

What attracts an angel? Churches, Mosques, Temples...How about a serial killer? Adrienne Tylar is a detective who knows. Life breaks her to fit in a puzzle of misshapen friends. Man's honest and dishonest best and worst flickers, A Rerun Fading.

A Rerun Fading

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A  
Rerun  
**Fading**

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This book is fiction. It is entirely a fictitious product of the author's imagination.

Its players share credence beyond rusty conveyers of holy manufacturing. The work is conceived to entertain and free compassion for a small stage of temporary character(s). It is built on the premise that flesh is but a Petri dish of spirit.

If one can sense love for the damned unlovable...enough was understood.

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A

Rerun

**Fading**

## Prologue

If it were logical that mirrors hang interconnected by some prosodic glance of the universe—and they do—a world of people might rethink each waking moment to align with providence.

Virtually none awakes, rightly, thinking that today will be her last on earth or that she will not be present for her next finite appointment. It is the one here and there who does sense this—and tells a friend true details before her death—that makes one hesitantly wonder about a searching eye of larger existence.

There are people who purport each day their final one, and so, tell everyone, everyday, that they are dying—and they deserve to die—but they live out their days with negative, compliant, uneventful notice and finally pass with people attending their funeral only to look sad, say the right things, discretely touch the body and ensure that, this day, they really ARE dead. But, as the preacher speaks, everyone knows unspeakably that they were always keyed and locked in virulent dirge.

During their bleak life, wayward mosquitoes visited them only for venal blood. Relatives had a similar attraction...and motivation. The universe allowed their organism purely as an irritation and as a dark mirror for others who may have needed it to fully disdain—or meekly desire—a lukewarm life.

There are, of course, those who kill, but even they would not be attracted to this arctic flicker to snuff its un-oiled wick. If it were named a crime to kill one's life with dispassion, obituaries would swell daily with fervent headlines of laggard

*D. Steven Russell*

homicide, and the paper would turn inside-out to tell its truer stories.

We swat a mosquito, smoker bees, pat dogs, and praise—or beat—a child and her needy pet to keep each in its proper place. We may dread the mortal closing of another's life yet feel an unutterable thrill to hear of it—especially death of the famous or mighty. Titillation by another's ruin is human.

We dare not ponder that the difference between a mosquito and us is learned conscience—guarded not by morality, but by the need for moral approval—a sought approval which intercedes between a thirst for, and the impulsive drawing of, another's blood. Some lack even this comma.

The eternal and the dead lie within as an ecclesiastical, pulsing and shrinking, sand-sized dark spot of time and space. An atheist's doubt mirrors the believer's canon; neither truly knows. And so, we carry the hidden burden of interlocking lies and persuasive conversations, peeking only rarely, as frightened children, and proclaiming faith. It is human arrogance and fainted grace that daily protects us from a theistic crawling knowing.

### *Mirror 1*

Adrienne Tylar awoke feeling that she had lost her destined purpose. She was bloated and her lower back ached from constipation and forthcoming cramps as she recalled dull and jagged fading dreams of triangular uranium wastelands surrounded by moonlit water and populated by faceless men. Years of periods reminded her that subjects like “destiny” weren’t true-north thinking today and, so, she paused. But, she had been depressed for months, not days, and this time of the year troubled her more for some intuitive, elusive, blocked—yet clearly known—reason.

A dream flashed, reran, faded, then arched and stabbed, splicing itself into her groggy-consciousness.

She remembered seeing a large dully painted car with flashing taillights teetered on the edge of a silver and bronze cliff. The sheer cliff resembled a crumpled glassy mirror—as when one wads up expensive tinfoil, then tightly re-stretches it—and the cliff’s earthen magnificence chiseled into crystal blue waters that dissolved quickly into sloshing, foamy, yet obviously deep, irregular, reforming muddy circles...like giant tree rings that painted and repainted themselves into the distance.

Each ring had thin red blood as a discerning point between it and the next. She heard a woman’s muffled desperate crying and screaming for help in some odd mix of Spanish, Portuguese, English, Greek, Hebrew, Lebanese, French, Russian and other languages, but it quickly became a haunting screech in the sky above the cliff. Her eyes were thus drawn

upward to see a powerful, green eyed, gliding eagle, with wings locked for impact, charging fearlessly into the violently cascading and bubbling anvil of a white and golden summer's thunderhead. She felt a surging instinct to find and help the woman, so she scrambled for context. A deific, hand-sized bee floated by and was absorbed upward into the claws of the eagle. The more she willed memory, the more it evaporated and, so, she lost her Good Samaritan will into the falling house-of-cards landscape of a no-rerun fading drama. Instead, she felt the floor beneath her tiny, sleepily dragging feet and stubbed her big toe on a peeling pinkish-brown linoleum bathroom tile.

"Ouch. **Fuck!**" She danced on one foot and reached to squeeze her toe to see if it was bleeding under the toenail. It wasn't; it just hurt. Even for late afternoon, what a wakeup call.

"Goddamn it," she muttered. "Fucking dumpy, peeling-floored, chicken shit, roach infested, rattrap dive. Goddamn it, Jen; you're a deliberate pig!" She felt deep love, then gazed around without perceiving only to see the blur of a dirty bathroom with tan walls...the only vivid colors were plastic ones—blue waves and yellow duckies on a moldy shower curtain. There were a couple of dusty, fake wilted flowers sitting on the toilet and some matching water-stained flower paintings on the walls. She instinctively thought of how she lacked the resources to handle her bills, and how she had more class than she could muster or defend. Then she remembered that scarcity was a lie. She peeked under the sink to see if she had any tampons...a few...no need to stop at the store on her way to work.



“Fuck,” she repeated, now thinking about irrelevant finances, and realizing how much she cussed. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” She enjoyed the feel of rage becoming words, and began making other words out of “fuck” and “rage” in her head: “for unlawful carnal knowledge...what a lugubrious puzzle.” She dulled to wonder where her masters in literature and appreciation for art had gone. Complex puzzles were now her way of masturbating literature, but when the complexity started with “fuck” or “rage” how deep could it be, really?

“Fuck the fuckin’ fuckers,” she muttered, thinking of mankind and knowing that an aging cynicism erased her intended betterments, cloaking once top-of-the-class charm. She loved old sergeants; they were simple. She aimed her fingers like a pistol and spat with defiance at her throbbing toe. She missed.

“Shit!” She smeared the bubbly clear-to-nebulous misfire with her right foot. “Can’t hit shit with spit.” She smiled for at least an accidental poem and began making other words out of “fuck, rage, shit” and “spit.” She was alive now...alive enough. She could make it through today...umm, tonight. It was Thursday.

She pulled her lower right eyelid down and focused on purple-lined bags beneath tattooed eyeliners. Tomorrow’s bags would match her toe. She felt older than 44, but knew that she was physically younger, and knew that she looked younger, maybe 33. A cucumber cold press would do it. She could fix herself up and look the part for another work night—whatever part that might be. Ah, tomorrow...then it would be the weekend. A little healthy eating, minimal coffee with an extra shot or two, some time at the gym, and she could crawl back to bed, read through exhaustion, and sleep, sleep, sleep!

“Jesus, is THIS who I’ve become?” She gulped, plopping down on the toilet without speaking...realizing that she had just projected an eventless, lifeless, day...night...workday. “*Crawl* back to bed...”

