



## God Help the Child Draft Fragments

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when she tried to pick up her purse and the other items scattered on the walkway, she discovered her right arm did not. She did the best she could with her left hand and limped toward her car. "The manager," she thought. "I'll report her to the Motel's manager. Then the police." One hour of freedom, barely tasting parole, 0071140 was going back to the place she'd left that very morning. Opening the driver's door Bride caught a blurred look at her face. At least one eye was closing, but it was enough to convince her she didn't want to see anybody but a cop. No staring manager, guests, or dining patrons. One-armed, having to lift her right hand with her left to turn on the ignition, Bride drove the two miles into Norristown down its main street. Police Department on a side street. Leaning out of the window, she could see the sign: Closed. Sheriff will return at 6:00. Clerk tomorrow at 10:30 a.m. til 3:00 p.m. "Of course," she thought. "With a four hundred bed women's prison five miles away, the State Trooper's headquarters on its site, no need for anything other than a homey police station just capable enough to hold teenagers and a drunk or two.

As she rummaged her purse for her cell phone, Bride had begun to cry and was crying still when Norma answered.

"Later," the nurse smiled. "After the doctor leaves."

Neither Bride nor Norma could hear her footsteps, so they waited a full minute before Norma whipped out her cosmetic purse and let Bride see the damage.

"Ruined," whispered Bride.

"No, it's not. Give it time. Remember what Grace looked like after her face tuck?" Norman was as jittery with optimism as she was with curiosity.

"A surgeon did her face. A maniac did mine."

"Well, tell me, girl. What all happened?"

"I'm tired. Hungry, too."

"There's applesauce. And juice." Norma fiddled with the carton, trying to stick in the straw.

"I want a steak. Raw."

"Who's going to chew it for you? Not me. I'm off meat."

Bride held the mirror closer. A quarter of her face was fine. The other three fourths cratered. Hateful black stitches around her slitty, puffy eye, bandages on her forehead; her lips so U-bangi she couldn't pronounce the 'r' in 'raw.' The pain medicine had stopped her jaw from hurting, but it was stiff ,



immobile, like her right arm. Under the pale flowered hospital gown, her ribs were encased in white strips that felt like steel. Worse than any of it, however, was her nose; nostrils wide as an orangutang's under gauze the size of a tea cup. Beside it her unbruised eye cowered, bloodshot, practically dead. Norma could chatter all she wanted, but Bride knew her job was lost. How could she persuade women to improve their looks with products that could not improve her own? There wasn't enough tk foundation in the world to hide eye scars, a broken nose and facial skin scraped down to hypoderm. Assuming all this would fade, she would still need plastic surgery which meant months of idleness.

"Don't sweat it," Norma had said. "I've already talk to Fayed, and Joanna too. They said take all the time you needed. Insurance pays for everything. Just keep in touch, they said...for the fall launch...."

"I can't eat, I can't talk, I can't think," Bride's voice was whiney.

"Come on," said Norma. "Pity party's over. We've got to get you out of here. This is a dump. They don't even have private rooms. The whole place is an emergency room, with doctors living fifty miles away. Do you know how long it took to get anybody to even look at you. Anybody with a license, I



mean. That nurse had lettuce in her teeth and I doubt she washed her hands since graduating from that fake internet nursing course she took."

"You don't think that doctor did a good job?"

"Who knows? I'm driving you to a real hospital - with a toilet and a sink in the room."

"Don't they have to release me? I mean a doctor has to?"

"Please. I bought sweat. No decent hospital had time but they got a shiny new Wal-Mart. Come on. Up. I'll help you. We'll get some frozen ice pops on the way. Or a malted. That's probably better medicine-wise or some tomato juice, chicken broth maybe.... Oh, Bride. Don't look like that. It really is going to be all right."

Norma drove slowly; every bump and turn made Bride wince.

"I didn't know you were twenty-eight. I thought you were my age. Twenty-two. I found out on your driver's license. You know, for the insurance forms I had to fill out. You don't look it, though. Even now your one good eye looks twenty-two." Norma laughed, hoping it would get a chuckle through that U-bungo mouth. Bride didn't answer.

"So who was he?"

mean. That nurse had lettuce in her teeth and I doubt she washed her hands since graduating from that fake internet nursing course she took. "

"You don't think that doctor did a good job?"

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"I didn't know you were twenty eight. I thought you were my age. Twenty-two. I found out on your driver's license. You know, for the insurance forms I had to fill out. You don't look it, though. Even now your one good eye looks twenty-two." Norma laughed, hoping it would get a chuckle through that U-bangi mouth. Bride didn't answer.

"So who was he?"

"Who was who?"

"The guy who beat you half to death."

"Did I say it was a guy?" Bride couldn't remember her telephone conversation in detail. Just the Norma help me and directions to where she was parked. In the hour or so it took her friend to get there, she must have fainted a couple of times. When Norma arrived, Bride might have said anything.

"Who else? Don't tell me a woman did this?"

"No. No. It was a guy."

"Why? Was he trying to rape you?"

"Yeah. I suppose. But something scared him off, I guess. He banged me around, threw me down and just took off."

"He didn't even take your purse, wallet, anything."

Tk

"What were you doing up here, anyway?"

"I went to see a friend."

"You find him?"

"Her. No. I never found her."

"Who is she?"



"Somebody from a long time ago. She wasn't there. Probably dead by now."

Norma turned her head to glance at Bride. Whoever it was, he must have rattled her friend's brain pan. Otherwise, why would she tell such a silly lie? Like a kid with soiled panties saying "That wasn't me." There was \$25,000.00 in the un-stolen purse and airline certificates, not to speak of samples of YOU, Girl products so new they hadn't been launched yet.

Then unfolding the fore-finger. Pow! Like a cop pistol. Sofia Huxley opened her mouth, as though to say something. She looked shocked. She really was a monster. The eye. The quick change from dutiful, obedient to feral predator. From tears to fangs. From slouch to arrow. Bride never saw the signal—the grip of the neck cords, the shoulder flex—nothing announced the onslaught.

Why? Bride was only eight years old, still Lotus Ann, when she had lifted her arm and pointed a nail bitten finger toward the young couple sitting at the long table.

"Is the woman you saw here in this room?"

Nod.

"You have to speak, Lotus Ann. Say 'yes' or 'no'".

"Yes."

"Can you tell us where she is seated?"

Lotus Ann raised her arm, slowly, to avoid knocking over the paper cup of water the lawyer had given her.

"Relax. Take your time"

And she did. Slowly raising her arm, her hand in a fist until the arm was straight. Then unfolding the fore-finger. Pow! Like a cap pistol.

Sofia Huxley opened her mouth, as though to say something. She looked shocked, unbelieving. But the finger pointed, pointed so long the lawyer lady had to touch her hand, say "Thank you, Lotus Ann," to get her to put her arm back down.

Outside the court room she was petted, embraced smiled at by mothers exhausted by tears, drained of anger but not despair; heart-broken fathers gave her a thumbs-up. Her grandmama led her away; they descended the steps in the cloud of 'April Dawn' wafting from the old woman's clothes.

This was the worst part of healing. Not the traces of pain, nor the slow return of her face. But the hours of nothing to do but recall. Her eyes were well



enough to cry from, so she did. Off and on throughout the lonely days. Visits from friends annoyed her; television was idiotic, print made her dizzy and plot lines were beyond her grasp. Even music irritated her. Obviously something awful had been done to her tongue for her taste buds were gone or in hiding. Everything tasted like lemons—except lemons which tasted like salt.

Tk

Why? Why did she do that to me? She didn't even hear me out. I wasn't the only witness, the only one who turned Sofia Huxley into 071140. She has no family anymore. Her husband is in another prison and still un-paroled after seven tries. No body was there to meet her. Nobody. So why not accept...help instead of whatever check-out clerk or cleaning woman job she had been given. Rich parolees didn't end up cleaning out toilets at Wendys. Bride was hurt not just by the busted jaw, arm, ribs you-name-it, but deeply hurt. Inside. What did they all have against her? Everyone she got close to dumped her.



## JUSTINA ONE

I met a man some time ago. I knew him for two months. Then he said, "You are not the woman I want."

I said, "Neither am I."

I don't know where that came from, only that it freed me up to think about the damage I had caused. The lives splattered because of me. I prefer ugly men, and he is certainly that, because they are more interesting to look at and because they are truly reluctant to have to leave you. The leaving is part of what I look forward to; it calms me. Nobody likes to be dumped; a long complicated parting is much better for me. Gives me time. Or used to. Tk

Decalon is right outside Norris in the kind of reclaimed desert California is famous for. An excellent spot for a prison: near a town that can serve visitors, provide guards, cafeteria workers, health workers and most of all contractors who are always improving the site, repairing the roads and adding wings to accommodate the increasing hordes of evil women committing crimes. I've driven up here several times, well, twice, but never entered. I just wanted to see the place where she was sentenced

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Her  
the relief was palpable although  
the affair had been ~~pleasant~~  
~~interesting~~ <sup>pleasant</sup> ~~even at times.~~ <sup>nothing close</sup>  
of course <sup>to</sup> the lips <sup>suggested</sup> ~~what her~~ the Sylvia line ~~promised.~~  
<sup>told in</sup> under its ad copy: TK

But what could you expect from  
a company that started out as  
Sylph\*Corsets for ~~X~~ <sup>Discriminating</sup> ~~Women~~ <sup>Martians</sup>.

Changed its name to Sylvia  
Apparel before ~~adding~~ <sup>accumulating</sup> six more  
lines including YouGirl: "Cosmetics  
for ~~her~~ <sup>your personal</sup> ~~then~~ <sup>contribution</sup> ~~in~~ <sup>to</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~rest.~~  
was her ~~contribution~~ - YouGirl -  
not the rest.

Slam dunk

"Money to  
waste now,  
Lotus Ann."

→ She smiled. Maybe that  
was the woman he wanted.

Too bad. Lotus was not available  
Beside, she was a <sup>17 yr old</sup> Kid. who  
dropped the name after high school  
and became Ann Bridenelle



for twenty five years to life. She was granted parole, finally, after seventeen years, and I had no choice but to be there when she walked through the gates I put her behind.

until she began calling herself Bride  
with [to say?] ~~without~~ nothing before or after. Cus turners &  
the company liked it, but he clearly did not.

I met a man same time ago. I knew him  
for 2 months. Then  
He said, "You are not the woman I want."

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I don't know where that came from, only that it freed me up to think  
about the damage I had caused. The lives splattered because of me. I  
prefer ugly men, <sup>like him</sup> and he is ~~certainly~~ that, because they are more interesting  
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leaving is part of what I look forward to; it calms me. Nobody likes to be  
dumped <sup>but</sup> a long complicated parting is <sup>good</sup> ~~much better~~ for me. Gives me time.

Bride  
told on her way to a prison to pick  
up female being let out after serving  
17 years.

1. Saw a man strangle a girl (8 yrs old)  
when she (<sup>bride</sup> girl) was 3.
2. At age 8 she ~~gives~~ <sup>false</sup> evidence of assault  
by a young mother, Sofia.
3. ~~girl~~ <sup>bride</sup> is 28 now; Sofia is 37

Bride arrives at prison. Several buses

[Prison] is just ahead



parked. People get off, others wait to  
enter (in <sup>family</sup> groups and sitting alone on benches)  
Curl parks on opposite side of street, <sup>with other cars</sup>  
Crosses to bus lane. Warts <sup>carrying a tote bag.</sup>  
Warts. Sees Sofia, alone - not getting

on bus - as if waiting for someone.

