

“SINFUL SOULMATES”

novel manuscript

THRILLER, ROMANCE

SEXUAL, SCANDALOUS

Young abuse-survivor Rene is hopelessly in love with married Kevin - despite learning his split personality tries to kill the “sinful adulteresses” with whom he cheats.

His estranged father Butch cannot help, but Butch’s aging swinger girlfriend, Trudy, can. Has-been singer Trudy Truly uses the scandal on the murders to get back on TV and expose Jekyll/Hyde Kevin and push her controversial sexual psychoanalysis to the world - *which does finally stop Kevin’s violence.*

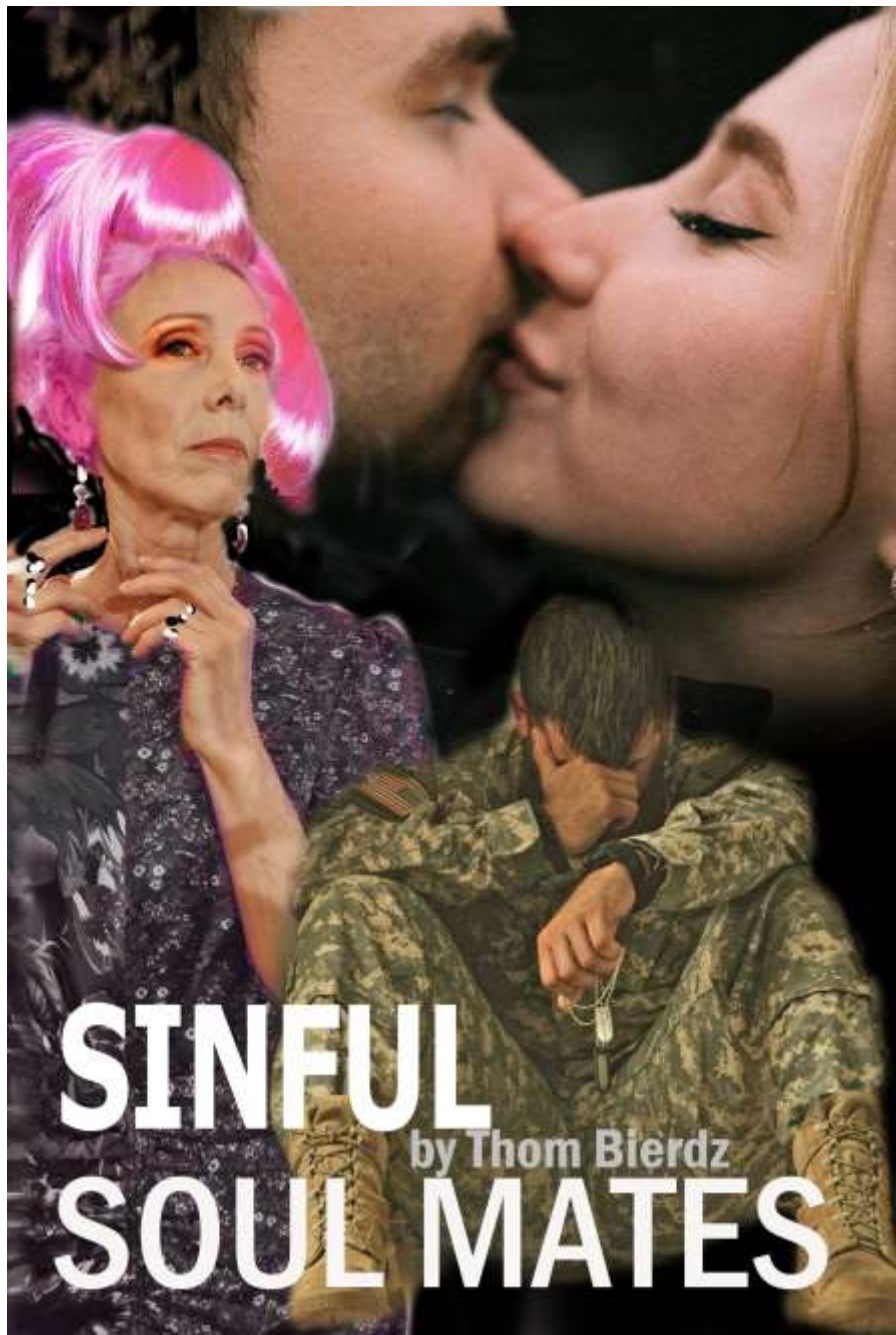
Lessons learned: Sexual repression kills. Sexual rebelling heals. *Two romantic happy endings.

Also a SCREENPLAY / 3 show-off roles for big stars:

KEVIN BRANDT (40+) Vulnerable Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

TRUDY TRULY (65+) Overbearing, intelligent, compassionate, scandalous.

RENE MILLER (25+) Obsessed with Kevin (not only in life, but in the *afterlife!*).



SINFUL SOUL MATES

by Thom Bierdz

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DAY 1

A war missile arced across the dark Iraqi sky. From the American army barracks only a small explosion could be seen, but not heard. At 2AM the only desert sounds were from incessant crickets and predatory owls.

U.S. Private Rene Miller in camouflage fatigues sweated from anxiety and the August heat. The short-haired petite blonde shook her pretty young head in disapproval and shuffled inside the barracks. Her aching hazel eyes conveyed she didn't want to be part of a war. Little did she know this would be her last day in an official war but what awaited her in New York would be far more dangerous. The next two weeks would be a battle for her life. For her heart. For her very soul.

Most the cots in the dark barracks were empty with only a few female soldiers asleep. Rene tiptoed to her rocky cot and sat quietly while opening her computer laptop. Her screensaver image was a photo of her with longer hair kissing a gorgeous dark-haired man older than she, both wearing fatigues. On the screen a pop-up message offered BAGHDAD UPDATES but she grimaced and instead searched WHAT'S HAPPENING IN BROOKLYN?

On the laptop screen, seated Marge, an overweight Brooklyn talk show host of color,

interviewed standing and stretching Trudy Truly who wore a tight white frilly blouse with tiny lights moving up and down the arms.

Trudy's straight neck-length pink hair and heavy make-up unfortunately did little to disguise her sixty-five year-old face. Nevertheless, desperate for attention and to exude youth, Trudy, clad in leopard leotards, zebra scarf and tiger sneakers, did jumping jacks.

However, the twelve audience members sitting across from her on Marge's garage chairs were not impressed enough to applaud.

So Marge egged them on, "Doesn't Trudy Truly look amazing for her age?"

Most the audience clapped obligatorily.

Having been validated, Trudy rose her LED blinking arms in victory and bowed, then she pulled up Marge to stand, asking, "Audience, doesn't Marge look tantalizing as a full-figured woman?"

Marge blushed, "Girl, you know I'd lose weight if I could."

Trudy insisted, "You can't!"

Marge shrugged, "I've tried everything in the world to drop pounds!"

"It's impossible!"

"Carbohydrates. Cheese," Marge sighed, "Or the corn syrup they put in everything, and Lord knows those chemical additives make me large."

"You're large because you keep shoveling food in your mouth. But you can't help it." Although her

words were directed at Marge, Trudy turned to the audience and camera man, continuing, "You were pre-programmed, sweetie. You -- that big curvy gorgeous body. Your whole mind. Everything you think you think -- was programmed onto you by parents and ancestors -- in your genes -- and societal influences. And sure, our medicines dictate behaviors, too! And this poisoned food they create which is so delicious it's addictive! You can't stop eating it. It's not your fault!"

Then as obviously practiced, Trudy walked to a table with a storebought cheesecake and ate a bite. Grandstanding like Lucille Ball, Trudy exaggerated the deliciousness, even hamming it up more when the audience laughed along.

Like a bad mime, Trudy pretended to wrestle a cheesecake slice away, but apparently it was stronger and dived down her wide mouth.

The audience laughed so much that Trudy couldn't help laughing along, nearly choking on the cheesecake. Which made everything even funnier.

Then suddenly the scene went black as Rene's laptop died.

Rene grimaced then turned it off and closed it, then opened it, turned it on, but alas the machine was inoperable.

She quietly carried it outside past the barracks and into a tent that read AMMO where in a corner could be seen a flicker of light.

Rene tiptoed over to see the flicking light was

from live wires in the hands of perfect-looking Colonel Kevin Brandt, the man she had kissed in her screensaver photo. The muscular forty-year-old was alone sitting at a make-shift desk of ammo boxes, fiddling with electronic gadgets.

Rene whispered, "Hey handsome, my computer keeps crashing."

The dark-haired square-jawed man in a crewcut dropped the wires, startled, then quickly retrieved them from the dirt floor.

"I didn't mean to scare you," she giggled.

"What did you meant to do?" he looked at her blankly.

Her sexy full lips grinned as she handed him her laptop computer.

"What's wrong with it?" he asked professionally, distant, as if they had never met.

"Works fine then boom, it dies."

As he examined it, she smiled to herself leaning closer and closer to the back of his thick neck, then as softly as possible she leaned over him and kissed his forehead.

He ignored her though stimulated by her proximity and perfume.

She purred with an Iraqi accent, "Let's play naked prisoner."

His thick hairy forearms stopped fiddling with the laptop just long enough to flash her the gold wedding ring on his finger.

Petulant, she moaned, "You're so boring now,

Kevin.” She couldn’t say what she was feeling: *why wasn’t I good enough? I was in love with you and you suddenly marry someone else?? I know you were in love with me. I know it. Aren’t you still in love with me? What did I do??*

Her athletic body pined, ached for him. She wiggled sexily over him but he ignored her to concentrate on fixing her computer.

Within a minute, proudly, he exhaled, “Ah! I got it to work! Look.”

On the laptop screen, the video picked up where Trudy was laughing, her mouth full of cheesecake.

Kevin looked at it closer, confused, “Who is the electric shirt lady?? I know her from somewhere.”

“She looked familiar to me, too. Trudy Trudy or something.”

“Ah!! Trudy Truly. She had a song that went to number one. Her and my dad did.”

“Your dad is a singer?” Rene asked, stunned.

“More a piano player. Long story. Song called, what was it? “Fantasy Bride” or something?”

“Oh yeah, I heard of that oldie,” she said excitedly, then shimmied playfully as she sang the lyrics as she remembered them, “*Feel my heart flutter like a butterfly, never floated in clouds this high, you are my soul mate, well worth the wait, don’t ask me why, how would I get by, without you by my side, my fantasy, fantasy, fantasy bride, my*

fantasy bride ...”

Rene twirled around Kevin’s chair. She tried to pull him up to dance but he resisted, anchoring down. Though she was strong for five feet three inches, his wide muscular frame at six feet weighed twice as much as she did.

He grumbled, “About twenty-five years ago. Before electric shirts. Trudy, with the same pink hair, used to go to the same church as my parents. My dad left my mom for this sleazebag.”

“So this weird lady is your step-mom??”

“I don’t know if they ever married.”

“How could you not know?”

“What is this show?”

“Some Brooklyn podcast I watch when I get homesick.”

“Maybe Brooklyn is where my dad ran off to? If he and Trudy are still together.”

On the laptop screen, Trudy urged the laughing audience members to pretend fighting away the cheesecake as she literally stuffed delicious thin pieces down their throats in an effort to prove their helplessness.

Not needing any provocation, Marge tasted a piece, “Lordy! I want the recipe! And by recipe I mean what frozen food aisle in what chain store?”

Trudy raised her brows, “All the stores have it because they know we’re helpless to resist.”

Marge pressed, “So are you saying we have no free will, Trudy Truly?”

Trudy looked to the audience, “Somebody has to have the balls to say it!” Then she put her arm around Marge, “We humans have become nothing more than pre-conditioned robots! Like this dog!”

Trudy pulled out a metal robot-dog from under a chair. The terrifying-looking machinery barked and walked around them.

Marge scoffed, “Oh come on. We can’t be robots. You said we were instinctive, like animals.”

“The only animal-ness left in us, is our genitals, which want to fuck everything that walks because that’s our last animal instinct!”

The audience boomed.

“It’s how we survived as a species, people!” Trudy lectured, “So you see, even there, our sexual instincts ... they overpower us, too -- so again, we have no free will.”

More booms came.

Trudy pointed at the boomers, “Your booing proves I’m right, people! You were programmed to resist or boo against things threatening your comfort zone! So boo your hearts out! Then when you’re finished booing let’s see if you’re any further ahead!”

Marge held up a book, *Evolution’s Trap by Trudy Truly*, and prodded, “Trudy, where is your book available?”

“Everyone here gets a free one and tell your friends my only book-signing is at Brooklyn Books in two days.”

“You’re not doing a national tour?”

“I wish. You’re the only show that will interview me. Rumor has it I’m an irrelevant has-been, so fuck ‘em!” then Trudy improvised dancing and singing, “*Fuck them. Fuck them fuck them fuck them alllllll...*”

Kevin turned off the video, disgusted, “She will do anything for attention. Wore a halter top to church. Classy.”

Rene stroked his shoulder, “I kinda like what she says about no free will around carbohydrates.”

“I don’t buy it.”

“And I like the fucking everything that walks thing,” she giggled, sitting on Kevin’s lap, facing him. She held back saying *I love you, you stupid hunk. I love you with all my heart. I am dying inside without you.*

“Rene. I’m married now.”

She pulled up her camouflage shirt and pushed her B cup breasts in his face.

He chuckled, “I got three months of blue balls. Stop it.”

With her hands, she forced his face between her warm bosom, denying the words she was thinking *You told me I was the best sex. You were the best sex. What we had was storybook deep. We were there for each other in this war. Stupid ugly war and killing around us but we were high on each other, so perfectly immune to the horrible war.*

Frustrated, his large hands pushed her off.

She fell on the floor, bruising her elbow, but

undeterred, tried to sit on his lap again.

He stood abruptly, pushing her away softly. But that only seemed to turn her on. She clung to him. He pushed her away roughly this time.

She smiled, "Oh you want it rough again? Should we play rape? Okay, let's play rape. I'm a virgin"

"You're a whore."

She thought *I'll play any sex game to help us relax, to bring you close.* She laughed, "I'm a naughty little whore," then she tore off her shirt, "Oh no, why did you rip off my little shirty, you big muscular soldier. Stop ripping off my clothes, you beast," she feigned, "You're older than me and I'm so little and young and inexperienced and vulnerable."

"Young whore."

"I'm such a naughty young whore," she said while thinking *Kevin, I love you damnit. I am anything you want, at anytime. Forever. We are soulmates.*

"Go to bed," he tensed, closing his wide blue eyes, clenching his powerful fists.

She dropped to her knees, reaching for his zipper.

He threw open his eyes, pushed her away, scrambling to step backwards, tipping over ammo boxes. Live wires sparked and scattered.

"Oh no," she pretended, "I'm so defenseless and you're so big and strong and manly."

Grinding like a stripper, she unbuckled and

lowered her pants.

He was furious that she kept ignoring his wishes, “No! We can’t do this anymore.”

He strategically moved to her.

She shrieked in ecstasy as he grabbed her pants – but to her chagrin he did not pull them off.

He tried to pull them up.

She wiggled so that he could not, and she stood up, pressing her naked body parts against his tight cotton fatigues. She felt intoxicated by the natural smell of their lustful sweating.

Without warning, he grabbed her neck, fingers pressing against her jugular veins, “I told you I was married! I told you a hundred times!”

He had become another person entirely. His Doctor Henry Jekyll had been taken over by violent Mister Edward Hyde and he couldn’t stop squeezing her neck. He was unconscious, as if his everyday personality and awareness was put on pause, totally helpless to a monster taking over his body.

Choking, she finally realized her danger, but was not strong enough to rip away his massive hands despite her efforts.

With nothing behind his eyes, he stared emotionless as his fingers, a monster’s fingers, pressed around her neck until they touched, causing her to spit up saliva and blood.

Unconscious, her body wilted.

Her shrill scream lasted less than a minute until it diminished into a whining gasp for air.

She dropped limply to the floor.

She was dead.

He had killed her.

But.

But.

But.

Amazingly. She wasn't dead, at least, she existed outside her body.

Somehow.

The pain from her neck left before she even fell to the ground and miraculously her consciousness was alert and pain-free outside her body.

Floating above it!

She had somehow been able to leave her body and have an aerial view when Kevin pinched her neck and her physical person expired. But her spirit fog was existent now in an invisible realm fifteen feet above her undressed Earthly body which was dead, shirt open and pants around her knees.

Though she was floating above, strangely she could also see Kevin's face looking down at her closed eyes, holding onto her dead flesh. He was emotionless. She didn't understand another personality had temporarily overtaken him and that who she knew him to be was not accessible, but in her afterlife she did see a kinder reality. She could see, or feel, many layers of positive emotions from him in that moment. His monster wickedness didn't register to her, because where she was, vibrations attracted only similar vibrations, and she certainly

had no wickedness where she existed. She was overwhelmed with love and longing and she could feel Kevin radiating love and longing as well, as his regular old self which was now his suppressed reality. Though his wide blue eyes and thick black brows were not wincing in regret, kneeling over her body, trying to revive her, in a deeper reality that possibility existed, and from where she was, she could miraculously and freely jump to any reality on which she focused.

In the afterlife, she had the ability to feel his regret, even though he could not even feel his regret, and she could read all his potential thoughts as if she had entered his soul. She focused on the potential reality that he was remorseful and that he had not meant to kill her at all. The truth that she couldn't see was of course that he had no idea a latent personality of his had killed her, and if and when he knew, he would indeed be remorseful.

She could also read his heart and saw deep in it that he was still very attracted to her but because of his commitment to his new wife, he was frustrated and needed violence to escape his lust.

Even in her spirit form, without a body, her heart-ache and longing for his love remained.

He was her dream man, her true love, her every fantasy, her whole reason for living – on Earth - and wherever the heck she was now.

The truth was that she had loved no one more in her twenty-five years.

Their happy memories replayed for her in her after-life like gasoline on water, on a magical sheen screen.

As her memories took focus, the real life scene of frozen Kevin blankly staring down at her dead body dimmed. It went foggy, then evaporated into blackness.

Suddenly alone in the dark, she felt afraid – and crushed that the afterlife surround was hollow and cold and meaningless and empty and black.

Until a light appeared above her.

It beckoned her to rise to it.

But she did not want to leave Kevin – she wanted to ease his future guilt to let him know she was not really dead, not in the way he thought.

The mysterious light increased in size, pulling at her, summoning her.

Involuntarily floating toward it, into it, she felt surrounded by warmth like bathing in a hot spa. She felt embraced by the surrounding pulsing warm matter. Grateful, she wondered what or who was embracing her and whatever it was read her mind telepathically and sent her back information that it was not one entity embracing her, but many.

Somehow she knew that was true and felt familiar beings around her but she did not know how or where she knew these other beings – beings which began to appear in glowing outlines.

Another message was sent to her, stating, “No, Rene, it is not your time.”

Never before had she believed in life after death, yet here she was, “living” after she had been killed. And it was wonderful. Each passing second allowed her to enjoy more of the unearthly love being pulsed to her by the surrounding seemingly-magical beings. Her new reality was invigoration of this pure love, filling up her mind and thus pushing out her Earth history of worry, neediness and validation-seeking.

“It’s not your time,” the concerned glowing lights repeated gently, “You have to go back.”

“But I want to stay here longer,” she begged, because she had never felt loved to this extent.

She was embarrassed to instantly realize she had never for one moment felt love like this on Earth. From her abusive home and countless attempts to find romance, the love she craved, the love now surrounding her, evaded her in physical form. She needed to feel loved longer by these divine lights - but she also needed to relieve Kevin of his future guilt which she could see, and feel.

Abruptly she was shown images indicating that if she did not get back in her body, Kevin would be arrested and spend forty years in prison.

The more she focused on Kevin and the less on the utopian afterlife, the more her invisible essence drifted down towards her motionless dead body.

With a whoosh and horrific pain, her spirit uncontrollably squeezed into her wounded prostrate

body and suddenly she was back inside her flesh, choking, spitting up blood.

Using all her strength, she jerked up and smacked his 220 pound body off of her, knocking him off balance. Crashing his side to the sand floor startled him to the point he snapped out of the alternate personality and was back to normal. Groggy and confused, he had no idea what had transpired and why Rene was riled with fury and coughing up blood.

She turned to the floor, gasping for air, writhing in pain from her purple swelling neck.

He backed up, eyes like saucers, in disbelief, then reached to her to help, gently grasping her arm.

She wheezed then opened her eyes, sticky from blood and dirt.

Kevin stammered, "What happened?"

"You killed me," she coughed, her fingers wiping blood across her face, "I went to the other side, you creep! You strangled me!"

Only part of her words were discernible. Suddenly angry, pants still around her knees, she rolled over and looked up to face him.

Their eyes peered into each other.

He said, concerned, "I didn't strangle you."

How dare you deny it!, she thought and kicked his stomach. They were both still unaware that an alternate personality had operated him during his violent moments.

He nervously backed away as she continued

kicking, her shoes hammering his knees.

He grabbed her feet to stop the attacks.

She shrieked.

He rose and backed away.

She crawled onto her knees, then stood up, unsteady, screaming, "You choked me to death!"

"I would never hurt you. Pull your pants up."

Though weak, she did shamefully, then charged at him, beating him with her small fists, until he grabbed her fingers, trying to restrain her fury.

Their bodies rocked like locked prize fighters as she hollered, her bloody saliva spewing over both of them.

"You two are discharged!" a baritone voice yelled.

It was Captain Grant, a giant middle-aged man, who immediately separated them.

Kevin stammered, "I was just fixing Private Miller's laptop, sir."

"Pack your things," the captain said sadly, "And that's an order. Rene, button your shirt and see medical for your neck. Now."

With his giant boots, Grant immediately stomped out the electrical wires snaking near ammo boxes.

* * *

A minute later, guilty-looking Rene with buttoned up shirt, carrying her laptop, stepped outside the ammo tent to find Grant speaking into a cell phone. He pointed her toward a medical tent.

She shuffled to it as Kevin stepped out.

Kevin put his hand on Grant's shoulder, "What you said -- about me packing -- that was only for Rene's benefit, right?"

"Both of you need to be discharged."

"Come on."

"I'm sorry."

"This is silly. You can't take away my pension after twenty years in the service."

Grant shook Kevin's hand off of him, "There will be trial courts to decide if you can keep your pension."

"You can't do this to me. It was completely Rene's fault. She practically raped me. You know how she is."

"When you were raping each other in private, it wasn't my concern, but when you endanger all our lives, and hers, it is."

"I haven't touched her since I got married!" he protested.

"Her neck was purple, she was spitting blood."

"Not from me!"

"Oh, she did that to herself?!"

"She must have. She was throwing herself at me, and I pushed her away."

“By grabbing her neck?”

“No, no, just gently, like you’d gently push a stripper away if you were married. After I resisted her, she got furious and yeah, she choked herself.”

Kevin believed that.

Grant did not.

DAY 2

The next day, on a consumer flight, chiseled Kevin, in fatigues with medals, sat by the window. On his fold-down plane tray, he meticulously built a house with pretzel sticks. He did not see Rene, also wearing her fatigues, whisper to the suited male passenger sitting next to him to swap seats.

The man agreed.

She sat in his place.

Kevin turned and noticed, “Hey — we’re not supposed to talk until court.”

“I was sitting next to this little kid who was crying for an hour.”

He didn’t believe her.

“You don’t believe me?”

He whispered, “Why did you blame me for your violent fit?? You ruined my life, Rene. How did I pass out? Dehydration in the heat? I never passed out before.”

He perfectly straightened the pretzel house.

“You didn’t pass out, jerk! Aw! How cute! A little log cabin for you and Sherry?”

“Yep. We always talked about getting away from everything. Moving to some woodsy paradise.”

“Not always. I’ve known you much longer. You known her a few months.”

“Six months.”

Rene inched her red nail-polished fingers to the pretzel house, grabbed it and shoved it in her mouth, chewing.

He glared at her in disgust, "You are such a kid."

"No, you are," she said, her mouth full.

Losing his temper, he shoved another pretzel into her mouth.

She choked.

She spit it out and as she caught her breath she thought of insults that would hurt him the way he just hurt her. But she didn't attack him. Instead she laughed, "You already killed me. And I didn't die anyway. I was with some wonderful spirits or something so I don't care if you kill me again, Bucko."

He relaxed a bit, chuckled and shook his head, "I never knew how crazy you were."

"See?" she played, "You can't keep your hands off me."

He rolled his eyes then turned to look at the graph of clouds out the window. A vein of frustration pulsed in his forehead.

* * *

A few hours later, the plane landed at LaGuardia airport.

Kevin exited the plane as soon as he could, trying to escape her – but her desperate petite body followed his large muscular frame like a magnet.

At baggage claim, she also stalked him. He just shook his head.

He hated her now.

She ruined his life.

But watching her pretty little figure stumble so awkwardly trying to find her bag, he couldn't help but remember her similar naivety and insecurity when she first enlisted, and he took her under his wing. They became friends, then great buddies, then intense uninhibited lovers.

He was first to find his army duffle bag and exit the building, but she was not far behind with hers, a shadow to the man she adored, clinging to their passionate past. A young woman feeling unlovable trying to figure out how to get her man to love her again.

As they trekked the burning August pavement, he ignored her, then asked, actually concerned, "You got family picking you up?"

"You never even listened to me once, did you?" She knocked him off balance with her bag. "What family?" she fumed, "I guess if you consider Neal's Diner my family -- yeah -- they'll be thrilled to see me take back one of the greasy waitress shifts."

"I don't even have cab fare."

"I have a credit card. Not much on it."

"Let me share a cab until I get to the subway,"

he proposed, reasoning, "We shared a fox hole."

"We shared so many more things than that! I guess sitting in a cab next to the best sex I ever had won't kill me."

"You said nothing can kill you," he joked, smiling, flashing his perfect teeth and dimples.

She smiled, embarrassed at her less than perfect teeth.

A cab pulled up. Kevin and Rene entered the backseat, looking out opposite windows, speechless as they realized they were back in civilian life.

Eventually he cleared his throat, "The best?"

As the auto sped up, she confessed, "Yes, Kevin, you're the best at everything. Best shooter, best with electronics whatever, best record, best conduct until recently, best looking, best body, best dick and ass, best sex."

"You have been around -- so that's like winning the Olympics or something."

"We should get you a sex medal to add to all your other medals."

"Well ... since I earned it," he grinned and winked.

She impulsively grabbed his crotch, "I get you soooooo hard."

His grin shifted into a frown. He became angry, "Sherry is the only woman I think about."

