

Kiko

1.

In his left hand, PJ had a ziploc containing his phone, his apartment key, and the key to the yacht he was going to steal. In his right, he carried his shoes. He slogged through the sand-grown grass, imagining eyes on his back. The edges of the grass sliced shallow cuts on his calves while the flat sides adhered and wrapped, vine-like, pulling away with stinging friction.

Finally foaming shallows churned around him; the vast emptiness of the Atlantic lay ahead. He walked a length of shoreline deep enough to make wading difficult but too shallow for swimming. To PJ's right, a white wall curved apparently to the horizon.

The stars were muffled in cloud. It was dark, but where PJ trod was deeper dark, an opacity within which he stepped on sharp things and soft yielding things worse than the sharp things. When the water was above his waist he flung himself down and began doggy-paddling along the wall, pushing through floating islands of segmented, turd-like kelp.

The kelp tangled in and then trailed the knotted-together shoes in his right hand. The baggie of keys and phone he clutched betokened a life outside the night ocean in which he swam, a life of light and activity and connection, of sanctuary and possibility.

The currents were strong around PJ. With his body flat along the surface, the tide buffeted him against the slime-and-barnacle-crusting wall, but it pushed lazily, sloppily. Within this lateral current, PJ was a strong enough swimmer to advance along the wall in a series of zigzags.

When he paused, though, and let his legs dangle down into the deeper coolness, he felt a stronger pull: the undertow. It wanted him away from the wall, with conviction. He went under for a second, managed not to panic, and fluttered himself back to the surface.

He kept as much of his body atop the water as possible. Kelp strands tickled insinuatingly at his feet and thighs. Something that he told himself was kelp brushed against the inside of one of his knees. PJ made his inefficient, diagonal way along the wall. He didn't dare look back to shore to see how far he'd come, nor did he dare contemplate how deep the space beneath him yawned. He was out far enough that there was chop, small wavelets that bobbed him a couple feet up and down within the general wallward movement. The sea was also trying to rotate him counterclockwise, roll him onto his back and pivot him into verticality; his body was being shifted along three or four different axes at once. The rough reliability of the wall, which he now felt more than saw, was all that kept him oriented. Designed to keep people like him away from the yachts it sheltered, the barrier was the only solid thing within reach.

It was crucial not to panic, he knew. After long minutes anticipating the end of the wall, he reached it, and a strong tidal current waiting there pushed him out to sea.

PJ flailed, losing his shoes. He could move his arms and legs however he liked, but he didn't actually have control of how or where he was going; that was up to the ocean. He was underwater-- but he'd only been rolled over, he determined, and writhed back face-up, gasping. A wave lifted him aloft as if sarcastically celebrating him, as if presenting him, Lion-King style, to the rest of the empty water. PJ craned his neck: he could see no shore. The water flung him down into a deep trough whose edges sluiced sideways. As he was sucked along the trough's sideways surface, more water towered above him, blotting out the sky. He was in open ocean.

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Stop being a titty, PJ told himself. He checked the address on his phone again.

It was only Lazlo, only John Smurf and Kiko, only oral. PJ didn't feel scared, but he felt unhappy, a little spooky, dreamily stoned though he hadn't smoked in days. He put his hand on the brass door-lever. He could feel he was unwell.

He'd been tested; he was clean. PJ stopped being a titty, pushed the brass door lever, and entered the undistinguished apartment. As usual, he was first to arrive.

The camera sat on a tripod by dusty vertical blinds. PJ was first of the boys; Lazlo was already there. Having to deal with Lazlo until the others arrived was unpleasant but not unbearable. PJ tried not to show annoyance, because Lazlo was peering intently at him, goggling through his glasses. Lazlo was always way too interested.

Almost on time, Lazlo said.

Yup, PJ said, and sat down in a comfy plaid chair. He hadn't hurried, but he still felt sweaty. In the A/C, his perspiration cooled to clamminess.

Think any of your boyfriends will show up?

PJ shrugged.

Lazlo gave PJ a challenging smile that may have been meant to convey contempt, towards PJ or towards the situation, or mastery, over PJ or over the situation. It may have been an attempt at friendliness by someone who lacked the knack.

We having fun yet? Lazlo asked, after several seconds of silence. PJ didn't respond.

Sullen little slut, Lazlo thought. He stared a bit longer at PJ. What was the kid going to do about it? Lazlo widened his eyes and then narrowed them in a way he considered ferocious. PJ wasn't looking. Lazlo nodded, scratched his beard, and took out his new phone.

While PJ gazed neutrally at nothing, Lazlo clutched the new phone at a specific middle distance from his eyes and jabbed its screen, checking messages he'd already read. No way any of these boys could afford such a phone unless they stole one or got it from a sugar daddy.

This new firmware is a shit-ton faster, Lazlo said. He squinted at PJ, got no answer, and returned to poking the phone's screen. The phone had been favorably reviewed; Lazlo had read a lot about it as well as its closest competitors before making his purchase. He was tech-savvy, smart about money, something else none of the stupid brats he worked with were.

PJ stared into space as if comatose, as if alone. PJ had worked with Lazlo for years, an eternity in this business, and yet after weeks without them seeing each other, he didn't have a single word to say. No questions-- how are you, Lazlo? You look well, how've you been? No small talk, no curiosity, no courtesy. Not even civil-- no concept of professionalism.

Or was it disrespect? Lazlo's beard bristled at the possibility. Lazlo was a confident little man, but his confidence had a brittle quality that he worried certain people were able to perceive. Was PJ deliberately disrespecting him, as some kind of power play? Lazlo stayed vigilant against anyone calling him out or checking his confidence, in large or small or extremely subtle ways.

A few years back, the boy had been tanned nearly chestnut; the contrast between his brown torso and pale groin had been really wild. PJ had been out on water a lot, then; he'd been staying with Clark Connors, spending a lot of time out on Connors' boat.

Clark was thousands of miles away, now, another victim of real estate armageddon. He still e-mailed Lazlo occasionally, mostly to ask after PJ. Hey-- just btw, you ever see PJ around? Don't have to tell him I asked, but how is he? He still in Miami?

Lazlo grinned grimly at PJ, no longer tan, now not even as thin as he'd once been. The PJ of today was pallid, sweaty, visibly unhealthy. This would be nice to write back to Clark-- your little fuckboy looks miserable. Aged badly in just a couple years, probably drugs. Dating some girl. I think they're getting married. Or better: oh yeah, PJ? Sure. He comes to me for advice, you know, looks up to me I guess. We work together. Once I got him in line, the little bitch turned out to be a decent earner; not a bad lay either. Lazlo felt savage delight at the prospect of relaying this to Clark, but as he looked at the sulky, withdrawn young man about whom he was fantasizing, his pleasure faded into annoyance. Really, why did the little shit look so miserable?

PJ was trembling. Slightly, but enough for Lazlo to notice. He's trembling because he's on drugs, Lazlo thought. The idiot's on drugs.

You get high before you came here?

No PJ said.

You're fucking shaky.

I need coffee, PJ said.

I bet you're high.

PJ looked at the closed blinds. It was never worth it. There was no point in responding to Lazlo's provocations, nothing to be gained.

Knew it, Lazlo said. Yup! I knew it.

For a while Lazlo had been in the habit of making clumsy, demeaning remarks towards the boys while filming, keeping up a running commentary, but lately he'd desisted. These days Lazlo was mercifully silent behind the camera, a great improvement over both the verbal abuse and its predecessor, the attempted cheerleading. Yeah, give it to him! Lazlo used to say to the boys. Oh yeah. That's the stuff, alright! The insults had been easier to ignore.

Lazlo was so awful, but a familiar, almost comforting awful.

