

*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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BOOK 1  
of the *A Failure to Bond* series



# TOOT TOOT

*On becoming a john*

A MEMOIR BY  
Henri Charles Molineaux

ALSO BY HENRI CHARLES MOLINEAUX  
Beep Beep: On being a john  
I Like to Walk: A Child's Journey to Understanding

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

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## CHAPTER THREE: *Angel*

“Don’t forget to pick up your granddaughter!” Meredith reminded me. I was already on my way out the door.

*Oh no! My date with Angel!*

Meredith had given me chores for after work, one of which was to pick up Eric’s younger daughter for an overnight playdate of sorts.

I owed Angel an explanation. When the Saturday route had me near the city, I deviated and returned to the ramshackle house.

Foolish of me, I know. To this niche of society, plans were built on sand and soon washed away by the tides of unpredictability. All they had to look forward to was the next trick; the next fix. To these people, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and I was but one scrawny bird in that thorny bush.

But I knew none of that yet.

The young man I had seen the day before stood across the street from Angel’s house. He talked with an older man, sitting on his stoop. Their gaze followed my approach.

I hoped the younger man was one of the two Angel had mentioned. She had said they were harmless. I stopped and lowered my window.

“I’m looking for Angel.”

“She should be back soon,” the younger man said.

“Should I wait here?”

“That’s up to you.”

“Do you know where she is?”

I had misgivings about waiting in what might be a dangerous place for a lone white man, especially not knowing how soon “soon” might be.

“She was headed to the park earlier,” he offered in a softer tone.

“Where’s the park?”

“It’s down there by Frank’s Deli. She’s prolly just chillin’ with the other bitches that hang out there. You know how women are.”

“I’m not familiar with Frank’s Deli.”

“I could go with you and show you where it is.”

“I can’t let pe—” I twisted with indecision.

“Was she expecting you?”

“Later, yes. I’m supposed to meet her after work today, but I won’t be able to.” *Well, okay. I’ve gone this far. It’s still early. Let him show me.* “I’ll clear the seat for you.”

With the shoebox, reports, and tote moved to the back seat, I unlocked the passenger door. He ducked in and stuck his hand out for a handshake.

“I’m Trey.” His smile was friendly, and I thought it sincere.

“I’m Steel,” I said as I shook his outstretched hand and surprised myself having given a nickname I hadn’t used in forty years, since my twenties.

I asked him to buckle his seat belt to stop the warning chime. I always require it of my passengers for safety.

Trey guided me northward over the hump.

*If we find her and she gets in, there’s no place for him to sit when I drive her to the house. He’ll have to walk. Will he get angry?*

But wait. Why did I think we’d be going to the house? I wasn’t thinking straight. I was too nervous. *Calm down!*

“She went to the trouble of drawing a map for me and said to come here for her, so I figured she wanted to see me, and I didn’t want to be a jerk and not show up with no explanation.”

I was rambling, trying to make sound sensible that which made no sense.

“Yeah, if she drew you a map, this would be the right thing to do. Turn left at the light. This is it.”

*Oh! This park! How stupid of me.*

I should have known. I passed it every weekday on the way to Doctor Spiegel’s. We had just passed his office, less than a half block further south.

A quarter-acre triangular plot where Ferry Avenue crossed Broadway at a sharp angle, several large trees grew there among flowering bushes and exotic plants. A brick path wended through. Monuments stood in the park and on the corner. On the Broadway side, a bus stop bench. Parishioners of the nearby Sacred Heart Catholic Church maintained the park. An occasional hangout for hookers and the homeless, it was usually vacant.

Across the street was Frank’s Deli, a longtime five-star delicatessen, known for its sandwiches and good food. The store was always busy with itinerants and locals, arriving by car, on bicycles, and on foot.

“Pull over there.”

Trey directed me to park on the Ferry Avenue side. He scanned the park without getting out. “Ain’t nobody here.”

“Okay, I’ll take you back.”

Two right turns, and I was headed that way.

*“There’s Monk!”* Trey pointed to a block ahead on the left. A man had just crossed Broadway at Viola Street. “Turn left here! Angel is his lady. He should know where she is.”

I turned as soon as traffic allowed and pulled over where I could.

Trey lowered his window and called, “Monk! Monk! *Monk!*” The man continued walking as Trey shouted, “*Monk! Monk!*”

Monk stopped, darted his head left and right, back and forth, unsure he was being hailed, and if so, from which direction.

A constant hum from two area factories and a nearby elevated highway made hearing difficult. Trey jumped out. He continued to call and wave until he caught Monk’s attention and signaled him to us. Trey brought him to my window.

A light-skinned Black man, Monk stood at five feet seven, a couple of inches shorter than the much darker Trey.

