

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Alison Louise Ruch for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing  
presented on April 24, 2006.

Title: Comic Toast

Abstract approved:

*Redacted for Privacy*

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Tracy D. Daugherty

*Comic Toast* is a novel depicting a transition period in the life of the comic book artist character, Monica Holliday. This document includes a prologue, which provides details of a trauma in Monica's distant past, in order to inform Monica's adult reactions to the situations she finds herself entangled in. Following the prologue are six of sixteen chapters. These chapters track Monica's process of acknowledging her dissatisfaction with her career, her half-hearted artistic pursuits, and her relationships, and detail some of the ways in which Monica both fails to and succeeds in changing her life.

In writing and revising this document I worked to balance the narrative between sections of dialogue, exposition, and descriptions of the artwork Monica creates. My intention for the future of this novel is to collaborate with an artist who will illustrate some sections, further developing the character of Monica by visually depicting the comic frames and sketches the character creates.

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Comic Toast

by  
Alison Louise Ruch

A THESIS

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APPROVED:

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Alison Louise Ruch, Author

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## **Comic Toast**

### **Prologue**

When Monica Holliday was eleven years old she treasured Roxanne Hatfield's dark and twisted comic books. Stories of girls conquering obstacles—fights with friends, risky quests, rigid rules, very bad men. The girls were alone in the world, but for the danger, and were drawn in sharp, elegant, black lines, with dashes of red in moments of intense rage. That year, Monica's doctor diagnosed her with a slightly twisted vertebrae, and Monica wondered (though didn't dare ask) if it had something to do with the heavy Hatfield books she stuffed into her school bag, leaving deep red impressions in her sharp thumb of a shoulder. She carried the books still.

Monica walked to school most days the way she wasn't allowed. Up and over the hill behind her house, down the richest street of her family's subdivision (peering in the windows), past the house with three black-haired boys (each, for a time, a crush), through the muddy cornfield, and past the Qwik Stop (sometimes a candy bar), to school, where the glottal hum of Mr. Benson's instructions numbed her or sent her, easily, elsewhere.

She wasn't allowed to cross through the cornfield because it was both muddy and private property. But Monica went to school with the farmer's son, Joe Pifful, and he'd told her once that nobody cared if she cut through the field—as long as she was the only one doing it. And Joe's farmer-father often waved at her from wherever he was in the field. Monica liked to watch Mr. Pifful on his green tractor, moving slowly up and down the rows, chewing and spitting. She drew a picture of him, which she showed no one except her art teacher, for fear that Joe would see it. She didn't want to give him the impression her visual interest in his father had anything to do with him. Mr. Pifful was her perfect farmer.

And then one day, earlier than usual, Monica walked through the field. Mr. Pifful was on his green tractor. The sky was thick with haze, but the sun pierced through. A tolerable, muted sun. She waved at her farmer, and he waved back. And

then he stopped waving, and started coughing. He coughed so many times. Monica stood—her book bag slicing painfully into her shoulder, and pulling on one of her long, stupid braids. She'd heard Mr. Pifful cough before, probably because of all his chewing and spitting. But then he paused. He put his head down on the wheel of his tractor. There was no wind. Monica moved her foot a little and was faintly comforted by the small squishing sound of the mud. Mr. Pifful's arm moved. He's okay, she thought, biting hard on her lip. And my shoes, my shoes are all muddy. I shouldn't be crossing through the cornfield. Shouldn't do it anymore. It was a very bad idea, she thought, continuing on toward the Qwik Stop. She repeated orders to herself, but lingering in the background was Mr. Pifful's head on that big, black wheel.

Monica bought five candy bars and put them in her bag to hurt her shoulder more. Joe didn't come to school that day. While Mr. Benson told the class about Gandhi, Monica poked her pencil into the flesh above her knee, between socks and skirt. Never cross through the cornfield. It is muddy, and it is private property. Principal Hoffman knocked ten minutes into first period. He and Mr. Benson talked softly, their throats clucking and gurgling like mud, and then Mr. Benson shut the classroom door and shared the sorrowful, surprising news. Joe Pifful's father had died that morning. Soon there would be a card for all of the students to sign. Monica's pencil snapped, broken, on top of her skin. She touched the aching divot it had made. She sat, stunned, until the bell rang, and Mr. Benson came over to remind her to run along to her next class.

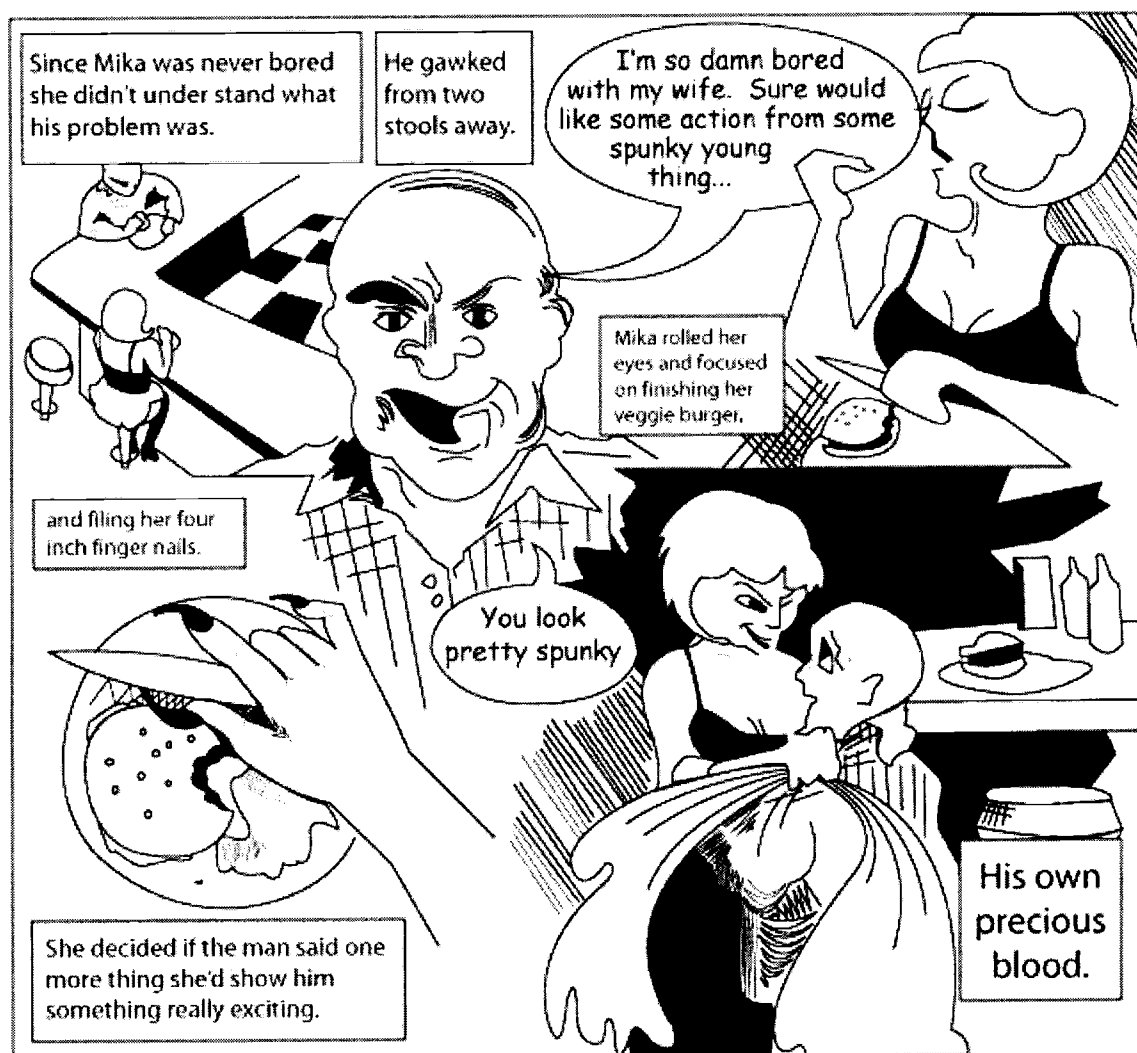
In the hallway, Monica noticed that the aide who was supposed to keep children from leaving the school was weeping on Principal Hoffman's shoulder. She left. She walked back by the Qwik Stop and in a wide arc around the cornfield. She walked along the rural highway, which had also been forbidden her. She liked the wind the cars made as they whizzed past her. In moments without traffic she walked in the middle of the road, to feel what that was like. She took the back entrance into her subdivision, by the richest houses (dark), by the dark haired boys' house (dark), and up the hill behind her house. The house was quiet; both of her parents were at work.



