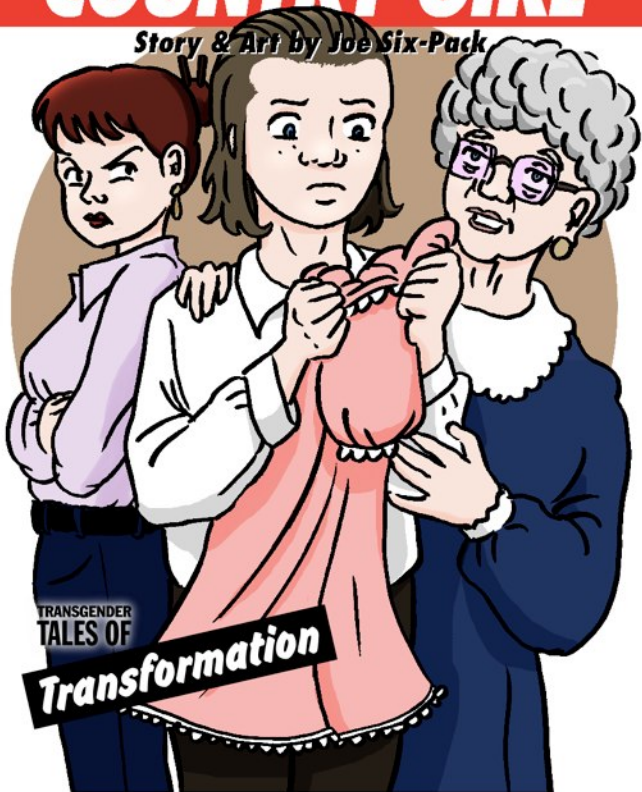


ADULTS ONLY

64 pages 25 illustrations

CITY BOY, COUNTRY GIRL

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack



TRANSGENDER
TALES OF

Transformation

J O E S I X P A C K

***CITY BOY,
COUNTRY
GIRL***

A Tales of Transformation Story



2006 Paperback Edition

Introduction, story text, design & cover © 2006.
All rights reserved.

The body text is printed in New Caledonia.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in whole or in part,
or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form
or by any means without written permission.

Printed in the United States of America.

joe@sixpacksite.com
www.sixpacksite.com

CITY BOY, COUNTRY GIRL

My husband Richard Weinstein and I lived on the upper west side, where we had a nice brownstone we had been sub-leasing for a couple of years now. He was an investment banker, and I had my work at the radio station to keep me busy. Public radio, of course. I was twenty-four, and I had promised myself that it wouldn't be more than a year until I was ready to start a family. At least, by that time I would have accrued enough time for a few weeks of pregnancy leave, and we'd be well-off enough that I could hire a quality nanny. But even then, I had my doubts about that timetable. There was a very real possibility I was going to have to re-prioritize my whole lifestyle agenda.

Richard was also twenty-four. We both graduated college early, mostly because of our heavy prep-school credits, and partially because neither of us were comfortable in that adolescent setting of a university. I had grown up in Brookline, Mass. And he in Waterbury. So, although we lived in totally different worlds, we still had fallen in love.

We met at the Hartsfield, Atlanta airport while our flights were being delayed. We talked for what seemed like hours. In fact, it was hours, if I remember correctly. Those incompetent idiots at the gate counter couldn't get a plane out of there to save their lives.

As it turned out, Richard and I saw the world in much the same terms. We both saw life as the domain of predators. A shark tank, for lack of a better metaphor. If you weren't in on the kill, you were the one being killed. We were very practical people.

So we exchanged numbers, and we'd text each other from time to time. One night, I found myself screwed over into attending a formal function, and I needed a date. Richard seemed like just the sort of man I could use – not threatening, only slightly intimidating, and a fine prospect with a good future and wonderful table manners.

And it sort of grew from there. After we had been exchanging favors by being each other's date at company gatherings and other formalities, it seemed like we were more than compatible. Plus, after we were married, getting the brownstone was much easier. Our combined contacts and referrals almost made it too easy. We had the lease signed just hours after we returned from our working honeymoon. And we got a prime location for parking as well.

No, it wasn't in a very upscale neighborhood, but I have no doubt that we were well on our way.

It was just after the holidays when we got a letter from one of Richard's relatives. I was busy writing the thank-you notes for the Hanukah gifts, and crossing off names from the gift list, when I found it in the mail. It was from Boregard, Oklahoma. My goodness. *Really*. Richard had relatives in Oklahoma. How *colorful*.

I gave the letter to Richard, who read it with a great deal of concern. "I have bad news, Janice. My Aunt isn't doing very well." He said, after reading the message.

"Oh, that's... how sad for her." I said to him.

"She lives by herself. After my parents passed away, I'm the only family she has left." He said. "And I think she's the only family I have left as well."

I didn't immediately see the reason for concern. "And this affects me how?"

Richard's face was dead serious. "I made some promises..." He ran his fingers through his slicked-back hair. "I said I'd come if she ever needed help."

"You can *not* be serious." I said. "Just because she can't get out of bed, she expects you to completely put your life on hold for her? That's just selfish."

"When my mother was on her death bed, I made this promise to her. That if her sister ever needed my help, I'd be there."

"She can't hold you to that!" I told him. "That would never stand up in a court of law!"

Richard sat back in his chair, thinking. "I suppose you're right." He said. He got up out of his chair and removed his blazer. He loosened his red tie and walked over to the mantle, examining a picture of his mother. "But there are some things which go beyond legalities."

"They'll never give you that promotion if you just up and leave the firm." I reminded him.

"I don't think it would be more than a week or two. I've been working there without complaint for almost two years. I should be able to spend a little bit of that credibility."

"So you're actually going to go." I asked.



“I’ll book a flight and leave tomorrow.” Richard replied.

“Well, I think it’s ridiculous. But I won’t stop you.” And besides, having Richard out of the area meant I could play the field. “Bring me back a souvenir. Maybe a butter churn or a banjo.”

“Thanks for understanding, darling.” Richard said, pecking me on the cheek. “Now I’ve got to get on the phone with my assistant to book the trip.”



Richard and I traded messages for the next few days. I was worried that the house would feel empty without him, but I found ways to pass the time. I hadn’t had a chance to go to the clubs for what seemed like years. The things they can do now with drugs are amazing. Even the smallest little hit will send you into ecstasy for hours. It was delightful.

But even after a week, I had yet to get a call from Richard. I had previously assumed he was busy doing whatever it was that he was doing, but now he was just being impolite. Finally, eight days after he had taken his flight out, he bothered to call. Eight days. Honestly.

“She’s not quite an invalid, but she needs a lot of attention.” Richard reported.

“I have your emails and your phone messages for you. Would you like me to forward them to you?” I said.

“I’ve had the town doctor out to look at her every day, and he tells me that he doesn’t really know when she’ll be ready to get back on her feet.”

I was impatient with him. I didn’t call for



updates on Aunt Daisy or whatever her name was. “Do you want your messages or not?” I asked.

“Janice, I can’t deal with that now. I have to look after her.”

“How much time could that possibly take? Surely you can just use a cell and your laptop...”

“Honey, thank you very much, but seriously, I have all I can handle, keeping the house and attending to my Aunt.”

I just knew that his messages were much more important than he thought they were. His clients were not going to be ignored for long. “You’re going to have to make some call backs soon, Richard. There are a lot of very important people...”

“And I promise I’ll get back to them.” He said, interrupting me rudely. “But for right now, my Aunt needs my help.”

“So when do I tell people you’ll be back home, honey?” I asked, making sure he knew I was not pleased with his attitude.

“Tell them I’ll be home when my Aunt is out of danger.” He replied, his tone less than cheerful.



It was two weeks later that Richard finally called again. Yes, I know I could have called him, but what would that have proven?

“It’s two steps forward, one step back. She’s really trying, but there’s only so much progress one can expect.”

“What does the old bag have, anyway?” I asked.

“Her name is Evelyn. My Aunt Evelyn. And she’s only about fifty.” He paused for a moment, probably trying to make me feel bad. “She has emphysema, complicated with pneumonia. It’s very serious.”

“Whatever.” I said. “Your boss called yesterday, and wanted to know why they haven’t heard from you in three weeks. What exactly do I tell him?”

“You can tell Pete that I have to take care of this house by myself, which means I do the cleaning, the cooking and washing. I have to pick up groceries, I have to pick up the doctor in town and I have to do everything else to keep this place from falling into disrepair. You can tell him that.”

“You’re honestly doing the cooking?” I asked. “I can’t believe you just don’t hire someone for that.”

“There’s no servants or maids around here, Janice. You have to do things here yourself. That’s the way it is outside the city.”

“It sounds *wonderful*.” I had had quite enough of this. “Why don’t you just tell your aunt you have a *life* you need to attend to, and you need to come back to New York. Promise her you’ll return in a week or something. Tell her anything. *I don’t care*. Just get back to work before something serious happens!”

“I know you mean well, Janice, but I can’t do that. First of all, Aunt Evelyn is on medication, and isn’t very lucid most of the time. Second, I have no intention of leaving this poor woman to fend for herself – and possibly die – just so I can return some insignificant phone messages.”

“Insignificant!?! That’s not the Richard Weinstein I married! You know as well as I that if you show any weakness or lapse in focus, there won’t be a job to return to!”

“That’s still not as important as my Aunt’s life.” He said.

“Don’t be so dramatic, Richard.”

“I am n... Aaa... not being...” He coughed, after his voice had cracked in the middle of the word ‘not.’ “I am not being dramatic.” His voice cracked again in the word ‘dramatic.’

“Well, I certainly hope that emphysema isn’t catching.” I said. “Your voice sounds horrible.”

“I’m fine. And emphysema isn’t something you can catch.” Richard was still trying to clear his throat. “I think it’s just a minor infection. Just a cold. The doctor is giving me some stuff for it.”

“Tell him to double it, because it obviously isn’t getting the job done. Is he an accredited physician? What’s his specialty? Did you get a referral?”

“I’ll call you later, Janice.” He said. I didn’t know what had gotten into him. He was usually so much more practical than this.



It was late February before I heard from him again. I had already contacted a lawyer about divorce proceedings. I wasn't going to give Richard many more chances.

"She's showing some real improvement." He said to me. Obviously, he knew that I wanted him back home. He needed to give me good news. But I was suspicious he was just telling me what I wanted to hear. "She's able to walk around and her breathing is becoming less labored."

"Well, she seems to be doing better. I can't say the same for you. The firm has put you on indefinite leave." I told him. I expected anger from Richard.

"They did what they had to do." Was what I got.

"Maybe you don't understand me, Richard. You don't have a job anymore."

"If looking after family is going to get me fired, then as far as I'm concerned, those guys at work can go... They can go... Soak their head."

"Soak their head!?" I yelled into the phone. "Soak their head!? You just lost a job that paid you over a quarter of a million dollars a year, and all you can say is 'soak their head!?'"

"What do you want me to say, Janice? There's nothing I can do about it."

"Of *course* there are things you can do about it, Richard!" I told him. "You could simply..." I stopped myself from having the same argument with him again. "I just want you to tell me when you're coming home. It's that simple. I need you to set a date. Tell me what day you'll return."

He paused for a long, tense minute. "I... Just can't do that, Janice."

"For God sakes, Richard! How do you expect me to make it through without you? Forget about being there for your Aunt, what about being there for *me!*?"

"For you?"

"I can't do everything myself! I need to get money from the bank! I need your paycheck! I need you to make contacts through your network of clients! *You just can't do this to me!*"

"Please. I know it's been tough on you, and I'll smooth everything over when I get back. But I'm so close to getting Aunt Evelyn able to take care of herself. It won't be long. I can't leave now."

Fine. Frankly, I was *this* close to giving up on him. But he knew so many people that made for great contacts. It made my job as a radio segment producer so easy. And his membership at the downtown club was in his name. It would take me years to get that membership on my own. I couldn't just walk out on him.

"You sound like you've caught something." I said, trying to take the conversation back from the edge. "It sounds like a really bad cold."

"A cold?" He replied. "Yeah, I guess it's a cold. So you don't mind if I stay here until Aunt Evelyn is up and about?"

“I mind. I mind a lot, Richard. You’re putting me in a very awkward position. I’m not your secretary, and I don’t like making excuses for you.” I said. “And frankly, this is pushing our marriage right to the limit. Right to the limit – do you *understand* me!?”

“Yes, I know, Janice. And I’m sorry. Truly sorry.” It sounded like he was really trying to sound remorseful. Maybe trying too hard, if you know what I mean.

I was getting tired of making these calls and getting the same answer. I was just going to have to let him come home on his own. If he didn’t want to come back, then I knew where I stood. “Richard, it’s up to you. You need to find your priorities. Okay?”

“I know, Janice. This is hard on all of us. And I’ll find some way to make it up to you.”

Now we were talking. I could use a new car. Maybe redecorate the living room? Oh, I had such plans to make. “So, how bad is your cold?” I asked.

“Cold? Well, I don’t know what it is, really. I sometime feel a little sick, and my voice is funny sounding, and I was in bed for a few days, but... I don’t really think I’d call it a cold. More like a flu, but not really.”

“You were in bed? For how long?”

“About three days. I had a really bad fever. I dropped a few pounds.”

“Well, you could always stand to lose a little weight. If it’s not a cold, what does that country doctor of yours call it?”

“He said it was just some sort of infection. He gave me some pills. And a couple of shots. It helps with the swelling.”

“What swelling?”

“Oh, I’ve puffed up in few places. Especially my chest.”

“Sounds like an allergic reaction. Are you allergic to anything?”

“Not that I know of. Listen, Janice I have to go now. Aunt Evelyn is calling me.”

I sighed into the phone, making sure he could hear the displeasure in my voice. “Next time I talk to you, I want you to tell me when you’re coming back.”

“I understand.” He said.



Well, around that time I got the promotion I had been waiting for, no thanks to Richard. I had been given my own program to produce, the morning drive-time news show. Oh, I had such good ideas. So far, it had been your typical NPR-type show. A little news, some interviews and then lame jazz in between. Well, I was really going to turn it upside-down. Who says you can’t put celeb-

rity gossip on public radio? Maybe bring a little Howard Stern to the public airwaves.

I called up Richard to tell him the news. And maybe to rub his nose in it a little bit. Who need a well-connected husband to succeed?



“Hello?” The voice on the other end answered. I didn’t recognize it.

Well, I thought maybe they had visitors. It was too young a voice for Aunt Evelyn. “Is my husband Richard there?” I asked.

“Janice?” The voice answered. “It’s me.”

I was dumbfounded. “Richard!? Is that you!?”

“Oh. My voice. It’s been a little strange lately.” He said. “It’s that flu I have.”

“So you do have the flu.”

“Oh, yes. The doctor told me I have a flu. So I’ve been in bed for the past week. But the doctor tells me I’m getting better.”

“Are you all right!? Do you need me to send a qualified physician? I can have you airlifted and sent to the nearest medical center right away!”

“It’s okay, Janice.” He replied. “I’m in good hands with Doctor Crumbpacker.”