“This guy’s looking for Angel. She drew him a map to our place.”

Did I detect a trace of anger?

Monk looked at me like a cat looks at rabbit food.

“I’m looking for her, too,” Monk said. “She caught a date.”

“I’m supposed to meet her after work today, but I won’t be able to, so I thought I should let her know.”

“Okay. I’ll tell her.”

We all looked at one another. Without a word, Monk turned and walked away. Trey shrugged and got back in.

“Well, Trey, I’m still working, so I gotta get back to work.”

Two rights and a left, and I was again on the way.

To fill the silence, I thought I’d explain. “My job is to pick up the bloods and urines from the doctors’ offices, so it’s against Federal law for me to have a passenger because they’re considered bio-hazards. See the sign on the cooler?” I pointed to the back.

Trey smiled at my confession.

“Who owns the house?”

“This woman Anna Robinson, but she’s in County. The stacies raided the place and found a pile of coke on her kitchen table. She asked me to take care of it until she gets out.”

“If you can’t do the time...” I said, paraphrasing the *Baretta* motto.

“Then don’t do the crime,” Trey said, finishing the theme song line.

We both thought that was pretty clever and laughed.

“She don’t own it legally. It’s a abandoned house.”

“You’ll tell Angel why I was here and why I couldn’t wait?”

“Yeah, sure. You told her you was coming and you don’t want her to think you’re a douche.”

I feared that was what *he* thought of me.

“Could I get a dollar?” Trey asked as we arrived.

"I have no singles on me," I said. "Honest."

"I believe you. You should stop by earlier. Before she hits the street."

"What time's that?"

"Usually 'round ten."

\* \* \*

Roxanne was again strolling by as I parked across the street from Doctor Stewart's. I signaled her and lowered the passenger-side window.

"You remember me?" I asked.

"Of course, sweetie. Could I get in now?" Her eyes made promises.

"It's against the law. I'm carrying bio-hazards."

Roxanne looked to where I nodded and puckered her lips in a playful pout. "Okay, so then, good looking, when ya gonna tell me *your* name?"

"I'm Steel," I said, for some of the same reasons Roxanne had given for working girls often adopting street names, and for the same reason I had given it to Trey; it sounded cool. "Did you get a phone yet?"

"No. That's apparently not gonna happen."

"I've been trying to figure out how I could see you, maybe after work or maybe on a day off. I could take you to my place."

"You said you don't live near here. I'd have to get forty dollars for the travel time."

"What time do you start here?" I had forgotten.

"Ten. A M. Usually. Depending on the weather."

"Where do you live?"

"North Camden, for now. There's someone I stay with."

"Is there a way I could meet you there? Is there a phone?"

"No can do. But how about this? Tonight at nine, I'm gonna be on the corner by the gym at Chestnut Street. Why don't you look for me there?"

"Okay. If I can."

"Could I have a rubber band?" She pointed to several, placed around the gear shift rod in the car's console.

I save the rubber bands some use to wrap their specimens for pickup. It's part of my frugal nature gained from a lifetime of near-subsistence living. I throw away nothing I think might someday be of use.

"Sure," I said, no doubt wearing a stupid smile, as though this little exchange had birthed a heartwarming friendship.

I gave her three. I had plenty. Would I have been so generous had they been scrunchies I had paid for?

"Thank you!" she exclaimed in an exaggerated show of appreciation.

“Anytime. Anything you need.”

While keeping an eye out for Angel, I continued to Doctor Spiegel’s. His two flirty assistants, Marisol and Anna, were always a pleasure to chat with. Especially Marisol. I had a feeling she liked me.

Again, from there, I detoured to see if Angel was at Lester Terrace. No one answered my knock. I checked the park. Not there either. But Monk lounged against the nearby fried chicken take-out store.

“I’m looking for Angel.”

“I’m looking for her too.”

Again? Why did he never know where she was? Wasn’t she his girl?

“Would you tell her I’ll be where we first met in East Camden at four thirty, and if she could, to meet me there?”

“When I see her.”

\* \* \*

My plan was shot to hell.

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. How foolish of me it had been to expect that, even if she received the message from Monk, she’d have been able and willing to meet me in East at four thirty.

But outside sounds of wind whistling and rain pounding threatened my plan. The radio weatherman said there’d been early morning storms. There’d been several tornados. Turned on the TV. Flooded roads had traffic backed up for miles. Tree limbs were down. *Damn!* I’d not be heading into Camden this morning. I resisted the new urge, to go back to bed.

I’ll admit it. I knew I had a problem. As a teen, I’d cry myself to sleep nightly, had thoughts of suicide, and suffered mood swings to extremes. I learned it had a name: manic-depression. I recognized the pattern. From crybaby suicidal to jackassy giddy. Logic always got me through it.

