told her sympathetically, "your hands are like blocks of ice."

"The rain was f-freezing, Mrs Henson," she stammered under her breath, "c-colder than that s-snow we had last year, I th-think."

"Well, don't worry. Once we get that dress off, you'll warm up in no time." Reaching forward, she began undoing the buttons down the front of Janey's dress then paused, looking over towards her son.

"David"

Dave glanced over at his mother, eyebrows raised in mute enquiry.

"Could you go upstairs and get a blanket for Janey?" Roslyn asked, absently undoing the next button, "she's freezing to death over here."

"Sure Mom," Dave replied, replacing the remote and hopping off the armchair. Chamberlain Regional News droned away in the background.

"And while you're up there, could you get my hair brush off the dresser, too?" She looked back to the little girl and touched her on the nose. "We'll do your hair while we're at it, sweetie." Janey nodded and looked down at her feet.

"Okay," Dave said with an off-hand tilt of his head, and stepped through the living room door. Ros watched him leave with a raised eyebrow, surprised he hadn't put up more of a fight. Odd behavior indeed for a boy his age: hardly seemed to notice there was a twelve year old girl getting naked in his living room. Well, no matter; the excuse had worked, the errand would keep him out of the room for at least five minutes. She turned her attention back to the girl standing in front of her. Time to get her out of that dress before she turned blue.

"Still cold, Honey-girl?"

"Yeah, a little," Janey replied.

"Well, let's take off that dress and get you warm," Roslyn said, and slid the sleeves off the child's rounded shoulders. Janey raised no objections, shed long since come to regard Mrs Henson as a second mother (much as she'd adopted Dave as an older brother). Four years ago, she would have refused to let anyone touch her. But four years ago, she'd been a completely different person.

Roslyn lowered the frock over her waist and hips, dropping it to the floor.

"Okay, turn around," Roslyn said, patting her gently on the hip, "we don't want you to getting a chest-cold, do we?"

Janey obediently turned her back and faced the door, arms hanging loosely by her sides.

"Deep breath, Sweet-heart."

Janey arched her back as Roslyn popped the clips. The brassiere gave way with an audible twang (it was six months old and one size too small), the shoulder-straps slipping loosely down her arms. Pert, tiny breasts flashed into view. Janey raised her hands to cover herself then noticed the bra was still tangled around her elbows. Giggles threatened to bubble up from her tummy as she imagined how she must have looked. What if Dave came back and saw her like this?

Rosy took her by the shoulders and turned her 'round, peeling the brassiere off her arms.

"I'll put those things in the dryer in a minute," she said, dropping the bra to the floor next to the dress. Janey stood before her, a lithe, pretty twelve year-old wearing nothing but her white nylon underpants. She looked round the room feeling small, helpless and terribly vulnerable. And incredibly, it was the most wonderful feeling in the whole wide world.

"Now," Ros said, taking the girl's hands and bringing her forward again, "let's have a closer look at you."

4.

Roslyn Henson was thirty-three years old and had lived in Ridgewick all her life. She'd been in her late teens when the Blaxland Disaster made national headlines, and like many of her friends, she'd witnessed the arrival of the first transsexual children - though none of them had realized it at the time. TISM doesn't manifest until the eighth or ninth year, and sometimes not until the advent of puberty. Roslyn considered herself very fortunate in this regard. David had never developed transfeminine characteristics (and probably never would at this late stage). It was like winning the lottery in a way; she'd delivered a perfectly normal baby, quite an unusual event in this particular town.

Unfortunately, the pregnancy itself hadn't been free of complications. Dave had arrived slightly premature – not enough to endanger his health, but more than enough to endanger hers. A breech birth had exacerbated the situation to critical levels, and her doctors had opted for a C-section. Several minor disasters ensued in a virtual cascade of agony, but at the end of her ordeal, the nurses had handed her a beautiful, red-haired baby boy.

Along with the worst news she could otherwise have imagined.

Was it somehow related to the Blaxland Disaster? Probably not; her pregnancy had been a text book case-study right up to the eighth month. It wasn't unheard of for a woman to lose the ability to conceive following a difficult delivery. Nevertheless, it had come as a crushing blow after everything she'd endured to bring David into the world.

Much as she loved her son, Roslyn had always harbored a secret, unspoken regret over the circumstances of his birth. Because she'd wanted more children. A whole tribe of them, in fact: raging and roaring 'round the house; scuttling beneath her feet and getting into the cupboards when her back was turned. Children rustling through the undergrowth, children sliding down the banisters and swinging off the chandeliers. Children of every make, shape and size. Tall and thin, short and round, good and bad alike, she'd wanted them, each and every one.

Most of all, she'd wanted a *daughter*.

Which was probably why she'd taken such a shine to David's little girl-friend.

Okay, she wasn't exactly his girl-friend – wasn't even a *girl* for that matter – but Roslyn had never met a child quite so endearing. Janey Watson had a delicate, ethereal appearance; her eyes were so bright they seemed to illuminate everything she looked at. More than that, she was kind and sweet and radiantly happy, the way a little girl should be. Roslyn had come to love her

over the past four months, much the same way she loved her nieces and younger cousins – maybe a little more than that, in recent weeks. And with a mother's unerring intuition, Ros understood that her feelings were being returned.

She placed a hand on Janey's cheek, brushing moist blond curls back from her face. She had the most beautiful eyes she'd ever seen, huge and deep and liquid blue. Her mouth was a tiny red pout surmounting a dimpled chin, her nose a bump between rose-tinted cheeks. The kind of face capable of inspiring Renaissance poets to Elizabethan raptures.

Roslyn skipped her gaze down Janey's narrow figure. Her body shimmered like a soap bubble in the wavering orange light. Rain-water trickled between her budding, nascent breasts. Rosy trailed her hands down the girl's torso, stroking the nipples with her fingertips. Janey was going through puberty, blossoming into a woman, there could be no question of that. The breasts were small but perfectly formed, the nipples big and dark against her milky flesh. Ros could feel them straining into her fingertips.

Other signs of the onset were evident – a thinning of the waist, a ripening of the hips; the beginnings of an hourglass form. And while she wasn't tall, her legs were long and tapering, lending her the illusion of lean adolescence. In a few years, she'd be shattering hearts every time she stepped out the front door; reducing grown men to tears of desire. Impossible to believe she'd ever been male.

"You must be the prettiest thing I've ever seen," Rosy told her. She lowered her gaze to Janey's underpants; sheer nylon briefs decorated with lycra trimmings. Floral patterns adorned the front and hips, a delicate lace frill encircled the waist. Like the rest of her clothing, they'd been drenched in the downpour and clung almost invisibly to the girl's pale skin.

What did she look like *down there*?

From what Ros had read, TISM mimics female biology to the finest detail, right down to the reproductive system. Some tranzies were known to retain a vestige of their former identity, though only in a minority of cases – intersexuals, for the most part.

David would be back in a minute. At twelve, he was both too young and too old to see his little friend undressed, but she'd worry about that when he came downstairs.

Before another word could be spoken, a strafe of lightening flickered beyond the window, followed by a blast that quaked the house to its foundations. The ceiling trembled, the lights blinked out of existence, and Janey leapt into Roslyn's lap with a startled cry. Coiling her arms around the woman's neck, she buried her face in Rosy's shoulder, struggling to control her whimpers. The thunder was so close now, almost inside the room with them.

"You scared of the storm, Honey?" Roslyn asked, unnerved by the light-show herself. Sounded like the roof was going to collapse, that time.

Janey nodded, biting her lip to keep from sobbing.

"Nothing to worry about, baby," Ros soothed, smoothing down her rain-matted hair, "the lightning can't hurt you in here."

Janey snuggled up against her Roslyn-Mom, a fragile little girl in flimsy white panties seeking warmth and protection. She could hear the night raging against the walls like some vicious, black animal and the sound terrified her. It was trying to claw its way inside; any moment now, the front door would explode off its hinges and the beast would rush snarling down the hallway, its red-coal eyes as huge as storm beacons –

"Honey, you're still shivering," Roslyn said, gathering the child so close they were practically breathing through each other's mouths, "come on, let's get you closer to the fire." She started chafing Janey's slender limbs to get her blood flowing. Warm, gentle hands roamed over

her body, massaging her back, her thighs, her plump, round bottom. Janey melted gratefully into Rosy's arms, closing her eyes and sighing in pleasure. Cheeks were kissed, faces nuzzled, and earlobes nibbled without mercy.

Outside, the storm tore through lawns and gardens, uprooting trees and lifting roofs in its wake. The keening winds slammed at the doors and windows, seeking entry through slot and jamb and keyhole. The skies were totally black now: not a single shaft of moonlight penetrated the swirling clouds. It was a wild, hellish night, the stuff of terror and nightmare. Of all of this, Roslyn Henson was largely unaware. She'd found the daughter she'd lost the day her son had been born, and nothing else mattered to her at this point. Mother and daughter lay together, nestled together in a warmth deeper than that of the fire.

Neither one noticed when the dogs began to howl.

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The Shaming

The nights over Ridgewick were clear and cool. The evenings still carried a hint of winter, particularly when the Northerlies blew down from the Ranges towards the end of the day. With just over four weeks to go before Foundation Day, the town was abuzz with talk about the coming celebration. Festive lights were already being slung along The Drive all the way down to Memorial Park; local stores were stocking up on fireworks, trophies, and commemorative coins. Businesses all over Chamberlain County were gearing up for the annual invasion; the Chamber of Commerce was expecting a huge turnout this year. Tourists would be coming in from all points of the compass to take part in the Opening Ceremony.

Nor was the excitement confined only to the business sector. The Century had been the only topic of conversation for weeks now, ever since the days started to lengthen towards Spring. Libraries were thrashing posters onto every available surface, churches were running last-second cake stalls. Bands and orchestras were rushing helter-skelter learning new routines; scores of yammering children were busy decorating their schools with pennants, streamers and Chinese lanterns. And, most importantly, in a hundred different homes, in a thousand different rooms and yards and poolside, young girls had started training for the Sprint.

Behind closed doors, secrets were taught and mysteries imparted as they had for more than six generations. Sometimes in private and sometimes in plain view, they worked on their drills and steps, counting down the hours until Century Day. It was like a fever that raged from house to house under cover of darkness, consuming every girl it touched with a kind of sweet, seductive madness. Some trained alone, some trained with friends, some trained in teams, and the fever swept on through street, square and avenue.

There were no easy victories, however.

Not everyone embraced the Festival with open arms and willing hearts. Many girls viewed the Sprint with fear, anxiety, and not a little dread. Voices were raised in hopeless protest, tears were shed in hopeless petitions. It made no difference in the end; the date had been announced, the lots had been drawn, and the Race would be run. That was the tradition, and in Chamberlain County, tradition took precedent over law. Ridgewick girls had always run The Silver Century regardless of how they felt. Some pleaded, some wept, some resisted with all their strength, but eventually, everybody succumbed.

Without exception.

2.

"Bethany? Could you set the table please?"

"Yes, Mom," Bethany Tyler replied, rising from the sofa and leaving her little sister with the remote. There was no sense in arguing; it was late in the afternoon, the streetlights were flickering on all over town and there wasn't much worth watching this time of day. Purple dinosaurs and dancing turnips may have snared little Kyra's attention, but they held little appeal for a girl Bethany's age.

Walking out to the kitchen, she was immediately overwhelmed by the aroma of slowly baking cookies. That was for after dinner; Cousin Irene was coming over for a meal and she had a fetish for homemade double-choc. Normally, Beth would have been looking forward to the visit, as Irene was her favorite crazy relative, but tonight she was feeling a little apprehensive. With only twenty-one days until *The Sprint*, Bethany had a healthy dose of the mysterious Ridgewick Jitters.

Pre-Race trepidation was reaching plague proportions around Bethany's school; most of her friends had already contracted the malaise. It was the same every year, Beth had seen it sweep through the student population on numerous occasions, although this was the first time she'd ever suffered the symptoms herself. That was mainly because she was now old enough to compete.

"Forks on the left, Honey," Carol Tyler said as Bethany opened the cutlery drawer.

"Okay," Beth replied, absently scooping out two handfuls of silverware out of the drawer. Laying the utensils out the table, she glanced at her mother, wondering if she should broach the subject that had been on her mind the whole day. It was a topic she'd discussed numerous times at school, usually in those huddled, whispering conferences held in the library. Kendra Morgan had raised the matter earlier that day on the way to the cafeteria. Her voice had been low and kind of tremulous, betraying a nervous giggle behind her words, almost as if she was reluctant to ask the question in public. Bethany had understood her anxiety – the topic was practically taboo in Ridgewick.

Kendra had wanted to know if *The Sprint* was absolutely compulsory for girls their age.

It was a simple enough question, straightforward and logical, but nobody seemed to have an answer for it. Bethany suspected this was because no one had yet worked up the courage to ask their parents or teachers. Like Bethany herself, everybody feared what the answer might be. More than that, it was one of those topics better left unresolved, because – inexplicably – no one really wanted to know the answer.

Why?

Well, *that* was virtually impossible to explain.

Like many of her girlfriends, Bethany had experienced a kind of breathless, guilty exhilaration over the past few weeks. It was all that they could talk about around school: tittering little conversations held between textbooks in the classroom; secret, conspiratorial meetings at the bottom of the playground. Questions were asked, alliances were formed and pacts were made. None of them could have put it into words, but their apprehension was matched only by their anticipation. It was like the first time you climb onto the roller coaster. You're frightened, terrified in fact, but you still want to ride. Because it terrifies you.

As The Big Day approached, that sense of unwilling desire seemed to increase geometrically. Bethany knew that many of her classmates had already started practicing; mostly under their parent's tutelage. That was how it started: a sort of secret ritual shared by close family members; first in the bedrooms and living spaces, then later in the yards and playgrounds. Weeks of preparation and rehearsals, working up to the big event at Memorial Park.

"I've finished, Mom," Beth said, stepping back from the table, "does it look okay?"

"Looks fine," Carol said, adding another dash of spice to the *Bolognese* sauce she was simmering, "why don't you go wash up? Dinner's almost ready and Irene will be here anytime."

"Okay," Bethany replied, and walked toward the hallway. Reaching the archway, she stopped and looked back over her shoulder to where her mother was bustling about between stove and counter, a tall, attractive woman in faded blue jeans and a loose-fitting green sweater. Bethany wavered undecided for a several seconds, then called out to her in a soft voice.

"Mommy?"

"Yes dear?"

"Is the..." Pause. Edit. Amend. "Did you have to take part in The Sprint when you were my age?"

"Well, of course I did," Carol smiled ingenuously, "every girl in Ridgewick does."

And before Bethany could ask her next question, the doorbell rang, announcing Cousin Irene's cyclonic arrival.

3.

Irene Marshall was something of a celebrity on Mommy's side of the family, one of those rare, exotic black sheep loved by all and understood by none but the smallest children. A slim, bewitching girl with lustrous black hair and eyes the color of an autumn sunset, she had gained a footnote in Ridgewick history by trekking all around Europe and Asia before her nineteenth birthday. Her subsequent achievements were both impressive and considerable: an artist's studio in California; a section in the Venice Biennale; a traveling fellowship from the Churchill Foundation to name but a few.

More importantly, she had won *The Silver Century* during her youth, an accomplishment which in Ridgewick outshone all others. The triumph had been celebrated in newspaper clippings and photo albums across the entire clan; everybody seemed to own a memento from that glorious occasion (mostly pictures of Irene holding The Prize aloft before a wildly cheering crowd). Consequently, she was considered an authority on the subject of winning The Sprint – although from what Bethany could see, that was largely a matter of luck.

Not that Beth would have dared to voice such an opinion out loud. Irene's victory had attained a kind of mythical status during the intervening years, and any suggestion that it was the result of blind fortune would have been akin to blasphemy. The Prize had been won through skill and technique alone – and listening to Reenie's account of that earth-shattering event, Bethany wouldn't have doubted it for a second. Like many prize-winning veterans of The Sprint, Irene was a spellbinding talker when it came to recounting the defining moment of her youth.

All of it was related in immaculate detail: the pennants waving over the pavilions, the manic warbling of the calliope, the frivolous odor of cotton candy and licorice drifting down sideshow alley. Irene wove the tale in a cascade of dazzling images; the roaring of the crowds around the Pavillion, the prickling of the short cropped grass beneath their feet, the blasting of

the horns as the Sprint began, the wild, careening rush beneath the endless blue skies. Bethany had listened utterly enthralled, her heart frequently soaring with awe and wonder.

