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Recommended Citation

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Mom, Dad, and Johnny

John Condry

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

May 13, 2014

Prof. Bruce Machart, Thesis Director
Dr. Ellen Scheible, Committee Member
Prof. John Mulrooney, Committee Member

The Russian Invasion of Carpenter St.

That crazy bitch is dragging shit onto her lawn again. Frank sat in his wicker chair, still in his loafers, slouched back with a beer in hand. The sun was going down over the evergreens behind his pale olive box-shaped house. Frank had an agenda on his lap for the next city council meeting. He wasn't a councilor, but he went to every single meeting. He sat in the back of city hall and pictured himself at the round table. For a small town the council was incredibly corrupt and exciting, Frank thought, but each time an election had come up, he lost.

Frank's ears rang at the buzz of the television through the wall behind him. He could see his mother Helene sitting where he left her this morning, hunched over, still in her fuzzy bathrobe. Frank had been taking care of his mother every day for years. Frank's gut grumbled and he took another sip of beer. He kept darting his eyes over the once carefully cropped shrubs, now overgrown and wild. Over the bushes, Valentina Petrov was littering her lawn with junk. Valentina was insane. Her lawn sprawled out in front of her two-story house that sat on the hill of Carpenter St. Her California Shine grass was now covered with old bicycle helmets, a wooden sled, an old mustang fender, and a chandelier. Apparently finished, Valentina threw her fists up over her buzzed purple hair and yelled,

"Fuck!"

and stomped back into her garage.

For the past two months, Valentina had been inciting mayhem on the peaceful dead-end of Carpenter St. She patrolled the street in the middle of the night covered in Christmas tree lights. She dug up and switched people's mailboxes. And she frequently subjected teddy bears to dragging torture by tying them to a string and throwing them out the window of her car. But her newest pastime was her impromptu garage sales with no signs, no warnings, and no customers.

Although he lived right next door to Valentina's small mansion, Frank hadn't had much trouble with her. He had only called the police once when she was blasting some Russian music out her double garage doors right into Frank's little basement bedroom window, at two in the morning. Her husband Jim Mason had done a decent enough job keeping her contained. He was a city councilman and had plenty of friends in the police department, which helped.

Frank headed inside his living room, where his mother Helene was dozing in her wide leather armchair. She was an old woman with curly gray hair, tired blue eyes, and crusts of food in the corners of her mouth. Frank sat on his couch, a puffy

love seat sinking in on one side. He grabbed his laptop off the little wooden coffee table and booted up his game. He put on his noise-canceling headphones and the buzz of his mother's television was muted. The sun had gone down now and the room was dark except for the light from the screens. Frank positioned himself so that the laptop eclipsed the television.

Frank could pass hours playing his game. Combing the streets of a bombed out city with a black ops task force. Fighting through hell in the Cold War. He moved through the levels with a silent cool, head-shoting every enemy that came his way. He could have upgraded, the game was eight years old now, but he never did. He just kept stalking the same alleyways, for the same commies that he knew he could take out with a single shot. Frank turned a corner with his gun cocked at his hip when he heard a dull ring. He spun around, but there were no Russians in sight. He tried to turn back, but when the screen filled with oozing blood--he was dead--he heard the ring again.

"Frankie, get the door!" Helene said

Somehow his mother's voice penetrated the bunker of his headphones. He ripped them off and went to the door.

"Calm down Ma." He said.

Frank stood at the door brushing his clothes off, trying to

straighten the wrinkles in his shirt. Probably just another wireless TV salesman. Frank opened the door and there was Jim Mason. He was tall and wore a navy sport coat with a grey fisherman's sweater, and he had a cluster of freckles underneath his left eye.

"Hey, Frank, how have you been?" Jim said

"Oh, Hi Jim, how are you, good?" he said

"Fine Frank, just fine. Hi there, Mrs. Johnson,"

"She can't hear you Jim. Hearing's gone,"

"Oh, sorry about that. Listen Frank, I'm in a bit of a jam here. My wife, well, I'm leaving on a boat trip today with some friends and my sister was supposed to come up to the house for the week but. Could you just keep an eye on things, you know? Sister has some kind of flu and can't come, and I was just wondering if you wouldn't mind, keeping an eye on, things."

"Oh."

"It'd only be for a few days, Frank. She knows to be on her best behavior. And listen, Artie Shaw, his term is almost up and the whole council knows you. I could put in a good word. Float a few compliments about your character, if you're interested? Just watch things this week and that seat is yours."

"Hello, Jim!" Helene said

"Sure Jim, of course I wouldn't mind looking after the house. Have a good time."

. . .

Valentina didn't show herself for the first few days of Jim's trip, and Frank was happy for it. When Frank got up on Friday morning, one day before Jim was set to come back, he was going to sit in a chair on his front lawn and plan his first term as a councilman. He wasn't going to work.