"Bullcrap. Like that Trudy Truly says, people are animals for sex and they can't help it."

He didn't want to believe that and looked away,

rolling down his window, surveying the intimidating wired city. Telephone lines. Cable lines. And sleazy women in tight-clothing, the makings of chaos. He could smell their perfume.

* * *

Inside a busily commuted subway car, Rene paced the aisle, desperately looking for Kevin. He ducked his head in the back corner seat, hiding - but spying on her. He had always been inexplicably drawn to her.

With her barracks bag, depressed Rene exited the subway station onto the street then stopped, lost and confused. Her heart was racing worrying she might never see Kevin again. Yeah they would have to appear in court in a month or two, but maybe he wouldn't show? Maybe she wouldn't?

Blocking traffic, she grew tired of being bumped into by unapologetic New Yorkers, so she skirted to the side.

A man ran up behind her and lifted her in the air. She reflexively screamed imagining she was being assaulted, then instinctively made use of her martial arts training and kicked the perpetrator.

He groaned in pain.

She recognized the groan and turned to see it

was Kevin.

“Damn it,” he moaned, sweating in the heat, “You are a force to reckon with.”

She laughed, “I thought I lost you.”

He shrugged, “Nah, I was behind you watching you try to walk sexy, throwing your skinny hips.”

“I was not.”

“You were too.”

Her pretty hazel eyes darted between his intense light blue eyes, “Why are you following me?”

He smiled, revealing his lostness, “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? You don’t know where to go?”

He shrugged, embarrassed.

“Well I’m going to try to get my shift back at Neal’s Diner,” she sighed, “I don’t have a choice.”

He nodded, walking with her past a crowd.

She teased, “I could put in a word for you for a busboy job?”

“Gee that would be fun,” he chuckled, sarcastic.

“Maybe a dishwasher?”

He didn’t know what to say. For the first time as an adult he felt like a huge failure and was too embarrassed to call his wife and tell her he was discharged.

Despite being in a crowd of hurrying pedestrians, Rene walked slowly, so Kevin wouldn’t follow her, so they would shuffle toward the diner next to each other, in step. She fought her urge to

hold his hand.

She remembered asking him to marry her a year ago, during a romantic interlude in the ammo tent. He said he couldn't although they seemed totally in love. He never explained why he couldn't marry her.

He stopped walking so she stopped as well, curious. He pointed to a seven year-old boy who was crying and obviously lost or abandoned.

Kevin moved gently to him, crouching down, "Are you lost?"

The Italian kid nodded and wiped his weeping eyes.

Instinctively and heroically, humanitarian soldier Kevin lifted him on his shoulders and yelled in his powerful low voice, "Heyy!!!! Who lost their kid??!!"

Everyone within thirty feet turned to look, but none claimed him.

More people need to see, Kevin thought. Not far from him was a modern sculpture. Carrying the child, Kevin expertly climbed it and stood on top, lifting the child above his head, "Heyyyy!!! Lost boy!! Lost boy!!!"

Suddenly from behind him a woman in a sundress with bags came running, "Tony! Antonio!!"

Kevin surveyed the boy's delight and reaching to the woman verifying the stranger indeed belonged to the young boy. Kevin aptly climbed down to reunite

them.

Rene applauded, then others did as well.

Briefly, Kevin felt like a hero. He grinned, waving in appreciation.

“You’re a superhero,” Rene gushed.

“I did what anyone else would have done,” he shrugged.

“No one else did. No one else could have. You deserve another medal for that.”

He appreciated her kind words, her years of support and admiration, her friendship – but he was still furious she had ruined his life.

They turned a corner and she pointed to the blue neon sign reading NEAL’S DINER.

“I so don’t want to sling hash,” she sighed.

“I would hate it.”

“You won’t have to. You’ll be with your precious wife in Jersey.”

He blushed, uptight.

“Well?” she prodded.

“Well what?”

“Well what are you going to do here in Brooklyn?”

“Trudy has that book signing tomorrow around here -- so maybe my dad will be there, too?”

“Oh, right. Brooklyn Books is just down the block.”

“He would have money since Trudy’s family is

loaded.”

“So you’ll stay with your dad tonight?”

They had approached the diner’s grimy glass door.

“Maybe tomorrow,” he grimaced, “He hasn’t cared for twenty years if I was alive or dead.”

She pulled his head down to hers, “Oh honey, I’m so sorry. You deserve so much better, my god, with your medals and looks and what a nice guy you are, any parent would be so proud.”

Fighting emotion, he looked away, guarded.

She followed his darting eyes to a Micro Hotel across the street and she sighed, “I might have to sleep in a box in that hotel tonight.”

“Not like Baghdad was a four star hotel.”

“Oh I know. I’ve slept in way worse.”

“I’m sure you have.”

She was insulted, but wanted to hang onto him, “Kevin, if you can’t find a room, look me up there. We could share my box.”

“I can’t share your box anymore,” he joked, “I am a married man.”

He pulled her into a hug. Surprised and grateful, she gripped onto him tightly.

“I love you so damn much,” she said.

He didn’t say anything but stayed still as she clung to him. Too long. Awkward. Eventually she withdrew her hold. He nodded, forced a smile, then

turned around and shuffled away.

She smiled but immediately hid inside the diner to weep. The love of her life had slipped away.

* * *

Later from a Brooklyn park, defeated Kevin sat on an aluminum bench in the shade of a mulberry tree. He couldn't help ogling the women jogging past him, their breasts and hips bouncing. He picked up his cell phone and pressed WIFE.

Thirty-five year-old pale, red-haired Sherry, dressed in a maid uniform, knocked on a New Jersey hotel door announcing she was, "Housekeeping."

She answered her ringing cell phone, "Hello?"

Hearing her voice, Kevin turned beat red and was tongue-tied and hung up.

* * *

That night Kevin found himself pacing outside Neal's Diner which was apparently open 24 hours. He was surprised to see across the street Rene and a tall man enter the Micro Hotel together.

Oddly jealous, though he knew he had no right or reason to be, he tried to hide and paced further down the street. Passing half a dozen stores, he found himself in front of Brooklyn Books, closed this late at night. Tomorrow he would finally see his father here.

Frightened of the hurtful scenarios plaguing his mind like his father showing no happiness to see him but instead disappointment, Kevin quickly retracted his footsteps like a scared kid. He was embarrassed at his fragility especially since his reflection in the store windows showed such a big, muscular military colonel.

He chuckled to himself, feeling worthless, and walked on, later finding himself looking inside the Micro Hotel to catch a glimpse of Rene. He didn't know why. He just couldn't get her out of his mind. Unable to see her, he sat and stewed on a green bus bench, where he eventually fell asleep, hugging his barracks bag.

DAY 3

At dawn, Kevin sat on the sidewalk leaning his back against the bench. He had collected fallen leaves from three different kinds of trees and was organizing them in separate rows. When Rene and the tall man exited the hotel, laughing, holding hands, nervous Kevin jumped in front of them.

Startled, Rene screamed.

Kevin grabbed the man's hand and seeing a wedding ring, shouted, "You vowed fidelity to your wife!"

Kevin threw a punch at the stranger but missed.

Rene jumped at Kevin, restraining his arm.

The tall man hopped into a cab and disappeared.

"You're acting retarded!," Rene laughed.

"Did you have a good time??"

"I always do," she said cattily.

"Yup. You always do."

"I thought I'd never see you again."

"You got over me quick, Rene!"

She grabbed Kevin's wedding ring harshly, "You're married!"

"That's what I keep telling you."

"You're spying on me?! Look how jealous you are!," she smiled, hugging him.

He shoved her away, "I'm not jealous!"

“Yes you are! You’re here and not with your wife.”

“I can’t tell her I lost everything. Yet. She’ll be so sad.”

She hugged him again. He let her, then pried her fingers off of him one at a time.

Humiliated, she marched inside Neal’s Diner.

He followed her inside, losing his temper, “Hey. I don’t want you. You took everything away from me, you nut case!”

“You took it away from me!”

“What the fuck do I have to bring home to my wife after twenty years in the army?! Bitch! Worthless used cunt!”

He stormed outside, frozen in place, unsure what to do, where to go.

Rene inched out smiling, flirting, “Worthless used cunt here. One dollar a ride.”

He looked way.

“Two for a dollar?” she smiled, desperate to repair their broken relationship.

He ignored her.

She looked down and screamed seeing a rat.

The rat ran across her shoes into the street. They watched it race between moving car tires wondering if it would make it to the other side alive.

Disappearing under a car for a second, it squeaked in pain, but undeterred and bloody it

hobbled on, making it to the other curb, alive but wounded.

Rene felt like that rat.

* * *

That cloudy evening outside Brooklyn Books, Kevin spied from up the street halfway to Neal's Diner. He watched a few women stand in line with books to be signed by Trudy.

Overbearing Trudy was sitting at a table in her trademark blinky shirt, animal leotards and scarf. If that didn't bring her enough attention, her silver eye shadow and pink hair might.

On the chair next to her sat Kevin's father, Butch. The mature man sported long sideburns and tattoos on his muscular arms, flexing them for the flirting women.

Trudy did not mind. She encouraged it, showing off his biceps.

She beamed, "Free cookies with books. Butch makes the best cookies. No sugar, flour or oil. He uses oats, dates, squash, flax. Write it down. Uses applesauce instead of butter. Write it down. And honey which is good for colds, coughs, sinus, toothaches, detox. And thiamin for cardiovascular issues and of course cinnamon for blood sugar or

inflammation or neurological issues.”

“He’s a regular scientist,” a woman flirted.

“Hardly,” Butch explained, his light eyes twinkling, “Trudy and I just try to eat healthy.”

“You’re as young as you feel,” Trudy smiled proudly, offering the plate of cookies.

The women took some and left, one with a book.

After they left, Trudy bit a cookie and fed one to Butch.

She sighed, “I only sold eight books so far. We need more press.”

“More people will show up. Be patient,” he championed, in a low uneven voice mangled by years of smoking.

“I need to do more podcasts, or maybe start one on my own? I need publicity.”

“Just take out more ads.”

“Ads. Kids today don’t read ads, Butch, they follow celebrities ... or scandals. We need a good scandal.”

She pressed a button on her electric shirt to strobe.

They didn’t notice that up the street Kevin spied on them, surveying their every move, his forehead vein pulsing, his eyes moist, his heart beating dangerously fast. Though he looked like Superman, he felt like a little gawky confused boy, an abandoned naughty child, and all his admirable

military achievements were forgotten as buried shame crushed his soul. A hundred questions trafficked his mind, all rooted in *am I not lovable? I try so hard. Asshole dad can't love me? Whore Trudy never cared about me? They are losers. Look at them. Ridiculous. Why do I even care what they might think of me?*

Overwhelmed, he dialed his cell phone, but didn't realize he had done so until he heard it ringing.

Meanwhile, in a Jersey hotel room, an athletic teen boy cruised thin pale Sherry as she stopped cleaning the room to answer her buzzing cell phone, "Hello?"

Struggling for composure, Kevin's voice cracked, "Guess where I am? I'm in Brooklyn."

Sherry was dumbfounded, "Kevin!? You're not overseas??"

"Out of the force, wifey."

"Oh no -- are you injured?" she feared, her light blue eyes caving.

"No. It's a long story but I love you, babe, and we can start our life in a cabin now."

"Brooklyn? A cabin?," she squealed, "You're not making sense but I'll go with you anywhere."

"Guess who I am looking at right now?"

"Who?"

"My sorry excuse for a father. Such a loser you

won't believe it."

"Your father??"

In the Jersey hotel, the boy flexed and undressed in front of Sherry. She turned away and looked at her phone.

The boy said, "I'm gonna take a shower."

She pointed, "Go ahead. It's already clean."

The boy asked, "Can you bring me in a fresh towel?"

She rolled her wide eyes.

Listening on his phone, Kevin's gaze stayed angrily glued on Butch and Trudy. "Sherry? Who is that talking to you?!"

"Just a teenager who wants a towel. I'm at work. Kevin? You saw your father?! Kevin??"

"Was that boy coming on to you? Doesn't he know you're married?"

"I'm not interested in him."

"You have to report him!"

"To who? I'm not going to report some teen for asking me to bring him a towel!"

"I want you to keep away from him!"

The teen boy persisted in his attempt to seduce Sherry, "The bathroom trash needs to be emptied!"

Sherry rolled her eyes and whispered into the phone, "I have to get back to work. I'll call you on my break."

"My phone may not be charged."

“Will you be at your dad’s? What’s his number?”

“I don’t know it. But Trudy Truly is probably listed. Trudy Truly. Like the Truly Pharmaceuticals corporation. I love you.”

“I love you.”

He hung up.

* * *

Still sexy nearing fifty years-old, Chinese Joy Kyong with enormous breasts had her book signed by Trudy then swished up the street toward Kevin in his fatigues holding his barracks bag. He squinted to read the pink sequins on her tight shirt spelling TRY-SEXUAL.

She caught him looking at her breasts, so she grinned flirtatiously, stepping very close to him, “Are you real soldier or pretend?”

“Real. A colonel.”

“Want to go and get burger?” she winked, gesturing to Neal’s Diner.

“You serious? -- I don’t even know you. I don’t think that’s appropriate.”

She pointed to her parked gold BMW, “Are you appropriate to check my battery?”

“Yeah, okay, sure, I can do that.”

“You too young and hot for me.”

She led him to the BMW parked in a tight alley. He opened the hood and finagled wires, probing, "How long is her book signing going for?"

"Two more hour supposed to be," she winked, "We got time, hunky."

Kevin chuckled at her audacity, then relented, "I am starving. Been a long time since I ate something. Buy me that burger?"

"I buy you anything, soldier. My soldier of love."

* * *

Moments later in Neal's Diner, eating a burger, Kevin positioned his French fries in a perfectly straight line. He glanced out the window to spy on Butch and Trudy as Joy bit into her burger.

"I don't eat many meat. Poor cow," she frowned, "Can't help itself. Get chopped up."

Kevin's sweating hands paged through Trudy's book.

"Maybe she right I don't got willpower," Joy mused, "I willpower me not to want sex with strangers -- but I do want sex with strangers. I study psychology to learn how to stop sex."

She touched his muscular thigh. He nervously glanced around the room for witnesses, relieved to see only an old waitress and preoccupied gluttonous

customers.

He pushed her hand off, “You really studying psychology?”

“My family high IQ,” she bragged, “You like high IQ?”

Her fingers wandered from her soda to Kevin’s chiseled chest.

Her touch and sexual lust turned him on. He had a mood swing, hypnotized by the idea of anonymous sex. The pulsing vein in his forehead disappeared and reappeared between his legs.

His mouth lowered, salivated, his blue eyes relaxed.

He spoke in his sexiest low voice, “You have naughty fingers.”

“You animal like me.”

“We can’t fuck. I’m married.”

She growled sexily, turning him on.

His eyes dropped to her buxom bosom, “But there’s no reason I couldn’t see your huge tit if it fell out of your shirt for a second.”

Hiding it behind a menu, she showed it to him.

He salivated, “That’s so huge it can’t be real.”

“Doctor make it. It feel real.”

“I bet it doesn’t.”

She took his hand to it.

He liked it.

From her purse she pulled out two hundred

dollar bills, then grabbed his crotch.

He groaned, "That's what my wife is for."

"Is what two hundred dollar for. You and me go back to BMW."

He drooled and nervously looked out the window, grabbing his barracks bag. Just then Rene came in wearing a waitress uniform, tying on her apron.

Her face lit up seeing Kevin, who looked away, then her hope diminished seeing Joy. She skirted away into the kitchen.

* * *

Moments later at the bookstore, Butch and Trudy spread out her books on the table, waving over pedestrians - who ignored them.

* * *

An hour later Kevin woke up in the BMW passenger seat, confused. The first thing that came into view was the alley. He felt stickiness on his hands and looked down to see they were red. Sticky and stained red. Cold sticky. He flinched in shock,

then looking to his left, saw Joy, nearly dead but breathing, strangled with dried blood on her neck.

Kevin gasped, eyes like saucers, then impulsively lowered down in his seat, looking out the windows.

I strangled her?? I did this? No, someone else strangled her and framed me. Who strangled her? Who is framing me?? The blood is dry and cold. This happened awhile ago.

“You’ll be okay,” he whispered to Joy, “I’ll send help.”

Dizzy Kevin battled a beating migraine as he wiped his hands on the car seat then reached to quietly open the car door.

Paranoid and inching to the street clutching his barracks bag, he looked around his surroundings further to locate the would-be murderer. A large shifty male ran away. A few other faces looked dangerous or ominous. Glancing up the street toward Neal’s Diner, Kevin was shocked to see Rene in her waitress uniform, smoking a cigarette, outside, her back against the diner door. They had eye contact, or he thought she saw him in any event, but maybe she didn’t. She seemed to get angry and then rubbed out her cigarette.

Kevin wondered, *Did Rene try to kill Joy out of jealousy – and try to frame me?? Yes, Rene must have seen me and Joy walking to the BMW. Last thing I remember is Joy zipping open my pants. Did*

crazy Rene watch and go insane and strangle her and frame me like her bizarre violent fit which got us fired? How come I can't remember anything after Joy unzipped me? Am I drugged? I feel drugged.

Kevin's paranoid thoughts continued as he marched nearing the bookstore where Trudy and Butch were packing up, ready to leave. Kevin suddenly collapsed against a store window from a sharp cerebral spasm. Only losing consciousness for a few seconds, he told an older couple who was helping him to stand that he was perfectly fine. Fortunately Trudy and Butch had not yet noticed his presence.

Turning back from the bookstore with fear of reuniting with his father, Kevin noticed that the helpful couple had magically disappeared! They were nowhere in view!

Did I imagine them? Did I lose consciousness again?

Swinging his army bag, he turned and ambled toward his father.

But it was Trudy who recognized him, "That soldier looks familiar."

Butch agreed, "He does."

Kevin berated, "My daddy! And Trudy Truly the church whore!"

Trudy gasped, "On my god -- is that cute little Kevin?"

Kevin pulled out an army rifle and blew them to bits.

DAY 4

The next morning at Trudy and Butch's spacious Brooklyn Heights condo, dizzy Kevin lay swinging on the leather sofa held up by chains. Falling unconscious, he suddenly flashed back to Saint Luke's Church in Columbus, Ohio.

A red rock sign outside the stone cathedral read OHIO'S BEST CATHOLICS PRAY HERE.

Inside the arched baroque interior were stained glass Biblical scenes and painted sculptures of God, Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Angels and Demons.

Eleven year-old Kevin, wearing a blue suit matching the polka dot dress of his conservative mother, Magnolia, knelt in prayer outside dark walnut confessionals. Exiting one was pink-haired Trudy, her fit forty year-old body pushed into a gold miniskirt and silver halter top.

Kevin's nostrils took in her heavy perfume.

His prudish gray-haired mother slapped him, "Stop smelling her!" she chided. "Imagine the nerve! All that perfume and dressed like a whore in God's house."

Overhearing, Trudy smirked, "I didn't come in here to offend anyone."

Magnolia glared, whispering with venom, "It's a wonder you came in at all."

“I sing in the choir,” Trudy stated.

“Not dressed like no whore you don’t. Imagine!”

As a nun passed, Magnolia smiled to her, then pretended to be nice to Trudy, “Enjoy you in choir, Trudy.”

“Oh, thank you, Magnolia,” Trudy appeased, “We all enjoy your bake sale goods.”

“That ain’t all you enjoy.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Seems you been enjoying a husband or two,” Magnolia accused.

Trudy looked down, embarrassed, “Your husband said he’d teach me the piano. Such a charitable man.”

Magnolia fumed, not unnoticed by Kevin, who felt compelled to rise and walk to Trudy then punch her in her stomach.

Magnolia quickly stood and yanked Kevin to her, spanking him. With her other hand, she opened the confessional and then shoved Kevin inside.

Inside the dark walnut confessional, Kevin peeked through the black curtain to see wavy-haired Father Mike.

The priest said, “Hurry up. Some of us have to take a crap.”

Kevin giggled, then mumbled, “I hit that whore Trudy and I used the Lord’s name in vain.”

Deep in thought, Father Mike responded

solemnly, “The Lord’s name is special, not to be used in vain. How do you think you should make it up to God?”

“Five minutes of *Hail Mary’s*?”

“Deal.”

“I masturbated again.”

“If the Lord sees you, he may throw lightning at you and burn off your penis.”

“I ... can’t help it.”

“Don’t let God see you doing that. Ten minutes of *Our Father’s*. You’re dismissed now, okay?”

“Okey dokey.”

* * *

Due to clouds striped across the sky, the Brooklyn Heights sunrise was particularly colorful.

A homeless man talked to himself outside an upscale brick condominium building with elegant iron deck rails. In a window above him, Butch looked down and yelled, “Go home!”

Fixing her make-up, Trudy appeared next to Butch, “Who are you yelling at?”

Butch pointed, “This building doesn’t need any more break-ins.”

She shook her head, “So you yell at him to go home?? He obviously does not have a home!”

In minutes, Trudy exited the lavish entrance doors walking slowly toward the unhoused stranger. She was carrying cookies and her purse.

“Hello there,” Trudy called.

The schizophrenic looked panicked.

“Oh no,” Trudy smiled, “I am not here to hurt you. Would you like a cookie?”

“You poisoning me??”

“Oh no!” Trudy insisted, scrunching to look less intimidating, “Look, I eat them.”

She tore off a piece of cookie and ate it, “My partner Butch makes these. No sugar, flour or oil. He uses oats, dates, squash, flax. Write it down.”

“Write it down with what?!”

“It’s just a saying, it means to remember.”

The man grabbed a cookie from her and while chewing, barked, “I remember everything. You’re my mother.”

“Oh no, we never met.”

“You’re my grandma!”

“Oh my god, I’m not that old.”

“Yes you are. You’re an old lady in clown make-up and clown hair.”

Devastated, Trudy nevertheless opened her purse and pressed sixty dollars into his dirty hand, “This is for you. You can go to a restaurant or find a place to sleep?”

“You don’t want drugs?”

“Oh god no, I am not trying to buy drugs.”

“I can bring you meth tomorrow,” he smiled confidently, before sprinting away.

“No, don’t bring me drugs!” she yelled after him, humiliated when she realized neighbors were overhearing and watching from their windows.

Butch hollered from the window above, “Get the Hell up here before you get arrested for dealing drugs!”

She shrugged innocently, then entered the building. Stopping by the foyer hall mirror, she examined her face wrinkles, horrified. *Grandmother? How did I get so old?*

Walking the hall, she put on more make-up from her purse, then entered her luxurious condo. Inside she passed the black grand piano flanked by human-size mannequins and robots dressed in animal masks.

Conservatively-dressed Sherry curiously touched a robot, inadvertently triggering it to embrace her. Creeped out, she moved away toward the wall, forced to examine the many small framed photos, but they disgusted her more. The mounted images were of Trudy and Butch in provocative S&M costumes with various other women on the couch swing.

But now – laying on the couch swing – was Kevin, semi-conscious.

“Is he lucid yet?” Trudy asked.

“Just mumbles,” Butch said, concerned.

Trudy tucked pillows around Kevin, whose watery blue eyes opened. Seeing her, and Butch, Kevin was aghast, “I ... killed you ... both.”

Butch asked, “Killed us? What do you mean?”

Trudy pet Kevin’s short hair, “He means subconsciously, buried us metaphorically to not be bothered by painful family issues ... strains.”

“No,” Kevin mumbled, “I mean with my machine gun.”

“What machine gun?” Butch asked, “There’s no machine gun in your bag.”

“Look, Sherry’s here, sweetie,” Trudy gestured, “She tracked down my number.”

“Stop the spinning,” Kevin pleaded, “Can you stop the room from spinning??”

Sherry gripped the sofa chains to stop movement, then scrunched to face Kevin, smiling, “Hi.”

“Hi,” he said, clumsily sitting up, adoring her innocent face and bright blue eyes. He parted her red bangs, admiring her soft innocent face, free of the garish make-up that Trudy and prostitutes wore.

“Remember me?” Sherry asked, smiling.

He stroked her freckled cheek, “How can I forget you? I think about you all day, every day.”

Sherry kissed him, “Butch and Trudy say you screamed at them for taking your pension??”

Butch explained, “Kevin, you said you were discharged or something?”

Sherry paced, “I told them that was crazy.”

Kevin stammered, remembering, “There was a mistake. I was discharged. But it’s bullshit.”

Sherry knelt in front of Kevin, pleading into his needful eyes, “Discharged?”

His thick brows furrowed, “In a couple months I’ll convince a jury that I didn’t cause a fight I had with a private. It was totally the private’s fault. Why is everything so fuzzy? Did you drug me?”

“Of course not, you were dizzy when you fell on the book table,” Trudy explained, “You are going to stay here with us until everything is figured out.”

Butch agreed nervously, “Whatever Trudy says.”

Trudy continued, “Sherry saw the guest room. Isn’t it a gorgeous room? View of the park.”

“It’s lovely,” Sherry nodded, tucking her auburn hair behind her ear, “What are we going to do, Kevin? My asshole roommate won’t allow me any overnight guests.”

Butch touched her hand, “You don’t have a choice then. You have to stay here.”

Sherry inched away from Butch, crept out by his lustful stare.

Trudy caressed a robot, “Trudy Truth number

one. No one really does have a choice. We have been so programmed by relatives and schooling and advertisers and we may think we grab a new option out of thin air, but the few options were already brainwashed into our brains.”

Butch edified, “Trudy thinks we’re half robot and half animal.” He smiled, looking at his handsome son, proud, but too self-conscious to say so.

Trudy flipped switches, initiating two robots to moan and simulate sex.

Bashful Sherry blushed and wanted to disappear.

Trudy elaborated, “We are partly sexual animals, running on instinct. You have no idea how instinct controls you.”

Sherry picked a pink sequin from Kevin’s hair, “Why do you have pink sequins in your hair?”

“Sequins?” he shook his head, rose, then stumbled to the window.

“In any case, Kevin,” Trudy professed, following him, “You used your instincts to sniff your way back to your father. Bravo!”

She high-fived Kevin, closed the window then faced him, “Kevin, your father had no choice but to leave Magnolia. His testosterone was in charge. He is hard-wired to carry on his species by distributing sperm. I was irresistible.”

“You sound ridiculous ... and you look ridiculous

in all that make-up and leotards.”

Hiding her hurt, Trudy smiled, holding Kevin sweetly by his ears, “You have no choice but to feel attacked and challenged and lash out. Understandably. Now don’t worry you’re hurting my feelings because I am very familiar with the way these dialogues go, what you say, what you’re about to say ...”

