

TELL HER SHE'S PRETTY: A NOVELLA

by

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A THESIS

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B. Saunders", written over a horizontal line.

Benjamin D. Saunders

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Preface

I'll be honest: when I began writing this story, I had no idea what I was doing or where I was going. I felt like I was following a rabbit down a hole. Some authors write with a map—before their pen touches the page they claim to know their story's beginning, middle, and end. That sounds great. I'd love to have written with a map at my side. Instead, I wrote with a compass that pointed to three themes: pornography, misogyny, and intimacy. This story explores how I think these three themes are related. Maybe you'll like it. Maybe you won't. My only hope is that you'll want to keep reading to the end.

## **Sam the Man**

Thursday, June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Sam thinks women intimidate me. He's always telling me I need to be more confident. That's easy for him to say. In the nine years I've known him—we're best friends—he's had sex with at least fifty girls. I've seen Sam pick up a girl with a glance. Of course, it helps that he looks like an Italian fashion model; dark-brown hair, sharp jaw line, olive skin, and six feet of football toned muscle. And then there's me, five feet ten, two hundred pounds, zero sense of style, no neck, no jaw line, and I've never done anything athletic in my life.

It's my twenty-fourth birthday and Sam and I are road tripping to San Diego to celebrate. He's promised me that we'll hang out with two cute girls he knows down there for the weekend. They go to San Diego State. After describing the girl's appearances in vivid detail, I know the trip will be worth it. Before we left, I made a list of things for our trip: a half gallon of Bombay Sapphire, two liters of tonic water, four packs of Marlboro Reds, sixty bucks of weed, rolling papers, and sleeping bags.

We're an hour out of Portland when I realize I didn't bring condoms. I tell Sam to pull over at a 7-Eleven. I walk in and buy a box of Trojans. When I get back in the Tahoe, Sam sees the box and smirks at me. He doesn't use condoms, even when he's with some random girl. I've told him a hundred times that he should wrap up—he'll get a girl pregnant—but he just responds with the same line: "I can't feel anything with a condom on. It's like having a blanket wrapped around my cock."

I tell Sam I'm hungry and we stop at a Burgerville before getting onto the I-5 onramp. He pulls into the parking lot. We step out of the Tahoe and walk inside.

Burgerville. It's ten o'clock, past dinnertime, and the place is empty except for an old couple eating in a booth and two girls who look sixteen or seventeen in another. They both have long hair that falls past their waists. One of them is a redhead, and the other is a brunette. They're hot. Very hot. In high school, girls that attractive didn't notice me. I didn't exist in their world. They were untouchable angels.

Sam tells me to order whatever I want. He's treating me for my birthday. He gets a Colossal Cheeseburger, fries, and a Coke. I get a Pepper Bacon Cheeseburger and a Mocha Milkshake. We sit down at a table with our food. I can't stop looking at the girls as we eat. They're both nibbling at a large French fry, scared to eat the whole thing. They look bored. Every now and then, one of them glances over at us, and I look away each time they do. Sam notices the girls checking us out as he wolfs down his burger.

"Those girls are hot," he says.

"Yeah."

"Let's go talk to them after we finish our food."

"They're half our age man."

"Stop being a pussy. We're just going to talk to them."

Part of me knows that hitting on girls that young is weird, desperate somehow. The other part wants to sit down at the girl's booth and look them in the eye without flinching.

We finish our food. Sam stands up, tosses his trash, and walks straight to the girl's table. I toss my trash and follow him. He slides into their booth and smiles. The

girl's eyes light up. They don't look bored anymore. I slide in next to him; the girls on one side, Sam and me on the other.

"I'm Sam McDougall and this is my friend Ryan Alexander."

"How old are you guys?" asks the brunette.

"How old are you?" I ask.

"We're eighteen," says the brunette.

"Actually, I'm almost nineteen," says the redhead, glancing at Sam. Her eyes sparkle when she looks at him. She thinks he's cute.

"No shit," says Sam. "I'm sixty-seven and Ryan just turned seventy."

The brunette crosses her arms. "We're not lying," she says.

Sam shrugs and takes one of their French fries, dips it in ketchup, eats it.

"Let's play a game," says Sam. He looks at the redhead, "Truth or dare?"

The brunette rolls her eyes. "Truth or dare was cool in middle school."

"I wasn't asking you. I was asking her." He nods at the redhead.

"Truth," says the redhead.

"Tell me what kind of underwear you're wearing?"

She blushes, but her eyes sparkle at him. "A white thong."

She asks me truth or dare. I tell her truth.

"How many girls have you had sex with?"

I eat a French fry and act like it's taking me a long time to count. I've only had sex with four girls. Sam doesn't know this; I only know this. "Thirty-two."

The redhead raises her eyebrows. "That's a lot. I'm not sure I believe you."

My cheeks turn red. Knowing that I'm blushing makes it worse. "I'm not lying."



“Say their names then,” says the brunette.

My armpits are sweaty. I start thinking of thirty-two girl’s names.

Sam grabs the back of my neck and points at the girls. “Hey, he doesn’t have to prove himself to either of you. He probably can’t even remember all their names anyway. Right?”

I nod.

The girls look at each other and smile. I want them to stop smiling. I ask the brunette truth or dare.

She tells me truth.

“No,” Sam says, “No more truths.”

The brunette glares at him. “Fine. Dare.”

I pause, trying to think of a good dare. “Well, it’s my birthday today, so I dare you to give him a birthday kiss.”

The brunette looks at me. Her eyes aren’t sparkling. She shakes her head, then leans across the table with lips pursed. I lean in and kiss her. Her lips stay closed; it feels formal, parental. I open my mouth. I want her to kiss me back. I grab her lower lip between mine and try to give her a deeper kiss. Her mouth is a wall. After six seconds, the brunette pulls away. She wipes her mouth across her sleeve, looking disgusted.

The redhead laughs, even Sam is smiling. I stare down at the table. I feel like I’m sixteen again, back in high school.

The brunette asks Sam truth or dare. He tells her truth.

“That’s not fair.” She frowns. “You can’t say truth after telling me not to.”

Sam smirks at her and eats another French fry. “I can do whatever I want.”

The redhead whispers into the brunette's ear. The brunette nods, looking at Sam.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" the brunette asks.

"No," says Sam.

"Would you go on a date with me?" asks the redhead.

"I don't date."

The redhead's smile disappears and the surprised look on her face makes it clear that no guy has ever told her no before. "Why not?" she asks.

Sam looks her right in the eye. "Because relationships are a waste of time, that's why. Especially with young girls like you."

The girls look like they just saw a dog get hit by a car.

"You're an asshole," says the redhead.

"Yeah," says the brunette.

The girls watch Sam, gauging his reaction. They want him to take it all back, to hear him say he was just joking and apologize. But he just looks at the girls and smiles.

"You guys are losers," says the brunette. "I bet you can't even get with girls your own age."

They get up to leave. I watch the redhead walk away. She's wearing a backless dress. I can see her shoulder blades sway as she walks—little white wings.

§

I start feeling drowsy around midnight. I look over at Sam and see his eyes glazed over with his hands gripped to the wheel. His head is leaned back against the headrest like a pillow. I ask him if he has any Adderall. He tells me to check his jacket.

I grab his motorcycle jacket off the back seat. It's black and heavy, made of thick goat leather. I find the Altoids mint can in one of its pockets. I open it and a plastic bag unravels, tiny blue pills spilling out. I start crushing two pills into powder with a razor. Snorting Adderall isn't like snorting coke. Adderall never feels good. Coke does once I did it for a while. I got into coke after my girlfriend in college dumped me—we'd been together for three years—and I spent the next two month blowing the pain away.

After crushing the pills into two neat lines inside the Altoids can, I take a crisp dollar bill from my wallet and roll it up. I rail a line. My right nostril strings like I'm inhaling broken glass. I didn't crush it well enough.

“Hook it up,” Sam says after I finish my line.

I hand the Altoids can over to him and then grab the steering wheel. Sam's eyes widen, and the glaze on his face wipes away. He rubs his nose and starts sniffing like he's about to sneeze. I grab a pack of Marlboros of the dashboard, light two, and hand one to him.

We smoke in silence.

Sam finishes his cigarette and ashes it on his wrist. It's an old habit I've seen him do hundreds of times. I asked him about it once, why he used his wrist as an ashtray. This was when we were at Seattle Academy after we'd taken some mushrooms. Sam answered my question by telling me a story about his mom. How when he was eight, he knocked over a new TV his mom had just bought while he was playing with his dog. His mom went wild. She pinned Sam to the ground, grabbed his wrist, and burned a cigarette into his arm. Drilled it left and right until it sank through his skin.

After he had finished the story, he touched the scar like he was seeing it for the first time. “No woman will ever hurt me like that again,” he said.

§

We’re passing through Medford—we pulled off the freeway to get gas—when I see the first lighted sign in hours. It’s a red silhouette of a woman with horns and a devil’s tail. *Sassy’s Girls*.

“Did you see that sign?” I ask.

“What about it?”

“Let’s go.”

“Are you serious?” Sam looks over at me.

“Yeah, why not?”

Sam shakes his head laughing. “You’re the boss birthday boy.”

Sam makes a U-turn. The Tahoe sounds like a motor boat as it picks up speed.