One time when Lazlo had been shouting at PJ while driving his sad little Lazlo-truck with PJ in the passenger seat, Lazlo had set his fat-ass plastic 7-11 soda cup on the dashboard for a moment to change gears and the cup had immediately slid off the dashboard, like immediately as Lazlo was still moving his hand back towards the gearshift. PJ had reached to catch the cup and Lazlo had responded, bizarrely, by

grabbing PJ's hand, letting the ice-shard-laden popcorn-container-sized cup of cola splosh uncaught all over one thigh of each of them, drenching the shag-texture console between the seats where the shifter was. The cup itself had then rolled off the console onto Lazlo's side and disgorged the remainder of its contents into the gravelly footwell, which Lazlo had reacted to by stomping the pedals with both feet, making the truck shudder and stall, stomping the pedals to break apart the cup like a child trampling it in a tantrum.

Lazlo had a rotted softness to him, part of why PJ had taken this job. He didn't like Lazlo, but he wasn't intimidated by him, in spite of Lazlo's prickish temper and the fact he carried a gun, something that scared the piss out of some of the boys.

PJ didn't have a gun, but he did have an awesome crazy girlfriend who talked frequently about murdering the men who paid PJ for sex. If it ever came down to it, PJ's money was on Kym and against Lazlo, gun and all.

Kym was smart and dykey and fun and absolutely obsessed with PJ. Life with Kym was so flattering and enjoyable. She was full of affection and ideas; she was by far the most fun person PJ had ever met. Really the only downside was that they couldn't have many friends because of her constant stealing.

PJ loved Kym effortlessly, effortlessly because the fire of the love she bore him was so intense that all PJ had to do for his part was exist. It seemed enough for Kym that PJ be alive, floating unmoored in the raging sexy fun holocaust of her love for him. Aside from occasional freak-outs about money or Kym stealing from people she shouldn't, they barely fought at all.

Thinking about Kym made PJ so happy he sucked his lips inside his mouth and bobbed his head like he had headphones on.

Oh yeah, you're fucking high, Lazlo said. He took out his phone again and held it at middle distance. You're high, but at least you showed up.

Lazlo made a moue of disparagement as the person whom he was telephoning failed to answer. His phone's cut off, Lazlo said. Very nice, very professional. Know what that means if all these other kids flake?

What, PJ responded listlessly.

It means you gotta fuck yourself, Lazlo gloated, his eyes and beard looking particularly fierce. No other boys here means you gotta go fuck yourself!

I'm not fucking you, PJ said. No offense.

Oh you're not, eh? But that's not what I said. I said you'd have to fuck yourself.

PJ blew his bangs up off his forehead for a moment. I'll do a solo, he said. That's fine. I'll jack off.

No! Lazlo shouted. I was joking, you idiot! It was a joke! Anyway it's only 1:30.

2.

A shave-and-a-haircut knock at the door announced John Smurf.

Hello hello hello! John Smurf said. He was a big reason PJ had agreed to this video shoot. John Smurf's easy-going friendliness made sex with him a relatively unselfconscious, uncomplicated undertaking. He had on a sleeveless t-shirt that was dirty, a pair of running shorts and New Balance with no socks. It's a beautiful day to sling dick, John announced, putting his hands on his hips.

There was never any question whether John Smurf had gotten high before a shoot. If he'd possessed the means to get high, he wouldn't have shown up at all.

John Smurf loved to laugh and to make others laugh. He had a slightly pug face and a two-day beard, which with his bright eyes and bristly hair gave him a silly look. His greatest claim to fame was that once a famous TV news personality in town for a convention had picked him up, and never actually getting to fuck him, had drunkenly chased John around the hotel room shouting: I need love, John Smurf!

John Smurf loved to tell this story. The television personality had finally gotten drunk enough to pass out and John Smurf had taken all his money and credit cards and passport and luggage, some of which John Smurf himself lost later that night while celebrating.

Nice of you to show up, Lazlo said. Lazlo found a lot to dislike about John Smurf.

You always look so cheerful, John Smurf said to Lazlo. I wish I knew your secret to enjoying life. You've got it all figured out.

Spare me your attempts at humor, Lazlo said.

You oughta do a self-help series, John Smurf said. Just you, sitting and talking. Put it on YouTube. Life advice.

Lazlo sneered. Why don't you?

People already pay to watch me, John Smurf said, and turned to PJ. There's the man I came to see. 'Sup homie?

PJ smiled tightly back through his jangling pre-shoot nerves. I hope you showered, he said.

Well well! I'm clean as a whistle, just for you, John Smurf said, and laughed, and waggled his sizeable penis inside his perforated running shorts.

Hell, said Lazlo, if just one more of you fuckers shows up we might actually get out of here before the sun sets.

How you been? John Smurf asked PJ.

Not bad, dude. How about you?

Got another place, John said. A whole house.

Oh shit, good to hear. John Smurf had been couch-surfing for a minute due to a roommate misunderstanding.

Do you have a phone? Lazlo asked PJ.

Yes, PJ said.

Not me! laughed John Smurf. I lost mine on the beach!

I didn't ask you, Lazlo said savagely. PJ, you got Kiko's number? Is it still Five Two Two?

PJ shrugged, dug his phone out of his jeans and scrolled very, very slowly through the numbers.

For fuck's sake, Lazlo said after a minute, do you or don't you have it?

Hold on, PJ said. I lost my place now. He milked another minute out of the search, then put his phone back in his pocket. Don't got it, he said.

I think I might have it, John Smurf said. Want me to check?

Lazlo looked at him and licked his lips. You lost your phone at the beach, he said.

I found it again, John Smurf said. Nestled up under my balls the whole time. Want to borrow it?

You just don't know when to shut up, do you? Lazlo said, and stared at John in a hard, hostile manner. John Smurf looked away, smirking like the idiot he was. You're not even clever, Lazlo said.

John Smurf shrugged. You're not, Lazlo said, raising his voice. You're the farthest goddamn thing from clever.

John Smurf farted, then laughed.

C'mon dude, PJ said, though he was smiling.

Thunder thunder, John Smurf said. Thunder thunder, lightning ahead.

That's exactly what you're worth right there, Lazlo said. You're worth a fart, you piece of trash! He waited for an argument or riposte, but none of the boys Lazlo dealt with bothered standing up to his temper.

Although he knew this absence of a challenge was not respect, although he could smell the contempt coming off the boys like stink off a dirty ass, Lazlo had nevertheless over time begun to consider his fierceness something authentic and rooted in toughness. Unchallenged, his almost virginal ferocity had curdled into an embittered egotism, further reinforced by filming fuck movies and corralling these dumb, drug-addicted boys, these trashy boys who thought they were too good for him...

...which only showed again how little they knew. Six months ago when the now-absent Kiko was new to the scene Lazlo had gotten fucky-sucky from him on multiple occasions, and he hadn't had to pay for it every time either. Lazlo had always punched above his weight class, going all the way back to a complicated situation in his college days where he'd semi-blackmailed a handsome athlete down the hall into a bunch of fucky-sucky over a period of several weeks, a golden memory and early evidence of Lazlo's suitability for his current vocation. How good it had been! And in retrospect the whole blackmail aspect had been mostly a ruse, at least partly a ruse, a way for Lazlo's special friend to justify his desire.

Sex was always a transaction, wasn't it? Always in some way. Fucky-sucky for money or goods or quid pro quo. Lazlo despised most of the boys, but he wasn't among them by chance. Whores were honest in their whoredom, and that made them bearable. Whores had no hypocrisy to hide behind. John Smurf might give attitude, but he knew damn well what he was. The truth was right there on tape.

You drive here? PJ asked John Smurf.

A-yup.

Can I get a ride?

John Smurf looked troubled, because he was anticipating how much of a hurry he'd be in to go get high. Sure, of course. You still in Opa-Locka?

Lazlo put his phone into its little leather belt-case, then retrieved it. Alright, we're giving that idiot another fifteen minutes, that's all. If he no-shows, I'm done with him!

Fifteen minutes hell, John Smurf said. Let's get this party underway. Lights camera cocksucking!

We'll split Kiko's money, PJ said, without much conviction.

