

COOLER THAN JESUS

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Cooler than Jesus.

He stood in front of the full length mirror, gazing at the tattoo across his chest with pride and the smallest hint of sorrow. This was the body he'd always dreamed of, in those early years before he'd taken charge of himself and carved a form more in keeping with the ambitions it could barely contain.

His reflection wavered as the apartment shuddered in the wake of a passing train, the noise drowned out by the doleful music he'd put on in preparation for the evening's festivities.

"I live for drugs," a girl recited in the background. "It's great."

He watched the mirror intently as he ran a tender hand across his freshly shaven face, then paused to imagine the girl behind the voice before sliding a probing finger into his mouth. He felt his loins awaken at the thought of her lithe young body, naked up against him. His hands wandered teasingly across his tattooed flesh, a combination of light strokes and pinches, and came to rest between his legs. Massaging the swelling, he felt the bitter taste of anticipation fill his mouth. Tonight would be a good night, he could feel it.

Leather trousers always aroused him. The way they looked; the way they felt on naked skin. Just the sight of them on a young girl's eagerly shifting buttocks would fill him with an urgent need. He pulled them on, their smoothness teasing his inner thighs as he thought of things to come. It was all he could do to stop himself spilling. Oh yes, tonight would be a good night. He smiled again and reached for his boots.

The loose white shirt seemed a fitting accompaniment, highlighting the paleness of his skin while hinting of the well-developed muscles beneath. He framed it with a long black leather coat. The classic vampire effect was a dramatic irony that was lost on him, accustomed as he was to the façade.

He added the finishing touches and took a last few items from the drawer by the bed. Then he headed for the door, snapping the latches and bolts aside before heaving it open in a self-directed display of his own significant strength. And, with a final loving rub of his leather-encased groin, he stood and waited for the lift.

Half an hour later he was striding down 5th, surrounded by the bright lights and thumping techno of another promising Friday night. Men, women and hybrids beckoned at him from the doorways of a thousand clubs and bars, their offers exciting him still more as he made a mental catalogue of future possibilities. Tonight, though, he had a specific place, a specific individual, in mind.

The Shame Club.

The seventh house, a place he had visited several times before. As he climbed the steps to its garish entrance, a host of arousing memories accosted him. The Asian transsexual with the silicon breasts that looked so perfect and yet felt entirely synthetic – too solid to be anything more than a visual kick. Oh, but the thrill of seeing her naked for the first time, rock hard cock rearing up below, so alien on such a feminine figure. The way they had fucked, with him sitting astride her, receiving like a woman while she used her expert hands

to make him come as she thrust and twitched inside him. *That* was an initiation. The vulnerability he had felt at that moment, the unredressable shift in the balance of power, had left him thirsting for weeks.

But he had never sought her again. The experience had reaffirmed for him his own need to be in control. He was strong, stronger than any woman, and he liked it that way. Had he thought about it, he might have better understood why he'd never been tempted by undiluted homosexuality. He was afraid to lose the advantage.

That was why he had chosen this specific girl tonight. He'd seen her dancing at the club a hundred times; painfully erotic, entrancingly controlled, yet desperately vulnerable. So young, so slight of frame, so eager to make a good impression, she was always dressed to accentuate her fragility. Whatever costume she gradually removed would have highlighted her innocence down to the very last item.

He had thought of her often, and tonight he would have her.

Walking through the mass of costumed revellers choking up the dance floor, he strode purposefully to the bar, eyes scanning the environs and stage for some sign of tonight's entertainment.

It didn't take long to find her. She was surrounded by a sea of adoring fans, riding another girl atop a four foot high viciously-spiked podium. She wore a straining grey and white school uniform. Her mount was naked but for blue satin camiknickers and the gagging reins of her own long black stockings.

He leant against the bar and looked on, hands deep in the pockets of his long leather coat, kneading the insides of his thighs as he pictured himself standing before her while she rode, her hair in his fists as he ground her face between his legs.

And all too soon it was over. The trapeze was lowered from the ceiling and the two girls were lifted into the air. Clutching each other tightly and lost in a passionate kiss, they glided over their appreciative audience and into the darkness beyond.

He waited for almost an hour, increasingly impatient yet refusing to drink more than three glasses of beer lest he lose the edge he'd so carefully cultivated over the course of the evening. Then at last she returned, marching toward the bar with a drug-peaked look on her face. She was wired; he could tell in that first glance. Exhausted, but propped up on speed or coke to help her through the night – to make sure she got the job done.

Well, he thought, she'll have plenty to maintain her attention tonight.

"Great show," he said matter-of-factly when she came and stood beside him, looking around for someone to buy her a drink.

"Thanks," she replied, measuring him up but showing no hint of gratitude.

He had her.

"Drink?" he asked, his crotch pulsing its familiar throb.

"Bottle of Bud and a scotch chaser – a double."