Medford’s sidewalks are empty, its windows are black, but the strip club’s small parking lot is full. Sam parks on the street. I didn’t want to go in sober. I twist open the Bombay Sapphire. The smell of juniper runs up my nose. I do a long pull. He does a pull. We walk into the club.

Stage lights bathe the room in a red glow. Dance music is blasting and no one is talking. There’s one stage in the center of the room. About twenty men sit around it watching a stripper pole dance. Sam and I stop and stare at her. She has long legs and wide hips, a slender muscular frame, and a long blonde braid that swings past her pink thong. She’s mesmerizing.

The bartender waves us over and checks our driver's licenses. I give him forty dollars and he breaks it into fives and ones. Sam and I find two seats at the stage, right up front.

I slide ten dollars onto the stage. The girl notices me and I think I can see her eyes brighten up a bit. She steps off the stage, walks towards me, and crawls into my lap, grinding her ass into my crotch. I want to touch her, but I keep my hands gripped to the chair.

The song finishes and she slides off my lap, giving me a wink as she walks away. She picks up my tip and walks off the stage. A new stripper walks on stage wearing a yellow G-string and a bikini top. A serpent tattoo stretches up her body—it's tail starts at her foot, then slithers up her leg, hips, spine and its head rests between her shoulder blades, its forked tongue wrapped around her neck.

I nudge Sam with my elbow and point to the blonde walking off the stage. "I'm going to get a dance."

Sam nods at me with a grin.

I get up and go after my girl. She's standing at the bar counting her tips. She sees me walking towards her and smiles.

"Hi," I say, "I was wondering if I could get a lap dance?"

"Sure can," she says, "Do you both want a one?"

I look behind me and see Sam standing there with his hands in his pockets, grinning.

"It'll be sixty for both of you. You get three songs."

I open my leather bi-fold and hand her three twenties.

“Okay, follow me.”

We follow her through a black curtain, down a hallway with four doors, and enter the last one. It’s a small room with a polished cement floor, a brown leather couch in the center, with a dim spotlight focused on it. Two large stereo monitors face the couch, playing a techno song.

Sam and I take a seat on the small couch; our legs pressed up against each other. She starts stripping, straddles Sam and unclips her bra. She has pierced nipples; a little metal rod runs through each one. Sam asks if he can touch her. She nods. He cups one of her breasts, pinching her nipple. I’ve never seen a stripper let a man touch her.

The first song finishes and I sit tight, waiting for my girl to start dancing on me like she did earlier. The second song goes by and she’s getting into it and Sam’s hands are all over her body—I feel like I’m watching them have sex. The third song finishes and I paid for the dance and the only action I got was Sam’s leg rubbing against mine. She stands up and smiles.

“You’re a hottie,” she says looking at Sam. “Want to go another round?”

Sam nods, looks at me and rubs his fingers together. He’s asking me for more money.

“Pay for it yourself.”

I walk up to the bar and order a double vodka-7. The bartender hands it to me and I drain it down. I order another. I can’t stop thinking about Sam and the stripper and the girls we hung out with earlier. They all wanted Sam; they didn’t want me.

The girl with the serpent tattoo is dancing on the stage. She takes off her bikini top, gets on her hands and knees, and crawls towards a man dressed in a suit. In his

right hand is a fist full of dollars; he wants to make sure he's noticed. When she gets closer, he dumps a bunch of bills on the stage. I can see him staring at her tits and ass, but he never looks her in the eye.

Sam comes out from behind the curtain with my girl behind him. They're smiling. Sam gets the bartender's attention and he pours Sam and my girl a shot. Sam whispers in her ear. She laughs and nods, touching his arm. Sam pulls out a pen and gives it to her. She writes on a napkin, kisses his cheek, and then heads for the stage. I can't believe what I'm seeing.

Sam comes over to me. He slides the napkin across the bar towards me with a big smile. "Just got her number."

I finish my second vodka-7. I don't say anything.

Sam looks at me for a second, waiting for me to congratulate him. The last thing I want to do is congratulate him. We leave the club and walk towards the Tahoe.

I stop walking. "Sam, why did you get a dance with my girl?"

He turns and faces me. "What do you mean?"

"Answer my question."

"Jesus, chill out. She was just a stripper. I don't give a shit about her. Here, you want her number?" He holds out the napkin.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me."

"Listen man, if you wanted her, you should have gone after her. You need to stop being so scared of every girl you see."

"I'm scared? You've never dated a girl in your life. All you do is fuck them. You're afraid of actually loving someone. You're just as scared as I am."

“You’re just jealous.”

I lunge at Sam.

He sees me coming, but he’s surprised, flat-footed. I swing my fist at his jaw and knock him in the neck. I throw another punch, going for his kidney, but Sam shoves me back. There’s a glimmer of wildness in his eyes. Sam’s a natural born fighter. I’ve seen him knock a guy’s canine tooth out in a bar fight; the tooth buried itself into Sam’s knuckle.

Sam rushes at me. He pounds me in the stomach—twice—knocking the wind out of me. I gasp for breath. He lands a third punch across my cheekbone. My vision snaps black; I’m going dizzy. I raise my hands up to protect my face. Sam wails on my ribs, stomach, kidneys. I can’t breathe.

Time slows down: I watch Sam’s fist flying towards my jaw; he’s going to finish me with a haymaker. I flinch away and he misses. I swing at his nose and bury my knuckles into his face, putting all my weight behind the blow. I feel his soft nose bend, then snap. Sam’s knees wobble. He drops to the ground like a fallen tree. He looks up at me wide-eyed, covered in blood and mud.

Sam laughs.

He laughs and laughs. Blood is flowing out of his nose like a leaking faucet.

“Jesus Christ,” he says, touching his nose. “I think you just broke my nose.”

It looks crooked; it suits him.



## **My Girlfriend Emma**

Sunday, September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Emma and I have a Sunday tradition: we do whatever we want.

Last Sunday we woke up without an alarm, grinned at each other's bed hair, kissed our crusty eyes open, and tasted each other's morning breath. Afterwards, we lay sprawled across my bed, the comforter piled on the floor, my body heaving and sweaty and going cold, except for the spot where Emma's hand rested on my chest; there it was nice and warm.

Emma got out of bed to take a shower. If Emma gets up first I get to watch her walk across my room to the bathroom. She has a fantastic ass. I got out of bed and followed her. When I stepped in the shower, the first thing I did was wash Emma's long brown hair. I ran my fingers through her thick soapy curls. She scrubbed my back with the luffa and reminded me that I needed to exfoliate more often. When Emma and I began dating, my shower had a bar of Dove soap and a bottle of Head and Shoulders shampoo. Now it has a facial cleanser, shampoo and conditioner that are sulfate-free, a pink women's razor and a lavender scented body wash.

For breakfast, we ate maple bars. Emma has a sweet tooth; her eyes lit up like a Christmas tree when she saw the white pastry box. I like to spoil her. While we were eating, she glared at me and said with her mouth full, "You're making me fat, you know that?"

After breakfast, we browsed *The Oregonian*. Emma did the crossword and read the celebrity gossip columns muttering, "I can't believe she got a boob job" and "I knew

they'd break up." I read the funnies, showing her the good ones. When the paper got boring, I grabbed a pencil and paper and brainstormed a list of things to do:

Make out in an elevator  
Get high and tan in Washington Park  
Take a random bus just to see where it goes  
Rollerblade the waterfront  
Sneak into a movie without tickets

Emma told me to put "grocery shopping" on the list. I added it and then crossed it out. Only fun things go on the list. We decided to go to the Oregon Zoo. She brought her Polaroid camera and we came up with a game: after she took a picture, the photo popping out of the camera like a kid sticking out their tongue, I wrote a haiku on the back. She'd taken at least a hundred photos by the end of the afternoon, and I'd written a hundred shitty little haikus. That was a fun Sunday.

But today was different.

Emma woke up at 6:30 with an alarm, rolled out of bed, taking the sheets and comforter with her, showered, and then left without kissing me goodbye. She went to a yoga class. No Sunday sex. No maple bars. No celebrity boob jobs. Just yoga pants, yoga mats, and yoga sweat.

I lay in bed after she left, tossing and turning for a few hours, staring at the back of my eyelids. I never fall back asleep.

When I got out of bed, I wanted a cigarette. I could put on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, walk a block to the mini mart, buy a pack of Marlboros, smoke one cigarette, throw the pack in the trash, toss my smoky clothes in the washing machine and then take a shower. Emma would never know.

Emma didn't care that I smoked when we began dating. She saw our relationship as strictly sexual—nothing long term. I'm not her type. The guys she dates wear power suits with power ties, keep their hair in perfect comb-overs and shake your hand with a vice grip, then give you their business card, in your now mutilated hand, so that I'd remember how important they are.

I work at Powell's Books and make \$8.40 an hour. I organize books for a living and tell people where the bathrooms are. Emma was dating two guys when we met: one who drove a Porsche and another who drove a Mercedes. I ride a Schwinn bicycle.

But the longer we dated, the more often she slept over. And the more she slept over, the more she complained about how my shirts and sheets smelled like cigarettes. After two months of dating, she asked me to stop smoking. That's when I quit. A week later, instead of putting her toothbrush back in her purse before leaving for work, she placed it next to mine on the sink. Later that night, she introduced me to one of her friends as her "boyfriend, Ryan."