She shut the door to her room, and she took out her colored pencils and the sketchbook she'd received for her birthday. For hours, she worked to capture the glint of the tractor under the still haze, the sun ball faintly visible, easy to stare at. And the thick-soled boots of the very strong girl came up from the mud, unsullied. And the long pink braids of the very strong girl swung wildly behind her as she pulled that chunk of whatever it was from Mr. Pifful's clogged-up throat and turned it into a glowing ruby, a cure she would give to Mr. Pifful, which would make him eternally okay.

[Illustration]

1



Monica scanned-in her illustration, organized and named her computer documents ("Can't a Girl Just Have a Moment with her Veggie Burger?: Part III"), attached them, and clicked SEND. Her publisher had been waiting for over a week for the latest installment of the veggie burger series, and his reminder messages were getting nasty.

Work had been a good distraction. Now what? Monica had been avoiding the clock. The test driver was late getting back. Twenty-two hours ago, the woman had rung Monica's buzzer and, having seen Monica's sign, invited herself to ask questions about the car. The woman's name was Joyce. In her sixties, or thereabouts, wearing

overalls and a thick screen of caution. She seemed an unlikely buyer for Monica's patchy orange '87 Mazda. But Joyce was intent on taking the car for a spin. She was odd, this woman. "What if it doesn't work out?" Joyce asked, and Monica told her, "It can't hurt to try." After the third round of questions, Monica asked if Joyce felt up to a test drive, or if she might like to come again tomorrow. Joyce replied, "No, I'm sorry. I've just had bad experiences with this sort of thing in the past. In fact, if you don't mind, I have a mechanic I've been going to for years—he's a ways out of town. I thought I might bring the car to him for a more thorough check-up."

"That sounds fair. He could probably tell you more about the car—. When would you return it, then?"

"Later tonight, if that's all right."

Joyce was the first and only person who'd noticed the sign that Monica had slapped into the car's rear window. "That's fine," Monica said. "And, I should tell you, the price is negotiable."

Beneath Joyce's casually cuffed overalls was a prim, ironed white button down shirt. Her short grey hair curled stylishly around her face. It was as though she had put on a costume, something to convince the seller that she had come to do business.

"That'll be fine, dear," Joyce said as if she hadn't heard or cared or understood about the price. "Tell me about the brakes. When was the last time you had them serviced?"

"Well, I'm not by any means the original owner... The only time I took it in for brake trouble was when they were squeaking last January. I'm not sure what they did, but the repair only cost me twenty dollars—" Monica sifted through the three papers she had for the car, none of which documented brake work.

"It's fine. I don't care, really. And then...has it always been stored in Texas?"

"Yes. Here, in Austin. Well—let's see—it was 'born' in Wisconsin. That's where my folks are. And I drove it from there after I bought it from my dad's friend, Lou, who I think is reachable..." She referred again to her papers but could not find Lou's phone number.

"It's really not important. But do you suppose this is an appropriate car for a single woman?"

"Uh, sure. I mean—I'm practically single. As in no one really drives the car but me. It's small. It's got a radio and cassette deck—no CD player, but..."

Joyce smiled faintly and crossed her legs. She looked around the room.

"Are you ready to give it a go?" Monica said.

"What's that painting there on the wall? Where does it come from?"

"Oh." Monica laughed. "Art school. I can't stand the fu— damn thing. I'm really an illustrator. But Eli—my friend—for some reason loves it. Especially that bit in the corner. It's—well—it's my foot." Monica laughed self-consciously.

"Did you hate your foot?"

Monica thought about this. The question didn't entirely surprise her. Her peers had asked similar things during her critique, five years ago. "No." She realized she didn't want to tell Joyce, or that Joyce already knew too much about it.

"Playful, then. Toes in the mud." Joyce's eyes challenged Monica to tell her otherwise.

"Playful."

"Do you think I should test the car?"

Monica saw fear on the woman's face. "There's no commitment if you decide after you drive it that it's not the car for you. I'm really easygoing about this. Between you and me, I've never done this before." She thought of her father, the salesman, and how he would scold her for admitting her inexperience.

"So you *do*," Joyce said. She pulled her tan leather purse into her lap and began pawing through it. "I'm going to give you something so that you won't worry I've stolen your car. You keep it until I come back. And if— Here." She handed Monica a small jewelry box.

They locked eyes. There seemed to be an understanding between them.

Monica broke the stare. "You really don't have to. I trust you."

“Thank you. That means a great deal to me, but I’d feel better if you had something that means as much to me as your car must mean to you.”

“My car doesn’t really—“ She stopped and laughed.

“Let’s start it up, see how it runs,” Joyce said, suddenly enthusiastic.

Monica set the box on her desk without peeking and showed Joyce to the parking lot behind the small apartment building.

She’d been advertising the car for a week now, hoping to make some extra cash. The checks from her publisher were ample and consistent, but she had a compulsion for buying gifts for Eli, and for friends. They were real starving artists. She shared her wealth out of guilt over earning money drawing comic books.

Monica showed Joyce how to press Stop instead of Play to get the tape deck to run, and how the moon roof slid open by way of the red button, and closed with all of an arm’s might. She pointed and laughed at the small piece of paisley fabric she’d pinned to the roof for shade. “It’s, uh, fun and functional.”

Joyce closed gentle, silk-skinned fingers around Monica’s wrist, smiled warmly and said, “It’ll do just fine.”

“Okay.” Monica’s face warmed. She was rambling—stalling, for some reason. Joyce’s mysteriousness sparked a creative cord in Monica. She was intensely curious about the woman, a sensation she realized felt distressingly old, even foreign. And Joyce’s subdued and distracted nature made Monica want to tell her things in order to snap her out of it. “It’s been nice talking to you,” she said.

But Joyce didn’t seem to notice. She took Monica’s skull and crossbones keychain and held it nervously next to her belly.

“Well, there you go,” Monica said. “I hope you enjoy the drive. It really is a fun little car.” Her sales voice disgusted her.

Joyce jerked twice in reverse and then rolled forward out the drive. As she passed Monica, she rolled down the window and said with her eyelids half lowered, “Goodbye.”

Now, Monica jumped each time she heard a car outside. She listened so intently, she could hear things she normally couldn't, like air conditioners turning on and off, a bouncing basketball, and a sprinkler. She tucked the beating clock under her pillow. What if the car had broken down on Joyce? She supposed there was no way to get in touch with the woman. She didn't even have a last name to look up in the phone book. Monica set her ringer on high and put on thick gloves. She went outside, sat on the front steps of her apartment complex, and braved the July heat. She began to repot her cactus, something she'd been meaning to do for months, the poor plant. Turning the pot, she got a spine stuck on the inside of her arm. "Fuck," she said, and put her mouth to the blood. Dampness formed at her hairline after just sprinkling the bottom of the new pot with fresh soil, and she found it difficult to breathe the thick air. She returned inside and cranked the cold until the old window-mount machine wheezed.

