

A Sober Drive

Harrietta Bloom drove up the freeway ramp onto the Interstate. Traffic had died down after rush hour. Empty of cars, the highway belonged to her now and she began to congest it with an onrush of thoughts. She was still fuming. White knuckles gripped the leather steering wheel, French nails dug into her palms, as if she were clinging to a branch over the side of a cliff.

“Honey, you’re going to be late again.” Her husband, Kelly, a retired Marine, had spoken sweetly to her that morning, but she had long stopped listening to tone and filtered only for content. “I got up extra early to make your lunch. I got your coffee and an egg crepe ready for you to eat in the car on the way. It’s an hour and a half from here and you’ve now lost your bit of window, so you better fly. They’re not going to be too happy if you’re late for your orientation.”

“Okay, okay, don’t remind me. It just makes me more anxious.” Harrietta strode into the kitchen. She wore her blond hair in a ponytail and her pretty face was unadorned by makeup. Abruptly, she strapped onto her shoulder the designer bag he had fully stacked with coordinated Tupperware in order of priority—vegetable snacks, salad, sandwich, and a slice of tiramisu next to a single square of dark chocolate. She took a few quick sips from the cappuccino he had artfully prepared in a metal to-go cup. A barista-whipped heart trembled on the foamy surface every time she took a sip.

Kelly stood up from the kitchen table, stretched his spine in all directions, then hung for a minute from a chin-up bar lodged in the door frame. He groaned with pleasure. “I already dropped Hannah off at her drawing class. Oh, by the way, Iris’s mom’ll drive her back here. And I’m expecting Clark any time. He needs more programing lessons.”

“Is he paying you for your time?” She said between sips, foam-heart trembling.

“He *was* paying me. But I’m expensive and he can’t afford it, so we’re bartering.”

“That sounds like a sweet deal ... for him. Can *we* afford it?”

He disengaged from the stretch bar. His massive arms bulged out like two honey-baked hams. “It’s equitable.” Kelly said. “We barter.”

“Well, I think you spend too much time with him.”

“Too much time? Really?” His face showed visible signs of hurt and disappointment—a twitch under his left eye and, for a moment, the muscle complex that controlled his lips surrendered the power to form syllables. Then, a timid flow of words built up from hurt to irritation. “Clark stops by once or twice a month. If I’m lucky. I don’t have any friends. I don’t go out to bars or do drugs. I quit my lucrative job so I can bang out your jewelry site, our only livelihood now... cause I believe in you. I do nothing else but slave my ass all day at home, by myself; and you can’t cut me a little slack for some social time?”

Harrietta took an extra long sip and burnt her lips on the hot coffee hiding deceptively beneath the cooler foam surface. As a reflex, she brought her fingers to her lips to comfort them. “Is that alcohol I smell on your breath?”

He looked down to avoid her angry stare. “Yeah, I had a beer a while ago. I’m feeling hyper from all the stress and thought I’d unwind before Clark arrives.”

“You promised Hannah and me you’d stop drinking. You need to get back into AA.” The heat from her stare competed with her coffee.

“Listen, Hera, I’ll tell you right now. I’m never going back to that depressing dungeon. If I have to sit one more time in that smelly chain-smoker’s hall and listen to another *loser* tell me his sob story for the mind-numbing millionth time, my Higher Power is gonna choke the life out of my Inner Child.”

He called her Hera, as a nickname (Harrietta is a mouthful). She used to think it was cute, him calling her this term of endearment after the Greek goddess. Now it annoyed her.

“Urrrh ... you’re an asshole, I hate you.” She pitched the coffee cup across the kitchen. It struck the scrubbed-steel refrigerator door, and gouged two deep dents where the edge of the cup and its handle made contact. With a long gait she stomped toward the front door and slammed it behind her.