Sherry inched over and clutched Kevin’s hand, “I need some air. Kevin, let’s go out and get breakfast.”

“Sure,” he said, dizzy, “Where do you want to go?”

“You mentioned Neal’s Diner several times. Let’s go there.”

“I did?,” he asked concerned, losing his balance, “What did I say?”

Trudy searched her phone, “You just repeated it ... Here’s the address. It’s right by Brooklyn Books.”

Butch argued, “Too far. That’s thirty minutes away.”

“Way too far,” Kevin agreed, “Sherry and I will go somewhere closer.”

He pulled Sherry to the door.

Butch offered, “How about I make you my Brioche French Toast stuffed with cashew cheese and blueberries?”

Kevin had never known his father to cook a single meal, so looked at him suspiciously.

Trudy took charge, “We are not going to deny Kevin the food of his subconscious after all those years of army food! Neal’s Diner sounds fine,” then she excused to Butch, “We don’t always have to eat healthy.”

Butch grinned, “Aha! So you’re saying we have a choice!”

Trudy thought a second but disagreed, “No choice. The deli beckons us.”

Kevin resisted, “No, Sherry and I will just find a small place around here.”

Kevin quickly pulled Sherry to exit, but Butch and Trudy were right behind them, locking the door.

Butch sighed, flexing his sculpted muscular body, “My food is better and better for you.”

Trudy argued, “We haven’t had deli food in ages. Let’s find this diner Kevin’s craving.”

* * *

A natural A-type personality, Trudy not only controlled her sparkling silver Tesla as driver but also drove the less than sparkling conversation.

Sherry in passenger seat could not have looked more uncomfortable. Butch and Kevin, seated next to each other in back, also seemed anxious, looking out opposite windows.

Kevin interrupted Trudy's psychological lectures with, "So ... Dad, is Mom still alive?"

Butch did not turn to him, "I don't know."

"You never talked to her after you left?"

"I'm sorry, Kevin. I figured you both were better off without me."

No one spoke afterwards.

* * *

Before 8AM, Trudy, Butch and Sherry entered Neal's Diner. Kevin followed sheepishly and ushered them to a corner booth, relieved he didn't see Rene, unaware that she was in the kitchen prepping salads. Kevin made sure his back was to the diner so he would be mostly hidden.

After the foursome finished breakfast, Trudy showed them a video on her phone.

In 1965, a little boy and a little girl were separated by glass. The boy played with a truck. The girl had a child's toy, an Easy-Bake Oven. The kids were led by lab techs to change rooms. When the wired boy played with the Easy-Bake Oven, he was punished with electrically shocks. Likewise, they shocked the girl when she touched the truck.

Butch commented, "Times have certainly changed. Today anyone can be anything, girls can

be boys.”

“Shh,” Trudy interrupted, “Look. They hounded these two kids with laboratory tests fifteen years, zapping them into submission.”

The video cut to fifteen years later in a parking lot. The woman screamed and fought lab techs who tried to load her into a real truck. Meanwhile, in an apartment, the man looked anorexic as he sat at a dinner table with his healthy family - he himself afraid of all food.

Trudy surmised, “If you allow your natural instincts, in this case eating, to be overridden by your “programming,” you could starve to death like that man did a week after this video was made.”

Bored, Butch was cruising a sexy waitress across the diner – Rene! – who flirted back. Kevin finally noticed her, too – and tried to duck out of her eyeline. Too late. Rene’s heart jumped seeing Kevin and she immediately wiped her hands on her black frilly apron, straightened her hairnet and sauntered toward him.

Kevin wheezed in fright, “Here comes my waitress from the other day. She was crazy so she may say something off the wall.”

Rene grinned, “Hello Kevin. This must be your wife then? Sherry?”

Sherry smiled politely, “Nice to meet you. And you would be?”

“I am Rene. Kevin and I served in Baghdad.”

Sherry looked to Kevin, “You did?”

Rene seemed surprised, “Didn’t he tell you we were discharged?”

Sherry added things up, “You were the one he got in a fight with?”

Rene massaged Kevin’s shoulders.

He cringed.

Rene grinned, “Kevin and I have this love hate thing. I’ll leave you guys alone.”

She left.

Kevin sighed, “I tried not to come here.”

Rene stepped back, again massaging Kevin’s shoulders, “Sherry, he doesn’t want me anymore. He wants you now.”

Rene stared into Kevin’s eyes, obviously still in love with him. Kevin glared back, thinking *don’t you even think about hurting Sherry like you hurt Joy.*

Butch eyed Rene’s pretty face and slim athletic figure, “I’m Butch.”

Rene shook Butch’s hand.

Trudy presented herself, “Trudy Truly.”

Rene said, “Yes, I know. Kevin and I watched you on Marge’s show.”

Trudy beamed, “Kevin didn’t tell me you saw that.”

Butch reasoned, “Is that how Kevin found me?”

Rene nodded, “Yes. Excuse me. I have to sing

Happy Birthday.”

“*Happy Birthday?*” Trudy laughed, rising, “Not without me.”

Butch blushed, “Trudy is such an extrovert. She’ll invade anyone’s space.”

Trudy playfully spanked Butch’s thigh then followed Rene to a table of customers where another waitress put down a birthday cake with candles burning and began to sing *Happy Birthday*. Rene and Trudy joined in. Overly friendly, Trudy crawled her hand across Rene’s shoulder.

From the corner booth, Kevin, Butch and Sherry watched.

Kevin grimaced, “Rene’s a piece of work. Dangerous.”

Butch said, “I like her.”

Sherry whispered, “Why the hell did you bring me here, Kevin?” The fresh softness in her face had become steel.

“I love you, Sherry,” Kevin coalesced, “... with my whole being and everything ... Rene and I did have a ... thing, before we were married.”

Sherry backed in her chair, crossing her arms, “Don’t play me for a fool.”

Kevin pleaded, “I’m not a perv like Daddio. I’m not. I love you. She’s a wacko that got me discharged.”

Trudy returned and sat.

Sherry fumed, "But Rene didn't come after you tonight. You brought us to her."

Kevin growled, "I didn't want to come here!"

Trudy raised her heavily drawn in brows, "Your subconscious did."

Suddenly Rene wheeled them a dessert tray.

Trudy continued, "And Rene's subconscious, too."

Rene pointed to a tray of mouth-watering cakes and pies, "You guys want free dessert?"

Kevin refused, "No thanks."

Trudy salivated, "Ooooh. Butch and I eat so healthy at home but when we're out, I can't resist cheesecake. Sounds perfect. Thank you, sweetie."

Rene added, "I get a bite."

Trudy took her fork and fed Rene a bite, exciting Butch, who grinned, "I'll take the cupcake, you cute cupcake. Thanks."

Butch lifted and held the unfrosted dry chocolate cupcake to Rene's lips for her to bite it. She did, seductively, trying to make Kevin jealous.

Kevin looked revolted.

Butch asked Rene, "So you know Kevin, hmm?"

Chewing, Rene replied, "Kevin has a way of turning explosions -- into fireworks."

She winked at Kevin, then she left, cough-choking on the cupcake.

Kevin was disgusted, "Classy. Like you, Trudy."

“Similar vibrations attract each other,” Trudy lectured, “Trudy Truth number five. No matter where you go, what is on your mind will show up there.”

* * *

A few minutes later, fuming Sherry stacked the empty dessert plates on the table.

Rene put down a check.

Kevin reached for his wallet and when he saw two hundred dollar bills he blushed, half-remembering Joy’s sexual proposition. Hating the memory, he grabbed the bills like they were poisonous and threw them at Rene, “Keep the change.”

Sherry snapped, “Kevin, we need that cash.”

“Sherry’s right,” Trudy said, “I’m paying.”

Rene handed Kevin his money back and took Trudy’s instead.

Kevin scowled, “Tip her good, okay?”

Rene winked, “Why, thank you, Kevin. It’s like you still care.”

Kevin glared at Rene, “I don’t want Rene to have to do anything unethical for a place to sleep tonight like with the tall married guy she banged night before last.”

Rene blushed and chuckled, "You should have seen how jealous Kevin got -- screaming at him."

Kevin grabbed Sherry's hand, "I screamed that he made a vow to his wife to be faithful. "If a man commits adultery with another man's wife -- both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death." -- Leviticus Twenty--"

Trudy interrupted, "If you're going to quote the Bible we also have to stone you to death. "If a child curses his father or mother, then his blood will be on his head. He must be put to death." -- Leviticus Twenty-Nine something."

"You got me," Kevin relented, "Let's go find stones and get this over with."

Kevin rose abruptly, pulled out a mini Bible from his pocket and shoved it in Trudy's purse, spewing, "'Women should remain silent in churches. They are not allowed to speak but must be in submission as the law says. If a woman wants to inquire about something, she needs to ask her own husband at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church.'" -- I Corinthians Fourteen --"

Rene giggled, "Kevin's just joking."

Trudy was up for a challenge, "Let's discuss all the religions."

Sherry argued, "This is the only one."

Trudy disagreed, "For you. But across the globe there are about 10,000 religions and over 2,000

gods -- and I have studied them all.”

Sherry protested, “Which god do you believe exists?? There’s only one!”

“They all exist,” Trudy insisted, “Whatever people believe exists. Who am I, or you, to take away anyone’s god??”

Trudy paged through the Bible then looked into Sherry’s nervous eyes, musing with sarcasm, “Were you a virgin, Sherry? If not, this says I need to gather more stones to kill you, too.”

Sherry proclaimed proudly, “Of course I was. I saved myself for him.”

Kevin nodded and kissed Sherry’s cheek.

Rene blushed of hurt and jealousy, “Is that why you married her?”

Kevin smirked and wanted Rene to hurt more, “Rene never saved herself for anyone. She just gives herself to everyone. Like Covid.”

Rene was too devastated to speak, but tried to smile as Kevin pulled the party to exit.

As they left, Trudy playfully warned, “The Bible also says not to sleep with Sherry on her period or both of you must be cut off from your people. Make a note.”

Kevin grimaced, “I am fine being cut off from my people.”

In the heat on the Brooklyn street, Trudy noticed an unhoused woman begging to passersby. Trudy

meandered over to her and sat adjacent on the pavement.

Meanwhile Butch tapped the deli window, smiling at Rene. “Rene?! Do you need a place to stay tonight?!”

“Excuse me, pop!” Kevin snapped, “You already have guests in the guestroom!”

Butch’s eyes did not leave Rene’s, “Rene could stay in Trudy’s and my room.”

Sherry was horrified, “Ewww. Kill me now.”

Equally disgusted, Kevin pulled his conservative wife Sherry toward the car.

Rene pressed against the glass, speaking to Butch but deliberately loud for Kevin to hear, “I’ll make do on my own tonight! But thank you! Nice meeting you all! Love your biceps!”

Butch opened the door to hand Rene his card. Kevin came back and pulled flexing Butch toward the car as Trudy gave the unhoused lady money and a hug.

* * *

On the hot drive home, tension escalated in the Tesla interior. Butch drove. Sherry sat passenger. In the back, Kevin and Trudy debated the mini Bible.

Trudy read, “There she lusted after her lovers,

whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses.”

Kevin grabbed back the Bible, “My little princess didn’t come up here for you to contaminate her -- ya got that? You and all your pervy Chinese-freaks keep your paws off my wife.”

* * *

Twelve hours later at the Brooklyn Heights condo building that evening, a cab pulled up. Rene got out with her army duffel bag.

Enjoying a breeze from the upstairs window, Butch happened to see her arrival, “That can’t be Rene the waitress from this morning, is it? Trude??”

Trudy saw it was, “She’s got balls, I’ll give her that.”

Overhearing, Kevin pulled Sherry into the guest room and locked the door, “I am so sorry we came here.”

“Me, too. They are disgusting. I can see why you stayed away from them all these years.”

* * *

In the master bedroom, Trudy handed Rene a martini. Butch sipped his, relaxing on the bed.

Rene looked into her drink, "I'm not a prostitute, if Kevin said I was, I'm not."

Butch replied, "He didn't say anything about you."

She was hurt by that.

Butch kissed Rene's neck, teasing, "You're a soldier. How can I thank you for your service?"

Trudy handed Butch a condom, then sat on her desk chair, typing at her computer.

Rene was perplexed, "This is so weird. You guys do this a lot?"

"Oh sweetie," Trudy said, eyes on her computer, "I've got important writing to do. Just pretend I'm not here."

Butch kissed Rene's breast as Trudy typed AN ADVANCED PERSPECTIVE ON SEX ...

As Butch undressed, Rene put her ear against the wall to the guest room, her heart breaking, "So weird that Kevin is just a few feet away."

* * *

In the guest room, by candlelight, the love that Kevin and Sherry made was evident in every gentle kiss, as he carefully laid his nude muscular body

over her soft curvy flesh. After ten minutes of passion, they orgasmed.

Kevin whispered, "I love you so much."

"I love you, too."

He absorbed it, knew it was true, then his personality split, "I can't believe that whore is fucking my dad in the next room! What a pig!"

"They both are pigs. Trudy, too."

"I need a little whisky."

"What? When did you start drinking whiskey??"

"I haven't for forever but I need something to calm me down."

"You have me"

"And I love you, but I need whiskey or something."

"You're shaking."

"Want some whiskey?" he asked.

"No! And don't go out there," she protested as if outside the bedroom door was a dangerous fire.

He kissed her, rolled out of bed, dressed in his fatigues all the while staring at her loveliness, "Look at you -- you're so damn gorgeous, you know that? Inside, too. I can't sleep."

He took an *Evolution's Trap* book and his phone from the nightstand.

She whispered, "Don't go out there! You can read that in here to me. We can both make fun of it."

"Shhh. You go to bed. You had a long day."

“We both did.”

“Shhh.”

He left. She stared at the closing door, concerned.

In the hall, Kevin stopped at the master bedroom door to eavesdrop but couldn't hear anything.

In the master bedroom, Butch snored. Rene pulled on her underwear.

Trudy watched from her desk chair, “Can I give you some money, sweetie?”

“Oh, Trudy, I am not a prostitute.”

“Oh heavens I know that. But you just got kicked out of the army.”

“Well, maybe, If you could just loan me a bit for a cab and a motel tonight? I think I maxed my credit card taking a cab here.”

“Why don't you sleep here?”

Rene shook her head.

Trudy offered, “Or on the couch?”

Rene shook her head in shame and continued dressing.

Trudy gave Rene money and fastened Rene's bra.

“This is a lot! I'll pay you back.”

“No need, my family has too much money. Trudy Pharmaceuticals.”

“Well, this is so nice of you. Thank you,” Rene smiled, “Hey -- good luck on your book tour.”

“I wish. I haven't found a way to impress

bookstores. Or a publisher. I had to self-publish.”

“Not sure if they are open-minded enough for you. For us,” Rene laughed, pulling on her waitress uniform.

“I rented a tiny theater in a couple days off off off off off Broadway. You should come,” Trudy invited, “I need you to come actually. It’s contingent on at least sixty ticket sales.”

“Sure. If I’m not slinging hash I’ll come.”

“Good. Why don’t you get some sleep in the living room and go home rested. The sofa swings.”

Rene put on her combat shoes, “Never thought I’d turn down a swinging sofa, but I couldn’t look anybody in the face in the morning. Especially Kevin.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about who you are. You’re a beautiful female animal with an aching heart and vagina with needs and desires. You were discharged from a job and you are craving acceptance and validity while you scramble for new footing. You are in a very vulnerable place.”

Rene hugged her tightly, then pulled back, teary-eyed.

Trudy smiled, “I am glad Butch could give you value and attention and intimacy which you so deserve. You have a beautiful young body and are a very beautiful spirit.”

Trudy walked to her closet and handed Rene

stylish shoes and several expensive outfits, “You need clothes, don’t you? I never wear these anymore and your figure would look darling in them.”

“Trudy! These are beautiful! Thank you so much!” Rene gasped, holding the garments, and peeking inside Trudy’s elaborate closet, “What is that?!” she asked, fingering a pink sparkly sleeve of an old skating dress.

“Oh you like this one?” Trudy asked.

“No, I mean no offense, but I would never wear pink sparkly taffeta.”

“It’s my old skating dress. I was Roller Skate Queen a million years ago. I just can’t throw it away.”

“You keep it. You could pull it off but not me. I’m so simple. But thank you for these other outfits! I don’t know what to say. Can’t believe you’re not jealous.”

Trudy tiptoed to sleeping Butch and tucked sheets around him, “Jealous? No. I selected this adorable soul as my significant other many, many years ago. I love him more than anyone else in the world. I want him to be happy. You made him happy. Thank you.”

“That’s so unusual. Most women would --”

“Repress their significant other -- choose that he suffer -- which turns into secret hate -- and divorce -- or even murder.”

Trudy followed Rene to the bedroom door, “Rene, feel free to call if you need more money. Promise?”

“Really? Amazing! Thank you,” Rene said, grabbing her army bag.

“You be careful out there. It’s New York now. Not all fun and games like Iraq.”

Rene showed off her martial arts moves. Trudy playfully karate kicked back, but fell, and laughed being stuck on the floor.

Rene helped her to stand.

Trudy reached for her phone, “I’m calling you a cab. Get some juice drink from the fridge on your way out. Butch blends it with a dozen natural supplements. Hemp seed, sea weed, flax, you name it. We robot animals need vitamins, darling.”

* * *

In the dark main room, the robot-animals creeped out Rene as she looked out the window for the cab. She did not see that watching her from the kitchen was Kevin drinking scotch.

* * *

Moments later outside the condo, Rene ran across the street to an arriving cab.

A shadow intercepted her.

She screamed, karate-kicking a man in a bear mask, wearing fatigues.

She warned, "Kevin?! I'll kill you. I will."

The creature clumsily grabbed her. She kicked, wrestled free and dove into the cab, slamming the door.

The animal took off his mask.

It was Kevin, laughing like a little kid.

She rolled down the window.

He whispered, slurring, "Where are you heading off to?"

"That stupid box hotel. I should have kicked your lights out."

"My lights have been going out."

Drunk, he leaned in, kissing her softly, shocking her.

He said, "You following me home and fucking my dad -- shit -- sleaziest thing I ever heard of. You are the biggest whore in the world. I'm hard as a rock."

"What about your cherished Sherry? Are you gonna try to choke me??"

"I never choked anyone. That's something you do out of jealousy. But I sent her help."

"What are you talking about? And how dare you demean me in front of everyone -- when I never ever

said anything bad about you. I never would say anything to hurt you.”

He looked down, remorseful, but still wondering to what extent she would go to cause he and Sherry harm. His forehead vein throbbed in pain and confusion so much so that he slapped his head to free himself.

Sympathetic and concerned, she opened the door to let him in.

Once the cab drove away, in the backseat she closed her eyes and collapsed into Kevin’s shoulder.

He looked out the window – lost – drunk – defeated, “I’m sorry if I ever hurt you. I know you wouldn’t hurt me. But I know you’d hurt women who I wanted.”

She laughed, “You men and your egos!” then she shook her head, smirked and took his hand to place over her breast.

His wedding ring shined in the passing lights.

He looked away from it, slipping into his dark personality as his handsome chiseled face changed from overwhelmed Jekyll to psycho Hyde.

DAY 5

Even before dawn, Sherry, wiping the sleep out of her innocent azure eyes, searched the condo for Kevin. Not finding him in the kitchen or living room with masked robots, she knocked on the master bedroom door, “Kevin better not be in there!”

Trudy was asleep on her desk chair, computer screen reading: REPRESSION IS DANGEROUS.

Naked Butch answered the door a few inches, “Sherry? You can’t find Kevin?”

Sherry tried to peek in, “He’s gone.”

“He’s not in here,” Butch said.

Not believing him, Sherry pushed open the door. Butch quickly pulled on his Superman robe as Sherry turned on the light switch.

The bedroom bulb glared obnoxiously bright, waking Trudy.

* * *

Just as assaulting, the glowing sunrise beamed on New York traffic. In a daze, Kevin aimlessly wandered between slow-driving cars, unaware of

them beeping at him.

* * *

That hot afternoon on the Brooklyn Bridge, Butch and Trudy leaned out the Tesla windows, searching for Kevin.

Back in their condo living area, Sherry combed her red locks as she spoke into the table phone, “My husband’s been missing now going on eighteen hours ... there’s a silly bear mask missing, too ... What? You are ordering me to call back when it’s twenty-four hours? -- Don’t you order me! -- Don’t you hang up on me!”

Sherry slammed down the phone as Butch and Trudy entered.

Sherry asked, “Did you find him?”

“Not yet,” Trudy frowned, “You look pale.”

“I am Irish,” Sherry retorted.

Trudy felt Sherry’s forehead, “Are you eating anything? Butch, whip her up your vegan chili.”

Butch asked, “Sherry, can I make you my vegan chili?”

She shook her head no, “Eww.”

Trudy pressed a button and a robot poured her a vodka. She drank it, exhaling in peace.

“How can you be so casual?” Sherry barked,

“The police aren’t going to search until tomorrow. Somebody could’ve run him over. I’m going out there to look.”

“I’ll drive you,” Butch offered, “Come on, Trude. Let’s go look for him.”

“I’ll stay here in case he calls,” Trudy yawned, “I’ve got work to do -- developing my brand new podcast.”

Sherry exited, Butch following.

* * *

As Butch drove Sherry on Brooklyn streets, he couldn’t ignore his animal attraction to her.

She was disgusted by him, “Don’t leer at me, scumbag.”

“I can’t help it.”

She slapped his face, “Oh, I couldn’t help slapping you, you idiot.”

She slapped him again.

He looked away, gulping in guilt, his low self-esteem crashing lower.

* * *

The sun was setting as hitchhiking Kevin looked up and read the I-78 West highway sign: HARRISBURG: 85. PITTSBURGH: 370. COLUMBUS: 533.

A red Chevy SUV stopped. Kevin climbed in but Kevin hardly looked at the driver, skinny Sara Kelley.

The forty-year-old wore long ribbons in her long straight blonde hair like a school girl. Her voice was soft and high like one, too, "I hope Pennsylvania smells better than Jersey."

When he didn't comment she continued, "I got a role in a show ... community theater in Harrisburg."

In a daze, Kevin's large hands reached for the dashboard to change stations from talk radio to a dramatic haunting aria.

"I am going to play a witch," Sara cackled in character, nervously driving between two trucks, "What's your hometown and then the name of the most obnoxious girl in kindergarten?"

Kevin answered flatly, "Columbus -- Clara."

"That's your Broadway name. Columbus Clara. Columbus? -- as in Ohio?"

"Yep."

"We're headed west in that direction, Ohio. Is that we're you're going?"

Kevin stared out the front window without expression.

Sara pinched him, “Could you be any more quiet?”

“Quiet is a good thing.”

“Who told you that?”

“Magnolia. My mom. Fine without anyone but God and the penguins. My mother the martyr.”

“Penguins?? You grew up in Alaska?”

“Magnolia called the nuns penguins. They dressed like them. She worked at a convent, maybe still does,” he closed his eyes, “Maybe Magnolia’s dead. That would make sense if she was. For some people it just seems right.”

“Death is wonderful, not that I died, but thousands of people on YouTube talk about dying and how great it is, but they were forced to come back to Earth. Near Death Experiences.”

“Heaven is wonderful. But Hell is Hell.”

“The few Near Death Experiencers who went to Hell, well they went there because they felt they deserved it -- but they escaped Hell when they chose to -- they followed a light through a tunnel and they were instantly in a better place.”

He opened his eyes and studied her pretty gamine face, “Who is filling your head with these lies? Your boyfriend?” Then he glanced down to see a bulge in his crotch, angry his body was defying his mind and principles. He had not even thought about her sexually but even so his penis was stirring,

instantly sexually attracted to her, and any other attractive woman. This had happened his whole adult life but he only noticed it now that he was married.

“No, none of my exes know anything about the afterlife or Hell, they just knew how to put me through Hell. Four motorcycle dudes and a minister. Ministers are the best sex.”

Kevin stopped hearing her words. Instead he heard the voice of Father Mike. It was 1997 and twelve year-old Kevin knelt in the confessional. Wearing a little green suit, he combed his hair.

“The sins,” the priest pried, “Spill them.”

“My pe ... I’m not supposed to say it, Mom says.”

“Say what?”

“My penis ... wants attention.”

“That’s bad.”

Kevin nodded.

The priest whispered, “Let me see it.”

Kevin was confused, “What?? My penis?”

“Let me see it.”

Terrified Kevin stood. He unzipped and as he lowered his suit pants, Father Mike’s hand reached through the partition and shoved Kevin out of the confessional through the door.

Kevin fell onto the hardwood church floor, trying to tuck his penis back into his pants.

Before he could, horrified Magnolia, wearing

matching green, saw his genitals and spanked him relentlessly.

Her physical abuse paled to the humiliation he felt seeing the congregation laugh at him, and behind them, distorted views of religious statues in the background. Jesus's brass face looked shocked and disappointed. Mother Mary seemed as disgusted with him as everyone else was.

Father Mike stepped out to shout, "You only show your penis to one person! A wife! Now zip up before God or the Devil sees it!"

Sculptures of church gargoyles frightened Kevin as he zipped his pants despite his mother's disciplinary hits.

"Father Mike, I do apologize!" Magnolia begged, "My home is one of purity, I assure you."

She marched away toward the exit as Kevin pulled up his pants and raced to hold her hand, as he was use to doing. But she reacted as if his hand was as deadly as the Black Plague.

He and his father Butch sat quietly at the homey dinner table that night, as Magnolia stood between them slopping down beef stew on their plates.

She frowned, "Tell your son he's going to Hell."

Butch looked down to avoid her bullying and chewed the tough meat, lying, "This tastes wonderful but why don't you let me experiment on a stew next time?"

Magnolia sat, “No, men don’t cook. Men discipline their children. Tell. Your son. He’s going. To Hell.”

Guilty Kevin’s hand and fork shook trying to eat.

Magnolia rose, removed a large crucifix off the wall and put it by Kevin’s plate as if to exorcise his demons.

Butch tried to change the subject, “Thought I’d teach Kevin the piano.”

“You will do no such thing!” she admonished, “Nor will you teach it to that Trudy whore. Tell your son he’s going to Hell.”

Empathetic Butch avoided her eyes, and the crying eyes of his tormented son.

“Tell him!!” she ordered.

Henpecked Butch reluctantly mumbled, “You’re going to Hell.”