Monica sat still in the center of her orange couch and tried to remember the things her mother had once told her about meditation. "Focus on a single, calming object." "Breathe to the bottom of yourself and then back up again, to the top of your head." But Monica's imagination wouldn't leave her alone: Joyce had stolen her car. Joyce had been in an accident. Joyce had some kind of head disease and forgotten she'd ever taken Monica's car for a drive; she had left the car in a Wal-Mart lot and was walking in a ditch by the highway, her pale blue eyes glossed over, arms raised like a zombie.

Later that afternoon the police officer showed up. He asked Monica if she owned an orange Mazda 626LX, license plate "COMIXX," and she said yes. He regretted to inform her that a Mrs. Martha Rippenford had attempted suicide in Monica's vehicle the night prior. He said he was sure a nice young lady like Monica would have had nothing to do with "negotiating" such an event, but she may have to appear in court to defend herself if "such questions related to her assistance in the attempt did arise."

Monica's voice remained trapped inside her throat, or someplace even deeper. She looked into the eyes of the officer. "Did she die?" she asked finally.

"Only an 'attempt,'" he said. "She's in decent condition. You've no need to worry about her. You were strangers, right?"

"Just met last evening."

"Thank you, Monica. We hope you are well compensated for the accident."

*We hope you get good loot for Christmas,* she thought.

"Expect further notification as the case unfolds," the officer said.

*Case?* "Thank you, Officer." She shut the door and stood to face the painting of her foot.

She called Eli. "It's me," Monica said, and started to cry.

"What's wrong? What's the problem, love?" Eli was a poet and sometimes talked the way he thought Brits talked. It was a transparent cover for his Texan upbringing, which he desperately would've liked to erase.

"Can you come over?" Monica asked.

He lived a few small blocks away, in a sort-of arts commune, where people discussed politics and their "pieces," and where nudity was commonplace. Eli had tried to live with Monica a few years before that, but the two of them decided that the relationship wouldn't work unless they had more space to create. (Or, rather, what Eli called Monica's "prolificacy" made him freeze up. His paralysis made Monica want to buy things for him.) She often wondered how Eli found "space to create" in his naked commune. The thought made her stomach clench. They'd been doing this little dance for five years.

Within minutes he was at her apartment—so timely, it was dorky. Monica was glad of it. She heard his key in the door and murmured, "It's open." She was sitting, hugging her knees, in the middle of the floor, in the middle of her garage-sale Persian rug. She shivered under a blanket—the AC cranked to capacity, still. She kept her head down and listened to the comforting scuff of Eli's black boots. He didn't ask questions; he held her. Monica relaxed when she smelled Eli's garlic sweat. He had

probably been on cooking duty that afternoon. She noticed he was wearing her favorite black t-shirt and jeans, the same kind of outfit she had on. She felt, then, absolutely connected to him.

After several minutes, Monica removed Eli's arms. She noticed her sketchbook lying open on the floor in front of her desk and tried to move nonchalantly to tuck it back in its drawer. She went to the kitchen to make some vodka tonics with lots of lime. Eli followed. They stood together in the kitchen, sipping and setting the tumblers on the counter, picking them up again. She sighed a lot, raised her arms above her head for maximum inhalation then let her breath out and hunkered down, fingertips reaching toward her feet. Eli pushed his thick glasses up on his nose and watched Monica go through her motions. She appreciated his patience. She raised her arms again, breathed in, and on the exhale, told all: "This old woman took my car for a test drive and crashed it, trying to kill herself." She knew Eli was already embellishing, mixing up her words and turning the situation into a fucking poem. She stopped her deep-breath bows and stared at him from below heavy eyelids, anticipating his dramatic response.

"Damn," he said.

Some poet. "I know," she said, nodding.

"Well, I'm sorry, I feel like a jerk asking, but did she accomplish it?"

"Nope. She's alive. They won't give me many details. Sounds like she's injured, but living."

"That's insane."

Monica sipped and swirled the ice. Staring into her glass, she said, "And they're investigating to find out if I may have assisted her."

"You're kidding me. That's completely bizarre, Monica." Eli moved his free hand to Monica's forehead. He swept her bangs aside and the bangs bounced back. He repeated the motion two more times. Monica felt like a puppy.

"Well." She grabbed his hand and held it firmly down.



As they drank, they delved deep, probably too deep, into the strangeness of it all. Both artists, having previously confessed to that somewhat embarrassingly juvenile fascination with suicide, went on and on, hypothesizing about Mrs. Rippenford and her sadness.

“Did you suspect she was unhappy when she picked up the car?” Eli asked.

“Hm. You know, people generally seem unhappy to me, unless they really wow me with genuine exuberance.”

“Do I seem unhappy to you?”

“Well, yes. You often do. It’s not an insult, just an observation. You’re a poet. Frankly, I don’t know what I’d do with you if you were bursting with joy. We couldn’t relate.”

Eli didn’t laugh, and Monica realized that what she’d said hadn’t really been funny. “I thank you for your honest observation, but I am, contrary to your diagnosis, quite happy,” Eli said.

Monica looked down, ashamed to have “diagnosed” him. Eli lifted her chin in his palm.

“Now,” he continued. “Mrs. Rippenford—do you know where she lives? Did you get the impression she was poor? I mean, Mon, your car was a bit of a—”

“I know. Not really worth a nickel. I got the impression she wanted something just for around town. She looked like a healthy sixty-something. Asked if it would be a good car for a single woman. She was very earthy-looking. Very plain, with pretty skin. She had this kind of business shirt thing going on. Must have been hoping for a tidy ending.”

“A tidy ending? Wouldn’t she have taken pills, then? Something less bloody,” Eli said.

“That’s disrespectful.” Monica paused. “Don’t you think it’s much more romantic to go tidy and bloody than disheveled and bloody? Maybe she was trying to make it seem like a real accident.”

"I've always thought the romantic thing to do would be to make it look spontaneous. I flirt with jumping out of buildings and off bridges and things—when I'm high up there."

"You do not!"

"How would you know?"

She couldn't argue. "I poke sharp objects into my skin." Monica put a hand over her mouth. She'd never told anyone that.

"Jesus," Eli frowned.

"I don't draw blood."

Eli looked away, and Monica wondered if he felt betrayed, her not telling him during for all their five years together.

He grabbed her hands to inspect her wrists. They were fine. He kissed them.

Before long they were drunk and the heated, dark conversation turned them on. They stumbled to Monica's bedroom and had sex. Afterward, Eli fell promptly, happily asleep.

Monica heard a ticking and remembered the clock beneath her pillow. It was early, only seven p.m. She felt that the Monica who put the clock under the pillow was a different person altogether. That Monica was alert and curious; this Monica was careless and drained, possibly drunk. It scared her to think of the contrast. She needed something else to think about. She rose and went to the living room, to her desk, to look over some work she had to complete and shoot off to New York by noon two days from now. With a new volume of MIKA to be released next week, they wanted proof she was diligently pumping out the next one.

Lately, the publisher had been harassing Monica to make the tits bigger. Her e-mail reply: MIKA must have horrid lower back problems as it is; let's not land her in the hospital, desperate for a reduction. But the publisher won. Gentrix—really, Victor—always did. At least he asked and didn't just have production add on a few cup sizes after Monica had already done her part.

Tonight, Monica surprised herself. Her MIKA drawings came easily. It was rare that Monica could be carried away with MIKA's outrageous life on the road, thwarting evil, seducing women, and delivering truckloads of toys to children's hospitals in big cities. That night she let herself ride in the passenger seat with MIKA. Monica felt she was MIKA's partner in crime, watching the landscape speed by too fast, their hair blowing perfectly in the soft breeze at sunset—after a just kill and strawberry milkshakes.

The phone rang. Dizzily she made her way to the bedroom where the ringing was. The clock, now on the floor, read nine p.m. Eli rolled over, snoring his drunk snore. It was the *Statesman*, wanting to ask her about the accident.

"So, she called herself Joyce?" the monotone reporter asked, bored with his own question, as if he were reading some other, bigger news while he spoke.

"She did."

"And were you suspicious of her motives at that time?"

Was this a recorded interview? Was she speaking to a computer? "No," Monica lied.