The lies. For all his smart-ass smarts and mechanical ingenuity, he doesn’t seem to understand how women think and process bullshit—on the fly, in the real world. At least he tried to be honest this morning. If you can call it that. ‘I only had one beer. To help me unwind.’ Yeah,

right. Probably more like three beers. Partial honesty is not honesty. It used to be a full-on denial. Tried to wiggle his way out of the lie.

“Have you been drinking again?”

“No.”

“Bullshit. I can smell it on your breath. You try to hide it with mouthwash and a mint? You think I’m that stupid I can’t smell the difference between mouthwash or a mint when the mouthwash and mint are struggling to cover up the underlying smell of beer? The combo is a foul lie.”

And then he slumps his shoulders. Looking all defeated. So I’m supposed to be the bad guy? The nagging wife? Pathetic. I really lose all respect for him at that moment.

Then he messes up the website for a few days and cripples my business. Asshole. Why won’t he just go back to AA? Does he hate me that much? Does he not care about Hannah and her future? Our future? Our family? Our security?

Harrietta gripped the steering wheel harder. She could feel her nails digging sharp pain into the centers of her palms. I wonder how badly I damaged the refrigerator door? How much will it cost to fix it? Do I need to replace the entire door? He’ll probably just leave the flaw as a memento. So I have to be reminded of the damage he causes me, every day.

She drove at 90 mph, attempting to reach the Texas Annual Gemology Conference in record time. She had left the house tightfisted. One fist clenched in rage, the other fist delivering a blow of anxiety to her stomach.

Though, at the moment, she was pretty pleased with herself, knowing that now she would beat the clock before the cutoff period imposed on the certification program by State regulations. She was bopping down the Interstate singing along to her favorite female songwriter/performer, PJ Harvey. She never quite got the lyrics exactly right. But precision in words didn’t matter. The fun part was syncing to the beat. Precision in gems, jewelry design, running her business with laser focus was the only thing that mattered to her.

“Down to the water,

I held her hand,

as sweet as my daughter,
I'll kiss her later.”

Harrietta sang in her best PJ Harvey voice, raspy and sexy and deep throated. Yes, that's all she cared about these days—her business. And, of course, her daughter Hannah. She was proud of her little girl. How smart she had grown up to be. She spent as much time helping to polish her daughter's talents, strengths and inclinations, as she did polishing a newly sold engagement ring, before nesting it inside an elegant ring box—*Harrietta Design* engraved into the box top—and handing it over to the happy groom. Hannah was her pride and joy. Her perfect jewel.

Harrietta loved her day job: creating new product lines; making the sales herself; even the joy in overhearing one of her salesgirls make a sale, while she crunched numbers and balanced the accounting books in the back office. But she always looked forward to the end of her day when she would spend time with her daughter; arrive home to plant a kiss on Hannah's forehead; sit next to her child, red correction pencil in hand; collaborate on homework; offer supplemental tutoring.

The song ended and the next random tune kicked in, one she didn't recognize. She looked at the display screen: *Make America Great Again* by Pussy Riot. Harrietta laughed. Her daughter shared her playlist and must have recently added this new entry. She and her husband had exposed Hannah to great music, in concert and at home. So the child had developed a sophisticated ear. Unlike her girlfriends' vanilla-cream musical taste, Hannah's heroines were superheroes with a social message, never whiny Pop Divas costumed in pink: “They paved paradise to put up a parking lot,” vs. “I'm just a girl.”

Harrietta listened to the lyrics swimming up through the punkish Brazilian styled Hip Hop rhythm. And then started to sing along when she thought she had gotten the words.

“Can you think of any politician
Who would call a woman a hog?
Are you a slave to your kitchen?
Is that the place where you belong?”

The sound of Harrietta's laugh drowned beneath the speaker volume. "That's Hannah, my little gem."

An odd screeching alarm that she first assumed was part of the soundtrack began to dominate the music coming from the speakers. Flashing red lights in her rearview mirror alerted her to danger. She looked down at her speedometer. The needle floated around 100 mph. "Oh, damn. That's all I need right now." *Fuck, it's going to bust the arrival window I gained. Let's hope my luck holds up like last time.* A month ago, exiting this same Interstate, a cop had let her slide after she ran a stop sign.

