

## The Valley of Heart's Delight

Sharon sits at her desk in the small office where she works alone. She watches a backhoe maneuvering through the neighboring Super Fund site, carting toxic debris to a waiting dump truck. The former fertilizer factory has been gutted, but still stands; a windowless mass of concrete, dwarfing the white-clad humans who climb around in and on it. Sharon assumes they will have to detonate the thing in order to bring it down. She hopes she will be able to hang onto her job long enough to see that happen.

It has been two weeks since she arrived at her office to find her regional manager, Bonnie Fairchild, sitting behind her desk, going through her files.

“Sharon!” Bonnie had said, as if greeting an invited guest. “So glad you could make it.”

“I’m sorry, Bonnie,” Sharon said. “The bus was early, so I missed it.” She’d tried to laugh, but it came out something like a cough.

“Listen, hun,” Bonnie said. “I’m on my way to Fresno. I only have a sec. I just wanted to stop in and talk to you about a little issue that was brought to my attention by Accounting.”

Bonnie motioned to the chair intended for Sharon’s clients. “Have a seat.”

Sharon sat, knowing what was coming.

“Now don’t get upset.” Bonnie said. “This is just a heads-up. But apparently you haven’t met quota once in the six months you’ve been here.”

“Nobody comes in,” Sharon said. “Nobody calls. I mean out here in the boonies, it’s not like I get a lot of walk-ins.”

“Nonsense, Sharon,” Bonnie said, one hand fussing with her silver skullcap of hair.

“Location has nothing to do with it. Do you get more calls than clients?”

## Valley of Heart's Delight

“Yes, of course, I...”

“Are you really following the script? The script is designed to so you will make the appointment for them, tell them when they are coming in, and never give them a chance to say ‘no.’”

Sharon nodded. “Always. And I never quote prices over the phone.”

Bonnie glanced at her watch. “I’m running late. Sharon, I have brought you a new copy of the script, and I want you to really study it.” She stood and adjusted her blue rayon dress around her substantial thighs. “This little visit is just an FYI. If you get yourself up to quota by the end of the month, I won’t have to come back here to ask you for your key.”

“I’ll make quota, Bonnie.”

“That’s what I want to hear. Don’t be frightened. Just consider this a pep talk.” Bonnie wedged her tiny purse under her arm and strode out the door.

Sharon went to the window and watched the woman’s silver Pontiac pull out of the driveway. She didn’t taken her eyes off it until it was out of sight. Only then had she allowed herself to cry.

Now, two weeks later, she hasn’t met quota once.

Her office is perched on the southern edge of San Jose, facing Morgan Hill and Gilroy and the last of the orchards and farms. The old, grey factory will surely be replaced by a new, grey strip mall called Peach Flower Plaza, or something of the sort; or an office building, or a condo complex with a name like Cherry Orchard Place; perhaps a McDonald’s, a Burger King, or The Hyatt Apple Valley, and beyond that, more will grow, as the city spreads like concrete stain across what was once The Valley of Heart’s Delight.

## Valley of Heart's Delight

It has been three days since she's had a client, and then it was only a typing job. Today she will report the few sales she has made this month, and soon, she knows, her keychain will be one key lighter, and she will be thrown back into that teeming pool of desperate people vying for the few available jobs.

She watches the slow demolition of the toxic building, wondering what she will put on her resume to fill the gap left by the past six months, and how she will feed and house herself once the axe comes down.

When the telephone rings, she sits up and stares at it. She lets it ring a few moments before answering, running through the script.

"Good, ah," she glances at her watch, "afternoon. Thank you for calling Perfection Resumes. This is Sharon Winston, Career Counselor. What may I do for you?"

"Hi." It's a man's voice, smooth and low.

"How may I help you?"

"You're a resume service, hunh?"

"Yes," she says, brightly. "Are you in need of one?"

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I am. I'm uh, trying to change jobs right now. But hey, did you say your name was Sharon?"

"Sharon Winston, yes."

"My name's Eric. I do need a resume, it's funny I wound up calling you."

"Would you like to make an appointment?" Sharon asks, trying hard to stay on script.

