

*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.*

## **Toot Toot: On becoming a john**

By Henri Charles Molineaux

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# TOOT TOOT

*On becoming a john*

A MEMOIR BY

Henri Charles Molineaux

ALSO BY HENRI CHARLES MOLINEAUX  
*Beep Beep: On being a john*

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ISBN: 978-1-63490-387-5

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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2021

Third Edition

**WARNING:** Contains graphic sex and strong language.

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## CHAPTER THREE: *Angel*

My plan was shot to hell. I was not only disappointed but depressed.

I had awakened with an urge to date Angel. I'd leave early, make up for having let her down last Saturday, and still get to work on time.

But the outside sounds of whistling wind and pounding rain threatened my plan. The radio weatherman reported early morning storms. There had been tornados. I turned on the TV for more details. Flooded roads had traffic backed up for miles. Tree limbs were down. *Damn!* I'd not be heading to Camden this morning.

I'll admit it. I'm bipolar. I now know that. Manic-depressive, they used to call it. It's not so bad that I become suicidal anymore, as in my teens, but foul weather is a trigger. Low atmospheric pressure, I believe. Not enough sunlight in the eyes, too, as with SAD, but this is WAD, a little different: Weather Affected Depression. I just made that up. They ought to do a study.

The weather improved, but my mood did not, even as I worked the route, and my pants cuffs dried and no longer stuck to my ankles.

The best treatment for depression for me, though it's no more than a temporary fix, is sex with a woman. I continued past Doctor Spiegel's office to Angel's house. A tan Buick sat parked alongside. I pictured Angel having sex with some fat, ugly loser who couldn't get a woman otherwise. Unlike me. I'm not fat.

I drove on by.

I made the pickup and returned. Maybe the Buick hadn't belonged to a date. The car was gone. A bicycle rim leaned against the door. A signal that no one was home, I presumed. Clever.

I resumed the route. But, before my duties took me out of Camden, I went again to the house. I had to. The rim still leaned there.

I had time to look for Angel. I cruised Broadway the entire mile and a half and back. Other toots patrolled, but not Angel. *Damn!* I picked up the next girl I saw.

I regretted it as soon as she entered my car. She was a skank!

Tall and slender as a stick, she used her purse to hide her face. But I couldn't now ask her to leave. That would have been hurtful.

"I only want to talk," I said. Maybe she'd get out.

"Uh-huh," she said. Her purse still hid her mouth.

"First, are you a cop?"

I tried to peek around the purse as she cupped my crotch.

“That’s not enough.”

I hoped she’d object and get out.

Slowed by reluctance and the use of only one hand as the other still held the purse to hide her mouth, she raised her blouse. Not only did that reveal meager breasts, but a fresh scar running from below her sternum to her navel.

“What’s *that* about?” I asked.

I had wanted it to sound sympathetic. I might have failed at that.

“I was in a bad car accident. I nearly died.”

She lowered her blouse and looked away. Her purse still hid her mouth.

How could I not feel sympathy for this sad young woman and regret her misfortune? Having heard her voice made her human. It was a pleasant voice, young and sweet.

I took a closer look. Her green eyes were kind and pretty; her light brown hair, shoulder-length and curled.

“I was looking for a girl named Angel.”

“Angel is my sister! She’s locked up.”

*Either she’s lying, or there’s another Angel. How likely is that?*

I sat there, studying her, trying to see what she hid with her purse.

“Are we going to do something?” she asked.

“I’m really in a hurry. I was just looking for Angel.”

“I could give you a quick handjob for ten dollars.”

I caught a glimpse of why she hid her mouth: a huge, weeping sore on her upper lip.

“I’m worried because of your herpes sore.”

“This isn’t herpes! It’s from the accident!” She was humiliated and at the point of tears. “It’s ugly, I know. That’s why I’m trying to hide it.”

I managed a better look at the wound. Although I wasn’t sure, it seemed she told the truth.

“Well, I won’t pay ten dollars for a handjob.”

“Why not?!”

“It’s only worth five to me.”

Her head drooped. Tears squeezed from her eyes, rolled down her cheeks, and dripped onto her collar. She mewled like a kitten. I shriveled in my seat. *Give her the ten.* A woman’s tears always get to me, even when I believe they are fake.

“Okay,” she said, so softly I barely heard, “but I’m gonna get slapped around for this.”

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She wanted me to believe she had a pimp who'd beat her for taking less than ten dollars. I didn't think this girl would merit a pimp. I was doing her a favor by offering five.

"We need to go to a safe place," I said.

Tears still flowed as she directed me to a spot a few blocks away.

When we got there, I looked around, then sat looking at her. She looked at me as though to ask, "What are you waiting for?"

I wondered the same.

So I lowered my pants to my knees and was surprised to see an erection. Her long, slender fingers wrapped around the shaft, and she went to work.

She was talented. Her hand brought me pleasure, but still I needed more.

"Pull up your blouse so I can touch your breasts." I wanted it to sound like a suggestion, not a demand, but again, I might have failed at that.

"You Jew me down and still ask for this?" she muttered, but she lifted her blouse.

Although without much body fat, her breasts were too small even for a training bra, I found pleasure in touching.

She soon made me come.

We made use of the handy paper towels. I pulled out my wallet while my pants were still down, in case she enjoyed the exposure, as my lingering erection evidenced that I did. She didn't see the five dollar bill I held out as again she cried softly, her head turned away.

I put myself together and asked, "Do you want me to take you back to where I picked you up?"

"Yes, please." She saw the bill, and as though accepting dirty money, she took it from my hand.

We arrived at her spot.

"My name is Colleen, in case you see me and want to date again."

My only kind reply would have been a lie, so I left it at "Thank you, Colleen." She scanned the area before she slid out.

She had been clean, well-dressed, polite, and well-spoken. Other than for the nasty gash to her lip, her face was unblemished and pleasant. Cute, even. And if a picture of that wound remained in my mind, so did one of her pretty, green eyes.

Well, maybe she wasn't such a skank after all. Shame on me for having been so quick to judge.

\* \* \*



At Angel's house a little after 10:00, I parked alongside as I had seen done the day before. I felt bold as I climbed the stairs and knocked. I heard a two-by-four get removed from being jammed under the doorknob. The door opened an inch. Eyes peered out. The door closed. I stood exposed to the world until Angel peeked out. She smiled in recognition, stepped onto the porch, and shut the door behind her.

We stood face to face, eye to eye as she was of equal height, a mere few inches between us. She smiled. I acted cool. My act didn't fool her.

"I hear you've been looking for me," Angel purred, her voice soothing, affectionate; her smile that of a woman who knows it is she with the power.

"Yes. I was here a couple or three times," I said in my most manly voice. I gazed into her eyes, trying to fool myself into thinking this was a seduction. "And I looked for you on Broadway, Westfield, and Marlton Avenue too."

She raised her brow and smiled for the effort I had made.

"Why are you here?"

"I want to make love to you."

Her face lit up. Maybe it had never been put to her like that before.

"You know you have to pay for it," she politely, seductively said to confirm the nature of our business.

"I know. I have thirty dollars."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Is here okay?"

"Sure, but you'll need another five for the house."

"Oh. Really? Okay. I have it."

Angel ushered me in.

Trey sat on a sofa that faced the front, a staircase behind it at the living room's back wall. From a TV to his right, the drone of crowd chatter between pitches held his attention. He barely looked my way. In a recliner to my left with its back to me, another person watched the game. A battered coffee table sat between them. The TV rested on a buffet set against the left wall, its sound echoing off the hardwood floors and plaster walls. To the right of the TV, a cushioned chair. Straight ahead, the kitchen door and, to its left, the staircase.

My quick impression was that the place was bleak and spartan.

"You go ahead," Angel said. "First door on the left."

As I climbed the stairs, she whispered to Trey.

The door to the room was off its hinges and wedged so tightly within the frame that a half-hearted effort to free it failed. I peered into the room.

Clothing was strewn about, mostly at the left wall, piled between a chiffonier and nightstand that sat near the head of the bed.

The bed sat crosswise to the left against the front wall. A bare window with its shade rolled up admitted the southern sunlight that brightened and warmed the room. Through the glass was seen the barren landscape. To the right of the window, a dresser with mirror. A chest of drawers was to the right. On the nightstand sat an amber plastic radio, an orange ashtray, and a shaded lamp. On the dresser rested a portable TV, its swivel chrome antenna extended straight up.

Immediately past the bedroom, an open bathroom door. Behind me, in another bedroom, sat a bed with no linens.

“Oh! Why are you still standing here?” Angel asked. Her brief flush told me she worried I might have heard her words to Trey.

“The door is jammed. I couldn’t get it open.”

Angel tussled with the door until it jerked loose, almost knocking her over. She nodded me into the room. Once she had the door leaning carefully within the frame and tested to be sure it wouldn’t fall, Angel turned to me and smiled, but she was clearly embarrassed.

“You can put the money there,” she said as she pointed to the TV.

I placed the thirty-five dollars and faced her for further instructions. She stripped naked, lay on the bed, and smiled up at me.

“What do you want to do?” she asked.

“What I came here to do.”

Such manly words, and surely better than the insipid, “I want to make love to you.” I swiftly undressed, looked for a safe place to put my clothes, being wary of bugs, and set them on the dresser. When I turned to look at Angel, she again smiled up at me. I looked down at my equipment. I’d not yet be able to back up those manly words.

I kneeled between her legs, leaned onto my left elbow, with my sex part pressed to hers. I expected arousal. There was none. Hers or mine.

I caressed her face, gently squeezed her breasts, ran my hands up and down her body. I massaged her clit, experimenting with foreplay.

It had been over twenty years since I had made love to anyone but Meredith, and foreplay had never been much required. And before her, I was used to arousal in my lovers without it. But Angel showed none. I had known there’d be no need for seduction, but I hadn’t expected no passion. I rested on top of her, enjoyed the closeness, and caressed again. She rubbed her hands across my back, though all too briefly.

“Is kissing allowed?” I whispered near her face.

“I won’t kiss you, but you will be kissing me.”

She sounded like the famous cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead, describing the sexual practices of primitive tribes.

I pecked at her nose, her cheeks, shoulders, and neck, hoping yet to arouse her and myself. I ran my tongue down her thigh but winced at the sight of her tattoo.

Discordant. Unlike her. Back to her face.