“Crumbpacker? You can’t be serious. I’m calling the med-evac people right now.”

“No, really, Janice. I’m doing fine. Doctor Crumbpacker is very good. And he’s on top of everything. My weight loss is finally stopping and...”

I interrupted him. “How much weight have you lost?”

"I'm scared to check." He said. "Last I weighed myself three days ago, I was down to 137."

"You've got to be nothing but skin and bones!"

"I'm fine. I still have a lot of fat in a few places. My chest and my lower body look fine. And the doctor tells me my strength will probably come back."

"Richard, you're truly scaring me. This sounds like some sort of chamber of horrors."

"It's not as bad as it sounds. I can walk around in short trips, and Aunt Evelyn is taking care of me."

"She... *She's* taking care of... *You!*?"

"As soon as the doctor told me to rest, Aunt Evelyn was able to look after me. I guess it's that country spirit of pitching in when someone needs help."

"Is she fully recovered? That sounds suspicious."

"She's only up for a few hours a day, but she's definitely improving. I think having someone to care for has given her something to focus on. Maybe it's crazy, but I think me being in bed has helped her recovery."

"Well, that's something, at least." This whole episode was making me very nervous. I always get suspicious when a bunch of coincidences come together. Maybe that's the journalist in me, but I really didn't like the way this was shaping up. "About you, Richard. Is there anything you're not telling me? Please don't hold anything back. I really don't think this is the time to be keeping any secrets."

"Well, I'm feeling better every day. And the medication keeps me in a good mood."

"Medication?"

"I'm taking a lot of pills and getting a lot of shots. That's why I know the doctor is so good."

"What kind of medication is it, Richard?"

"I asked Aunt Evelyn, but she told me I didn't need to worry about it."

"And you trust her?"

"Of course I do. She's been like a mother to me since I got here."

I just couldn't seem to get Richard to break through. He didn't seem even *lightly* suspicious of what was happening. Shots, weight loss, forced bed rest, a suddenly mobile invalid. This wasn't right. And Richard wasn't seeing it.

"Promise me you'll stay in bed and take it easy, darling."

"I will."

"And just see if you can try and get a few more answers about what's happening to you."

He paused. "Okay. I'll give it a try."

"I love you." I said.

“I love you too, Janice.”

As soon as I hung up, I booked my flight for Oklahoma.



The flight from New York went into DFW. From there, I took an express flight to Oklahoma City. The only transportation from Oklahoma City to Boregard was by bus. Yes, by bus. Normally, I'd just get a limo for the day, but the trip was eight hours out to Boregard. I hap my laptop with me for the trip, and I caught up on my budget planning for the quarter. But just two hours out of the bus depot, the cell phone stopped working. No signal.

Fabulous. Now I was truly on my own. The battery on the computer gave out a while later, and I was left with nothing but the window to provide me entertainment.

I don't know if you've ever been out to Oklahoma – and I pray to God you have better sense that that – but it's flat. So amazingly flat. Miles and miles of flat.

I never even imagined you could have so much space in this country with nothing in it. No trees, no houses, no people. Just a road. Once and a while you could see a tractor. Yes, a tractor! I had never seen one before. I'm not even sure what they do. But, they were there, driving aimlessly through fields of dirt. Maybe I was just here in the off season. Maybe it was a bad year for growing things. But for all I could tell, there was nothing but miles and miles of dirt stretching out for as far as I could see.

What a truly miserable place to live.

The bus stopped at something a lot like a restaurant, with vending machines that dispensed plastic-wrapped sandwiches. Barbaric. I had to drink out of an *aluminum can*.



Dreadful.

A few hours later, a few houses appeared on the horizon, and a gas station. The bus pulled up, and the driver announced that we had arrived in Boregard. I lugged my carry-on bag with me, and stepped outside into dusty wind. The bus closed the door and was on its way. And I was by myself in the middle of nowhere.

The roller wheels on my bag were useless in the rough baked dirt, and I had to drag it along into the gas station.



“Kin I help you, Ma’am?” The gawky man behind the counter said. The patch on his oil-stained shirt said “Jeter” on it. I kid you not.

“Well, Jeter, I was wondering if you could call me a cab.” I asked.

He looked at me like I was from another planet. I guess he had never seen a woman dressed as nicely as I was, in my business suit. “You’re not from ’round here, is you?” He said.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m just here to see my husband. Maybe you can call me that cab, if that’s not too much time out of your busy schedule?”

“Well, we ain’t got no taxi cabs here in Boregard.” He said, adjusting his baseball cap. “Who’s it you come here to see?”

I had to translate the accent and the verbage before I responded. “My husband Richard. He’s visiting his Aunt.” I got the envelope out of my pocket to check the name. It was the envelope this Aunt Evelyn had sent Richard which started this whole mess. “Evelyn Johnson.”

“Oh, the Johnson place where old maid Johnson lives.”

“If that’s where Evelyn Johnson lives.”

“We just all call her Evie around here.” He said. He pulled up a sign that read “Closed” and placed it on the desk. He grabbed some keys off a pegboard and headed by me, out the front door. “But if you’re lookin’ to get out there, I can take you.”

“What will it cost me?” I asked.

He looked at me confused. “Cost you?” He asked. “I jus’ need to go pick up some fan belts from my pal Raymond out past there. I’ll drop you off on the way.”

“What’s in it for you?” I asked.

By that time, he was revving the engine in a rusted tow truck. “Git in if you’re a-comin’.”



I was let off at the beginning of a long dirt road, which this Jeter person assured me would end at Evelyn Johnson’s house. “I can drive you all the way, if you needs me to,” he offered. I assured him I was quite capable of doing this for myself. It must have been three miles, but he turned out to be right.

Damn heels nearly killed me.

The house was a surprisingly large Victorian-style, aging badly. The place was probably white originally, but now had collected dirt, blown into the slats of wood siding by the winds which never seemed to let up around here. The house appeared caked with dirt.

I knocked on the door after struggling up the creaking old stairs with my bag. A woman answered the door. “Yes?” She said, a little scared. Then she gave a disconcerting smile. “Land sakes, you must be Janice!”

“Yes. And you are?”

She hugged me warmly. “I’m your Aunt Evelyn!” She said. “Ritchie didn’t say you were coming, or else I’d have prepared a room for you.”

“I’m not staying,” I said, “and Richard didn’t know I was coming, either.”

“Well, you sure do know how to surprise someone. I saw you coming down the road, and I was worried you were lost or a car had broken down.”

“Where’s Richard?” I asked.

“He’ll be so glad to see you. He’s up in bed, resting. Did he tell you he’s had an awful time with the flu.”

“He mentioned it.” I took a skeptical look at Aunt Evelyn. She seemed to be as alert and healthy as any woman her age. It was hard to believe she had been sick at all.

I mean, it was *really* hard to believe.

“Can I see him?” I asked.

“Oh!” She said, embarrassed. “Where are my manners? Why don’t you leave your bag here, and we’ll go upstairs and see him. The dear should be done with his evening nap by now.”

I followed her up the stairs, and noticed how briskly she was moving. Some kind of miracle recovery, don’t you think?

It was a huge house, with far too many rooms just for one woman to use. The was kind of a folksy charm to the place. If this house had a little work, some paint and some decent landscaping, you might get some resale value out of it.

Except that we were out in the middle of nowhere.

Come to think of it, we were out even further than that. Even the people who lived in the middle of nowhere hadn't even heard of Boregard.

"Ritchie has had an awful time of it the past two weeks. He's just been so difficult." Aunt Eveleyn said.

"Yes, it must have been hard to take care of him while he was sick."

"Well, yes, it was a trial, but that's not what I'm talking about, dear. It's his ornery disposition that's been a problem."

I didn't believe she had actually just used the word 'ornery.' "He's been difficult?"

"I suppose you know, being his wife and all, but Richard can be downright stubborn sometimes."

Like when he's trying to take care of some old bat in Dumbfuck, Oklahoma?

"Yes, he certainly can be that way at times." And frankly, I didn't like it. "I hope he hasn't been too much to handle."

"Oh, he was fidgety and fussy when Doctor Crumbpucker ordered him to get some bed rest, believe me." Her cross face then brightened. "But once he knew I was in charge, he eventually succumbed. Now he trusts me to make his decisions for him."

Yeah, he was like that when we first met. But after a while, he stopped trying to pretend he was in charge. I knew what was best for both of us. He could still be the boss at work, but I told him what to do at home. And we liked it that way. And he was perfectly fine with it – until he got that letter at least. I thought I had whipped all the backbone out of him.

Aunt Evelyn knocked gently on the third door she came to. "Ritchie dear, are you awake? Oh, I have such a surprise for you!" She opened the door and peeked through the crack. "Oh he's still sleeping. Give me a minute to wake him." She then entered the dark room and shut the door behind her.

I really didn't have time for this. That bus was due to come back through here soon, so I could get back to New York and run the production meeting on Monday. So, I needed to make my connections to get to the airport by midnight. I only had an hour or two. I needed to get his signature on a small pile of documents, get his PIN number for the debit card and the bank accounts. After all, I had bills to pay.

The door creaked open again, and the lights were on. I strained to see if I could see Richard, but Aunt Evelyn was blocking me. "Here's the surprise I promised you, dearest." She teased.

The door eased open and I could see Richard, and he could see me. And I could see that my husband, my strong, virile husband was laying in an old-fashioned canopied bed, dressed in a ruffled, cotton nightgown.



He raised hi hands to his mouth in shock. “Janice!” He yelped.

“Hello... Um, Richard.” I said. The sight of him had taken my breath away. Not only was he dressed in women’s clothing, but he was resting with layer and layer of fluffy pillows and quilts.. His hair had grown a little, hanging from the back of his head. And his body, neck and arms looked bony thin. If I hadn’t been told that it was my husband, I might not have recognized him.

“Don’t look at me!” He cried. Childishly, he flung the covers over his head so I couldn’t see him.

Aunt Evelyn was angry. “Ritchie!” She yelled. “Don’t be a nuisance! Janice has traveled all the way from New York City to see you, and you will behave!”

The covers stayed up.

“Ritchie! *I said behave!*” Aunt Evelyn commanded.

And slowly, the covers dropped, but Richard turned his face away, so he didn’t have to look at me. “I don’t want to talk to her.” He said.

“Ritchie, you will talk to Janice or I’ll put you over my knee and give your backside a good spanking!” She threatened.

The look on Richard’s face and the flinch in his body seemed to tell me that it wouldn’t have been the first spanking he had received. How was that even possible? Even docile Richard would never allow such a thing.

“Say hello, Ritchie. Say hello to Janice.” Aunt Evelyn told him. “Say hello, or no tapioca pudding for desert.”

Reluctantly, Richard looked in my direction. “Hello.” He said, clearly embarrassed. “Hello, Janice.”

“Richard.” I replied. I was still blown away by how he looked. I turned to Aunt Evelyn for an answer, fearing Richard didn’t want to talk. “Why is he dressed...”

“Oh, the nightgown.” She said, smiling mischievously. “I simply don’t have any proper bedclothes for a man. I only have nightgowns.”

That didn’t explain everything, though. And I didn’t feel like asking.

The next thing I was worried about was how Richard felt. He looked awful. Oh, he was clean and groomed, but he was rakishly thin. “Richard, are you feeling okay?”

His eyes cast down, he looked up at me and then down in his lap again. “I’m okay.”

I really just needed to talk to him. “Um... ‘Aunt’ Evelyn, could you give us...”

“Of course, you probably have so much to talk about.” She said, smiling. “Will you be staying for dinner?” She said on her way out.

And miss that delightful pudding? What was the main course, road kill? “I’ll have to be on my way.” I said.

“I can make more, it’s really no trouble.”

“I have a bus to catch.” I explained.

“Well, if you change your mind, let me know.” She said before shutting the door.

I turned slowly to Richard. I looked him up and down. “I don’t even know where to start.” I said.

Richard shook his head. “I’m sorry I’ve been acting like this, Janice. I just... I just really didn’t want anyone to see me like this... Before I was back to health.”

“I can understand that.” And I did. I wasn’t sure about his behavior, though. I leaned in close to him, to make sure no one listening in could hear us. “Are you *really* okay, Richard?”

He nodded. “It’s been a tough few weeks.”

“It’s been two months, Richard.” I told him.

“Glory be. That long?” He answered. Glory be, indeed.

“Your voice, it sounds awful. You sound like a teenager.”

"It comes and goes." He said. "More coming than going, lately. The doctor said it will settle, in time."

I got the papers I needed him to sign out of my bag. "There's a lot of things I need you to take care of, Honey. There's bills, we have a new lease to be signed for the next year..." I spread the papers out before him.

"It sure does pile up, doesn't it?" He said.

"Yes, Richard. It does. Especially when you're not even thinking about it."

"I've been thinking about it!" He objected. "I've been thinking about you all the time!"

"Well, I can't cash a check made out to 'Good Thoughts' can I?"

He pursed his lips, and squinted his eyes. He was getting emotional. I hate emotional.

"Never mind, I just need the papers signed." I handed him a pen.

He took it and signed the half-dozen sheets he needed to. He had been away so long, I didn't even recognize his signature. Once he was done, I quickly collected them and put them away. "Now, since you're obviously not in good health, you should probably stay here." I said. "I had been planning on taking you with me when I left, but it's clear to me you're not ready to return. I don't think the rest of the world wants to see you like this."

"Yeah." he replied.

"So, when you're ready to come home, just let me know and I'll take care of the arrangements." I bent over so I could look him in the eyes. "I'm trusting that you'll know when you're ready to leave, and not let your lonely Aunt or that crazy Doctor talk you into staying, all right?"

"I... I'll do that. I promise." He said.

I decided he needed a little reminder of what he was missing, and I kissed him. Hard. He was hesitant, almost recoiling when my lips met his, but he relaxed quickly and let me do the work. I ran my fingers through his unusually soft, longish hair. It reminded me of the college kid I had slept with last weekend. And Richard's face was soft where I usually felt the grip of stubble on his cheeks.

Aunt Evelyn interrupted us by entering the room. Perfect timing. Perfect if you were trying to keep us from being intimate. "Is everything okay in here?" She asked. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

"Of course, you're not interrupting," I said, coating my voice in restrained anger. I stood up and dusted off my skirt. "So, 'Aunt' Evelyn. Tell me about the doctor you have helping my Richard. What was his name? Crumberman?"

"Doctor Crumbpacker. He's an old friend. He's treated the last three generations of Johnsons. Old Gene Crumbpacker's the best doctor this side of the Mackford ridge."

"And what does he say is wrong with Richard?" I asked.

Aunt Evelyn looked at Richard, who was looking at her with anticipation. He wanted to hear the answer as much as I did, it seemed.

The old woman gently touched me on the arm and guided me towards the door. "We'll be right back, Ritchie. I have to talk to Janice now." She said, sweetly. "Why don't you read one of your books. I think you're almost finished with 'The Black Stallion.'"

Richard wanted to hear the discussion. "But I..."