The fuck you will! Lazlo snapped, pleased to have a clear target for his frustration. The fuck you will split his fucking money, that fucker is blackballed!

Better than blueballed, John Smurf said, leaning back on the beige loveseat. He reached into the right leg-opening of his track shorts and fished out his handsomely proportioned dick. It was hard, and he began petting it in an affectionate, absent-minded way.

Hold your horses, Lazlo said, mildly titillated in spite of himself.

Do you just have wood all the time, or what? PJ asked.

I'm automatic for the people, John Smurf said. Rain or shine, ugly or fine, I show up with my bro up every time.

Alright, to hell with Kiko, Lazlo said. If one of you idiots see him, tell him from me I'm done working with him. So basically, let's do: you blow John, he blows you, then you both come all over each other.

Really? John Smurf said. Let's just do one then the other.

No, Lazlo said. You guys finish at the same time, you cuddle up and come on each other's stomachs.

I can't do that, PJ said. I can't come at the same time.

Be a professional, Lazlo said.

What's a little ass-eating worth to you? John asked Lazlo. Can we get a little bonus for that?

No, PJ said. Sorry.

Really? John asked, sounding hurt.

Today is strictly cocksucking, Lazlo said. It's not my website, so don't ask me why. No rimming. No fingering.

Well then I hardly call that cocksucking, John said. What kind of homo is scared of the butt?

Are you making a dig at me? PJ asked.

Not in the least, John said. I'm just confused. I genuinely look forward to your asshole. As a professional.

Drop it, PJ said. Seriously.

We want lots of talk, Lazlo said while tending to the camera. That's the other thing-- chatter your fucking heads off. Talk about stuff, let 'em hear you've got no accents.

What should we say?

Anything. Just talk like normal Americans, Lazlo said, fiddling with the camera. People want real American kids getting fucked.

Ah, John said, they all are wanting the American cockski. They are have craving for American patriot cock.

You better hope they crave it, Lazlo said as he peered through the camera's viewfinder. He straightened up and went to adjust the vertical blinds. You better pray they do, 'cause there's ten million half-starved pumpkin-head Polacks or whatever the fuck, ready to take your job. They'll eat runny shit, fuck a corpse for pennies.

Jesus, PJ said.

You think I'm joking? Little desperate slant-eye kids from Transylvania, that's your competition. The only thing those kids can't do, Lazlo said, is look and sound American. So if you care about your survival, gimme lots of natural, normal talk.

Lazlo was holding the tripod between his knees and tugging at the camera. There was a cracking noise. Jesus goddamn christ! he shouted.

Ruh-roh! John Smurf said.

This fucking cheap piece-of-shit fucking tripod! Lazlo kicked the tripod, which fell over. Fuck you! he shouted at it.

If it's metal, PJ said, you could probably weld it.

Lazlo turned, furious. Oh, could I? Is that your opinion?

PJ looked abashed. Probably, he said. I mean, most likely.

The camera's fine, Lazlo said. The camera's what matters. We don't need the fucking tripod anyway.

Thank Jesus, John Smurf said, and took his shirt off.

Hold on, let me film, Lazlo barked. I want it all on film. No, fuck it, I want PJ coming into the room on film.

What about me? John Smurf asked.

You stay there. Okay. Easy-peasy: PJ comes in, you say hello, a few lines, then he gets naked, slowly. No, you help him get naked. No, he takes his own clothes off.

You want, like, a strip-tease?

No. Well, yeah. Basically. Ok, and then we go to kissing, and then John, you rub on him a little bit.

You got a breath mint? PJ asked John.

I used mouthwash, John Smurf said, just for you. I told you I was clean.

No I meant for me, PJ said.

John Smurf laughed. Are you kidding? I ain't scared of your breath, Pee-Bear. Hit me with your best shot.

Ok. You wanna do me first?

John nodded agreeably. Thanks, PJ said. And just... as a favor, uh... go gentle. Alright?

John Smurf looked thoughtful. No problem, he said.

Are you listening? Lazlo was asking. Go outside, wait five seconds, come in.

What should I say? Do me and John know each other?

Oh, for fuck's sake, that doesn't matter. Just talk.

Should I have my cock out? John Smurf wanted to know.

3.

Hey, PJ said, entering the unremarkable apartment again.

Greetings, John Smurf said. What is good in the hood, comrade?

PJ's nerves kept him from cracking a smile. I'm... looking for Kiko, he said.

John Smurf tilted his head, absorbing this news, then craned his neck and made a big show of looking around, as if Kiko might be visible in some corner. Sorry, John said, I am not seeing Kiko presently here.

Oh, PJ said. He came further into the room and shut the door behind him. Lazlo was hunched behind the camera, a mere mobile support apparatus for its domed, black-iridescent eye.

I notice you're a very sexy man, John Smurf said. You are liking by some chance to make party-party?

PJ felt he might laugh, might cry. I do, he said. I do like to, actually.

You do what? John Smurf asked. Tell me what it is you like to do.

I'll show you, PJ said, and crossed his arms across his torso. He took the rough hem of his polo shirt in his hands and began to slide it up his stomach, rolling his shoulders and slowly rotating his hips as he worked the shirt up his ribs.

He knew without having to look that John Smurf was staring appreciatively at him, a crooked smile in scratchy stubble, and the camera's eye was on PJ too, behind it Lazlo's, and thence the eyes of a thousand thousand strangers, riveted by PJ's body, waiting to see him undress.

It's cold in here, PJ said coquettishly, hugging himself, holding the removed shirt against his chest.

Shirtless, PJ was gawky. He had light muscle, a smidgen of fat, and a scattering of pimples, red as LEDs against his lunar pallor. His chest was nearly concave, more boy's than man's. Narrow shoulders compounded his androgyny, reinforced by an absence of body hair-- absent but for a line of close-cropped, dirty-blond fur that ran from the base of his navel down to where his peppermint-stripe boxers began.

God damn, John Smurf said, you look hot as fuck to me.

You think so? PJ asked.

John Smurf stuck his hand in his shorts, fished out his dick, and waved it at PJ almost admonishingly. I'd rather show you, John Smurf said, running a hand up and down his hard-on.

PJ nodded his head at John's cock, as if greeting an acquaintance on the sidewalk.

Talk! Talk, talk! Lazlo mouthed from behind the camera, and flapped his hand like a duck beak at mouth-level.

I guess Kiko really isn't here, PJ said, and squeezed his own, still-soft cock through his jeans.

C'mere, John said, and PJ went towards him. John said, You shore have a purty mouth.

It was true; PJ did have a pretty mouth. He brought it down to John's, John stretching up from the couch like a hungry baby bird. John's tongue flicked at PJ's lips. He doesn't care about your breath, PJ reminded himself.

John Smurf's mouth tasted like menthol cigarettes. John Smurf's whole face, head, clothing smelled like cigarettes.

John Smurf, who liked PJ and liked fucking PJ, put one hand behind PJ's soft blonde head and pulled him harder into the kiss. This elicited a brief hum of surprise from PJ, who at last opened his mouth and let John have his tongue. PJ's breath was a little flat was all, a little like sour milk. John Smurf really, truly didn't care. He licked every angle of that mouth he could get at, kissing like a drowning man trying to get air. He chewed the hell out of PJ's lips and shy tongue... send Pee-Bear back to his girlfriend nice and chapped up. PJ was too polite to object, or didn't have an opinion, or maybe liked it...

PJ broke the kiss, pushing John away. He stood up and stepped back. His brow was troubled; his face bore the ghost of reproach.

Shit, John thought, I forgot Go gentle.

He wanted to do as PJ had asked, but he also wanted PJ-- not just to fuck PJ or suck PJ but to somehow eat PJ, maybe. He wanted to eat him, to inject him like a drug, to powder and snort him. He wanted PJ badly, and resisting things he wanted wasn't John Smurf's strong suit.

Lazlo hissed behind the camera, annoyed at the delay. His own hard-on, ignored even by himself, made a pointy peak in his slacks.

