

Almost Show Quality

Roxy strains against his L.L. Bean puppy halter as Torrie works the lock on the back gate. The old lock used to open with the first three numbers of Grady's social security number. This new one, turns out, opens with the last three. The gate swings open into the alley that separates the backyards of Sea Isle Acres from the back of the plaza.

On the alley side, the plaza is a long row of dark open doors like missing teeth in bumpy gums. It has a liquor store, a coin-operated laundry, a Vietnamese restaurant, a Cuban restaurant, a sandwich shop that's only open for breakfast, and a second-hand store full of stuff that used to belong to people who are probably dead now. That's where Torrie got her snakeskin boots.

Most of the clothes in *Minnie's New To You* are heinous crimes against fashion--corduroy pants suits, nylon blouses with padded shoulders, spongy men's trousers--everything the relatives didn't want when they cleaned out the closets. But the boots were a find. Genuine snakeskin in a red and black diamond pattern shiny as new linoleum, toes sharp as a razor, and four inch stiletto heels that push her hips forward and her shoulders back. Torrie wonders about the woman they used to belong to, if they made her feel as sure of herself, or if it's some left-over magic from their first owner she's borrowing.

Grady would have bought her brand new snakeskin boots if she said she wanted them, still would if she'd get rid of these, they'll give her a foot disease, he says. Except Torrie didn't know she wanted snakeskin boots until she saw these particular ones in Minnie's and found she had enough in her jeans pockets to pay for them herself. That was three months ago, back in April. Grady doesn't keep his change in the clamshell on the bureau anymore. He keeps his wallet hidden, too, in crazy places he thinks she'd never look--the Sanka can in the freezer, the bucket of cleaning supplies under the sink.

Still, Grady's generous for a rich guy. Not just for what he'll buy her but for what he lets her get away with. If he notices fives and even tens missing, he never says. Maybe he doesn't

notice. That still counts as generous. Most people with money keep a running tab on exactly how much they have and get cranky when they have to part with any of it. People with next to nothing are better about giving things away. Maybe because giving things away makes you feel rich and people with money don't need to feel rich, they already are.

It's only ten in the morning but already the air is a thick steamy cloud. Torrie's dying inside her long-sleeved sweatshirt, one of Grady's, way too big for her. Its stretched-out sleeves, wide as bell-bottoms, flop against her wrists as she walks down the alley.

Chauncey from the sandwich shop is the first to come out. He's got the pumped up body of a guy who's spent serious time in prison. His head is like another muscle, huge, bald and shiny. "Who's a good Roxy boy?" he says in baby-talk sing-song as he strokes Roxy's ears. Torrie doesn't know what his real voice sounds like.

Zing is next. He heaves a trash bag in the dumpster and squats to let Roxy lick his face. Zing isn't exactly his real name. His real name sounds like a wound-up spring letting go. He talks to Roxy in a high, crazy, beautiful song that isn't like any tune Torrie's ever heard. Roxy understands. His pointy ears stand up and rotate like little satellite dishes.

Grady bought Roxy right after they moved to Pompano. Torrie just happened to mention that she always wanted a puppy when she was a kid, and even before all the boxes were unpacked, Grady brought home a purebred Boston Terrier as a surprise. Almost show quality, he said, except for his markings, which are just a hair on the wrong side of perfect, but still, a bargain at six hundred dollars. Torrie named him after the club in Detroit where she and Grady met.

If it had been up to her, she'd have picked a stray from the pound. A fancy purebred would have been her last choice. Now she understands why mothers who get the wrong baby at the hospital don't want to make the switch after the mistake is discovered.

Raul joins them at the dumpster. The lines of his goatee look like he drew them with a ruler. "Not seen you in a while," he says. "Where you been?"

"Been nowhere," says Torrie. "Thought I'd drop by for happy hour."

“Just in time,” says Raul. He pulls the joint from behind his ear, fires it up, fills his lungs, hands it to Torrie. When she lifts it to her lips, the sleeve of Grady’s sweatshirt slides up her arm. They all see it--the wide white tape criss-crossed over gauze from her elbow to her knuckles.

