

*IT SAYS LOVE*

The whippet-thin young man walked close behind the woman into the beauty salon on Parliament Street. To Jennifer's old eyes his physical closeness to her was protective as well as aggressive, and held a threat to anyone who might harm the young woman, for that was his privilege. By the condition of the young woman's eye and the right side of her face it was a privilege he had exercised recently. They seemed to be in their late twenties, and walked both loose and tight together as they made their way toward the middle station of the manicure bench. The young woman sat down while he stood, shoulders bent, over her.

Jennifer sat high up on the big, black massage chair, with her feet in bubbling water, looking and feeling like a pensioned dowager queen on a throne. In her right hand, like a scepter, she held the wired remote control that turned on both the back massage and feet bubbles. It had been over ten years since she had been in a nail salon. This visit was pushed by a gift certificate from her daughter who did not approve of the quantity of gin Jennifer could consume on a warm summer evening and thought that her mother might feel better from a little pampering. At this moment Jennifer's black, baggy skirt was hitched up to her knees. Today she wished for those long ago elastersized knickers into which to tuck her skirt but any elastic would have been as tight and painful as a tourniquet squeezing her flesh. Her thighs had blown up like late summer marrows and were too visible under the old graying pink knickers that shrouded the dark depths of her

sagging pubis. She sat unflinching as little Tula scrubbed the soles of her feet and recited, as if kneeling to a confessional priest,

“I have been in Canada for eight years, yes with my family, I am from Vietnam.” She said this as a litany every day to inquiring clients. Usually it was enough to satisfy them but Jennifer was kept young by curiosity and conversation.

Why, that little thing isn't even half my weight, thought Jennifer as she watched Tula take another pumice stone to the bottom of her foot, trying to smooth out the rough edges. Tula seemed to soften into the old woman's gruff kindness even as she scrubbed more vigorously on her feet. To take her mind off the sharp tickling that was close to pain Jennifer looked over again at the couple.

The young woman had got up from her chair and was now washing her hands meticulously at the sink. She turned her hands over and over, moving the soap suds through her fingers slowly, relishing the warmth of the water. Jennifer could see how terribly thin she was. Instead of the usual prick of envy she felt at seeing someone young and slim, Jennifer felt an ache, a long dormant maternal urge stirring for this girl. The girl's posture held no vibrant life force, her body seeming only to stand for survival. For a moment she wondered what it would take to get this young woman to eat a good meal. Maybe a long hot bath would do it; she looks like she could use that too, Jennifer thought to herself. She envisioned the young woman wrapped in an oversized terry dressing gown with her washed hair knotted in a towel sitting in a chair in the sunlight of Jennifer's messy kitchen and herself gently removing the terry turban and combing through that tangled hair. *I'm Going to Wash That Man Right Out of Your Life*: Jennifer hummed the tune to herself and was caught for a moment wondering if she had actually been singing

out loud. The young woman continued to wash her hands with a repetitive slowness that could appear as if she was preparing carefully in readiness for this needed manicure. To Jennifer it looked more like belligerent sink lingering, and her washing made the man restless. Everyone in the salon was conscious of him staring at the young woman and his movements as he shifted in the seat he had taken beside her chair.

The young woman dried her fingers one by one, as carefully and slowly as she had washed them, and returned, like a dog coming back from a good smelling tree on a retractable leash, to her seat, with small, slow steps. Lulu, another young manicurist from this stable, bent over the young woman's hands for a cutical check before releasing her to the boss's care.

From a lifetime of watching and being watched, the young woman was aware of Jennifer's observant looks. She had also stared at Jennifer's broad, flat feet that were being grasped first by the toes and then held deftly, like a fresh coconut, by the heels ready for trimming down. The razor blade flashed in its curved handle as Tula swiped accurately at the soles of Jennifer's feet. She skimmed off layers of worn, yellow flesh that fell in a final death dive to the soggy newspaper that lay on the floor between Tula's outspread legs. The young woman wondered if that hurt. She curled her own toes instinctively and wondered again if you needed to be stoned to have it done. Her feet were not where she would choose to apply a razor.

Jennifer's feet were now scrubbed, her toenails clipped and filed and her legs, to just below the knees, had been vigorously massaged with cream. Tula reached over to the sterilizer and pulled out a pair of pink, sponge toe-separators. Jennifer was not happy with the red she had carelessly chosen. It was the rushing of the decision that made it

wrong as well as the color. In her dissatisfaction Jennifer absentmindedly picked up a bottle of metallic mauve varnish and looked at it with curiosity. Tula suddenly swung back onto her bottom and raised both her feet up into the air.

“Try mine, it’s pretty,” Tula said in a confident chirp. Jennifer looked at Tula’s tiny but sturdy feet and thought they were surprisingly pleasant. She nodded her consent.

“All right, something like that might be nice.” Tula hopped off her stool and brought back three bottles. Jennifer chose one. Tula applied a strong, but not sparkly, red vanish deftly and cleanly to Jennifer's toenails. When Tula finished, Jennifer eased herself off the high altar chair of pedicure heaven and with her feet encased in a pair of blue rubber slippers that had ‘One Canada’ stamped across their velcro top, she waddled across to the manicure bench beside the young woman and her man. Kim, the father and owner of this franchise, was now sitting in front of the couple.