"Hush!" Aunt Evelyn said, cutting him off. "Read your book and we'll be back in a moment."

Richard looked like he wanted to say something, but he held back. Dejectedly, he pulled a beaten old cloth-bound library book from his bedside table and opened it to the bookmark. He watched us leave, rather than read it, though.

Once we were outside, Aunt Evelyn still kept her voice low. "I didn't want to say anything in front of little Ritchie, but the doctor thinks it could be some sort of problem with his pituitary gland." She reconsidered what she had just said with a funny, concentrated expression on her face. "Pituitary? I think that's what it's called. It regulates the hormones?"

I nodded. "That's right. The pituitary gland."

"He said that it was a correctible problem, and a combination of drugs and rest will have it fixed lickety split."

Well, I had to admit, this did sound serious. "Will he be in bed much longer?" I asked.

"Well, all of us are optimistic, but he's going to need someone to look after him for a while. Doc Crumbpaker said it could be just a few weeks, but he's seen this sort of thing take several months. Sometimes a year."

This *was* serious. "When you say look after him, do you mean..."

"I mean someone needs to be by his bedside, administer the medications on a schedule of three times a day, clean up after him if he should mess himself, take him to the doctor and feed him. He won't always need that sort of care, but he will have his good days and his bad days."

I had to think. A year? I could hire a nurse, but have you seen how much they cost? Oh, I mean, I could afford it, but it seemed like an avoidable expense. Plus, I wouldn't want to have to screen for a good nurse, hire them, do the paperwork, and then have to practically live with a stranger for months. And having a bedridden person in my home seemed so depressing.

"But I don't mind looking after him." Aunt Evelyn said. "We never really got to know each other even though we're family. There's so many things we have to talk about and so many things I have to teach him."

"You wouldn't mind taking care of him, then?" I asked. "I mean, I would never ask, but..." Sure, the woman was up to something, but surely my husband could deal with a frail woman like Evelyn. What harm could it possibly cause? And I wouldn't have to spend all that time dealing with this. "I mean, just purely out of concern for Richard's well being, I think maybe... Not moving him... would be the best thing for him right now."

“I would love to have someone to take care of after all this time. A little bit of company.” Evelyn said.

“Well, what if it takes months?”

“Whatever my little Ritchie needs. He’s all I have left of my dear, departed sister.”

Then it was settled. I could leave him here and not have any major interruptions in my life. “If you ever need anything. Money. Just give me a call.” I said. “I’ll be happy to help out with the expenses.”



“How very generous of you to share the burden like that, dearie. But I think I’ll be able to handle it. I live on a sizable land trust that takes care of everything I need.” She patted me on the shoulder. “I know you’ll miss Ritchie, but this time will pass by so quickly. You’ll see.”

“Yes. Yes.” Speaking of time, I had to check my watch. I needed to think about meeting that bus. “Oh, look at that. I’m going to have to run soon.”

“I’ll be happy to drive you out to the gas station so you can meet the bus. It’s due at five seventeen. It gives us a few more minutes. Maybe you’d like to say goodbye to Ritchie?”

“Do you have a phone?” I asked. I really needed to make some quick calls. “I need to touch base with my people back in New York. Let them know what my schedule is.”

“It’s downstairs.” Evelyn said. “I’ll show you.”

I pulled out my PDA which was dead. “Can I recharge this?”

“Anything you need.”

I plugged it into the wall and found some phone numbers. I made the calls I needed to make, and confirmed the times of the meeting I need to attend tomorrow. Our lead reporter had been assigned to a story by the network, and we’d have to have our b-team fill in. We had a solid fifty minutes or so, but we needed another two hours worth of material. I told them what to do, mostly to fill the space with interviews. By the time I had taken care of that, it was time to leave.

“We only have a minute before we need to go,” Evelyn said, putting on a pair of white gloves. For driving? How quaint.

“I’m ready.” I said.

“Do you want to say goodbye to Ritchie?” She asked.

Well, I probably should do that. But I was so short on time. I quickly jogged up the stairs and stuck my head in the room. He was still in bed, reading that book. He was totally engrossed in it, mouthing the words as he was reading.

“Ritchie?” I said. “I mean, Richard?”

He turned his head, and set the book down. “Janice. Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine. But I have to run and catch my bus. Are you going to be okay here with your Aunt?” I said.

He looked confused, and maybe a little hurt. “Leave me here? But I...”

“We agreed that you should rest and get healthy before coming back to New York with me.” I reminded him.

“Oh, yeah.” He said, staring at his hands for a moment. “You have to go right now?”

“Evelyn’s warming up the car right now.”

“That wasn’t a lot of time.”

“I have meetings.” I said. “I’ll come back out and we’ll have a little more time to spend together. I promise.”

“I’m sorry you had to see me like this.” He said.

“Don’t worry about it.” I reassured him. “After all, we’re married. I’ll send you some of your clothes. Just remind me.”

“All right.” He replied. “Oh, I wanted to give you this. I made it.” He looked for something at his bedside. It was a small swatch of fabric. “Home Sweet Home” was stitched on it with a flowery detail around the edge.

“You’re sewing?” I asked, barely disguising my shock.

“It’s needlepoint. And it helps pass the time. Aunt Evelyn is showing me how.”

I took the fabric and folded it up and stuffed it in my pocket. “I’m sure it’s very nice. Now I want you to be nice to Evelyn, but please be careful. I’m not sure I entirely trust her or the Doctor.”

“I can’t say I haven’t been suspicious,” he said, “so I’ll be careful.”

“Are you being nice to Janice, dear?” Evelyn said as she entered the room. “I don’t want her to leave thinking I have such rude child.”

“Yes. Ma’am.” Richard replied.

She turned to me. “I’ll be in the car. We’ll need to get a move-on.”

“I’ll be right there.” I said.

She turned to Richard again. “And what do you say when someone’s come all this way to see you?”

“Thank you Ma’am.” Richard said to me.

“Very good.” She said, and then left.

“What was that all about?” I said, laughing. “‘Yes Ma’am,’ ‘no Ma’am?’”

“What?” Richard said, staring at me blankly. I just decided to move on.

“I really do have to run.” I said, as I hugged him. As I did, my head was behind him, and I glimpsed down. The nightgown had ridden up, and I was sure I could see a pair of pink panties on his butt. With my head beginning to swim with crazy and bizarre images of what Richard was really going through, I finally had enough. I just had to get out of this place.

“You know I miss you, right?” I said.

“I miss you. I miss the house. I miss the city. I miss...”

“Of course you do, but I have to go now.” I kissed him on the cheek. “Now, be good for your Aunt. She’s really helping me... Us out here, looking after you.”

Richard’s expression was one of concern. And maybe some fear? “Oh... Okay.” He said, less sure than I ever remember my husband being.

I hated to leave him like that, but there just wasn’t time. To make my point, a car – presumably Evelyn’s – honked outside.

“Bye-bye, honey.” I said, leaving the room. “I’ll call you when I get back to my house. Our house.”

“Bye.” He said. He did sound sad. But I had other things to worry about.



Predictably, those close-minded fools who ran the radio station didn’t want me to change anything on my show. Well, why did they hire me, then? To do nothing? To do jack shit? I was going to take them into the twenty-first century, and they just wanted to play it safe and keep the status quo.

So I was dumped. They tried to call it a “lateral shift,” and place me in one of their three-AM public service shows, but they effectively fired me. Yes, they said that since I took over, they had never had so many complaints about the program. But you can’t make omelets without breaking a few eggs, you know what I mean?

But out of the generosity of their hearts, and probably to keep me from suing their asses off, they gave me a month to find a new job. Which was fine with me. Everyone’s going to satellite radio anyway. That’s where the money is. That’s the future.

And now, without any income, I needed to get into the savings, and I needed Richard to let me. It was the beginning of spring, in early April I made my next trip out to Boregard. Even with spring in the air, it did little to improve the countryside in this part of the world. At least the sky was blue.

I got off the bus and made my way to the gas station in a fierce wind. Sure enough, there was Jeter, seated behind the counter.

He smiled when he saw me, his crooked, tobacco-stained teeth making him look even more freakish. “Well, howdy to you again, Ma’am.” He said. “I’m suppos’n you need a ride out to the Johnson place.”

“If I could use the phone, I can call and see if Evelyn will drive out here to get me.” I replied, not wanting to sound too dependent on this bumpkin.



“I wouldn’ want her to go through all that trouble when it’s so easy fer me t’ drive ya.” He got his keys and went out to the truck. I followed. This time, I was a little more prepared for the trip. I just carried a small backpack with me and wore my khakis.

The truck rattled along on the bumpy roads, throwing me all over the front seat, which didn’t even have seat belts. The roads were so rough, I had no clue where the road ended and where the hard dirt of the ground began. Has this area always been this desolate? After about five minutes of silence, I decided to ask.

“Is it always like this out here?”

Jeter shook his head. “It gets colder in the winter.”

Well, that answers that. “Have you lived out here for very long?”

“All muh life.” He said. “I’m third generation here.”

Yeah, that was something to be proud of. “What about Evelyn?”

“Evie done moved out here, musta’ been, thirty years ago, I reckon.” He put a toothpick in his mouth and let it dangle from his lips. “She married into the family.”

“She’s my husband’s aunt.” I said.

“Moved here from the North.”

“Massachusetts.”

“So where are you from, if you don’t mind me askin’ Ma’am.”

“New York City.”

“Whooo-ee!” He said with a country twang. “That’s the one city to be from, ain’t it?”

“I guess so.”

"I always figured on goin' there one of these days. But now that they had the nine-eleven, I think maybe it's too dangerous." He parked the car in front of the road to Evelyn's house. "Don't want to be killed by them a-rabs."

I got out of the truck and closed the door. "Well, I think that's the safest thing to do." I said. "Don't want to tempt fate."

"No Ma'am." He said.

"Listen, Jeter..." Time to swallow some pride. "Could I call you when I need to get out of here?"

He grinned. "Be my pleasure, little lady." He just made my skin crawl. Jeter tipped his cap and pulled away.

I walked the long walk up to the front door of Evelyn's house and knocked.

"Janice!" Evelyn said as she saw me. "Ritchie told me you were coming sometime this week. I'm so glad to see you again. And I'm sure little Ritchie will be overjoyed. Please come in, and have a seat."

"Thank you." I said, seating myself in a plush, ancient chair that was the most comfortable thing I'd been in for the last two days. "How is Richard?"

"He's been making wonderful strides in his recovery. He's up all day long now, and finally starting to put a little meat on his bones. He still has to take his shots and his pills, but Doctor Crumbpacker tells me it's just a matter of time before things work themselves out." She turned to the kitchen. "Ritchie, Janice is here, come say hello!"

She turned to me with a broad smile. "I can't imagine what it must be like to live and work in New York City. It must be a adventure every day."

"It's a busy place all right." I told her. "But I've always thought that it's the most important place in the world. And if I'm going to live somewhere, I have to live in the most important place in the world. Everything you could possibly imagine is in that city. I love it."

"How wonderful." Her attention returned to the kitchen. "Ritchie! Where are you? Janice is here to see you!" She was immediately frustrated. "Sakes alive, I have to look after little Ritchie every moment." She left the room. "I'll be right back."

As soon as she entered the kitchen, I could hear some fussing. Evelyn's voice was loud and harsh. The second voice was soft and hard to hear.

"Yes you will!" I could hear Evelyn shouting. "You'll go out there this second!" There was another pause. "Right this very second!"

And without much delay, the door to the kitchen slowly opened. Behind it, what used to be my husband appeared.

I say what used to be my husband, because this person didn't bear much of a resemblance to my Richard. My Richard was a proud, sharply dressed and handsome man who looked you in the eye and told you what he thought. The person who emerged from the kitchen was a faded memory of that man.

Richard was dressed in a long house dress, in light blue. Over that, he wore a small white apron that had a spatula and two oven mitts tucked into it. His

hair, which now looked slightly lighter, was tied into two pigtales that rested on his shoulders. And he wore a plaid red kerchief that covered the top of his head.

“Hello, Janice,” He said, in a soft, lilting voice I could barely hear.

The blood rushed from my head for a moment, causing me to forget where I was. Just for a instant. This was Richard? I could hardly believe it. My husband was the man I showed to the world with pride. I’d never be seen with this... This sissified version of that man.

“Hello, Richard.” I said coldly. “I see you’re on your feet.”

“I’m sorry, Jancie. I know you said I shouldn’t let Aunt Evelyn do these things to me, but...”

“Ahem!” Evelyn’s voice said, interrupting.

Immediately, Richard froze what he was doing and put a forced smile on his face. “Would you like a drink, Ma’am?” He asked me.

“A drink?” I replied, unable to figure out this sudden change in the way he talked to me.

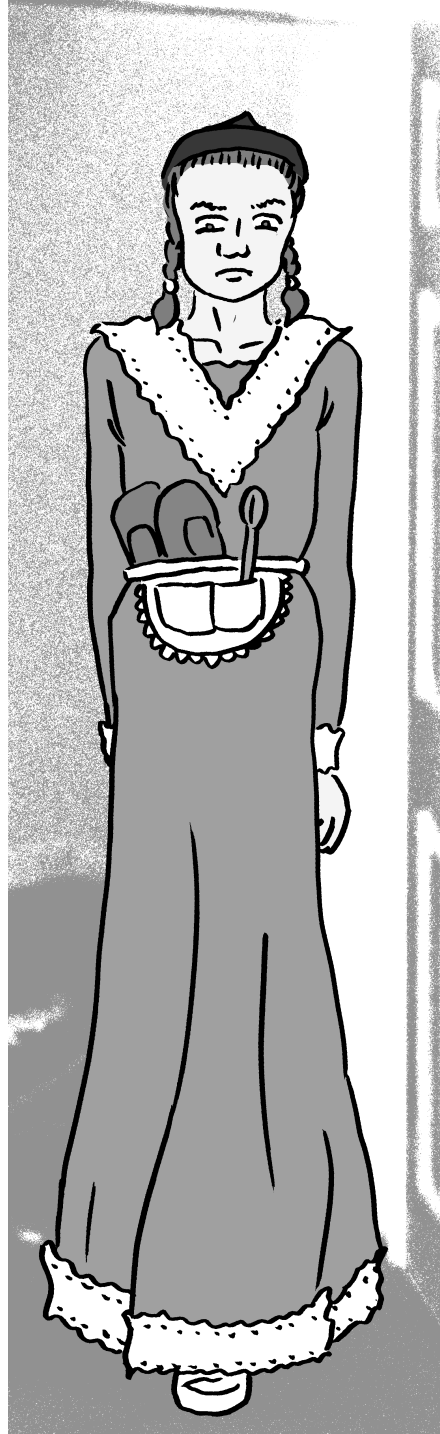
“A refreshment? We heave iced tea and lemonade.” Richard answered, his smile becoming more strained. “Please tell me what I can get for you.”

“Richard, are you feeling alright?”

“Just tell me what you’d like, Ma’am.” He said, a bead of sweat coming from his forehead. “I must get you something to cool you down.” His eyes pleaded with me.