As soon as she pulled over to the shoulder she reached for her lipstick. She unfasten a top button on her expensive silk blouse, a DKNY limited edition. She always dressed appropriately for business meetings, but knew how to unravel a man when she had to. A man's simple cravings were easy to placate by a solitary button. Through the sheer white fabric, a strapless, black, Amy Undersoft bra bled into view. She applied the lipstick nervously with a heavy-handed impatience. Pressing the fully extended red bullet against her lips, it snapped at the base and dropped somewhere inside her blouse. "Oh, shit." She looked down, relieved to see it had dodged the white fabric, landing in a bra cup. Had the lipstick stained the lavish silk, Harrietta would have torched the royal coach and set the Queen's highway on fire. She fished out the broken piece from where it had lodged between her breast and the bra's lacy scalloped edge. With a single stroke she larded her top lip and then rubbed both lips together to leave a subtle trace of crimson.

As hyper-vigilant as a Marine, the cop walked over to the window in measured steps. He had watched her applying the lipstick in her rearview mirror, then reach down, looking for something. Firm, cautious knuckles tapped on the window. "License and registration, Ma'm."

She lowered the glass. Bountiful effervescence widened her smile; her teeth tinged with gleaming red.

"Good morning, officer. My apologies for driving over the speed limit. I only just noticed it when I saw your lights." Her smile broadened another lane or two. "I was listening to music and must have pressed a little too hard on the gas pedal."

She handed the leery police officer her registration and then reached down into her purse, hunted around for her wallet, hidden deep in its well, found her license and slipped it to him,

brushing her fingers against his. Her smile now stretched across the highway—a string of white pearls washed in crimson.

“I’ll admit I was in a hurry but I had no idea how fast I was traveling. I’m on my way to a gemology certification program, State regulated, and didn’t want to be disqualified for breaking the rules of ... you know ... their strict guidelines, by being late.”

The cop shook his head and sighed, career-weary from having listened to this familiar song and dance.

“So you decided to break our State’s traffic rules instead? The government isn’t overreaching or hard to please, Ma’m. Big Brother is an urban myth. The rules are simple: ‘Don’t be late for your date ... so ya don’t need to speed.’”

Harrietta’s face beamed from sudden recognition. “Oh my god. It’s you!” Her mouth remained open in genuine surprise. “Remember me? A month ago? The stop sign?”

It took him only a moment to recall.

“Oh, no ... *You* again? What are we going to do with you, Ma’m.” He reached around his utility belt, past the gun, the mace, the handcuffs, to a secured leather pocket housing his ticket book.

Harrietta’s lips were dry and she licked them briefly out of nervousness, smearing the crimson off her teeth. “You know, officer ... as an afterthought, after you drove off last time ... and I’m sorry it didn’t pop into my silly head beforehand ... but ... has anyone ever told you that you look just like the spitting image of Brad Pitt?”

The cop’s blue eyes looked off into the distance. His face turned the same crimson color as her lipstick. He tapped the plastic surface of her license.

“No,” he said, shyly, hesitating before continuing. “Not in a long time...”

His eyes unconsciously drifted down to the blouse’s opened button for a respectful moment, before looking her directly in the eyes, “I noticed your left taillight is out. So, I’m only going to issue a fix-it ticket.”

“But officer, my husband can take care of that as soon as I get home this evening. He’s good with his hands. I mean, he’s a great handyman. Do you really need to give me a fix-it ticket?”

The cop's trained pokerface lost its net neutrality from the incredulity of this woman's bold thanklessness. "Ma'm, would you like me to issue a fix-it ticket or a speeding ticket?"

Harrietta blinked. Realizing her expensive faux pas, she adjusted her attitude from privilege to gratitude. "Oh ... thank you for your kindness, officer ... I'll gladly take the fix-it ticket.

