

THE EXHIBITIONIST

Jim Gordon uncovered his date's true identity one evening while she was in the shower. He concluded that "Shanterelle" was her own invention, although the reason behind adopting a misspelled mushroom name remained elusive. Looking for a pen to circle movie times in the paper for their evening out, he opened her nightstand drawer and found Army dog tags stamped with her serial number and given name. He saved that information for another time. Later that week, he was standing in her apartment holding a magazine while she was in the kitchen, preparing drinks and snacks. He called out, "Anything I can help you with in there, Louise?"

He caught rapid motion in his peripheral vision just before she went airborne and into his upper body with a linebacker's lunge. The impact carried them both over the back of her slick vinyl couch with her on top and him, not in position to go much of anywhere. An intense session of hot, wet sex was followed by a baby talk special request.

"Never call me by that name again," came from the lips pressed against his ear.
"Promise?"

"Ung-kay," was the sound he heard escaping from his throat, acutely aware of his hard draw for air, "it's a deal."

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About a month earlier, his lawyer suggested a request from the 'other side,' to meet with a marriage counselor might serve his long term interest. Jim was glad to have Will's

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representation, although it put his friend in an awkward position. Will had known the Gordons for twenty-some years.

“Sure you wouldn’t want to be represented by someone else?” Will suggested, “One of the other competent partners here?” Jim was cautious; looking out for himself while trying not offend. Divorce lawyers take their fair share of grief in Wedlock, Texas anyway.

“No, I trust you. And those other guys,” he hesitated, “act like they think their smarter’n me. Better’n me.”

“Buddy,” Will cocked back in his chair, “think you’re going through a mid-life crisis? Middle-aged crazy?”

Jim forced a single, “HA,” and said he respectfully disagreed. “Middle? Ain’t no way I’m living to ninety-six.”

“Mind telling me, what happened between you and Angela?”

He couldn’t talk around what Will already knew. His attractive, accountant wife grew his homegrown printing venture into a successful enterprise. Before digital, she put up with the pervasive smell of inks and the cyan, yellow, and magenta stains that found their way from skin to clothing to furniture.

“It’s just that, she’s holding me back.” The words tumbled out hollow. While Jim worked odd hours printing late editions, Angie took night classes to complete her MBA.

“Whoa.” Will forced a wide-eyed blink for emphasis. “Holding you back from what?”

Jim’s hands pressed together in front of his face, eyes closed. His silent prayer for a better response went unanswered. “From having other women.”

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A former small businessman, Jim craved more notoriety in a wider arena. Money issues were behind him. Livestock once grazed in the spare vista around the metal shed where he started the business. Now, those same placid sights were an hour drive in any direction. Around him, new neighbors threw up mini-mansions financed at the crest of their Enron stock.

He sold Flash Printing to a national publishing company, AdCorp. As a condition, they hired him back as sales consultant to retain established clientele. Folks used to deride corporate raiders as intrusive Yankees. Now, in the fresh year 2000, the Sun Belt economy held everybody in the same open-armed embrace.

All those working years, Angie did the books from home, put dinner on the stove and sorted mail at the kitchen table. With the city eating countryside in aggressive bites, she needed a plan to get out of Wedlock. The drawer under the phone held brochures requested from retirement communities in Destin, Boca Raton.

She'd watch for the van, business name in large letters on both sides, to pull in the driveway. His name was on the driver's door, with truncated lightning bolts on either side of "Flash Gordon." After years of prepping car ads, he knew what he wanted. That day Angela saw the Mercedes convertible pull in the driveway, she didn't know what came with it.

Jim told his wife of 23 years he wanted a divorce. She could keep their modest, just about paid off home. Half the proceeds from sale of the business were hers. There would be details at tax time but the bottom line was, he wanted out.

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Angela listened through the whole practiced monologue, chin in hand, elbow on the kitchen table. Her expression grew more distant, waiting for an elaborate, ironic punchline that never came.

“Well,” she exhaled long and slow, “isn’t that some shit?”

Jim caught himself, stopped his head nodding involuntarily in agreement. “I just can’t decide whether I should leave tonight. Or in the morning.”

