



## God Help the Child Draft, as "Bride Anew"

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## BRIDE ANEW

*Over*

We made love every day for six months. Then he said, "You not the woman I want."

I said, "Neither am I." I don't know what I meant by that but as soon as I heard my answer it was as though I had spent those months in a holding cell without arraignment or a lawyer, and suddenly the judge called the whole thing off—dismissed the case or refused to hear it at all. I didn't whine, wail or accuse. He said one thing I agreed. Besides, the affair wasn't all that spectacular not even the mildly dangerous sex I've sometimes enjoyed. *Whatever,* ~~In any case~~ it was nothing like those double page spreads in fashion magazines, you know, couples standing half naked in surf looking so fierce and downright mean, their sexuality like lightening and the sky going dark to show off the shine of their skin. I love those ads. But our affair didn't even measure up to any old R and B song—some red and black tune

digested

Naked or not we ~~clung~~ dined on one another



with a beat arranged to generate fever. It wasn't even the <sup>syrupy</sup> ~~sugary~~ lyrics of ~~a~~ <sup>those</sup> thirties blues song: "Baby, baby, why you treat me so? I do anything you say, go anywhere you want me to go." Why I was comparing <sup>us</sup> ~~us~~ to magazine spreads and music, I couldn't say, but it tickled me to settle on "I Wanna Dance with Somebody," <sup>Dearest used to sing</sup> <sup>our thing</sup> <sup>the absence of</sup>

I refused to glance out the windows at the sidewalk beneath my condo when he left. I just opened a bottle of Pinot Grigio and sank into the sofa, its suede and silk cushions as comfy as any arms. <sup>And gorgeous too</sup> ~~And~~ Almost. Because I have to admit he was beautiful, flawless even except for the scar on his shoulder—a plum red blob with a tail. A little buzzed, I decided to call Norma, tell her all about it. But I changed my mind when I realized there was nothing to say except he walked out and I don't know why. Besides, there was too much going on at work for me to distract my best friend and colleague with personal gossip about another breakup. Especially now. Being Regional Manager is like being a captain so I have to maintain the right relationship with the crew. Our company, Sylvia Inc., is a small cosmetic business, but it's beginning to blossom and make waves, finally, and shed its frumpy past. It used to be Sylph Corsets for Discriminating Women in the forties, but changed its name and ownership to Sylvia

Apparel, then to Sylvia Inc before going cool with six cosmetics lines, one of which is mine. I named it YOU, GIRL: Cosmetics for your Personal Millennium. It's for girls and women of all complexions from ebony to lemonade to milk. That's mine, all mine—the idea, the name, the packaging.

Wiggling my toes under the silk cushion I couldn't help smiling at the lipstick smile on the wine glass, thinking "How you like that, Lula Ann?" Maybe that was the woman he wanted. But Lula Ann Bridewell is no longer available and she was never a woman. Lula Ann was a seventeen-year old me who dropped that country name as soon as I left high school. I was Ann <sup>- fide</sup> Bride for two years until I interviewed for a sales job at Sylvia Inc and on a hunch shortened my name to Bride with nothing anybody needs to say before or after that one memorable syllable. Customers and reps like it, but he did not. He called me "baby" most of the time. "Hey, baby," "Come on, baby." And sometime "You my girl", accent on the "my." The only time he said "woman" was the day he split.

Good riddance. No more dallying with a mystery man with no visible means of support. An ex-felon if ever there was one though he laughed



when I teased him about how he spent his time when I was at the office: idle, roaming, writing or meeting someone. He said his weekly meetings downtown were not reports to a probation officer or drug re-hab counselor. Yet he never told me what they were. I told him every single thing about myself; he confided nothing so I just made stuff up with tv plots: he was an informant with a new identity, a disbarred lawyer. Whatever.

Actually the timing of his leaving was perfect for me. With him gone out of my mind and my apartment I could concentrate on the launch of YOU, GIRL, and keep a promise I'd made to myself long before I met him—a promise that infuriated him for some unknown reason. It was time according to [prisoninfo.gov/paroleboard/calendar](http://prisoninfo.gov/paroleboard/calendar). I'd been planning this trip for a year choosing carefully what a parolee would need: I saved up twenty-five thousand dollars in cash, a three thousand dollar Continental Airlines gift certificate. I put a promotion box of YOU GIRL into a spanking new Louis Vuitton shopping bag, all of which could take her anywhere. Comfort her anyway; help her forget and take the edge off bad luck, hopelessness and boredom. Well, maybe not boredom, no prison is a convent. He didn't understand. It was the day after our fight about my

promise that he left. I must have threatened his ego by doing some Good Samaritan thing not directed at him.