Her mind began to wander and solve common problems as she splashed her hands around in a hot bath and made swirls into waterspouts, fish, teacup tempests, and bubble-mountains. As she rose from the tub, she accidentally remembered the towel-wrapped body of a handsome black-haired man shaving a heavy overnight beard and winking clear emerald eyes at her in the mirror. She flushed with desire as, for an instant, he was there. She loved flushing with desire for only him.

“Evening, Puppies.” She *heard* his deep whisper. He called her Puppies because they had the passion and innocence of puppy love and because she always made a puddle when she stepped from the tub...but she never remembered to towel it. He always did that. She smiled sweetly with conditioned memory and wanted to leave her body behind.

Suddenly, she ached, then shuddered and returned to numbness. Numbness was comfortable now. It had been well over a year...No, almost two.

She swept her eyes, first quickly, and then, gazed slowly across her lingerie drawer; she paused, ran her fingers a few layers deep and put on a silky, lacy pair of red underpants and a matching bra to personalize her pain, while defying it, and to keep—not the thought, but the *feeling* of—his memory deliberately close just for today. She didn’t know why but, thus clad, she could know his presence as she gazed into the misty mirror. She smelled cedar, lingering on her fingertips

and remembered his sweaty, sawdust covered chest as he built the dresser. She tasted salt on her tongue and then cried.

She clipped collar-length brown hair to the top of her head to keep it away from tan and flesh colored foundation, pink make-up and blue streaks, as she stroked on eyeliner and rubbed-in an extra dose of her daily face. Whatever she did now might change later. Maybe she'd be a pawn shop clerk tonight...maybe a cabbie...maybe a drug dealer...in principle, it was all the same: She was an actor, *reacting* to an audience who would never know her soul or respect her improvisations. Who really cared? "It's a fucking revolving door," she whispered. "The door needs oiled because no one can lock it; who really *fucking* cares?"

She could hear the thumping speakers of a passing radio and cursed to know that other humans had survived the day. She hated sounds in her "morning," especially that "distortion" sound. Somehow, she secretly wished that she might awake one afternoon and find them all gone. Except for the lingering dead-smell—which would pass—perhaps she even wished that they would all die of an angel-of-death virus leaving only her alive. She could live with that and then die happily alone after a junk food binge and some time off. If only the *bad* people could die.

As she dressed, her mind wandered and she fantasized going door to door, knocking with a smile, entering, killing everyone in the house and going next door to do it again...and again, until she ran out of godless luck, make-believe bullets, or human time. She didn't know her neighbors as she had when she was a child. Everyone was moving too fast, hurrying, and then doing it again tomorrow...and tomorrow. What "it" was

eluded her, and likely them as well. But they had to do **it** with fervor. Shakespeare was righter now than when he penned “**it**” then.

No, come to think of **it**, she wouldn’t kill everybody...She would choose who lived and who died. She might leave the children alive but, then again, they would grow-up to be “people” soon. More people were turning out rotten every day. Better that they die young and not continue learning from their fucked-up parents. *Higher education*? Now there was an oxymoron missing-link—educating in processes and systems that no longer worked for a nonworking world in changing chaos.

And that Ricky Joe kid, fuck...somebody *needed* to un-birth him...she’d enjoy watching him beg...13 and already a gangly little prick. His daddy seemed nice enough...His momma was like a fucking Girl Scout leader or something. Adrienne wondered via tangential thoughts about people’s masks and presentations, and then she wondered about both her need and her true ability to discern or judge people at all. But, it was her business...a survival skill. She *had* to be good at reading people.

“Whoa. Stop! Hey, that’s not you, Tylar! Jesus, girl, why the rage-insanity shit?” She knew...but it had been, well, over a year...No, almost two. “Damn, I’m calloused.” She sighed. “I’m growing colder...without natural warmth. I probably need to see a shrink; it’s bubbling-up again. Oh, God help me.”

Suddenly, she smiled with a mustard seed of uniqueness and felt her purpose return for the workday. Ironically, her purpose

was saving lives. “But, hey, fuck!” She spoke aloud just to affirm existence, and because she liked saying it. “Fuck.” She smiled and, as an act of self-love, kissed her throbbing toe.

\* \* \* \* \*

Adrienne had spent nearly 11 years on patrol before she became fully *one of the guys*...ironically, buying tampons.

As she dragged around the store one Saturday evening, securing veggies, chocolate-covered meals, coconut cupcakes, milk and ice cream, her eyes scanned some newsprint-based, four-color-poor-color, bullshit mag-rag about someone cheating on somebody and the near-mutant baby that might be theirs. She concluded that she could live without it, so paid for her groceries and headed towards the door...but then, she began obsessively rethinking.

“Who **was** that guy banging?” She pondered. “And, isn’t he the guy who used to be married to what’s her name? They were a great couple. And, wait, isn’t the chick he’s supposedly nailing co-starring in that romantic comedy about the what-ya-ma-call-it guy...what’s his name?” Need-to-know merged with a craving for death-by-chocolate and gave her benign addictions permission for pause. She was sick of paperwork, perfect models, plain, fat and skinny housewives, serial TV, bad pick-up attempts, beautiful men, ugly relationships and evil kids. “Hum? It’ll keep me awake thinking about it.”

She **needed** to see the article, so she darted to the end of the magazine stand—just beyond the candy, chips and snacks—sat her brown paper bag of groceries briefly on the floor, looked both ways like a criminal, and knelt reading...lost in

scandal. She filled with judgmental glee to know that the rich anorexic bitch had finally been exposed and that cocaine and ice-cream mixtures had caused the mutant child...now in the care of nuns. The baby was fat...quintuple-chin fat, and cried constantly—Guinness Baby Book fat...with alligator tears! The nuns would pray and fast it back to health. Adrienne pondered affinity for the word '*fast*.' With many definitions, it was right in there with '*yoke*.' No...it was better! Puzzles tried to form.

"Ha, you deserve it, lady," she murmured, then looked around to see if anyone had noticed; she felt guilty for not buying the magazine, but only cared about one pathetic story. Besides, it wasn't worth buying. "Trash," she whispered. "Pure bullshit." God, she *loved* it!

Washed with soap drama and dried in newsprint, she picked up her groceries and headed back toward the front of the store. Reality began to rheostat back, but her instincts involuntarily snapped to *ON*. Something was wrong. She knew that the clerk had been watching a loud cop show on TV, but what she was hearing—while trite like TV—sounded real, not like tinny, blown speakers.

"NOW, MOTHER FUCKER!!! I MEAN **NOW**! DON'T FUCK WITH ME, DICK-WAD...don't do that."

She was rounding the front of the isle, within eyeshot of the cash register area, when it fully hit. It *was* real. Two men: one thin, greasy, 5'11", gaunt, 130ish pounds, stringy blonde hair, yellow jaundiced, and—top to bottom—wearing dirty, solid green army street clothes, stood nearest, three feet behind a big man...6'5", 250 pounds, Caucasian, dark well-groomed

short hair, handsome, blue jeans, thumb-sized frayed tear in his left rear pocket, brown leather belt, bright yellow shirt, short sleeved, *dark angel and flames* tattoo on his right forearm...holding a .9mm on the pimple-faced clerk and repeating, “**NOW...**”

Adrienne’s mind was keen, though everything beyond it blended now into slow motion. She could smell the store’s ill-kempt cleaning beneath time-released pine deodorizer spray. It clicked and sprayed at the back of the store. Things seemed backward: Despite loud words, the appearance of the large man was sad, detached, barely committed to the act, and seemingly, untidily *broken*, even kind. The face of his friend, however, was restless, defiant, frightened into a lifetime of garbage can anger, stabbed with dilated pupils in blue-green eyes, and stray cat mean. Likely a BIG presence and booming voice made them choose this order. It was more intimidating up close to a clerk. Dissected this way, it was logical...but was it logical enough to bet one’s life on? Survival instincts deployed, welcome, but uninvited.