And that was the strangest part was simply this: Beth had actually witnessed the event when she was six. It was her first trip to Memorial Park, her first encounter with The Sprint. It had been huge and bright and wonderful (as the Century always was), and yet Irene's retelling was infinitely more thrilling. All of them sat entranced around the table, transfixed by the narrative. Even little Kyra, Beth's irrepressible younger sister, had been uncharacteristically silent throughout the story (a rare event indeed in the Tyler household, Mommy later commented).

The meal was half past finished when the conversation drifted onto this year's Silver Century. By that time, Bethany had begun to suspect that Reenie's visit wasn't entirely coincidental. The timing was just too close, the atmosphere too jubilant to be just another family meal. She guessed – accurately, it later turned out – that this was one of the countless unspoken rituals connected with Century Day; the sharing of knowledge between mothers, sisters and family. The same initiation that Carol and Irene had undergone each in their turn a space of years ago.

And it always began with the same question.

"So – are you looking forward to The Sprint, Bethany?" Irene asked, sipping thoughtfully at her Swiss Blend. They were seated around the table, two girls and two women wreathed in a cloud of domestic bliss and homebaked double chock. Bethany looked up from her cookie, taken slightly off balance by the question. She dithered about for several seconds, not really certain how to answer. It wasn't something that could be easily put into words, even at the best of times.

"Well ... yeah, I *guess* so," she replied after a long moment, hoping they wouldn't notice the lack of enthusiasm in her voice. Irene traded an amused glance with Carol, then looked back to the girl.

"Feeling a little nervous?"

"Uh-huh." An obvious understatement: saying she felt nervous was like calling a hurricane a slight breeze.

"Well, that's completely normal. I had the worst case of Ridgewick Jitters when my turn came round; practically begged my mother not to make me run the Century."

"Really?" Bethany gaped, frankly astonished by this admission.

"Yes. Of course, yes. We all go through this when the time comes," Reenie told her nonchalantly, "one of my friends locked herself in her bedroom and didn't come out for two days. Another one tried to run away the night before. Girls go a little crazy when they know it's their turn to run The Sprint. By the time Century Day rolled round, every girl in my grade was practically climbing the walls, we were so hyped-up over the whole thing. It happens every year. You must've seen it down at your school."

It was true of course, Bethany had seen it. A lot of weird stuff had been going on around the playground lately. All the secret meetings, the huddled conspiracies, the endless, probing questions. A few of her classmates were trying to plea-bargain their way out of the Sprint, while others were almost desperate to practice in the school gym during lunch hours. Even now, three weeks down the road, you could feel the tension building up like some vast, high-pressure cable.

Irene leaned in close, lowering her voice to a vaguely confidential tone.

"Bet I know what everybody's talking about at school this week."

"Do you?" Bethany straightened her spine attentively, thinking of Kendra Morgan.

"You're all asking each other what you'll be wearing on Century Day."

Beth started in surprise, almost knocking her milk off the table. Not exactly the question Kendra had asked, but one she'd heard incessantly over the past five days; the question uppermost in everybody's mind this week. Everyone thought that clothing was the key to winning the Prize. She sat regarding her cousin with eyes the size of dinner plates. How could she have possibly known that?

Irene smiled indulgently, exchanging another glance with Mommy.

"Oh, I know how it is," she remarked airily, "I remember from when I was in school. Happens the same way every year, doesn't it, Carol?"

Mommy nodded her agreement, waving a dismissive hand. "Sure does."

"Right about now," Irene continued offhand, "everyone seems to think that the most important thing is whether you're wearing a skirt or a dress. Am I right?"

"Yes!" Beth answered immediately, sitting up a little straighter in her chair. Carla Daniels had asked her that very question only yesterday. So had Bianca Willoway, Serena Richards, and half a dozen others.

"Yeah, I know," Irene went on, "they're asking all sorts of embarrassing questions too, like what color your panties will be, or if your bra's going to clip up at the front or the back."

Bethany felt her cheeks start to pinken at the mention of her underwear. Beside her, Kyra giggled with innocent delight. Irene paused long enough to take a sip from her coffee, then resumed her discourse.

"Like any of that's going to help you win the race," she said with a throwaway gesture. "Well, let me set you straight on that, kiddo. The truth is, what you decide to wear is the least important thing in the Sprint. As a matter of fact, I already know what you'll be wearing to the Century."

Bethany leaned forward, utterly captivated by her cousin's down-home rhetoric. Everyone at the table seemed to be hanging on her next word, even Mommy.

"Want me to tell you?" Irene asked, as if there were any question of the matter.

"Uh-huh," Bethany replied without hesitation.

"OK, then. Stand up."

Shifting her chair back from the table, Bethany rose to her feet, absently smoothing her skirt with both hands. An odd sense of anticipation descended over her, making her pulse quicken slightly. A tiny flutter seemed to ripple through her belly, just like the time she danced solo at the school concert last year.

"All right now," Irene mused, tapping her chin thoughtfully, "take off your shoes, one at a time."

Bethany paused for a moment, glanced at her feet, then knelt down to unstrap her glossy black MJs. A few seconds later, she straightened up, glancing back to her cousin expectantly.

"Good. Now – take off your socks."

Another momentary hesitation, then Beth peeled off her white cotton knee-socks, wondering where this was leading. The kitchen had fallen oddly quiet, even Kyra was mute with curiosity. Bethany stood up, her bare feet cold against the smoothly varnished floorboards.

"That's right," Irene commented approvingly, "now, take off your t-shirt."

Bethany's eyes widened slightly. She looked over at her mother, lips parted with unspoken surprise. She suddenly understood precisely where this was going. It was a dress rehearsal, so to speak; a practice run for the Silver Century. Surely they weren't going to make her –

"Go on, sweet-heart" Mommy told her reassuringly, "we're all family here."

Bethany wavered for several seconds, then reached down to draw the t-shirt over her head. The neckline tangled around her throat for several seconds, then came free after a brief struggle. A fine, crimson blush began to spread through Bethany's features as she dropped the t-shirt to the floor. She was wearing a white polyester bra with a tiny pink bow between the cups, the kind worn by little girls when they first reach puberty. This was Bethany's hidden shame – her build was so delicate she had to wear a training bra. One of the straps had fallen over her left shoulder. Slipping it absently back into place, she turned back to her cousin.

Irene waved a hand towards her midsection, indicating her sheer cotton wrap.

"And the skirt too."

Bethany felt her breath catch in her throat. She was no longer a child; like most girls her age, she had become extremely self-conscious about her body. Her head began to swim with a dizzying blend of helpless arousal. Were they going to make her take off everything? Eyes darting from face to face, she reluctantly slipped her skirt down her thighs, struggling with her natural, adolescent modesty.

"*Panties!*" Kyra squealed delightedly as her sister's underpants went on display. Bethany's flush darkened several shades. A wave of gooseflesh hummed across her arms and shoulders; it was a cool night and the picture windows were wide open. Worse than that, her panties were the full-cut variety made for little girls. Decorated with a pretty floral print, they were the only kind she could wear. She downcast her eyes, feeling roughly six years old. Icy cold fingers seemed to be streaking the length of her spine.

"Cute," Irene smiled, running her gaze up and down the girl's petite figure, then instructed her cousin to remove the next article of clothing.

Bethany moistened her lips, stifling an anxious giggle, then reached back to unclip her plain white training bra. She fumbled the first two attempts, partly through inexperience but mostly through nerves. Two bright red spots stood out on her cheeks; Irene had never seen her topless. Few people had, since she'd started wearing a brassiere. Slipping the straps over her shoulders, Bethany discarded the tangled remnant and covered her tiny breasts with both hands. She could feel the nipples hardening against her fingers like sharp ruby pin-points. A deep, carmine flush had spread all the way down her bare torso by now. She knew what was coming next.

"And now the *panties*, Bethie-girl."

Pausing only long enough to prompt a nod from her mother, Bethany dropped her hands from her chest and slipped her thumbs through her flimsy cotton briefs. Her pulse was fluttering in her tummy like a swarm of teasing butterflies; her entire frame was trembling in kind of delirious anticipation. Drawing a long, calming breath, she peeled her panties all the way down to her ankles, her entire nervous system buzzing with electric fire. Chill evening air whickered over her naked flesh as she crossed her hands in front of herself.

She lowered her gaze as Irene and her mother admired her lush, perfect body. Her figure was slim but beautifully formed, her skin as flawless as polished alabaster. Cherry-red nipples thrust out from her small, ripening breasts; further down, an impertinent little belly-button poked out from a gently curving tummy. In time, she might fill out to more adult proportions, but for now, she possessed that rare, insubstantial beauty peculiar to adolescent girls.

"Very good," Irene said, taking another sip from her coffee, "now put your hands by your sides."

Beth looked up, her pale blue eyes glittering with a kind of demure, innocent shame. There was no sense appealing to her mother, she already knew what the answer would be. Slowly,

hesitantly, she drew back her fingertips, humiliation spilling over her in warm, delicious waves. Standing before her family with her smooth, hairless dimple on open exhibition, she looked no more than twelve years old. She lowered her eyes once more, looking down at herself, her nipples throbbing in time to her cantering heartbeat.

Irene leaned forward in her chair.

"Do you see what you're wearing *now*, Bethany? she asked, indicating the girl's faultless nudity, "*that's* what you'll be wearing on The Day."

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KEEPING SCORE

1.

As soon as her agent called to arrange a shoot that afternoon, Holly knew she'd have to wear her prettiest underwear. While *PICS* was ostensibly a 'news and views' magazine, Holly knew that she'd probably be stripping down to her panties as soon as she arrived on location. It didn't matter what the story was, shedding her clothes was a foregone conclusion. As far as *PICS* editorial staff were concerned, a story wasn't complete without at least one beautiful teenaged girl revealing all in the flick of a bra strap.

And this latest feature would prove to be no exception.

The shoot was taking place in an old singles bar in downtown Chamberlain, a place called Maxies, preparing to celebrate its centenary. The festivities included an old-boys eightball tournament, which *PICS* had generously arranged to 'spice up' – for a small, phenomenal fee, of course. As far as Holly could tell, she was supposed to keep score with two other girls (sisters apparently, the daughters of a Maxies' regular). Everything had to be kept completely above board: as her agent had told her, class and decorum were the order of the day. After all, Maxies had a hundred year-old reputation to protect.

Holly had been conscripted to stand by the score boards, elegantly gowned in a classical black mini-dress, her arms adorned with long black gloves and her legs with sheer midnight stockings. With her hair professionally styled and her face freshly made up, Holly would look both beautiful and sophisticated, as befitted the occasion. Of course, keeping score was only half the job.

The rest involved *taking* her *clothes* off, one piece at a time.

That was the deal, apparently – every time a ball was sunk, one of the girls had to remove an article of clothing: first an earring, then a broach, then a deliciously long black glove. Discarding their svelte black minis, they would gradually reveal all, placing their tantalizing figures on public display. By the end of the tournament, they would be left standing in nothing but their high-cut lace panties. In short, the entire feature was another thinly-veiled excuse to strip three pretty young girls down to their bare essentials. The image made her pulse quicken with a breathless mixture of feminine outrage and trembling expectation. It was the most gratuitous exploitation she could imagine.

And she could hardly *wait* to get started.

2.

Holly couldn't stop smiling. She could feel her blush deepening with every passing minute. The points were stacking up, the pockets were being filled. She'd removed all of her jewellery; her black lycra gloves had come off only five minutes before. Very soon – probably in a matter of seconds, if the next shot went down – she'd have to reach back and unzip her figure-hugging velvet dress, teasing it slowly to the floor, gradually exposing her scanty French lingerie to the world.

One of the players, an ancient, grizzled veteran named Hal Gordon, was lining up his shot, his leathery face serene with concentration. Holly watched him with bated breath, alternating between pleasure and panic. Any moment now, she'd be stepping out of her tight black mini, exposing her skimpy little underthings in all their lacy glory. The old pool-shark wouldn't miss his shot, she was certain of it. Butterflies were teeming through her tummy; the suspense was utterly intolerable.

The enormous, smoke-hazed bar-room was absolutely silent. An enormous crowd had turned out this evening; the Hotel's management had wasted no expense advertising the competition, along with the complimentary entertainment provided by the 'scorekeepers.' Holly could feel the tension humming through the air like high tension cables. Everyone was willing the old man to make his shot: they knew it was Holly's turn.

Holly bit her lip in gentle anxiety. One small part of her was desperate to keep her unmentionables modestly covered, all her girlish mysteries decently hidden. Undressing in public carried a unique kind of humiliation experienced only by pretty women. Even when the performance was entirely voluntary, there was still a deep sense of embarrassment, huge and bright and *terribly* naughty. Turning her attention back to the pool table, Holly watched in silence as the old man drew back on his cue stick.

The moment of truth.

Clack-*CLACK!!!*

Hal made his shot. Holly stared wide-eyed as the nine streaked towards the corner pocket.

She bit her lip against a moan of pure delight –

As the nine dropped *in*.

3.

Laughter and applause as Holly stepped forward:

Laughter because she was so obviously embarrassed; *applause* because she'd come to far too back out now. A stunning young girl with porcelain skin and blue eyes, she walked towards the main table, her stilettos clocking loudly on the polished wooden floor boards. There was an art to walking in high heels, an art very few women ever truly mastered. Holly was one of the very few.

She looked astonishingly feminine, reaching back over her shoulders to loosen her zip, arching her spine and thrusting her belly gently forward. The applause began to escalate as she drew the zipper slowly down the length of her back: they'd been waiting for this moment all night; it was what they'd all come to see.

And this was only the first step. Before the night was over, she would be almost completely naked, her dress and bra, suspenders and stocking strewn in casual disarray around the floor. She would have to stand on exhibit to the world with only a flimsy pair of satin panties to hide behind. Flashing the audience a brilliant smile, Holly slipped the dress off her shoulders,

lowering the hem slowly to her waist.

The view was literally breathtaking. The shiny satin brassiere seemed to adhere to her body by some force unknown to modern science; her breasts were utterly magnificent, barely constrained by the cups. Holly continued to lower the mini, exposing more of her pristine white underwear. Blushing from toe to hairline, she shimmied the tight material over her wide, curvaceous hips. Her face approximated the hue of an autumn sunset. Struggling with sheer, helpless embarrassment, she bit her lip to hold back the giggles, knowing that once she got started, she'd never stop.

Stepping carefully out of the dress, she straightened up to allow everyone a heart-stopping eyeful of her lingerie. She'd chosen to wear a virginal white ensemble beneath the black mini: it was her prettiest outfit, and she'd known it would be an added surprise for the crowd. Her high-cut g-string panties shimmered like quicksilver against her lightly tanned flesh. They glimmered beneath the bar's glaring fluorescents; soft blue shadows flowed across the glistening material whenever she moved her hips.

The garter-belt and stockings had been inevitable: she'd been given no choice in the matter. *PICS* magazine had a long association with exotic corsetry. It featured in every issue; pages and pages of college girls in suspender stockings, proudly displaying their long, tapering legs for the lens. It was practically law, as far as the editorial staff was concerned.

The mandate also applied to the other girls as well. *PICS* had **INSISTED** that all three of them wear frilly little garter belts beneath their clothing. **NO** stay ups, **NO** panty hose, **NO** thigh-socks, and definitely **NO** bare legs. Garters were a necessity for this shoot, no exceptions to the rule. Holly agreed with these sentiments to some degree. She was supposed to look sophisticated and elegant for the tournament, even after she stripped down to her undies. Beautiful women should wear exciting underwear; and suspenders would give her outfit that touch of elegance, sophistication and excitement the Maxies' crowd would be expecting.

She'd selected an intricately designed bridal number; a magical wisp of lycra, lace and 'liquid' satin. It somehow appeared both decadent and demure. The kind of thing worn by a virgin on her wedding night. Long, white, adjustable garters were clearly visible below her underpants, clipped up to sheer midnight stockings at mid-thigh.

Feeling *indescribably* saucy, she reached down to tug gently at one of the reinforced black tops. The cheering escalated to a roar. There were few things as truly captivating as the sight of a pretty girl adjusting her hosiery. Holly straightened up, planting a hand on her hip and shifting her weight to her left heel. As a final treat for her howling admirers, Holly put a hand to the back of her neck, removing a clasp and letting out her glorious mass of platinum hair. A blond avalanche swept down her shoulders; the luxurious, wavy tresses trailing to her hips. Flash bulbs exploded all around her; the *PICS* team weren't the only ones bearing cameras in the bar.

She raised her hands above her head, saluting the crowd with a 1940s pin-up girl pose, then turned on her left heel and walked back to the score board, her luscious young bottom turning cute little circles in its glistening satin sheath. Her suspenders stretched and shortened along her thighs, matching tempo with each clicking step.

