

Yellow Fever Excerpt

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“This is the sound of my agitation ...”

- Ludwig van Beethoven

From the lobby ...

You can kiss me, and you can touch my tits, but no sex. You cannot finger me, but you can masturbate. Those are my rules. Her mind was racing, trying to figure out what she was going to have to say. Qianqian, pronounced like the jutting facial appendage just below your mouth, not once but twice, sank slowly into the soft cushions of the large burgundy couch that found a place off center in one the oldest hotel foyers in Hollywood. She adjusted herself carefully trying to find a little comfort. Her eyes moved across the folds and bends of her black gown. She began admiring herself with her hands, stroking the blonde streak in her silky black bangs, adjusting her strap and crossing her legs, left over right. When she smoothed over the material that covered her knee, she caught the reflection of the delicate white flowered, potato vine tattoo that circled her ankle.

She was nervous. She usually didn't put wine or spirit to her lips, but she was creating tension inside of herself just sitting still. She could almost taste the tequila soaking into her gums and moving across her tongue. Usually, alcohol was out of the question. It created a blush response that she found indignifying. Tonight though was different. She could feel herself unraveling slowly.

Qianqian had never met anyone outside of her club. She didn't think that anyone would ever find out, and so she saw no harm. She was stripping at the Industrial Strip Club in North Hollywood. It was a fully nude club that gave lap dances behind closed doors. The club had the reputation of the place to go if you wanted sex in return for a small amount of money. Most men felt that the risk at the club was lower than picking girls up off the street. She'd been there for almost a year. She wasn't sure if she was losing control, but the money was starting to change her and it was what put her in the lobby of the Hollywood Roosevelt. When the waitress had appeared and asked her what she wanted, she politely asked for a premium margarita. In the hope of subverting the waitress from asking for identification, she went into a nonchalant routine of exactly 'how' she wanted it.

“Can I please have a top shelf Cadillac on the rocks, no salt?”

“Absolutely.” The waitress responded. “Would you like to start a tab?”

“I’m in 221, can you charge it to my room?”

“Absolutely.” The waitress shot again, and then disappeared with a smile. Qian sighed in relief, glad not to be carded, and languidly placed her arm across the top of the cushion next to her and began admiring the room. The lights were soft and blending calmly with the cream walls and red carpeting. The building had class and was quiet enough for the type of rendezvous that she had in mind. At least, this was the idea she had romanced in her mind. She began to feel overdressed and she felt the eyes of the place moving in on her. Her neckline was low, the curve of her breasts were barely visible. Her nipples were thick and stuck out confidently through the sheer material of her gown. She felt no embarrassment. The waitress brought over the drink, smiled and left.

The man Qianqian was waiting for was sixty-one years old. His name was Layden Strausse, he had been married to the same woman since he was twenty. He had met Qian several times in the club. He had become fixated and started an everyday routine that quickly turned into a personal obsession. He had begun asking her to meet him outside of the club. She resisted, but finally broke down for the offer of five thousand dollars. Quietly, she sat anticipating her evening, and mostly her payment. She sipped her margarita, and glanced around the lobby looking for Layden, trying not to appear nervous. They were to meet at eight pm. It was already ten after. She was feeling foolish and wondered if she was about to be stood up. Her ego started to grate against the side of her head, looking for a place to inflate for the purpose of self-preservation. The panic from inside quietly began.

“Qian, you showed!” Layden exclaimed. “Sorry, I’m running behind. The traffic was heavy.” He approached her from behind and he placed his crumpled hands on her bare shoulders. He squeezed her thin neckline and massaged her once with his thumbs.

She held her breath in bound and nervous apprehension. She was trying hard to remain silent and not start blurting things out. She didn’t want him to sense her fear. In the year that she had been dancing, she hadn’t felt this tense since her first day. The first day she was uptight about being fat, now she was frightened about losing control of herself and going too far.

Layden sat down beside her, only a few inches away. She had her hands in her lap and was looking at him from the side of her face. He put his arm around her and placed his hand lightly on the inside of her covered knee.

“No, Layden. Not in public.” She admonished him, removing his hand away. The waitress appeared and gave them both a quiet once over with a raised eyebrow. The nature of their relationship was flamingly apparent.

“Can I get you anything?” she asked, looking at Layden.

“Diet coke, please.”

“Anything more for you, Miss?” she asked, with impertinence

“No, I’m still fine, thank you.”

The waitress hesitated for a moment before she left, any good mind reader could’ve figured out what she was thinking.

“Can we go up, people are beginning to stare?” Qian asked.

“I thought that you’d never ask.” Layden responded oozingly, smiling from behind his silver mustache, his eyes gleaming with lust. His mind was focused on his purpose. The tablet of Viagra he had taken in the car before he had come in had begun to have a chemical effect on his thinking. When all the blood starts to move to one head it quickly leaves the other.

Qian stood up and trailed off alone towards the bank of elevators across the lobby. She glanced at the old black and white photographs that adorned the walls, depicting old Hollywood as she headed towards the polished brass doors that portrayed her mirrored image. She reached out to a picture of the Roosevelt Hotel standing alone with flat ground on all sides surrounded by oil derricks, scattered mathematically. She thought it was better to stare at the pictures than her own reflection in front of her. Her cheeks were already flushing pink, she was lightheaded. She turned back to see Layden still at the chairs, paying the waitress. He was trying to find something smaller than a hundred, amongst a larger stack of the same. In a rush, he gave up and told her to keep the change. Qian felt cheapened by the way Layden was handling the money and his desire. He was moving quickly to catch up as the elevator doors opened and swallowed Qian whole. Finally, they were alone. She pushed the button to the seventh floor for the room she had reserved earlier. He pushed the button to the penthouse suite. He moved in close to her and placed his hand on her hip. The thin material of her gown made it apparent that she wasn’t wearing any underwear. She leaned against the wall. Layden pressed against her and moved in to kiss her.

The bell dinged and the doors slid open, it was the second floor. They quickly moved away from each other to avoid being seen. Fortunately, no one was waiting. When the doors closed again,

Layden moved in again, Qian put up her hand and stopped him.

“You can kiss me, and you can touch my tits, but no sex. You cannot finger me, but you can masturbate. Those are my rules.” She spoke firmly, but it just made him smile. She was letting him know where she stood, or where she thought she wanted to be standing.

“No sex, huh?” he queried.

“You heard me,” she laughed. He looked at her carefully from the corner of his eye, slightly askew and chuckled. “Okay,” he replied in disbelief.

“I’m serious.” She insisted. Qian quickly became aloof, and tried to behave in an unconcerned manner. Layden was a bit taken aback, but still single-minded. When the doors opened again, she walked out ahead of him. He was happy to watch the swish of her figure. Qian was extremely well proportioned. She was endowed with the figure of Salvador Dali’s wife. Her smooth back, majestic, and strangely wide hips and pear shaped breasts had the dangerous formula in them that could make men kill each other in the deserted city streets like a scene from a Charlton Heston movie.