“A lemonade.” I said.

“Right away, Ma’am.” Richard ducked his head, and then – so quickly I almost missed it – he curt-



seyed. He dashed back into the kitchen.

Evelyn then left the kitchen and returned to me, a look of satisfaction on her face “Isn’t little Ritchie such a polite child?” She said.

“Evelyn, why is my husband dressed like that?” I said, angrily. “I asked you to look after him, not turn him into some freak.”

“Hush, now.” Evelyn said, without even batting an eyelash. “Haven’t you noticed how slender he’s become? The only clothes I have that will fit him are some old things I had around the house.”

“I sent some of his things to wear.” I pointed out.

“They just drape all over him. He’s just not comfortable in them. Besides, his skin is so sensitive right now, he’s likely to break out in a rash.”

“And his hair? The apron?”

“His hair is a lovely brown once all that gunk gets washed out. And who doesn’t work in the kitchen without an apron? It’s only common sense.” She said, finding a seat on a nearby chair, joining me.

“He’s my husband, Evelyn. And he’s a fully-grown man. You’re just being cruel to him. This is not doing him any good. You’re ruining him! He’ll never be confident of himself if you’re putting him in dresses!”

“I’m *building* his confidence *back* up. The poor dear was near suicidal when he first saw how much weight he had lost and how weak he was feeling.” She turned toward the kitchen. “Do you need me to come in there and help you, Ritchie!?” She yelled, more as a threat than as an offer.

“No Ma’am!” Richard called back, in a feeble voice.

I tried to get in her face and stare her down. I wasn’t used to losing arguments.

“You could cut his hair short, give him a pair of pants and let him get involved in his work again. That would help him feel like himself again. It would give him the confidence he needs.”

“Oh,” She said, “that may work for you, dear. But little Ritchie is a little more delicate than that. He needs that feminine touch to soothe him back to health.”

I bristled at that insult. Was she insinuating I wasn’t feminine? Yes, I wore my hair in a tight bun, worked hard and wore slacks most of the time, but that didn’t mean I was any less of a woman, god damn it. Who did she think she was? I’d give her a good one-two across the jaw, if I wasn’t so civilized.

Before I could make any more points with the old woman, the kitchen door opened and Richard returned, with a tray. Two glasses and a large pitcher were on it, and the ice in the pitcher clinked as he carefully balanced them. He then adeptly picked up the pitcher with one hand and poured it into one of the glasses, filled it, and returned the pitcher to the tray before handing me the glass. He had obviously practiced this. “Your lemonade, Ma’am.” He said, without looking me in the eye. I noticed his fingernails were polished to a shine as he handed me the drink.

I took the glass and put it aside without tasting it. I was too mesmerized by the display of passivity I was watching. Richard repeated the task for his Aunt and curtsied again before returning to the kitchen.

“Evelyn, this is an absolute outrage. You’re taking advantage of my husband’s illness and using him to fulfill your own twisted purposes.” I said, as sharply as I could say the words. “Give me one good reason I shouldn’t phone the police and have you locked up.”

“Oh, the police have already been here.” Evelyn said. “Little Ritchie got this fool notion in his head to phone the police, and they came right over. Ol’ Sheriff Turnbull.” She turned to the kitchen again. “Ritchie, come out here!”

Quickly, Richard minced out the swinging door and to attention in front of his Aunt. “Yes Ma’am.” He said.

“What did I tell you about smiling, honey?” She asked.

“A smile is a ray of sun into everyone’s life.”

“And you wouldn’t want to block out the sun, would you?”

Richard immediately painted a smile on his face.

“Now tell Janice what happened when the Police came.”

Richard’s smile vanished. “You... You spanked me.”

“Before that, Ritchie.”

Richard pursed his lips in hesitation. “Well... I just was going to ask the police if...”

“What did they say when they saw you, honey?”

“They laughed.” Richard said, his face blushing. “An’ they said I was a sissy, an’ they said I was a fag, and’ they said...”

Evelyn interrupted again. “And they didn’t believe you, did they?”

“No.” Richard said, looking down at the floor. “I’m so sorry, Auntie. I’m so sorry!”

“For what, honey? You didn’t get anyone in trouble. If there’s anyone you should be feeling sorry for it’s yourself, dear.” She then sipped her lemonade. “Why don’t you go back to the kitchen and finish making supper, Ritchie?”

Richard glanced at me for a moment as he walked away.

“Smiles, Ritchie!” Evelyn said, and Richard put another fake smile on his pained face.

I was angrier than ever. “You should be ashamed of yourself, treating anyone like that, and your own family!” I lost my temper a little. “I don’t care what your little backwater police say, I’ll have you buried so deep in lawsuits, you won’t be able to cross the street without a lawyer present!”

Evelyn just sipped her lemonade. “If you feel so strongly about it I will would not object to you taking him home and looking after him. I’m sure he’d be delighted to go back to the city and meet all of your old friends, and talk about how sick he is. And I’m sure he’d love to meet your new boyfriends as well.”

That was it. I had heard enough from this self-righteous prissy old woman. "Let me tell you something, Mrs. Evelyn Johnson, I know people who..."

And right as I was getting into it, the phone rang.

Richard poked his head out of the doorway, silently asking Evelyn if he should do anything about it. "Please answer the phone, Ritchie." Evelyn told him.

Ritchie walked past us over the phone on the wall, his head hung low. He picked up the phone, and tried to block his voice from being heard. "Johnson residence." He sang sweetly with a practiced cheerfulness. "This is Little Ritchie. How may I help you?" He looked over at me and his eyes cried out for forgiveness at his behavior. "Yes, Doctor, she is. May I tell her the reason for your call?" He listened for a moment. "I'll see if she's available." He looked over to Evelyn. "It's Doctor Crumbpacker. He'd like to talk to you, but he doesn't want to tell me why."

"Tell the doctor I'll take his call in the den." Evelyn said, rising to her feet. "We'll pick this up when I'm done, sweetie." She said to me with a smug smile. She then proceeded to the den and closed the door behind her.

"She'll be with you in moment, sir. May God bless you." Ritchie said. He waited for Evelyn to pick up. "Yes Ma'am." He replied, and hung up.

But as soon as Richard hung up the phone, he checked to make sure the door was shut. He urgently motioned me over. "Janice!" He whispered loudly.

"Richard? What the hell?" I asked.

"Please keep your voice low," he said, "M... Aunt Evelyn may hear you. She doesn't want me to talk to you."

"Listen, Richard, I didn't have the patience to play games with you any more. I just need your signature and you PIN numbers..."

"Please, Janice! She won't leave us alone for very long! You have to listen!" He begged.

He knew I wasn't very pleased with him. In fact, disgusted was the word I'd use. "How could you let her do this to you!?"

"Janice, I need to talk!" He said, looking as scared as I'd ever seen him. "I know this is all insane, but you don't know the whole story!"

I tapped my toe on the hard wood floor. "Well? I'm waiting."

"All that stuff she's telling you is a lie! I haven't agreed to any of this! She's forcing me to do everything I've been doing!"

"Everything?" I said. "It looks like you're just letting her have her way with you."

"Yes! She uses threats of drugs and taking me out in public to control me! I know it sounds nuts, but I think she's trying to really make me into a..."

"Into?"

"She's trying to make me believe I'm a girl. A young girl." He said. "And she's starting to make me look like one, too."

"Making you look like one? What do you mean?"



“I can’t grow a beard anymore. When I woke up after my fever, my face was smooth, and the hair never grew back.”

“I noticed that last time I was here.”

“And look at my skin!” He held his arm out for examination. “Look, it’s soft and smooth. Somehow, my skin has been changed!”

“How?”

“The doctor is always giving me shots and pills. He won’t tell me what they are. I think M... Auntie is telling him to give me things that change me.”

“You’ve almost called her something else twice, Richard. What does she want you to call her?”

“M... Mom.” He said. “She makes me call her Mom. I’ve been doing it for weeks, and she told me to call her Aunt only when you’re around.”

Amazing. “What else happens when I’m not around?”

“She always has me in dresses. And what she told you about the clothes you sent isn’t true. She took them out back and burned them when they got here.”

“That bitch is out of her mind.” I said. “There’s got to be a way to get her to stop.”

“Take me out of here!” Richard begged. “Please take me home!”

“That isn’t going to work for me, honey. I don’t have a job right now, and I don’t have enough money for both of us to live on. That’s why I need you to sign these papers. I’m running out.”

“What?” He said, not understanding my very simple request. What did he think I was living on while he was out here? Did he ever think of what I was going through? I shoved the papers in his hands with a pen. “Just sign them, please.”

He did so, almost angrily. I didn’t have the time or the patience to get in a debate with him.

“She also has me taking lessons on courtesy and takes me to...”

“Please tell me you’re just talking like that to play a joke on me. That can’t be what your voice sounds like.”

“Um... I... I guess it’s been like this for the last couple of weeks.” He said. “I can’t help it. I think it was the drugs.” It sounded so strange to hear this adolescent voice of a kid coming from his mouth.

“If possible, it sounds even more high-pitched than it did on the phone.”

“I guess I’ve just gotten used to it.” He sounded like he wasn’t able to put all of his energy into speaking. Besides being light and airy, it sounded distant and slightly dreamy.

“She’s really done a number on you, hasn’t she?”

“Please, Janice, I need to get away from here.”

“Richard, I promise you that I’ll do everything I can to stop that woman from ruining our life.” I said. “What I need you to do is remain strong and fight her. Do whatever you need to do. But don’t let her win.”

I hugged him tight to show him my support.

“But I need to get out of here,” he said.

I felt his chest. “Are you wearing a bra!?” I said, feeling a garment underneath his dress.

“A bra... And panties, yes.” He said. “That’s why you have to get me...”

“Panties too? I thought I saw you wearing them when I was here last, but I wasn’t sure.” I stuffed the papers away in my bag. “Listen, Richard. This is important. What are the PIN numbers to the bank account?” I asked.

“It’s my birthday. 051789”

“Great.” I wrote it down.

“Can’t you take me with you?”

“Would you stop whining? And stand up straight. You’re slouching.”

"I am standing up straight." He said.

"Impossible, I'm two inches shorter than you! That would mean that..."

"Janice, I need to get out of this house!"

"Richard, don't be stupid. I don't have a car with me, I can't take you anywhere. You'll just have to stay here until I can come and get you. Show some backbone, for God's sake." I said. "And you can start by taking off those dresses and..." I suddenly had a question. "Where's she getting all these little girl dresses anyway?"

"She gets them from Katie Mae's room."

"Who's Katie Mae?" Jeter called her and 'Old Maid' didn't he? That meant she had never married. So she never had a kid. "Is she...?"

A noise came from the den door and Richard's head suddenly snapped, turning towards the sound. "She just hung up the phone. She's coming back!" He turned to me and began to beg. "Please, Janice I need to get out of here! Now!"

"If you want to leave so badly, just walk out the door, Richard! You don't need my help!"

"It's miles to the nearest house! And everyone knows her they'd just..."

"Ritchie," Evelyn said sweetly. "Why aren't you making supper like I asked you to, dear?" She slowly entered the room and walked to her chair.

"I... I..." He looked at me for some sort of help. What did he expect me to do, exactly? Take her down? Fight her? "I'm sorry, Aunt Evelyn."

"Get a move on, Ritchie."

"Yes Ma'am." He said, giving me one last pathetic look. He then left for the kitchen.

Evelyn turned to me. "Now, weren't we having a discussion?"

"I think it's time for me to go." I said. "Do you mind if I make a call?"

"Not at all, dear." She said, motioning to the phone.

I pulled the greasy business card Jeter had given me to dial the number. As I waited for him to pick up, I looked at the sign hung above the phone. It read "Blessed are those who walk in Jesus' footsteps."

I looked over to Evelyn. Figures she'd be the religious type. And the pushy religious type.

She noticed my interest. "Like the sign? Little Ritchie made it for me."

"We're both Jewish, you know." I said.

"We're all God's children." She replied. Sanctimonious cunt.



That inbred yokel picked me up at the end of Evelyn's driveway. I don't know which was worse. Having that crazy woman try to fool me or watching Jeter run his eyes up and down my body.

"Eyes on the road." I told him.

"Aw shucks, Ma'am," he said.

"You just may be the prettiest girl I ever did see. So sophisticated."

Compliments like this I could do without. "So what do you know about this Doctor Crumbpacker?"

"The Doc?" He said. "He's fourth generation. His great, great grandfather settled in this town when it was founded. Way back when the Comanche were still in these parts."

"Fascinating. I mean, is he a good doctor?"

"I couldn't rightly say. I've never met another doctor. But I don't know anyone that wouldn't trust him with whatever ails ya'."

"Where's his office?"

"Works out of his house."

"Can you take me there? I need to ask him some questions."



I knocked on the door to the Doctor's house. It had an irritatingly quaint wooden sign out front that read "Will take cattle for payment."

"Hold on, hold on!" A warbling voice said from behind the door. The latches clicked open and I was face to face with an old man, slightly stooped over. He was bald with grey hair at the sides, and thick-lensed English-rim glasses resting on the tip of his nose. "What kin I do for you, miss?" He said. "I hope you're not lookin' for help fixin' your car..."

"You're Doctor Crumbpacker?" I asked.

He took it as an accusation, and straightened out his posture. "That I am."

"You're treating my husband."





“Your husband? I don’t know anyone...”

“My husband *Richard*.”

“Richard?” He said, trying to place the name. “Oh, oh. Ritchie. Evelyn’s guest. Why don’t you have a seat, my back...”

“What are you doing to him?” I said. “I want you to tell me what the hell you think you’re trying to do to my husband.”

“Well, if you’re not going to sit, I will. I just can’t stand up for too long these days.” He walked through the door and hobbled over to a wooden chair nearby on the porch. “Your husband has a severe pituitary gland problem.” He said. He paused as he lowered himself into the chair. “The symptoms were severe fever, hallucinations and diarrhea.” He wiped his brow with a handkerchief he pulled from his jacket pocket. “The treatment is a series of drugs designed to take over the functions of his pituitary gland while simultaneously trying to treat the original problem. Also, some sedatives to keep Ritchie from feeling any pain.”

“I’ve never heard of any such thing. You’re lying to me.” I wasn’t going to let him try and trick me with his made-up diagnosis. “I know plenty of doctors, and they can tell me what’s really happening to Richard.”

The old man just shrugged. “Believe what you want.” He said, unconcerned. “But your husband has a very serious problem that needs serious medical attention.”

“And how does taking all the beard hair off his face qualify for medical attention? How does starving him down to a shadow of his normal weight help him at all? And what the *hell* did you do to his voice?”

He looked across his front lawn, not even meeting my eyes. “I could explain it all, but I’m not sure you’d understand it.”

“Not understand it!” This redneck was telling me *I* was the stupid one? “I understand *plenty*, doctor! Have you ever had a malpractice suit!? Well, you’re sure going to get one hell of one now, I *promise* you!”