4.

Holly's fellow scorekeepers fared little better in the lingerie sweepstakes. Having seen Holly discard her dress to reveal her skimpy satin unmentionables, the crowd grew all the more impatient to see the other two girls revealed in all their glory. Fortunately, they didn't have long

to wait. From the moment Holly had stripped down to her foundation garments, both contestants began to demonstrate amazing skill: they weren't simply playing to win, they were playing to undress three very attractive little girls.

Suzy Taylor was a tall, lissome girl with a slender figure and a classically rounded bottom. Blushing to the eyebrows, she stepped up to the competitor's table and climbed prettily out of her mini, her legs as long and graceful as a prima ballerina's. Her choice of underwear received the crowd's highest acclaim: a glaringly red bra and panties ensemble, completed by a gauzy black garter belt strapped tightly around her tiny waist.

Kathy's dress came off with the sinking of the twelve; Cool Hand Gordon being the culprit once more. Like her younger sister, Kathy removed her black mini in slow, teasing ripples of velvet. She grinned from ear to ear as the audience cheered her on. Complying to the *PICS* lingerie mandate, she was wearing a cherry-red suspender belt over matching pink bra and pantie set.

An expectant hush fell over the room as each stroke was made; dozens of eyes alternated between the players cue sticks and the scorekeeper's panties. The girls waited with their deep, fleshly cleavages thrusting the air, almost trembling with anticipation. Holly felt an odd, nervous tension fall over her as Hal lined up his next shot; she was strangely anxious to see the next ball sunk. Technicolor visions danced gayly through her pretty head; closing her eyes, Holly could see herself modelling her underpants before the entire bar-room: stockings, bras and suspenders cast to the four winds. That moment was rapidly approaching. Gordon had just potted the six, and it was time to fulfill her exhibitionistic responsibilities.

Holly had been told that once the brassiere came off, she wasn't allowed to hide her breasts behind her hands or turn away from the crowd any longer than it was necessary to score a point on the blackboard. It was simply another gratuitous excess – the hotel's management wanted the girls' firm young breasts on display for as long as possible. Refusal was out of the question; Maxies' was paying half their wages for the evening. It was grossly unfair of course, but the management had been most specific on this issue.

Sweeping her gaze the across the bar, Holly stepped over to the middle of the room. She reached back and unhooked her satiny white underwire, allowing the shoulder-straps to glide loosely off her shoulders. There was always an instant of speechless, shivering tension whenever she took off her BRA in public. She was a large, busty girl possessing a classical, Jane Mansfield figure – 'A regular D-Cup Delight' was how *PICS* often described her. Her lush, enormous breasts bounced and lolloped as she removed the tight, satiny constraints. Holly was almost dizzy with arousal. She felt utterly vulnerable, completely subject to the voyeuristic whims of her wildly cheering audience. Her first impulse was to hide her gigantic, pulsing tips behind her small, delicate fingers, but she paused in the act, recalling the editorial veto against feminine modesty. Her hands twitched nervously as she tried to decide where to place them. She was blushing all the way to her hairline by now.

5.

Suzy Taylor suppressed an almost irresistible impulse to cover her cleavage. Her time was almost up: her high, pointed breasts would be going on exhibition with the sinking of the next ball, and the mounting tension was all but excruciating. Paradoxically, she was no stranger to this kind of dishabile; she'd been modeling lingerie since her fifteenth birthday and posing for topless shoots since her eighteenth. Of course, there was considerable difference between a pool-

hall striptease and closed photo-session; such events were invariably handled in a professional – if somewhat relaxed – atmosphere. Standing before the mob in her glimmering red panties – her stockinged thighs trembling and her tummy swarming with teasing, tickling little fingers - Suzy felt small and naked and unspeakably feminine. Her heart skipped a beat as she felt the clips give at the back of her bra strap, allowing her full, thrusting orbs to shift free of their c-cup restraints.

Moistening her lips with the tip of her flickering pink tongue, Suzie arched her back and removed the brassiere with sensitive, precise fingers. Palming elastic with her left hand, she slipped the straps down her arms in a single deft movement. There was not an instant's hesitation in the manoeuvre; she'd had years of practice to perfect her technique. The brassiere fluttered to the carpet, forgotten.

Gasping with suffused pleasure, Suzie placed her fingertips over the dark, sensitive points of her nipples. A dozen flash bulbs flared simultaneously; the crowd gaped in wordless appreciation. There was literally nothing which could compare to a beautiful teenaged girl trying to hide her breasts from public exposure – and not *quite* succeeding.

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EREBUS

Prologue

Lydia lay in her gleaming, satin cocoon, watching the clouds cutting deep silver rifts across the night. The late evening winds had just begun to fill the room, billowing the curtains across the window, masking the ascending moon with a nebulous blue radiance. Stirring restlessly, she drew the sheets slowly down the bed, exposing her frail, ivory figure to the cool, autumn breeze.

Her face was a luminous blur in the silent darkness of the bedroom. The shades of the night were gradually descending over her, caressing her bare flesh with a touch of twilight. Her breath hitched in tight, shallow gasps as the teasing mistral flickered across her breasts and arms and thighs.

Lydia turned her gaze toward the sky.

The sun had fled the horizon more than two hours before, the vast wheel of the stars was circling slowly towards the west. The time was very close: He would be here soon, riding the midnight zephyrs like some dark god. She could sense his approach, taste his presence beneath the shimmering October starlight.

Her pulse fluttered in her temples.

She always felt a delicious stab of excited fear when his arrival was imminent. He was an utterly merciless lover: as wild as the tempest and harder than tempered steel. Lean and tall and impossibly strong, he would take her like a prisoner of war, impaling her with his cobalt blue eyes and roaming his large, marble hands over her trembling, naked form. She would plead and sob like a frightened child while he slaked his thirst in her flawless, alabaster body, but when the moment came, she would surrender herself to his predatory lusts with an almost grateful release.

She closed her eyes, thinking back to their first time together. He'd left her bruised and exhausted, her tender, white skin shadowed with the marks of hard, crimson passion. He'd been almost painfully careful with her since then, holding her between his long, iron fingers like a

fragile crystal figurine; but their love-making was still a treadmill of ecstasy on which her delicate feminine being was broken, hour by hour.

She ran her fingertips over her smooth, ivory belly, tracing a line of sweet, shivering fire from her cleavage to her navel. He always effected her this way, filling her with a longing so profound she wanted to weep with expectation. The desire he raised in her was virtually unspeakable; shuddering in his embrace, she sometimes thought she would actually die with agonized pleasure.

And perhaps she would.

There were nights when time seemed to freeze in an endless crystalline moment, when his hunger was irresistible and his teeth glinted with razor-keen brilliance. She would arch her spine and drive her nails into his broad, massive back, shrieking wordlessly as he bit and pierced and nuzzled at her breasts. She would feel the life flowing inexorably out of her, like some hot, rich liqueur; the pain was exquisite, almost blinding in its intensity.

The room dimmed momentarily; a veil of mist obscuring the moon. Lydia glanced out the window again, her lips moist and shining.

No – not mist.

He was here, hovering just beyond the range of human vision, waiting as patiently as death while she observed the ancient formalities. She whispered his name, feeling her tummy clenching in tense little knots.

"Erebus ..."

How long had they been lovers? Not long; eleven, twelve, thirteen days, although she'd lived centuries in that brief span. Time seemed to twist and contort around him, coalescing into strange, fluid shapes.

Where had it started?

When had she crossed the threshold of the impossible, at what point had her existence tottered at the edge of reality, before finally crossing into this place of indigo shadows?

When, how, did it start?

With the consummation, when his lips had finally touched her neck with a crescent of ice?

No. Earlier. Much earlier.

With the gale, the storm that had blackened half the city in its raging electrical fury?

No, earlier still.

It began with the wall. The wall and the blood and the words scrawled in a language extinct for close on four thousand years. Words only she could read.

She felt unseen fingers stroking her shoulders.

Lydia closed her eyes, allowing him to settle down over her. She drifted on a deep, sensual tide, clearing her mind and casting her thoughts back; days, weeks, months. Remembering, gliding backwards to the last glimmering of summer, to the warm, August evening when her life had changed forever ...

PART ONE: BELIAL

1.

He was easily the most beautiful man she'd ever seen.

Even from a distance, the sight of his fluorescent blue eyes and Renaissance features had frozen her heart in mid-beat. Standing over by the central exhibit, he was a tall, motionless, jet

black figure, virtually lost in the forest of Amani suits and designer labels that filled the main courtyard. Her reveries had instantly dissolved into the endless, grey limbo of the incomplete thought. She stared at him in moist-lipped astonishment, feeling all her carefully constructed barriers collapse like a shattered mirror.

The crowd seeped and ebbed around him in a thick, fleshy stream. Carmille felt a cold finger teasing her spine; the moody exterior lighting appeared to wane in his immediate presence. Standing in a pool of magenta shadows, he seemed to loom in her vision like some ebon-winged ghost, gathering dark substance from the brooding purple twilight. She shifted her position slightly, studying the albino contours of his face.

And his eyes locked with hers.

Camille glanced immediately away, feeling small and naked and completely vulnerable before that that devastating, nocturnal gaze. A lush, crimson flush spread over her face and throat and bare, creamy shoulders. She glanced self-consciously around the artspace, desperately trying to focus on the decaying gothic piers rising sharply over the courtyard.

(he saw me he saw me looking he knows)

A trim, petite woman with huge brown eyes and a tiny, crimson mouth, Camille had worn the stamp of hurt on her pale, childlike face since early childhood. Her life had been a bitter montage of pain and abuse from the age of five, an interminable struggle against the despair and shame that hounded her very waking moment (and frequently invaded her melancholy dreamscapes). She feared men the way a child instinctively fears the night; she had never forgotten the anguish and misery and soul deep torment she'd been forced to endure during those years of cruelty.

And there was NOTHING that terrified her more than the searing, inarticulate desire she felt at this moment. She wanted him.

It was a betrayal of all of the promises she'd made to herself over the last three years, but she WANTED him. A stranger in every sense of the word, he had shared nothing with her apart from a split-second glance; but he'd penetrated her defences to the deepest core of her soul in that single fleeting contact. And worse still –

(he knows he knows he saw me looking at him)

He'd seen the feverish, helpless lust simmering in the fathomless pools of her sienna eyes. It was irrational, incomprehensible; a paradox staining the logical confines of her meticulously delineated existence. She wanted him; wanted to drown in his merciless, polar stare and surrender herself to his jagged, ruthless masculinity.

She wanted him to take her, possess her: throw her down on his bed and ravish her for days on end; savaging her breasts and probing the most intimate recesses of her delicate, fragile body. Most of all, she wanted him to own her, to use her for his pleasure, and satisfy himself in her soft, yielding femininity as if she were a thing of no consequence.

And the worst part was this:

He knew it.

2.

She had, of course, escaped the vicious domestic excesses of her youth long ago, swearing she'd never submit her body to a man's sexual authority again. Unfortunately, the oaths and resolutions had ultimately amounted to nothing. Her early tribulations had conditioned her to an unceasing cycle of agony which she'd never managed to break. A vicious chain of self-

destructive relationships had left her exhausted and emotionally destitute; a numb, nerveless being lacking the even will to believe in the most basic forms of human happiness.

She cast a tense glance back towards the earthworks, where the dark man was absently scrutinizing the showpiece – a cluster of medieval gargoyles erupting from the turbulent soil, their faces contorted in bestial snarls. He seemed oblivious of the small throng of miniskirts and stiletto heels converging on his position: he was totally surrounded by beautiful, long-legged women exuding the cloying aroma of the semi-professional; office managers and image consultants and other de facto patrons of the arts, falling into his sphere of influence as light is drawn into a black hole.

Camille felt some degree of bitter relief.

Hemmed in by that slow-motion vortex of spiral perms, neon smiles and gleaming thighs, he'd have no interest in her whatsoever. She was an alien, an exile; men rarely chose an outcast over a sexual stereotype. She watched him surreptitiously for several minutes, suppressing a virtually irrepressible urge to walk over and join the harem.

She stared at her desired object in a fugue of pathetic longing. Her desperate need put him effectively beyond her reach; even if by some unforeseen miracle of pheromones and random happenstance he were actually available to her, he'd eventually turn out to be a sociopath of Anthony Burgess proportions. Whichever way the dice fell, the outcome was ultimately irrelevant; in plain language, she wasn't meant for someone like him. Better to strangle her emotions *in utero* than risk another plunge into the abyss.

She found herself wondering why the simple joys and pleasures which came so naturally to other women were denied to her on the most fundamental of levels. As a child, she'd imagined that she somehow deserved the abject misery her father had wrought in her life; as an adult, she'd decided that happiness was an illusion, love a mirage which existed only to torture the lonely and the forlorn with false hope.

Some time later, she found herself drifting away from the crowd, sinking into a pit of desolation so intense she doubted that even Silvia Platt could have adequately described it.

3.

It was close on 10.30 before Camille finally dredged up the strength to quit the opening. The maraschino flavor of the evening had turned to battery acid in her mouth and her mind was revolving on that endless loop of self-loathing which accompanied her frequent depressions. She was a manic insomniac; like most visual artists, dawnwatching was innate to her character. The night was still young, she could put in a good six hours in her studio before the need to sleep finally overtook her. Her latest triptych required some serious attention, and while painting was hardly the key to orgasmic bliss, it was pleasantly distracting, and that was enough.

She decided to take the path leading by the Lady Chapel; it was a veritable labyrinth of crumbling masonry, ominously lit and littered with relics, but the moody torchlight atmosphere possessed a subtle enchantment that always appealed to her creative faculties. It could be a little frightening, even at this early hour, but the exhilaration of a ghost-walk through the ruins could only improve her current state of mind.

Her studio was located in the old rectory on the other side of the Cathedral Artspace. The rectory was probably the best preserved building of the Cathedral complex, which in its glory days had boasted a seminary, convent school and a reliquary. That had been over seventy years

before; the saints, shrines and crucifixes had long since departed, leaving St Pauls' a precarious mass of decaying High Victorian bluestone.

The hectic conversational buzz of the opening faded to an insistent drone as she threaded her way through the maze, sidestepping fallen buttresses and assorted debris like a sleepwalker. A delicate, fragile girl with large, prismatic eyes and a burnished silver complexion, she possessed a quiet ethereal beauty easily overlooked at the initial glance. Her lustrous black hair spilled over her shoulders in a sumptuous cascade, sweeping down past her hips in an obsidian wave.

The distinctive signifiers of her subculture were unmistakable; the complex interplay of decadence and austerity; the sombre, funereal accenting of her eyes and lips and fingernails. Her one sartorial lapse was the absence of christian symbolism; she'd abandoned all belief in a higher power decades before. No crosses, no rosaries, not even the veil of mourning given her by her grandmother two years ago. She had no faith in any deity who neglected the prayers of an abused child.

Camille halted at the centre of the pathway, hesitating between two close-set walls. Something had caught her attention. She stepped across the narrow stone hallway, leaning in for a closer look. It was a large, vaguely trembling flower, growing out of one of the meandering cracks in the wall. She wondered how she'd missed it before; she must have passed this way at least twice a day.

It was a most unusual plant; she doubted she'd ever seen a black flower before. The petals seemed to ripple in the flickering lamp flame, lending the illusion of spectral movement. The heart of the blossom was a rich, vibrant, carmine red, the deep vermilion veins seeming to form archane letters in some eldrich, forgotten language. She studied it with an analytical, Da Vincian gaze, marvelling at its shimmering, nebulous aspect.

And strangely, Camille realised she was shivering.

The warm summer air had turned suddenly cold. She could actually feel the temperature dropping, raising the gooseflesh on her naked arms. She glanced tentatively around, unconsciously hugging herself against the inexplicable chill. There was no breeze, no wind; nothing stirring through the pitted stonework.

Camille half-turned back towards the artspace, then paused once more. The muted babble of the opening had disappeared entirely. Straining her ears, she listened for the more mundane (and gently comforting) sounds of the night: the unceasing murmur of traffic along Chamberlain Road; the intermittent, metallic creaking of the scaffolding on the western facade of the Cathedral; the mindless, joyful chirping of millions of crickets serenading the labyrinth.

Nothing.