I touched her lips with mine. Would she respond with a kiss? She closed her eyes, then popped them open when I pulled away instead. I hoped my tease would ignite the flame. Again I fondled her breasts, squeezed her nipples, suckled first one, then the other.

My effort seemed tolerated rather than enjoyed. Nor was there much pleasure in it for me, as her nipples remained soft, her breasts hung like a matron's, her belly was flabby, her legs much too big.

But, her face. Ahhh. Her face was delightful.

"Your hair is darker than I remember. I thought you were a blonde."

"I *am* blond," She removed a yellow scrunchie that held her hair in place. She caused her hair to flow out around her head on the pillow. The sun's morning rays piercing through the window turned her hair into a halo. She appeared a true angel. Such a pretty face.

I felt between her legs. She was ready. Now eager to enter her, I believed I was ready too and had better do so before I was not.

"Will you put a condom on me?"

She snatched one from the nightstand. When she struggled to unroll it by hand, she used her mouth. *Oh! Good idea. I like that. Smart girl.*

She lay back and pressed her legs over her head. I was firm enough to enter. I used her legs and my stiff arms to keep a line of sight to our genitals in action. I needed the visual stimulation, I thought, to remain aroused.

But, after a couple of thrilling minutes of my eyes on the prize and the pleasure of her pussy, my arms wearied. My shoulders burned, my heart pounded, and I was out of breath. I softened from the exertion. I gasped for air, my arms gave out, and I collapsed onto her.

Using slow, measured strokes, I hoped not to further wither, slither out, or be pushed out by a tightening vagina.

"Wanna fuck me from behind?"

"I'm not interested in anal if that's—"

"No. I don't do anal. I just thought it might help to do it doggy."

"Oh. No. This is good."

More and more, I was losing it. I'd not be able to re-enter if I were to pull out. But in any case, in another minute, it was gone.

“Would you finish me by hand?”

“You bet! No problem. I’d love to.”

The condom smacked Angel’s hand as she yanked it off. She tossed it to the floor and kneeled beside me, her bouncing breasts on full display.

“I really enjoyed how you did it the first time, with that little twist.”

“You mean like this?”

She did her best. She had pride in her power to please. When all failed, she leaned forward, and my penis disappeared into her mouth.

“Just until you get hard again,” she said with an impish smile.

Her fellatio was good, but my erectile had dysfunctioned.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Why are *you* sorry? *I’m* sorry you didn’t come. That doesn’t ever happen with me.”

“I guess I’m just too nervous.”

“Yeah, you did look a little nervous.”

We talked as we dressed.

“Thank you, Angel,” I said, to let her know I didn’t hold her at fault. “I usually do better the third time with a woman, so if we can count the three-dollar handjob as the first time, then the next time, I should be okay.”

“Three dollars?! I did that? You sure?”

“Yeah. I had only wanted to talk. But you got into my car, and I thought three dollars was all I had, so you said okay. But I had another dollar in my wallet, and you asked for it so you could get something. ‘A bag,’ you said.”

“You were soooo lucky! I must’ve been really high! I bet I agreed ’cause of your beautiful eyes. What color are they?”

“Hazel.”

“Mine too! See?!”

Angel stood wide-eyed, face to face again, so close that the warmth of her breasts kissed my chest.

She pocketed the money and asked, “Will you take me to the park?”

“Sure. I have the time.”

Trey and the other person still sat watching TV as we left.

“Is this where you walk seeking dates?” I asked on the way.

“I don’t have to walk much when I’m tricking. There’s a stoop where I’ll sit here on the left before the park, or I’ll sit in the park, or sometimes stand on a corner. I always get picked up right away, sometimes on my way to the park, or even when I first step onto Broadway.”

“It might be a while before I can see you again. Is coming to the house early like I did today okay?”

“Maybe. Here’s the stoop I mentioned,” Angel said as she pointed. “Turn left at the light.”

I pulled to the curb as I had done with Trey. Monk and another Black man approached from within the park.

“They said your name is Steel?”

I nodded. I didn’t want to say the word *yes* out loud because it felt like a lie. I hadn’t been called Steel in over forty years. But it wasn’t a lie. It *had* once been me. It had been my persona. It could be again, here on the mean streets of Camden.

“Wait here a minute.” Angel pecked me on the cheek and slid out.

I lowered my window as she approached with the two men.

“You know Monk already. This is my friend, John.”

A little over six feet tall, muscular, dark, ruggedly good-looking with specks of gray in his hair, John was closer to my age than to hers.

“John, this is Steel.” Angel smiled at me and said, “These guys can help you find me if you don’t see me.” She knew I’d want to date her again.

“Oh! Okay.”

“Well then, bye-bye!”

The two men followed Angel back into the park.

That afternoon, as I sat recording the numbers in the makeshift parking lot across from Doctor Spiegel’s office, Angel and John ambled by. I honked. Angel smiled and skipped to me as I lowered my window. Having had a premonition she’d walk by, I had already practiced what I’d ask.

“I was wondering if I could get lucky again and go back to the house with you for a handjob for five dollars.”

“Oh! Well...”

“The thing is, I thought maybe I couldn’t come this morning not because I was nervous, but because of my depression. And wearing a condom doesn’t help. It takes away the sensitivity. So, I wanna try again. You remember also what I said about the third time?”

“Sure. Let me check with John first.”

John groused, but Angel returned to the passenger side door and reached for the handle. I cleared the seat and unlocked the door. She slid in and smiled as though I were offering a gift.

“Five dollars for a handjob, right?”

“Yes!” My glee escaped self-control.

“Okay. Gimme the five.”

I dug out my wallet.

She gave directions: right turns; lefts. This wasn't the way to the house. Were we taking a back route? Or saving time by going to a nearby safe spot?

Between instructions, I asked, "How do you recognize a cop posing as a hooker? I wouldn't want to get snagged if I were to pick up someone else."

She looked at first puzzled, then worried.

Had I been disloyal? Dangerously naïve?

"You should stay away from other women! They could be trouble! If you do pick up someone, bring her to me first so I can see if it's a girl you can trust. Tell me you're not gonna go picking up strangers!"

Had she become my caretaker? Had she been insulted by my question? It wasn't even the question I had wanted to ask. I had wanted to ask how *she* avoids getting arrested by a cop posing as a john.

"You were my first, and, really, I don't want anyone else. Really. I just thought..."

Should I tell her about Roxanne, a confession of sorts? That there had already been another woman? No. Why risk losing her respect? I dared not mention Colleen. She might think of Colleen as I had first thought.

"You gotta be careful out here."

"I'll keep that in mind. But I was planning to use only you."

*Use?! I shouldn't have used the word use. She'll be embarrassed or angry. But, isn't the bottom line, after all, that this is a business arrangement, so that word was correct? And, she didn't seem to mind.*

"You're a nervous guy, Steel, and the girls out here will pick up on that right away and take advantage of you."

Angel directed me to a playground next to a low-rent housing project. She left her purse on the seat, ordered, "Lock the doors!" and with the money in hand, she stepped out and disappeared around the corner of a building.

I pulled my sunglasses from a soft case strapped to the sun visor and sat motionless and wary. I replaced them in a few minutes when she reappeared. She jumped in, and with a mission-accomplished-thank-you smile, she leaned forward and looked at me as though to say, "Now let's get the hell out of here!"

She guided me to the house.

Trey sat in the same spot and barely nodded our way.

"You go ahead up to the room."

I went up, but I stood out of sight in the hall.

Five long, loud sniffs, evenly spaced, were followed by several seconds of silence. I stepped into the room when she started up the stairs.

"Were you doing H?" I asked, out of curiosity, as an interviewer might.

My question surprised her. She chuckled.

“I haven’t heard it called *H* in a very long time.” She studied my face. Was it to decide if she would answer honestly, if at all? “I was just so tired from getting up early this morning.” She made light of it with a coy smile and a backward wave of her hand.

“You’ve changed your clothes,” I said.

“I *have*.”

Angel undressed and lay naked on the bed. I barely noticed the tattoo. I lowered my pants to my thighs.

“Take your pants off,” she ordered. I did. “Your shirt, too.” I complied. “Sit here,” she said and patted a spot on the bed next to her.

She took my semi-erect penis in her hand and tenderly stroked. To try to arouse myself further, I fondled her breasts. But not until I closed my eyes, stretched my legs, tensed my body, and pointed my toes—a long ago, self-discovered technique—did her strokes arouse sexual tension.

“When you feel like you’re gonna come, turn on your side toward me and come on my belly.”

But, although I had hardened, after much effort on her part, I got no closer.

“Let me see you jerk yourself. I get hot when I see a guy do that.”

“Don’t play me, Angel.”

She smiled at my perception and resumed.

I again used my technique, but this time with eyes open to enjoy her happy face and bouncing breasts. I sensed an orgasm build. About to come, I strained to turn onto my side as she had ordered. I worried the effort would stall the orgasm, but she saw my struggle and helped me turn.

My eyes closed as the sensation engulfed me; convulsed me; stole my breath and power of speech.

I opened them when I could.

Ejaculate had spewed onto her belly, the bed, and on me.

“Did I shoot?!”

I was amazed at the distance and spread. I caught my breath as we looked at each other in mutual delight.

“Yes, you did!”

She sounded proud of me, as she must have been of herself, and smiled with pleasure.

“You remember what I said that first time?”

“What you said?”

“I said, ‘At my age, a man doesn’t shoot. It just oozes.’”

“As far as I recall, you shot your load *then* too.”

“I’m sure I didn’t.”

“Sure you did!”

“No, I was watching.”

Angel rose and looked for something to cleanse us. She found only a paper napkin in a grease-stained brown paper bag on the dresser. She handed it to me and left the room.

She returned, wiping herself with a wet facecloth. The skimpy napkin had not been enough for me, so I asked to use her cloth. She refused. Nor would she provide one for me. When she turned her back as she dressed, I used a pair of Daisy Dukes—maybe the same shorts she wore the day I met her—that lay in the nearby pile.

We dressed and descended the stairs.

Trey sat at the coffee table, drawing in a sketch pad. Angel took the pad from him to show me Trey’s work.

“Trey’s an artist,” she said. “Look at this beautiful flower! Isn’t this good?!” She handed the drawing to me.

“This is really good, Trey,” I said.

“Thanks.” He reached for the pad.

“You draw a lot?” I asked as I returned the sketch to him.