"How would tomorrow at two be for you?"

"See, I'm at work right now, too."

"Okay..."

## Valley of Heart's Delight

"I'm doing a poll of California women," he says. "That's my job."

"Okay."

"If you'll answer a few simple questions, I'll make an appointment. I'll even promise to buy a resume."

"Okay, Eric. Shoot."

"Okay, how old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Married?"

"Um. No."

"Race?"

"Caucasian."

"Hair color?"

"Blonde"

"Eyes?"

"Brown."

"Sexual preference?"

"What?"

"Sexual preference? I need that information so I can tell which set of questions to ask next."

"Is this a prank?"

"It's no prank, Sharon," his voice is soft, sincere. Almost tender. "I am very real."

"I'm straight," she says. "Straight as anybody anyhow."

"Good," Eric says. "You sound cute."

## Valley of Heart's Delight

"Next question?"

Sharon hears paper being shuffled. He clears his throat. "Here it is," he says. "Um, how often do you have sex?"

"Look, that's pretty personal."

"I'm sorry, I need to know. I have this chart here and I go to the next question based on your answer. So?"

"Not a lot. Not ever, lately."

"You don't have a boyfriend?"

"No."

"I see. Do you like being tied up?"

"What?"

"I mean, like if I slowly undressed you and walked you to a chair, that chair you're sitting on, right there in your office, and I bent you over it and tied you to it, and..."

Sharon slams the receiver back into its cradle. She sits very still, her hands pressed flat on the desk in front of her, before calling the police and finding out there is nothing they can do.

"Look," she tells the woman on the other end of the line, "I'm in this office alone all day. That call really frightened me."

"Honestly," Sharon can hear the woman's growing exasperation. "He'll probably never call you again." Sharon thanks the woman and hangs up, fighting a sense of disappointment that she can't quite put her finger on.

Sharon's bus is late, and twice as crowded as usual. She can't find a place to stand where she can hold onto the back of a seat or a support pole. The bar that runs along the ceiling is too high for her. She can just cling to it with the tips of her fingers. Every jolt and shiver of the bus

## Valley of Heart's Delight

jangles the nerves of her hyperextended shoulder. A tall, slim man in a leather jacket half-smiles an apology as he pushes into place behind her. She does not allow herself to make eye contact.

The ride home is forty-five minutes long. When her car was still running, it took her fifteen minutes to go the same distance. Riding the bus to and from the office always serves to reaffirm her sense that she has failed at everything she once believed she could and would do.

The cold metal and hot, often sour human odor of the bus tend to throw her into the darkest mood she is capable of. But this time is different. The man behind her smells like Alan. A vivid image of Alan's forearms appears in her mind. Thick, strong boned, the blond hairs standing out against his carpenter's tan like honey on a wooden spoon. She fights the urge to lean back against the chest of the man behind her, to let him encircle her with those arms, his coat leather creaking, his rich smell rising up around them both like steam. The bus lurches to a stop and for a brief moment, he is pressed against her. She feels her knees go weak. He grabs her around her waist to keep her from falling, holding her against him until she has steadied herself. "Thanks," she says, turning to look up into his face.

He smiles. He has no front teeth and there is something brown and sticky gluing the scruffy bristles of his mustache to one side of his face. "Yur welcome," he says, jovially enough. The doors hiss open and he pushes his way to the exit.

Sharon lives on the nothing side of town. Her duplex is one of many hidden from the road by a façade of automobile dealerships, their brightly colored flags snapping. She has lived in this place for four years. Until three months ago, she had shared it with Alan. But shortly after their engagement, Alan had packed and moved to Alaska, to work on a fishing boat. He needed to find himself, he'd said. He told her she could keep the ring, if it would help her heal, but he could use the money he'd get for it if she didn't mind. She'd taken it off as if to hand it to him, then turned

## Valley of Heart's Delight

and thrown it out the front door. It still lay somewhere out there, buried in the ivy they'd permitted to take over all but the brick walkway.