An icy hand began to caress her heart. The evening had gone wrong, hideously wrong, and she was caught in the middle of some unseen, intangible trap. The torchlight was a weak, guttering witchfire, distorting the corroded gothic architecture with its failing radiance. The evening was more than cold; it was frigid, arctic. There was magic here, no question of that, but there was nothing enchanting about it. Disoriented and alarmed, she considered spinning on her heel and returning to the opening but

(he saw me he knows he knows)

her fear had already grown to prohibitive levels. The ruins appeared to be watching her with a hidden, malign intelligence. If she ran, something would follow her, something merciless and hungry and evil beyond all rational thought. Something which would drive her into the tainted earth and devour her sanity while it gorged itself on her soft, yielding girl-flesh.

(*he saw me he saw me HE KNOWS*)

Stay calm, she told herself, consciously forcing her bunched fists to unclench. She was only a minute or so from the main courtyard, she could be safe amongst the upwardly mobile in little more than a hundred steps. All she had to do was get clear of the coldzone and she'd hear the alcoholic banter beckoning her back to the opening. Nothing could happen to her in the space of sixty seconds, surely. Willing the frosty air to part before her, she began to turn-

"Camille."

She halted in mid-stride, electric fire dancing the length of her spine. The voice was low but intimate, little more than a whisper, yet it tightened her throat and sent her pulse careering into overdrive. A rush of panic struck her with a locomotive impact.

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Moulin Rouge!

Having read this far, you're doubtlessly aware that my sister and I were incorrigible knicker-flashers, so it was more-or-less inevitable that we would get 'round to dancing the cancan when we were kids. We'd both studied gymnastics since early childhood and used to impress our friends with various tricks we learnt down at the youth center – handstands, back flips, step-overs ect – anything that would "accidentally" display our knickers in the playground. Given the circumstances, it was only a matter of time before we discovered the acrobatic joys of *La Chahut*.

If I remember correctly, we first started playing "*Moulin Rouge*" when I was about eight years old. It was a long weekend, and Lydia and I were lying on the living room floor watching TV. It was some kind of children's show, a talent quest with lots of singing and dancing. One of the acts was a troupe of four girls dressed in bright red chorus outfits, complete with full circle petticoats and frilly white panties. Lydia and I watched in wide-eyed fascination as they whirled through their routine, which was mainly pirouettes and high kicks (although they finished the number by revealing their panty-bottoms to the camera).

Both of us were utterly intrigued by what we'd just seem. For my part, I'd always thought that only *grown-up* women danced the cancan, neither of us imagined that little girls could dance it too. In addition, the thought of showing off my undies in public was kind of exciting – and I could tell Lydia was thinking exactly the same thing.

2.

After the show finished, we got up and walked out to the rumpus room, guided by some innate telepathy shared by close siblings. Not a word had been exchanged beforehand, but we'd already decided what we were going to do. There was a full-length cheval mirror leaning against the back wall, we pulled it out to a more central position and immediately started playing house in front of it, watching ourselves with occasional side-long glances the way young children always do.

We went through our usual catalogue of domestic role-plays, warming up for the main event. We were both pretty eager to start the evening's panty-flashing festivities, but we had to observe the usual formalities. It wasn't until we'd completed the pre-requisite tea party that Lydia decided

it was time to do the cancan.

We started out by turning some cartwheels in front of the mirror. This was the signal that we were ready to begin, and I could feel my cheeks turning red with anticipation. With our gymnastic background, we'd be *much* better than those girls on TV; we were far more agile and limber.

The only trouble was, we weren't *dressed* for it. Lydia was wearing jeans, I was wearing shorts, and as we weren't "officially" dancing the cancan yet, we needed an excuse to ease into the new role (believe it or not, that's exactly how young girls think).

"I can't *stretch* right in these jeans," Lydia said with an exasperated gesture, "they're too tight to do cartwheels in."

"Same with my *shorts*," I replied in the same dismissive tones.

Lydia shrugged her shoulders and started fumbling with her belt, undoing the top button of her Levis.

"We'll *just* have to take them off," she remarked in utter resignation, as if we had no other choice. Once she'd peeled off her jeans and stepped lightly out of them, I removed my black cotton culottes, dropping them onto the sofa without a backward glance. I felt an unusual flutter in my tummy as I straightened up, unconsciously tugging down on my t-shirt. The hem reached to about six inches above the knee, keeping me decently covered, I imagined it only barely covered the trim of my underpants.

Lydia stood watching me from the left side of the mirror, a slim, leggy girl in an over-sized tunic and long white knee-socks. After a few seconds hesitation, she gathered up the right side of her shift, exposing her bare thigh almost up to the hip. Eyebrows raised with an unspoken question, she glanced in my direction, then tilted her face towards the cheval. *Are you ready?* No words were necessary; I simply nodded my answer and the performance began.

Flipping our "skirts" clear up to our throats, we launched into an impromptu routine, wheeling across the floor in front of the mirror. Crossing over from right to left, we adjusted our speed to allow our hemlines to fall away, revealing our tummies, thighs and panties at precisely the same moment. I was wearing a pair of white cotton knickers that came all the way up to the belly-button; Lydia, being a few years older, wore shiny nylon full briefs – glossy red with lacy inserts on the sides.

Next, we experimented with various dance steps – high kicks, flip-flops and hand-springs, trying to recall the cancan in exact detail from the numerous movies and TV shows we'd seen over the years. At one point, Lydia bent over backwards and kicked her legs into the air one at a time (she was always more supple than me) resulting in her t-shirt creeping all the way down to her training bra.

I followed this up with a point-perfect handstand, parting my legs in a classic aerial split. My light yellow tunic turned completely inside out, hanging tenuously from my shoulders and exposing my whole body from neck to toe. I could feel the cool afternoon air on my bare torso, raising a buzz of goose flesh along my tummy.

Precisely at that moment, I realized the windows to the rumpus room were wide open, and giggled with pink-faced embarrassment. I dropped down back onto my feet, smoothing out my clothing and wondering how much the neighbours had seen. Lydia asked what was wrong, and after I explained, we decided to preserve our dignity as best we could. Calling an end to the afternoon's activities, we drew the curtains and climbed back into our clothes, trying not to snicker at how silly we felt. If any of the local boys had seen us, we'd *never* live it down!

3.

Needless to say, fear of exposure didn't deter us very long. The temptation to flash our panties to the world was irresistible. The very next morning after breakfast, we headed straight down to the rumpus room to continue practicing our faux-cancan. Jeans were shucked, hemlines were raised and pristine white knickers went on open exhibition.

Our rehearsal began with the curtains closed, but after a while, Lydia found an excuse to throw them open, claiming that the room was getting too hot. Nothing could have been further from the truth, of course: summer had long since departed and autumn conditions had kept the house cool for weeks.

I raised no objections – despite my earlier misgivings, the idea of being caught doing the cancan made my pulse race with excitement. I was certain Lydia felt the same way; if anybody happened to walk past our window and see our underpants, we'd just have to deal with it.

After we'd worked out a satisfactory dance number, we took a short break to discuss our progress, determining that tunics and t-shirts just weren't right for the cancan. Still flaunting our undies, we ran up to our rooms and started rummaging around our closets for more suitable attire.

As it happened, Lydia had a nice, long full-circle skirt with broad lace trimmings, almost exactly what she was looking for. I had a high-waisted party dress with puffy sleeves and "Spanish" ruffles around the hem. It wasn't as long as Lydia's skirt, but I knew it would be perfect for twirling about the room!

4.

Once we'd finished assembling our costumes, we rushed back downstairs to compare outfits. It turned out we'd also been more selective in our choice of *underwear*. The subject was virtually unavoidable; the first thing I asked Lydia was what colour panties she had on. Naturally enough, she was more than will to oblige.

Lifting her skirt in the mirror, Lydia revealed a pair of black satin knickers, shimmering full briefs with a garish red trim around the legs. My eyes practically bulged out of their sockets when I saw them, I didn't know she owned anything so undeniably cheeky. Apparently, Aunt Mishka had bought them for her last Christmas, but she'd never had a reason to wear them until now. You can probably imagine how jealous I was at that moment; Lydia got *all* the best presents.

Reading my expression with a well-practiced eye, she asked if I was wearing anything special. I responded by stepping forward with my right foot and raising my dress to my chin. As a general rule, I only wore plain white cottontails, but I also had a set of *incredibly* girly underthings hidden at the back of my closet. Like my sister, I didn't get much chance to wear them out, but today seemed the perfect opportunity.

I'd chosen a pair of pastel pink sissy-pants with delicate lace frills all over the sides and bottom. A dainty floral pattern decorated the front, barely visible against the sheer, rosy fabric. They were, without question, the *cheekiest* little panties I had in my entire wardrobe.

Gazing at my reflection in the mirror, my head spun at the thought of showing them off: quite suddenly, I was secretly hoping that *might* be looking in through the window right now. These knickers were just too darned pretty to cover up.

Lydia sidled up next to me, still holding her skirt high over her waist. In spite of my overwhelming embarrassment, I still couldn't help grinning with secret mischief. I was looking forward to this – and it seemed a pity there would be no-one else to witness our performance.

Posing together in the cheval, Lydia asked me if I was ready to begin. Raising my dress as far as it would go, I nodded my assent, and we started into our routine.

"You ready?" she asked, nodding in my general direction.

"Yeah," I replied, carefully shifting my center of balance.

"OK. On the count of three. One – "

"Two – "

"THREE!"

And suddenly, directly behind us – the sound of a photo being taken.

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MASQUE

1.

Glancing briefly into the floor length mirror, Terri Lakehurst leaned slightly forward, adjusting her stockings with deliberate, practiced fingers. She was wearing a pair of sheer tan Diors; long and seamed and whisper thin. Unthinkably expensive, they gave her alabaster smooth legs that sleek, tapering look found only in french Lingerie advertisements.

Brushing a twisting lock of snowy blond hair back from her face, Terri straightened up to scrutinise her image. The mirror displayed a petite young woman in her late teens, modelling her lacy, white underwear to the world. Huge, crystal blue eyes gazed out of a soft, doll-like face, her complexion coloured by an uneasy blend of anticipation and embarrassment. The illusion was virtually flawless; even at extreme close up, no one would have guessed she was a actually male.

A warm, tingling flush began to creep through her flat tummy. She always felt this way, dressing up for her evening shift. Stepping into a pair of flimsy gossamer panties invariably left her feeling small and weak and vulnerable – *precisely* the way Roxanne wanted her to feel. It was so unfair: Roxy had no right to humiliate her this way: forcing her to parade around the private bar wearing nothing but her bra, briefs and nylons, night after night.

Running a quick inspection over her make-up, Terri checked the gloss on her full, moist lips. A hazy rose flush shaded her cheeks. She had to get ready, and her appearance had to be perfect. It was nearly nine o'clock; her shift started in just fifteen minutes; Roxanne would soon be tapping impatiently at the door. Roxy didn't like to be kept waiting, she'd warned her last night that she expected her to be working the lounge before the main crowd swept in. Terri knew from painful experience that it didn't pay to cross her cousin and erstwhile employer.

Hastily replacing a fallen bra strap over her slim, round shoulder, Terri turned her attention back to her lingerie. Roxy would be inspecting her ensemble before she entered Prospero's Ballroom, and she had no desire to suffer the consequences should she find something amiss.

Her waist was constricted by a filmy white waist-cincher, the kind with adjustable suspenders and a reinforced tummy.

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CLASS ACT

1.

"Kris – you can go *first*."

Krystal Delaney stared in surprise, not quite believing what she'd just heard. The request had taken her completely by surprise; for a moment she was struck speechless, lips parting in silent disbelief. She felt her complexion darken with embarrassment: this had *never* been part of the deal. Perhaps she should have known better, but absolutely no mention of this had been made at any of the meetings.

Turning her head, Kris glanced over at her friends, eyebrows raised in mute enquiry. They returned her gaze with wide, unbelieving eyes, looking at least as surprised as she did. They'd all been blindsided by Paul's casually phrased instruction. None of them had seen this coming, none of them had even imagined he could make such a humiliating arrangement behind their backs. Trouble was, it was too late to back out now. And Paul wouldn't let them, even if they could.

Krystal looked back across the conference table, where the media folk were awaiting her impromptu performance. Reporters were hunched over their notebooks, photographers were readying their nikon's. The atmosphere was charged with a sense of frenzied purpose, flashbulbs began to pop at the back of the room. Their excitement was understandable; in a place like Chamberlain, the opening of the city's first transgendered nightclub was earth-shattering news. Paul had reeled them in with promises of a free show, and they weren't leaving until they got one.

Krystal stood up, modestly adjusting her clothing (rather odd, considering the circumstances) and walked to the centre of the dais. Her breath came in quick, shallow spurts; her pulse was quickening in her veins. This was all so ... pointless. The press didn't need this free exposure; they'd already seen the promos, the videos of their dance show. They already knew how she looked undressed. Knew how all of them looked. It just wasn't right.

Unfortunately, refusal was out of the question. Publicity was essential to the success of the opening. The Palais contract was their proverbial ticket out of the squee circuit, their one opportunity to escape the dives and clipjoints. She couldn't afford to alienate the local press, none of them could. There was too much riding on the outcome of their first major presscon.

Still, Paul had acted completely without their knowledge, dismissing their ideas with typically masculine indifference. And why the hell not? HE was their manager, HE was the expert, HE made the decisions, by God. And they either complied or they were out on the street. That was how Paul Shepherd did things. Class Act had been his idea from the start: an all-male revue specializing in sexually ambiguous entertainment. He'd placed the ads, he'd held the auditions, he'd formed the group. Class Act was HIS creation, HIS brainchild, and they'd damned-well do things HIS way.

And if any objections were raised, they weren't raised for long.

Pausing at the front of the stage, Krystal cast Paul a furtive glance, trying to gauge his mood. Paul flashed his most engaging smile for the sake of the cameras, but the eyes locked on Kris were as hard as weathered granite. It was a warning look, one the girl knew only too well. Paul would tolerate no defiance; and even a moment's hesitation could earn the severest penalties. Krystal had no wish to incur that wrath.

"Down to my bra and *underwear?*" she asked in a breathless, feminine voice, knowing she'd never get off so lightly.

"Oh, I think we can do a little better than *that*," Paul replied in his genial, crowd-pleasing voice. The mask never slipped for so much as a second. she looked out towards the 'audience,' beaming that earthy, down-home grin that had women melting in their pants. A born salesman was Paul Shepherd, the kind who'd happily sell your infant daughter for a bottle of cheap burbon. Krystal lowered her eyes, knowing precisely what Paul expected of her.

She stood before the nikon crowd, a slim, petite figure in a pink cotton top and blue hipster jeans. Three months shy of her nineteenth birthday, she had the build of a lush adolescent, all lean curves and coltish thighs. Soft, girlish features framed by a halo of golden curls, Krystal possessed the sensuous beauty of a DaVinci angel. Possessing virtually no masculine characteristics (fully clothed, at least), her gender was completely indeterminate.

Which was the main reason why the media had shown such an interest in Class Act.

2.

Krystal began loosening her top at the waistline, inspiring a low babble from the press club. They'd obviously come expecting an impromptu striptease; at the end of the day, nothing sells newspapers like a half-naked Lolita - even if she'd been born with a Y chromosome. The entire cast of Class Act were boys - boys with hourglass figures, boys with gently rounded hips and deeply dimpled bottoms. Each had girl's names, each wore girls clothes, and each preferred stockings over tights. Natural blonds with natural breasts, they were capable of stopping traffic with the bat of an eyelid.

The girl now standing at the front of the dais was a typical example. Krystal Martin, AKA Christian Marsden, had lived as a woman over the past four years, ever since her parents discovered her affinity for conjugated estrogens (and promptly shown her the door as a consequence). Her biological sex was virtually undetectable at anything but the most intimate quarters, and even then would leave the casual observer gaping in astonishment. In a way, it was this shock value that Paul had capitalized on when he first assembled the troupe.

Moistening her lips, Krystal peeled the top over her head. She was wearing a pale blue underwire bra; a transparent sweep of bridal lace that barely covered her fully developed breasts. He dropped the blouse to the floor. Shelly Mailer's face had assumed the colour of a morello cherry; Leisa Snowden managed to hide an embarrassed smile behind her right hand. Kylie Gibson and Melissa Corben traded shocked expressions, knowing they would probably be next in line.

Moistening her lips, Krystal peeled the top over her head, revealing her flat, pale tummy. She was wearing a pale blue underwire bra; a delicate sweep of bridal lace that barely covered her firm young breasts. She dropped the blouse to the floor, suppressing an urge to cross her hands over her cleavage. Two bright spots had begun to flare in her cheeks, obvious to everyone present. An almost imperceptible shiver ran through her figure.