"Did she exhibit signs of hopelessness?"

Monica lay next to Eli and rolled on her side to face away from him. "Oh, a skepticism. But only about the car."

"And at precisely what time of day did she inquire about the vehicle?"

"Noon...I don't know exactly."

"Had you had prior correspondence with Mrs.—ah—Rippenford?"

"Joyce?"

A long pause.

"Had you had—"

"No. No prior correspondence. I mean, not that I'm aware of. I mean, no."

After a few more questions, the dispassionate voice of the reporter lulled Monica into a half-sleep. She jumped, minutes later, startled by the voice in the phone, a rather sexy voice: Please hang up or dial the number you wish to call. Eli

snorted, still asleep, and turned away from her. Monica put her arm up around his thin waist and used the moonlight to count the moles on his back until she nodded off. Sleep was fitful and Monica got up at five a.m. to scan the paper for Joyce's story. It was cool outside the apartment, a coolness Monica knew would not last past seven. A businessman was walking down the sidewalk. Monica felt his eyes on her, so she turned to nod good morning to him. When she looked at him, he turned his face toward his feet. Once she sensed he was out of earshot she said "Hi," to the spot where she'd first seen the man, with the strange sensation she might elicit more of a response from what remained in his path. Up and down the block, air conditioners buzzed.

The story of the crash received only a corner of page three. The only snippet of Monica's phone interview with the reporter was confirmation that Joyce had made up a new name for the day she planned to die. The remote agricultural research building that Joyce had chosen to bash would require thousands of dollars in repairs. The skids in the mud had convinced authorities that she slammed on the brakes at the very last minute, but not in time to avoid a crash. Joyce—Mrs. Rippenford—had a dead husband, no friends, a daughter the authorities were unable to locate, and a few neighborhood kids she paid to get her groceries and do small fix-it jobs. She was agoraphobic, the article said, though Monica hadn't sensed that from Joyce—and she liked to think she had a good sense about people and their phobias.

She remembered the jewelry box. It was covered in tan suede and looked weathered. Inside, as she had suspected, was a ring. A wedding ring? It was a very plain gold band. She gently removed it and slid it onto her finger. It stuck enough that she had to use soapy water to remove it. While she ran the water, she thought she heard Eli's footsteps in the bedroom. She raced to return the ring to its box and the box to her desk drawer before he came into the room.

Over the next several days Monica looked for more articles on the accident, but there were none. She tried to turn the questions off, but couldn't help wondering what about meeting her might have convinced Joyce to do it. Should she have been

able to read Joyce well enough to know she wasn't fit to drive? Should she have asked Joyce more questions about herself? She felt like a child, so curious. It was quiet. She cranked music and picked up a pen, imagining a more beautiful scene for Joyce. The car remained the same, but instead of a building Joyce drove into a deep, clear pond. Monica drew the car at the bottom of the pond, with fish, and Joyce's short grey hair standing on end, the head bowed down against the steering wheel, blood-stained water coming gorgeously up from it.

## 2

*MIKA V: POWER SMUGGLE* appeared in bookstores the following Saturday. Its release had been pending for several months. Thanks to Victor, the paper stock for this volume was infused with a strawberry scent (“marketing”), and during shipment from the tragic factory in Bangladesh to the U.S. distributor, a pack of mice nibbled on and pooped all over thousands of copies. Monica had told Victor she thought the scented book thing was ridiculous, but he was in love with his idea. He e-mailed her: Girls will want the scent in a bottle and boys will want to lick the page. Victor had a penchant for disturbing Monica. Just when she felt used to his perversions, he swaggered up to take another swing. Victor liked to exploit the fact that her books appealed to a number of straight men, intrigued by MIKA’s lesbian encounters. The man did know a thing or two about making money. And sometimes, *sometimes* his perversity cracked her up. Monica once sketched Victor, suited up for a sushi lunch meeting, in a Viking hat with SEX emblazoned across the front.

Annie, Monica’s publicist at Gentrix, thought it would be a good idea for her to do a book release signing at ComZone, the local comics shop. Monica had done this once before, and the scene had been so dead that she spent most of the time sketching knockoffs of the Marvel heroes plastered all around the dusty sales room while the store clerk and a teenaged boy with tattooed eyelids made out in the curtained porn room. When she wasn’t drawing, Monica watched the store’s bunny, kept in a cage in the window. Annie, a woman who actually dyed her hair red and curled it to look like the fucking orphan, had told her this event would be different; this time Gentrix would “provide posters” announcing the signing. Annie said she’d send the posters to ComZone and she’d threaten them not to post them around town, reminding them of the economy and the public’s fading interest in books—even books with colored pictures.

The poster proof featured an enormous MIKA, kicking her bladed boot so high you could see her hot pink panties. The text said, simply, “Meet the maker of MIKA and pick up the latest Volume, *POWER SMUGGLE*.” In the corner of the poster was a

tiny photo of Monica, the only one she'd allow the publisher to print. She liked her smug, red-lipped smile and glossy hair. Eli had taken the photo the night they went out for calamari in hill country, then drove to the Congress Bridge to see the bats. It was early in their courtship, and Monica had been very careful to look her best around Eli. Normally her hair wasn't shiny, and her lips were some shade of worn-off, bitten-up pinkish-brown.

Saturday afternoon, before the book signing, Monica tried hard to recreate the look of the photo. Eli had spent the night at her place and helped her gussy up. He dutifully took the cash Monica held out to him and ran down to the salon to buy some gloss goop. Monica thought carefully about her readers and decided they'd approve of the MIKA maker wearing a low-cut red top, a thick, black leather collar, and a long black, clingy skirt. It would be a hot, sweaty walk to the comic book shop, but would probably pay off in the end. Eli returned and oohed and ahed at his dressed-up girlfriend. He wanted to touch her, but Monica was too nervous and shooed him away.

"It's just a signing, Mon. You won't be on stage or anything."

"I know, but I get anxious, having to pretend I'm this bad-ass chick like MIKA. Why can't I just be a nice girl?"

"You can," Eli said, and he pulled Monica to him by her hips.

She pulled away. "No, it wouldn't work. Annie says that part of what carries the book is my 'public persona.'"

"Your 'public persona' is damn sexy. I might stop down and pick up my own signed copy." He kissed her, square on the red lips, and she felt ashamed because she wasn't enjoying the kiss; she was worrying about fixing the smudge.

"You know you get it for free, darling," she said as she stepped into the bathroom to fix her face. "I'll bring a copy when I meet up with you guys at the—where are we going later?" Monica had a bad feeling about Eli coming to the signing. She didn't want him to see her acting.

"Clarke and Nance want to meet at The Cactus Club at nine. We'll see about the signing. I've got to get some writing done today. But I might surprise you."

“Great.” Monica practiced the photo face in the mirror and imagined Eli standing in the corner of the comic store, wincing at the sight of his slutty girlfriend.

“Thanks for the hair goop.” After a pause she asked, “Are you writing here?”

“Yeah, it’s quieter.”

“True.” She rifled noisily through her make-up bin, then opened and slammed shut her medicine cabinet.

Monica closed the door on her dry cool apartment and instantly began to sweat. She hoped that the inevitable moons under the sleeves of her red shirt would dry before the signing began. She lived only ten blocks from ComZone. As she neared the store, she had to stifle a scream when she saw the poster stapled to the Guadalupe Street kiosk. It wasn’t at all like the proof Monica had seen. The kicking MIKA had been removed, and the picture of Monica had been blown up to about twenty inches by thirty. It was the largest photo Monica had ever seen of herself. What if someone she knew thought that she had printed and posted them? What vanity! Monica glanced around to see if anyone was watching, then ripped the poster down, wadded it up, and tossed it in the trash. She saw two others down the road and, as she passed, she tried to look casual as she tore them down. By the time she arrived at the store she had ripped down seven posters. She glared at the one plastered on the front door of the shop, but knew better than to make a scene there. She was the author now. She would be a good bad girl.

