

A rollicking journey of two coeds striving to get ahead and find love in 1980s Florida.

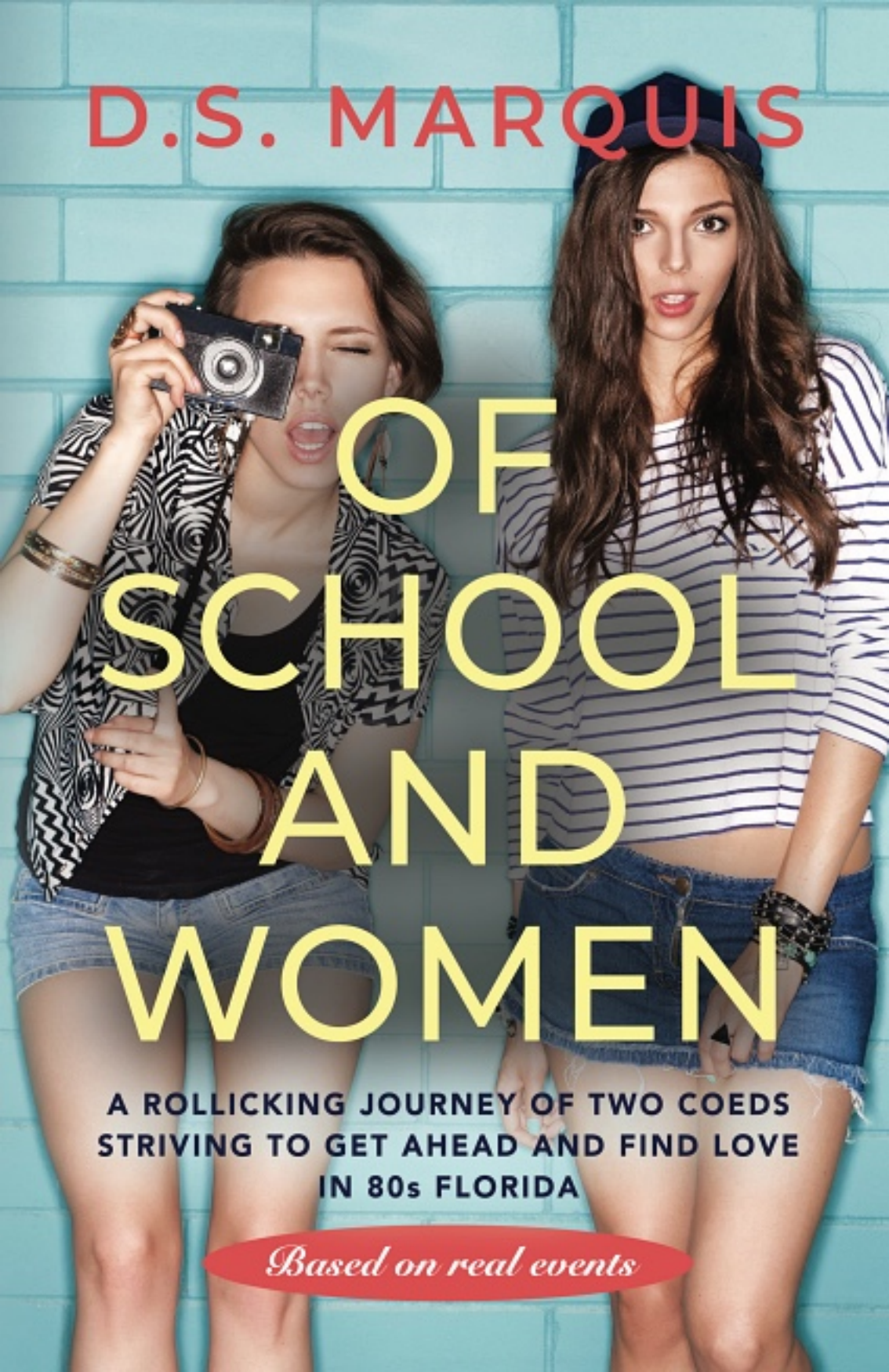
Of School and Women

By D.S. Marquis

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The background of the entire cover is a photograph of two young women standing against a light blue brick wall. The woman on the left is holding a vintage black camera up to her eye, with her mouth open as if taking a picture. She is wearing a black and white patterned cardigan over a black top and denim shorts. The woman on the right is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. She is wearing a white and blue striped long-sleeved crop top and denim shorts. The overall aesthetic is retro and youthful, consistent with the 1980s Florida setting mentioned in the text.

D.S. MARQUIS

OF SCHOOL AND WOMEN

A ROLICKING JOURNEY OF TWO COEDS
STRIVING TO GET AHEAD AND FIND LOVE
IN 80s FLORIDA

Based on real events

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This book is a work of narrative nonfiction.
Names and identifying details have been changed.

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I WANT YOUR SEX

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Chapter 1

From her two-room apartment at Alumni Village, Lynette Autry couldn't see the campus, but she could picture it. The university was out there, she knew, beyond the projects and tenements that crowded her brick strip of off-campus housing. The big quad bordered by streets dotted with palm, magnolia, and cypress trees draped with Spanish moss, the immense football stadium looming in the distance, and the quiet pathways, where students strolled along with their book bags. Would she find friends now that she was on her own? Would she find a job that would provide enough money to pay bills? Would someone like her fit in here? What would these spoiled college coeds think if they knew about the places she had been? The things she had done.

She managed to keep the past hidden from her folks. She wondered if there were any other fresh young coeds who'd been punched by the likes of Papa Joe. Or who'd bunked with an ex-con and ex-hooker. When it came to a wet T-shirt contest and burlesque dancing at the club, she knew her way around, but how would school go for her now? Academic achievement came easy at community college. A three-point-eight grade point average, while earning her associate degree, was proof of that. But was the reckless lifestyle behind her?

The whistling of the tea kettle and a knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. "Just a minute," she yelled, while shutting off the burner on the stove. She ran toward the door, flipped on the exterior light, and peered through the peephole. "Who is it?" Lynette yelled through the closed door.