~~Curl~~ Buses leave. Curl approaches.

"Need a lift?"

"No. ~~X~~ Thank you. <sup>I don't</sup> No."

"Somebody picking you up?"  
She is answering a stranger - dutifully - as tho' need to it.

"(A cab is coming. <sup>Her face</sup> I called a cab."

Cab arrives. Sofia gets in. Curl  
follows in her car, wondering where  
she could be going in a taxi - it's  
X miles to X. Why ~~spend~~ <sup>waste</sup> her money

like that? She couldn't have much.

Cab stops at a motel/restaurant. Sofia  
checks in, enters door marked 3B.

Curl parks. Enters restaurant sitting near  
window where she can watch the door  
to 3B.

1979  
20

1999  
40

122 98

Beats her up.



She met a man some time ago; slept with him for two months until he said, "You are not the woman I want."

"Neither am I," she answered.

Her relief was palpable although the affair had been pleasant even interesting at times. Nothing, of course, close to the lies Sylvia told in its ad copy: tk

But what else could honestly be expected from a company that started out as Sylph Corsets for Discriminating Matrons, then changed its name to Sylvia Apparel before accumulating six more lines including YOU, Girl: Cosmetics for Your Personal Millennium. That was her slam dunk contribution. YOU, Girl—not the slogan.

"Money to waste, now, Lotus Ann," she smiled. Maybe that was the woman he wanted. But Lotus Ann Bridewell was not available. She was a seventeen year old kid who dropped the name right after highschool and was Ann Bridewell for x years until she interviewed for the job at Sylvia and began calling herself B ride with nothing anybody needed to say before or after that one sweet syllable. Customers and the sales force liked it, but clearly he did not. He called her 'girl' most of the time. "Hello, girl. I sure do need you, girl." "You my girl?" The only time he said 'woman' was the day he left.

"See there, Lotus Ann? Free again." Free to attend to serious business. No more dallying around with a mystery man with no visible means of support. A felon if ever there was one, though he denied it; said his weekly appointments in tk were tk, not reports to a probation officer.

Afternoon was wet in the city, but farther north a flawless summer sky was promised. Bride selected a channel for the two hour ride, but didn't raise the volume. The hum muted by tk leather was more suited to an already racing pulse. Twenty-five thousand dollars in cash, a three thousand dollar American Airlines gift certificate and a promotion box of YOU, Girl products were tucked into her Louis Vuitton shopping bag. All that could take a girl anywhere, almost. Comfort her. Help her forget. Take the edge off back luck, tk, and boredom.

Bride clicked the windshield wipers off and slowed. The Norristown exist was easily missed and the prison had no sign for a mile after you left the ramp. Right outside Norristown, in the kind of reclaimed desert California was famous for, Decalon was an excellent site: near a small town whose population can serve visitors, provide guards, cafeteria workers, health workers and, most of all, contractors' laborers who were always improving the site, repairing the road and adding wings to accommodate the increasing waves of evil women



committing violent crimes.

Although she had driven to Decalon twice, Bride never tried to enter.

Those times she just wanted to see the place where the monster had lived for twenty-one of her twenty-five to life sentence. Today was no different. No need to enter, even if she had fabricated a reason to, The monster had been granted parole and, according to the Penal Review Notices, Sofia Huxley would walk out of the gates Bride had put her behind.

Decalon was the one place a Jaguar was embarrassing. Behind the buses at curbside, old Toyotas and second-hand trucks lines the road or took the few spaces in the parking lot that prison staff had left. Bride's car, sleek, rat gray with her name on its vanity plate—a hit at sales conference and among the other regional managers—looked tacky and out of place. Like the sinister white limousines that sometimes arrived, engine snoring lightly next to chauffeurs leaning against the hood. Bride never stayed long enough to see a passenger who would need a driver to leap to open the door. She imagined a Grand Madam impatient to get back to her tk designer linens in her tasteful high-rise, or a little hooker-ette dying for a return to the private patio of a smooth club where she could celebrate the rip and burn of her prison-issue panties with friends. No Sylvia products though. The line was risqué enough for the

hooker-ette's clients, but not expensive enough. Still, she might own some  
YOU. Girl—the sparkle eye shadow, the gold flecked tk.

Today there was no limousine , unless the Lincoln Town was a modest  
one. Just the worn cars and trucks, the quiet children, animated family groups,  
a single relative sitting on a bench at the bus stop. Bride waited. Huxley, Sofia  
aka 071140, would not be released during visiting hours. She and, if there  
were other parolees, would emerge as a separate lot. By 4:30 only the Lincoln  
Town was left. A lawyer, thought Bride.

Tk Her mouth is trembly, now, thought Bride. It used to be hard, a straight  
razor. Suddenly, there she was. Unmistakable because of the height. Six feet.  
Still. Twenty-one years had not dwarfed the giant B ride remembered. At eight  
years old, Lotus Ann could not believe a woman taller than the bailiff, the  
judge, the lawyers; as tall as the police and almost as tall as her own husband,  
was anything other than the “filthy freak” stricken parents called her. “Look at  
her eyes,” women whispered in the restroom. “Lidded, like the snake she is. At  
twenty? How could a twenty-year old do those things? Just look at those eyes.  
They’re old as dirt.” Twenty plus one years later the eyes were still a snake’s  
and the height unchanged. Everything else had. Parolee 071140 was thin as a  
rope. Size three panties. A cup bra, if any. As Bride approached she could not



help registering how much her features would benefit from Miracle, or better still, Firmaline Wrinkle Softener, and Juicy Bronze would restore color to the whey colored skin.

Not sure of anything but the absolute necessity of being there; not wondering or caring if Sofie recognized her, Bride slid into the moment and spoke.

"Need a life?"

"No, thanks. I don't."

Her mouth is trembly, now, thought Bride. It used to be hard, a straight razor ready to eat a child. A collagen shot and Tango—matte, not glitter—would have changed it, influenced the jury, maybe, except there was no YOU. Girl back then.

"Somebody picking you up?"

"Taxi cab." She was answering a stranger, dutifully, as though used to it. Not "What's it to you?" or even "Who the hell are you?" But going on to explain further. "I called a cab. I mean the Desk did."

Bride was reaching out, to touch her elbow, prelude to convincing her not to waste her money, when the cab rolled up. Fast as a bullet, limber as an acrobat, Sofie tossed her tk nylon carrier bag through the door and followed it.

"Wait," called Bride, but Sofie, leaning toward the driver's ear, ignored her. The taxi drove away negotiating the U turn like a NASCAR pro.

It wasn't at all hard to follow her. Bride even passed the taxi in a playful attempt to deceive. It didn't work because she saw, in the rear view mirror, the cab slow and turn toward Norristown instead of the exit ramp. Bride splayed shoulder gravel to brake, reverse and catch up, murmuring, "Sofie, Sofie. Don't."

When the cab stopped at Eve Dean's Motel and Restaurant, Bride parked the Jaguar across the street, thinking, she is too meeting someone. After a few minutes at the check-in desk, Sofie turned and, showing no interest in her room assignment, went straight into the restaurant and took a booth by the window. Like a slow student she studied the menu, lip reading while running her finger under the offerings. Watching her, Bride sighed, "And this is the woman who once taught pre-schoolers, cut apples into rings to resemble the letter O, doled out pretzels as B's slit watermelon chunks into Y's. All to spell out 'BOY'—whom she liked best, according to the women whispering in the courtroom toilets. Maybe she could recognize no alphabet she couldn't eat. Fruit figured centrally at the trial and as Bride watched the waitress place dish after dish before her customer, she wonder what her post-prison menu would contain.



She was eating like a refugee. Never taking her eyes from the food; stabbing, scooping, slicing, helter-skelter all over the table. She took no water, buttered no bread. It took all of nineteen minutes. Then she paid, left and hurried down the walkway to 3B. Key in hand, she hesitated. Suddenly she darted into a narrow tk between two blocks of concrete rooms. Bride abandoned her post and ran after her, pausing when a retching sound clarified the motive. Backing away, Bride hid behind a SUV, bent down to attend to her ankle strap until Sofie collected herself and unlocked the door to 3B.

The knocking should be strong, Bride decided, authoritative, to get the automatically obedient response the felon was trained to.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Huxley. Open the door, please."

"I'm sick."

"I know. Open the door." Bride's voice, a combination of power-to-fire-you with a hint of administrative understanding—the one that worked on insecure and or unproductive reps—worked now. Sofie opened the door wide and stood there barefoot, a towel in her hand.

"Yes?"

"We need to talk."

"Talk?"

Still, no "who are you?"

Leading with the Louis Vuitton bag, Bride pushed in past her. Wizard, Rain Forest, was overwhelming.

"You're Sofia Huxley, right?"

She nodded.

"Let's sit down. I have something for you." Bride held up the shopping bag. Sofie didn't look at it. She gazed instead at Bride's shoes, the high lethal heels, the dangerously pointed toes.

"What do you want me to do?"

Such a soft voice. Already knowing that nothing was free. Nobody gave anything that had no cost to the receiver. Whatever it was: cigarettes, magazines, tampons, stamps stationery, Mars Bars or twenty-five large, it came with strings tough as fishing line.

"Nothing. I don't want you to do a thing."

Sofie's gaze traveled up to Bride's knees, poking out from a skirt cut from a yard and a half of Egyptian cotton. Not enough to cover the head of a mullah.

Tk



"I saw you leave Decalon. No one was there to meet you. Don't you have any—"

"That was you?"

"I offered you a lift."

"I know you? You know me?"

"My name is Bride."

"That supposed to mean something to me?"

"No, but look what I brought you." Bride hoisted the shopping bag to the bed spread and reached into it. On top of the gift package of YOU, Girl she laid two envelopes, one slim one with the airline certificate, the fatter one with the hundred dollar bills totaling twenty-five thousand. Not much, if you thought of it as one thousand dollars for each year of her sentence.

"Why are you doing this?" Sofie's voice was soft, almost tearful.

Tk

"You would remember me as Lotus Ann. Lotus Ann Bridewell. At the trial? I was one of the children who—"

It was just like the way she had gotten into the taxi. Swift. From slightly stooped patience to acrobat. Sofie knocked Bride to the floor, then leaned down to beat the life out of her. Wild, hard-fisted, screaming "You! You!" she

pummeled Bride's face. Then she dragged her to the door and threw her out of the room, very like the way sanitation workers handled plastic trash bags.

Easily, graceful out of habit. Bride lay on the pavement with just enough sense to search out her teeth with her tongue. The door slammed, then opened.

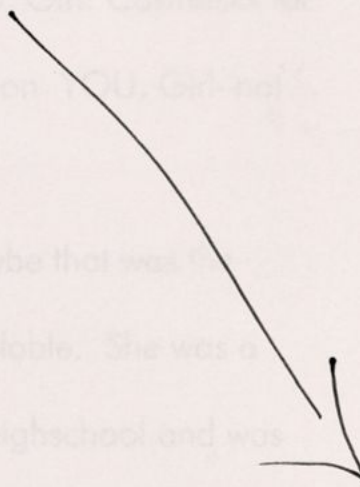
Bride's purse, shopping bag and all it had held flew through the air and bounced on her back. Before she could rise to her knees, the door opened again, this time a spiked heel shoe arced toward the prone and bleeding Bride. Her teeth were all there but her mouth belonged to somebody else.