“Some.”

“Can you drop me off at the park? John’s waiting for me there.”

Yes, and I had the route to get back to. We were swiftly underway.

I was curious to know John’s part in this muddled menagerie, but to ask would be rude.

“We’re planning to buy phones pretty soon. You’ll be able to call me.”

“Good.” I paused to plan what I’d say next. “I reckon you don’t really wanna know your clients’ personal stories and why they use you. You can’t become emotionally involved.”

I wanted her to know me as a person, not as a trick. I wanted to know her that way too.

Suppose she knew what was fueling my depression, why I was willing to pay for her services. In that case, she might become a friend, a confidant, a steady provider of medicinal sex and therapeutic conversation.

“Oh, no. That’s true, but I do wanna know *your* story. Tell me, Steel. What’s your deal? Oh! That rhymes!”

I took her at her word. I spoke of my failures in business and marriage, seeking her sympathy and understanding.

She listened with interest. But the park was soon there.



“There’s more I’d like to tell you, but I gotta get back to work.”

“Definitely wanna hear more another day,” Angel said. “Find me when you can. I like you, Steel. Bye-bye.”

Again, a peck on the cheek. She slid out, and I went on to the next stop.

\* \* \*

How peculiar life is, I mused, how adventure can so fill the minutes of one day, like my time with Angel, and the next day be so uneventful.

Were it not for the locked Conference Room door, and our inability to find the key, so that I missed the season premiere of *Friends*, there would have been little to record in my journal.

And, while dreams are usually forgotten soon after we awake, the dream that woke me early and remained in my memory was not of Angel, or of Roxanne, who had been on my mind as I went to sleep that night, but instead a repeat of a recurring childhood nightmare.

One of two night terrors to haunt me often throughout my early years was one in which several faceless, ageless, knife-wielding wraiths would menace me, their knives held high. In every such night terror, as they closed in, I was powerless to do anything but cower. I curled as an armadillo curls in self-defense, in dread anticipation of those blades. And as they thrust toward my back, before the blows would strike, I would awaken, breathless, and trembling.

## CHAPTER FOUR: *Hot Oatmeal for Breakfast*

My dates with Angel were still a source of pleasant daydreams two days later. They were with me to ease the way as I dragged myself out of bed a few minutes after I realized I was awake.

Because a microwave is noisy, with it whirring and beeps, I waited for Meredith to rise before I cooked my hot oatmeal. I'm nice that way.

Oatmeal had become my daily breakfast several years prior when blood tests showed my cholesterol to be a little high, and medical professionals still thought it a contributor to heart disease.

Oatmeal is a food well known by nutritionists to help lower one's blood cholesterol, and it did that for me.

But it must be the Old Fashioned, not the Quick. It retains its nutritional value when not processed, which the Quick version is. It tastes better, too. Not that oatmeal has much flavor. So, after I cooked it in the microwave, in the bowl, to save time and not have a pot to clean, I'd stir in three shakes of cinnamon, a tablespoon of sugar, then the milk.

I'd often slice a banana in half lengthwise and cut it directly into the hot cereal with a Ginsu knife every eighth inch or so.

Nowadays, thanks to advances in nutritional knowledge, my breakfast menu is much changed. For instance: if necessary, I'll sweeten with raw honey, never sugar. My milk of choice is organic whole milk from grass-fed cows. Hot oatmeal has a place but is no longer routine.

Yet on this morning that had started so well, I couldn't eat it all. I had lost my appetite. Euphoria had morphed into depression. I knew why.

There were many triggers, not the least of which was the reminder that, as I had told Angel, I had failed in both business and marriage.

And so the past two days, I had suffered from my self-diagnosed manic-depressive, now labeled bipolar condition.

I flushed the oatmeal remains and rinsed the bowl.

I always had to rinse the bowl.

Meredith had long since made it *her* job to wash the dishes, leaving only large dinnerware and pots for me to handle. She was fine with poopy diapers and baby vomit, but she couldn't stomach the "slime" residue of oatmeal. Though she knew intellectually it was starch, it made her nauseous. So, I always rinsed the bowl before putting it in the sink with the dirty dishes. I could at least be kind and loving enough to concede her *that*.

No, things weren't at that time and hadn't usually been terrible between us. We never bickered or had angry words. We had been happily married five years. But, unfortunately, as the joke goes, we were now married nineteen; and, I'm not so sure about the first five.

In recent years, if I felt a need, I'd have to coax her into bed. It had to be a missionary quickie, or she'd soon complain of pain from long ago hip and knee injuries. She sleeps on the sofa because she says she can prop the pillows in such a way that she won't wake up in pain.

Without the use of her legs to help support and stabilize me, I'd struggle not to roll off her ample body. From the four-poster bed she had brought into the marriage, it was a long way to the floor. That sounds funny, but of course, it wasn't. I learned to shift our love-making to the middle. Even so, as my arms and shoulders burned, my stamina petered out. Pun intended.

As a result of all that, if I didn't come quickly, I'd give up. In that case, I'd often ask for a handjob, with which she'd usually comply.

But then she'd complain she felt as though she were milking a cow.

More and more, I'd eschew the coitus and just ask for the handjob. The coaxing had become rare.

When we first became intimate, she volunteered that she was working up the courage for fellatio. But she had shunned it ever since, so we never had that as an option.

And so it was that I was jolted from my reverie about the state of my marriage, Angel, hot oatmeal, and other mundane things, by the sight of Roxanne. She strolled farther south on Broadway than I would expect her to be and on the opposite side of the street, approaching Chestnut. I parked, hoping she'd see me. She did. If her enthusiasm was less than at our previous chance encounters, I thought it minutely so. But she was here for a purpose, and I was needlessly keeping her from that. She had little reason to expect that I was ready to date. She came to the passenger side window. It was the courteous thing for her to do and good business.

"Hi, Steel! You working?"

"I am." I tried to sound disappointed. "But, I was wondering. You said you live in North Camden. Couldn't we go there?"

"No. Remember? I told you. But anyhow, I had to move. I'm staying with my grandmother in Somerdale now."

I didn't believe her and didn't care if my disbelief showed.

"When you got a day off?" she asked. "You working tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I've been working most Saturdays for the overtime."

"Sunday?"

“Maybe I can look for you Sunday—”

“You should.”

“But I usually visit my mom on Sundays. She’s been sick. I might have enough time to come look for you, though.”

“Well, I’m out on the street every day. And in the evening too.”

Had things changed, or had she lied? Had I misunderstood? It didn’t matter. Lies would be part of the game in which I was now a willing player.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Could I bum another rubber band?”

“Sure.” I took a couple off the shift lever. “What do you use them for?”

“I use them to hold my hair back...when...you know...out of the way.”

“Good to know they’re going to good use.”

“So, you’ll look for me?”

“Will do. See ya!”

It appeared to be Angel walking in my direction a few blocks further south of Doctor Spiegel’s office. I ran to my car, secured the specimens, and recorded the count. When I looked up, expecting to see her near, she was not. I stepped to the curb for a better view. Only hundred-year-old dwellings and weeds growing through the cracks in age-old sidewalk.

I thought she might be sitting on the stoop she had shown me.

I crawled in that direction, checking right and left at each cross street and past the vacant stoop.

A wave of the hand caught my attention. Monk stood a few feet ahead, waving me to him. I lowered the passenger side window as I pulled up.

“Hey! Wassup?” Monk asked.

“Nothing. I thought I saw Angel and just wanted to say ‘Hi.’ I don’t have any money today, but I couldn’t be this close and not say ‘Hello.’”

“Not looking for a date?”

“No.”

He backed off and walked away.

I used a long-abandoned gasoline station to turn around and resume the route. Either Angel had been picked up, or she had seen me and hid. I feared the latter. What? *Me* paranoid? No. Must not have been Angel I saw.

My imagination had been fueled by desire.

In the tony village of Merchantville, a young couple walked: a cute white girl and a handsome Black youth a step or two behind. I drove slowly by but was not encouraged by body language nor glance to risk an approach.

I circled the block and passed them again. Nothing warranted taking the chance on her being a working girl.

The next stop was a few blocks away.

A young woman was startled as I pulled to the curb just as she passed by in the same direction. She made an abrupt about-face. I hurried the pickup, then used the parking lot behind the building to turn around and resume the route in the direction from which I had just come. She once more strode on the sidewalk to my right.

All the clues were there. She was a working girl. I lowered the passenger side window, caught her eye, and called out.

“Hi! Sorry I startled you. Were you looking for a date?”

“What was that?”

I dared presume she asked me to repeat myself only because she hadn't heard me. I repeated myself louder.

“Oh. No.” She turned away and resumed her stroll at a faster pace.

I drove off. *Whew! That could have gone so much worse.*

Later, I checked my wallet to see if I had enough on me in case she had said, “Yes.” I had twenty dollars. Enough for oral.

Did I have time to look for Roxanne? I checked the dashboard clock. Yes! There was time.

I thought better of it. Sanity prevailed.

\* \* \*

“Are you not feeling well, or are you just tired?”

I had trudged around the apartment all morning, listlessly getting ready for work. Meredith's question surprised me. I had to laugh. As a private duty Pediatric Nurse, she was so perspicacious to the moods and needs of her gravely ill young charges, yet so blind to mine. Was there a hidden agenda or meaning to the seemingly innocent ask? Was she perceptive? Suspicious? Was this empathy? Criticism? But her tone sounded harmless, so I concluded that my concern was just me and my perverse way of looking at the world around me.

Yet, there were times when I'd tell her I was depressed, and she'd dismiss it. I'd tell her she's killing me, and she'd scoff. Couldn't eat, rarely smiled, sleep was fitful and too short. I couldn't summon the energy to work out, even though I had a full rack of dumbbells next to the TV.

I barely greeted her in the morning or said, “Good night,” when we retired. I'd accede to a light kiss on the lips only if she was close and seemed to be wanting and expecting it. I was enthusiastic about nothing.

But she failed to notice.

If she were to acknowledge my despair, she'd have to admit her complicity in it. She had planned to be the perfect wife; but, she had either failed at that or had failed to choose the perfect husband. To her, failure was an outcome best ignored. That was *my* diagnosis of *her*.

It sounds as though I'm blaming her. I shouldn't do that. But, there it is.