"It's John, I live up the street." The voice was muffled.

Lynette opened the door as wide as the chain lock would allow. The eyes staring back at her from the smooth, youthful face of the well-built man, were not smiling.

"Hi, I was wonderin' if maybe I could borrow your basketball?" he asked.

Lynette glanced in the direction of her basketball under the plant stand, and then back at the stranger, and lied. "It's almost flat, and besides it's my boyfriend's, so I really can't loan it out. Sorry," she said. "Listen I have to go, it's nice to meet you." More lies. Then she quickly closed the door and turned the deadbolt. Without hesitation,

she reached for the cord of the curtains, jerking them closed. Her mind raced with questions. Who the hell wants to play basketball with me? I'm short and I'm white. Who plays basketball at this time of night? Did he see the basketball through the window? What did he do, climb over the bushes and press his face against the glass to see in? How else did he know there was a basketball in here? Lynette had the creeps. And this was all too familiar. She saw the seven-digit number scratched on the scrap of paper laying on the table. She picked up the phone receiver from its cradle and dialed. After four rings, the machine answered. "Hello, this is Warren Jones. Leave your name and number at the tone, and I will return the call."

"Hey Warren, it's Lynette next door. I know we just met, and it's late, but I saw your light on when I came in a little while ago, and, a-a-h, I'm kinda worried about a prowler. Please, call me back. My number is 644-2567." Lynette hung up the phone and returned to the kitchen cabinets to take out a mug. Minutes later, she was relieved to hear the phone ring.

"Hello," said Lynette.

"Hi, it's Warren."

"Thanks for calling back, I was wondering if you've noticed anyone hanging around here looking in the windows?"

"No, why?"

"I feel like I'm being stalked."

"What's going on?"

“Some strange guy just knocked at my door and asked to borrow a basketball. It’s just too weird.” Calming down slightly from the sound of a familiar voice, Lynette was hoping she was overreacting.

“Well, call me anytime. I’ll be home all night. If I notice anyone, I’ll let you know. Alright?” Warren sounded reassuring.

“Ok, thanks.”

“Bye,” said Warren.

“Bye,” said Lynette. She hung up the phone.

She wanted to pour the hot water in her cup, but instead she listened to the little voice in her head that told her to secure the apartment. She thought of the bedroom window and slipped toward the doorway, where she detected the wide opened curtains. To decrease being visible by anyone who might be outside, she edged herself along the wall in the darkness of the bedroom. The bricks were cold and rough against her hand and they brushed at her shirt. At arms-length now, from the window frame, she reached out and clutched the draw string of the drapes. Before pulling them closed, looking out, from the edge of the window, she spotted a figure of someone crouching in the shadows behind the line of hedges. The outline of a person’s head was certain. From that position there was a perfect view of her bedroom. *Shit, it’s him. He’s out there.* She jerked the cord, turned, then bounded through the doorway toward the phone in the kitchen and dialed nine-one-one, “My name is Lynette Autry, there’s a peeping Tom at Three Two Seven Pennell Circle, Apartment number one.”

“Are you inside your home or outside?” the woman’s voice asked from the other end of the phone.

“Inside,” said Lynette.

“Ok, good, I am sending an officer to you,” said the woman. “Are your doors and windows locked?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, great. The officer should be there within ten minutes. Is there anything else you can tell me about the suspect?”

“Umm,” Lynette swallowed. “He’s tall, young, clean-shaven. His hair’s shaved short. He’s wearing black track pants with white stripes and a matching jacket. He’s black.”

“Do you want me to stay on the line with you?”

“No, I’m ok, I’m going to call my neighbor again and see if he can see anything out his window.”

“Lynette, what apartment is your neighbor in?”

“He’s in Apartment two.”

“Ok, I’m going to hang up now,” said the phone dispatcher.

“Ok, thanks.” Lynette pressed the dial tone button and made another call.

“Warren, it’s me, can you stay on the phone with me until the cops get here?”

“You called the police?”

“Yeah, the guy’s behind the building, I saw him creeping around the bushes.”

“Don’t worry. He probably just wants to watch you.”

“Right. I’m totally freaking out.” Another knock came. “Oh My God, there’s someone at the door. Hold on.” She set the phone receiver on the table, and stealthily she moved to the door and looked through the peephole. *Fuck, it’s him again.* Lynette responded with silence.

“I found a basketball. Do you want to come out and play with me?” asked the stranger outside.

Lynette remained quiet. She tiptoed across the room, picked up the phone receiver from the kitchen table, leaned against the wall, and whispered, “It’s him again. Go outside and distract him.”

“I’m not going out there,” said Warren. “Hold on. Let me see if I can see him. I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t hang up,” said Lynette.

“I won’t.”

Lynette could hear Warren set his phone receiver on a hard surface. Her breathing and her heart beating seemed too loud. She stared at the front door making sure that the knob didn’t move. To free her hands, she held the receiver between her chin, and her shoulder. Then she slowly opened the kitchen drawer. She reached in and clasped hold of the wooden handle of a steak knife.

“Lynette, you still there?”

“Yeah, did you see him?”

“Yup he’s out there. He’s still standing near your door. He’s holding a ball under his arm, looking out at the street. And, um, he’s big.”

What she heard next made her feel paralyzed. “He just knocked again.”

“Is your door locked?” asked Warren.

“Of course, it’s locked. I got the chain on too. Go look out your window again and see what he’s doing now.”

“Ok, hold on.” Warren set down the phone again. Lynette waited in dread. Then she could hear Warren fumbling with the phone. “The cops are here,” he said. “They’re getting out of the car now.”

“Thank God, alright, thanks. I’ll call you later.” Lynette hung up, set the knife on the table, and darted to the door to look through the peephole in time to see the officer lift his fist to knock.

“Leon County Police,” said the officer.