He smiled at her bravado. But he'd come here with more money than he thought he could spend. A few overpriced drinks was nothing compared to what he expected in return. He ordered the beer and scotch, along with a shot of tequila for himself, and grabbed an empty stool. She assumed it was for her, and flashed him a smug rather than grateful smile.

He slid the stool between his legs and perched on it himself. His arrogance riled her, but held her interest.

"I particularly enjoyed the grand finale," he told her after a long pause. "Very genuine. Tell me: have the two of you been an item for long?"

"We were born an item," she smiled sweetly.

"And I suppose you're both eternally faithful?"

"She goes her way; I go mine. At the end of the night we meet and swap notes."

She could smell the money. Why was he wasting his time?

"And you share the sordid details and lick each other's wounds?" he continued for her.

"That depends on what kind of night it's been," she grinned, laying a hand on his closest knee.

"And why don't you give me an example of such a night." It wasn't a question.

"Well, last night I took a ride in some old guy's car. I thought it'd be the same old thing – quick blowjob if he could get it up; maybe a short fuck in the back if he didn't splash too soon. But no, the guy just takes me for a drive, we head up into the hills and he kills the engine. Then we sit there for the next three or four hours while he holds my hand and tells me how much he misses his wife. He goes through the whole story of how they met, how they fell in love, got married, couldn't have kids and eventually split up so badly that he hasn't seen her since."

"So you gave him a little head to make him feel better..."

"No." She looked angry. His blood flowed still faster. "An hour or so before dawn he takes me for an early breakfast. He doesn't want to eat but, while I tuck in, he pulls a pair of beautiful earrings out of his jacket and puts them on the table in front of me. 'These were hers,' he says to me. 'And I'd like you to have them.' Just like that. The guy doesn't know me from shit, but he gives me the prettiest jewellery I ever laid eyes on."

"So you took it?"

"He didn't give me a chance to refuse. Just lays three fifties on the table, kisses me on the forehead with a big sigh, and walks out."

"I take it you didn't need much licking after that."

"On the contrary," she grinned. "The guy got me so worked up I ended up staying in bed 'til my pussy was red raw, aching and ready to weep."

"Which would explain why you look so tired now."

"I do? Well, then I guess I should get an early night."

"And a night off the action, I'm sure," he snorted, knocking back the tequila. "And here was me, hoping for a piece of that cute little bitch on the podium. Guess I'll have to look elsewhere."

"Depends what you have in mind." Her tone was serious as she ran a hand up his trousers, slipping it under his shirt and giving his belt a tug. "Give it a while and I'll see what I can rustle up. Now sort me out with somewhere to sit by the time I get back or I'll just have to go someplace else."

Slapping his crotch, she walked off through the club, stopping briefly to speak to another member of her adoring public.

He smarted at the loss of control, angry that she had left him no opportunity to respond; only an ultimatum. Bow down or be left at the wayside. Her cockiness made her all the more valuable, and in spite of himself he was forced to comply. By the time she returned,

there was a stool waiting for her; not his own – that would have been far too yielding – but one he had found elsewhere. She sat down without the slightest recognition of her victory.

“Another drink?” he offered.

“Why certainly,” she feigned politeness. “I’ll have the same again.”

He ordered the drinks, then turned and stared her straight in the eyes. “So,” he said, “What’s the state of play?”

“You still haven’t told me what you have in mind,” she chastised him. He was beginning to get irritated. Such a sure thing twenty minutes ago, and now she was toying with him, expecting him to take the bait and fall under her spell. Well, let her think she had him hooked; let her reel him in, and then they would see who was doing the netting.

“Well, it would seem I have a lot to compete with after that old guy last night,” he pandered, exaggerating the length of his words for extra effect.

“Mmmmm...,” she purred, closing her eyes and placing a palm between her legs. His cock struggled in its slippery leather cage.

“I just figured I’d get you alone and try and work out how best to keep your attention,” he tried her.

“Oh, so you want me alone, do you?” She licked her lips. “You want me all to yourself without poor Cookie even getting a look-in?”

“Just you ... and me,” he smiled. “And a couple of hours of intimate privacy. No shiny jewellery, but the price’ll be more than right I’m sure.”

“Oooh. An offer I *can’t* refuse,” she beamed back at him.

“I would hope not,” he told her enigmatically, leaning back on the stool and flashing her a glimpse of the wad of notes in the inside pocket of his coat.

“Just you wait there, honey pie,” she grinned, the sound of her mental cash register almost audible. “I have a job to do. Just one more act and I’m all yours. Twenty minutes and I’ll be right back.”

Sure enough, after an act throughout which he failed to catch her eye once, she was back, dressed once more in the grey and white school uniform.

“Ready to roll?” she asked, grabbing him by the hand.

She led him through the maze of corridors at the back of the club, a labyrinth he had visited several times before but which never looked the same. The walls were painted in lurid colours and adorned with numerous mirrors, some warped, some broken, some bounded with glitter, others with tacky pink or orange fluff. Countless different styles of music issued from behind the many closed doors. Laughter and long, ecstatic moans echoed through the halls. This was a hell he would return to, time and time again.

