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# Artist's Rendition

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## Artist's Rendition

*KATHLEEN M. MCKEIVER*

I have been awake nearly an hour now, just lying here, next to him. I watch him breathe, his mouth barely open. I watch his tan chest rise and fall in rhythm with that very breath. I watch his long wavy hair, kissed blond from the sun, as it falls around his face, messy from our night of frolicking. I watch his callused hands clasped around his stomach and I remember what they felt like caressing, stroking, massaging my body. I lay there next to him and I watch, never once thinking about what

had happened in these last 24 hours. Never once thinking about what I had just done.

I rise from the four post bed, set in the middle of his studio like some altar to the gods. I prayed to those gods last night, wrapped in his tree-trunk legs, embraced in his rower's arms. I scan the floor for my clothes, but pull on his T-shirt instead. It smells like him.

I pad across his cold hardwood floor and into the kitchen. I search for coffee but find only tea. While I wait for the water to boil, my eyes examine his warehouse apartment. I take another glance back towards his bed, where he still sleeps. I hear him softly snoring. Despite my better judgment, I decide to look around in order to get a better idea of who Jackson Davis, number 354-65-9922, really is.

His apartment is large and bare. I don't really know what I was expecting. After all, when I think back to my college digs, my own artistry was built around head shop tapestries and hand-me-down furniture.

The one exception to the emptiness of his barren dwelling place are the walls. They are covered with art, but none

of his own. I do recognize a Bill Anders landscape, though. He was one of our most talented students. There had been talk of him getting a gallery show in San Francisco; the department was going to give him a grant. I notice an amazing abstract hanging purposely sideways over his black foton. I read that the artist's name is Julia. An old girlfriend, perhaps? Not that I care. . . just an observation. Next to the foton are twelve wooden milk crates stacked in the shape of the letter "U" against his wall. They are filled with books on art, photography and politics, intermingled with random notebooks and music songbooks, mostly piano, a few guitar. He even had a splash of eastern philosophy on the side. I had figured correctly, with the exception of the piano. In the center hangs a figure drawing of a young woman, maybe 23, 24, years old. She has dark skin and black eyes and even blacker hair. It is loosely curled and long. It falls down around her breasts, but doesn't cover them. She is shaven and pierced. She is strikingly beautiful. I notice now that this one is his. *Julia, perhaps? Maybe another. . .* I am not jealous. Just curious.

I hear young master Jack begin to stir. From my place in the "living area" I can see the outline of his strong thighs and tight ass as he shifts his body beneath the thin white linen. I reach up, drawing my hand against my breast and down my body, imagining that my hand was his, as it was last night. I consciously use my right hand. He breathes softly, I sigh deeply. I could continue to look around, but there isn't much more to see. I would save the medicine cabinet for another day.

I see Jack waking up a bit more. I return to the kitchen to pour him some tea. I bring it to him, resisting saying "good morning sunshine" as not to trigger any kind of fond maternal memory.

"Good morning," I say, handing him the mug of tea. I sit in the white rattan chair, across from the bottom of the bed. I cross my legs, slowly and deliberately, letting his T-shirt crawl up high on my well sculpted runner's thighs, allowing my eyes to penetrate him. His hair is mussed. I take a sip of tea to hide my smile.

“Well, good morning Dr. Hanson.” *Exactly the words I did not want to hear.* He sets his tea on the window sill and crawls across the bed, tiger like, to kiss me hello. I rise from his chair instead.

“Why, Jack, I had thought that all formalities had been set aside last night. Surely you must feel comfortable enough to call me Robyn by now.” I smile coyly, tossing my dark auburn hair over my shoulders.

“I’ll call you whatever you want me to Dr. Hanson.” He turns his brown puppy dog eyes up in my direction, blinking rapidly. Now he is just being cute. I smirk and take another sip of tea. I decide to get business over with.