He took his glasses off his nose and started to clean the lenses. “I think you’ll find that out here, the courts don’t have a lot of meanin’.” He rubbed a little bit of spit on the lens. “And the truth is, I’m saving him. And I’ll do everything I can to help him, no matter what you try to do. I have a duty.”

“You just made a big mistake, asshole!” I yelled at him. “You’re going to regret the day you ever decided to fuck with me!” I turned on my heel and got the hell out of there. Jeter was waiting in his truck.



I did eventually find a job. Unfortunately, it was in Los Angeles, producing kids’ radio. Well, it was all I could get. No, it didn’t pay very well, and what made it worse was that I still lived in New York, so I commuted every four days back home. Otherwise, I lived in a hotel. And the money was being spent

as fast as I could make it. That damn PIN number Richard gave me was absolutely useless. He said it was his birthday. Well, he was born in 1981. The date of the PIN number he gave me was in 1989. He'd have to be seventeen years old if that was his real birthday.

Maybe it was about that time I finally gave up on being married. Yes, I had already been sleeping with a few men, but I always thought I'd come back to Richard when he was healthy. What he didn't know wasn't going to hurt him. And hell, if he knew, who cared? I would never had let him leave me.

But now, I resigned myself to knowing that we weren't going to be the way we were. Still, divorce was out of the question. I lived in his house, drove his car and used his credit cards. I needed him. As the months passed, I realized that what I had to do was get him back here. As much as I hated to do it, I needed him to live the lifestyle I was accustomed to. I told the people I was working for that I was going to take a few days off and I packed a suitcase. The last two times I had been to Evelyn's, I had left in a rush. I wasn't going to make that mistake again. I would clear out the time and make sure I could convince her and/or Richard it was time to come back.

I had tried to call him once, only to hear him say "I'm not allowed to talk to you, Ma'am." And then he hung up.

It was late August when I returned to that godforsaken Boregard. I had phoned Jeter ahead of time to let him know I was coming. He met me at the bus stop with a cold bottle of Coca-Cola. "This is gettin' to be a habit," he said. "One might think you wuz comin' back just cuz you were sweet on me." I nearly threw up.

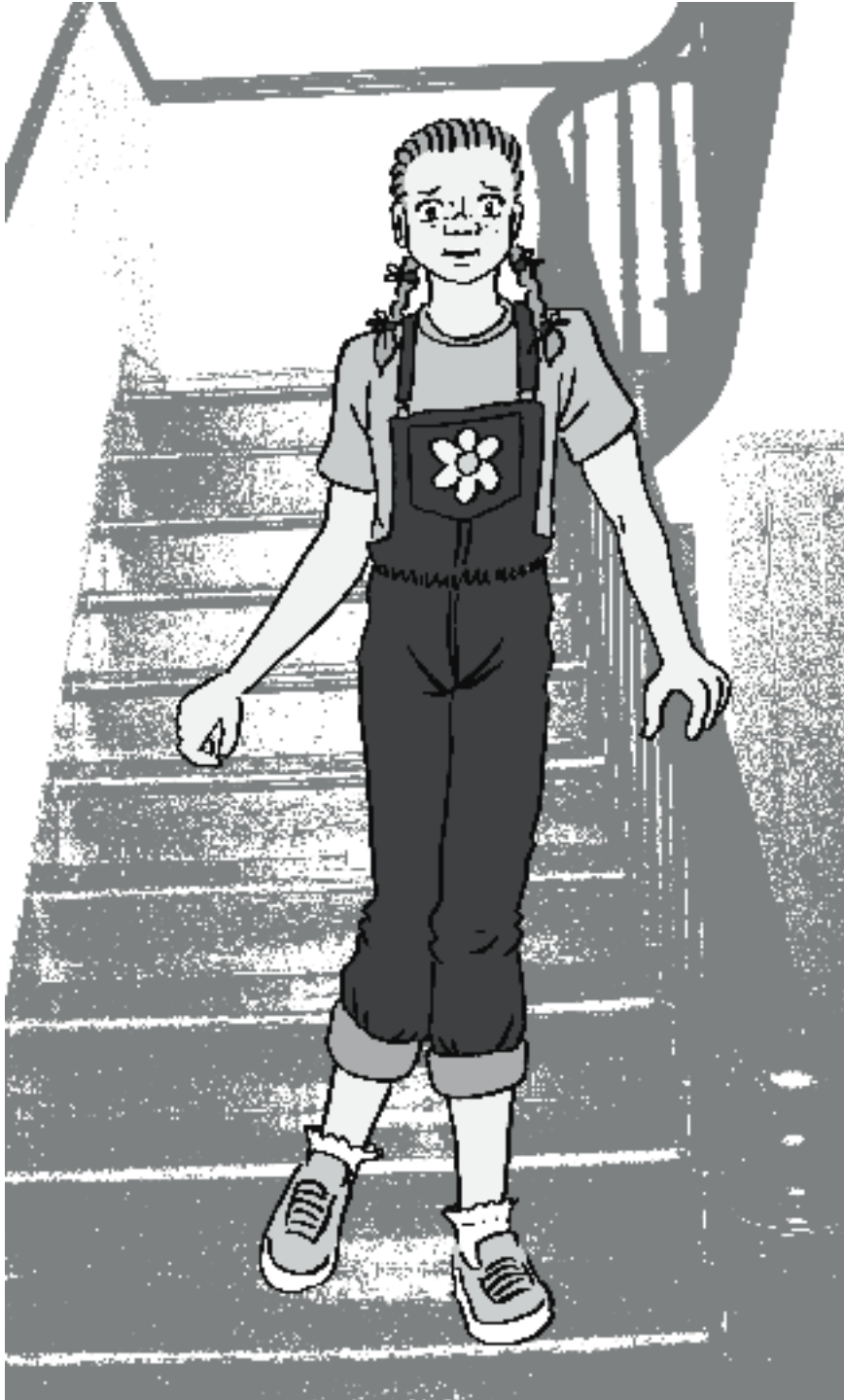
We headed out the now-familiar road to Evelyn's house. It came off of a sparsely-used highway, a turn-off that at parts was paved, and other parts wasn't. Mailboxes were the only real indication that somebody lived in the area. They all had small yellow boxes attached to them for the local newspaper. Some mailboxes were plain, others decorated and painted. There were patriot themes, covered-wagon designs and the occasional miscellaneous decoration like cheerleading, the Oklahoma Sooners or one that was made to look like a giant gun. That was just this part of the country, I guess. Everyone wanted a little bit of attention and this was all they got.

Jeter decided to let me off easy and drove the full length of the driveway up to Evelyn's house. I asked him to wait for me, and he obliged, as usual. I could probably ask him to knock over a bank and he'd do it.

"Jaince!" Evelyn said, sounding almost pleased to see me. "Why, I wasn't expecting visitors! Do come in!" She was drying a dish with a towel and finished up while ushering me inside. "Hello, Jeter!" She said, waving to the truck in the driveway.

Jeter waved back.

I braced myself for what I knew I had to do. At the same time, in my mind, I was running over what I was planning to say. "I've come to see Richard." I said, simply. No small talk. No distractions.



“Oh, of course you have. I’ll go fetch him.” She went upstairs where I could hear the faint sounds of music playing. Country music. Awful stuff.

The music stopped, and then Evelyn returned with Richard following behind. I can’t explain how I felt when I saw him. My blood ran cold. I just didn’t want to believe what I was seeing.

He was dressed in a pair of denim overalls with the pant legs cuffed up to his shins. A large yellow daisy was stitched into the top. Under it, he wore a pink t-shirt and pink tennis shoes. Although his outfit wasn’t terribly feminine, there was no need for it to be. He looked like a girl. His face had changed. His nose was smaller, and his eyes appeared larger. A sprinkle of freckles went across the bridge of his nose. And his hair was no longer just tinged brown. It was strawberry blonde. It was tied up into two braided pigtails that must have been at least eight inches long.

I nearly lost my balance, standing before him. He was so feminine, it was impossible to comprehend that he was the man I had slept with for the past two years. This person wasn’t a man, he was a girl. From the hot pink ribbons tied in his braids to the tips of his polished fingernails to the small lacy socks on his feet. He looked like a nineteen year old girl, fresh from the farm.

And rather than being humiliated and reserved, he smiled brightly at me as he gently swayed from side to side, playing with one of his long braids. He knew I was staring at him, and he seemed to like it. “It’s wonderful to see you again, Ma’am.” She said. “I thought you’d forgotten about us way out here.”

“Richard. Oh my God... I...” It was just incredible what I was seeing. “I’m so sorry.”

For a brief moment, the look in his eyes told me that he was still living in fear. He was begging for me to take him away. And that’s what I was here to do.

“Please don’t be sorry, Ma’am. I know you is busy with what you do, an’ I’m just so happy to see you again!” He said, smiling.

“The way you look...” I tried to explain it, but the words just couldn’t come out.

“I’m sorry I ain’t dressed all fancy for you, Ma’am. I wuz just up in my room practicing. I wasn’t expecting callers.”

“Practicing for what?” I asked.

“Why don’t you show her what you’ve been working on, darlin’?”

Richard was shocked. “You mean...?”

“She’s come all this way. I think she’d like to know how you’re getting along here in Boregard.”

“But you can’t mean that I...”

“I want you to show her everything, little one. Just like you showed all my friends the other day.”

“You’ve been taking him out in public?” I said. “Looking like *this*?”

“Oh, no. We dress up when we go out.” She turned to Richard. “Now, go change and get your music.”

Richard was about to object, but he didn't. He just looked at the two of us and then hung his head. "Yes Ma'am." He said, and he then headed back upstairs. He stopped mid-way and turned back. "Should I do my hair?" He asked.

"No, that'd take too much time. Now scoot."

"Yes, Momma."

"But everything else!" She reiterated.

"Yes, Momma!" Richard replied.

Evelyn watched as he went up the stairs and waited to hear the door close. "Now we have some time to talk without little ears eavesdropping." Evelyn said, she gestured towards a chair for me to sit on. "You must be startled to see Richard like he is now."

"Of course I am! You're trying to turn him into a girl! You're just insane!"

"Now, just calm yourself, Janice." She said, folding her hands calmly in her lap. "I haven't done anything but show little Ritchie some discipline. Besides that, the circumstances of his condition are sufficient to explain everything."

"What!?" I said. "You *can't* be serious!" When had she ever given me any rational explanation for what was going on here?

"Janice, I'll ask you to keep a civil tone."

"What you're doing to him is the most un-civil thing I've ever seen done to another person!"

"His weight, his appearance and his behavior are all due to his illness. You know that as well as I do."

"That crazy doctor is pumping him full of drugs that have changed almost everything about him!"

"The doctor is *saving* him." She then gathered her purse, from where it was resting on a nearby table. "Now let's get to why you're here. You need money."

She didn't have to make it sound so pathetic. "All the money and all we own is in his name. Every minute he's in your clutches, the faster I'm going to be thrown out on the street."

Evelyn laughed. "My 'clutches.' Oh my." She seemed amused at the term.

"Well, I had heard that you had to take out a second mortgage."

Bitch. It was true. I had just done that. "How did you know?"

"That's not important." She replied, waving my concern off. "But you are family, and I wouldn't let family go hungry." She took out a check book. "How much do you need, dear?"

"I don't want your money!" I objected. "I want the money I already have. Richard's money!"

"Well, I'm afraid you might not be able to get it so easily." She said, starting to write on the check. "He's just not the man he used to be."

"Just let me talk to him. I just need the PIN numbers and the account numbers."

“He doesn’t have any more money, Janice. He gave it all to me.”

“He *what!*?” That wasn’t possible! “He wouldn’t *dare* do that before asking me!”

“Richard signed over his power of attorney to me last month. I transferred all his accounts into mine. After all, I’m the one looking after his best interests.”

It looked like she was smiling.

“This will make everything easier, Janice.” She said. “Since I have access to his money, you won’t have to go through Richard anymore. How does fifty thousand dollars sound? Should that cover things for now?”

“Fifty thousand!?” I said. “I owe a hundred and twenty thousand right now!”

The old woman didn’t even blink. “I’ll make it our for a hundred and fifty thousand then. That will give you a little bit of spending money.” She finished up writing the check and carefully tore it from the book. She put everything away and then offered the check to me.

“I don’t need your money.” I said.

“Don’t think of it as *my* money. As you said, it’s the money you and Richard earned. I’m just looking after it.”

I got up to take the check from her. I reached for it, and she pulled it away.

“Now, I don’t think Richard would want this money to go to someone who was taking advantage of him.” She said.

“What do you mean?” I replied.

“I mean, if I was trying to make Richard into a girl or some fool thing, one might think I was paying you to look the other way. Someone might think this was some sort of... Bribe.” She laughed again. “Ridiculous, don’t you think?”

I really hated this woman.

“Don’t you agree that it’s ridiculous?” She asked again.



I nodded. I just needed the money.

“And poor Richard is just going through an illness, you believe that, don’t you?” She asked.

I nodded again.

“I’m sorry, by my ears aren’t what they used to be, sweetie.”

“Yes.” I replied, spitting out the word.

“And we wouldn’t want Richard to think you didn’t trust me completely.”

I took two deep breaths. “I trust you completely.” I said. I grabbed the check from her fingers. I had so many debts. And cocaine isn’t cheap.

I had folded up the check and put it in my pocket when I heard an upstairs door open and close. A loud clacking on the stairs told me someone was descending. Someone wearing shoes that had to belong to a...

“Richard!?” I yelped involuntarily when I saw him.

I first saw the feet, wearing white dancing shoes. They had a sculpted one and a half inch heel and a strap over the instep. Next, his legs. Long and lean. I saw the skirt he was wearing with a hem above his knees. The skirt was huge, flaring out widely. It had to, because of the layers and layers of frilly petticoats underneath. As his legs moved, the skirt swayed back and forth, rustling from side to side. The top had short, poofed sleeves and a square-cut bodice. There were frills stitched into every edge, and lines of more frills accenting the dress. It was pink satin, and it screamed ‘girl’ all over. Richard’s hair was indeed the same as I had seen it earlier, but he had applied a dark layer of mascara to his eyelashes and red lipstick.

And he smiled. He smiled! He wasn’t shrinking away, he was happy. Or at least, he looked like it.

“Richard.” I said again. The look on my face must have been one of horrific disbelief, because the grin on Richard’s face was replaced by a pensive pout.

“The little dear has been taking square dancing lessons.” Evelyn explained. “Isn’t it a wonderful dress? He made it himself.”

“You did?” I asked.

Richard nodded. “Yes. I worked really hard on it.” He looked at me, waiting for a response. “At first, I didn’t think it was a very good idea, but when Momma said it would help me recuperate...” He trailed off. “You think I’m a sissy, don’t you?”

“Uh...” I had to say something. Looking at him, there were so many questions. He had the fair skin of a teenager, and he was three inches shorter than I was, plus he was wearing a skirt and high heels. His nose was just a little nub. How was it possible? How was *any* of this possible?