At last they were in her room, or at least one she shared with her mount from the podium. Framed photographs of the two of them stood on the shelves and dressing tables. A Polaroid camera lay on the table by the huge four poster bed. He stared at it, his stomach hot with childhood memories.

“So,” she said, sliding a bolt across the door. “You’ve got your ‘cute little bitch from the podium’. Now which piece do you want and what would you like to do to it?”

He stepped forward and gathered her hair in his hands. He scraped it back from her face and tied it up with the hair band he had brought from home for that very purpose. Then he

pushed her up against the wall and thrust a hand between her legs. Her cotton panties were already gloriously wet.

He lifted her onto his hips and held her there with one hand as he undid the zip of his leathers and freed his aching cock. Pulling the sodden underwear aside, he slid inside.

"Hey!" she shouted, her well-trained muscles tightening. "I've got some rubbers in the drawer..."

"Doesn't matter," he told her. "I'll pay."

She relaxed and he continued, raking her buttocks with his long nails and easing a moistened finger inside. She groaned in what he knew to be faked ecstasy, and he fed her another two fingers, applying pressure to his own heaving cock as it hammered away inside her.

His arms began to ache from the strain and he backed away from the wall, walking her over to the bed. Lifting her from him, he threw her across it before turning her over, flipping up her short skirt and pulling the panties down to her knees. Keeping her legs together, he thrust between her buttocks, reaching around to cover her mouth with his hand. He didn't expect her to enjoy it, and he had no intention of listening to her pretending that she did.

"Take off your clothes," he told her as he withdrew and pulled away. She turned over, a grin on her face, and proceeded to do so.

"And what about your own, tiger boy?" she goaded him as she unbuttoned her blouse to let her breasts fall free. "Or do you always fuck with your coat on?"

He said nothing, only smiled, as she made herself naked before him.

"Come on," she purred, reaching for the buckle of his belt. "Let's get a proper look at that big juicy cock."

His stomach tightened as she undid his trousers and slid them down to bear his aching balls. She knelt in front of him and cupped them in her delicate hands, stroking the sensitive flesh behind them. A curious finger probed his arse as she licked the end of his cock. He gasped as she slid it into her mouth and forced her finger inside him.

He let her continue for a few minutes, relishing the sensation and gripping the back of her head to pull her lips to his balls. And all the while he thought of her laughing as she told her girlfriend about her latest meal ticket. This was no act of lust. No matter how she moaned as she licked and sucked his cock and balls, it was all nothing but money. Within days, maybe hours, he would be forgotten – just another face in a sea of buttfucks and blowjobs.

Or rather, that was how it *could* have been. This time, things would be different. The story of the old man and his earrings would be entirely forgotten after tonight. What was about to happen now would wipe it from the Shame Club's seedy mythology.

He looked down at the top of her head. As she continued to play with him, eyes closed in mock rapture, he reached inside his coat for his semi-automatic. His cock twitched as his fingers found the handle and wrapped around it. Slowly, carefully, so as not to disturb the industrious whore beneath, he slid the weapon from its holster, pushed the safety across with his thumb and placed the muzzle against her forehead. As he cocked the trigger, her eyes sprang open in terror.

"I am the Electric Messiah," he said. "The AC/DC God."

Lying on the bed in his uptown apartment, waiting for Erin to come home from work, Rob tries to write but simply can't muster the energy. It's been a long time since he put pen to paper and it doesn't come naturally anymore. Sure, he went through a period of wanting to document everything a few years back, but things are different now. Life has a lot less to say and he is left to abstractions. The old short stories and poems he, Erin and Rick used to put together on Rick's old PC, sometimes together sometimes alone, are a thing of the past. Those days died when Erin and Rick split up.

They were a great little threesome, sharing a great ground floor apartment in a classic New Orleans house a long way out of town. A couple of blocks off St Charles, and a short walk from the Garden District with its skulking buildings and up-and-down pavements – a place that was been a source of inspiration for the three of them, just as it had been for so many others.

Their lives were pretty much one. Erin worked with the local kids as she still does today. Rick tended the bar at Lucky's, their local watering hole and Laundromat about halfway into town – a place Rob would still visit, just to reminisce, were he not too ill to do so.

Back then, he was a chef at a nearby Caribbean restaurant, moaning about the hours, the shitty pay and perpetually irritating manager, while secretly loving his work. He had a talent for cooking; always had. Thinking about it now, now that he has the time for such reflection, he realises that his culinary abilities were probably honed through fending for himself as a kid. It was hell, and the experience had ultimately ruined his life, but he can't deny that it left him incredibly well-prepared.

As a tear runs down his face, he wonders where he would be today, had things not gone so terribly wrong. He thinks of the inheritance he will never see and the life it would have allowed him to live.

Retirement at forty. All I've got to do is make it to forty, he'd always told himself.