Going through the motions, prepping for the Saturday run, I fantasized a heart-to-heart with Angel. I'd tell her why I've paid her for sex. I'd say how fond of her I've become. But would I confess that I always grow fond of any woman with whom I have sex three times or more? Unlikely. Unwise.

I'd tell her what she did right to hook me, what she's done since to reel me in, even as there were things about her I didn't care for—her weight, her coarse language, the tattoo. If she knew what I don't like, she might change. Now, that's a fantasy!

I'd tell her my life story and judge by her body language whether she was interested in me as a person or merely as a john.

I'd ask if she sleeps with anyone at night.

Angel was so lovely when she smiled at me. She did smile at me often. Her smile filled me with a man's pride and arrogance.

*Everybody needs a little fantasy.*—D.B. Russell, *CSI Las Vegas*

And with that, I bound down the stairs, into the company car, and off to my once-a-week duties.

It was overcast and raining as I left, but before the first stop, that had changed. With nimbostratus here, sunshine and blue skies there, heavy rain in the distance, and weirdly wind distorted cumulus elsewhere, the skies were like someone had mixed the pieces from four jigsaw puzzles. My psyche was like the fractious sky.

Nice people here, but no one to flirt with. On to the next. The hours and flat miles rolled on.

*Caw! Caw!Caw!*

A big black bird flew from behind Elmer Hospital as I exited the front door. It flew over my head to the topmost branch of the tallest nearby maple, a branch so thin, it bent under the weight of the lonely bird.

*Caw!Caw!* The bird called out again from its lofty perch.

I had no idea what the crow's calls meant. I don't speak Cawcasian.

Perhaps it sought another of its species.

The Saturday route was supposed to be shared in rotation with the four drivers whose daily routes were combined. In that way, no one would be

burdened by it more than once a month, unless, of course, the month had five Saturdays. The driver was given a compensatory day off during the week. I chose to work it every week, without a day off, for the overtime pay and the solitude. And I started from home.

Unlike the weekday route, most of the many fewer stops were closed when I arrived, so the pickup was usually from an outside lockbox. Through five counties, the route didn't take me into Camden, but close enough that, if time allowed, I could detour into town, as I had the week before.

The desire to see Angel increased throughout the day. I hoped to find time enough to do so.

But a late call had me backtrack several miles, and Meredith had given me a domestic errand. I couldn't risk her getting home before I did and asking where I had been. She'd know if I lied. I'd turn red.

Three hours passed before the sound of her key in the lock. I knew I shouldn't be angry, but I was. I couldn't know what I had missed out on, but I had certainly missed out on *something*.

Nevertheless, like the good husband and good person I usually tried to be, I took her heavy work bag from her and set it alongside the kitchen table.

"Any grocery bags?" I asked.

"No."

"Then, how come you're so late?"

"A client had an emergency, so I had to stay late. I'll put in for the extra time. Have you eaten?"

"No. I was waiting for you."

"You shouldn't have."

As Meredith rustled up something for us both, I turned on the TV for the season premiere of *The District*.

Meredith remained busy in the kitchen and ate her dinner there as she completed her nurse's notes. I used a lap desk to eat, then enjoyed the British version of *Couples*; so much better than the American version. When my show was over, I spread her linens on the sofa. By this time, she had used the bathroom to do all those things a woman does to prepare for bed. I don't know what they are, but I know they take forty-five minutes. When she saw that I had made her bed for her, she thanked me and settled in. I readied myself for bed and soon quietly shut the bedroom door behind me.

As I lay in the peacefulness of the darkened room, the sound of rain grew increasingly louder against the window and aluminum siding. Sleep would not come until near dawn.

\* \* \*

Second to having sex, a win by the Philadelphia Eagles could lift my spirits. They beat a conference rival that Sunday. I went to bed, excited and nervous, with a plan to visit Angel the next morning. I had a daring proposal. Again I barely slept.

\* \* \*

I knocked several times before a sleepy-eyed Monk peeked through a two-inch gap. "Angel's still asleep. Come in. I'll see if she'll get up for you."

It was after 10:00am. That they were still asleep surprised me.

Monk leaned the two-by-four alongside the door.

"Wait here," he said, then mounted the stairs.

Trey walked grumbling into the living room from the kitchen, his face so distorted by rage, I didn't recognize him.

"That bitch ain't gonna live long if she keeps this shit up! She ain't gonna be disrespecting me again! Last night was the last fuckin' time!"

He grabbed the two-by-four from where Monk had just placed it.

"I'm gonna fuckin' go upstairs and fuck that bitch up!" Trey brandished the board. "Gotta teach that cunt a lesson! You ain't gettin' no ass today!"

Monk now stood wide-eyed at the bottom of the stairs. He turned to me and said, "She asks if you'd come back later."

"That whore is only nineteen years old!" Trey continued his rant, not so much directed to Monk or me as to an inner demon. "She thinks she can talk to me like that?!"

Monk saw the two-by-four in Trey's hand. His face went blank.

"Let me talk to her," I said. I would alert her to the threat, and somehow direct her out of bed and to safety.

Monk stood mute, so I started up the stairs. Trey pressed behind me.

"Get out of my way!"

I could only slow him. Monk followed, shouting at Trey. Trey bulled his way past me and into the room where Angel was already up and dressing. She would have heard the ruckus. She saw the two-by-four.

"Get the fuck out of here!" Angel screamed at Trey.

"Yo, bitch! Don't fuckin' tell me what to do in my own house!"

As Trey raised the board to strike her, Monk and I stepped between him and Angel, shouting at Trey, trying to calm him. Angel slipped past us and flew down the stairs. She headed for the door with Monk and me trailing.

"Don't you fuckin' run away from me, junkie bitch!" Trey barked as he pushed Monk aside and grabbed at Angel.



“Get the fuck away from me!” Angel swiped Trey’s hand away with her forearm.

We were bunched at the door. Pressed against it, Angel struggled to get it open. Trey swung the board low between Monk and me. It clipped Angel’s right calf without much power as Trey could get no momentum on the swing. He thrust his arm between Monk and me to grab Angel’s hair. “You fuckin’ better gimme an apology, bitch!”

“I don’t fucking know what you’re talking about!”

Angel wrestled free from Trey’s grasp of her hair and managed to open the door and jump out, with Monk and me right behind.

The remote keyless button on the car key fob unlocked the doors as we ran. I jammed the key into the ignition and looked back in dread. But Trey hadn’t followed.

“Turn left!” Angel ordered as we approached Broadway.

“Turn left up there!” she ordered, two blocks further at Fairview Street.

She pointed to a spot across from the first house and spoke more softly.

“Park there.”

She hunched to look past me for a better view of the house. She honked the horn. Three short blasts. She bobbed to see if anyone had come to the upstairs window or the front door. After ten seconds, she growled and again honked. Three short blasts. No movement came from the house. Angel burst from the car, stormed across the street, stomped up the steps to the porch, and pounded on the door. Monk remained silent in the back seat.

Other than the first two lots, the rest of this block of red brick row homes still stood. Several were boarded up, though not the vacant one next to where Angel stood. Only the last house, at the corner of Sixth Street, showed signs of life. Young people were coming or going or lounged there on the porch. Long-abandoned commercial properties lined the south side of the street, behind six-foot wrought iron pickets or chain link fence.

John appeared at the door. He and Angel carried on a lively exchange for several minutes. John calmly returned inside, and Angel, still fuming, marched back to the car and plopped into her seat.

“That asshole is gonna get fucked up!”

“What do you wanna do now?” I asked as I put the car in gear.

“I’m hungry!”

“Okay, I’ll get you two something to eat. Where ya wanna go?”

“Head back into town.”

Angel turned to me, the tension in her face eased, and she smiled. I returned the smile.

She and Monk discussed it. She decided. We'd go to Broadway Eddie's.

Angel guided me to the landmark eatery's dirt and gravel parking lot at the southwest corner of Broadway and historic Mickle Boulevard. Renamed Doctor Martin Luther King Junior Boulevard five years prior, the old name still appeared on some street signs.

As we walked toward the Broadway entrance and entered, I stayed alert for anyone who might know me.

Front and side were waist-high to ceiling glass windows, the booths to the right. I imagined furtive glances and curious looks from passersby and diners. We made a strange little group, I'm sure, this tall, beautiful white girl, a much shorter Black man, and a skinny old white guy.

While Monk claimed a booth, Angel placed the order, and I paid. We sat with Monk while our breakfasts cooked.

"I'm sorry about all this," Angel said, speaking softly to keep our talk private. "Trey's never been like that before."

"I hope you don't think I'm a coward because I didn't stand up to him."

"No, no, no! You did what you could. It wasn't your place to protect me. You were brave just to stand in the way."

"Not really."

"I got the hell out of there 'cause I didn't want *you* to get hurt."

"You gonna be able to go back there?"

"Sure. It's not his place. I'm the one who found it. Besides, John's gonna set him straight."

A bell rang. Our orders were ready. Angel rose, and I followed.

The daring proposal I planned to spring on Angel, the plan that kept me awake through the night, had me still nervous and trembling this morning, so much so I had skipped breakfast. The scuffle with Trey had me more so.

Though still with no appetite, I knew I had to eat, so I had ordered one scrambled egg. Monk had ordered pancakes; Angel scrambled eggs, fries, sausages, and toast.

Monk doused his stack with syrup. A squirt of catsup on my egg would help me get it down. Angel took the catsup bottle from my hand and squeezed a large mound onto the side of her plate to dip her fries into.

As we ate and spoke in whispers, a clamor outside our window snatched our attention. An overturned car, still rocking, its wheels spinning, had come to rest just past the box of the intersection. Monk tossed the last bite of pancake into his mouth and dashed to check it out. Sirens grew louder and ended abruptly as emergency vehicles arrived.

"I hope no one's hurt," Angel said.

We continued to observe while we ate and chatted.

“Monk is your boyfriend?” I asked, and took a bite of my catsup laden egg.

“No. Kinda sorta was.”

“But, you sleep with him?”

“Yeah, but we don’t have sex. The bed in the other room has bugs, and we don’t have any bed linens for it anyway, and Trey sleeps downstairs.” The mention of his name brought back her anger. “That stupid prick!”

“What’s with John?”

“He’s like a big brother. No sex.” She smiled again, an innocent girl’s smile I had come to know and adore. I chose to believe her.

“I tink you are vewy, vewy pwitty,” I joked as I leaned in toward her.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling at my playfulness, sounding more in agreement than in modesty.

