

creamy nougat

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erec smith

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Chapter One

The ad specifically read, "We are a very liberal minded trio that is looking for a fourth roommate who is equally in need of a 'marginal' sanctuary from a society bent on conformity." After reading this statement in a trendy alternative newspaper, he decided to call the number.

"Hello," rang the voice on the other end of the line. "This is Frank, how are you today?"

"Well, I'm pretty comfortable, Frank," said Ross. "But not as comfortable as I could be in a more open society."

"Ah, you're interested in the roommate situation."

"That I am, Frank. That I am."

"Well," Frank paused for suspense, which managed to do no damage to Ross's patience. "We are a pretty— alternative group, and we feel that a comfortable and accepting living environment is just as important to one's well being as, well, a good diet, exercise, etc."

"Sure."

"And, well, I'm gay, I'll tell you that right now. Actually, I'm bisexual but I haven't been with a woman in two years, so for the time being I'm a homo."

"Whichever way the wind blows, huh? Good attitude. It's all about love you know? I'm sure you do know. But, I mean love in a large, large sense. Love of feeling, attitude, comfort. Oh, I love comfort, and I'm not afraid to say so."

Frank put his hands on his hips, his head askew, sporting a smile that relayed a bit of unexpected admiration. The stranger's voice, intonation, timing all exuded a charm that he wanted to trust. A kind

~ eric smith

of game-show host chic. “Well, in our apartment no one is afraid to say anything. You can say whatever you want to us.”

“Do you take it in the ass?”

The question caught Frank a bit of guard, causing a pause that had nothing to do with suspense. Frank collected himself with the affirmation, “I am open to ALL things in life” relentlessly echoing in his head. “Well, yes. Yes I do. And I do it safely, too.”

“Well, safety and anal sex are two terms that go hand in hand, aren’t they?”

Another pause. “May I ask why you wanted to know?”

“Well, I wanted to see just how open you were.”

Frank rolled his eyes. “Hey, I have a boyfriend if this is some cheap attempt—”

“Oh, no, not at all. As far as I know, I am completely heterosexual—just trying to break some ice and test your openness and immunity to worldliness at the same time. I respect that you answered me honestly. I’m actually ecstatic that you simply didn’t hang up on me. You’re a man of your word, Frank.”

“Well thank you. Thank you very much, ahm—”

“The name’s Ross, Frank. What about your other roommates?”

Frank thought about the excitement of having such an off-the-cuff personality as their roommate, someone on their side who seemed to have one foot in the mainstream and one on the outer banks of conformity. “Listen, why don’t you stop by tomorrow afternoon and ask them yourself. I think you’ve earned a personal interview with us. Are you up for that?”

“Sure, Franky. I can’t wait”

Actually, Frank couldn’t wait, either. He had a kind of

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nervous eagerness the second he hung up the phone.

On the next afternoon, Frank sat on the living room sofa, genuinely excited and proud of the liberating environment he had constructed with his current roommates. Finally there would be a place where he felt comfortable, and everyone could feel the same. He only hoped that he could make the latest prospective roommate feel the same way.

The next day, in the early afternoon, the door bell rang. Without trying to figure out who it was over the intercom, Frank rang the person in. Thirty seconds later, Frank, a lanky, bald man with casual attire, opened the door to a smiling man, about the same height as he, with a slimmer build, mid-length blonde hair, and a movie-star face. He smiled back. "Ross?"

"Frank. How are you?" They shook hands. "I pictured you with blonde hair for some reason." Ross smiled as he folded his arms.

"Well, I do have a radiant personality," said Frank, acting coy for comic effect.

"It's warming me up already." Ross' calm confidence only added to his all-American good looks and Old Navy fashion sense. From his golden hair to his Tommy Hilfiger shoes, he looked like he could do no wrong. He stepped in and admired the apartment. It had a soft and warm ambience to it, with various paintings and statuettes situated throughout. He smiled at the poster of the zodiac. "Nice poster. I'm not too into the occidental zodiac, but in the Chinese one I'm a pig." He looked at Frank. "A fucking pig. Can you believe that?"

"Well I'm sure there are some redeeming qualities to being a pig."

Ross smiled at him for a moment. "Let's hope so."

~ eric smith

“Have a seat,” said Frank, gesturing toward a circular table off to the side.

Ross and Frank sat down and, upon hearing footsteps to his left, Ross turned to see two smiling women walking toward him. One seemed to have a physical problem and limped severely when she walked, she wore soccer-mom jeans and a vertically blue and white striped shirt. The other walked with an enticingly confident sway, flaunting a kind of neo-Stevie Nicks radiance. She reached Ross first with an extended hand as both women sat at the table. “Hi, I’m Jennifer and I practice the Wiccan religion.”

As he stood to shake her hand, Ross released a subtle chuckle at her seriousness. “Oh, you’re a witch, huh?”

“Well that’s what society calls us. And frankly I don’t mind it. It pulls no punches.”

“Good for you,” said Ross with a nod.

The other girl extended her involuntarily limp hand. Ross took it into his, delicately. “And who might you be?” he asked.