Well, by now, it's pretty clear he won't. His bedding smells like a morgue and the end is something he can almost reach out and touch. No matter how devoted Erin's ministrations, he will soon be doing his final shuffle. He laughs out loud at the vision: a DNA double-helix roller-coaster track corkscrewing through the ether, nothingness in all directions. A stupid-looking tattooed thirty-something ambles almost intentionally over the edge. Cartoon style, he hangs suspended in mid-air while the vision fades, leaving the all-too-familiar ceiling in its wake.

His thoughts return to Erin. It's been so long since they met that he can't even remember when it was. He struggles to fix a year but all he can find is an event. They're in a club, slamming to a band he can't recall. She falls and he drags her up from the dancefloor, so small, so light. She shouts a 'thanks' in his ear and they get talking. A few years later, they're here in this apartment and she's doing palliative care.

He's no longer friends with the people he was with that night and neither, as far as he knows, is she. Their names escape him. He wishes he had a journal or some photos to consult. Erin used to keep a diary. He could look there, but he wouldn't even know where to find it. Her room is a mystery to him. It always has been, even when they used to climb into each other's beds all those years ago. No, they really aren't important enough, those names. Not enough to warrant dragging himself from his sickbed to go rummaging through the mountain of books and paperwork that covers Erin's desk, drawers and floor.

Picturing her room, he finds himself with a vision of her standing amidst the chaos, a small bright-eyed figure in a vest top, bobbed hair dragged back in the half-ponytail she always wore when ready for action. He remembers the day they got their matching Calvin and Hobbes tattoos, identical but for slight variations in the colouring. A momentous day, their marks the first of many in a veritable arms race of body art.

Grinning to himself at the memory of their room mate's reaction, he finds himself wondering what Rick's up to these days. The three of them are no longer in touch. It was a pretty messy ending to something they'd all been determined not to begin, and Rick had soon left town. They still have some mutual contacts, but Rob hasn't heard Erin talk of him for a long time. Last thing he heard, he'd gone out to Korea to teach English or some such shit.

And how had they gotten together in the first place? Rob can't remember. He's pretty sure it was while he was away for a week or so, staying with his long-term girlfriend, Lila. The one who'd lived out of town; the one he hasn't heard from in years, not since he had to make that call to warn her that she, too, might be in danger. He'd never cried so much in his life as he did that day; never felt such shame, and it was a burden he'd felt unable to bear. It drove him mad for a time. The strands of Fate had wrapped themselves tightly around his throat, forcing the air from his windpipe as they slithered into his ears, nose and mouth and fed on his sanity.

Another vision: a stronger healthier him lying on a makeshift raft of old framed photographs, blood-filled syringes and hypodermic needles, a raging torrent sweeping him onward as he tries desperately to paddle his way upstream. All the while, his hard-earned athletic physique withers away as the insatiable curse takes its toll.

No appeals, no admissions of mistake...This is 'justice' – pure, simple, and freed from the trappings of sentience.

The words form an echo as the picture dissipates, and he thinks once more of the elusive inheritance. He doesn't even know how much it would have been, only that it would have lasted him indefinitely. His parents made a lot of money after he fled to New York, only to escape one hell for another. The inheritance was a form of compensation, their way of buying themselves out of damnation. He never thanked them for the gesture, and they never asked him to. It was simply enough for them that he accept it. If he let them buy him off, then they'd consider themselves forgiven.

It barely smarts now when he thinks of those awful nights, lying in bed, praying his mother wouldn't bring her friends upstairs. The flash of the Polaroid, the sound of his mother's vicious laugh, the taste of the salt of his own tears as he begged her to stop and called out for help to a father too absorbed by the TV downstairs.

Now no more than an unpleasant memory, his youthful terror had driven him to seek a better life elsewhere, a life in which he sold drugs to pay his way through school. Eventually, inevitably, he became addicted himself.

And that was how he presumes he became HIV⁺. He'd thought as much when the first confirmatory test result came back. But then, after the disastrous call to Lila, he decided he got it through sex. At the time, his only hope of solace was to return to the drugs. To do so, he had to divert the blame. Lila never let him know the result of her own test and he had simply imagined the worst.

Getting back on the brown was far easier than he could have imagined. Oh, sure, he's given it up again now – just the odd bit of weed to numb the pain. But, back then, it took only a couple of hours to find an obliging dealer who would fix him up with a Welcome Back double-jab of smack.

Back on the heroin, he was a very happy man. But the ecstasy was painfully short-lived. As Erin drove him back from the Quarter, he burst into tears at the thought of Rick discovering what he had done. Rob's room mates had tried so hard to help him overcome his addiction. They'd even weaned him off pot. And that was how he'd repaid them.

The following day, he'd left New Orleans. Erin and Rick's relationship was blossoming, and he felt increasingly isolated by his condition. Theirs was a closeness he could never again experience.

But that was then and this, of course, is now. No use blaming his parents or the price of New York schooling for his current condition. If he'd chosen to tread a different path, he might still have been around to collect that hard-earned inheritance. If he hadn't run away from the apartment on Rue Bourbon that he'd shared with Erin and Rick, and later returned so dramatically in the wake of his adventures elsewhere, the three of them might still have been in touch. They might even have still been living together in that same apartment, working the same jobs.