“Shit, girl,” whispers Raul. “What’d you do?”

“Cut myself shaving,” she says with a no big deal laugh. “Sign my cast?” The heavy glossy tap makes them look like casts. It takes a few twists and turns—all of them clumsy-- to get the sweatshirt off. Still, it’s not so different from being on stage. She knots the sleeves around her hips over her tank top. The air dances on her skin. For a second she feels better, cooler. Two seconds later she feels just as sweaty, just as hemmed in. Like them, probably. When they’re inside, the alley must look good too, but two seconds after they step out, it’s the same old let down, your special drug not taking you where you want to go anymore, just taking you back to the same place you were before. Are now. On the backside of Sea Isle Acres-- which must look like paradise to them, each fourplex with its own central air unit beating noise into the air.

Same air over there, though. A few degrees cooler maybe but not enough to keep you from looking for a rush of cooler air somewhere else. Not that they’d believe it. She wouldn’t either. Spoiled rich girl, she’d think, if someone--her own self, now--told her the same thing half a year ago.

“Try waxing next time,” says Raul. He pulls the Sharpee from behind his other ear, writes *Raul Was Here* in big curly-cue letters down her left arm. Torrie takes the pen, offers it to Zing. He doesn’t move--it’s like he’s forgotten how. She turns to Chauncey, looks right at him. His eyes are the color of melting Tootsie Rolls and the whites of his eyes aren’t white, they’re yellow. He looks right back, actually seems to see her for once. He clears his mighty throat and hocks up a big one, right at her feet. Raul leaps away, turns it into a dance move. Laughs.

She gives Roxy's leash a gentle tug--she's done entertaining here. Roxy resists for a second. Two seconds later his toenails tap a hyperactive dance on the asphalt. Now it's all about where he's going.

The alley feeds into the parking lot behind the boarded-up Esso station, and then, the park. Torrie has to squeeze between two poles to enter. The main entrance is somewhere on the other side of Sea Isle Acres.

Palm trees, deep green shade, curvy asphalt paths, picnic tables, pavilions, a playground on an island of sand. A family is having a picnic under one of the pavilions. It's someone's birthday. There's a melting cake and a few lumpy presents wrapped in newspaper comics. On the tennis court two guys are smashing a ball back and forth like they're trying to kill it. Friends of Grady's. He gets creamed by one or the other every Saturday morning. He doesn't wake her up to watch him play anymore.

Grady used to be really good at tennis. He was *ranked*. Two hundred thirty-seven. That was his number. Only two hundred thirty-six players in the world—the whole entire world--were better than him. That was in my previous life, Grady always says with a laugh. The laugh is supposed to cancel out the previous part. Older guys were always saying things like that--*back in the day, in my previous life*, but they're not kidding like they think they are, it really was another life. In Grady's case, twenty years ago at least. Someone else must have his number now.

Grady tried to teach her to play when they first moved to Pompano but she always aimed the ball so he wouldn't have to run after it. Tennis wasn't *supposed* to be polite, he said, you were *supposed* to make it hard for your opponent, the game was all *about* killer instinct, which, he was sorry to say, she did not have. But Grady could never stay annoyed at her for long. He really *was* sorry, and at the same time, glad to be, like he got something more out of being disappointed than just disappointment. That's why Grady never made it big in tennis, she thinks. He's the one who doesn't have killer instinct.

Roxy pulls at his leash—they're almost to Irwin's bench. Except someone else is sitting there. A guy who looks like he went to bed being twelve and woke up thirty, a middle-aged kid with bad posture and thick glasses squinting at the newspaper with a pencil in his hand. The bottoms of his pants ride high above his ankles showing miles of blue socks.