Lynette removed the chain, unlatched the deadbolt, and opened the door. “Hi, I’m Lynette the one who called about a peeping tom.” She recapped the story. She gestured toward her basketball.

“Ma’am, have you seen the guy before?” asked the officer. He shifted his weight to one leg.

“No, just tonight.”

“We are patrolling the area now. Are you alright?”

“Yes, now that you’re here.”

“You’re not the first to report incidents of this nature. Other residents have seen someone looking in windows around the property.” He used his thumb and forefinger to pinch a small notebook from the front pocket of his uniform. Before he could write anything, the radio on the officer’s belt blared.

“Suspect apprehended at radio station parking lot.” The officer returned the notebook to his pocket, and now held the walkie-talkie to his mouth.

“This is Nelson, I’m at apartment one, copy,” He paused, now looking at Lynette. Radio static filled the air. “Ma’am, we got him.”

“Thank you, Officer.”

“Good work, calling when you did. Call us if you need anything else. My name is Officer Nelson.”

“I will. Thanks again.”

“Goodnight, Ma’am.”

“Goodnight.” Lynette closed and locked the door. She exhaled gustily, then turned to see the phone on the wall. After dialing Warren’s number again, she spoke before he could say hello, “Hey, they got him.”

“It’ll be hard to sleep tonight,” said Warren.

Lynette agreed. “Thanks again for everything. Goodnight.” She hung up the phone, then turned around to switch on the stove burner to make the cup of tea she tried to make earlier. She realized she was exhausted. Dampness lingered from days of rain. She kicked off her shoes. The tile floor was cold. She crossed the room to turn on the small thirteen-inch television.

“We are live from the Orange Bowl in Miami Florida. The Dolphins and New England Patriots meet in a key AFC match up. On the line tonight, with a win, they will take their first divisional title since nineteen seventy-eight. As for the Dolphins, a win tonight and

a win next week against Buffalo, and they are assured the AFC title. The Orange Bowl here in Miami is alive with anticipation! The Patriots tonight are pinning their hopes for a divisional title in the strong arm of Tony Eason. With fine running from Craig James, Tony Collins, Eason can look deep to a pair of wide receivers that can burn you from any spot on the field. There's Irving Fryar. Then there's this veteran, Stanley Morgan."

Lynette was fantasizing about her boyfriend, Claude. He would be watching the game in Destin. The television flickered light around the little living room where Lynette now sat on the green vinyl love seat.

"This ABC sports exclusive is brought to you by Lite Beer from Miller. Everything you ever wanted from a beer and less. By Chevrolet, who invites you to live the style and performance of Chevrolet in eighty-six, by Handicam, the astonishingly simple new Sony Handicam. All the excitement of video movies by Sony in the palm of your hands. And by IBM."

She stared at the screen, waiting for the whistle of the tea kettle to summons her back to the stove.

"Hello again, everyone, I am Frank Gifford, along with my colleagues O.J. Simpson and Joe Namath and all of our guys behind our ABC scene. We are delighted to have you with us tonight. We think we could have a real stunner for you. Two football teams within the same division, the AFC. They are two hot football teams."

The soothing sound of the whistle came. Lynette poured hot water into her mug, then dropped in a tea bag. She reached for the tag hanging on a string. On it a quote, *Fresh starts and change go hand in hand*. She smiled to herself. “Nice,” she said. Then her head turned to the T.V.

“They have been battling all season. The New England Patriots with a win tonight can clinch this division. They have won eight of their last nine games. They lost the other game in overtime to the Jets.”

Realizing the drink was too hot to drink, she reached into her only kitchen drawer, clutched a spoon, and began stirring.

“Meanwhile, the Miami Dolphins were defeated November the third, by this New England team. They have won five in a row. But there is something called the jinx over New England. That little black cloud. Remember the little character called little Abner?”

She dropped the spoon into the sink, carried her cup to the desk to the right of the T.V., setting it down next to a cardboard box and a Corona typewriter.

“Every time the New England Patriots come to the Orange Bowl, they go away with a loss. The last time they won here was in nineteen sixty-six, ladies and gentlemen. They have lost seventeen consecutive games here at the Orange Bowl. The players...”

She stepped over to the T.V. set and reached over to shut it off. The room fell silent. The last unpacked box called for attention. She lifted out pencils, pens, paper, paper clips, white out, boxes of

typewriter ribbon and correction tape and filled her desk drawers. Stopping occasionally to sip at her tea, she held her paint brushes, and file folders before organizing them neatly. When the box was empty, she carried it over near the front door and set it on the floor. After sipping the last of her tea and putting the cup in the sink, she shut off the desk light. "I've had it," she mumbled.

Her break from worry came when she began her nightly routine. After brushing and flossing her teeth, she stood looking in the mirror, unbuttoning her blouse, until it slipped from her shoulders. She hung it on the doorknob, then did the same with her lacy beige wire bra. She reached her arms around the back of her waist and unzipped her skirt, which dropped and met a kick to the corner of the room. As did the bikini panties. She glanced at her ivory skin, full breasts, and thin waist. She smiled, admiring her straight teeth inside her sharply etched natural lips. "Damn, I'm good looking," she said.

After a shower, her body welcomed a warm flannel nightgown and a triple blanketed double bed. She switched off the lamp, and felt fear climb into bed with her. Lying on her back under the covers, she realized she was living alone in her own apartment for the first time in her life. Sure, she had been on her own since eighteen, but she had always shared an apartment with someone. Someone who was trouble. Her peeping tom was not her old roommate's thieving pal, Papa Joe. She had no black eye, and the only one who had held a knife in their hand tonight had been her. So, she doffed her cloak of trepidation and opted for consoling nostalgia. She reminisced on her

decision to move back home with her mom and stepdad for six months. She was glad for the time with them and all their help on move day.

* * *

"This place sure is dingy," said Lynette's mother. She'd been scrubbing the bathroom tub, but had stopped now, and was holding a filthy sponge in her hand. Lynette's mother looked at the sponge and shook her head.