For me, foul weather was a trigger for depression. Low atmospheric pressure and not enough sunlight in the eyes can lead to what they’ve labeled SAD, but this is WAD, a little different, more serious: Weather Affected Depression. I just made that up. They ought to do a study.

The weather improved, but not so my mood.

The best treatment for depression, for me, anyhow, though no more than a temporary fix, is sex with a pretty woman. Second best: Sex with any woman. I continued past the doctor’s office, hoping to find Angel.

A tan Buick sat alongside the house. I pictured her 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 from Doctor Spiegel's office and returned. Maybe the driver of the Buick hadn't been a date. Maybe he was gone and I would take my turn.

The car was gone. A bicycle rim leaned against the door. A signal that no one was home, I presumed. *Clever.*

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

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

*We don't want a thing because we have found a reason for it; we find a reason for it because we want it.*—Will Durant

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

Tall and slender as a stick, she used her purse to hide her face. I couldn't now just tell her "Never mind. Please get out." That would have been hurtful.

"I only want to talk," I said. Maybe that would encourage her to leave.

"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."

Maybe now she'd object and get out.

Slowed by reluctance and the one hand still holding the purse up to her mouth, she raised her blouse. Rather than my eyes being drawn to her meager breasts, she had revealed a still-healing incision running sternum to navel.

"What's *that* about?" I asked.

I had wanted to have sounded 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? 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 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 at the point of tears. "It's ugly, I know. That's why I'm trying to hide it."

A better look, and although I wasn't sure, it seemed she told the truth. And even if it were herpes, I wouldn't catch it from her hand.

"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 shuttered 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 me, even when I think them false.

"Okay," she said, so softly I barely heard, "but I'm gonna get slapped around for this."

I couldn't believe she had a pimp who'd beat her for taking less. I didn't think this girl would catch the interest of a pimp. I was doing her a favor by offering five.

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

She directed me to a spot near the water treatment plant.

I looked around. No one in sight. I 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 by what I saw. She wrapped her long, slender fingers around the hardened shaft and went to work.

She had talent. Her hand brought 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, then raised her blouse.

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

Before long, we were making use of the handy paper towels.

I pulled out my wallet while my pants were still down, in case she'd enjoy the exposure. But she didn't see my lingering erection or the five-dollar bill I held out as again she cried softly, her head turned away.

I put myself together. "Do you want me to take you back to where I found you?"

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

"My name is Colleen," she said as we arrived at her spot, "in case you see me and want to date again."

My only kind reply would have been a lie, so all I said was "Thank you."

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 climbed the stairs to the porch and knocked. I became less bold as I waited, out in the open, for someone to respond. The sounds of a two-by-four being removed from jammed beneath the doorknob and I took a breath. 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, intimate, her smile that of a woman who knows it is she who has the power.

"Yes. I was here two or three times," I said in my most macho 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 gone to.

"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.

"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.”

She ushered me in.

Trey sat on a sofa facing front. He cast a glance my way, then returned his attention to the drone of crowd chatter between pitches from a TV to his right. To my left, in a recliner with its back to me, another person watched the game. A battered coffee table sat between them. The TV rested on a buffet against the left wall. To its right, a cushioned chair. Straight ahead, the kitchen door and, to its left, behind the sofa, the stairs rose to the left.

The ancient hardwood floors were waxed. Though clean, the house 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 in the frame that a half-hearted effort to pull it free failed. I peered through a gap into the room.

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

The bed sat crosswise to the left against the front wall. A bare window, its shade rolled up, admitted southern sunlight that brightened and warmed the room. To the right of the window, a dresser with mirror. A matching 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 black and white portable TV, its swivel chrome antenna extended straight up.

Past the bedroom, an open bathroom door. Behind me, in the shadow of another bedroom, sat a bare-mattress bed. I heard her footsteps on the stairs.

“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, though clearly embarrassed.

“You can put the money there,” she said, pointing toward the TV.

I placed the thirty-five dollars on the TV and turned to her for further instructions.

She stripped naked, stretched out on the bed, leaned back on an elbow, 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, setting my clothing on the dresser. Again, Angel smiled. I looked down at my equipment. I’d not yet be able to back up those manly words.

She bent her legs back as I kneeled between her legs. Her smile said, “Go ahead. Stick it in me.” I lowered myself until my business pressed up to hers. I thought the touch would bring arousal. There was none, hers or mine.

I caressed her face, squeezed her breasts, ran my hands up and down her body. With two fingers I gently probed. She wasn’t ready.

Not for over twenty years had I made love to anyone but Meredith, and foreplay had never much been required. And before her, I was used to arousal in my lovers without it. I had known there’d be no need for seduction when the sex is paid for, but this was unexpected. I rested on top of her, enjoying the closeness, her naked breasts against my chest, and caressed her again. She rubbed her hands across my back.