That was rough, John said. He made an apology with his eyes. But, uh, I can be gentle too.

PJ bit his lower lip. Was he play-acting, or was he genuinely upset? John felt his desire for PJ clouding his judgment, spreading through his mind like blood in water. Take your pants down, John Smurf said. I'll be gentle, you'll see.

PJ did as he was asked, with a lot less bump-and-grind than when he'd removed his shirt. John Smurf smiled encouragingly at him, and then there was PJ's familiar, pleasant penis. Uncircumcized and gently arched, it lay like a pastel lily, drooping from a bank of brassy down. Both boys looked at it, and PJ swatted at it with what he hoped wasn't obvious concern.

So hot, John Smurf murmured. Bring me that sweet thing. PJ shuffled forward again, looking off into the distance, thinking of nothing, remembering nothing. John Smurf's hand went under PJ's cock, lifting it and then lowering it as if judging its weight. John's hands weren't entirely soft; a ridge of callus lay just below where the fingers met the palm, and PJ felt the edges of this harder tissue graze the underside of his cock, tweaking the thick vein that ran like an exhaust line along its underbelly. Miraculously, mercifully, he felt his cock twitch and begin easing out of itself, relaxing into greater length, beginning to better fill John's palm.

That's it, murmured John, and brought his mouth down to nuzzle the dick, brushing his unshaven cheeks along it. PJ gasped-- the skin was so sensitive; John's jawline was so rough.

Feel good? John asked him.

Yes, PJ whispered, his eyes tight shut. Yes, he said again louder. It feels good, PJ said as the moisture of John's mouth began to baste his thickening cock. It was happening-- he was getting hard. As the surface area increased, PJ's dick provided a spectrum of sensation: the textured lavings of John's tongue, the heat of John's breath, the cool of John's copious spittle, all simultaneously, all in nuance.

John Smurf was gentle. Tender, confident, and skilled, a lover ministering and asking nothing. PJ's narrow pink cock slipped into John's mouth, and PJ gave himself over to John in a larger, invisible but very real way, giving John his sex and his vulnerability, surrendering to John the trust John had earned.

PJ's entire torso was tense, his sinews taut. His elbows and upper arms were stiff against his midriff, but his hands opened and closed, kneading the air. He was hard, but he thought if he didn't come soon, he might not be able to; he had to ride this small wavelet all the way to orgasm. He brought his hands up to his puffy, candy-dot nipples, tugging them hard between thumb and forefinger, twisting them and distending them, bowing his head and gritting his teeth-- and all the while John worked patiently away, coaxing the come from him.

The steady, gradually-increasing rhythm became an irresistible summons. Gonna come! PJ announced, and began lightly thrusting his hips, his buttocks clenching, bucking as if the motion was involuntary. John's mouth vanished from his cock and

there was only the firm, spit-slicked ring of John's fingers keeping tempo on PJ's shaft. The contractions of his coming seemed to start in the muscles of PJ's thighs and stomach, and it was not merely intense but actively uncomfortable. It felt like liquid cement working its way from his balls, up the length of his cock like mercury inching up a thermometer. PJ swallowed spit, stopped breathing, and compressed his nipples flat between his fingers. John's tongue was flickering along the underfin of PJ's cockhead-- it was too much, and then PJ came, gasping for air, shooting hard. He felt no pleasure, only queasy relief; it was ejaculation without orgasm.

Oh yum, John was saying as PJ spewed semen everywhere except his mouth.

No No No Lazlo was mouthing behind the camera, annoyed they hadn't done it in the right order, but he hadn't stopped filming.

Alright, John Smurf said. You want to clean Daddy up a little?

PJ nodded, feeling pleasantly as if he might faint. He'd gotten hard and come. He was delighted with himself, delighted with John. PJ took John's head between his hands and with his small cat-like tongue licked his own cooling jism from John's rough cheeks, then off John's neck and arms.

Oh dude, Smurf groaned, squirming on the couch. Oh god, Oh fucking god. His voice was husky in the way PJ had heard so many mens' voices-- a rough, urgent croak. Please, please suck my fucking cock, John Smurf said, and he didn't sound ironic or jokey at all. He sounded desperate, almost frightened. Please touch my cock.

The part of the shoot PJ had feared was past; all that remained was celebration. He knelt to John Smurf's trembling, twitching, perfectly proportioned penis.

Jasmine

4.

PJ followed John Smurf across the undistinguished apartment building's empty parking lot to a faded red Japanese hatchback.

This yours? PJ asked.

Well, John Smurf said, unlocking the passenger door, I'm using it. It's my brother's.

It was stiflingly hot in the car, but the heat and the smell of old leather made it cozy. John put on aerodynamic black wrap-around sunglasses, curving shades with lenses barely wider than the earpieces.

It's my brother's house, too, John said. In Hialeah.

The glasses were pretty damn redneck, it seemed to PJ. It was striking how different John Smurf appeared with his eyes made invisible. He looked older and less interesting; just another Florida cracker.

John started the car, which was loud. Now we're both basically grown up, John said, me and him are friends.

After a few miles, all the business signs were in Spanish. The men on the sidewalks wore soccer jerseys or guayaberas. The women all had long hair; they pushed or pulled along kids. The air coming in through the window smelled like grilling meat, then like pesticides, then chlorine. This last was a powerfully evocative smell to PJ; he'd swum Varsity in high school.

It's about trust at this point, John was saying. We've both changed a lot.

They pulled onto an expressway, the car obediently accelerating. You think the exhaust is supposed to sound like that? John asked. I can't decide if it sounds cool, or like a part fell off.

You could probably just re-weld it, PJ said.

The Smurf house, when they reached it, was a very small ranch home the color of spray-on tan. Its roof looked a little like terra-cotta tile, but wasn't-- just as the little picket fence around the front yard wasn't wood. The roof was shiny; it was a type of plastic. The fence was white, wood-grained plastic. The gutters were plastic, the window trim was plastic. Because of this, the building looked like a playhouse.

PJ clambered out of the car. He hadn't been in Hialeah before. The neighborhood had a slapdash feel. The street itself wasn't black macadam, but a wide, light-grey, recent-looking strip of poured concrete. There were no curbs or curbstones. The sidewalks, driveways and doorpaths were also bright, uneven channels of concrete. For Sale signs, mostly in Spanish, competed with shrines to Mary. You like living here? PJ asked.

John Smurf laughed, ambiguously but not unkindly.

Inside the house's round-topped front door, the air-conditioning was nearly as loud as the car's exhaust had been. Matt Smurf paused his military-combat video game when they entered.

Back already? he asked.

Matt Smurf looked slightly out-of-scale with the house. Though not tall, he was a broad, intimidating turret of a man, a salt-cellar of muscle and fat. He filled the chair in which he sat.

I came straight back, John Smurf said.

Matt stood. His face was disconcertingly like his brother's, set on a shorter, much thicker neck. The rest of him was bulldog, bred for carrying heavy things and guarding nightclub doors.

John held out money. Thanks, John said, as Matt counted it. For use of the car, too.

You're welcome, Matt said, and looked at the slight young man standing behind his brother, a fair-featured blonde who was dressed like a high-school preppie.

Hello, PJ said.

Oh! John Smurf made sweeping, stagey gestures. So, Matt, this is my friend PJ, from work. PJ, this is Lieutenant Matt Smurf, from... Afghanistan.

Truthfully, it had been a couple years since Matt Smurf was in Afghanistan. He was no longer a Lieutenant, either; he'd been stripped of his bars at the court-martial and left Leavenworth without rank. Googling Matt Smurf's legal name returned a string of alarming news items, though in the end he'd been convicted only of falsifying patrol reports.

Nice to meet you, PJ said. How long you been in Miami?

Matt snorted. This ain't Miami.

PJ looked at him with no discernable emotion; it was like being looked at by a cat.

You fuck my brother for money? Matt asked.

Don't be ugly, John chided him. Just 'cause nobody wants to see you naked, bro.