Frank opened the front door and stood on his threshold, greeting the day with a life-sized fart. Across the street, in an overgrown field ignored by the residents of Carpenter St., was Valentina. She wore an army jacket and held a ketchup bottle in one hand and a mustard bottle in the other. She was skipping through the field, shooting the condiments in the air in a kind of tribal dance. It was a miracle the sky did not rain pickles. Frank stood on his stoop, no longer enjoying his own smell. He watched her for a minute squirting her condiments in the air, letting them fall on her clothes and in her hair. At least she's having some fun, the crazy bitch. Frank looked down the street to the five other houses, their cars gone and the windows dark. She wasn't bothering anyone, and she wasn't going to bother him

either. He went inside for the comfort of his laptop.

. . .

After a day of killing soldiers in the dark streets of Moscow, Frank headed out to his back porch. He sat still, half naked in his wicker chair. Frank's stomach started to growl, so he got up to set up his grill. He looked around but couldn't find his charcoal tin anywhere.

"Shit," Frank said. What the hell did I do with it? I always leave it right next to the grill.

Frank chased a quick sweat around his forehead as he ran his hand across his bald head. Moving slowly through his yard closer to the bushes, he looked over them again into Valentina's lawn. There on her hot black tar driveway, holding up a small sign that said "Selling," was Frank's tin, full of charcoals.

"Crazy fucking Commie. This shit is getting old," Frank said.

Checking the large glass windows above the garage for any sign of the purple-haired menace, Frank tiptoed over, grabbed his tin, and hustled back into his yard. Breathing deep, he set up his grill and went in the small screen door to his house.

"Frankie, is that you?" Helene said.

Frank walked right past the flashing gray light in the dark living room and went for the kitchen. The fridge was bare besides the remains of a thirty rack of beer and some hamburger buns, but Frank lingered, hanging his weight on the door.

"Frankie?" Helene said.

"You tell me, Ma," he said.

"Oh, I thought you were a robber or maybe that awful woman," Helene said.

"No you didn't."

Frank grabbed the burgers out of the freezer and passed back through the living room. Helene sat staring at the TV through her old red walker with cut open tennis balls on the legs.

"Come sit and talk with me," Helene said.

"No Ma, I'm cooking," he said.

Coming back into the living room half an hour later, Frank stumbled with the plate of hot burgers.

"Ma, can you turn a light on in here?"

"Shush, Frankie. I'm watching a movie," Helene said.

Frank sat down, glancing at the muted buzzing television.

"Ma, that's an infomercial," he said.

They ate on fold up tables permanently parked by their respective spots in the living room. Helene sat in her armchair close to the television and Frank on the couch along the back wall. Frank ate his plain burger, not bothering to close his mouth when he chewed, and he slouched down into the couch so far he thought he might just slip into it and never come out, except to grab a beer, which he was doing about every ten minutes.

"Frankie, would you make me some soup?" Helene said.

"We don't have any soup Ma. Eat your burger," Frank said.

"No thanks," Helene said.

"Ma, this is all we have for dinner. It's this or nothing," he said.

"I'll wait for supper," Helene said.

"This *is* supper," he said.

Frank felt sweat dripping down a vein on his forehead, even with the air-conditioner locked on high. He went back to his burger when something made his nostrils twitch and suddenly the taste in his mouth went sour and rotten. It wasn't the burger. Frank got up and, with a heavy stomach, walked towards the bathroom door. He reached out slowly to push open the cracked

door. As soon as it was opened, he staggered back from the unmistakable smell of shit.

"Ma? Did you have an accident in the bathroom?"

The television unmuted and sound blared from it, filling the tiny house and drowning out Frank's yelling.

After cleaning the bathroom, he headed downstairs. Frank shut the door to his room, and within a few seconds he had slipped off his loafers and was lying on his bed in his striped purple boxers. The walls were painted a deep green, and there was only one bulb with any juice left in the ceiling fan. His bedside table held a thick stack of porn magazines. The room was dark. A dull roar from the television still filled the air, not enough for Frank to know what it was saying, just enough to know it was still on. It made his ears tingle and he felt a slight pressure building in his temples. Frank pulled a large plastic bin from underneath his bed and dumped the contents out. Frank picked up the colorful papers shuffled and organized them in his hands, fanning them out like a hand of cards. They were all brochures for elderly homes. He read through the bullet points of each one and then threw it onto his bed.

"Twenty-five miles away, pool and spa, billiard room, forty miles away, church services and bingo, and here's the winner.

One hundred miles away with a full country club onsite," Frank said.

His bed now covered in colorful pictures of smiling seniors, Frank flopped onto the bed and ran his arms and legs through them like a kid in the snow. He flailed in them, pulling up handfuls of brochures and covering himself with them. This bizarre ritual had become all too common for Frank. When he started to feel the room spin a bit, Frank let his eyes droop until he saw a tuft of purple hair through his little window. It was Valentina, peering through the glass at him. He jumped up from his bed and hit his forehead on the base of the ceiling fan. Falling backward, he saw little multicolored stars, and Russian commandos, and shuffle board courts.