"Yeah, I need a bug man too," said Lynette. She swept a cockroach into a dustpan. The front door burst open and a man came in, red-faced and out of breath. In his hand, Lynette saw a bottle.

"Didn't you see me flashing my lights? I had to pee so bad, I ended up going in my Pepsi bottle," said Daddy. He rushed through the doorway into the bedroom. He glared at Lynette. "Mmm, Mmm, Mmm, Eva Maria."

Lynette learned years ago that expression meant that this daddy, mother's husband-number-three, her step-dad-number-two, was really irritated. The first time he had said it was during dinner one night when he announced that he couldn't believe he'd married someone who smoked and had a kid. He went on further to add that he swore he'd never marry someone who had been divorced either. And back then he shook his head, and said "Mmm, Mmm, Mmm, Eva Maria" just like he did now.

“Where’s Momma?” asked Daddy. Lynette pointed to the bathroom door, which was open. He stepped through the doorway. “Hi, Momma,” He bent and kissed her on the head. She was sitting on the edge of the tub rinsing out a bucket. “Don’t look, Momma,” Daddy emptied the Pepsi bottle into the toilet and then slosh went the water. Momma laughed.

“Oh, come here,” said Momma. “Let me give you a hug to make you feel better.” Momma stood up stretching her arms out in front her body. Daddy returned her affection and wrapped his arms around his wife.

“We’re making good progress. Don’t you think?” Momma asked.

“The bathroom looks good,” Daddy praised and then asked, “What can I do to help?”

“Here,” Momma passed him a box from the floor. “Take this out of here.”

Stepping out of the bathroom, with an empty box in hand, Daddy stopped at the bureau, where Lynette stood unzipping a duffle bag.

“The weather forecast calls for sun tomorrow, but it will be cold tonight, thirty-five degrees, so wear your long johns, daughter.” Daddy dropped the box he had been holding. “When is the power scheduled to be turned on?”

“Tuesday, I think, four days without hot water.” Lynette held socks in her hand.

“Maybe you can run an extension cord from your neighbor’s apartment so you can have a light in here?”

"What am I supposed to say? Hi, I'm Lynette. I just wanted to know if you could give me some free electricity." She opened a drawer and threw in a handful of t-shirts. "Oh, that sounds lovely."

"Oh, come on, it won't be that bad," said Daddy. "It's better than being in the dark half the week." He was flattening the box.

Lynette knew he was probably right, and she sighed. "Ok, I'm going," she said. She stepped out of the bedroom and took the few steps through the living area to the front door, opened it and stepped out into the pouring rain, walked twenty feet past the rhododendron bushes and the sliding glass door that offered a full view of her kitchenette, then to the neighbor's apartment door and knocked. When the door opened, Lynette saw a clean shaven, wavy blonde haired, petit man.

"Hi, I'm your new neighbor, Lynette Autry." She reached out for a handshake.

"I'm Warren Jones, Nice to meet you," he said. "Lousy weather for moving. What are you studying?"

"Right now, how to survive without electricity." Lynette glanced at the extension cord in her hand. "My power won't be on for a couple of days, the hurricane and all, has the Tallahassee Utilities company back logged with work orders. Any chance, I could run this from your unit so I can at least have a lamp on?" She lifted the extension cord in her hands to show it to him.

Warren's eyes widened, he shrugged his shoulders, "Sure, why not." He reached out for the plug and the cord Lynette passed him and plugged it into an outlet just inside his door.

Lynette noticed his deep pock-marked face and thought about how severe the acne must have been. "Thanks so much. I owe you." She smiled and looked down at the muddy, wet ground, where she would have to trail the cord.

"No problem, welcome to the neighborhood," said Warren. He bent to slide the cord under the door. "Hang on a minute, I'll give you my phone number in case you need anything else." He opened the door. "Come on in," said Warren. Lynette could see the apartment was the same floor plan as her own, galley to the right, green vinyl loveseat and desk to the left, bedroom straight ahead. She watched him grab a notebook and a pen from his loveseat, where lined up against it were framed splatter paintings. After scratching down his phone number, he tore out the sheet of paper. Lynette reached out to accept it.

"I'm heading out now, so I'll see you later." Warren grabbed his keys off the loveseat and stuffed them into the front pocket of his jeans.

"Thanks again, Bye," said Lynette. The door of apartment two shut with a thump.

Lynette ran the orange extension cord behind the bushes flush against the building and carried the remaining coil of cord into apartment number one, where Daddy was searching through a

toolbox on the floor. He looked up to see Lynette stepping toward a lamp. Her long ash blonde hair and flannel shirt were soaked now.

“Well?” he asked.

“Well,” Lynette answered, “Now I know my new neighbor, Warren.” She plugged the wicker lamp cord into the extension cord. And when the bulb lit up, she announced triumphantly, “And the Lord said, let there be light. And there was light!”

“Aha, I’m so glad that worked out,” said Daddy.

Momma came in the room. “Me too.”

Lynette was now taking off her wet shirt and hanging it on the kitchen chair to dry. The box marked, *KITCHEN*, sat on the floor waiting. She squatted to open it, then began stocking the old rusty metal kitchen cabinet sink combo with cereal, tea, and peanut butter.

“Single life isn't complete without these,” said Lynette. She held a pack of Ramen noodles in one hand and a package of Oreos in the other. She looked over her shoulder at Daddy. “Thanks for the care package, it will come in handy. And thanks for the good idea about the neighbor’s electricity.”

“You're welcome,” said Daddy. He hugged Lynette with one arm while holding a basketball under his other arm. “At least you didn’t move in before Governor Graham lifted the state of emergency. I heard on the radio, that there were still some places without power from Hurricane Kate.” He moved near the window, where he bent down to place the ball under a plant stand. “Extensive damage to the campus too. City-wide curfew is finally lifted, though.” He picked up

a long board and carried it across the room. "Momma," he yelled, "I'm almost done with the bookshelf." He set the board on top of two cinder blocks.