TK dress/car

You ought to be able to enjoy scenery this lovely but the highways are so thick with lanes, exits, parallel roads, overpasses, cautionary signals and signs it was like reading a newspaper while driving. Annoying. Along with Amber alerts, silver and gold ones were springing up. I stayed in the right lane and slowed down because from past experience I knew the Norristown exit was easy to miss and the prison had no sign of its existence in the world for a mile beyond the exit ramp. I guess they didn't want tourists to know <sup>how much</sup> ~~that some~~ of the reclaimed desert California is famous for holds evil women. Decagon Women's Prison, right outside Norristown, is owned by a private company worshipped by the locals for the work it provides: serving visitors, guards, clerical staff, cafeteria workers, health care folks and most of all contract laborers repairing the road and fences and adding wing after wing to house increasing waves of violent wicked women committing unspeakable crimes. Lucky for the state, crime does pay.



The couple of times I drove to Decagon before I never tried to <sup>go</sup> get inside on some pretext or other. Then I just wanted to see where the monster had been caged for fifteen of her twenty-five to life sentence. This time was a little different. The monster has been granted parole and according to Penal Review Notices, Sofia Huxley is going to strut through the bars I pushed her behind.

You'd think with Decagon being all about money that a Jaguar wouldn't stand out. But behind curbside busses, old Toyotas and second hand trucks, my car sleek, rat gray with a vanity license looked like a gun. But not as sinister as the white limousines I've seen parked there—engines snoring, chauffeurs leaning against gleaming fenders. Now, who would need a driver leaping to open the door and make a quick getaway? A grand Madam impatient to get back to her designer linens in her tasteful high-rise brothel. Or maybe a little hooker-ette eager for her return to the patio of some sumptuous, degenerate, private club where she could celebrate her release among friends by ripping up her prison-issue underwear. No Sylvia Inc products for her. Our line is sexy enough but not expensive enough. Like all sex trash she thought the higher the price the better the quality. If



she only knew. Still, she might buy some YOU, Girl sparkle eye shadow or gold-flecked lip gloss.

No limousines today, unless you count the Lincoln Town car. Mostly just worn cars and trucks, jittery grown ups and quiet children. An old man sitting at the bus stop is <sup>digging</sup> digging into a box of Cheerios trying to find the last circle of sweet oat bran. He's wearing ancient wing-tip shoes and crisp new jeans. His baseball cap, his brown vest over a white shirt scream Salvation Army Store but his manner is superior, dainty even. His legs are crossed and he examines the bit of dry cereal as though it were a choice grape picked especially for him by groundskeepers to the throne.

Four o'clock; it won't be long now. Huxley, Sofia, aka 071140 won't be released during visiting hours. She and if there are other parolees will come out as a separate group. At exactly four thirty only the Town car is left, owned probably by a lawyer with an alligator brief case full of <sup>legalese</sup> words, money and cigarettes.

"Are you ok, Lula Ann?" The prosecutor's voice was soft, encouraging. "There's nothing to be afraid of. She can't hurt you."

No, she can't and here she is. Miss 0071140. Even after fifteen years I could never mistake her simply because of her height, six feet. Nothing has shrunk the giant I remember who was taller than the bailiff, the judge, the lawyers and almost as tall as the police. Only her co-monster husband matched her height. <sup>Dearest least of all</sup> Nobody doubted she was the filthy freak the parents called her. "Look at her eyes," they whispered. Everywhere in the courthouse, ladies' room, benches, halls they whispered: "Cold, like the snake she is." "At twenty? How could a twenty-year old do those things to children?" "Are you kidding? <sup>me</sup> Just look at those eyes. Old as dirt."

Now those eyes are more like a rabbit's than a snake's but the height is the same. A whole lot else has changed. She is as thin as a rope. Size 1 panties; an A-cup bra, if any. And she could sure use some Glam Glo. Formalize Wrinkle Softener and Juicy Bronze would give color to the whey color of her skin.

<sup>inset -></sup> When I leave the Jaguar I don't wonder or care whether she recognizes me. I just walk over to her and say "Need a lift?"

She throws me a quick, uninterested glance and turns her gaze to the road. "No. Thanks. I don't."