“Hi, I’m Lonnie. I have cerebral palsy.”

“Wow,” said Ross. “Were you born that way or did the witch, here, put a spell on you?”

The girls looked at each other and then at Frank, as if looking for an explanation to the new guy’s tastelessness. Frank just shrugged, smiling uncomfortably.

“Just a little something I do to test the openness of people, that’s all,” Ross explained as he sat back down. “Nothing personal. The thing is, if you let someone know they’re being tested they don’t give you genuine feedback, you know? I would never intentionally offend some one without just cause. You, Jennifer, being of the Wicca persuasion, probably know all too well about

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karma. My goal, like yours, is to give goodness and, therefore, receive it."

"Well, that's nice," said Jennifer, before looking at Lonnie for some kind of assurance. When Lonnie just shrugged, Jennifer looked at Ross. "Most people don't know that my faith is one of optimism and love. And they think karma is only a Hindu or Buddhist thing."

"Well that's changing substantially," said Ross. "They did make Wicca an official religion in '92, if I recall correctly. I've had some Wicca acquaintances. Somebody's taking it seriously." He took her hand into his left one while covering it warmly with his right. "May the God and Goddess bless you with their essences. So above, so below."

Jennifer smiled, and was somewhat embarrassed when she felt herself blushing. Most people were not aware of Wicca discourse.

"Well, what do you know about *me*?" asked Lonnie defiantly.

"Yes, in addition to being a lovely human being, you seem to be a mild spastic, a category which makes up the larger percentage of the American cerebral palsy population. You're in abundant company." He pulled it all out of his ass. He had read that somewhere and took a risk with his feigned certainty, smiling all the while.

Lonnie shrugged, again, and took a seat in the living room area behind them. She looked back at Frank and Jennifer, who stared at her, trying to notice any "spastic" qualities in her demeanor. Ross just smiled.

"What!?" Lonnie shot at her current roommates.

They all snapped back to the original subject, Ross, who was still smiling at Lonnie. He slowly turned his attention back to Frank and Jennifer.

~ eric smith

"What's your, ah, specialty?" asked Jennifer, taking a seat across from him and next to Frank.

"Me? Well I taught at the state college as I got my Masters degree in Cultural Studies. I'm at Athena University, now, downtown campus, writing my dissertation and researching the progress of openness in the U.S. I, personally, am extremely open in many ways. You could say I am a chameleon of liberation. It's kind of like I am in my own Peace Corp of human freedom." He almost rolled his eyes at his Bush Administration rhetoric, but, for some reason, it always worked. "I figured three open and receptive people like yourselves could help me out a bit."

"Will we be in a book?" asked Lonnie as she sat on the couch and stretched the remote toward the large entertainment center in the living room. *Three's Company* slowly came in at high definition.

"Perhaps. All parties willing."

"Well, what do you mean? How do you want us to help you out?" asked Frank, his eyebrows raised in interest.

"Well, I am experimenting a bit with myself and with the human race as a whole." He crossed his legs. "I am a revolutionary. You three have built your own liberated sanctuary because the outside world isn't liberating enough—for *your* lifestyles. Correct?" Frank and Jennifer replied "Yes," almost simultaneously. Lonnie nodded, her eyes fixed on the television. "Well, consider me your new-wave Dionysus, except a little calmer and more rational. If you do agree to have me, you can join me as my maenads, if you will." He leaned across the table toward them. "As long as this remains an open and accepting environment," he continued. "You guys aren't hypocrites, are you?"

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"Oh no," said Frank, "not at all. People like us cannot be at all like those assholes out there: the Powers that Be." He waved his hands and cowered in mock terror for a bit. "They have stifled us for too long."

Ross stood up. "Well, let us be the powers that *free*. All of us, let's make the margins into heaven and create new myth." He was really pouring it on thick. He felt he sounded like an infomercial and was relieved that his laughter at himself and them was interpreted as optimistic glee.

"Cool," smiled Jennifer.

"And poetic," Frank added.

Lonnie gave a perfunctory thumbs-up as she giggled at Jack Tripper running into a door.

"Let's be innovators," Ross continued. "Not because it is cool or poetic, but because it is our duty, our calling as nonconformists. What do you say?"

"I like him," said Frank to Jennifer.

"Yeah, I'm down with him," she concurred.

They both looked at Lonnie, who was already awaiting their anticipatory glares; there was a commercial break. "Yeah, okay."

"Then I'm in?" asked Ross, arms open.

"Yes, you are," said Frank as he extended his hand.

Ross shook it, shook Jennifer's, and then pranced over to Lonnie, who he bent over and hugged tight enough to induce an uncomfortable giggle. He straightened up and addressed them all. "I will move in tomorrow. How about that?"

Chapter Two

Two days later, with two bags of groceries, Jennifer made it up four flights of stairs to her apartment door. While putting one bag down and fiddling in her pockets for the door key, she heard sounds of thumping, slapping, running and giggling inside. She finally found her key and opened the door just in time for Ross's female guest to ram into it.

"Oh shit, are you okay," Jennifer heard Ross say.