Sometimes she thinks she stayed for the ring. Every weekend she plans to rip out the ivy, but she never seems to get around to it. Perhaps she stays out of simple inertia. The detritus of four years of two people's lives seemingly too much to sift through. Her dead car in the driveway, Alan's dead car and rowboat behind it. A garage full of things she can neither bear to look at nor let go. It can't be love that she stays for. She longs to burn the whole place down with everything in it, and embark upon some adventure of her own.

Sharon's housemate, Andrea, is home. Her battered VW Bug is parked at a strange angle, one tire up on the curb. Sharon hopes she is sleeping in her nest on the floor of what once was her guest bedroom, but gives up all fantasies of a quiet evening as she approaches and hears the dissonant strains of Bon Jovi blaring out of her living room windows. She sees Andrea dancing inside. Andrea's dog, Angel, is tied, as usual, to the bumper of Sharon's car, growling at her and straining at its collar. Half pit bull and half whippet, the bug-eyed, sickle toothed, semi-hairless creature is probably the ugliest living thing Sharon has ever seen. She growls at it as she drags the big metal garbage can she'd hauled out that morning back up the driveway. She makes a great show of clattering and banging the can up the back steps, slamming the lid into place. She still hopes Andrea might learn by example. The music is deafening as she comes in the backdoor. Flies rise off dishes piled in the sink. The entire house smells of Angel and rotting food. Her housemate gyrates past the kitchen doorway in a black KSJO tanktop and lacy panties with a big smiling cherry at the crotch. Andrea wails along with the music, waving a fifth of Jack Daniels. Sharon slams the door shut behind her and a viscous silence wells into the shambles Sharon once called home.

## Valley of Heart's Delight

Andrea's head pops around the doorframe. "Hey Share! How's tricks?"

"All right, I guess," Sharon says, picking through the mounded dishes for a washable glass. "I brought the garbage can back up."

"I was just about to do that," Andrea says, dumping old newspapers off a chair and sitting down. She lights a cigarette and leans forward with her elbows on her knees, apparently oblivious that her posture has pushed one nipple clear of its sheer covering. "It was my turn, I know. I planned to wake up early enough to take it down this morning, but by the time I got up, the truck was already gone."

"Forget it," Sharon says. "Are all these dishes mine?" She knows none of them are.

Andrea takes a swig off her bottle and sets it on the kitchen table. "Sorry," she says, wiping a strand of sweat-sticky hair from her haggard face. "I think most of them are mine. I've been so busy. I just haven't had a chance to do all the cleaning I've been wanting to."

"So you've found a job?"

"No. I've just been busy, Sharon. You know, I went to Unemployment today, and then my mom called when I got home, so I had to go over there for a while, and then I was planning on bathing Angel."

"Wow, rough day." Sharon dumps the clotted remains of a glass of milk into the garbage because the sink is too full to reach the drain. She starts cleaning the glass and finds herself doing all the dishes while Andrea talks.

"I stopped by that guy, Richard's, house today, too. Remember Richard? He, uh, he spent the night here one night? Remember him?"

"Sure I do. You guys were up until three or four in the morning."

## Valley of Heart's Delight

“Yeah, that guy. Well, he's got this cable for his radio. You know, like four hundred channels. He says it's only fifty bucks a month. I thought, that's only twenty-five each for us. What do you think? I could call the cable company tomorrow.”

“I can't afford it,” Sharon says. “And you don't have a job.” She considers telling Andrea that she is likely to be unemployed herself in the next day or two, and decides against it.

“Yeah, you're right. You know, you really shouldn't dump all that old food in the trash. Angel's just gonna eat it and puke it back up like last time.”

“The garbage can's empty. There's room to dump this now.”

“I guess so,” Andrea says, dropping her cigarette into a dirty glass on the table and lighting another.

Sharon goes to the refrigerator, but the gust of fetid air that wafts into her face when she opens it changes her mind. She closes the refrigerator door and busies herself untying her shoes. “Tomorrow's the first,” she says.

“Yeah.”

“And...?”

“And?”

“I have to take the rent in,” Sharon says, straightening.

“Oh, yeah. About that...”

“What?”

“I don't have it.”

“You what? Andrea, I can't pay it on my own. That's why I am renting to you.”

“I know. I'm sorry.”