Then, I felt the check in my pocket. Until I cashed it, nothing was for certain. The money. I had to have the money. “I think it’s a beautiful dress.” I replied. “You look very nice.”

With those words, Richard’s face lit up with joy. A moment later, it faltered. “You don’t think I’m...”



“She said she loves the dress, so what do you say?” Evelyn interrupted.

“Oh! Thank you, Ma’am!” Richard said, as he grabbed the skirt and gave me a full-on old-fashioned curtsy. “I’m so glad you like it, because dancing is a lot of fun!”

“You could have just worn jeans and a shirt.” I said.

Richard looked to his aunt to answer.

“Unfortunately, the men around here don’t have much tolerance for feminine boys. Putting him in a dress is the best disguise.”

Richard looked back at me. “No one suspects a thin’!” He giggled in his tinkling little voice. “Everyone thinks I’m a girl for reals!” And he giggled again.

Giggled. He *giggled*.

“What’s it like in New York?” Richard suddenly asked me. “I miss the city.”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. “It’s been a hot summer. But you can see the first leaves starting to turn brown in Central Park.”

“Fall is my favorite time of year in New York.” He said, his eyes wandering off into the distance.

“So why don’t you show Janice what you’ve been learning?” Evelyn said, taking a cassette tape from Richard’s hand. She walked over to a small player and started up the music. “Here we go!”

The strains of fiddle music and a taped dance call started. I watched as Richard went into a routine, dancing around, pretending there was a man at his side, leading him. He twirled, turned and pirouetted like he had been doing this for a long time. He looked... Graceful. Even in heels.

As I tried to look away and regain my composure, I couldn’t. The sight of my husband prancing and skipping around in petticoats, dancing in time with the music was mesmerizing. It didn’t seem real. *How could it be real?*

I don’t even remember leaving there. I was beaten. I felt like I had just watched everything I valued in my life taken from me. Here I was, a successful career woman, living on two coasts, in charge of a major market radio station, and this hayseed had me eating out of her hand.



“Jeter, is there any place to stay around here?” I asked. “I can’t leave like this. I just can’t let this go.”

“Should I be askin’ you what you’re talkin’ about?”

“No.” I replied. “You really don’t want to know.”

“Well, there ain’t no hotel in Boregard. There’s a boardin’ house up the highway in Fort Junction.”

“How far away is that?”

“Fifty miles.”

“I’m going to need a car, too.” I realized.

“How long are you fixin’ on stayin’?” He said, scratching his unshaven jaw.

“However long it takes. Maybe a few days. A week.”

Jeter took off his ball cap, scratched his unkempt hair and put the cap back on. “My place has a spare room I’m not usin’. I can put’cha up fer a few.”

“Uh...” I probably wanted to laugh, but I wasn’t in the mood. “Let’s just keep that as a last resort.”

“Is there some place to eat around here?”

“There’s the truck stop.”

“Do they serve drinks?”

“No. But the rhubarb pie will make you cry for mercy, it’s so good.”

I really wanted a drink. But I wasn’t up to arguing about it. “Let’s go.”



After we ate, Jeter had to get back to the station. He said he could get a car ready for me by the afternoon. “Ain’t gonna be as fine as them luxury see-dans you drive in New York.” He said. That was fine with me. As long it could get me around.

That check was burning a hole in my pocket. I asked the waitress where the nearest banks was, and she said there was a savings and loan just down the road. It was located inside a drug store. Classy.

I opened an account there and deposited the check, which was the easiest thing to do, and I’d transfer the money to my own accounts in NYC later. I cashed out a thousand for spending money.

I went back to the truck stop and waited for Jeter to return with his car. While I had the time, I needed to figure out exactly what I was going to do now. I wasn’t about to let that crazy woman win. I was going to get Richard back, one way or another. But I had to know more about what was going on. Yes, he was being slowly changed into someone he wasn’t. But I had to know more. How was is being done? Was Richard going along with this, or was he still fighting it?

He did seem to remember the city. It almost seemed like he was giving me a message, that he wanted to come back with me.

I decided what I needed to do was ask a lot of people a lot of questions. And it was clear from the stares I was getting that I was the outsider here. I wasn’t going to able to get any information out of anyone while I stuck out so much.

Jeter returned with a beat up seventies car of some sort. “The throttle’s a little sticky so you might need to keep yer foot on the brake.” He said. I tried to give him a hundred for his trouble, but he refused it. See, that’s why they live out here. You never turn your back on cash money. Any successful person knows that. Business lesson one.

I had a map, and decided to follow it to the nearest large dot. That’s got to be the biggest city in the area, right? Well, if you count four stores and a single stop light a city, that’s what I got. Lake Stimpson was the name of the town, but if there was an actual lake nearby, I missed it. There was a small strip mall there that had what I was looking for. A “Beauty Salon.” And I’m using the term loosely.

I used a wipe to clean my face off and scruff up my hair before I walked in. I told the lady that I wanted “The Works.” I fed her a story about having a job interview or whatever.

I knew that Tyrell, my stylist back in New York was going to give me a tongue-lashing for what I was about to do to my hair, but I wasn't sure I had a choice.

I must have been there for a while. A few hours at least. And I wasn't disappointed. I expected incompetence, and boy did I get it.

They gave me the most awful French-tipped nails you could possibly imagine. They re-did my makeup to make me look like some whorehouse slut, complete with blue eye shadow. I had so much makeup on my face that it was actually darker than the rest of my skin.

And my hair – Oh, it makes me want to cry. They did this patently horrible dye job, taking me from my nice mahogany reddish brown to a radioactive red. On top of that, my nice, straight hair had been frizzed out in the front and the back. I looked like I had been given a haircut by a dog groomer.



But I couldn't have asked for anything better. It was exactly what I wanted. I asked where the nearest dress shop was, and the ladies there told me to go down the highway a few more miles to Jasper Flats. I did so, and found a small store with a middle-aged fat woman in a muumuu ready to help me with my fashion choices.

I made her year, I bet. I cleaned the place out. Which wasn't much, mind you. I just asked for the stuff she sells the most of. And I got a bit of everything. Shoes, purses, hats, sunglasses – whatever they had.

I changed in the car on my way back to Boregard.



“Howdy, Flo!” The Captain said as I came into the diner. The Captain is what they call him. I don't know his real name, but he's always parked in the same booth, day after day. Kind of a fixture at the truck stop.

“Hi!” I responded with a friendly wave. ‘Flo’ was short for Flora. That was the name I was going by here. I had to blend in. I had to make these people believe I was one of them. That was the only way I was going to get to the bottom of whatever it was that was happening to Richard. I needed these yokels to trust me.

So I had to make myself into someone they hadn't met yet. They all knew about “Janice” the woman from the big city. “Flora” was from Shooter's Canyon, Texas. I'm not even sure if there's a “Shooter's Canyon,” but Jeter came up with the name and it sounded right to me, so I went with it. We told everyone that I was his girlfriend. It seemed like a good story, and Jeter wasn't about to turn down the opportunity to pretend to be my boyfriend. Or “steady” as they called it out here.

Of course, Janice would never be caught dead hanging around with Jeter. But I made Flo the sort of girl that would. She wasn't very well educated, dropping out of High School to work on her Daddy's ranch. She met Jeter at a Rodeo, and after exchanging letters for several months, decided to move to Boregard. IQ was eighty five, tops.

But that was just a cover story. During the day, I spent most of my time in that car Jeter gave me parked just off the highway, where the dirt roads that led to Evelyn's house began. If she was on the move, I was there to follow her. Over the past week, I had gotten a good idea of what she was doing and where she was going. In fact, I expected her to appear here any minute. It was Sunday morning, and Evelyn was a church-going person. She stopped off here for coffee before services began at seven. That's way too early to praying to any god, if you ask me, but that's what these people did.

I had on a nice church-going outfit. A yellow ankle-length dress with an overabundance of ruffles. It had some white details that made it look even more virginal. I had a huge white floppy hat with fake flowers in it, and had white low heels and a white purse to go with it.

“Coffee?” the waitress asked.

“Thanks much, Muriel.” I said. “Kin I get it to go?”

“Shore thang,” Muriel said with a smile.

As she poured it into a styrofoam cup, I watched as Evelyn's station wagon pulled into the parking lot. She was pretty much on time. We had already



crossed paths twice since I started to pass myself off as Flo, and she hadn't spotted me. I took my cup out to my car and wished Evelyn a neighborly "Morning!" as I passed by. She just returned the greeting, pleasantly and politely. Not even my mother would recognize me in this getup. And God help me if she ever did.

As I walked by the station wagon, I could see another person in the back seat. It had to be Richard, but I wasn't able to get a good look through the tinted windows on the car. I guess I was just going to have to wait until Church to see him.

I drove the car to the church, where the entire town seemed to gather on Sunday morning. It was a very religious town. A very Christian town. Boregard Family Christian Church was what the sign read. Sure enough, a priest in a robe with a collar was greeting the parishioners at the front door.

As I lingered, sure enough, Evelyn's car pulled in. I tried to look casual as I waited for the passengers to exit. Evelyn was in a light blue and white dress, a type of dress truly unique to these parts, thankfully. It could have been worn by settlers. It looked that old-fashioned.

And then Richard got out. He was indeed wearing a dress – short, and in pink. He was wearing white stockings with black Mary Jane shoes. As they got out of the car, I couldn't hear what they were saying very well. But Evelyn pointed toward another part of the church, and Richard went running off to that entrance.

Sunday school. Richard was attending Sunday school.

I had to steady myself a little, so I went inside and found a seat towards the rear. I tried to stay inconspicuous, except for saying hello to a few of the people I had met around town the past few days. They all knew Flo as the friendly, neighborly, aw-shucks girl I wanted them to see.

"Sorry I'm late." Jeter said, seating himself beside me just before the services began. Well, I quickly learned it doesn't look right for me to be myself like this. Jeter had to go where I went. Especially to church. I can't have people think either Flo or Jeter aren't God-fearing Christians like everyone else here, can I? "Did I miss anythin'?"

"Hush." I told him. "About to start."

I sat through the whole thing, trying my best to look like I was having a grand old time, smiling and putting all my heart into the hymns. But when it was finally over, I was first out the door so I could get a good view of Richard, as Evelyn took him home.

Dragging Jeter behind me into the parking lot, he gave me a peck on the cheek and went off back to the gas station. I fussed with the things in the trunk of my car as I waited for Richard's return.

A few minutes later, Richard and the children in the school were let out, and he ran across the lot into the arms of Evelyn. He proudly showed her a few pieces of paper, and she hugged him even tighter.

After they drove away, I picked up a piece he had dropped. It was a worksheet. A Bible study worksheet.

“Q. Isn’t it true that the Bible says we are to never judge anyone?” It read. Then there was a handwritten answer. “John 7:24 says ‘Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.’”

“Q: Is homosexuality condemned by the Bible?” Was the next question. Its answer read: “In Romans 1:26 it says ‘For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, 27 and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.’ And this is why homosexuals are evil and have AIDS.” It was graded A plus plus.

All the answers were in carefully lettered, girlish script. And it was signed “Katie Mae Johnson.” Just as I thought, Richard was almost totally gone, and I didn’t have much time. Soon, he might actually come to believe he was Katie Mae.

I had done some research on Evelyn and this Katie Mae name. It turns out that although Evelyn never did marry, she did have records of having a stillbirth baby. The records listed it as “K. Johnson.”

Good. The bitch didn’t deserve a daughter.





Unfortunately, as time went on, it became clear to me that wherever Evelyn went, she brought Richard. All I wanted was to get Richard alone. Alone where I could talk to him, get him to reason things out. And maybe I'd even be able to convince him to get away.

This time, I didn't care what they said in New York. I'd spend whatever Richard had left to get him back to being himself. I'd get the best people to tend to him and the best hospitals. And he'd get a new job once he was better. Who wouldn't want to hire a man who was at the edge of death and came back for a full recovery? A man who was kidnapped and fought his captors? That was a man with character. And it would all be thanks to me. He'd be garteful for the rest of his life towards me.

But first, I had to get his Aunt away from him. And I had a plan.

I used Jeter's phone and I called up Evelyn's house. "Hello, Johnson residence. This is Katie Mae Johnson." sang a delicate, girlish voice.

"Hello, Richard." I replied. "This is Janice."

"Hello, Ma'am. I'll get Momma cuz I ain't allowed to talk to you."

"Please do." I said.

I waited a minute for Evelyn to get to the phone and pick up. I remember thinking how I felt sorry for her and how I was about to take her child from her once more. But she's a crazy old bitch. And besides, guilt is a useless emotion.

"Thank you Katie Mae." Evelyn said as she got on. "Now why don't you finish up with the preserves." She then turned her attention back to me. "Hello, Janice. How are things in New York?"

"Preserves?" I asked.

"Katie Mae and I are doing some spring canning."

"Canning?" I replied like I didn't understand. Oh, but I did. Over the past two and a half weeks, I had learned a lot. Every woman in the town was talking about spring canning season. It was almost like a holiday or something. A holiday for shut-ins and nut jobs. They took the seasonal fruits, jellied them and packed them away in jars for the rest of the year.

Of course, you can just go buy the same stuff in the supermarket, but I guess these people weren't that bright after all. Anyway, not only had I learned this, but I learned a little bit about how you do it. You have these giant pots of simmering sugared fruits on the stove for a long, long time. Almost a day. And they need regular attention. At least this is what Muriel down at the truck stop told me.

And if she was right. I had just gotten what I was looking for. "Evelyn, I... I... I hate to bother you... But I need money, quick!" I said, doing my best to sound exasperated.

"I crashed the car, and I don't have enough to cover the repairs!"

"Now calm down, dear," Evelyn said, condescendingly. "I told you I never let family go without. How much do you need and where can I wire the money to?"

I gave her my New York address, drivers license number and social security for ID. "Please hurry!" I begged.

I jumped in my car and sped towards Evelyn's house. Sure enough, her car sped by me half-way there. She would be headed to the drugstore, the nearest place you could wire money. And the car had no passengers, just Evelyn.

Why? Because someone had to stir the easily-burnable sugar simmering on the stove. Richard.

I pulled my car into the driveway and ran up the stairs. I didn't have a lot of time to spare. I banged loudly on the door. "Richard!" I yelled. "Richard, It's me!"