When she entered the apartment she saw a girl lying on the ground, seemingly in pain, yet amused by the whole situation. Ross was kneeling beside her, propping her head up with his right arm while brushing the hair out of her eyes with his left hand. They were both completely naked.

Jennifer's chin dropped along with her groceries.

"Hey, kid," said Ross, looking up at her and smiling. "We're kind of in the middle of acquainting ourselves. This is, ahm—hmm. Well, she's a good gal, whatever her name is."

Jennifer nodded, losing the battle to suppress an uncomfortable grin. She discarded her groceries, went straight for her bedroom, and unwittingly slammed the door shut. Ross looked back at his naked friend and laughed at the drunken perplexity on her face. She laughed at Ross's laughing.

"Are those your roommates?" she giggled.

"Well, that's *a* roommate. Her name is Jennifer. What's yours, again?"

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"Cindy, asshole." Her giggles broke down into spurts of chuckling.

"Cindy Asshole. Interesting surname, if not extremely suggestive. Okay, I'll remember this time."

"You said that," she giggled, "the last two times."

"Well, do you remember my name?"

"Yes," she said seemingly insulted. "You're Kilroy."

"You have an excellent memory." He patted her on the stomach. "I have to go check on her, okay? I'll be right back."

He got up and walked to Jennifer's door and leaned against it with his right shoulder. "Hello, in there. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," said Jennifer, who was on one knee before one of her self-made statuettes of her perceived "Woman of the Winds." "Lady of the East," she chanted, "give me the power of toleration and openness. The ability not to be embarrassed by what has just happened and the ability to handle—"

"You're not embarrassed by my nakedness are you?" said Ross through the door.

"Ah—ah, no."

"Good. You should try it, you know? It's very liberating."

"I don't think so."

"Hmm. I thought you would, being Wiccan and all."

She didn't respond.

"Okay, well, keep it in the back of that open mind of yours, okay?"

Then a voice came from the front door. "What are all these groceries doing in the—oh my Lord."

Ross looked to see Frank ogling the naked girl, who was now sitting up.

~ eric smith

“Hi-ya buddy,” said Cindy, right before cracking up uncontrollably. Frank looked around for an answer until he spotted Ross. “What the fuck is going on, here?”

Ross smiled. “Exploration and expression, Franky.”

“Well,” Frank proceeded to close the door, giving him more time to process what was going on. “I can respect that, but perhaps you should do this in your own room for now. At least gradually acclimate us to your—” he quickly looked Ross up and down, only moving his eyes, and then shielding them with his hand, “—expressions.”

“I’m sorry,” said Ross as he swaggered toward Frank, face aglow. “I didn’t think I had to with such open minds about.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“No, not at all. It’s respect.” Ross stopped about three feet from Frank. “I am now better aware of my limits and will act accordingly” he said before moving to about four and a half feet from Frank. “Nudity is out of the question.”

“Ah yeah. That would be good,” Frank nodded, with a slightly sarcastic smirk of his own.

“For now,” said Ross, making sure to look straight into Frank’s eyes.

Frank coughed a little. “Well, we can have weekly check-in meetings. You know? To see where we are.”

Ross’ face lit up even more. “That is a wonderful idea. Weekly discussions. Dialogue. Franky-boy, you’re a genius. I think I’ll stay in the buff for just a little bit longer, though.”

“Thanks,” said Frank before speed-walking to his room. He shut the door behind him and Ross could here the faint sound of metal against metal, the sound of a door being abruptly locked.

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About an hour later, Lonnie entered the apartment to find Jennifer and Frank seated at the rounded living room table with Ross bare-chested, opposite of them. "Hello, Lonnie," he said, his smile providing the only radiance in the room.

"We have to talk," said Jennifer. "Have a seat."

"What's going on?" said Lonnie as she sat down, looking from Jennifer's disquieting glare to Ross's surprisingly optimistic expression, to Frank's look of anxious anticipation.

"Well," started Ross. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to explain myself more than I planned." He stood up and started to pace. Lonnie's chin dropped, followed by her eyes, so to not look at Ross's completely bare body. Jennifer just shook her head as Frank looked straight ahead, in awe of Ross's audacity, his smile signifying anything but amusement or glee.

"Why on Earth," said Lonnie, "are you—"

"Naked?" concluded Ross. "Because I am what you call a nudist, among other things." He started to circle the table. "And being the extremely open people you are, I guess I thought there wouldn't be a problem."

"You're naked," said Jennifer, almost shouting.

"And you're a witch and he's a homosexual. Two lifestyles that are shunned in society. Shunned enough for us all to need an open and receptive sanctuary."

"You didn't think that was important enough to tell us about yesterday?" asked Jennifer. "You know, during the interview?"

Ross almost told them that he hadn't decided to be a nudist until around lunchtime, but he decided to keep it to himself. "I guess it's so engrained in my life I forgot to bring it up."

~ eric smith

Lonnie heard “*get it up*” and began to laugh a little. This attracted a smile and a wink from Ross.

“Well, there are nudist colonies for you,” said Jennifer. “Why can’t you go there?”