“Your hair is great.”

She smiled, cocked her head, expecting more. “What else do you like about me?”

“You have a pleasant voice. It soothes me.”

“Is that it? Well, okay, so tell me, what do you *not* like?”

My smile morphed to a grimace. The chat had gone astray.

“Go ahead. You can tell me.”

“Well...umm...” I looked at my plate then at her. “Don’t get me wrong. I usually prefer a more slender woman.”

“Ah-hah! You should’ve seen me a year ago. I was a hundred pounds heavier. Would you have dated me then?”

“Probably not.”

“What a shame. You would have missed out on my good loving.”

“A year ago, I was still trying to make it with my wife.”

“So, you’re married. I figured you were. Maybe you already told me that. What’s the problem with her?”

“She was slender enough when we married, but she’s become heavier and heavier to where I’m just not attracted to her anymore.”

“That’s too bad. Could I finish your egg?” She had cleaned her plate while I was still picking.

I studied Angel’s face as she scooped up the last of my egg with the last of her toast. Even the way she ate was sexy.

“That was great!” she said. “Thank you, Steel. Is there any way I could get a couple slices of pizza?”

Her appetite astonished me, especially after so much turmoil. Angel scarfed down the two pepperoni slices I ordered. With one hand on her belly, she wore a satisfied smile as we left. She called to Monk, still on the corner across the street, mesmerized by the overturned car, the emergency vehicles, and EMTs bustling around it. He rejoined us as we returned to my car.

“So, what now?” I asked as we piled in and buckled up.

“Take us to the park.”

Angel and I talked the entire fifteen blocks. Just idle chitchat. About the classic architecture of many of the old buildings we passed, the abandoned structures, the vacant lots, and how so many of Camden’s streets lined up with Philadelphia streets of the same name.

I parked in the usual spot. Monk got out without a word and was gone. Angel unbuckled her seat belt, turned, and faced me with the hint of a smile.

“You’re such a sweet guy, Steel. I really appreciate your help today.”

“You’ve been good to me.”

“Still, I don’t know why you stuck around after what happened.”

“I like you...and I need you, Angel.” I touched her hand. “I’m gonna be paying you for sex, but that doesn’t mean we can’t be friends.”

“You should fuck your wife more often. Maybe then she’ll lose weight for you.”

“I doubt it. We used to have sex three or four, maybe even five times a week or more, but she still got heavy.”

“Try it.”

It was humorous to me that this nineteen-year-old prostitute thought of herself as a marriage counselor. I changed the subject.

“I guess we’re not gonna be doing any business today. I gotta get to work. And besides, we can’t use the house right now.”

“Yeah, that’s too bad.”

“I’ll try this again tomorrow morning at the same time.”

“Right, but don’t forget, sometimes I’m out on the corner much earlier than ten.”

“Does that mean I should look for you walking along Broadway if you’re not at the house?”

“I don’t walk, remember? And I usually get picked up right away. Even before I get to the park.” Her smile of self-confidence endeared her to me, and I’m sure the remark was to remind me, it was she who had the power.

“Could I borrow ten dollars?”

“I don’t know.”

Would it be proper procedure in a working girl–client relationship? It seemed to buck the rules. But of course, I had no way of knowing yet what the rules were, or if any rules existed.

“I’ll pay you back later if I see you over there at the doctor’s office.”

“Or we could put it toward our next date.”

“You bet,” she said, with a smile I assumed was because I was saying we’d *have* a next date. But, when I thought about it, wasn’t the smile more likely because she needed a fix, and she now knew from where the money for it was coming?

It was time to present my daring plan.

“So, listen. I’m going on vacation for a few days starting Thursday. And so I had wanted to see you today, tomorrow, and Wednesday in the morning if possible.”

“That would be great! For dates, you mean, right?”

“Yeah, for dates. I have the money.”

“You still might have to try to find me.”

“This would be so much easier if you had a cell phone.”

“Why don’t you buy me one?”

The question hung there. It was a truth, though spoken in jest, that I seriously considered.

Angel touched my shoulder. A loving touch, meant to encourage such serious consideration.

I pulled out my wallet to lend her the ten.

“Thank you. I’ll see you later.” She leaned forward for the friendly kiss, opened the door, and turned to smile at me again. “Bye-bye.”

“See ya.”

Sleep came quickly that night as I yet eagerly anticipated more fantastic adventures to come with my sweet Angel.

## CHAPTER FIVE: *Look at my Face*

Because Meredith was late leaving for work, I was late getting to Angel's house. Monk answered the door. Angel was already on the street, he said, but he'd go with me to help find her.

At his suggestion, I parked just past Frank's Deli and joined Monk on the sidewalk. He checked to see if she was in the store. She wasn't.

He suggested we wait by my car and keep an eye out for her. She'd show up sooner or later, he said. We managed a stilted chat.

John strolled up from the direction of Carl Miller Boulevard and joined in our lazy gab. He couldn't say where Angel was or when she might return.

As John and Monk conversed, their cultural idiomatic expressions and speech pattern amused me. Though often syntactically butchered and frequently ambiguous, they understood each other well. For the most part, I, too, understood them.

Much of what we say in casual conversation is ambiguous but understood by context. When confused by a statement with two possible meanings, an intelligent, self-confident person will ask for clarification. The timid and less intelligent will not. I didn't need to ask John or Monk what they meant because I didn't care. I didn't care because they weren't talking about Angel.

"You got a couple dollars I could borrow?" Monk asked.

I gave him two singles. He went into Frank's Deli.

"How about you, John? You okay?"

"I could use a couple bucks." He tucked the two bills I gave him into a pants pocket.

"There she is!" John nodded in the direction from which he had come.

We three slipped into my car, the two guys in the back, and I drove to meet Angel halfway.

She slid in and buckled up. "Hi, Steel. Been waiting long?"

"A little," I said as I drove around the block to head toward the house, "but the guys entertained me while I was waiting. Can we go to your place?"

"You bet, but I need to stop at the store first." She directed me to the grocery at the corner of Viola Street. It was on the way.

I parked a car length past the corner.

"I'll only be a few minutes," Angel said as she hopped out.

The guys were quiet until John asked what I did for a living. I described my job and inquired the same of him. John confessed he had recently been released from prison after a few years there for assault. He said he didn't do well in lockup because he was claustrophobic.

Monk could claim only minimal time in jail for minor drug offenses. I already knew his only income was from panhandling and Angel.

"No. I've never been arrested," I answered John.

Ten minutes passed. I asked Monk to see what was keeping Angel.

Several more minutes passed. I sent John on the same errand.

A minute later, Monk was at my passenger side window. "She's on the phone. With her dad."

He leaned on a nearby tree until a couple of minutes later, he saw Angel and John on the way.

"Here she comes." He returned to the back seat.

Angel's face warped as she argued with John, who trailed by a step. When she glanced back at him, she tripped on a tilted section of sidewalk and fell forward. She rose cursing, moaning, and rubbing dirt off her arm. Heavy denim blue jeans and toe-guard walking shoes protected her knees and toes, but her right forearm was scraped.

When she took her seat, I pretended not to have seen her fall. She'd be embarrassed if she knew I had seen. But that meant I couldn't offer comfort.

"I'm sorry I took so long."

"Not a problem."

"I had to talk to my dad. I haven't spoken with him for so long, and the connection was bad, and I had so much to say to him."

"It's okay, Angel," I said as I drove off. "I get it." I wished there were something I could do to ease both her physical and mental pain, but I didn't want to admit having seen her fall. "Everything okay now?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

John got out at the Gordon Terrace corner.

Monk led the way into the house. He sat in the recliner to join Trey, who lay on the sofa engrossed in a *Gunsmoke* rerun. I rushed to follow Angel as she ran up the stairs.

"Why don't you sit on the bed a minute," she instructed, as though in a hurry, as though worried I'd be displeased if we didn't get right to it. "I need to find some peroxide."

She threw open and searched all the drawers.

"Shit! Wait here. I'll be right back."

Angel whisked to the bathroom and shut the door. Water ran.

I stepped into the hall at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Trey stood there, his face twisted in anger.

“You gonna fuck that dirty bitch? This morning she got boned by John right there on that bed,” he said as he pointed to the bed with no sheets in the other room. “And then the fuckin’ whore squeezed out the jizz from her cunt in the hall right here right in front of Monk that the bitch was just sleeping”—he pointed forcefully—“in here with!”

I stood dumbfounded. Trey glared at me, turned, and stomped down the stairs. I hoped Angel hadn’t heard him over the sound of running water and through the closed door. I returned to the room.

Having forgotten about the ten she borrowed the day before and about the five for the house, I placed thirty dollars on the TV, then took a knee at the nightstand and turned the radio on.

I don’t wear a wristwatch. No jewelry or rings. I hate the feel and look of anything strapped on, slipped on, or hanging from my body. I was still without a cell phone. The company had recently switched from beepers to the Nextel, but with the walkie-talkie function only. I had to get to work after my date with Angel, so I’d need to track the time. I should have thought to check the dashboard clock before going up.

Angel entered and saw me fussing with the radio.

“What’s up?”

“I need to leave by eleven thirty to get to work on time. I’m trying to find KYW.”

“Let me try. What’s the number?”

“Ten sixty.”

She took my place at the nightstand and fiddled with the dial.

“Shit! Fuck! What the fuck!”

She stepped outside the room and called, “Monk! Let me know when it’s eleven thirty!”

After a moment, we barely heard Monk reply, “*Yeah. Okay.*”

How would he know when it was 11:30? The house had no clock, and neither he nor Trey wore a watch.

Angel undressed and lay naked on the bed. When I stood nude, she pulled me onto her. But, I was soft, and she tight and dry. She threw open the nightstand drawer and pulled out a pillow pack lube. She tore the pack open and smeared the oil on her slit. I tried again. Not yet. She ripped open another and used her fingers to guide the oil further in. She fiercely masturbated to soften and open her vulva. I still could not enter.

“Let’s try this,” she said as she flipped to her hands and knees.



Doggy didn't work. I knew it wouldn't.

I returned her to her back, raised her legs back and over her head so that her knees almost touched the sheet, and with a few pokes from my right index finger, I was in.

Now, to stay in, with slow, measured strokes.