Kevin was ashamed and devastated.

* * *

Sara’s red SUV had parked outside the neon VACANCY sign of Pennsylvania’s HOTEL HARRISBURG.

In the dark hotel room, Kevin knelt next to the bed masturbating to sleeping Sara. The second he orgasmed his traumatic childhood sex guilt spun his

brain into such taxation that for it not to explode in a fatal aneurism, it hid, it retreated, forcing in his other self, the monster, the aggressive Hyde, the big bully that would not be shamed or hurt or tormented.

Kevin's monster refused to be at "effect," it was at "cause." It was cause. It was the boss, the one who called the shots, the protagonist, the decider, the judge. And it had decided Sara was evil to have had sex with motorcycle guys and a minister while not married. The judgment was clear, and Kevin whispered it to her as he buckled his pants, "Deuteronomy. "There the people of her town will put her to death by throwing stones at her. She has done a very terrible thing in Israel. She has slept with a man before she was married. Get rid of that evil person.""

Unable to find a rock in the hotel room, Kevin flung open the door and searched outside. Grasping a large stone, he reentered.

Leaving the door open, he aimed the pointy field stone above her head not because he was squeamish about his duty to destroy her evilness, but to awaken her and educate her showing her the deserved punishment. Pounding it relentlessly above her head and on the headboard scared her awake. Emotionless, he next stabbed the stone near her sides, rotating as she lay too petrified to move. Her

mouth yanked wide in screaming mode, but no sound emanated from it.

Just as he decided it was time to splay open her chest and heart, her fingers wrestled him away, only because he was caught off-guard. By the time he pulled his fist with stone back to retry, her feet kicked his elbow, catapulting the stone out the door.

Her scream finally materialized and it was so shrill and deafening that the monster fled. Grabbing her keys, he stole her SUV and drove fast to escape her piercing shriek.

When the SUV hit a curb Kevin shook out of his dark personality and back to his normal self. Still driving, but slowing, he could barely keep up his dizzy head.

Why am I in this car?

Where am I going?

What happened with Sarah?

He pulled over and held his throbbing head, until he heard a police siren, then he put his foot on the gas.

DAY 6

In the morning, Sherry walked two female police officers out the front door of Trudy's condo.

She asked them pointedly, "You girls have husbands, don't you? Pretend it's your husbands that are missing!"

One officer replied, "We'll put out another APB, Mrs. Brandt."

"Would you check the nearest forest real-estate offices?" Sherry pleaded, "Kevin's probably browsing cabins for me."

The policewoman joked, "Yeah -- my Frank's buying me a place in Hawaii."

The other cop laughed then said sarcastically, "That's what missing men do, Mrs. Brandt. They disappear to buy their wives' some real estate."

Incensed, Sherry slammed the condo door pushing them into the hall.

As the lady cops left, a young good-looking blond male cop arrived.

The first policewoman informed him, "We already answered her call."

The new cop seemed confused, "A lady by the name of Trudy Truly?"

"No. A Mrs. Sherry Brandt."

"I'm here to question a Trudy Truly," the man

said, knocking on the condo door, just as Trudy appeared with a striped box and bag behind him. She was in jeans and a leopard blouse, no electric shirt or make-up.

"I'm Trudy," she smiled to the male officer, as the females walked toward the elevator.

"Well, hello," he said, "Can I ask you a few questions?"

"I only stole the olives," she joked, from the bag pulling out a jar of martini olives.

He laughed, "In the old days we'd pull you in even for that."

"Oh pull me in anyway. I'm a lot of fun," she winked.

He pulled out his handcuffs in good humor.

"Oh come on inside," she laughed, "Come on in and taste some hot olives. So much better than ones paid for."

* * *

Moments later in the guest room, Sherry was packing her suitcase.

In jeans, T-shirt and apron, Butch knocked, but when she didn't answer, he went in holding breakfast plates, explaining, "Trudy insists you try my Omelet de la Mere Poulard. Eggs, creme fraiche

using the healthiest yogurt, mushroom, lardons. Then we can call and check your apartment in Jersey again, Sherry?”

“Kevin’s not there,” she whimpered, “I just called my asshole roommate.”

Trudy entered with the striped box and pulled out a beautiful sky blue cashmere sweater, tearing off a price tag, “It’s the same color as your stunning eyes, Sherry. I had to get it for you, gorgeous. The buttons match your fabulous auburn hair.”

She smiled, handing it to Sherry.

Sherry’s brows crossed, overwhelmed, “This is beautiful. It’s cashmere, isn’t it? But Kevin ...”

“Yes,” Trudy agreed, “And Kevin will love it on you ... Look, sweetie. Another officer just questioned me. He asked if I saw anything the night of my book signing. Not far away a woman was found unconscious in her BMW. She’s in a coma and is expected to die ... I think Kevin tried to kill her. A Chinese woman.”

Butch abruptly dropped the plates on a table, “Why do you think Kevin had anything to with that?”

Sherry echoed his frustration, “Of course he didn’t!”

Trudy crossed the room, straightening the lavish silk curtains, “This woman was Chinese. Kevin said something about Chinese perverts. He wasn’t going

to let them contaminate you.”

Butch sat on the bed, “You’re convicting Kevin of attempted murder because he mentioned Chinese?”

“Kevin’s hands were reddish, remember?” Trudy said, “Maybe from blood? He mumbled incoherently and fainted.”

“It was barbeque sauce,” Butch snapped, “Or ketchup probably from Neal’s Diner.”

Trudy continued, “Short hair his color was found in the car. And semen. So it was a man.”

Sherry protested, “There are a million people with Kevin’s hair color in this city.” Incredulous, shaking her head, she threw the sweater at Trudy and resumed packing.

Picking up the expensive sweater, Trudy found a pink sequin on the carpet and showed it to her, “The Chinese woman was wearing a shirt with pink sequins.”

“Oh, I remember her,” Butch said.

“Of course you do. She had tits out to here,” Trudy rolled her eyes, “I told the officer we didn’t see anything.”

“Well we didn’t,” Butch barked, “And you better not have mentioned Kevin!”

“I didn’t. But not to leave any stones unturned, I asked the cop about other attacks in the city.”

“In Brooklyn??” Butch rubbed his pulsing headache, “There must have been hundreds.”

“Dozens. And I listened to each one.”

Sherry walked her suitcase to the door, “I am leaving now and I wish I could say thank you -- but I really can’t.”

“Outside Neal’s Diner in Brooklyn,” Trudy continued loudly, “A bloody duffel bag registered to the U.S. army containing a waitress uniform was found.”

Butch lay back on the bed in disbelief.

Sherry shook her head in denial and disgust at Trudy.

* * *

Meanwhile, underneath a highway sign reading PITTSBURGH: 285 MILES, COLUMBUS: 448, the red SUV parked.

In the driver seat, Kevin in his fatigues fiddled with his iPhone, watching Trudy read from her book, *Evolution’s Trap*.

Trudy’s voice lectured, “Do you realize humans could live peacefully without one act of violence? We don’t have to kill in war, or out of anger, or to even slaughter animals or swat mosquitos. These are learned, accepted and even celebrated behaviors. All these killing actions have been programmed into us.”

Trudy paused and then added, "Previously I would have said we can't fight the programming but now I have to at least wonder if we can?"

* * *

Later that chilly morning, Trudy, now in full make-up, with Butch and Sherry wearing the cashmere sweater, walked to the glass door of Neal's Diner.

A heavy African-American cop, Ernie Jones, exited, "Hey! I know you from somewhere."

"Yours truly, Trudy Truly."

"You're that singer!" Ernie smiled widely, "My wife bought your book and tried to return it. I'm Officer Ernie Jones by the way."

Trudy smiled then looked serious, "Shame about that diner waitress -- heard it on the news."

Butch inhaled, "She was from the army, was she?"

"Recently discharged," Ernie said, "We thought the blood was from overseas but it is just a day old. Maybe a suicide or a murder -- but we haven't found a body."

Watching Sherry's face lose all color, Trudy shook Ernie's hand, then said, "Oh. Excuse me. This is my partner, Butch. And Sherry. Officer Ernie

Jones.”

“What was the waitress’s name?” Sherry asked, barely audible.

“Private Rene Miller,” Ernie replied, “Did you know her?”

Suddenly Trudy was at a loss for words. Shaking their heads no, she and Butch and Sherry turned around and headed toward the Tesla.

When they were far enough away that Ernie wouldn’t hear, Sherry gripped Trudy’s hand, “I hate I have to ask. What happened that night with you guys and Rene?”

“We had sex like adults,” Butch remembered wistfully.

“Butch and Rene had sex,” Trudy corrected, “Then she left. I called her a taxi. That’s all.”

Sherry threw Trudy’s hands from her, “I need to get away from you scuzzy low-lifes.”

Sherry turned and vomited.

Butch caressed her shoulders, “We’ll find him, and find this is all a crazy mix-up. We have to stick together. You’re part of the family now.”

She wiped her mouth and shook his hands off of her, “Don’t touch me. Eww.”

Trudy added calmly, “We’re a pack. Animals stay in packs.”

“Eww. We’re different species,” Sherry admonished, “I need to get back to Jersey until we

hear more. Until Kevin calls and we find out what a mistake this has all been.”

“Okay,” Trudy smiled, “But we can’t ignore facts.”

“The facts are you and Butch were the last people to see Rene Miller. Maybe you killed her?”

Trudy backed away, insulted, “Why would we kill her?”

Butch whispered, “We had a good time, left as friends.”

“We all left empowered,” Trudy said with pride, “Only powerless people kill.”

Sherry shook her head, “You people are deranged.”

Trudy handed Sherry money, “That’s to get you to Jersey, since you insist on leaving the pack. We’ll catch up by phone.”

Sherry sighed, “No thanks. I’ll charge it.” Then she glared into Butch’s quivering light eyes, “What a horrible father you have been to Kevin! He’s probably getting drunk -- if you didn’t kill him.”

Butch felt stabbed in the heart.

Trudy was aghast, “Butch has no reason to kill his own son.”

Sherry spoke harshly, “Kevin didn’t kill Rene!” Then she revealed an even bigger fear, “Maybe Rene killed Kevin?? She had that stalker energy!”

“Maybe?” Butch wondered, his voice cracking,

“We don’t have a clue.”

“We do have clues,” Trudy whispered, “A bloody bag. And Kevin missing. And pink sequins.”

Butch turned to Trudy, asking, “You said they found semen in her car?”

“Yes. They’re running tests on it.”

“It’s not Kevin’s!” Sherry laughed, then whispered, “You guys don’t understand how shy Kevin is sexually. He and I discussed sex when we took our vows and we agreed it was best not even to discuss our sexual fantasies with each other. He’s a prude sexually. Which works for me.”

Trudy warned, “Repression is dysfunctional and dangerous.”

“Just the opposite,” Sherry grinned, “Look at you two. You’re downright pitiful. America was built by Puritans. We did all right hundreds of years without three-ways and porn sites.”

Sherry ran away into traffic to hail a taxi and disappeared.

* * *

The silver Tesla drove through morning traffic.

Trudy, driving, sighed, “The Puritans scalped Native-Americans.”

Butch quipped, “According to your book, they

didn't have a choice."

"Well, I am sure they felt they had to."

"No one understands you, my dear."

She got defensive, "I don't make sense? But killing Native-Americans makes sense?"

"I don't know what pilgrims thought, damn you. Are you going to your lecture tonight?"

"Of course! People need me! Damn you!"

"I didn't mean anything --"

"You certainly did. You think no one's going to come to hear me speak because I'm a pitiful old swinger! Well why don't you sit in a corner and jack-off until your porkchop of a head explodes? In a city as big as New York, how hard can it be to get sixty people to come to a life-transforming lecture?"

"Last month they cancelled because you didn't have sixty."

"I have been writing year after year while you fuck anything that walks. I have been writing year after year across the room from you as you fuck anything that walks. Do you think I wasted all that time? Do you think I don't have something people want to hear? Valuable relationship advice women need to hear. Most couples last four years. We've got twenty-five -- because of me. My compassion and analysis."

"Let's get a beer somewhere."

"Butch, I don't have the patience today to

babysit you through a hook-up with some young tart with daddy issues.”

“I need to get my mind off Kevin.”

“You need to keep your mind on Kevin. We need to find him and help him.”

“We can’t tell the police. This is all a misunderstanding. They’ll shoot him.”

“Maybe we have to tell the police,” she wondered.

“No way. Why?”

She stuttered, “If he killed a person? Or two? He thought he killed us.”

“Well, we are alive, Einstein. All you have is circumstantial evidence.”

Her cell phone rang. She answered, “Hello?”

“Trudy, it’s Maury.”

“It’s my agent,” Trudy smiled.

Maury explained, “Sugar, they canceled tonight’s lecture. We didn’t get enough reservations.”

“They can’t cancel me again!” she yelled, “They’re not going to get anyone else at this last minute!”

Maury said apologetically, “They got some teen influencer.”

Trudy hung up.

Dazed and devastated, she drove on, beating the steering wheel in anger. Butch sat passenger, afraid to say anything.

But eventually he yelled. Because looking down to beat her dashboard, Trudy misjudged the road

and accidentally rammed into a pick-up truck.

* * *

Noon. Driving the SUV on the Pennsylvania highway, Kevin, wearing his army fatigues, looked nervously to his ringing cell phone. *Is it the cops?? Who's calling me?? Sherry? It has to be Sherry. I fucked up her life. I screwed up everything. Rene screwed up my life. Sherry's life. I can't talk to Sherry. It could be the cops? Or crazy Trudy and my daddio leaving another message?? What do I have to say to those sinners? Crazy Trudy and daddio fucking Rene. They caused all this shit. I should tell them off! I will tell them off!*

He answered the phone, hostile, "What??"

"Kevin?" a woman's voice asked. It wasn't Sherry's voice.

"Who is this?" he demanded.

"It's me."

"Rene?"

"Yes." In the clothes that Trudy given her, with a bruise on her face and arm, Rene spoke into her cell phone, "You made that weird comment about heading home and I figured it was Columbus, right? I rented some old station-wagon! It was the cheapest car on the lot. A station wagon!"

“Rene??”

“Yes,” she repeated, “I’m trying to follow you. Don’t hang up. Where are you?”

“Rene? What happened? I know we had sex then I don’t remember anything.”

Kevin pulled the red SUV off the highway ramp to an El Salvadorian restaurant.

“I don’t want to talk about it, you jerk. I hear traffic,” she said, “You’re in a car? Who’s driving you?”

“No one.”

“Where’d you get a car? Is it the Tesla?”

“No, some stupid red SUV.” He shook his head in confusion, but hearing her voice, he remembered how many times they talked as friends over the years, sharing personal stories and intimate thoughts. And she was the only one he felt he could talk to about all the recent nonsensical events. He rambled, “Taking the I-Seventy-Eight from Pittsburg to my new residence of Hell, I don’t know. Going home to Columbus. Currently, El Salvador. What happened in the box motel? I don’t remember.”

“It was so perfect and then you freaked out and started beating me.”

“I did not.”

“El Salvador?”

“Why are you lying to me? Did you knock me over the head with something? Where are you

calling me from?”

“I’m on the I-78 about half an hour from Pittsburgh.”

That’s too close! He thought and hung up.

* * *

In Brooklyn, a tow-truck pulled the totaled pick-up truck away leaving Trudy’s silver Tesla only slightly dented. An officer filled out an accident report. Trudy and Butch, still numb, stood on the sidewalk as a mass of school children passed.

Butch sighed relieved, “At least the driver wasn’t hurt.”

Trudy held her heart in gratitude, “And my insurance will cover everything he needs. Poor fellow.”

“And insurance can fix the Tesla.”

“Who cares how it looks. It still drives. I’ll have to call a press conference for tomorrow afternoon.”

“A press conference about an accident?”

“No, not about this ridiculous accident.”

“Not about Kevin?!”

“Whether you can admit it or not, people need me -- my clean, unemotional, wider perspective on the chaos out there!”

“I don’t see how telling people they are

programmed robots and animals helps them. You just doom them.”

“I give them insight and clarity.”

“You say they can’t change, they are helpless to their programming.”

She understood his point, and finally stuttered, “I am investigating some ideas on maybe how they can change their programming.”

“You are?! Fantastic! Find out how and then your book might sell.”

The children’s chaperones stopped and couldn’t help overhearing Trudy gush about the well-behaved kids.

“They are adorable,” Trudy enthused, “Someone has to help these precious children.”

Resisting a nervous breakdown, she stared at the naïve young children’s faces, then held her head in pain, “I’m not smart enough for sixty New Yorkers to listen to me? Straight A’s. I was hall monitor and Roller Skate Queen, ran the college newspaper, Most Likely To Succeed. Butch, we had a number one song! That’s not enough for sixty New Yorkers?? -- who probably flunked out of school and sing off-key, the ingrates! How many hours have I studied analysis and psychology and nutrition so I can help lost souls?? A million hours?? And no one thinks I am worth hearing??”

“Some people do,” Butch said supportively,

“Forty I bet.”

Trudy’s eyes discovered an angelic girl. She knelt in front of her, touched her curly light hair.

Butch was off in thought, “Kevin ... it is all circumstantial.”

Trudy helped the little girl button her coat. She snuck her arms around the girl and inched her into a soft embrace.

The chaperones pulled the girl away.

Trudy rose and lectured them, “You squeeze these young promising impressionable minds into an adult capitalist puzzle system rigged against their freedom and happiness! They need my help to survive your destructive poisoning!”

Trudy heard airplanes and pointed at the stratospheric aerosol injection, “Pollution from the air! And from water faucets and grass and chemicals and drugs and the internet! And school bullying and endless wars for profit!! What the fuck do these little angels have to look forward to?? They’ll never be able to afford a house!”

The chaperones hurried the kids away.

Trudy chased them, her voice resonating with great authority, “Elect me as world leader and every human gets a free dirt lot, and seeds to grow vegetables and fruit trees! Then their entire lives wouldn’t be working to pay expenses. But the greedy corporations don’t want these kids to be free to

spend their lives in bliss!! -- They need them to be needy. Need, need, need, need, need!! I know. My family owns one of those corporations.”

With the children out of her reach, Trudy knelt and pet a wildflower, cupping soil in her hand, “Why are eight billion people on this Earth all needy when we should all have a free small dirt plot of land -- and seeds? Seeds are free! The earth makes seeds!! Healthy food has zero cost. It groooowwwwws!!”

Like a crazy lady, Trudy threw the dirt at the airplane.

* * *

In the empty EL SALVADOR restaurant every inch was lit sterile bright like an examination room. Kevin sat at a booth and straightened out a cork board on the wall so all the thumbtacked business cards were perfectly even.

The Latin waiter Luis dropped the check, “It was a pleasure to wait on you.”

“I straightened these business cards for you.”

Luis smiled appreciatively though he saw no reason they should be aligned, “Why did you do that?”

Kevin looked at him, dumbfounded, thinking *Things are supposed to be in order.*

Kevin said, "You're welcome. How much do I owe you?"

"Lunch special ... Fourteen-nineteen -- make it fourteen dollars even."

He handed the waiter a hundred dollar bill with pink glitter, "Just give me eighty back."

Luis did and said, "Thanks."

Kevin pointed to a thumbtacked business card with a Military Hotel, "What's this?"

"A Pittsburgh hotel that gives like fifty percent off for military. From what you're wearing looks like you qualify."

Kevin studied the card and exited.

* * *

That windy afternoon, back in their ritzy Brooklyn Heights condo bedroom, in her Supergirl robe Trudy stared at framed photos of herself in younger years as a college newspaper editor and in the 1970's pink sparkly Roller Skate Queen dress. She answered her ringing desk phone and listened.

Frowning, she spoke into it, "In front of City Hall ... I see ... well I can postpone it an hour, would that help? ... I see ... what if -- hello!?"

She slammed down her receiver and went to the PRESS CONFERENCE LIST on her computer - then

deleted all five of five TV stations.

In his Superman robe, Butch passed the door, holding a shirt and an iron, "You can't mention Kevin ... We don't know he had anything to do with it."

She pointed to a pink sequin on her desk.

He ignored it, "So what?"

She stormed out, chasing him in the hall with the pink sequin on her finger.

He ignored it.

Her finger forced the sequin on his forearm. He inhaled and blew it off onto the floor.

* * *

At the JERSEY HOTEL, Sherry and a vacuuming heavy hotel maid cleaned a room.

Sherry's cell phone rang.

The large woman turned off the vacuum to warn, "You better not answer that, Sherry. They could fire you for good."

"But it could be Kevin," Sherry gasped, anxiously answering it, "Kevin??"

It was indeed Kevin, roaming an alley near Pittsburgh, "Hey. I've done some really dumb things. I miss you, Princess ... "

"Oh Kevin! I was so worried!"

“I’m not sure if I’m thinking too clearly.”

“Trudy’s not thinking clearly. She says you attacked and killed Rene.”

“Rene’s not dead! I just talked on the phone with her.”

“She’s alive? Cops think she is dead! You didn’t go with Rene anywhere that night, did you?”

He thought about lying, since he had committed so many worse sins, but he couldn’t, “I love you, okay?”

“I love you, Kevin! I want our little cabin –”

He hung up, leaving her cold.

Sherry whimpered into the dead phone, “Kevin? Kevin? We got disconnected.”

“Oh, go on,” the heavy maid championed, “Call him back.”

Sherry frantically pressed redial.

* * *

In the sunlit alley, Kevin leaned against profane graffiti, drinking a bottle of whiskey. He ignored his ringing phone.

Two rough-looking prostitutes passed. The Caucasian, Laura, eyed him seductively.

Kevin growled with venom, “You’d fuck a groom on his honeymoon, wouldn’t you?”

“Sure,” Laura said, straightening her tight Lycra outfit, “Is that you?”

“It doesn’t matter, right?”

“Not my problem,” she grinned, fluffing her long brunette hair.

If he had the strength and composure, he would have looked away, but like a sex addict, his eyes lowered from hers and devoured her voluptuous figure.

His mental anguish gave way to lust. His eyes relaxed, his slight grin salivated. Perspiration sprung over his blushing chiseled cheeks.

He wasn’t in his right mind, his perfect overachieving colonel mind. He had slipped into his sex mode, with only one thought on his mind. He hadn’t lost consciousness completely. He wasn’t the monster. But his heavy conflicted mind had numbed and now what directed his life was his growing erection.

* * *

Meanwhile, at the El Salvador restaurant, the cashier waved over waiter Luis to talk with Rene.

Rene asked Luis, “Did this man come in here?”

She flashed her phone showing a photo of

herself and Kevin in fatigues, smiling, holding hands, in love, before Kevin met Sherry.

Luis nodded, "Such a nice guy. Are you two soldiers?"

"We are."

"And you're married?" he gasped in adoration.

She hid her ringless fingers, "Yes, we're spouses. Soulmates. My husband needs me. Do you know where he went?"

"He didn't say."

"When was he in here?"

"Not long ago. About ... an hour ago."

"He didn't say where he was heading? Columbus? Allentown? Scranton? Pittsburgh? Akron?"

"No ... Oh, he was looking at this card with a military hotel in Pittsburgh."

Luis pointed to the business card. She ripped it from the corkboard and hurriedly left.

* * *

Fighting the summer wind at 4PM, Trudy, in her electric shirt and leopard leotards, lugged thirty volumes of *Evolution's Trap* up twenty cement stairs to Brooklyn Borough Hall. Down by the parked dented Tesla, Butch, in jeans and T-shirt, shook his

head displeased.

“Bring up the microphone and more books!” she ordered to him.

“No one came to your press conference!”

“Shut up and get up here with the microphone!”

From the backseat, Butch reached in and grabbed twenty more books and a standing microphone, then climbed the steps as instructed.

His muscular arms grew tired, as did his legs, and approaching her he dropped the books, several skidding down many stairs, pages flapping in the wind.

She spanked him, half in jest.

“Oh spank me more,” he chuckled.

“Butch, this is serious.”

“No one showed up for your press conference.”

“Sweetie, listen, we’re more likely to get in trouble if I don’t mention something about Kevin -- that’s withholding information.”

“If he is innocent, they could kill him by mistake.”

She tested the cordless microphone audio with finger taps.

He looked at her with sympathy, “You don’t have to try to revive your career by capitalizing on Kevin.”

Feeling the truth in that, and guilt, she looked away and saw pretty college girls exit the building. They pointed and giggled at Trudy’s outrageous

appearance and blinking-light shirt.

She forced a smile at them, fluffed her pink hair, tucked in her belly, "I'm doing the best I can with my age -- you ladies, however are gorgeous!"

They did not return her smile or compliment and went out of their way to avoid the eccentric old lady in blinky shirt with microphone.

Trudy smiled invitingly at other passers-by in suits, who also ignored her.

Butch's eyes ogled the young college women descending the staircase then he noticed Officer Ernie Jones climbing up.

"Trude -- isn't that the cop from Neal's Diner? You called him??"

Trudy smiled complacent with at least the attention of Ernie. She waved to him.

Butch turned his back to Ernie and whispered to Trudy, "Don't make this about Kevin."

"Kevin is in danger. Or dangerous."

"Tell the cop this is about something else."

"Kevin needs us."

"Tell him it's only about book sales. To get you a singing gig. It's not too late for us to revive our cabaret act. Ask him if he knows a piano bar foreclosing. You can buy it."

"I'll ask him if I can do splits on his glass coffee table."

"You'd break his table. And you can't do splits

anymore.”

Angered, she descended the stairs toward Ernie, slowly. A couple steps away from him, she stopped, held her head, dizzy - almost fainting - of failure. *No one came to my press conference? No one??*

Ernie helped steady her, “Did I miss your press conference?!”

She nodded, barely with strength to meet his eyes, lying, “Many news stations came.”

Ernie held up the 2001 “Fantasy Bride” C.D., “Look what my wife and me found! I want your guys’ autographs!”

Finally some acknowledgment.

She smiled, signing the C.D..

Butch had followed her down and enthusiastically signed it as well, asking, “Officer -- isn’t there a Taco Bell in an Eighth Street high-rise that’s up for lease?”

“I don’t know.”

“A Taco Bell?” Trudy complained, “You want us to convert a fourth story Taco Bell into a piano bar?” Gasping for air, and a career comeback, words flew out of her mouth, “Ernie -- what would your boss think if you brought in a lead on the man who put Joy Kyong in a coma?”

“Trudy! Stop this!” Butch shamed her, “Nothing is forcing you to do what you want to do here!”

“I’m not saying anyone’s name.”