Angie took steps toward the hallway and called back over her shoulder. “Think you can make that decision by the time I get your suitcase from the attic?”

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The counselor said she wanted to see them separately for the first session. It hadn’t occurred to him there would be more than one. On his day, a slender little thirty-something brunette came in and sat across the coffee table. Hemmed in among a rectangle of couches and comfy lounge chairs, Jim was edgy. One wall behind her hung with diplomas and certificates. The other had kitten pictures with cute sayings in a swirly font. Her tone made him nervous, remarks rolling out like a theme-park tour guide. Her lilt reached a point where she asked him for his first response as she held up a series of images on cardstock.

“Imagine this one,” she held card fourteen, “sitting on the table in front of you. Would you see the glass as half empty, or half full?”

He pushed both palms across his forehead and slowly through his hair. “Well, I’ll tell you one goddam thing. If that’s my glass, it ain’t nothing full about it.” That first session was his last.

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Jim rented an aging townhome closer to the office with the notion to make it a swinging bachelor pad, crib, or whatever new name they went by. He'd resurrect the rugged, handsome young man pictured on his office walls. The owl-eyed, slack-jawed, average looking white man shaving in the mirror wasn't him.

Despite his success, he sensed people still saw him the same way; an unsophisticated little man with ink-lined fingernails and an empty space where an education should be. He would strip away that blue-collar persona and bare everything underneath.

Television specials on the fading twentieth century seemed to recap the partying he missed. He'd worked instead, jumping into a demanding apprenticeship to establish himself in the printing trade. Remembering those late-night hours summoned the ghost of his evaporated youth. He would need a plan, or a clue, to join the dating game in a new millennium, a new life.

For years he worked with alternative weekly newspapers there in the city and others along the Gulf Coast. Flash Printing helped develop the profitability of their "Personals" section. Jim was fascinated with how people described themselves in those ads, at the base price for 300 characters or less. He felt further study was warranted.

At first, his research was disappointing, often disturbing. He concluded the term, forty-ish, was code for fifty-ish, and knew enough Photoshop to recognize altered emailed images. Then, connecting with a charming young lady, recently retired after two tours in the Army, showed some promise. They clicked on the phone and her wild sense of humor was enough to transcend the stark differences between them.

Their first date, as it happened, celebrated her twenty-sixth birthday. Shanterelle Green checked out as advertised; 5'4" tall, about 135 pounds and, she didn't mind repeating, rigors of

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army training left her without enough body fat to calculate. At first sight, her muscular, round limbs summoned images of carnival vendors twisting tubular balloons into shapes of dachshunds.

As she told him on the phone, her skin was as dark as anyone she ever met. She reported for duty on the day she turned eighteen. Her military career concluded with nine months as a base MP. During the hearty parting hug that night, Jim realized she could probably kill him with her bare hands.

He didn't think about that again in subsequent dates. With her remarkably sweet disposition and energetic sexual proclivities, she was fully engaging. Looks the couple generated in public entertained them both.

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He missed the answering machine message, returning his call. She spoke her name, Esther, in a pronounced British accent. She'd like to know more about him. He responded to many personals but couldn't recall an Esther. He took sheets saved from Metro Free Press with him for breakfast at Denny's to look over ads he had circled.

"Nigerian Princess," it read, "raised and schooled in England." The next line stated she looked like Sade. "Seeks mature male companionship." It seemed a light behind the page shined through at Jim and he silently mouthed, "That's me."

Esther Oni was long and statuesque, taller in spike heels, paler than Jim, and lacking any crisis in confidence. When they agreed to meet outside a popular, upscale restaurant, she asked how she would recognize him.

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“I’ll be driving a red convertible. How about you?”

“Oh, you’ll know me,” she told him. “I look like Sade.”

In the parking lot, he spotted her on the terrace. There was, indeed, a remarkable resemblance to the celebrity, but later he noticed substantial differences; a more curvaceous figure, fierce eyes, and wide, ovate breasts whose weight swayed them strikingly to each side when freed from her brassiere.