I had smoked for five years. When Emma had asked me to quit, I told her I'd do it because it was the healthy thing to do. That was a lie. I didn't do it for my health. I did it because I wanted her more than I wanted a cigarette.

Emma is the kind of girl you run across once or twice in your life. She's beautiful. Emma dresses down because she's tired of guys torpedoing towards her on the street. She'll wear a baggy sweatshirt, faded jeans, flip-flops, and have her hair up in a messy bun and guys still stare at her.

I decided to get up without showering, went to the kitchen, made a cup of coffee, and opened the white pastry box: four big cinnamon swirl rolls. I decided to eat two.

Emma had left a note on the kitchen table:

Portland Art Museum?  
Call when you're up.  
xoxo

I didn't know Emma loved art until our fifth date. We were eating sushi for lunch when I asked her one of my canned dating question: "What would you do if money were no object?"

"Photography."

Her immediate response surprised me. "So why aren't you doing it?" I asked.

That's when she paused, fiddled with her chopsticks and soaked a sushi roll in soy sauce. Right before she put the sushi in her mouth she said, "My Dad."

"Your Dad?"

"He thinks photography is a hobby, not a career," she said chewing.

"But you're twenty-seven. Who cares what your father thinks." I didn't know it at the time, but Emma's Dad was a founding partner in a multi-million dollar accounting firm in New York. He was an entrepreneurial behemoth.

"Yeah, I don't care so much now. But I did when I was younger." She sipped her miso soup. I chewed a piece of fried calamari.

"Before I graduated from college, I told my father I was considering photography as a career. He said that he'd never met a photographer, or any artist, who could ever support their family."

“Jesus.”

“He gave me an ultimatum,” she said, resting her chopsticks across the wasabi bowl. “I could either become a photographer and never get another dime from him again. Or I could salvage my fine arts degree by getting an MBA and graduate with a ‘real’ job and my father’s support.”

“When was the last time you shots some photos?”

“Awhile.”

“How long?”

“My father made me throw away all my cameras before grad school.” Emma took a chunk of green wasabi and ground it into her soy sauce bowl.

The next Sunday, we lay in bed, dozing in the afternoon sun. Emma had been re-reading *The Hobbit* aloud to me.

“Hey,” she said. “Are you listening?” She poked me in my stomach with her elbow.

“I’m listening.”

Emma closed the book and turned over to face me. “You fell asleep. I thought you said you were a good listener.”

“I am.”

I rolled out of bed and opened my closet. I pulled out a shoebox wrapped in newspaper and set it in front of her on the bed. She looked at the box and then up at me. Her fingers traced the wrapping paper, found the creases, and delicately removed the newspaper, then lifted the lid and gasped.

“The first photo I ever took was with a polaroid.”

“I think it’s about time you started again, don’t you?”

She raised the camera to her face and pointed it at me.

“Hey! I’m naked.”

She laughed and snapped a photo, then another, and another, the photos spilling out of the camera. The camera covered her eyes and nose, but it didn’t cover her smile.

Emma kept the polaroid tucked in her purse, pulling it out when something interested her. She could take a picture of a garbage dumpster or a sewer drain, stuff I walked by every day and tried to ignore, and make it look beautiful. I didn’t know those ugly, shitty things had any beauty in them.

Emma had mentioned that the new art exhibit at the Portland Art Museum featured an artist famous for his female nudes. I turned my phone on and sent her a text message:

Me: Morning babe  
Sun 10:41

Emma: Are you still in bed?  
Sun 10:55

Me: No how was yoga?  
Sun 10:56

Emma: It was good  
Sun 11:04

Me: Still on for the museum?  
Sun 11:04

Emma: Sure  
Sun 11:17

Me: 12?  
Sun 11:19

Emma: K  
Sun 11:31

I got to the art museum early and waited for her on the white marble steps. I waved when I saw her. She was still in her yoga clothes. I wished she had changed into something nicer.

“Hey,” I said, kissing her cheek. “Want to grab something to eat before going in?”

“I already ate. Didn’t you?”

“Yep, two cinnamon rolls. You would have loved them.”

“You know I don’t like eating sweets.”

After I had bought our tickets, we separated; Emma went into one gallery and I went into another. At the gallery’s entrance was the artist’s biography:

Jean Desire Gustave Courbet (June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1819 – December, 31<sup>st</sup> 1877) was a French painter who led the Realist movement. Committed to painting only what he could see, Courbet occupies an important place in 19<sup>th</sup> century French painting as an innovator and as an artist willing to make bold social statements through his work.

I went into the gallery. There were only four paintings in the room, one on each wall, and all of them were of nudes. One was a woman lying down on a bed, her face hidden and her legs spread open. Her vagina was painted with more detail than anything else in the painting. The painting’s caption read, “The Origin of the World.”

“What do you think?” Emma asked. She stood behind me.

I turned around and looked at her. She was looking at the painting. “I don’t know.” I could feel my cheeks turning red.

“It’s pornographic. He’s portraying her as nothing but a vagina. Which is what porn does. Porn portrays girls as blowup dolls.”

I swallowed.

“Do you still watch that stuff?” she asked, studying me.

“What do you mean?”

“Porn.”

I shook my head. “I told you I’ve stopped watching that stuff. I stopped after you asked me to.”

She was silent.

“You left your laptop open last week. There was a porn video on the screen, so I checked your internet history. You watch porn every day Ryan.”

“Jesus, keep your voice down,” I said. There were six other people in the gallery. It was quiet. A man glanced at me. I could feel myself sweating: behind my neck, between my arms and across my chest. I swallowed and felt the saliva slide down my throat.

“Why did you just lie to me.”

“Emma you’re making a scene. Let’s go somewhere else.” I put my hand on her back, but she stepped away.

“I don’t want to go somewhere else. You promised me you’d stop watching porn. It’s like you’re cheating on me.”

A young couple was staring at us. A man walked out of the gallery.

“Ok Emma. I’m a liar and I watch porn daily. There, I said it. Are you happy now?”

“No. I’m not happy. I don’t trust you. I think we should take some time apart,” she said.

I felt violently open.



I could see Emma's things in my apartment: her toothbrush by the sink, the golden earrings that she'd left by the bedside, her comb, her extra pair of reading glasses, and her silk night slip. All these little pieces of Emma. All of them gone.

## **Chastity the Prostitute**

Saturday, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010

She called herself Chastity. Except for her black hair and two tattoos—a Celtic cross on her inner thigh and an anatomical heart on her wrist—she looked identical to Emma. Her ad on Backpage.com read:

### Your Wish is My Command – 22

Posted: Sat. Oct. 2, 8:37 PM

(503) 513-5331

100% REAL Body & 100% REAL Pics & 100% READY Now. Soft skin, sparkling eyes, beautiful lips, cute toes, & a perfect hourglass figure that will have your mouth watering. I'll rock your world and keep you rock hard until you leave satisfied. Text me now! I'll provide satisfaction at any hour. No blocked calls. No foul language. No negotiations. Let's have some fun.

Donations = 150 hh – 200 h – 350 2h

I picked up my cell phone and entered Chastity's number. I started a text message but hesitated; I wasn't sure what to say.

I heard the apartment door open and slammed shut.

"Ryan?" Sam called. "You home?"

The light in my room was off. I stayed quiet.

Sam knocked on my door. "Ryan? You in there?" He grabbed the door handle, but I had locked it. "Ryan. I know you're in there. Open up."

"I'm sleeping."

"No you're not. You're moping about Emma or jerking off."

"Fuck off."

"Open up man." He pounded on the door.

“Alright,” I said. “I’m getting up.” He kept pounding on my door. I closed out of Internet Explorer and shut down my laptop. I opened the door. Sam looked at me and shook his head.

“You look like shit. There’s food stains on your shirt. Take a shower and put on something nice. We’re going out tonight.”

“I don’t want to go out.”

“I don’t care. I’m not letting you spend another weekend in our shitty apartment.” Sam glanced at his watch. “We’re leaving at ten. I want to get to the Blue Moon before it gets too crowded.”

“You’re a douchebag, you know that?”

“I’m your savior. Now get in the shower.”

Thirty minutes later, I grabbed my keys on my desk and put my iPhone in my pocket.

## §

The Blue Moon Saloon was packed with people. Sam headed to the bar and I followed him, listening to people yell at each other over the bar’s loud music. A girl screamed in my ear as I passed her, calling out to her friend, and I could see little spit particles fly out of her mouth. Sam and I got to the bar and took a seat. I wiped a pile of peanut shells in front of me onto the floor. Shannon was bartending. She saw us and winked. “Be with you guys in a second,” she said, squeezing a grapefruit over a glass, her forehead speckled with sweat.

She came up to us and asked us for our orders. I told her a Coors and a shot of Evan Williams. Sam got the same. She poured the whiskeys and drew the beers, then set the drinks in front of us. We knocked the shots back.

A blonde and a brunette sat at the end of the bar. The blonde had on a low-cut blouse and gray miniskirt, a gold necklace disappeared into her cleavage. The brunette had short cropped hair and had a cute nose ring. She had nice legs and her a little black dress did nothing to cover them.