Somehow her side-jaunt into the magazine article still made the scene feel enacted. Her first clear thought was not fear but, rather, surreal amusement that it all seemed so rewritten, rote and re-rote, scripted. Both the higher and lower portions of her mind, told her *clearly*, though, that scripted or not, it was no movie.

She was in street clothes, but had a .38 in her purse. She loved that gun. Her purse was draped over her left shoulder; she was left-handed—well, ambidextrous—and the bag of groceries, hugged by her right arm, offered disguise. She eased her right

forearm under the bag and into her open purse...she could feel the weapon.

She thought of the mishmash of bullets she had put in it as she placed her fingers around it and eased-off the safety...it was a thought she couldn't stop, like some version of bullet fashion. As she gently slid the gun from the purse and into her left hand—with it tucked below her purse and behind the groceries still—she became intuitive and multi-dimensional. Here it came.

In slow-mo she noted that the clerk saw her and that both robbers were reading his eyes; they were, thus, instinctively beginning to turn towards her. She didn't look like a cop, *yet*, and, for the moment, *had* to seem non-threatening. There would be no reason to shoot at her, *yet*. She perceived, analyzed and thought in multiple streams. Amazingly, danger was still not one of her concerns.

"I put in three hollow-points and three regular bullets," she reflected involuntarily. "They were in a cylindrical row, but in which firing order now?" Deep down, she knew that her mind was overtaking her humanness and was calculating the behavior of bullets leaving the chamber. Above all, she could not hit the clerk. "Deescalate this," her training commanded. She could even hear her first training sergeant's voice: "You almost never *have* to shoot tha fuckin' fuckers, but when you **do...**"

"How's your MOM doin'?" she burst out in a smiling voice, with the tone and confidence of an old friend. Her eyes locked now with the eyes of the large man—he had the gun. She was looking across the smaller guy as though he were likely a



friend of a friend, but she was not engaging him emotionally. She needed time...time.

“Huh?” blinked the big gunmen, visibly disoriented. “My whaaa...?!”

She may as well have rolled him a grenade. He was frozen with a look of deep stupidity...just long enough. He looked at her, then back at the clerk, then at her, and his gun drooped for an instant—a sign of pause.

Unfortunately, the smaller man read something in her eyes that triggered fear, and she knew that it was going to go bad fast. The big guy had cynical hope in his countenance, but the little fellow had bitter, aimless hate...He whipped a small gun out of his right coat pocket with incredible speed, and raised it to fire. Adrienne’s purse fell to the floor as she raised her weapon to match him.

He fired at Adrienne without hesitating and the clerk took-off, screaming and running away from them all. The bullet stabbed and stung her left breast and sternum area and, oddly, milk began pouring onto her feet. Amazingly, she was still standing...and still holding the groceries. It was only seconds, but by now, the little man had also fired at the scrambling clerk. He hit the kid and turned to fire again at her.

“...but when you **do**...” pierced the now urgent words of her sergeant. The big man was lowering his gun, and looked disgusted with his partner. He was out of play. Shot or not, the clerk was now out of *her* line of fire.

The seemingly right-handed skinny man spun, turning to his right for a better angle, and moving with seasoned premeditation to get two hands on his gun and, therewith, a controlled shot. His empty eyes said that she was weak. She fired at him instantly.

Investigators, interviews, the video camera, and some multicolored numbered markers would sort out what happened and in what precise order, but it went something like this:

Adrienne's first bullet—not a hollow-point—would enter the right lower wrist of the assailant, exit his inside right wrist, bounce off the back of his 22-caliber automatic, enter the inner part of his left wrist (as he was reaching to grip the weapon) exit downward through the top side of his left wrist, bounce off the metal counter siding and, lodge, barely dangling, in his partner's left butt cheek, just below the tear in his pants.

A defiant attempt by the bony man to lunge and kick at her would result in a second, instinctive, shot—a hollow-point—to his left, upper foot. The simultaneous discharge of his own dropping weapon would leave a similar hole in his right upper foot. Amazingly, no major arteries would be severed and the willowy yellow scarecrow would slump back against the counter—ultimately sitting—dazed and defeated, bleeding slowly from each wrist and both upper feet.

The big man would raise his hands, roll his *empty* weapon by the trigger guard, lay it on the floor and laugh uncontrollably. He would pluck a .38 caliber slug out of his butt cheek with three fingers, stare at it in the palm of his hand for a few seconds, and then drop it on the counter.

His laughing words, “Jesus, I can’t believe you shot me in the ass...” would join the clerk’s synchronous crying of *identical* words. It was indeed surreal now.

The big man shrugged and wagged his head. “My mom called me this morning and said, ‘Son, whatever you’re going to do today, *don’t* do it. I had a real bad dream.’ So, the answer to your question is: My mom’s fine. Thanks for asking.” He smiled with surprising deep intelligence and with an indistinguishable remorse for doing wrong. “We needed some dope money,” he added, with his words trailing off. “I need to get my ass back into recovery...I was there for six years...but right now...I *need* a beer. Jail will give me a new pause.”

He raised his hands and shuffled towards a nearby “beer on ice” display, where he pulled-out two beers. “Here, kid;” he said, twisting open a longneck and handing it, like a drinking buddy, to the befuddled moaning clerk, “this’ll help till you get some morphine. Drink it; don’t *pour* it on your ass, by the way. That would sting like *hell*.” He winked. The kid sobbed and moaned, sipping and huddled over his beer, like a bulky baby.

Adrienne fumbled for her badge, showed it, and stated what was now obvious. “I need to read you your rights,” she said compassionately to the big man and mechanically with her eyes to the beaten one. Sirens were nearby. “You have the right to remain...”

Within seconds an unmarked police car pulled in front, followed closely by two marked vehicles, then another, an ambulance, and God knows what else.

This was her first true look at Jerry Blondt and her introduction to a sequence of events that would marry their lives forever. Her first impression was that he was borderline idiot savant—short on savant—out of shape, insensitive, crude, and out of sequence with most human things. She was partially right, some of the time. Nonetheless, he took command of the scene and with minimal words, allowed her to detach, breathe, analyze, and reflect.

She could hear the clerk and the spindly man crying simultaneously for attention and pain meds to separate EMS personnel, and her eye caught a look of deep gratitude and respect from the big man as they leaned him against the counter, examining his ass-cheek and cuffing him. One was a piece of shit, pure and simple; the other would be alright in time.

She finally dropped to the floor next to her broken bag of groceries and worked backward in her reflections—now in ultra-fast motion, not slow-mo. Her knees were suddenly weak and shaking. Oh, wait, she'd been shot.

Her chest stung more like a burn than a bullet hole, and so it was. The hollow-point .22 had gone through her milk jug, at an angle, through the edge of her pistachio nut ice cream container, through a cream-filled coconut cupcake, through a box of tampons, through the edge of a carrot, and into her grandma's antique necklace, where it sat, smashed as a rivet. It had bruised, cut and burned the inner part of her left breast; it bruised more than it penetrated. "Tit for tat," she chuckled, as she recalled her bullet drooping from the big man's ass.