Reaching down to unbuckle her blue 'hipster' jeans (unbelievably expensive, but didn't they look fantastic in the mirror?), Krystal popped the clasp and opened the zipper with an audible *zzzt!* The jeans immediately loosened around her waist; she found herself grabbing at the belt loops to stop them slipping down. Silly really, she was going to take them off anyway. Some habits were impossible to break. She looked back towards the conference table, where the Panel

of Experts were making themselves comfortable; just a bunch of regular guys settling back for the free show.

Can't believe this is happening again, she thought, forcing down a spate of the giggles. No matter how many times she performed these personal demonstrations, they always left her breathless with embarrassment. Shifting her centre of balance, she shimmied the jeans over her hips, then let them drop to the floor. Soft denim whispered over her thighs.

Krystal drew a deep, calming breath as her panties came into view.

She was wearing a tiny satin g-string; high-cut briefs with tiny lace trimmings; the ones that looked so inviting when you see them lying at the bottom of your lingerie drawer. Gossamer thin and pale blue, they were a perfect match for the brassiere. Small purple shadows shifted across the gauzy fabric at even the slightest movement.

She began to smooth out the gleaming material, tugging gently at the waistband with neon red fingernails. She was almost delirious with excitement by now. Her skin was suffused with a rich pink glow, she was tingling from crown to heel. Her cheeks were radiant, shining like a pair of ripe summer apples. Moist heat played around her thighs like tiny, teasing butterflies.

Krystal straightened up to face the 'selection committee.' She placed her hands behind her back and lowered her gaze, knowing that her lithe, supple body was on open exhibit. She could almost feel their eyes wandering over her curvaceous figure; the yielding swell of her breasts, the shapely columns of her thighs.

From all appearances, Krystal seemed to be totally relaxed, but inside she was trembling to the core of her being. She felt utterly defenseless: vulnerable – and *terribly* feminine. Here she was, standing up in nothing but her skimpy underwear, her clothes scattered heedlessly about her feet. Krystal raised her eyes, a tiny crescent curving her gloss red lips.

The Board of Directors were swapping comments, remarking on the tantalizing sweep of the girl's thighs, the pliant curve of her bottom, the size of her d-cup. *Look-er. Yeah, right, I'd pay 30 bucks a ticket for that.* Krystal listened in breathless amusement, her complexion bright pink. They were talking about her as if she was some pretty little barbie doll they were going to play with. A sweet warm tingle seemed to be flowing the length of her tummy. She could actually feel the waist band of her panties stretched lightly across the smooth flesh below her belly-button.

A not *wholly* unpleasant sensation, truth be told.

She stole a glance towards Shelly and the others. They were sitting red-faced at the conference table, their faces decorated with wide, teasing grins. They were all thinking the same thing: soon, very soon, they'd all be standing there half-undressed, their nubile bodies on open exhibit. They could lay odds on it.

Paul caught her attention, making a spinning gesture with his index finger.

"Vogue, Honey. With that little twirl at the end."

Yes, of course, Krystal thought ruefully.

It wasn't enough to make her strip all the way down to her underthings; they wanted to see her in motion, strutting across the floor in her tall, black pumps. This obsession fully grown men have with seeing teenaged girls walking around in their lingerie! She stole a glance towards the others, who were sitting red-faced at the conference table, their faces decorated with wide, teasing grins. They were all thinking the same thing: soon, very soon, they'd all be standing there half-undressed, their nubile bodies on open exhibit.

Krystal turned on her heel and stepped lithely across the room. This obsession fully-grown men have with seeing teenaged girls walking around in their lingerie!

Typical!

Meantime, the rich young Suits continued their discussion, thumbing through the photos and arguing over which of the girls should be the next to uncover. Everyone seemed to a personal favourite (and let's face it, there were so many to choose from), the Suits were just about falling over each other. Polaroids and snap-shots were literally flying across the table. The debate may have dragged on forever if Paul hadn't vetoed all demands by choosing one girl at random.

"Leisa. You're next."

Leisa's grin widened as she stood up, removing her red leather jacket and laying it over the back of her chair.

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FRIDAY NIGHT SPECIAL

The Friday night crowd had been drifting in since seven pm when ole Eddie Mertzner mounted the bandstand at the back of the lounge and raised his hands for order. Sally and her friends filed up onto the platform behind him, their faces flushed with high colour beneath the bright fluorescents. They stood behind Eddie in a tight little group, peering out across the bar and trading naughty little whispers.

"All right, *awwright*," Mertzner called out over the general din, his triple chin jostling as he spoke, "if you'd all like to keep it down to a dull roar, I got an announcement to make."

"Yeah, well keep it brief and bring on the *girls*, Eddie – we ain't here to eyeball *your* ugly mug!!" Stan Bukowski yelled, drawing a rash of good-natured chuckles from around the bar. Sally found herself struggling to keep a straight face; the sentiment was infectious. She still couldn't believe that she and her friends were actually going through with this.

Mertzner ignored the miscreant, simply talking over the laughter as if Bukowski was beneath his contempt:

"OK – as you already know, we've promised you something special tonight, and if it comes off as well as we're expecting, we might just make it a regular feature."

An expectant murmur began to circulate through the crowd. They'd all heard the rumours, all seen the writing on the wall (the adverts had been up since last Saturday) and were eager to find out precisely what Old Man Mertzner had planned for tonight. Up on the platform, the girls exchanged coy smiles, their faces pulsing with embarrassment. They fidgetted nervously

"Ever since those strip-joints opened down the road last year," Eddie continued, his hairless pate glittering beneath the spotlights, "some of you reprobates been droppin hints that we need to offer a more 'sophisticated' atmosphere – meaning you wanna see *half-naked* goils walkin' round in their *skivvies*."

Eddie levelled a disapproving eye at Stan Bukowski's table, much to the amusement of the Friday night regulars. A real old reprobate was Stan Bukowski, no question in that regard.

"Anyway, we've decided to bow to public pressure and spice things up a little around here," Mertzner went on, "to cut to the chase, the girls have agreed to strip down to their bras and panties and wait the tables in their underwear."

A wave of applause thundered around the bar at this pronouncement, shaking the bottles over the counter. Sally's blush darkened to a deep carmine rose. She placed a small hand over her

mouth to hide naughty-girl crescent curving her lips. Glancing around the stage, she saw that all of her friends were wearing similarly mortified expressions. Waiting tables in their *lingerie!* What had they been *thinking?!*

Mertzer waved for order once more, chomping hard on his stogie until the applause died down.

"Yeah, I know: some of you been wonderin' what their underwear looks like fer years," Mertzer rasped as the brouhaha subsided, "well, now you're gonna find out." Another groundswell of applause blasted through the lounge, this time loud enough to rattle the widows in their frames. Tapping ash on the floor, the old man turned and started waddling from the stage, gesturing towards the band with his cigar.

"Maestro – a little music for the ladies."

The spotlights turned full on the girls as a touch of New Orleans bump 'n' grind filled the smoky air. Cheers and wolf whistles rose above the music; palms clapped and heels stamped in time to the low, bluesy tempo. The girls stared at each other with enormous, giggling eyes, knowing the moment had finally arrived.

Sally looked out at the crowd, her tummy fluttering with anticipation. In a very few seconds, she'd be serving drinks to the regulars in nothing but her bra and panties; her nubile young body on full display to every man in the bar. Why had she ever agreed to this public spectacle?! It had seemed such an exciting idea when Nicola had suggested it a month ago; now she was almost fainting with embarrassment.

Well, too late to back out now.

Flashing her friends a final grin, Sally began to undress.

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DANNY AND ROSE

*Another time, another place.
Another world identical to our own...
Except for one crucial difference.*

"You ready yet?"

Danny Richards looked over towards the doorway, vaguely annoyed at the intrusion. At barely eight years old, he'd recently grown to resent his sister's constant policing of his behaviour. Worse still, she had absolutely no respect for his privacy, particularly when he was getting dressed. He'd complained to his mother about it just last week, but she'd dismissed his protests with a laugh: Rosa had seen him naked since the day he was born, what was the big deal? Wasn't like he had anything to hide.

"You ready yet?" she repeated.

"No, I'm not," Danny replied with a touch of petulance, and turned back to the mirror. At least she hadn't caught him *completely* naked this time. He stood in the middle of the bedroom in his sheer white panties, meticulously stroking the twists out of his long, blonde hair. A pastel yellow sundress had been laid over the end of his bed, along with a pair of frilly white ankle socks. The clock on the dresser read 8.10.

Rosa stepped into the room, a tall, loping teenager with a denim jacket and the take-no-prisoners attitude peculiar to her generation.

"Yeah, well, Mom said to get a move on," she informed him, "so stop dawdling about and let *me* do that."

"Hey!" Danny protested as Rose took the brush from his hands. A moment later, she was herding him towards the bed, applying a good-natured slap to his bottom for good measure. Danny gave a yelp of surprise; it didn't really hurt, but he absolutely hated it when she treated him like an infant. She was always barging into his room and acting like she owned the place. Sisters were like that: thought they owned the whole damned world (which wasn't that far from the truth, he would later discover).

"OK, hold still," she instructed. Seating herself on the bed, she made him stand between her denim knees, facing the mirror so she could finish untangling his hair. Danny settled into position without a struggle. Rosie was much stronger than he was; he'd learned a long time ago that resistance was useless. That didn't stop him from voicing his objections, however.

"Why can't *Mommy* do my hair?" he moped disconsolately, "it *hurts* when *you* do it." He winced as the brush encountered a particularly obstinate twist.

"She's busy dishing up breakfast," Rosa replied, readjusting her grip on the brush, "told me to come upstairs and make sure you weren't late for school again."

"I wasn't late last time. I was getting ready."

"You were late because you wanted to try on every dress in the closet," she countered without missing a beat, "that's why I laid your clothes out while you were in the shower."

"Well, I don't want to wear *that* old thing," he complained, looking down at the short yellow dress, "I want to wear the one with the strawberries on the front."

"You wore that yesterday," Rosa reminded him, breathing in his sweet, subtle child-scent. His hair smelt of baby shampoo and freshly sliced apples.

"I don't care. It's my favourite and I want it."

Rosa chose to ignore him. He didn't really want to wear the strawberry-frock, he was simply testing the limits, the way he did most mornings. Mom said his contrary moods were perfectly natural for a child his age, so they had to be patient with him – firm, but patient all the same. Rosa thought she understood what she meant. The Little Ones were as fragile as pink carnations, everyone knew that.

Anyway, she quite enjoyed these forced grooming sessions.

Placing a hand on his smooth waist, she ran her fingertips along the trim of his panties, grazing his belly button in the process. Her touch was gentle, gliding over his pale skin with a silken whisper. Danny shifted slightly in her arms, though he didn't pull away from her feather-light caress. His complexion darkened as a warm flush spread through his tummy. Part of it was simple modesty: he'd become increasingly self-conscious about his body over the past few months (another reason why he resented her constant invasions of his personal zones).

But there was also a touch of anticipation in his shallow breathing and cantering heartbeat. Gooseflesh hummed across his shoulders as her fingers slid up his torso. Being stripped to his panties added to this sense of unwilling pleasure. Rosa was a girl, she had no right to see him undressed, and yet his head was spinning with excitement. That was part of the paradox: part of you loved being helpless and secretly hoped it would never stop.

"Okay," Rosa said, laying the brush aside and tying his hair back in two long ponytails. She turned the boy around and looked him up and down, flicking an errant curl out of his face. Danny had always been an unusually pretty boy, with his clipped button nose and tiny, sensuous

mouth. His frost-blue eyes were large and solemn, the kind of eyes that could melt a woman's heart with a single glance.

"You ready to climb into that dress now?" she asked, knowing he'd probably refuse just out of principle.

"No," he replied, "I want to wear the pink one."

"Well, you *can't*," Rosa told him, picking up the sunfrock, "it's in the wash. *Everything's* in the wash; this is the only thing you've got left."

"Don't want to," he answered sulkily, "I don't like it." He looked down at his feet, refusing to meet her gaze.

"Why not?" she coaxed.

"It's too short. Looks like a baby-dress"

"You *are* a baby."

"No I'm *not*," Danny pouted, "I'm nine"

"You're eight. Anyway, it's either this, or walk to school in your underwear."

Danny's eyes flickered in momentarily surprise.

"What?" he said after a brief pause.

"Mom said if you don't wear the dress, you have to go to school in your socks and panties." Rosa explained offhand, although no such conversation had actually taken place. She regarded Danny with a quizzical expression, amused by his obvious discomfort. His cheeks had flushed the colour of a ripe summer tomato as he considered her words. He studied his sister's face, trying to determine whether she was serious or not. Reading his expression with practiced ease, Rosa raised one eyebrow enquiringly.

"Well, what's it going to be?" she asked, concealing her amusement, "daylight's burning, kiddo."

Danny glanced at the frock in his sister's hands, deciding that she had to be joking. Turning up at school in his underwear would be embarrassing beyond words. His Mommy would never make him go through with it (although he didn't find the thought entirely unpleasant, for some reason). No, this was just another ploy to get him into the sunfrock, he was *certain* of it. Rosa was always teasing him like this. Well, he wasn't about to give in so easily. He was going to wear his strawberry dress come what may, even if it *was* in the laundry hamper.

"Okay," he answered with an indifferent shrug of the shoulders, "I'll go to school in my undies." He turned around and stepped toward the hallway, turning his fanny in tight little circles. Rosa watched him indulgently; despite his sometimes exasperating nature, he really was the sweetest little thing on the face of the planet. Smiling to herself in wry, adolescent amusement, she put the dress aside on the bed.

"Danny?" she called, keeping her voice carefully neutral. He looked back over his shoulder at her.

"You planning to go barefoot?" she asked, holding up his frilly cotton socks.

"No," he replied, and started back to the bed. Wild roses stood out on his cheeks, Rosa saw with considerable satisfaction. He was practically fainting with anxiety; she could see that at a glance. Well, serves him right for being so contrary. Hiding a grin, she picked him up beneath the arms and lifted him up on the bed. Leaning back on his palms, he placed his bare feet on Rosa's lap. She drew the socks carefully over his toes, eyes wandering over his sleek, creamy thighs. His legs were slender, supple and rather shapely for a child of eight. She finished adjusting his socks and patted him softly on the knee.

"Don't you think you ought to change out of *those*?" she said, indicating Danny's plain nylon underpants. Danny looked down at himself in genuine surprise.

"Why?"

"You'll want to wear something prettier than these," she said, tugging at the waistband, "they're going to be on show all day. A lot of people are going to be seeing your panties, Danita, so you've got to wear your *prettiest* underwear for them."

Danny's eyes widened as he processed the image.

His heart started galloping like a runaway race horse. Suddenly, he wasn't quite so sure this was one of Rosa's tricks. What if she was telling the truth? More than half the kids in his school were female. Most of the girls in his class had seen his undies from time to time (like any other boy, he spent half his life playing around on the jungle gym), but this was completely different. Danny began to regret his impulsive decision. Why had he ever argued with her, especially over something so pointless? For a second, he was tempted to simply capitulate; concede defeat and slip into his short yellow dress.

"You said all my clothes are in the wash," he said doubtfully.

"Not your undies," Rosa replied conversationally, "Mom always makes sure we have a fresh supply." Danny bit his lip in frustration; he wasn't dealing with a rank amateur. He looked over at his dressing table, knowing she was right: there would be a neatly folded pile of vests and pants in the top drawer: folded, stacked and doubtlessly sorted by colour. She'd checkmated him again.

"Well ..." he started doubtfully, still wavering with indecision. Sensing his hesitation, Rosa seized the opportunity to settle the matter for him.

"C'mon," she said, reaching out and taking him by the hand, "let's go and find you something pretty to wear to school today." Rising to ease her feet, she helped Danny off the bed and led him over to the dresser. He followed along with his pulse leaping into overdrive. *How* could this be *happening* to him? He couldn't back out now, she mightn't even let him change his mind at this stage. What was he going to do? In a few minutes, he'd be walking down to the bus stop in nothing but his panties, curly blond hair streaming down to his waist. This was literally a boy's worse nightmare. He racked his brain for an escape route, some plausible excuse which would allow him to retain some vestige of dignity.

Nothing much came to mind.

Rosa halted before the dresser and pulled open the top drawer. As expected, it was practically bursting with freshly-washed lingerie; pants and vests and crop-tops and all manner of dainty underthings. Releasing Danny's hand, Rosa began to finger through the drawer, painstakingly checking through the various articles. She supposed she was being a little mean, teasing him so mercilessly, but she honestly couldn't help herself. He was so innocent, so vulnerable, so deliciously naive. And anyway, he deserved it; acting like a prima donna when he was supposed to be getting dressed.