Thought that was a fairly natural question, Matt said. No offense intended. He shrugged at PJ, turned, and sat back down in front of the television.

I gotta run PJ home real quick, John said, if that's cool.

Matt grunted. Uh-Waiting Orders! the TV set barked.

I'll put some gas in the car, PJ volunteered.

Keep your money, Matt said. God knows you earned it.

As the two headed out the door, Matt paused the game again. Hey, he called. Both younger men turned around. Matt pointed a thick, stubby finger at PJ. Nice to meet you, Matt said.

PJ held his gaze. You too, PJ said, wondering what it was all about.

Matt nodded and turned back around. Uh-Waiting Orders! barked the game.

On the way to PJ's apartment, John drove as if in a hurry. His face was sallow and a little damp. You feeling okay? PJ asked.

I'm fine, John said, or I will be soon. Matt didn't piss you off, did he? Kidding around?

Nah, it's whatever. He ain't the first military dude I've met.

He was being friendly. We're jokers in my family.

I wish I had his benefits, PJ said. They'll pay for you to go to college.

John Smurf laughed. Matt doesn't have any benefits. He makes his own money.

Doing what?

John honked impatiently and pulled around a slow-moving pick-up truck. You'd have to ask him, John Smurf said. I generally don't.

He some kind of a gangster?

He tries to be, John said, but he's too emo. Anxiety and shit.

Seemed okay to me.

Always was a bully, John said after a pause. Now he's a killer, but also a lot easier to be around. People change. John laughed. Green green green green, he said to a stubborn traffic light.

He's a killer?

He was in war, dude. Is this my left?

No, PJ said. Still another couple miles. After a moment he added, I'm super hungry. You got a minute to stop and grab a bite?

Man I really don't, John said between his teeth, I gotta run errands, soon as I drop you off. Get the car back to Matt.

PJ nodded and sat back. I guess I wanted to talk to you, he said.

John was visibly sweating. You did? About what?

I just-- I think this was my last scene, dude. Today.

John made a skeptical face.

I think I'm getting out of the business, PJ said. I proved to myself I can-- I can still do it, so... but now I'm done. I really think I'm done.

Washing dishes sucks, John Smurf said.

What?

You didn't know that? Working at Waffle House sucks. Going to jail for selling weed sucks.

Oh, PJ said. No, I have something else in mind. See, Kym's dad was a machinist, and he made enough money at it where he could buy a farm.

John Smurf didn't acknowledge this information one way or another.

I'm thinking I'm gonna take some welding classes, PJ said, over at the Community College. Save some money, learn metalworking.

Sounds like fun, John Smurf said, though it was unclear if he meant saving money or learning metalwork. I went to college, you know that?

No, PJ said.

Two semesters, John said. Then I discovered doing drugs was way more rewarding than reading about them.

I wouldn't really be reading, PJ said, I'd be learning hands-on. John looked both unwell and uninterested, which hurt PJ's feelings a little. Metalworking school wasn't some random idea; it was a real plan. PJ and Kym had been discussing it for ages.

One night as a result of this ongoing discussion, Kym had ordered for PJ a series of twelve slim but densely-typed booklets on how to construct your own metal shop from scratch. The booklets were extraordinary-- with nothing but some scrap iron, a firepit and a couple buckets of sand, you could create your own hand tools, hand tools with which you could create slightly more complicated tools for forging and brazing, slightly more complicated tools with which you could build your own lathes and handmills. By the time you were done you'd have a whole metalwork shop you'd built yourself.

Of course, one couldn't dig a firepit or forge tools at the apartment complex where PJ and Kym lived; the only outdoor space at the Lemieux Apartments was parking lot. The machine shop had to wait for more favorable circumstances. Eventually all of the books but volume nine ended up in a box under the sink, and as a result suffered water damage. Volume nine, Additional Lathes, stayed on a side table where it continued to give good service as a drink coaster.

Okay so you're quitting the business and also saving money, John Smurf said. I'm not sure I see how those go together. He swerved into the parking lot of the Lemieux Apartments, braking noisily.

Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about.

John Smurf closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and opened his eyes again. I don't want you to think I don't take you serious, he said, but this kind of easy money-- what we do-- you can't walk away from it. No-one can. That's the short version.

I can, PJ said, showing no signs of unbuckling his seatbelt or getting out of the car. I have to. I am.

John nodded. You turn a bad trick?

What's a good trick? PJ asked. Where you're not some dude's fucking toilet? Is that a good trick?

Wow, John said, holding up his hands. Okay.

I don't know, I'm not sure why you would assume that's what this is about. What if I'm just tired of this? Tired of fucking people I don't care about?

John's temples dimpled above his earpieces. He rubbed his nose. Well, if something happened, the important thing is you talk to someone about it. That's all. Keeping bad secrets will fuck you up, bro.

PJ stared at him from the passenger seat, as angry as John had ever seen him. None of that's at all the point, PJ said. I did the scene just now. Okay? I did the fucking shoot. So that's not the issue.

You got my number, John said. He climbed out of the car.

What are you doing? PJ asked, getting out the passenger side.

C'mere, John said. He held out his arms, opening and clenching his hands. Come on, Pee-Bear.

What?

Come get this hug.

Traffic roared behind them at highway speeds. PJ went and got the hug, which was as clammy as it looked.

I got you, John murmured. I got you, any time you want to talk, or anything. Okay? Please know that. He kissed PJ then, a light smooch between the cheek and the ear.

PJ disentangled and turned away. I gotta go, PJ said. But thanks. For the ride.

Any time, John Smurf said, and dived back into the car. He peeled out into traffic, and PJ began trudging up the stairs.

5.

Kym glanced up from her phone again. At first she'd thought he was just zoned out, but no, the scumbag across the aisle was actively, openly staring at her. Kym encountered this more and more often: men so far gone into hopelessness that they became shameless and unembarrassed. It was disconcerting. A few years ago she would've responded by snarling back at him or trying to fight him, but times had changed. Kym slightly angled her phone-- a shitty phone, but the camera wasn't bad-- got a shot of him, and posted it up on Hedges with the caption PERVERT OOGLING ME ON BUS #STARING #SCUMBAG #UWISH #DIEPLZ

...and within seconds the notifications on her Hedges account lit up with Reshares and Faves of her surreptitious photograph, friends and strangers chiming in Ewwww and So Nasty, mocking the scumbag's age and dye job and shirt. Launched unknowing into the Hedgesphere, the middle-aged man across the aisle was reduced to food for the monster that was Kym's Hedge.

Originally Kym had signed up for Hedges to show off her drawings, but she hadn't lately been drawing, not since the last move-- since two moves ago actually. Her Hedge was at this point mostly other peoples' drawings and paintings she liked, or other things she liked, interspersed with stuff about her, and it was a big success. It did gigantic numbers.

At some level it was stupid to say it was a success, because Hedges was stupid, just a stupid online thing, but stupid or not, she had thousands of Follows and Reshares and Faves on her Hedge, which was more than almost anyone who wasn't famous in some independent-of-Hedges way could say.

Getting Follows and Reshares and Faves was relatively easy if you just said what people wanted to hear, but Kym didn't do that, so her gigantic numbers meant something different than most people's. Most people on Hedges were fake as fuck, and just tried to fit in or bandwagon, so their numbers of Follows and Reshares and Faves were a measure of how successfully they'd concealed their own personality, whereas Kym's fearless Hedge meant her gigantic numbers-- still gigantic, even after the whole thing with the racist cartoons-- meant people were actually interested in her, her opinions, her life, her underwear.

Hedges was a waste of time, on one hand, a pretty obviously stupid waste of time, but on the other hand most people did something stupid all day, and maintaining her Hedge, stupid as it might be, was something Kym actually wanted to do, whereas most people did stupid things they didn't want to do.