“Hellooo,” said a man wearing a black top hat, sitting on a stool behind the counter. He had shoulder-length blond hair and a neatly trimmed goatee. “You must be Monica. How very nice to see you in person.” His inflection went down in pitch at the end of all of his statements.

“Hi,” she said, swallowed, and approached to shake his hand. “Are you new here?”



"I am—" He paused for much too long and gawked at Monica's unremarkable breasts. "—new. I feel *renewed*." His fingers were slender and his fingernails were too long. With one of them he scratched a spot just beneath his nose.

"I'm gonna get some coffee before we start. Do you need anything?" Monica said. She felt assaulted by the man's purple contact lenses and wanted to walk out and forget the signing. But she knew better. She would get some coffee and regain composure.

"Azrael. My name. And, no, I don't need anything at all. I'll just—" God, he paused again. "—be here." Azrael grinned to reveal perfect white teeth with professionally crafted vampire caps. Monica had a friend who'd had that done just after high school, inspired by a family vacation to "the lake" with her suitcase packed full of Anne Rice books. Later, one of her caps chipped off on a Jolly Rancher. Monica had lost touch with this girl after college. In fact, few attachments remained to the life she'd had before Texas.

Hoping for a long escape, Monica was disappointed to find the coffee shop just next door to ComZone. She ordered an iced Americano, carefully and nonchalantly took down another signing poster from beneath the counter, and inched her way back to the shop.

She found that Azrael had unbuttoned two buttons on his shirt to reveal a snow white, hairless chest. Monica thought she could hear him growling softly. She scanned the store for her stack of books. She saw the Magic Cards and all the Marvel, the red curtain, and the rack of D&D and other role-playing books. There was an entire wall of action figures. At her last signing, the figures had only occupied a few shelves.

"My books?" she asked, and pretended to be looking still.

"Haven't arrived yet," Azrael said indifferently.

Panic bubbled in her throat. "Excuse me?" She stared straight into Azrael's purple eyes.

"The shipment is late. Instead you will sign these posters." He draped a long hand over a stack on the counter beside him. "You may have noticed I've made some

changes to them. I found the original version—” Pause, pause, pause. “—of the wrong proportions.”

Monica’s black collar was getting tighter, strangling her. She tugged at it.

“Does Annie know about this?”

“Annie—” Pause. “Is a bitch.”

“Hang on.” Monica assumed a strict babysitter tone. She stared at the poster, wondering if she should stay. He was right about Annie, but Monica hated hearing it from this guy—this guy who doubtless had never been exposed to the fragile underside of Annie’s bitchiness. Monica knew what had happened, most likely. Probably someone at ComZone had ordered the books too late—or not at all—and Annie had spoken her mind to Azrael regarding the error. Monica found it funny that Annie didn’t have patience for idiots—after all, publicists were supposed to schmooze with all sorts of morons. Still, Annie’s spark had a magnetizing affect on some people. Monica had suspicions about Annie and Victor. Something about the way Annie talked about him. Monica once drew a napkin sketch for Eli of Orphan Annie stripping off her little red dress for Viking Vic. Eli added an abstract dog, Sandy, in the corner. He wrote a villanelle about it, too.

Monica clenched her left hand, held her coffee cup as if she were ready to charge with it, and assumed her position behind the stack of mortifying posters. Azrael wrapped his claws lightly around her shoulder, and Monica wriggled out of his grasp. She could sense her back would ache when this was done, as she felt inclined to sit tilted to the right, as far from Azrael as possible without deliberately shifting her stool.

“Let us get started.” With his fingernail, Azrael lifted a poster off the stack for Monica to sign. The huge, bending poster thundered as it moved toward her.

Monica did not feel flattered, nor did she giggle like a schoolgirl, as she suspected Azrael would have liked. Instead she dug through her purse for her special fountain pen and signed the poster. “So, how long have you worked here?” she tried again to find out. She handed the poster back.

Azrael stretched his arms behind him, ostensibly to show off his naked chest, and then put a hand to his mouth for a loud yawn. "You'll have to excuse me. I got shit for sleep last night."

"Oh, that's fine. Were you out late?"

"Yeah. Friend's party. She had us painting our bodies and rolling on these massive sheets of paper at four a.m." He yawned again and looked away.

Monica laughed. She'd done something similar, years ago, drunk with her art school friends. "Well, I hope the signing isn't a total waste."

Azrael shrugged and took off his hat. He put his arm down on the counter, then set his head on it, like he was going to take a little nap. Monica thought that would be just fine. But then he sat up.

"I'm from New Orleans."

Shocker.

"Used to lead ghost tours in the Quarter. Sucked my will to live. But you know what else sucked?"

Monica blinked at him.

"We did."

She sipped her coffee and wished she could add a few shots of booze.

Azrael continued, "Do you use that choker to cover up bite marks?"

"No," Monica said, annoyed.

"We get tested—you know, for HIV, regularly. It's clean. It's mostly about sex anyway. Orgies."

"Well."

As though Monica willed the distraction, a pimply boy walked in the door, bell jangling loudly. She and Azrael turned.

"Hi," she said to the boy and smiled as seductively as she knew how.

The boy ignored her. He wandered over toward the *Spidermans*, and stood quietly, flipping pages.

"People can order the book when they get the signed poster," Azrael told Monica, perhaps trying to win back what favor he thought he'd had.

"Good," was all she could muster. "That's a good idea."

Azrael put his head down onto his arm again. Monica watched the boy roll up a comic book, slip it into his massive jeans pocket, and walk out the door. This pleased her. She tried to remain very still, so as not to wake the sleeping vampire. She felt in her purse for her tiny sketchbook and began to draw a vignette of MIKA and Azrael.

*MIKA went to the comic book store to see if the latest edition of Roxanne Hatfield's The Modest Witch had come out. She wanted to load up the empty part of her delivery truck with copies, for the children. Schools and hospitals were tragically lacking quality feminist literature.*

*The store clerk was a self-proclaimed vampire. MIKA knew he was a poseur because she had dated a vampire chick for a few months when she had done a stint in New Orleans. She was the real deal. MIKA wouldn't let her bite, so the chick didn't want to go out anymore. That was just fine with MIKA, who was ready to split anyhow. She had important work to do, deliveries to make.*

Azrael stirred and faced Monica. He opened one eyelid. Monica gasped and the eyelid fell. She heard a metallic thump and jumped again. It was just the bunny, repositioning itself in its window cage. She continued drawing her comic.

*MIKA asked the store clerk, "Got any Hatfield, vampy?"*

*"You bite?" the clerk asked her.*

*"Don't be ridiculous, dickhead. Got any Hatfield?"*

*"You never know until you try." The clerk licked his pinkie claw.*

*MIKA flashed her own claws in front of him and the clerk backed away.*

*"Hatfield," MIKA repeated calmly.*

*"N-n-no. Don't think so."*

*"You don't have fucking Roxanne Hatfield? The only smart comic book with a classy female role model?!" MIKA leaped up on the counter and shoved a boot in Azrael's the clerk's face.*

The door jangled. Monica shut her book and looked up to see Eli, holding a bouquet of wildflowers and smiling sweetly. "Oh, hey," she said to him.

Azrael lifted his head and readjusted his top hat.

Eli looked briefly at Azrael and then back at Monica. "How's the signing?"

Monica's cheeks burned. "Okay. Um . . . no books."

"No books?" He looked to Azrael.

Azrael muttered a sleepy, "You want to talk to that bitch, Annie?"

Monica shrugged at Eli.

"Well, what are you doing then?" Eli held the bouquet down at his side, as if it had only been for the books.

Monica took a deep breath and reached for a poster. "These," she said, holding the picture side to herself.

"Well, let me see."

Monica handed over the poster and put her palm over her eyes.

"You're signing these?"

Monica nodded.

"These are great, darling." Eli's drawl slipped out on that last word.