Sam followed my stare. “Wow,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go talk to them.”

“Another round first.” I never knew what to say to women at bars. It was a mystery to me. But I knew that alcohol blurred everything into a nice warm buzz. Conversations slowed down—it was harder to think—and I didn’t care as much.

Sam shouted at Shannon, lifted up the empty shot glasses, and gestured for more. She brought over the bottle of whiskey and he ordered four shots. Shannon lined the shot glasses in a row and poured them full. He picked up one in each hand and I did the same. We clinked glasses and downed the shots back-to-back. I swallowed down a gag.

Then Emma walked in through the bar’s blue doors.

She was with a guy I’d never seen before. He looked like a model in a fashion magazine—chiseled cheekbones, brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, tall and slender. He was wearing a cashmere trench coat, charcoal pants, and a white collared shirt. His hand was on Emma’s lower back.

Emma had done up her hair. She never did her hair up. She was showing off her ballet legs in a tight blue miniskirt, the one that zipped up from the back. I've only seen her wear a miniskirt twice. She was trying to impress this guy.

"Emma just walked in," I said.

Sam looked over his shoulder and saw her. "Do you want to leave?"

"I don't know." The whiskey crawled up my throat. I didn't want Emma to think I was leaving because of her. I didn't want her to know how much it hurt seeing her.

"Listen man, let's get out of here. Head over to the Silver Dollar," Sam said.

"I hate the Silver Dollar."

"What do you want to do then?"

"Just give me a minute." I wrapped my hands around my pint glass. I watched Emma sit down at a booth. The guy she was with came up to the bar, standing a few seats away from me. He leaned against the bar and pulled out his money clip. He had five one-hundred-dollar bills folded into it. That's what I make in a week working at Powell's Books. He saw me staring at him and nodded at me. I didn't nod back.

Shannon came up to him and he ordered two gin and tonics. Emma hates gin and tonics. I watched the guy bring the drinks to Emma. She sipped her gin and tonic and gave him a smile, pretending to like her drink.

"Tell you what," Sam said. "Why don't we go hit up that hot blonde and her cute friend?"

I looked over at the blonde. I wanted Emma to see me flirting with a girl that pretty. I nodded at Sam, stood up, tucked in my shirt, and drained my beer. We headed for them.

I was getting more lightheaded as we got closer. The whiskey had hit my stomach. I pulled my hands out of my pockets, stood up straight, and looked the blonde in the eye. She met my gaze. I felt the urge to look away, but I forced myself to keep looking at her. I knew I needed to look confident. My heart pounded against my chest.

Sam introduced us to the girls. The blonde caught me staring at her boobs—I glanced away—she pulled up her blouse.

The blonde introduced herself as Holly.

The brunette introduced herself as Katie.

I shook their hands and did most of the shaking. Sam asked the girls what they drank. They smiled at each other and told him cosmos. He waved down Shannon and ordered their drinks, then eased his arm around the back of Katie's chair, and started talking to her.

I turned to Holly. She had taken out her iPhone and started texting.

"It's pretty busy tonight," I said.

She nodded, still texting. I had no idea what to say to her. I felt like an idiot.

"Do you come here often," I asked.

She looked up from her cell phone. "What?"

I repeated myself.

"Oh, we're visiting from L.A. One of our girlfriends is getting married."

"Weddings are always exciting."

She shrugged.

"You don't look too excited."

“I’ve been to like five weddings in six months. I mean, every girl I know is racing to get married right now. It’s like if you don’t get married before thirty, you’re a failure. It’s kind of annoying, you know?”

I didn’t know, but I nodded, pretending I did.

“Well, do you have someone special to marry back in L.A.?” I asked.

She looked me in the eye, the first time since we’d started talking. “Are you asking me if I’m single?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Because we’re just having a girl’s night out tonight. We’re not here to pick up random guys.”

I looked over at Katie. She was laughing at everything Sam said. It was like watching a flower open to the sun. He had placed his hand on her knee. He’d inch his way up her leg the longer they talked.

I pulled out my pack of Marlboros. “Want to step outside?”

Holly jerked her head back. “Do I look like a smoker?”

“No, I just wanted to talk outside. It isn’t so noisy.”

“I can’t be around cigarette smoke. It gives me a headache.”

“Okay, I won’t smoke then.”

She shook her head at me, pulled out her iPhone and started texting again. I didn’t exist to her anymore.

I looked over at Emma. The guy had wrapped his arm around her shoulders. He leaned in and started kissing her as she was talking, stopping her mid-sentence. She

didn't push him away. She grabbed his shirt, pulled him closer, and opened her mouth for a deeper kiss.

I had been on four dates with Emma before she let me kiss her. We'd know each other a month. This guy had probably known her a week. I wanted to walk up to their booth, grab the guy by his piece-of-shit-ponytail, and bash his head into the table.

I got up and went outside.

My breath frosted in the cool night air. I sat down at a wooden table next to the bar's entrance and lit a cigarette—it took two matches; my hands wouldn't stop shaking. I took a deep drag and pulled out my iPhone. This time I didn't hesitate.

Me: Hi, is this Chastity?

Sat 10:41

Chastity: Yes

Sat 10:43

Me: How does this work exactly? This is my first time

Sat 10:44

Chastity: Are you looking for a date tonight?

Sat 10:45

Me: Yeah

Sat 10:45

Chastity: What time

Sat 10:47

Me: Are you free now?

Sat 10:48

Chastity: I can be. Where did you want to meet?

Sat 10:50

Me: I'm at the blue moon saloon on 21st

Sat 10:51

Chastity: I could be there in 20 minutes

Sat 10:51

Me: Ok see you soon

Sat 10:52



My hands were sweaty when I hung up. The realization that I had just hired an escort set in. It had only taken ten minutes and I hadn't even spoken to her. I scrolled through the text message conversation again. It almost didn't feel real.

Three cigarettes later, a yellow taxicab pulled to the curb and Chastity stepped out. She wore a short red dress, black nylon stockings, and three-inch high heels. Her dress clung to her as she walked. She looked like Emma's identical twin.

I waved at her. "Chastity?"

"Hi there." She smiled at me.

We shook hands and she sat down across from me.

"Aren't you handsome," she said.

I couldn't tell if the compliment was part of her routine, but I also couldn't remember the last time Emma had told me I looked handsome. It felt good.

"Thanks. You're beautiful."

She laughed. Every guy she had dated had probably told her that.

"So what should we do on our date?" she asked.

"Well, what do you recommend?"

"Do you know how much time you want to spend with me?"

"Probably two hours."

"Okay. For two hours we could have a few drinks, get to know each other a bit, and then see what happens. Or we could head to my hotel and hang out there. It's really up to you."

"Let's start with a drink."

"Sounds good. Do you have your donation with you?"

I pulled out my leather bi-fold and paid her.

“Okay,” she said, putting the money in her purse. “Let’s have some fun.”

I offered her my arm and we walked into the Blue Moon. Several guys checked Chastity out. She was hard to miss. She carried herself with style. She wasn’t ashamed of her beautiful body and how men looked at her. She stood up straight and looked men in the eye and ignored the fact that they were drooling over themselves. She flowed. I felt whole with her next to me. I never felt right when I was alone; sometimes it felt good, but it never felt right. I felt like I was with Emma again.

I looked for Sam as Chastity and I sat down at the bar. He was making out with Katie in a corner booth, his hand now under her skirt. At a table nearby them, Holly was flirting with two guys who were trying to impress her. She didn’t have her iPhone out. I scanned the room twice but couldn’t see Emma or her date. She had left—I wouldn’t have to talk to her. The tension in my shoulders melted away and I relaxed into my seat. I didn’t have to prove myself anymore. I felt lighter. Better.

Shannon came up to us and I ordered two greyhounds.

“So what kind of work do you do?” Chastity asked.

I thought about lying to her. I could say I was an Intel business analyst or a bank accountant, somebody important. But for some reason I told her the truth: “I work at Powell’s Books.”

“Are you like a manager or something?”

“No, I just help people find books and tell them where the bathrooms are.”

She laughed. “Sounds exciting.”

“It’s an action-packed job.” I smiled at her.

I asked her what she did out of habit and then realized what I had asked. “Sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

“That’s okay. I’m a student actually. This is only a part-time thing.”

“Really? What do you study?”

“Biochemistry.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “You’re joking.”

She smiled. “Not joking.”

I laughed. I was starting to feel like I was on a real date.

Shannon set the drinks in front of us. We toasted, looking each other in the eye; her irises were a gray-blue. Emma’s were green. I sipped my drink and noticed the room starting to sway like I was on a boat. I was drunk.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” she asked.

“No, I just got out of a relationship.”

“Is that a good or bad thing?”

“It’s a long story honestly.”

“I’ve got time.” She crossed her legs and brushed her foot against mine.

“Let’s talk about something else.”

“Oh come on, don’t be like that.” She gave a good-natured smile. “I’m good at talking about relationship stuff. So who ended it?”

“I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“Well, if she called you tonight and said she wanted you back, what would you say?”

I thought about it for a moment. I had never known a woman so beautiful and at the same time so gentle and intelligent. "I'd take her back."

"Ryan?"

I heard Emma's voice and froze. I turned around and saw her standing next to her date. The room was spinning.