Her heart sank when she sailed up to the conference grounds, saw the entrance doors closed and not a single participant walking in. *Damn. This doesn't look good. I'm screwed.*

All the gemology attendees were comfortably seated inside the conference room. Having nothing to do now, three valets chatted away in Spanish and laughed, fully immersed in their downtime enjoyment. She screeched into the parking lot and slammed to a stop in front of the valet station, startling the men. "I'm late, can you stop talking and hand me a parking stub?"

All three men jumped into action. One young man opened her door; another took her keys, smiling; a third older man with white hair and a neatly trimmed grey beard respectfully handed her the ticket stub.

Harrietta flew toward the building entrance, handbag swinging, arranging her silk blouse, presentably buttoned. She jerked a few door handles futilely trying to jar them open. All locked. "Shit. Shit. Shit." She screamed, shaking and kicking the glass doors. The valets stared silently.

A conference official from inside the building opened a door for her. She smiled and ran past him, heading straight for the registration table. "Apologies. I'm running a bit late. A cop pulled me over for a fix-it ticket."

The woman at the table gave her a sympathetic look. "I'm so sorry to hear that. But the conference has already started and I'm not allowed to let you in now. State regulations." The woman eyed a small red lipstick stain over one of the buttons on Harrietta's blouse.

Shocked, yet determined, Harrietta observed the woman's name tag. "Oh, jeez, but I'm only a few minutes late?" She set down her bag and picked up a pen, smiling. "Is this where I sign, Betty?"

"Oh, dear. I'm afraid I haven't made myself understood." Betty cleared her throat politely. "I can't let you in now, young lady. The government is pretty strict. We could lose our

accreditation license if we veer from State regulations. The maximum grace period they allow is fifteen minutes and you're now well over 30 minutes late. I can't let you in, I'm so sorry."

Harrietta's smile drooped like an abandoned rose. The news knocked the wind out of her projected *sales*. But only for a nano second. She reached into the side pocket of her Jackie Crocodile Shoulder Bag, pulled out a business card and handed it to the woman. "I can get you 75% off any item in our store."

The woman automatically looked down at the card and for a moment studied the sample jewelry images neatly alined in a grid across the back of the promotional card. "They're stunning. Next time I'm in Austin I'll pay a visit. Thank you for the offer." The registrar smiled up at Harrietta.

And Harrietta smiled down on the woman. "I really need this accreditation, Betty. I can't wait a whole year. This extra credential-feather in my cap will boost my sales, which have been a bit sluggish lately." She slipped a lanyard cord around her head so her name tag and smiley photo ID hung between her breasts like a Hello Kitty. "I'd really appreciate it."

The woman behind the desk stopped smiling and instituted an officious face, earnest and resolute. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Bloom. But I can't make any exceptions. State regulations."

Harrietta's own smile instantly erased, as if snuffed out by a blackboard eraser before some disgruntled grade school teacher replaced it with a chalk scowl. She snapped up her promotional card from between the registrar's fingers, returning the card to Crocodile Jackie, and stomped out of the convention center.

By the time she reached the valet station, her car was already waiting, door opened for her, which only infuriated her further. She realized the men had anticipated her not getting in, so hadn't even bothered to park the car. She thrust her angry bottom onto the leather seat and drove off. Without leaving a tip.

Before exiting the parking lot she stopped under the shade of a large weeping willow. It's chartreuse leaves reminded her of her daughter's favorite tank top. Each leaf gleamed with added luminance under the Texas sun. She set her alarm for three minutes, which was the maximum time she would ever allow herself to experience a full-throated meltdown. There in the shade, with the willow branches drooped around her black Bavarian coach, the leaves pressed against

the windows like lips trying to speak through the glass, Harrietta had a good quick cry. When the alarm went off, she took ten, forced, deep breaths. Using her rearview mirror, she wiped away the tears with a white, monogrammed handkerchief. She smiled. “What am I going to do now? Kelly is *most dev* going to rub it in. He won’t ever show it on his pokerface. But I’ll be able to hear him think out loud ... ‘I told you so.’ ”

She tightened her lips and forced a whispering sound through them. “Wooh ... Makes me so mad thinking about it ... Asshole.” She turned the key and started up the BMW. “Maybe I’ll go to the mall ... Yup ... What a great idea. Haven’t been to Barton Creek Square in a gem’s age. I’ll stop in on my return to Austin. Maybe take the I-45 to the S MoPac Expy and get off at Frontage Rd. I always problem solve when I shop.”