All in all, saved by grandma, milk, ice cream, cupcakes, veggies and tampons, she couldn't help but smile at the irony of a women's preparedness. But, her most expensive blue-rhinestone Manolo Blahniks were soaked with milk, and she knew, deep in her being—of all that she cared about tonight—that this was the true disaster.

She laughed aloud. "Now ain't that some *shit*!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Adrienne had taken the detective's exam when she was nine and a half years into her career, and had scored good enough to be in the top quartile—in fact, on the written test, she was *the* top. She had a model career record with no fuck-ups. She was steady by all indicators, though not really dynamic or noticeable. She was, by nature, a loner, and so had spent the first six or so years of her career working full time and getting her masters in English Literature with a minor in Art History—just because. It filled up her time and she loved words. It took a while longer to want a detective shield, and she didn't know how to play the game.

The promotion system was rank-ordered to allow a certain amount of "discretion" in the interview process. Even though one might have a great written score and record, it only counted as 40% of the composite. Another 40% was dependent on scoring by an interview team, and the Chief weighted the remaining 20%. The Chief had *never* varied from the interview team's recommendation, and everybody knew that they'd better praise the "participative" nature of the process.

Adrienne's top score and unblemished record was enough to get her interviewed for each opening over an 18-month period, but was never enough to push her over the top. Race seemed irrelevant, but having a dick and a sponsor seemed to help other candidates—even ones with less balls and less time on the force. She kept this analysis to herself. She was resilient and tough and, for some unknown reason, silently believed in a form of destiny and fate. This was, however, etiolating.

Within a few months of the tampon shootout she sat waiting to be interviewed again. She had received a commendation for the event, and even a little press coverage, but she was not naive about protocol. Medals didn't supplant plumbing or suck. New guys were constantly transferring into the precinct and new guys were constantly being promoted. It was like a caste system that couldn't be castrated by mere excellence. She would continue to suit up and show up, though. And so, she arose with a hollow positive confidence when they called her name. She recalled how her grandfather told her that people transferring in used to mean that they were a political fuck-up; it was simply a system beater nowadays.

By now, she was used to the interview process. Three old guys would sit there and ask situational, hypothetical, preferential, legal, and ethical questions and she would respond with perfection as they exchanged glances that said she was a cute little thing, that they'd love to fuck her, that they liked her answers, and even that they thought she was smart. But from the first 30 seconds, she knew that she was not going to be a detective anytime soon. Adding roughness or charm to her style did not change the outcome, and sticking socks in her pants wouldn't enhance her work jacket.

She couldn't know that today would be different. Three old guys and a stream of bland questions would be replaced by one Jerry Blondt and two of his ex-partners.

"Well, I'll be fucked," began the interview, upbeat and completely inappropriately. "If it ain't THE *Centurion* lady!"

"Excuse me," Adrienne responded with surprise, unable to hide some level of being offended, and judgmentally replaying her first sighting of this man at the grocery store event. "The *Centurion* lady?" He seemed different now...more real...TOO real.

"Yeah," he continued, rising from his chair, and adding what little social tact he could muster. "Oh, I'm sorry...how rude of me. I'm Jerry, and this is Milt...and Pecker...Don't ask." Each of them rose and shook Adrienne's hand, smiling as though they had some secret handshake among them. "You know me, Jerry...I'm Jerry...from the...well, *your*...shootout."

"Of course I remember you," she responded, regaining composure but stunned by the opening. Suddenly she felt completely relaxed. She knew that her answers, charm, or style didn't matter anyhow, so decided to enjoy the oddness of this beginning. "The *Centurion* lady?" She repeated his words and left the question mark hanging.

"Fuck, man, you should 'a seen it!" Jerry bounced with an uncontrolled animation, looking side to side at his fellow detectives. "She shot the fuck out 'a that little fucker. He was sitting there on the floor crying and whining for 'paaaaain meds'...Oh, sorry...'*Centurion* lady' is a label you got from

the detention boys when they finally rolled your little prick out 'a the hospital and into the general population. Green Blondie Boy began claiming to his Aryan butt-fuckin' brothers that he was some '*Anti-Christ*' being '*crucified by*' the...how'd he say it...oh; I've **gotta** get this right...oh, yeah...by '*the evil twisted .38 nails of a godless society of faithless fascist whores, Jew boy clerks, gutless Catholic partners and drug store whoremongers.*' My God, it was *poetic*—pure meth-head recovery literature. **Centurion**...get it...like nailing Christ? You shot the shit outta that punk!"

"Ah. Of...of course." Adrienne sat stunned, knowing that this would never happen in real life and could not be preconceived or replicated. "*Centurion*...yes; yes...of course." She cleared her throat and twisted her neck side to side nervously—loudly cracking it—wondering what line of questioning could *possibly* follow this introduction. She scanned her bio-system and realized that, on a surrealist trauma scale of one to bloody triple runny egg yokes, this outranked the shooting incident by a bent spoonful of twin Milky Way dark star holes. Being competitive, she flushed with anxiety and ill preparedness, awaiting her next "question." No education, time on the street or shootout had prepared her for this. Fuck, she *hated* flushing!

"Interview over!" blurted Jerry. "I'm the one who needs a partner and she can have my back anytime, any day, anywhere. Questions?" He ignored Adrienne and looked to his fellows. Both of them looked absolutely convinced, neither looked brave enough to even *think* of fucking her, and each was nodding with permanent exaggerated agreement.



“Done,” he punctuated, placing a period in the air with his right index finger. Her hands instinctively went over her mouth as she swore that she wouldn’t allow joy to squirt out as tears.

“Of course we’ll have to wait on the *Chief’s* ranking.” He winked, and then smiled, with the knowing of a lifetime best friend. She suddenly knew that he would become that and more. Perhaps he already was.

Adrienne flashed to the day when her grandfather Tylar handed her his pearl-handled .38 at her graduation from the academy, and she knew that she would love this man, Jerry, with equal trust and gratitude. He was to become the mentor and the father whom she had lost too soon.

“How *is* the universe connected?” She pondered as she blushed silently with absolute respect and involuntary love. He was so childlike and she trusted him completely, like a tarnished looking glass of God himself.

## *Mirror 2*

In the same moments that Adrienne stubbed her toe and begrudged her puffy eyelids, *Ashton* glided towards his mirror with a famished hunger to see his own reflection and, then, spiritually fulfilled, spoke with himself as an endeared true love. As she spat at her toe, he looked at his leather slippers and paused to feel Italian crafted softness—sewn perfection.

As he bathed, he needed no love's specter haunting him from the mirrors of memory. He stared into the water of a black marble tub and saw only his bare, wafting strength reflecting. He viewed all else as emanating from his presence. Even the woodwork was somehow connected to him, and he, the center of it all, delectably connected the crafted cabinetry of dead carpenters to once living trees. It was a form of service to the biology that had created him. If there were a god, he was it.

"God you have *such* beautiful eyes," he thought with a sexual attraction to winking mirth. He could only see his beauty in the mirror. Intelligence? Enticement? Why, those went without saying, but certainly not unnoticed. Others told him this, and he allowed it with a mirror-studied cloak of humility, though none could truly deem him so...why, at best, they were red ants—drunk on leftover purple mulberries from tree lined sidewalks that he owned. He laughed aloud with detachment and growing joy.