“Sure, then why aren’t you in a coven somewhere in Salem? Why isn’t Frank in San Francisco? Why isn’t Lonnie in a circus or something?” Ross noticed Lonnie’s silent disapproval with his statement, but decided there was too much going on to try to assuage *that* situation as well. “I’ll tell you why,” continued Ross. “Because we are individuals. Innovators who do not want to be treated like lepers. I think it’s a bit therapeutic to live with others who are not like us.” He looked at Lonnie. “Don’t you think? I mean, you start hanging around people who are only like you and a) you miss out on the rest of the world and b) you start feeling like there’s something strange about you, you know? Well, I don’t like that feeling, and I’m pretty sure none of you do, either.”

Silence.

“Well, am I right?”

“You *are* right,” said Frank. “But—”

“We shouldn’t have to look at your swinging penis all day, either,” said Jennifer, still a bit defiant.

“That’s what the kids used to say about me,” said Lonnie. “Not the penis thing, but about me, period. No one wanted to be near me and all I was doing was sitting there. I sat normally didn’t I? People still feel that way, and—some people get angry. They get visibly angry that I’m there. I should be welcome anywhere I please!” she said, stomping the table. Frank placed a hand on her shoulder and Jennifer placed her hand on Lonnie’s as she noticed her eyes watering.

“Lonnie,” said Ross, softly, taking his seat, “I’ve only

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known you for two days and I don't feel disgusted by you at all. In fact, I look forward to knowing you more. As well as the rest of you." He stood up and began walking around the table. "I think our perspectives and lifestyles can give each other new insights into life. I respect your differences. Should mine not even warrant an attempt at toleration because you're not as used to it?"

"Run around naked all you want," said Lonnie. "I won't think any less of you. I'll respect you."

"Well," said Frank. "It's not like you have a bad body or anything."

"Thank you, Frank. If only I partied like you do."

Frank returned a cordial grin, "Don't flatter yourself; I don't do the Alex P. Keaton thing."

"You're gonna have to give me some time to get used to it," said Jennifer. "It'll be a new moon tomorrow, which is perfect for asking the Goddess to shed me of my inhibitions."

Her pompous air almost made Ross laugh aloud. "I'll be patient," he said, wondering where she had picked up the whole Wiccan thing. Was it truly a lifestyle or did she read a book a month ago and wax inspired? He put his hand on her shoulder and then lifted it when she looked at it as if it were a poisonous snake.

At that moment Cindy stumbled out of the back room, danced around a bit and tripped over her own feet, falling on her face.

"How frequently is that going to happen?" asked Lonnie.

"Not much," Ross walked over to Cindy and helped her up.

"Where did you go?" Cindy asked in a pouty child's voice.

~ erec smith

“Over there,” he said without indicating direction.
“We’re gonna get dressed and get you home, okay?”

“I forget where I live,” she pouted.

“Well, we’ll drive around until you see a house that looks familiar.”

She lit up. “Oh, okay!”

And so the days went. Ross at his most pristine in appearance, the other three trying with all their minds’ abilities, and quite a bit of their hearts’, to tolerate Ross’s freedom. He cooked naked, cleaned naked, got on his knees to scrub naked. He talked on the phone naked, read naked, played solitaire naked, wrote to his dear old mother in Haverford, PA, naked. He ate naked, discussed the events of the day naked, combed his hair naked, did calisthenics, danced, sang, repaired, all naked.

One night, he sat on the couch watching T.V., naked, with Lonnie to his left, Frank to his right, and Jennifer with the love seat all to herself.

“This show’s over,” said Ross, naked, as he saw Dave Letterman waving at him from behind a wall of credits. “You mind if I switch the channels a bit?”

“Be my guest,” Frank handed him the remote without looking at him, pretending he was more interested in who handled the boom mike operations at Ed Sullivan Theater.

“Okay, well let’s see—rerun—rerun—that show sucks—God, Oprah’s on three times a day in this city—nope—can’t do that—okay, is it me or does Owen Wilson play the same character in all his movies. I mean, I like the guy, but Lou Farigno has more versatility—Oh, for the love of goodness and graciousness. Look at this, will you?” Ross had stopped at a commercial for a sex hotline. Two girls facing each other, with not much space in

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between them, were slowly turning their heads toward the viewers. "Call us," said a sensuous disembodied voice. "We've been waiting for you."

"Oh, you've been waiting for me?" mocked Ross, naked. "Well hell, I better call right away, then. I mean, she's been *waiting*. Jesus!" He shook his head. "There is no greater insult to my intelligence in the world than this fucking phone sex thing. Like imaginary tits and ass are enough to make me spend four bucks a minute. I don't even know these chicks, and what's more, they're probably 300 pounds with beards and adam's apples. Un-fucking-believable."

Ross switched the channels some more, naked, until he came upon the latest rock diva, Cynthia Sledge, straddling a piano bench singing her hit song, "Let You In." "Whoa," said Ross, speaking with a noticeable drop in speed and timbre. "Now *she's* worth four bucks a minute—just to watch. That is a woman. Not that you ladies aren't. It's just that, well, Cynthia gets my blood flowing, you know?"