“Is kissing allowed?” I whispered.

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

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

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

Up the inside of her thigh and to her belly. Looked up for her reaction.

My effort seemed more tolerated than enjoyed. Nor did I derive much pleasure from it. Her nipples remained soft, her breasts hung like a matron’s, her belly flabby, her legs a bit too big.

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

“Such a pretty face,” I said. “Your hair is darker than I remember. I thought you were a blonde.”

“I *am* blond.” She removed a yellow scrunchie to spread her hair across 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 touched my lips to hers. She closed her eyes, then popped them open when I pulled away instead. Again I fondled, squeezed, suckled one, then the other. I massaged her clit. Fondled, squeezed, and tongued.

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, splayed and bent her legs. With help from my fingers, I was firm enough to enter. I used her legs and my stiff arms to keep a line of sight. I thought I'd need the visual stimulation to remain erect.

But soon my arms wearied, my shoulders burned, my heart pounded, and I was out of breath. I softened. I gasped for air, my arms gave out, and I collapsed on top of her.

A slow, measured pace would allow me to recover. She'd not go dry, and I'd not 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, however, I was losing it. I'd not be able to re-enter if I were to pull out. 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 ability to please and in the power that ability gave her. But confronted now by her inability to make me come, neither by hand nor intercourse, 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’ll bet I agreed because 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?”

Trey and the other person still sat watching TV and ignored us as we passed by and out the door.

“Is this where you walk to get 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 pointed as we rolled by. “Turn left at the light.”

I pulled to the curb in the same spot as I had 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, not having been called Steel in over forty years. But it wasn’t a lie. It *had* once been me. 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 it 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 short 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 when you look for me again.”

“Oh! Okay.”

“Well then, bye-bye!”

The two men trailed Angel back into the park.

Recording the numbers in the makeshift parking lot across from Doctor Spiegel's office that afternoon, 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 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 and reached for the passenger-side 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."

I had read about police traps in the paper. I would easily spot a trap. Better looking, better dressed, better behaved women. Or so I imagined. I had never seen a trap as far as I knew.

She looked at first puzzled, then I worried as her brow pinched.

Had I been disloyal? Dangerously naïve?

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

Had she become my caretaker? Or had she been insulted? 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 is 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 as she buckled her belt, 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 she deciding whether to answer honestly or not at all? “I was just so tired from getting up early this morning.” She made light of it with a coy smile and a backhand wave.

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

“I *have*.”

Angel undressed and lay naked on the bed, leaning back on her elbows. 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 tenderly stroked my semi-erect penis. I fondled her breasts. But not until I closed my eyes, tensed my body, stretched my legs, 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 had gotten 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 struggled to turn onto my side as she had ordered. I worried my effort would set me back, but she saw 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 a cloth for me. When she turned her back as she dressed, I used her Daisy Dukes that lay in the nearby pile.

We dressed and descended the stairs.

Trey sat at the coffee table, busy drawing in a sketch pad he held.

“Trey’s an artist,” Angel said as she took the pad from his hand. “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 role here, 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.

Supposing she knew what was fueling my depression; why I was willing to pay for her services. She might then 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.

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 unexciting.

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.

It was the kind of day that, if someone were to ask, “How was your day?” I’d normally respond, “Uneventful.” That would mean nothing had gone wrong. It was the tongue-in-cheek response of a pessimist; a truth spoken in sarcastic jest; a manic-depressive’s “It was great!”

## 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 lumbered out of bed a few minutes after I realized I was awake.

Because a microwave is noisy, with it whirring and beeps, door closings and such, I waited for Meredith to rise before cooking my oatmeal. I'm nice to her that way.

Oatmeal had become my daily breakfast several years prior when blood tests showed my cholesterol to be a little high and most medical professionals 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 instant. It retains its nutritional value much better when not processed. 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: Hot oatmeal, milk, and bananas are no longer routine. If necessary, I'll sweeten with raw honey, never sugar.

Yet on this morning that had started so well, I couldn't finish my hot oatmeal. A temporary high 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-depression.

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 poop 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 *that* to her too.

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 wedded 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 hip and knee injuries suffered long ago. 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 her legs to help support and stabilize me, I'd struggle to stay atop her and not 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 of the bed. 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 that she use her hand. The coaxing had become rare.

When we had first become intimate, she had 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 on that balmy afternoon 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 to see her 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 it. She had little reason to expect that I was ready to date. She came to the passenger-side window and put her hand on the sill. 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." She ignored my look of disbelief. "When do you have 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 as I left Doctor Spiegel’s office. I ran to my car, secured the specimens, and recorded the count. When I looked up, expecting to see her approaching, she was not. I stepped to the curb for a better view. Only hundred-year-old dwellings and weeds growing through cracks in the sidewalk.

