

The continuing story of one troubled man's venture into the shadowy world inhabited by prostitutes, drug addicts, and the homeless. Lasting relationships alter his life, providing adventure and meaning, even as the rest of his world crumbles.

Beep Beep: On being a john

By Henri Charles Molineaux

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BOOK 2
of the *A Failure to Bond* series

BEEP BEEP

On being a john

A MEMOIR BY
Henri Charles Molineaux



Beep Beep

On being a john

**A Memoir by
Henri Charles Molineaux**

ALSO BY HENRI CHARLES MOLINEAUX
Toot Toot: On becoming a john.
I Like to Walk: A Child's Journey to Understanding

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WARNING: Contains graphic sex and strong language.

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CHAPTER ONE: *Addicted*

Like a stunted, twisted, wind-raked evergreen peeking over the frigid edge of a high mountain crag, Kim would have been bent and distorted by her OCD and bipolar condition. Yet, even as the jagged pine might inspire a prize-winning black and white, so too, deeply flawed Kim was beautiful in her way.

I had observed her at a distance from the comfort of my car. I had sat in the shadow beyond the stream of light from the telephone pole luminaire under which she stood. Tall, slender, pouty lips, button nose, her auburn hair cascaded from a Gatsby Flapper hat to her steel grey winter coat.

Proud of myself for having broken off a senseless romance that existed only in my damaged, love-starved mind. Proud of how the fondness Angel and I shared for each other had never strayed to such foolishness, though just shy. Proud too of my uncommon friendship with Angel and John. Yes, proud of all that. Yet, when Kim stood cold and lonely on that corner, in despair, perhaps longing my return, I could not leave her there to suffer. She needed me, as I needed her.

Senseless? Whether it made sense mattered not. It felt good. It felt right. Irrelevant now was the sensible notion I once had that all I need do to keep my job, so ideally suited to my needs and disposition, was to avoid accidents with the company car and keep my nose clean.

I had rationalized that it was not cheating on my wife if there were no kissing, no vows of love, only the business of sex for hire.

I had expected that uncomplicated sex alone would fill a need.

Neither had I planned what had just happened nor could I predict what was to come.

From the moment she acceded to my demand and entered my car, she cheated on and cheated with subtly flipped. Kim became the one to whom I must be faithful, not my wife. She would say she loved me, and I would see only the beauty, the good in her. There was *much* good in her.

“I just got a ticket from a cop,” Kim said. “Officer Mary Murray.”

Her clear, sweet voice, sweet and clear as a piccolo, her casual words, brought me joy.

As though no voices had been raised in anger, no car door slammed, no cereal cup hurled with fury and shattered against a red brick wall, as though none of that had happened, Kim pulled from a coat pocket and showed me a form she said she had moments ago tucked there.

I smiled at her words, and with no destination, I sped from the curb.

“What for?” I asked.

As was her way, as she spoke she faced forward. A delicate profile, made glamorous in the hazy glow and changing shadows as we flowed below the arching streetlights.

“I don’t remember what she said—malingering for the purpose of prostitution? I’ll have to read it later. This means I’ll have to go to court because Officer Mary Murray is always harassing me out here, and she’ll know if I don’t show up.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that.” My smile lingered.

“She hates all prostitutes because her husband left her for one.”

“How do you know that?”

“That’s the word on the street.”

Had she become inured to the pain of our shattered love? Shattered like the cup she had hurled against the wall? Had she shoved the memory to a deep, dark dungeon in the far chasms of her mind, where resided other traumas long-confined? Was it a flood of love for me, so intense it flushed away the anguish of that event? A flow that carried her back in time to pick up the narrative at a point where we had been a few days prior, in blissful love? Did she blame herself? Had she mishandled my complaints and my distrust? Was she relieved for this second chance at love?

Or was I no more than a john, with money in my pocket, for which she would use her considerable skills of persuasion and deception to dislodge?

“Take me to Mount Ephraim Avenue,” Kim said, as if it were a part of our dating routine, unaltered by numerous protests and entreaties that she no longer ask this task of me.

I knew where to go. She had directed me to this drug set many times.

“So! We’re gonna date?”

She ignored my question for its implications.

Joseph’s words echoed: *“If you love her, why wouldn’t you do what she asks?”*

“I’ll need twenty dollars,” she said as I parked a block away.

There was now no doubt; business as usual.

In urgent need of a toilet, I would not want to use a public restroom. When Kim returned, I headed for my employer’s nearby Patient Service Center (PSC) to use the men’s room there.

“We should use this place instead of going to Pop’s,” Kim said when we arrived. “That way, you could give me the ten dollars you’d be giving to Pop for the room, and I could cop a dime bag of ready instead.”

Yes, business as usual.

We each used a restroom.

I feared another obsessive-compulsive episode, but Kim was already undressing as I neared the Recovery Room. In a minute, we were making love on the same cot, on the same navy blue throw blanket, with the same ambient light from my flashlight bouncing off the white walls. But this time she kissed me with passion, pulled me tight, and as I peered into moist eyes that stared blissfully back at me, she said, "I love you."

I smothered her with kisses that she fervently returned, and again she said, "I love you."

She writhed and pumped beneath me, eager for the pleasure and eager to give the same pleasure to me, her only lover.

As doubtless as it had been that this was business, strictly business, it was now just as certain this was love: deep, unreasoning, passionate love.

"I love *you*, Kim," I whispered, as sure of its truth as I was that I'd be a fool if it were.

We both muffled cries as the ecstasy peaked, and I came inside her.

When I could once again breathe and no longer crush her to me, I let her loose. She scooted to the bathroom, saying, "That made me hungry!"

I secured the navy blanket in its hacked zippered case and returned all to as we had found it. We walked smiling to my car. Kim rarely smiled.

First to a bodega for cigarettes and a bottle of blue soda water.

In a shadowy corner of the downtown McDonald's, Kim ate her fish sandwich, her sweet lips pressed upon the bun, a holy presence mere inches from where I sat in silent awe. She smacked her lips and turned to me. "I'll need to use the ladies' room."

She took her purse and the blue soda water.

When she returned, it was to the back seat.

"It was too crowded in there."

She spread her rig beside her: disposable BiC lighter, spoon, cotton ball, syringe, and the bottle of soda water.

"Don't look!" she ordered, and I obeyed.

When again buckled in, she still held the syringe, the sharp needle yet exposed. She saw my puzzled gaze, at her, at the syringe, and back at her.

"I couldn't find the cap."

Kim directed me to a North Camden set. There she'd score the dime bag of *ready*, to which she had referred: crack cocaine. In the few minutes it took to park at a safe distance, she became groggy, her face pasty.

"I'll need the ten dollars," was spoken as half asleep.

As stoned as she appeared, she strode straight and steady. I shivered as she disappeared into the gloom.

I checked the doors, remained alert. Her purse lay on the seat.

Kim emerged into the faint glow of a lonely luminaire. I fled that dark place as she twisted for the strap.

With one eye on the road, I observed her.

Kim poked a white kernel into her pipe, a four-inch glass tube, its bore a quarter-inch; smokers call it a *stem*. A plug of Chore Boy near the tip was to hold the drug in place and filter solids from the vapor. Her BiC flicked. I lowered her window two inches to vent the fumes.

The sparkle in her eyes grew with each lick of flame.

“Steel?” she probed so sweetly as she secured the hot tube. “Your real name is Henri, is that right?” She pronounced it as do the French: ahn-REE. I had revealed it the night I told of my Waco girlfriend, Surfer. “Steel is your nickname. Am I right?”

Kim’s recollection of that story pleased me. It meant she’d also recall my brag of the many ten-orgasm nights I had given Surfer, and that I’d not let myself be on any girl’s list of favorite lovers, not even at number one.

“Right. I use it for the same reasons many girls use street names.”

“I have a nickname too. Only my family calls me this. It’s ‘Cricket.’”

“I *like* that. May I call you ‘Cricket?’”

“That would be nice. Kim isn’t my real name anyhow. It’s Noel, but nobody in my family ever calls me that. They always call me ‘Cricket.’”

I looked away to hide my face. “Noel is the name of my ex-wife who recently died, so I wouldn’t want to call you that.” Saddened and ashamed for having so poorly treated the young mother of my children, I grieved that she had passed before I’d had a chance to make amends.

“But you should still call me Kim around other people. And I have a name I’m going to call *you*.” With a smile and conspiratorial tone, she said, “I’m going to call you ‘Sunshine.’”

She *had* previously addressed me in that manner more than once.

“Ooh! I like this song!” She reached and raised the volume, then shot a glance my way. Perhaps I frowned. She returned the sound to my setting and peeked my way again. She’d have been less courteous with another.

“My leg still hurts,” she said. “It seems a little better, but now I also have a pain in my chest.”

When she had twice told me of the increasing pain and swelling, I had shown little interest. Each time I’d had a loathsome agenda. Now my only thought was to end my lover’s pain.

“Should I take you to an emergency room?”

“No. I think I might try to see a doctor tomorrow because I think I have thrush. And I told you about the flap of skin on my hiney hole.”

“I’ve heard of thrush. What is it?”

“It’s something babies get in their mouth. I really don’t know, but my tongue is white.”

“Why don’t you go to your mom’s? She’d take you to see a doctor, wouldn’t she?”

Our small talk rambled until the dashboard clock warned I’d soon be risking questions at home. “I’m gonna have to drop you off now.”

“If I give you the ticket from Officer Mary Murray, will you keep track of the court date for me and let me know when I have to be there?”

“Why do you need *me* to do that?”

“Because I’ll only lose it like I lose everything.”

I took the summons from her hand.

“Will I see you tomorrow?” she asked.

“I’ll be back to work tomorrow, so I’ll have to look for you at Poky’s, if that’s where you expect to be.”

“Yes. Most likely at Poky’s. What time?”

“Sometime around two or two thirty. I’ve told you, it’s always around that time when my route takes me that way.”

“You know, the River Line trolley is supposed to start in a couple of days,” Kim said as we rumbled over the newly laid rails. “Do you think, maybe, it would be fun for us to take the free ride all the way to Trenton and back when they have the ribbon-cutting ceremony?”

“Oh, for sure. I’d like that.” I brushed her cheek with the soft hairs on the back of my fingers. “There was a story about it in yesterday’s paper. I’ll read it again and get the details.”

“Steel, would you do me a big favor? Could you bring me a peanut butter and jelly? On your regular bread, not the big, hard loaf.”

* * *

There had been no need for a sleeping pill that early March, 2004. I was at peace, happy, and content. Cricket, my sweet Cricket, had said she loved me; she was safe at Poky’s; she’d soon be in my arms again.

Awake early, I lay daydreaming, dozing off and on.

“Cricket”! What a cute nickname for such a pretty girl. I visioned her blissful face beneath me as we made love, long auburn hair that I brushed aside to bare her breasts and suck her nipples, her shaved and ready pussy.

I jumped up when my bladder begged. Meredith had long since risen from her makeshift bed on the sofa and gone.

My lunch cooler packed with Kim's PB&J, two sandwiches for me, and a couple of little Snickers, I soon was out the door.

John had called last evening as I'd spied from the shadows. Had he left his tobacco pouch on the back seat? Would I look? I had found it on the floor and placed it on the seat. I'd get it to him first thing this morning.

Sunlight sparkled off Kim's syringe between the door sill and the seat when I opened the front passenger door to place my cooler there. She had dropped it in her stupor and forgotten it, as had I.

Be careful. The needle isn't capped.

I searched and blindly groped but couldn't find the cap. A small empty box from my car's cargo space was the right size to secure the syringe. I set the box and my black everyday carry bag behind the seat and reached for John's pouch. Only a non-lubricated condom sat there.

Something Kim might use to give head, it would have fallen from her purse when she pulled out her rig. She'd have taken John's pouch.

I didn't mention the several burn holes in the upholstery when I called to tell John.