After crawling for a few feet, Bride tried to stand. Her legs worked, but when she tried to pick up her purse and the other items scattered on the walkway, she discovered her right arm did not. She did the best she could with her left hand and limped toward her car. "The manager," she thought. "I'll report her to the Motel's manager. Then the police." One hour of freedom, barely tasting parole, 0071140 was going back to the place she'd left that very morning. Opening the driver's door Bride caught a blurred look at her face. At least one eye was closing, but it was enough to convince her she didn't want to see anybody but a cop. No staring manager, guests or dining patrons. One-armed, having to lift her right hand with her left to turn on the ignition, Bride drove the two miles into Norristown down its main street. Police




Department on a side street. Leaning out of the window, she could see the sign: Closed. Sheriff will return at 6:00. Clerk tomorrow at 10:30 a.m. til 3:00 p.m. Of course," she thought. "With a four hundred women's r prison five miles away, the State Trooper's headquarters on its site, n need for anything other than a homey police station just capable enough to hold teenagers and a drunk or two.

~~As she reached into her purse for her cell phone, Bride had begun to cry and was crying still when Norma answered.~~



Against her is accumulating six more lines including YOU. Girl: Came to for  
True 24-hour 100-cash. With that slam dunk contribution YOU. Girl: not  
the about regional manager was not contest.

"Oh my 10 waste, now, Lotus Ann," she smiled. Maybe that was  
woman's networked. But Lotus Ann Bridewell was not available. She was a  
seventeen-year-old who dropped the name right after highschool and was  
240 Bridewell for 7 years and she interviewed for the job of Sylvia and began  
calling herself Bride with nothing anybody needed to say before or after that  
one sweet syllable. Customer and the sales reps liked it, but clearly he did not.  
He called her 'girl' most of the time. "Hey, girl. I sure do need you, girl."



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Her relief was palpable although the affair had been pleasant, even interesting, at times. Nothing, of course, close to the lies Sylvia told in its ad copy: tk

But what else could honestly be expected from a company that started out as Sylph Corsets for Discriminating Matrons, then changed its name to Sylvia Apparel before accumulating six more lines including YOU, Girl: Cosmetics for Your Personal Millennium. With that slam dunk contribution YOU, Girl—not the slogan—regional manager was <sup>hers without</sup> no contest.

"Money to waste, now, Lotus Ann," she smiled. Maybe that was the woman he wanted. But Lotus Ann Bridewell was not available. She was a seventeen year old kid who dropped the name right after highschool and was Ann Bridewell for <sup>2</sup>x years until she interviewed for the job at Sylvia and began calling herself Bride with nothing anybody needed to say before or after that one sweet syllable. Customers and the sales reps liked it, but clearly he did not. He called her 'girl' most of the time. "Hey, girl. I sure do need you, girl."



"You my girl?" The only time he said 'woman' was the day he left.

"See there, Lotus Ann? Free again." Free to attend to serious business.

No more dallying around with a mystery man with no visible means of support.

A felon if ever there was one, though he denied it; said his weekly appointments in tk were tk, not reports to a probation officer.

Afternoon was wet in the city, but farther north a flawless summer sky was promised. Bride selected a classical music channel for the two hour ride, but didn't raise the volume. The hum muted by nappa leather was more suited to an already racing pulse. Twenty-five thousand dollars in cash, a three thousand dollar American Airlines gift certificate and a promotion box of YOU, Girl products were tucked into her Louis Vuitton shopping bag. All that could take a girl anywhere, almost. Comfort her. Help her forget. Take the edge off back luck, tk, and boredom.

Tk scenery

Bride clicked the windshield wipers off and slowed. The Norristown exist was easily missed and the prison had no sign for a mile after you left the ramp. Right outside Norristown, in the kind of reclaimed desert California was famous for, Decalon was an excellent site: near a small town whose population can

serve visitors, provide guards, cafeteria workers, health workers and, most of all, contractors' laborers who were always improving the site, repairing the road and adding wings to accommodate the increasing waves of evil women committing violent crimes.

Although she had driven to Decalon twice, Bride never tried to enter. Those times she just wanted to see the place where the monster had lived for twenty-one of her twenty-five to life sentence. Today was no different. No need to enter, even if she had fabricated a reason to, The monster had been granted parole and, according to the Penal Review Notices, Sofia Huxley would walk out of the gates Bride had put her behind.

Decalon was the one place a Jaguar was embarrassing. Behind the buses at curbside, old Toyotas and second-hand trucks lined the road or took the few spaces in the parking lot that prison staff had left. Bride's car, sleek, rat gray with her name on its vanity plate—a hit at sales conference and among the other regional managers—looked aggressively out of place. Like the sinister white limousines that sometimes arrived, engine snoring lightly next to chauffeurs leaning against the hood. Bride never stayed long enough to see a passenger who would need a driver to leap to open the door. She imagined a



Grand Madam impatient to get back to her tk designer linens in her tasteful high-rise, or maybe a little hooker-ette dying for a return to the private patio of a smooth club where she could celebrate the rip and burn of her prison-issue panties with friends. No Sylvia products though. The line was risque enough for the hooker-ette's clients, but not expensive enough. Still, she might own some YOU. Girl—the sparkle eye shadow, the gold flecked tk.

Today there were no limousines , unless the Lincoln Town was a modest one. Just the worn cars and trucks, the quiet children, animated family groups, a single relative sitting on a bench at the bus stop. Bride waited. Huxley, Sofia aka 071140, would not be released during visiting hours. She and, if there were other parolees, would emerge as a separate lot. By 4:30 only the Lincoln Town was left. A lawyer, thought Bride.

Tk

Suddenly, there she was. Unmistakable because of the height. Six feet. Still. Twenty-one years had not dwarfed the giant B ride remembered. At eight years old, Lotus Ann could not believe a woman taller than the bailiff, the judge, the lawyers, as tall as the police and almost as tall as her own husband, was anything other than the “filthy freak” stricken parents called her. “Look at

her eyes," women whispered in the restroom. "Lidded, like the snake she is. At twenty? How could a twenty-year old do those things? Are you kidding? Just look at those eyes. They're old as dirt." Twenty plus one years later the eyes were more like a rabbit's than a snake's but the height was unchanged. Everything else had. Parolee 071140 was thin as a rope. Size three panties. A cup bra, if any. As Bride approached she could not help registering how much her features would benefit from Miracle, or better still, Firmaline Wrinkle Softener, and Juicy Bronze would restore color to the whey colored skin.

Not sure of anything but the absolute necessity of being there; not wondering or caring if Sofie recognized her, Bride slid into the moment and spoke.

"Need a lift?"

"No, thanks. I don't."

Her mouth is tremble-y, now, thought Bride. It used to be hard, a straight razor ready to eat a child. A collagen shot and Tango-matte, not glitter-would have changed it, influenced the jury, maybe, except there was no YOU. Girl back then.

"Somebody picking you up?"



"Taxi cab." She was answering a stranger, dutifully, as though used to it. Not "What's it to you?" or even "Who the hell are you?" But going on to explain further. "I called a cab. I mean the Desk did."

Bride was reaching out, to touch her elbow, prelude to convincing her not to waste her money, when the cab rolled up. Fast as a bullet, limber as an acrobat, Sofie reached for the door, tossed in her tk nylon carrier bag and followed it.

"Wait," called B ride, but Sofie, leaning toward the driver's ear, ignored her. The taxi drove away negotiating the U turn like a NASCAR pro.

It wasn't at all hard to follow her. Bride even passed the taxi in a playful attempt to deceive. It didn't work because she saw, in the rear view mirror, the cab slow and turn toward Norristown instead of the exit ramp. Bride splayed shoulder gravel to brake, reverse and catch up, murmuring, "Sofie, Sofie. Don't."

When the cab stopped at Eva Dean's Motel and Restaurant, Bride parked the Jaguar across the street, thinking, she is too meeting someone. After a few minutes at the check-in desk, Sofie turned and, showing no interest in her room assignment, went straight into the restaurant and took a booth by the window.

Like a slow student she studied the menu, lip reading while running her finger under the offerings. Watching her, Bride sighed, "And this is the woman who once taught pre-schoolers, cut apples into rings to resemble the letter O, doled out pretzels as B's, slit watermelon chunks into Y's. All to spell out 'BOY'—whom she liked best, according to the women whispering in the courtroom toilets. Maybe she could recognize no alphabet she couldn't eat. Fruit figured centrally at the trial and as Bride watched the waitress place dish after dish before her customer, she wondered what her first post-prison menu would contain. She was eating like a refugee. Never taking her eyes from the food; stabbing, scooping, slicing, helter-skelter all over the table. She took no water, buttered no bread. The gobbling took all of nineteen minutes. Then she paid, left and hurried down the walkway to 3B. Key in hand, she hesitated. Suddenly she darted into a narrow tk between two blocks of concrete rooms. Bride abandoned her post and ran after her, pausing when a retching sound clarified the motive. Backing away, Bride hid behind a SUV, bent down to attend to her ankle strap until Sofie collected herself and unlocked the door to 3B.

The knocking should be strong, Bride decided, authoritative, to get the automatically obedient response the felon was trained to.



"Yes?"

"Mrs. Huxley. Open the door, please."

"I'm sick."

"I know. Open the door." Bride's voice, a combination of power-to-fire-you with a hint of administrative understanding—the one that worked on insecure and or unproductive reps—worked now. Sofie opened the door wide and stood there barefoot, a towel in her hand.

"Yes?"

"We need to talk."

"Talk?"

Still, no "who are you?"

Leading with the Louis Vuitton bag, Bride pushed in past her. Wizard, Rain Forest, was overwhelming.

"You're Sofia Huxley, right?"

She nodded.

"Let's sit down. I have something for you." Bride held up the shopping bag. Sofie didn't look at it. She gazed instead at Bride's shoes, the high lethal heels, the dangerously pointed toes.

"What do you want me to do?"

Such a soft accommodating voice. Already knowing that nothing was free. Nobody gave anything that had no cost to the receiver. Whatever it was: cigarettes, magazines, tampons, stamps stationery, Mars Bars or twenty-five large, it came with strings tough as fishing line.

"Nothing. I don't want you to do a thing."

Sofie's gaze traveled up to Bride's knees, poking out from a skirt cut from a yard and a half of Egyptian cotton. Not enough to cover the head of a mullah.

Tk

"I saw you leave Decalon. No one was there to meet you. Don't you have any—"

"That was you?"

"I offered you a lift."

"I know you? You know me?"

"My name is Bride."

"That supposed to mean something to me?"

"No, but look what I brought you." Bride hoisted the shopping bag to the



bed spread and reached into it. On top of the gift package of YOU, Girl she laid two envelopes, one slim one with the airline certificate, the fatter one with the hundred dollar bills totaling twenty-five thousand. Not much, if you thought of it as one thousand dollars for each year of her sentence.

"What's all that for?" Sofie looked at the items as though they might be infected.

"It's all right. Just a little something to help you."

"Help me what?"

"Get a good start. You know. On your life."

"My life?" She sounded as though she needed an introduction to the concept.

"Yeah. Your new life."

"Why are you doing this?"