"Okay," she announced, "these look nice."

She held up a pair of flimsy satin panties; sheer full briefs with a delicate white trim. They were a soft pink colour and decorated with a faint floral pattern on the front and bottom. Danny felt his temperature rise: they were so thin he could see daylight shining through them. Moist, liquid heat swept through his tummy – Rosa was going to make him put them on, force him to wear them in to school. By the end of the day, every girl in his class would know exactly what he usually wore under his dress. Danny looked up at his sister, speechless with embarrassment.

Rosa returned his gaze with a benign, knowing smile. He was blushing from crown to heel, blushing to the very roots of his hair. She knew precisely what he was thinking, she could almost see the panic cascading through his nervous system. They'd reached the moment of truth, the point of no return.

"All right then," she said without further ado, "let's get you into these."

Danny stifled a gasp as reached for his panties.

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INVASIVE PROCEDURES

1.

"Nikki. It's time."

Nikki Chambers froze at her desk, feeling the blood run cold in her veins. The moment she'd been dreading the whole week had finally arrived. She glanced fleetingly around the room, feeling a soft pink glow spreading across her cheeks. Heads were buried in books, no one seemed to have heard. She looked up at Ms Longridge, her slim, high-breasted supervisor, hoping for some kind of momentary reprieve.

"Now?" Nikki asked in a hesitant voice. Ms Longridge nodded.

"Yes, you're next on the list," the woman answered briskly, "Dr Wrenston's waiting for you down in his office. Come on, he can't wait forever."

"Yes ma'am," Nikki replied shyly, gathering up her books and holding them possessively against her chest. She was blushing all the way to her hairline. Her stilettos clicked on polished concrete as she walked towards the door. A dozen heads swiveled to follow her progress. Study was instantly forgotten; everyone was paying attention to her now.

Stepping out into the hallway, she closed the door carefully, then headed down towards the office. She flicked a lock of hair from her face, moistening her lips nervously. She wasn't looking forward to this. Full frontal examinations were an ordeal for most women; Nikki had always found them to be treadmills of humiliation, even *before* her transition.

She walked quickly down the hallway, a tall, slender girl of sixteen with long brown hair and huge, soulful blue eyes. Her lean, coltish legs were sheathed in sheer black thigh-highs, the kind with a lace garter at the top. She'd taken to wearing them soon after she enrolled at Chamberlain College in an attempt to overcome her innate modesty. They were the reason she seemed to attract so much attention. That, and her skin-tight lycra minis.

She was wearing a stretchy black mini-skirt. Alarmingly brief, it barely covered the edges of her underpants and left about six inches of thigh exposed between hemline and stocking-top. Her waist was encircled by a black leather combat-belt from which hung a plethora of holsters, clip-ons and electronic devices. They were more than a fashion statement, like most girls her age, Nikki lived half her life in cyber-space. Magazines like *Cosmo* called it the millenium chic.

She turned a corner and clocked down a flight of stairs leading into A-Block. Her tummy was swarming with butterflies, she felt feverish with expectation. Every girl in first year was required to attend the mid-term physical. There were no exeptions, it was a condition of enrollment. Nikki had managed to avoid the medical most of the year, but her turn had finally come. There was no escape. As Phil Collins had said back in the 80s; you can *run*, but you can't *hide*.

Her pulse was racing like a trip-hammer. She hated submitting to this ritual striptease. It seemed invasive, exploitive, a gratuitous probing of her body. The fact that she would be undressing for a General Practitioner did little to relieve her anxieties. She was hyper-sensitive about her body. Most girls were. Even today, very few women wanted to stand naked and vulnerable before a complete stranger.

So much the worse for Nikki: she was a *tranzie*.

Nikki found these examinations degrading beyond words. She was a young woman, not a six year-old girl. No one had the right to see her this way; bare thighed and naked, with only a tiny wisp of polyester nylon to cover her shame.

Of course, Nikki had no real choice in the matter. Every three months, she was required to report to the clinic and strip down to her bare essentials. Once she'd finished taking everything off, the nurse would take her through to the surgery in her virginal white underpants, her hands cupped over her high, pointed breasts. She endured this festival of humiliation like a nervous child, her face burning with embarrassment.

Sometimes she was made to stand with her hands clasped behind her head, shivering with embarrassment while he tracked his eyes over her creamy white flesh. It was an ordeal of disgrace virtually beyond description, made all the worse for the knowledge that it was *completely* unavoidable.

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JESSIE'S DAY

1.

Jess Taylor ambled swiftly up the driveway, fishing his keys out of his pocket as he approached the front door. He was a boy on a tight schedule; his Aunt would arrive home at five, dinner would be on the table no later than six. That left him less than three hours of free play; three hours of simple, childish joy in the late September sunshine, three hours on the swings and slides and monkey-bars down at O'Connell Park.

Heart pounding with excitement, Jess let himself into the house, dropping his backpack in the hallway. Aunt Cathy would probably give him grief over that later, but he was in too much of a hurry to consider the consequences. Heading towards the staircase, he unzipped his jacket and bolted up the steps two at a time. It was 3.15 in the afternoon; the day wasn't getting any longer. Lisa and Debbie would already be waiting for him down at O'Connell's.

Leaving his jacket hanging over the banister, he scrambled into his bedroom, hurriedly pulling his t-shirt over his head. Six hours a day in the school from hell, surrounded by creeps, cretins and bullies. He couldn't wait to get changed, kick off his school clothes and slip into something more comfortable – so to speak.

Pausing in the middle of the room, Jess climbed out of his jeans and walked over to the closet, a petite, twelve-year old boy with long blond hair and pale blue eyes. His soft, effeminate features lent him a lush, girlish appearance, the illusion further enhanced by his rounded, curvaceous shape. Exceedingly pretty, he was often mistaken for a girl at first glance. Strange to say, this was something Jess didn't mind at all.

Jess, you see, was a very *special* boy.

He opened the closet door and started sorting through the racks and hangers. One side of the space was full of boy's clothing – pants, shirts, gym socks, boxer shorts and runners. Jess didn't spare it a second glance. Boy's stuff; ugly, scruffy things, he'd never had much use for them. He certainly never wore them once he got home from school. The moment he stepped in through the front door, Jess was free to shed his male identity as a snake sloughs its skin. He could be his *real* self.

Jessica.

The right side of the closet was lined with cutesy little girl's things: skirts, vests, tank tops; printed floral blouses with puffy sleeves, drop-waisted sunfrocks with outrageously frilled hemlines. They were all gifts from his Aunt Catherine; stock-taking specials from her downtown kidswear store. Strangely enough, Aunt Cathy had always been surprisingly tolerant of Jessie's feminine preferences. She even went out of her way to encourage his cross-gendered behaviour. Jessie suspected it had something to do with her not liking men.

Jessie reached into the closet and removed a pastel pink sun-dress, a delicate cotton wisp decorated with tiny rosebuds around the neck line. Sheer, loose and almost unbearably cute, it was one of his all-time favourites. Aunt Cathy had helped him pick it out for his last birthday. It had been one size too big at the time, but he'd grown into it over the past nine months.

Laying the frock out on his bed, Jess walked over to his chest of drawers and took out a pair of pristine white panties – flimsy cotton briefs with a dainty trim encircling the legs and waistline. Jessie's pulse began to race as he stepped carefully into the underpants and drew them slowly up his thighs. Easing the pants into position with a loud, elastic snap, he went back to the bed and pulled the sundress over his head.

And, in the blink of an eye, a boy became a girl.

Smoothing the cool fabric against her tummy, Jessie turned to look in the mirror, smiling at what she saw. The boy she been a few minutes before had disappeared without a trace. Jess Taylor had vanished the instant she'd kicked off the jeans. No – that was wrong. Jess Taylor had never really existed in the first place. He was just a mask she wore during school hours. A mask, a name, and nothing more (*quothe the raven ...*).

Giggling a child's innocent laughter, Jessica spun around several times to make the skirt twirl. The dress flared up in a pink arabesque, then floated lightly back into place. The hem barely reached down past the tops of her thighs; the cotton was so thin that her underpants were clearly visible through the gauzy fabric. She posed in the mirror, admiring the line of the frock, the shape of her long, tapering legs. Moistening her lips in anticipation, she whirled around once more, allowing the dress to sail up past her belly button this time.

Having completed the dress-twirling ritual, she retrieved a pair of socks from the drawer and sat down on the bed to pull them on, one tiny foot at a time. They were the kind with a lacy white frill decorating the band. Aunt Cathy had bought them for her during a recent shopping expedition. Jessie had fallen in love with them at first glance, putting them on right there in the Stocking Shop. When they got home, Aunt Cathrine had taken her shoes off and proceeded to tickle her feet for half an hour – frilly little girl-socks and all. Jessie had no idea why Cathy had tortured her so mercilessly, she guessed it was just the price he paid for being a *girlie-boy*.

Jess stood up, glancing at the clock. It was 3.25; time to go. Her friends would be wondering where she was. Stepping into her pink Barbie runners, she grabbed a black hair-band on her way out and tapped off down the hall. She descended the stairs at a gallop, binding her hair back in a long, golden ponytail. Not a second to lose now, she'd have to sprint all the way to

the park. As she noted earlier, Debs and Lisa wouldn't wait forever.

2.

Autumn in Ridgewick was known locally as "The Breezy Season," two chilly months of clouds, mistrals and dancing leaves. The winds blowing in off the Bucknell River held a promise of snow this time of year, whispering through the trees like the breath of winter. The days were usually mild, but temperatures dropped rapidly toward the end of the day.

Jessie Taylor's legs were buzzing with gooseflesh by the time she reached O'Connell Park. She held her dress down against the invading breeze with one hand. She could always count on an errant gust to lift her skirt an inch or two whenever she stepped out the front door: there were very few things as embarrassing as having her panties revealed to the entire world; all of her friends agreed on that point. Speaking of which, she knew she had to make tracks; Lisa and Debbie couldn't wait forever, they all had to get in a good hour of playtime before dinnertime.

O'Connell Park was a football oval on the outskirts of Ridgewick; the River lay just beyond a slight rise. There was a small playground on the other side of the playing field; Jessie could see her friends rocking sedately back and forth on the swings. Both girls were wearing baggy jeans, faded sweat shirts and Dodgers baseball caps, their ponytails pulled through the backstrap. As long as she'd known them, Jessie had never seen either wearing a dress. Shorts, yes, knee-pants sometimes, but never anything even vaguely resembling a skirt. Neither were tomboys so far as she could tell. It was just the way they dressed.

Well, to each their own, as her Aunt Cathy often said.

Jessie cut across the oval, where an exceedingly violent game of football was in full swing. She knew many of the boys by sight now; most of them went to St Patrick's over on Lincoln Road. Lean Irish lads with chestnut hair and about six zillion freckles. The majority were Jessie's age, though she'd noticed a few older guys chasing the ball lately; kids from St Paddy's seventh grade, she judged. Seemed to be more every week.

She skirted around the game, ignoring the covert boy-glances, and headed towards the playground. Her friends were still seated on the swings, idly dragging their feet through the turf. Noting her approach, Debbie called her name and raised a hand in greeting. Jessica waved back, careful to retain her grip on the wayward skirt.

There was a low chain-link fence dividing the oval from the playground. The opening was on the far side of the park, and Jessie had no intention of walking half a mile to use it.

"Hi," Lisa called from the swings, "didn't think you were coming."

"I got out late today," Jessie replied, setting a hand on the fence-rail. The back of her frock filled up like a sail as she climbed over, although she managed to preserve her modesty by clamping down on her drifting hemline. Quite a trick, considering how short the dress was. Had to be careful; these wintry updraughts loved to catch you unawares.

Clearing the fence, she walked over to the swings and took her place between her two friends. All three began swinging in unison, gradually increasing their velocity. Overhead, the endless blue sky seemed to revolve above them.

"Late?" Debbie asked doubtfully, "you in dutch with your teacher?"

"No, we had dance practice after school." Jessie straightened her legs, pointing her feet towards the sky. Her dress began a steady hike along her thighs, inching its way up to her panties.

"You take DANCE CLASS?" Lisa asked incredulously, as if this was some momentous revelation. She looked genuinely thunderstruck, as if someone had told her that the tooth fairy wasn't real.

"Yeah, every Thursday afternoon," Jessie replied, arching her back for greater height, "my Aunt Cathy says I have to go. Says it's important." Another inch, two. A rush of air slipped around her thighs, lightly flickering her hemline

"Why?" Lisa, again.

"She says all girls need to know how to dance," Jessie shrugged. She swung faster now, long blond pony tail trailing out behind. The dress had crept up nearly three inches, making her bare legs look impossibly long and slender.

"So, what are you learning?" Debbie wanted to know.

"A lot of things," Jessie answered, "tap, ballroom, modern jazz." Her skirt slid one final, teasing inch to the top of her thighs. The hem was now quivering at the very edge of her panties. Jessie glanced down, feeling the wind gathering strength at the tip of her underpants.

"What about ballet?" Lisa inquired, eyes still goggling with disbelief.

"Well...not so much now," Jess replied offhand, "I did ballet when I was little, before we moved to Ridgewick." The edge of her hem began to rise, just the barest fluttering of pink cotton. The suspense was unbearable: her underwear was about to go on display. The dress was going to blow up around her hips, everyone in the park was going to see her panties. It was unavoidable, inescapable.

"Hey, do you have to wear a leotard or anything?" Debbie enquired, showing an unexpected interest in all things girly.

"Sometimes. But usually, we just practice in whatever we're wearing," Jessie explained, soaring ever higher. Her tummy seemed to be swarming with butterflies, her heart pounded in her chest like a triphammer. The lining of her dress flickered once, twice, settled – then flickered again. The capricious Autumn winds played around her thighs, chasing their way up with icy, tickling fingers. She clung to the swing-chains with both hands, moving way too fast to let go and hold her dress down.

"Do you have to put on a show?" Debbie asked. Jessie gave a start, almost nipping her tongue despite herself.

"At the end of the year, maybe," she affirmed, wheeling off into the wild blue yonder, "we have a school concert around Christmas." A cold thrill ran the length of Jessie's spine: her skirt was dancing a fraction of an inch above her thighs, but the lace trim of her panties remained just out of sight.

"We're having a school concert in SEPTEMBER," Lisa cut in, running off at the mouth like a country housewife, "DEBBIE'S going to be in it, she'll be doing this ROUTINE with her GYM CLUB – you know she does GYMNASTICS, don't you Jess?" She looked over at her friend, eyebrows raised expectantly.

Jessie opened her mouth to answer – and the front of her dress ballooned up like a huge pink bubble. A frigid gust of air blasted up her thighs, inflating her skirt and chilling her belly. So abrupt, so unexpected, so breathtakingly cold. Jessie gasped with shock, watching the dress bulge and ripple literally right before her eyes. The hem flew up past her waist, offering the world a heart-stopping view of her silky white underpants.

Vaguely aware that Lisa was still prattling on about the school concert, Jessica streaked forward on the swing, her panties fully visible clear up to her belly button. The breath caught at the back of Jessie's throat, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. This had never happened

before, not in all the months she'd been hanging out here with her friends. Her eyes bulged in shock as the bubble continued to swell.

Stifling a little scream, Jessie began kicking her legs in a vain attempt to deflect the breeze. Needless to say, her plan immediately backfired, revealing more of her virginal white panties to the world. Lisa and Debbie started laughing as her frock inflated towards the heavens. They both loved Jessie to pieces, but it was utterly hilarious, nonetheless. This was why they always wore jeans to the playground!

Blood roaring in her ears, Jessica swung in a great, looping arc, biting her lip to hold back her screams. The wind was still picking up, threatening to peel her dress off completely. Her mind's eye magnified the spectacle as only a child's imagination can: she could almost see the floral pattern sewn into the front of her snowy white undies, glimmering in the afternoon sun. It seemed to go on forever, the moment spinning out to eternity –

Then the bubble finally popped.

Jessie's billowing dress collapsed in on itself, the front turning inside-out for good measure. The wind pasted the skirt against her torso, leaving her panties completely uncovered. Hair flailing in the gale, Jess fought an impulse to lower her hemline to a more demure position. She felt as if everybody in Ridgewick was staring at her underwear.

Still giggling at Jessie's discomfort, Lisa turned her feet towards the ground and allowed herself to decelerate. Debbie followed after a few moments, matching her speed with the ease of long practice. The two girls leapt gracefully off the swings, touching earth in perfect synchronicity. They turned back to look at their pretty blond playmate, still struggling to conceal her shimmering nylon briefs. All three had lapsed into good natured laughter.