As it was, Rick soon grew jealous of Erin's attentions. Sure, he was worried about Rob's health, physical and otherwise – after all, they were still great friends. But Rick was happy with what he had – a perfectly stable, perfectly normal life with Erin. Just the two of them in their newly refurbished apartment, not far from the old Rue Bourbon residence. He didn't want Rob to ruin it.

The fact that Rick's and Erin's working hours were so out of sync didn't help matters at all. While he was at work, Rob and Erin would be enjoying quality time together. But when Rick was home, Rob would in all likelihood be sleeping off the consequences of that same quality time.

Eventually, Rick moved out. Within a couple of months, they'd given up all hope of hearing from him. They rented a new apartment over-looking the tramline, hoping to shake the stubborn memories of what they'd both lost. They grew closer again, rebuilt their old friendship and revitalised the old tattoo arms race.

But it wasn't long before Rob's illness began to show itself. From there he went into rapid decline, an accelerated freefall from grace over which he had far less control than he'd expected. Perhaps it was the excesses of the past few months, there was no way he could tell.

Initially he had fought with a vigour and determination he'd forgotten he had. He'd flown to Mexico for special treatments and taken a plethora of expensive new drugs paid for by loans taken out by his closest, longest serving and perhaps only remaining friend. But that all seems such a long time ago.

As he lies there, recalling the extent of her loyalty, the door to the apartment slams shut. He hears her walk into the kitchen. She drops her car keys on the side and lays down a couple of heavy paper bags.

Dinner. He wishes he had the energy to cook for her. Not that Erin isn't a perfectly able cook in her own right. It's just that he's desperate to show her just how much he

appreciates her efforts. He'd wanted to put it into words, on the notepad lying next to him on the bed, but somehow he just hasn't found the time.

His eyes fill with tears as he realises he's failed her again. He slumps back into the pillows, stares at the open window and the New Orleans haze outside. Then, with the tip of his finger, he traces the letters tattooed across his chest.

I am the Electric Messiah, he remembered shamefully. *The AC/DC God*.

It was my first visit to the city, first time in the country, no less. I'd saved up a small fortune and got myself on a plane for what promised to be an eye-opening few weeks before I headed off to the world of University not quite so far from home.

Three weeks visiting an old school mate, staying in his flat just a short train ride from the centre of town. I'd been looking forward to this for ages. No matter that I'd have to find some way to get round the country's prohibitive drinking laws. Things like that always have a way of working out for the better.

And, of course, it was never a problem. My resourceful friend had already arranged a whole batch of fake IDs for me, a selection rivalling his own. The keys to the city were ours, and I felt I was ready for anything.

Jeff lived with his girlfriend, Kath. For the first few nights, the three of us would eat out, go somewhere for a quiet drink, then head home to watch a video, chat some more and finally drift off to sleep. It was such a small flat that we all shared the same room. No doubt this caused them some inconvenience, not to mention frustration, but not once did they make me feel like I was encroaching in any way. They were far too gracious for that. Besides, there was little that could be done about the situation: on my budget there was no way I could afford to stay anywhere else but with friends. And anyway, budget or no budget, Jeff would have been offended if I'd stayed anywhere else.

For the best part of a week, the pattern remained the same. I spent my days wandering the streets in search of things to see and do, checking out the local sights while my hosts were at work. And in the evenings, we'd eat together, have a few drinks and head home. But on the first Friday night, Jeff and I headed out alone. Just the two of us – a kind of boys' night out, I suppose, nothing we'd ever have done back home.

We started in an Irish pub just around the corner from the flat. The resident Irish backpacker behind the bar introduced us to a variety of drinks we'd never tasted before, which embarrassingly included Black 'n' Tan. Several samples later, suitably oiled and with no need for fake IDs, we hopped on a train into town.

But you didn't care about all that. You could tell by my voice where I came from, and that seemed to be more than you needed to know. I'm pretty sure you didn't even take in my name, though yours is indelibly stamped on my mind – impressionable lad that I was. Not that it bothered me at the time – nor does it now, when the memory has become something I smirk at, amused by my own gullibility, my desperate desire for your attentions. You made me feel cool, for a time, and I thank you.

Years on, you're highly unlikely to remember either me or how we met. But to me it was quite a major chapter in my life – a lesson in self-depreciation. Jeff and I had settled ourselves at the bar in a well-known hangout for the under-aged. It was a colourful place with rock music pounding from a classic Wurlitzer perfectly equipped for its users. We'd

spent most of the evening reminiscing, going over our school days with a well-worn fine-toothed comb. The parties we used to organise; the hellish moments when things went wrong and antique furniture or crockery took a fall; the well-publicised indiscretions of our peers and selves. They were great times, we heartily agreed. My own time at sixth form college had been dull in comparison, a fact that continues to astound me given that I had moved from single-sex to mixed education. I could only pray things would liven up at Uni.