Bride laughed. "You don't remember me. Lotus Ann. Lotus Ann Bridewell. At the trial? I was one of the children who—"

It was swifter than the way she had gotten into the taxi. From slightly stooped penitent to un-defeated acrobat, Sofie knocked Bride to the floor, then leaned down to beat the life out of her. Wild, hard-fisted, screaming

"You! You!" she pummeled Bride's face. Then she dragged her to the door and threw her out of the room, the way sanitation workers handled plastic trash bags—one hand at the neck, the other on the bottom. Easily, graceful out of habit. Bride lay on the pavement with just enough sense to search out her teeth with her tongue. The door slammed, then opened. Bride's purse, shopping bag and all it had held flew through the air and bounced on her back. Before she could rise to her knees, the door opened again, this time a black spike heeled shoe arced toward the prone and bleeding Bride. Her teeth were all there but her mouth belonged to somebody else.

After crawling for a few feet, Bride tried to stand. Her legs worked, but when she tried to pick up her purse and the other items scattered on the walkway, she discovered her right arm helpless. She did the best she could with her left hand and limped toward her car. "The manager," she thought. "I'll report her to the Motel's manager. Then the police." One hour of freedom, barely tasting parole, 0071140 was going back to the place she'd left that very morning. Opening the driver's door Bride caught a blurred look at her face. The one swelling eye was enough to convince her she didn't want to see anybody but a cop. No staring manager, guests, or hamburger chomping



patrons. One-armed, having to lift her right hand with her left to turn on the ignition, Bride drove the two miles into Norristown's main street. Nothing. Nobody. Finally, in a lot behind a thrift shop, she saw the sign: Police Department. Leaning out of the window, she could see the sign: Closed. On closer inspection she could make out the rest: Sheriff back at 6:00 p.m. Clerk, Abbey something, had banker's hours. Mon Wed Fri 10:30 a.m. til 3:00 p.m. "Oh God," she thought. What would be the point with a four hundred bed women's prison five miles away, the State Trooper's headquarters on its site; no need for anything other than a homey police station just capable enough to hold teenagers and a drunk or two.

As she rummaged her purse for her cell phone, Bride started to cry and was crying still when Norma answered.

"Later," the nurse smiled. "After the doctor leaves."

Neither Bride nor Norma could hear her departing footsteps, so they waited a full minute before Norma whipped out her cosmetic purse and let Bride see the damage.

"Ruined," whispered Bride.

"No, it's not. Give it time. Remember what Grace looked like after her face tuck?" Norman was as jittery with optimism as she was with curiosity.

"A surgeon did her face. A maniac did mine."

"Well, tell me, girl. What all happened?"

"I'm tired. Hungry, too."

"Here's applesauce. And juice." Norma fiddled with the carton, trying to stick in the straw.

"I want a steak. Raw."

"Who's going to chew it for you? Not me. I'm off meat."

Bride held the mirror closer. A quarter of her face was fine. The other three fourths cratered. Hateful black stitches around her slitty, puffy eye, bandages on her forehead; her lips so U-bangi she couldn't pronounce the 'r' in 'raw.' The pain medicine had stopped her jaw from hurting, but it was stiff, immobile, like her right arm. Under the pale flowered hospital gown, her ribs were encased steel bands disguised as white strips of gauze. Worse than any of it, however, was her nose; nostrils wide as an orangutang's under gauze the size of an English muffin. Beside it, her unbruised eye cowered, bloodshot, practically dead. Norma could chatter all she wanted, but Bride knew her job



at Sylvia Inc. was lost. How could she persuade women to improve their looks with products that could not improve her own? There wasn't enough tk foundation in the world to hide eye scars, a broken nose and facial skin scraped down to pink hypoderm. Assuming all this would fade, she would still need plastic surgery which meant months of idleness, hiding behind sun glasses and floppy hats.

"Don't sweat it," Norma had said. "I've already talk to Fayed, and Joanna, too. They said take all the time you need. Insurance pays for everything. Just keep in touch, they said...for the fall launch...."

"I can't eat, I can't talk, I can't think," Bride's voice was whiney.

"Come on," said Norma. "Pity party's over. We've got to get you out of here. This is a dump. They don't even have private rooms. The whole place is an emergency room, with one wacko nurse and two doctors living fifty miles away. Do you know how long it took to get anybody to even look at you? Anybody with a license, I mean. That nurse had lettuce in her teeth and I doubt she's washed her hands since graduating from that fake internet nursing course she took. "

"You don't think that doctor did a good job?"

"Who knows? In this trailer-park country clinic? I'm driving you to a real hospital—with a toilet and a sink in the room."

"Don't they have to release me? I mean a doctor has to?"

"Please. I bought sweats. No decent hospital out here but they got a very hip Ag-Way. Come on. Up. I'll help you. We'll get some frozen ice pops on the way. Or a malted. That's probably better medicine-wise or some tomato juice, chicken broth maybe.... Oh, Bride. Don't look like that. It really is going to be all right."

Norma drove slowly because every bump and turn made her friend wince.

"I didn't know you were twenty eight. I thought you were my age. Twenty-two. I saw it on your driver's license. You know, for the insurance forms I had to fill out. You don't look it, though. Even now your one good eye looks twenty-two." Norma laughed, hoping it would get a chuckle through that U-bangi mouth. It didn't.

"So who was he?"

"Who was who?"

"The guy who beat you half to death."



"Did I say it was a guy?" Bride couldn't remember her telephone conversation in detail. Just the 'Norma please you gotta come help me' and the best directions she could manage to where she was parked. In the hour or so it took her friend to get there, she must have fainted a couple of times. When Norma arrived, Bride might have said anything.

"Who else? You telling me a woman did this?"

"No. No. It was a guy."

"Was he trying to rape you?"

"Yeah. I suppose. Something scared him off, I guess. He banged me around, threw me down and just took off."

"He didn't even take your purse, wallet, anything."

"Sweet."

"Why didn't whoever scared him stay and help you"?

"I don't know!"

Norma backed off. Bride was sobbing, or trying to. Her mouth obviously hurt too much to continue. After a few miles of silence, Norma made her voice as casual as she could.

"What were you doing up here, anyway?"

"I went to see a friend."

"You find him?"

"Her. No. I never found her."

"Who is she?"

"Somebody from a long time ago. She wasn't there. Probably dead by now."

Norma turned her head to glance at Bride. Whoever it was, the almost rapist must have rattled her friend's brain pan. Otherwise, why would she tell such a silly lie? Like a kid with soiled panties saying "That wasn't me did it." There was \$25,000.00 cash in the un-stolen purse and airline gift certificates, not to speak of samples of YOU, Girl products so new they hadn't been launched yet. He might now want any tk, but free cash?

Tk

She really was a monster. The eyes. The quick change from dutiful, obedient to feral predator. From tears to fangs. From slouch to arrow. Bride never saw the signal—the grip of neck cords, the shoulder flex—nothing announced the onslaught.



Bride was only eight years old, still Lotus Ann, when she had lifted her arm and pointed a nail bitten finger toward the young couple sitting at the long table.

"Is the woman you saw here in this room?"

Nod.

"You have to speak, Lotus Ann. Say 'yes' or 'no'".

"Yes."

"Can you tell us where she is seated?"

Lotus Ann raised her arm, slowly, to avoid knocking over the paper cup of water the lawyer had given her.

"Relax. Take your time, Lotus Ann."

And she did. Slowly raising her arm, her hand in a fist until the arm was straight. Then unfolding the fore-finger. Pow! Like a cap pistol.

Sofia Huxley opened her mouth, as though to say something. She looked shocked, unbelieving. But the finger pointed, pointed so long the lawyer lady had to touch her hand, say "Thank you, Lotus Ann," to get her to put her arm back down.

Outside the court room she was petted, embraced, smiled at by mothers

exhausted by tears, drained of anger but not despair; heart-broken fathers gave her a thumbs-up. Grandmama , pleased and proud of her brave little girl, led her away and they descended the steps of the court house in a cloud of 'April Dawn' wafting from the old woman's clothes.

This was the worst part of healing. Not the traces of pain, nor the slow approach of her face to normalcy. But the hours of nothing to do but recall. Her eyes were well enough to cry from, so she did. Off and on throughout the lonely days. Visits from friends annoyed her; television was idiotic, print made her dizzy and plot lines were beyond her grasp. Vases of gorgeous flowers, over packed, overdone, the way all California florists prepared them, made her nauseous. Even music irritated her. Vocals, both the beautiful ones and the mediocre, depressed her; instrumentals were worse. Obviously something awful had been done to her tongue for her taste buds were gone or in hiding. Everything tasted like lemons—except lemons which tasted like salt.

Tk

She didn't even hear me out. I wasn't the only witness, the only one who turned Sofia Huxley into 071140. She has no family anymore. Her husband is in another prison and still un-paroled after seven tries. No body was there to



meet her. Nobody. So why not accept...help instead of whatever check-out clerk or cleaning woman job she had been given. Rich parolees didn't end up cleaning out toilets at Wendys. Bride was hurt not just by the busted jaw, arm, ribs you-name-it, but deeply hurt. Inside. Everyone she got close to dumped her. And she had not fought back. She had just lain there, unresisting as Sofia beat her. She would have died there, probably, if the attacker, her face wet with flecks of blood, sweat and saliva, had not grown tired. But Bride took it all—not a sound, not a single defensive gesture. Weary and panting Sofia dragged her to her feet, pushed her through the door. Bride could still feel the hard hands clenching neck skin, her behind, and hear the crack of her own bones hitting concrete. Elbow, ankle, jaw. The long slide and rip of arms grabbing for balance as she fell. Her tongue searching, through blood, for teeth. And when the last item was thrown at her, the spike-heeled shoe, she had simply crawled away. Once again, taking it. "You are not the woman...." then pretending it didn't matter.

Tk

Foam spurting from an aerosol can made him laugh, so he lathered with a brush. A handsome thing—tk hair swelling from an ivory handle. It ought to

remain in the heap she tossed in the trash: toothbrush, mouthwash, strop and straight razor. The things he had taken: two books in a foreign language he could read but not speak, a notebook and the leather bag that swung from his shoulder like a purse. For reasons she couldn't explain, Bride picked through the trash bag, retrieved the shaving brush and bone handled razor and placed both in the medicine cabinet. When the door clicked she stared at her face in the mirror.

"You should always wear white. Only white and all white all the time."

Jeri, the buyer who called himself a "total person" designer, was insistent.

"Not only because of your name, but because of what it does to your skin.

Makes people think of white chocolate every time they see you. Yummy!"

"Or Oreos?" she asked.

"Classier," he hissed.

Although it was boring at first, looking for white only clothes—winter white, summer white, spring white—it got more interesting when she began choosing colors for accessories.

"Listen, Bride baby. If you must have a drop of color confine it to shoes and purse. But I'd keep them black when white absolutely won't work."



"What about jewelry? Gold? Some diamonds? An emerald brooch?"

"No no," said Jeri. "No jewelry at all. Pearl dot earrings, maybe. No! Not even that. Just you, girl. All milk and milk. Everybody's dream, believe me. And with your body? Puh-leeze."

Bride did as he directed and certainly cut a stunning, unforgettable figure. Love by all. Well, adored anyway.

