

Feed the Hungry

Thomas and Carolyn are on the wicker loveseat looking brave.

I'm on the matching chair across from them, glasses on, ankles crossed, cleavage squeezed.

"He's really such a sweet boy," Carolyn says, her voice cracking. She smiles wanly.

"He's twenty, but I still think of him as a boy." The wicker whines under her as she reaches for a tissue. She dabs her eyes. "It's not just the basement time. It's the stuff he says." She glances at her husband. "Tell her what he said about feminists."

"I don't need to know," I say.

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“I mean,” she says. “We don’t like their methods, but they’re still entitled to their opinions. Opinions don’t make them whores, no offense.”

“Your devotion is really wonderful,” I say. “Most people wouldn’t think outside the box like you.”

They smile, glance at each other.

“Some people think sex is private business between two people,” I say. “But you seem to get that sex can be community service, like feeding the hungry.”

“I’m imagining a cleaning lady,” she says. “As your cover. If he wants to live in our house, he has to put up with our cleaning lady.”

“You can dust the basement in a little maid getup,” Thomas says.

“You like the getups, do you?” I say, smiling.

Thomas flushes and puts his hand on Carolyn’s leg. “We’re so afraid we’re going to see his face on the evening news,” he says. “I lurked in some of those forums he goes to. Unbelievable.”

Carolyn nudges him. “She’s probably an expert,” she murmurs.

“Misogyny is my mother tongue,” I assure them.

More smiling.

“I can come every day,” I say. “Treat his atrophied, translucent body like an archeologist treats a digsite.”

They’re nodding.

“Precious,” I say. “Desperately in need of preservation.”

Carolyn’s eyes well up again. “I feel so good about you,” she says, hand on her heart.

“I’m three hundred an hour,” I say. “More if he hits me.”

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They nod.

When you get on the bus at Carolyn and Thomas's house, you get your pick of the seats.

Day One. I descend the carpeted stairs to the family basement. No get up, save for daisy dukes and a sensible t-shirt. Vacuum cleaner as prop.

The bed is a jumble of sweaty sheets, stained and concave down the middle. The cream carpet is brown on the path between the bed and the desk. Stacks of computer games, gadgets, and cords form a solid mass on the perimeter like a hedge row on a property line. An addict's paraphernalia in an addict's habitat. The room reeks.

The boy is in his trance at his desk, his back to me. He is motionless, brown hair clumped against his pale neck, long nails clacking on the keyboard.

I bump the vacuum cleaner against the wall.

The boy starts, looks up wild-eyed. He doesn't bother with me, just runs to the stairs and yells, "Mom! Get her out!"

"She went down the street," I say, entering the room more fully. I push open a transom window.

He turns around. "I said No to a maid," he snaps.

He's finally looking at me, so I bend over alluringly and plug in the vacuum cord. Most of my clients are actually pretty mortified by the porn act. Others are so immersed in porn, they don't know it's an act at all.

But the boy is back at his desk, in chatroom oblivion. It will enrage him when his desire for me reaches the breaking point. The sex will be heartless, but I decide in advance not to take it personally.

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I don't mind really cleaning. Community service in its own right.

"Don't touch my bed," he tosses over his shoulder. "Or any of my stuff."

I have to seem like I'm cleaning the whole house, so I keep interrupting him to ask where stuff is.

"The linen closet?" he says. "Top of the stairs."

"Will you show me?" I ask.

"No."

"I looked everywhere."

"Then you're stupid. There's not even a door on it."

"Please please please," I say, daring to tug on his sleeve. "I don't want your mom to know it took me twenty minutes to put away the towels."

He caves and I make sure I'm ahead of him on the stairs. I reach the top and discover he stopped halfway up. He points at the shelves next to me, paisley and stripes and floral flannel all in plain sight.

"I do feel a little stupid," I say.

He doesn't reach for me once the whole week. I keep expecting him to follow me around but he doesn't. I try sighing and wriggling out of my shirt, dropping it into his lap. He glances down at it, frowns, and chucks it on the floor. When we meet in the kitchen, I open a drawer and back into him. He steps away. When I savor a banana beyond all reason, he averts his gaze.

The boy is impervious to even my most aggressive jiggling and giggling. When I sneak a peek at his screen, I brush my breasts against his shoulder.

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“Excuse me,” I say. Then I do it again.

The boy jolts to his feet. “What are you doing, whore?” He cries.

I would laugh if I didn’t know better.