He could have anyone he wanted but he wanted no one. None could stand or walk beside him. None could be consumed in flesh, mind, or spirit, to improve—or even satisfy—him. He

had to be careful of what he ate, lest it defile him. Human touch? Why, it was like eating warmed-over grub worms. Drinking water was only from his private French or Hawaiian artesian wells and, then, carefully tested. He had some bottles refined from polar ice, but it was tart to his tasting and, thus, mainly for gifts, shelf display, and dinner conversation.

He would gently kiss a woman on the cheeks in passing to portray a social dignity, but would *never* kiss someone on the lips. Women had tried, but only he was good enough to touch himself. They could never inhabit his universe; they could only think that they might. Oh and how he enjoyed that flirtatious little game. Sex was the only reason humans rose from ants to rabbits in his hierarchy—soft, warm, fluffy...like his slippers, but to him, unfitting. He was not aloof, though, and would photograph them sometimes as “subjects” to anoint their place as a servant in his kingdom and to honor their loyal humanness by touching himself and thinking of them, thereby allowing the most base to share his mind and his flesh.

He looked at a distorted *van Gogh* that matched his bathroom décor, and smiled at its appropriateness—perfect in oil color, deceptively distorted yet inerrant with heavy stroke. They shared the same birthday, March 30<sup>th</sup>. He had acquired the unregistered painting through legitimate acquaintances that hailed ancestry from a nurse at the hospital of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole. He moved to check the automatic temperature and humidity setting, not so much to ensure that the painting was preserved, but more to ensure that he was comfortable, and to affirm that the universe served him. He loved that he preferred a cool room and loved more that he and the painting were somehow sculpted, heavily brushed and exhibited as one—hidden from registry, formed of secret genius.

He would love to say that his childhood had been abusive and bizarre; then, perhaps, he could identify with the mingling chitchat that his social fellows guzzled as they cried and sipped their tasteless wines. Ah, but, his life had not been so. He had been born of wealth, schooled with the finest, deemed athletic, hugged appropriately, never defiled by a parental kiss, fed by servants and trained to survive from the sweat of humans. Wearing this lifestyle felt even more comfortable than his slippers and, so, he wore it without effort. Schoolmates ran his businesses; a eunuch business manager ran his affairs. He was completely free to drink and eat of life and its pleasures.

Ashton owned companies that owned companies that owned the Ivy League common man. Real estate vaunted plants and houses just to inoculate the game board with his abundance. Stocks were for common men to sweat over while making his empire more invisible. Men in expensive suits irritated his sense of order and dignity with a pretense that they mattered. He avoided them. But, they were “somebody” all right—somebody to serve him. He had a bland contempt for executives and even more disdain for those who employed them. Journalists were furthest beneath him as the “4<sup>th</sup> Estate.” Estate; how laughable. They were pulp and sawdust paper weights awaiting puppy feces.

He was amused that peon—oh, please; it’s *pee* on—manager-fathers had wasted tense lives on midnight offices and co-pay benefits, buying and selling houses, real estate, stocks, bonds, and fancy cars, only to raise their children in a caste blindness that continued to pay their bills at *his* banks and *his* mortgage companies, passing a thousand forms of usury back into his pockets. But, he had long ago learned—at mother’s

scolding—to ignore such distractions, lest they splash on him and infect his focus. His true gift was that he could read people. Others did all else.

He bored easily and, ironically, hated the humdrum of material life. When he wished to travel, he simply left and, then, he was there—anywhere. When he wanted cars he bought them, rented them, or—one of his favorites—stole them. He would never be caught. He was cunning beyond the laws of chaos...agile, and audacious beyond any institution's ability to keep up. As a god, he perceived himself to be, not immortal, but indestructible and as eternally willed as the laws of physics and biology could allow.

With seeming contradiction, it was the people, smell, and sound of the street that he loved most. It was there that he left the ivory pretense of deluded robots and fueled his thirst for honest human service. He had developed uncountable ways of escaping into the night and eluded accountability by never leaving a traceable starting point for any man to sense or know his presence.

He was excited about the day ahead. It took some work to know it, but it was *Thursday*, a day of wealth, and the day before another day that had endless wealth, omnipotent power, human bondage, and yet another meaningless name...like...Friday. He had learned that today was a day when common people felt some sense of weekly pre-holiday as they neared the flashbulb freedom of a *weekend*...a strained delusion of rest, preceding their Monday. People would be unguarded today, expecting neither wealth nor poverty...just surviving...but today, with Wednesday's failed lottery ticket

and glimmered hope of weekend escape. He loved seeing that in tired, wanting eyes.

Tonight he would indulge his craving, and would thereby share his world with another soul—not that *he* had one. Tonight he would find someone who was cloaked, but brutally honest, and who honestly worked for a living...someone who existed beyond the rotating doors and feeding conveyers of his vast, robotized kingdom. Tonight he would give of himself and, like the healing pain of surgery, would secretly use his abundant resources to share himself and end another's blank suffering.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You’re gonna love this,” Jerry announced with the flamboyance of a high school dork. “As is customary, Pecker and I picked it out ourselves...just for you. We knew how particular you would be, so took *all* of that into consideration. This is the finest a thrift store can provide.” He winked with exaggeration at Pecker and held up a set of...clothes...hooker clothes.

“Jesus,” said Adrienne, with the cynicism that had started her day, “For ME. You shouldn’t have.” Her eyes were fixed on the four inch red stilettos and a platinum wig. “No, really...you *shouldn’t* have.” It wouldn’t be a night in the pawnshops or selling dope. She was peddling something else tonight.

“Now, A, You’d have bought some goddamn stylish shit that would have been in a fancy storefront window time you finished,” Pecker said. “We’re trying to sell you as a hooker,

not a model. I, of course, was partial to something a little more plain, but Jerry insisted that we go with the short, what's that word...umm...'fuchsia'...look, and he insisted that it be...umm...'somewhat gradually layered' with, how'd that go again, Jerry...'some camisole and lace appeal to it.' Damn, Ty, seems like he knows a *little* much about that shit to me." He cleared his throat and chuckled as Jerry turned beet red with a stir of emotions. Jerry hated shit like that and was trained to be street polite but blushed easily and was obviously homophobic, transsexual phobic, cross-dresser phobic and all similar phobias. How could one see that only two phobias haunted him: Eisoptrophobia and dikephobia? How a blush can lie.

"I'll put it on," said Adrienne grimly. "Sure one of you cuties doesn't want to do this part AGAIN tonight?" She held out the clothes for them to take. They scowled at the accusing word "again."

"No, Drain, it's all yours," smiled Jerry like a protective father, with his eyes conveying that nothing would harm her as long as he was alive.

Jerry had named her "Drain" after she sunk into a dark depression when she lost her true love...almost two years back. "You're a drain, lately," he said, trying to encourage her, and thinking of how he missed her perkiness. "You're sappin' the life outta me, A. Wait, *A Drain*, Adrienne...that's pretty good." Thus it started...as a ribbing...to perk her up. She put on a happier face from then on and worked to energize its conveyance. She didn't *feel* it; but she did it for Jerry.

Cops had this way of naming scars to ignore the pain of their making, and of sculpting anything into a nickname; and so, she was now known as “Ty, Tylar, A, T, Adrienne, Drain, ACT, Camo” (her middle name was Camille) and a number of more transient things. Tonight she would be known as “Dianne.” That was her whore persona. She would never admit it, but she actually liked playing the role and always looked forward to the boys buying her a new outfit. She got a real kick out of it.