On cruise control, Harrietta coasted down the 45 back to Austin. She dreaded having to inform Kelly that she got rejected from this year’s certification program ... that she would need to wait another fucking year to take the course. She could imagine the scene in her mind’s irritated eye. At first, he would just nod his head, taking it in, as he quietly cleaned the kitchen. Then he would offer some consoling platitude. “Oh, honey, so sorry, you had to drive all that way and waste a whole precious day ... But you’ll be more prepared next year.”

Her blood roiled a murky red. Why does he make her feel incompetent? So damn sure of himself all the time. Always in a good mood. Humming his rock ‘n’ roll ditties around the house. Never makes mistakes. Everything is so easy for him. Mr. Fixit.

While she had to struggle at every turn. Pay the bills. Balance the books. Oversee the web design; the jewelry production; the manufacturing; the quality control for every square inch of her business. He got to do all the fun stuff. Like spend more time with Hannah. It wasn’t fair. And then his drinking. Why did he need to drink? She hated the whole alcohol culture. Blubbering drunks. She couldn’t stand his incoherent slurring when he drank too much. And the smell of his breath.

And then it pissed her off that he no longer lusted after her. Of course, after Hannah, she had put on a bit of extra weight. Which even she found unattractive. But she was looking thinner these days, now that she started going to the gym again. What a pissar that nit-picky men,

ironically the most homely and out of shape, always pick away at a woman's flesh down to her anorexic bones. Scalpel-eyes incising judgement. Whenever these men spotted a hint of cellulite or a solitary wrinkle, their unforgiving eyes would slice through every flaw and imperfection without mercy.

Though, to be fair, Kelly never criticized her and he was neither homely nor out of shape. Her hubby was still hot. No beer belly in spite of all the beer. And those perfect biceps, sweaty from working in the yard. She liked his smell then. When it wasn't too rank, she wanted to throw him onto the bed and lick off the fresh sweat, both salty and sweet on the tongue. Yes, the way they used to play before Hannah. But now her rage kept her lust in check. She couldn't remember a day when she wasn't angry at him. Why was that? Was it the alcohol? Was it her mother's influence? God, her mother. She loved her, but hated the nasty way her mom treated her dad, whom she loved equally. And the way she condescended to her own sweet hubby was shameful. Even though Kelly killed her mother with kindness, the woman shot back rapid-fire insults. Precision strikes to his pride.

Harrietta merged onto the S MoPac Expy. A man, white-lining on his Harley, roared past her much too close, startling her. She flipped him off. She was glad Kelly didn't ride his any more.

Where was I? Oh, yeah, my mother. What a bitch it is having to deal with that woman. Never showed up for my labor. To see her granddaughter being born. She couldn't walk two blocks from her hotel to the hospital? Does she think she's royalty? Too privileged to make the effort? Wanted Kelly to leave my side to go pick her up. We even offered to call a taxi. It's a miracle when she gave birth to me she had the patience to hang out on the delivery table long enough for me to be born. Yeah, she didn't bale on me during her long labor, when I was struggling, inch by inch, through the birth canal. So I guess I owe her. And they didn't allow anyone in the delivery room back then. Must have been scary all alone. I'm so glad Kelly was there with me for Hannah. What would I have done without him?