He slid the magnetic card through the electronic door lock. It clicked and he pushed it open. He allowed her entrance into the room first. She recognized the room immediately. He was trying to throw her off as fast as possible and he succeeded. It was the same room from the movie *‘Pretty Woman’*. Qian set down her drink just inside the door, on the glass top table in the entryway. Layden slowly moved in behind her and pushed himself against her backside. She arched herself outward and moaned. She let go of her purse and gyrated against Layden’s erect member. She was no stranger to it. Every time he had come to the club, she had given him at least a handjob. It was her way of making at least three hundred dollars from each customer. She could always bank on going home with close to a thousand bucks if she was willing to make the sacrifice.

Layden moved his hand up the inside of her dress; he knelt down on the tiled floor and buried his face into her crotch. He found what he was looking for. She allowed him to please her for a long twenty seconds, and then abruptly moved away. She was moaning and panting. Within a few steps, she was on the other side of the room. Layden was still on his knees wiping the smile from his face.

“Leave the money on the table next to my purse, please.” She instructed him. The word please was more of an afterthought. She found herself looking out the open window into Hollywood and lighting a cigarette. The windows had been left ajar and the blinds had been pulled back, Los Angeles at night was beautiful and absolute. From the fourteenth floor of the city, the noises had faded. She stared at the lights coming from the boulevard below. As usual, the Mann Chinese Theater was setting

up outdoor lights, bleachers and white tents for yet another meaningless awards ceremony that would only interfere with traffic and bloat the streets with tourists. She thought of Steffan, quietly working on: his reports, his manuscript on child psychology and listening to ‘*Charles Mingus among us*’. She believed Steffan was deeply predictable, especially on weeknights. His face faded into the slow current of distracted reality that she found herself stepping out of.

She looked behind her. Layden had done as he had been told to. The money was sitting neatly beside her purse. She looked over at him again. He was pouring himself a drink and had removed his blazer, which he had tossed across the back of the couch. She felt safe with Layden and never thought that he would mistreat her. Layden provided an immediate sense of security to her, and there was no denying the path that she was now following. She wondered if maybe it was his age that made her feel so secure, but he was actually older than her own father. She felt comfortable, but she told herself to be cautious. She repeated to herself what she had told him in the elevator. “*Those are my rules, those are my rules, those are my rules.*” Her mind Xeroxed what she thought important for the moment. “*And don’t get arrested,*” she added as she glanced at the money across the room, lying neatly on the table.

“Did you bring any music or a change of clothes, Qian? If there’s not going to be any sex, I assume that I’m at least in for some kind of show?”

“I am providing the entertainment, stop worrying.” Qian chided. Layden began dimming the lights around the room. She became uncomfortable and slipped into the bathroom to change. “Wait there in the chair, and relax.” She closed the door behind her. She noticed herself in the reflection of the mirror as soon as she hit the light switch, glancing back at the doorknob, her instincts told her to lock it, but she ignored them.

Slowly she kicked off her shoes and dropped her gown via the spaghetti straps and began admiring herself closely. Her dress fell to the cold tile floor like a whisper and bunched up around her feet. She cupped her breasts in her hands. At twenty, she was already preoccupied with sagging. She wasn’t in need of a bra and refrained from wearing one on most occasions. She pulled her hair straightforward in front of her face with her fingers, let it fall as it wished, and then moved it outward to the sides for effect. It was a personal distraction. It was her way to find sensuality in moments when she didn’t feel sensual. Her skin glowed like deep honey against the stark white walls and silver fixtures of the tiny bathroom from the countless hours inside a tanning bed. Rifling through her purse on the counter, she retrieved the lip-gloss and applied a small amount. The light taste of kiwi that was embedded in the wax made her smile. She thought of all the times as a girl when she had savored the

wax across her tongue, when she couldn't fight the temptation of eating it. Her large almond shaped eyes were common in her province where she was from in China, but uncommon to most Westerners with their mal-formed stereotypes of squinting half-closed sleepy stares. As an Asian woman, she always stood out and she knew it.

She deftly applied a little more black eyeliner. Finally, she crumbled a breath mint between her teeth and checked the shape of her pussy and examined the crevice of her ass for flakes of toilet paper. She had learned the hard way, as all dancers do, that toilet paper glows luminescently under the black-light when on stage. No one wants to find it gliding across the surface of their tongue either. Now, it was just a customary habit of nature. Again, she glanced at the doorknob. There was no sound or movement from the other room. She opened the door slightly to see what Layden was up to. She found him leaning against the doorframe of the bathroom waiting for her. He had already begun to disrobe and looked down at Qian's naked body. She looked him over slowly. He stood six-two pale, his chest hair was white like TV static and he had a personal scent that was as close to Stetson as anyone would ever be able to identify without saying so for sure or having to testify. He wasn't tanned, but his torso was suppler rather than fat or saggy. For a man of his age, he had been given a little grace in his posture, but it had faded years ago and Qian thought he was now reminiscent of someone's uncle. The chemical aid had restored his confidence, and his eagerness gave everything away to her that he foolishly believed remained secret.

He was no stranger to Qian's kisses. Kissing was the highest form of arousal for her, whether she knew it or not. His fingertips brushed the outer edge of the curve of her breasts. He caressed her lovingly and slowly. It was all in a single pass. He stepped closer and kissed her forcefully, she thrust her tongue into his mouth and began moaning again. They stood together naked, pressing against each other on the tile floor. She was slowly forgetting herself. He placed his hands against her hips and pulled her soft frame into him. Gripping her by her ass cheeks, he lifted her up onto him, she straddled her legs around his waist, and he sank slowly into her. She wrangled herself into a comfortable position as he took her off into the bedroom.

"God." she moaned, "Layden, I shouldn't be doing this," she sighed. She was confused about the sensations. Somewhere in the back of her mind she felt guilt, but it wasn't enough to stop her from indulging in the overpowering moment. He laid her down on the hotel bed and made love to her for twenty minutes. When they finished, his mind was completely blank. She was merely agitated and exhausted but they were both speechless, if only for a moment. Qian began laughing as they lay there naked against each other.

“What’s so funny?” Layden asked, finally breaking his silence.

“Nothing,” she responded. She bounced out of bed and began dressing. She searched her purse for her cigarettes and lit one. “Hand me the ashtray,” she commanded.

“What’s the magic word?” Layden taunted.

“Now!” she replied. She was sinking back away into herself, realizing the gravity of the moment, sensing her compromise.

“Where are you going, Qianqian?”

“I’ve got to get home. I have some things to do,” she lied. She just wanted out of the hotel. She didn’t feel dirty or disgusted, she just wanted to go home and count her money.

“Can I come by the club and see you tomorrow?”

Qian inhaled on her cigarette, pulled the straps of her dress over her shoulders and looked at Layden blankly. “No,” she answered slowly. “Why don’t you give it a few days before you come back in?” She couldn’t help but smile trying to get his cooperation.

“I’m leaving for San Francisco on Monday, for three days. Do you want to come along with me, or not?” he asked.

“Why would I go to San Francisco with you, Layden? Don’t you have a wife for that?” Qian looked at him with an eyebrow raised as she picked up her money and put it away.