. . .

Frank woke up with his alarm set to go off in one minute. He knew his mother was already awake by the sound the walker made on the floor with her shifting around.

"Dammit," Frank said.

He rushed through his morning routine, cleaning her sheets, taking a quick shower for himself. He dressed and was out the door in fifteen minutes, leaving Helene in her chair with a cup of coffee she wouldn't touch until noon. Frank had already

started his car when he realized it was Saturday. It wasn't work he had to prepare for--Jim was coming home. He jumped from the car, sprinting into the backyard to check on Valentina, when found the shrubs butchered. The leaves were all removed and piled in clumps all around his lawn. There were ketchup and mustard trails everywhere, the grill was overturned and the junk that normally warmed Valentina's lawn was now on Frank's lawn. Nearly shitting himself Frank stumbled around. It was then that he heard a rustling in the bushes. Valentina popped out, her face covered in condiment war paint. She charged at him still covered in the bushes. Frank ran back falling through his screen door.

"Frankie, is that you?" Helene said.

Valentina pummeled him and the pair rolled around on the floor of the living room, Valentina screaming in Russian and Frank gasping for air.

"Stop it!" he said

Valentina stood up, her eyes wide, and pulled Frank up with one hand.

"I'm so sorry, neighbor. I thought you were someone else. Excuse me, I have to go kill the president."

"Wait. Stay here and clean up. Your husband will be home

soon."

"I don't have a husband."

"Of course you do. Jim. He asked me to look after you this week."

"That is, of course, a lie."

"Wait, would you like something to eat before you go kill the president?"

"Yes, neighbor. That would be nice."

He sat Valentina down at the round kitchen table that he and his mother never used. He brought Helene over too, and they all sat down for lunch. Frank slapped together some sandwiches, and they ate in silence until Valentina let out a large burp. Frank laughed, and Valentina smiled.

"You know, neighbor, I am glad I did not kill you, but I am sure you know something about the president's whereabouts. I found all this intel when I raided your room last night."

"When you what?" Frank said.

Valentina emptied the pockets of her jacket onto the table, and there was every brochure Frank had collected for the past ten years. Along with his agendas and notes from former city council meetings.

"Frankie, what is all this?" Helene said.

"I will tell you, ma'am. This is proof that the president of this country wants to farm old people. He puts them in these homes, forcing them to stay there so they can produce knitted sweaters and blankets for his armies."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Frank said.

Valentina threw the sandwiches in the air and rushed out of the house with Frank's brochures and notes in hand. Frank got to the front door as he heard the screeching of a car. Valentina was standing on the hood of her husband's convertible.

She squirted ketchup in his face. And screamed, "Kennedy is dead!"

Frank saw the look on Jim's face and headed back inside.

Girls Don't Sign My Guitar

Steven Carpenter's white Fender jazz master lectured onstage. It was covered in signatures from neck to tail. The names weren't of famous guitarists or musicians he admired, they were of his friends and band mates, people he had met through playing shitty bars every Saturday night. There was just one small white spot left on Steven's guitar just under the bridge. Not that you could see it in the blood red lightshow dancing around the stage. His band was playing a place called Just Asia, nobody was sure where the Asia part was but between the sweet old Irish woman bartending and the craft beers on tap, no one seemed to care. The show room had some out of work pizza ovens and a small stage half taken up by an early nineteenth century tuba. Steven was sitting behind a refrigerator sized amp. His legs were crossed in cut off jeans exposing his stalk like figure. His knees were perpetually skinned like he took a fruit peeler to them every morning. Steven was wearing an extra long flannel shirt that draped over him the way his Brunette hair hung on his face. If the audience could have seen Steven they might have noticed the way his guitar moved when he played. Not in big, wild, rock and roll gestures, but in little ways. It twitched every time Steven tried to sit up. It would sag into his lap with each hushed sigh he uttered and it drowned them out with

its flawless chords and riffs. As their last song finished the guitar rang out its last note, lingering. Jack, the bassist, spun around the shield of Steven's amp and grabbed his hand to pull him up.

"Hey man, you were killing it. Come on let me buy you a beer," Jack said.

"Thanks mango, but I think I'm just going to wait for the next set," He said.

"Dude you can't just sit around because she didn't show up. Come on, beer."

Jack managed to pull Steven up but the guitar swung around and the tuning pegs nearly slashed his cheek. They put down their instruments on the stage now bathed in a dusty white light that came on between the sets.

"Not much room left on that old thing?" Jack said.

"Nope just one spot left. I'm hoping for a blood stain of the virgin Mary."

"Virgin white space, you're weird buddy."

Steven looked out into the crowd and thought they all looked like they had just woken up. Like they were something different than the cheering mass he had heard in the dark. As he

was looking around he felt a hand on his shoulder, he saw Jack's hairy knuckles pulling him toward the bar, his stomach lurched. Jack pushed and parted the confused faces around the room, stepping down from the stage made it easy. He pulled Steven along with him. He got up to the bar and immediately got the attention of the woman behind it.