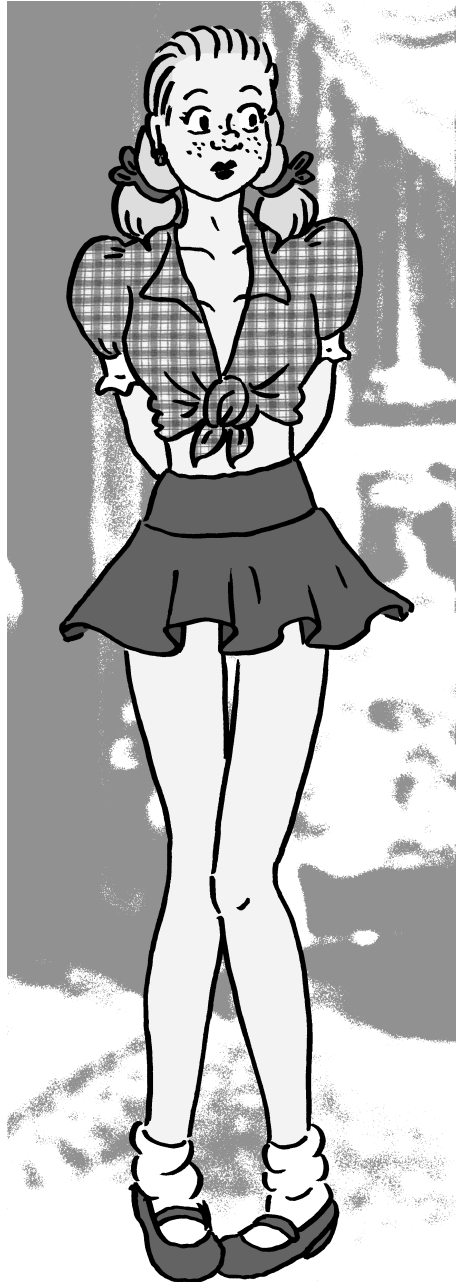
The door opened as Richard peeked out. "Janice?" He said. "Is that you?"

He didn't recognize me in this ridiculous getup. "Yes, it's me, Richard. I know I don't look like myself but..."

And as the door swung open, I realized it wasn't just me who didn't look like themselves.

As he stood there, looking anxious, he bit his plump lower lip, girlishly. His big, clear eyes looked out the doorway for any sign of Evelyn. He braced his weight on the doorframe, his long, slender arms holding the sides.

"I... I guess we're alone? Um, come in?" He said. His voice was just as light and melodious as it



had been last time. I talked to him. But this time there was something different about the way he said things. He talked in quick bursts, ending every sentence like it was a question. Just like a teenage girl does.

I came inside. "Richard, we have to move quickly. I don't have a lot of time." I turned back towards him, seeing him in full for the first time. He was wearing a simple outfit, but one only a country girl would wear. He had on a flirty denim skirt that ended where the thighs began. They showed off an envious pair of long, smooth and slender legs. He had on white cotton socks, gathered at the ankle, where he had on a pair of simple one-inch pumps that had a single strap. He stood slightly knock-kneed, looking somewhere over my shoulder as he waited.

But as girlish as his legs were, the top half made the blood in my heart go as cold as the bathroom floor on a winter morning. He had a paid flannel shirt on, with cap sleeves that poofed out like popcorn on his shoulders, ending in small ruffles. But the shirt dove deep down to the middle of his chest, showing two perfectly formed, round globes of flesh that would make any man drop to his knees in awe. I wondered how he could make such convincing fake breasts like those.

They had to be false, right?

"You still want to escape, don't you, Richard? You still want to go back to New York, right?" I asked. Because I had some doubt in me now.

"Oh, I shore do!" He said with a smile. His red, pouty lips smiled, showing off all of his pearly white teeth. His tiny, freckled nose scrunched up in the cutest way. "Is you gonna take me back to the bownstore?"

"Brownstone." I corrected. "Yes, but we have to move now. If there's anything you need to bring, get it now!"

"Okay. I'll git my thins'." He said, going for the stairs. "C'mon!"

I followed, watching my former husband trot up the stairs, his arms floating out to his sides, being ever so careful in his heeled shoes. When we got to the hallway, he passed up the room I had originally seen him, so many months ago.

"Isn't your stuff in there?" I asked.

"Not no more." He replied. "I'm in my new room now."

We went into his "new room," which was decked out in feminine frills. A pink bed sheet with white lace trim dressed a simple but large bed that had a pile of stuffed animals on it. White cotton lace curtains blew in the wind. The walls were painted a pastel pink and the dresser, vanity, the full length mirror were white.

On some shelves, a raggedy-ann doll rested, smiling vacantly at the floor. And on every wall, a framed picture of needlework was hung. "Only in the Lord will ye find happiness," read one. "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom," read another. And stitched on his pillows was the most intricate stitching of all, where it read "Property of Katie Mae."

"This is Katie Mae's room." I said.

“Uh-huh.” He replied, unfazed. “Momma made it when she was carryin’.”

“I see.” I said. “And now you stay here.”

“Of course I do!” He said, looking around for the things he wanted to take. “It’s my stuff.”

“It’s Katie Mae’s stuff.”

“I’m gonna needs me some clothin’ I’m figgerin’.” Richard said in that idiotic country twang he used now. He opened up his closet. It was stuffed with dress after dress, lace, frills and ruffles bursting forward.

“Everything’s so pink and girlish in here. How can you stand it?”

“Ain’t it wonderful? I’ve always loved pink.”

“When I wore pink to the Nusbaum bar mitzvah you said it made you sick to be seen with me.”

“I thought you looked like a slut.” Richard said, looking at me. I recognized the look in his eyes. That look of determination. That steely gaze I knew so well. “And no one can be taken seriously in pink.”

“So why do you stay here, Richard? Why don’t you change the color?”

“I think I did... Once...” He said, looking around the room, at the walls. “But then I remembered how much I love pink...”

“You’re bring brainwashed!” I told him.

“Momma would never do that. She loves me so.”

“Your mother died three years ago, Richard. You were by her bed!”

Then a look of awareness came to him. He was sad. He looked down at the hard wood floor. “I promised her I’d look after Aunt Evelyn.”

“Do you like dressing like this, Richard? Do you like living out here in the Godforsaken hellhole? Do you want to be the virtual slave of that woman!?”

“I want to go home, Janice!” He said, strength coming to his voice. “Please take me home!” He looked at me, begging me again. He relied on me for direction. He needed me to tell him what to do. That was the way I liked it.

“Get your things and let’s go!” I said. “We’ve got to go now!”

Richard turned back to his closet and picked out two dresses. “I guess I can’t really go anywhere in my old clothes.” He said. “I’ve got to use what’s here.”

“Pick one and move!”

“One!?” He whined. “I can’t take just one! This one’s my fancy dress for company and this one I made myself, and this one’s for church...”

“Richard, you’ve got to stop thinking like that!”

He looked like he was on the verge of crying. “But... Don’t you think... Sometimes I know down deep in my heart... I really could be... I like it when people call me Katie Mae. I feel so good. So real and warm inside. It’s so wonderful.”

“Richard!” I barked.

“Oh, I so *hate* that name!” He said, his strong voice giving way to a girlish screech. “I *hate* being called that!”

“You’re my husband, Richard Weinbaum. Twenty-three years old. Born in Waterbury, Massachusetts.”

“No I ain’t!” He replied, his eyes expressing delight, like he had just discovered the truth. “Your husband is dead! My Momma said so! That proves I ain’t your husband!”

“She said... *What!?*”

“She said that’s why you’re all bitter and’ that why you want to take me away! Because you’re lonely and wicked!”

“Richard, *please!* You have to concentrate! We nearly...”

“My name is Katie Mae Johnson! My Momma is Evelyn Johnson and I was borned in this very here house by ol’ Doc Crumbpacker! You’s a liar!” He pointed at me accusingly, as his eyes welled up in tears. “A liar!”

I grabbed him by the shoulders. “I know you can beat this, Richard! Please *concentrate!*”

“No!” He screamed. “I’m Katie Mae Johnson! I *know* I am!” Tears started to roll down his cheeks. “I want... I want...” He then shook his head and looked me in the eyes. “Help me, Janice. I... don’t know what’s happening anymore.”

“Then let’s move!” I said, tugging him by the arm.

He just looked at me, his body beginning to shake. His eyes were filled with confusion and terror, with tears streaming down his face. I took him in my arms... I hated having to do this. There wasn’t time. And I hate babying people. As his arms wrapped around me, his legs gave way and he sobbed like a baby into my shoulder. “...I just wanted to make Mom happy...” He blubbered. “That’s all I ever wanted... I just wanted to be good for her... Oh, Mom...”

I patted him on the head. “Just let it out. Let it out, honey. There’s been so much you’ve been through. I know.” I wanted to sympathize with him to make him feel better. “No one knows better than me what you’re going through.”

He pulled his head back to look at me. “Really?” He said, fighting the tears.

“Of course I do. I mean, look at me. I’ve had to pretend to be this awful, tacky, tasteless person to keep these local pinheads from finding out who I am! I mean, do you know the things I’ve had to do!?! Just look at my hair! It’s awful! And my fingernails, I mean I’ve been through hell!”

“Uh-huh.” He said. And he let go and stood on his own. “It must have been... really bad for you.”

“I mean, not to complain, but the faster we’re out of this horrible, miserable little town of losers and slack-jawed yokels, the better!”

“We better get going then.” Richard said. “I’ll just take one.” He went back to his closet. He picked one dress out and felt the fabric. “I wore this one to my baptism. Everyone in town was there. Everyone told me how pretty I was and how much they knew I’d be such a wonderful daughter for my Momma.”

“Richard. Please. You’ve *got* to focus.”

"I remember thinkin' that I was going to get it all wet, because of the baptizin'. Then I thought that I could make sacrifices for my faith in the Lord."

I caught a glimpse of something out the window. I ran to see the clouds of dust Evelyn's car was making as she drove down the long three-mile road. "She's coming back!"

"...And then when I was bendin' over, I realized that my slip might be showing, to I tugged at the hem, and everyone laughed. I was so embarrassed. Did I show you the shoes I wore that day?"

I grabbed Richard by the arm. "Richard!" I yelled at him. "Richard!"

"I wore my Mary Janes because so many other girls wore them to Church. And Momma said I looked so sweet in my Mary Janes and my white stockings. Sweet as sugar frostin' she said."

"You're Jewish like me, Richard! You're a man! You're my husband!"

"I can't be your husband, can I *really*?" He said. It was a question he wasn't asking me, he was asking himself.

"Evelyn has to be stopped! She's made you as crazy as she is!" I stomped on the floor. "Let's move now!"

"Okay." He said. He took the dress he was holding and then ran behind me down the stairs.

We got to the front door and he turned quickly to a mirror to re-apply his lipstick.

"Please, Richard!"

"I need to look proper going out." He said. Then his eyes started to drift again. "Maybe we should ask my Momma if it's okay for me to go with you?"

I grabbed him and kissed him as deeply as I could. I knew I didn't have the time, but he left me no choice. "Do you remember, Richard? Do you remember the way things used to be? Don't you want to be in my arms again?"

"But..." He still had some hesitation. I kissed him once more. "Did we really love each other?" He asked.

"Of course we did, Richard!" I told him. "We're husband and wife!"

He straightened himself up and swallowed. "Evelyn's going to be heart-broken. I hope we're doing the right thing." Clearing his voice, he seemed to struggle with his voice. "Let's go." He said.

"Finally." I said, rolling my eyes. "Sometimes you're more trouble than you're worth."

He took one step outside before stopping cold. He sniffed the air. "The stove!" He said, looking back inside.

"Get in the passenger seat. I'll drive." I said.

"There's smoke coming from the kitchen!" Richard said, not moving.

"Good. Let the whole damn place burn down." I replied.

"I have to..." He said, before turning and running back inside. He ran to the kitchen, and I left the ignition running as I ran after him.

Once I caught up with him in the kitchen, I could see a pot on the stove burner was belching black smoke.

"No, Richard! *No!*" I yelled. "Let the damn place burn!"

He grabbed an apron and tied it around him. "My blackberry preserves! I'll never win the blue ribbon at the county fair now!" He took the pot and put it under the faucet, causing steam to spew out and mix with the smoke.

I had no time left. I pushed him away from the sink. "Please, Richard!"

He looked at me with a stare. "I... I gots to do what I gots to do, Ma'am." He said.

"Richard!" I barked. "I'm giving you one last chance!"

"Leave Katie Mae alone, Janice."

I turned to see Evelyn standing in the doorway. She picked off her white gloves finger by finger. "Of course I know it's you. The girls down at the beauty parlor in Jasper Flats sure do fine work, don't they?"

"Momma, my preserves!" Richard wailed.

"We have many more blackberries, darlin'. Why don't you go pick some more." Evelyn said, supportively.

Richard untied his apron and put it back on its' peg. "I know Momma, but we worked so hard!"

"And we'll just have to work harder." She replied. "No go fetch your pickin' basket and get some more berries before sundown." She then paused. "Unless you want to go to the city with Miss Janice here."

He only glanced at me for a split second before he walked past me. "Okay, Momma!" Richard said, his mood lightening.

"Richard!" I called to him.

He turned around. As he did, I no longer saw any trace of my husband in that face anymore. "I guess I'll just never see the big city," he said with a half-hearted smile. "I'm jus' an old-fashioned country girl at heart."

"No!" I yelled. "*Don't let them win!*"

"I've got to change into a berry pickin' outfit, don't I Momma?"

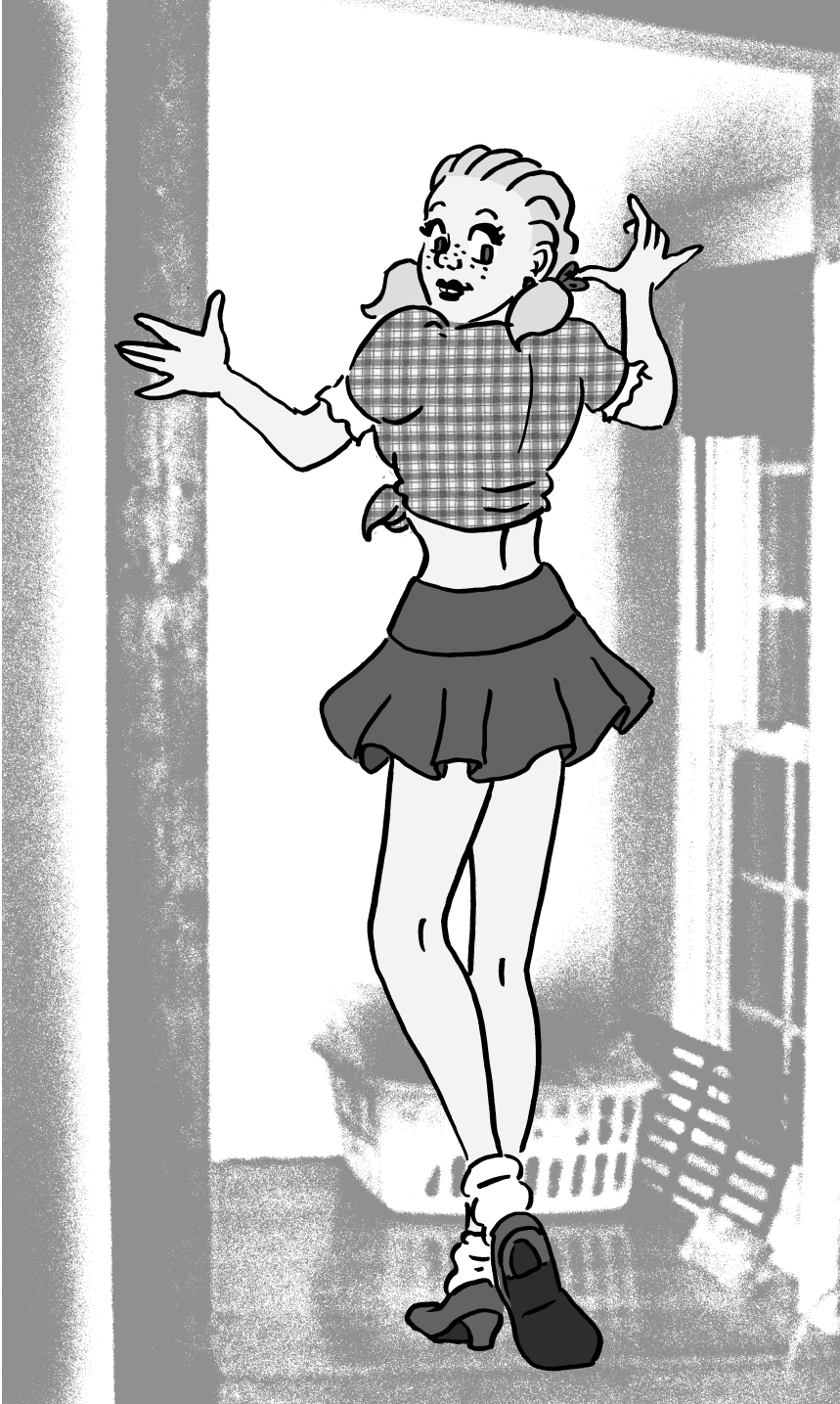
"I expect so, little one," Evelyn replied with a smug smile.