Kym checked the numbers on her Hedge repeatedly and continuously and compulsively and compulsively responded to people's funny or gross or retarded questions, even the anonymous ones, especially the anonymous ones, which she usually responded to with a firm theory about who the asker was, although that also

made her worry she had schizophrenia like her aunt who thought everyone at the Dairy Queen was secretly a famous celebrity.

The boys on Hedges were just a fungal forest of foregrounded penis pics, but the other girls on Hedges were Kym's audience, her collaborators, and her competition. Such babe, they'd say to one another. With each of the girls Kym paid attention to (and there weren't many) there existed a delicate climate of mutual reinforcement, a zone in which something like friendship could grow but which the slightest temperature change could render rapidly and catastrophically unfit for life. With Kym's gigantic numbers, any one of the other girls Kym was sort-of Hedgebuddies with needed Kym's Reshares and Faves way more than Kym needed theirs.

As far as Kym could tell, most of the girls on Hedges who weren't just dumb spoiled cunts had pretty grim lives, whereas Kym dated a porn star, lived by the beach and almost never had to work for a living. Which sounded conceited, but Kym thought of it like this: if high-school Kym had somehow been able to be on Hedges, if it had existed then and high-school Kym had had a smart phone or a computer or access to one back on the goddamn fucking farm... okay. If high-school Kym had somehow been on Hedges, wouldn't she have wanted to see that a life like present-day Kym's was possible? And the answer was, she would have loved it. It would have been her Disney Princess dream; she would have cried to see it. Present-day Kym's life, especially as presented on her Hedge, would have been absolutely mindblowing to high-school Kym, who could've really used, back then, the awareness that such possibilities even existed.

So in part the Hedges habit was for high-school Kym, because maintaining her Hedge made Kym count her blessings in a way she probably otherwise wouldn't, and curating this maybe slightly idealized mixtape version of her life forced Kym to be posi or upbeat about her life in a way she definitely otherwise wouldn't. And so really it was for her, the Hedge, it was a way to celebrate her happiness, and if other people got a glimpse of her happiness, that was fine too. Clearly it was worth glimpsing, or it wouldn't do the numbers it did.

Kym was smarter than the college bitches and tougher than the gangster girls, most of whom were just twelve and lying. The newest thing Kym would do to spoiled girls, in collaboration with two of her most trusted allies, a girl in California and a girl in Iceland who Kym occasionally suspected wasn't a girl but just someone using a cache of photos to pretend with, but she couldn't prove it... whatever, anyway, what they'd do with spoiled girls was all individually badger the girl for pictures of her parents, which often made the girl uncomfortable which (spoiled girls being uncomfortable) sort of got Kym off. And often spoiled girls had good-looking parents and Kym would msg the the girl like Yeah So I'm Getting Off To Your Dad Right Now or be like I'm Gonna Come Fuck Your Mom or whatever. To hurt their feelings, or anyway to fuck with them, because that also got Kym off.

When a spoiled girl closed down her Hedge or freaked out, it felt good, but how much Kym enjoyed it was probably a sign that she, Kym, was maybe not a good

person. Just lately for a while Kym had noticed in other girls' selfies and GPOY less and less the girls' torsos and more and more the phones in the mirrors with which they were photographing themselves.

Probably if Kym was a better person she wouldn't have cared. The phones in mirror pics weren't accidental; selfies were full of stuff like that, accidentally incidentally in-the-shot super-nice jewelry. A better person wouldn't have cared, but some things went beyond Hedges. Kym could accept that some of these girls would always be so-called prettier in whatever way, but there was really no reason on God's green earth they should own a phone that much nicer than Kym's.

Unlike these spoiled bitches whose parents bought them shit, Kym knew how to get things for herself. Everything good in Kym's life was something Kym had gotten for herself, including her boyfriend, and that was the difference between Kym and other people-- that was why something like a stupid phone, which in the hands of some spoiled cunt meant nothing, in Kym's hand was a direct measure of how much Kym could or couldn't do for herself, could or couldn't get for herself. If Hedges somehow disappeared, that would still be true. That was real, and mattered.

6.

Hey PJ called, opening the door to their apartment. The lights were off. When he flicked the switch, the overheads shone orange-maroon; the light covers had been painted with something translucent. The whole apartment was redone. Beads and scraps of colored lace hung everywhere; the low ceiling was swathed in fabric. Where had all the cushions come from? PJ didn't notice the smell right away, not consciously, but a finger of unease poked the back of his stomach.

There was a note on the fridge:

WELCOME ...
TO THE BOUDOIR xxxxxxxx

hope u like...
<3 <3 <3 I am at Taj Malllalalal gettn a new phone!
back later pm
I <3 you so much much
let's have an orgy in the boudoir baby !!!!

XOXOXOXOXO KYMZINJAMMER XXX

Cutouts from glossy magazines bedecked the backslash and the stove hood-- veiled female models, aerial photos of distant coastlines, pyramids and temples. PJ and Kym's shitty studio apartment was a playful, faux-oriental love nest. The transformation was stunning. PJ reflected, not for the first time, that Kym really should find a way to get paid for doing the sorts of things she constantly did for PJ for free.

His stomach clenched, then; he felt his guts churning. Was he coming down with something? He felt fluttery, weirdly hungover. Maybe it was hunger.

So what did Kym mean by an orgy? Surely, jealous as she was, she didn't mean, like, an orgy orgy--

The smell of the apartment forcefully asserted itself on his awareness. It was a strong smell, not clean or crisp; it was thick and earthy, unwholesome, spicy, like a deep heap of rotting flowers. PJ went, or rather staggered, back out to the exposed concrete catwalk fronting the second floor of the Lemieux Apartments.

This stretch of 135th St., which the catwalk gave him a view of, was busy. Heavy traffic merged endlessly from six lanes to four beneath a sun hot as noon. A knot of centipedes tumbled in his stomach. Why? What? Everything had been fine, everything had gone fine.

The centipedes writhed energetically, orgiastically, their tiny feet and armor plates scratching the lining of his guts. The knot expanded; the roiling, wriggling,

scratching centipedes explored down into his colon, up into his esophagus. He grabbed the railing tight, becoming alarmed. The sun was a cone, a beam, a linear series of variations on the sun.

And there was the annoying neighbor from downstairs, with her hair blowing around and the long neck of a Goldschlager bottle in her fist.

Oh hey what's up, the annoying neighbor said, as if she just happened to be wandering the second-floor catwalk that her apartment wasn't even on. I thought that was you I heard coming in, she said, advancing. She took a swig from the bottle, then pumped her cheeks in and out, swishing it around her mouth.

PJ said nothing and remained leaning on the railing, He looked at his forearms. Something far worse than the neighbor was happening. Maybe if he vomited, which he felt he might, the neighbor would go away. The golden hairs on his forearms twinkled. The sense of unreality ebbed a little, but he was oppressively aware of his heartbeat.

You're never going to believe, the neighbor assured him, and then launched into a tale about the people next door to her. PJ's ears were occupied by echoing obstacles; the neighbor's voice was mercifully far-off.

The annoying neighbor was one of the only other white people in the Lemieux Apartments, and had decided that PJ and Kym were her allies against the rest of the tenants. She wanted to party with PJ and Kym, though the feeling was not mutual. She wanted to party with PJ in particular.

People were often nice to PJ because they found him attractive. He didn't feel superior about it, didn't feel anything about it. It was just how things were. People were sometimes shitty to PJ, too, because they found him attractive. The neighbor was nice to PJ in an awkward, aggressive way that suggested rich potential for turning shitty.

As PJ tried to catch his breath, a great wave of dreamy terror broke over him, far bigger than what had come before. He sat abruptly, swamped. Currents eddied around him. Everything was awash in glittering unreality. It all looked false, computer-generated. He might float away if he let go of the railing. He might not vomit; he might shit himself.

The annoying neighbor squatted next to where he sat. I mean they're trashy fucking-- she leaned in closer-- trashy fucking spics, she whispered. I'm sorry but that's exactly what they are.