Six weeks and the stitch scars were hardly visible. Her lips were back to normal, as were the nose, the eye, the elbow. Only the rib area remained tender and, much to her surprise, the scraped facial skin had healed the quickest. Good news, really, so why did she feel so bad, so sad? Bride opened the cabinet and removed the shaving brush, fingering it, letting the silky hair tickle. She looked again at her reflection. Slowly she brought the brush to her chin, stroking it. Then the jaw, the underside, then up to her ear lobes. Trolling above the lip she felt faint. "Soap", she thought. "I need soap." She tore the fancy paper from a "luxury bar" sported by an up-scale spa, dropped it in the soap dish and wet the brush. Stirring the creamy lather on the lower part of her face took her breath away. She paused; gathered herself and proceeded. The look was astonishing. How wide and lustrous her eyes became; how elegant

her nose; her lips so kissable she touched them with the tip of her little finger. It wasn't too long before she clasped the razor, awkwardly. How did he hold it? Some finger arrangement she couldn't remember. She would have to practice. Meantime, using the razor's dull back, she carved straight avenues through swirls of lather. Splashing water on her face she realized the satisfaction that followed was unparalleled in her brief lifetime.

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Working from home Bride had the best of all worlds - a tiny room



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Working from home Bride had the best of all worlds: a delicious

combination of authority, self-pity and slake-able desire. Calling the shots for promotional material, assignments and so on was fulfilling, but too easy. Feeling legitimate sorrow for herself was better. Tk The thrill, however, was tucked in a little kit where the shaving equipment lay. When desire swept through her, she could touch the badger hair to her cheek or, if she chose to or needed to, she could indulge herself in full. Numbering the many ways she had been wronged was strengthening. In that warm vat she recalled and re-imagined both powerful and trivial incidents of rejection. Being an orphan raised by a grandmother who never attended parents' night or school plays; the low expectation people had of her because of her race—business courses instead of college track; community college instead of a four -year State while working the cosmetic counter in the day; becoming a buyer finally, after promotions were parceled out to stupid white girls; even the move to Sylvia was marred by a question of her style, her dress. So she consulted Jeri on her own and sky-rocketed to Regional Manager. All along the way various boy friends, the would-be actors, musicians, artists, players waiting for her paycheck like an allowance; others already professionally successful treating her like a medal. Shiny, mute testimony to their prowess. None giving, helping—all disdaining her



work , her ideas, baby-talking her through what she thought was serious conversation before finally locating a more reliable source of ego enhancement or pocket lining elsewhere.

Then him.

So independent. So seemingly fascinated by her. Tender. Tough. Funny. Open. Honest. They had joking arguments about sexy shades of lipstick; grave ones in which he explained why he despised the whole idea of make up. He could make feeding ducks popcorn an adventure. And no routine morning/nightly snatch for him. His appetite for sex was intermittent—periods of reticence surrounding an earthshaking need to erupt. Then, suddenly out of nowhere, literally nowhere, “You are not the woman...” and vanishing like a ghost.

Sofie was in the same category. She could have said no thanks, or even get out. Unless brutality was prison talk. Instead of emphatic words, savagery, blood letting in case the other inmate was retarded. Bride was not sure which was worse, sudden inexplicable abandonment or sudden unjustified assault. Ripping a heart or crushing a body. While Bride could admit she may have startled Sofie with a memory of guilt, it should have been obvious that her

motive, her gesture was all about forgiveness. There was no such excuse for him. The day before "You are not..." they had had lunch in her office: lobster salad, Smart water, peach slices smiling lazily in brandy.

Stir-crazy, tired of wandering in her condo—a west coast version of a New York loft, all light, space and loneliness—Bride donned another white uniform, shorts, halter, thong sandals; tucked the shaving kit in her bag and snatched up a magazine and sunglasses. Norma would be pleased that she had taken a bracing walk, sat in the park. Casually, calmly reading. Her long legs crossed, her manner cool. Dog walkers and seniors visited the park this time of day. Later on runners and skaters. Seldom a mother, a child. In this part of town, children had play dates, guarded by nannies in patios, play rooms, pool side in restaurants designed for their fun.

Bride chose a bench near a fake pond where real ducks sailed. Deliberately not thinking of him or popcorn or lectures about the difference between wild drakes and yard birds. Studiously avoiding tk

A white-haired couple strolled by. Unspeaking, holding hands. Paunches the exact same size, although his was lower down. Both wore slacks, beige,



and loose t shirts with faded language, front and back, about peace. Theirs was the long, intimate life together that evoked such envy, dog minders snickered and yanked leashes for no reason at all. They moved slowly as though in a dream. Steps matching, looking straight ahead like people called to the space ship where, at last, a door would slide open and a tongue of red carpet roll through. Ascending, hands in hand, into the arms of a benevolent alien they would smile and the music would bring you to tears.

Norma chose the restaurant. Something semi-chic, formerly hot now barely hanging on with a few tourists and the decidedly un-hip. Norma must have thought the pretty food, the male waiters with red suspenders emphasizing their bare chests would call Bride back from the dead—the hibernation her friend had been insisting on for tk weeks. Although there was no medical evidence, Norma thought Bride was behaving in a classically post-rape manner. Tiny steps back into action were needed. No pressure, just a quiet dinner in a failing restaurant with cute but harmless beef on display. The evening air was too cool for the sleeveless shift, transparent in interesting places, Bride wore, but Norma was encouraged by the effort taken. Even she, who knew, could hardly detect

the scars. In all, Bride was as tk as ever.

They talked offce through the appetizer, the conversation collapsing with the mahi mahi.

"I want a vacation. Go somewhere."

"OOOOh. Where?"

"No kids."

"That's easy."

"No parties."

"Say what?"

"Settled people. I want to play shuffle board on a deck. Bingo, maybe."

"You're scaring me."

"No, really. Just quiet. Nothing louder than waves lapping, melting ice in plastic glasses."

"Bride? You're still in shock. Don't make plans till it wears off. You won't know what you want til then."

"I do know. Listen. That was a woman beat the hell out of me. Somebody I was trying to help. She would have killed m e if she could."

"Who?"



"You don't know her."

"You don't either, obviously."

"I did once."

"Bride, don't give me scraps. Let me have the whole plate, please."

It took merely tk to tell it. How when she was little, fourth grade, a teacher in the kindergarden building. Next to the main school, played nasty with her students.

"I can't hear this."

"You asked."

"Okay, okay."

"She was caught and sent away."

"Good."

"I testified."

"Even better. So?"

"I pointed. Pointed her out. Said I saw her do it."

"And?"

"They sent her away."

"Got it. End of story. No?"

"No. I. I. Thought about her, off and on. You know?"

"No. Tell me. Why?"

"Because. She was just twenty."

"So were the Manson girls."

"Now she's forty five or so. And I thought she probably had no friends."

"Poor thing. No kiddies in the joint. What a drag."

"You're not hearing me."

"You better believe it. Of course I'm not listening to you. You nuts?"

Who is this alligator, besides being pond scum, I mean. She related to you?

What?"

"No."

"Well?"

"I just thought she would be lonely."

"She's alive. That not good enough for her?"

Bride sighed and signaled the waiter.

Again," she told him, nodding toward the apple martini glasses.

"None for me, cookie," said Norma. "I need absolute sobriety."

The waiter obliged with a killer smile full of bright and bonded teeth.



"I don't know why. What I do know is I kept remembering her. All these years. In Decalon."

"You write her? Visit?"

"No I've seen her twice. Once at the trial; and once when it happened."

"Idiot. You put her behind bars! Of course she wanted to put your lights out."

"She wasn't like that before. She was gentle, kind."

"Before what? You said you saw her twice. At the trial and when she clocked you. But before you said she taught next door and you saw her diddling kids, so..."

The waiter leaned in with the green drink.

"Okay. Three. Three times."

Norma touched the corner of her lip with the tip of a fingernail. The woman must have done it to Bride too. But she was in the fourth grade, she said. Maybe..maybe...Is that why she couldn't forget her, went to see her with presents. Because she liked it. This was thick and getting thicker. Maybe Bride was an undeclared lesbian. But why would she be? The company was run by lesbians; their clients were trannies, straights, gay—anyone who took themselves

seriously. Not so thick, after all. The guy walks, she goes to make nice with a female child molester she helped convict.

"Waiter, honey. I change my mind. Bluveldt on rocks. Double it."

"I guess I wanted to feel good about myself. Less disposable. Sofie, that's her name, was all I could think of, someone who would appreciate...without strings..."

"I get it."

"Do you?"

"Absolutely. The guy walks, you feel like cow flop, you try to get your mojo back, but it's a bust. Right?"

"Right."

"So we fix it."

"How?"

"Well not with no Bingo."

"What then?"

"Blingo!"

"You called?" asked the waiter.



"So we fix it."

"How?"

"Well not with no Bingo."

"What then?"

"Blingo!"

"You called?" asked the waiter.

Everything had turned out perfectly. Hair, dress, makeup. She was to be the main attraction at the celebration. A company award, was it? Or a surprise birthday party. Something as important as it was lovely. In any case, a crowd awaited. Was there a limo coming? Surely she did not have to drive herself. And where was it? A hotel? The uneasiness of the questions only added to the excitement and kicked up the level of satisfaction at her appearance. Just the earrings, now. One carat diamonds. Now what? Jesus. They wouldn't go in. The platinum stem kept slipping away from the lobe. She looked closer and discovered they were not pierced. How could that be? Bride had had pierced ears since she was eight. She never wore clip ons. Never. Pearl dots usually. Tk But there they were: virgin earlobes untouched by a needle, smooth as a

baby's thumb.

## ONE

She had been away from him for two months, and she said, "You are not the woman I want."

"Neither am I," she answered.

Although she didn't know why she said that, her mind was not on him. Besides, she had some other business to attend to. The world was not a pleasant, even thrilling, at times. But not earthshaking. She was not even close to the world Sylvia Inc. revealed in full night. She was not in its ad copy: it



But what else could honestly be expected from a company that started out as Sylph Cosmetics for Discriminating Macons, then changed its name to Sylvia Apparel before accumulating six more lines including YOU, Girl: Cosmetics for Your Personal Millennium. With that slam dunk contribution [YOU, Girl-not the slogan] regional manager was held out contest.

ONE

*How about that?*  
"Money is money now, Lotus Ann," she smiled. Maybe that was the woman he wanted. But Lotus Ann Bridewell was not available. She was a seventeen year old kid who dropped the name right after high school and was Ann Bridewell for two years until she interviewed for the job at Sylvia Inc. and began calling herself Bride with nothing anybody needed to say before or after

She met a man some time ago; slept with him for two months until he said, "You are not the woman I want." *Then*

"Neither am I," she answered.

Although she didn't know why she said that, her relief was palpable. *fx*  
Besides, she had some other business to attend to. The affair had been pleasant, even thrilling, at times. But not earthshaking and certainly nothing even close to the world Sylvia Inc. revealed in full page spreads and described in its ad copy: tk

But what else could honestly be expected from a company that started out as Sylph Corsets for Discriminating Matrons, then changed its name to Sylvia Apparel before accumulating six more lines including YOU, Girl: Cosmetics for Your Personal Millennium. With that slam dunk contribution [YOU, Girl—not the slogan]—regional manager was hers without contest.

*How 'bout that?*  
"Money to waste, now, Lotus Ann," she smiled. Maybe that was the woman he wanted. But Lotus Ann Bridewell was not available. She was a seventeen year old kid who dropped the name right after highschool and was Ann Bridewell for two years until she interviewed for the job at Sylvia Inc. and began calling herself Bride with nothing anybody needed to say before or after that one sweet syllable. Customers and the sales reps liked it, but clearly he did not. He called her 'girl' *baby* most of the time. "Hey, *baby* girl. I ~~sure do~~ need you, *baby* girl."

*And sometimes*  
"You my girl?" The only time he said 'woman' was the day he left.