“Where are the lucky charmers tonight?” she asked, looking deeper into the clothes bag that they’d presented her. “Who gets a shot at Dianne tonight?” She shook her rump and looked sexy.

“We’re in Old Town tonight,” said Pecker. “Seems the Mayor’s next door neighbor’s wife’s brother got hit on by a ‘lady’ there last week and so, they want the area ‘cleaned up’ and ‘made presentable’ for business folks and visitors...don’t want it to ‘go bad and drive away business people.’ He used his fingers to make quotation marks around key words, which irritated the shit out of the hyper-literate, anal-retentive (when used as an...), quasi-librarian in Adrienne. She didn’t know why; she just hated it. Pecker, though, all in all, was a nice guy and a steady worker. He was like an evolving and devolving robotic splice of artificial intelligence and early man. He knew politics. He surprised her sometimes and he always meant well.

“Speaking of whores, too bad politicians’ friends don’t know that they themselves seem a little skanky...just because they are *friends* with politicians,” he added, snickering like he’d



mastered complex political humor with one near hit. Adrienne winked like a bawd charlatan and headed for the locker room.

She stood in her red underwear gazing momentarily into the mirror. She was calloused enough now to dislike everything and everyone, including herself, but she reflected for a moment on her sweetie walking up behind her as she had stood just so at home one afternoon. She remembered strong arms pulling her into his obviously arousing body and warm breath whispering, “Puppies, you are so beautiful.” They did not make love that afternoon, because she was late for work. She involuntarily choked back a tear and then remembered herself, *Dianne*. She was beginning to have more flashbacks; she didn’t know why they had waited so patiently.

She put neatly folded street clothes in her nearby locker and sifted through the thrift bag to see what the boys had gotten her. They actually hadn’t done badly. Jerry was adept at detail and clearly had led the charge in this purchase. The skirt was short, fuchsia, and had irregularly patterned—and increasingly shrinking, overlapped circles of—lacy lower edges in an eggshell white. It had been expensive at some point when a college girl owned it, and it fit the bill now for her size 4 body. Jerry knew her better than a spouse.

The camisole they’d bought was cream colored with a pink-bordered lacy top to make it provocative; and, it actually looked new. The blouse was embroidered silk, yet somehow looked sexually sultry and cheap. It was eggshell off-white and was low-cut with three exaggerated pink buttons that matched the skirt fairly well. It had a strange outer-space type embroidered upright collar. It didn’t tuck-in and came to a

wide separating set of points at the bottom. It was inviting, in a peddler-sort of way. It was...well, appropriate.

She could see that Pecker had bought the nylons. They were new, but were not panty hose; they were a pair—a cheap pair with a black fishnet weaved pattern, and a black garter belt to hook them at her panties. Jesus, only a single old man could do this beyond the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The good news, however, was that it enhanced the rest of the outfit to radiate “slut” and it said “for sale” or maybe even “fire sale” in an unmistakable, grandiose, pathetic, desperate way when combined with a platinum wig and 4-inch red stilettos.

“Fuck,” she gasp into a disgusted exhale as she looked at herself and smeared on a little more red lipstick and rouge to match her shoes. “Fuck,” she thought, “this is so laughable...and men actually **buy** this shit—this package of...ME! They buy this, one dimensional—apparently beaten so I look vulnerable—me. M-E,” her mind-puzzle mechanically spelled. “E-A-T,” it continued. “M-E-A-T,” it concluded. “Meet me at...Here to meat me, Big Weenie Boy.”

“Fuck,” she repeated to feel the word again pass her lips and thereby to feel the part. Saying it and thinking about meat turned her on a little, yet it was about the raw power of deceit, not about sex. She felt a sexual shiver to know that she would handcuff her suitors tonight and that she then controlled them—desires, dick, fantasies, everything. That shiver suddenly scared her. She realized how thin the line was between a damaged Adrienne, a real whore, those she arrested and something far worse. But, it was a Camo ACT, just a role. “Meet me at...” her mind continued in cleaner puzzles and runaway black and white 1930s movie clips.

She shook her head to ruffle the wig. She was ready now. “Go get ‘em, Girl,” she said, tightening her muscles and spreading her legs deliberately, wiggling her right index finger in a come-on gesture, and winking at Dianne. She loved Dianne.

“How much for the week?” mocked Pecker in bad imitation of a great movie, as she walked out, strutting and exaggerating her swagger. She wouldn’t honor it tonight with the proper next movie line.

“The *week*?” She sold softly, with pure sex in her voice. “Why tonight, it’s the same price for *both* of you boys...at once: Detective’s pay. We all get detective’s pay for this week. You’re on top, so pay with cash, Grandpa,” she taunted Pecker, making fun of his being topped-out with seniority on the pay scale. She Marilyn Monroed him a long kiss off the top of her right palm to practice ambidexterity. It was good practice, not natural to a lefty, and sickening cliché. He shook his head, flopping large ears and lips like a wet hound dog.

As they drove a plain, deer hunter looking, black pre-SUV to the target area, she sat in back, preparing for her role and reflecting. Jerry and Pecker talked about “the old days.” Half listening, she could tell that she was becoming a part of “the old days” in discussions now. She had been doing deals with Jerry and Pecker for over seven years now. They were always her family. Before that, she had partnered with Milt and Jerry for a couple of years, until Milt retired, and then with a mix of other guys who, for various reasons, didn’t work out until Rube Pecker reemerged and got assigned to work with them.

She had been a detective now for almost as long as she had been on patrol...but this second lap of time had flown in

comparison. She was happy for most of those years and had even found true...She burned and then numbed as a trained reflex...but, it struggled for acknowledgement...She had even found...**No, goddamn it!** That was *gone*. She tasted salt water as she swallowed.

“So, where do we start,” she asked to break her battling recollections.

“Don’t you listen, T?” checked Rube cynically. “We’re starting in the south warehouse restaurant area and fishing our way to North Old Town until you “hook” somebody. He used the quotation-in-air thing around a trite and obvious “hook” and further emphasized the pun with an index finger in the side of his mouth. She grimaced with a lippy fish face.

“We’re actually targeting that fancy looking seafood place that sits among several dives. It’s where the Chief said that the Mayor said that his wife said that the neighbor’s wife said...”

“I get the point,” she interrupted.

“Don’t worry...we’ll keep an *eye* on *you*, Baby,” he added with Groucho Marx eyebrows and a tone that clearly said they’d be watching her ass. She knew he was joking and a big brother.

Unusually, Jerry drove and said nothing now. He stared ahead with both hands on the wheel and seemed agitated. He was gripping the steering wheel with focused resolve.

“You all right, Jerr?” she asked with the first serious tone exchanged since she prepared to suit up as Dianne.

“Yeah,” he said, “must be the moon. You know how the crazies crawl out of the sewers all week before it’s full. They crawl out of my mental sewers as well. It’s history. I’m just edgy and can’t seem to focus.” He pondered, shifting his eyes from side to side, as though he were looking for, or hiding, an answer. “I’ll be alright. Just paranoid and anxious for some reason. Bad dreams...old flashbacks. Probably just chemistry...or some version of lunar Herpes. It grabbed me from the mirror this afternoon when I was shaving. Hell I even cut myself and the whole fucking deal. Spastic ole fuck!”