"Emma?" I choked out her name.

"It's good to see you," she said. "Bill this is my friend Ryan. Ryan meet Bill."

Bill held out his hand and we shook. He crushed my hand in a vice grip.

"Good to meet you," he said.

I nodded without responding.

Emma looked at Chastity. "How do you know Ryan?"

I had forgotten to introduce Chastity. She glanced at me and I could tell she wasn't sure what to say. "Emma, this is my date Chastity." I emphasized the word date, looking at Emma as I said it.

Emma didn't seem surprised. She didn't give Chastity an up-and-down or seem jealous. She didn't care that I was with another girl. Emma smiled and shook Chastity's hand.

"You look like Emma's twins," Bill said to Chastity. "Maybe you're related and don't even know it." He laughed.

Emma studied at me. I drained my greyhound. The room wouldn't stop spinning.

"I know," Chastity said. "I feel like I'm staring at myself in the mirror right now. What are the chances of this even happening?"

Emma looked at Chastity and then at me. There was pity in her eyes.

“Well, we should get going,” Emma said. “Have fun on your date.”

Emma and Bill walked away. She held his hand as they left the bar.

My mind was spinning. The room was spinning. My stomach was spinning. I wanted to vomit.

Emma walked away holding hands with Bill. I told Chastity I needed to piss.

I went up to Sam’s booth. He and Katie looked like they were about to have sex right there in the bar. I knocked on their table to get their attention. They stopped and looked at me. Their faces had the warm red glow of being very drunk. It took Sam a second to recognize who I was. I asked him for a bump. He slid the Altoids mint can across the table and then went back to making out with Katie. I went to the bathroom.

I kicked open a stall door and lifted the toilet seat up with my foot. I forced two fingers down my throat. The throw-up launched out of my mouth like a fire hydrant breakaway. The toilet water turned brown with bourbon and hamburger meat.

The guy in the stall next to mine chuckled. “That’s right man, get it all out.”

I threw up again and flushed the toilet. Yellow and brown specks covered the toilet rim like a shit version of a Jackson Pollack painting. I put the toilet seat down, rolled up my crispest dollar bill, and did a line of coke. My nose went numb. The back of my throat went numb. The stall walls stopped spinning. My mind was sharp—clearheaded. I felt good again.

I went to the sink and rinsed my mouth out. I wiped the sweat off my face with a paper towel and stared in the mirror: my coke nostril was bleeding. My face was pale. I pinched my nose shut and watched the blood drip down my chin and into the sink. After

a few minutes, the bleeding stopped. I washed my hands and left the bathroom without looking in the mirror again.

Ben and Katie had left. Holly was still sitting at her table; only one guy was with her now. I walked up to Chastity and told her I was ready to go. I closed my tab and we left. Two taxicabs idled in front of the bar. We got in one and Chastity told the driver to head to the Holiday Inn on NW 23<sup>rd</sup>.

The taxicab dropped us off at the hotel lobby. We walked through the empty lobby towards the elevators. The hotel concierge looked at us as we passed her. She didn't smile or greet us, which seemed unusual. Maybe I was the second or third guy she'd seen with Chastity that night.

The elevator went up; I listened to the floors beep by. Chastity leaned against me and I turned to kiss her. She put her pointer finger across her lips as if to silence me.

“You can kiss me anywhere except my lips.”

The only place I wanted to kiss her was on the lips. The elevators doors slid open and I pulled away. I followed her down the long hall until she stopped in front of room 808. She swiped her keycard through the reader and opened the door. The room looked like every hotel room I'd ever seen: the egg-shell white walls, the pastoral painting hanging above the bed, a radio alarm clock on the bed stand, an old fat TV, and a desk covered in dust pushed into the corner.

Chastity went into the bathroom to freshen up. I sat down at the foot of the bed and waited. I heard the bathroom door open. She stepped out wearing a black lace thong and a garter belt clipped to her nylon stockings. So much skin. It was like looking at the sun; I had a hard time taking it all in.

She said, “How do I look?”

I said, “Amazing.”

She sauntered towards me; her hips swayed left and right. She took my hands and placed them on her waist. I held her hipbones, ran my fingers across her flat-toned stomach, and traced her spine upwards, then pulled her down into my lap. I tried to kiss her, but she shifted her head away. I wasn't kissing her. She wasn't kissing me. I wasn't getting hard.

I grabbed one of her firm breasts. I sucked on her nipples. No response. I ran my hand down her legs—her skin was satin smooth. She grabbed my crotch and noticed I was soft. She started rubbing me through my jeans.

She gave me a warm whisper, “Don't be nervous.”

Telling me not to be nervous was not a turn on.

I stood up and she helped me undress. I took off my shirt, my belt, my shoes, socks, pants, underwear. I pulled her into me. Skin on skin. She stroked my cock. I groped her ass. Nothing. I've never had a problem getting hard before.

I pushed her on the bed, opened her legs, and dry humped her panties. I pounded her with my pelvis. I gave her four violent thrusts, hitting her harder and harder. I wanted to fuck her and fuck her and fuck her and fuck her. My cock stayed soft.

“Kiss me,” I said.

She looked me in the eye and said, “I want you to fuck me.”

I stroked my cock, strangling it, beating it. I closed my eyes and focused on the sensation. I was half-hard. She saw me getting harder, pushed my hand away, and rubbed my cock against her clit, through her panties. I was hard.

“Kiss me.”

“Fuck me.”

I held her by the chin and forced a kiss. I wanted her to want me. It needed to be real. She opened her mouth but didn't kiss me back. Her lips were limp. I slid my tongue into her mouth. Her tongue stayed still. I felt like I was doing CPR on a dying body.

I rolled off her and stared at the eggshell ceiling. My cock had gone soft.

“I can't stay a hard.”

We stayed silent for a minute, lying next to each other.

She put her hand on my chest. “Maybe we could just and talk for a little bit? Or I could give you a backrub. You still have thirty minutes.”

“I think I should go.”

I got off the bed and put on my clothes. Chastity lay on the bed and watched me. She looked incredible. I'd never been with a woman more beautiful. The sweat on her forehead and breasts sparkled. She looked like a mermaid or a Greek goddess. But all that beauty hadn't been enough.

She walked me to the door.

“See you around,” I said.

She didn't say anything. Neither of us looked the other in the eye. She closed the door.



## **Pornstar Perfect**

Tuesday, November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010

The first time I saw her, I was waiting in the fifteen-items-or-less checkout line at Whole Foods Market. She was standing in front of me, wearing jet-black jeans and a white blouse. I started undressing her. I unbuckled her belt, slid down her zipper, and pulled off her tight skinny jeans. I was wondering what kind of panties she was wearing when I stopped. I pulled my eyes away and forced them onto the conveyer belt.

Hers: apples, kale, a bottle of red wine, crackers, and toothpaste.

Mine: a prime rib steak, blue cheese, and a six pack of Coors Light.

I looked at her again.

She had her hair pulled back into a tight brown bun. Her face was heart-shaped with high cheekbones, big green eyes, and curly eyelashes. She looked like a Playboy girl. I couldn't stop staring.

Then she looked right at me—her eyes stabbing into mine—I looked away, feeling myself blush. Dr. Meyer's voice echoed in my mind: *Sexual arousal, Ryan, begins the moment you look at a woman longer than three seconds. That's the length of time it takes your brain to register sexual attraction and then fall into a fantasy. You need to train yourself—rewire your brain—to stop these fantasies before they begin.*

Later that week, I saw her again. I stood outside Powell's Books, smoking a Marlboro during my lunch break, when I noticed her coming towards me on the street. I had heard her before I saw her; the clip of her high heels striking the pavement. She was holding a red umbrella in one hand and a shopping bag in the other, her gaze locked on

the ground. I doubt she would have noticed me, but a pair of gloves slipped out of her bag as she passed, so I called out to her.

“Hey,” I said, picking up the gloves. “You dropped these.”

She turned around, glanced at me and took the gloves without smiling.

“Aren’t you going to say ‘thank you’?” I said.

She put the gloves back in her bag, thanked me, and then walked away. I felt like a cockroach that had scuttled across her path.

I couldn’t get her out of my mind for the rest of the day. I tried not to daydream about her, but it felt good, like a warm blanket on a cold day. During my fifteen-minute break, I stood where she’d dropped her gloves. I lit a cigarette and replayed the interaction in my mind.

First, when she realized that I’d saved her gloves, she gave me a pearly smile. Then giggled and thanked me, looking me in the eye the entire time. She put the gloves back in her bag and lingered, not acting anxious to turn around and leave me. I told her that she was pretty and asked if she’d like to get a drink sometime. She blushed and nodded and I pulled out my cell phone and got her number. As she walked away, with a little bounce in her step, I felt myself hooked to her like a fish on a line. I went up behind her, grabbed her shoulder to turn her around, and kissed her. She gasped—surprised—but pulled me closer. I pushed her up against the brick building bordering the sidewalk, our tongues dancing in and out of each other’s mouths. I bit her lower lip and she moaned. I knew she wanted me, so I lifted her dress, unzipped and pushed myself inside her. Right there in the street so that everyone could see.

At nine o'clock, I got off work and headed straight home. I unlocked the apartment door and called out to see if Sam was home.