"What the fucking hell is that!" yelled Jennifer, pointing at Ross's lap.

Lonnie and Frank followed her finger to its target: a full erection standing straight upward, of a good and almost disturbing size.

"I told you she gets my blood flowing," said Ross as he shrugged.

"No, that is where I draw the line," raged Jennifer, standing up. "That is fucking ridiculous!"

"Among other things," commented Frank before getting up and escaping to the kitchen. Lonnie just stared at it, not for any sexual reason; she'd just never seen

~ erec smith

an erect penis in person before and thought she never would.

"There's nothing 'ridiculous' about it," rebutted Ross, calmly. "This is all natural. You're Wiccan, you should appreciate nature."

"Oh, no, no. This is much different. That is disgusting." She got up and walked to the kitchen.

Ross got up to follow her, erection still in tact. "You are just afraid of human sexuality. There's nothing perverted about this," he said, pointing at his penis. Frank leaned against the kitchen sink, out of the crossfire, with a Mystic iced tea in his hand, clueless of what to say or do. "This is pure energy," Ross continued. "I don't even have sex. Haven't had it for over a year. I let the energy rise from the root chakra, through the solar plexus, and into the heart and mind." He took deep breaths. Inhale: "It's very invigorating." Exhale: "Liberating as well."

"Liberating?" Jennifer asked. "So, if you had sex more you'd put your clothes on? Good." She waved her hands in the air, willy-nilly. "Let's go whoring!"

"There you go." Ross clapped his hands. "Humor. Humor makes the world go round."

"And the erection go down," said Frank, causing Ross and Jennifer to notice the now relaxed penis.

"See, there you go," said Ross. "Maybe now we can talk more calmly about this matter."

"I really have nothing else to say on the matter," Jennifer said, storming past Ross and out of the kitchen.

"Hey, you're not gonna put a spell on me or anything, are you?" asked Ross. "Remember the law of karma, Jennifer. Karma's a bitch."

Just then an incredibly pathetic voice screamed, "Hey Frank," from outside. "Lonnie!"

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Frank and Lonnie almost sunk into their shoes; it was obvious that this person's presence was less desired than that of the naked man in the kitchen.

"Wonderful," said Jennifer as she stopped in front of her room and faced them. "Why don't you ask that guy to move in, too? Reality TV has nothing on this apartment." She walked toward the front room, Lonnie followed.

"Who's that?" asked Ross to Frank, whose face had transformed into an icon of dread and fatigue.

"That's Maurice. He's got a little problem with crack."

"Crack, huh?"

The two of them walked to the front window, where Lonnie and Jennifer were already looking outside as covertly as possible. By the time Ross and Frank looked out, Maurice could be seen easily in the middle of the street, for he was the only one jumping up and down, waving his arms frantically, while screaming the same three names over and over again. People looked at him as they walked by, but in a way that suggested they were used to that kind of thing. Some shook their heads, some looked for a moment before going about their way, as if looking at a squirrel or a bird. In general, they seemed nonchalant about this relatively young black man, late twenties or early thirties, small dreadlocks, clothes dirty but not filthy. The only ones concerned were his addressees, who were all staring down at him from the safety of their apartment.

Ross shook his head. "You guys deal crack and I can't walk around naked?"

"We don't sell crack," said Lonnie. "He just knows we have money to spare."

"You shouldn't have given him that fucking dollar to begin with Frank," complained Jennifer.

~ eric smith

"I thought it would be just one time, okay? God, get off my back about it."

"One time?" she said, turning her whole body toward him and placing her hands on her hips. "He didn't even *ask* for the money. What, do they need a fucking 'Don't feed the crack addicts' sign on every block'?"

"Well, weren't you supposed to have put a spell on him or something, *Jeanie*? What the hell is he still doing here?" Frank put his hands on his hips as if challenging Jennifer for an answer.

"I guess I wasn't specific enough. Next time I'll make sure he's happy enough to stay where ever the hell he goes."

"What exactly did you say in the spell," asked Ross, just for kicks more than genuine interest. He made sure he asked in a serious tone, a serious facial expression, to induce a serious answer.

"I asked that he go where he will best serve the community and get over his problems."

"Wow," said Frank. "Talk about 'beware of what you wish for'."

"Wait, wait," said Ross, raising his hands, palms out, like a convention host trying to quiet his audience. "This guy just comes around asking for your money so he can buy crack every night?"

"Well, almost every night," said Lonnie, hypnotized by the addict's street performance. "But it never feels like he's 'asking' at all. I guess we just feel sorry for him."

Ross looked up at the ceiling for a thought, which intrigued Frank and downright worried Jennifer. "This has lots of potential. I'll speak with him."

"What!" Frank and Jennifer exclaimed in unison.

Lonnie snapped out of her trance and looked at Ross,

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intrigued. "You're gonna talk to him or give him money? Or both?"

"Well unless I have my wallet shoved up my ass, I'm gonna only talk to him."

Ross walked to the door, saluted his roommates and left. All three of them looked at each other for a few seconds before hurrying out of the door. They arrived in time to see Ross motioning Maurice to the front steps of the apartment.