No, she can't answer that. She's Mrs. 0051140. Even after fifteen years  
I could never mistake her simply because of her height. Nothing  
has struck the glass. I can't remember who was in the hall, the judge  
the lawyers and almost as tall as the judge. Only her co-singer husband  
matched her height. Nobody doubted she was the fifty-year-old parents  
called her. "Look at her eyes," they whispered. "Everywhere in the  
courtroom, judge's room, benches, halls they whispered. "Cold like the  
tub." "They are like old eyes," says to "old eyes." "On a bed's side  
snake she is." "At twenty? How could a twenty-year old do those things to  
children?" "Are you kidding? Just look at those eyes. Old as dirt."

on the bed she was like a rabbit's than a snake's but the height  
is the same. A whole lot has changed. She is as thin as a rope. Size 1

The last one and  
She is alone. Even the Cheerio man is  
gone.

When I leave the Jaguar I don't wonder or care whether she  
recognizes me. I just walk over to her and say "Need a lift?"  
She throws me a quick, uninterested glance and turns her face to the  
road. "No, thank you."

Her mouth is tremble-y. It used to be hard, a straight razor sharpened to slice a kid. A collagen shot and Tango-Matte, not glitter, would have softened her lips and maybe influence<sup>ed</sup> the jury in her favor except there was no YOU Girl back then.

"Somebody picking you up?"

"Taxi," she says. Funny. She is answering a stranger dutifully like she's used to it. No "What's it to you?" or even "Who the hell are you?" but going on to explain further. "Called a cab. I mean the Desk did."

When I come closer and reach out to touch her arm the cab rolls up and, fast as a bullet she grabs the door handle, tosses in her little carrier bag and slams the door shut. I bang on the window shouting, "Wait! Wait!" Too late. The driver negotiates the U turn like a NASCAR pro.

Following them isn't hard. I even pass the taxi to disguise the fact that I am tailing her. That turns out to be a mistake. In the rear view mirror I see the taxi slow then turn toward Norristown instead of the exit ramp beyond. Gravel pings my wheels as I brake, reverse and catch up. The road to Norristown is lined with neat, colorful houses built in the fifties and added on repeatedly—a closed side porch, garage expanded for two cars,



back yard patio. Like a kindergarten drawing of <sup>sky</sup>light blue, white, yellow  
 houses with pine green or beet-red doors sitting quietly in wide lawns. All  
 that is missing is a pancake sun with ray sticks all around it. When the road  
 leaves the houses behind a mall, as pale and sad as 'lite' beer, announces  
 the beginning of the <sup>business part of</sup>town. Next to it another, bigger sign for Eva Dean's  
 Motel and Restaurant. There the taxi turns and stops by the entrance. I  
 follow and park a ways back near the restaurant. I am sure she is meeting  
 someone, but after a few minutes at the check-in desk, she goes straight to  
 the restaurant and takes a seat by the window. I can see her clearly and  
 watch her study the menu like a remedial or English-as-second language  
 student—lip reading, running her finger over the items. What a change.  
 This is the teacher who had first graders cut apples into rings to shape the  
 letter O, doled out pretzels as B's, slit watermelon chunks into Y's. All to  
 spell BOY—who she liked best according to the women whispering in front  
 of the sinks in the ladies' room. Fruit as bait was a big part of trial  
 testimony.

Look at her eat. The waitress keeps placing plate after plate in front  
 of her. Makes sense, sort of, this first out of prison meal. She's gobbling  
 like a refugee, somebody floating at sea without food or water for weeks

and just about to wonder what harm it would do to his dying boat mate to taste his flesh before it shrank. She never takes her eyes from the food, stabbing, slicing, scooping, helter-skelter among the dishes. She drinks no water, butters no bread as though nothing is allowed to delay her speed eating. The whole thing is over in ten or eleven minutes. Then she pays, leaves and hurries down the walkway. Now what? Key in hand, tote bag on her shoulder, she stops and turns into a break between two stucco walls. I get out of the car and walk-run behind her until I hear the retching sounds of vomit. So I hide behind a SUV until she comes out.

*Room* 3 A. I'm ready. I make sure my knock is authoritative, strong but not threatening.

"Yes?" Her voice is shaky, the humble sound of someone trained to automatic obedience.

"Mrs. Huxley. Open the door please"

There is silence then, "I uh. I'm sorta sick."

"I know," I say. A trace of judgment in my voice, hoping she thinks it's about the <sup>puke</sup> sick she left on the pavement. "Open the door."



She opens it and stands there barefoot with a towel in her hand. She wipes her mouth. "Yes?"

"We need to talk."

*shape my mouth into  
I smile what I believe is a sweet but  
not condescending smile.*

"Talk?" She blinks rapidly but doesn't ask the real question—"Who are you?"

I push past her leading with the Louis Vuitton bag. "You're Sofia Huxley, right?"