*thank you Jesus hanging out*  
No more dallying around with a mystery man with no visible means of support. A felon if ever there was one, though he denied it; said his weekly appointments in tk were tk, not reports to a probation officer. With him gone, out of her thoughts, she could keep the promise she'd made to herself long before she *set eyes on* met him. *It was time.*



Afternoon was wet in the city, but <sup>as she drove</sup> farther north <sup>the</sup> a flawless summer sky was promised. Bride selected a classical music channel for the two hour ride, but didn't raise the volume. <sup>Aida's cries</sup> The ~~hum~~ muted by nappa leather was more suited to <sup>her</sup> an already racing pulse. Twenty-five thousand dollars in cash, a three thousand dollar <sup>Continental</sup> American Airlines gift certificate and a promotion box of YOU, Girl products were tucked into <sup>a</sup> her Louis Vuitton shopping bag. All that could take a <sup>woman</sup> girl anywhere, almost. <sup>anyway</sup> Comfort her. Help her forget. Take the edge off bad luck, hopelessness, and boredom.

Tk scenery

Bride clicked the windshield wipers off and slowed. The Norristown exit was easily missed and the prison had no sign for a mile beyond the ramp. Right outside Norristown, in the kind of reclaimed desert California was famous for, Decalon was an excellent site: near a small town whose population could serve visitors, provide guards, cafeteria workers, health workers and, most of all, contractors' laborers who were always improving the site, repairing the road and adding wings to accommodate the increasing waves of evil women committing violent crimes.

Twice before she had driven to Decalon, but never tried to enter. Those

times she just wanted to see where the <sup>beast</sup>~~monster~~ had been caged for twenty-one of her twenty-five to life sentence. Today was no different. No need to enter, even if she had fabricated a reason to. The <sup>beast</sup>~~monster~~ had been granted parole and, according to the Penal Review Notices, Sofia Huxley <sup>beast</sup> would walk out of the gates Bride had put her behind.

Decalon was the one place a Jaguar was embarrassing. Behind the buses <sup>or</sup> curbside, old Toyotas and second-hand trucks lined the road or took the few spaces in the parking lot <sup>left by</sup> that prison staff ~~had left~~. Bride's car, sleek, rat gray with her name on its vanity plate ~~a hit at sales conference and among the other regional managers~~ looked aggressively <sup>disorderly</sup> out of place. Like the sinister white limousines <sup>parked there</sup> that sometimes arrived, engines snoring lightly ~~next to~~ chauffeurs leaning against <sup>snowy metal</sup> the hood. Bride never stayed long enough to see a passenger who would need a driver <sup>a 22 foot limousine and</sup> to leap <sup>in</sup> to open the door. She imagined a Grand Madam impatient to get back to her ~~tk~~ designer linens in her tasteful high-rise, <sup>brothel</sup> or maybe a little hooker-ette dying for a return to the private patio of a smooth <sup>hip</sup> club where she could celebrate the rip and burn of her prison-issue panties with friends. No Sylvia products though. The line was risque enough for the hooker-ette's clients, but not expensive enough. Still, she might own



some YOU. Girl ~~the~~ <sup>or</sup> sparkle eye shadow, the gold flecked tk. lipstick.

Today there were no limousines, unless the Lincoln Town was a modest one. Just worn cars and trucks, quiet children, animated family members, a solitary man <sup>He ached into a box of cereal</sup> single relative sitting on a bench at the bus stop. <sup>scouring its corners for the last piece of sweet nothing.</sup> Bride waited. Huxley, Sofia

aka 071140, would not be released during visiting hours. She, and if there

were other parolees, would emerge as a separate lot. By 4:30 only the Lincoln

Town was left. A lawyer, thought Bride.

Tk

Suddenly, there she was. Unmistakable because of the height. Six feet.

Still. Twenty-one years had not dwarfed the giant Bride remembered. At eight

years old, Lotus Ann could not believe a woman taller than the bailiff, the

judge, the lawyers, as tall as the police and almost as tall as her own husband,

was anything other than the "filthy freak" stricken parents called her. "Look at

her eyes," women whispered in the restroom. <sup>Cold</sup> "Lidded, like the snake she is. At

twenty? How could a twenty-year old do those things? Are you kidding? Just

look at those eyes. They're old as dirt." Twenty plus one years later the eyes

were more like a rabbit's than a snake's but the height was unchanged.

Everything else had. Parolee 071140 was thin as a rope. Size three panties. A -

He wore wing tip shoes and brand new jeans.

His baseball cap, ~~matched~~ <sup>brown</sup> the vest ~~he wore~~ <sup>were obviously</sup>  
over a white long sleeved shirt - given clothes  
~~it was chosen from~~ <sup>chosen from</sup> the shelves and tables of  
Goodwill Stores. Unflappable <sup>legs crossed</sup> he sat there

Like a prince in disguise <sup>examining</sup> ~~each~~ cereal as though  
~~it was each one~~ <sup>each</sup>

plump?

<sup>fat cherry</sup>  
it were a hand-picked by ~~servants~~ especially  
for him by gardener's to the throne.



stepped out of the car  
cup bra, if any. As Bride approached she could not help registering how much  
her features would benefit from Miracle, or better still, Firmaline Wrinkle  
Softener, and Juicy Bronze would restore <sup>needed</sup> color to the whey colored skin.

Not sure of anything but the absolute necessity of being there; not  
wondering or caring if Sofia recognized her, Bride slid into the moment and  
spoke.

"Need a lift?"  
→

"No, thanks. I don't."

Her mouth is tremble-y, now, thought Bride. It used to be hard, a  
straight razor ready to <sup>slice</sup> eat a child. A collagen shot and Tango-matte, not  
glitter—would have <sup>softened</sup> ~~changed~~ it, influenced the jury, maybe, except there was no  
YOU, Girl back then.

"Somebody picking you up?"

"Taxi cab." She was answering a stranger, dutifully, as though used to it.  
Not "What's it to you?" or even "Who the hell are you?" But going on to  
explain further. "I called a cab. I mean the Desk did."

Bride was reaching out, to touch her elbow, prelude to convincing her not  
to waste her money, when the cab rolled up. Fast as a bullet, limber as an

A quick glance <sup>at the speaker</sup> followed by <sup>one</sup> searching the  
road.



acrobat, Sofie reached for the door, tossed in her tk nylon carrier bag and followed it.

"Wait," called B ride, but Sofia, leaning toward the driver's ear, ignored her. The taxi drove away negotiating the U turn like a NASCAR pro.

It wasn't at all hard to follow her. Bride even passed the taxi in a playful attempt to deceive. It didn't work because she saw, in the rear view mirror, the cab slow and turn toward Norristown instead of the exit ramp. Bride splayed

shoulder gravel to brake, reverse and catch up, murmuring, "Sofie, Sofie.

Don't." ~~Twenty minutes later they were in town~~ <sup>with Bride's effort</sup> ~~the cab stopped~~ <sup>where</sup>

~~When the cab stopped at Eva Dean's Motel and Restaurant, Bride parked~~ <sup>Just beyond it a road sign identified</sup> <sup>squinted at</sup> <sup>watching through the plate glass,</sup>

the Jaguar across the street, thinking, she is too meeting someone. After a few minutes at the check-in desk, Sofie <sup>a Huxley</sup> turned and, showing no interest in her room

assignment, went straight into the restaurant and took a booth by the window.

Like a slow student she studied the menu, lip reading while running her finger under the offerings. Watching her, Bride sighed, "And this is the woman who

once taught pre-schoolers, cut apples into rings to resemble the letter O, doled out pretzels as B's, slit watermelon chunks into Y's. All to spell out 'BOY'

<sup>q</sup>-whom she liked best, according to the women whispering in the courtroom

They  
Bride followed at a respectable distance  
Every now & then a colorful ~~house~~ built in the 50's added on to  
they passed as ~~house~~ repeatedly until they resembled a Kindergarten  
drawings - ~~it~~ <sup>sitting</sup> quietly in <sup>a large wide deep</sup> ~~lawn~~ <sup>White</sup>  
with a blood red door seemed to be the  
~~preference~~ preferred color scheme. ~~At the~~  
A mall-fresh as <sup>lemonade</sup> ~~the~~ announced the <sup>beginning</sup> ~~entrance~~  
of the town.

as pale and  
fresh as  
1



toilets. Maybe she could <sup>preferred</sup> recognize no alphabet she could <sup>had</sup> eat. Fruit figured centrally at the trial and as Bride watched the waitress place dish after dish before her customer, she wondered what her first post-prison menu would contain. She was eating like a refugee, ~~Never~~ taking her eyes from the food; stabbing, scooping, slicing, helter-skelter all over the table. She took no water, buttered no bread. The gobbling took all of nineteen minutes. Then she paid, left and hurried down the walkway to 3B. <sup>Tote bag on shoulder</sup> Key in hand, she hesitated. Suddenly she darted into a narrow <sup>break</sup> ~~tk~~ between two blocks of concrete rooms. Bride abandoned her post and ran after her, pausing when a retching sound clarified the motive. Backing away, Bride hid behind a SUV, <sup>then</sup> bent down to attend to her ankle strap until Sofia <sup>hopping</sup> collected herself and unlocked the door to 3B.

The knocking should be strong, Bride decided, authoritative, to get the automatically obedient response the <sup>CON</sup> felon was trained to.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Huxley. Open the door, please."

"I'm sick."

"I know. Open the door." Bride's voice, a combination of power-to-fire-you with a hint of administrative understanding—the one that worked on insecure

and or unproductive reps—worked now. Sofia<sup>6</sup> opened the door wide and stood there barefoot, a towel in her hand.

"Yes?"

"We need to talk."

"Talk?"

Still, no who are you?"

Leading with the Louis Vuitton bag, Bride pushed in past her. Wizard, Rain Forest, was overwhelming.

"You're Sofia Huxley, right?"

She nodded.

"Let's sit down. I have something for you." Bride held up the shopping bag. Sofia didn't look at it. She gazed instead at Bride's shoes, the high lethal heels, the dangerously pointed toes.

"What do you want me to do?"

Such a soft, accommodating voice. <sup>Ex con, former felon</sup> ~~Already~~ knowing that nothing was free. Nobody gave anything <sup>at</sup> that had no cost to the receiver. Whatever it was: cigarettes, magazines, tampons, stamps, stationery, Mars Bars or twenty-five large, it came with strings tough as fishing line.



"Nothing. I don't want you to do a thing."

Sofia's gaze traveled up to Bride's knees, poking out from a skirt cut from a yard and a half of white Egyptian cotton. Not enough to cover the head of a mullah.

Tk →

"I saw you leave Decalon. No one was there to meet you. ~~Don't you~~  
~~have any~~ "

"That was you?"

"I offered you a lift."

→ "Yes."

"I know you? You know me?"

"My name is Bride."

"That supposed to mean something to me?"

"No, but look what I brought you." Bride hoisted the shopping bag to the bed spread and reached into it. On top of the gift package of YOU, Girl she laid two envelopes, one slim one with the airline certificate, the fatter one with the hundred dollar bills totaling twenty-five thousand. Not much, if you thought of it as one thousand dollars for each year of her full sentence.

"What's that for?" Sofia looked at the items as though they might be

When her eyes met Bride's <sup>they</sup> ~~these~~  
were as ~~close~~ to opaque, ~~for~~ no inquiry  
at all reflected there, so Bride  
answered the ~~unposed~~ question a  
normal person would have posed.



infected.