Sharon wills herself to remain calm. “Will you have it tomorrow?”

## Valley of Heart's Delight

Andrea fiddles with her cigarette. Her fingers shake. "I don't know how."

"Andrea, we can't be late again."

"I know."

"We have to pay it tomorrow."

"I know. I just don't..."

"Say you will have it tomorrow."

"I will try."

"Damn it, Andrea. Say you *will*."

"Okay," Andrea says, standing. "I will."

"You have to, Andrea. Please."

"I said, I will."

"Okay. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Andrea says, sounding put upon. She goes to the living room, sits on the couch, and turns on the TV. "Oh yeah," she shouts. "Some guy called for you. He sounded cute."

Sharon goes to the doorway. "Who?"

Her housemate looks up at her across piles of magazines on the coffee table. "Some guy, okay? Said he was a business acquaintance."

"Did he leave a number?"

"Sorry. No." Andrea raises the remote and points it at the television. "He said he'd call back."

Sharon knows who it was. She can feel it in the blood pounding in her ears. In her heartbeat flickering a frantic rhythm at the corners of her vision. "Was his name Eric?"

## Valley of Heart's Delight

"I dunno."

"It was him."

Andrea turns up the volume. "So?"

"He's a prank caller. He called me at work today. God, how did he get this number?"

"Oh come on. It could have been anybody."

"D'you think I should call the police?"

"Why? Jesus, Sharon."

Angel barks outside, his voice rising in pitch to match his excitement.

"Something's out there," Sharon says.

The dog's barking gets wilder, tinged with yips and howls.

"Something generally is." Andrea turns the sound up further and stares at the screen, dismissing Sharon entirely. Viper, her favorite American Gladiator, has just knocked a Contender from his plastic perch with a padded ramrod. "That's Viper," Andrea says, gnawing the edge of her index finger.

"I know," Sharon says.

"I think he's so cute."

"I know," Sharon says. "I'm going upstairs."

"Kay," Andrea replies, not moving her eyes from the television screen. "Have fun."

Sharon locks her bedroom door and checks to make sure the knife she keeps under her bed is there, within easy reach. Her room is much cooler than the rest of the house. The window faces the evening breeze. She sits on her bed and lets the breeze caress her face. In the blue evening light, she sees spires of ivy reaching through the top of the plum tree in her front yard as if preparing to pull the old tree to the ground.

## Valley of Heart's Delight

Angel has stopped barking. Through a gap in the leaves, Sharon can just make out his grey, snakelike body, pulled taut against the rope as he strains toward something on the other side of the street. "A cat," she says aloud. "I'm being paranoid."

She runs through her conversation with the caller. For the most part, it had been innocent enough. She can still hear his voice. It was soothing. The kind of voice you'd like to curl up in front of a fire with. "Do you enjoy being tied up?" She'd never thought about it before. She wonders if she would.

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At five-thirty Sharon takes off her pumps and places them in her desk drawer. She puts on worn sneakers for the long walk to the bus stop. Outside, the pavement wavers beneath a slick heat haze. The leaves on the eucalyptus trees that line the dusty parking lot hang limply in the stale air. The awful heat slams into her as she opens the door, stinging her eyes and nose with its dryness. She heads out into it, walking as fast as she can in order to be at the bus stop by five forty-five. If she misses that bus, she will have to wait another hour. She takes off her suit jacket as she walks and ties it around her waist like a sweatshirt.

Sharon is halfway to the bus stop when the rumble of a car engine catches her attention. She keeps walking, expecting at any moment to be passed by the car behind her. When that doesn't happen, she glances over her shoulder. An old green El Camino rides low to the ground maybe ten yards behind her. It seems to be pacing her. She speeds up her walk, but she can tell by the sound that the car is still there, keeping just to the rear of her peripheral vision.

To her surprise, she grows calm. Even the heat seems to dissipate around her. The engine revs and the car accelerates past her, its metallic paint gleaming. By the time it reaches the corner, it is moving so quickly its tires squeal and its rear end shivers as it turns and roars down

## Valley of Heart's Delight

Red Farm Road. Sharon stops walking and stares after it until it disappears. She sees her bus pull up to the stop a few blocks away and watches as it approaches and passes her. Its tail wind lifts the hair from the back of her neck and breathes coolly against her damp skin.