"Two beers please."

"He twenty-one?" She said

Steven held up the back of his left hand that was marked with a black X. Jack's face scrunched like he was looking at a chemical burn. He pulled Steven towards the door and stopped just next to the bouncer.

"Man I always forget you're not twenty-one yet. When's your birthday anyway?"

"It's not a big deal, I don't feel like drinking," Steven said.

"Look you need to snap out of this, we were sick tonight, there a tons of babes here, forget about, what was her name again?"

"This chick Sara, I don't know, we aren't dating or anything but I asked her to come tonight. I texted her like five times telling her about it."

"What do you want man? A girlfriend or something? Look you can have any girl here."

"I just want someone cool, you know?"

"You got to get some face time with them then get them out on the dance floor, that's the best way, and to do that tonight you need beer. I'm going to go find Andy and he'll grab beers for you. Wait here."

Steven stood by the door for a minute, but feeling eyes start to find him he brushed past the bouncer and pushed his way into the cool air. He navigated past the cloud of smokers and found a quiet spot against the bar's wall. Cars were buzzing by and people stumbled past in drunken crowds heading for new bars. Steven just leaned his ass against the cold cement wall. There was something about this atmosphere that he loved. Having a clear head while everyone else dealt with blurred vision gave him a sense of control. Steven was too much in his own head to see the young girl approaching him.

"Hey, you got any cancer on you?" she said.

"What?"

"Any cancer? I'm dying for a smoke?"

"If you have cancer you probably shouldn't be smoking," Steven said.

"Probably, but no I don't."

"Have cancer or smoke?"

"Both, just trying to make conversation."

"Oh, sorry."

She had shoulder length blonde hair, ripped jeans, a fake leather jacket, and freckles all across her face. She was skinny, probably more than she ought to be. She took some kind of cue from Steven's silence and leaned on the wall next to him.

"What's the x for?"

"I'm not twenty-one."

"Oh man, here I am trying to flirt with a minor."

"I'm nineteen."

"Clearly you're an adult then."

"How old are you?" Steven said

"Twenty-three, I'm old as fuck."

They laughed and fidgeted against the wall. The crowd of smokers in front of the door was heading inside and red and green lights started to shine out of the bar's windows.

"Looks like that's your cue, guitar guru."

"What?"

"You're that guitarist who plays lead for like five different bands sitting down right?"

"Four but yea, what did you call me?"

"Guru, it means a spiritual teacher."

"Oh, but you're right I should get back inside."

Steven turned and gripped the handle of the door and ripped it open harder than he had to, but didn't step inside.

"Whats- "

"Maggie, text me sometime."

She handed him a crumbled bar napkin as she hurried past him back into the crowded bar.

. . .

Steven sat sinking into his living room couch in his father's sparse apartment nervously fingering a scale on his guitar.

Maggie was coming over. They hadn't stopped texting since the night at the bar. Steven had jokingly suggested they were only internet friends, so Maggie instantly decided she needed to see his house. Steven might have been ashamed if anyone else coming to his apartment. With its single couch and TV with no stand, mud stained carpet, and a ceiling fan that looked like it might come down and impale you, his place was not welcoming. But with her he was willing to take the risk, although he had spent the whole day cleaning and hoping his father would stay away from the fridge. Steven's father was a man who was proud of his beer gut that hung slightly out of his clothes, even on the rare occasion that he wore a button down for a new job interview. He was bald and had old tattoos on his arms that were now wrinkled and distorted. He spent most of his time in his room. Steven only really saw him if he came home from a gig late, he would be passed out on the couch. The only time they talked was the days when his disability checks came in the mail; they would exchange a few pleasantries and he would leave Steven some money. He was always willing to give Steven money for music supplies. But it was only afternoon and Steven was fairly sure that the check had already come this week. He heard the low tone of the buzzer over his scale. He unplugged his guitar, set it in its stand in the corner of the room and went to the door buzzing Maggie up. Steven stood on his toes waiting in front of the door. Maggie

didn't knock. She swung open the door and hugged him, nearly sending both of them to the floor.

"It's so good to see you. How are you?" Maggie said.

"I'll be better when you stop choking me."

"I bet you like it."

"I kind of do, come on let's sit."

As they sat down Steven felt like he was still fingering his guitar scales but less focused. Maggie was straightening her hair in a mirror. She was dressed up the way she had been the night they met and he could smell her perfume, it was like fresh rain and apples. Steven suddenly felt cold in his shorts and wrinkled t-shirt.

"You look so comfy. What have you been doing today?" Maggie said

"Yea sorry, I had work this morning and I have practice at bandlife tonight, so I'm just chilling."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a line cook at a restaurant," Steven said.

"Sounds fancy, like the art you see in fast food places."

"Maggie I don't know what that means."

"Can we sit on the floor instead?"