Over the next weeks, heads swiveled whenever they went out, as if looking for cameras shooting a cosmetics commercial. They showed up at dining establishments without reservations to be told, “Sorry, we’re booked tonight, but hold on a minute. Let’s see what we can do.” They would be seated at a window table for the benefit of passers-by.

Her regular demeanor suggested the anticipation of some impending annoyance. She could find fault or cast slights with little provocation. Jim sensed the implication; he was somehow inadequate, less than what was expected for a prize of her magnitude.

“Tell the waiter this soup is cold.” She might say, “There’s not enough rum in this drink,” or, “This drink is mixed too strong,” at another venue. The list went on. She was never particularly affectionate, either. The first time wasn’t enthusiastic and from then on, she reacted to sexual intimacy as an unfortunate necessity; a somewhat distasteful obligation, regrettably met.

Jim wondered if it was worth his trouble. Esther was such a showpiece, figuring her out was a challenge he couldn’t let go. He thought cultural differences might contribute to the emotional distance; her standoffishness part of a well-executed ‘hard to get’ strategy. While it didn’t keep him from trying to rouse a different response, she never strayed too far from that

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same, sour detachment. At every opportunity, he massaged his face into the rich, café au lait curves of her decidedly passive, disinterested physique. In spite of his diligent search, he never found her sweet spot.

It seemed her act wasn't just for him alone. She related stories of things she said to co-workers that were more than rude and nearly appalling. She made regular comments about the provincial, crass nature of American culture in a British accent more pronounced, or less, one day to the next. He laughed it off as some sardonic humor he might "get" later on.

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What was left of his rational mind told him he'd have to choose between girlfriends. A serendipity in their schedules suggested otherwise. He was, after all, making up for lost time. Shanterelle was enrolled in classes at the downtown university branch and worked evening shift managing inventory at the nearby Car World branch. Esther assisted geriatric hospital patients with rotating evening shifts, as well. Jim told both he was on call around the clock; often summoned to production meetings at odd hours. He could arrange to meet with one or conjure a fast excuse for the other as needed, and continued the exercise of dating them both.

Car World did big business at the sprawling southwest location and sometimes paid cash bonuses to the managerial staff. When Shanterelle would get one, they'd meet for drinks and late dinner at Pablo's Cajun Fusion Cuisine across the freeway. She delighted in picking up the tab. Of Pablo's many locations, this older one was fancy; horseshoe-shaped booths with plush, button-upholstered seats. When Jim closed a contract, dinner was on him. Either way, evenings ended in tender, naked moments. He couldn't bring himself to address her as Shanterelle. With

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“Louise” out of consideration, he called her “Baby.” She took to that, nuzzling and laughing her pet name, “old goat,” into his mottled nest of chest hair.

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One Wednesday Jim received a call from Karen, one of his wife’s old friends, who asked if they could meet for lunch. He remembered a sexy vibe from Karen once and, within the parameters of his new world view, figured she just might want some. The image of his new silk tie and matching pocket square docked in his mind as he suggested Pablo’s. He waited on the terrace as her car pulled in the parking lot. Not until he saw her picture on the magnetic door sign did he remember she was a realtor.

Before their food was served, he put thirty-two signatures on documents authorizing sale of Angela’s house for three times what they paid for it. Angie’s part in executing the contract was already complete. Her signature on the last page was on the line above an address in Florida.

Over lunch, Karen asked if Jim was too busy for a social life, or if he was seeing other people. He nodded in the affirmative. In a coy tone of voice, she asked if maybe a mid-life crisis lead him to date younger women.

“Yeah, maybe that’s it,” Jim said, recognizing a topic best left unexplored.

“How much younger?” She turned slightly, looking from the corners of her mascara.

“I dunno,” he paused, “on average, twenty-five.”

“Wow,” Karen said, with a short turn of her head and a long focus on some vanishing point across the parking lot, “I guess everybody’s looking for something.”

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His AdCorp colleagues called him names, though never to his face. Jim returned that superficial courtesy by never allowing himself to utter the words “smart-ass punk” out loud. Still, overhearing someone mention “the relic” left little doubt to the reference. With the company picnic coming up, he planned to change the conversation.