"I know exactly what I want to wear!" He said, his face lit with joy. He galloped on upstairs to Katie Mae's room, humming a happy tune.

I turned to Evelyn. "What have you done to him!?" I yelled. "He really believes he's your daughter!"

"And I'll love him like a daughter." Evelyn replied. "Because she *is* my daughter."

"He's my husband!"



“She’s not anyone’s husband any more.” She said, with a smile that made me sick. “She’s dressing in girls’ clothes, living in a girls’ room and answers to a girls’ name. She’s no more your husband than she’s the King of Siam.” She put her gloves on the kitchen counter and turned off the stove burner. “She’s become the person God always meant her to be.”

“Fuck you and your fuckin’ God!” I screamed. “And fuck your self-righteous, condescending attitude! You’re a murderer! You killed him! *Killed him!*”

“No, we *saved* him.” Another voice said, coming from behind me. I turned around to see it was Doctor Crumbpacker. “We saved your husband. And now Katie Mae is blessed by the glory of God.”

“Saved him from dying!?” I yelled. “He was never sick! He never had any disease!”

“We saved his *soul*.” Evelyn said.

“We saved him from eternal torment in the fires of hell!” The doctor said, with an evangelic flare.

I turned back to the doctor. “You’re insane! You’re out of your feeble little minds!”

“No, Janice.” The doctor answered. “Your husband was sick. Sick with a disease so insidious that only the most radical treatment could cure it.”

“I don’t believe anything you say.” I tried to leave. The doctor grabbed me by the wrist with surprising strength.

“The truth is very simple, and plain to see for those with the righteousness of God on their side.” He said, his voice in reverent tones. “Your husband... I’m sorry to have to tell you this.” he seemed almost regretful. “Your husband... Was a *homosexual*.”

I had just heard the craziest thing they had said yet. “Let go of me, you demented old man!” I said. “We were lovers! We fucked each other like... Like...”

“His mother told me before she died, Janice.” Evelyn said. “He way gay through high school. Then when he went to college, he wanted to succeed. So he pretended to be normal and dated you.”

“What!?” I cried. “That’s not true!”

The doctor let me go. “So we saved him, Janice. We gave him the body God couldn’t give him. Now that poor soul is in the proper vessel, where she can ascend to the kingdom of heaven. We do the Lord’s work here in Boregard.”

“Why!?” Even if it were true, *why!?*”

The doctor leaned in close to talk. “Because,” he said in a low, gravely voice. “*God hates faggots.*”

And I had heard enough. I barged through them and headed out to my car. The hell with them. The hell with Boregard. I was sorry for Richard, but I had tried my best.

“Oh, don’t go.” Evelyn said, without doing so much as turning around. “Don’t go. Just yet.”



I looked over my shoulder to see what she was talking about. “You’ll need these if you want to go anywhere.” She held up a handful of papers for me to see. She examined them. “I got them from your car. Driver’s license, check-book, credit cards...”

They were mine. “Give those back.”

Evelyn walked over to the stove, turned on the gas burner and looked at me. “You’re just too angry for us to let you leave.” She tossed the items onto the burner. They lit into flame quickly.

“You bitch!” I yelled.

She just grinned. “Now there’s nowhere for you to go. No room you can rent, no plane you can ride, no bus to take. Without those, you’re not leaving Boregard.”

“What do you want?” I said, sizing things up. “Do you want me to make another promise? Lie to Richard? Do you want the money back? What!?”

Doctor Crumbpacker stepped forward. “My family came to this land in eighteen hundred and twenty-two.” He said, fishing for something in his pocket. “We lived alongside the Cherokee here. My great, great grandpappy Boregard Crumbpacker became friends with their medicine man. And he told Boregard an incredible story. It’s not unusual for there to have been Injuns who ain’t quite men... And ain’t quite women. They treated them special. Gave them a special place in the tribe, treated them like wise men or sorcerers.”

Evelyn started to speak. “They had one of these special members of the tribe who wanted desperately to be a woman. He was a man, but only in body. Inside, he was a woman. And he was miserable. Suicidal. He desperately wanted to fall in love with a man and bear children.”

The doctor continued. “So the medicine travelled down to the Gulf of Mexico to the shores of Lake Michigan, gathering the plants and animals he needed. Then the man made a stew. A stew with every ounce of medicine they knew about. Thousands of years of knowledge passed down through generation after generation. And this tribesman drank it. Every day. Day after day.

Seasons passed. The snows came and melted away. The winds came and went." The doctor said. "And when a year was over..."

"He." Evelyn picked up. "Was a *she*."

"In every way. Had five children," the doctor remarked, "so they say."

"That's a load of shit." I said.

Crumbpacker shrugged. "Believe what you will. But now, your husband will one day have a child."

"Four." Evelyn said with a smile. "I want lots of grandchildren."

"Impossible!" I said.

"Not impossible." The doctor said, producing a syringe. "Done this myself seven times. My father did it eight."

"What's that?" I said, backing away from the man with the syringe.

"The stew." He said. "I've been giving it to Richard to fix that little hormonal problem of his. And in six months, she'll be complete."

"That's crazy. You're deranged." I told him. "You're all clinically insane!"

"Hal!" Evelyn said, her loud laugh shocking me. I turned to see her trying to hold in more laughter. "It also has an effect on women, too." Evelyn said. "It makes them want to settle down and..." She paused. "Well... you'll find out."

I felt the needle in my arm. Before I could do anything, that stuff was in my system.

"Oh, and it shaves a couple of years off for some reason. I'm sure you'll enjoy that. Who doesn't want to be younger?" She smiled, showing me her grey, aging teeth. "Welcome to Boregard," Evelyn said, "hope you'll stay for a spell."



With school beginnin' the days here at the truck stop pass by pretty slowly. In the summer, the kids hang out here. But then school starts up and they have to go. I mean, we get our regular business in from the truckers, but they're mostly night people. Otherwise, it's just me and Muriel holdin' down the ship.

Well, it's us and the Captain, of course.

At lunch time, Jeter drops by an' I serve him up a burger and a heapin' helpin' of fries. And of course, some of that dee-vine rhubarb pie. I kiss him goodbye and he goes back to the gas station. He's savin' up to by the place an' when he's got about half, Mr. Sherman says he'll turn over the place to him. So it's not like I'm gonna work here forever. But until then, I'm just a workin' girl.

"Hey Flo! The captain says. "Give me another fill-up, won'cha?"

"Shore thang, Cappy." I say. I know it's just so he kin git an eyeful of me, but I don't seem to mind.

What's it been, six months? Six months since I became a resident of Boregard? Has it been that long? I tell you, though I just fell in love with the place.

I'm so happy to find such a nice town with such nice folks.

No, now, I know what you're sayin'. 'You're from New York, and those evil people made you stay here in this city so's you could never tell about what they did to your husband.' And that's true. But you see, I do love the place – because of that drug the doctor gave me. It wasn't but a few hours after that Injun stew got into me that I decided I'd never leave this beautiful town. I know the drug made me feel like this, but there's nuthin' I kin do about it no more. I know I don't really like it, but I just can't stop the feelin' that I do.

Did I tell you about the last time I saw Richard? Well, I was in Haskell, doin' a little shoppin' and in comes Evie Johnson and Katie Mae. They wuz shoppin' fer clothes and' Katie Mae was so excited that she was gettin' her very first a-dult bra. I never did see such joy on a girl's face. She was just beside herself, I tell you.

She was so pretty. When I was her age, all I was thinking was how I was going to get a job and what college I needed to get into. Now, Katie's a girl with



her head on straight. She's gonna marry a good, decent man and have his children. There's just no more fuffillin' thing in life to have your man's children.

I know, it's that Injun stew talkin' again, but I just can't tell anymore where that drug starts and where it ends.

"What's your favorite type?" Katie Mae asked me.

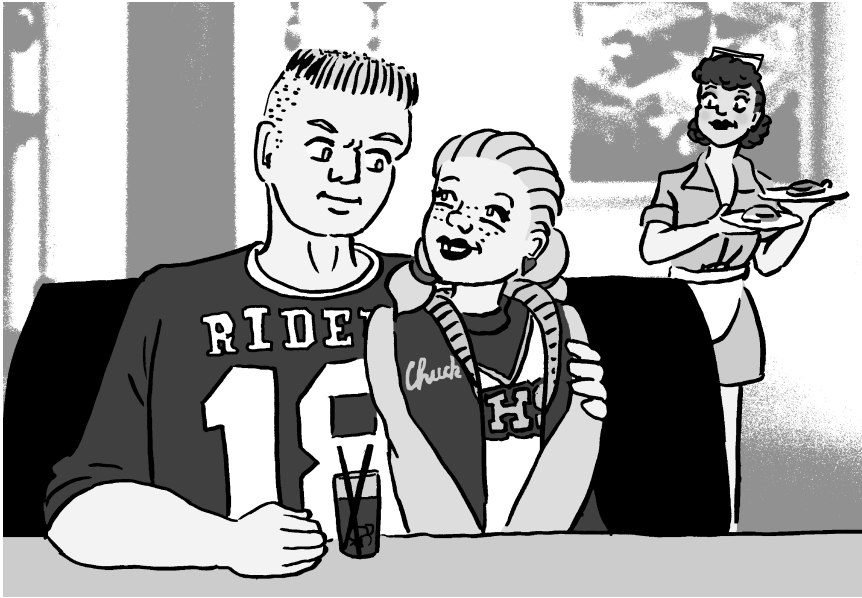
"Jeter likes me in the underwire." I whispered to Katie Mae. I din't want her Momma to hear me. She might just scold me for talkin' that way to her child. She's very protective like that.

"Do they really work?" She asked me.

"Trus' me." I replied, winking.

Oh, I forgot. I saw her after that. I actually saw Katie Mae just yesterday. She was in with her friends here at the stop, makin' a big ol' scene in one of our booths. Laugin' and screamin' with her friends. She's a senior in high school,





an' she's seein' Chuck Andrews, the All-County halfback. She wuz in her darlin' little ol' cheerleadin' outfit and wearin' Chuck's letter jacket. She's growin' up so fast.

They were orderin' mostly the cheapest thing on the menu – sodas – and sharin' em with two straws. You could see that Chuck had really fallen hard for Katie Mae. He was just starin' in her eyes all the time. No kissin' though. Katie Mae's a good girl. I suppose they'll get married probably in a year or two. He's a nice boy, he'll make a good husband. A good catch. Sometimes I feel so proud of my girl.

Yeah, I guess life for me in Boregard is pretty good. I've joined that square dancing club down at the veteran's hall and I see Katie Mae down there every Wednesday night. I'm also really involved down at the church, putting together the annual bake sale. I enjoy it so.

Sometimes, though, I find myself forgettin' about my old life. There will be days I go without thinkin' about the big city. Sometimes a whole week goes by an' I'll not even remember Janice, an' what it used to be like to be her.

Been gettin' more and more frequent, too. But what are you gonna do? I guess that's why I wanted to tell the story one last time before I fergets it.

There was this time that I tried gettin' my money from my bank and all, but I couldn't prove nuthin' to the bank. I had no identification or anyhin'. There ain't never been no such person as Janice Weinstein as far as anyone's concerned. So now, I'm just simple, plain Flora. Just call me Flo. All the people here in town do. An' that's all I ever was to them. It ain't so bad.

There's that stew talkin' fer me agin.

Maybe it was during one of those times I forgot who I was when I got pregnant. Well, I'm going to deliver in about seven months according to ol' Doc Crumbpacker. I'm about startin' to show, so I told my boss, and I'll probably work up through my weddin'. I'm not going to have my baby outside of wedlock. It's just not Christian. So although we ain't set a date yet, me an' Jeter are gonna marry soon. I've got my gown picked out from a mail-order catalog already.

So I'll leave the truck stop and raise my baby, like all the women do here. By then, Jeter will have enough to run the station and we can be a happy, respectable, God-fearin' family. I'll be so proud the first time I can show my baby off at the church. Won't that be wonderful? Another citizen of Boregard. And don't you think for one minute I'm going to let Jeter Jr. be an only child. No sir. And Katie Mae's already said she'd babysit. She's so good with children. You can tell she's going to be a really good Momma. I know I'll be a good one too.

I don't rightly reckon I have a choice.

The End

Titles by Sick Puppy Press

Teens Transformed

She Made Me Into My Sister

PUP001-BKLT

“A Little Too Clever” by Joe Six-Pack. Wyatt wanted to help his girlfriend get revenge, but at what cost?
Book / 78 pages / 17 illustrations

Tales of Transformation

He’s the Wrong Girl

PUP003-MINI

“Office Chemistry” by Joe Six-Pack. James had to fill in at the reception desk. Problem is, the business is a bio-genetics company. And all of the sudden the coffee tastes funny.
Mini / 40 pages / 5 illustrations

City Boy, Country Girl

PUP005-BKLT

By Joe Six-Pack. Richard’s long-forgotten aunt is sick, and he goes to care for her. His calls back home leave his wife Janice confused and unsure about his return. So she goes to find him. But is there much left to be found?
Book / 64 pages / 25 illustrations

Stories of the Supernatural

Changed and Rearranged

PUP004-BKLT

“Wrongs make Wright” By Joe Six-Pack. Chris and Matt were rivals. Then, Matt decided to show everyone how smart he truly was by impersonating a teacher. But the disguise becomes more and more real, much to Chris’ dismay.
Book / 74 pages / 19 illustrations



***Reading is
Fun de Mental!***