Without waiting for a reply Maggie climbed to the floor and sat crossing her legs. She patted the ground next to her inviting Steven to join. He slipped off the couch and sat so that their shoulders were brushing together. She pulled, out of her leather jacket, a little bound notebook and opened up a new page.

"Let's play a game."

"Ok, what kind of game?"

"It's called theme of the day, you have to think about what happen to you and what you did today and sum up your theme in a couple words. I'll go first so you can see how it's done. So today I woke up early, before my alarm and when I got out of bed I instantly knew what I was going to wear. I went to class and I had to come up with a thesis for my final paper. There was a kid sitting in front of me who looked like a young Mark Twain so I decided right there to write my thesis on how women of the time period read Twain. I wrote the paper after class and emailed it early. And then I went home, got ready, and came here. So everything was really easy and almost set up for me today. It felt like I had a guiding hand helping me. So the theme of my day is certainty."

"Do you believe in that stuff?" Steven said

"Your turn." Maggie said.

"Okay I'll try. I woke up early too. Since I had to go to work and my boss is a real hard ass about being late. So I got up and threw on some work clothes and headed into work, there was a little traffic though and I was like two minutes late. I was waiting for him to say something all morning. On my lunch break I was working on a new song and I got really excited about it and I can't wait to play it for the guys tonight at bandlife. And this afternoon I cleaned up and waited for you to get here. That's all I did today."

"So what would you say the theme is?" Maggie said.

"I don't know, waiting?"

"Anticipation is probably a better word. But good job, not bad for your first time."

"Thanks."

They sat on the floor and Steven was thinking that he had to do something fun now. She had brought something to the table and he had to deliver. He thought she might like to hear the new song so he stood up and reached over for his guitar. But Maggie was scrambling over to the TV on her elbows and knees.

"Hey VHS, cool. What are these?"

"Those are my dads, he's into, adult entertainment."

"Gross, but hey this one is labeled birthday '95. Have you ever watched this?"

"No, but hey come here I want to play you my new song."

Maggie sat on the couch next to Steven as he pulled his guitar onto his lap. The guitar seemed larger in his hands and he needed to spread out and make room for it between himself and her. His hands felt sweaty and they were slipping up and down the neck. He tried to play his song but he kept glancing over to Maggie and something about her threw him off. He got out a few rough chord progressions and then stopped.

"That's the gist of it anyway."

"It sounds good. So what's the deal with the guitar, guru?"

"What do you mean?"

"The signatures, who's signed this thing?"

"Oh all my close friends and band mates and my first guitar teacher, he gave it to me."

"That's cool. Can I sign?"

Just then he heard the loud creaking of his father's door open. He strutted out in only a pair of white underwear and headed for the fridge. He didn't look at Steven or even acknowledge Maggie sitting next to him. He grabbed three beers and headed back through the hallway.

"Get the check," He said.

He closed his door with the same force as opening it. Then the apartment was quiet again.

"I should get going to bandlife, thanks for coming over though," Steven said.

"Sure let's do this again, I'd love to see where you practice."

"Ya maybe you could come check it out later."

. . .

Steven's phone hadn't stopped buzzing his whole way to bandlife. He finally turned his phone off while he was heading inside. She can wait a few hours, he thought. Walking up the broken concrete steps to bandlife all he could smell was dog shit. It always stunk outside the building, it was south of the city in a rundown neighborhood. But inside was his place of worship. None of the bands Steven played for knew that he owned a spot here, they had their own practice spaces littered about the city, but

Steven was on his own with a few childhood friends whom he first started to play with. He got inside quickly the room was an insane asylum white and had a single unshielded light bulb hanging from the ceiling. It swung slightly, creating darting shadows on the walls. There was an old couch they had dragged in from the street one day that held a book of American poetry and a month's old bag of cheese puffs. Steven just nodded to his friends and began to set up in his corner. He had a skateboard deck covered in delay pedals plugged into an amp that he sat on as he checked the tuning on his guitar. Max was on drums, he was like Steven he didn't say much but he could play anything in an instant. Justin was the bassist, he was new to playing but had grown up seeing his friends play, and when they were practicing he always looked like he was sweating. Kyle stood next to Steven, he was a guitarist too the same age as Steven but less gifted, he watched closely as Steven played and rarely missed a performance of any of Steven's bands. He wanted more than anything to be just a little better than Steven. Steven started them off with a simple riff and one by one they joined in. It sounded good but disjointed, Steven was off in his own world focusing on the technique he was practicing, Kyle was trying desperately to catch up to him. Max seemed happy enough to keep on going but there was a look in his every time the tune died down for a moment like he might cry if he had to stop. Justin

kept his head down and tapped his foot to the beat using everything he had to keep on tempo. They went on that way for hours until Kyle stopped abruptly and signaled to the others.

"I need to piss, who wants to go smoke a bowl?" He said

"Let's go," Justin answered.