On Saturday I stand on his desk and wash the window. He’s still in his chair, complaining that my legs are obstructing his view of the screen. The daffodils are blooming at eye level. The glass is warm. I wait for his hand, his beard, and nothing comes, so I climb down onto his lap, look sweetly into his eyes. I don’t say, “You know you can touch me” or some phrase about general liberties. I wouldn’t throw other women under the bus like that. I say, “You have my permission to touch me. Do I have yours?”

He smells like a sedentary body, tart with cortisol. I don’t mind his skin or breath. I struggle with his head, that specific smell of unwashed hair.

“Touch me.”

He moves his hands on me rigidly, like spatulas. I scratch over his t-shirt, press my fingers up his neck to his ears.

We don’t have sex in any sense of the word even though I’m at my best, safe and soothing as an angel.

“What’s this about?” he says, but he wants it to be real, wants me to kiss away his fear and confusion, his chatroom claptrap. He tells me all the ways his heart is broken-- by schoolyard bullying, poor parenting, his own lack of athleticism/intelligence/wit, and by some study buddy he knew for two months year-before-last, whom he blames for being both a teasing whore and the mastermind behind a global scheme of somethingsomething, of which white men are the victims.

I listen, dewy and rapt. Then I kiss him lightly and make my escape, all smiles.

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After that, the walls come tumbling down. I'm thinking about how much detail to report to his parents. I'm a hooker with the heart of a freelancer.

His tongue is thick and coated in something too smooth, but I'm a master of my craft. I can find it within me to appreciate it. He is not as heartless as I predicted, but almost. After, I keep holding him, curl all around him, delay his retreat from the tangible.

"Did you orgasm?" He says.

"Yes," I always say, whether or not it's true. "Thank you for checking."

We're silent for a moment, and then I say the opposite of what I'm thinking, "I don't want to go."

"You don't have to," he says.

"Your parents would kill me if they found out about us," I say. "And I need the money."

"And not to be killed," he says, which strikes me as legitimately charming.

The next day I see he's left the window cracked.

"Want to know a maid secret?" I say. "The fastest way to clean a shower is to be in the shower."

"Are you telling me I'm dirty?" he says.

"I'm telling you where I'll be if you want me," I say. I undress.

He calls me such an awful name that I jump like he startled me. He laughs and follows me into the dusty plastic shower stall where I embrace him, say his name, hold his face as the water streams over us. Then I giggle and say, "I completely forgot to clean the shower."

He's glowing so I venture, "I'm famished. Could you get us a snack?"

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He looks surprised but says he will.

I clean the shower, but when I come out into the main room, he's sucked back into the computer.

I kiss his neck.

"Aren't you hungry?" I say.

"You don't get to tell me what to do," he says.

"I just want to take care of you," I say, but I second guess it as I say it. It's not sincere, and his statement was fair. "What can I get us?"

He doesn't answer.

Thomas is in the kitchen. I can tell he wants a progress report, but he's a good boss. Circumspect, appropriate for the most part. I return to the basement with carrots. The boy ignores them and me, so I get right up close and smile and say, "Thanks for today."

"Get out of my face," he says. "You got what you wanted."

The next day I'm in maid mode, claiming more turf. I'm moving the mattress in order to flip it, but he pounces on whatever was hidden underneath and roars about his right to privacy, his mother and father, the somethingsomething conspiracy. He throws his treasures into the closet and slams the shutter doors shut. Whirls around and bellows, "Keep out of there!"

The doors burst open and secret detritus tumbles out-- sketchbooks, yearbooks, laundry. He wages war against it while I school my eyes not to roll, think of sneaking upstairs to raid the refrigerator. Then at last he's won. The closet stays closed but his rage isn't spent and he's turning it on me now, or that's the plan written on his face, so I drop to my knees and open my mouth, and both of us feel awful.

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This is my real business, of course, not the mattress, and as I perform it dawns on me that this boy is the first client to be mean to me. Most clients are far nicer than an actual boyfriend.

Then I remember this boy doesn't know he's a client.

Poor child, I think. He's probably thirty years younger than my next youngest client. I'm probably the best thing that's ever happened to him. The notion rouses my sentiments and stirs my vanity so I'm able to imbue a demeaning, self-preserving blow job with intimacy and tenderness. The boy responds in kind, fingers my hair like he cares, which proves not all is lost.

We move onto his vile concave bed, a crime scene without a crime.

And now, while the boy is in his glow, when I've just seen the involuntary flash of awe that young men get when they're really making love, now is the only time to nudge him.

"I'm having a fantasy," I say. "Of doing this with you in a field of daffodils." And, "Do you like trivia night?" (Risky, because I know everything and he mustn't be upstaged.)

He says, "I'm only twenty. I can't get into the bars."