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

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

A wave of the hand caught my eye. Monk stood waving me to him. I lowered the passenger-side window as I pulled up.

“Hey! Wassup?” he 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 had seen.

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 as she was passing 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 toot.

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.*

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 date Roxanne if I found her right away? 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.

Yet, there were times when I’d tell her I was depressed, and she’d dismiss it. “You’re killing me,” I’d say. She’d scoff. I couldn’t eat, rarely smiled, sleep was fitful and too short. I had a full rack of dumbbells next to the TV, but I couldn’t summon the energy or motivation to use them.

I barely greeted her in the morning or when retiring said “Good night.” I’d accede to a light kiss on the lips only if she was close and seemed to be expecting it. I was enthusiastic about nothing. 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 admit how fond of her I've become. But would I confess that I always grow fond of any woman I have sex with a third time? Unlikely. Unwise.

I'd tell her what she'd done 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!

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

I'd tell her my life story and judge by her body language whether her interest was 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.

Overcast and raining as I bound down the stairs and off to my workday duties, that had soon 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 jumbled 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 minutes, 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 understanding of what the crow's calls were saying. 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 to form the one. That way, no one would be burdened by it more than once a month, unless 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 in addition to all that, I could start the route from home.

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. But a late call had me backtrack, and Meredith had given me a domestic errand. I couldn't risk her 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 door. 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, I met her at the door, took her heavy work bag from her and asked, "Any grocery bags?"

"No."

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

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

I set her bag down by the kitchen table.

"Have you eaten?" she asked.

"No. I was waiting for you."

"You shouldn't have."

As she rustled up our dinner, I turned on the TV.

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, watched the season premiere of *The District*, 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.

As I lay in the darkened room, the patter of rain grew increasingly louder against the window and aluminum siding. Sleep would not come until 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, planning a daring proposal to Angel. 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. How could that be?

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

“Wait here,” he said, then climbed 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 much longer 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 pussy 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’s only nineteen!” Trey continued, 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 down 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 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!”

Trey raised the board to strike at Angel. Monk and I stepped between them, 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 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 without hitting Monk or me. He thrust his arm between us 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 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 as I started the car. But Trey hadn't followed.

"Turn left!" Angel ordered as we neared 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 and 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 honked again. 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. I looked around.

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 house at the far corner showed signs of life with young people coming, going, or lounging on the porch.

To my right, 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 brisk exchange for several minutes. John 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, her tension eased, and she smiled. I returned her smile.

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

The landmark eatery sat at the southwest corner of Broadway and Mickle Boulevard. Renamed five years prior to Doctor Martin Luther King Junior Boulevard, the historic old name still appeared on some street signs.

From the dirt and gravel parking lot behind the storied building, we walked to the Broadway entrance. As we walked and as we entered, I stayed alert for anyone whom I might not have wanted to see me with the two.

Front and side were waist-high-to-ceiling glass windows, the booths to the right, alongside the windows. I imagined curious looks from passersby

and diners. We made an odd trio, I'm sure, this tall, pretty, white girl, trailed by a shorter Black man, and an ugly, old, skinny, nervous 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 enough to not be overheard. "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 because I didn't want *you* to get hurt."

"You gonna be able to go back there?"

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

A bell rang. Angel rose, and I followed.

The daring proposal I planned to spring on Angel, that had kept me awake much of the night, had me so nervous and trembling I had skipped breakfast. The scuffle with Trey had me more so. But I knew I had to eat.

I had ordered *one* scrambled egg. Monk was having pancakes; Angel: scrambled eggs, fries, sausages, and toast.

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

As we ate and spoke in whispers, a clamor outside our window turned our heads. An overturned car, still rocking, its wheels spinning, had come to rest just beyond 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 talked.

"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." At the mention of his name, her anger returned. "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.

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

“I really like your hair.”

She smiled, cocked her head, expecting more. “Oh? 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 into 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 her abandon in eating was sexy.

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

Her appetite amazed me, especially after the earlier disturbance. 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 the 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 derelict

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 a 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 thought herself a marriage counselor. I changed the subject.

"I guess we're not gonna be doing 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 even if there were any rules.

"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 again. “Bye-bye.”

“See ya.”

Sleep came quickly that night as I looked forward to two more dates and many more adventures to come with sweet Angel.

## CHAPTER FIVE: *Look at My Face*

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

He suggested I park just past Frank's Deli. He'd go in to see if she was in there. When he came out, he came to my window.

"Not in there. We should wait here by your car and keep an eye out for her. She'll show up sooner or later."