Butch reeled in disappointment, “You’re killing someone to sell a book.”

She locked eyes with Ernie, “Maybe the police force would promote you if you linked Joy Kyong to the disappearing waitress, Rene Miller.”

Butch glared at her, blood draining from his face.

Trudy continued, loudly, “Rene -- had sex -- with my lover -- Butch here -- the night she was murdered. But Butch didn’t kill her.”

Devastated Butch walked away, down the stairs, kicking her fallen books.

Ernie was confused and pocketed the C.D., “Can you repeat that? Wait -- let’s get it on tape. Come down by my car.”

Summoned by the scent of comeback fame, Trudy quietly followed him down the stairs to his shiny police vehicle.

Ernie positioned her in front of the hood, “I have to turn on the siren for the camera.”

He turned on the flashing siren, automatically propelling the police camera.

Enjoying people finally looking at her, she pressed a button on her shirt for strobe lights, eager to have finally regained the spotlight.

As the siren screamed, she bellowed to the camera and all curious onlookers, “Little darlings, it’s Trudy Truly! I have obtained evidence to suggest

a certain young male, in his forties, is connected to the battery of Joy Kyong and the disappearance of Private Rene Miller! I'll release info tomorrow from my brand new Trudy-Truly-dot-com podcast and explain where I'll be signing my controversial book, *Evolution's Trap!*"

Suddenly she was filled with adrenaline, overriding her guilt of possibly causing hurt or challenges for Kevin.

Ernie opened the car back door, "Trudy, let me drive you back to the station to fill out a report."

"Charmed."

Ernie yelled to Butch who was watching from the Tesla, "Butch, you too. Down to the station!"

"I'm not coming!" Butch hollered, "I had nothing to do with Rene's murder!"

Butch drove away.

Ernie glared, not appreciating being defied. Trudy grabbed Ernie's arm, warmly.

In the back seat of Ernie's police car, Trudy turned off her blinky shirt and smiled wistfully, looking at plane-made clouds through the cracked window. She ignored Butch in the Tesla pulling next to them, his screams deafened by the window and traffic.

Ernie handed back to Trudy a bag of potato chips, "I'll give you the star treatment."

"Oh they have ridges," she purred, "I feel like the

Queen Of Sheba.”

“I could make you feel like the Queen Of Sheba every day,” he winked.

“Would your wife have a problem with that?”

“She doesn’t care anymore,” he laughed, “Honestly, she just wants me to be happy.”

“That’s the way it should be!”

He winked to her in the rear-view mirror.

She spoke into her cell phone camera, “Guess who’s being arrested by a sexy black cop? Stay tuned for more info and follow my new channel and post it everywhere!”

* * *

In the Brooklyn Police Office, Ernie and a handsome silver-haired Lieutenant Valio faced Trudy, who turned on her phone camera.

She eyed the camera while saying to the officers, “I can’t give you his name.”

Valio paced, “What the fuck are you talking about -- you can’t give us the suspect’s name?”

“I’m saying there might possibly be a connection between those two crimes.”

Valio shouted, “Tell me what you know!!”

Trudy surmised, “Rene Miller is probably alive since you have not found a body.”

Valio argued, "Then where is she?!"

"He probably did not kill her because he did not intentionally want her dead. Subconsciously he did - - but not consciously."

Tired of her riddles, Valio gripped her shirt, "How would you like to spend the night in a holding cell until you start to make sense?!"

He turned off her phone and handcuffed her.

Her fingers grabbed his wrists and she pleaded, "Let's sit down, okay? I have to tell you something."

They sat on a wooden bench. Thinking she wanted privacy, Ernie stepped away.

Trudy pled into Valio's eyes, "Your pulse is going way too fast, you're close to a heart attack. You have to stop taking your work so personally. Listen, we're consciousnesses experiencing this temporary physical reality through these bodies. Your job is to take care of you, not me or other people. I'm not saying not to care, just saying if there's a god, a source, it allows life to happen. You need to take deep breaths and allow life to happen or you'll have a heart attack. Promise me you'll go get a massage after your shift."

She pressed his chest.

Exasperated with her, he shook his head, heart pumping violently.

Her cuffed fingers reached into her small purse and pulled out a small bottle, "Some say cayenne oil

can stop a heart attack. I want you to have my bottle.”

He threw his hands up and kicked the wall.

* * *

Later in the condo living area, seated Trudy in her Supergirl robe watched the TV play her news segment. In the kitchen background, Butch, shirtless in an apron, prepared their elaborate supper.

“Dinner smells wonderful!” she called.

“Tikka Masala Chicken!” he responded, “I hate you my dear for your decision to hunt Kevin! You had a choice!”

“Okay maybe I did have a choice but I did it for Kevin!”

“You did it for you! Chicken’s with roasted garlic cauliflower and broccoli dal curry. ”

“And Magnolia said you couldn’t cook!”

“Correction. Magnolia said no man can cook.”

The television newscaster reported, “Singer and author Trudy Truly of the Truly Pharmaceutical family was arrested and released today on charges of baiting and abetting in relation to the assault and rape of Joy Kyong –”

Trudy yelled, “Show my book!” just as her book

cover came onscreen.

She stood up, clapping, “National channels! Yes yes yes!! They’re even playing “Fantasy Bride” in the background! Listen to our song, Butch!”

Her cell phone rang. She answered, “Hello?”

“It’s Sherry.”

Trudy called to Butch, “It’s Sherry!”

The phone had an additional call so Trudy told Sherry, “Hold on, Sunshine. I got another call... hello?”

Trudy’s face beamed, “Javier Del Rio? I’ve watched your show for years! ... Yes! Yes, I’d be happy to appear on your show tonight! Hold on!”

She pressed a tab to connect with Sherry, “Sherry, that was the Javier Del Rio show!! La di da -- national talk show!”

Looking miserable, Butch entered, “They’ll be hunting for my son all over the country if you talk.”

Trudy insisted, “Javier will lead us to him first.”

Butch mumbled, “Kevin hangs up when I call him.”

“Leave him a message that I will be on Javier,” Trudy instructed, “We can get him info through that talk show. It’s the only way to help him, Butch.”

* * *

At dusk, Rene drove the rusted beige wood-paneled station-wagon into the parking lot of the Military Hotel.

She ran inside the lobby and to the registration desk, "Hi there!"

She forced a smile as did the tough old woman behind the computer.

"Need a room?" the elderly employee asked.

"I need to find my husband's room actually."

The old woman adjusted her glasses and focused on the bruise on Rene's face and forearm, "He's not here."

"Oh, I know he is. Please check for Colonel Kevin Brandt."

The woman scanned her computer, "No Kevin Brandt."

"Maybe he used another name?"

"Look, hon, we don't want no trouble here."

"I won't be trouble."

"I don't see a wedding ring but I see bruises."

"Oh, I fell. And I forgot my wedding ring."

"Please hon, he's not here."

"Oh I know he's here. Tall, amazingly handsome, about forty years-old."

"Aren't they all?"

Rene pulled out her phone showing the old photo, "Here we are. He's so handsome you couldn't have missed him. He must have checked in about

an hour ago.”

Not wanting drama that could escalate to room destruction, she lied, “Sorry hon. I can’t help you. I don’t see a wedding ring but I see bruises.”

Rene dropped her fake smile realizing she had met a dead end. With just as much energy as she arrived, she ran out to the parking lot, and started looking in hotel windows. But in the few with open curtains she did not see Kevin.

It occurred to her to look into the parked cars to see if there was clues to which was Kevin’s. No red SUV’s in sight.

She dialed her phone, “Kevin pick up. Kevin, pick up your phone.”

He didn’t.

“License plates,” she said to herself, rounding the building, “He wouldn’t be driving anything with Pennsylvania plates.”

Each license plate she came across that was from New Jersey or New York, she looked up on her cell phone. Rounding the corner she saw the red Chevy SUV.

She put her ear against the door nearest the car, but didn’t hear voices, only TV commercials.

She had no idea that inside that room, prostitute Laura lay on the bed lifeless – eyes closed - next to Kevin, watching TV.

On the TV appeared Trudy in her trademark

electric shirt and tiger leotards sitting next to Javier Del Rio, the suited fifty-year old Latin host with trademark large mustache.

Trudy chose her words carefully, “I believe a forty-something year-old man had sex -- consensually -- with Private Rene Miller after she left our home.”

Javier’s eyes bulged, “After she had sex with your husband?”

“My partner. Butch and I never married. We have an open relationship.”

The audience booed and chuckled.

Trudy stood up, “Grow up, people! Few animals are meant to spend their whole lives monogamous.”

Javier pointed to camera, “Another scoop? Is the Truly Pharmaceutical family a bunch of swingers?”

“Don’t be crazy,” Trudy laughed, “My family is so stuffy and conservative. I’m the black sheep.”

“Well that’s a scoop. No one in Truly Pharmaceuticals does interviews, so we at least now know they are stuffy people.”

“Now don’t twist my words, Javier. My family is very solid, extremely solid.”

“But you’re the black sheep?”

“Of course. Look at me,” she grinned self-deprecatingly, gaining smiles and applause from the audience.

Javier pried, “But you’re all obnoxiously rich?”

“They are indeed, and yes I get a stipend.”

“Do you work at Truly Pharmaceuticals?”

“An office job? With my obnoxious personality?”

The audience laughed along.

Javier inquired, “So you get a stipend to promote your products?”

“Me? Pharmaceutical products?” she shook her head, then whispered to camera, “I don’t need pharmaceuticals. Yes I indulge in a nip and tuck and Botox, yawn yawn yawn, but other than that, people, I choose natural. I high dose vitamin D and C instead of flu shots, and I’ll do honey and garlic and elderberry and chlorine dioxide.”

“Stuff that Big Pharma says is not proven.”

“They have to say that. They can’t say everything you need to be healthy is in a garden. You got muscle weakness, take vitamin E, like nuts and seeds. Cardiovascular issues? Thiamin like in fish and legumes. Dementia? Take Niacin. Iron is great for restless legs. Magnesium for heart palpitations. I take the supplement but magnesium is in avocado and dark chocolate.”

“Trudy, you’re putting your family out of business.”

“Shhh! Chromium for Diabetes Two. Potassium for arrhythmia. Bananas have potassium. Hair loss? Biotin. Hair issues, selenium,” she shook her pink hair, “Hair dye? Well I can’t find a natural vitamin

for that so this is Revlon and I love it.”

The audience roared and applauded.

Watching the TV in the hotel room, Kevin was startled to hear a knock on the door. He ducked and crawled to it to sneak a peek at who it was.

On TV, Trudy spoke to the viewers, “I’ve seen this man collapse with dizziness you could say. He has trouble remembering events.”

Javier gasped, “So he kills in a daze?”

“We can’t say that. Joy Kyong is not dead. He has not killed anyone yet.”

“Joy Kyong died earlier today.”

On the hotel floor, Kevin winced in remorse for ever speaking to Joy, learning of her death for the first time.

On the TV set, Trudy sat, also devastated, “Oh, damn it. I didn’t know that.”

Javier asked, “Can you talk your friend into turning himself in?”

Trudy turned hesitantly to the camera, “Kevin, please turn yourself in.”

“His name is Kevin?”

“Kevin Brandt. Colonel Kevin Brandt served with Rene Miller in Iraq. They were discharged together. Kevin is my partner’s son.”

On the hotel floor, furious Kevin flipped the bird to the TV.

On the TV screen, Trudy lifted her book, showing

it off, hoping for sales.

Javier spoke gravely, "This is quite a scoop. Thank you, Trudy Truly. Private Rene Miller is missing. Colonel Kevin Brandt had sex with both these women? Joy Kyong and Rene Miller? And then attempted to kill them?"

"No! No! I don't think he is trying to kill anybody – but his extreme views might be dangerous. He holds very strong religious views, condemning extra-marital sex."

"He is trying to kill the evidence of his extra-marital sexual conquests?"

"Oh! I hadn't thought of that."

Kevin crawled to the hotel bed and shoved Laura, to wake her. He whispered, "Get out of here."

He threw clothes at the drug-dazed prostitute.

She dressed, confused and frightened.

More urgent knocks came from the door.

Laura moved toward the door to answer it.

He raced Laura to it, grabbed her neck, choking her, listening to Trudy hypothesize his psychosis.

Trudy paced the TV stage, "My guess is Kevin's brain is misfiring anger out of early repressed sexual trauma –"

Javier was enthralled, "Was he wounded in the head in Iraq or something to cause him to act so insane?"

"Look, combat doesn't help," Trudy said

pointedly to the audience, “You wouldn’t catch me in the military! But I don’t believe Kevin’s post traumatic stress disorder is military related -- not sure -- more childhood related.”

Outside the hotel room, Rene, hiding in the dark of night, tried to slide open the window.

Inside, Kevin’s raging alternate personality was now in complete control and he strangled Laura until she collapsed to the floor. His monster stood emotionless and then as if unplugged, he fainted.

Trudy continued to lecture America via the TV show, “I believe his early religious conditioning -- I know his mother -- what a piece of work she is -- conflicts with his animalistic sexual urges and maybe you’re right, he has been programmed to eliminate evidence of infidelity.”

She paced.

Javier rose and followed her, “Is he going to continue killing? Can you say something to stop it?”

“My best guess is he would have to eliminate the programming. Somehow. Kevin! Kevin!!”

Her shouting woke Kevin up from the hotel floor. He was dumbfounded to see that Laura’s body was no longer in the room. Again, he had no recollection of being the monster or guilty party.

Trudy pleaded through the TV, “Kevin, you have to reverse or change your past programming!”

Javier sat, “That doesn’t sound possible except

for a lobotomy.”

Trudy pleaded to the TV camera, “Kevin, somehow you have to change your past -- your beliefs -- maybe trick your brain into a more productive past -- like a self-hypnosis -- reset your triggers ... ”

Kevin stood up, dizzy. A memory took hold of him.

In the kitchen of his childhood home, Kevin was a three year-old in a high-chair, joyous - drumming his spoon to his bowl.

Butch slapped the table, “Stop the noise!”

Magnolia slapped the table louder, “It isn’t just noise! It was a song! I liked it! Keep drumming!”

Kevin was afraid.

His mother’s hand forced him to drum.

His father’s hand forced him to stop.

Little Kevin cried.

Butch pointed at him, “Now don’t you cry like a little girl!”

Kevin tried to hold back further tears as his mother forced him to drum.

Butch held his head in agony, then aggressively banged his hand on the table.

Rene aggressively banged on the Military Hotel window, waking Kevin from his memory.

Kevin scurried to hide in the bathroom.

The TV played Trudy’s unprofessional

diagnosing, "Maybe when Kevin got married, a couple months ago, he did not expect to be aroused by other women, or to surrender to the temptation, since he is so religious."

Rene broke the window and climbed in, holding a gun. She looked for Kevin, who was not in sight.

Trudy's voice on TV stunned her.

Onscreen, Trudy held her head, concentrating, "Maybe he feels if he kills the evidence he can erase it? Or that he is required to erase the sin, something like that."

In the hotel room, Rene turned off the TV. She heard a noise in the closet and threw the door open, pointing her gun, to find the terrified drugged prostitute.

Laura pleaded, "Don't shoot me. Pleeeeeease!!"

Kevin walked out of the bathroom, "Rene! Don't kill her like you killed Joy!"

Rene pointed the gun at Kevin, "Who is this girl?? Who is Joy?"

"Chinese. You saw her blowing me in her BMW."

"What are you talking about?!"

"You strangled her out of your insane jealousy!"

"I have no idea what the hell you are talking about, Kevin."

"Please don't shoot me," Laura pleaded.

"Why would I shoot you?" Rene asked, "I'm rescuing you from him."

“He choked me,” Laura whispered, rising, then bolted out of the room.

Rene kept her gun pointed at Kevin as he realized, “Rene, I don’t remember choking her.”

“You don’t remember choking me and beating me, either!”

“I thought you were telling me lies,” he said, he hoped, as he began to realize the ugly truth of his subconscious violence.

“Why would I lie to you? I love you.”

“How can you love me,” he asked, hollow inside, falling into a chair, “... if I choked and beat you ... and choked that girl ... and killed the Chinese lady?”

“I honestly don’t know why I don’t blow your brains out right now.”

“Shoot me,” he said, “Go ahead.”

He raised his hands in surrender. Defeated and suicidal, he rose then ambled to the bed and laid face-up.

Rene balanced on the mattress to stand over him, full of passion, pointing her gun down at him, “You are a serial strangler! What’s wrong with you?? What should I do?! Should I blow your brains out!?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Why not?” he begged.

“I want it to be like it was, before Sherry.”

To hide his tears, he turned over to lie on his

stomach.

When she heard the big muscular man cry, her dream man cry, her only reason for living cry, she softened and hugged him from behind.

He sobbed, "I never wanted you dead. I never wanted to kill Joy Kyong."

Hearing that, she dropped her gun to the floor, "You become this crazy man! Nice one minute then a maniac the next!"

"I don't remember."

"Of course you remember!"

"I don't," he wept.

She maneuvered around him, crawling under him, squeezing her cheek against his. She wiped his tears then listened to him breathe a long time. She gently kissed his cheek.

"I'm married," he grumbled, "Get away."

"You need me here. I know you care about me. All those nights. I know you care, right? You care about me?"

"Of course I care about you."

She kissed him.

He shut off the nightstand light.

In darkness, she ripped off her clothes.

"No," he pleaded, "I'm married."

"She's so not your type."

"She's everything I wanted."

"She's uptight. She can't be good sex."

“Rene, I don’t want to hurt you again.”

She reached for his zipper, “I love you and I love this.”

He screamed, “Filthy whore! You know I’m married!”

She quickly grabbed her gun in self-defense and turned on the light.

He freaked, “Turn it off! Turn it off!!”

Emotional, he collapsed on the floor, in a ball, and slugged the wall – until Rene turned off the light.

She asked, “The light makes you freak out?”

“The light has to be off.”

“Why?”

“So ... they can’t see.”

“Who? See what?”

“Me fucking you.”

“Who can see?”

He pointed around the room.

She didn’t see anyone, “Who? No one is there.”

“You can’t see them but they can see us.”

“Who?”

“The devil. God ... Mary. Jesus.”

Skeptical, she knelt next to him, “I never saw a devil or a god or a Jesus.”

“You said you died and went to Heaven.”

“Well I didn’t see god or a devil or Jesus but maybe they are real. I don’t know.”

“You’ll rot in Hell for doubting.”

“No, I doubted before and when I died it was not Hell. It was a good place. So much love.”

“You lie.”

“Maybe what you were taught is not true,” she said, dressing.

Once clothed, she held him, not seeing his hand inch ominously to the gun on the pillow. But his fingers passed the gun and climbed the nightstand to the lamp to turn off the light. Breathing in relief, he tentatively embraced her.

DAY 7

Early the next morning, Kevin and Rene left the red SUV in the Hotel Harrisburg parking lot. They took her rented station wagon instead.

Half an hour later they parked on a quiet tree-lined street to watch Kevin's phone play *Evolution's Trap*.

The video showed Trudy filming herself walking around her condo, reading from her book, "We humans could live peacefully without one act of violence. We don't neeeeeed to kill in war, or out of anger, or to even slaughter animals or swat mosquitos. These are learned, accepted and even celebrated behaviors. All these killing actions have been programmed into us."

In the passenger seat, Kevin in his fatigues paused the video, "What do you think?"

Pretty blonde Rene pulled down the driver's seat roof mirror to apply mascara, "That's a lot to unpack."

"She seems like she's trying to help me stop ... the violence."

"She's been around a long time, studied so many places."

"I wish I could hear from other people ... people

like me.”

“Sexy handsome soldiers?” she winked, now applying eye shadow.

While he appreciated Rene’s affection, he knew their peaceful moment was destined to turn chaotic again at some point, where he would lose control, and horrific scenarios would take place again. “Killers. People like me. Who kill and can’t stop it.”

“You didn’t kill me last night,” she smiled, pushing up the mirror to close.

“We didn’t fuck last night.”

“I wanted to so bad!”

“You just held me like a friend.”

She smiled, “I am your friend.”

“The only friend I have,” he looked outside at the sunny neighborhood, “The darkness in the room helped too I guess. I don’t know. But it’s light out now and we can’t hide.”

She looked around nervously, “Well, we are hiding.”

“You should hide from me, I could lose my mind again and choke you and not remember any of it.”

“You’re not a killer, you say you don’t remember ... the violence. Like a multiple personality?”

“Maybe like a split personality?”

“Dr. Jekyll and Mister Hyde?” she purported.

“I guess. How did Jekyll deal with it?”

“He wasn’t real. Was he?” she wondered, turning

on her phone to search: JEKYLL AND HYDE. REAL?

She read her findings aloud, “No, the strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is a fictional story.”

Kevin searched on his own phone, “SERIAL KILLERS IN THEIR OWN WORDS.”

He found a site where the serial killer’s photo, nameplate and victim count were split screen with their quotes. Occasionally a criminologist narrated.

Kevin read aloud, “Albert De Salvo: Boston Strangler, killed 13.”

Onscreen De Salvo in prison garb confessed, “Once I stabbed her, I couldn’t stop. Later it hit the news on TV. I knew it was me who did it but why I did and the else I don’t know.”

Kevin pointed to his phone, “That’s me,” looking devastated.

Next onscreen came the text: JEFFREY DAHMER, KILLED 17.

The criminologist explained, “Dahmer would inebriate himself to the point of unconsciousness. He massacred in Ohio, Wisconsin, and even abroad in West Germany where Jeffrey had been assigned briefly while in the army.”

Rene said, “I didn’t know Dahmer was in the army?”

“Like me,” Kevin nodded, confused, sweating.

They both read the text appearing on his phone: RICHARD SPECK, KILLED 8.

The criminologist explained, "In Richard's case, his brain stopped developing at twelve years. He was the epitome of a loser."

Rene said encouragingly, "You're so not a loser! You have every medal."

"I am the biggest loser," Kevin gulped, closing his eyes, perspiring more.

The phone showed new text: JOHN GACY, KILLED 33.

Kevin grimaced, "He dressed as a clown and went after young boys."

The criminologist explained, "At eleven, Gacy was hit in the head with a swing and consequently suffered dizzy spells. But did this alter his mind to that of a killer?"

Kevin shook his head no.

"Were you hit as a kid?" Rene asked.

"Every now and then," he mumbled, opening his eyes.

"So what? Most kids are. I was."

They were riveted to the upcoming screen words: CHARLES STARKWEATHER, KILLED 10.

Kevin shrugged, "Never heard of him."

"Me neither."

Murderer Charles confessed, "The salesman just happened to be there. I didn't put him there and he didn't know I was coming."

"What a cold monster!" Rene remarked.

“They all are. I am.”

“No you are not!”

Onscreen text showed: TED BUNDY, KILLED 20.

Ted Bundy smirked, “I feel like a vampire.”

“He was,” Rene scoffed.

“Not in reality,” Kevin reasoned.

“Well, I know, not really. But a monster anyway.”

“They all are,” Kevin grimaced, “That’s what I am.”

“No you just black out. You never meant to hurt me, did you?”

“No.”

“See?”

“I just had to push you away.”

Text across screen showed: DAVID BERKOWITZ:
SON OF SAM, KILLED 6.

The criminologist explained, “Berkowitz had been born a bastard. His mother gave him up for adoption. Her abandonment led him to lash out at females.”

Rene parted Kevin’s hair, “You never attacked a man, right?”

“No, I am like Berkowitz.”

“You are not!”

“I just attacked whores.”

Rene looked down guiltily.

He grinned, “Well, you are a whore.”

“I can’t control myself, like you I guess. You can’t

help being violent and I can't help ...”

“Fucking any man.”

“Taking love wherever I can find it!” she corrected.

HENRY LUCAS, KILLED 300+ typed across the screen.

Rene gasped, “Over 300?!”

The criminologist explained, “His mother, a prostitute, kept him in the room during tricks ...”

Kevin barked, “What a whore.”

“Maybe she had to be? I mean, maybe she couldn't find another job and a babysitter?”

“So you think this Henry Lucas couldn't help killing 300 people??”

“No, no, of course he could help it. I mean obviously these were intentional.”

“How do we know?” he asked.

The criminologist explained, “Henry never had any father nor bonded with anyone period. Every one of us, to Henry, was expendable.”

“Not like I had a father,” Kevin said.

“Butch is your father.”

“But he's like invisible, you know?”

Across screen appeared: EDMUND REPMEK, KILLED 20+.

The criminologist explained, “He killed his wife with a hammer and shoved her larynx down the disposal ...”

Rene turned off Kevin's phone, "I don't want to hear these. It's not helping you."

Kevin remembered, "In Baghdad I kill five Iraqis and I get a medal. And I feel crappy about doing it. In New York I kill one Chinese and I'm going to be killed now by cops. And I don't even remember killing her."

Rene put her little arm around Kevin's massive shoulders, "War is fucked up."

"The world is fucked up," he said, emotional, falling into her bosom to be cradled.

A tear dropped from her eye as well, "We need to find a safe place to hide out. A little cabin somewhere?"

"Sherry and me wanted a cabin."

"Okay I'll settle for a little trailer."

"What are you saying? Like permanently??"

"Yes. And I'll show you I won't be a whore. I want to be with only you."

"You and me??" he asked incredulous.

"Sherry is probably already filing for divorce. Then we can be together."

"No -- she wouldn't do that. Til death do us part."

"When you have sex with Sherry, do you keep the lights on?"

"Sometimes. It doesn't matter."

"Because the devil or god or Jesus can watch

you screw Sherry?”

“They don’t watch me screw Sherry.”

“But they want to watch us screw? Do you see how crazy that sounds?”

“It’s a fact.”

“Prove it. Point out them watching us.”

“They don’t want to be pointed at,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Listen as if you were me. What you’re saying, what you believe, you can’t prove. Should you believe things I say without proof? Like Marilyn Monroe’s ghost tells me how to fold my laundry?”

He tried to digest her point but couldn’t, overwrought with guilt of his crimes and fear of when he would next turn violent.

* * *

Returning from the gym before noon, fully made-up Trudy wearing zebra leotards was thrilled the paparazzi followed her to her condo building main entrance, snapping pics. She posed however they asked.

“Want to come in or have you had enough of me?” she laughed.

Two photographers eagerly entered the condo building along with her.

She posed in the foyer, elevator and hallway and opening her condo door, shouted, "Butch, we have photographers!"

No answer came.

The shutterbugs took photos of Trudy posing at her desk, wearing a sexy nightgown between her robots and even lying on the grand piano in her scandalous leather harness and boots.