The venue, ‘The Hoedown,’ was little more than a few tin roofs on creosoted poles. Groups rented tables, brought potluck dishes, listened to country music and floated kegs. Jim’s second thoughts began as they parked in a freshly mowed field and started walking toward the covered areas. Esther wore tall wedge, cork heel shoes with open toes and a form-fitting, brilliant blue dress, displaying ample cleavage and slit above one mid-thigh. Her lips and nails matched in a striking carmine color and, as those red tipped toes cut through the loose hay, visitors seated on tailgates looked around the two of them for the entourage.

“Glad I caught you, Jimbo.” Regional vice-president Taylor Malkin was on his way out, ending his brief show of support. “We need you at the trade show next week. Something came up and the CEO and I can’t make it.” Taylor’s remarks were addressed to Jim, but his eyes cut away continuously to survey Esther. “Sylvia will fill you in Monday on your reservations and details. Convention Center and Exhibition Hall in Dallas.”

“All right-ee-roo,” came out as a kind of squeal Jim intended to suggest enthusiasm and familiarity with the company brass. “I’m a conventioneer from way back!”

“And, they tell me, an exhibitionist par excellence.” Taylor touched the brim of his nylon fedora and nodded at Esther. Jim watched cautiously as he stepped away, always suspecting foreign phrases as a joke on him.

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His coworkers, most dressed in western boots and jeans, made a show of cordiality to Esther. She responded to their polite overtures as if they spit when they talked, and stared at the homemade casseroles like they were bowls of shit from indeterminate origins.

That afternoon spawned a lucid moment. He would never understand the dynamic between his romantic efforts and Esther's remarkably accomplished bitch act. It wasn't driven by wining and dining or nights on the town. It was about immigration status.

Esther was definitely driven though, looking to land a husband of the American persuasion, and not too happy with her timeline. A topic meticulously avoided, pages of her visa expiration calendar were rapidly turning. She had a lingering notion: Jim as a waste of precious time. She had yet to see his finalized divorce document and was way too proud to ask again. The acerbic demeanor was her strategy to produce resolution. Within the week after the traumatic night at Pablo's when Jim was to be suddenly exposed, Esther was too. It was their last conversation. The tipping point came when he floated the words "green card" into the empty space between them.

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In retrospect, going to Dallas set the disaster in motion. Jim was scheduled for three days at the biennial trade expo to hype new services and participate in a panel discussion with competing firms. If successful, it could be a new direction for AdCorp. His last trade show was long past, but Jim had a lifetime of built up confidence and six days to prepare. There were specifications to memorize and talking points to develop.

The convention's theme was "Moving with the Millennium." His became unequivocal disaster. After the first hour, Jim stepped out to the restroom with his swagger intact, but came

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back to the main ballroom floor alone. Trade shows used to be his thing; long legs strutting in high heels and fish net stockings, passing out business cards, logo pens, refrigerator magnets. Sharp dressed men glad-handed and talked up product lines. Girls in short velvet skirts and bell hop caps carried cigars, cigarettes and wrapped hard candies in trays all wedged up under eye-catching cleavage. Break time meant bourbon and seven in the lobby, with several more to follow before dinner. That was then.

These people drank coffee from paper cups in cardboard sleeves and some kind of iced tea in painted bottles. He looked around for anyone else wearing a suit, or even a tie. The guys in other booths wore jeans and loud sneakers, with shirt tails hanging out like they missed some home training. They spoke in clipped, short vowels and those who commented on his ‘accent,’ looked at him from then on like he just might be stupid.

Jim sat silently on the dais during the Q. and A. session. Everyone talked in acronyms he couldn’t decipher. Nervous about his turn, he planned to use the old fallback ice-breaker that always worked.

“Hello, everybody,” he would say into the microphone and introduce himself. “Anybody out there heard of Wedlock, Texas?” An enthusiastic, “Yeah,” or whistle would fly from somewhere in the crowd. “Well,” it’s the grin, he thinks, that always wins them over, “I was born just outside Wedlock.” He would have to pause here, waiting for rippling chuckles to dissipate, before launching into his sales pitch.