My annoyance at John was replaced with a lingering smile as visions of last evening's joy with Cricket replayed as on a loop throughout the drive to work.

"Did you enjoy your day off?" my supervisor Stacey asked.

"Oh yeah!" I said. "I had an adventure!"

"Do I wanna know about it?"

"No. You don't wanna know."

"Oh, then," she said with a chuckle, "don't tell me."

I joked with anyone within joking distance but remained diligent as I separated, sorted, and stuffed medical lab reports. Specimen cooler loaded on the back seat, envelopes of reports piled on the front seat, and boxes of medical supplies to be delivered on board, I left the Marlton office singing. Most times, when I'm happy, I'm singing.

Early afternoon, I deviated from the route to Ferry Avenue past Sixth and the highway overpass. I tapped my horn across from the middle unit of a block of boarded-up nineteenth-century red brick rowhomes. Poky waved from a second-floor window and, in a minute, ambled over.

"Kim, she been here, but she stepped out around nine."

"I have something of hers she'd want, and a peanut butter and jam."

Poky smiled. He'd tell her if he saw her.

I went to Joseph's at Sixth and Ferry.

As I made the turn, the intimidating young thug lounged near the side door to his second-floor apartment in a century-old flat roof quadplex. He came and stood in the street at my window.

I greeted him with none of the enthusiasm I'd once felt.

"Something's been bothering me," I said. "Could we have a man-to-man?"

"Yeah, man. Sure. But you gotta take your shit off the seat so I can sit there, and we gotta move away from here."

"Why is that?"

"This is a drug set, man!"

I shifted a shoebox of work materials and pile of lab reports to the back.

We talked as I drove. He didn't know where Kim was, but he said he'd guide me from one set to the other to help me search.

"You seem angry at me," I said.

"Have you done something I should be angry at you for?"

"Not that I know of."

"What did you do that I *should* be angry at you for?"

He had rephrased the question. He was angry. "*You tell me*," I said.

"How about the night when you and Kim drove away from me?"

I was annoyed by the venom in his tone and recalled no such event. "You talking about the time you asked me to buy kerosene for you, and I returned the can empty?" He looked at me as if I were stupid. "That was so long ago I forgot about it."

"That's not hardly an apology." Joseph glared. I wasn't showing the amount of fear or respect he believed he deserved and usually received.

That he had expected me to run an errand had been an imposition and presumptive, unwarranted by any true friendship between us. I had run out of time. I'd had to get home before Meredith that night.

"So, anyhow, what's bothering you?" Joseph snarled.

"I paid forty dollars for a phone for Kim the other day, but she doesn't get to use it. *You* use it. I need her to have it so I can call her."

"Just buy her another phone."

"That would mean having to put out another forty dollars."

"You're too obsessed over a fucking forty dollars. That's an amount I wipe my ass with every day!"

"It's not such a small amount to me."

"What else?!"

"Did you know I broke it off with Kim, but I'm seeing her again?"

“Yeah, man. I’m aware.”

“Does she really care for me?”

“She does.”

“Am I foolish to care for her?”

“No.”

“Are you having sex with her?”

“Yo! I got a dozen girls I can fuck! I don’t need Kim!”

“That’s kind of what she said. Do you beat her?” I looked him in the eye. “She’s shown me bumps and bruises. I don’t much care for that.”

“I’m gonna forget what you just said.”

I took that as a warning. One I should heed.

We tracked a route Kim might have taken from the sets to Poky’s.

“This guy’s a drunk and a junkie,” Joseph said, as I parked across the street. “You can’t trust him. He’s no good for Kim. He’s got no electricity. He’s got no heat. That’s why I dragged her out of there a couple of times. If she *did* come right here from copping her shit, she’s probably inside shooting up. She won’t come out if you honk your horn. Wait here.”

He strode across the street, bound up the stoop, and entered without knocking. In a few minutes, he returned.

“She ain’t there,” he said. “What do you wanna do?”

I returned him to his corner. I thanked him for his efforts, although halfheartedly since I was still out forty dollars, Kim still without a phone, and he had deflected half my questions.

I returned to the route, burdened by the shouldasaid that came to me too late.

Time allowed my return to Poky’s before the route took me out of town. I still might see Kim to give her the PB&J and her syringe.

A woman appeared at the window in response to my horn. Her signal said Kim wasn’t there.

As I put my car in gear, another pulled in front and blocked the way. A troubled-looking Trisha stepped out. Her deliberate approach left no doubt she intended to get in. Again I cleared the seat. The other car took off.

“You know I’m here looking for Kim?”

“I know,” Trisha said, in a foreboding tone I thought strange.

I sped away with her, hoping none at Poky’s had seen.

This once charming, vibrant, confident young woman whom I adored when we first met had become a pitiable waif. She sat next to me now, hair matted, face blemished and distorted by a frown.

“I wanted to see how you was,” she said.

Ali stood with a hand on the bus stop bench as I crossed Broadway to the park's Ferry Avenue side.

"Did you see Ali standing there?"

"I saw him. He's waiting for me."

"So, what's up, Trish?"

"Me and Ali are looking for jobs."

"What about the job you said a woman you met in jail has for you?"

"She's still in jail. I gotta wait until she gets out."

"You still renting the room I gave you the thirty dollars for?"

"Yes."

"And how are you feeling? Everything okay?"

"Except for being stressed out all the time." Trisha opened her mouth as though to speak, and after a long pause, she said, "I was about to ask you something, but I remembered you asked me not to ask you again."

"I don't have much on me, Trish, but even so, yes, I told you, I can't give you money anymore."

Instead of the argument I expected, she offered an awkward goodbye and left.

She approached Ali, embarrassed.

I went to the corner of Carl Miller Boulevard, where Kim often stood. From there, past Joseph's building. He stood outside.

As I drove slowly by, he responded to my questioning hand gesture with his own that said Kim wasn't there.

I tapped the horn twice across from Poky's. His girlfriend, Azul, gave the "One minute" sign.

Poky soon stood at my open window, his hand on the sill.

"Hey, Steel. She ain't been back here yet. You be trying again later?"

"Probably, after work, if I have the time. I still have that sandwich and something else important to give her."

"Gotta tell ya, man, I'm fuckin' pissed at that motha-fuckin' Joseph for how he busts in my place and he don't knock. Like he fuckin' owns it." Poky reached into a pants pocket. "I got somethin' to take care of him if he don't show me no respect!" He pulled a full auto stiletto.

"Stay cool, Poky."

"What's this important thing you say you got for Kim?"

"Well...uh...she left her syringe behind in my car last night."

"Give it to *me*. She gets 'em from me anyhow."

I handed over box and all. I wouldn't risk anyone getting jabbed or the syringe being seen by a passerby or someone watching.

“I’m glad to have it out of the car. Be careful. The needle isn’t capped.” Poky lingered. “Did you see that girl get into my car before?”

“No, I didn’t, but my lady told me ’bout it.”

“It was just a girl I knew who wanted to tell me something. Just a friend. I don’t want anyone to get the wrong idea and tell Kim.”

“Yeah. No worry.”

But I sensed he reserved doubt. They all likely knew about the feud between Trisha and Kim and my part in it. I had long since learned how fast news travels among Camden’s street people and how sometimes the story gets mangled.

“Well, I better get out from the street,” Poky said as he realized there was nothing about to be offered but a handshake.

I returned to the route. Taking care of business yet reflecting on late events, I reveled in remembrance of my date with Angel. *The window!* I had again forgotten to shut the window. For the second time in two days, I called Pop to apologize.

He asked if I’d seen Rebecca. I answered I had not.

That evening after work, again I searched for Kim. No one I spoke to had seen her. *Not to worry. She went to her mom’s as I suggested.*

That night I wrote these thoughts in my journal.

Am I insane? I’m forty-two years the senior of a twenty-three-year-old drug-addicted, homeless prostitute. If she’s with a date who has more money than I, someone who can give her what she needs, I shouldn’t be jealous. That would be selfish. It’s just business.

It’s crazy, I know, but I believe I love her, and I believe she believes she loves me. How to explain it?

The fury that drove her to smash her oatmeal cup against Joseph’s wall had transformed into unreasoning love, a common reaction. As when Don Juan seduced Duchess Isabella by killing her prized pigeons one by one until Isabella’s anger and hatred of Juan morphed into sexual passion.

That same reasoning might be made to explain my love for Kim.

I must remain alert to ignore the emotions that so profoundly permeate my body in my fantasies that they travel with me into the real world.

I had those thoughts as I felt the fool for having had them.

I lay in bed in dreary reverie, closed my eyes, inviting sleep.

Before I dozed, I whispered a revised benediction to the ether: “Good night, sweet Cricket, wherever you are.”

CHAPTER TWO: *A Tree Grows Through It*

I could hear the pain she must have been feeling.

Her call had come late morning as I stood at the kitchen sink, my cell phone handy, set on vibrate. I was rinsing my oatmeal bowl of its “slime,” the starch residue that made Meredith gag. I dried my hands and took the phone into the bedroom. Meredith would generally have gone to work by then but was, at the moment, in the bathroom.

After banal greetings and inquiries into each other’s health, “I’m good,” Trisha had said. But then she had stammered, backtracking. “I...I mean...um...not...not really too good. Um...I was wondering...I mean...I got a bad toothache and something else, I don’t really wanna say.”

“Trish, all I have until payday is seven dollars. And I need that for the store later.”

“Oh. I was hoping to borrow ten dollars?”

Is Ali there, coercing her?

“Where are you?” she asked.

“I can’t talk, Trisha. I’m still home, and so is my wife.”

She apologized. I repeated my work hours. She said, “I’ll call later.”

She did call later, but again, I refused.

“What will you do now, Trisha?”

“I guess I’ll try to borrow it someplace else.”

I could help by making a withdrawal and dating her. I had the time. I was almost an hour ahead of schedule. And Kim was away, to where and for how long I didn’t know, but therefore unavailable for that purpose.

Yeah, but no. Trisha no longer aroused anything in me but pity. Pity sex is bad sex. I had seen her in the light, in both the literal and figurative sense. But those thoughts sparked an urge.

I might date the loquacious Adriana, or the coveted Roxanne should either cross my path. Or I might seek the beautiful, playful Rebecca. I could swallow my pride and forgive Rebecca her offenses because the ledger listing her debits and credits showed a bottom line favorably in the black. Angel and Lizette came to mind. Opposite sides of the same coin. As for Dottie, no. She represented a failed, foolish love affair, now replaced by my love for Kim. My experience with Dottie had been like having paid for football uniforms, played one game, and not having scored a touchdown because we played with a tennis ball with no lights at night.

The urge to seek a date ended with that thought, perhaps because of it.

Kim reentered my daydreaming in a fantasy. She'd be calling from her mother's home. I'd call her "Cricket." I'd meet her mother, much younger than I.

I'm half living my life between reality and fantasy at all times.—Lady Gaga

When the route took me to where I might find Kim, I strained to spot her. I went to Poky's. He hadn't seen her, but one of the women who took refuge in his wretched home claimed to have seen her on Broadway that morning. Poky again lingered at my window, his hand on the sill. I felt neither guilt nor shame that I had no dollar to spare.

* * *

"Yeah, I was with her a little while ago," Poky said as he again stood at my window. "She was down a ways past Carl Miller, trying to not get seen by *that* guy," he said, a sarcastic reference to Joseph.

Returned early from the Saturday route, I had made a withdrawal and was now in town looking to spend it on Cricket.

I hurried in the direction Poky had pointed, aroused by a vivid memory of our furious lovemaking earlier that week.

But in the spirit of a bird in the hand being worth two in the bush, when I thought I saw Lucia, the girl with the voice of a child, I pulled over. Having had to settle for a back street oral last month when Pop's room was unavailable, I still had the lust to sample Lucia's self-proclaimed tight pussy.