Silence.

I went into my room, locked the door, and left the light off. I tossed my jacket on the floor and opened my laptop. I paused for a second as the Windows screen loaded. Dr. Meyer would describe this moment as being on the "edge of no return." He'd tell me I should close my laptop, take three deep breaths, and go for a walk around the block.

I opened Internet Explorer.

I started getting hard as I clicked open my bookmarks: BangBros.com, Brazzers.com, RealityKings.com. For years, I thought people who paid for porn subscriptions were stupid because there are plenty of websites that stream porn for free. But four months ago, I did a two-day trial to BangBros and couldn't believe how much better it was. Every video and image was in high definition and only took seconds to load. The subscription was \$60.00 a month, but it was worth it; I felt like I was watching porn for the first time again, back when I was twelve.

I logged into Brazzers.com and started scrolling through the hundreds of thumbnail images of beautiful woman. Each thumbnail opened a video that lasted thirty minutes to an hour and varied from softcore to hardcore content. All the videos were in high definition. I could see a girl's individual pubic hairs and the sweat glistening across her chest. I searched through them: blondes, brunettes, Asians, girls with big boobs, girls with big butts, ones who were petite and skinny. I stopped when I found a

pornstar that looked just like her. I unbuckled my belt and pulled off my pants and boxers. My mattress springs squeaked as I stroked.

§

“How many times have you viewed pornography this week?” Dr. Meyer said, cleaning his glasses with a handkerchief. When he put them on, he stared at me like a court judge calculating a criminal sentence.

Dr. Meyer was my shrink I had decided to start seeing. He specialized in treating depression and sex addiction. Over the last two months, he’d wear the same outfit at each meeting: a black suit jacket, black slacks, a thin black tie and a white collar shirt. I knew it was the same suit because the jacket was too big for him in the shoulders. I told him I hadn’t kept track.

“I thought I asked you to keep track last week?”

Dr. Meyer masked his accusations in questions.

“I forgot,” I said.

“Well, why don’t you try estimating?”

“How is this helping me again?”

Dr. Meyer tapped his pencil against his notebook. He was getting frustrated.

“Like I explained last week, we’re increasing awareness. The more aware we become of our habits, the easier it is to change them. By keeping track of your pornography consumption, you can assess how the habit is operating in your life and develop methods to change it.” He stopped tapping his pencil. “Do you understand?”

I nodded.

“Good. Why don’t you try keeping track again this week.” He paused, writing in his notebook. “Have you used the deep breathing exercise we practiced together during our last session?”

The Three Breath Exercise: in a moment of intense sexual arousal, take three deep breaths, focusing all attention of the sensation of breathing and then quickly move to a new location.

“A few of days ago.”

“And was it successful?”

“I’d been thinking about this girl I know all day, and after I had gotten off work I wanted to go home and jerk off to her.”

“Did you go home?” he interrupted.

I nodded. He wrote in his journal.

“When I got home, I turned on my laptop but paused as Windows loaded—I took three deep breaths—and closed my laptop, then I went outside and for a long walk. I didn’t jerk off that night.”

Dr. Meyer eyed me. “Fantastic, it’s those little victories that we’re aiming for Ryan. Remember Rome wasn’t built in a day; it was built brick by brick.”

§

I met Sam for beers at the Silver Dollar after my session with Mr. Meyer. It was happy hour and the bar was quiet. Sam and I were the only ones there except for a young couple sitting close to us at a booth. I’d lost two games of pool and if I lost again, Sam reminded me, I had to pick up his tab.

“I keep running into this girl around town,” I said.

“Yeah, so what? Portland’s a small place.” He handed me the cue stick.

“Am I stripes or solids?” I asked.

“Stripes,” he said. “So have you gotten her number?”

I shook my head.

Sam drank his beer. He stared at me as he drank. “You know, I can’t remember the last time you brought a girl back to the apartment.”

I leaned over the pool table and aimed my stick at the cue ball. I didn’t say anything.

“Fuck off man.”

The couple in the booth looked over at us. They were holding hands across the table. It was gross. I wanted to flick them off.

“You keep talking mentioning all these pretty girls you supposedly know, but you never do anything about it. When are you actually going to date one of them?”

“Jesus, the next time I see this chick I’ll get her number. Alright?” I took a shot and missed, landing the cue ball in a corner pocket.

“I know a girl I could set you up with.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“You need all the help you can get.”

“Listen, I don’t need you to set me up.” I pulled out my pack of Marlboros.  
“I’m headed out.”

“But we haven’t finished our game yet.”

“I don’t care,” I said, putting on my jacket and leaving.

The next morning, I got coffee at Heart Café before my ten o'clock shift at Powell's. A new girl was working the cash register. I tipped her a dollar and smiled. She smiled back, but I couldn't tell if she gave me a courtesy smile or a genuine one. I sat down with *The Oregonian* and sipped my coffee.

Then she walked in. It was her.

She floated into the room wearing a cream white dress, her black stiletto heels clicking the hardwood floor, her toned olive-tan legs, her polished red nails, the golden bracelet on her right wrist, push-up bra, soft pink lips, and diamond earrings.

I swallowed.

My heart pounded in my ears as she ordered her coffee to-go. I tried taking a deep breath, a Dr. Meyer breath. My stomach had clenched shut. She left the café with her coffee and I wrote my number down on my coffee napkin. I followed her.

She was walking in a hurried pace; her short dress flowing behind her. I ran to catch up with her.

"Excuse me," I said, out of breath. "I think you dropped this."

She turned around and I waved my coffee napkin at her. She paused, staring at me like a bird about to take flight.

"I just wanted to say I think you're one of the most—"

"What did I drop?"

"Oh, you didn't drop anything. I just wanted to give you my number." I held out the napkin, smiling. "Let's go out for coffee. My treat."

"I'm not interested."

We were so close I could smell her lavender perfume. She turned around and began walking away.

“Hey, I’m talking to you.”

I grabbed her shoulder.

“Don’t touch me,” she gasped.

“But we aren’t done talking.”

“I don’t care,” she said, shrugging off my hand on her shoulder. “I’m not interested. Now leave me alone.”

“You don’t know anything about me. I could be the most interesting guy you’ve ever met.”

I gave her a charming smile.

“I don’t go on dates with creeps like you.”

I stopped smiling.

“I’m not a creep,” I said.

“You’re a creep.”

“No I’m not. I’m not a creep.”

“You just followed me out of a coffee shop and I don’t know you. You’re a fucking creep.”

She started turning around, anxious to leave me, but I held her arm.

“Listen—”

“Get your hands off of me!” She swung her coffee at me—the lid popping off—and splashed burning hot coffee across my chest.

I stood stunned.



The coffee bled down my shirt as I heard her stilettos sprint away.

§

“I spilled coffee on myself,” I told my supervisor when he asked.

“Alright,” he said, shaking his head. “Go find a sweatshirt in the lost-and-found. You can’t work the reference desk looking like that.”

I felt like a teakettle boiling over as I sat at the reference desk. I couldn’t stop thinking about her. Her look of complete disdain, the coffee burning down my chest, the smell of her lavender perfume and sound of her stiletto heels all kept replaying in my mind. I wanted to stop thinking about her. I wanted to feel good again.

I could go to the fourth-floor bathroom, the one no one used. It was only ten minutes into my first shift. I had thirty minutes before my supervisor checked on me again. I stood up and put an away sign on the reference desk.

I walked up the three flights of stairs, my hand in my pocket, clutching my iPhone. I pushed the bathroom door open. It was empty. I went into the stall farthest from the door, locked it, pulled down my pants, my underwear, and sat down on the toilet.

I took out my iPhone. I tapped opened Safari and went to Brazzers.com. I wanted to forget about the girl. I could hear her voice ringing in my ears calling me a creep. I took a deep breath.

I clicked my phone off and stared at the black screen.

I was tired of feeling small, insignificant. I was tired of lying because I was afraid of myself. I was tired of jerking off to porn until my cock hurt. I was tired of paying prostitutes and strippers to pretend to like me. I was tired of proving to Sam that

I was a man. I was tired of looking for love in all the wrong places. I looked around me.

Torn toilet paper littered the floor and urine had stained the white tiles yellow.

I was ready for a change.

## **Sympathetic Villains & Misogyny: Why I Wrote What I Wrote**

Two questions inspired my creation of *Tell Her She's Pretty*: first, how do writers create sympathetic villains? Second, how do misogynistic characters experience love and sexual intimacy? I was introduced to the concept of sympathetic villains while reading Douglas Bauer's essay "The Need for Flawed Heroes and Sympathetic Villains." In his essay, Bauer proposes that all fictional characters must be complex and that the way to create complexity is through sympathy. Bauer asserts that a writer must "present villainous, ignoble, antiheroic characters sympathetically" (Bauer 48). *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines sympathy as, "The fact or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings of another." To understand Bauer's assertion, it is important to distinguish the difference between likeability and sympathy. A reader should not like a villain as they might a hero. They should, however, feel as though understand them. In other words, villains who are unjustifiably evil lack complexity and sympathy. According to Bauer, it is a writer's responsibility, then, to show why a character is a villain.