After they left, Trudy checked her phone for voice mail, hearing a message, "It's Ernie. I look forward to our date."

She pressed a button for a robot to pour her a martini then went to her bedroom, sat at her desk and typed TO KILL OR NOT TO KILL? CAN ONE REWIRE THE BRAIN?

She answered an incoming call on her large computer monitor, surprised to see her wealthy family gathered together. Her ancient mogul father, suited Theodore Truly, sat in a leather tufted chair. Standing beside him was her fashionable mother, Diana Truly, draped in pearls. To the sides were nerdy brother Thomas Truly and stuffy sister Tina Truly. Dressed to the nines in expensive fashion and jewelry, all also wore scowls across their unfriendly faces.

Trudy downed her martini, "Good heavens, what have I done to deserve the family call?"

Diana replied, "You're anything but stupid,

Trudy, and we won't stand for you to further humiliate us."

Theodore followed suit, "Your silly charades over the media have my associates even questioning further corporate involvements. You've turned the Truly family name into a lowly joke."

Trudy ignored their drama, "Father, you're too red in the face," she sat down to look closer, "I want you to take that cayenne pepper and clean your veins. And nicotine gum."

Her brother remarked, "You are free to live your life as a joke, sis, but we have adult obligations."

Her sister echoed, "You absolutely must pledge this instant you will put a stop to your embarrassing public rants –"

Trudy huffed, "I will do no such thing!"

Her mother insisted, "You certainly will or you will be swiftly disinherited."

Again, Trudy tried to ignore the issue at hand, "Mother, you're getting hunched over. I sent you that inversion table."

Her father spoke grimly, "Promise us now or your stipend checks will be canceled immediately."

Trudy rubbed her aching forehead, "That soldier desperately needs my direction on TV. Americans need me –"

Diana closed down the video.

Angry at being cut off and discounted, Trudy

rose and threw her empty glass against the wall.

DAY 8

As the sun rose in Bexley, Ohio, Kevin woke up in the station wagon. The back seats were down allowing a large enough area for sleeping.

“Hey, Rene?” he called, wiping sleep from his eyes, searching outside the windows. “Oh no,” he said frightfully, “Where is she? What did I do to her??”

* * *

In the red light district of Tribeca you couldn't see the red lights in the bright morning light. Nevertheless, Butch drove the dented Tesla slowly following a sashaying prostitute with long red hair.

* * *

Looking her best in tight animal prints, Trudy gave Officer Ernie Jones, in jeans and sweatshirt, a tour of her condo.

“Thank you again for breakfast,” she said, opening the window for a breeze.

“So very welcome,” he grinned, pulling the C.D. of Trudy’s hit song from his pocket, “Look what I brought.”

“Oh,” she played, “A signed copy? Don’t you rank.”

He put it in the C.D. player as Trudy climbed on the grand piano to gyrate and sing to it, “*Feel my heart flutter like a butterfly, never floated in clouds this high, you are my soul mate, well worth the wait, don’t ask me why, how would I get by, without you by my side, my fantasy ...*”

Bothered that Butch told her she could no longer do splits at her age, she tried to sexily do splits on the piano, but wretched in pain, “Ohhhh!! Damn it! Butch warned me I couldn’t do splits.”

Ernie quickly moved to her aid, hoisting her off the piano, as he sang more, “... *how would I get by, without you by my side, my fantasy, fantasy, fantasy bride, my fantasy bride ...*”

* * *

The same time that morning in a Tribeca motel, Butch lay on the bed receiving oral sex from the pretty young hooker.

“Sorry, I can usually get as hard as a bowling pin,” he inhaled, “Sorry.”

Bored out of his mind he stared at the glaring lightbulb.

* * *

Fighting the morning wind in Bexley, Rene carried coffees and muffins as she approached the rented station wagon.

From a distance she witnessed Kevin delicately lift a fallen baby bird back into its tree nest.

“That was so sweet,” Rene called, nearing him.

He jumped down from the tree, relieved she was alive, but angry, “I almost drove off!”

He got in the driver’s seat.

She handed him the tray, “Well that would have been dumb.”

“I thought I killed you.”

“Baby,” she said sympathetically, getting in the passenger seat, “You didn’t hurt me. We just cuddled and talked about growing up and our bad parents. You don’t remember how hard we laughed?”

“Yeah, yeah I think so,” he said, sipping a coffee.

Suddenly, two local policemen lunged at both car doors.

Rene screamed.

Muscular Kevin threw open his door, knocking one officer on the grass.

Kevin sprinted away.

A policeman chased him.

The other cop, Paulo, a short thin officer with a scar on his face, grabbed Rene out of the vehicle.

Impulsively, she used her martial arts training to fight him off. Each time he charged her, she was able to high kick him, and usually land him on his butt. But from the ground he shot his gun twice, barely missing her on both sides.

“You may be stronger, pretty thing,” Paulo chuckled, rising, “But I’ve got the gun and am an expert shot. If I wanted to hit you, I would have. But why would I want to mess up a sexy chic like you?”

As he approached her with handcuffs, she got in a defense position to flip him.

“Don’t even think about it,” he said, “I won’t mess up that angel face but I’ll destroy your leg with bullets. You’ll spend the rest of your life in a wheel chair.”

“I didn’t do anything illegal,” she insisted.

“Beating my ass??”

“I was just defending myself.”

“Put out your hands so I can throw cuffs on.”

“What if I don’t?”

Paulo cuffed her quickly.

As he yanked her to the police vehicle, he flirted, "I like women that can take care of themselves. And I like women that can take care of me, if you know what I mean."

"You followed me to get coffee and muffins?"

"No, I saw you getting coffee and muffins. And I recognized that pretty little darling face."

"Recognized me?"

"You don't know you're all over the news? The missing private?"

"I am hardly missing."

"Your boyfriend's bad news. You need someone better like me."

She spat on his shoes.

He opened the backseat and forcibly shoved her in the back.

* * *

That cold afternoon in New Jersey, still in her maid uniform, Sherry sat on her apartment couch watching TV. On the screen, Javier laughed with repeat guest Trudy who fed him a cookie.

Javier spoke with his mouth chewing, "Trudy Truly is my guest again with news on Colonel Kevin Brandt. Trudy, have you spoken to Kevin?"

"He has not returned my calls and I just talked

to Butch, his father, my partner.”

“You have an open relationship?”

“Yes, and Butch tried to call him all day and Kevin did not pick up. I only hope Kevin has access to see me now, on your show. Today I researched methods on how Kevin might reprogram his brain so he stops killing ...”

“You do know Kevin has been arrested?”

Trudy was stunned, “No.”

“Yes, this morning in Bexley. Outside Columbus, Ohio.”

“Columbus?”

“Isn’t that where he was raised?”

“Yes.”

“Police tracked Rene Miller. She had rented a station wagon. He was with Rene.”

“Rene’s alive then??” Trudy exclaimed in relief, clapping.

Sherry turned off the TV and stared at the blank screen, her mind buzzing in a million directions, sickened to her stomach.

* * *

Meanwhile, in the small Bexley prison cell, Kevin had no access to TV. He knelt in his cell, reading a Bible.

* * *

At the same time that afternoon, in the kitchen of Trudy's Brooklyn Heights condo, Butch made cookies. Only wearing an apron, his numerous body tattoos glistened with sweat from the hot stove as he watched a small television.

Onscreen, Javier asked, "Many people wonder if soldiers that kill overseas are more likely to kill here?"

Trudy nodded, "That argument can't be dismissed of course, as once an animal kills -- or an animal breaks any pattern, it is easier to break the pattern again."

"Thus the serial killing tendencies of discharged Colonel Kevin Brandt. Do you support the war, Trudy Truly?"

After decades craving the spotlight, Trudy did not hold back the opportunity to grandstand, "I am damn against every fucking war. So sue me for being honest! People kill when they feel powerless. It is that simple."

Hearing mixed roars from the seated show audience, Javier held up *Evolution's Trap* and asked, "No wars? You think America should sit by while foreigners burn our skyline? Like 9-11?"

Trudy debated, "Terrorists burned the Twin Towers because they felt powerless -- America went to war because we felt powerless. Every country justifies war murders as self-defense, don't they? Kevin Brandt is killing in self-defense. He is fighting against vicious demons that we can't see."

* * *

Kneeling in his cold cell as the sun set, Kevin looked up from the Bible when Paulo the fresh cop banged his bars.

Paulo smirked, "My girlfriend's here to see you."

Kevin looked confused, "Your girlfriend?"

Paulo nodded and walked back a few steps then abusively pulled Rene into view. "My girlfriend," he repeated, winking at her and grabbing her butt.

Rene wanted to kick him, and he knew it so he maneuvered away skittishly, forbidding her, "You kick and your five minutes are up."

He disappeared leaving a heartbroken Rene staring at a heartbroken Kevin.

He exhaled, "Why did you trick me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Calling the cops. Is he really your boyfriend?"

"What? He was joking, I just met that jerk when he arrested us."

“I thought maybe you were in on it.”

“In on having you arrested? Kevin, come on. I don’t want you in here. I want you out here, with me.”

His thick brows furrowed surveying her lush hazel eyes. He said, “I want that, too.”

“To be with me?” she smiled in disbelief.

He was noncommittal, “To be out there.”

“I meant it when I said you and I should disappear and we’d have a happy life. Maybe some trailer tucked in the woods somewhere. With dogs and a garden.”

“Too late now,” he stated.

“And maybe kids someday?”

“Where does your mind go, Rene? You just go off on crazy scenarios.”

“I have another one. Let’s break you out.”

“Break out?”

“Shh.”

He whispered, “Break out, how?”

“I have that skinny cop wrapped around my finger. Wanna bet I couldn’t undress him and hand you the keys.”

“Yeah, right, like that can happen.”

“You called me a whore. But I am your whore, baby. Only yours. I’ll screw him right here for you, I sneak you the keys, we knock him out and shazam, run fast I guess.”

He smiled and reached his hand through the bars to stroke her face, "You're really sweet."

"Let's do it."

"Yeah, right," he huffed in sarcasm.

"Officer Paulo!" she called.

Kevin whispered frantically, "No, don't! I deserve to be locked up but you don't. You deserve your freedom. Don't risk anything for me. Don't ruin your life."

It was too late. Rene had made up her mind and the sleezy cop stepped in besides her.

Paulo brushed up against her, to turn himself on and to make Kevin angry.

Rene pretended to be upset, "Don't make me kick you."

Paulo smirked, "In here, I got the power, sweetheart."

She kicked him intentionally softly, to force the drama. As she expected, Paulo lost his cool, "I should teach you a lesson. Right here in front of your boyfriend."

Behind her, with his legs, he pinned her legs between his. His arms held back hers so she couldn't hit him.

"Leave her alone," Kevin complained, in all seriousness.

Paulo was a cop who liked to belittle and demean his victims, so he licked Rene's face as she

pretended to be upset.

Then he forced a kiss onto her lips.

Kevin retracted further into his cell.

“Oh you’re gonna watch us,” Paulo fumed, kissing Rene again.

He was surprised to hear Rene say, “You’re a good kisser.”

“She’s a whore,” Kevin stated plainly.

“Don’t say that about my girlfriend,” Paulo whispered.

Rene kissed the cop.

Shocked, Paulo took a step back, “What got into you?”

“Kevin is a loser,” she said, “I came here to cuss him out. I deserve better.”

“I’m a step up,” Paulo grinned, ramming his body into her from behind.

“Not so rough,” Rene whispered. “You don’t have to force me.”

She kissed him romantically then said, “Be gentle. I want Kevin to see I am through with him.”

Paulo brutally turned her to face him and kissed her passionately. Instead of hitting him, she embraced him and then reached for her pants to unbuckle them and lower them.

Kevin sighed, confused, “Don’t do this.”

“Do this,” Rene encouraged Paulo, “The whole thing. Prisons turn me on. I want to be naked here

with a naked cop.”

Paulo laughed, “You’re a wild one.”

Kevin agreed, “She is.”

“I am,” Rene purred, removing her pants and shirt, wiggling seductively in her underwear.

Both men were silent as she removed her panties like a stripper.

Rene got on her knees and reached for the cop’s pants. She unbuckled his belt.

He looked around to make sure no one was watching, and let her take down his pants. Then she unbuttoned his shirt.

“I like this,” Paulo growled.

“I like your slim body,” Rene lied, “Let me see all of you.”

“I’m packing,” he winked, not talking about his gun but about his underwear.

She felt him, “Oooh you are.”

He threw off his shirt.

Rene stared at the keys linked to his belt that were still around his ankles, trapped by his shoes.

“I’m into feet,” she said, “Let me see your feet.”

Paul looked concerned, “What’s so great about feet?”

“Are you kidding?” she gushed, “The toes, the soles, naked ankles. I bet you have hairy ankles?”

Not wanting to disappoint, he bent down to remove his shoes and kick off his pants.

Kevin heard the keys jingle as the pants slid across the cement.

Rene looked down the cell hallway, "Making sure we are alone."

Paulo reached up to a hanging ceiling camera and turned it, "No one can see us now. I'm the only one on cell watch. My buddy is at the desk."

Fully nude, Rene lay down on the cold cement, as far away from the cell as possible, giving Kevin an opportunity to grab the keys clipped to the pants.

Kevin reached his arm as far as he could, but still was not able to grab the pants or keys.

Noticing, Rene twirled across the floor like a stripper so she was able to discreetly push the pants closer to Kevin.

Kevin reached again and with all his stretching was able to grab the pants cuff and inch them toward him.

Rene rolled into the hall.

Paulo lay on top of her.

Kevin twisted his wrists through the bars and quietly unlocked his cell.

Paulo noticed too late. By the time he jumped up, Rene grabbed him and flipped him on his back, knocking his head against the floor. Dazed, Paulo punched her and rose but Kevin was already above him, and kicked his head down, knocking Paulo unconscious.

Kevin winced, "He's not dead, is he?"

"I don't know. Dress in his uniform," Rene whispered, grabbing her own clothes and dressing, "I'll go out and distract the desk guard."

As Kevin threw off his shirt he asked, "How?"

"This isn't a big prison. There's only a few cops so I'll make sure they are looking at me, and then you just sneak around their backs until you get out and hide in the station wagon."

It didn't go as easily as planned, but it did go and within ten minutes Rene was driving her station wagon out of the small dark parking lot. Squeezed into a tight cop uniform was Kevin, hiding in the backseat.

"You're such a whore," he called.

"Your whore."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

"What you did was disgusting."

She shrugged, eyes on the road, going well over the speed limit.

Kevin got up to sit in the backseat, "Now what?"

"Now we find a trailer in the woods."

"Let me out here," he whined.

"No, I'm not letting you out."

"Nothing makes sense anymore."

"Nothing ever made sense, baby," she sighed.

"The cops will be after you now, maybe sentence

you to jail for twenty years.”

“What do I have to live for anyway?” she asked, locking into his oceanic eyes in the rearview mirror, “Besides you. God I love you, Kevin. I always have.”

“I’m married.”

She huffed, “You think Sherry still wants you??”

He thought deeply, “No, probably not.”

“No offense but she’s passionless, right? I could tell by looking at her. Uptight.”

“She’s amazing. Pure. Devoted.”

“Devoted? Hah. You’ll see who is devoted. It won’t be Sherry. Did she try to find you and break you out of prison? No, only I did. Stupid slutty Rene. That’s who is devoted. And I always will be, baby. I mean it. Always. Forever and ever. We’re soul mates.”

“You’re crazy. What does that even mean?”

“Souls destined to be together.”

“We are not.”

“We are.”

He looked out the window as the station wagon careened, passing numerous cars to enter a highway.

DAY 9

In her Brooklyn Heights condo, Trudy slept on her bed, cucumber slices over her eyes.

In pajamas, Butch turned on the vacuum and pushed it near the headboard.

She woke up, startled, “You passive aggressive freak!”

“I felt like cleaning!”

“When did you get home?!”

He shut off the vacuum, “When did you start to care?”

“Don’t play games with me. I’ve had it up to here with you and my family. I am centered right now -- I feel so right to be sharing on TV right now.”

“You feel so marvelous because you’re famous again.”

“You’re jealous because you are not.”

“Ridiculous!” he laughed.

“America needs me.”

“I suppose I can always have another son if mine is killed.”

She threw her cucumber slices at him, “Maybe you could’ve looked for him harder in the past twenty-five years?”

“You are a dragon lady.”

“I’m sorry. We could have looked harder. I am mad at me, too.”

He turned back on the vacuum. Her cell phone on the nightstand rang. She tried to listen and talk into it. Butch only moved the vacuum closer to her to thwart her conversation.

She got up, holding her crotch in pain and pulled the vacuum cord out of the wall, “That was your son who just called me!”

He turned white, “Kevin called??”

“I think he said he escaped and wants us to meet him in Columbus.”

“He escaped?”

“We have to go. Start packing.”

Her phone rang again. She anxiously picked it up.

The station wagon was parked in an alley. Kevin paced around it, wearing the tight police uniform, speaking into the phone, “I don’t know what I’m going to do with you, Trudy. You were the first woman I ever masturbated to, you know. Maybe you’re to blame?”

For once, Trudy was speechless.

Kevin hung up.

Butch moved to her, “Was that Kevin? What did he say?”

Trudy typed into her phone and read the internet text, “The phone says he’s in Bethel Park,

Pennsylvania.”

“He didn’t threaten us, did he?”

“Of course not. Let’s get to Bethel Park -- I know a cop who can track his phone while we drive.”

“The one who rammed you so hard you can’t walk today??”

“You men and your egos! We didn’t get to sex -- I pulled my groin muscle doing splits.”

He raised his brows as if to say *told you so*.

Insulted, she grabbed the vacuum and even though it was not running she chased him with it, aiming for his ankles. Laughing, he hopped away, as she persevered.

* * *

Casually dressed Butch and Trudy took turns driving the hot six hour route to Bethel Park, Pennsylvania. Whether she was driver or passenger, Trudy’s brain was in the “zone” quietly formatting grandiose philosophical ideas for new books on consciousness and possibility.

Under foreboding night clouds, the dented Tesla slowed outside a rundown nightclub between miles of evergreens. Trudy and Butch ran out and into the crowded club which was blasting deafening rock music.

Trudy and Butch rushed through the bar pulsing with strobe lighting, noticing a man ahead that looked like Kevin from the back.

Trudy was compelled to ask Butch, in a loud voice so he could hear her over the obnoxious music, "Butch? Did you ever ... abuse him -- when he was a boy?!"

He stopped and faced her, insulted. The strobe-lights magnified his torment, and guilt.

Trudy tapped the hair of the stranger - who turned around. It was not Kevin.

They didn't see across the bar the real Kevin in the stolen uniform on a barstool building a cabin out of matchsticks.

He got up and walked to the men's room - but there was a line - so he walked outside the back door and ducked into the dark evergreens. He peed.

Inside the bar, Trudy showed Kevin's photo to the bartender - who pointed to Kevin's empty stool - and his cabin made of matches, "The cop was right here."

"Cop??" Trudy asked nervously.

"Your friend in the photo, he was right here. In his police uniform. Drunk."

"He was wearing a police uniform?"

"That's what I said."

Exiting the bathroom, Rene brushed her short blonde hair. Walking to the bar, she froze, seeing

Butch and Trudy. She took a breath and a lighter out of her purse and without a word lit a match to try to burn the tiny matchstick cabin. But the flame fizzled out.

“Rene!” Trudy gushed, hugging her.

Butch smiled, “We thought you were dead.”

Seeing Butch in person again after their intimate encounter the prior week, she remembered his tenderness, and smiled, “I’ve never felt better.” She hugged him for a second.

He hugged back, asking, “Where is Kevin??”

“He was sitting here a few minutes ago,” Rene said, lighting another match which successfully burned Kevin’s matchstick cabin.

The bartender used his bar hose to put out the small fire, “We reserve the right to not serve arsonists. You are kicked out of here.”

Trudy apologized for Rene and paid the man.

Rene led Butch and Trudy out the back door where they spotted drunk Kevin zipping his pants.

Rain drizzled. Lightning flashed.

He looked at them, surprised, slurring, “I had to pee. How did you know where we were?”

Butch exhaled, “Trudy had a cop acquaintance track you.”

Kevin glared at Trudy with hate.

Thunder roared.

Kevin was jealous to see his father so near Rene,

inadvertently brushing arms. Impulsively, Kevin's strong hand separated them.

Trudy whispered, "Let's get out of here before the cops get here."

Rene pleaded, "Kevin and I need to escape somewhere."

Suddenly Kevin, like a little boy, hugged his father.

Butch was caught off-guard and couldn't return the sloppy embrace. So Trudy forced Butch's arms around his son's back.

Trudy assured, "It's all gonna be easier now, Kevin."

Kevin sobbed clutching onto his father for dear life. Butch was stiff. So Trudy forced Butch's fingers to stroke his son's back.

Kevin begged, "Dad, help me stop killing."

Trudy insisted, "I can do that. Once we get you calm and situated –"

Kevin looked terrified, "I can't go to prison again."

Trudy assured him, "We'll find you a better place."

Kevin released his hold on his father, "Trudy, I have to figure out how to stop it! I don't know how to stop it!"

He then stumbled back into the loud crowded bar.

They chased him through the deafening drumbeats and invasive strobe lighting.

Exiting the front door drunk Kevin saw a police car's flashing light approach the area. Kevin quickly sprinted to the station wagon, opening the driver door, falling on the ground. He got up and inside the driver's seat.

Lightning struck the adjacent field just as Rene, Butch and Trudy raced into the parking lot.

Butch asked over the thunder, "Where did he go?!"

"Damnit, I see a cop car!" Rene gasped, sprinting to the station wagon, Butch following.

Trudy hopped in the Tesla and pulled it to the wagon, screaming, "We need to drive away!" to Butch, who jumped in her passenger seat.

As rain beat down, the Tesla followed the station wagon out onto the road just as the cop car pulled in.

Kevin pounded the gas pedal and the old car sped onto the highway, followed by the Tesla, despite horrific driving conditions due to the sudden downpour.

Kevin glanced in the rearview mirror and seeing police sirens way in the distance, immediately clumsily exited an offramp. Then he turned off the car lights and drove aimlessly into a dark cemetery.

Nearly crashing into a truck, Trudy juttred the

steering wheel to exit the same ramp. She managed to follow the wagon's disappearing lights into the cemetery, but in the dark with sheets of rain obstructing the windshield, she lost sight of the station wagon.

Butch snapped, "You're a marvel! Getting a cop to track him!"

The Tesla got stuck in the mud. Trudy revved the engine, "Can it, Butch!"

Hiding her iPhone so Butch couldn't see it, Trudy turned on her camera phone to air live on the internet.

She said dramatically, "Now we're stuck in the mud in some cemetery in Ohio and we lost sight of Kevin and Rene's car."

Butch pressed Trudy's leg on the accelerator all the way but the car wouldn't budge. The tires spun at 100 MPH until they unstuck and splashed into deeper mud. In lightning they saw they had parked between large religious tombstones, one of Jesus in agony waving his fists to the sky and one of Mary with her arms widely outstretched. In typical daylight the Virgin Mother's countenance would have been inviting but under these horror movie optics she looked demonic and threatening.

Butch beat the dashboard as more lightning flashed, "I think I saw their car about fifty feet ahead."

Trudy turned off the engine.

Butch shook his head, "Do you think I ever touched him inappropriately when he was a child?"

Trudy's eyes misted, "No. Worse you would do is vacuum his feet."

They listened to the rain belt the steel.

"It's not your fault ..." she said.

"I know that! You stole me away from his mother."

"Oh please," she rolled her eyes to the secretive camera.

"What was it like with the black cop? You kissed at least?"

"Neither you nor I killed Joy Kyong. Kevin did. Magnolia's screwed-up conditioning."

"I can't believe my son killed that woman."

"Like he didn't kill in Iraq?!"

"That's not the same thing!"

Trudy spoke toward the camera, "They aren't human beings in Iraq?!"

Butch noticed the phone camera light and turned it off.

She was frazzled, "Butch! This exposure can help people!"

"Help you sell a book!"

"Well we need some source of income since my family cut off the checks."

"They cut off your checks?"

“We don’t need their handouts anymore. I’m trendy or trending or whatever they say.”

Angry, he shifted the car into reverse.

The Tesla sloshed a few feet.

Fifty feet ahead in the station wagon, Kevin reached for Rene’s hand. He kissed it softly, slobbering, then opened his car door.

She grabbed him, “You’ll get soaked!”

“I’m just going to their car.”

“Let’s drive there instead.”

“No, we’ll get stuck in the mud like they are.”

He took the car keys, and surprisingly locked her inside. She threw up her hands in confusion.

For a minute she was afraid he would kill her, then she didn’t care if he did. She sat resigned awaiting her fate. Awaiting her dream man to return.

Pounded by rain, ankle-deep in mud, Kevin stumbled past lightning-lit tombstone angels and gargoyles all the way to the Tesla, squatting next to Butch’s passenger door.

Dizzy, Kevin eavesdropped, his presence unnoticed by Butch hiding his head in his hands.

Trudy surveyed the rearview mirror, “The way he held onto you. And you couldn’t hold him back. Don’t you feel guilty, sweetie, your parents never hugged you.”

Butch remained hidden in his hands.

She took a breath and gathered composure, "This isn't a game anymore. No more leotards."

"What are you talking about?"

"Leslie Stahl pantsuits from here on out. The media will now take me seriously. They have to."

They didn't see Kevin's frightening face pressed against Butch's soaked window.

Butch offered, "I can stop sex with strangers."

Trudy secretly turned on her phone camera, "Butch, what did you say?"

"I can stop sex with strangers."

"Don't you dare repress on me."

"There is no thrill for me anymore. It's become routine. I may as well just have sex with you."

"Poet."

"What if we got married?"

She wiped her eyes to see the moon sliver peeking through the rain, then secretly turned on her phone to film them live. She overrenounced so viewers would hear their drama, "You're asking me to marry you out of desperation, feeling powerless. Your son is in trouble. I know you need me there and I'll be there for you. But not marriage."

"Maybe in a few years when everything passes."

"Let's talk about it then."

He started to sing their old hit, "*Feel my heart flutter like a butterfly, never floated in clouds this high, you are my soul mate, well worth the wait,*

don't ask me why, how would I get by, without you by my side, my fantasy, fantasy, fantasy bride, my fantasy bride ..."

Not looking at him, she clutched onto his hand in gratitude of their rich history.