Sharon finds a patch of shade within a block of the bus stop and sits down in the dirt, her grey tweed skirt hiked up around her thighs. She has an odd sense of anticipation, as if something spectacular is about to topple into the world. She looks around at the dull expanse of warehouses and office buildings that surround her. There is not another human being in sight. A redwinged blackbird swoops lightly across the road and lands on a utility box. The folds of the old hills rise up around her like the cupped palm of some massive, golden hand.

At home, the front door is open and the house is empty. Sharon calls out for Andrea but gets no response. The interior of the house is dark and silent. She takes a few tentative steps into the living room, straining for the slightest sign of an intruder. Her plan is to make it to the kitchen and get a knife before she goes upstairs to her bedroom, where she is certain Eric is waiting. She turns on first one lamp, then the other.

In the unaccustomed light, the mounded couches and dog hair-coated carpet seem all the more horrible. There are stains on the walls where Angel has urinated, and stains on the carpet where his vomit has been allowed to soak in. She makes her way to the kitchen. When the phone rings, she jumps, smothers a scream, and runs to answer it.

“Sharon,” the voice is male. The connection crackles and wavers.

Sharon pulls the receiver as far as the cord will reach, and stretches to get the kitchen knife out of the mound of dishes in the sink. “Eric?” She whispers. “You son-of-a-bitch. Is that you?”

“Who the hell is Eric?” She recognizes the voice now. It is Alan.

## Valley of Heart's Delight

"No one," she whispers. "I'm doing something. I can't talk now."

"Baby, I need to tell you..."

"I'm doing something," she hisses through clenched teeth.

"I've been thinking about you. A lot. I miss you something awful."

"What?"

"Okay, look, honey. I didn't think I'd feel this way, but I do. I guess I really love you, you know? If Eric's some guy you're dating, I don't care. Only get rid of him now, 'cause I'm coming home." He says the last as if he's announcing a prize she's just won.

Sharon feels her face flush hot. Her heart pounds and her breath comes hard and fast. "You can come back to California if you want to, Alan," she says. "But you can't come back to me." She hangs up the telephone, amazed at how naturally her response had welled up out of her, like blood from a puncture wound.

She looks down and sees the knife is still in her hand. "I'm gonna kill you, you bastard," she whispers to the ceiling, and a smile flicks across her face.

Sharon picks her way through the living room and climbs the stairs. Beads of sweat gather on her upper lip and forehead, rolling into her eyes and mouth. She catches one on her tongue and tastes the sea. The phone rings again behind her and goes on ringing.

Sharon goes first to her own room. In her mind's eye, she sees Eric there, sitting on her bed. She gives him thick, dark hair that runs in a braid down his broad back, and brown eyes ringed with long, curling lashes. He is holding a rope in his hand.

She pushes her bedroom door open and walks in. The room is empty, the cover pulled up neatly on the bed. She goes to Andrea's room and pokes around in the mounds of clothing, the

## Valley of Heart's Delight

molding coffee cups and ancient sandwiches. "Okay," she says aloud. "Okay, calm down. Nobody's here."

Then she remembers that the front door was wide open. She realizes he must be downstairs. She hears him now. Moving around down there like he owns the place. When Andrea speaks, Sharon jumps.

"Such a good Angel," Andrea coos. "Angel, baby, did you have a good time in the park puppy baby, hunh?"

"Jesus Christ," Sharon says. "Jesus fucking Christ." She heads downstairs, the knife still clutched in her hand. Andrea is crouched on the living room floor, hugging Angel's skeletal head against her breast.

"GodDAMN IT, Andrea. Where did you go that you thought it was okay to leave the damned front door wide open?" Sharon pants with rage. "Why don't you just hang a big sign on the door, Andrea? 'COME RAPE US!'" Sharon is pacing now, waving the butcher knife in the air.

Angel growls at her, low in his throat. "Shut up, you disgusting thing." She moves as if to kick the dog.

"Don't you kick my dog, you bitch!" Andrea stands to face her housemate.