I joined him on the busy sidewalk. We leaned back against the building and 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 talked, their speech pattern and cultural idiomatic expressions amused me. Though syntactically butchered and ambiguous at times, they understood each other well, and for the most part, I, too, them.

Much of what is said in our casual conversation is ambiguous but is understood by context. An intelligent, self-confident person might ask "What do you mean?" The timid and less intelligent will not. I didn't need to ask John or Monk what any of what they said meant, only 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 turned and disappeared into the deli.

"How about you, John? You okay?"

"I could use a couple bucks." He tucked the two bills 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, "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." The grocery at the corner of Viola Street was on the way.

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

The two men were quiet until John asked what I did for a living.

I described my job and inquired the same of him.

John confessed to having recently been released from prison after a few years served 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 back against a nearby tree.

"Here she comes," he said a couple of minutes later as he saw John and Angel on the way.

He returned to the back seat.

Angel's face twisted as she argued with John, who trailed her by a step. She glanced back to snap at him, tripped on a tilted section of sidewalk, and fell forward. She rose cursing and moaning, rubbing dirt and sand from her right forearm.

"I'm sorry I took so long," she said as she took her seat.

"Not a problem," I said, pretending not to have seen her fall. She'd be embarrassed if she knew I had seen.

"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 couldn't now 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 up the stairs.

"Why don't you sit on the bed a minute," she ordered, as though rushed, as though worried I'd be displeased if we didn't get right to it. "I need to find me 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 red face twisted in anger.

“You gonna fuck that dirty bitch? This morning she got boned by John right there on that bed,” he said, pointing to the unmade bed in the other room, “and then the fuckin’ whore squeezes out the jizz from her cunt in the hall right here, right in front of Monk that the bitch was just sleeping in *here* with!” He stood a moment like that, his finger forcefully pointing, his eyes piercing mine.

I stood dumbfounded. He turned with a *pfffft* of air and stomped back down the stairs. I hoped Angel hadn’t heard him over the sound of running water and through the bathroom 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 to turn on the radio.

I won’t wear a wristwatch. No jewelry or rings. I was still without a cell phone. I had to get to work after this date with Angel, so I’d need to track the time. I should have thought to have checked the dashboard clock.

Angel entered and saw me fussing with the radio, trying to tune into the all-news station.

“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!”

We barely heard Monk’s reply seconds later. “*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 reclined naked. When I stood nude too, she took my hand and guided me to mount 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. 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, 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. Her lack of protest was, to me, her approval. Great! I needed the higher sensitivity and erotic, psychological boost of an unsheathed penis. In my psyche hid an unconscious ethos that, if you were using 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 armpits, and I softened.

With loving smiles for each other, I released her legs and settled on top of her so that I might recover, leaning on a forearm to ease my weight on her. She'd let me set the pace.

I raised her legs and resumed, but soon again my shoulders were on fire and I weakened. I leaned on her raised legs to catch my breath.

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

I released her legs, again settled on a forearm, and gazed into her loving eyes. I stroked her cheek with the soft hairs on the back of my fingers.

"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 believed that as a woman, she wanted to respond, but as a prostitute, she must take care to maintain her distance. To keep it strictly business.

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

Still inside her, my penis stirred, so again I 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 nipped her nipples, and once more rose high on stiffened arms. From her face to her pussy, I glanced back and forth, but as I tarried on her blissful smile, each of us fixed onto the other's eyes, 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 with my last bit of strength, I controlled my collapse onto her, gasping.

Perhaps I had *not* overstated the effect of her face.

"Good boy," she cooed, and patted my head as one would a puppy. She put her arms around me in a tender embrace. Unexpected. I felt loved.

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

Angel grabbed a bath towel from the nearby clothing pile 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?"

We ignored 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 to ignore.

"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," "Mer," 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!" She sounded 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 authorized by the city, a converted box van traveled the streets as a mobile clinic. Any woman who wished to be tested for STDs 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 use protection.

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

In the lobby of Cooper Hospital, on my way to their lab, a man’s voice called out. “*Steel!*”

I turned to see Monk sauntering toward me. He flashed a friendly smile.

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

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

“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 that I have a place to have sex with Angel.

As I rushed from stop to stop, my thoughts would return to that morning.

Why had she needed artificial lubrication on this date but not the first? Had *she* needed seduction and foreplay from *me*? Had she developed an affection for me? And 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. Most of my sexual encounters had been me responding to a woman seducing *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, coming 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 gulps. He offered me a can. I declined 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 Monk there? Is that why?"

"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 a story, 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 done weed? 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. I once 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. You could see across the bar, and the people sitting and crowded all around it. 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, once to her place, once to mine. She said I shouldn't stick to one woman. There were lots of women who'd enjoy what I provided. Neither she nor her sexy friend, who I also would have tapped, were there now.