“Oh, here’s your new purse,” interjected Pecker with the mime drama of a late present. It was a worn, gaudy looking, beaded, dance-ball reflecting, small evening bag that matched the shoes. It was barely big enough for a taser, a tampon, some loose tissues, lipstick, a leather-cased gold shield and a standard-issue cell phone—nope; no room for a phone. She transferred these items from her regular purse’s side-pockets to the “new” bag and smiled with fully prostituted gratitude. She jammed the listening device in her left ear and got out stealthily to work the street corner as they casually arched and parked within eyeshot.

As she moved along the area, there were some interested drive-by business types, but each of them seemed to chicken out, or was about to stop when a party of business people came drunkenly laughing out of the restaurant and scared them. Likely a fear of the town becoming too small shrunk their dicks and sent them wanking. Perhaps they opted to go to a dozen other *sure* corners where they knew a myriad of diseases likely waited, but even so, weighed it against their craving, since it dressed subtly as available love.

At one point, another younger, but obviously meth-and-crack beaten, hooker eased out of the shadows and challenged Dianne for the space. Neither Ty nor Di were in the mood, so suggested other promising places, but to no avail.

Ty didn't want a scene; she wanted a bust. She saddened for a moment to think that the girl had likely been just a daughter and a student recently and that she was rapidly turning old. She was maybe 23, but—even with some jail time to pause the hell—would look toothless and 80 in just a few more years. But, Ty wasn't a counselor or a social worker tonight and she couldn't fix the universe. She was here to spread the news for hookers to get out of this area and to arrest wayward men and run their names in the paper. Jerry had a system for this intrusion scenario.

“Get this child out of here, while I go take a piss,” she mumbled in a low but clearly audible tone, while simultaneously cloaking her mouth and coughing into the side of her purse. She began walking towards a dive across the street.

“Say whaaa?” the competitor challenged, no doubt overhearing mainly the words *child* and *piss*.

“Say...I'm gonna take a piss. Something tells me you'll get lucky while I'm gone and then this corner will be free. Gotta love America; it's a great country, huh, Honey? Plenty to spread around.” She could see Pecker getting out of the distant Jeep and shuffling towards her with a stiff knee. The new player had her back turned to him and, so, would think him a timely, desperate old wheezer. They'd done this housecleaning routine dozens of times. It was nothing new. Pecker loved

talking girls into walking back to the vehicle with him, while dark tinted windows hid Jerry. Pecker looked harmless to the bone—any bone.

The boys would talk to the chick; Adrienne would pee; she would return to her corner and the competitor would be happily relocating to a busier, lower class corner, glad to escape jail for the evening and circulating news that the warehouse area was not a good bet now for working girls.

As Adrienne entered the front of a dimly lit mid-block diner, she could see a full moon rising large and orange behind the Jeep and above the antiquity of decaying warehouses and a towering rebuilt cannery that was being advertised nationally now as condos for artists—at least that's how it was being billed. She stung spiritually. City Hall would figure out how to woo and fuck any artist when money was aligned. It was amazing that art was the only remnant of great civilizations; yet, it was nearly always scraped and brushed—not from prosperity, but—from deprivation and pain. Looking at the cannery for too long made her feel touchstones of deep agony.

The cannery's towering silhouette joined with lesser brick remnants to whisper lost renaissance and awakening consumerism. The area was being revitalized slowly, but sat as a battleground of the old and the new...as a transient blend of past and future. She felt something mortally beyond words in digesting the sight. It was now perceived as "safe" to the average citizen; that's why business parties came here with out-of-town visitors to eat and share the ambience. That transition was also why hookers and dealers could not be allowed in this area, and so they were running and fading to out-standing darkness and futures soon past.

“Evenin’ Sugar,” said the raspy, smoking, cook & restaurant-keep as she entered the front. Bathroom’s in the back; enter from the alley,” he added with a tone of street respect, acknowledging their shared experience. She admired that he did not seem to judge or screen her and that he understood her unspoken need for a bathroom.

“Thanks,” she responded, smiling. “How ‘bout a big-assed coffee to go?” He nodded, affirming.

“Boys, I’m signing-off for five-to-seven so we’re not too intimate,” she whispered, removing her earplug and placing it into the handbag. Switch be damned; she double wrapped the listening device in a tissue before putting it into her purse, recalling the heckling she’d gotten from them the first time she entered an echoing dive and shared splashy pissing sounds. Somehow those sounds carried better than anything else. As delayed knowledge, Jerry did it back one time, with a squirting musical toilet song, just to show her the tinny clarity of splashing and to hyperextend the embarrassment of her oversight.

As Ty pulled the earplug, she could hear Jerry giving the young hooker a stern talking-to about morals, drugs, pimps, health, old age, disease, street life, and relocations. Adrienne knew that he would be *satisfied* if the child only preached the word about “location.” She also knew that they would be thanking Jesus if the child actually showed up in recovery someday and dropped-off their roster. Likely, however, she would die before she turned 30. That was a curb & gutter law of physics.



She hardened against powerless thoughts as she noticed the flickering green alley light and opened the tin-covered shed door to go into the unmarked *UNISEX*—what a word that was—bathroom. It was dirty and it stunk like mad dog 20/20 drunk-piss, so she hung her purse on the crank of the paper towel dispenser and—after she had cleaned the lid obsessively—began placing toilet paper neatly where she would sit. She then washed her hands before sitting, of course. “Some hooker I am.”

She sat listening to water drip, synchronized and harmonious, into both the sink and an un-topped toilet tank and began thinking that she needed a new attitude soon or she would become invisible from emotional darkness and glum. She paused and saddened as she pulled her red panties up, remembering the reason she wore them. She smiled as she reattached her netted panty hose to the *roaring 20s* dungeon-wear that Pecker had gotten her. She was blessed to have friends and partners like Pecker-Rub and Jerry, and she knew it. Whatever love she had left, it was for them and her mates, Jen and Trina.

She instinctively wondered how much time had passed and looked forward to the first sip of hot coffee as she twice rewashed her hands and stared intently into the dark, cracked, dimly lit, mirror of this concrete cesspool. “I’m always efficient,” she thought...five minutes; maybe six.”

She fiddled with the broken machine, cranked-out some more paper towels and mused that she had done so without knocking-off her purse (though she had already planned to catch it if it fell). She was always thinking, always analyzing. It kept her awake for hours each morning. It was her *nature*

and so, she had turned it into a playful child's game. She loved to calculate her percentage of being right about things that she predicted. She loved to predict the behavior of people and things and she had learned to adjust her model when she found that she was wrong. She wasn't wrong much.

"I can't believe how a pigsty starts smelling acceptable after only minutes," she pondered, amazed at her updating senses. "No doubt street life, in general, is principally so." A final look into the mirror was a clear and deliberate look at Dianne and then she turned slowly to reach for her purse. She scanned her body to see if she might predict when her period would start—"tomorrow by noon," she thought. "Definitely by the time I get up tomorrow."

*Had* she been able to react and reason, she would have scolded herself without mercy. *Had* she found another clear moment of consciousness, she would have told herself that, as a police officer, she should have known better; she might have even crafted a defense. But, her last memory was of a tall, faceless man throwing open the bathroom door, leaving her no time to turn, and soundlessly pressing her between the sink and the towel dispenser with a powerful thigh holding her left leg upward so that she couldn't stomp. Her body was bent helplessly forward into the corner and across the trashcan so she couldn't fight. His weight was on her. A long, powerful arm was pressing her strong arms shut and a manicured hand was pressing a chemical-smelling cloth tightly against her face and nose. It was like surgery, but without warning. Everything sounded funny—like a buzzing sound—and then went silently, timelessly dark.