I had to disappoint and embarrass the girl who got in. She protested but got out at my request. I'd have rejected her anyway. Her mouth was full of yellowed and broken, if not missing, teeth.

And I still hoped to find Cricket. It was too early to settle for a girl about whom I knew nothing but her poor dental hygiene.

A male voice called out. I pulled over. I waited at the curb as he caught up. It was Ali. When he bent forward at the waist to talk through the closed window, I signaled and said, "Please, get in."

"Hey, Mister Steel." He had addressed me as Trisha had once said she refers to me when talking about me to him. "I'm Ali."

"Yes, I recognize you," I said as I held out my hand. "What's up?" I was eager to hear what new adventure the young man was about to offer.

"I wanted to warn you about Kim." He was unsure of what to do with his hands. "Trisha really likes you, and she's worried for you. She doesn't wanna see you get hurt by Kim, or one of them people Kim hangs out with,

or by some robber or punk around the drug sets where Kim makes you go.” His eyes darted away from time to time. “It’s dangerous for you when she runs off to cop her dope and leaves you sitting there.”

“I know, Ali. I’ve already told her I don’t wanna do that anymore.”

“A white man could get jumped, or robbed, or both. Trisha’s been so worried for you, and she got so stressed out, she had a seizure.”

“Oh! Really?”

“Yeah. I know you sometimes pick up Trisha for a sex date, and that’s okay with me cuz you’re a good guy and she likes you so much. I like you too cuz you’re a gentleman. I know you’ve been good to Trisha.”

“I try, Ali, but I value honesty very highly, and here’s the thing: I can’t always believe what she says.”

“She’s really a good person, even though she started doing the crack again. Prolly my fault. I love her cuz, like I said, she’s such a good person.”

“I believe that.”

“I graduated from Maple Shade High School, so I’m no dummy. So, I hope you listen to what I said.”

“I appreciate what you’ve said.”

He appeared to have finished, so I offered my hand, but even as we shook, he resumed his speech.

He repeated most of what he had just said, though with some different words and in a different order, and when he appeared again finished, again we shook hands. But once more, he repeated much of what he’d twice said.

“Thank you. I hear you. Gotta go now.” Again I held out my hand.

“Thank you, Mister Steel.” He shook my hand again, slid out, and shut the door softly behind him.

Ali’s purpose for this bold entreaty on Trisha’s behalf was yet unclear.

He had failed to address my complaint about her lies. He had said she had made herself ill worrying because she cared so much for me. She was a good person, he had said. Obviously rehearsed, was he pimping her to me?

Well, of course. For me to resume dating Trisha and drop Kim would benefit him financially. Once having thought it, I believed it. That was his agenda. I admired his effort, but I was too smart for him.

The bright streetlights revealed Trisha standing near the park, waiting for me. I hadn’t noticed her before. It didn’t occur to me that Ali might have been stalling till she arrived.

I stopped short of the yellow-painted curb. Trisha rushed to enter.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Oh, um, how are you?”

I turned right to park on Ferry, a now-familiar spot. Trisha fidgeted as we spoke.

“I’ve just had a strange and interesting conversation with Ali,” I said with a wry smile for his thrice-repeated plea.

“What about?”

“About you, me, and Kim. About the danger I put myself in when I take her to the sets.”

“I saw you in Centerton.” Trisha referred to a high crime, lower socio-economic section of South Camden. “You was alone in your car when she ran for her blow. That ain’t safe for you.”

“As I told Ali, I’ve told her I don’t want to do that anymore.”

“I been so stressed out, I had another seizure.”

“I’m sorry,” was the best I could offer.

“She’s been telling people you’re her sugar daddy.”

I’d have viewed it as an insult had I believed Kim thought of me that way. But I reasoned Kim might say that to save face with those who would think her foolish to have entered into a genuine relationship with a trick: someone like me.

“Trisha. You still need ten dollars?”

“I borrowed it from somebody.”

A ten slid more easily from my wallet than if she had asked for it.

“Do you still have the room?” *I might as well get something for my ten dollars.*

“Yes. I still have it.”

“Would you take me there?”

“I can’t right now.”

You usually can’t tell from a prostitute’s face if she’s lying. That was especially so with Trisha. But either she had just lied or was about to. Or if I were to give her the benefit of the doubt, and now was indeed not a good time to use her room to date, if she was anything like me, her guilty look was out of fear that I would *think* she was lying.

“There’s two reasons why.” She cleared her throat. “The couple I rent from is having a terrible fight right now—I just come from there—and I’m carrying for some dude, and I gotta run his shit to him right now. I would if I could, Steel. I would!” She had the ten dollars. She didn’t need the date.

“That’s okay, Trisha. I’ll just head on home.”

We said goodbye with kisses on the cheek.

But my dashboard clock showed it was too early to go home. A date with Angel would be fun. I had her on speed dial. I hoped to find her at the

Fairview Street house where she and John now lived with his Aunt Nora and his sister, Bernice. No answer. *She's probably on a date.*

How much time did I have? I called Meredith. We'd meet in two hours at our favorite diner. I might still find Cricket, or if not, another date.

Near the same spot where earlier I had mistakenly picked her up, the toot with bad teeth strolled with another working girl. Young and pretty, I'd have chanced a date with this other, but it would have been hurtful to the first girl, so I continued cruising Broadway.

I passed the crumbling hundred-year-old Carnegie Library building. At the end of the 600 block, so long neglected a tree grew through its roof, the neoclassical landmark was now a hangout for Camden's prostitutes. You'd often see a hooker peeping from halfway up its broad, weathered steps or its low, stone retaining wall.

No toot sat there this day.

Passing the park a second time, I had a thought. Trisha might now be able and willing. I parked across from where she had the room. She might see me and come out. *What a stupid idea.* I tired and left.

And what would Cricket think if she were to learn of this? She'd be pissed! Wouldn't the best use of my money be to save it for the next time I saw Cricket?

Yet the money was in my pocket, and I had the need, so as I turned onto Morgan Boulevard to head for the highway home, and a hooker stood on the right shoulder, I slowed for a better look.

A charming smile and Mediterranean features, I pulled over. I lowered the passenger side window and parked. She approached.

An unbuttoned flannel coat revealed a slender body. She wore a man's red plaid winter shirt, ripped blue jeans, and black walking shoes. A black knit hat held long, dark, curly hair in place against a warm evening breeze. She wasn't pretty, but her smile lent a sparkle to her face. Barely five feet tall, she appeared self-assured. Perhaps in her thirties, she was still young and attractive enough for me to consider date-worthy. She reached for the door handle.

"Can we talk first? I don't like to let a stranger into my car."

"Yeah, sure. That's okay." She still smiled. She was not offended. She stepped back, bent at the waist, and peered in.

"I'll let you in if you want, but it won't be a commitment?"

"Yeah, sure," she said again. "That's fine."

She entered, took her seat, and her smile won me over.

We exchanged pleasantries and names. Augustina had been working this corner eight years. Camden had been on my route almost nine.

“I think I’ve seen you before, Augustina, hopping into one of the big rigs often parked along this strip.”

“Just call me Tina. Most people do. Especially since I’m so tiny.”

“I have a couple women I usually date, but neither seems available tonight.”

“Oh, really? What’s their names?”

“First things first, Tina. I need to know you’re not a cop.”

She cupped my crotch, then bared her breasts when she saw me glance in that direction as though requiring it. They were cute little breasts, as you would expect with such a slender person. They sagged just a bit, as they might with a woman her age. And erect nipples pushed out from silver-dollar-size, dark areolas.

“May I?”

“Sure.”

I fondled the breast I could reach and gently pinched its nipple.

“I like to suck on nipples.”

“I like that, too—when a man sucks them.”

Once I’d had my fill of looking and fondling, she rebuttoned.

I named several women I had dated. She claimed not to know them. I mentioned Pop’s room. She had a place nearby for the same ten dollars.

I hadn’t taken a pill. I asked for assurance she’d be sensitive to my ED and do whatever she’d need to assure my happy ending.

“You won’t be disappointed.”

“There are exceptions,” I said. “I never have a problem with the one girl, Kim. Maybe because she first gives great oral. And Liz is a magician. She’ll just touch me, and before I know it, I’m in her and doing it, and in a minute, I come. It’s like in the book *Fear of Flying* by Erica Jong. You familiar?”

“I think so.”

“There’s a scene on a plane where she has sex with a guy, still in their seats, and it goes smoothly and effortlessly with no one around them aware they’re having sex. She called it ‘The zipless fuck.’”

Tina laughed.

“That’s how it is with Liz?”

“Exactly like that!”

Her fees were the same as those of my other women. I said we’d date.

She directed me to a part of South Camden that long-time residents knew as Sweet Potato Hill, to a two-story A-frame with weather-worn red asphalt shingle siding. The inside was in darkness. Ambient light seeping through shaded windows lit our way to the front bedroom. A wall switch turned on a ceiling light.

“Tina, I really need to pee first.”

She walked me to the bathroom and flicked the switch.

Tina explained that as long as you were willing to fill a bucket from the bathtub faucet to flush it, the toilet worked fine.

“Do you want to watch?” I asked in jest as I unzipped.

I was like a teenage boy exposing himself to a girl, expecting to arouse her and get laid. I had done that twice, and both times remained a virgin. I had been following the advice of a couple of men at the weight room where I lifted. They had a saying: “When in doubt, whip it out.”

“Yeah, sure,” she said as she stood in the bathroom doorway.

“I’m just kidding, Tina, but you can look if you want.”

She did look as I stood and peed. I suspected from her body language she did so thinking it might be a sexual quirk of mine for self-arousal. But I also knew that while some women think a man’s penis is ugly, others get aroused and like to look, especially if it’s erect. Though probably not a long-timer like Tina, who has seen more dick than she cares to admit.

I would have sat to pee, as I usually do, but I didn’t care to sit on that seat, and I didn’t care to have to explain my reasons for sitting, as I’d had to with Kim and others.

“Do you have toilet paper?” I asked, seeing none on the holder.

Tina brought a roll from the dark living room. She watched as I milked my penis and wiped the tip with a sheet of two-ply toilet tissue, folded in quarters.

“That’s to catch the last two drops that, no matter how much you shake it, always end up in a man’s underpants. But not mine.”

“I’ll flush it later,” she said, with only an eye-flash reaction to my odd claim. With a tilt of her head, she directed me to follow.

A box spring and mattress sat on the bedroom floor. The Hollywood frame that would have held them lay unused against the wall. A chest of drawers stood nearby, but askew and partly open drawers revealed it not to be in use. Though disorderly, the small room appeared clean, as did the linens.

I put thirty dollars on a nearby wooden chair.

“Don’t forget the ten for the room.”

We stripped. Tina sat on the edge of the bed. I stood nude before her and placed a condom in her hand.

Seeing the need, she pulled me closer and took me into her mouth.

When she saw me ready, she ripped the condom from its wrapper and used her mouth to roll it on. She scooted back a few inches, her feet still on the floor. She rubbed her pussy to lubricate herself, leaned back, pulling me with her, our feet still on the floor. As her back reached the mattress, she bent and splayed her legs, guided me in, and moaned as I filled her. She reached to cup my testicles and press lightly to the base. If the pressure was to help keep me erect, it worked.

Tina made sounds of ecstasy and joy. She exclaimed what I should do to her, her words adding fervor.

I responded in kind. But that's not my thing. I shut up. I'd just enjoy what she was saying and what we were doing. It didn't take long.

"I'm coming!" I said, to let her know not to stop.

I allowed myself an excellent climax, even as she stifled a scream as if she were coming too.

She squealed with pleasure for our success as I still pulsed within her, but as soon as my ejaculations ceased, she gently pushed me off and was up and dressing. She wordlessly encouraged me to do the same.

"I like to go a lot longer than that," I said, "but the longer I hold off, the harder it gets for me to come."

"Yeah. I know what you mean. If I don't come quick, I don't come at all."

"I didn't think it could be like that for a woman."