"It's all right. Just a little something to help you."

"Help me what?"

"Get a good start. You know. On your life."

"My life?" She sounded as though she needed an introduction to the concept.

"Yeah. Your new life."

<sup>? who are you.</sup>  
"Why ~~are you doing this?~~"

Bride laughed. "You don't remember me. Lotus Ann. Lotus Ann Bridewell. At the trial? I was one of the children who—"

It was swifter than the way she had gotten into the taxi. <sup>Changing</sup> From slightly stooped penitent to un-defeated acrobat, <sup>a Huxley</sup> Sofie knocked Bride to the floor, then leaned down to beat the life out of her. Wild, hard-fisted, screaming "You! You!" she pummeled Bride's face. Then she dragged her to the door and threw her out of the room, the way sanitation workers handled plastic trash bags—one hand at the neck, the other on the bottom. Easily, graceful out of habit. Bride lay on the pavement with just enough sense to search out her teeth with her tongue. The door slammed, then opened. Bride's purse,

shopping bag and all it had held flew through the air and bounced on her back. Before she could rise to her knees, the door opened again, this time a black spike heeled shoe arced toward the prone and bleeding Bride. Her teeth were all there but her mouth belonged to somebody else.

After crawling for a few feet, Bride tried to stand. Her legs worked, but when she tried to pick up her purse and the other items scattered on the walkway, she discovered her right arm helpless. She did the best she could with her left hand and limped toward her car. "The manager," she thought. "I'll report her to the Motel's manager. Then the police." One hour of freedom, barely tasting parole, 0071140 was going back to the place she'd left that very afternoon. Opening the driver's door Bride caught a blurred look at her face. One <sup>mushrooming</sup> ~~closed~~ eye was enough to convince her she didn't want to use the open one to see anybody but a cop. No staring manager, guests, or hamburger chomping patrons. One-armed, having to lift her right hand with her left to turn on the ignition, Bride drove the two miles into Norristown's main street. Nothing. Nobody. Finally, in a lot behind a thrift shop, she saw the sign: Police Department. Leaning out of the window, she could see the sign: Closed. <sup>With one-eyed</sup> ~~On closer~~ inspection she could <sup>barely</sup> make out the rest: Sheriff back at



6:00 p.m. Clerk, Abbey something, had banker's hours. Mon Wed Fri 10:30 a.m. til 3:00 p.m. "Oh God," she thought. What would be the point with a four hundred bed women's prison five miles away, the State Trooper's headquarters on its site; no need for anything other than a homey police station just capable enough to hold teenagers and a drunk or two.

As she rummaged her purse for her cell phone, Bride started to cry and was crying still when Norma answered.

"Later," <sup>perhaps</sup> the nurse smiled. "After the doctor <sup>when</sup> ~~leaves~~ <sup>get back</sup>."

Neither Bride nor Norma could hear her departing footsteps, so they waited a full minute before Norma whipped out her cosmetic <sup>mirror</sup> ~~purse~~ and let Bride see the damage.

"Ruined," whispered Bride.

"No, it's not. Give it time. Remember what Grace looked like after her face tuck?" Norma was as jittery with optimism as she was with curiosity.

"A surgeon did her face. A maniac did mine."

"Well, tell me, would you? What all happened?"

"I'm tired. Hungry, too."

"Here's applesauce. And juice." Norma fiddled with the carton, trying to stick in the straw.

"I want a steak. Raw."

"Who's going to chew it for you? Not me. I'm off meat."

Bride held the mirror closer. A quarter of her face was fine. The other three fourths cratered. Hateful black stitches around her slitty, puffy eye, bandages on her forehead; her lips so U-bangi she couldn't pronounce the 'r' in 'raw.' The pain medicine had stopped her jaw from hurting, but it was stiff, immobile, like her right arm. Under the pale flowered hospital gown, her ribs were encased <sup>in</sup> steel bands disguised as white strips of gauze. Worse than any of it, however, was her nose; nostrils wide as an orangutang's under gauze the size of <sup>a cupcake.</sup> ~~an English muffin~~. <sup>near</sup> Beside it, her unbruised eye cowered, bloodshot, practically dead. Norma could chatter all she wanted, but Bride knew her job at Sylvia Inc. was lost. How could she persuade women to improve their looks with products that could not improve her own? There wasn't enough tk foundation in the world to hide eye scars, a broken nose and facial skin scraped down to pink hypoderm. Assuming all this would fade, she would still need plastic surgery which meant months of idleness, hiding behind sun glasses and



floppy hats.

"Don't sweat it," Norma had said. "I've already talk to Fayed, and Joanna, too. They said take all the time you need. Insurance pays for everything. Just keep in touch, they said...for the fall launch...."

"I can't eat, I can't talk, I can't think," Bride's voice was whiney.

*Hey, girl*  
"Come on," said Norma. "Pity party's over. We've got to get you out of here. This is a dump. They don't even have private rooms. The whole place is an emergency room, with one wacko nurse and two doctors living fifty miles away. Do you know how long it took to get anybody to even look at you? Anybody with a license, I mean. That nurse had lettuce in her teeth and I doubt she's washed her hands since graduating from that ~~fake~~ internet nursing course she took. "

"You don't think that doctor did a good job?"

"Who knows? In this trailer-park ~~country~~ clinic? I'm driving you to a real hospital—with a toilet and a sink in the room."

"Don't they have to release me? I mean a doctor has to?"

? "Please. I bought sweats. No decent hospital out here but they got a very hip ~~Ag-Way~~ *Wal Mart #*. Come on. Up. I'll help you. We'll get some frozen ice pops

on the way. Or a malted. That's probably better, medicine-wise, or some tomato juice, chicken broth maybe.... Oh, Bride. Don't look like that. It really is going to be all right."

Norma drove slowly because every bump and turn made her friend wince.

"I didn't know you were twenty eight. I thought you were my age. Twenty-two. I saw it on your driver's license. You know, when I was looking for your insurance card for the forms I had to fill out. You don't look it, though. Even now your one good eye looks twenty-two." Norma laughed, hoping it would get a chuckle through that U-bangi mouth. It didn't.

"So who was he?"

"Who was who?"

"The guy who beat you half to death."

"Did I say it was a guy?" Bride couldn't remember her telephone conversation in detail. Just the 'Norma please you gotta come help me' and the best directions she could manage <sup>the rear of the thrift shop</sup> to where she was parked. In the couple of hours or so it took her friend to get there, she must have slept—maybe fainted <sup>from the pain</sup> a couple of times. When Norma arrived, Bride might have said anything.



"Who else? You telling me a woman did this?"

"No. No. It was a guy."

"Was he trying to rape you?"

"Yeah. I suppose. Something scared him off, I guess. He banged me around, threw me down and just took off."

"He didn't even take your purse, wallet, anything?"

<sup>I guess</sup>  
"Sweet."

"Why didn't whoever scared him stay and help you"?

"I don't know!"

Norma backed off. Bride was sobbing, or trying to. Her mouth obviously hurt too much to continue. After a few miles of silence, Norma made her voice as casual as she could.

"What were you doing up here, anyway?"

<sup>came</sup>  
"I ~~went~~ to see a friend."

"You find him?"

"Her. No. I never found her."

"Who is she?"

"Somebody from a long time ago. She wasn't there. Probably dead by

now."

Norma turned her head to glance at Bride. Whoever it was, the almost rapist must have rattled her friend's brain pan. Otherwise, why would she tell such a silly lie? Like a kid with soiled panties saying "That wasn't me did it."

There was \$25,000.00 cash in the un-stolen purse and <sup>an</sup> airline gift certificate, not to speak of samples of YOU, Girl products so new they hadn't been launched. <sup>A rapist</sup> He might now want any <sup>skin cream</sup> ~~sk~~, but free cash?

Tk

She really was a freak. The eyes. The quick change from dutiful, obedient to feral predator. From tears to fangs. From slouch to arrow. Bride never saw the signal—<sup>a</sup> the grip of neck cords, <sup>a</sup> the shoulder flex—nothing announced the onslaught.

Bride was only eight years old, still <sup>little</sup> Lotus Ann, when she had lifted her arm and pointed a nail bitten finger toward the young couple sitting at the long table.

"Is the woman you saw here in this room?"

Nod.



"You have to speak, Lotus Ann. Say 'yes' or 'no'".

"Yes."

"Can you tell us where she is seated?"

Lotus Ann raised her arm, slowly, to avoid knocking over the paper cup of water the lawyer had given her.

"Relax. Take your time, Lotus Ann."

And she did. Slowly raising her arm, her hand in a fist until the arm was straight. Then unfolding the fore-finger. Pow! Like a cap pistol.

Sofia Huxley opened her mouth, as though to say something. She looked shocked, unbelieving. But the finger pointed, pointed so long the lawyer lady had to touch her hand, say "Thank you, Lotus Ann," to get her to put her arm back down.

Outside the court room she was petted, embraced, smiled at by mothers exhausted by tears, drained of anger but not despair; heart-broken fathers gave her a thumbs-up. Grand Dear, pleased and proud of her brave little girl, led her away and they descended the steps of the court house in a cloud of 'April Dawn' wafting from <sup>her mother's</sup> ~~the old woman's~~ clothes.

This was the worst part of healing. Not the traces of pain, nor the slow

approach of her face to normalcy. But the hours of nothing to do but recall. Her eyes were well enough to cry from, so she did, off and on throughout the lonely days. Visits from friends annoyed her; television was idiotic, print made her dizzy and plot lines were beyond her grasp. Vases of gorgeous flowers, over packed, overdone, the way all California florists prepared them, made her nauseous. Even music irritated her. Vocals, both the beautiful ones and the mediocre, depressed her; instrumentals were worse. Obviously something awful had been done to her tongue for her taste buds were gone or in hiding. Everything tasted like lemons—except lemons which tasted like salt.

Tk

She didn't even hear me out. I wasn't the only witness, the only one who turned Sofia Huxley into 071140. She has no family anymore. Her husband is in another prison and still un-paroled after seven tries. No body was there to meet her. Nobody. So why not accept...help instead of whatever check-out <sup>counter</sup> ~~clerk~~ or cleaning woman job she had been given. Rich parolees didn't end up cleaning out toilets at Wendys. Bride was not just hurt by the broken jaw, arm, ribs you-name-it, but ashamed. Fact was, she had not fought back. She had just lain there, unresisting as Sofia beat her. She would have died there,



probably, if the attacker, her face wet with flecks of blood, sweat and saliva, had not grown tired. But Bride took it all—not a sound, not a single defensive gesture. Weary and panting Sofia <sup>had</sup> dragged her to her feet, pushed her through the door. Bride could still feel the hard hands clenching neck skin, her behind, and hear the crack of her own bones hitting concrete. Elbow, ankle, jaw. The long slide and rip of arms grabbing for balance as she fell. Her tongue searching through blood for teeth. And when the last item was thrown at her, the spike-heeled shoe, she had simply crawled away. Once again, taking it. “You are not the woman....” then pretending it didn’t matter.

Tk

Foam spurting from an aerosol can made him laugh, so he lathered with a brush. A handsome thing—boar’s hair swelling from an ivory handle. It ought to remain in the heap she tossed in the trash: toothbrush, mouthwash, strop and straight razor. The things he had taken: two books in a foreign language he could read but not speak, a notebook and the leather bag that swung from his shoulder like a purse. For reasons she couldn’t explain, Bride picked through the trash bag, retrieved the shaving brush and bone handled razor and placed both in the medicine cabinet. When the door clicked she stared at her face in

the mirror.