Torrie reins in Roxy, looks around. The others are here. Curled up on top of picnic tables hugging trash bags for pillows, picking through barrels for aluminum cans, sifting through ashtray sand for smokable butts, parked on benches like zombies waiting for a bus. Old Lady's under her usual tree guarding her Publix buggy full of naked baby dolls like there's a big plot to steal them. Crazy Wanda's sitting cross-legged on top of her picnic table having an angry conversation with herself.

The floaters, the ones who almost blend in, are here, too. Old Nam vets playing Texas Hold Em. Girls with buzz cuts and homemade tattoos. Skinny boys in pants so wide they look like skirts. Three little kids with bug bite welts at the edge of the playground watching, just watching, the Sea Isle moms catching their kids at the bottom of the slide. A big woman weighing down a swing—the mother of the watching kids, probably—fingers wrapped tight around the chains like she's waiting for someone to give her a push. They won't almost blend in for long. Don't now, actually. They're already others, you can tell, mostly by the way they're invisible to the regular people, the ones who come here to play. The tennis guys, the old ladies doing power walks, the women with asses like knots jogging behind three-wheeled baby strollers—they don't see them.

It goes the other way, too. The others don't see the regular people, either. Maybe they really are invisible to each other, like some parallel universe deal from one of Grady's Star Trek DVDs. But Torrie can see them both. And they both see her and Roxy, too. Crazy Wanda windmills her arms at Torrie like she's got some life or death thing to tell her. Steve and Lucas, the old gay couple from Oleander Avenue playing chess behind Wanda, lift their scrawny arms and wave.

"Irwin!" Wanda's hollering at her. "Irwin! Irwin!"

“You seen him?” Torrie shouts. You have to shout to get Wanda to hear you.

“He down there by the, you know, over there by the . . .” Wanda bangs her fists on her thighs to beat the words out of her brain. Roxy paws at Torrie’s feet—Wanda scares him. Torrie bends down, scoops him up. Her blood thumps hard against the Frankenstein staples under the gauze and tape.

“You tell him I found you,” Wanda hollers. “He listen to you. Don’t never listen to *me*, he just go on, listen only to himself telling his own silly ass stories where he the star, oh, he the star all right . . .” She’s back to talking to herself again.

Irwin’s on the bench behind the cinderblock bathroom resting his greasy gray head on the banana seat of his bike, an old-fashioned thing with fat saggy tires and wide rusty handle bars.

“Roxy and Foxy,” Irwin says slow and lazy like he’s not a bit surprised to see them. Roxy leaps out of her arms into Irwin’s crazy mish-mash of a lap where the green plaid pants leg is rolled up in sloppy bunches and safety-pinned to his belt loop.

“Where you been Roxy dog?” says Irwin. “Speak to me, boy!” Roxy gives a high excited yelp. “Speak to her, too. Tell her to let you off the goddamn leash.” To Torrie he says, “Sick of being drug around. Tells me so all the time. Don’t ya, Roxy boy?”

There’s a guy sitting next to Irwin on the bench. A wiry little guy in a red tee shirt, a bony white knee poking through a frayed hole in his stonewashed jeans. She might have seen him before. People in the park come and go. He looks like someone who could easily come and go and not be noticed either way.

“Got another lap here, Foxy,” he says. Maybe it’s just his type that’s familiar, a great big giggle just waiting to happen kind of guy.

“Wanda said you’d be here,” Torrie says to Irwin. “I’m supposed to tell you.”

“Fuckin psychic, ain’t she?” says Irwin. “Considering the multitudes of places I’m likely to be on any given day.”

In another lifetime Irwin used to ride with the Outlaws, sworn enemies of the Hell's Angels. That's how he lost his right leg. Got one foot in the grave, he likes to say, kicking Angel ass in hell. Exactly how he lost it changes every time he tells it. Street fight in Homestead, ambush in Bel-Glade, Stones concert riot in Sarasota, gun shot, knife wound, nerves sliced, gangrene. But the ending's always the same. Leg, Harley, glory—gone. All gone. Now all he's got is this beat to shit little kid bike he got at Minnie's ages ago. Traded something very special for it, but Minnie got the best end of that deal, he always says with a nasty wink.