“So Jack, you realize that this was a completely spur of the moment occasion. I am not saying that it can’t happen again. I am saying that if it is to happen again, it is to remain completely discreet. So don’t stop by on my office hours and don’t ask me for lunch and don’t tell your buddies that you’re hot for teacher. Nothing is to change in our scholarly relationship. My personal life and professional life are two separate things. . . and I usually like to keep it that way. . . but honestly Jack, I haven’t gotten so much as a back rub from a man in the last two months and I needed to get laid. But next time. . . it doesn’t *have* to be you. Do I make myself clear?” I am confident enough in myself to be a bitch. I know that my bedroom talent had surpassed my scholarly knowledge and my artistic abilities long ago. *’Twas easy to keep a young man under my thumb. . .*

“Don’t worry about it Dr. Hanson,” he says and I smile.

“And cut that Dr. Hanson shit. Do you understand what I am saying to you?” I place one hand on my hip and stare directly at him, all traces of a smile disappearing. I look sexy when I’m tough.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I get it Robyn, I get it.” Jack said, laying back amongst the pillows.

“Good.” I purposely pause for effect. I smile again. “Now fuck me.”

It’s about a hour drive to my country home from Jack’s downtown apartment. I told him he could page me if he ever needed to “discuss art.” I am confident that he will. I

turn up the stereo. I listen to Patti Smith. I smoke Camels. I swear at tailgaters and people on cell phones. I think no more of Jack. I listen to Ella Fitzgerald. I smoke camels. I swore to myself I wouldn't do this again. I think of my husband.

I met Stephen nineteen years ago. I was 24, he was 48. I was on a weekend bus trip to the Chicago Art Institute with other art students from Muncie Community College. We were to tour the museum and then have the opportunity to show our portfolios to instructors from the University of Chicago. I showed mine to Stephen.

*I remember. . . I went to the last door on the right. I looked down to the paper I had clutched in my hand. My hands were sweating and the ink had ran, but I could still read the name. Stephen Hanson. I knocked twice and I heard a soft low voice invite me in. I opened the door and saw an attractive middle aged man reclining behind a desk. His salt and pepper hair was held back in a long thick ponytail. He wore all black. The office was empty except for us and his desk. Without even looking at me, without asking my name, he told me to put my portfolio on the desk. He told me I could stay or go. I stayed. I watched him as he poured over each piece, staring so long as if to memorize each stroke. He did not talk. He did not look at me. He just immersed himself in my art while I stood there watching. Watching him. His intensity. The care he took in examining each piece. No one had ever really looked at my work like that before.*

He was so impressed with my portfolio that he asked me for dinner to discuss my future at the University of Chicago. When I explained that going to an out of state college was impossible due to finances, he offered me a patronage. . . of sorts. I would stay in his empty room, go to school and concentrate on my art. I would take on a part time job, and contribute what I could. Stephen felt that my "natural talent" would be wasted without "proper cultivation" . He said he was willing to fully "devote" himself to my studies, and I wouldn't have to pay a thing. It was an opportunity that couldn't be passed up. So I took it.

It wasn't long before the empty room became empty again. Stephen and I started sleeping together not more

than two weeks after I moved in. I really don't remember how it happened, it just. . . happened. It could have been the excitement of being in the big city. It could have been the prestige of being the student of an accomplished artist. It could have been that Stephen was intelligent, an amazing painter and that he used to be attractive. He had no trouble finding a beautiful woman to spend the evening with. I was flattered that he chose me to share his bed. I don't know, it could have been a lot of things, but before I knew it, Stephen and I were involved in an all too serious relationship that seemed easier to stay in than to get out of. He took me to Milan. We were married. Things got worse.

I don't love him. I may have once, but I don't now. It's been nineteen years, and it's still easier to stay than to go. I've become accustomed to the lifestyle. The fine foods, the expensive wines, the exclusive parties, the extensive vacations. By now I've established myself well enough that I could have all this without him, but in all honesty, and I feel guilty even thinking this, it just seems easier to wait for him to die.

We are no longer lovers. We now co-exist. Sometimes I still fuck him, even though I don't want to. I hate his heavy body and I hate his stale breath. I hate his bald head and I hate his wrinkled skin. I hate listening to his raspy breathing and I hate the way he says "oh baby, oh baby" before he comes. But I still do it. I guess I just feel I owe him at least that much. . . I mean, considering.