But when he tried it at the convention, his last ‘Wedlock’ fell like a single raindrop in an empty water barrel. The only sound across the expanse of the conference room was the tap and

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jabs of fingers on electronic devices. Jim's pause, scanning the crowd for a connection, lasted long enough for heads to lift from their laps and look around for the disturbance.

The rest of the session didn't go any better. It was clear his competitors had a better product and process. Also evident: that's why he was sent. The unopened suitcase never came out of the trunk and he started the drive home later that afternoon.

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Tired and disappointed, Jim just wanted to relax that evening over a good meal. In the solace of steering and rhythm of the road, a quiet evening alone held appeal. He knew Shanterelle planned to attend a concert with friends that night. She had wanted him to go, showed him the tickets ten days in advance, for an act called Frankie Beverly and Maze. "Can't, Baby. Got the convention that week." Esther was off on Tuesdays. The mistake came in calling ahead for a dinner date.

He craved familiar comfort and, once at home, knew where to call. He was becoming a regular. He knew the servers, the menu, and even the table number of the isolated booth he preferred in a quiet corner of the establishment.

"Thank you for calling Pablo's. Can you hold please?" He recognized the voice.

"Sure, not a prob . . .," he was interrupted by an interval of smooth jazz for a few minutes until the voice came back.

"Party of two. Gordon. 8:30." Jim added the request, "in booth twenty-five?"

"Perfect," she said, and Jim nodded on the other end of the phone, thinking the same.

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He decided to freshen up and stay in the new suit he'd been wearing all day. It was comfortable and, considering all the bucks he paid for it, might just meet with Esther's approval. He splashed some water in his face, swilled mouthwash, and brushed his teeth. Unbuttoning his shirt with one hand, he reached the other inside to swipe stick deodorant. The contact lenses were scratchy but he used some eye drops and left them in. Esther said wearing his glasses made him look old.

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The restaurant's small room was packed with a party celebrating a special occasion, but the hostess saved the requested booth. A copy-shop banner on the back wall congratulated "Phil and Alice - Happy Fiftieth Anniversary from Car World." Candles in tiny lanterns and floral centerpieces dotted tables throughout the room. Jim and Esther were escorted to the back right corner. They slid into their booth, little more than arm's length from the gentleman seated at the head of the longest table. His yellow knit shirt had "Phil," embroidered above the pocket bearing the Car World logo. All the yellow shirts around the room stuck Jim with needles of sudden panic, before he remembered Shanterelle's concert that night.

Esther looked stunning. She did amazing things with a simple, cut up black dress and oversized, round silver accessories. She told him she attended a fashion design institute during her time in London, though he remembered another time she said it was Manchester. As they looked at menus, she mentioned how good he looked that night, too, running her nails up his lapel and caressing the fabric between thumb and fingers. Later he would reflect on that irony, just moments before his façade was stripped away.

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They could observe most of the party activity and hear much of the conversation. Some folks, away from the main table, did their best to suck up drinks on someone else's tab. Just inside the door, a toddler in a booster chair gnawed remnants of a hush puppy while an older sibling repeatedly dabbed a discarded lemon slice in her ear hole. Phil took a congratulatory card from its envelope and held it out, thanking someone for the warm sentiments. Jim was close enough to have taken it from his hand.

When their wine was poured, he began to relax. Esther preferred red high-end vintages toward the bottom of the page. Crawling out from under the blanket of a long day's disillusionment, he reached to gently cover Esther's hand on the table with his. In a gesture which, for her, represented amorous foreplay, she turned her hand over to squeeze back.

Jim leaned back and, after slowly stretching his neck over each shoulder, found himself staring straight at the couple pictured in tent cards on tables around the room that touted the monumental task of staying married to the same person for fifty years. The personal trials and extended tribulations of all that were beyond the scope of what Jim could comprehend.

In the soft candle glow, he saw an aura settle around the elderly couple, a contentment, a grace and dignity free of pretension. Their deep pool of their lives seemed unfathomable from the shallow pond where Jim found himself sitting, watching. He was blinking clear of those daydreams when the jolt came.