"Oh right," I say.

"I wouldn't anyway," he says. "Stupid people who don't know what's worth knowing."

I hug him. "That's a sad thing to say."

He smiles, proud of his misery. Digs into me like a fox at a rabbit warren so I throw my arms and legs around him and remind him where he really is— the gates of Heaven, begging for salvation.

It's working: he's showered when I show up.

Working: he stares into my eyes and strokes my face.

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Working: Thomas and Carolyn give me a bonus because he said something about baseball.

Everyday now I have to search the house for him because he cleans before I arrive. I find him hunched over his parents' tub bleaching the caulk. I find him in the backyard beating the pollen off the palm frond cushions. He thinks if the maid work slackens his parents will fire me.

We get straight to it wherever we meet. He seems to relish the risk that his parents might see. He always wants to loll around where we've landed, even long after we're done.

"Have you told your friends about me?" I ask, stretching, letting my body skim along his. We're lying in the upstairs hall, reeking of lemon carpet cleaner.

"You don't get to ask about my friends," he says, and I don't know if he thinks those chatroom goons count, or if the boy knows he has social problems. (Don't blame the rightwing extremism. In my experience, a man can have impeccable politics and not a friend to his name.)

Our bodies are facing each other, his penis at ease on his thigh, his head propped on his arm. I run my hand over his chest. "Want to go out somewhere?"

"To where?" He runs his hand up my neck, a little firmly. He likes to do that kind of thing, eyes locking with mine, like he's daring me to flinch. "I just want to stay here."

I pout, which is one of those tricks that either really works or really doesn't. "Will you show me your sketchbooks? I bet you're amazing."

"Get over it," he says. He gets up and goes to the basement. I follow, but he goes straight to his desk chair, his body molding into it like a mollusk in its shell.

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Thomas is arriving as I'm leaving. We stand by the mailbox in the yard and talk about the boy. Thomas likes to get deep. He ruminates all over me, always without asking, always about his son. Today: He turned his back on the world, sure, but who hasn't quit certain cultural diets, cut this influence and that stressor? The big difference isn't the substance of the ideas so much as the medium of the computer. After all, who doesn't carry inside themselves a viable little kernel of misogyny, a seed most of us manage to keep in the dark, under wraps, unsprouted? The boy's hatred has been basking in computer glow for so long it's become an old growth forest, but here you come, he says, pruning him back.

"It's what I do," I say.

"He was never going to be a mainstream person," Thomas says. "I liked that in him. It implied critical thinking, being countercultural."

As he's talking, some small, separate part of me can see us standing there, can see Thomas and me trying to draw an analogy between the boy's mind and ours, and I see that we are damn damn fools.

I also see motion at the basement window, and I know the boy has seen us.

But the next day I think maybe it's ok because the boy devours me with single-minded fury, like how I get with popcorn. Then he's up and in the shower washing me off, which seems backwards, makes me wary. He comes out rubbing a towel on his groin.

"You're still here?" He says, pointedly cold.

I think, not for the first time, that this may not be a long term career.

But just as some women are the bride of God, I am the bride of man. Of men. When I level my gaze on him and say, "I love you," I am not lying, though I also don't mean the thing I

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have never meant-- specific and special love. I mean my general humanistic devotion. The boy benefits incidentally.

He looks at me, then toward his computer. "I'm busy," he says. And then, not unkindly, "Sorry."

"With what?" I say.

He sits.

"The conspiracy?"

"Are you making fun of me?" He spins to face away.

"What is it preventing you from doing?"

"Whatever the fuck I want."

I go to him. Place my foot on his precious chair. Pick up his hand and place it on my butt.

"Build your revolution on my body," I say.

But he doesn't actually want that.

The bus barely comes in the middle of the day. I walk out of his swanky neighborhood onto the main drag that leads downtown, where the fun people live. An hour's walk home, and the whole time I'm trying and failing to name the sinking feeling in my chest. I'm in a rut of righteous, bitter thoughts. When a man is starved for sex, he theorizes that sex is the great motivator of all mankind. He believes he wants nothing else, believes it 'til it wrecks him, but he is no more capable of sex than he is of surviving in the wild or escaping prison. Barely more interested, when push comes to shove.

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I'm home for five seconds, thinking of calling a friend, going to a movie, getting some exercise. I notice I'm missing my usual clientele, the sad traveling businessmen and adorable retired couples.

Then he's calling me, or I figure it's him because the number is two digits off from Carolyn's. I let it ring and check the message:

"I'm downstairs."