Bauer outlines four strategies a writer can employ to create sympathetic villains. First, a narrator can explain a character's behavior. The narrator's explanation, in a way, apologizes for the villain's actions by establishing a context—whether it is the villain's background, their social environment, their delusional psyche, a traumatic experience—tries to explain their villainy (Bauer 53). This "apology" does not excuse the villain's behavior or advocate for them, but it does help the reader understand their actions.

A second way to create sympathy is for the narrator to embody the villain's consciousness. By telling the story from the villain's viewpoint, the narrator forces the

reader to enter the villain's mind, and in doing so, the reader adopts a villainous worldview. By inhabiting a villain's consciousness, the reader can understand what they are thinking and what their rationale for their actions are. This continual invitation into a villain's mind has the unconscious effect of making the reader feel strangely grateful and privileged (Bauer 58), which further induces sympathy.

A third way to develop sympathy is to compare a less villain to a greater one. Readers naturally compare one character against another. If a villain is less malicious than another, if they are rebuked or bullied, or somehow made to suffer at the hands of another villain who is even more corrupt, than the lesser villain's evil will be diluted. As a result, the reader will be less condemning of the lesser villain's actions who appears relatively less evil.

Finally, how the writer characterizes a villain can determine how sympathetic they appear. If a villain is smoothly competent, dashing attractive, cold-blooded and calculated, they appear more malicious than one who is stuttering, self-conscious, stupid, and desperate (Bauer 55). The first villain appears more intentionally evil, and therefore less sympathetic. The more accidental a villain's actions seem, the easier it is for a reader to excuse them. Therefore, a writer can invoke sympathy by having a villain appear incompetent, which makes them feel less threatening.

Many well-known writers have utilize sympathetic villains. John Milton's speaker in *Paradise Lost* portrays Lucifer sympathetically, a character who could not be more perfectly evil. Shakespeare is a master at portraying sympathetic villains: Shylock, Richard the Third, Caliban, and Claudius (to name a few) are all given a chance during their respective plays to explain their actions; they are never portrayed as cardboard cut-

out villains. To further my understandings of Bauer's outlined strategies, I will analyze Charles Bukowski's protagonist in *Women*, Henry Chinaski.

Henry Chinaski is a misogynistic villain. On the surface, *Women* reads like a laundry list of Chinaski's sexual encounters. Chinaski's life goal, which he repeats three times in the novel, is to be "80 and fucking an 18 year old girl" (Bukowski 55). He is perpetually dissatisfied women, using and abusing them as he floats from one relationship to the next. Bukowski writes from Chinaski's perspective, who is a vulgar and pornographic narrator:

The trip to Catalina was horrible. I waited with Dee Dee on the dock. I was really hungover. Dee Dee got me an Alka-Seltzer and a glass of water. The only thing that helped was a young girl sitting across from us. She had a beautiful body, long good legs, and she wore a mini-skirt. With the mini-skirt she wore long stockings, a garter belt, and she had on pink panties under the red skirt. She even wore high heeled shoes. "You're looking at her, aren't you?" asked Dee Dee.

"I can't stop."

"She's a slut."

"Sure."

The slut got up and played pinball, wiggling her behind to help the balls fall in. Then she sat back down, showing more than ever. (Bukowski 58)

The novel has at least thirty misogynistic descriptions that mirror this one (and this one is relatively tame in comparison). Chinaski's misogyny can't be more clearly stated than in the novel's epigraph: "'Many a good man has been put under the bridge by a woman.' –Henry Chinaski" (Bukowski 6). There is nothing likable or redeemable about Chinaski. He is unquestionably a villainous protagonist. However, Bukowski tries to portray Chinaski sympathetically.

Of Bauer's four strategies for creating sympathetic villains, Bukowski utilizes three. Bukowski wrote six novels in his lifetime, five of which follow Chinaski, his thinly veiled alter ego. While Chinaski's childhood is barely alluded to in *Women*, is

fully illustrated in Bukowski's earlier novel *Ham on Rye*, which follows Chinaski's childhood through high school. In *Ham on Rye*, Chinaski has an abusive and militant father who frequently beats him as a thirteen-year-old child:

I walked in and [my father] closed the door behind us. The walls were white. There was a bathroom mirror and a small window, the screen black and broken. There was the bathtub and the toilet and the tiles. He reached and took down the razor strop which hung from a hook. It was going to be the first of many such beatings, which would recur more and more often. Always, I felt, without real reason.

"All right, take down your pants."

I took my pants down.

"Pull down your shorts."

I pulled them down.

Then he laid on the strop. The first blow inflicted more shock than pain. The second hurt more. Each blow which followed increased the pain. At first I was aware of the walls, the toilet, the tub. Finally I couldn't see anything. As he beat me, he berated me, but I couldn't understand the words. (Bukowski 39)

Readers who have read Bukowski's canon will recognize the link between Chinaski's inability to love and his troubled childhood. Immediately after his father beats him in the bathroom, Chinaski tells his mother:

"It wasn't right," I told her. "Why didn't you help me?"

"The father," she said, "is always right." (Bukowski 39)

By defending his father's physical abuse, Chinaski's mother is psychologically abusive. Chinaski's misogyny, his inability to connect with women, is born, in part, from this psychological abuse, as he learns not to trust his mother. Chinaski's abusive upbringing serves as a context for his behavior and gives the reader a chance to understand him.

Bukowski also establish sympathy for Chinaski by narrating the story from his perspective. While Chinaski's narration is blatantly misogynic, he is not completely calloused towards women. Throughout the story, he offers glimpses of humanity by showing affection towards women. While these moments do not excuse his villainy,

they give the reader a chance to relate to him briefly. One of these glimpses is prompted by a difficult break up in which Chinaski relates feelings of nostalgia in a particularly poetic passage:

I was sentimental about many things: a woman's shoes under the bed; one hairpin left behind on the dresser; the way they said, 'I'm going to pee.' hair ribbons; walking down the boulevard with them at 1:30 in the afternoon, just two people walking together; the long nights of drinking and smoking; talking; the arguments; thinking of suicide; eating together and feeling good; the jokes; the laughter out of nowhere; feeling miracles in the air; being in a parked car together; comparing past loves at 3am; being told you snore; hearing her snore... reading a newspaper alone in a sandwich joint and feeling nausea because she's now married. (227)

This passage stands in sharp contrast to the Chinaski's standard narration. As mentioned earlier, Chinaski's standard description of women is through sexual objectification. In this passage, none of Chinaski's descriptions are sexually objectifying. The passage is flooded with tender details, showing that there is more to Chinaski than his misogyny. Furthermore, most of these details are relatively mundane, everyday occurrences. Chinaski does not see emotional intimacy as a series of fantastic events. Something as simple as seeing a hairpin, hearing a woman snore, or being parked in a car together, are moments when Chinaski has felt connected with women. These types of passages become more frequent as the novel progresses, highlighting Chinaski's character transformation from an apathetic misogynist to a more caring individual.

In the novel's closing chapters, Chinaski begins to feel guilty about his promiscuity, as he grows more attached to his girlfriend Sara. When offered sex by a nineteen-year-old girl, Chinaski refuses a sexual opportunity with a woman for the first time in the story. He realizes that,

Sara was a good woman. I had to get myself straightened out. The only time a man needed a lot of women was when none of them were any good.

A man could lose his identity fucking around too much. Sara deserved much better than I was giving her. It was up to me now. (Bukowski 290)

While Chinaski fills the majority of his narrative with misogyny, these moments make him more sympathetic. These moments remind readers of Chinaski's humanity and that he is capable of caring for another. By seeing the story from Chinaski's perspective, the reader can observe how his worldview is transforming.

Finally, Bukowski's characterization of Chinaski as a fat, unattractive, drunkard portrays him less villainously. On almost every other page, Chinaski is either inebriated or trying to become inebriated—he is destructively alcoholic:

I like to change liquor stores frequently because the clerks got to know your habits if you went in night and day and bought huge quantities. I could feel them wondering why I wasn't dead yet and it made me uncomfortable. They probably weren't thinking any such thing, but then a man gets paranoid when he has 300 hangovers a year. (Bukowski 288)

Chinaski's alcoholism signals to the reader his intense depression and general dissatisfaction with life. He is hiding from himself by constantly numbing his emotions with alcohol. His alcoholism also offers insight into Chinaski's misogyny, as women, like alcohol, become a source of pain relief. Chinaski does not use and abuse women with the sole purpose of hurting them—he is not a sociopath who finds enjoyment in the pain he causes women. In addition to his alcoholism, Chinaski repeatedly reminds the reader how ugly he is over the course of the story. This is best depicted when Chinaski meets a woman he has been corresponding with for several weeks by mail for the first time:

Katherine walked off the ramp, perfect, with red-brown hair, slim body, a blue dress clinging as she walked, white shoes, slim, neat ankles, youth. She wore a white hat with a wide brim, the brim turned down just right. Her eyes looked out from under the brim, large and brown and laughing. She had class....