They all got up including Steven. He sent his guitar down in its stand slightly stroking the head as he walked out.

"You're killing it as usual Stevie, what's your secret?" Kyle asked

"I'm just playing man, strutting along."

"You own it man," he said.

The four of them went outside into the cold dog shit air and stood around in a circle passing around a spoon pipe. Steven pulled out his phone to give his hands something to do while they passed around the weed. He had three texts from Maggie. The last one read,

"So what are you up to tonight?"

He texted back,

"I told you at life with the guys jamming,"

He had no sooner put his phone back in his pocket than it started to buzz again.

"Oh let me come! That's right by my apartment, I want to see you jam!"

Steven held the light of the phone against his eyes. He felt a tightening in his stomach as he typed out a few replies but deleted them all. After a minute of indecision and fearing that she had seen him trying to type he quickly text back,

"k"

. . .

Steven sat alone in the practice room in the middle of the floor. Max, Kyle, and Justin had cleared out to hit the bars. Steven wasn't playing anymore he sat with his phone in front of him on the floor watching it. He kept shifting himself, first he sat on his legs then he crossed them then went back. His phone light up and tried to jump off the floor. He read the text without opening it. Maggie was outside. She hugged him again at the door and he brought her inside.

"Wow this is really nice."

"Ya it does the job."

"And I guess the couch is for all the girls you bring in here to fuck, huh?"

"Actually I've never had a girl in here."

"I'm popping your cherry right now, I'm honored."

She did a little fake curtsy and spun around rushing over to hit one of the cymbals' on the drum set.

"Man this is cool, play me something will you?"

"Ya sure, just give me a second I need to use the bathroom."

Steven walked out into the black and red painted hallways. Maybe he could have a girlfriend he thought. The knot in his stomach dissolved as he headed to the bathroom and hurried back to the room. When he opened the door Maggie was standing in the center of the room holding her hands behind her back, the neck of Steven's guitar was poking out from behind her curved ear. She was smiling as she said,

"I've got a surprise for you guru, I finished your guitar for you."

Right under the bridge in the only open space in bright red marker was the name Maggie circled with a big heart impaled by an arrow. He grabbed the guitar from her hands. Maggie stumbled

backwards and fell over. The guitar screeched as the plug came out of the amp and it fell out of his hands onto Maggie.

A Gangbang Scene Orders Lunch

Nicole Cunningham wanted two things, to complete a number of hardcore pornography films she believed would help her advance her career in the adult entertainment industry and to become a mother. She meant to do these things at same time. She contacted a graduate student named Robert Lingman who she had heard was conducting research into the porn industry. Robert was also her ex-boyfriend. Her plan was to seduce him on the morning of her first gangbang shoot. Nicole put her hair up in a professional bun and put on her best heels on.

She met Robert at coffee shop near her home, in the suburban part of the city. The neighborhood was gentrified. There was an independent bookstore with a Mexican flag out

front, multiple coffee shops with terrible art, and an electronics store selling tablets and laptops. Nicole slipped out of her heels underneath the patio table. There was only a cool breeze pushing her hair back like an air conditioner on low, so her choice to do the interview at an outside café near her house seemed natural. The sun was sweating and in the distance church bells were ringing. Robert had his face down in his notepad as he was listening to Nicole. She couldn't see much of his face that way, except the mole on the side of his nose. She thought he must be doing this as his way of trying not to stare at her. She was after all letting her cleavage show in her low cut white blouse with cherries on it. Nicole remembered he used to always get the car door for her when he would pick her up for a date. She was inching her big toe closer to Robert's leg. He sat waiting with his pen above his pad for Nicole's answer. She could tell he was getting impatient because he was tapping the point of his pen on his notepad.

"It was really the right move rebranding myself as a milf. I'm fucking twenty-nine already. It was past time. But I'm feeling really positive. I think getting into more hardcore stuff will really increase my fan base."

Robert didn't look as he took down her answer in his pad. He was scribbling so fast Nicole wasn't sure he was actually

writing anything, she thought he might just be doodling a bird or a penis.

"Why is that?" he said

"It's just what you do. When you're at my stage you've got three options, do anal, go all black, or do a gangbang. Although I don't know how long that's going to cut it. Girls who start now are doing all three in their first scene. But I should be ok. I've got some loyal fans. And this is just a jumping off point. I've got some big plans. Anyway what's my high school sweetheart been up too?"

Robert didn't even look up from writing as Nicole answered his questions. Nicole couldn't tell if he even watched porn. He must she thought he's a guy, its normal thing now. He had probably even seen her. Nicole's leg shook as she shifted in her seat.

"Would you describe yourself as a sex addict?" he said

"Hell no."

As Robert keep his head down writing in his notebook, Nicole could see the beginning of a bald spot on his head. She ran her toe along Robert's leg. At the other tables of the café there were families sitting down eating bread and desserts.

"Sorry did you say something?" he said

"How have you been? I haven't talked to you since graduation."

"I like it fine."