He mumbled, "I did abuse him."

Trudy secretly pointed the phone camera at Butch.

He cried into his hands, "I beat him with a spoon from the time he was three to like when he was six. I found a porno magazine in his room when he was like fifteen and told his mother and she ripped out Bible pages to put in between the porn pages. That must have scared him, but he didn't throw it out so I am sure he continued to masturbate, so conflicted. As time went on, she put photos of Satan in it."

"Photos of Satan??"

"From movie posters and albums and who knows."

"You and Kevin were both so repressed, that's why you had to get away from her."

"Her insanity chased us out. She found lotion in his room, probably what he jacked off with, and she put hot sauce in it. And glue. And bleach once. She was so proud of herself. She was such a bad mom. I was such a bad dad."

A tear ran down Kevin's cheek but in the rain it looked like a million tears.

Trudy spoke to camera, “Your ex Magnolia was batshit looney tunes.”

“But your batshit looney book says she couldn’t help the way she was and -- thus -- I couldn’t and -- thus -- I hit Kevin and -- thus -- Kevin can’t help killing people! That’s bullshit! I’m tired of pretending we don’t have choices. We make choices every second.”

“I ... don’t know. I don’t know anymore.”

Something jumped across their hood. They screamed seeing a wet possum scurry up to the roof.

Outside the Tesla, Kevin clumsily retreated back into the dark storm. He tripped halfway, falling into a huge tombstone. In the lightning he saw it was Mary holding baby Jesus, accidentally crashing it to the mud, on top of him. In the thunder, he struggled to escape the suffocating weight of the monstrous statue.

Police cars with sirens passed on the highway.

Muddy drunk Kevin reached the station wagon, entering it.

Inside, he grabbed the phone from Rene’s hand, “Who the fuck are you calling?! Cops??”

She looked at him, perplexed, “No. I’ll never call the cops. I broke you out of jail.”

Paranoid, he threw her phone out the window, “You got that right. Whore.”

She shivered, cold and afraid, mind whirling as

to how to fix him, how to reverse his sudden mood change.

Was he going from Jekyll to Hyde again? Was he Hyde now??

He wondered the same thing.

* * *

In the bathroom of a cheap motel in Bexley, Kevin showered. Rene stood between the toilet and the wall, afraid to move. Thunder roared.

He loudly slurred, "You better be out there like I said!"

"I am. Standing right here."

He soaped up and rinsed. She stared out the bathroom door at the hotel phone, wondering if she should call for help. *Was he going to kill her? Did they need help? Maybe she shouldn't call the police, but maybe Trudy and Butch??*

He peeked his inebriated head out of the shower curtain and smiled. He was still dizzy but there was no fury behind his oceanic eyes. He smiled genuinely, looking longingly at her, like the way he did a year ago when they were alone comforting each other during war time.

He's okay now, she thought. He's not a threat.

She suggested, "We should drive to Canada

now.”

“Tomorrow. No, I can’t leave Sherry.”

“Tonight. Before anyone catches us.”

He stepped to her, his hairy muscular nude body dripping wet, but dizzy, he leaned all his weight on her. She stood frozen, trying to hold him up, with her hidden heart skipping beats, waiting for his lead as to what she should do. He stared at her warmly, leaning his face down into hers. He smiled widely, lovingly. Excitement and relief tingled up her heart into her face.

He turned off the light.

He kissed her in the dark.

She was putty in his hands.

As clumsily as the rain strummed the motel window, he carried her to the bed and lay his naked body on top of hers.

They kissed with the innocence of strangers.

She stroked his hair.

He nibbled on her neck, slobbering, “You’re the only one who’s always been here for me.”

“I always will be,” she promised, “I love you baby.”

“I love you, too,” he said easily, as if he had become an entirely different person.

Though she couldn’t see his face in the darkness she felt his warm nurturing hands and knew by his heavy breathing he was comfortable and loose, more

due to the alcohol than his romantic feelings. She was bothered at his personality switches, but any concern was overrun with the electricity between their beings. If one thing was constant during their rollercoaster relationship, it was the passion.

Their sweet nothings and tender caresses soon turned into heated mashing of flesh. She pulled him inside of her, not just one organ, but she could feel his soul inside hers, as they huffed and puffed and rocked to orgasms.

“I’m married, you whore!” he slurred at the top of his lungs, becoming the murderous monster who had choked her to death once and beat her face another time.

“I know you’re married,” she said as softly as possible, stiffening in fear, trapped under his sturdy, muscular frame.

He clenched his large powerful hands around her tiny throat.

She managed to garble out, “No one can see us in the dark.”

Confused, he stopped choking her.

She gingerly slid out from under him and now free from him she abruptly turned on the light.

He jumped away to the other side of the bed, pulling covers over his head.

“Kevin! You stopped, honey! You didn’t kill me.”

His low voice muffled by blankets, he sighed,

“It’s still dark here. I need to live in the dark.”

She heard him crying and soothed him, “Judging god or judging Jesus or judging Mary are not in the room. The light is on.”

When she heard no response, she yanked the covers back, forcing him in the light.

“Look around, they’re not here,” she persisted.

He looked around and his face registered that he in fact did see horrifying figures in the room.

“Maybe I’m still dead,” she offered, “Maybe the first time you really killed me and this has all been a heaven.”

“I’m not dead,” he assured her, “And you’re alive.”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” she mused, “I will never leave you baby. Not in life and not in death.”

She sat on the bed, rocking him in her arms.

“I don’t deserve you,” he slobbered.

“You exactly deserve me and I exactly deserve you.”

He chuckled, “I guess, we’re both nutcases, huh? You have sinned as much as me.”

“I don’t sin,” she protested, “I love. And you are just an abused little boy looking for love. But it’s right here. I love you.”

“I am married.”

“I love you so much I’d give you to Sherry if she wanted you.”

“You would not. You’re obsessed with me.”

“I am obsessed with you, but if Sherry makes you happier, I’d want you to be happier.”

“Bullshit.”

“Didn’t I give you up when you and Sherry came in Neal’s Diner? I didn’t hold on to you. I didn’t.”

“I have to see Sherry.”

“Sure baby. I’ll take you to her,” and with her heart breaking, she assured, “If that’s what you want.”

When she looked for a reaction, she saw he was asleep.

DAY 10

The next morning in Bexley, the station wagon was parked in a lot for Walmart and Applebee's customers. Rene relaxed in the driver's seat. Kevin, muscles bulging, in the tight police outfit, passenger.

Rene pointed, "Isn't that Butch and Trudy's Tesla pulling into Applebee's?"

Kevin nodded, enthralled, but could utter no words.

Rene urged, "Let's go eat with them. One last time."

"They'll turn us in."

"No, they'll give us money."

"No, we'll get money elsewhere."

"I'm starving though," she said. "We have to eat."

"We have charge cards."

"They'll trace them," Rene frowned, getting out of the car. She called to Trudy and Butch, but they did not hear her. She looked deflated.

Kevin snapped, "You trying to have sex with him again?"

"Who?"

"Who!? My dad."

"No."

“Yeah, right.”

“I only did that to get to you.”

“Bullshit.”

“It worked,” she grinned.

He weighed her words, wanted to argue, but this wasn't the time.

A few moments later, Kevin and Rene nervously walked the busy aisles of Walmart, afraid they would be recognized from media blitzes and *America's Most Wanted*.

Rene pulled Kevin to an aisle with sunglasses and put a pair on herself and Kevin.

She went to grab lunchmeat and cheese as he wondered in a daze behind her.

For no known reason, Kevin suddenly saw everything in slow-motion.

He fixated on average Americans shopping, but their movements were at half their usual speed, and all darkened by his lenses.

He watched three poor old ladies marveling at a pillow. The audio disappeared so he couldn't hear their conversation but telepathically he felt their delight pointing at the low price and pulling on the fabric for what seemed like minutes, not seconds.

Ambling up the aisle, he saw a large woman in a patterned caftan looked around to make sure no one was watching her as she tucked imitation jewelry up her dress to shoplift.

Dazed Kevin followed an old homeless man wheeling an empty cart to the fruit aisle, in slow motion. The unhoused elder grabbed a bunch of bananas, then counted the change in his pocket. He frowned, tore off one banana, putting the others back. Kevin felt compelled to help him out and reached into his own wallet, handing him his last dollars. Rene watched from a distance.

In another aisle, two small boys ran at a snail's pace playing guns with their fingers, shooting at each other.

Kevin flashbaked to wartime combat when he and grown Middle-Eastern men fired real weapons at each other. The Middle-Eastern men fell to their deaths in slow-motion, in agony, their faces crushing to the sand.

Kevin found himself between the Walmart kids and demanded, "Put your guns down."

Intimidated by his size and gruff voice and dark glasses and tight police uniform, the frightened boys showed their empty hands.

Kevin grabbed their shirts and repeated, "I said put your guns down!"

The boys made gun fingers and lowered them to point to the ground.

Kevin released them.

Wearing a beach hat with the price tag still attached, Rene pushed her cart to Kevin, handing

him jeans and a flannel shirt, "Will these fit you?"

She pulled up a yellow sundress from the cart, "I'll put on this. Let's get you a hat, too."

* * *

In the parking lot corner, wearing a baseball hat, flannel shirt and jeans, Kevin spray-painted the wood-paneled beige station wagon black. Rene used a purchased screwdriver to switch their license plate with another car's.

Rene stood up to point, "There goes Trudy's car. Come on, get in."

"Meeting up with them will bring the cops."

"Get in, we'll just follow them awhile."

He obliged.

She drove.

He dialed his cell phone.

Her fingers grabbed his, "Don't call them. Any phone calls will probably be traced."

He sighed, "You just used your credit card so they know where are we are. I'm not calling them," he said, but made a call regardless.

An old nun at Saint Luke's Convent answered the ringing phone, "St. Luke's."

Kevin timidly asked, "Listen, a Magnolia Brandt used to work there years ago. Do you know anything

about her? When she died?”

The nun replied, “Magnolia? If she’s dead I’m going to beat her ass. She’s scheduled in for the morning shift.”

Kevin’s heart skipped a beat.

* * *

In the Tesla, Butch drove.

Trudy hung up her cell phone, humming, “My agent is negotiating me speaking at Brooklyn College, the big lecture hall. 350 seats. Could be a regular gig.”

Butch seethed, “You and Javier are picking up fans.”

“But bittersweet, of course ... in the light of Kevin’s struggle.”

Trudy searched her phone, “Oh my stars, we have four million views!”

“You’re a psychopath.”

“I am making the best of a bad situation. Best for all of us.”

“Opportunist.”

“Bite me.”

“Does your lover cop have any info on Kevin today?”

“No.”

“Then let’s stop at a motel and wait for leads,” he snapped, “I’m tired of driving.”

“Well I can’t be the one to always drive!”

“I didn’t say you had to be! I just said I was tired!!”

“You sound tired!!” she screamed.

“I am!!! Tired of your ego.”

“My ego?? That’s the thanks I get when I bend over backwards to help you? And everyone else!”

“There’s always something in it for you. Don’t kid yourself.”

“I don’t kid myself!,” she huffed, “No one self-analyzes more than I do and I know exactly what is going on twenty-four seven!”

“Here she goes again.”

“Don’t you here she goes again me!,” she berated, frustrated, “As if going was a bad thing. I am always going, doing, accomplishing, and you just sit there like a bump on a log chasing lost tarts.”

“Lost women? Because I am lost, is that it? We’re a couple for decades and ... why are you with me if I am lost??”

“You’re pathetic. You need someone.”

“Well thank you tons Miss Grandiosity Mastermind Of The Universe!”

“Why are you with me, Butch? Seriously. I’m no looker, yet we go on, day after day. You’re not after my looks or body, been so long since you’ve been

romantic, and since you hate my personality and everything I do, just what the hell is your interest in me? The money?"

"What money? Money's gone now thanks to you embarrassing your family."

"Fuck off, you leacher."

"Leacher??"

"When did you ever contribute?!"

He fumed, "I cook and clean ... write music ... isn't that what you wanted?! It's exactly what you wanted, in fact, you said that was exactly what you wanted when we began this arrangement."

"Arrangement?"

"Partnership?"

"Whatever."

"I asked you to marry me," he said softly.

"You're overtired."

"You're over obnoxious, over irritating."

"Overlooked more like it," she argued.

"Not anymore. Not since you sold my son to sell your book."

Heartbroken, instead of arguing more, she dramatically zipped her lips and threw away the key. When he started another sentence, she pinched his lips together, zipped them and also threw away the key.

Exasperated Butch drove in silence eventually nearing a line of cheap motels.

“Motel 6 okay?” he asked.

Feeling victimized, she unzipped her lips briefly to retort, “You don’t want me to speak. You don’t want a partner with words, and ideas.”

Bothered by her attitude, he zipped her lips and drove into the parking lot.

Once in the motel, Trudy showered, then exited the bathroom in a towel, without make-up. She was not surprised to find Butch on the bed watching pornography. They didn’t speak for awhile as Trudy dressed.

“What do you think of this one?” Butch smiled.

“This what?”

“This porno.”

Trudy looked at the screen, “I don’t recognize anyone.”

“None of them are porn stars. It’s that young woman who had a hundred guys bang her in a day.”

“Oh, right, to set a world record or something. Does it turn you on?”

“Not really. What do you think of her?”

“I can speak??”

“Yes, oh Mastermind Of The Universe. Speaketh. Enlightenith me.”

She watched more of the film, “I am not going to shame anyone for what they do sexually.”

“I know that. But do you think it’s sad or happy?”

“Happy for the guys, and for her, I don’t know. It all depends on how she is filing it.”

“Filing it?”

“Filing the events in her brain and heart. What it means to her. There’s no right answer. Anything can be happy or sad depending on how we interpret it.”

“I think she thinks she’s victoriously achieving what no one else has and breaking limits.”

“All right.”

“Your book would say she’s trapped in her limits because that’s all she knows how to do. So maybe your book is right after all. We’re trapped right where we are. Cheap thrills until we die of heart-attacks ... Pass me the lube.”

She did.

He asked, “You never get mad I watch porn?”

“You can’t help it.”

“I can, damn it!” he said throwing the lube and shutting off the TV. “I’m a loser partner and loser dad because you expect that from me.”

“Sweetie, I don’t expect anything from you.”

“Maybe it’s time you did!” Impulsively, he pulled her onto the bed, kissing her shocked face, “I love you, you old bag.”

“Poet. Well you could have told me that before!”

“Of course I did!!”

“How long ago?? I can’t even remember!” she hollered, rising.

He pulled her back down on the bed, and spoke forcibly, “I am in charge of this scene. I am boss for once!”

She grinned, in disbelief, wanting him to prove it. She closed her eyes and lay docile, trying not to grin with delight but she couldn’t help it.

His eyes devoured her aging face, as in love with her as he was thirty years ago. Vulnerable, she stared longingly into him as he kissed her face and neck, then progressed lower, savoring each inch of her wrinkling skin. After half an hour of love and tenderness, they orgasmed together, each clutching onto each other. They remained gripping each other’s flesh, shocking her.

She closed her eyes, “I didn’t think we ... you ... could be so present. This intimate.”

“People can change.”

She opened her eyes, realizing, “You’re not an animal, are you? Or a programmed robot. I have been a pompous, delirious fool. We have free will, like you say?”

“Of course we do.”

“That means Kevin can change. I have to help him change.”

* * *

Graffitied trees guarded the entrance to low-income Columbus Flats Apartments. In a brown shirt and pants Magnolia approached her doorway, startled to see two people at her door. Rene in her beach hat and sundress and Kevin in his baseball hat, flannel shirt and jeans looked at her soberly.

Kevin cleared his throat, "Penguins gave us your address."

Magnolia was unnerved, "Who are you? What do you want?"

"It's me," her son stated simply.

"Kevin!" she stared at him, confused.

They both stood frozen.

"I'm Rene. Hi there."

"This your wife?" Magnolia asked, disappointed.

"Just his friend," Rene smiled trying to be friendly.

They all stood stiff.

When Rene and Kevin moved apart for Magnolia to reach her door, she did, grimacing, then waved her hands in front of her nose at Rene's perfume.

A minute later in the dated kitchen, Magnolia cleaned while cooking, "Making the same stew I made when you was a kid. You couldn't get enough!"

She was loud so they could hear her in the living

room.

Kevin and Reney sat on the ripped floral couch, a foot apart, as Kevin paged through an old photo album, Rene totally absorbed in his history.

“Is that you?” Rene asked, pointing to a two year-old in a sandbox.

He nodded without emotion.

Magnolia brought in a plastic tray with a ceramic tea set and served them each a cup.

She asked her son, “Why you wearing a wedding ring?”

“Married a girl named Sherry a couple months ago,” Kevin explained, guarded. “We sent a wedding invitation to you at St. Luke’s but you never wrote back or anything so I figured you moved or died.”

Magnolia turned to the back of the photo album showing the wedding invitation.

He asked, “You never responded??”

“First time you wrote me in all these years? Almost had a heart attack. What did you need me for? You got another girl,” she snarled, her hand shaking, pouring them milk in their tea. “Don’t think I didn’t try to find you when you first ran away. I did. At first. Then I had to tend to the penguins.”

To break the awkward tension, Rene piped in, “How long you been working for penguins, Mrs. Brandt?”

Magnolia grunted, "Penguins make a mess everywhere. Don't know what they'd do without me."

Rene said, "They're lucky to have you."

Magnolia handed Kevin a cookie.

"Thanks," he said.

Magnolia informed Rene, "He always liked the oatmeal ones."

"Awww," Rene mused, "You kept making them hoping one day he'd come home?"

Magnolia scowled at her, "I make them because I like them, too."

"I need some introspection," Kevin said, bothered, "Clarification."

"Shoot," his mother said, the first time appearing vulnerable.

"Do you think people who have sex, outside marriage, should be killed?" he asked.

"Like that nasty face Trudy?," Magnolia scoffed, "Yes, but I ain't gonna do it. Leave her to the Lord or Satan."

Rene watched, intrigued.

Kevin asked, "And they will kill her?"

"When they find time," his mother said, venomous, "Do you have any idea how many whores there are? Millions and millions. The Lord is busy with climate change catastrophes -- and Satan, I think he likes to watch the filthy whores long as he can. Disgusting. Like Las Vegas."

Irritated, Rene stated, "I am what you would call a whore."

Magnolia shook her head and walked back into the kitchen. From there she shouted, "Kevin, please ask the smelly whore to leave my house!"

Kevin shouted back, "No!"

Magnolia turned around, shocked.

Kevin stood up, empowered.

Rene rubbed his back, "Good for you."

They heard a door slam and went to investigate. Magnolia had locked herself in her bedroom.

Rene called, "Come on, Magnolia, we can be friends!"

She called back, "No whores in this house!"

Kevin didn't know what to say. He tried to talk Rene into leaving, but she instinctively felt they had to stay, to work out his deep-seated issues.

So they stayed.

They looked through his old family photos until the sun went down.

Magnolia did not answer their calls or exit her room. She slept soundly in her bed, snoring.

In the living room, Rene turned off the light and sat next to Kevin on the couch and kissed him. He resisted.

"Okay whatever," she said, "Check the web again. See what Trudy is up to."

In the dark room, Kevin scanned his phone and

opened an online video. Onscreen Trudy spoke into camera. Behind her, Butch played the piano, unaware she was filming. Her book was positioned on the piano for optimum exposure.

Trudy said emphatically, “Kevin, I hope you see this. Look, Magnolia raised you to feel she had all the power and you had zero power -- which is why you are acting out of self-defense. Surrender to the cops and we’ll get the courts to understand she created your world with an abusive god and abusive devil chasing you for your natural sexual urges.”

Rene tried to absorb that, leaning on Kevin’s chest. She rebutted, “Don’t surrender. They’d lock you up forever.”

Trudy continued, “You are acting out of self-defense. She made you her idea of a perfect little boy and she made you be perfect, and for her love and acceptance, for your survival, you did perfect as long as you could. You don’t have to straighten your French Fries and don’t have to be powerless trying to be what she told you was perfect.”

Trudy grabbed her book and aggressively ripped out pages, crumbling them in fury, screaming, “People, throw my book away! I’m an idiot! I was wrong! You have choices! Kevin, you don’t have to act out of your programming -- you have free will. Go see your mother and stand up to her! Show her she does not control you anymore! You are the boss

of your new life! She says sex is sick. You can say sex is beautiful! Sex is beautiful, honey!”

Overwhelmed to the point of a migraine headache, Kevin beat the couch with a fist.

In the bedroom, Magnolia woke from the noise, “I told you two to scat! You’re both rotten!”

In the living room, defiant Rene kissed Kevin. He resisted, then surrendered the more his mother shouted insults.

To rebel, he shouted, “We’re kissing!”

Magnolia screamed, “Not in this house of purity! Don’t you sin in here!”

As outrageous Magnolia pounded the wall, Kevin felt triggered to “sin” and undressed Rene as fast as she undressed him. They had loud passionate sex, *maybe for the last time*, Rene, wondered, *maybe he’ll kill me but I love him anyway*.

To rebel against a childhood of sex shaming, he moaned loudly so his mother had to hear. Taking it further, he began to narrate their actions, “She is sucking my big hairy cock!”

In tears, Magnolia screamed, “You’re not my son!!”

Kevin turned on the light and orgasmed in the excitement and audacity.

Rene held onto him, waiting for him to switch personalities and start to strangle her as he did other times when the light was also on.

But he didn't.

Like a little boy who had gotten away with something, he chuckled.

Rene relaxed, staring at him in relief.

He could read her mind, "I didn't become the angry personality."

"You don't want to hurt me," she said. It was a statement, not a question.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Because she's so angry? Or what?"

"Maybe? I don't know."

A thought occurred to the pretty blonde, "You feel powerful. You're empowered. Not powerless."

"Could be."

"Did you hear me commit adultery?! Mom?!" he howled, laughing.

"You'll burn in Hell!" his mother prophesized.

Rene whispered, "Like Trudy said, you changed things, Kevin -- brain memories or whatever, you feel powerful."

He held her tenderly, "I'm going to Hell, Mom! And Rene just sucked my big fat hairy cock, did you hear her?!"

Magnolia took the crucifix from her wall and beat her door, praying, "Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be the name! Thy kingdom come, they will be done ..."

Kevin dressed, "Let's get out of here."

As Rene dressed, Kevin straightened the room, the cushions, pillows and coffee table.

Rene mocked him, "Such a perfect little boy."

Kevin absorbed that, then before leaving, messed everything and threw a chair at his mother's bedroom door.

DAY 11

The next day in a sunny field in Pennsylvania, Kevin and Rene stripped off their clothes and ran naked. Kevin finally felt freed.

* * *

That afternoon, Trudy was once again a guest on Javier. She passed out cookies to the audience, “My partner Butch made these! No sugar, flour or oil. He uses oats, dates, squash, flax. Write it down. And honey which is good for colds, coughs, sinus, toothaches, detox.”

Seated Javier read his teleprompter, “When killer Kevin Brandt’s mother talked to authorities, she said she was frightened for her life.”

Eating a cookie, Trudy stopped him, “Please reread that, Javier, I believe she said she was not frightened for her life.”

“I am sorry. Is that correct?”

Trudy sat, “She told the police she was embarrassed and humiliated her son had sex with a,

can I say it? ... whore, she said whore, in her house but Kevin's mother said she was not afraid for her life."

"But her son ravaged her home."

Trudy rose and threw her chair across the studio, "He threw a chair. Did I ravage the studio because I threw a chair? No. Audience, I have talked via phone to Kevin and Rene."

"This is a scoop! Why are they still together? The mother said Rene was not a hostage."

"Rene's in love with Kevin. Kevin's a very likeable, lovable man."

"Since when are killers lovable?"

"As are people that kill spiders and cheat on their taxes -- and cheat on their wives."

Behind his back, Trudy pointed to Javier and pursed her lips to her finger to "shush." The audience laughed.

She continued to lecture, "All of us works-in-progress are lovable. Even I am not a perfect law-abiding citizen. I vote twice every election," she winked, "Just kidding," she excused, playing innocent, "That would be illegal, wouldn't it?"

"A killer and his girlfriend, discharged soldiers, are on the loose. When does he strike again?"

* * *

That cold evening in her Jersey apartment, Sherry listened to music on the radio as she hemmed a skirt.

From out of view, her roommate yelled, "Did you eat my ice cream?!"

"No!!" Sherry hollered back.

Hearing a knock on the door, Sherry straightened her outfit, checked her appearance in the hall mirror and answered it.

It was Kevin.

She went pale, "What are you doing here?"

Kevin fell into his wife, hugging her, emotional. She backed up standoffish, especially seeing Rene.

Sherry asked defensively, "What is this?"

When Kevin couldn't speak, Rene did, "He's here to apologize. He didn't mean to hurt anyone. Least of all you." She continued, biting her tongue, "Do you want me to leave you two alone?"

"No," Sherry answered quickly, "No. What is going on? I don't get it."

Rene tried to explain, "They were accidents. He lost his temper."

Sherry didn't want to hear more, "I think you both should get out."

Kevin stared at Sherry. Though she tried to hide it, their love was evident. But Sherry obviously saw no future with Kevin. Her love had turned to pity.

Rene asked, "Can you forgive him?"

"What?" Sherry asked incredulous.

Kevin stuttered, "I love you and didn't see this coming, Sher."

Sherry slapped him, "Neither did I!!"

Rene said, "Trudy says he has to feel better about himself. Can you help him feel better?"

Sherry couldn't believe their audacity and she spewed sarcastically, "Sure! What a great husband you are to carry on an affair, and murder people!"

She pushed them both out the door and locked it, yelling, "Go rot in Hell, Kevin. I filed for divorce days ago!"

* * *

Crying Kevin and Rene drove away in the spray-painted station wagon.

She held his hand.

In a highway rest area, they slept in the back of the car.

DAY 12

The next day, hiding out in a sunny orchard in Bedford County, Pennsylvania, Kevin and Rene picked apples.

“It was my neighbor,” she said, “He’s the first one.”

“That molested you?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It got easier.”

“Where does he live? Should we go there?”

“And what, Kevin? Choke him?”

“No. I don’t have rage against him. I don’t want anyone else to die.”

“Me neither. What’s done is done.”

“It freed me to have sex at my mother’s place.”

“You needed to be freed. You were misfiring. I’m not misfiring. Let bygones be bygones. I don’t want to screw you in front of my neighbor.”