Jessica stepped down from her swing, primly adjusting her dress. Her hands shook imperceptibly as she smoothed out the rumpled fabric. She felt dizzy, short of breath; a faint crimson blush tinted her face, neck and shoulders. She'd never shown so much panty in her life. Nothing more than a flash of lace around the bottom, even on the windiest days. Today, every inch of her chaste white knickers had gone on exhibit. Every stitch, every lace, every frill, right down the little red tag on the waistband. Nothing had been left to the imagination.

Having laughed herself breathless, Debbie began looking round for some other way to humiliate her best friend. The perfect opportunity presented itself almost immediately.

"Wanna climb the monkey bars?" she asked, indicating the jungle gym.

"OK," Lisa agreed, gleefully imagining her companion hanging upside down with her dress over her head. "You in, Jess?" she enquired in an overly casual tone, carefully calculated to drive the point home.

"No!" Jessica almost wailed, knowing precisely what her friends had in mind. Her hands flew protectively to the front of her dress as the wind threatened to whip it up in her face. All three burst into sweet, tinkling laughter once again.

"Come on," Debbie teased, tilting her head in a vaguely challenging manner, "it'll be fun. I'll race you to the top."

Jessie shook her head in girlish refusal, her cheeks still burning like an Arizona sunrise. At this point, they couldn't have payed her to climb up there, not after that panty-flashing fiasco on the swings. Why hadn't she worn shorts under her dress, same as every other girl on the planet?

"You're just afraid the boys will see your *underpants!*" Lisa jeered with a kind of sugar-coated malice. Jessie's complexion flared even brighter.

"Am not."

"Are too!"

"Am not!"

"Are TOO!!!"

"Am NOT!!!"

"Are TOO are TOO are TOO!!!"

The last exchange settled the matter for all time, being the feminine equivalent of the infamous triple-dog-dare. Jessie had no choice now, she had to climb the jungle gym and prove she *wasn't* afraid to let every boy in Ridgewick see her panties.

3.

"Last one up has to kiss a pig!" Lisa yelled before Jess could find an excuse to back out. Squealing with laughter, the girls bolted over to the bars and clambered up the rungs in a tangle of hands, feet and elbows. Debbie claimed the first place by virtue of her superior athletic abilities, Lisa and Jessie tying in second.

Once at the top, the three perched together gazing out across O'Connell Park towards the centre of town. As young children, the monkey bars had seemed infinitely tall and steep, a vast, looming monolith overlooking half the planet. Nowadays, the view was considerably less impressive, encompassing only three or four states.

"Know who I saw holding hands with Suzy Chatterson?" Debbie asked, apropos of nothing in particular. Lisa cocked her head to one side, face lighting up at the prospect of some juicy, small-town gossip.

"Who?"

"Bobby Hilliard," Debbie replied nonchalantly. Lisa's eyes shot wide with astonishment, occupying roughly a third of her face.

"Bobby HILLIARD? But he's in the eighth grade!!!"

"Yep. Saw them walking home together from the library yesterday," Debbie reported with an air of quiet satisfaction, "held hands all the way down Ridgewick Drive. You know Bobby Hilliard, Jessie?"

Jessica nodded her head, already zoning out. Her hands fumbled with the hem of her dress, which she knew was going to ride up around her panties at the earliest opportunity. It was one of those immutable laws of nature: a little girl's skirt rose in direct proportion to the proximity of her underwear. Her recent adventure on the swings had proven that.

"I can't BELIEVE Suzy's got a boyfriend in the eighth," Lisa rattled on, oblivious of everything apart from her own opinions, "I mean, he's like THIRTEEN and she's OUR age!!!" Presumably, the relationship violated every known law of physics.

Jessie wasn't really listening, she was too busy replaying her recent adventure on the swings. Her dress had turned into a balloon, revealing everything she had on underneath: her lean, tanned thighs, her dainty white underpants, her pouty little belly-button. How would she ever live it down?

"Well, the way I heard it, Bobby is Suzy's second cousin or something," Debra was saying, electing to play devil's advocate, "so maybe they aren't actually going together..."

"Oh...yeah – second cousin," Jessie nodded indifferently. She was having a great deal of trouble following the conversation; all she could think about was the way her dress had flown up over her waist a few minutes before. Worse still, she knew how this conversation was going to end. Sooner or later, Debbie would grow tired of Lisa's inane chatter. She'd get fidgety, grow

restless, look for something else to do.

And here they were, sitting on the monkey bars.

"Yeah, but why was he holding her hand?" Lisa steamrolled on, "I mean, it's not like she's five years old or anything..."

Jessie completely lost the thread after that point, she had more important things to consider. Yes, here they were, sitting on the jungle gym, and Debbie was already looking bored with her friend's mindless drivel. Any second now, she'd lock her knees around one of the bars and swing herself upside down. Lisa would follow almost immediately, still jabbering nonsense. The two of them would hang there with their ponytails trailing towards the ground – and then it would be *her* turn.

Jessie's features flared the color of a ripe raspberry. It was going to happen again. She had no choice in the matter: just like on the swing, there was nothing she could do to protect her modesty. Her pretty white panties were going on view once more: in a matter of moments, she would have to drop between the bars, dangling by her knees six feet above the grass. Her dress would turn inside out, drooping gradually over her head. Jessica's pulse accelerated, a wave of sultry heat swept through her tummy.

Meantime, the Bobby Hilliard controversy raged on.

"There's nothing wrong with them holding hands as long as they're just friends" Debbie pointed out in condescending tones, "it's not like they were caught kissing under the bridge." She glanced in Jessie's direction, rolling her eyes with a dismissive shake of her head – another tell-tale sign she was losing interest in the discussion.

Jessica lowered her gaze, trying to suppress a stream of nervous giggles welling up from her tummy. She couldn't help herself; Debs was getting ready to launch herself through the rungs. Jess could see it in her face; she was considering the action at that very second. There would be no last minute reprieve, no evading her just deserts. Jessie's fate was sealed. Her flimsy white panties were going on display whether she liked it or not. Why had Debbie opted for the monkey bars anyway? The playground was full of slides, roundabouts and teeter-toters. There was even a large wooden fortress – Fort O'Connell, scene of countless Indian raids and massacres – over by the Big Dipper. Plenty of girl-friendly equipment which didn't require the lifting of her skirt.

"Yeah, well, I just think he should hang out with someone his own age," Lisa opined in the background, "he wears black socks with white shoes. You know what THAT means."

"... what's *that* got to do with anything?" Debra inquired after a pause. She straightened up and began swinging her feet back and forth beneath her. Jessica's heart leapt into her throat.

Debs was preparing to go head over tail, she recognized the signals. Jessie cupped a hand over her mouth to conceal her rising trepidation. She felt warm and feverish, molten silver seemed to be pumping through her veins. The moment was fast approaching. Light-headed with expectation, Jess waited for her expose to begin. Again, the suspense was almost unendurable.

By this time, Debra was practically yawning in Lisa's face, the conversation was going nowhere. Stretching her arms high over her head, she turned and looked over at Fort O'Connell, her gaze settling thoughtfully on the Big Dipper.

And Jessie saw a faint ray of hope:

Debbie wanted to play on the slippery-slide!

It was almost too good to be true. Her friend was going to climb down off the bars and trot over to the other side of the playground. Jessie's modesty was safe; there would be no unveiling of the panties, no free show for the teeming masses. Smoothing her hair back with a trembling

hand, Jessie exhaled a sigh of pure relief. Abject humiliation had been averted by inches. Nothing could have been more embarrassing than parading her undies before half the town.

Strangely enough, she couldn't help feeling just a *little* disappointed. She had resigned herself to having her underpants shown off in all their alabaster glory, had actually been looking forward to it in the same hesitant, giggly way a little girl looks forward to being tickled against her will. There was a kind of reluctant delight involved in having your unmentionables placed on public exhibition.

Well, what's done is done, as Aunt Cathy often said. The decision had been made. Jessie started to relax, allowing her galloping pulse-rate to return to its normal tempo.

Then, it happened.

Upfolding her legs without a word, Debbie leaned backwards and hooked her knees over a cross-bar. Slipping lightly through the grid, she swung herself upside down, holding her cap in place with one hand. She glanced up towards her friends, wordlessly inviting them to join her under the scaffold.

(oh *NO!!*)

A bolt of panic shot up Jessie's spine. How was she going to get out of this?! Lisa was already shifting herself into position, preparing to pitch over the side. It was all so unjust: both her friends were wearing jeans. No one was going to see their underwear. Jessie had a sudden vision of her fresh white panties, sweet and innocent and painfully feminine. It just wasn't *fair!*

Face blazing maraschino red, she looked out across the oval, where the football guys were still chasing the ball about the field. On the surface at least, the coast looked clear. Trouble was, Jessie knew it was a trick; they were all biding their time, waiting for the penny to drop. Every last one of them!

What was she going to do? Her dress was too short to tuck into the legs of her panties (which was what she normally did) too light to stay up of its own accord. What on Earth had she been thinking, wearing this thin, gossamer remnant to the playground when she knew they'd be playing on the monkey bars? Why hadn't she worn one of her tight denim skirts? She only had about a hundred of them. She could even have worn tights, it was certainly cold enough this late in the year.

Of course, that was all beside the point now; Jessie was swiftly running out of options. Lisa had just eased herself down through the rungs. In a few seconds, she'd be expected to follow, brief cotton sunfrock or no. She had no excuse, no way to explain her dubious behavior. It was a classic no-win situation. She really had no other choice.

No other choice at *all*.

4.

Swallowing a deep, calming breath, Jessie hooked her knees over a bar and slung down between her two friends. Her dress fell away almost immediately, flipping inside out and revealing her thighs and belly, all the way up to her tummy button. She swung back and forth with her virginal white panties flashing brightly in the late October sunshine, a rich carmine hue darkening her features.

The girls hung together in a gently undulating row, their long hair streaming toward the turf. Three little bats in a belfry, quiet as church mice. Jessie's dress was creeping inexorably toward the ground, inverting gradually over her neck and shoulders. Her heart skipped a beat; several, in fact: she was presenting far more panty to the world than she had on the swing.

A brief lull in the conversation ensued. A cool breeze whipped through the park, whispering through the trees like an Autumn wave. Jessie shivered momentarily, feeling a delicious rush of gooseflesh cover her belly. Her dress had slipped down so far it was practically dropping off her body. Her smooth, ivory torso was on open exhibition, all the way down to her smooth white chest.

"That dress is about to fall *off*," Debbie suddenly warned, tugging gently on Jessie's skirtline, "then you'll have to walk home in your underwear."

"No, I won't," Jessie replied indifferently, although the idea made her pulse hurtle into overdrive, "if it falls off, I'll just put it straight back on."

"If it falls off, those boys will come over and throw it up in a tree," Debbie said, gesturing towards the oval.

"No, they won't," Jessie answered, "I'd be down off here so fast, they wouldn't get the chance."

Her dress was now hanging completely over her face. She held the hem out of the way with her right hand, fighting a losing battle against both gravity and centrifugal force.

"Bet you they *would*," Debbie challenged. A mischievous smile touched her lips.

"Bet you they *wouldn't*," Jess answered.

"Would!"

"Wouldn't!"

"WOULD!!"

"WOULDN'T!!"

"OK, then – let's see."

Moving faster than Jessie could react, Debra took hold of her dress and yanked it down with a both hands. Holding on by no more than a promise in the first place, the frock peeled off without the slightest resistance. Jessie's eyes widened to the size of dinner plates, she gaped in open-mouthed shock. Her dress had vanished like a soap bubble, leaving her hanging upside down in nothing but her socks and panties.

Her lacy, *white* panties.

Jessica shrieked at the top of her lungs.

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THE BOY NEXT DOOR

One: The Stage

I suppose it must have come as something of a shock for The Boy Next Door. He and his family had moved in only a few days before, and when his mother sent him over to borrow a cup of sugar, the last thing he expected to see was a pair of firm, young bottom-cheeks staring him dead in the face.

I still giggle everytime I think about it.

You see, I was dancing *the cancan*.

Yeah, I know that sounds crazy, but I've always thought the cancan was a rather sexy kind of dance; the idea of whirling across a stage with my skirt raised to my chin made my heart race every time it crossed my mind.

It had taken me a while to assemble the costume, starting with a garish satin dress I found at a Red Shield store out in Chamberlain. It looked practically brand-new when I took it down from the rack. The shop-lady told me it was an authentic chorus-girl outfit, a hand-me-down from one of the local dance schools. I managed to talk her down to ten dollars for the dress and a pair of black stiletto heels I'd seen in the window. Everything fit perfectly; I literally couldn't believe my luck.

The layered petticoats were a little more difficult to locate (not to mention expensive) but I eventually came across a dancewear supplier on the net specializing in music-hall accessories. I used my mother's credit card to buy them online and had them mailed to a post-box number at Chamberlain Mail Centre. I eventually paid her back with interest, although I didn't tell her what the transaction was for.

I picked up the lingerie at a Valentine's sale out of town, pooling my allowance for weeks in advance. The sales assistant wasn't sure whether I was a girl or a boy, but she was helpful enough once she saw the colour of my money. So helpful, in fact, that I bought four of everything; bras, panties, garter-belts and suspender stockings. Variety being the spice of life, I settled for matching sets of white, pink, red and black - except for the stockings, which I purchased in midnight, tan, and flesh-tone.

The outfit looked absolutely fantastic once I added a cincher-belt and a pair of shoulder-length lycra gloves. I couldn't wait to try it out in the rumpus room (which my imagination transformed into a 19th century Soho music hall). Unfortunately, it was weeks before I found myself alone in the house. My bedroom was a little too small to dance in and I didn't want to run the risk of my mother walking in on my performance unannounced.

Anyhow, by the time Mom went to spend the weekend at Grandma's place, I was almost climbing the walls. If you've survived puberty, you'll know how desperate the situation becomes when you're a teenager struggling in the grip of raging hormone levels.

Finally having the house to myself, I pulled the ensemble out of its hiding place in the wardrobe and carried it down to the rumpus room. It was large and well-lit, with plenty of space for twirling and kicking. There was a cheval mirror set up to one side of the television. Walking over to the sofa, I laid the garments out in careful order, preparing for the afternoon's festivities.

Peeling off my t-shirt, jeans and hipsters, I stood before the mirror, ready for my transformation. I paused a few moments, allowing the excitement to surge through my system like waves of moist heat. I'd been waiting months for this moment, feeling the exhilaration building up inside me like a slow-burning fever.

Shivering with arousal, I reached for the lacy, black garter-belt.

It was the sort with adjustable suspenders and a hook-and-eye arrangement at the back. Just looking at the thing made me delirious with embarrassment. Clipping the flimsy piece of lingerie around my slim waist, I picked up a pair of seamed midnight stockings and stepped carefully into them, cautious not to tear the sheer fabric. Adjusting the suspenders to mid-thigh, I turned to pose in the mirror, enjoying the touch of nylon against my bare flesh. My legs looked long and tapering in their ebony sheaths.

Next, I pulled on a pair of pristine white panties, slipping them over the garters with a whisper of liquid satin. Delicate and nebulous, they shimmered like platinum in the lazy afternoon light. The garter-belt was plainly visible through the gossamer material. The hips were decorated with a delicious floral trim. I was blushing at the thought of exhibiting them to my imaginary audience.

I put on a matching white underwire brassiere, adjusting the shoulder straps with vaguely tremulous fingers. My tummy was fluttering with anticipation; the girl in the mirror was tall and slim and quite beautiful. Shining blond hair tied back in a long ponytail, she looked maybe sixteen years old; her large blue eyes and tiny mouth giving her an innocent, child-like appearance.

Turning around, I looked back over my shoulder, enjoying the curve of my figure; the lush, full shape of my bottom. The panties were a little high-cut at the back, exposing a generous amount of cheek on either side. I wriggled my fanny impishly, smiling back at myself. Raising one hand, I slapped myself, very hard, on the right buttock, leaving an angry red mark. My smile broadened in pleasure. I needed a good, hard spanking; I was an extremely naughty girl, after all.

Returning to the business at hand, I pulled on the petticoats, their flouncing bulk accentuating the luscious swell of my hips. Two layers of alabaster frills, an absolute prerequisite to dancing the cancan. Waved above the waistline, the crinolines formed a kind of backdrop for the underwear, a curtain raised to exhibit the panties and stockings.

However, the costume wasn't *quite* complete.