"Ok, well, the bed is made," said Momma. She was sitting on the bed, taking a break.

Daddy looked out the window at the diminishing daylight. "Well, I don't want to drive home in the dark. Let's finish up and go grub. Things look pretty good around here. Good job, Momma."

"Alright," said Momma. "I just want to hang the candle sconces. Can you get the hammer?"

Daddy went right to work. He took two long screws from the toolbox and met Momma at the brick work around the front door. After Daddy drove the screws into the cement between the bricks, Momma hung the sconces. "There! Looks very pretty!" said Momma. "What do you think, Lynette?"

Lynette had been spraying cleaner in the sink, and she turned around to see. "I love it," she said.

"I saw a Captain Dee's on the way in. It's about five minutes from here," said Daddy. He pulled on his coat, while Momma was heading for the front door. "Lynette, you can follow us there, and then we'll say goodbye from the restaurant."

Lynette tossed the last of the crumpled newspaper that she had been picking up off the floor, into a box. "Alright, I'm ready." She grabbed her flannel shirt, and her purse. Daddy held open the door. "You know, daughter, it could be good for you to have a guard dog.

Maybe Momma could bring Tashi here on her next visit. He's going to miss you."

* * *

Lynette recalled the drive home from Captain Dee's that night. Her apartment was in the heart of a poor black neighborhood. From the car window, she had seen the dilapidated porches, houses with hardly any paint left on them, and litter in between the weeds of front yards of Levy Avenue. She had lived in worse neighborhoods, and being broke, she thought, isn't illegal. Lying in bed now, she pondered the correlation between poverty and crime. She wondered if peeping tom lived on Levy Avenue.

She remembered how the rain poured down while she had groped through her purse for the front door key the first night that she came home to the apartment alone. Boxes, Windex, bleach, sponges, and rags were scattered throughout the apartment. Dishes were piled on the kitchen table. The tile floor was cold. The smell of floor wax and bleach tainted the air. No hot water. Carrying the lamp to the bathroom doorway dragging the slack extension cord behind. Taking a cold shower. Had the guy been watching her that night too?

She rolled on her side and reached into the nightstand to comfort herself with pink plastic rosary beads. They had been a part of her life since birth. She carefully wrapped the beads around her left hand and gently placed her thumb on the crucifix, where she rubbed the

crusty glue that held the cracked cross together. As a young girl, she used to wonder if God was angry when the cross had split.

The Rosary, prayer endorsed by the Catholic Church, came from the Latin word, *Rosarium*, meaning crown of roses. The beads that the church meant for counting prayers, Lynette ritualized in a personal way. Her beads triggered memories of comfort and hopes for the future. They were her conduit from past to present. A symbol of faith. Her first memory of kneeling to pray was at age four. Her grand-mère by her side, discovering the mysteries of the clicking beads, Lynette had felt the pull of blind faith. Tonight, she prayed the *Hail Mary* and *Our Father*, and blessed all her loved ones, and thanked God for the good. Then she analyzed the day's evil.

"God bless the man, who was arrested. May he do better," whispered Lynette in the dark. Her right hand touched her forehead, her chest's center, then her chest's left and chest's right. She could hear the rain beginning to fall. The droplets tapping on the window made for a lullaby. Her eyes closed. She faded, and soon slept, eventually arriving at the deep REM sleep she had read about in her psychology books.

* * *

Which is worse, job hunting or working? Lynette had driven up and down the streets downtown, uptown, all over town all day filling out employment applications. Now on South Adams Street, she decided that the answer to that question was job hunting. Today was

the worst. The morning had begun with a cold shower in chilly December weather. Now the sun was setting, and still no job. She could hear her mother's voice. "Don't come home from job hunting until you've got an offer. Even if it's not the job you want, the important thing is to secure income. You can always look for a better position later." And Lynette held herself to that standard. The downtown clock chimed four, and still no W-4 Form had been signed. A woodpecker was striking a tree trunk. He flew off when he heard the rustle of Lynette dropping onto a bench nearby. She sighed. Newspaper in one hand, pen in the other, Lynette reviewed the classified ads of the Tallahassee Democrat. Her expression was a mix of intent, and desperation, when the man in the blue suit jacket approached.

"Had any luck yet?"

Lynette looked up from the newspaper. "Not yet," she said. "And how did you know I'm in the market for a job? Is it the blue dress, the heels, the trench coat, or this?" She waved the classified ads, with the circle around the ad that read, *Wait Staff wanted: The Brass Rail, 228 South Adams St. Apply in person.*

"I'm a smart guy. And I'm the assistant manager of the Governor's Suite. I might have a position that could interest you. The name's Mike." His hand met Lynette's in a handshake. "And yours?"

"Lynette, nice to meet you."

"Do you have time to meet my boss at the restaurant?" asked Mike.

“That’d be great,” said Lynette.

“Ok, see that door” he was now pointing toward an unmarked glass door. “That’s the side entrance. Follow me,” Lynette stood and walked alongside Mike. The sound of her heels snapped the pavement.

“Tell me something about your work experience.”

“Well, I’m a transfer student at FSU and I’ve got six years of restaurant and bar experience.” Lynette was hopeful that maybe Mike was her ticket home from the job hunt. Eagerly, keeping up his pace despite her tired feet, she now stood in front of the glass double doors, watching him jiggle his key in the lock. The door opened and Mike guided the way to an atrium decorated with two brass storks standing on the floor in the corner and a brass bonsai tree sculpture hanging on the wall. Lynette, now trying to appear graceful, followed Mike up a narrow staircase that wound around to the second floor. At the top, there was an open door at the end of the hall. “Looks like Mr. Reed is in. Mike gestured for Lynette to step ahead. “After you.” Walking a few steps more, a man’s voice drifted out the door.

“Alright, but don’t let it happen again, because, heads will roll.”

Lynette had reached the doorway and was now looking at the face of Mr. Reed, looking at her. His eyes were tightening. “I’ve got someone here, so later.”