I look around. See my apartment as he would see it. The normalness of it, but also the me-ness of it. My futon, which knows my body. My pots and pans hanging from the peg board, clever and neat like everything I do. He'll see my books, unpurged since college. The proud, heavy novels, the critical theory, the *Imagining Post Patriarchal Economies*, all sticky-noted, loved. It's the apartment of a bean soaker, a trivia nighter, a doer, a healer. An optimistic, well-adjusted, educated woman. Of course he can't come up, scan my studio from under that bad haircut, see all the proof that I'm better than he is-- the open book on the end table, the tomato plant on the patio, the framed photos of a rich and active life. Can't have my social/emotional wellbeing surrounding him like a funeral pyre.

Besides, this is not a norm I want to establish for my practice. I don't even have my actual friends over, unless briefly because someone's borrowing a dress. Now here he comes without asking, going to stink up my shag rug with his bare feet.

Someone must have held the door for him because he's inside my building now, shouting my name. It's ringing through the stairwell.

I trudge downstairs, already anticipating my relief at the end of this, the takeout I'll order, the book I'll read after I tell him to get a real therapist. This boy is a man's job.

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“Why are you scowling?” the boy says, peering up at me as I descend the final flight into the lobby.

“It’s creepy to follow a girl home.”

“I wanted to know where you live,” he says.

“Why are you here?” I should have stopped on the stairs but I’m standing in front of him.

“I was thinking about the thing you said.”

“Don’t.”

He reaches for me, folds me into his arms. I go wooden.

“I thought you were flirting with my dad yesterday,” he murmurs. “I was so pissed until you said you loved me, and I saw the look in your eyes and I knew you meant it.” He’s got his chin painfully pressed into my face. “I told my parents everything.”

“What’s everything?”

“I told them to go fuck their bourgey expectations that I meet a nice college girl and have a lamestream middle class life. I told them I don’t give a shit about their comfortable liberalism where they talk about justice but never actually help anyone. I said I’m in love with the maid, and she needs me, and she’s in love with me too. I said there’s nothing they can do about it.”

The boy is glowing. He takes my hand in his and says with new animation, “Celia, I’ll take care of you.” He strokes my hair. “I want to lift you out of poverty. You won’t have to live like this anymore.” He gestures widely, indicating my perfectly middle class apartment lobby. “I can protect you from all of this. From everything. You’ll see. It’ll be alright. You won’t have to work so hard anymore.”

“What did your parents say?” I say, stepping away.

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“Apparently it was all a misunderstanding. My dad’s supportive after all. Always has been. He said he was hoping this would happen, and you seemed like a nice girl, and he doesn’t care that you’re not educated.”

He closes the distance between us, and he’s all over me. Kissing my face, tugging my hair.

I try to guide us outside.

“I’m so relieved,” he says. “I couldn’t get him to admit he was hitting on you at the mailbox like a creep. I’m sorry you went through that.” He clutches me, squeezes me with his cold, inept fingers. “But now he and I are square.”

I stumble through the door, needing this boy out of my building even if I have to go too.

He follows me blindly, rambling about all the ways he’s saving me.

I’m looking around the street, as if I’m meeting a friend. As if I’d already ordered dinner and it should be here by now. The bar on the corner looks busy, and I remember it’s trivia night.

Then I see, standing on the sidewalk by his car, Thomas. He kind of waves and I’m flabbergasted.

“You brought your dad?”

“It was easy to catch up with you,” the boy says, yanking me into him. “Oh, Celia.” He’s moved half to tears by his own heroism. “You’re my purpose. I’ve waited so long.”

“That’s very sweet.”

“Your love has brought my son back to me.” I look up and Thomas is right next to us, his hand on the boy’s shoulder like a normal paternal gesture, only he’s spewing gratitude into my face while his son is pinning me against him. “I can’t thank you enough, Celia. You’ve served our family beyond our wildest hopes, and I know this is just the beginning.”

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I realize I'm wiggling like I'm desperate, so I go still. Stare the boy down. "Boy," I say, drawing on every advantage I have over him. My age, but also my sophistication, professionalism, core stability. My genuine affinity for other humans. My ability to enjoy life and connect with my community. My ability to eat, sleep, and exercise. "You need to tell your clueless parents you want to take a grand tour, or you want to get an internship, or you want to do whatever twenty-year-olds are supposed to do these days. Tell them the maid you love thinks you should get a life."

And then I scuttle toward the bar because he can't come too.

"I know it's a lot to think about," he calls after me. "I'm not going away. I'll be here when you get out. We'll go home and you'll be happy. I promise."

Thomas is following me. "I'll talk some sense into her," he calls his shoulder at the boy, and I'm running like it'll make a difference.