Layden stretched out on the bed casual, and exposed. He rested his hands behind his head and smiled. “I’ll pay you three thousand dollars. Is that reason enough? That’s a thousand a day. That should more than compensate you for your time away from your club, your patrolman or whatever else you spend your time on. Don’t you think?”

“I’ll have to think about it, I’ll call you tomorrow in the afternoon with an answer.” She was already holding the handle of the bedroom door. “You’re paying for the airfare?”

“Sure. Why not?” He replied.

“I’ll call you Thursday, then.” She disappeared into darkness. He listened for the slamming of the door, and then called for room-service.

HHe Hehhh

Qian chain-smoked for the rest of the evening. She was telling herself that she had done well, and that the money would be well spent as she pulled away from the Valet stand in the rear parking-lot of the old hotel. She squirmed around in her car seat and felt the wetness starting to ooze from her insides, slowly being evicted. He had cum inside her. Nary a condom, foam, diaphragm, pill, patch or surgery. Only Russian roulette was a good enough credo for her to adhere to. Her heart raced a little from the panic of the situation. She had already undergone five abortions, her first one at fourteen, and she didn't know if she could take another trip to the doctor. She turned up the stereo and opened the sunroof, which she rarely, if ever did. She had been listening to the same music for the last three weeks, and it was still going. She realized that she had compromised 'somewhat' on the rules, but convinced herself that she needed to be flexible. The city lights cast a burning glow up and down the entire boulevard. The street was thick with people on all sides. She looked in her rear view mirror at the tall building she had just left, watching it fade and grow smaller. She thought about San Francisco. She thought about the three thousand dollars, but she never once thought about what she was doing.

From my bedroom ...

I was stuck inside my Hollywood apartment working on manuscript revisions when the phone rang. It had been raining all morning and I was locked in due to activity concerning the Los Angeles Marathon. I could hear the combination of pelting rain on the window and the soaking wet runners being urged forward by supporters on the sidewalks.

“Pronto” I answered. My studies in Italian had begun to affect me outwardly.

“Can you come out to play?” The voice on the other end beckoned, playfully. It was Qianqian. Her voice clutched at me, I was immediately under some form of mind-control that was beyond my ability to consciously resist. I was one of the people that would possibly kill someone in the deserted street to stay next to her. It was madness, desperation or something that I didn’t have a name for yet.

“Of course, Miss Mao” I replied, feeling like a nouveau Carey Grant.

“How about now?” she asked.

“Why don’t we at least wait until we’re face-to-face. Phone sex with you can be a trifle one sided.” I jibed at her, amusingly. She laughed. Sucked in, I forgot about the large amount of work that desperately needed attention. My deadline to the publisher was approaching quickly, but I just didn’t care. I had been working on a story that wouldn’t take shape. It couldn’t find itself, or me, on a clear day on flat ground. I had wasted almost a hundred pages on stressors that trigger reactions of amnesiac fugue states in children, and previous case studies from the past decade concerning severe disassociation. I had wasted several hundred pages on adolescent suicide that might end up taking a blue ribbon for page count and nothing else. It was sadly turning out to be a text-book that would probably never see the light of day. The manuscript was the cause of my headaches and not the thousands of hours I’d spent in front of my computer monitor as I had previously suspected. I used to believe it was the overdue thesis obligation concerning my Degree that I just couldn’t let go of, or abort.

“I’m turning onto McCadden Street now. Why don’t you put your shoes on and come down?” I glanced down at my bare feet and examined myself in despair. Across the room, I caught a reflection of myself in the mirror, I looked like a young Humphrey Bogart in winter. My neighbor told me I resembled Lee Marvin. I tussled with my hair. I was still wearing my pajamas.

I had worked through the night once again. I felt madness stirring just below the surface of my skin. I had gone over the entire book completely, and had unknowingly added another un-needed hundred pages.

“Why don’t you park and come up, it’s been too long since I’ve seen your naked body, I need you ... and besides I have a surprise for you.” I responded.

“Oh joy ...” she replied, unamused. “Another surprise. I wonder what it could be this time, maybe a kiss ... or something you found laying in the street?” She had grown wise to my schemes and impromptu romanticism. I laughed.

“You’re so lucky, Steffan Piper, there’s a parking spot in front of your building.”

“Good then, I’ll see you in a minute,” I replied.

She quickly clicked out, without need to say goodbye. I got up and went to the bathroom to brush my teeth and wipe my face with a hot washcloth. Just as I was finishing, her key hit the door lock. I still had my face in a steaming, cotton hand-towel, but I managed to hide myself, quietly, before she saw me from the hallway. I stood statue-like inside the bathroom. I heard the slamming of the heavy, reinforced fire-door close behind her. I listened to the sound of her wooden clogs scrape across the hardwood floor as she crossed through the small blue colored entryway and into the pale green front room. She was heading for the office, where she must've thought I was working. I crept up slowly behind her, tip-toeing. I wandered through the maze of my apartment trying carefully not to be seen. When I got to the office, she wasn't there. I was a little shocked but now, I was on the hunt. It was only right.

I maneuvered back into the front room and headed for the closet door. I opened it quickly and laughed, she was flinching against the wall wearing a wide-mouth smile and indulging in her own laughable hysterics.

“Aagghh. Damn you!” she screamed between giggles. I stared at her for a moment as I began to fall apart. She glowed a deep hue of tan from inside her white linen dress. Her teeth gleamed pearlescent beneath her large, half-crazed expression. She swore a few lines at me in Chinese as I reached in and socked her on the arm and pinched at her flanks. She tried to run out and escape, but I caught her from behind as she tried to slip past. She became hysterical as I tickled her. Some people have extreme aversions to being tickled, she was one of them. My hands found their way around her curved body, her hips resembling a pear. I had already started salivating for a small, carefully placed bite.

She ran to the bedroom, I focused my eyes on her birthmark about the size of a half dollar in the shape of the ‘Black Sea’ on her right thigh. It was showing through her thin dress. She ran to the solace of my large king-size poster bed. I jumped on behind her and grabbed her foot. She screamed, not wanting me to tickle her any further.

“Don't touch me ...” she bellowed, laughing.

She was on her knees crossing the countryside of the fully-clothed mattress. I slowly pushed up her dress and held onto her shoulder with my left hand, I began my motions to mount her right then and there. The intensity was burning, I was fully consumed. As I rubbed up against her backside, she sighed, as I pressed harder, she moaned. I cupped her left breast in my hand and turned her over onto her back. I slowly began removing my pajama pants, pushing them away with complete disregard. I inhaled and took in the smell of her skin. She smelled of vanilla. She moaned loudly as she lost herself next to me as our tongues met. We kissed like a hundred salmon jumping upstream, with only one

purpose. I cradled her head in my hand. As my right hand searched down and felt her, she was wet. From all the hours of drinking tea, my senses were completely dulled, and for that I was thankful. We made love for what seemed like most of the afternoon.

“Would you like to play a game?”

“Of what?” I asked.

“Take your pick ...”

“What, like chess, or something?”

“No ... not like that,” she answered.

“Ohh ... I see.” She was intimating a game of words. It took a moment. I was exhausted, but I figured it out.