She nods. A tiny flash of fear is in her eyes. I want to calm her so I hold up the shopping bag and say, "Let's sit down. I have something for you." She doesn't look at the bag; she stares at my shoes with their high lethal heels and dangerously pointed toes.

"What do you want me to do?" she asks. Such a soft accommodating voice. Knowing after fifteen years behind bars that nothing is free. Nobody gives away anything at no cost to the receiver. Whatever it is: cigarettes, magazines, tampons, stamps, Mars Bars or a jar of peanut butter, it comes with strings tough as fishing line.

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

Now her eyes stray from my shoes to my face, opaque eyes without inquiry. So I answer the question a normal person would have posed. "I saw you leave Decagon. No one was there to meet you. I offered you a lift."

"That was you?" She frowns.

"Me. Yes."

"I know you?"

"My name is Bride."

She squints. "That supposed to mean something to me?"

*bigger this time. Again even.*  
 "No," I say and smile. "Look what I brought you." I can't resist and  
 place the bag on the bed. I reach inside and on top of the gift package of  
 YOU, Girl I lay two envelopes—the slim one with an airline gift certificate  
 then the fat one with twenty-five thousand dollars. A thousand for each  
 year had she served her full sentence.

Sofia stares at the display as though the items might be infected.

"What's all that for?"



I wonder if prison has done something to her brain. "It's Okay," I say. "Just a few things to help you."

"Help me what?"

"Get a good start. You know, on your life."

"My life?" Something is wrong. She sounds as if she needs an introduction to the word.

"Yeah." I am still smiling. "Your new life."

"Why? Who sent you?"

"I guess you don't remember me. Why would you? Lula Ann. Lula Ann Bridewell. At the trial? I was one of the children who...."

I search through the blood with my tongue. My teeth are all there, but I can't seem to get up. I can feel my eyelid shutting down and my right arm is dead. The door opens and all the gifts are thrown at me, one by one including the Vuitton bag. The door slams shut then opens again. My black spike-heeled shoe lands on my back before rolling off next to my left arm. I reach for it and am relieved to learn that, unlike the right one, this one can move. I try to scream 'help', but my mouth belongs to somebody else. I

crawl a few feet and try to stand. My legs work, so I gather up the gifts, push them into the bag and one shoe on, one left behind, <sup>and</sup> limp to my car. I don't feel anything. I don't think anything. Not until I see my face in the side view mirror. My mouth looks as though it's stuffed with raw liver; the whole side of my face is scraped of skin; my right eye is a mushroom. All I want to do is get away from here—no 911, it takes too long, no motel churches and Wal Mart are open. She was hysterical when I found her and manager staring at me. Police. There has to be some in this town. Igniting, shifting, steering with a left hand, while the other one lies helplessly next to my thigh takes concentration. All of it. So it's not until I get <sup>further into</sup> ~~to~~ Norristown and find the station that it hits me—the police will write a report, interview the accused and take a picture of my wrecked face as evidence. And what if the local newspaper gets the story along with my photograph. Embarrassment would be nothing next to the mockery directed at YOU, Girl.

Hammers of pain make it hard to get out my cell phone and dial the one person I trust. Completely.



NORMA

She's lying. We are sitting in this dump of a clinic after I've driven over two hours to find this backwoods town then find her parked in front of a closed down police station. Of course it's closed; it's Sunday when only the churches and Wal Mart are open. She was hysterical when I found her and crying out of one eye, the other one too swollen to shed water. Poor baby. Not the eyes, those eyes that spooked everybody with their beauty—large, slightly hooded and strangely colored considering the color of her skin.

Well, I find this little emergency clinic facing the mall's parking lot. We get a nurse's startled attention and wait for the on call doctor who lives, I don't know, in some other town. Bride doesn't speak while I drive her here, but in the waiting room she starts the lie.

"I'm ruined," she whispers.

I say, "No you're not. Give it time. Remember what Grace looked like after her face tuck?"

"A surgeon did her face," she answers. "A maniac did mine.

I press her. "Well, tell me. What happened, Bride? Who was he?"

"Who was who?" She touches her nose, tenderly.

"The guy who beat you half to death."

"Did I say it was a guy? I don't remember saying it was a guy."

"Are you telling me a woman did this?"

"No," she says. "No. It was a guy."

"Was he trying to rape you?"

"I suppose. Somebody scared him off, I guess. He banged me around and took off."

See what I mean? Not even a good lie. I push a bit. "He didn't take your purse, wallet anything?"

Boy Scout  
She mumbles, "Christian, I guess." Her lips are puffy and her tongue can't manage consonants but she tries to smile at her own joke.

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