"Yo man," said Maurice, yards before reaching Ross. He wore a blue, blank t-shirt, dirty khaki slacks and shoes that were almost impressive in their ability to stand the test of time. "You look like you got a couple bucks I can borrow. I need to get some food, man"

"Does it look like I have anything for you?" Ross asked, legs and arms spread wide.

"Well, find somebody with pockets, man. Come on, just a couple—." He spotted some one in the doorway and then looked in to see the three, each considering whether they should run back upstairs or not.

"Hey, Franky, man. Let me have five dollars. I'll owe you."

"I don't know Maurice. You said that before and I'm starting to think—well, I think you're using that money for drugs."

Maurice smiled as if amused by Frank's wholesomeness. "Drugs? No man. I'm just having a hard time right now, man. I need some money."

"Wait a second," said Ross. "Now, I have a plan, ah, what's your name?"

"I'm Jake."

"Hold on," said Jennifer. "I thought you said your name was Maurice?"

~ eric smith

“Okay,” said the homeless man, shrugging.

“Well,” continued Ross, “whatever your name is, you’ll get your money. You just have to first tell me the truth. What do you want the money for?”

The homeless man looked at Ross and thought a bit. He shrugged. “Crack, man,” he said, almost proudly.

“Okay. That’s good. See, this is a very open-minded environment you’re in now. I’ll make a deal with you. Come on up.”

“Alright, man. Sure thing.”

Frank, Jennifer, and Lonnie, wide eyed and surprised, made a wide berth for Maurice, who headed up the stairs abruptly. Ross tried to follow but was blocked by Jennifer. Frank and Lonnie decided to make sure Maurice didn’t do anything crazy, although neither had a clue of how to stop him if he did.

“What are you doing,” said Jennifer, too overrun by disbelief to be totally furious at Ross. “He is going to contaminate the sacred space of our apartment. It’s bad enough you have to walk around naked.”

“Jennifer.” Ross put his hands on his hips and cocked his head as if politely scolding a three year old. “That’s not very open and receptive, is it? He’s a human being despite his problems. And he is an outcast like all of us. Stop worrying so much.” He stepped around her and headed upstairs. Jennifer, still furious, followed while only complaining to herself.

When the two arrived at the apartment, Frank and Lonnie were just standing there, watching Maurice nose throw everything like a curious toddler.

“Alright buddy, sit down. I wanna make you a proposition.”

Maurice sat down. “Just help me out, man.”

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“With crack?”

“Yeah, man. Shit. With crack.”

“Okay. I am an educator by profession. And I’m on sabbatical right now.”

“Oh yeah?” Maurice’s eyes widened. “Is that shit good?”

Ross smiled. “It’s not a drug, Maurice. It’s like a paid vacation of about six months. Anyway, how would you like to be my—experiment. Help me on my research about the concept and manifestations of openness on the contemporary urban landscape.”

Maurice looked at him suspiciously. “Are you sure that sabbatical shit ain’t a drug?”

“In exchange, you’ll get your beloved crack.”

Maurice shot up in his seat, startling the already baffled roommates. “How much crack?”

“Enough for three good sessions a day. As long as it isn’t too expensive.”

“Three good sessions?”

“*Good* sessions,” repeated Ross, not entirely sure of what a good crack session was.

Maurice looked at the others, who either looked away or returned a gaze of confusion and dread. He looked back at Ross. “Alright. It’s a fucking deal. Starting now, right?”

“That’s right.”

Maurice stood up abruptly, itching for a high.

“Okay, Maurice,” Ross walked to the door, opened it and turned towards Maurice. “Let’s go get some CRACK.”

The three watched Maurice walk around them and out the door. Ross nodded, exited, and closed the door behind him. The three stood dumbfounded.

“Did that just happen?” said Lonnie.

~ eric smith

“I have to summon the four winds,” said Jennifer as she threw her hands up and walked to her room.

“What do you think he’s gonna do?” said Frank, still with a look more of fascination than disgust.

Who the hell knows, Frank?” yelled Jennifer. “That guy has to go.”

“Then we’d be hypocrites.”

“I can live with that.” Jennifer slammed her door shut.

“He hasn’t done anything with him yet,” said Lonnie. “Maybe he won’t even bring him back here.”

The door opened and in walked Ross. “He tells me crack dealers don’t take kindly to nakedness,” he said. He went into his room but could still be heard as he quickly dressed. “You’d think some one who sold crack would be a little more accepting of alternative lifestyles. I mean, that is what we’re grouped under, right? Damned selective openness. That’s what really dusts my doilies, you know? I mean, he’s not accepted very much, either. He should understand, you know? We are the quintessence of alternative, let me tell you. If a space creature came down and only had contact with us, boy would he get the wrong picture. Oh, can’t forget the moolah.” Ross came out with jeans, a t-shirt, and sneakers. He tipped an imaginary hat to them as he left, “Good night, kids.” He shut the door but could still be heard yelling, “Alright, Mo, let’s kick some shit!”

Lonnie and Frank just stared at the door.