Precisely after the handset of the phone hit the receiver, Mike seized his opening. “Mr. Reed, this is Lynette, and she’s interested in waitressing or bartending.”

"Hello, Mr. Reed, it's nice to meet you." Lynette flashed a smile and turned her head toward Mike. "Thanks for all your help."

"Please sit down." Mr. Reed motioned toward a chair across from his desk, then glanced back at Mike. "Let me know when that shipment comes in tonight, will you?"

"Will do," said Mike.

"That'll be all," said Mr. Reed.

Lynette dropped into the seat in front of the desk, waved to Mike and watched him turn and leave.

"Tell me about yourself," said Mr. Reed.

"Well, I'm enrolled for winter semester at FSU. Classes begin the first week of January. I'm working my way through school, and I need to work thirty to forty hours a week. I've been in the restaurant and bar business for six years now, and I've tended bar in the dingiest to the finest places. My first barmaid job was at a little dive in Colorado. I worked there while food waitressing at a Mexican restaurant. When my manager got tired of me working two jobs, he decided to train me behind the bar. After that, I moved to Destin, Florida, where I worked at a beach resort and a poolside Tiki Hut, which brings me to the present."

"Well, I've got nothing to offer you right at the present time, but there are a couple of waiters graduating this semester, who will be quitting in two weeks. I don't want to hire anyone until after the holidays, so call me in January and I'll have a job for you."

"Thank you very much for your time, Mr. Reed." Lynette stood to shake his hand. The phone rang, and Mr. Reed answered it.

"Yes, I'll speak to him. Stewart, did you get my message?" Lynette spoke in a whisper. "I'll call you in January." Mr. Reed responded with a nod. Lynette led herself out of the office and out of the restaurant.

Outside now, preparing for more pavement pounding, she sat at the bench where she had met Mike. She realized that her next stop was across the street. Grateful, she traipsed in that direction. Now standing at the door, in green and gold stenciled letters, Lynette read, "The Brass Rail open 5-10 pm." It was only four thirty and the joint wasn't open yet. Through paned glass, she could see the cooks were busy setting up the kitchen for dinner. She tried waving her hand, but that did not catch anyone's attention. She decided to walk back to her car, when she noticed a metal door to the left of the glass door facing east. The door was ajar. Lynette was not going to pass up the opportunity. It might lead to the Brass Rail. She felt the warm breath of conditioned air blow gently from inside the building, and she was about to grab the knob, when the overweight chef she had waved at through the glass, was walking toward her. "We don't open until five," he said. A cigarette protruded from the side of his mouth.

"I'm interested in applying for a waitress job."

"Alright." The chef stepped outside, now holding a match to his cigarette. "The guy to see is Tony. Come back at six, that's when he gets here."

"I'm Lynette." Her hand outstretched, she shook hands with the chef. A plume of smoke swirled above his head.

"The name's Jim."

"Jim, do you have an application I can fill out?"

"Sure, come on in and I'll see if I can find one." He took a final puff of his cigarette, threw it down, and stepped on it. Lynette followed him into the dining room, where they approached a buxom woman wearing an apron and holding a handful of silverware.

"Karen," said Chef Jim. "This is Lynette. She needs an application." Karen's eyes narrowed.

"Have you waitressed before?" asked Karen.

Lynette began the well-rehearsed interview spiel she had given Mr. Reed no more than twenty minutes earlier. All the while, she was walking behind Karen until they reached the hostess stand, where Karen rustled through its insides until she found an application that she extended in Lynette's direction. "Come back after six and I'll tell Tony you'll be here."

"Thanks a lot, I hear The Brown Derby is hiring, so I'm going to head over there and then I'll be back. Hope you make lots of money tonight."

Lynette was about to turn and head for the door, when she heard Karen, "Yeah, me too. Gotta make rent."

Steadily, Lynette trekked over the red cobble-stoned sidewalks back to her car. Keeping her heels from getting caught in between the bricks, she silently played a child's game at high stress times like

these. "If you step on a crack, you'll break your mother's back." As a child she remembered being genuinely worried she might be home one day, when her mother walked in from work complaining of back pains. Lynette was always worried about something. In the big Winnie the Pooh book of life she could relate to Piglet. Her cold exterior was a front a lot of the time, but deep down she knew she was more sensitive than most. When she read J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher and the Rye* she wondered if she was as sensitive as Holden Caulfield before his nervous breakdown. He had worried about the ducks in Central Park. *Where do they sleep at night and where do they go when it's cold?* She was sensitive now.

In the parking lot, she saw a grey bearded man walking toward her. Over his left shoulder he carried a black trash bag filled with what appeared to be aluminum cans. The filthy blue nylon jacket he wore flapped open. He glanced at Lynette with weary eyes, "Do you have a quarter?" he asked.

Lynette's response was to dig out three dimes and seven pennies from her pocketbook. When she dropped the coins in his hand, he smelled of a mixture of tobacco, ancient body odor, and alcohol. He tipped his torn stained beret, smiled, and said, "Thank ya, Ma'am."

Lynette was about to turn the corner, when she looked back at the old man, now bent over the trash receptacle foraging for more cans. She wondered where he would sleep tonight.

In her Toyota, she considered her job possibilities. Working at the Governor's Suite, the hours would be great for study time, but

terrible for the bank account. All the job possibilities so far, assumed that if a college student wanted work, it had nothing to do with being self-sufficient. Lynette needed full time work to support herself, not just mad money for the weekend or Spring Break fun in Ft. Lauderdale.

She was determined. She searched her car floor for the Tallahassee map Claude had bought when they visited the city for the Tina Turner concert. She found the map and carefully traced out directions to the Brown Derby. She pulled the Toyota Corona out of the parking lot and onto Adams Street, turned right on Park, and left on Monroe. Almost missing the final turn, the tires screeched, when the car veered into the mall parking lot.