"You should always wear white. Only white and all white all the time."

Jeri, the buyer who called himself a "total person" designer, was insistent.

"Not only because of your name, but because of what it does to your skin.

Makes people think of white chocolate every time they see you. Yummy!"

"Or Oreos?" she asked.

"Classier," he hissed. "*Godiva*."

Although it was boring at first, looking for white only clothes—winter white, summer white, spring white—it got more interesting when she began choosing colors for accessories.

"Listen, Bride <sup>honey</sup> baby. If you must have a drop of color confine it to shoes and purse. But I'd keep them black when white simply won't work."

"What about jewelry? Gold? Some diamonds? An emerald brooch?"

"No no," said Jeri. "No jewelry at all. Pearl dot earrings, maybe. No! Not even that. Just you, girl. All mink and milk. Everybody's dream, believe me. And with your body? Puh-leeze."

Bride did as he directed and certainly cut a stunning, unforgettable figure. Love<sup>d</sup> by all. Well, adored anyway.



Six weeks and the stitch scars were hardly visible. Her lips were back to normal, as were the nose, the eye, the elbow. Only the rib area remained tender and, much to her surprise, the scraped facial skin had healed the quickest. Good as new, almost, so why did she feel so bad, so sad? Bride opened the cabinet and removed the shaving brush, fingering it, letting the silky hair tickle. She looked again at her reflection. Slowly she brought the brush to her chin, stroking it. Then the jaw, the underside, then up to her ear lobes. Trolling above the lip she felt faint. "Soap", she thought. "I need soap." She tore the fancy paper from a "luxury bar" sported by an up-scale spa, dropped it in the soap dish and wet the brush. Stirring the creamy lather on the lower part of her face took her breath away. She paused; gathered herself and proceeded. The look was astonishing. How wide and lustrous her eyes became; how elegant her nose; her lips so kissable she touched them with the tip of her little finger. It wasn't too long before she clasped the razor, awkwardly. How did he hold it? Some finger arrangement she couldn't remember. She would have to practice. Meantime, using the razor's dull back, she carved straight avenues through swirls of lather. <sup>dark</sup> <sup>white</sup> Splashing water on her face she realized the satisfaction that followed was unparalleled in her brief

lifetime.

Working from home Bride had the best of all worlds: a delicious combination of authority, self-pity and slake-able desire. Calling the shots for promotional material, assignments and so on was fulfilling, but too easy. Feeling legitimate sorrow for herself was better. The thrill, however, was tucked in a little kit where the shaving equipment lay. When desire swept through her, she could stroke the boar's hair down her cheek or, if she chose or needed to, she could indulge herself in full. Numbering the many ways she had been wronged was strengthening. In that warm vat she recalled and reimagined both powerful and trivial incidents of rejection. ~~Being an orphan~~ raised by a grandmother who never attended parents' night or school plays; the low expectation people had of her because of her race—business courses instead of college track; community college instead of a four-year State while working the cosmetic counter in the day; becoming a buyer finally, after promotions were parceled out to stupid white girls; even the move to Sylvia was marred by a question of her style, her dress. So she consulted Jeri on her own and sky-rocketed to Regional Manager. All along the way various boy friends,

editing  
his comment  
on her style  
- Just you, girl



the would-be actors, musicians, artists, players waiting for her paycheck like an allowance; others already professionally successful treating her like a medal, Shiny, mute testimony to their prowess. None giving, helping—all disdaining her work, her ideas, baby-talking her through what she thought was serious conversation before finally locating a more reliable source of ego enhancement or pocket lining elsewhere.

Then him.

So independent. So seemingly fascinated by her. Tender. Tough. Funny. Open. Honest. They had joking arguments about sexy shades of lipstick; grave ones in which he explained why he despised the whole idea of make up. He could make feeding ducks popcorn an adventure. And no routine morning/nightly snatch for him. His appetite for sex was intermittent—periods of reticence surrounding an earthshaking need to erupt. Then, suddenly out of nowhere, literally nowhere, “You are not the woman...” and vanishing like a ghost.

Dumped.

Like always.

Even Sofia <sup>Huxley</sup> dumped her. She could have said ‘no thanks’, or even ‘get out.’

Unless brutality was prison talk. Instead of emphatic words, savagery, blood <sup>was required</sup> letting in case the other inmate was retarded. Bride was not sure which was worse, sudden inexplicable abandonment or sudden unjustified assault. Ripping a heart or crushing a body. While <sup>she</sup> ~~Bride~~ could admit she may have startled Sofia <sup>a</sup> with a memory of guilt, it should have been obvious that her motive, her gesture was all about forgiveness. <sup>But</sup> There was no such excuse for him. The day before "You are not..." they had had lunch in her office: lobster salad, Smart water, peach slices smiling lazily in brandy.

Stir-crazy, tired of wandering in her condo—a west coast version of a New York loft, all light, space and loneliness—Bride donned another white uniform, shorts, halter, thong sandals; tucked the shaving kit in her bag and snatched up a magazine and sunglasses. Norma would be pleased that she had taken a bracing walk, sat in the park, casually, calmly reading. Her long legs crossed, her manner cool. Dog walkers and seniors visited the park this time of day. Later on runners and skaters. Seldom a mother <sup>and</sup> a child. In this part of town, children had play dates, guarded by nannies in patios, play rooms, pool side or in restaurants designed for their <sup>glee</sup> fun.



phony

Bride chose a bench near a ~~fake~~ pond where real ducks sailed.

Deliberately not thinking of him or popcorn or lectures about the difference between wild drakes and yard birds, ~~Studiously avoiding tk~~ —>

~~A~~ white-haired couple strolled <sup>ing</sup> by, ~~Unspeak~~ing, holding hands. Their <sup>were</sup> paunches <sup>^</sup> the exact same size, although his was lower down. Both wore colorless slacks and loose t shirts with faded language, front and back, about peace. Theirs was the long, intimate life together that evoked such envy, dog minders snickered and yanked leashes for no reason at all. They moved slowly as though in a dream. Steps matching, looking straight ahead like people called to the space ship where, at last, a door would slide open and a tongue of red carpet roll through. <sup>There they would</sup> Ascending, hands in hand, into the arms of a <sup>and</sup> benevolent alien <sup>accompanied by</sup> they would smile <sup>that</sup> and the music would bring you to tears. —>

Norma chose the restaurant. Something semi-chic, <sup>a</sup> formerly hot, <sup>^</sup> now barely hanging on, place with a few tourists and the decidedly un-hip. <sup>She</sup> Norma must have thought the pretty food, the male waiters with red suspenders emphasizing their bare chests would call Bride back from the dead—the hibernation her friend had been insisting on for tk weeks. Although there was no medical evidence,

→ The recollection of coal (fingers) massaged  
She flipped the pages of X. At the  
sound of slow footsteps on gravel, she  
looked up to see

→ 1 Bride reached into her purse and  
~~with~~ having found the shaving brush,  
diddled it lightly, ~~in the privacy~~ privately,  
until she was soothed.



Norma thought Bride was behaving in a classically post-rape manner. Tiny <sup>forward</sup> steps <sup>a social life</sup> back into action were needed. No pressure, just a quiet dinner in a failing restaurant with cute but harmless beef on display. The evening air was too cool for the sleeveless shift, transparent in interesting places, <sup>that</sup> Bride wore, but Norma was encouraged by the effort taken. Even she, who knew, could hardly detect the scars. In all, Bride was as <sup>gorgeous</sup> tk as ever.

They talked office through the appetizer, the subject collapsing with the mahi mahi.

"I want a vacation. Go somewhere."

*Bride nudged the fish away from the pine nuts.*

"OOOh. Where?"

<sup>though</sup>  
"No kids."

"That's easy."

<sup>And</sup>  
"No parties."

"Say what?"

"Settled people. I want to play shuffle board on a deck. Bingo, maybe."

"You're scaring me."

"No, really. Just quiet. Nothing louder than waves lapping, melting ice in plastic glasses."

*Oh, girl. Answer man*

*Look,*

"Come on. You're still in shock. Don't make plans till it wears off. You won't know what you want til then."

*I lied*  
"I do know. Listen. That was a woman beat the hell out of me.

Somebody I was trying to help. She would have killed me if she could."

"A woman? Who?"

"You don't know her."

"You don't either, obviously."

"I did once."

"Bride, don't give me scraps. Let me have the whole plate, please."

*3rd?*  
It took merely tk to tell it. How when she was little, *4th* grade, a teacher in the kindergarden building. *9* Next to the main school, played nasty with her students.

"I can't hear this."

"You asked."

"Okay, okay."

"She was caught and sent away."

"Good."

"I testified."



"Even better. So?"

"I pointed. Pointed her out. Said I saw her do it."

"And?"

"They sent her away."

"Got it. End of story. No?"

"No. I. I. Thought about her, off and on. You know?"

"No. Tell me."

"Because. She was just twenty."

"So were the Manson girls."

"Now she's over forty. And I thought she probably had no friends."

"Poor thing. No kiddies in the joint. What a drag."

"You're not hearing me."

"You better believe it. Of course I'm not listening to you. You nuts?"

Who is this <sup>female</sup> alligator, besides being pond scum, I mean. She related to you?

What?"

"No."

"Well?"

"I just thought she would be lonely."

"She's alive. That not good enough for her?"

Bride sighed and signaled the waiter.

"Again," she told him, nodding toward the apple martini glasses.

"None for me, cookie," said Norma. "I need cold sobriety."

The waiter obliged with a killer smile full of bright and bonded teeth.

"I don't know why. <sup>I went</sup> What I do know is I kept remembering her. All these years. In Decalon."

"You write her? Visit?"

"No, I've seen her <sup>why</sup> twice. Once at the trial; and once when this happened." Bride gestured toward her eye.

"Idiot. You put <sup>he</sup> her behind bars! Of course she wanted to put your lights out."

"She wasn't like that before. She was gentle, kind."

"Before what? You said you saw her twice. At the trial and when she clocked you. But before you said she taught next door and you saw her diddling kids, so..."

The waiter leaned in with the green drink.

"Okay. Three. Three times."



Norma touched the corner of her lip with the tip of a fingernail, <sup>thinking</sup> The woman must have <sup>molested</sup> ~~done it to~~ Bride too. But she was in the fourth grade, she said. Maybe..maybe...Is that why she couldn't forget her, went to see her with presents<sup>?</sup> Because she liked it? This was thick and getting thicker. Maybe Bride was an undeclared lesbian. But why would she be? The company was <sup>practically</sup> run by lesbians; their clients <sup>included</sup> ~~were~~ trannies, straights, <sup>as</sup> gay—anyone who took <sup>their looks</sup> themselves seriously. No, not so thick, after all. Must be the guy. Lover man walks, she feels <sup>low</sup> ~~down~~, so she goes to make nice with a female child molester she helped convict.

"Waiter! <sup>!</sup> Honey. I change <sup>d</sup> my mind. Bluveldt. Rocks. Double it." →

"I guess I wanted to feel good about myself. Less disposable. Sofia, that's her name, was all I could think of, someone who would appreciate...without strings..."

"I get it."

"Do you?"

"Absolutely. The guy walks, you feel like cow flop, you try to get your mojo back, but it's a bust. Right?"

"Right."

"Look, Bride. Think about it. <sup>What</sup> ~~Why~~ made  
you feel so sorry for her. ?"