"It is for me. Could I borrow your phone?" She held out her hand. "I gotta call my friend, Meadow."

But she handed the phone back, asked me to dial the number, then again took the phone.

"I've met Meadow," I said as Tina placed the phone to her ear.

She acknowledged my comment, listened to the phone ring, then left a voicemail. Her date with me had made her late for a meet with Meadow.

"Could you drop me off on Broadway?"

We thanked each other as she got out.

I rushed home to get out of my work clothes before I would bolt out again to join Meredith at the diner.

As I changed, I found I still wore the condom.

CHAPTER THREE: *Glitter*

A grunt or two were of help to Meredith as she rose from her sleep on the sofa. Old injuries nagged.

“What’s for breakfast?” I asked as I sat reading nearby.

Meredith’s mumbled response was beyond understanding.

She disappeared into the bathroom.

It was already late for her: midmorning. I sympathized with her pain as, several minutes later, she limped from the bathroom to the kitchen.

I returned to the bedroom to write.

An hour and a half passed. I looked up as Meredith entered, tinkling a handheld dinner bell, announcing, “Breakfast is served.”

On our good china, she had set cheddar cheese and asparagus omelets, three little turkey sausages, and two slices of buttered whole grain toast each, the sausages still sizzling, the butter still melting. She had persevered and stuck to our Sunday morning routine of a semi-formal breakfast at the kitchen table.

We enjoyed hushed small talk and a leisurely morning meal, though it was by then well past noon.

“Your kids and your grandkids would love to see you,” Meredith said.

So, with compliments to the chef, I excused myself to arrange family visits and then to take a shower.

I set my cell phone on the mat within easy reach of the tub. The phone went wherever I went because, well, you know, you never know when you’re gonna get a call from a pretty girl or something.

It trilled while I stood in the spray. I had forgotten to set it on vibrate. Dripping wet, I snatched it from the floor. The only way to stop the ringing—to keep Meredith from hearing it ring—was to answer.

Poky greeted me. Kim needed to see me, he said.

“Oh. Okay,” I whispered. “I can be there in an hour or so.”

When dressed, I went to the kitchen where Meredith stood washing dishes. She turned her head toward me in a slow roll stare-down.

“Who called you while you were in the shower and you’re going to see in an hour?” There was more ridicule than anger. She yanked wet fists from her hips and continued. “It’s ridiculous you’d take your phone into the bathroom with you and even more ridiculous you’d answer it while you were still in the shower!”

“It was just a friend who needs my help.”

“You know, not telling the whole truth about something is the same as lying.” Her glare demanded an explanation.

“I’ll tell you someday, but right now, my friend Poky’s expecting me.”

She spun from me and grabbed the next dish.

“I need you to bring up the spring and summer silk plants,” she said. “Then you have to finish boxing up the Christmas trees and wreaths and get them to my storage unit. Use my car and take it through a car wash for me.”

The large carton for the main tree and two smaller tree boxes covered the back seat to within an inch of the roof. Unable to see behind, I should have gone immediately to the storage unit. But Poky had sounded as though Kim’s need was urgent, so it was to Ferry Avenue I went first.

Poky sat on his steps, enjoying the warm winter sun on his face as I parked across the street. When he saw it was I behind the wheel of the strange car, he jumped up and called after Kim. I followed his gaze and caught sight of her, striding away a block ahead. My sweet Cricket, from whom I hadn’t heard for three days.

“It’s him!” Poky shouted. “Kim! It’s Steel!” His waves sliced the air. He signaled her to return and pointed to me.

I stepped from my car. It took a moment for her to recognize me from that distance.

“She was going to the store up there to call you again.”

I thanked Poky and ducked back in. He ambled over. Kim was soon in her seat, buckling up, and spoke first.

“I was sick in bed with the flu for two days.” Her voice was weak and wavered. It could have been true, but the flu typically lasts five days to a week, and I’d be sick now too, having caught it from her. Kim perceived my doubt. “Poky can tell you.”

Poky confirmed, though how would he know other than by her having told him?

“I went to the hospital,” she said. “Feel my forehead.” She put my hand to her brow. “It’s still hot and clammy.”

How could I tell? She had been walking in the sun. We were in an air-conditioned car.

If I were to believe her, her explanation would account for two of the three days since I’d last seen her. But truth or not, I didn’t care. I’d not risk upsetting her by voicing disbelief. I was happy just to have her by my side.

“So, did you want to spend some time with me, Cricket?”

“Of course!” Her grin showed pride and pleasure for my having used the sobriquet. “Where are we going?” Before I could answer, she pointed to the back and asked, “What’s all this stuff?”

I thanked Poky. He hesitated, maybe again disappointed that I had not offered a buck or two, then returned to his stoop.

I turned to answer Kim. Glitter in the makeup she wore sparkled gaily.

“I have to take this to our storage unit. We’ll have to go there first.”

“No. First, we’ll have to cop if we’re going to be a while doing that.”

“I was hoping you’d have that taken care of by now. Like I’ve told you, I don’t want to be parking near these drug sets anymore. And I can’t risk getting caught with your drugs in the car. You have to do that stuff either before or after we date.”

“I know, I know, but sometimes it can’t be helped. This is one of those times that I was too sick to work.”

Again, the truth of the matter was irrelevant if I wanted her with me, and I wanted her with me.

I took her to cop, heroin at one set, crack at another.

“I promise not to make you do that again,” Kim said as she buckled up, “but you must know there will be times when I have no other choice. You don’t want me getting dope sick when I’m with you.”

True, but... Oh hell, what’s the use?

“You still interested to hear more of the story about my first wife?”

The drive to the storage unit would take us half an hour. I’d need to entertain her on the way. I had already told her bits and pieces over the past few weeks. I was sure she wanted more.

“I am,” she said as she lowered the radio.

I began my tale with the night Bobbie Ann came to Buddy’s Lounge. When she said she’d pay for the motel room if a friend and I would go with her and hers. By the time Kim and I arrived at the storage facility, I was telling of when I asked a local buddy, James, to get a gun.

Kim’s eyes, on me all the way as I told the story, occasionally widened. Much of it, she said, was new. I promised to continue, if she wanted, our next time together. She assured me that’s what she wanted.

My ego thus was stoked and stroked. I had her respect. She thought me “gangster.”

And as I’ve often heard, quoted and paraphrased, “It ain’t bragging if it’s true.”

Kim and I made swift work of unloading.

I brushed her cheek with the soft hairs on the back of my fingers and asked, "Would you like to do it here?" I was eager. "It might be fun."

It might be dangerous and exciting too, and why not?

Kim agreed.

But then, a beat-up work van rolled up to the next unit.

"Could you move your car a few feet so's I have room to unload?"

The man took out a dust mop to sweep out his space before he began unloading. I offered my help to speed things along. He declined.

Kim signaled her intention to reenter the car, but to the back seat.

I needed to keep busy as the man cleared his van. I borrowed his mop.

My frustration mounted. He was taking too long. I cursed the man for delaying my sex, but half an hour later, he was gone.

Kim slid from the car, her stem and disposable BiC lighter in one hand and a broom in the other. "This was on the floor."

I took the broom to sweep again. The dust mop hadn't done the job, and seeing what else she held, I knew I'd have the time.

"You're gonna smoke it *here*?"

"It'll keep me from getting groggy, after...you know." She fired up. "And it helps me feel better after having had the flu."

"Well, so..." I started, looking around as I swept. "How we gonna do this?"

"Can't we use that box?" Kim pointed to the five-foot Christmas tree carton we had just unloaded. Lying on its side, it might do well.

"I'm not sure it will support us."

"Let's see," Kim said. She lay on the box. It remained firm. She stood, removed her pants and panties, and again reclined. With inviting eyes and a coy smile, she displayed her pussy.

I lowered the roll-up door to a foot off the ground in case of passersby. We remained still bathed in sunlight. For stability and to lighten the load, I set a firm box on each side of the carton for where to place my hands. I dropped my pants. She took me into her mouth, and in a minute, I was ready. She leaned back, pulled me to her, bent her knees, and splayed her legs. My feet on the ground and each hand firmly placed, I slid in. The carton sagged but held.

Making love in a new location, in a storage unit no less, in danger of being caught, was indeed exciting. Every so often, I'd have to slow to catch my breath but never wanting it to end. There was too much pleasure in it, too much fun, the physical sensation, the intimacy, the passion, the love I felt for her for me to ever want to end it.

She appeared to enjoy the loving also, so why would I end it? But still, I could not make her come, and she wearied before I did.

Having gone so long without coming, it was unlikely I would through coitus. Kim took me again into her mouth. But neither that nor her hand nor mine were effective. I had held off too long.

Disappointed but happy together and neither of us blaming the other, we dressed. As Kim returned the broom to the car, I called my son, Eric, to confirm a later visit.

“Sure, Dad, if the timing works out.”

“Let’s go eat,” I said, and we took off.

“Oh! My sunglasses!” She had set them on a shelf in the unit. I was thankful at least she had remembered before we had entered the highway.

Lines at the McDonald’s forebode a long wait. Though I was hungry, Kim was not. A lingering effect of the flu, we supposed. I’d eat with her later when she was ready.

At a full service car wash, Kim bought a pack of cigarettes from the woman at the counter and a blue soda water from a vending machine. We sat and talked as we waited in the lobby.

“Cricket,” I said smiling, enjoying the name on my tongue, “should I have your mother’s telephone number?”

“I don’t see why. Why would you want it?”

“In case someone tells me you’re there and I need to talk to you. If I were to call for you, would I ask for Noel?”

“You could, but you should really ask for ‘Cricket.’ That’s what all my family has ever called me since I was a little kid.”

I coaxed to get more of her story.

Her smile faded. She frowned, looked at me, then away.

“I grew up an only child,” she said, choosing her words, “so I was pretty much spoiled. My father died when I was nine, and I started acting up.”

“I thought you told me he moved away.”

“I might have told you that because I didn’t want to discuss it. I didn’t know you as well then. But he died. We had been very close, my dad and I.

“When my misbehavior became too much for her to handle, my mother put me into a special needs school for preteen girls with behavioral problems. That straightened me out for a while, and I graduated high school on the Honor Roll.

“I mean, I smoked a little pot once in a while and popped a lude now and then, but not much. But then I became a go-go dancer. That was how I met the man who got me hooked on heroin. I’ve already told you the rest.”

“Were you ever abused or molested as a child?”

“No. Nothing like that. I just got in with the wrong people.”

“What about your obsessive-compulsive behavior?”

“What are you talking about? I don’t have that. I’m bipolar.”

“Have you ever heard of Seabrook House?”

“You’ve mentioned it. What about it?”

“It’s an in-patient drug rehab program. Some people can have their fee paid by the county.”

“I wouldn’t want that. First of all, the other girls there would hate me. That always happens. And I couldn’t stand such a regimented system.”

“Well, one of my Saturday stops is often Seabrook House. Last week, I saw a woman there I dated one time. She has a degree in literature. Very smart.”

“I don’t need that place. I’m going to do it on my own.” Kim sat back straight, clenched her jaw, and squared her shoulders. “When I have enough money, I’m going to stand outside the Broadway methadone clinic on a Saturday and buy as much methadone as I can from the junkies in the trust program. They get a full week’s supply on Saturdays instead of having to go every day.” A glance, no more, then again she faced forward. “A lot of them don’t need all they get anymore, so they sell what they don’t need on the street. I’m going to go there with Ron and get myself clean that way.”

“Sounds good. I hope you can.”

Kim had mentioned this before. If indeed Ronnie were to help Kim with that, her plan might succeed. The tall woman was an intelligent and mature forty-two. I had dated her twice. Kim knew and had said that was cool.

“It’ll happen,” Kim said.

“This woman I mentioned, she was supposed to help me with my book. Give me the female perspective. Ya know?”

“You told me you wanted *me* to do that with you!”