“How about ‘*most unforgivable thought*’?”

“All the way to the bottom, huh? No ‘*confessions*’ or ‘*pick your favorite year*’?” I queried.

She pulled the covers over her bare skin and leaned on her side, watching me, happy to see me, smiling.

“As you like to say, everything to lose and so little to gain.”

“Why not.” I responded. “But you go first.”

She bit on her bottom lip to think for a moment, I wondered if she was just dreaming something up to shock me, or if she was actually going to admit her most unforgivable thought that she had in the last day or so.

“Every time I see a homeless man, who’s filthy, bearded and bumming a cigarette, I want to have sex with him. It’s like an urge that I can’t explain. Men fantasize about screwing most half-decent women that cross their path, but I just wanted to put his filthy cock in my mouth.”

“Sweet, sweet Jesus. How can I make a move on that? That’s putting my senses on ‘tilt’. How can I forgive you for scarring my brain with that?”

“That’s pretty unforgivable, huh?” She blushed, laughed and slipped under the sheet, trying to pinch me.

“I don’t have anything even close to that.”

“Oh no. You aint’ getting off that easy.” Her head popped up from under the sheets with a comic-

seriousness.

“The most *‘unforgivable-thought’* I had all week ...” I slipped into silence contemplating something worthwhile. I could’ve lied and said anything, but it was about being honest, practicing open communication.

“I thought about quitting the department, turning in my badge. Moving somewhere.”

Qian looked at me with a serious but concerned look. “I don’t believe you. You love being a cop.”

“If you believe that, then you don’t know me as well as you think you do,” I sighed, quietly. “I could do without it let’s just say.”

“You don’t get off on carrying a gun, wearing a uniform, having a prowl car?”

“Well ... I’ve always liked the cruiser. I can’t lie about that.”

“See,” she replied. She was shaking her head at me, mocking me. I reached over and grabbed her, planted my face on hers and pecked at her lower lip like I was meditating against the great wall.

The rain outside fell steady all afternoon, I could still hear the crowd clapping for the runners down on the street. The stereo was washing them out slightly. Tom Waits was playing on repeat, in the front room. We held each other and laid silent for over a half-hour. A love affair is nothing without the comfort of being firmly in the grasp of your lover in the middle of the afternoon. My orange cat, Fuzzbody, was lounging in the window ledge against the wet screen cleaning his paw. He had been watching us, and I felt sad that he had no mate.

I got slowly up off of the bed, Qian laid there motionless. I suspected that she was watching Hollywood moving in and out of fogged obscurity. The wind pushed under the open window and toyed with the curtains. The buildings seemed to melt into the dark and heavily billowed sky for the entire length of Los Angeles. I felt that it was magnificent outside, but I knew the rain just made her depressed. I crossed my rented-rooms and found the kitchen amongst the mess of paperwork, half read books and what not. The kitchen’s pastel blue was warm and just being there always increased my appetite. I put the kettle on and prepared the tea service on a mahogany tray. The cat had wandered in and sat in front of his bowl crying about the crumbs, and of course, that just wouldn’t do. I made the tea, fed the cat and left for the bedroom.

Qian was laying on her side, smoking a cigarette with the covers off, her eyes lit up when she saw the tea service.

“Oh yes, that sounds good, I could really use a cup.”

“Really?” I asked, quizzically. I thought she might have been teasing me, tea was not an addiction to her, as it was to me. I had lived on the Eastern seaboard of England during my formative years as a youth. My father, who had been stationed on an Air Force Base most of his adult life, thought it a sacrilege to not only live on one while overseas, but also to send me to the American High School the base provided. For that and that alone, I am eternally grateful. For everything else, I had to make a list. I attended a public school in a small English, seaside, resort town. Felixstowe was known for its Norman churches, day-spas and gambling. Through the years many people have remarked upon my English accent, which has always seemed out of place. If I had a choice though, I’d fake a southern drawl before being mistaken for being English. My family and my roots are Irish. As far as tolerance goes, Cary Grant and Earl Grey is as far enough for me with the English. But tea was engrained upon everything that anyone, namely in my Mother’s or my own direct influence, ever did. Tea had currency, warmth and familiarity. Tea gave me something while everything, including the day, did nothing but take.

I had also brought us both a shot of whiskey and a side of lemon, which of course, prompted a ‘definitely not.’

“C’mon now, sweetheart, old Deep South cold remedy, I heard you sniffing over there ...” I prodded her to take the shot and the lemon. I really just wanted to see her turn pink one more time. I used to think that plying her with alcohol would open her up and make her talk, spill all of her carefully hidden lapses in judgment. I felt she had too many secrets and could’ve been well-served to loosen up a little. She was always tense, even if it didn’t show. The alcohol though, just made her more defensive and standoffish. I had never seen it, but I would’ve bet she was a mean drunk. I believed that was the price of too many secrets and unresolved issues. Her eyes lustily scanned the surface of the lemon from behind the solace of the white tea cup.

“You gotta take the shot, Qian. If you want the lemon, you got to take the shot.”

“Damn it, Steffan. I don’t want to.” She pulled the blanket up over herself. The sky was getting darker. I pushed the windows down to the half-closed position. Gratefully, all my downstairs neighbors had their heaters on, allowing me to save the effort and money of ever having to mess with mine.

She finally drank the shot. After all, it was only one. “Very good ... here.” I handed her the fruit. She bit down on the opened end and sucked out all the juice. Her face didn’t ball up into weird expressions like some people’s faces do upon the taste of citrus. She had an addiction to only a few

things that I knew of, lemons were one, sex was another and I would find out later that lying was a third. Some things you just never see coming, although it does help to keep your eyes open. I took my shot and ate my lemon whole. The rind, having more vitamins than the actual fruit itself, was something I never shied away from.

“Care for a game of chess?”

“You can’t be serious?” She asked, between sips of tea.

“Why wouldn’t I be? You’ve been playing so well lately.”

“I never win when I play you.”

“Do you always have to win to enjoy it?”

“Probably.” I set the up the board in front of us, using a few books to steady it from underneath. I behaved predictably and opened textbook e4.

“How was work today? Was the club busy?”

“Ugghhh,” she groaned. “I don’t want to talk about it. Would you like it if I asked you to tell me why you like being a cop? Or whose privacy you were violating today?”

“I hate being a cop.” I replied, looking straight at her.

“Really?” she responded, curious.

“I’ve never really fit in with the other boys and girls, so to speak. They’re some pretty useless excuses for a collection of dried turds.”

“Ouch, that’s rough.”

“I’d never violate your privacy.” I answered with a wink.

“You can violate my privacy anytime, Steffan.”

“Not much use violating your privacy on the payroll, but I do have some thoughts about violating you elsewhere ...”

“I bet you do.”

“So, answer the question. Do you like being a stripper? I’ve asked you this many times before and I always get a different answer.”

She looked at me again with a boyish glint in her eye. “You know I hate stripping, but it’s hard to say

no to the money. It's even harder to walk away after you've been sucked in."

"Tell me about your shift," I volleyed.