For some time now, she had been seeing a series of billboard ads along the highway, displaying happy people engaged in community activities; overlooking the Gulf of Mexico from

a Galveston resort, Lamas and Alpacas mingled among the attendees. The message in bold letters: *SOBER LIVING—A Modern Approach. No More Addiction. Sober Up In The Great Outdoors. Counseling Under Sunny Blue Skies & Fresh Open Air. No More Dark Smoke-Filled Rooms. Positive Outlook. Unlimited Possibilities. Optimism Is Your Friend.* She snapped a photo and sent it to her husband.

The Frontage Rd exit appeared in front of her and she got off. She laughed suddenly. The name reminded her of her own frontage. She had wanted to buy a new bra. She loved well made, expensive underclothes. Those were items where she never skimped. Always paid top dollar. Victoria's Secret. Fleur du Mal. Hanky Panky. And Kelly's favorite, Commando.

But her own favorite was Amy Undersoft. A local designer. Expensive, durable bras that lasted years, formfitting uniquely to her body over time, thrilled Harrietta. Fabric so soft and comfortable it disappeared into her unconscious and made her feel, throughout her long days, as if she were braless.

Amy's underthings were so elegantly crafted that even the stitching was covered over by some additional fine material. Harrietta couldn't stand the feeling of stitching against her skin. It drove her crazy with irritation. When a bra began to fray and she could feel a single thread brushing against her back or shoulder or rib, she wanted to rip it off her, toss it into the fireplace and light a match under it. Her daughter called her *Seven Mattress Mom* and her husband called her *Princess Pea*. She laughed thinking about it. Yes, she was too sensitive for her own well being.

Good old Frontage Rd. Grew up on this road, when there was still open fields of grass. When I was too young to have frontage of my own. How much it's changed. So much development. All these new condo high-rises.

Oh ... those are cool windows on that office building. Never noticed before. They're all an odd tear shape. As if they're slanting raindrops in the wind. Hum. And the negative space between them is just as unique, like a slanting grid; amazing geometrics; I could cut gems in that shape, set them onto a silver mount with slanting links and clasps. I'll make a mental note for later. That's exactly the new design I've been looking for. Yes. The one for my Galactic Series. Took a month struggling with ideas. Got to a frustrating nowhere. And suddenly, when I least

expected it ... why here it is. Popped right into my head. Glad I decided to go to the mall. What a lucky day.

Can't wait to go home tonight. Uncork that organic Pinot Noir I picked up in Galveston years ago. Sit next to Hannah, work these new ideas into the design for my new line; while she draws and paints her bizarre fantasy creatures. Where does she come up with those freaky monsters? One day, she'll become a great designer like me. Maybe even better. Put a piece of paper in front of that child and she'll fill it in minutes with stunning ideas. Stole some of her geometric squiggles for my own designs. Paid her for it too. That'll give her incentive. Nothing like knowing you can make a living and become independent, as a byproduct of your own creativity.

Harrietta pulled up to the valet station. A handsome attendant opened her door. Dark eyes fixed on her. In her nervousness, as she stepped out of the car onto the uneven gravel surface, her stilettos wavered and she almost slipped. But the dark-eyed valet was quick to steady her before she fell.

“Oooh!” she grinned. “Feels like I’m off-roading.” She smiled at the young man who gave her a parking stub as she handed him her keys. He looked at her, struck by her majesty and beauty. This lifted her spirits. Young men still found her attractive. She planned to leave him a big tip when she picked up the car later....

Oh, shoot, I remember now, I was in such a foul mood at the gem training, running so late, I forgot to tip the three valets who served me well. It wasn't their fault, after all. Hopefully they'll be there next year and I'll triple tip them. I'll be on time too. And better prepared ... Oh, what the hell, why make the poor guys wait. I'll just call the convention hall concierge tomorrow and charge up my card with a generous tip for each one of them.

Harrietta decided to take the escalator rather than the elevator so she could experience the new construction. They had closed down the mall for a few months to renovate. Amy Undersoft had moved to the top floor.

Oh my goodness. This is spectacular. Wow.