I drew the satin hemline over my head, allowing the dress to drop into place over the massed petticoats. It was beautifully designed, with a halter top and a full-circle skirt that swept down to just below the knee. The frock was ornate and rather gaudy, red and black stripes ran the length of the skirt. Lace traceries embellished the bustline. I finished my preparations by drawing on the long, crimson gloves and fastening the cincher around my waist. And then I was ready.

I posed in the mirror, stepping forward on one foot and lifting the petticoats to reveal a saucy black garter. My heart was racing in my chest, my eyes twinkled with mischief. Was this how it felt, waiting backstage while the band warmed up its horns and strings? I could almost hear the murmur of the crowd, the popping of corks and the clinking of glasses. In a very few moments, I'd have to run onto the stage with my panties on full display. My entire body was trembling with expectation. Gazing into the mirror, I saw a rich, pink glow suffusing my features.

Snatching up two handfuls of flocked white lace, I conjured up a packed Victorian nightclub on the south side of London. For one second, I could almost see the chandeliers flickering overhead, the coils of smoke rising to the rafters, the dim shape of the audience beyond the footlights. The band had started up with a clashing of drums: I was being summoned out before the crowd. It was time to reveal my gauzy white underwear to the world!

Grinning my most brilliant smile, I raced onto the stage in an avalanche of gossamer frills. I launched into my routine with a series of classic high-kicks, straining my garter-belt to the breaking point as my feet swept towards the ceiling. A vast star of joy seemed to explode in my belly. Heart pounding in ecstasy, I spun into a long, wheeling pirouette, skirts flying out in a perfect circle. I orbited around the room, exposing my panties all the way up to my belly button. Stockinged thighs flashed in the mirror as I swirled past, my hair flailing about my shoulders.

Every nerve in my body seemed to tingle with electric fire. Drawing a deep breath, I pitched forward into a cartwheel, scissoring my legs in mid-air to allow the crinolines to fall away. I paused at the height of my arc; suspended upside-down with my petticoats cascading over my head. Cool air whisked between my thighs as I went over, almost shrieking in rapture. It was wonderful, better than I'd ever imagined.

Landing gracefully on my feet, I whipped the dress back up to my throat and kicked my heels over my head, giggling like a child as I leapt from foot to foot. The audience roared its approval, their deafening shouts echoing about the ceiling. I rushed forward, waving my skirt as

high as it could go. I felt sweet, feminine and unbelievably naughty. Tight black garters snapped against my haunches, virginal white panties glared in the mirror.

The performance lasted about ten minutes. Pulse thudding in my temples, I careened through a succession of kicks, handstands and flip-flops, taxing my gymnastic abilities to the limit. My stockings crept imperceptively down my thighs, exhibiting more bare flesh until the suspenders were as taut as violin strings. Wild exhilaration filled my veins; I spun ever faster, giggling and screaming as my petticoats rose and fell.

I finished up with by bending double and tossing my skirts over my back, baring my ripe, pantied bottom to the entire room. Breathless with arousal, I stood with my heels together and my dress hanging over my head. I clenched my bottom-cheeks impulsively, listening to the crowd cheering; thundering for more. I smiled to myself in pure, innocent delight, prepared to stand up and give them the encore they deserved.

Just at that second, someone cleared their throat behind me.

Two: New Kid in Town

My eyes widened in surprise.

Lips parting in a silent gasp, I peeked out from below the frothy curtain of my petticoats, still doubled over with my bottom thrust out in rude display.

There was someone standing at the door of the rumpus room. Someone I'd never seen before. A boy about my age, maybe a year older. Tall; taller than me, and much wider across the shoulders. He was wearing a Ridewick High School jacket and holding something in his right hand, although neither fact registered with me at the time. He was staring at me (or rather at my *derriere*) slack-jawed and speechless, astonishment stamped all over his face in capital letters.

"Ohmygod!!" I cried, remembering how high-cut my underpants were at the back, how much of my creamy white bottom-flesh they exposed. I swung around and straightened up, flipping my skirt over to a more modest position. I stared back wordlessly, my face darkening with embarrassment.

How *long* had he been standing there?

How much had he *seen*?

What was he *doing* here?!

His eyes seemed to refocus, as if he'd just come out of a trance, then he cleared his throat again.

"Hi ..." he said, raising his hand in unconscious greeting, "I ... I'm from next door ... I've ... I just came over to ..." That was as far as he got before he remembered he was holding a coffee mug in his right hand. A rather large one with a Starbucks logo on the side.

"How did you get *in* here?" I demanded, feeling more than a little scared. He was far bigger than me – built like a linebacker on steroids, in fact. I stepped away from him, feeling small and weak and vulnerable. He was blocking my sole exit from the room. I looked anxiously around, wondering how I'd get past him if it came to trouble.

"Oh ... I'm sorry, the front door was open," he replied red-faced, gesturing over his shoulder with the Starbucks mug, "I knocked for about two minutes, but no one answered, so I ..." his voice trailed off and I saw that he was nearly as embarrassed as me. Two bright spots stood out on his cheeks. Despite his size, he looked like a very small boy caught with his hand down the cookie jar. He offered me a sheepish, apologetic grin, his eyes roaming over my costume – particularly the bustier.

"What do you *want?!?*" I exclaimed, covering my tiny cleavage with both hands. It was a reflex action: He was a stranger, I was standing here in a low-cut dress. I wanted to cover up, hide myself from this lumbering monstrosity. How could I have been so stupid as to leave the front door open? Now my secret was out: he'd seen me capering around the rumpus room with my skirt over my head.

And he'd seen my *bottom*.

"Nothing ..." he replied uncomfortably, "I mean, my mother sent me over for a cup of sugar ... she's making a cake, and we only moved in two days ago ..."

"A cup of sugar?" I asked in a slightly calmer tone. He obviously wasn't going to hurt me. He now seemed less of a threat than when I'd first seen him bulking out the doorway. Now that the initial shock had passed, I was able to take a closer look at him. He had a surprisingly open expression, almost devoid of thoughtless, adolescent cruelty. He was big, but he wasn't mean.

"Yeah," he said, and rubbed the back of his neck with his huge left paw, having exhausted his vocabulary for the time being. I searched his features carefully, uncertain how to proceed. Could I trust him? Would he keep what he'd seen to himself? I lowered my hands to my sides, realizing I didn't have much choice now that the cat was out of the bag.

Unless, of course, I could come up with a convincing enough lie.

"You're probably wondering what I was doing," I said, sweeping a gloved hand around the room.

"Oh .. no, I didn't ..." he started, looking more uncomfortable than ever.

"I was rehearsing for our school musical," I explained, blushing to the edge of my hairline, "we're doing a Moulin Rouge number on Bastille Day." I guess it sounded plausible, even if I'd been dancing without any music whatsoever. I watched him closely for any sign of disbelief. His reaction startled me:

"Really? Well, it looked pretty good from where I was standing."

"How much did you see?"

"Just about everything," he replied without thinking, then realized how his words might have been interpreted, "I mean, just the last couple of seconds, that thing where you bend over and ..." he closed his mouth, evidently deciding it would be better to quit while he was ahead. He glanced down at his feet, unable to make eye-contact.

It suddenly occurred to me that he'd swallowed my explanation far too easily. I'd neglected to mention that I attended an all-boy's academy, which would have made more sense if he thought I was male. Why did he feel so embarrassed? Why couldn't he look me in the face? Here he was, staring down at his Doc Martins, like a little kid who'd broken the neighbour's window. He was almost acting as if ...

The penny dropped for me at that moment.

He thinks I'm a girl, I thought incredulously, *this hulking great lugoon thinks he's talking to a girl*. There was another pause in the conversation while I considered this revelation. What was happening here? How had he mistaken me for a woman? He couldn't be that slow; no one could. Stereotype small-town jock though he was, The Boy From Next Door wasn't a complete moron. I could see that much, at least.

"You ... came over for a cup of sugar?" I asked, feeling my spine relax somewhat. The words cycled through my mind with clarion-like intensity: *he thinks I'm a girl: he saw me dancing the cancan, and he thinks I'm a girl! He's standing here talking to me face-to-face and he STILL thinks I'm a girl!! That means ...*

"Yeah, if that'd be all right," he answered, holding up the mug with an almost comically self-deprecating look. *Aw, shucks ma'am, I'm so sorry about all this. Just gimme my cup a' sugar and I'll be on my way.*

"OK," I said, a genuine smile rising to my lips, "you want to come out to the kitchen?" I stepped towards him, hearing my stilettos clocking on the floorboards. Nylon frills brushed against my thighs, raising static along the stockings. My sense of touch seemed to have been amplified a hundredfold, I was almost painfully conscious of everything touching my skin. Flimsy white panties, clinging to my hips; wispy black garter-belt; nestled snugly around my waist. Long, tight suspenders, stretching along my legs.

"Sure," he nodded, and stepped aside, allowing me to pass into the main corridor. My skirt rustled gently as I pushed by, giving him a shy sideways glance. So huge; I was frankly amazed that he'd fit through the front door, open or closed. He fell in behind me without comment, two hundred pounds of all-American beefcake squeezed into a Chamberlain jacket and a pair of faded blue levis. And carrying a Starbucks coffee mug in his right hand.

I could almost feel his eyes wandering over my bottom as we walked out to the kitchen.

Three: Milk and Cookies

On reflection, it must've about the dumbest thing I'd ever done in my life up to that point. I had to live next door to this guy and his family; how could I have been crazy enough to think I'd get away with it? In a perfect world, I suppose I would have been 'straight' with him from the start; told him I was biologically male (even though my genetic condition gives me a highly feminized appearance) and that he'd simply caught me fooling around in a ten dollar dress I'd bought at the Salvation Army. He was a regular guy, he'd understand my position. Probably laugh at the mistake and invite me over to watch the Semi Finals on ESPN.

Well...maybe *not*. But who knows? As I later discovered, Pete Fuller had about the sweetest nature to be found on God's green earth, not a malicious bone in his entire body. I might have saved myself a hell of a lot of trouble by just coming clean. I certainly would have saved myself the humiliation of having to strip down to my panties and stockings in a crowded Westside Bar ... but I'm getting ahead of myself.

The truth was, I didn't know the guy from Adam. In the course of events, he proved himself a stand-up dude and a better friend than I'd ever known, but at the time he was just some big lummoX who'd wandered in off the street while my back was turned (and my prim young fanny bared, let's not forget that little detail). I had no idea what I was dealing with here; he could have been an escapee from a psych-ward for all I knew. I mean, he walked in holding a Starbucks mug, for chrissake.

It was too late to change my story, anyway. I'd started out with a lie, telling him that I'd been rehearsing for a school musical. It wasn't completely untrue; St Andrews was putting on a Bastille Day review in July, which included a Moulin Rouge number in the grand finale. It's just that I wasn't in it. We had some girls coming in from Chamberlain Ladies College for the Montmartre sequence (CLC usually supplied the female talent for our co-productions, it had been a tradition since the two schools were founded back in the 1950s).

I've heard it said that no good relationship begins with a lie, and in light of what followed that first meeting, I can vouch for the accuracy of the statement (although things worked out fine in the end, at least for Pete and his family). My sole defence throughout the whole Westside fiasco was that I never acted out of malice, never wilfully set out to hurt anyone. I know that no

real excuse, but at the end of the day, my behaviour was prompted by circumstance rather than spite.

Still ...

"I haven't seen you around," The Boy From Next Door said as we walked into the kitchen, "you go to Ridgewick High?" I wasn't aware of it at the time, but this was my last opportunity to tell the truth, break the cycle of deception before it gained too much momentum. I stepped over to the pantry, throwing him a backwards glance. He'd halted by the kitchen table, hands sunk into the pockets of his jacket.

"No, I don't," I replied to his question, folding open the louvered doors, "I go to CLC over on Bridgeport Street." My second lie, spoken with an ease and confidence cultivated over six years of schoolyard intrigues. I reached into the pantry, mind racing ahead of my mouth as I tried to anticipate his next question.

"Oh, yeah, CLC ..." he repeated, scanning his memory for any references to a Bridgeport Street, "that's the girl's school, isn't it? The one out by St Andrews."

"The same," I nodded, turning to face him, sugar bag in hand, "sounds like you know Chamberlain pretty well." I was a little surprised by his knowledge of the local geography. He'd only moved in two days ago, from what he'd told me.

"Yeah, I do. Been here my whole life. My folks and I used to live in the Westside before we bought the place next door." He was standing in the window, his brown hair tinted gold by the deepening afternoon sun. Square-jawed and blue-eyed, he must have had at least a dozen girls hanging off his arm come Friday night. Cheerleaders most probably.

"The Westside?" I asked, putting the sugar on the table and extending my hand for the starbucks mug, "I thought it was mainly nightclubs and casinos out there."

"Yeah, it is," he agreed, passing me the mug without conscious thought, "my Dad owns the Windjammer Tavern down in Pitt Street. We used to live upstairs, over the main bar, but then we decided to move out here to the burbs."

I'd heard of the Windjammer. One of the Westside's more upmarket establishments, it was best known for its entertainment center, which included a games-room and a theatre restaurant. Live bands played there most weekends, and it was the venue of choice for a wedding receptions and civic functions, despite the Westside's sleaze-dive reputation.

"Your father *owns* the Windjammer?" I asked, pouring the sugar into the mug and spilling a little on the table, "you must be the most popular guy at Ridgewick High."

He contemplated this for a few moments, then smiled: a wide, easy smile, quite unlike the penitent grimace he'd given me previously. Like I said, at least a dozen girls come Friday night. They'd just about melt in their pants before that heart-stopping grin.

"Yeah, a quarterback with a singles bar; every senior's fantasy." He laughed as if he'd never considered it before (which, in fact he hadn't), and I caught myself laughing with him. I was struck again by how open his face was, how warm and free of teenaged cruelty. The fear and doubt I'd experienced earlier had dissipated entirely; so had my first impression of a blundering, witless lout. It was almost possible to forget I was wearing suspender stockings beneath my skirt.

We stood looking at each other across the room, a table full of sunlight between us. I guess that's where it started: that tiny burst of spontaneous laughter, followed by a long second of relaxed silence. I discovered that I liked him. Very much. Strange how a friendship can form in the space between two words.

"So ... you play football?" I asked, apropos of nothing.

"Yeah, I run defense for the Ridgewick Rebels. Although I seem to spend more time on the benches than on the field lately."

"Hard to believe," I said, measuring the spread of his shoulders. He shrugged his response, then surprised me by changing the subject.

"What about you? You play any sports?" He sounded genuinely interested.

"Studied gymnastics since I was ten," I answered, telling him the truth for the first time that day. I was impressed: I'd never met a jock who didn't bulldoze straight over the conversation once they got started on the virtues of the game. The Boy From Next Door was a rare find indeed..

"Cool," he said, and a look of recognition seemed to pass over his features, "hey, didn't CLC win the state gymnastics finals last year? You weren't on the team, were you?"

"No, I wasn't. I'm good, but not *that* good." Which was a pity, CLC's gymnasts wore cute little pleated skirts with long white socks. I could almost see myself flipping over into a handspring during the introductory routine, exposing my flawless white briefs to like a million people. *Cheerleaders and cancan girls*. The thought brought the hint of a smile to my lips.

We laughed again, although he had no idea what I was giggling about. And for one perfect instant, reality seemed to peel back, replaced by the illusion I'd generated within myself. I was no longer a boy torted up a garter-belt and a tawdry satin dress. I was a girl: a pretty, teenaged girl who been caught flaunting her undies when she thought no one was watching. Laughing it off in the kitchen with The Boy From Next Door.

I looked down at the Starbucks mug on the table, wondering what to say next. My uninvited guest was still standing on the other side of the table with his red-gold hair glinting in the sun. His errand was complete; we had no further business with each other. His mother was probably wondering what was taking him so long. But paradoxically, I didn't want him to leave. I was enjoying myself; enjoying the attention he was paying me, the thrill of discovery and exposure. I was excited, more excited than I'd ever felt before. It was magical, it was enchanting, and I didn't want it to stop.

"You ...wouldn't like some milk and cookies, would you?" I asked hesitantly, feeling like a bobby-soxer in a 1950s situation comedy. A vague premonition whispered through my mind, a soft warning echoed over some great distance: *What are you doing? What in god's name are you doing?* It was a small, insignificant voice, drowning in the flood of arousal rising through my system. I had no trouble dismissing it from my thoughts.

"Yeah, sure," he answered without a second thought, as if afternoon tea with the local transvestite was the most natural thing in the world. He sat down at the table, hunching comfortably forward on his elbows. I walked back over to the pantry, petticoats skittering as I moved.

"Chocolate chip OK?"

"Nothing Better," he replied.

And so it began.

Cynosure Collected Fiction



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