She relaxed gracefully, chewing on her lemon, tossing the rind down on to the tray. She had already memorized several openings, knew two ways to checkmate in under thirty moves and understood that the Knight was vastly more powerful than the Queen, a lesson most people don't realize until after several decades of playing. At first she was reluctant to believe this, until I played against her without a queen for quite some time. She always preferred playing black as she found it fashionable, and was always happy to allow you to go first.

"Ok, fine, I'll just drink my tea." I kept quiet, knowing better by backing off. I messed with the fading creases of my dry-cleaned pajama bottoms and stared into the board deeply.

"I did thirty dances. They were all two-for-ones, so I really did sixty." She sipped her tea and met my standard Pawn opening with a textbook response of developing a knight.

"What did you leave with?"

"Take a guess." She was now playing with me again, as usual.

"I'd say around seven fifty, eight hundred".

"Nope. Guess again." She sipped.

"A thousand even." I ejaculated. "I wouldn't be surprised if it was more, though."

"No, but you're getting closer."

"Twelve and a half then?"

"Very good, twelve sixty. I'm glad I went in to work, that's a lot of money for one day."

"It just depends upon what you gave back in return, I guess." As much as I was being silent about the obvious truth of her activity, I tried my best to only be subtly aware. Madness is sometimes easier to wear warm than the cold reality of truth. I advanced a Bishop.

"Dude, this guy I was dancing for was wearing jeans and he wanted me to grind on him really hard. My pussy is really sore now, never again. No more jeans."

"Never say never" I laughed at her. I lost myself for the moment in the comfort of the cotton sheets and down pillows that adorned my king size bed. I leaned against the headboard and searched for the cigarettes. Qian grabbed them from my hand, "Get your own," she insisted.

“Why should I, when I can just smoke all yours?” I had known Qianqian for almost four years, she had been stripping for two, and I had seen her change. For all the *good* there was, she had been moving into some very obvious *bad*. I didn’t think that she was seeing any of it though. The forest through the trees was on fire, and no one suspected a damn thing. She moved in on my side of the board aggressively hoping to make me sacrifice pieces early. She loved having the advantage, even if she couldn’t hold it for twenty moves.

“Some of my regular customers came in. Layden came in again. I pulled him into the booth and kept him there for ten songs.” While she continued talking, my heart sank a little upon hearing that name.

“Are you planning another trip with him?” I asked her, hoping that she’d say no.

“He asked me to go to San Francisco with him for three days. Does that bother you?”

I didn’t know how to answer her. I relaxed my mind for a moment, trying to let it all pass. I sipped my tea again, the water was extremely dark. It had fully steeped.

“Are you mad at me?” She asked again, with a slight hint of insecurity.

“Of course not, Qian. I just wish that he wasn’t a factor in our relationship. It’s just a bit too creepy. It just doesn’t make me feel right. Besides, he’s older than both of our fathers.” I laughed.

“You have nothing to worry about. There’s no sex involved between us,” she said. I looked over at her with a raised eyebrow, but she missed my meaning. I was readily accepting of her lie, which she ham-handedly put down for me to digest.

“He’s going to pay me three thousand dollars just to spend the weekend with him up in North Beach.” I took her Queen from her, leaving her in bad shape. I began wondering if she was trying to play a Pawn game against me, trying to stall me and wear down my attention span. I tried hard not to think about her with other men, and so I instructed myself to believe her. When you witness someone lying to themselves, it seems obvious to you that no good can come from it. When you start lying to yourself ... well, that’s just a whole other set of sad circumstances.

“Why can’t you understand that it’s just business? Falling in love and having a relationship are two different things” She remarked, sharply. I said nothing, and this just made her more infuriated and defensive.

“Ughhh,” she grunted, “I don’t know what your problem is!” She rolled over and set down her empty teacup on the side table. I moved the chess board off the bed and set it out of the way on my side

table to finish later.

She had her back turned toward me. The cat popped up onto the side of the bed and sat in front of her staring at her in a way that almost seemed confrontational. The cat had his own thoughts. He was like the great bodhisattva from the East, all knowing, all seeing, everything but amused. He treated Qian like he knew her well. It was that way from the first. But that's not saying that the animal was fond of her either.

I took a sip from my tea and sat it on a Conan-Doyle volume that she had picked up for me in her travels, via flea market. I began kissing her back and pulling on her foot. Most women have a certain amount of self-consciousness concerning their calves. Qianqian of course, was no different. All it took was a single comment or even just a touch to spark a bad mood. I began to kiss her on the inside of her calve.

“Mmmmm, ... soft calves.” Silently, I felt like Hannibal Lecter.

“I hate my calves.” She replied automatically, it was almost a knee-jerk reaction. I kissed her tattooed string of flowers. I slowly began caressing the outside of her thighs. I then buried my face in between her legs. She moaned and arched her back at my touch, I licked her. She was clean-shaven and wet. She began making even louder noises, I tried hard not to laugh. The splendor of any woman moaning at the slightest touch is an interesting and rare experience. I was fortunate, and I was smiling from one side of the room to the other. She arched her head upwards and back, moaning as I slowly took her over. I rode her in that position for twenty minutes. I was playing matador, she was playing bull, or rather cow. Her moaning was guttural and continuous. She bucked me and became louder than I had ever heard her before. She pounded on the pillow and screamed my name out. I was beginning to get scared, but I laughed a little, nonetheless.

She came three times. The first and second time I could actually see and feel her coming, the third time I just felt the same muscular contraction. The final time I had told her that I was about to come. I thought she had finished, but she ordered me to hold out because she was coming again and she wanted me to wait until she was completely through it. She was being selfish not letting me enjoy it, but I had grown used to it. She was a victim of the 'Dildo Culture' that had unnecessarily desensitized her to real sex. She was probably more interested in imaginary sex and masturbation than having a partner.

Holding off and controlling ejaculation is probably one of the most difficult tasks for any man to accomplish at any time or any age, regardless of the situation. Most women today don't appreciate that fact. They just want to wait for the tail-end of the reclusion to start again.

I rolled Qian over onto her back and positioned her legs against her chest. I pushed back into her (very carefully – with softening penis) and grasped a hold of her breasts. She began laughing again, of course I couldn't help it, the more she laughed, I laughed.

“Why are you laughing?” she managed through her own laughter.

“Stop laughing,” I answered, barely, “I'm trying to finish.”

She kicked me off in a hysterical fit and I fell over the side of the bed unable to stop. I hit the floor hard, but we were both still laughing. My leg was tangled up in the bed sheet. When she saw me get up off the floor, she wasn't laughing.

“You're not hard anymore?” She blurted out, both surprised and unhappy. I couldn't stop laughing now, and I had lost my train of thought, so to speak. She grabbed her cigarettes, jumped from the bed and ran to the toilet. I listened to the sound of her feet crossing the old creaky hardwood floor. She moved as if she was responding to a schedule. I moaned in frustration when I realized the episode was over and I didn't get to finish. I did a few push-ups on the spot to channel my energy elsewhere. Most of the time, I couldn't watch her while having sex, her mouth would make an expression as if she was grasping for air and her eyes would roll into the back of her head. It was too exhilarating. I found solace in picturing the grimacing face of Gene Hackman. If I had been able to patent the idea, I could've made millions. I would've called it '*The Gene Hackman Method*', but that was most likely another lifetime. I admitted defeat, got up, got dressed and was proud that I had done my country honor, at least in figurative terms anyway.