After carelessly driving the wrong way in the lot, she parked the car, brushed her hair, refreshed her lipstick, and stepped out into the evening air. Pen in hand, she entered The Brown Derby. The dining room was large. Near the hostess stand, the Christmas tree blocked the view of the main dining room. Soon, a hostess directed Lynette toward the back of the restaurant to a private dining area, where Lynette rushed through the application and waited for the manager.

The interview was over in a flash and the balding supervisor hired her that night with a start date of tomorrow's lunch shift. She had succeeded in landing a job. It would have been time to go home if it was the best job she could find. However, she decided to return to The Brass Rail, where there was potential for working dinner

shifts in a much plusher place. Nights meant better money in the restaurant business. Bigger dinner tabs meant bigger tips.

She pulled her car into the utilities company parking lot. Parked now, sitting in her car, she grabbed a pen from the passenger seat, and on the dashboard, she filled out another application.

Inside the Brass Rail, a crowd was shuffling in for dinner. Lynette noticed the chef talking with a man, who was adjusting his necktie. He wore big black horned rim glasses. A second later, Karen appeared through a door that concealed a dark, musky stairwell. It looked like a perfect prohibition raid escape route. Lynette's eyes locked with Karen's. They stepped toward one another. The man with the glasses trailed behind her.

"Hi, forgive me I cannot remember your name," said Karen.

"Lynette Autry."

"Tony, Lynette's here to apply for a job. I told her you'd be here after six." Karen caught a glimpse of her wristwatch. "And here she is, eleven minutes past."

"Hello Lynette, I'm Tony Rucolo. He reached out to shake hands. "I'm the assistant manager of The Brass Rail, Tuto Bene's, Andrew's Second Act, and Maxin's."

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rucolo," said Lynette.

"Let's go upstairs and we can talk." Tony gestured the way. Lynette tracked behind. The hall ended abruptly with another door ahead of them, revealing a carpeted stairwell. A waiter stopped to let them pass by. "Lenny! That case of Johnny Walker Black just came

in. It's inside the door at the loading dock. Please bring it up to the bar."

Lenny nodded. "OK," he said, now hurrying down the stairs with a full tray of dishes hoisted on top of his shoulder. Lynette figured she must have looked perplexed, because Tony seemed to offer an answer to the question that was in her mind.

"The kitchen is downstairs. Maxin's Lounge is upstairs," said Tony.

As they climbed, slow jazz music poured over them. At the top of the stairs, the lounge was dark, with a sunken dance floor. The booths all around the main floor were raised up a step. A waitress wearing a black skirt, bow tie and black fish net stockings was lighting candles. A five-piece band played on stage, and sensual vocals came from a plump African goddess with corn rowed hair. Her song ended with a note of such strong primordial passion that the bartender, who had been counting money, looked up from the cash register. Lynette's soul drifted on the last note of the tune until the room fell silent. The goddess stepped off the stage and walked toward Lynette and Tony. The clicking beads in her hair broke the silence.

"Sound check is all good, we'll be back before eight," said the goddess.

"OK," said Tony. He walked toward the bar and interrupted the bartender's cash count. "Mary, any coffee? Lynette, would you like anything?"

"No thank you," said Lynette. She really could have used some, but she was proud of the fact that she never accepted anything on an interview no matter how informal.

The bartender set a napkin and a cup and saucer on the bar. "Thanks, Mary," said Tony. He added cream and sugar to his cup, and then carried it to a nearby table, where he and Lynette sat down.

"Here's my application," said Lynette, now handing over the document.

Tony began scanning it right away. "So, it looks like you've worked the front of the house and the back. Bartending, waitressing, busing, aerobic teaching, nurse's assistant, and preschool teaching. I like it," said Tony. He took hold of his cup. "What is your school schedule going to be like?" His mouth on the rim, he sipped his coffee and looked over at Lynette. His expression was thoughtful.

"I plan on school during the day and work at night." Lynette tucked her hair behind her ear.

"At this time of the year someone always quits; besides, legislature will be in session soon, so this place will be busy. As far as a bartender position is concerned, there are none. My bartenders have been with me for years and I'm not anticipating any resignations right now." Tony pushed his black rimmed eyeglasses closer to his face. "Call me in a few days and check in. I'll definitely have something for you."

"Alright, I'll call you on Thursday," said Lynette. "Should I wait until after six?"

"That would be fine." Tony stood and reached out his hand. Lynette willingly accepted his invitation to shake on it.

"Thanks for meeting with me, Tony." Lynette swung her head from side to side. "What is the best way out of here?" asked Lynette. Tony smiled and turned his head in the direction of the stairs.

"Bye, now."

During the chilly walk back to the car, Lynette smiled to herself. She would be starting her new waitress job in the morning. And she had landed two possible backup positions. She was planning to celebrate over a grilled cheese sandwich and shrimp flavored Ramen noodles as soon as she reached her apartment.

* * *

Lynette stood at her small kitchen table waiting for the coffee to drip. She emptied a pile of bills and coins from the apron pocket, still tied around her waist. Tips were fair for a weeknight, but would she make enough to pay February's rent? She was grateful that the apartment had electricity and she had work. Lynette's time serving Groggs and Prime Rib at the Brown Derby was winding down. She had only been there two weeks, when Tony called with a start date at the Brass Rail. She couldn't wait to get out of the Derby. She had enough of the short lunch hours, white trash, weak tips, and conversations in the wait station about spouse abuse and drug abuse. It was depressing. She realized she was the only college student working day shift. One waitress had come to work with bruises on

her arm and face. Lynette wondered about the bruises she couldn't see under the uniform. At least she hadn't gone hungry at the Derby, and she earned enough cash to cover January's rent. She was allowed any one meal at no cost from the lunch menu per shift and each of those meals she devoured during the two short weeks of employment. "Work in a restaurant, Lynette, and you'll never go hungry," her mother had always told her. She untied her waitress apron and threw it on the kitchen table. Then she pulled out a chair and sat down. Courses would begin in a week. Life in Tallahassee was taking form. Lynette's thoughts were diverted when she heard a knock at the door.