“May I look? Do you mind?” Jennifer asked the young woman as she was getting up. Jennifer kept her eyes firmly on the young woman’s face as she asked. How old, how young was she, she wondered to herself. Jennifer dared not look away from the face, though the guarding, hovering presence of the man oozed out a sheet of concern that spread like spilled motorfuel across the floor. One wrong move, thought Jennifer, and this salon would be demolished. The young woman held out her hands for Jennifer to see.

“Do you mind my looking?” inquired Jennifer with uncharacteristic repetitive deference. The young woman shrugged and kept her hands still for Jennifer’s inspection. Her nails were long, shaped strongly and sanded ready for the application of some new kind of beauty. Kim silently held up a sheet of acrylic with transfers on it under the metal lamp for the couple to see. The young man looked very quickly at Jennifer and then away

again, his face beginning to show the end of his patience. The young woman spoke lightly,

“Not at all, see,” and held up her hands.

“What happens now?” Jennifer asked.

“We put these on, we’re choosing now.” The young woman waved her fingers vaguely towards the acrylic sheet.

“It’s all right,” she had sensed Jennifer’s consideration, “I was watching you too.” Jennifer’s heartbeat gave a skip of hope for the woman. “Does it hurt your feet?” the young woman asked looking down at Jennifer’s feet and up again at her face.

“No, not at all,” Jennifer lied. “And they feel so much better now. What do you think of this color?” Jennifer realized that the woman had been watching her pedicure with some curiosity but was more familiar with other uses for a razor.

“It’s pretty,” and with a half smile she turned back to the counter and placed her forearms and hands down, spreading her fingers apart for Kim to work on, as she would later spread her legs for another man. With one hand Kim readjusted his angle lamp, pulling the arm closer to him and his goggles down over his eyes. He looked down at her hands, bringing his focus solely onto her nails, precluding the rest of her body. Kim pushed away his imaginings of what acts would she perform with these hands and the nails he was to give her. The young man slid forward in his chair, resting his arm across the counter, closing in on Kim’s workspace like a farmer at a country auction leaning across the metal barrier eyeing the animals brought in for sale.

Jennifer waited for Tula to bring the dish of warm soapy water and more polish from which to choose for her manicure.

“That one.” said Jennifer. Tula laughed.

“Not the same, too bright? That’s OK. This one nice too.”

For a while, the salon was quiet. The hum of the traffic through the open door was soothing and distracting enough as Tula and Kim worked side by side on the downhill slope of these clients. Tula was relaxed now. Before Tula had applied the varnish she asked for payment and the old woman had added five dollars, not the usual three that the affluent girls who came in every week usually gave her.

Another group of young people came in to the salon, two women and a man. They were younger than the couple already seated and lighter in years and knowledge. One of the women was pregnant. The other woman was tall, thin with black curly hair she had half-contained with a scarf, and she wore bright red lipstick as black haired, white faced woman can. Her long black summer dress hung close to her body and danced around her feet which were lifted off the floor on thick rubber soled, thonged sandals.

“Any chance of a manicure?” The tall girl asked the shop in general. Her smile lifted her face to point towards the squared ceiling and florescent lights. Kim glanced up at her, his mask hiding the fact that his lips were compressed again at the rudeness of regular customers who did not bother with a phone call for an appointment. It was towards Wendy and another waiting manicurist that he nodded for this group. Soon they were settled and all chatting away and the young man within this group turned his body towards them and held his hands in two bowls of soapy water on the counter while loudly and cheerfully calling out colors for his companions to wear. He loved playing with colors. For him, this Tuesday afternoon on Parliament Street in Toronto was a moment of heaven.

Jennifer's manicure was finished now and she looked at the results of Tula's work with surprised pleasure. For a moment she pushed back her own sense of the waste of Tula's work. Now she only had to sit still and let them dry. How hard, Jennifer thought, it still is, even at this age, to sit still. Tula took away the blue plastic sandals and quickly pulled out the toe-spreaders before giving back to Jennifer her own white flip flops. Any pampering of herself had always felt alien and Jennifer knew she would never get used to it though it was a life style that the young women who came in off the street and out of the suburbs took for granted. She wondered how this family afforded this shop location and how did hundreds of such shops across the cities and suburbs survive. Were manicure salons the new parking lots and dry cleaners for money in need of laundering? She realized that she was an accessory to something she would never know.

The young woman was also finished and getting ready to leave. As she got up from her chair the man rose and stood beside her.

“Let me see, may I?” Jennifer asked again, suddenly wanting one more moment of connection, not wanting this afternoon to end. The young woman flashed her hands with their new long coated nails pointing downward in front of Jennifer's face as a practice flourish of how she would play them on the bar counters during dark nights like finely knotted fishing flies cast upon fast moving rivers. Diamond and white letters danced through the red blood varnish. Jennifer stared, struggling to find beauty in the brittle talons before her eyes. In one blink her gaze of bewilderment turned to pity that the young woman caught before it was gone. She straightened up her body before Jennifer could speak. The man standing close beside sensed that the old woman had flustered his mare. His lips tightened along with his grip on her elbow as steered her

away from the old woman. He would have to bridle her hard before she settled to obedience again.

“It says love,” said the young woman. She looked into Jennifer's eyes with scorn before turning sharply and walking out of the door. The man followed close behind her.

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