As we sat in silence for a while, mulling these things through our beer-clouded minds, I caught sight of you at the back of the bar. Leaning over the pool table, Marlboro Light hanging casually from your lips as you marked out the angle for your next shot, you were a vision of erotic obsession. In black jeans and red halter top, blonde hair in a bob that you repeatedly pushed from your face, you seemed something I could only dream of.

I turned to my friend, and found him as struck by your beauty as I. We grinned at each other and ordered another pitcher of beer.

It was after we'd turned our attentions to the policemen playing chess outside, the board perched precariously on the top of a litter bin between them, that you astounded us still further. Maybe my jaw dropped and my tongue lolled drooling from my mouth, or maybe it was just in my eyes, but Jeff followed the direction of my gaze without a second's hesitation. And there you were, the two of you, arms wrapped tightly around each other, your eyes closed in ecstasy as she ground you against the bar. *Way* out of my league.

It's not that I was some sort of inexperienced shy boy, straight out of school and with no idea how to deal with the opposite sex. I'd had my share, and perhaps a little more. But when you appeared at the jukebox, standing over me as I bent down to select a couple of songs, your arms over me either side of my head, I had an overwhelming sense of being way out of my depth. I'd had my share of teenage girls, but here I was in the clutches of a woman.

Naturally, it gave me a rush. There I was – barely nineteen and, yes, pretty much straight out of school – and here was a woman as gorgeous as you, quite obviously chatting me up. In the split second I had before you spoke, I prayed that Jeff was watching.

"Mind if I choose a track?" are the words you won't recall, words you poured down my back like molten honey. I can still taste the mixed scent of sweat and cheap perfume that settled on my skin like a crippling dew.

My own words are lost to me now. Maybe I said nothing, just moved aside with a smile and a nod, unable to respond as my self-confidence continued to ebb.

You pushed the buttons with a nonchalance that can only come from a lifetime spent in a bar. "Would you buy me a beer?" you asked, knowing I could only comply.

I led the way to the bar, raising an eyebrow at Jeff as though I found the whole thing amusing. Oh, I do now, but at the time nothing could have been further from the truth. At the time I was filled with fearful anticipation.

"It's all about power, baby; you know what I'm saying?" you sang along with the track you'd chosen on the jukebox. I should have taken it as a warning. To be honest, I probably did. Whatever, from where I am now, I'm glad I didn't heed it.

You didn't speak to Jeff. I introduced you, if only to get the name you'd failed to volunteer already. You smiled a smile that cost me a breath, then devoted all your attentions to me.

We talked. I bought you beer while I learned all about you, hoping against hope that you would consent to see me again. Our lives were entirely different, and my own felt increasingly dull and insignificant next to your mounting revelations. Perhaps that's why I told you almost nothing; or perhaps it was because you never asked. Back then I didn't care. I was embarrassed by my seemingly sheltered upbringing, the run-of-the-mill existence that had meant so much to me only a week before. Now that I think back, happy with what I have here – as far as it is from the excitement you purveyed – I'm still content to have merely paid and listened. After all, I already knew all there was to know about me, and you were an ever-deepening mystery.

So while Jeff got bored and eventually went in search of a game of pool, I plied you with beers you were all too happy to accept, listened to your stories and wondered if you'd decide to take me home.

But, of course, you didn't. If you were to see me in the street and I tried to help you remember who I am, you'd probably wonder yourself whether or not you took me to bed. You might well assume that you did, although perhaps I'm being too judgmental.

Instead, I went home with Jeff, who'd managed once more to shark the regulars. Pocketing enough cash to pay for a week of similar evenings, he led me out of the door and into a cab twenty minutes or so after you'd left. Was the supposed arrival of your violent ex-boyfriend a regular blag? I'll never know.

The following night, on the pretence of allowing my hosts time to themselves, I went out on a mission alone. Walking down Fifth Avenue, dressed in clothes it'd taken forever to choose, I was caught in a moral dilemma.

There were a number of interlaced horns to this agony, and my conscience had been quick to voice its opinion well before I'd emerged from the shower. I shouldn't even have been thinking of coming. I should have been taking advantage of early release dates, sitting in front of some summer blockbuster chomping on popcorn and annoying my neighbours as I slurped up the last of my Sprite.

But my conscience was soon slapped aside. Yes, I had a girlfriend back home, an attractive young Swiss girl who was spending her summer in Bern as she'd done with every other holiday since we'd met, but it was hardly a blooming relationship. Indeed it had seemed doomed for a while, chugging along on momentum that had far more to do with comfort than joy. We didn't dislike each other, we rarely even argued. And perhaps that was the problem; there were no sparks at all. We'd been going out for over a year and nothing seemed to be progressing. I, for one, felt no greater fondness for her than I had in the early days – even the lust was gone. And I'm sure she felt the same.