Chapter Three

(About 14 Months Ago)

At a dinner party, peopled by the academics of Athena University, an interracial couple fooled around in the coatroom. William's dark-skinned hands felt Layla's bare shoulders like a cloud's shadow drifting over snow. She locked her right hand with his left as they kissed as if trying to pull something intangible out of the other. They kissed like it energized them, like they were in love or, at the very least, the throes of an intense, ethereal lust.

"We should get back to the party," she said smiling, after signaling to stop kissing by placing her left hand on his chest with the slightest of pressure.

"Do you honestly think they miss us?" he said, enjoying her eyes as his hands enjoyed her waist and, sometimes, her ass.

"Well, part of the night consists of the Vice Provost and deans honoring a certain someone's award winning book."

"You wrote a book?" he said, feigning surprise.

She laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. "No, silly. *You* wrote a book. A good one. And I don't even get into theory, that much. I actually need more of it in my work."

"Sure," he shrugged, "if by 'theory' you mean 'me' and by 'your work' you mean—"

"Just stop it," she said, rolling her eyes. "Stop it."

They eventually emerged from the coatroom when

~ eric smith

the cost was clear and staggered their entrances into the main ballroom. Athena University had rented out a hotel banquet area for this pre-Fall semester get-together, and with the exception of having a grown couple make out in a closet, all was pretty typical. Wine, cheese and finger food. Mingling, schmoozing, competing for being the most impressive at any given moment. This was why William was so laid back; for *this* party, he didn't have to strut his plumage. His book would probably be mentioned during the Vice Provost's speech. For now he walked through the party, sans Layla (only a select few friends in the institution knew about them) and did his best mingling:

"Hey, Roger. Nice shirt. I think I'll have it"

"Hello Jennifer. Looking good. Perhaps some of your art research should involve looking into the mirror."

"How are you, Patrick. I read your piece in *Poetry*. It made me second guess my self-worth. Brilliant."

And then, he happened upon Anthony Fox, Vice Provost of Athena University. "Hello Mr. Vice Provost."

"When are you going to stop calling me that, Mr. Watson? Oh, I'm sorry, Dr. Watson?"

"Well, you *are* the Vice Provost. Oh, and you're a doctor, as well. "Should I call you Dr. Vice Provost?"

"Call me Tony. If that's too personal for you, Watson, you can call me Fox. I'll get the informal vibe going by calling you Willy. How are you, Willy?"

William smiled at the fact that Fox was being his jovial self. For once, thought William, the atmosphere fit Fox's personality. "I hate 'Willy,'" he said. "I hate 'Bill', too. William will do. But enough about me."

Fox folded his arms. "Enough? We haven't even started. I have to give a speech honoring you and a

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few other people. I forget their names. But you have a spotlight to step into, my friend. I kinda resent the fact that I have to talk about the role and reprisal of rhetoric in the humanities. I can only say *that* because I memorized it from one of your book reviews. My background is in psychology, for fuck's sake."

William scratched the side of his head, presenting a level of discomfort that was more for show than actual. "I'm sorry to cause so much trouble for you, Fox. You know, you don't have to talk about me."

"No, I don't." Fox slapped him on his shoulder. "But you're the one I like the most. You're—fearless. You were the first faculty member to stand up to me when I wanted to cancel the undergraduate conference. You told me how we could make it more financially fulfilling and popular. You were wrong and someone from economics probably should have said something instead, but *you* did. You have big, bodacious balls, Watson. Big—" Fox looked at his hands, which he maneuvered as if shaking a bowling ball in each one, "—bodacious fucking balls." He looked up at William and slapped him on the shoulder again. "You are my favorite faculty member. And I have plans for you."

William smiled, holding back an audible chuckle at Fox's sense of entitlement, Vice Provost or not. "You have plans for me, sir?"

"Yes. I'm hoping this graduate student, who I met at the American Popular Culture Conference, attends Athena for his Ph.D. Given the stuff he's already done and wants to do with sociology and ethnography, and given your ethnographic research, combined with your golden-boy attitude, all three of us have—"

"Golden-boy, sir?"

~ eric smith

“—we can take over the world. And yes, *golden-boy*. I’m not talking about Hollywood-Brad Pitt shit, Willy. I’m talking about spirit. Vavoom. You remind me of me when I was younger.”

“You were a black man, sir?”

Fox nodded, showing his acceptance of William's lack, thereof. “Fine. You may not think so, but I *know* so. I have to schmooze. Stay golden, Willy.”

The night went on. Fox’s speeches about faculty achievements went as expected, and the party continued, afterwards. William found himself speaking with some colleagues next to the bar when Jameer Nielson, the head of African-American Studies, stepped up for a glass of wine. Dr. Nielson was a proud man, always dressed sharply, never without a tie. His stature and presence demanded respect. William, however, did not have much respect for him at all, and justified that by acknowledging that Nielson had no respect for him, first. From the moment one was aware of the other’s existence, Nielson had feigned a fierce competition with William. William never seemed to care what Nielson did, but Nielson seemed to care about William. Nielson’s book award the previous year was his completion of a race to get a book published before William. William, on the other hand, was unaware that he was racing Nielson to publish a book. Now that William knew Nielson’s general attitude toward him (beat the other black guy at everything academic and everything “black”), he knew that his book award was probably burning him up inside.