Other times, when there's no one around but her, he likes to wonder about the kid the bike used to belong to. Where he is now, what he's driving, if he ever thinks back on his first set of wheels, if any place he's been to since matches the thrill he got from the places that banana seat bike took him to, how he'd feel if he knew an old crippled dude uses it to haul his hairy ass around in circles.

"Nice look, Foxy," says the guy in the red tee shirt. "That the style now? Leg warmers for the arms?"

"Shut your ugly mouth," says Irwin.

"Wha'd I say?" The guy makes his face go blank and innocent, holds up his arms like he's surrendering. The words on his tee shirt spread out across his chest. *I got up and got dressed. What more do you want?*

Irwin elbows him hard. The guy folds over, hands deep under each armpit. Roxy leaps off Irwin's lap, scratches up Torrie's legs.

"She's *my* friend, asshole, not yours," says Irwin. "Quit asking her questions. We don't do that. We don't ask each other questions. Ain't that right, Foxy?"

Irwin gives her a look from beneath his wild hairy eyebrows. Torrie sees two things in it. One, he'd be happy to pulverize this guy for bringing up her personal business. Two, he wonders about the bandages himself but if she'd rather he didn't, no problem, what bandages? Maybe that's more than two things.

"Dude," breathes the guy. "*You* just asked her one. Ain't that right, Foxy?"

Either the guy's got a serious death wish or doesn't have good sense. Either way, Torrie doesn't like him. He likes himself enough for both of them.

"Nice tee shirt, Red," she says. "Cute saying."

"Truth in packaging, Foxy." He keeps his arms criss-crossed over his chest, doesn't realize Irwin won't spike the air out of him again now that she's having a conversation with him. "Bit of transient humor. Like, ironical. Get it?"

Like everyone isn't in on that joke, where something that shouldn't be true is, but you're supposed to laugh at it anyway even when, especially when, it's not really funny. Still, you need to know what you're laughing at. This guy'll laugh at anything.

"Hey," says Irwin. "Hey, Foxy. You hear they discovered life on the moon?"

This is where she's supposed to pretend to be amazed.

"Astronaut looks under a moon rock and says here it is, proof of life on the moon. Know what he found? Guess. Guess what he found."

"Lunar ticks," says Torrie.

Irwin concentrates all his attention on massaging Roxy's ears. Roxy's back in his lap again.

"Good one, man," the guy says to Irwin.

"Irwin," says Torrie. "Hey. Irwin. Sign my casts?" She holds out her right arm to him, the blank one.

"Don't got a pen," he says, sulky.

"Got one right here." She digs in the front pocket of her jeans, pulls out Raul's Sharpee. The mostly smoked joint comes with it, flutters to the ground. The guy in the red tee shirt inches his foot over, covers it with his sneaker.

"Get the guy who signed your other arm to," says Irwin.

"My little cousin wrote that," says Torrie. "Has this idea it won't heal unless special people sign your cast. C'mon, Irwin. Just put *To Torrie* and some *X's* and *O's*. Something like that."

“What’s a tatorrie?” says Irwin.

Irwin doesn’t know her name, she realizes. Maybe couldn’t write it, even if he did.

“Draw me a lunar tick. Ain’t no one but you could do that,” says Torrie, then adds, “Might not heal, otherwise.”

He’s left handed, turns out, same as her. He takes hold of her right hand to steady her arm. His sandpaper fingers knit into hers—they’ve never touched before--leans in, gray broken teeth biting a wedge of gray tongue, concentrates on the figure he’s drawing, a circle with legs, four on one side, one, two, three on the other, slaps Torrie’s left hand away before he gets to the fourth. “Quit messing with my pants,” he says. “What you doing, messing with my pants?”

“Jesus Christ, Irwin,” she says. “Just trying to give you something. Advertise it why don’t you. Few others in the park might not of heard.”

Irwin reaches in his pocket, pulls out the bills, a ten and two fives. “Oh,” he says. “What’ll it be? I’m guessing name brand today. Tanguaray?”