"Thank you." She smiled and snatched the poster back.

Azrael chimed in. "You can order the book and have a poster signed by the author now."

Eli looked confused. "No, he's—he's taken care of," Monica told him.

Azrael grabbed one of the posters and raised it close to his face. "You've got dimples," he said.

Eli shoved his free hand in a pocket and looked around the store.

Monica was sweating, even in the chilled shop. "Had them all my life. My mother called them fairy pinches." Why, why had she said this? Neither man reacted.

"Well." Eli cleared his throat and contorted his body so he faced Monica and blocked out Azrael. "These are for you."

“Thank you.” Monica took the flowers and lifted them to her nose. They smelled like cardboard. “These are perfect.”

“I’m glad you like them,” he said, sneaking glances at Azrael, who clawed at the apparently incurable itch below his nose and then leaned in toward the couple, chin on palm.

Monica felt trapped by the counter, by Azrael, and, strangely, by Eli. She wished for solitude, her pen, and her sketchbook. “What time are we meeting again, Eli?” She used his name endearingly, to make things clear to Azrael.

“Nine,” Eli said. He seemed pleased to have been asked.

“Good. I should be out of here in an hour or so. I want to stick it out a bit longer. I know Annie would want me to do at least that.” Monica scowled at the pile of posters.

“Don’t worry, love. We’ll celebrate later. Bring some posters for Clarke and Nance. They’ll dig those.”

“Maybe. I might forget.”

“Boyfriend?” Azrael asked her.

“Yeah.” Monica watched Eli cross the street and go into Hobo’s, a pool hall. She knew he was getting a beer and wondered if it was a real hankering or if he was stressed out. She knew she hadn’t been the most pleasant companion since Joyce’s accident.

“You two like to go to parties?”

“Not really.”

“I would love to get something going here in Austin like we had down in the Quarter,” Azrael said. “If you’re afraid of how the blood will taste, don’t worry. You know, often we mix it with wine. The more wine you drink, the less you taste it. And the better you feeel.” He actually licked his thin, chapped lips.

“I really don’t think we’d be interested. But thank you. Thanks.” His dumb stare begged for more. “No.”

Azrael lifted his eyebrows at her, removed the hat, and again put his head down on the counter. A teenaged girl walked in. She had spiked blonde hair and wore a short kilt like the ones Monica wore in high school. Where Monica wore combat boots, this girl had on little black ballet shoes.

"You doing a signing?" the girl asked as she approached the counter.

"I—I am, however, and I'm so sorry, the books haven't arrived yet."

Azrael kept sleeping, or whatever he was doing.

"Oh," the girl said, and began to poke around the store.

Monica sat and enjoyed the ballerina's peaceful presence. She actually moved like a dancer, her toes guiding her across the floor, her long upper body following as though she was suspended from ceiling strings. Monica wondered if shoes like those would give her such grace.

The girl danced her way back to the counter, took a curious look at Azrael, and asked, "You guys got any gum?"

"Gum." Monica looked at Azrael's top hat. "Um, no, I don't think so."

The girl turned to leave, and Monica felt compelled to give her something to make her visit worthwhile.

"We've got these posters," Monica said, "and you can order *Volume V* for pick-up. Should only be a few days."

The girl spun back around and, surprising Monica, said, "Okay."

Monica slid a poster off the stack, so as not to disturb Azrael, and scrawled her name across her face. She found, next to the posters, what looked like order forms. She said, "Here, just fill in your phone number, and the store will contact you when the book's in." She wasn't sure if this was the procedure, but she was willing to do anything to keep Azrael napping.

"Is he okay?" The girl gestured toward Azrael.

"Oh, he's fine," Monica said.

Azrael grunted, head down, and the girl laughed.

“When’s MIKA gonna settle down?” asked the ballerina, her voice as graceful as her gait.

“Huh?” Monica was entranced by the girl’s stare. Her eyes reminded Monica of Joyce’s intensity. Monica had been looking for that intensity everywhere.

“I mean—” The girl squinted at the poster. “When’s MIKA gonna take care of herself for once? When’s she gonna relax and choose a city to live in?”

Monica considered the questions. She said, with authority, “MIKA thrives off her nomadic lifestyle. I’m afraid you won’t see her settling down anytime soon.” She grinned, sure this would suffice.

But the girl pressed further. “I don’t know how much longer your readers will care about MIKA if she doesn’t start acting like somebody with roots, somebody with people.”

Monica grew defensive. “She’s got people all over the country.”

“She comes and goes. People don’t really care about people like MIKA unless they’re in a room with her. Then she’s the object of everybody’s affection.”

Monica sighed. A wise little ballerina.

“I like it, though. Good job with it.”

“Thanks.” Monica said. “Something to consider, definitely,” she said, though she knew the majority of her readers liked the lightness of MIKA’s lifestyle, her detachment from the dull, real world of human relationships.



## 3

The book signing remained a quiet affair. Monica did a few more sketches of the nervous rabbit and what she remembered of a man in obscenely short shorts who'd stopped in hoping ComZone had Disney videos.

The poster of MIKA would have improved business. MIKA was a minor celebrity in Austin, while few people recognized Monica as the artist behind her. The previous Halloween Monica had met two slender young things dressed as MIKA at the same party. Both MIKAs stayed at different ends of the room all night, embarrassed to have had the same clever idea. Monica chatted with each one then hurried home to draw the encounter in her sketchbook. [Illustration: Room full of MIKAs with Monica's face, painted with dollar symbols, coming up for air].

"Where'd you run off to?" Eli had asked her later that night. At the time, he was carefully removing his Charlie Chaplin moustache.

Monica sat on her couch on top of the cushion under which she'd shoved the sketchbook. "Do you think people associate me with this kind of superficial pop art?"

"I think they associate you with talent and creativity. It's completely flattering that those two dressed up like your...invention, if that's what you're worried about. She's not like fucking Superman," he slurred. He stank of scotch.

"What, just because she's a woman?"

"Well, she's not like Wonder Woman either, is she?" Eli set his bowler hat on Monica's freshly showered head and laughed too much.

Monica pulled the hat down to hide her eyes. She smiled. "Let's go back out. I'll put my fairy wings on again. Drinks on me," she said.

But Eli was dropping his costume, preparing for sleep.

While he slept, Charlie Chaplin received a page in Monica's sketchbook. He used his cane to keep himself propped up on a barstool. Monica sat a few stools away, saying things that were unintelligible to Charlie. In the next frame Charlie stretched, yawned, and put his head down on the bar.

When Monica woke Azrael to tell him she was leaving, he asked her for a cigarette. She had one, as she sometimes did, and she gave it to him. He seemed less anxious after his rest, and his voice took on a natural, less deliberate inflection. He was sorry if he might have scared her. Monica didn't want to flatter Azrael by telling him he had scared her, so she lied and said he would have to try harder. He didn't try harder. Instead he laughed and told her he had a little side business she might be interested in, which had nothing to do with drinking blood.

"What is it?" she asked.

He handed her a card, which was plain and clearly conceived at Kinko's by someone artless. It was off-white and said: "Azrael Gumpford, Analyst," with a phone number. All in Times New Roman. "Analyst?" she said. She could laugh about this later, but he looked so earnest now.

"Laugh if you want, but I've helped a number of people."

"Did you get some kind of degree for this?"

"Doesn't exist. I've done a lot of thinking about how to coexist amicably with darkness. No drugs, no mantras."

"I can't—I'm sorry." Monica stood and packed up her sketchbook. "I'm sure it's very effective for some people."

"It's hard to explain to someone who clearly doesn't need any help. You know, perfect people," Azrael snapped.

"I'm far from it—man." She felt a surge of adrenaline. Are we fighting? she wondered. And then she felt a chill. The bunny scrambled from one corner to the other. Are we flirting?