"But across the bar 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 return her 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 across the bar. We danced to a couple songs, but when last call was announced, she asked me to take her 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.

"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 having been invited, but I could come in. Again, it went well.

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

“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 was curious to know what she was doing. I crept to the bathroom door to spy through the keyhole. She sat naked on the edge of her tub, a white tube in her hand. She opened the tube, inserted the open end of the tube 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. I was of two minds. I still wanted to get laid, but I was afraid for whatever she had squeezed into her pussy.

“I undressed, not sure what I was thinking, but willing to take the risk. I caused her nightgown to crumple to the floor and we climbed onto the bed. But I wasn’t hard. We both tried, four hands and twenty fingers in the effort, but failed to poke me in. She said, ‘You might as well get dressed and go.’

“Hours later, it dawned on me: anything harmful to me would have also been to her. So I figured the pot had made me both paranoid and impotent, and I haven’t smoked it since.”

John had politely listened, smiling as I told my tale. He had saluted to show he understood what I meant by “It went well.” He chuckled at my “Oh my God!” declaration.

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

“Well, it looks like Angel’s not coming down. 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 might have had it on me, but I didn’t want to anger Angel.

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 her soon, I'd have one last chance to talk to Angel 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 a mission to see Angel.

Over the hump and left onto Gordon Terrace. From the distance walked Monk. He saw me and pointed to the end of the block. There, Angel crossed the street, climbed the steps, and entered the last house on the right, one of the few homes still standing.

Though not knowing how long she'd be, I parked out front.

From the shoebox, I pulled a steno pad. I wrote "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!*

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 and scrunched.

"She's here to see Misses Williams. About some business."

"So, I should wait here?"

"I guess. If she told you."

"How's your dad?"

"He's getting his foot off today."

"Is Trey out of the house?"

"Not yet." Monk fidgeted; looked away.

Tapping at my window straightened me up. I lowered the window for Angel.

"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 an 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 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 get yours in it. But I don’t expect any problems at the house the next time.”

“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 looked down as, with care, she folded the paper. Was there a mist in her eyes? She tucked the note into a butt pocket.

“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 misty 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.” That all sounded better when I said it than it does now.

“I’m not going to talk about it.”

She had turned her face away, but I read her body language. She was smothering her emotions.

“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 to 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 said?

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 the checkbook was my charge, as the kitchen was hers. 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 for an extended visit with friends.

Bits and pieces of earlier that day flit in and out of my mind. Like static intrusions from a parallel universe, sporadic 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 we had planned.

We set no alarm. We'd let our circadian rhythms awaken us. We'd not risk getting drowsy during tomorrow's 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 her for sex. She muttered about having to finish packing and leaving as planned.

"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 by pretense of seduction. Still, I regretted having to resort to this tack.

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 having once 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 question nor request. I wanted not to chance refusal. Deflation was at risk.

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

When the moonglow of satisfaction had 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 to our room. We shared a bed, holding hands, for the first time in many months.

\* \* \*

Behind the log home ran a stream. From the stream across the fen to the slightly under 2,000-foot mountain the distance was perhaps half a mile, but you couldn't go that way. Toting a backpack, I had to hike a mile further down a straight country road from the log home to an unlocked rusty gate. Beyond the gate, I knew the way fairly well, having twice the previous year climbed this pile of volcanic spew, born eons ago under an ancient sea.

I paused to pull down my safari hat netting. It was a lesson learned the hard way the previous year when I had first made this climb. The net was needed when hiking through grassland to fend off flying insects from my face and out of my mouth, nose, and ears. Only then would I set out.

A gently inclined snowmobile and ATV trail continued on from the gate for unknown miles. Branching off to the right, a half mile in or so, a quarter-mile footpath cut through a steeply rising meadow. Then, where tall grass met short brush, the ground rose sharply, and, nearly hidden behind a bush, was the start of the trail up the tree-covered mountain.

Once on the mountain trail, I could remove the hat with netting.

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

Also in my pack were rain gear, granola bars, toilet tissue, binoculars, a flashlight, a sixteen-ounce jar with a lid, a compass, clean underpants, and a camera. In my pants pockets, I always carried my wallet, a comb, coin purse, spare keys, ChapStick, facial tissues, and a red, multifunction Super Tinker pocketknife. Clipped to my belt, I wore a walkie-talkie, borrowed from our host to communicate with him, and, in a shirt pocket, identification: a three-by-five card with our hosts' names, 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 thirty feet from the summit, I sat on a lip of stone, my feet dangling over the edge, to survey the valley far below. An hour had passed. Through my binoculars, I found the log home from which I had started. I used the walkie-talkie to tell them I'd arrived. My host found me with his field glasses. Would he 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 scrub grew in patches.