I don't know if he even knows about my young lovers, and if he does, I don't know that it matters. Lately he spends his days in front of the television watching A & E or CNN, drinking Dewar's and pretending to smoke a Monte Cristo. He stopped painting after the cancer scare. He told me "the art is gone now, the art is gone." I never really knew what he meant by that. I haven't cared enough to ask.

I drive up our private drive and pull in next to his Lexus. I walk into the house. It is just how I had left it two days ago except the roses are dead now. He didn't bother to throw them away. I hear Larry King's voice in the back-

ground. I walk to the living room and stick my head around the doorway.

"Hello Stephen," I say to the back of his head. He raises one arm in acknowledgment of my presence as we exchange generic pleasantries.

"How was the conference?" he asks, not really listening for an answer.

"The usual. And your weekend?"

"The same. Your mother called. Your Aunt Helon died. The funeral is on Thursday. She understands if you can't make it." He takes a drink and sets his glass on the table.

"Oh. . . well. . . I'll have to see. . . I hate to cancel classes. . . I'll see if Marty and Sharon can cover. . . I can fly out Wednesday and come back Thursday night. Then I can be here for class on Friday. Anything else?"

"The lawn service is coming to turn on the sprinklers Wednesday." He takes another drink. "And I left a plate warming for you in the oven. I made ribs. There's a salad, and some bread, in the refrigerator."

"Fine. Thank you, but. . . I'm tired. . . I'm going to take a bath and go to bed. Goodnight Stephen." I turned to leave. *I left a plate warming for you. . .*

"Goodnight Robyn."

I walked upstairs and into our bedroom. I notice that Stephen went shopping. He bought me more shampoo. *He had to go to the salon for that. . .* As I ran the water for my bath, I began to think more and more about the relationship between Stephen and I. I remember when I used to run a bath for two instead of just one. I remember coming home to fresh flowers everyday. I remember staying up till dawn talking about everything and nothing at all. He would read to me at night. Sometimes it would be his own. We would paint together. *Naked. . .* I remember what it felt like to love him. To be loved by him. *When did it all change. . .* Sometimes I miss him. Or who he used to be.

I rose from the bath and put on my gown for bed. Before turning out the light I noticed something on the bookcase. I peaked around the back of the bathroom door and came upon a vase full of roses. There were eleven red roses, one

yellow. The same bouquet Stephen had given me on our first anniversary. I love fresh flowers.

I arrive early to school the next morning. I had a lot of work to do, since I didn't really get a chance to get it done this weekend. I usually don't come to campus on Monday, but I didn't want to be bothered. I listen to Joan Baez and start to read student essays. There is a knock at the door.

"Yes?" I call. The door opens, and there stands Jackson Davis.

"Hi Robyn. What's up?" He is very non-chalant. Very cool. He stands leaning in my doorway, his book bag over one shoulder, his portfolio next to his leg. *Hi Robyn, what's up. . .*

"Come in and shut the door." He does as I ask. He is smiling. As I begin to speak, the smile disappears. "What the fuck do you think you're doing? What is this? Don't you remember what we talked about?"

"Whoa. . . easy. Sorry. I was on my way to Professor Winfeild's office, and I heard the music. I just thought I would stop in. . ."

I interrupt him.

"No, there is to be no stopping in remember what we. . ."

He interrupts me.

"I was just stopping in to get your opinion on this design I've been working on because I value what you think. Is that all right?" He stares at me. I am embarrassed that I lost my cool.

"Yes, yes Jackson. That's fine. I'm sorry. Sit down." He came into my office. He seemed comfortable there. I looked at his design. I had a feeling he was here for a different reason.

"So. Did you have a good night last night?" he asks, breaking the silence.

"Let's stick to the art, OK?"

"OK. What do you think?"

"I think it can be a little more uniform through the center. Work on the texture of the vertical lines. That's really about all I can see. Nice work." I smiled and handed the paper back to him.



“Thank you.” He pauses. “So. . . I’m sorry, but. . . this wasn’t the real reason I came to see you. I, I wondered when can we get together again? I mean, Saturday night. . . that was. . . I just, I’d really like to see you again.”