“William Watson,” said Nielson before pointing to the bottle of Cabernet he preferred to drink and nodding as the bartender picked it up to pour. “You must be feeling good, right about now.”

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William rolled his eyes and took a deep breath before presenting his index finger to the person with whom he was speaking, indicating that he'd be back in one moment. He turned to face him. "I'm always feeling good, Jammer?"

"It's Jameer," he corrected as he took the glass from the bartender's hands and gave a thank you nod. "But I suspect a black man who consistently turns his back on his race to mispronounce such a name."

"Oh!" exclaimed William, frantically looking around the banquet room as if searching for someone. "I bet Patrick Callahan ten bucks that you'd call me a race-traitor before midnight. Where is he?"

"You can make jokes all you want, Watson. No one is laughing."

William checked out the people around the bar, those he had been talking with and those within earshot. Indeed, no one was laughing. Ironically, to William, the look of discomfort and awkwardness on some of their faces *was* laughable. "Wow, you're right," he conceded.

"I know I'm right. And this book. You wrote it about rhetoric and not once did you talk about the dissonance between African American rhetoric and the Eurocentric rhetoric of the academy."

"Whoa, whoa whoa," said William, waving the hand that wasn't holding a glass of Pinot Noir. "I speak about the marginal presence in academia and how Gramsci's 'organic intellectual' speaks to them. There was no need to get specific; focusing on African Americans, specifically, would have been a distraction."

Jameer was taken aback but able to maintain his austerity. "So now your people are a *distraction*?"

William shook his head as he looked around at

~ eric smith

listeners, knowing they would be hanging on his every word. Although he felt like he was stooping to Jameer's level by responding, he had to provide an accurate representation of his work to his colleagues. "Once again, your dependence on logical fallacies weakens your argument. My book, liked by black people and white people alike, *Jammer*, is about the bigger issue of the social construction of knowledge and the contingent nature of such knowledge. It's not ethnography. Anyone can read the book, and if they understand it, can, in turn, apply it to a variety of situations involving marginal cultures, lifestyles, what have you. *Including* African Americans."

Jameer's look became a stare shot into William's eyes as if trying to hypnotize. "You don't know how to give back to your community. You don't even try."

William felt himself getting a bit angry. He smiled and took a sip of his wine. "First of all, you didn't even attempt to address my last point, which not only is another logical fallacy, but is analogous to saying 'uncle' in a wrestling match. Secondly, I'm from Haddonfield, New Jersey. Giving back to the community, for *me*, would be...donating a cappuccino machine to Starbucks." He saw some people, out of the corner of his eyes, chuckling, and felt vindicated.

"I feel sorry for you, Watson," said Jameer, shaking his head before taking a sip. "You are something else."

As Jameer walked away, William looked around. "Well, it's a good thing that guy's opinion means nothing to me. Or else, I'd be pretty upset right now." He downed his drink, said, "Adieu," and walked away. He wanted to find Layla, but thought about what Jameer would think about his fornicating with a white woman. Well, he would find her, anyway. They'd escape the party, and

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forget that race was even an issue. Because it wasn't. It wasn't. It wasn't. He smiled, and smiled wider when he spotted her.

They did, indeed, leave the party, and William was feeling good enough to express himself. "This is for real, right?"

"What?" she said, genuinely surprised. So surprised that she questioned whether he was talking about what she thought he was talking about.

"This. Us. This is real, right?"

"Of course it is. I—. William, how could you doubt that?"

"We should let more people know."

She looked down while shaking her head and then looked back up at him. "You *know* how Athena is about that. Whether we're both faculty or not, it would be weird."

"So how long are we to be like this," said William, suddenly more solemn than he had been, previously.

"I don't know, honey. Can we cross that bridge when we come to it? Please?"

"Sure," said William, before looking away into the street, thinking "We *are* at it. We've *always* been at it"

"Come on," she said, "Let's make love in the park."

This succeeded at snapping William out of his funk.

"What?"

"Let's get wild," she said, tugging at his sleeve. "I mean passionately wild. Let's express our love to the utmost."

"Well, 'utmost' is a very unsexy word."

"I mean, let's hold nothing back. I mean nothing. I want to fully express myself with you."

"That's wonderful, honey, but can't you do that in the bedroom."

~ eric smith

“No, that’s too—inside the box.”

“How about the kitchen?”

She stomped her feet in semi-mock frustration. “Why can’t you come here with me?” She said, placing one hand on her heart and the other hand on her sacral chakra, the place that apparently symbolized spiritual sexuality.

“Wow, I shouldn’t have dated a Libra,” said William, smiling. He soon realized that Layla very much did not share his sense of humor in this particular situation. “Hey, I’m just kidding. Listen, let’s just take a walk, okay. Let’s enjoy the night and see what happens, later. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, okay?”

Layla rolled her eyes. “Okay,” she said, while thinking, “We *have* come to it.”