He ate an apple, staring off at the fast moving highway in the distance. After deep breaths his gaze returned to her, noticing how beautiful she was, her hazel eyes, her gamine face.

“You’re so pretty,” he smiled.

Her heart raced.

* * *

Meanwhile at the Brooklyn Heights condo, Trudy typed on her desktop computer.

Butch kissed the back of her neck, ““What kind of crepes can I make you for breakfast? What you writing?”

“What the people want. More Trudy Truly truths,” then turning to him, eyes moist, “Kevin’s violence is not your fault.

“I know.”

“The lines are tapped so if he calls they’ll find him. I didn’t tell them to tap the lines. They tapped the lines.”

“I know. I know. Because you’re soooo important.”

“Strawberry,” she smiled.

“With Keto maple syrup and Greek yogurt,” he said excitedly, backing away allowing her to type at exorbitant speed, her being in the “zone.”

* * *

Later that morning, Kevin in baseball hat,

flannel and jeans, and Rene in beach hat and sundress, entered a bank in Bedford County, Pennsylvania. They looked around sizing up the joint like nervous bank robbers.

“Are you ready?” Rene asked.

Kevin took another glance around, nodded, then unzipped his pants as she lowered her skirt.

“Let’s do it,” he chuckled.

As fast as possible, they had sex in front of the shocked bank customers. He shouted as he orgasmed and then they ran out laughing hysterically.

* * *

That afternoon on the Javier Del Rio show, he played the censored bank camera sex footage. Javier raised his eyebrows to his audience as if he had never seen anything so bizarre. Some clapped. Some bood.

He sat and turned to Trudy, in a tiger striped pantsuit, seated next to him, “Fornicate in a bank?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” she winked.

The audience laughed as she pursed her lips comically and patted Javier’s hair.

“Now get serious,” he said. “Why would they fornicate in a bank?”

“Because it is taboo?” she shrugged. “That’s the only reason I imagine. It can’t feel good fucking on deposit slips. Although the banks have fucked us for years.”

The audience laughed and applauded. There was no denying she had a way with people and had this audience, and the majority of America, in the palm of her fame-thirsty hand.

He asked, “Why didn’t they just rob the bank?”

“They have not called me to tell me – Kevin, don’t call me, they tapped my phone -- so I am only guessing he and Rene are sick of being judged and repressed and shamed -- so they are shoving sex in our faces.”

An audience member shouted, “It’s disgusting!”

“Sex is natural, people!” Trudy stood up, hands on her hips, “Repression is not natural. Repression is dangerous.”

“Sex is not natural in a bank!” Javier insisted.

“Says who?!”

“People never have sex in banks,” he explained.

She sat down, “That means it’s not society-accepted. That has nothing to do with what’s natural. Banks bring up stress and money issues could certainly be relieved by sex.”

“It’s insane, Trudy. What’s next for Kevin?”

“I am sorry anyone was offended by sex in a bank, but he didn’t kill anyone -- don’t you see a

healing, people?”

The audience fidgeted, unsure what to think.

“How could that be healing?” Javier protested, “America is horrified.”

“And what right do they have to judge anyone for having sex?”

“What next, Trudy? A post office?”

DAY 13

The next day, Rene and Kevin, both in dark glasses and new outfits, waited in a Guernsey County, Ohio post office – slowly undressing each other. Not only were they pushing their own limits, they were pushing society’s limits, and giving popular TV host Javier Del Rio exactly what he asked for.

Kevin kissed Rene gently, which went fairly unnoticed by the other customers, then he told her, “I love you” and completely undressed.

Customers grew more and more uncomfortable as they made tender love on the floor, ignoring the postal clerk’s threat to call the police.

* * *

That afternoon, Trudy was again Javier’s talk show guest. This time she was wearing a pink pantsuit to match her trademark pink hair.

Javier spoke to camera, “America is abuzz and they’re not sure what to think. This is the

underwear left at the Guernsey County Post Office!”

The audience clapped.

Javier was surprised, “You people like this?! Can you read the writing on the underwear?? His says Clyde and hers says Bonnie. Bonnie and Clyde. Like the notorious killing bank robbers!”

The audience was quiet and uncomfortable.

Trudy surmised, “Kevin is rebelling against childhood shaming.”

“People don’t want to see sex at the post office.”

“Javier, I think you are making an assumption. I wouldn’t mind. It would make the wait more tolerable.”

The audience nodded and applauded.

* * *

That night, inside a Muskingum County, Ohio grocery store, Kevin and Rene made love on a moving check-out conveyor belt. They ran out before they could be apprehended by authorities.

* * *

In the Brooklyn Heights condo, Butch and Trudy

made gentle love to one another. Afterwards he lit a cigarette. She watched him, adoringly.

He sighed, "Where is Kevin going to turn up next?"

"I wish I had a clue. Ohhhh! What is today? Saturday?"

"Saturday ends in an hour."

She jumped out of bed to dress, "I know where he'll be Sunday. Get dressed. He's going to need us there. We have an eight hour drive. Stopping for gas and food we can get there just in time."

Undaunted, Butch gave his all, "For the drive I'll make us some watermelon-cucumber-feta skewers with Tajin-lime splash."

"Delicious!"

"What kind of juice? Pineapple beet? Or apricot cherry celery?"

"Let's do pineapple beet this time."

"Agree."

"Butch?" she said.

"Yeah Trude?"

"You're so good to me."

In response, he smiled and winked.

DAY 14

Columbus, Ohio was home to a Sunday church mass that day that would go down in history for multiple murders.

The red rock sign outside Saint Luke's Church read the same statement as when Kevin was a child: OHIO'S BEST CATHOLICS PRAY HERE.

Inside the arched baroque interior were stained glass Biblical scenes and sculptures of God, Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Angels and Demons. Over time the paint on the statues cracked and the stain glass shifted, giving insects and small birds an inch access to enter.

Magnolia in her blue bonnet and worn blue polka dot church dress sat attentive in a front pew.

She and the congregation didn't know what to make of the movement under the blanketed altar between statues of Mary and Jesus.

The gregarious young priest was giving a sermon, "I know you all join St. Lukes in taking pride that a portion of the offertory collection will go to our recruitment charity aimed at bringing in more diversity. So nice to see so many shades of hair color and skin color in the pews today, and even if we can't see the other diversities, we do appreciate any

new bisexual, homosexual and trans brothers joining us today. Or should I say sisters?”

Some people in pews laughed, some scowled.

Magnolia scowled.

The priest continued, “We are also grateful for members of the addiction community gathering amongst us, as well as the wide array of handicapped individuals -- some of us mentally handicapped. Like me.”

Supportive laughter came from his audience.

Under the blanketed altar, Kevin and Rene orgasmed.

Rene ripped off the blanket shielding them.

The congregation was almost uniformly horrified, rising, laughing, pointing, jeering.

The priest caught his breath, “What are you two doing up here?!”

Some of the disgusted congregation hurried to exit.

Trudy, in a stylish lavender sports coat and slacks, rose from the back pew and walked toward the altar, filming herself with her phone camera, “No one has to leave! People, please do not shame the naked body! We all have been naked, haven’t we?! Naked is not naughty!”

Kevin and Rene stood, defiantly displaying their nakedness.

Rene whispered to Kevin, “I can’t believe we’re

doing this.”

He said, looking blankly, “Nothing makes sense anyway.”

The priest exited the stage, directing some security to approach the altar.

Rene grabbed Kevin’s hand, “Let’s get out of here quick.”

“I can’t leave. You go,” he said.

“Not without you.”

“I can’t go,” he said, shifting to a crucifix pose.

Rene tried to martial arts kick the men who grabbed for him.

Documenting the scene on her camera, airing live, Trudy rushed up to intercede, “Who has the right to judge this man for being naked?! Is nakedness such a crime you will assault a man?! In your house of God??” Contumaciously, she ripped off her sports coat and unbuttoned her blouse.

The organ played a melody. Surprisingly, Butch was playing it, “Who is in the mood for a little cabaret?!”

With all her strength, Trudy, now naked from the waist up, dropped her phone and helped Rene push the men away from Kevin.

Trudy demanded, “Take your hands off Kevin! – - what is Kevin hurting? You never saw naked people before?! We’re all adults here! Tell them, Kevin.”

Butch played more melodramatic organ music.

Kevin announced, "I have to be naked here. I don't know why."

Trudy retrieved her phone camera, and filmed herself topless as she lectured the room, "This church shamed Kevin for his natural feelings and he is now attempting to reverse that programming!! Let him heal, people!"

Kevin confessed, "Father Mike said God sentenced me to Hell for playing with my penis. I need to talk to God about this directly. And Jesus and Mary."

He fondled his genitals looking at the adjacent religious statues as Butch played foreboding organ music.

Magnolia held her heart to stop it from exploding, "Shame on you, Kevin!! Shame, Butch!"

"No!" Trudy yelled, "We don't shame people in church, do we?!"

Magnolia fumed, "Don't shame me for shaming you, you nasty old whore!!"

Trudy stepped behind the podium to speak into the sermon microphone, and to all the camera phones pointing in her direction, "Didn't the priest talk about diversity and welcoming everyone in God's house? The addicts? The mentally handicapped? All sexualities are welcome here but you're going to condemn a person who touches a

part of their body that makes you uncomfortable! ”

All eyes were on her.

She continued, “Because you were programmed to think it was naughty!! No part of the body is naughty!”

Kevin shouted, emotional, “I stopped killing!”

“Bravo!” Trudy championed, “You are amazing, Kevin! Bravo!”

Men covered Kevin and Rene with cloths and restrained them.

People with phones recorded.

Trudy spoke to each and every camera, “Repression kills, people! This tortured man was healing from being shamed all his life but now you shame him, hiding him in cloths!”

Rene and Kevin kicked and chopped free of the cloths and men.

Police ran into the church entrance.

Rene and Kevin held hands and as they ran naked down the aisle towards them.

Magnolia screamed, “Shoot him! He’s a devil! Shoot him!!”

Trudy protested as she pulled on her shirt, “Don’t shoot him! Kevin is not dangerous!”

Before Trudy could button her shirt and run to them, a policeman fired his gun at Kevin.

Bloody Kevin fell dead.

Rene knelt over his heaving body, “Kevin! Wake

up! Talk to me!”

Though Kevin was dead or unconscious, he still existed. His spirit fog had lifted out of his flesh body and now circled above. He somehow could see, in slow-motion, Rene weeping, her tender young eyes destroyed in anguish, her blonde bangs trapped by tears against her cheeks. The image went fuzzy and the many sounds that were overlapping diminished to a high-pitched tone, like an alarm of sort.

Everything went black.

Though he wasn't witnessing the drama of life and death anymore, he did feel the weight of it, of himself dying, and harder to accept, the drama of his past killings.

The high-pitch tone lowered considerably, note by note, until his spirit fog only heard low ominous discordant sounds. In this unnerving racket he somehow slipped into a hole which sucked him painfully to what could only be described as a Hell.

All his senses were invaded by evil trapped souls and their coarse loudness, screaming, hurting, fear and fright. These sounds multiplied and a putrid greenish demon appeared before him.

Kevin shrieked and tried to move, then noticed it was a mirror, a reflection of what he had become.

A riotous Satan flashed, even with a pitchfork.

Though Kevin was dead or unconscious, his mind thought *I am in Hell* and without his effort, his

lips also spoke, "I am in Hell."

In church, shaking his muscular dead shoulders, Rene heard his last words and begged, "No! Kevin! Come back."

When his lips fell closed and his dead eyes fell open, she wiped her tears and rose. With her little fists she beat the cop who shot him, "Asshole! Kevin wasn't going to hurt anyone anymore!!"

Trudy reached for Rene but Rene glared at the cops and kicked at them, screaming, "Shoot me, too! Come on!!"

She beat one cop until his face was bloody and she had no intention of stopping.

Trudy could not hold her back but yelled, "No! Rene! Violence never solved anything!"

The bloody cop fired his gun at Rene.

Trudy berated, "You people are insane! There's no reason to kill!"

Rene was dead.

She asked for it.

She needed to be dead so she could find Kevin.

As Trudy rocked Rene's expired flesh, Rene's spirit fog lifted out of her body.

Similar to Kevin, she existed in an afterlife with sentient faculties, aware of the physical drama she could oversee and also merging with a supernatural world.

This wasn't her first time dying, so she knew a

little of how it worked. She knew her essence would drift to where her thoughts drifted so she intentionally pushed out thoughts of Trudy and the Columbus church and instead she focused on Kevin's spirit – what was it? *Where was it?*

Divorced from the Earth dimension, her spirit surroundings went fuzzy then black. She was not frightened like the first time this happened to her because she knew this blackness was not all there was. She waited, anxiously, forcing thoughts of love and gratitude to attract similar.

A small light appeared above her and she concentrated on it so it would grow. It did and then swirled into a tunnel beckoning her to jump in it. She did enthusiastically and the moving tunnel walls became rotating galaxy stars then brightened until they were gorgeous pulsing lights and she was in an afterlife Heavenesque reality.

One of the glowing beings who had met her previously to say, “It’s not your time” appeared.

Though his love was irresistible, her mind was still on Kevin, “Kevin?? Where is Kevin?? Kevin!! Where are you??”

“He’s lost,” the angelic soul telepathically communicated.

“Where is he?”

“He can’t see or hear us. He is on a much lower vibration.”

Rene shook her head defiantly, thinking *no, that won't do. I need to be with Kevin.*

Her spirit fog backed up and reversed her flight away from the light, down past the spinning galaxy, back into the tunnel with diminishing light – into blackness.

There she screamed for the man of her dreams, “Kevin?? Kevin??”

Not finding him, she willingly floated lower. To do so, she knew she had to think low-vibration thoughts. She began cursing and accusing the universe of being mean and cruel and disorganized and unjust and evil.

She attracted what she emanated. Not only was she lowering in a turbulent tunnel, but the walls were shape-shifting into cruel disorganized realities. She saw heartbreaking abuse akin to what she suffered as a child and predators reaching at her now. Horrific smelling demons flashed and she heard a Satanic figure laugh threateningly.

“Kevin?!” she screamed, her spirit fog exploring foul-smelling caves with floating wet bloody body parts and predatory demons.

When her calls for Kevin went unanswered, she reached out to touch rotted corpses and giggling gargoyles, which sped her in a cyclone below to where she could see flames surrounding her.

She was in Hell.

Kevin was right, she thought, we deserved Hell.
She sighed, surrendering her body and her mind.

DAY 15

Brooklyn's sky was striped by planes and their stratospheric aerosol injections. In the park below high schoolers played volleyball. A woman in an outdated pink sparkly skating dress slowly skated into view, reading a newspaper atop her cookie tin.

The newspaper headline read: JEKYLL, HYDE, CRUCIFIED. BONNIE, CLYDE, DOUBLE HOMICIDE.

The newspaper was in the hands of Trudy wearing the 1970'S taffeta skating dress matching her pink hair. She placed the newspaper and cookie tin on a bench.

Then she skated, spinning fast, lowering into a squat, holding her toe like an Olympian!

Applause came from high school kids playing volleyball.

Trudy stopped and bowed, yelling, "Thank you! I was Roller Skate Queen fifty years ago! Before your parents were born! Hey, I want to play volleyball! Count me in next game!"

A Black high school boy noticed her and slowly moved toward her. The other kids followed.

"What?!" Trudy called defensively, "You think I need to dress my age? My partner Butch says to throw this dress away! But it still fits! Am I too sexy?"

She stood up and stretched, showing her fit aging body, like she did on Marge's local podcast.

"My partner made these cookies!" she offered, "You have to taste them. No sugar, flour or oil. He uses oats, dates, squash, flax. Write it down. And honey which is good for colds, coughs, sinus, toothaches, detox. And thiamin for cardiovascular issues and of course cinnamon for blood sugar or inflammation or neurological issues."

A blond jock ran toward her, littering a paper cup.

"Hey, pick that up!" she ordered, turning on her camera phone to embarrass him, "This Earth isn't your garbage can!"

He laughed, embarrassed, picked it up and dispensed it the trash can.

"You're Trudy Truly," he said, taking a cookie.

"You've seen me on the news? -- and had a good laugh? Look, what I say goes over kids' heads."

"I love you!"

She beamed, accepting the surprise compliment, "You love me?"

A Black girl and Latin girl ran over.

The blond jock continued, "Of course! I don't want to go to war! I don't want to kill a stranger because my president says to. I don't want to die."

The Black high school boy said, "Make love, not war. Make love in the post office, no kill in Iraq."

A blonde girl gushed, "When you stood in that church topless, it was courageous! No one should be ashamed of their naked body."

The Latin girl oozed in awe, "When you said all gods exist ... it just made me think ... And why do I have to have the same god as my grandparents? Why can't I be god?"

"You can be god for your life," Trudy smiled encouragingly, then spoke directly into her camera phone, "But you can't be god for anyone's else's life. No reason to be. Let them be their own gods."

The Black girl smiled, "Someone finally makes sense."

"My mom doesn't get you," the Latin girl grimaced, "But all of my school does."

"The students get me?" Trudy blushed, overjoyed, "What do the teachers think?" she asked, pointing the camera at the teens.

"Who cares," the Black girl replied, "The teachers are robots spewing propaganda." She pointed at the planes, "They tell me planes aren't making clouds, when we see they are."

"You're the one who gives us hope," gushed the blond jock, "And cookies without poison."

The Black boy high-fived Trudy, "No more violence."

Finally feeling she mattered and contributed, Trudy shut off her phone and put out her arms,

“Come give Mama Trudy a hug.”

They took turns hugging their idol.

More students came and sat on the grass at her feet, awaiting more wisdom from their beloved new guru.

* * *

In the afterlife, Rene couldn't see Kevin, but she had dangerously journeyed to his low-vibration plane. Unconscious, he spun vertically in agony not far from her but in an altered lower dimension so she could not see him.

She was in Hell.

Trying to figure out how to save him was so overwhelming and exhausting that she had fallen to sleep, or was put to sleep, or surrendered to dark forces sucking the ability to think from her. Unconscious for a day, flames rose steadily around her as her spirit fog had become imprisoned, nearly inexpugnable, as if in frozen ice.

Trapped, panicked and melting to nothingness, one last iota of her spirit fog became conscious temporarily. Her memory and heartache rushed back ever so briefly.

“Kevin?!” she screamed, both with a hoarse voice and telepathically.

Eventually she heard his soul whisper back,
“Rene?”

“Kevin!!” she shrieked in joy, “Where the fuck are you?”

“Rene?”

“Yes! It’s me! Rene! I can hear you! I can’t see you! Can you see me??”

“I can’t see you.”

“Try!” she beckoned, “Let’s get out of here! I can move again! I was frozen somehow but now I can move. Can you move??”

“I’m spinning nonstop. We’re in Hell,” he stated defeated, hearing his mother’s harsh words from his childhood repeat in his head, “Tell. Your son. He’s going. To Hell.”

“We don’t deserve Hell, Kevin. Think about our good times -- things we did that helped people. The time we soldiers saved a village --”

“I can’t remember that.”

“Think about finding that lost kid and climbing the statue and yelling to find his mom.”

“Was that me?”

“That was you! A hero!”

“I’m a killer.”

His brain was disparaged hearing over and over his mother’s words in the church, “Shoot him! He’s a devil! Shoot him!!”

He remembered Sherry’s hate when he was in

her apartment door, “Go rot in Hell, Kevin.”

Rene persisted, “Kevin, you’re a sweet man. You gave your last dollars to that guy at Walmart for bananas.”

“That was me?”

“Think how we helped others -- how you helped me! Kevin, you changed my life, from the moment I met you, my heart sang, you know what I mean?”

Reliving the fond times and seeing them play out before her on some magic review screen, the ice trapping her melted more, freeing her spirit fog to fully move.

“You’re such a stalker,” he said with humor, “You even stalk me into the afterlife.”

She laughed as well, floating in a circle, then recalled, “You saved that baby bird, remember? Lifting him up to his nest in that tree branch?”

Kevin saw a tiny light, “I see a little light.”

“Follow it! Go towards it!”

To create a higher vibration, she improvised singing joyous melodies, forcing her higher – but unfortunately higher was further away from Kevin.

He cried in torture, “I can only spin in a circle.”

“Think about the light and how much I love you!!”

She turned her words into more melodies, remembering every little joy she could and pouring them into uplifting harmonies, automatically raising

her again many feet higher.

Kevin saw a small light glow far above his head and realized she was that light.

He struggled to stop spinning and when his effort was not enough, he sang back to her lyrics of love and gratitude.

That unlocked his torture apparatus and his spinning essence slowed and illuminated for one split second. That was all Rene needed to know where to fly down and grab him, to unite with him.

Suddenly Rene's spirit tentacle, or hand, grabbed Kevin's barely visible spirit tentacle, or hand, and yanked him up a gray swirling tunnel.

Tumbling up at high speed they saw another tiny light a million miles away.

Unexplainably they arrived together at that light in an instant. It glowed then pulsed like it was alive.

Maybe you're an angel? Rene wondered about the light. *Thank you! Help Kevin!*

The pulsing light emanated love and led them, summoned them, to another wider tunnel. This one was purple.

It was filled with pulsing light beings zipping joyfully around them as they flew, exhilarated.

Eventually the tunnel opened to a deep blue sky-canvas and the dancing lights became an infinite galaxy of stars.

Kevin and Rene were in awe, their bright spirit

fogs floating effortlessly in such a humungous kaleidoscope of inspiring imagery and healing energy.

They were beckoned, summoned, to the right which magically turned white.

In this Heaven scape, glowing angelic beings slowly surrounded them.

Re-experiencing this unconditional love, like in her previous death experience, Rene was filled with even greater gratitude and joy. She telepathically invited Kevin to also experience the unearthly divine that she was feeling.

All Kevin's earthly fear and anger and regret were instantaneously washed away and replaced with the bliss of this cosmic love frontier.

But then he had a setback, flashing on unconscious Joy Kyong. That parlayed more self-hate remembering nearly stoning Sara Kelley, and strangling Rene.

His spirit fog shrunk.

He was disappearing from this high realm and teleporting toward Hell again.

The light being nearest him merged into his spirit fog, as if it were giving him fuel.

In a minute, the light being stepped back and Kevin's spirit fog was tall again as if having received a profound spiritual download.

He bowed to the glowing being and then it

materialized into Jesus Christ in a white robe.

“Thank you, Jesus! Look at you!” Kevin exclaimed telepathically for all to hear.

Rene did not see Jesus so another glowing being explained to her, “We are light. We are divinity. Recent arrivals like yourself see us in many different ways. You might see me as Jesus, or Mary, or Buddha, or Ala, Brahma, Vishna, Raven, YHWH. It does not matter who you see in us. It only matters you feel eternal pure love and realize you are also eternal pure love, returning from your Earthly incarnations.”

For the first time, Rene looked at Kevin and could see his spirit was only pure love. She had always clung to believe the best in him, so this wasn't a jarring adjustment.

The light being told Kevin he must forgive himself, that his Earth adventure was over, and this new reality was the only permanent true reality.

Kevin battled to forgive himself but could not fully, stuck in judgment.

Rene's spirit fog merged into his and she felt his gratitude to her, which lifted his vibration.

She thought *I am so powerful! How did I get so powerful?!*

Rene looked at herself and for the first time saw she also was infinite pure love. She no longer needed to cling to Kevin, to stalk him, to compete for

his attention. She was whole, complete, omnipotent. He was whole, complete, omnipotent, and she vowed to help him understand that.

She realized she spent her Earth life chasing him, chasing validation. It all seemed so silly and petty now.

Just then she heard him telepathically thank her for chasing him.

“You literally saved me from Hell,” he chuckled.

“I told you I would love you forever,” she telepathically professed, “And I do. I will.” Then she realized, “All this time I thought I was unlovable. When the truth is ... all I am ... is ... love.”

* * *

That evening in Trudy’s Brooklyn Heights condo, many candles flickered on the framed photos lining the grand piano. It was being filmed by Trudy’s phone set on a tripod across the large room.

Wearing a leather tuxedo, Butch rose from the swinging couch. Trudy straightened his bowtie.

As she lowered her hand, he grabbed it, whispering in his low voice, “Will you be mine forever?”

He slid a diamond ring on her finger.

She looked gorgeous modeling her wedding gown

combining white lace and silver chain. "Yes," she giggled, "But we've already had forever. I can't imagine there's more."

"With you, there's always more. Something crazy around the corner."

"Well, forgive me I am not boring," she rolled her eyes.

"No one would ever accuse you of that."

His strong arms pulled her body to his lips. They kissed gently.

Serving as her Maid Of Honor was their tiger-masked robot -- wearing Rene's clothes that Trudy had given her.

The Best Man was their wolf-masked robot -- in Kevin's fatigues adorned with his many medals.

Butch positioned the robots to face each other, "I never told Kevin how proud I was of him, did I?"

Trudy didn't answer. She wiped a tear from Butch's eye.

He mumbled, "They were way too young to die."

"I know. Senseless deaths."

"Do you think there's an afterlife?"

"Yes, of course."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I've studied almost ten thousand religions, Butch. They all say life carries on after we die here."

"So will Kevin be with Rene?"

"I don't know, but she adores him, I hope so."

Trudy programmed the robots to slow dance then she grabbed Butch's hand.

"Is it time to dance with my wife?" he asked.

She nodded, slowly swaying, resting her head on his chest as his hips rocked back and forth -- slowly. The room was silent besides the slight murmur of cars on the road a couple floors down and a single outdoor bird chirp.

Butch started quietly singing "Fantasy Bride," their hit song, *"Feel my heart flutter like a butterfly, never floated in clouds this high, you are my soul mate, well worth the wait, don't ask me why, how would I get by, without you by my side, my fantasy, fantasy, fantasy bride, my fantasy bride ..."*

Her deep-creased eyes smiled into his, recognizing decades of drama they enjoyed and earned and/or at least endured together. Her heart beat fast excited to have the sole romantic attention of the man she loved so ultimately and for so long.

Trudy joined in singing, *"Feel my heart flutter like a butterfly, never floated in clouds this high, you are my soul mate, well worth the wait ..."*

Yes, Butch was her soul mate. She couldn't imagine any other. But the lyrics also reminded her of Rene and Kevin's happy ending, as soul mates believably.

Trudy wondered about them as she sang again, *"Feel my heart flutter like a butterfly, never floated in*

clouds this high, you are my soul mate, well worth the wait ...”

She admired the many framed photos on the piano, smiling at the photo of Rene and Kevin in fatigues in love many years ago, the very same photo Rene had always kept as her screensaver.

THE END