She was dressing now in the hallway mirror. She watched herself as she threw on every piece of clothing. In my mind, she had been in dress-rehearsal all day. It didn't take her long at all. Within a few minutes she was ready to leave. She was singular amongst all women in that regard. She looked striking at every turn and needed no preparation.

“I'm going home,” she stated, without any other words of explanation. I glanced at my watch. It was just after seven. Her words gave me douche-chills, I was feeling abandoned.

“You're not going to stay the night?” I asked her, pleadingly. I could sense that she didn't want to. She wouldn't and I knew it.

“No, but do you want me to?” she answered, ambiguously.

“Of course I do, I was hoping it would be just the two of us alone tonight.” I was tying my shoe, sitting in the darkened front room.

“I’ve got things to do at the house, but you’re welcome to come over.” Her words made me feel like an afterthought. I wondered why she couldn’t find a little sensitivity and just ask me to come over first.

“I’ll come over with you.” I said, quietly falling into the trap and releasing a little more of my control.

“You want to follow me in your car, since you have to work in the morning?” She asked.

“Sure,” I answered. “I’ll follow you.” I was working as an investigator in the Los Angeles Police Department. I had been working on the force for three years. I only spent a year on the streets. I was quickly promoted to a highly classified post, listening to cell phone conversations on top of Mount Hollywood at the old antenna display. I spoke three languages fluently: Arabic, Korean but still struggling in conversational Italian. The department either valued me or didn’t trust me. I could never decide which. The Department is everything that it’s cracked up to be concerning its Internal Affairs. There’s almost a ‘don’t ask and don’t tell’ philosophy that’s engrained within everything that you do. I didn’t mind being a cop, but I never felt it in my blood. It was probably more accurate to say I didn’t mind collecting a Cop’s paycheck. I had family on the force who had carried a badge their whole lives and never thought or wanted anything else. From birth, I had wandered from one servitude into the next. I had joined the Academy during my last few months of enlistment in the Marine Corps. After the Persian Gulf, I felt another uniform might help me keep my sanity. Looking back, I thought it was the most natural thing to do in the world. I should’ve joined the Post Office. After so many years, I had slowly developed a distaste to being a subordinate. There was always too much room for insubordination. Most of the time I just couldn’t relate to engrained bureaucratic thinking patterns and the inertia-infected reasoning. The need to crush another under the weight of a supposed success to obtain an obtuse, oblique goal that internally never had merit, had absolutely no curb appeal for me at all. I had little interest in Managerial Statistics, it probably would’ve been better in the long run to develop ‘The Gene Hackman Method.’ Most of the Police forces around the country operate under these systematic and antiquated modalities of non-thought hoping to achieve peace through force, or rather nullification through over-stimulation. Good luck. To me, it just seemed like another bad John McTiernan movie come to life.

Moonlighting, being an officer’s only escape I sought the refuge of higher ground, of something that I thought I had the strength for instead of being a bouncer in a club or a security guard in an office structure. I had been writing a column under a pseudonym for the L.A. Weekly newspaper for six

months. It was a free trade press that weekly found its way into small red boxes around the city like clockwork every Thursday. I never gave myself a name, I just described myself as an appendage pointing myself directly at celebrities and local officials spreading gossip and nefarious accusations. However, both entities had no idea I was working for the other. It was a precarious position to be in, one wouldn't allow the other. After all, it was only gossip that I was publishing, but it was in direct violation of my agreement with the Federal Communications Commission as laid out by the regulations in conjunction with the L.A.P.D. '*Under no circumstances would any information derived from the activity of monitoring private citizens be repeated to any outside entity in any form of communication whatsoever*', and so on and so forth. Signed documents to follow ex post facto.

When most people look up and see the Hollywood sign in Los Angeles, they might think of the symbolism that it stands for: actors and actresses, production sets, the history of movie-making and so on. A few people take note of the structure just above it and to the right, wondering what it really is. Fewer people know what the structure is used for. Most would cry constitutional infringement if they did. Having to shorthand all conversations heard and recorded, I became an adept and voluminous writer. The Police Academy had made me engrain *Gregg's Shorthand Manual* into my brain. Later, I found it to be an excellent tool for stream-of-consciousness writing. The kind that either makes you a good writer, a bureaucrat, or a kook. I had been writing for the magazine for only a short time, but the article I wrote was well received. In the beginning, the staff always questioned my information but would be astonished when the same information would surface elsewhere within a week at another publication or on television, and usually in a much more 'progressed' form. Having the heads up by a whole week in the media world is solid gold. My response would be something about journalistic integrity or a saturated look that implied 'Sorry.' Or 'Yes, I am related to Stonewall Jackson.'

Little by little, they stopped questioning the source and just ran what was written. Time would always bear out the real truth. Was I ashamed of taking advantage of my fellow Americans and trampling their constitutional protection to privacy just to pay my rent and squander it over drinks in Boardners Bar on North Cherokee? Absolutely not. Most of the people I published information on not only deserved it, but probably craved extra press. Did I actively make an executive decision about that though? Everyone was fair game as far as I was concerned. Lenny Bruce had once stated that in this society, everyone's ass is up for grabs. It's an unfortunate but balanced truth. It's the American Way.

Qianqian sped along, and I followed behind her, having some trouble keeping up. The drive into Burbank from my house was almost thirty minutes with traffic. She could always do it fifteen. I watched the red taillights of her BMW 735i move in and out of traffic as she slipped like mercury

between speeding cars travelling North on Highland Boulevard. The back end of the BMW is pleasant and classic, almost sexual and pleasurable to stare at. I could see her silhouette lighting a cigarette through the darkened back window. I began working on the congruous task of making anagrams from her license plate. 2LVA666. It was a tough one. To love a demon, a devil ... to live like a demon? I just couldn't tell. She pushed through every amber light unflinching, and even went through two red ones. I gunned it through both just to keep up. I wondered if she was trying to lose me. She would criticize me later for driving dangerously. It was a given. She was doing sixty in a thirty-five.

I settled beside her at the next light. Rain began to fall across my windshield. I looked over and watched her talk intently into the telephone. Her posture was unbecoming, hunched over in the seat. From my vantage point it looked as though she might be gnawing on a piece of leather. My mind drifted back to my unfinished writing that I had left on the desk and open on the computer. I couldn't remember saving it. I had told myself too many times to bring it with me regardless of where I went. I could see that she'd be on the phone again, most likely for a large part of the night. She was probably canceling plans that I was unwittingly trampling on. I listened to the radio, a song by Steely Dan that played earlier in the afternoon, came on again. It was the lyrics that caught my attention the second time around. The singer said:

You'd been telling me you're a genius, since you were seventeen

In all the time I've known you, I still don't know what you mean.

I chuckled to myself when I realized the song made me think of her. Even the name of the band seemed appropriate. The cell phone on the seat beside me rang. I thought that it was Qian, but from the caller ID, I could see that it wasn't.