Azrael pulled his hair back into a band. This, for some reason, made his fangs less pronounced. His posture improved and he cleared his throat. He had morphed into a man in three short minutes. Seeing him this way made Monica wonder about his past. She wondered if he'd worn clunky glasses as a boy, or headgear. He seemed to be waiting for her to elaborate or leave. She glanced at the posters and felt a little disappointed that she could no longer enamor him. Had she ever, or had she imagined

it? "I need to go," she said. "I'll call in a few days to see if the books have shown up. Or if I get my advance copies I'll bring them here. There was one girl—"

"I heard," he said. "Phone number's on the form?"

He reached across her to grab the sheet, leaving a surprising warmth in his wake.

"Thanks." Monica crammed Azrael's card into her purse and looked at him dumbly. "Well, bye."

He waved as she made her way to the door, accidentally taking the longest route.

Monica liked how life had slowed now that she didn't have a car. Walking everywhere allowed her time alone to think, time she had always been uncomfortable seeking. Now it was attached to necessity. On the walk home from ComZone, Monica fantasized about what she would drink that night. A mojito, for starters, with extra sugar. The thought of tingling alcohol shooting down her throat and out to her extremities relaxed her. Monica thought of how the conversation would go. Eli would want details about Azrael. It exhausted Monica to think about telling a story, giving her friends a character sketch. It made her feel tacky, too—as if she couldn't dream up a better character herself, she had to describe some poor, actual soul. And were people really interested in second-hand experiences? Monica predicted the Azrael sketch would lead to some laughter, some genuine, but mostly sympathetic chuckles of good people trying to understand why the story needed to be told. She decided to downplay Azrael. She would tell Eli he was more normal than he probably seemed. The details would remain in her sketchbook (she planned to revisit him soon, to draw the calmer version with the ponytail and the business card), tucked away and safe. She would do that for Azrael, and then she could conserve her energy to laugh at the others' stories, to listen to the details of their days.

When Monica arrived home, she saw a bouquet of yellow daffodils on her front step. Eli was really overdoing it today, she thought. The flowers were sagging in

the heat. Monica reached down to inspect the card. In the lightest of pencil scrawls, in elegant cursive, the card said, "I am so sorry, Monica, about the orange car. Odd circumstances—" And then the writing skipped down a bit. "I hope they compensated well. Sincerely, Joyce."

Monica trembled. She scooted the flowers over and sat on her stoop between the cactus and the daffodils. She felt a wave of dizziness, imagining Joyce at her doorstep, Joyce dialing the flower shop and requesting a delivery. Somewhere, Joyce was living, sleeping, eating. Monica's feet were numb, probably tucked up under her too tightly. She gathered the day's flowers and hurried inside to catch the blaring telephone.

It was a woman from the police station, calling about Joyce's accident. "Miss Hollandaise?"

"Holliday."

"Right. I'm sorry to disturb you on a weekend. We're going to need you to come in and answer a few questions."

"What kind of questions?"

"Well, it's been suggested that some of the things you may have discussed with your test driver may have influenced her actions."

"Who's been suggesting—"

"Between you and me, Miss Hollandaise, this lady is missing a few marbles, if you know what I mean."

"Holliday. *Joyce* suggested—?"

"Between you and me, I think she's trying to scam you." The woman's voice lacked grace. It buzzed from her nose, and she was indiscreetly gnawing gum. "I apologize for wasting your time."

"It's fine." Monica scanned the card from Joyce again, to see if she had misread it.

"Why don't you come on down to the station on Monday morning around ten. Bring the ring she left with you."

Of course. Monica had thought of the ring a few times and hoped she'd have the opportunity to give it back to Joyce. "I will," she said.

Monica put all of her flowers together and crammed them into a too-small vase. She fantasized, briefly, about calling the Flower Gallery to see if she could obtain some contact information for Joyce. Even if she could reach her, what would she say? I'm sorry you wished you were dead, and I'm glad you're not? What was it I said? There was nothing tactful, nothing normal to say. She unsnapped her choker and considered what she might wear for drinks. She glanced at the clock and realized it was already eight-thirty, barely enough time to change and arrive by nine. She twirled the choker around her left wrist, pulling it tight so her hand turned white. She felt dizzy again. This outfit would have to do. Monica snapped the choker back on and went to the mirror to touch up her crimson pucker.

Clarke, Nance, and Eli had grabbed their favorite corner table. The Cactus Club had a fenced-in patio with lights strung in rows overhead. Every table was occupied by young people in jeans torn just so, T-shirts faintly ironic, with things like laundry detergent logos on them. Several small groups of standing people seemed to be hawking for the next rec-room style card table to free up. Four heavily pierced people, who looked underage, stood close to the table Monica's friends were at. She felt, momentarily, like taking them under her wing, buying them drinks, and guiding them safely home.

Her friends welcomed her with unusually wide smiles. They seemed to be waiting for her to make some kind of announcement about her day or her fancy clothes. Monica didn't comment. She smiled back at them, took a seat, and gave Eli a bright red kiss on the cheek.

"You're stunning," Nance said.

Monica thanked her and asked how they were doing. Clarke went into detail about a trip they were planning to the Gulf and the border.

Clarke and Nance were a loving, good looking couple. Nance, with her long, dark blond locks, had the smartest face. Her eyes were set wide and her nose and cheekbones stood out sharply from her flesh. She was Romanian. She managed Café Beatrice on the fringe of town and made jewelry on the side, working the craft fair circuit on weekends while high school kids took care of the shop. Sometimes the kids bailed, and Monica filled in, making lattes, so Nance could still work her booth or table and make some cash for her wares.

“There’s a fair I’m going to hit in Corpus over Labor Day,” Nance said.

“Good planning,” Monica said. “Have you been finding enough time to work on stuff? You know, because if you need it, I could pick up a few more shifts at Beatrice.”

“Oh, it’s fine. It’s weird, even when I have the day to work, I still putz around and then string beads until three a.m.” Nance giggled softly and Clarke massaged her shoulder.

“Well, the offer’s good whenever.”

“Thanks,” Nance said. She lit a cigarette.

There was an uncomfortable lull.

“What would people like to drink? I’ll go order.” Monica stood and mimed a notepad and pen.

Eli tugged on her skirt. “I’ll come with you.”

“Something sweet—and cheap,” Nance said.

“Whiskey neat.” Clarke held out a ten.

Monica pushed the money back at him, and Nance grabbed it and shoved it, a little too hard, toward Monica’s gut. She tossed it back on the table and turned to get the drinks. Eli followed, surely aggravated by the money game.

But he didn’t let on. “I wrote a poem today,” he announced cheerfully.

“That’s great!” They had to push their way into the small and rowdy bar. Monica rarely enjoyed poetry, but she loved Eli’s work. His father, who died when Eli was fifteen, had been a chemist. Eli’s mother sued her husband’s company because his

death was linked to chemicals at work. She won and quit working, but the money was running out. The whole bizarre situation gave Eli an anxiety that made for depressing, sciencey poems. Monica had great faith that Eli could publish more (he had, once) and often encouraged him to send poems out. "What's it like?" she asked. She squeezed her way between two middle-aged men in leather caps and vests.

"It's a sestina. It's the story of my father teaching me to skip stones. But, I mean, it's not really about that."

"I'm intrigued," Monica had to half-shout. Eli had been sucked into the crowd and was several feet behind her now.

Monica couldn't make out what he said next. The bartender raised his eyebrows toward her. "A mojito, a Glenfiddich, neat, a piña colada, and a Tanqueray and tonic." She listed them like a pro. The bartender sloshed it all together. As he set the drinks on the bar, Monica passed them around bodies toward someone she assumed was Eli, so he could carry two. She paid and found him in the crowd, holding one of the drinks up to the inside of his wrist.

"Maybe I'll show you the poem later," Eli said, less enthusiastically than before.

She smiled encouragingly. She put a drink up against Eli's arm to stop him, to tell him before they rejoined the group, "Got a call from someone at the police station. They want me to come down on Monday for questioning."

"Can't this rest? You got the insurance thing figured out, right?"