"I'll do anything I damn well please, Andrea, and do you know why? Because this is my house. Because you are my tenant. I can't live like this anymore. I can't. I'm laying down some rules here, Andrea, and you can obey them or you can move. First, we don't ever leave the door unlocked, let alone wide open, when we are not home. *Do you understand?*"

Andrea, eyes wide, nods her head. "I'm sorry," she says, looking down at her dog. "I didn't think it would upset you like this."

## Valley of Heart's Delight

"It's not just the door." Sharon goes into the kitchen and sets the knife down. She takes a deep breath and lowers her voice to a normal level. "It's everything," she says, returning to the living room. "The mess. The constant noise. That dog."

"So what do you want?" Andrea has returned to her perch on the only unlittered portion of the couch. Her bony fingers scrabble to pull a cigarette from its pack.

"I want us to set up a regular cleaning schedule. I want you to bathe that dog and take it to obedience school. I want you to let me watch my television every so often. And I want you to pay your rent on time. If I can't have these things, then I want you to leave."

"I get it now," Andrea says, her big, grey-ringed eyes welling with tears. "I thought we were friends. I thought we were sharing this place." She stands, fists balled at her sides. "I thought this was my house, too!" She shouts the last like a petulant twelve-year-old and turns and runs up the stairs, slamming her bedroom door behind her.

"Okay," Sharon says. "Come on, you shit." She reaches for Angel's choke chain. He growls again, his tattered ears pressed flat against his skull. "Come on, ugly boy." His gums flick up past his long, yellow teeth, and he glares at her out of the corner of his eye. She yanks the chain tight and drags the dog, still sitting, still growling, outside. She unties the rope from her bumper and wrestles the dog into the street behind her housemate's car. She ties Angel to Andrea's bumper and goes inside, closing and locking the door behind her. She can hear Andrea throwing things around upstairs. "I hope you're packing," She whispers to the ceiling. She dumps the clutter off the couch and lies down, putting her feet up and reaching for the remote control.

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## Valley of Heart's Delight

Sharon gets off the bus at ten 'til 8:00 the next morning. The air holds the promise of another hot day, but the fog has brought the sky down low. She smells garlic on the breeze wafting north from Gilroy. The shadowless landscape is cool and quiet - the susurrating the freeway, as calming as the sound of the sea.

But Sharon isn't calm. It's been two days since she reported her office's earnings. Plenty of time for Bonnie to prepare her black folder; her final paycheck. And there's no check in her pocket from Andrea. No extra stop to make on the bus ride home. She's been late every month since Alan left, and the management company has already made threats. If it all doesn't come crashing down today, she knows it will soon. She can hear the heavy sky whistling as it falls.

She walks. It's the only thing she knows to do. She keeps going until she reaches the parking lot of her office building and sees Bonnie's silver Pontiac parked by the front door. Bonnie stands beside it.

Sharon hears voices from the Super Fund site, muffled by the fog. They've put up red tape, marked DANGER, around the perimeter. Perhaps they are laying explosives. She'd like that. She gets up close to the tape, leans in, and listens. She doesn't know what for.

Beside her foot, a spindly seedling pokes up through a crack in the sidewalk. A single, tiny oak leaf taps the side of her sneaker, quavering in the breeze.

Sharon's eyes meet Bonnie's. She feels nothing.

She turns and walks past the trucks and the trailers and the heavy equipment to the on-ramp to Highway 101, and she follows it to the freeway, where a steady line of cars creeps toward the city center, and the occasional truck rumbles south, toward Gilroy and Salinas and Monterey.

## Valley of Heart's Delight

This stretch of highway is adorned with mission bells marking the path of the padres who came to take this land and make slaves of its people, to plant their fruit trees and foreign grasses and tend the cattle on which they fed. Sharon leans against one to dump a rock from her shoe.

She peels off her suit jacket and drops it in the dirt and hears the rumble of a suped up engine. She knows that sound. She turns as an old green El Camino tops the rise. Its blinker winks on and it glides across lanes until it is beside her, slowing as it passes. It stops a few yards ahead, and the passenger door opens with a squeal.

END