“Don’t want nothing,” says Torrie. “Not today.”

“Wha’d ya do, turn twenty-one?” says Irwin. “And didn’t invite me to the party?”

Her age has nothing to do with why she gets Irwin to buy for her. The liquor store in the plaza won’t sell to her anymore, not so much as a pack of gum. Grady’s doing. Irwin must know. He knows the story behind everything else that goes on in the neighborhood.

“Party invitation musta got lost in the mail,” the guy in the red tee shirt says to Irwin. “I’d raise holy hell with the post office if I was you.”

“For real, Foxy,” says Irwin. “What’ll it be?”

“It’s your birthday present, man,” says Torrie. “Sorry I didn’t have time to wrap it.”

“Don’t no one know when my birthday is,” says Irwin. “Classified information.”

“Twenty bucks says you’re a Cancer,” says Torrie.

Irwin won’t go along with her, won’t laugh, won’t budge. “Don’t need no charity,” he says.

“*Charity?* This here’s a gift for me. For *my* birthday. Go to Minnie’s. Get yourself something. New pants, say. Sick of looking at them green plaid things.” She especially hates the way the cuff of the pants leg pinned to his waist is worried to shreds from where someone else dragged it around.

“You got a problem with these pants, quit coming round. Park won’t crash and burn without you.” Irwin stuffs the bills in the front pocket of her jeans.

“Be that way.” Torrie turns, takes four long strides, stumbles on the fifth. The leash jerks her back.

Don’t never look back, Miss Chantal used to tell the girls at the club. *Cheapens the performance*. What she sees is Roxy, curled up and comfortable in Irwin’s lap.

Torrie tugs at Roxy’s leash, harder than she means to. Roxy tumbles down in a clumsy heap on the asphalt. Seems she’s a rich person after all, thinking a rich person’s thoughts. *Mine*. Before she can reach for him, Roxy springs up, does a happy little tap dance around her feet. What choice does he have?

She turns to go. Stops. Looks back a second time.

“Irwin,” she says. “Hey Irwin. Been meaning to tell you something.”

Irwin looks right through her like she’s invisible.

“About this dream I had. You know that kid? The one that used to have your bike?”

Irwin’s a big time believer in dreams. He squints up at her, can’t help himself, says, “He a kid in the dream, or grown?”

“Grown. Bad posture, bad dresser. Big old glasses.”

“He got a family? House? Job?”

“Hard to say. Mostly the dream’s about what’s going on in his head. All these things he’s supposed to take care of, everybody needing something. Gets heavy, feels like he can’t move. But sometimes--this is what the dream’s really about--he gets these rushes. Craziest thing. They just come over him. Wash him clean. Like air in the face. Colors going by. Everything new. Sky just opens up.”

“What’s he on?” says the guy in the red tee shirt. “I want some of that shit.”

“Has to do with his bike,” says Irwin. “That’s what the dream’s about. You tell him it’s his if he wants it back.”

“Irwin, this is just a dream I had. It’s not about him wanting his bike back.”

“What’s it about then?” says the guy in the red tee shirt.

“Has to do with you,” Torrie says to Irwin, “riding that bike now. Has to do with all the unused magic still in it. And when you ride it, it gets released. Got to go somewhere, so it goes back to him. That’s where the rushes come from. In this dream I had, anyway.”

“Huh,” says Irwin. Sits quiet for a minute, says, “so he must know about me then, right? Think about it. Here’s your mind plugging into his. Stands to reason, don’t it, some of what you know gets leaked into him? You tell that kid he’s welcome next time you see him. You tell him that for me.”

“Okay, Irwin.”

“And do something else for me, Foxy. Cut the little pooch some slack. Quit acting like you own him. Do that for me?”

“Anything for you, man,” she says.

The leash is on extend now but Roxy trots beside her, pretty little skipping steps keeping time to hers. No looking back this time.

“Foxy!” calls the guy in the red tee shirt. “Dream something for me!”