She rode up the escalator, eyes wide open; all the new shops and video ads above and below her filled her field of vision, as if she were inside a snow globe. Hanging vines draped over the banisters on the second floor level with shoppers strolling in every direction on each level and the descending escalator crisscrossing her ascending one like a house of mirrors reflecting herself. The sound of birds piped through the speaker system in the vaulted ceiling above her and echoed the pleasant splendor of virgin wilderness in her ears. Giant screens, from the ground rising up to the ceiling, displayed slinky models on runways or single shot ads for every shop in the mall. Closeups of eyes and lips and makeup and accessories; studded belts and bangles and brightly colored leather purses and high heels, and sports wear, as she rode higher to the second floor. A towering palace of finery.

Harrietta spotted Iris and her mom on the descending escalator. She waved to mother and daughter. “Hello there, sweet Iris. What a pleasant surprise?”

“Hi Mrs. Bloom. I’m shopping for an outfit to wear for Pussy Riot tomorrow night. Mr. Bloom said Hannah can go and you guys’ll take us.”

“Oh, my, how cool. This is the first I’ve heard about it. Hope you girls have fun. Coincidentally, I was just listening to....” Iris and her mom disappeared into the crowd below.

As she ascended, her phone buzzed and a motorcycle roar alerted her to her husband’s incoming text. The Harley ringtone was the last remnant of his reckless days, before Hannah was born. At some point, she and little Hannah had begged him to give up the bike before he gave up his life. He had sacrificed his pleasure for them.

In reply to Harrietta’s Sober Living billboard photo, Kelly responded with an animated gif: A cappuccino mug, repaired after some previous shattering, ages ago, showed off the Kintsugi technique—gold veins gleaming along the cracks. A barista heart floated on the trembling foam.

In the background, framed through the mug’s round handle, she could see her husband’s friend, Clark, sitting on the couch, sipping from his own coffee cup, staring at his laptop screen.

Clark is a good man. A loyal friend. Doesn’t drink, doesn’t do drugs. Maybe Kelly should have more social time. Maybe he’d drink less. Maybe I’m being too much of a b..., hum. Am I a bitch because Kelly drinks? Or does Kelly drink because I’m a bitch? Now there’s a thought.

Harrietta got off on the second floor and walked into Amy Undersoft.

The girls all knew her and came running over to shower Harrietta in royal servitude. Predicting what she wanted, they brought her a variety of bras and slips. She loved to leave them big tips. Hard work and a pinch of luck had made her successful. Why shouldn't she be lavish with those around her who service her needs. So, she would leave a Benjamin with each of the girls at Amy Undersoft for all the times they had swirled around her attentively. They smothered her in hugs and shot mock kisses to her cheek so as not to smear their own makeup or leave her covered in lipstick.

She draped a stack of undergarments over her arm and walked into a private dressing room lounge. Surrounded by floor to ceiling mirrors, a red, lip-shaped divan at the hub of the circular room invited her to lay down the lingerie hanging on her forearm, so she could try on each item at her leisure. She sighed and a wave of pleasure ran through her when her fingers caressed the delicate fabrics. She loved the black and white scalloped slip. Without trying it on she set that one aside on the pile she had selected to buy.

She unbuttoned her blouse, slipped it off and folded it neatly on the divan. "Oh, no." She noticed a small red stain on one of the buttons. *Darn lipstick. Oh well, I'm in too good a mood now to get upset. I'll take it to Troy's Dry Cleaners. They're the best. Which reminds me, I need to pick up another lipstick. This time I think maybe the Athen's Pomegranate.*

Not too bad, she thought, looking in the surround mirror, pivoting round and round at the center of the 360° reflection. *Going back to the gym is paying off. Yes. Parthenon's Gym. That's where we met. I remember looking over at him and smiling. Kelly had the cutest grin. Filled with delight, because I'd noticed him. He was so attracted to me then.*

After trying many bras, she settled on the simple black one, detailing a hint of lace along the top. It was luxuriously soft and fluffy and unpadded. She released a deep moan when her nipples first touched the inner lining. Always a virgin experience for Harrietta with any new bra. Her hands grazed the bra's surface, rolling over the curves, the hills and valleys, where even the clasps were covered in protective cotton or silk. The bra was as seamless as Kelly's hands folded over her breasts.