“Yeah, only, the day we were supposed to go look at your high school writings—Remember?—you blew the whole day with that pig Helen, and then you disappeared on me.”

A quick, deep frown, a snap of the head away, and then a return to looking straight forward. “I have a friend who works at the Camden Public Library. We could go there to sit and write.”

“Don’t know about that, but first, I need to see your writings.”

“You don’t need to. I’m good.”

Leaving the car wash, Kim said we should cop.

“Already?”

“It’s getting late, and you still have to visit your son. And we haven’t eaten yet, so we’ll have to stop at the downtown McDonald’s.”

Though parked on a busy main street a block from the set, I made sure the doors were locked and frequently checked my mirrors as I awaited her return. The warnings from Ali and Trisha were getting into my head. I had never before been fearful. I had been cautious, not fearful.

Angel once said, “You’re a nervous guy, Steel.” Did my other dates perceive me that way? Did Kim?

Already in the drive-through line, Kim said she wasn’t hungry, that if I’d give her five dollars, she’d eat later.

She asked me to park and eat in the section of parking lot behind the building. The light overhead would leave the inside of the car in shadow.

She took her purse and the blue soda water to the back seat.

“Don’t look!” she again commanded.

But this time, I peeked.

Kim spread her rig on the seat beside her. She tore a pinch of cotton off the cotton ball and placed it on her lap. She spooned half the bag of heroin from the one-inch square wax fold, poured blue soda water into the spoon, and used her lighter to bring it to a boil. She placed the pinch of cotton into the spoon, used her teeth to remove the cap from the needle, and filtered the solution through the cotton to fill the syringe. She exposed her belly and injected the fluid.

“What the hell!”

“I told you not to look!”

“You used that blue stuff? It has contaminants in it! It could have bacteria in it!”

“I’ll have to risk it.”

Kim repeated the process with the rest of the drug, but this time, there was a snag. A blood clot had formed in the needle. She fussed and cursed until she was able to clear the blockage and inject herself again.

I’d like to say I was unfazed, but I was shaken.

As Kim secured her equipment and put herself together, I called first my son, then my daughter. Neither answered. But in any case, it was time to drop Kim off and go home.

Kim changed her mind several times about where to let her out. She wanted me to think she was indecisive about where she’d sleep that night.

She needn’t have worried. I knew her habit would have her turning tricks as soon as I was out of sight.

“Just take me to Broadway. I’ll decide from there.”

“Cricket, define our relationship.”

“We’re dating.”

“I love you, Cricket.”

“I love you too.”

She looked at me as she said it. I believed she believed it.

Was not looking at me when she spoke a quirk, perhaps related to her OCD? Was it a type of autism? She did look at me when we made love, although her eyes were more often closed than open during those times. I prefer open eyes, looking at me, enjoying me.

“You’re my poison,” I said. “But I can’t keep spending all this money on your drugs.”

“Yes, but this keeps me safe and off the street, and with *you* instead of with another man. If you really love me, that should please you.”

Not the first time she had replied in that manner; the logic still held. Or did it?

“I don’t like it, but as I said, you’re my poison. I only wish I could fully trust you.”

“You can!”

But I knew I couldn’t.

We turned onto Broadway. Kim said the driver of the car behind was a regular, a lawyer who paid her from eighty to a hundred dollars. I suggested she let me get far enough ahead that she could get out and catch his eye.

“No! No. Don’t do that. Just let me out at Kaighn.”

“Why Kaighn?” That was an odd place for a girl to get out.

“Don’t be mad. I’m going to use the five for more ready.”

“I didn’t know you could buy it for five dollars.”

Her reply was more a grunt than a word. *She must have more money.* I had only ever heard my ladies speak of buying “dime bags.”

And I was unaware of a set on or near that corner. I had never seen anyone loitering there who I thought could be a dealer.

I parked several yards before the intersection.

“You don’t want to try to catch the lawyer?”

Her thoughts elsewhere, she didn’t reply. Her eyes darted and scanned in all directions. Was she looking for someone and not finding him? Or was I witnessing an adverse drug reaction? I worried.

Perhaps her body was reacting to the blue soda water. Or she was still suffering from the flu.

Was she having second thoughts about us as a couple, in whatever manner we might define us, whatever she had meant by “dating”?

Was I overthinking it? Maybe, just maybe, it was nothing more than that she expected to see a dealer of nickel bag crack and was dismayed that none stood there.

Damn! I always overthink it.

So, I cleared the stardust from my eyes and reminded myself again to be careful with this adventure. Don't take it so seriously. It's all fantasy. Be cool.

Fantasy...represents a flight into a dimension that lies beyond the reach of time.—Walt Disney

Kim returned the seat to its original position. She checked front and back for anything left behind.

Appreciated. Unlike her. She was changing.

I would pick her up at Poky's the next day, the same time.

The kiss goodbye was dutiful. An honest kiss. The kind you'd give your boyfriend.

I had time to think during the lonely drive home.

Why had Kim become angry at my suggestion she get out so the lawyer could see her? Was it because she needed first to smoke the crack to remove the signs of her recent heroin use?

Maybe the lawyer would check her purse and refuse to pick her up if she was carrying illegal drugs.

He'd not only refuse to take her to a set, but he'd boot her from his car if she were to request it.

Anyhow, as she'd said, the man would continue to cruise until he found her. There was no hurry. He could wait. The ready couldn't.

I called home. I told Meredith I had been unable to reach either of my kids, so I was on the way.

She sounded sad. Why? Because I'd been unable to visit my children? Or had she viewed my behavior as secretive? She was suspicious.

She must be thinking that I had been gone all day and not sufficiently accounted for all that time. To unload the car, take it through a carwash, and still not have visited my family would not have taken me all day.

Or was that only in my head? A guilty conscience?

It might have been that she was still doing laundry. It was nothing more than she was tired.

I wouldn't ask. I might not like what she had to say.

Yes, it's true. I tend to overthink things.

Meredith said she was about to step into the shower. She'd see me when I got home.

Before getting out, I checked the car for evidence of Kim having been there, even though I had seen her do the same. I found a black scrunchie on the back seat. Lesson learned: Always check after Kim for anything she left behind.

As I readied for dinner, much more damning evidence was revealed in the bathroom mirror: glitter from Kim's makeup on my face and genitals.

Only because Meredith had left me to my own devices as she huddled over nursing paperwork had my dalliance with Kim not been exposed.

That night, as I reviewed the day's adventure, I had a thought. Could the mysterious spider bites on Kim's belly she had shown me on our first date instead have been infected injection sites?

But she was changing. She'd not tell such lies again.

Until she told the big one.

CHAPTER FOUR: *The Big Lie*

Oh no! What now?

A bit insensitive, perhaps, but that was my first thought when Trisha called late morning as I drove to work. As we often did, we agreed to meet in the vacant lot across from Doctor Spiegel's office, the last Broadway stop, just past the park. The route took me there every weekday. A deep affection I still felt for Trisha made it difficult to say no.

I found her heading that way, a block from where she once lived with Ali and his strict Muslim parents. She trod hunched, her eyes to the ground. I cleared the seat, beckoned her in, and parked around the corner.

She opened her coat. Her left arm lay within, not in the sleeve, with her hand pressed hard to her belly. I looked at her face and again felt her pain.

Trisha blushed. "Remember there was something else what I needed money for, what I didn't wanna say?"

"Yes. I remember."

Trisha looked at and pointed to her crotch, her hand bobbing up and down to be sure I saw to where she pointed.

"I went to the doctor there," she said as she jerked her head in that direction, "'cause it hurted so bad. He said it was a boil, and he said he had to...um...What?...What?...*lance* it! I was really pissed off at you and Ali at first 'cause you're the only men I let have sex with me without a rubber. But he said it wasn't a STD, so I'm not mad at you no more. So, anyhow, I need twenty dollars for the medicine the doctor wrote me."

Could I believe her? But Trisha's face and voice were so twisted from her pain that I winced at the thought.

I took out my wallet to show her I had only enough for the shopping list taped to the dashboard as a reminder. Instead, I found another sixty dollars, tucked there by Meredith. Something she rarely did.

I gave it some thought before handing her a twenty. What if Meredith had put the sixty there for a specific purpose? I'd chance it to help Trisha. She took the bill as though embarrassed for having asked.

"Ali told me 'bout his talk with you the other day. He said he thought you was gonna cry. I told him you're very sensitive."

"I appreciate his advice that I should stay away from Kim, and in fact, I intended to do that, but she called me Sunday, and I spent four hours with her. You know I love you, Trish, but I'm in love with Kim. I can't *not* be with her."

A subtle nod from Trisha said she understood but didn't much like it.

"This might sound stupid..." I started. "I mean, you might think I'm trying to con you..." Trisha cocked her head as I stammered. "I know you're gonna misinterpret what I'm gonna say, but, uh..." One more try to say what I wanted to say without it sounding oafish. "This money I'm giving you isn't for sex." *Ah! That's a good start.* "But from the love I feel for you." *Good. I'm on a roll.* "But I still need the sex. How else am I gonna stay away from Kim? I'm gonna need to collect on all the free dates you owe me from the money you've borrowed." *Ugh. Yeah. That does sound quite oafish.*

Trisha smiled. I was encouraged by her smile.

"Do you still have the room?" I asked for future reference.

"Uhhh...kinda. It's up in the air right now."

"I came back to look for you Saturday night to see if we could date."

Again, a sweet smile. That meant she would have welcomed it had she been able.

An explanation for "up in the air" would have to wait.

So while her pain precluded sex, I was satisfied that at least I'd be able to collect on that debt sometime soon.

"I'll have to go now," I said as I pointed at the dashboard clock. "It's getting late, and I still have to meet Kim and then get back to work."

Trisha frowned at the mention of Kim, looked down and away. I drew her to me, and we kissed each other's cheek. She slid from her seat, a hand again pressed firmly to her belly, and softly closed the door.

From Doctor Spiegel's office, I rushed to Poky's and tapped my horn.

Kim and Poky popped through the door, wearing smiles meant for me to see. Kim pranced across the street to the passenger side, shook her hair as she took her seat, and without buckling up, she turned to me and smiled.

Poky came to my door. "How you been, man?" he asked as we shook hands. "You look good. Well-rested."

"I guess that's because my baby's sitting next to me," I sang. *Oh no! What a stupid thing to say.* My eyes glazed. I turned red as I heard my own puerile words. "Well, but the truth is," I said, hoping to erase that utterance from our ears, as if it were a line written on a sheet of paper, "I didn't get much sleep last night, Poky."

"Steel," Kim interrupted, "I have some news you should like. Poky can tell you. I joined a rehab program at the church! Tell him, Poky."

"Yeah, man. We was there all morning filling out the papers."

Great news. If it's true. But Kim never prances.

"Now, I need thirty dollars to file the papers and get into the program."

Having already gone through this with Dottie, I was both open to the possibility yet doubtful that there was such a program at the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, a half block from the park. And based on her comments the day before, I doubted that Kim would sign up for it if there were.

But Poky was also telling me this, and he'd not lie to me.

In my wallet remained two twenties and a few singles. I pointed to the grocery list taped to my dash.

"I'll have to make change of one of these twenties, so I have enough for food shopping tonight. Can I go to that store up there to get it?"

"Yes. I'll go in with you. I need cigarettes."

Poky retreated to his stoop as I drove the three blocks to the store. Kim pointed to the public payphone bolted to its front outside wall.

"That's the phone Poky and I call you from."

Kim added a Twinkie to her order. She kept ten from the change and handed me the rest.

I parked in the church lot across the street from Poky's. Yet fearing I was being duped, I handed Kim the other twenty.

"I hope you have enough left to do your shopping."

I hoped so too.

"When you come by tonight, I'll show you the paperwork to prove this is happening."

"I'm sorry, Cricket, sweetheart, but I won't be stopping by tonight. I have to do that shopping and squeeze a workout in."