I had forgotten to don a condom. I was sure she had noticed. Her lack of protest was a sign of approval. Great! I needed the higher sensitivity and erotic, psychological boost of a naked penis. In my psyche hid a personal ethos that, if you needed to use a condom, you were doing something you shouldn't be doing.

Her warm, slick pussy brought pleasure, and my erection grew until it could no more, and I was entirely within her. On stiffened arms, I sought the best angle for the most pleasure and a better view of our union.

But my shoulders soon burned, my heart pounded, my breath heaved, sweat flowed from my brow, and I softened.

With loving smiles for each other, I settled on top of her that I might recover. She'd let me set the pace.

I resumed, but soon again, my shoulders were on fire, and I weakened. Once more, I relaxed onto her and caught my breath.

"I'm so sorry," Angel said, "but I need to lower my legs."

I released her legs, leaned on my forearms, and gazed down at her.

"Such a pretty face. Your face excites me."

"What is it you like about my face?"

"Your eyes that look at me lovingly, your nose so perfectly shaped, your lips so kissable, your skin so smooth and lightly tanned."

"Oh, baby. You, Steel, are a player. Aren't you?"

"Not me. Never. Should I not say those things?"

"I don't mind."

I believe that, as a woman, she wanted to say more, but as a prostitute, she needed to maintain a distance.

"*Eleven thirty!*" Monk called out. He must have known from a change of program or the Commerce Bank commercial that announced the time and temperature every half hour.

Still inside her, my penis stirred, so I again lifted her legs as far as they would go and resumed. Her eyes closed as she felt me harden within her, then opened with a quizzical look as again I softened.

"Look at my face, Steel! Look at my face."

I did look at her face, but only to conceal that I had overstated its effect. She smiled. I cupped her breasts, gently pinched her nipples, and once more

rose high on stiffened arms for the thrill of the view of the act of having sex. Again to her face, her eyes on mine; blissful. From her face to her pussy, I glanced back and forth, and soon a climax built.

I presumed she'd not want me to come inside her. At the first throb, I pulled out and ejaculated onto her belly. I released her legs and collapsed onto her, gasping.

Perhaps I had *not* overstated the effect her face had on me.

My orgasm both surprised and relieved me that it had occurred, given recent difficulties.

"Good boy," she cooed, and patted my head like a puppy's. She put her arms around me in an unexpected embrace. I felt loved.

"I'm so out of shape!" I said.

Angel grabbed a bath towel from the nearby pile of clothing to wipe the semen from us both.

"You got any singles?" she asked as she took her payment off the TV.

"No. I gave them to Monk and John earlier."

"What do you mean? Why'd you give them money?!"

"They asked for it," I said, incorrectly recalling the event.

"Don't be giving those guys any money!"

"Okay."

"You can take me and Monk back to the park?"

No one glanced at Trey as we left.

"You remember I said I'd like to see you again tomorrow?"

"Why don't you come for me earlier? Most of the time, I'm out tricking by nine thirty."

She might have meant to say "at times," but that sounded to me like another contradiction that I chose not to question.

"I have to wait for her to leave for work before I can get out. She usually leaves around nine thirty. That's why I've been getting here a little after ten."

Always "her" or "she." Never "my wife" or "Meredith."

"Then, come try to find me, like you did today."

"You can't be at the house at ten?"

"I never know what time it is."

"As I said, this would be much easier if you had a phone."

"We plan to get one."

"We'd be able to get one *now*," Monk said from the back seat, "if the money didn't go for that shit she puts up her nose."

"You don't use, Monk?" I asked.

“I’ll smoke a joint. At a party. If it’s offered. But the shit she uses? Crazy!”

“Shut the fuck up, Monk!” Angel said, more embarrassed than angry. “You don’t own me anymore.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“We used to be boyfriend and girlfriend, but now we’re just friends.”

She looked away. That was old news and offered nothing to explain her choice of words. Her glance out the window told me not to pursue it.

“What’s the deal with Trey? Any more trouble?”

“We’re gonna try to get him out of the house,” Angel said. “But I do have some good news. My STD tests from the health wagon came back negative. No STDs.”

I had read about the “health wagon,” as Angel called it. A free service provided by the city, a converted box van outfitted as a mobile clinic traveled the city streets. Any woman who wished could be tested for STDs. She would be given a code number and was to call in three days for the results. If a test came back positive, the woman was required to submit to treatment.

“That’s good to hear,” I said. I hadn’t considered that possibility earlier when I failed to wear protection.

I dropped them off at the park and hurried to work. A few minutes late, no one noticed.

On my way to the Cooper Hospital lab for a pickup, a male voice called out. “Steel!”

I turned to see Monk sauntering toward me. He flashed a friendly smile, as though we were now longtime friends.

“Hey, Monk. What are *you* doing here?”

“Visiting my dad. Upstairs. He has to have his foot amputated.”

“Ewwww! I’m sorry. Diabetes?”

“I guess. Yo, man. You should know. I talked to the landlord. He said he would go to the house today with a cop to kick Trey the fuck out.”

“Oh! Good. That’ll be a relief.” There was no need to mention how his story differed from Trey’s. There *might* have been a landlord. Someone other than the three was paying the electric and water bills. And, it was unlikely the police would get involved in such an issue. But the details didn’t interest me enough for me to delve.

All that mattered was I had a place to have sex with Angel.

As I rushed from stop to stop, my thoughts returned to that morning’s date. Why had she needed artificial lubrication? Had *she* needed seduction

and foreplay from me on this date? Had she developed an affection for me? Would that be so bad?

I had tried seduction when I said, “Such a pretty face,” and all that other sweet talk. It hadn’t worked.

I’m not very good at it, I suppose, because I’ve rarely practiced it.

So many of my sexual encounters had been me responding to a woman’s seduction of *me*.

What had changed? Maybe *my* dysfunction was because of *my* need for seduction and foreplay from *her*. I hoped not in both respects. After all, that’s supposed to be a benefit of using prostitutes: no need to waste time on notions of sexual technique or romantic inspiration. Well, I say that, but that’s not how I behave, now, is it?

\* \* \*

Meredith left for work early enough for me to arrive at 9:15. No one answered my knock. I tested the door, and it opened. I was about to enter but paused to look around.

John ambled my way from Broadway. Under his right arm, he carried something heavy in a brown paper bag. His casual greeting as he mounted the porch steps was permission for me to follow. He set the package on the coffee table.

“I’ll check on her. Wait here.”

John woke Angel. I couldn’t hear their brief exchange. He came down the stairs, saying, “Angel says, come back later.”

I displayed my annoyance for John to see and made no move to leave.

“That’s no good. I have to get to work later.”

John sat on the sofa and pulled a six-pack of cold beer from the bag. I sat in the chair next to the TV and stared at him, challenging him to come up with a better solution than that I come back later.

“She ain’t feeling good. Cold or something.”

He opened a pop-top and took a couple of gulps. He offered a can to me. I declined his offer with a testy backhand wave.

“Maybe she doesn’t want to see me today.” I squinted and frowned as I studied the floor.

“No, no. That ain’t it.”

“Yesterday, she said I should come by earlier, so today I get here earlier, and she’s still in bed.” I stared at him to express my displeasure. “Is it because Monk’s there?”

“Monk left early to go see his pops in the hospital.”

“Did he tell you we ran into each other there yesterday?”

“Yeah. Said you was working.”

I stared absentmindedly at the six-pack. John must have thought my stare to be criticism of his early morning drinking.

“I just needed the fix.” He lifted the can like a salute as if to explain his meaning. “I really don’t drink much,” he said.

My stare went to a crack in the far wall.

I was feeling sorry for myself. Should I leave? Or should I insist he get Angel for me? Should I see if I could entertain him with one of my stories, and by that time, Angel would be up? I was not yet resigned to having failed in my mission.

“You get high?” John asked.

“No. I never saw the sense to it.”

“Me neither. Maybe a little pot from time to time. I wish Angel would quit that shit she snorts. It makes you crazy. You never toked?”

“A few times, socially, but I had a bad experience once a long time ago, so I haven’t done it since. It’s a funny story if you wanna hear it.”

“What? Yeah. About the last time you smoked a reefer? Ha! Sure.”

“Okay. Well, John, this was back in the seventies, I think. When nothing was happening at The Cherrywood Lounge, I’d go to The London Inn. Often I’d meet a drinking buddy there, but one night Honey and Sandy joined me.

“Honey was a lovely five foot nine blue-eyed blonde I had met a couple years before at The Cherrywood. We had become good friends.

“She wouldn’t sleep with me, she said, because I looked too much like her ex-husband. Once I built a bed with a built-in drawer and attached trunk for her five-year-old son. When I separated from my second wife for the second time, Honey let me crash with her until an apartment opened up in the building next to hers.

“Sandy was Honey’s best female friend. When Sandy broke up with her boyfriend after he nearly killed them both in a motorcycle wreck, she would tag along to The Cherrywood with Honey and me. Honey didn’t drive. Sandy would either leave her car at Honey’s or have me pick her up because she knew she’d be too drunk to drive home.

“It worked out well because Honey would only slow dance, and because she was five feet nine and I was five nine and three-quarters, we didn’t make an ideal dance couple. But the shorter Sandy was a great dancer, slow or fast, so I mostly danced with her.

“Since I was in Honey’s ‘friend zone,’ Sandy thought of me that way too. Because of that, I had never made a move on Sandy even though she was quite shapely and pleasant to look at.

“Sandy wasn’t getting drunk this night, she said, because she had an early Bat Mitzvah celebration she had to be sober for and not hungover the next morning. So, she drove Honey to join me at the London Inn to see what I had been telling them about.

“The bands were always top-notch, and the dance floor was twice the size of at The Cherrywood. When not dancing, we stood at the crowded bar with our drinks or sat on a stool when we could. During the band’s break, the jukebox played, but no one there danced to the jukebox, so neither did we. We’d engage in idle chitchat at the bar, although, even without the band playing, we had to shout to hear each other.

“The bar was a huge fifteen-foot long ellipse with two bartenders in the middle and people sitting and crowded all around it. Nothing obstructed the view across the bar. I scanned the ballroom tables, checked out the crowd by the door, and searched the bar. I hoped to spot a woman I had twice taken home. Neither she nor her sexy friend, who I also wanted to tap, was there.

“But across the way sat an attractive brunette, slender and sophisticated, looking my way. I held my gaze on her for a moment, to be sure it was me she was looking at, then smiled. She returned the smile. I turned to continue my conversation with Honey because you never want to be the second one to look away.