I checked for my name, etched in the stone. Barely visible, it remained. With my pocketknife, I refurbished the proof of my existence. Mine was not the only name immortalized there, a fact I hoped lessened my guilt for my offense to Mother Nature. Two walnut-size fragments would make excellent souvenirs. With chest bared and body splayed on the warm rock, absorbing the sun's rays, I enjoyed the solitude for several minutes.

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 that 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.

It's unlikely I'm the only one 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 thereby made 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, one raised by subduction and shaped by erosion. There'd be no river pebbles found there. And thankfully, no flying pests to require protective netting.

A little over 2,000 feet, its slope was a near-constant forty-five degrees. My legs quickly tired.

The trail was well-marked and well-traveled. Other climbers sped by in both directions providing a sense of camaraderie.

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

## Toot Toot

From the lot, a path led to the summit. A stone foundation was all that remained of what had once been a world-famous hotel frequented by fat cats and nabobs. Tourists and climbers all bustled about. I took out my camera to take a few scenics and selfies.

\* \* \*

This mountain had been 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 and dead leaves.

Near the summit, I chuckled and took a selfie as I stood at 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, past a fire lookout tower from which jutted cell phone, radio, and TV antennas.

Returned to the summit, 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 quarry. A truck road opened to a posh residential street that led into a quaint, historic village. From there, the main route led to the secondary road that led to our hosts' rustic log home. On the way, I stooped to examine a smoothed river stone the size and shape of a baking potato. *Meredith might enjoy this as a souvenir.* It had been a fulfilling four-hour walk.

\* \* \*

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 re-entered, 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 excess weight. This rare simultaneous orgasm might have brought us even closer.

I credited my time with the hookers.

The sun was low when we kissed Janette goodbye. It had been a nice visit. But not as nice as 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 return from the bathroom, my enthusiasm waned. As before, I thought it best that at least I pleasure her. When dysfunction again betrayed me, she suggested I give her oral. Surprised, yet pleased, I did so.

Again, her imminent climax aroused me. I entered her hoping again for 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 pale minuscule. She understood my intentions had been good and agreed to use her hand, though not without the cow-milking comment.

\* \* \*

We visited Ginger the next day, the last day of our vacation. Still my darling baby girl at age thirty-four, she sat close 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.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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

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

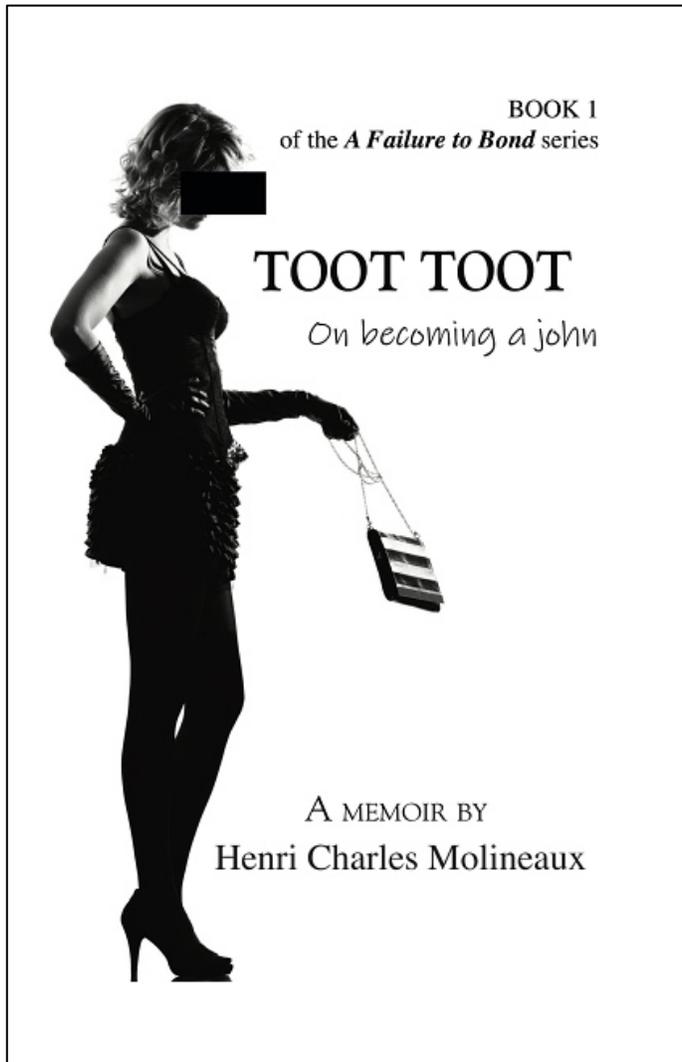
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