"Aww," Kim protested with a pout. She fidgeted and leaned forward. She glanced into my eyes as though worried she had not yet convinced me.

"They said I have two options." Another glance. "I could try to go it alone on the street or go away for treatment, so that's what I decided to do because it's going to be a rough two weeks getting started."

"I thought it was thirty-five to enroll. That's what Dottie told me."

"But Dottie never went through the program!"

True enough, and my memory could have been faulty. But, how would Kim have known this about Dottie? Might Kim have talked with Dottie, learned of Dottie's ruse, and decided to try the same? Had I told Kim of it, enough for her to fabricate this story? I was unsure, and while the distrust was annoying, there was no harm to me. I chose to trust Kim, and thereby Poky too. I'd play along for the benefits if nothing else.

So, I assumed it was true, and with that assumption, felt proud of her decision. I cupped her head between my hands and pulled her to me for a

kiss. She offered a pursed-lip, perfunctory kiss, but I pressed into her for a full-on, smashmouth kiss of passion. She allowed it.

She let me continue to hold her in that manner, so I again pulled her to me for a second kiss like the first, my love for her overwhelming.

“Now I have to go back to the church to give them this money,” she said, as though sorry to have to leave me to do so but confident that I too would think immediacy a need. “Poky’s going with me. We have to go out of the way to avoid walking past Joseph’s.”

If she was hinting they could use a lift, I was too dense at the moment to see it, my thinking clouded by suspicion and muddled by love.

My greater concern was not for her and Poky, nor even for the truth of the matter, but that I stay on schedule.

“Do you still have the ticket from Officer Mary Murray you’re holding for me?”

“Uh-huh. Don’t worry, Cricket. I’ll let you know when it’s time.”

“Even though I gave a fake name, I’ll still have to go because she’ll recognize me and arrest me if I don’t show up.”

We agreed to meet again tomorrow, same time, same place, and kissed goodbye.

I resumed the route with a growing, gnawing sense of guilt, not only for not having thought to offer them a ride, but also because I had withheld the truth. Not that I should have told Kim I had met with and given money to Trisha earlier. It would only have upset her and served no useful purpose. But not telling Kim felt like lying; it had made me false.

Not only did I now have to compartmentalize reality from fantasy, but also the Kim fantasy from the Trisha. The guilt I felt said I was failing at that. More than guilty, I felt foolish. Foolish for letting these women use me to their own purpose, and for the foolish words that so often lately spewed from my mouth. Would that I could undo them, both words and deeds. In real life, however, the foolish things we say and do are indelible.

Conscience: An inner voice that warns us somebody is looking.

—H. L. Mencken

* * *

There are two ways you can tell when a person is lying: too many details or too few. There’s one way to tell when Kim is lying: Her lips are moving. That’s just a joke. She might have been telling the truth.

But her claim to have signed up for a drug rehab program increasingly dogged me as a new day dragged on.

Monk sat where I would often find him, on the Carnegie Library steps. I'd ask him. He'd know.

I called him to me as I stood in front of Doctor Stewart's office at the other corner of the short block.

Monk had heard nothing confirming Kim's story. But he was doubtful, for sure, now making me more so.

Ooh! Ooh! Another thought. What if Kim had said they would go out of the way to avoid walking past Joseph's was really in case I saw her heading to a set rather than to the church? Nah. Again overthinking.

Trisha stood near the park. I signaled her to meet me across from the doctor's office.

I backed into the makeshift parking lot and cleared the seat. Trisha took a cautious glance around, jumped in, and offered a quick kiss.

I asked if Sacred Heart Catholic Church offered such a program as Kim—and Dottie before her—had described, with a thirty-dollar sign-up. She didn't know but said she'd check on it right now and try to get back to me before I left the lot. She ran off.

Marisol greeted me with a sly smile. "You little devil, you," she said. But she wouldn't reveal what warranted the tease. I hounded her to explain while she completed a Test Request Form (TRF). And Anna, though busy with patients, offered a knowing smile. "Marisol?" I begged. Fond of both women, I enjoyed their playful taunt.

I would have liked to have Marisol in my bed, but that could never be. The risk to my continued employment if I were to come on to her and she object was too high, as with many other provocative, flirtatious women on my routes. And unnecessary, as long as I had all my toots always ready and happy to serve. If I stuck with the hookers, I could still convince myself I wasn't cheating on my wife.

Oh, but now I had to wonder: Would that be cheating on Kim? Again, overthinking.

Trisha waited at my car.

"I found out the church does got a rehab program," she said, beaming, "but it's free."

"What about the thirty-dollar fee?"

"They didn't say nothin' 'bout that. I didn't think ta ask."

"Oh, okay. Thanks, Trisha, for checking on that for me." I frowned for that not yet being clear. "Kim said she paid a thirty-dollar fee to sign up, but

it wouldn't cost her anything beyond that, so it still could be that she's telling the truth." I was reasoning more to myself than to Trisha. "But if she's lying, I'm gonna need you."

"I'll be here for you."

Trisha lingered. We chatted.

My fondness for Trisha remained, even as the rose-colored glasses through which I had once viewed her were now off.

I was enjoying our idle chitchat until, "I could really use ten dollars."

"I don't *have* any more money, Trisha. I gave you and Kim almost all I had yesterday, and I was supposed to have that money for groceries and car washes and stuff like that. Look!"

I showed her the five singles remaining in my wallet. She begged from me four of those five dollars.

"I'm gonna need *you* to get *me* some money, to replace all I gave the two of you!"

"I can get you twenty dollars tomorrow."

Not that I believed her, but I gave the four dollars. Why not? The five did me no good when it was fifteen I needed for the shopping. And it might buy me more free loving. Besides, my Social Security would be in the bank tomorrow morning.

"I need fifty!" I said as I tucked away my wallet. Let the played be the player.

"That might take a while," she said, "but I'll try 'cause you been givin' *me* so much."

Maybe it was cynical of me to believe that another lie. She might have meant it when she said it. *No harm in having asked. She might get it if she tries. Hah! Slim chance.*

I parked across from Poky's place and tapped the horn.

A chuckle escaped as I looked at the boarded-up rowhome. A play on words occurred. *Poky's place* became *Poky's Palace*, a jeering jest in no way directed against the man. At least, I didn't intend it to be. But perhaps it reflected how I was feeling at the moment about Poky.

He approached my lowered window. A guilty look and body language gave him away. A guilty conscience needs no accuser.

"She ain't here, Boss. Got no idea where she is." That sealed it. Kim had lied, and Poky had been in on it.

"Poky, her story about signing up for rehab at the church, well, I don't buy it, and so that means *you* were lying to me, too!"

My anger welled as I spoke. Poky jerked back with a pained expression.

“No, Boss! I *did* go to the church with her. I din’t stay there with her, so I can’t say what she done once I left. I go to that church all the time for stuff.”

His last statement, because it was irrelevant—too much detail—was proof he was complicit.

“The story you told me was that you stayed with her and helped her fill out papers.”

“Well, yeah, Boss, yeah, but she really din’t need my help, so she said I could go.”

“Poky, she said you stayed to help her with the paperwork, and you were standing right there yesterday, agreeing with her.”

I had hoped he would say something logical and convincing. But his every response and guilty look convinced me that, as I had feared, Kim had again played me for a fool.

“No, Boss. Really. I only took her there. Whatever she done after that, I din’t have nothin’ to do with.”

“I won’t be giving her any more money. Here. Take this,” I held out the summons Kim had received from Officer Mary Murray. “This is the last act of kindness I’ll be showing her. She’ll need this.”

Poky hesitated but took it.

“Will you give it to her?”

“Yes, Boss.” Poky looked and sounded like a chastised little boy.

“Poky, you keep calling me ‘Boss.’ You never did before. That sounds disrespectful. I don’t think I’ve ever done anything to you to deserve your disrespect.”

“No, there ain’t no disrespect intended.” Poky wasn’t so dark I couldn’t see him blush. He looked down and away and scratched his cheek. “I call everybody ‘Boss.’”

I looked at him as though to say I knew that wasn’t true and that I was disappointed in him. I put the car in gear. Poky looked at the ticket in his hand, looked at me as though he had just lost his only friend, and turned to trudge across the street and return to his wretched home.

Had I been unjustly cruel?

I returned to the route, perhaps as upset about the incident as Poky must have been.

Still upset from the confrontation with Poky, Trisha’s call half an hour later brought no relief. She had a favor to ask of me in person. I had no wish to see her again this day, but I agreed to meet later that evening. She might reward me with a blowjob or, better yet, a quickie, but I wasn’t thinking much, just reacting, being me.

She stood like a fretful beggar. Wearing the same faux-fur coat that had shed on the seat, same red gloves, red knit hat, and ratty purse, the sight of her brought mixed emotions.

Trisha again needed a lift to Uncle Claude's house in Mantua.

I couldn't refuse because after the last time I took her there, I had said, "Anytime."

Uncle Claude, Trisha claimed, had money for her. How much or why she didn't offer.

Once on the highway, I told her of my face-off with Poky.

"But nothing is proven yet," I said. "Do you think you might be able to get the truth for me?"

How foolish of me to think she would want to, or even that she'd tell me the truth if she were to find it, but I was desperate, and she agreed, so instead of feeling foolish, I felt wise.

And in my wisdom, I told Trisha of the night I took Kim and Joseph to the house where Kim claimed to have overdosed to look for the bag of her belongings. I told of Joseph having pulled a gun on the woman.

"Oh my God! The word on the street is that Kim and Joseph pulled a robbery, and they had a white man as a getaway driver. That was you?!"

As I'd had to do with Angel, I now had to set the story straight to ease her mind and dispel the rumor.

Perhaps with a point to make, though maybe it was no more than that she had forgotten, Trisha repeated much of what she had said the day before. Hearing her sweet voice, I imagined the Trisha I had become so very fond of on our first date.

"You're the only man Ali likes enough what he don't get mad I date. And you're the only man but Ali I let have sex with me without a rubber."

The subject and her voice aroused lustful thoughts. That might have been her intention.

"Are we gonna be able to have sex when we get back?"

"I can't. Remember? I'm pretty sore from the boil, so we're gonna hafta wait until it heals."

"I was thinking of oral."

"Well, to tell you the truth, me and Ali was planning to get high after I get back. We already put it off so's I could do this with you."

"Was I wrong or out of line to ask you for sex?"

"No! Not at all. And believe me, you'll get lots of free sex for all you've done for me."

There was a moment of silence as I savored the thought of “lots of free sex.”

“You angry at me ’cause I said no right now?”

“No. I just didn’t have anything else to say.”

“Oh.”

“I’m always amazed at how many words it takes for street people to say what could otherwise be said in a few. Like, last week, when Angel and John were deciding what to do to avoid the drug dealers chasing them. It took them ten minutes to say what I could have said in one. Maybe you’d like to hear about what happened that day. It’s a pretty exciting story.”

“Oh, well, sure! On the way back.”

We had arrived at Uncle Claude’s.

On our last trip here, Trisha had said her urgency to pick up the box of books was because her uncle was moving, yet here he remained. There may have been any number of causes for that. It was none of my business. If she was lying, it didn’t matter.

I called Meredith while I waited. I told her I’d be late; I was helping a friend. That was the truth. Meredith said she’d hold dinner.

Per Trisha’s request, I had waited in the car.

Per my request, at least I thought it was, Trisha’s visit was brief.

On the highway back to Camden, I asked if she still wanted to hear that short story. She said she did.

I started with the night before, when a police car pulled alongside as I drove the wrong way on one-way Market Street.

Trisha gasped and then chuckled at my good fortune when the cop let me make a U-turn and continue on my way. She laughed again when I told of Angel having slept the night in a tree.

“I heard Angel was in trouble ’cause she stole a dealer’s stash.”

“No. It wasn’t like that at all.” I told the story of their run-in with the drug dealers as John had explained it to me and as I had seen for myself.