“Really Jackson, I’m flattered.” I was. “But please, not here, at school, OK? I’m flying out to Indiana on Tuesday night. I’ll fly out Wednesday instead. How about that?”

“That would be incredible.”

“All right then. I will come to your apartment around six, OK?”

“I’ll be waiting.” He smiles, stands and turns to leave. I go back to work. Before opening the door, he stops and turns.

“Robyn, there’s just one more thing. . . ” his sentence trails off as he rushes towards my desk and, leaning across, he covers my lips with his, delivering only the most passionate of kisses. I am aroused and angry at the same time. He senses this, gathers his bag and makes a hasty apology. “I just couldn’t help it. . . you’re so. . . beautiful. . . ” *I’m so beautiful.* He again turns to leave.

“Jackson?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s Dr. Hanson.” Jackson just smiles and closes the door. There is a knock less than a minute later.

“Yes,” I call without looking up from my desk. The door opens and in comes a man with a bag. His uniform says ‘Chinese Express’.

“Dr. Hanson?”

“Yes?”

“This is for you.” He places the bag on my desk.

“But I didn’t order any chinese food.” I say, puzzled.

“No, but your husband did. Have a good day.” He turns to go.

“Do I owe. . . ”

“Already taken care of,” he interrupts, closing the door behind him. I look in the bag and see a note.

*Thought you could use a break. Don’t work too hard. —S*

Moo Goo Gai Pan. My favorite.

“Goodbye Stephen. I’m leaving for the airport.” I gather my suitcase in one hand, my car keys in the other. It was Tuesday and I was leaving for Jackson’s.

“All right. Have a safe trip. Give my regards to your family.” He didn’t look up from his paper. The door closes behind me.

The drive seems quicker than usual and before I know it I am standing outside of Jackson’s door. I knock and he almost instantly answers, naked from the waist up, a white rose between his teeth.

“M’lady” he says as he stands aside, one arm outstretched, ushering me in.

“Well, what a surprise,” I say, laughing. “I can only imagine what is in store for us this evening.”

“And that is where you are wrong, Dr. Hanson. You see, you can’t imagine what I have in store for you this evening.” With that flirtatious comment he grabs me around the waist and pulls me tight to him. He stares into my eyes for what seems like minutes before leaning in and delivering one of his very passionate kisses. I can feel the heat building inside of me as he runs his fingers up and down the length of my spine and then into my hair. He wraps one hand around the back of my neck and pulls me tight to him, holding me in a deep embrace. He cradles my face in his hands. I feel like the only woman alive.

He takes my hand and walks me towards the bed. I have yet to remove my coat. He removes it for me. He smiles an obnoxious smile and begins to speak in an announcer-type voice.

“You seem tense. Why don’t you lay back and. . . let me relax you. . .” I coyly smile at his flirtatious advances. I lay down as he strips me of my clothes. There is no talking now. There is only silence as I lend myself to him, allowing myself to become his clay as he molds my body and kneads my flesh in only the most euphoric of ways. My body is overcome by the intensity of his strong yet gentle caress and I can think of nothing else but he and I and this very moment

Our pleasurable romp continues for what seems like days but is only hours and we collapse in a tired, sweaty heap upon his bed, the sheets in tangled knots all around us. We

breathe heavily, waiting for our heartbeats to slow to normal. We look at one another and laugh. I think to myself, *this is the best sex I ever had.* . . . and I smile. We talk all night. *Naked.* Then we fall asleep.

In the morning, it starts again—our escapades. This time he holds me afterwards. He kisses my head. I am elated. I sit up in bed.

“You know what we need?” I ask

“Round 2?” he answers. I hit him playfully on the arm.

“No! We need breakfast.” I rise from bed. I pull on one of his T-shirts and go to the kitchen. “Let me see what I can whip up.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Yes, I bet you do. Did you buy any coffee yet?”

“I don’t drink coffee.”

“And you call yourself an artist. . . .” laughter was my only response. Then silence.

“Hey, your pager’s going off.” he called

“All right, all right” I say half running to the “bed area”, taking one last glance at my eggs. . . . *I don’t want them to burn.* . . .