"Who in God's name is that?" Lynette murmured to herself, remembering the basketball saga. She stood on her sore feet and stepped to the door to look through the peephole. "Who is it?"

"It's little ole me!" The voice coming through the door was familiar. "Open up, it's cold."

"Oh, Sweetie, what are you doing here?" Lynette unlocked the chain, then the dead bolt, and swung open the door. The draft of wintry air blew in. "Welcome to my house," Lynette gestured for the man and his duffle bag to come in, quickly closing and locking the deadbolt and chain lock behind him. Now spinning around, she could see his bag and Tallahassee Democrat Newspaper had fallen to the floor. His hands were outstretched in an invitation, and she rushed to him.

"It's so good to see your face," Lynette was drawing back now to admire his thin frame, blue eyes and wavy dark hair. "What a wonderful surprise, what did I ever do to deserve this?" Their lips met for a kiss.

Looking into Lynette's eyes, Claude whispered, "You deserve everything you want, Babe. Do you want me?"

Lynette broke the embrace, to pull him to the green vinyl love seat to sit. "So how did you get here? I thought your car was dead."

"I rented a car. And during the whole trip, all I did was think about my lady," he stroked Lynette's cheek and moved a hair out of her face. Lynette snuggled against him, her head on his shoulder.

"I'm quitting my job, and I'm moving to Tallahassee to be with my lassie." Lynette's eyes widened. "There's no point in me staying in Destin when you're here. I've already lived two weeks without you, and I can't take anymore," said Claude. He was looking down at her face and lovingly stroking her hair. "I'm flying up to Boston to see my parents for the holidays; then I'll pick up my last Sandestin paycheck and move in with my dream girl until I find a job, if that's ok with you?" Claude reached for Lynette's hand. "I know you don't want us to live together, but you can't keep me from moving into the same city."

Lynette's response was to kiss his nose, his cheek and then his lips until she had him melting under her spell.

"You sure do taste good." Claude licked his lips, smiling and sighing now. "Mmm Mmm, Lynette."

"I'll taste even better after I brush my teeth." Lynette stood, then led him by the hand into the bedroom, where he sat down on the bed. Claude's eyes settled on a stuffed Koala bear on the pillow. There was an Australian Flag hanging from a ribbon on the bear's neck. Claude grabbed it and wound up the lever in his back. The Australian "Waltzing Matilda" tune chimed from the little bear. Lynette was now watching him from the bathroom doorway.

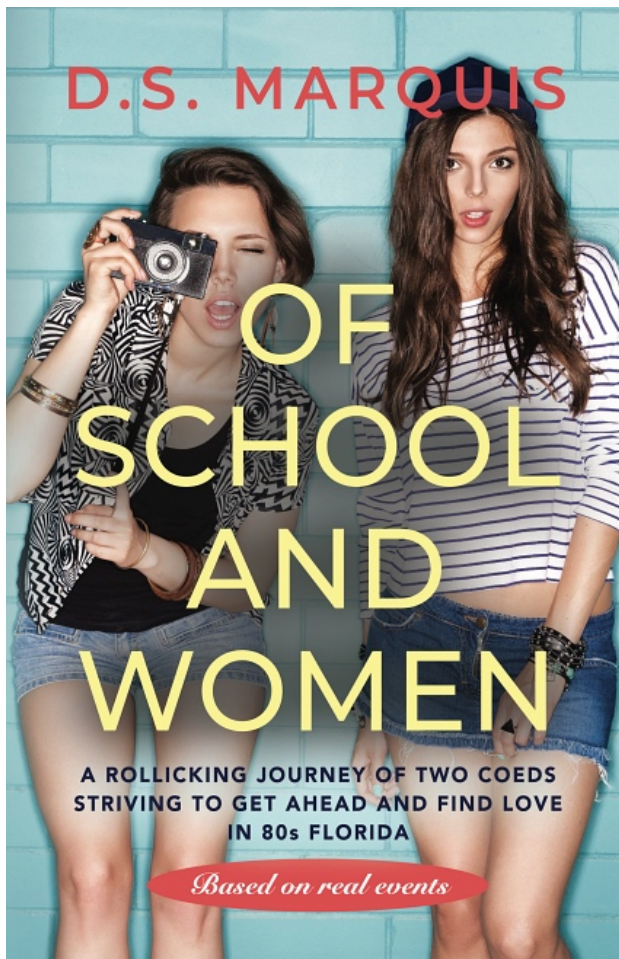
"So, this is my humble home for a while," she said with a mouth full of toothpaste. "What do ya think?"

"What are you keeping this around for?" Claude's eyes narrowed with disgust. "So, you can dream of Travis? I'll bet he gave this to you." A trombone sounded off in Lynette's head. She still often thought about Travis. Claude spoke with resentment. "You'll live with him, but you won't live with me."

"I've already been that route." Lynette was now raising her blouse over her head. "I'm not living with another man again unless I'm married to him." The blouse fell to the floor. Claude's eyes now on her, she promenaded toward the bed, where she stood to unzip her khaki skirt and let it drop to the floor. She had his full attention now. Taking the bear out of his hands, and climbing on top of him, she spoke softly, "Kiss me."

"You sexy thing." Claude shed his jealousy. Overcome and ready for I-miss-you sex, they enjoyed each other. And the next morning, Claude put his plan in motion: He returned to Destin and quit his job. Since his car was dead and had been impounded from the spot where

it had broken down, he decided to cut that as a loss. He didn't have the money to fix it anyway, especially after buying his plane ticket home for Christmas. What he knew was that he had to move forward, hire an attorney and get himself out of debt. He and his ex-old lady had dealt and snorted a lot of cocaine. They maxed out all their credit cards. They spent all their money living the life of Riley in Pensacola. How he allowed that to go on for eight years, he still had no answer. Would he be able to start clean? He knew it would be a struggle. He was determined to get his life in order. Would he ever feel good enough for Lynette? It hadn't occurred to him that he needed to feel good enough for himself, first.



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