She remembered when they used to lay in bed together, leaning into the comfy pillows stacked against the reclining headrest Kelly had constructed. He sitting behind her. She sitting in front between his thighs, her back pressed against his massive, firm chest, his pecs cushioning her weary ribs and spine. Oh yes, his arms wrapped around her, his hands cupping her breasts, slightly lifting them, like the softest support bra in the universe.

She didn't need another man. Kelly was her man, her only squeeze, forever. No other male had ever made her feel so hot and bothered. He was fiercely attentive to her. So unselfish in the bedroom, showering her with pleasure. Why had that paradise evaporated into a distant memory?

Oh, yeah. Hannah came along. And then there were three. Four, if she counted her jewelry business. She had launched it in an over-ambitious, out of sync reality with Hannah's delivery and it would continue to tug on the faulty strings of her energy until her marriage snapped.

And even then. Yes, even then, Kelly came to her rescue like a superhero. He left the sweet 300K a year programming job he loved so much, when he was at the top of his game and in hot demand, freeing her up to run her business efficiently. He executed a daily drudgery of chores that would have set her head spinning if she had to perform them herself. He did it for her. For the love of family. For their beautiful new daughter. But mainly for her. For his profound, unrelenting love of her. He never left her. He had plenty of opportunities to do so over the years. But he stuck it out with her through the ugly thick and unbearable thin.

He shopped, cooked, cleaned house, fed Hannah the milk I had suctioned out of my breasts into the baby bottle. So he could nurse that sweet baby while I worked at my dream job. The job I'm still so passionate about.

Sometimes I would even let him operate the suction pump because he took pleasure in it. I even offered his mouth a nipple to suck up the last few drops, knowing how much he loves touching me. Hum. Now that I think about it, I enjoyed it too. I wish we could return to the kinky-fun we had when it was just the two of us....

But then he started his drinking again. That's what killed it. Caught him drunk twice this week. Once, he was passed out on the floor of his studio, damn Punk Rock music playing in the

background. Said he had fallen asleep. But he's always so straightforward that when he lies I can smell the bullshit. Smell it on his breath. Besides, he only snores when he's drunk.

He fucked up the website on Monday in a drunken stupor and it went down for two days. Took him that long to fix it. Asshole. How much money did we lose to his sloppy addiction? He won't return for treatment. Thinks he can struggle with the habit on his own. It's so aggravating.

Harrietta sat back on the divan looking at her reflection in the mirror and emulated Kelly's fingers. She slipped both hands inside the bra, crisscrossed in a self-embracing hug, so her left palm cupped her right breast and her right palm engulfed her left breast. A nipple kissed the center of each hand, where her nails had dug in earlier. Then, she softly pinched those buds, using her thumbs and index fingers, and quarter turned them as gently as if it were Kelly tweaking her nipples for hours on end.

She had read somewhere, maybe Ms., or Elle, or Vanity Fair, that nipple stimulation activates its own pleasure center in the brain, located next to and separate from the region of the brain that promotes genital ecstasy. No wonder she enjoyed her nipple orgasms. Like a two for one sale.

She invoked now her last playful memory in bed with Kelly, when Hannah was eight and they all went to Galveston on summer vacation. She had combined the trip with a gem convention, which she attended while Kelly and Hannah basked in the Gulf Stream.

Evenings, in her own room, Hannah would sketch dark, muscular unicorns flying over rainbows of snarling monsters. While Kelly held Harrietta's breasts as if he would never let go; and turn her nipples back and forth like the gently rolling tides they watched from their hotel window. Then, the sober organ of his love would enter her and remain inside, hard and determined and idle, waiting for the next wave to crash on the shore.