I pick up the pager, but do not recognize the number. It’s 11:30 on Wednesday. I am supposed to be in Indiana. I am in the apartment of student artist Jackson Davis. Whether it’s work or Stephen or my mother there is no way in hell I am returning that phone call.

“It’s nothing.” I say, gently tossing the pager aside. I start to climb back into bed with Jackson but stop suddenly. “Oh my God, the eggs!” I ran back to the kitchen and realized that I was too late, they were burned to the bottom of the pan. “Sorry Jackson. I’ll have to give you a rain check on a real breakfast. I have a plane to catch. You can split this bagel with me.” I say, hurriedly covering one half with cream cheese.

“You have to leave so soon?” he asks as I dump the plate in his lap. I am pulling on my nylons and stepping into my shoes at the same time.

“I already told you. . . . ‘da plane, da plane’. . . . I have to go.” I look in his mirror, realizing that I look like I just had a monstrous night of sex. No way to show up to your aunt’s

funeral, but I have no time to shower or tame my long curly hair.

“Will you braid my hair for me?” I ask, digging into my purse for a pic and hair tie.

“I’ll try. I’m not making any promises.” As Jackson divides each section, I remember back to Stephen and how he used to braid my hair. He took such care to place each strand evenly across. He never made it too loose or too tight. I would close my eyes and he would fit it all together. *Perfectly*. . .

“There” says Jackson, leaning back to admire his work. I put my hand back and feel lumps. And some hair started to fall out. *Stephen*. . .

“Thanks. That’s great. Look, I don’t have time for long good-byes, so thank-you, I had a wonderful time. I will talk to you after I get back” I kiss him on the forehead and head out the door.

\* \* \*

I take a cab from the airport to my mother’s house. I think of how grateful I am to Stephen for taking me out of this hellish small town. I don’t like coming back here, but it’s where all my family lives. I usually only come for funerals and weddings, and even that is pushing it. There is nothing for me here. I shudder to think what would’ve happened to me had it not been for Stephen. Maybe I would work at Tom’s Fill-up or the Dairy Freeze. Or maybe I would take over for Snaggletooth Marge at the DMV. . . the possibilities are endless. I laugh at the thought.

I walk up the steps to my mother’s, knocking once before opening the door.

“Hello everyone, I’m here.” I call out. I look around and see empty faces staring back at me. My mother separates from the group and comes over and gives me a hug and starts to cry.

“Sshhh, mom, it’ll be all right.” I wrap my arms tighter around my mother and rub her back to console her.

“No, Robyn. . . I’m. . . I’m not crying for Aunt Helon. . . I’m crying for you. . .” Her sobbing increases.

“For me, what are you talking about. . . I really didn’t even know Aunt Helon. . .” I am confused.

"You don't understand Robyn. Maybe you should call the hospital." she wipes her eyes with a handkerchief.

"No, please, tell me what's going on." I place both my hands on both her shoulders and plead with my eyes.

"Well, the hospital called here, they got the number from school emergency or something, and. . . oh Robyn. . ."

"Mother, tell me!" I am getting angry and curious at the same time.

"Stephen had a heart attack. Sometime Tuesday night they figure. The lawn care people came on Wednesday, when no one answered, they peaked in the window and saw him lying on the floor. Where were you honey?" she asks.

I think I am going to be sick. I sit down on the sofa and close my eyes, waiting for the nausea to pass but it doesn't and I get up and I run to the bathroom and I lock the door and I fall into the toilet ridding my body of all that was inside. I collapse upon the cold tile, barely able to breathe. My husband of nineteen years lie dead on our floor while I am fuck some twenty-something coed who is no more to me than a piece of meat. I want to die too.

\* \* \*

Two months have passed. I am driving towards town. I smoke camels. I listen to Billie Holiday. I do not see Jackson anymore, nor do I think of him or any of his predecessors. I drive into the cemetery. I retired from teaching. I turn off the car and close the door. I smoke camels.

I walk to Stephen's grave. I see mine next to it. I lay down a bouquet of flowers. I pick up the bouquet from yesterday. Eleven red roses, one yellow. I hang my head down low. And I cry.