PJ was having a heart attack, a stroke, an aneurism; he was having simultaneously an aneurism and a heart attack. He was too young... but what else could this be? The cars passing below were linked together, extensions of one another, bellowing notched belts on a horror engine that was the world. The universe had tilted

irrevocably and unmanageably into nightmare. Why this was, and even what it was, no longer mattered; the intensity of the experience left no room for anything else.

His neck and forearms were being licked by a trillion tiny pointy tongues. PJ belched. Oh! the neighbor said, excuse you! She laughed. Then she asked, Hey, are you alright?

His heart was kicking out of his ribcage. His throat was swollen shut; the pupils of his eyes and his urethra were pierced with mile-long needles. PJ closed his eyes to keep out the needles. He opened his mouth for oxygen he couldn't get, folded his arms around his knees, and tipped over on his side. His whole interior was centipedes, the world was blazing needles.

Oh my god! the neighbor said. Honey you alright? She was crouching by him, her hands on him. You're covered in sweat, he heard her say. Wow, honey, you're just... dripping sweat...

PJ could smell the clangingly artificial, car-freshener fruit perfume or body-spray she had on, melon or something-- it was in her hair, which was on his face-- and laid atop the melon-fruit like a blanket was the smell of the Goldschlager, an inches-thick frosting of syrupy cinnamon sweetness. Cinnamon Liqueur with Flakes of Real Gold. Ha ha, and Kym had speculated to PJ about the neighbor having accumulated whole big gold nuggets in her stomach. They'd laughed about it. Kym had been like I'll cut that dumb bitch right open. I'm about the gold, Kym had said. I'll dig it right out of her guts.

These reminiscences briefly distracted PJ from the horror he was experiencing. That he could be distracted was a good sign. He might even survive whatever this was, which hadn't seemed possible a minute ago.

The neighbor's cinnamon-syrup breath was on PJ's cheek and in his nose. Do you need help? she was murmuring. Her hands were on his chest. He was supremely annoyed-- dying, but annoyed. He still felt as if he was having a heart attack, but he managed to shake her off.

Water, he groaned. Get water.

Right away! she said, climbing up off of him, the fake fruit briefly reasserting itself. Should I call an ambulance? she asked.

No, PJ said, his eyes squeezed tight against the sunlight. He straightened out a little on the concrete where he lay. His heart was still going like gabber bass. He would just crawl back into the apartment-- and then a tendril of the incense from his apartment reached him, returning in the absence of the neighbor's smells. That was it. Petty as it was, shameful as it was-- it had been that smell that started this. His asshole spasmed, and he swallowed burning bile.

He was ashamed, then, on top of feeling terrified and ill. He rolled over onto his back. Another wave of horror ran through him like an electrical surge, but it wasn't strong enough to convulse him. He remained stretched on the warm concrete. He could better hear the sounds around him-- the car engines, the frequent car horns, the neighbor clattering back up the steps.

Honey you feelin better? Can you sit up? Here I brought you water.

PJ sat up; as he did so, her hands were on his back. Here, she said, let's get you out of the sun.

No, PJ said, and opened his eyes. It was punishingly bright, but it felt more like the real world and less like a stoned nightmare. Please stop touching me, PJ said, and took the plastic cup of water.

After a sip he said, I'm okay. Thanks. Thanks for the water. You can have the cup back.

Let's get you inside, the neighbor said. She hesitated. I have my A/C on, if you want to just lay down in my apartment for a minute. I'll help you.

No. I'm just going to sit here. I'm okay.

Honey the neighbor said, with unexpected forcefulness, if you sit out here in the sun with no sunblock and just that thin shirt you'll be burnt to a crisp, and I'd feel responsible. You need cool air; now come on.

PJ wondered if he was going to have to fight her. If I get sunburned it's not your fault, he said. Not your fault or my fault-- it's the sun's fault. He laughed at that.

You're disorientated. Come inside, or I'm calling an ambulance.

PJ hauled himself to his feet. I'm leaving, he said. Don't call; I won't be here when they get here. He closed the door to his apartment, getting another whiff of the spicy smell, and over the neighbor's protestations made his shaky way along the catwalk and down the wide stairs, stairs basically outdoors behind a honeycomb enclosure of never-cleaned, repeating-pattern concrete blocks. He paused, halfway down the shuddering steel-and-concrete steps, and tried to think what his options were. Kym was at the Taj Mallal, their name for the Bal Harbour shopping district. He'd go find her there.

The pattern in the concrete block enclosure let bright shards of anti-shadow onto the stairs, narrow spindly flower petals of light. On the bus he'd at least be out of the sun.

7.

As PJ had been heading into the changing room he'd heard someone singing in an unfamiliar language.

PJ had hesitated, but then thought, I have keys, I have every right to be here. Only when he went into the changing room did he realize he had also recognized the singing voice. It was Mr. I.

Why PJ, said Mr. I. Fancy meeting you here!

It was Mr. I who'd given PJ a key to this private Spa in the first place. PJ, though not at all pleased to meet one of his tricks in a place that he, PJ, associated with relaxation and un-work, smiled tightly back and said Hey.

It was unusual to see anyone in the changing room. PJ came to the Spa to use the pool, and he nearly always had the changing room to himself. He had just taken a nice long swim, and was still dripping wet. Mr. I, buttoning up a sand-colored dress shirt, smiled at him.

You're making a little puddle, Mr. I said.

It was true. Water from the pool was running off of PJ, puddling on the changing room's immaculate ivory-toned tile.

Mr. I looked PJ up and down in a frank, unhurried way, and then looked at the door behind PJ, the door out to the fourth-floor Spa lobby where the woman who always smiled and sometimes winked at PJ staffed a desk.

I know you're probably here to relax, Mr. I said, showing via this acknowledgment the kind of insight that made Mr. I a complex, demanding trick for PJ to deal with. But since we're both here, PJ, I have a dirty idea.

PJ was unhappy about the volume of Mr. I's voice and the whole situation of Mr. I being in the Spa and propositioning him. PJ's small swimsuit made him feel additionally vulnerable in relation to Mr. I, who was almost completely dressed. I'm not working right now, PJ told him. I hope that's cool.

I understand, Mr. I said. Okay. But if you want to, you know, go for a quick... a quick something...

Mr. I trailed off and checked his watch.

Um, I'm sorry, PJ said. But call me later okay? With those words, PJ and his tote bag of clothes went past Mr. I through the door to the shower room, which was just a small tiled room with a single fancy shower in it.

Inside the shower room PJ went to lock the door, and then hesitated. If he locked the door, Mr. I would hear it, and he would know, or think that... angry with himself for overthinking it, PJ went and turned the shower on to let it get warm. He pulled the shower curtain dividing the shower part of the little tiled room from the part where PJ's tote bag lay leaning against the wall.

Steam began to fill the room, and PJ reached for his swimsuit, which was hugging his hips a little tighter than it once had. He was about to go back around the curtain to where the shower was when Mr. I opened the door, still smiling, and came inside the room, saying, Can I come in?

Mr. I had taken all his clothes off, quite quickly. He was middle-aged and paunchy but had clearly once been well-built. He still carried himself like a man proud of his body, even if it had become soft and saggy.

Hey, PJ said, nervously. Mr. I's cock was hanging there like a hairy, purple-hued plantain. It had a shockingly dark head, and was overall a significant piece of meat. The first time PJ had sucked Mr. I off, his jaw had been sore the next day.

I hope I'm not intruding, Mr. I said, locking the door behind him. As with him asking if he could come in, his words didn't seem exactly in sync with his actions.

I'm in here right now, PJ said.

You certainly are, Mr. I said. And I respect that but listen. My wallet is out there in my pants with four hundred something dollars in it. Let's just have a quick shower together, you and I, alright? And then if you want, on your way out, you can just... Mr. I smiled.

PJ waited for him to finish. You want me to take the money? PJ asked, although it seemed obvious.