“What the fuck ya think is keeping Tylar?” barked Pecker, as though he had some urgency to resume watching her stand on a corner. “How long’s it been anyway?”

“It’s probably been 10 minutes,” sneered Jerry, irritated by his partner’s impatience. “Who knows, maybe she’s having that monthly woman thing—that’s common with a full moon, ya know—and it’s her time. Or maybe she’s just fucking tired of standing on concrete in those *comfortable* shoes you bought her, Rube, or maybe she’s got diarrhea, or maybe she’s reading the stall. Maybe she’s having a cup of coffee or working a crossword puzzle. Who knows. Phuck, ‘ecker, relax. It’s not like we’re late for a drug bust or something. We’re pretty much holding our worthless old dicks and watching a woman do all the work. Nothin’ new, huh?”

It grew silent for a long minute. Time dragged. Each could hear the other breathing as a sense of breached personal space while uninvited intimacy sat in.

“Ok,” said Jerry. “Fuck it. Let’s go get a cup of coffee and chat with *the whore*.” He smirked with affection for Adrienne. “Nobody’ll see us, plus, we’ve earned it, besides, some alcoholic prick in a fancy suit will lose all judgment in the next hour or so and try to pick up Dianne in his wife’s borrowed Mercedes. You know how we are when we’re loaded...pure pecker...or sorry. We’ll get our bust, or two, for the news release. That’s the point of this; plus we’ve already spread the word with Kytti the little crack Ho.”

The afterthought theft-alarm chirping of his distant, locking vehicle joined an un-oiled hinge as Jerry opened the diner’s door, double punched the alarm obsessively, and turned to let

Pecker pass. There was one large Styrofoam cup sitting on the counter with steam levitating around its lid; a greasy white-haired night cook was leaning with his arms spread on the counter as they entered the restaurant. Now something was ALL wrong.

“What happened to the young lady that came in here a little bit ago?” Jerry asked with police mechanical sounds that couldn’t disguise concern in his voice.

“The hooker? Oh, so, she’s a cop *too*?” He played, quickly realizing that it wasn’t welcome. “Oh, umm, she ordered this and went to the bathroom.” He pointed down at the coffee and then towards the rear storage area’s non-swinging two-way metal door that blocked a clear view of the exit. “Outside,” he clarified, as though they hadn’t figured that out. “Women, you know...shit, probably takin’ a bath or something. Who knows?” Jerry and Rub were already passing through the storage area and out the back.

“Ty!” said Jerry once, just to be polite, but completely willing to walk in on stark nakedness, if necessary. “*Adrienne*...Are you ok?” He swung the bathroom door open and saw only a glittering red purse hanging on a black-shelled towel dispenser. All else was a blank nothing. “Fuck,” he gasped with total demoralization and horrified fear. “Call for backup and get someone from forensics here, NOW, Rub!”

“Ty! Tylar!! Adrienne!!! *Adrienne!!!*” Urgent words echoed with annul hollowness against the brick and metal background of concreted cold. Everything was soundless and blank for an eternal 20-seconds as they looked and listened intently for ANYTHING that might speak of her presence or absence.

Only the green buzzing randomness of a blinking alley light remained as a sound, and, almost unnoticed, the sound of distant traffic hummed in time with a rhythmically dripping sink and toilet. The cook was joining them as they called, radioed for help, and ran on *empty*.

“Oh, fuck, Baby,” swallowed Jerry. “How did this happen? How could I LET this happen?” His mind raced with scenarios and experience to glean a lead, a motive, or an instinct that could help him find his beloved child. “Oh, fuck, Baby,” he repeated as Pecker peeked into the contents of her hanging purse. “Nothing’s missing, and the snoop piece is here,” said Pecker despairingly, needing no accolades for knowing each item that Adrienne had dropped into her purse as they jokingly bantered the matter. Pecker had a keen and perceptive mind and he knew that he would need it tonight.

“*Hurry up, God Damn it!*” growled Jerry toward the night sky with growing fear and complete powerlessness.

Pecker was on his cell phone giving directions and details to the best people he knew and to those he knew he could wake up and count on in this grim hour.

Both men prayed with mixes of worry and spiritual fear. “Where is the goddamn back-up and Forensics? Where are the people to sweep this area while it’s still hot? Who could take Ty so easily? Where’s our help...Where’s our girl? How the FUCK could I be so careless with her life!? Goddamn it...Oh, God watch over her,” One man prayed staring helplessly into the cracked mirror; another prayed on his knees outside. The cook was looking again in the dumpster. “God, protect our baby girl,” they whispered humbly, in unison.

\* \* \* \* \*

Her first impressions were groggy, but not blurred. He looked like a British movie spy or an ultra-banker. He was handsome, serene, dark-haired, tall, muscular, elaborately dressed, non-threatening in appearance and clad with gold and diamonds that were clearly unique, yet strangely cold.

“I’m *Ashton*,” he said softly, without even turning towards her, seemingly busy with some miniscule task in a near corner of the brightly lit room. “And, you are?”

It took perhaps 30 seconds to move from dazed observer to keen knower. The cop in her was struggling to *solve*, but was without data, trapped, powerless and overpowered—she was frantic to regain her senses, and *every* waking sense in her knew trepidation.

She was spread eagle, face up, stretched across a twin-sized bed, and lying on a thick, soft, off-white down comforter. Her hands and legs were bound tightly with black, ratcheted nylon packaging materials; a duct tape band was taped beneath the binding—and then another over it—apparently to keep it from cutting or sliding. Heavy tarnished brass-painted metal head and footboards secured the bindings. The bed did not move or squeak and was apparently resting on plywood or a similar platform. She could move her hands and feet only a little before they began to feel strangled of blood. Suddenly everything seemed so real that nothing did. She remembered her last “period” thought and wondered how much time had passed; she had no idea. Her lips and mouth were chapped and dry.

As perceptions came back on line, emotion joined and now, this time, she was deeply afraid. This was not a grocery store shootout where a simple bullet might get her; this was likely something that she had read about and studied with curious, academic detachment. It wasn't academic now. She was **IN** it. She had to be calm. Time was always her friend. Time. She would need it. Time. Roll, pitch, yah...time—time was a fourth dimension. Time was always her friend. She repeated it as focusing affirmation.

“Breathe,” her Yoga classes instructed. “Analyze and play dumb,” said the cop. “Buy time. What’s first? Stay harmless. Breathe. Focus. Find tactical advantage. Develop a strategy. Pain is ok if it gets you time. Pain is life. But, you must live. Watch. Seek. Learn, **Dianne**.”

“Umm, *Dianne*,” she said hoarsely, clearing her throat. “I’m, I’m Dianne. What’s this, man...some kinda kinky sex shit? We should have talked about it, ‘cause bondage will cost ya extra.” It was her first attempt to play the simple hooker and get a fix on his intentions.

“Kink!? My, goodness...no,” chuckled Ashton, adjusting a compact, yet complex, battery-driven lighting system and gazing down at her. He opened a designer bottle of water and offered her a drink. He poured into her opened mouth until her throat stopped burning and she nodded that it was enough. She felt a little sick at her stomach, but that was quickly passing. Her stomach was quickly exchanging nausea for knots.

“You are a pretty one,” he mused in the tone of a hairdresser with his right fingers touching his face. But, he wasn’t gay; she sensed that. “You look *really* good for a working girl.

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