*

It would be long after that night before all the details came together for him. Jim never expected to hear from Shanterelle again, but a couple months later, she called him from out of state. She hadn't gone to that concert with her friends. Two employees called in sick at the last

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minute. She cleaned and detailed several cars herself. Afterward, there was still time to drop in at the anniversary party for Phil, General Manager who hired her, right across the freeway at Pablo's.

She was calling from Little Rock, transferred to a position at a start-up location. It was a promotion for her but that night she was lonely, somewhat drunk. She said she forgave him, missed him and, over the next fifteen minutes, led him through a kind of phone sex tutorial. Would he come up there and see her over the weekend? The sad shame of the last night at Pablo's still hovered around him like an oily mist. Jim said he wished he could but, "no, too much going on at work." He hung up, feeling serious stabs of regret before his hand was even off the phone.

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The bustle of servers distributing salads that night was the likely distraction, but he didn't see Shanterelle until her thighs pressed against the edge of the table. The mix and intensity of emotion in her face registered indelibly within him. His palms rolled up from the table like overturned starfish at low tide. His jaw seemed to move in the disjointed orbits of a patient awakening from anesthesia. Shanterelle's head shifted side-to-side, index finger pointing at the ceiling, waving like a metronome set on andante. His mouth hung open to deliver an explanation that did not come.

"Don't even try." She leaned toward him. "You can't lie to me." Further explanation came in the same breath, but louder tone. "I have seen you naked." The phrase had a pop culture ring, a sitcom punchline he was expected to know but could not place. He could see his frozen, blank expression reflected in each flash of her angry eyes.

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The sting of his own humiliation didn't keep him from sensing her embarrassment, as well. He always appreciated her sharp, fresh look when they dated, but knew it came from careful cosmetic effort. She hadn't prepared for this accidental encounter.

Her coarse hair bore the mold of a Car World cap, pulled tight to just above her eyebrows. Her yellow shirt, tied up to miss soap spray, revealed glimpses of her tight, dark stomach. The white plaid shorts stretched across her muscular behind, with the red high-top running shoes, rendered a pretty lady into a comic drawing.

Only those seated close to the unfolding scene heard her initial comment but, that soon changed. A compelling quiet fell over the room as the audience tried to distinguish drama from theater of the absurd. On center stage, Shanterelle took a deep breath and repeated louder, closer to his face, "I have SEEN YOU NAKED." Few in the room missed it the second time around.

A fork tapped a water glass somewhere, reminding the crowd the party was still in session. Intelligible sounds had yet to come from Jim as the contents of his full wine glass washed through his hair, across his forehead, and continued downstream. The crimson display was spectacular, even in the table's dim light. Cabernet ran through his clothes and bled out through the table linen like in a gangster movie murder scene. He froze, trying to minimize the splash of liquid dripping from him. Shanterelle wasn't finished. Holding the empty glass by the stem, she delicately set it on the table, as if replacing a daffodil in a vase of cut flowers.

"No, no, Flash Gordon." Her head rolled back to roar. "I have seen . . ." Something in what she had seen set her free. She turned and quickly moved away, muscular legs pumping like firing pistons on a direct path to the exit sign.

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“You go, girl,” came a cry that scattered light, laughter and sporadic applause across the room. Another called out, “Amen.”

Jim didn't know what to expect, turning to Esther. Her smug radiance spoke for her. It was only natural. She was the one still at the table. Actions of the dark, disheveled, unsophisticated American girl demonstrated Esther's vast superiority.

Wine draining down Jim's face curled a contact lens into the corner of his left eye. Fishing it out from his eyelid, he felt the unblinking focus of the room. He looked up and, with his good eye, saw Phil staring at him a few feet away.

Compelled to produce some semblance of apology, Jim opened his mouth to speak. Phil raised a hand to silence him, rocked it gently, side to side. After a moment he spoke, tired empathy in his voice, a subtle smile in his eyes.

“Not necessary, son,” he said. “I guess we've seen you naked.”

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