"Pronto?" I answered.

"Steffan?" Abbey, ex-wife. I exhaled.

"Good evening, darling. How's things?" I asked.

We had been separated for almost nine months. Our relationship had failed because we had just both stopped trying to keep it together. More self-fashioned servitude. Sometimes it's harder to do that, than

to just walk away. She had pushed me away as time passed and I stopped coming back. I eventually fell in love with someone else. I had mixed feelings about the way things had ended between us. We had a solid love together, which was as well-formed as any could be, but the differences were far too great. She came from a traditional Korean background - Buddhism, family restaurants, over-bearing parents, financial schemes called *Ket-dongs*, (or Joy Luck in Chinese), church meetings three times a week and sacrificing your life for your parents poorly constructed whims. Her family was lost in a country with less footing than the one that was left for a dream that never panned out, all due to bad and misguided planning.

I wandered the earth alone from city to city my whole adult life. My independence was too great for a matriarchal culture where the women run the show, without question. There was still a great deal of love between us, but we weren't about to start trying to salvage anything. Especially not after I had fallen in love and had sexual relations with her best friend behind her back. Having done the unthinkable, I was immediately written off by her as untrustworthy and barely tolerated. Abbey despised me, and I deserved it. She was still concerned for reasons that are usually too difficult to explain rationally.

"I haven't heard from you in over a month, Steffan, I was a little concerned about you." I had to tread delicately with her. She was still stripping in the same club as Qian, but she had gone down to part time and was spending more time in her job as a tarot card reader at the Psychic Eye in Venice Beach. Abbey had worked as a stripper two years longer than Qian. Abbey always made good money, and it had eventually influenced her long time friend from High School to do the same. Qian had always told her that the work was demoralizing, prostitution and everything else, but through the years I realized that Abbey's price for her job, wasn't as high as I had originally thought. Qian, on the other hand, went much farther than Abbey and for a whole lot less, but that was the shape of things in the stripping business. Qian had practiced on me, as her first customer, when I was still married to Abbey. She gave me her first lap dance in my front room on the sofa. It became a moment in my mind frozen forever, and most-likely the impetus for everything that was to follow. Some religious scholars would say however that it's just remnants of a previous life repeating itself one more-time for the camera, with the same actors again and again. When I saw the expression on her face when she touched me, my mind became hideously pregnant with envy and desire. In chess, it's called Castling. Covert sacrifices made, both large and small.

I followed behind Qian as she passed an enormous billboard of Jay Leno that was attached to the NBC building where the show was broadcast, pre-recorded.

“Doing good really,” I answered. “On route to a friend’s house for a little while. How’s everything with you? Still stripping at the club?”

“Yeah, I haven’t walked away from it yet, completely. It’s hard working with Qian. Every time I see her I want to punch her in her smug fucking face. She is such a cunt. You have no idea.” I pondered that last statement inwardly. I laughed a little to ease the tension she was creating between us.

“I really figured that one of you would have quit by now to tell you the truth. Just from sheer tension alone.” I feigned my ignorance, sheepishly, Abbey knew we had previously slept together, but she didn’t know about my relationship with Qian and Qian wanted to keep it that way. I also didn’t bother to tell Qian that Abbey still called me, even after everything that had happened. I was playing both sides dangerously, but for the record, very reluctantly.

“She’s going to have to quit first. Not me. She keeps giving me these stupid looks all day. I swear it’s going to come down to blows between us. It’s just a matter of time. Everyone in the club hates her anyway. They all know that she’s fucking her customers in the booth.” The images ran through my mind of her being fondled and fucked by strange, unknown men. I swerved in and out of a few cars. I slowed behind Qian as we passed an accident where a motorcycle lost to a minivan at the corner of Olive and Buena Vista. People were looking on from the stoop of the Mobile gas station. The Police and the ambulances had yet to arrive. Qian slowed as she passed to get a good look. Within moments I was doing fifty again behind her. I realized that she was a psycho behind the wheel - and would probably die behind the wheel. I would never mention it to her myself, but I’m sure that she’d probably tell me one more time before the day was through how reckless I was.

“How’s your so-called anonymous job at the paper going? I really liked your last piece on Brad Pitt, that was pretty funny the conversation between him and Alec Baldwin. I never knew Alec Baldwin once had a coke problem in the nineties.”

“They really didn’t want to print any of that. They didn’t think Alec Baldwin was reasonably print worthy ... they almost ended my gig due to the pressure of them wanting my sources. I just got up and left the editor’s office. She called me back an hour later and asked if I’d consider doing a piece on McCauley Culkin.” I noticed the scambler light blinking to the adapter on my phone, all Department issued equipment. Someone else was now listening. Work checked up on me often, if for no other reason, than just to listen. That was the dark truth of surveillance. While I was listening to the thugs, someone else was listening to me.

“So, what are your plans then?” I asked, looking to change subject. Hanging up would be too

suspicious.

“I’m flying up to San Francisco on Monday for the week. I’m going to a gallery opening with a friend.”

“Be careful that you don’t run into Qian and Layden.” No sooner had the words left my mouth had I regretted uttering them. I thought for sure that she was going to grill me.

“Yeah, I don’t want to run into that whore, I’d just embarrass her. Maybe if I see them, I’ll take pictures and mail them to his wife.”

“Some unresolved tension, and bruised feelings there?” I asked, relieved. Thankfully she missed the opportunity to lay into me over it. She did suspect the two of us, I could tell.

“Nah ... well, just a little maybe,” she laughed on the other end. The scambler light went off. I was only a block from Qian’s house on Scott Road, when she turned into the parking lot of the Ralph’s grocery store on San Fernando.

“Hey, I’m here, I’ve gotta go. Call me sometime.”

“Okay, take care of yourself, please eat, I know how you are.” Ex-wives know your habits better than your own Mother.

“Yes, dear,” I quipped, mockingly. Just as I put the phone down, I pulled up beside Qian’s car. She had stopped in the back of the lot and was still on the phone. She was staring into deep space, oblivious of me. I stared at her, waiting for her to acknowledge me. When she finally did look over, her complexion was glassed over. She was nodding her head slowly, still miles away from where she was. Finally, she hung up after I waited for what seemed like an eternity. I rolled down my window on the passenger side, she rolled down hers.

“I’ve got to get some tampons and stuff, okay?” she asked.

“You’re not starting are you?” I could hear the desperation in my own voice. I was definitely snagged and pussywhipped. For any man it’s a sad state of affairs and not a good position to be in.

I roamed the isles, selected some import beer from my country of origin, some cat food, and stopped at the magazine rack. Qian had gravitated to it every time like a small moon lost in space, finally finding a passive orbit. I never appreciated magazines for their pulpy substance, the glossy, empty longing that they created in the souls of young women the world over. It was abominable. The magazine stand was where the disease of gold-digging truly begins. That’s just a more popular

delivery-system for feminine greed. No one could ever be what the magazines asked of us, no matter how hard - we would all die trying, just to find a miserable breathless crash and burn upon the wheels of subscription. Her phone rang once again, and I couldn't help but send her a disapproving look.