Nicole kicked his leg.

"Oh sorry Robbie, I thought that was the pole."

"It's fine. What were you saying?"

Nicole leaned back in her chair and took a deep breath. She smiled at Robert. His button up shirt was wrinkled and she knew he couldn't have a girlfriend. She would never have let him leave the house like that.

"I was surprised when you called me. I was a real bitch to you when we broke up. I'm sorry for that."

"That was years ago, we were kids, don't worry about it. I just couldn't pass up the opportunity to talk to you. Thanks for your interest in my work," he said.

"You miss me that much or are you just another fan?"

"No I meant interview you. This is really going to help my research. I haven't done much field work yet and Dr. Goodwin says I need to get hands on experience."

"I'm good at hands on."

"Very funny."

Nicole looked around the café at the other patrons. It was busy for a Sunday afternoon. Men in suits jackets and women in spring dresses were at every table.

"What's your major again?"

"I'm an anthropologist. And I'm studying, well my professor is studying the porn industry specifically porn starlets, she has some really interesting theories."

"What's his name?"

"Her name is Dr. Goodwin."

"Sounds smart."

"She's brilliant. Anyway thanks for agreeing to the study."

"Of course, it's fun."

Robert returned to his notepad although Nicole was sure she hadn't added anything for him to be writing down. She watched as the waiter came over to their table. He was a teenager with large glasses on that were almost fashionable and a cowlick that he tried to press down with every few steps he took. When he got

to the table he was scribbling down in his notepad as he greeted them.

"How are we doing today guys? My name is Todd I'll be your server. Can I start you off with something to drink?" he said

Robert wasn't paying attention, still lost in his notes. Nicole just smiled up at him. Todd looked up after he finished his speech and saw Nicole. His face locked for a second with his mouth open. Nicole knew he had recognized her. Normally this would have been annoying, but it hadn't happen for a while and Nicole couldn't help but blush.

"Anything to drink sir?"

"Just water for me." Robert said

"I'll have a mimosa please."

"Sure thing guys and are we ready to put some food in?"

"No thanks, we are leaving soon." Robert said.

"Okay sure thing." Todd said.

Todd left the table. Nicole slipped back into her heels. Nicole could feel her blouse riding up in the back. She tried to straighten it and sit up. Todd was coming back to the table with their drinks in hand. As he put their drinking down on the metal table top he didn't take his eyes off of Nicole.

"Here you go miss. And for you sir."

"Thank you" Robert said

"Ok great, let me know if you need anything else."

Todd hurried away to attend to the other table straightening his cowlick. He reminded Nicole of Robert when they were still in school. She a senior in high school and he a nerdy looking sophomore, if it hadn't been for his acting skills she never would have noticed him. But he stuck out in drama class and she was the queen of that little world. She knew they would get together. And they did by the end of September they were hand in hand everywhere they went. Nicole thought about how Robert had been on their first few dates. When he walked up to her door for that first date he looked as if he was trying to balance spinning plates on a stick.

"Robbie, do you ever think about high school at all?"

"Not really. Do you think that's when you started thinking about doing porn?"

"Hell no. I just sort of fell into this to make money. What I mean is do you ever think about me?"

"How would you say the temptation of a not only stable but lucrative income affected your decisions? And can you tell me about your experiences with your first couple of scenes."

Nicole slumped down in her chair and took a long sip from her mimosa. The other tables were full of chattering families having lunch. Two kids were screaming at each other at the table behind them over a plastic fork that they had turned into a magic wand.

"Like I said I just fell into this to make money when I couldn't get into school."

"What?"

"I just needed money. I got an offer to do a scene and it paid well so I just did it, I didn't really think about making it a career."

Robert stopped and looked at her. He put his hand up on the table and gripped it. Nicole got to look into his eyes for a minute and she remembered how strange they were, green with little brown splotches like a Rorschach test.

"No you said you couldn't get into school. You told me when you broke up with me that you got into an acting school in New York."

"Oh, well I was looking into schools in New York but nothing really panned out."

Nicole downed her drink and tried to straighten herself up in her chair. Robert didn't pick up his notepad. Nicole giggled nervously.

"Do you want to see my house? That would be helpful for the study right?"

"Do we have time before the shoot?" Robert said

"Plenty let's go."

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They pulled up to Nicole's apartment. It was a pale yellow triple decker with four separate satellite dishes on the side of house. Nicole rushed up the front steps fighting with her keys shouting for Robert to follow. He came quickly out of the car with his notebook in hand. Nicole pulled him inside and up the stairs to her apartment on the top floor. As she opened the door Robert got a whiff of dry sage burning. There was a lime green loveseat on the far wall. The wallpaper had a tiny red floral pattern and it made the walls look like a building covered in vines and flowers. Nicole shoved Robert onto her couch. He went to put his notebook on the coffee table but there was no room. There were piles of books stacked up on it some with tiles like

Don't Be A Tits McGee, finding success in the porn industry. But there were also a few baby books lying around. Nicole rushed off into another room and Robert was left sitting there staring at her blank television. A closer look at the books would have tipped Robert of to what Nicole had in mind. She came back in a black silk robe wearing nothing but thin lingerie.