“When the band came back and announced their last set, Honey and Sandy went to the Ladies’ Room. I sat on a barstool, observing the dancers, studying their moves. I felt a hand on my shoulder and in front of me stood the attractive brunette from across the bar. She asked if I’d like to dance.

“I took her hand, walked her to the dance floor, and we jockeyed for position. She was a good dancer. When that song ended, I said, ‘Let’s stand here and see what the next one is.’ The intro indicated a ballad, so I asked her if she wanted to sit or would she slow dance with me. She said okay, but I shouldn’t get too fancy. Before the next number, I asked if I could take her back to her seat. I bought her a drink and went back to Honey and Sandy, who had returned from the Ladies’ Room. They said they were gonna leave, to beat the crowd, and also because Sandy had to get up early.

“So, when a song came on I wanted to dance to, I went to the young woman on the other side of the bar. She danced with me, but when last call was announced, she asked me to take her back to her stool.

“She was with three other young women, and they were all in a party mood. She said they were going to The Hi-Nella, a place that stayed open another couple hours, and asked if I’d like to meet her there. I said ‘No,’ if she didn’t want me to take her home, I was just going to say ‘good night’ because I had to work the next day.

“That surprised her. She turned to speak with her friends, then turned back to me and said I could take her home.

“At her place, we sat on her sofa, talked, made out, and went to bed.

“A couple of nights later, on my way home from night classes, I took a detour and knocked on her door. She said she didn’t like guys knocking on her door without being asked over, but I could come in. Again, it went well.

“A few nights later, again, she let me in. This time she produced a doobie. I couldn’t refuse without looking like a punk. As we smoked, she asked probing questions. The pot affected me like sodium pentothal, and it came out that, although separated, I was married with kids. ‘That’s too bad,’ she said. ‘Why?’ I asked. ‘Are you looking to get married?’ ‘No, but you’ve just been wasting my time,’ she said. ‘Okay then,’ I said and got up to leave. ‘Not yet,’ she said. ‘We might as well do what you came here to do.’

“I sat with my hands in my lap as she carried a filmy garment from her bedroom into her bathroom. She was in there so long, I had to know what she was doing. I crept to the bathroom door and spied through the keyhole. She sat naked on the edge of her tub with a white tube in her hand. She inserted the open end into her pussy and squeezed. ‘Oh my God!’ I thought, ‘She’s putting something in her pussy that’s gonna rot my cock off! She wants to punish me because I’m married! She wants to rot my cock off!’

“I snuck back to the sofa. She came out wearing a sheer nightgown and signaled me to follow her into the bedroom. I still wanted to get laid, even though I feared whatever she had squeezed into her pussy. I undressed, not wanting to believe what I thought to be true. I slipped the nightgown off her and followed her onto the bed. I assumed the position above her, but I was soft. We both tried for several minutes to poke me in, but I couldn’t get hard. She said, ‘You might as well get dressed and go.’

“Hours later, it came to me: anything that could harm me would also be harmful to her. So I figured the pot had made me paranoid and impotent, and I haven’t smoked it since.”

John had politely listened with an amused smile as I recited my tale. He chuckled at my “Oh my God!” declaration.

“You tell a good story,” he said, still smiling.

“Well, it looks like Angel’s not getting up. I’d better go. I’ll see if I can stop by later when my route brings me back this way.”

I rose to see myself out. John followed me to the door.

“Got a couple dollars I can borrow?”

“No, John.” I recalled how angry Angel had become when I told her of the money I had given to the guys.

It was still early. I rushed home to vacuum, dust, and straighten up. It would look as though I had been there all morning.

After my last Broadway stop, I checked the time. If I were to find Angel soon, I’d have one last chance to talk to her before leaving on vacation, though not enough time to date.

As I pulled from the parking lot up to the sidewalk, an attractive young woman strolled by. I smiled. She smiled.

She was a temptation, but I had to talk to Angel.

Over the hump and left onto Gordon Terrace. In the distance, Monk, walking toward me. He saw me and pointed to the end of the block. There, Angel crossed the street and climbed the steps of the last house on the right. I drove there and parked.

Angel had already entered the house. Not knowing how long she’d be, I waited.

From the shoebox of work paraphernalia, I pulled a steno pad. This pad was to jot down incoming on-calls and to make quick notes as I ran the route. I wrote the name “Steel” and my home phone number, tore the page out, replaced the pad, and laid the note on the dashboard. I closed my eyes and dozed.

*Budda budda boom!*

A loud thumping on the hood startled me awake. Angel came to my window. I lowered it.

“Hey, Steel. Park over there,” she pointed to a vacant lot across the street, “and wait for me. I’ll be a few minutes.” She reentered the house.

As soon as I relocated, Monk was there at the passenger side window. I lowered it for him.

“She’s here to see Misses Williams. About some business,” he offered.

“So, I should wait here?”

“I guess. If she told you.”

“How’s your dad?”

“He’s getting his foot amputated today.”

“Is Trey out of the house?”

“Not yet.” Monk fidgeted; looked away.



Tapping at my window straightened me up. I turned to see Angel there again. I lowered the window.

"I'm sorry I couldn't see you this morning," she said. "I was really feeling lousy." Her tone was neither apologetic nor regretful. She might have been annoyed at having to offer the apology. "I got a date here, so I can't talk long."

"Well, I had hoped for five minutes of your time, which I would pay for."

"You don't ever have to pay to talk to me, Steel."

"I thought you should have my telephone number in case there's a change in your status or residence while I'm gone." I handed her the note. "That's my home number. I still don't have a cell."

"Oh! Okay. Sure. I have a book of telephone numbers. I'll put yours there. But, I don't expect any problems at the house the next time."

As she read the note, I asked, "Are you remembering I told you I'm going away for a week and a half starting tomorrow? A lot can happen in that time."

She slowly folded the paper. Was there a mist in her eyes?

"Ah! You feel the same way I do about my not seeing you for a while. I see it in your eyes."

"I'm not going to discuss my emotions."

That sounded like confirmation to my enfeebled brain. I wore a smug smile as I gazed into those eyes.

"You're right," I said. "For us to get emotionally involved would be foolish, and it's probably foolish of us to even be talking about it, but I know how I feel about you even though, intellectually, I can explain away those feelings."

"I'm not going to talk about it," she said. I read her body language. She was holding her emotions back.

"Would you like a kiss goodbye?" I asked.

She leaned forward, and we kissed, but it was just a peck, not full on the lips. She stepped back and returned into the house.

Was she there for a date, as she had said, or was there a Misses Williams with whom she had "some business" as Monk had explained?

It didn't matter. I could return to the route, strutting like a drum major for having succeeded in my mission and having received a little extra in the bargain: a kiss and misty eyes.

## CHAPTER SIX: *The Perfect Pebble*

We had much to do that evening to prepare. That included a deliberate hundred dollar error in the check register to hide the withdrawal I had made to date Angel. There was little chance Meredith would catch the deception since I was in charge of the checkbook, just as her province was the kitchen. I paid the bills. She ran them up. It was a workable division of labor.

I made phone calls, packed climbing gear, and hunted for the directions to our vacation retreat. As the year before, we were invited to an upstate New York log home to visit younger sister Renee and her mate.

Bits and pieces of earlier that day flit in and out of my mind. Like static intrusions from a parallel universe, scenes flashed.

Was Angel truly saddened that I'd be away for a while? Was it faked? Was it a cold or gas, or my imagination? Wishful thinking or arrogance, the adolescent belief that misty eyes proved Angel cared for me?

So much to do, and as with anything Meredith had to do, it took longer than it should have. We got to bed later than planned.

We set no alarm. We'd let our circadian rhythms awaken us. We'd not risk getting drowsy during the five-hour drive.

\* \* \*

We awoke within minutes of each other. Although a little later than planned, if we moved fast and nothing went wrong, we had plenty of time. We attacked what remained of our get-ready list.

With no perceivable provocation, I became horny.

Perhaps it was the swish of her dress or the jiggle of a buttock cheek. Provocations aren't always clear. I saw no reason to squelch the sudden urge.

"This might sound strange, and it's been a long time since I've asked, but I'd like you to come to bed with me now."

Meredith smiled a sly, shy smile as she always had when I'd ask for sex. She muttered something about having to finish packing and leaving soon.

"Well, I'm erect, and it's not going away."

By reflex, she looked at the bulge, swiftly averted her eyes, and said, "But, I don't want to."

I turned to storm away, then turned back. "But I do!"

"I'll have to use the bathroom."

Perhaps the bulge had aroused her.

A sly, shy smile as she passed me in the hall.

It pleased me that I had achieved her submission through machismo, not an unpleasant pretense at seduction. Still, I regretted having to resort to such gruffness.

But as I lay waiting, I softened. The urge passed. What to do?

It's both cruel and foolish to arouse a woman, then turn her away. A scar of guilt remains after once having done that to another.

She came to me in a satin nightgown. For the thrill of having me slip it from her shoulders? I sat her on the edge of the bed, guided her onto her back, lifted and spread her legs, and lowered my head between them. I ran my tongue along her inner thighs, down her belly, and slowly to her clit.

My erection returned. When she tasted ready, I guided her to the middle of the bed. In a very few minutes, she gasped and quivered. Exhausted by the effort, I rolled onto my back.

"Would you use your hand." It was an instruction, neither a request nor a question. I wanted not to risk refusal. I was in danger of losing my erection.

She complied without a word. She, in turn, was exhausted by the effort.

When the moonglow of satisfaction faded, she rose and returned from the bathroom with a flushable wipe.

Though two hours late, our hosts had waited up. They fed us and showed us our room. We shared a bed for the first time in a long time. We held hands before falling asleep.

\* \* \*

From the log home, the distance across the stream and fen to the slightly under 2,000-foot mountain was perhaps a half mile, but you couldn't go that way. With a backpack strapped over my shoulders, I had a mile walk further along the road to a gate that served to discourage rather than stop foot and vehicular traffic. From there, a half mile of a slowly ascending snowmobile and four-by-four trail led to a quarter-mile footpath through a steeply rising meadow. Then, where the tall grass met the short brush, the ground rose sharply, and the trail up the tree-covered mountain began.

I knew the way fairly well, having the previous year climbed this pile of volcanic spew, born eons ago under an ancient sea.