And there I was, 225 pounds, perpetually lost and confused, short legs, ape-like upper body, all chest, no neck, head too large, blurred eyes, hair uncombed, 6 feet of geek, waiting for her. (Bukowski 96-97)

Chinaski's juxtaposes Katherine's beauty with his ugliness. In the first paragraph, Chinaski sexually objectifies Katherine; in his mind, she becomes nothing more than the form fitting clothes she wears. However, Chinaski blunts his obvious misogyny by portraying himself in a self-depreciating light. By referring to himself as ape-like, Chinaski dehumanizes himself more than he does Katherine. Chinaski states multiple times how self-conscious he is of his "huge, white, flabby belly" (Bukowski 21, 80, 192, 210). Bukowski does not characterize Chinaski as a Don Juan who is dashingly attractive. Instead, Chinaski ugliness, and self-depreciation, makes him sympathetic—his seductions of women almost appear accidental. The reader wonders why how women could be attracted to an ape-like man. In summary, none of these strategies excuse or redeem Chinaski's villainy. They do, however, provide insight into his actions and allow a reader to understand how he developed his misogynistic worldview.

Chad Kultgen's nameless protagonist in *The Average American Male* and *The Average American Marriage* stands in sharp contrast to Bukowski's Chinaski—Kultgen's protagonist (which I will refer to now as the narrator) is completely unsympathetic. To begin with, Kultgen's narrator is grotesquely misogynistic. Throughout the two novels, the narrator is abusive to everyone around him. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the opening scene of *The Average American Male*:

I'm in Denver International Airport watching this old fat bitch eat a cup of yogurt. My blood is boiling.

She has this weird little baby spoon, and these leathery fucking jowls, and this twitchy mouth, and her little tongue keeps jerking around to lick this shit off her lips—it's really fucking disgusting me. But even more disgusting to me is the fact that her mouth has had cocks in it. I wonder

what it is, other than age, that turns a mouth a man would want to put his cock in, into a twitching hole getting yogurt shoveled into it with a baby spoon.

At some point in this old cunt's life some guy was paying for her dinner, buying her presents, and being as nice and romantic as possible just so he could put his cock in that disgusting fucking hole. (Kultgen 2)

Immediately, the reader confronts a narrator who feels justified in his abusive outlook. The reader wonders where the narrator's anger is coming from—why the narrator is so complicit in the degradation of this old woman and others around him. But since Kultgen does not portray his protagonist sympathetically, these questions are left unanswered in the two novels.

The narrator's anticlimactic character transformation further emphasizes his villainy. As the novel progresses, the reader hopes the story will challenge and transform the narrator's misogynistic worldview, not continue it. Instead, the closing scene of novel portrays no change in character:

I take another bite of scrambled eggs knowing that any bitch I ever fuck will ultimately become any other bitch I've ever fucked and they'll all become the fat old bitch eating yogurt in the airport. I look at Alyna and see Casey, Jenna, Katy, and every bitch I've ever fucked or gotten head from or a hand job or even thought about while I jerked off. There is nothing better. There is no fucking escape. (Kultgen 245)

The narrator continues to use the same sexual, vulgar diction he has used to describe women throughout the story. In addition, he still perceives love and women as objects of sexual gratification. His decision to marry his girlfriend, then, becomes a forced surrender—a resignation rather than a transformation.

Kultgen's unsympathetic protagonist displays the need for sympathetic portrayals of villains. The only way a reader can relate to Kultgen's narrator is to share his misogynistic worldview; the reader must be a part of the same demographic and

cultural influences. The sympathetic moments scattered throughout Bukowski's *Women*, which make Chinaski's actions understandable, are absent in Kultgen's narrator. In other words, Kultgen leaves his narrator unexamined. This lack of examination and character transformation turns the story into propaganda. The story only justifies and reaffirms a misogynistic worldview, rather than challenge or examine it.

Bauer, Bukowski, and Kultgen each influence my portrayal of Ryan Alexander in *Tell Her She's Pretty*. Like Chinaski and Kultgen's protagonist, Ryan is a misogynistic villain—he idolizes Sam, a character who embodies misogyny; he objectifies every woman that he sees; his addiction to pornography destroys his relationship with Emma; his sexual encounter with Chastity is violent and dehumanizing; and his entitlement towards the stiletto heeled woman in “Pornstar Perfect” exemplify his misogynistic worldview. I intentionally make Ryan an unlikable character, a villain. But I also try to make him sympathetic.

Of Bauer's four strategies for creating sympathetic villains, I utilize three. First, I narrate the story from Ryan's perspective. In comparison to Bukowski and Kultgen, I make Ryan's consciousness relatively less misogynistic. I achieve this by increasing his objectivity as a narrator. When Ryan describes women, I limit his use of subjective descriptors like fantastic, incredible, perfect, nice, or beautiful. Instead, Ryan focuses on what the woman is wearing. For instance, when he sees Chastity step out of the taxicab, he notices her “short red dress, black nylon stockings, and three-inch high heels. Her dress clung to her as she walked” (32). Certainly, Ryan objectifies Chastity in this moment, but his description is not vulgar or gratuitous—I limit his unreliability as a

narrator. While reading Bukowski and Kultgen, I find their descriptions of women become monotonous, a kind of sexual fast food. I try to portray Ryan's misogyny without gratuity to avoid this monotony. By making his misogyny more objective and less vulgar, I reduce Ryan's villainy.

Like Chinaski's character transformation, I also show a transformation in Ryan's consciousness. As the novella progresses, Ryan's misogyny is slowly deconstructed. The final story, "Pornstar Perfect," exemplifies his final transformation. In the story, Ryan's reality becomes a pornographic fantasy. His misogynistic worldview is making him delusional. In the story's final scene, Ryan has hit rock bottom. Confronted by the denial of the stiletto-heeled woman, he escapes to the bathroom to masturbate instead of face his reality. But he stops himself. He realizes that he is tired of his self-deception and wants to change. While this transformation does not redeem Ryan of his villainy, it displays that Ryan has transcended, to some degree, his misogynistic worldview.

A second way I reduce Ryan's villainy is by comparing him to Sam, who is a more misogynistic character. For example, in the story's opening paragraph I portray Ryan's sexuality in relation to Sam's:

Sam thinks women intimidate me. He's always telling me I need to be more confident. That's easy for him to say. In the nine years I've known him—we're best friends—he's been with at least fifty girls. I've seen Sam pick up a girl with a glance. (2)

From the start, Sam appears as a Don Juan who naturally seduces women. Ryan, in contrast, has trouble even talking to them. Within their friendship dynamic, Sam is the leader and Ryan is the follower. For instance, when Ryan and Sam see the teenaged girls at Burgerville, Sam instigates the interaction. Sam also begins the game of Truth or

Dare. In this example, Sam takes center stage, while Ryan recedes into the background. As a result, Sam appears more malicious because he actively engages the girls. The key difference between the two characters is that Sam acts out his misogyny, while Ryan projects it. In this way, Sam's Don Juan-like characterization dilutes Ryan's misogyny, as Sam's seductions of women are intentional.

Finally, I characterize Ryan as unattractive and unconfident to appear more sympathetic. Bukowski's grotesque depiction of Chinaski inspired my portrayal of Ryan as "five feet ten, two hundred pounds, zero sense of style, no neck, no jaw line, and I've never done anything athletic in my life" (2). I also borrow Bukowski's contrasting technique and compare Ryan's appearance to Sam's, who looks like an "Italian fashion model" (2). Ryan's appearance makes him unintimidating; he does not appear like a stereotypical playboy. In addition, I highlight Ryan's low self-esteem: "Sam thinks women intimidate me" (2); "In high school, girls that attractive didn't notice me. I didn't exist in their world" (3); "I never knew what to say to women at bars. It was a mystery to me" (31); "I had no idea what to say to her. I felt like an idiot" (33); "Then she looked right at me—her eyes stabbing into mine—I looked away, feeling myself blush" (45); "I felt like a cockroach that had scuttled across her path" (46). With the exception of Emma, Ryan never seduces a woman in the story. The teenaged girls at Burgerville, the stripper at Sassy's, the blonde at The Blue Moon Saloon, and the stiletto heeled woman in "Pornstar Perfect," all reject him. The women in these situations are more powerful than he is and their rejections portray Ryan as a victim. Ryan's ugly appearance, his low self-esteem, and his incompetence with women all work to reduce his villainy.

One of the key differences that separates *Tell Her She's Pretty* from Bukowski's *Women* and Kultgen's *The Average American Male*, is my focus on sympathy. Both Bukowski and Kultgen feature grotesquely misogynistic narrators. The narrators in both of these works focus primarily on pornographic descriptions, rather than examining a misogynistic worldview. Furthermore, these intensely vulgar descriptions alienate readers to the point that many stop reading. The reader, like the narrator, becomes so engrossed in the pornographic descriptions that they lose track of the deeper emotional issues in the text.

Instead having my readers focus on pornographic descriptions, I want the reader to experience Ryan's isolation, his deep fear of intimacy. Ryan is a character that both desires and fears emotional vulnerability with women. In his mind, he reduces women to their body parts as a method of self-defense; they become an ass, breasts, or legs. When reduced to objects of lust, women cannot emotionally hurt him. Ryan's misogyny acts as a protective wall in his psyche. I want the reader to understand that Ryan's misogyny is unsustainable—it prevents him from connecting with women, which is something that he desperately desires. These stories, then, illustrate the failure of misogyny.

As the culmination of my last year of work as an undergraduate, I hope this novella takes its readers into an experience that transforms the way they see the world. As an author, and as an artist, this is my greatest aspiration.

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