We arrived at her corner as the story ended with my date with Angel.

After pecks on the cheek and friendly goodbyes, I hurried home.

Although I had become horny for Trisha when she spoke of condom-free sex, she now seemed more a friend than a lover, though not a very good friend. Her intentions were dubious, as she only ever called to ask for money or a favor.

But who could blame Trisha for her hostility toward Kim? Kim was bad for me and Trisha’s main competition for my money. Trisha’s warnings about Kim might be proof of affection for me. She might have been jealous

of my feelings for Kim. That seemed so, if I were to judge by recent talks, but how could I know whether it was all but an act?

It mattered little. She had her life, and I had mine. She had blemished skin, a poor grasp of the English language, a boyfriend, and six kids. I had a wife and family. And even if I no longer had Kim, I had Angel.

* * *

I found and tossed out Kim's six-day-old peanut butter and jam. It had become hidden and forgotten behind the condiments in my fridge. But I wasn't yet ready to toss away my love for Kim.

Living through this turmoil was much too much fun, too stimulating to give up. No harm had come to me yet, nor did I fear it might.

I wished she'd call to offer proof of her rehab, or her love, or both, but I knew she wouldn't. By now, she'd have heard from Poky. She'd know I knew she had lied. She'd know I had told Poky it was over.

She was an intelligent woman who, no doubt, saw the senselessness of an affair with me. Because she cared, to end my misery, the best thing for me, she would have thought, would be to let me off the hook. To let me find another.

What she would not have realized was that I already knew all that, but that I thrived on the emotion, negative though it be.

My Social Security had arrived. Direct deposit. *Tomorrow I'll look for Angel. Angel's never told me such lies.*

CHAPTER FIVE: *Angel: Still the Best*

It was a long shot, but, with nothing to lose, straight to Camden.

Right to Ali, fortuitously standing near the park.

He'd go with me to the house where Trisha had the room and bring her to me. Though I had money in the bank, I wasn't letting Trisha off the hook.

"Why do you need to see her this morning, Mister Steel?"

"She might have some info about Kim for me, and she was gonna try to get some money to pay back what she borrowed. I need it for groceries."

"Oh? I doubt she'll have any money for you."

Ali brought Trisha to me. He shut the car door for her as she settled in.

With sand in her eyes, droopy eyelids, and uncombed hair, it appeared Ali had awakened her. She had stale breath and body odor.

"Anything new to tell me?"

"Well...um...I saw Kim yesterday." Trisha's hesitation was as though reluctant to give bad news but also as having just been awakened from a dysfunctional sleep. "And I said 'Congratulations' to her, and she looked at me like I was crazy, so I said 'I heard you been doing a rehab program,' and she said she don't know what I was talking about."

But Kim wouldn't have wanted to tell Trisha any of her private business.

"That doesn't sound good, but it doesn't prove a thing. I'll still need you to find out if there's a thirty-dollar application fee. Will you try to find out for me?"

"Oh, well, why not? I'll ask again at the church."

"Any money for me? You thought you could get twenty dollars."

"No, Steel. I couldn't come up with it. I was hoping to bum a few bucks from *you* for something to eat."

"Sorry, Trisha. I won't have any money now until payday. But..." I was about to say, "But I told you, I can't give you any more money."

Whoa! That would have been stupid. While that would no longer be so if my affair with Kim was now over, also, if I were to say that, it would remove all incentive Trisha might have to ask about the thirty-dollar fee. Instead, I said, "I still need you to try to get me some money."

As long as I was asking for money from her, she'd not be asking to get it from me.

She agreed to meet me later across from the doctor's office.

I headed off to work.

When the route had me again on Broadway, I spotted Monk.

At the end of the 500 block, a once-proud Romanesque building now housed a municipal service. Adriana had just joined Monk and a young woman who lounged on its weathered white marble steps.

As I passed through the intersection, I signaled him to meet me. Parked across from Doctor Stewart's Graystone, I cleared the seat.

Monk had no news about Kim. After he assured me he considered himself a friend, I unburdened myself on him.

I confessed my love for Kim and how her latest betrayal hurt. I sought Monk's interpretation of Kim's actions, his sympathy, and advice. But as I spoke and peered into his unsympathetic eyes, I realized that Monk could not feel what I allowed myself to feel. It was in *my* head only. He might never have had the experience, so he'd not understand. He might lack the intellect to have an opinion or be able to express one. He wouldn't care. He'd have no advice. Of that, I was sure. He'd think me foolish.

Even so, I prevailed upon him, as the friend he claimed to be, to do two things for me. He was to find out if Kim had entered a rehab program, and if she had, if she now needed and wanted an apology from me. But if she hadn't, would she apologize to me so we might get back together?

Monk said he'd do this for me, but in turn, I had to promise that if he were to discover and reveal anything to me, I'd not tell Kim he had.

I assured him of that.

I asked Monk to repeat what I had asked him to do. If he could, that would mean he understood, so he'd be more likely to succeed. He repeated only the first part of the task. There was no point in restating it. I had little hope he'd be of help.

But he might be of help by telling me about the pretty toot I had seen him sitting with. Oh, wait. No. Monk would have thought that inappropriate or strange after a moment ago having expressed my love for Kim.

And yet, after the pickup, I laughed at myself. What might I have done had I the time and the money on me? Would I have dated the pretty toot who sat with Monk? Or Adriana if she remained?

Again, I laughed when I drove past an attractive hooker a few blocks afterward—a woman I had often seen and who always returned my smile. Would I have signaled her? My behavior was so often out of impulse.

On my way to see if Trisha had answers or money, I waved off a shapely blonde trying desperately to flag me down.

I had no time. I didn't know her. Anyhow, she was ugly.

I waited for Trisha half an hour. She didn't show.

I dared to honk where she rented the room. No response. That was all I would do.

It was a workout night, so straight home after work.

But I already knew. There'd be neither answers nor money.

* * *

It seemed good news when Trisha said that, yes, the church did have a thirty-dollar fee to help a woman get into a rehab program. But I suspected she lied and was setting me up when she then claimed that the people from whom she rented the room had doubled the rent to sixty dollars. They were keeping her from the room and from getting her clothes until she paid. She asked for thirty dollars.

"That's ridiculous, Trisha. There's no way I believe that. Besides, I've told you, I don't have the money right now."

"Yeah, but if it was that drug addict bitch Kim asking you, you'd go right to the bank to get it for her!"

"That might have been true before, because I'm in love with her, but not now the way things are between her and me."

"You should stay away from that girl!"

"Well, she's probably done with me now anyhow for not believing her because, since you said that there is a fee, then it could be that Kim really did sign up."

"No! You can't believe nothing that lying bitch says. You know that."

"Yes, but if she was telling the truth about that and so now she's angry at me and hurt because I didn't believe her, then maybe that was her last straw. Trisha, I need you to find out for me and tell her what I'm thinking and feeling."

I heard what I had just said.

"Yeah, well, that ain't gonna happen."

"Anyhow, I don't see how I can help you."

"You gotta help me, Steel! I can't afford to lose all my clothes!"

"I have no money!"

"Can't you do *something*?" she begged as tears flowed.

"Maybe I could get it for you later and meet you after work."

"But I need it *now*. I gotta get ready to start back to work as a EMT. They took me back. I gotta start at three."

"I'll see if I can borrow it from Doctor Spiegel."

Moved by her tears and a lingering affection and open to the slightest chance she was telling the truth, I would try to borrow it. I didn't have it on

me and had no time to hit the bank. I wouldn't want her to lose her clothes and her job because I was too cheap to help or too distrustful.

Trisha waited by my car as I crossed the street to Doctor Spiegel's.

Marisol and Anna tried to hide their surprise and concern when they heard me ask to borrow from the doctor. He handed me the thirty dollars without question. I thought then to ask for forty, but the thirty had already been extended.

Trisha stood outside the office.

"He loaned me thirty dollars," I said as I held a couple of tens out to her, "but I gotta keep ten for the carwash and stuff, or my wife will ask questions."

"I can work with this." A beautiful smile and a tippytoes kiss on my lips. "Steel, I promise I won't ever ask you for money again."

"If you do ever ask me for money, from now on, I'm gonna want proof of what it's for. And I expect you to start paying me back, either with sex or with money."

"Want me to call you tomorrow?" Her sly smile hinted her method of repayment would be sex.

"Yes," I answered, warming to the idea. "Call me around five thirty or six. Will you do that?"

"Yes! Definitely! Ya know, I ain't been dating much lately. 'Specially since I had that thing on my private part. That's one reason I need the money. And, I can't do nothing till it heals, anyways."

"What about blowjobs?"

"I could do that if I had to."

I wasn't sure if she referred to me, her dates, or both, my question having been as ambiguous as her answer.

Words of love. Tender kisses. Back to work.

An hour later, entering East Camden, *What's this?!* Up ahead! Angel! Walking boldly down the middle of the street directly toward me.

She shrieked my name and waved like a castaway at the sight of a rescue ship. I pulled to the curb and whisked the shoebox and reports to the back seat. She jumped in.

She threw out her arms for an enthusiastic embrace that I accepted with glee. Her hair bobbed as she bounced in her seat, offered a quick kiss, and buckled up. She beamed and asked, "How much time ya got?"

She must have just returned from a date because she held a fistful of bills, and a few also peeked from a pants pocket.

"I have a few stops to make before they lock the doors and shut the gates, but then I'll have a little time."

“Great! I can go with you?”

I cautioned her to stay hidden and be patient as I made the stops.

“I haven’t slept for two days, and I haven’t seen John the whole time!”

“You’d better be careful you don’t fall asleep and wake up in a tree, like you did last Wednesday!” I joked.

“What?! You know about that?”

“Sure. That’s the first thing you told us when John and I found you last week.”

“Really? I hardly remember anything from that day. Talk to me.”

As I continued to work the route, I reviewed that day’s events. Angel laughed when I described how she had paced like a caged tiger outside the West Jersey Hospital ER. She fumed when I reminded her of Whirley’s role in John’s having suffered a split lip.

“We had great sex at Pop’s,” I said, hoping to arouse her with the recollection and get a freebie. “I don’t have any money on me, but we’re near Pop’s right now. Would you like to go there with me?”

Angel laughed. She knew I was serious, but she thought it cute that I’d be so bold as to ask for free sex. Her disappointing response was expected.

We spoke of my further adventures with Kim and erroneous rumors as I drove or as we sat and caught each other up to date. She had little herself to tell. She was bouncy and full of joy, whether high on heroin, amped on crack, or delirious from sleep deprivation, as she insisted was the case more than once. *Oh! Maybe out of joy for being with me! Naaah.*

So perky and exuberant that my desire for her welled. I recalled a hot winter day: Angel processing a white powder in a barricaded room, ample breasts peeking from the unzipped top she wore, giving me an erection and prompting me to ask, “Are you trying to seduce me, Angel?”

Again I mentioned Pop’s room, a mere few blocks away.

Angel said she might have met Pop before that afternoon, but she was sure she had never met Carla, as Carla had claimed. Angel had agreed with Carla only because “it was simpler that way.”

When I had made the last East Camden stop, it was time to drop her off. She gave me directions. I knew it was to a set. Her promise never to ask me to do that for her again perhaps had slipped her mind.

“That’s my favorite tree to sleep in,” Angel joked. She pointed to a tree in Oliver’s Park and chuckled. “Pull over there.” As soon as I had, she said, “I’ll be right back. Stay in the car. Lock the doors.”

Several men milled about in the park and a nearby mini-mart. Angel walked a couple of blocks and turned down a narrow street.

I remained wary.

In ten minutes, she returned. It seemed longer.

We found a quiet, tree-lined side street where she loaded her pipe and smoked her drug. I relaxed, and our pleasant chat resumed.

I admitted my foolish attempts to enlist Trisha's help and to get money for my wallet to replace what Meredith had put there.