Steal my wallet, Mr. I hissed, still smiling. I took all the credit cards out of it already. We'll just have a little shower together and then you leave first, and I'm so distracted you just take my wallet. And I'm like, I'm up the creek! Right? Because I got so distracted by you.

As he was saying this he was walking towards PJ and then past PJ, not quite touching him. Oh this water is hot, Mr. I said from the other side of the curtain.

PJ looked at the door.

Do you really like it this hot? Mr. I asked. I'm cooling it down a little. Just a bit. Come have a shower with me, PJ.

Something about hearing his name aloud, something about the low, even confidence of Mr. I's voice, something fundamentally weak and cowardly within PJ that PJ could not later forgive himself for made PJ walk in a slightly zombie-ish way around the curtain. He may have been intending to tell Mr. I that this was not how things worked.

Take your little suit off, Mr. I said. Let's get soapy. Mr. I was poking the beige Shower Gel dispenser and it was dispensing spurts of bluey-green heavily scented goo into Mr. I's big left hand.

The water had slicked Mr. I's hair down to his skull, making his head look out-of-proportion small for the rest of his baggy body. PJ stood with the shower curtain brushing his ass. PJ often got turned on while showering; showers were where he'd learned to masturbate as a child. It bothered him on multiple levels to see Mr. I and Mr. I's cock under a shower where PJ had sometimes jerked off. Mr. I was smiling at him, and PJ tried vaguely to cover himself with his hands. He could smell the strong, spicy smell of the Shower Gel, diffused into the steam that was filling the room.

Come on, Mr. I said. Come under the water where it's warm.

PJ did as he was told, and Mr. I leaned down to kiss him, a kiss that was splashingly full of the shower water beating down on them. It was kind of fun, for that. PJ felt Mr. I's big arms wrap around him, and then the side of Mr. I's cupped left hand was between his shoulder blades, nominally soaping PJ's back before slipping straight down inside his swimsuit to push, over-insistently, at the tense button of PJ's anus.

Hey, PJ said.

It's okay, Mr. I said. Just getting you soapy. His other hand loudly-- though lightly-- slapped PJ's ass cheeks, twice in rapid succession. In the small tiled room, the sound was like gunshots. Relax, Mr. I said, and rolled PJ's swimsuit down to his thighs. Get this thing off, he said. Who wears a swimsuit in the shower?

Mr. I's body loomed against PJ's. As PJ raised his knee to step out of his swimsuit Mr. I gripped PJ's ass, and then lifted PJ up bodily, entirely off the floor. Hey, PJ said again, but when he opened his mouth water went in it. Water was in his nose and eyes. Mr. I rolled PJ's swimsuit off one leg and returned both his hands to PJ's butt. The first joint of Mr. I's twisting finger burrowed past PJ's sphincter. PJ's weight was supported entirely by Mr. I's arms and hands, soft strength holding PJ aloft.

Whoops-a-Daisy, Mr. I said, and leaned PJ against the wall. PJ's tailbone sat less-than-comfortably on the tubular brushed-metal hand rail that girded the room's

shower section, and PJ would have slipped off it had Mr. I not been gripping him under one knee, folding him into the corner. The water was all around them, bouncing and dripping off every surface. For a second there was even more water, then almost none as Mr. I's broad torso eclipsed the spray-- only the insistent, white-noise roar of it remained. PJ heard the Shower Gel dispenser's plastic tab click back and forth, back and forth, smelled its spicy incense smell.

Spread, Mr. I was saying. Spread your cheeks for me, now; go on.

Mr. I's bulk was pressing on PJ; Mr I's hand was wriggling in his ass crack, his finger worming this way and that in the space just past PJ's asshole. In part to relieve the discomfort and in part because he was unsure what else to do, PJ reached down and spread his cheeks. The finger withdrew, and PJ arched his back to let it withdraw. This brought his ass out from the wall a little. There was an instant of broad, blunt pressure against PJ's anus, and even as PJ began to say something, a shape larger, blunter, softer, harder than Mr. I's finger popped soapily up into his ass.

Ow! PJ said, while Mr. I said Shhh, shhh. PJ grasped the rail on which he was semi-perched and tried to lift himself off the dick, to rock back a little, but the uncomfortable cock remained solidly lodged. Gravity was not on his side. He eased back onto the bar, Mr. I waddled a little closer, and PJ took another thick inch.

There we go, Mr. I cooed. There we go, there we go.

No, PJ said. A new pang cramped him, bringing his knees up, and then the warm, satin plains of Mr. I's hips were against the backs of PJ's buttocks. PJ had taken the whole thing.

Attaboy, said Mr. I. Oh, yes yes. Mr. I began sawing gently back and forth.

You can't, PJ gasped. Without a condom.

I won't come, Mr. I said. Just want to feel it, just a moment longer. Mr. I pulled partway out but then went all the way back in.

PJ gazed past Mr. I's big, soft shoulder, gazed without looking. PJ tried to relax, to will relaxation of his ass, trying to make it stop clenching spasmodically and painfully every time Mr. I's sizeable prick pumped up-in or down-out. All of PJ's attention, his consciousness, seemed to reside in the nerve endings of his asshole. Now he felt the full width of the shaft, now the furrow just under the cockhead, the flared meat of the head tugging against the inside rim of PJ's sphincter, then bam-- the full width of the shaft again. When Mr. I got all the way in he grunted and gave a little extra buck.

It had to end soon; Mr. I had said just a moment. It would end soon. PJ's own stupid slack face reflected back at PJ from the rounded edges of the fancy shower's chrome

hardware. Each angle of the arm that held the detachable shower head aloft and each facet of the temperature adjustment levers was rounded and reflective, each a tiny funhouse mirror for PJ's blank, unhappy face and the big, baggy but mostly hairless back of Mr. I, a back that hunched and then went concave with each thrust. As PJ watched disinterestedly, below and beside his own staring face Mr. I's knobbly spine arched out and then vanished back, shoulder blades protruding in its place, accompanied by a pang deep up in PJ's guts. A little grunt, the pressing breadth of Mr. I's pelvis against the backs of PJ's thighs; a little extra buck of Mr. I's hips, a little extra hot discomfort.

Mr. I reached back with one arm, while his left still helped support PJ's weight-- but with the removal of the additional support PJ felt his tailbone slipping forward, felt himself impaled ever more solidly on the dick. Mr. I's right arm was groping back in PJ's field of vision, blocking PJ's view of the shower's reflective chrome surfaces. Mr. I's questing arm grabbed the detachable chrome shower head, sliding it off the chromed mount where it had hung at the terminus of its long chromed rope-sleeve.

There was no water at all hitting PJ; the tile was cold against his back. His hamstrings hurt, the base of his spine hurt, his asshole hurt, his insides hurt.

Ohhh, Mr. I said, his body shuddering against PJ's, his thrusts becoming faster and shallower, more of a sustained quiver. PJ saw in the remaining chromed reflective surfaces that Mr. I had the detachable shower head jammed up between his own baggy old-man buttocks. Sexy boy, murmured Mr. I, his arms flexing, pressing PJ and the showerhead both into himself, as if he was an amoeba and could absorb them both. Sexy boy sexy boy sexy...

PJ gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. There was nothing he wanted to look at, nothing good to see. Don't come, he hissed between his teeth over Mr. I's shoulder.

Not-- not-- Mr. I assured him. Not cumming up inside my sexy... boy...

And then Mr. I sighed, a long wheezing sigh like an ancient Golden Retriever might make. He stepped back from PJ, flinching as he eased out his still-hard cock at an unfavorable angle, the friction of which felt additionally injurious to PJ's rectum.

Without Mr. I supporting him, PJ fell down off the metal hand-rail, and would have fallen altogether had Mr. I not caught him.

So nice, Mr. I said. So nice, PJ.

Something that may or may not have been entirely Shower Gel trickled from PJ's brutalized ass as he donned wet clothes, dressing without even toweling himself off, wandering as in a dream out to the changing room where he didn't take the wallet even though Mr. I had instructed him to.