Once on the mountain trail, I could remove the hat-with-netting I wore. During that first climb, I had learned the hard way, it was needed to keep the bugs off my face and neck, and out of my mouth, nose, and ears.

I pulled a bottle of water from my backpack for a sip.

Also in my pack were rain gear, granola bars, a walkie-talkie borrowed from our host, toilet tissue, binoculars, a flashlight, a sixteen-ounce jar with a lid, and a compass. In my pants pockets, I carried ChapStick, facial tissues, a red, multi-function Super Tinker pocketknife, and identification: a three-by-five card with our hosts' name, address, and phone number.

The trail was not well-marked. Sometimes I had to guess the way and backtrack if I guessed wrong. In such places, I erected a three-stone cairn to guide me on the path down, and for the next two or three times I planned to make the climb again this week.

The trail was steep at times, and at times more horizontal than vertical, but always going up and counter-clockwise. As I climbed ever upward, I had fallen trees and outcrops of stone to scramble over or skirt around.

At a clearing still thirty feet from the summit, I sat on a lip of stone, my feet dangling over the edge, to survey the valley below. An hour had passed. Through the binoculars, I spied the cabin from which I had started. I used the walkie-talkie to let them know I had arrived. My host found me with his field glasses. I asked him to hand them to Meredith. A wave to her would be a nice thing to do. She couldn't find me. I turned and made my way to the top.

The summit was a blob of exposed granite, fifteen feet by twenty. From here, you could see tree-covered mountains a hundred miles in all directions to a hazy horizon. The trees nearby were stunted evergreens. Foot-high grass and low huckleberry brush grew in patches.

I checked for my name, etched in the stone. Barely visible, it remained. With my penknife, I refurbished the proof to my presence. Mine was not the only name scratched there. That fact lessened my guilt for my offense to Nature. Two walnut-size fragments found there would make excellent souvenirs. With chest bared and body splayed on the warm rock to absorb the sun's rays and produce Vitamin D and a tan, I enjoyed the solitude for several minutes.

For a half hour or so, I explored. I searched for bear tracks but found not even a spoor. I gathered huckleberries and replaced the half-filled jar into the pack.

I surveyed for another path down but returned to the summit when I feared walking into a bog, poison sumac, or other foul danger; or falling off a cliff. I used the known path for my descent.

At the base of the mountain, where the slope changed from forty-five degrees to five, a patch of gravelly soil was exposed. As if by elven magic, my eyes fell on one tan river rock pebble out of the hundreds there, half buried in the mud of recent rains. I plucked the tiny stone, wiped away the

dirt, washed it with water from my water bottle, and carefully examined it. A perfect ellipse. An inch and three-quarters wide, two and a quarter inches long, three-quarters of an inch thick. The Golden Ratio. Smooth. Flawless. It was the kind of object you'd want to put into your mouth.

I know how strange that sounds. Let me explain.

Perhaps at an age when anything I could pick up went into my mouth, I filled my mouth with three or four smooth river rock pebbles, and my reptilian brain enjoyed the sensation. Perhaps I did that more than once because it felt good. That feeling would return from time to time, even to this day, though it's now rare. Phantom pebbles fill my mouth. A serene pleasure imbues. If there's a trigger, it lies hidden.

There must be others with such phantom stimulations.

This perfect pebble would make an awesome gift for Angel.

Back at the house, I told everyone I had made three stops on my return: once for a sip of water, once to pick myself back up, and once to chat with a couple of men on their way to where logging was soon to start.

I told no one about the perfect pebble.

\* \* \*

Two days later, I again climbed the mountain. With another young woman in mind, the *most* flirtatious of office workers on my route, I sought another perfect river rock pebble. On the trail, and in the stream that flowed from the valley, wherever I saw pebbles, I would scan, but there would be no more elven magic. Angel's pebble was all the more special.

\* \* \*

The next day I drove to a nearby resort town to climb another trail. This was a different type of mountain, raised by subduction and shaped by erosion. There'd be no pebbles found there. A little over 2,000 feet high, its slope was a near-constant forty-five degrees. My legs quickly tired.

And thankfully, no flying pests to require bug netting.

The trail was well-marked and well-traveled. Many other climbers passed in both directions providing a sense of unspoken camaraderie.

On this mountain were historical relics and vestiges of a more glamorous era. Near the summit, a vast parking lot provided a rest area, water, and toilet facilities for the hundreds of tourists who either drove there or arrived by tour bus.

This mountain was much more engaging and physically challenging than the other. I returned the next day.

On this second visit, I purposely wandered off the path to explore, to give my legs a rest. Nothing but trees.

Near the summit, I chuckled and used my Kodak Single Use, One Touch Flash Camera to take a selfie as I stood in front of a trail sign that read, "You Are Here." The humor was in that no X-marks-the-spot map remained in the sign housing, and I had walked across the 100-yard lot to see what the sign read. It told the truth. I was there.

A crushed stone road led down and up another hill. I followed that road to a forest fire lookout tower from which jutted cell phone, radio, and TV antennas.

Back to the lot, a path led to the summit. Only a stone foundation remained of what had once been a world-famous hotel frequented by fat cats and nabobs. Tourists and climbers both bustled about. I took more scenics and selfies.

\* \* \*

The following day my host told me of another mountain he thought I might want to assault, but a tamer trail through a nearby state park suited me better. My legs were too weary to climb a fourth day in a row.

Of singular interest on the park trail was a tree so massive, some of its several branches were themselves as wide as a fifty-five-gallon drum. They grew straight up and faded into an island of foliage, like the magic beanstalk that disappeared into the clouds and led Jack into the giant's domain.

I accidentally strayed from the trail and found myself walking past a dusty old stone quarry. A truck road opened to a posh residential street that led into a quaint, historic village. From there, I needed only to follow the main route back to the secondary road that led to our kind hosts' rustic home. It had been a fulfilling four-hour walk. A half mile from the log home, I stooped to examine a smoothed river stone the size and shape of a baking potato. *Meredith might enjoy this as a souvenir.*

\* \* \*

On the long drive to my sister Janette's home, our only stop was on impulse at a TCBY. Meredith and I held hands a while in bed that night.

We had the house to ourselves the next morning when Janette had to spend a few hours at work. I had an urge to take advantage of my sister's absence. Meredith consented. I used oral to lubricate her for quick entry, but I soon lost interest and withdrew. Two licked fingers would have to do. Her

vocalizations and spasms as she neared climax aroused me. I reentered, and as she came, so did I.

There had been hand holding and intimacy during the past few days, which had enabled me to get past her weight. This rare simultaneous orgasm might have brought us even closer. I credited my time with the hookers.

The sun was low in the sky when we started home. It had been a nice visit. But nothing like climbing a mountain or a four-hour walk through the woods. Or a frozen yogurt or a minute with Angel.

The Moorestown mall was on the way. We stopped for cell phones and take-out Salmon Sukiyaki.

We sat together at the kitchen table to enjoy our meal and a glass of red wine. Side by side, we relaxed on the sofa and watched a rerun of *Law and Order: SVU*. When both ready to retire, I invited her to bed. She declined. I let it pass. I slept well and long.

\* \* \*

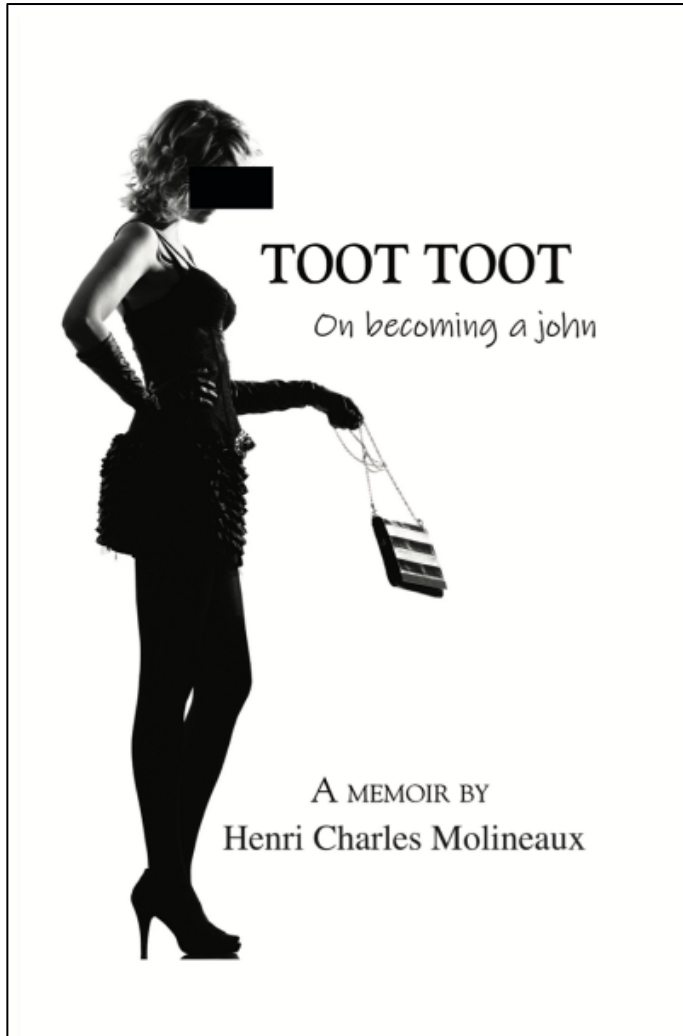
A couple of hours into our morning activities, the urge again hit. She resisted. I persisted. She gave in, but again as I waited for her to come from the bathroom, my enthusiasm waned. As before, I thought it best that I at least pleasure her. When dysfunction again betrayed, she suggested I give her oral. Surprised, yet pleased, I did so.

Again, her imminent climax aroused me. I quickly entered her in hopes of simultaneous orgasms. However, this time the switch from tongue to penis stalled her come, and although I massaged her clit, her Big O was reduced to a minuscule. She understood that my intentions had been good, and so agreed to a handjob, though not without the cow-milking comment.

\* \* \*

We visited my daughter Ginger the next day, the last day of our vacation. Still my darling baby girl at age thirty-four, she sat close to me as we enjoyed an Eagles win. What an ideal end to a pretty good vacation.

Mountain climbing, a perfect pebble, a little sex, cell phones, an Eagles win, and four wonderful hours in the glow of a daughter's love.



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