"Maybe I could get you a few bucks," Angel said. "I could try. How much you need?"

"Fifty dollars." No need to tell her it was no longer needed.

"Oh. I don't think I can get *that* much, but I can try. Tell you what: I'll call you tonight around eight if I come up with at least ten dollars, and you can come after work. It won't be worth your while if it's less than ten."

"That's right. And if I'm back here, would you go to Pop's with me?"

"You know I can't, bad boy," she said with a chuckle, again amused by my request, perhaps knowing that, for me, it was a truth spoken in jest. "That would be cheating on John if we had sex without you paying for it."

"Maybe you could look for Kim for me and tell her my side of the story. And if she really has gone into a rehab program, you could tell her how bad I feel about not believing her and how I want to apologize."

"What I think is that it looks like she's in love with you, and she went into rehab for you."

"Let's go to Pop's right now!"

Again said in jest, I thought I had read between the lines. Angel could believe Kim truly loved me only because she, Angel, loved me too. But I already knew Angel's response would be the same. Anyhow, I was out of time, and duty called.

"Remember how we started to care for each other a while back?" Angel said. "That wouldn't have been wise. Free sex would be like if we cared for each other that way, so that wouldn't be good."

"I know, Angel. You're right. Really. I agree."

"So! You ready to drop me off on Marlton Avenue now so's we can both get back to work?"

We chatted the whole way and said sweet goodbyes. "Such a pretty face," I said. Angel gently kissed my cheek and unbuckled her belt.

She smiled and turned to leave. I turned to check for traffic.

"Wow! There's enough crumbs here for a whole nother smoke!"

I turned to see Angel pulling crack crumbs off her clothing, the seat, and my lunch cooler lid. For that minute longer, I enjoyed the sight of her.

When she was satisfied she had retrieved all she could, she smiled again, blew a kiss, and left.

I guess Angel didn't earn enough that evening. She didn't call.

* * *

Meredith left early to catch a department store sale. Her absence left me lonely as I slogged through getting ready to start the Saturday route from home.

A glow lingered from my time with Angel, but I remained in a funk. Not knowing what to think or do about Kim's disappearance had me again like that marble torso with a beach-ball-size hole through its middle.

I packed little more than a peanut butter and jam, a nostalgic reminder of Kim, although that had not been my intention.

In the quaint, rural city of Bridgeton, I drove through a self-service car wash and used the coin-operated vacuum to rid the front seat and floor of a sprinkling of remaining crack crumbs.

Why still such affection for Angel, after months of seeing her reckless involvement in sex and drugs? Because I saw her behavior as superficial, as the clothing one wears, and it was the person beneath all that risky behavior who deserved my admiration and affection. As for the disrespect toward her by two or three working girls with whom I had spoken, well, Angel bore an air of arrogance. She believed she was the best and prettiest to work these Camden streets. Perhaps, her haughtiness was a defensive mechanism used to shield her from her demons, much as I was often seen as arrogant by an occasional co-worker and some family.

A call came in for a pickup at Seabrook House.

"Tim! I need a big favor. Could you look at my route sheet from the Saturday before last and see what time I was there and tell me the woman's name I wrote in the margin?"

Silence. I struggled to remember. It had been two weeks since that surprise encounter and six weeks since we had dated. She had been on a power walk down the long driveway with another resident. It was likely she took this exercise at the same time every day. There was a good chance I'd see her again if I got there at the right time. I was still hopeful she'd want to work with me on a book, helping me capture the female perspective.

Although her presence here meant there'd be no sex if we were to collaborate since she'd be drug free and not need the money, I was excited by the thought there might be.

Slim chance, but my motto is that old maxim: Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

My Nextel chirped. I acknowledged.

“*Melissa. Three o’clock.*”

A few minutes after three, I turned into the driveway of the sprawling, rural, residential alcohol and drug addiction treatment and rehabilitation center. Ahead, two women powerwalked in the same direction I traveled, one of whom I was sure was Melissa. I carefully pulled alongside, lowered my window, and spoke as they both looked at me and smiled.

“Excuse me, ladies,” I said. They continued at their exercise pace, so I matched my speed to theirs. “You’re Melissa,” I said, inviting confirmation as I pointed at her.

“Yes,” she replied, her lovely smile unwavering.

Gone, the stress lines from a hard city life I had noted on our date. She had become radiant in the fresh country air.

“Did we wave to each other two weeks ago?”

“Yes,” she confirmed, her smile and pace unchanged.

“Can you talk?”

“No. I’m not allowed to talk to *anyone.*”

Out of driveway, I stopped as the two continued on a narrow walkway to their dorm. I leaned out my window and in mirth I pleaded, “But I wanna talk to you!”

She maintained her discipline and did not look back, though I believe I heard the two young women chuckle.

Recovering addicts are instructed to avoid enablers. I understood that. But I didn’t see myself as such. I was a potential friend and resource.

I made the pickup and left, but with a plan for the next time I saw her.

The remainder of the route went swiftly. There was time to head for town to look for Trisha and Angel. Trisha might have money. Unlikely, but if it were Angel I found, we could talk. And, maybe date.

I hoped not to run into Kim. *Then* what would I do? I’d be forced into a decision: a decision I’d screw up, whatever that decision.

Calls to Angel went unanswered. I hoped she’d call me. Thought my wish had been granted, but it was Meredith I picked up to.

“How much longer will you be?” She wanted to meet for dinner at our favorite restaurant.

“I should be on my way about seven thirty.” I hadn’t lied. But I had built in an hour for adventure.

Although I had money in the bank, I made no withdrawal; took no pill. I would only if things fell that way. Still, I was hoping for *something*.

I cruised all the hooker haunts several times over. There were women I might have dated, but sex wasn't what I needed. Not with a thirty-dollar toot, unless, perhaps, with Angel.

But eventually, I tired of that. I'd settle for Italian.

Meredith waited at the restaurant with a dress shirt and a tie.

When we finished our meal, Meredith took care of the bill and the tip. I was saved. I hadn't thought ahead. I'd not have to explain why I didn't have enough cash in my wallet.

Relaxing, reading the paper that evening, I read another article on the River Line Trolley, due to make its maiden run the next morning. The article reminded me of our plan, Kim's and mine, to be on that first trip.

I fantasized various scenarios in which that still might happen.

I sat bathed in gloom as I mourned the loss of Kim. It was for the best, but I missed her. I wished to be with her. This didn't feel like fantasy. This felt real.

What a maudlin fool I am, I chastised myself. Such childish behavior.

* * *

I shaved and showered. Not something I'd usually do on a Sunday morning. I worried Meredith would notice my change in routine. But she was rushing to run out on her errands and oblivious to my doings. My only plan was to keep busy with domestic chores and be ready if one of my ladies of pleasure were to call.

It was unlikely Angel would call. She didn't need me. She was always busy, never idle from conducting her sex-for-hire business or enjoying lines of heroin or puffs of crack. And if those activities allowed her spare time, Angel loved her crafts. She made jewelry of all sorts she planned to sell one day at the Berlin flea market.

Angel was wise enough to be wary of the affection we shared. She was twenty now, no longer a teen, mature enough to understand that one of us could get hurt, and she knew me well enough to know that the one to get hurt would be me. She cared enough for me to not want that.

But if she were to call, and if we were to date, I had prepared a joke.

Hidden in my car, I had a river stone the size of a baking potato. Onto it, I had taped a label that read in French, *objet trouvé*. Loosely translated, that meant a work of art made by nature, such as a piece of driftwood or a shell. This rock would replace the "perfect pebble" she had lost in a fire.

Discovered last summer at the foot of a mountain trail, Angel had been thrilled to accept the rare memento as a loving gift, and regretted its loss. If we were to date, I would hand her the stone and say, “Try losing this!”

It was also unlikely Trisha would call. She by now must realize that, even without Kim in the picture, I’d no longer give her money, that my only interest would be in having her repay what she owed.

Kim wouldn’t call. Even if I was wrong about her having deceived me, she’d have had more than enough of me: my distrust, stinginess, dating and giving money to other toots, especially to Trisha, that instead should have gone to her without the *quid pro quo*.

It was strange to think of her as “Kim,” now knowing it wasn’t her real name. I had fallen in love with the real person, not the street-hardened, drug-addicted prostitute known as “Kim.”

It was wrong to think of her as “Cricket,” a term of endearment I no longer deserved to use and by which I had known her for too few days.

What does her boyfriend Box Car call her? Had he been released from prison, as Kim had said was due? Was she at this moment in his arms?

It was after midnight. No one had called. I had long stopped reflecting on Kim when I came upon another article in the paper about the River Line Trolley, and she was again in my head. I read of drug busts, robberies, and murders in Camden City and felt great sympathy for her, living in the midst of all that strife.

I fantasized her sitting on a stoop, her head hung low, as Trisha had once described. And me knowing I had contributed to that pain when I might have brought her happiness, had I been a better lover; a saner man.

Humans need fantasy to be human. To be the place where the falling angel meets the rising ape.—Terry Pratchett

Among late snacks, I indulged in a Toblerone to lift my spirits, and later, an Ambien to bring on blessed sleep.

As the pill took effect, I lay in bed and whispered, “Good night, sweet Cricket, wherever you are.”

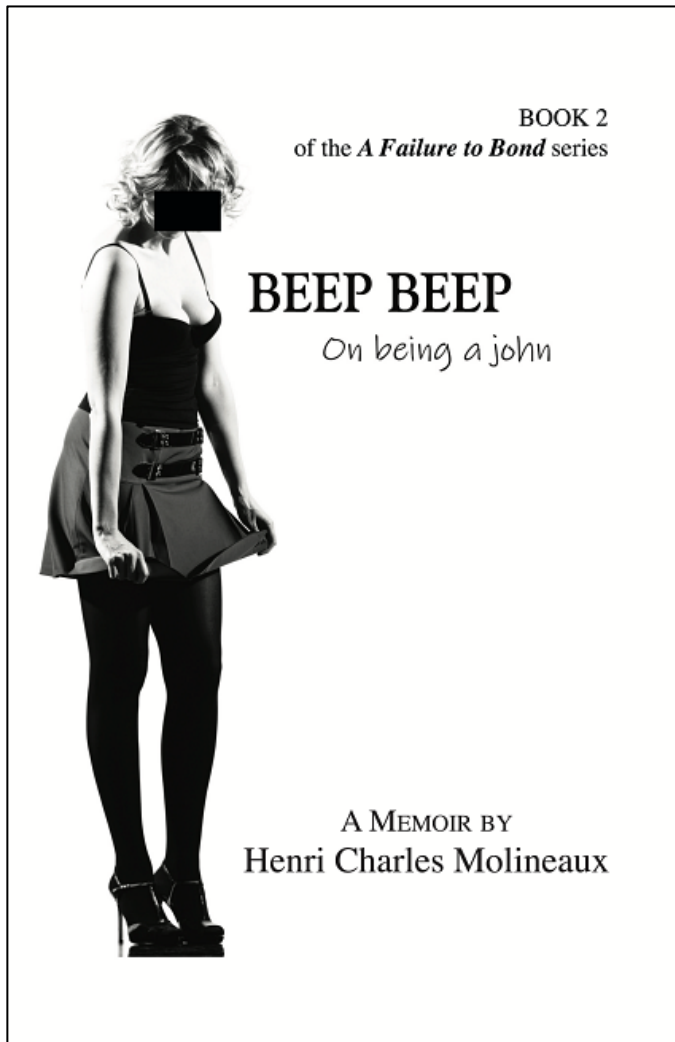
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author grew up in and around New York City during the golden years following World War II, the son of a barroom brawler.

He attended thirteen different grammar schools, some while a ward of the state, as his mother moved him and his two sisters from place to place to escape an abusive husband or a landlord looking to collect the rent.

Married three times, he has three beautiful children and is proud of his three grandkids, but now lives alone.

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