But you couldn't care less about that. The fact that I was already – at least technically – attached had no effect on the events to which you were a catalyst. In retrospect, I doubt any relationship would have slowed me, snared as I was by your beauty. I was a million miles from home, plucked from my world at a time of great change, and nothing I'd left behind was of any consequence. I'd been given a chance to taste something new. Your mystery and aloofness, the otherworldliness of your existence drew me irresistibly towards you. They blinded me to guilt, reason or consequences.

All the same, I still had to overcome my shyness to cross that threshold. The invitation was clear and I knew, or thought I knew, what I was letting myself in for. Nevertheless, years of stigma and good breeding stood between us.

So, hands thrust deep into my pockets, I paced up and down outside the so-called 'seventh house'. Within minutes, it was obvious that I was making an even greater fool of myself by hanging around outside. My eyes scanned the street for smirking faces clocking me and my pitiful procrastination. Yes, it was *that* big a deal for me to come.

But eventually I was inside.

It was a far stranger place than I'd expected. I'll dispense with descriptions: you worked there, and perhaps still do, so you know what it was like. I'd tried to find you at first, weaving my way through the dancers and making a show of enjoying the rampant techno. But I was soon bored with the effort and sick of the pretence.

I ordered a beer from the bar and leaned myself up against a mirrored wall near the dancefloor, determined to leave once I'd finished my drink. I was inside. I'd made the effort, come to see you at work and failed to achieve my ridiculous aim. So ludicrously gullible, I felt it even then, but I clearly wasn't bitter enough to leave before buying the beer. No, I was still desperately hopeful in spite of myself.

I waited and finally allowed myself to watch the show. Like the pacing I'd done outside, my attempts to avert my gaze from the various stages and podiums were a ridiculous spectacle. Taking my cue from the rest of the audience, I forced myself to stare directly at them. Even now, I'm surprised at how easily I took to it.

It was as I neared the end of the beer that you finally appeared, striding with crushing confidence toward the bar. You stood there for a moment and, for a second, it seemed you were looking for me. Some leather-clad vampire-type next to you tried to get your attention, and at first I thought you'd ignore him. Ah, the rush of pride as I convinced myself you were wondering if I'd bothered to come.

But in seconds I knew I was wrong. You smiled at him, he smiled at you, and from then on he had your attention.

I sipped slowly at my beer as I waited to see what would happen. No longer in the running, I was fascinated by what might follow.

I watched as he dragged up a stool and failed to offer it to you. His actions reeked of contempt. When I saw the look on your face, I wanted to step up between you and pull you away in an act of boyish chivalry. But soon you were smiling again. I'd have assumed it was all just a front, if you hadn't put your hand on his knee as the conversation rolled on.

Once again, you did most of the talking. And as I stood there holding my empty bottle, afraid to go to the bar, I wondered whether the stories you were telling were the ones you'd recounted to me. I wondered if any of it was actually true, and whether you even remembered me at all.

My attention began to wander, lost as I was in a rapture of self-pity. Then, suddenly, you were beside me, your face lit with such a gleaming smile that for a moment I thought I was saved.

"I'm so glad you came," you told me. And I believed it. I was so desperately thrilled just to have your attention, even more so than I'd been that previous evening by the jukebox.

“Just thought I’d come and say ‘Hi,’” I bluffed, praying the music would cover the thinness of my voice.

“Can you stick around for a while? I’ve gotta talk to the clients, keep ‘em happy an’ all that,” you explained. I caught a glance from the guy at the bar. He was watching you talk to me with a smug grin on his face.

“Get y’self another beer,” you told me, tapping the empty bottle. “I’ll get back to you later.”

Before long, you were back at the bar, sitting on a stool he’d been kind enough to fetch while you were away. I’d watched him do it, watched him spot a newly vacated stool and stare at it for a while, as if mulling over whether it was worth his while to stride over in his ultracool long leather coat and bring it to the bar. I tried to remain objective in my contempt, convinced as I was of my greater rank in your estimations, but it didn’t last long. He didn’t even acknowledge me when I fetched myself another beer. Up close I had the dubious honour of seeing just how attractive he was: athletically built, chiselled features, the right number of years older than me – hardly the sort of appearance that breeds confidence in the competition.

I returned to my skulking by the mirror, my reflection a whorl of inferiority, acquiescence and incompatibility as I ambled, bottle in hand, toward it. It wasn’t long before I wished I’d passed on the second beer.

Your flirting had reached a visual crescendo that made a mockery of all my belief in your candour. Try as I might, I simply couldn’t reconcile your behaviour with anything I’d previously thought of you. Beautiful and deeply alluring though you were, I was forced to accept the fact that you were someone with whom I could never keep up. I might steal a night with you, and maybe a day, but all you’d leave me with would be a sense of inadequacy I might still not have come to terms with today. I prepared myself to leave.

And sure enough, you chose that moment to return. But, before you could speak, I took charge and said my goodbyes. I had things to do, I told you, and had simply come by to say ‘Hi’. Perhaps you believed me. It really doesn’t matter now, no more than it did then. All I that mattered was that I get out, with whatever tatters of my dignity remained, and find somewhere less testing to be.