"Andrew," she grunted, unhappily, and then shut it off and smiled at me. There was definitely a first time for everything. I moved in closer. Something instinctive took over, I pushed her magazine aside and kissed her. She placed her hand on the back of my neck and when I pulled away, she was looking at me as if I was crazy. Maybe it was her? I couldn't tell. I realized a few seconds later that it meant something else.

When we got to the house, it was still and quiet and a little cold. The heater had been off all day. When Qian saw her mess one more time, she huffed "I really need a maid."

"I thought that was why you were seeing me? I come early and clean real good, real cheap too!" I was being facetious.

"Promise?" she asked, seeking clarification of my point.

"Don't know the meaning of that word." I shot back at her. She hit me on the arm.

I poured a hot bath a little later, a nightly ritual that we had shared from the very beginning of our relationship. It was the most natural way to dissolve into sex, sleep and the end of the day.

"You don't need to worry about Layden or Andrew, Steffan." She opened up the subject herself. I tried extremely hard not to bite at it. I just continued with my task of gathering up towels and washcloths.

"Don't I?" I asked, falling in head-first like a fool.

"No, I just said that you didn't."

"I'm glad, Heiness, that's very reassuring." I quoted a line from *The Princess Bride*. She hated the things I loved. She was aware of my sarcasm and I knew it. Qian was now staring at me in a very disapproving sort of way. I sat on the edge of the tub with my feet in the water gauging the temperature as it filled. I watched the yellow sodium bicarbonate soap ball that was tossed in, spin and dissolve in the bath water. It left only the barest scent of lemons. I was shocked that it wasn't jasmine. Every item in her bath-tub arsenal was vanilla or jasmine scented. I surveyed the territory and counted twenty-three bottles of different shampoos, conditioners, body soaps, facial scrubs, deep pore facial cleansers, etc. I shook my head at her excessive and overtly American nature. I once told her that she reeked of condescension. She got pissed off at my remark and made me recant my position. She never delved that

deep into the meat of what I truly meant. I always wondered if this was her attempt of “getting it off”. It was like something right out of Macbeth. It gave me chills.

“Have you ever read Macbeth?”

“Is that the one with Mel Gibson?” she answered. I gave up.

She came down beside me and sat in the same position. She was naked and her leg was pressed up against mine. I touched her hand, and realized at that moment that I felt trapped inside that bathroom. I was a prisoner of her love and sought confirmation, wanting her to touch me. I wondered in that split second, how it got to that point, that place, that deep?

“I’m now open for Confession,” she said, musically. Another bathtub ritual. “Your sins first, then mine.” She was staring at her toes in the water and groaning from the heat.

“Baby ...” I laughed.

“What?” she looked me over. I watched the desire in her eyes swimming towards me.

“You know damn well that I’ve been living a confession free life since I’ve been with you. You know all my secrets.” I grabbed the loufa sponge and submerged it under the surface of the water. She leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek with her eyes closed. She slowly placed herself in the water, making noises the whole way down.

“Ohhhh ... my God, it’s hot!” “ah, ah,” and so on.

“Please, it’s adequately hot, stop fussing.”

“And what exactly does ‘adequately’ mean to you then?” she asked me, curiously.

“That, perhaps, it could be just a little hotter?”

When she was all the way in, she farted and giggled. She was the gassiest chic that I had ever laid eyes on. She farted every chance that she got. I always felt that she needed more meat in her diet. She had a paranoid disposition regarding meat and starches, although ‘*Sizzler*’ was her favourite restaurant. I left it alone for my own good. I had told her that we hadn’t climbed to the top of the food chain eating vegetables. She didn’t find it amusing. She thought my argument ‘plastic-coated’ and antiquated.

Candles flickered in the other room behind me. I got up and turned off the bathroom lights and turned on the antique wall heater, casting a reddish glow across the white tile walls before I sank back into the water.

“I’m not bothered by Layden at all, Qian, really. It’s just what he represents.”

“Meaning?” she plied.

“Meaning ... that I wish you didn’t have to see him at all.” I had something on my mind, but was unable to force the words out of mouth.

“You don’t seem to understand and I don’t want to talk about it.”

“This is so predictable. May I ask why not, Qian?”

“Because Stef-fan, you’re pissing me off.”

“Ok.” I gave in and resigned myself to shut up. She quickly became defensive and retreated further inside herself, the one place she felt safe. Having me on the outside was preferred. I sunk into the large tub and soaked while she scrubbed herself. I watched her cross the entire surface of her body with a sea sponge. She went through the familiar process of cleaning her face with several different products and then gradually slipping down to soak beside me. I thought she was going to continue the conversation, but she just remained silent. I knew that if I pushed it, there was bound to be either an argument or me leaving in the middle of the night to go back to Hollywood to spoon with Fuzzbody. It’s not that I minded leaving on principle, I just didn’t want to. I was reluctant to disturb the status quo and become the enemy.

I watched her as I rested in the warm water. She began tapping at the hair on my leg with her razor, watching it slowly come off in small clumps. I wondered how far I really was in this with her. Deep down though, I already knew. She spat water at me and told me that I was finished. I washed my face and got up from the tub.

After I found my robe, I made my way into her office, I opened the drapes and sat down on the leather swivel chair and looked out the window. I didn’t turn on the lights. I wasn’t in the mood for anything so illuminating. I had seen enough for one night and sat quietly by in the dark. Outside the tiled patio was lit by moonlight, I noticed that the potato vines crawling up the bricks that we had planted earlier in the summer looked weak and needed water. The sound of the stone fountain in the center of the yard, just below the orange tree made me close my mind for a moment and relax. I leaned back and reclined, putting my feet on the stool. I lit one of Qianqian’s *Stone Forest* import cigarettes that her father had brought her back from China. I had tried for a long time to quit but without having another habit to replace it, I knew that I was doomed to addiction. I thought for a few moments about the words ‘stone’ and ‘forest’. An image of a cemetery loomed up in my mind from the sketch on the

front of the cigarette pack. I wondered why anybody would've chosen that name, it seemed almost obvious. I felt like quitting immediately. My concentration that had been affixed on my assured demise was broken by the sound in the bathroom of Qianqian pulling the bath-plug.

“Steffan ...?” She called out from inside the tub. I could hear water droplets sliding off her tanned body.

“Yes, What can I do for you?” I answered her quietly. I almost didn't even hear my own voice. She soft-footed across the floor and sat on my lap. She was still wet, but wearing the towel. She cocked her head to the side and began to slowly brush her hair. I watched her do this for what seemed like ten minutes. Her hair was always badly tangled, and in need of rescue. She had removed her contact lenses and had on an old pair of glasses that looked as if they were a style that was popular in nineteen fifty-two and purchased from a plastic turn-style rack at Woolworth's for a dollar forty-nine. I slipped my hand inside the robe and placed my finger on her belly button and kissed her on her exposed breast. She watched me, but didn't say a word. She kissed me back and I finally felt as if she had registered me as a separate presence, outside of everything else and all the bullshit. She usually treated me with more kindness – after a bath. It was as good of a feeling as any to end the day on.