"I'm ready to continue the interview now."

"Nicole, maybe you should put something else on."

"I just want to be ready for the shoot, your going to watch that aren't you? So what's the big deal if I'm comfortable?"

"I guess your right so tell me what was your first scene?"

"It was me and another girl, we were pretending to be in college and we were just running around this fake dorm flashing people."

"What do you mean fake dorm?"

"It was like a hallway in this office building that the company owned to shoot college scenes. They just came up to me and my friend on the street one Saturday night and asked if we wanted to make some quick money. And we were already kind of drunk but it wasn't that late so we said fuck it."

Robert returned to his notepad and was writing faster than ever. He motioned for Nicole to continue the story with little nods from his head but he didn't look up. Nicole noticed he had a stain on his shirt above the pocket.

"You've got a stain on your shirt."

"What?"

"Nothing sorry. So anyway we did that and made like five hundred bucks and then he asked us if we wanted to come back the next day. My friend Lara said no but I was in my first apartment and I was dead sick of waitressing my nights away so I said sure. I made my rent doing two more shoots that week and then I was in."

"So it was just a financial motivation?"

Robert put his pen in his mouth and put the notepad on the table and Nicole wasn't sure if he was listening anymore.

"Not just that but that's what I was thinking about at the time I guess."

"And what was the mood like in those first few scenes? Do you have copies?"

"No. And I don't know. I was drunk the first time and the next time I was so nervous I threw up in the bathroom

beforehand. But the guy I was filming with was really nice. We smoked some weed together before the shoot and he never mentioned me vomiting. I tried to find him after that but."

"Go on. Can you tell me more about your first few scenes and how they made you feel? What was it like?" Robert said

"I was actually pretty sad for a while, I liked him and the director didn't have any real info about him, most first timers use fake names. So I never saw him again. I tried to find him a few times recently but."

"No I meant that first scene with him, how would you describe it? You said you were nervous."

"Well yea but Ryan, that was his fake name anyway, was so cool about it that I chilled out a lot. I kind of forgot we were even on camera. I mean I was a virgin but I didn't feel uncomfortable, even after a bled on him. But all that college stuff is easy. It's mostly set up like a fake hidden camera so there isn't some guy with a camera in your face the whole time. It's like you're in college and you're just hooking up with a cute guy you like. That was the best part of those kinds of scenes."

"And you did those for a while right?"

"Yea"

"When did you move into more serious stuff? When would you say you made the transition from amateur to porn star?"

"Oh I don't know. I guess when I was twenty-one and I got a boob job, like a really expensive nice one. Look can we take a break for a minute?"

"We just started back up again. Why was that your transition moment?"

Nicole sat down next to Robert on the couch and let her robe fall open. She pushed some of books of the coffee table with her feet. She put her arms behind her head and pushed her breasts out.

"You tell me."

"Fair enough, so what is your goal for this comeback? You've got today's scene then what's next."

"As many scenes as it takes to get me back on top. I need way more fans and screen time."

She leaned forward exposing herself as she straightened out the contents of the coffee table.

"But isn't your age a factor?"

"Of course but I just want to get on top so I can move up."

"Move up to what?"

"Directing, producing anything but acting. I want a real job."

"Have you thought about going outside the industry?"

"This is what I know. It's just the best way to climb the ladder. Once I have a massive fan base, I'll have enough pull with companies so I can sign on as a producer. Then eventually I want to be an executive,"

"That's very ambitious of you. What about those jobs attract you?"

"The money,"

"And what about children?" Robert said

Nicole closed her robe and turned her legs away from him. She wasn't planning on tell him yet. The room seemed smaller. She was suddenly very uncomfortable with Robert being there she wanted to cover herself with a blanket.

"What do you mean?"

"Have you ever thought about having children?"

Nicole could hear the ticking of her clock. It was a grandfather clock in the corner of the room. The ticking made her knees shake.

"Get up Robbie I want to show you something, I think it will be important for your profile."

"Alright."

Nicole held his hand and led him down the hallway. He could keep his eyes off Nicole as she walked. Robert didn't even notice he had left his notepad in the other room he just kept following her. She stopped them when she came to a white door with freshly painted pink letters that said Samantha. Nicole opened the door and pulled Robert inside. In the room there was an elephant with a little yellow hat outside a circus painted on the wall. There was a pile of stuffed animals nearly encasing a dresser. From the center of the room there was a bright hanging mobile above a pink crib.

"Nicole do you have a daughter?"

"Not yet. But I will. I need the money and then I need the father. And then I can have my little girl."

She pushed Robert further into the room. He hit his head on the mobile and looked down into the crib. There lying on the

pillow was a pair of simple cotton panties with a small dark red
splotch.