“But you can’t go now: I’m just about to go on,” you insisted – and I’ll swear you looked genuinely disappointed. Somewhere deep within you was a strong sense of pride in your work, a noble quality with which I empathised and couldn’t resist. So of course I felt I should stay, and watch you perform like all of the others before I beat a hasty retreat. You slipped me your phone number on a small piece of paper, and with a peck on the cheek you were gone.

I’d given no thought to how it would feel, watching someone you know – even vaguely – acting the whore up on stage. That night was my first ever brush with public arousal and I felt I’d dealt with it well. I felt I’d become immune to the oily bodies and to the eyes and smile that everyone thinks is for him. But it’s a troublesome shift when those eyes and that smile belong to someone who knows who you are.

But that’s just it, isn’t it? You *didn’t* know who I was. You’d never bothered to ask. And you’d as soon have forgotten I’d bothered to come as you’d have forgotten I’d left by the end.

“Shit, baby! What j’do?”

“What the fuck *could* I do? I thought he was gonna blow my fucking head off! I really thought I was gonna die.”

“What’d he do next?”

“That’s just it, Cookie: it got weirder. Sick motherfucker tells me to keep sucking or I’m dead. Then he starts telling me his whole fucking life story, going on about his fucking parents. Moaning how his mum used to beat the shit out of him, how she used to tie him down and have her friends play with him while she watched and took pictures. Sick shit, yeah, but what the fuck’s it got to do with me? And he just goes on for ages about what her friends used to do, fucking him, filling him up with acid ‘n’ shit, cutting him up. Mad shit.”

“And you believed him?”

“Shit, Cooks; I had the guy’s dick in my mouth and a fucking gun to my head. I couldn’t have given a shit if he was telling me he was the Queen of England. All I was worried about was him shoot’n his load and blowing my brains out.”

“Sorry, baby. It’s just that Chickie had him a few weeks back. Said he was strange as pickled shit. Got a real power problem, begged her to fuck him up the ass then cried as she jacked him off. A real loser, she said. Never really there. I wouldn’t be surprised if he made all that shit up just to get his rocks off.”

“And you think what Chicks told you makes it any less likely all that stuff *happened* to him? You think it takes real deep cross-dressing insight to see this guy’s got – what did you call it – ‘a power problem’? Jesus, Cookie; he’s a fucking maniac!”

“I was just...”

“Well I’m fucked if I’m gonna be some damn social worker, trying to find out what’s true and what isn’t. The guy’s a Grade One asshole, piece of shit first class. That’s all I need to know.”

“I’m sorry, baby. I’m just try’na make you feel better. Come on: tell me what happened next.”

“Well, he keeps telling me his lifestory. I’m getting lockjaw from gagging on his dick, which has still got wood in it despite him telling me what a shitty life he’s had... and all of a sudden he just stops talking. He looks down at me – asshole’s been staring into space for fuck knows how long – and smiles. I think ‘That’s it; he’s had his fun, I’ve given him a blowjob that’d earn me a Golden Globe and now he’s just gonna put his gun away and walk on out of here’.”

“And he did?”

“No, Cookie, he didn’t. Fucking asshole still hadn’t had enough. He had to take it one step further...”

“It’s okay, baby. It’s okay to cry. He’s gone now. We’ll have the boys find out where he lives and get him fucked up bad. Don’t you worry now.”

“Fucking shit! Says to me ‘Sorry ‘bout this, bitch, but I can’t come ‘til I see yo’ stoopid-ass brains splattered all over those peachy creamy walls’. I’ll never forget those words as long as I fucking live. Asshole! Then he pulls the fucking trigger and... ah fuck, I couldn’t help myself, Cooks... I shit and pissed all over the floor. Same time, he comes in my mouth and all over my face, grinning like the Cheshire fucking Cat.”

"So the gun wasn't loaded?"

"Course it wasn't loaded, Cooks. Do I look like I've had my fucking brains blown out?"

"Sorry..."

"Yeah, well stop saying sorry all the goddamn time. Anyway, then, when he's doing up his pants, he spots those earrings that old guy gave me. He walks over to the table and picks them up. Then he throws them on the floor and stamps on them. He damn near crushed those beautiful earrings to nothing."

"Ah, shit. Fucking asshole!"

"Yeah, and he just says 'You won't be needin' them no more. Filthy bitch like you don't deserve purdy presents like this. Beats me what he saw in you anyway, spendin' a night wit' an ugly ho' when he's supposed to be missin' his wife. Y'all ask me, he wuz prob'ly juss some limp-dick college professor too old and useless to keep fuckin' his students. Cheap white trash like you prob'ly all he can get his hands on'."

"Ah, fuck, baby."

"Fucking Louisiana redneck. Didn't use a rubber, either. Christ, Cooks, I really thought I was dead. I really thought he was gonna kill me."