"Yeah, I did. It's not about the car. Joyce has said some things about my role in—"

"Monica, I don't think you're seeing how fucked up—"

"It's fine. I wish I hadn't told you."

Eli made his way back to the table and Monica followed.

Nance and Clarke were making eyes at each other, and they seemed startled to see Eli and Monica back so soon. Clarke thanked Monica for the drink. "Eli said the

clerk at ComZone was quite the—” He smirked, waiting for Monica to fill in the blank.

“Oh, he was fine,” Monica said. She took a big swig of her mojito. Clarke and Nance leaned in. Eli watched the underage kids, still hovering nearby. Monica gave in. She reached into her purse. “He gave me his card.” She passed it to Clarke, who gave it a curious look, then handed it to Nance.

Clarke angled again for more details. “Eli said he was sort of a slimy Goth guy. Not very...” He knocked on his head to insinuate *bright*.

“He was really tired, I guess.” She regretted having started the conversation. Eli still seemed distracted by the Joyce thing. “He’d been up late, at a party.” Clarke seemed fascinated, and Monica wondered what Eli had said to get him this hooked. She took another big sip of her drink and felt the tingling she’d been looking forward to. Eli had already drained his glass. “He wants to have blood sucking parties,” she said. She squeezed her lime over her glass.

Nance concentrated on Azrael’s business card. “Let’s call him,” she said.

“It’s funny, I actually have to—”

“Let’s call him. You and me, Mon. Let’s call him tomorrow.”

Sometimes it was difficult to tell when Nance was joking, but she looked serious now. Monica felt challenged. She returned Nance’s gaze. “Okay.”

Eli disappeared back into the bar.

“I don’t think it’s such a good idea,” Clarke said.

“Not much is a good idea these days, huh Clarke?” Nance said.

Her suddenly bitter tone shocked Monica. Nance blushed furiously, and gulped her drink. Clarke began drumming the table. He craned his neck to check out the young punks who had finally procured the table behind them. Two of them were chant-singing a punk rock version of “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” It would have been funny under normal circumstances. Monica sipped. Nance left for the bar.

“She’s been cranky lately,” Clarke said, still drumming, avoiding Monica’s eyes.



“Why?”

“Oh, lots of reasons. The shop’s not doing so well, and the owner’s getting on her to make all these lame changes. Her jewelry’s not selling. And there was the abortion.”

“What?”

Clarke slammed his drink and headed toward the bar. Monica stamped her lime skin onto the table with her palm. She had never felt particularly close to Nance—who she knew had very few close female friends—and now she felt even more distant. Don’t girlfriends tell each other these things? The punks were now pounding out “Chopsticks” on their table, drinks splashing all around them. She admired their carelessness. She slapped her own table and a droplet from her mojito spilled onto her skirt. She wiped it up with her napkin. I need more, she thought. As she reached the door, her three companions were emerging, now jovial—arms linked.

“We did shots!” Nance shrilled.

“Good for you,” Monica said.

“Do some!”

“I may.” She continued past them. When she got to the bar, she stood patiently until a stool opened up. She rubbed her temples, ordered two drinks, drank them slowly, and wondered how she might gracefully sneak off. She worked her way into a fantasy about dancing away like the ballerina at ComZone, but when she stood she felt drunk, and she stumbled back to the table. People held out their hands to steady her. One guy thrust his face close to hers and asked, “Are you okay?”

“Oh, you bet I am.” She punched the guy playfully in the arm.

“What took you so long?” Eli asked. The three faces were no longer so happy. They looked sleepy, now. Nance’s head lolled on Clarke’s shoulder.

“Ballet dancing,” she said, falling into her chair.

The next morning, Monica ate toast and watched a TV show about drug-addicted cheerleaders. Eli had not spent the night, which she was trying to figure out,

wondering why it didn't make her feel much of anything. Maybe, she thought, it was because she knew he'd come back.

Three knocks on her door. She saw Nance through the peephole, wearing ugly grass green Capri pants. She remembered, now, their plan to call Azrael.

"Nice pants," Monica said, showing Nance inside. "They accentuate your ankles."

Nance told Monica her apartment smelled good. Monica sniffed and got nothing, maybe dryer sheet.

"How've you been?" Nance asked, too seriously.

"I've been, you know, working." She turned the TV off and took her plate to the kitchen.

"Have you been happy?"

"Happy. Sure. And *you*?"

Nance sighed. "Lemme just throw this out here. Eli said you seem down. He said you cry about this Joyce woman. I just want to make sure you know that that had nothing to do with you."

"Oh, Eli," Monica said.

"He's concerned. He said last night you seemed to somehow want to involve yourself in this mess. Just take the money and move on, Monica."

"I am," Monica said. "Just yesterday I got called to the police station to answer a few more questions. That's all."

"Oh. Eli didn't say that."

Monica poured two cups of coffee. She turned up the air conditioner and they sat on the couch.

After a long silence, Monica asked, "Did you have an abortion?"

Nance tugged on a loose couch string and unraveled a bit of fabric. She stopped when she noticed she was actually doing damage. "Clarke said he accidentally told you. Yeah," she sighed. "He's 'not ready.'"

"I'm sorry."

"Me too." Nance started to cry. Monica gave her a tissue. "I didn't mean to burden you with this." Nance looked around. "Is that your foot?"

"Um, yes... It's no trouble, Nance. None at all. I'm glad you told me."

Nance started again on the couch string. Monica wanted to tell her to stop, but didn't want to upset her more. It was only a couch, she figured. "So, about this Azrael guy. What's this 'Analyst' thing?" Nance said.

"Well, it sounds like he's some kind of amateur shrink. Maybe more spiritual. I'm not entirely sure. Were you serious about calling him?"

"Maybe. Should I be embarrassed about that? I don't know. I've seen shrinks. They've been—really nice. I think I might like to try something a little different."

Monica wondered if Nance felt more comfortable talking to men. "Let's call him, then," she said.

Nance smiled, a little desperately. "Okay."

Monica fished Azrael's card out of her purse and dialed the phone. "Azrael," she said. "It's Monica."

"Monica Holliday?" Azrael said groggily.

"Yes. Sorry—did I wake you?"

"Fuuuck," he said. Monica began to regret her decision, but suddenly he was awake—almost perky. "You did wake me up. It's okay. I have to go to work soon anyway."

"Did anyone else stop in for the new MIKA yesterday?"

Monica could hear Nance shifting her jewelry around.

"Yeah," Azrael said. "Well, this one kind of older lady stopped in late in the day."

"No!" Monica felt light. She turned toward Nance, who was now spinning her bracelet in circles on her pointer finger. "Did she have grey curly hair, blue eyes?"

"I think. She was disappointed you were gone."

“Really. Interesting.” Nance’s big, watery eyes stared up at her. “So I’ve got this friend. When might you be available to, uh, meet? Your side business, I’m referring to.”

Nance scribbled on a piece of paper and held it up for Monica: *You and me meet him together.*

Monica fumbled for words. “We’d like to meet you together. The two of us. At the same time.” She blushed, realizing what he might think she was insinuating. She curled the phone cord around her neck while she talked.

“Let’s meet. Certainly. There’s a diner off 35—Rodeo Rick’s—where I generally do business. I like to get out of town a ways, for confidentiality reasons.”

Monica stifled laughter. “I’ve been there,” she said, shocked he didn’t hold his “sessions” at a bar or in his candlelit bedroom. “There’s a—” The laughter came. “neon lasso around a piece of steak, right?”

Azrael laughed, too. “Yeah,” he said. Nance looked confused.

“Tomorrow night would be fine,” she told him. Nance nodded. They set a date for seven. Azrael would pick them up after his shift ended.

Monica hung up and she and Nance laughed like little girls, a panicked or crazed kind of laughter. “Don’t tell Clarke,” Nance said through her teary hiccups.

“And don’t tell Eli.” Monica laughed. She crossed her arms, pushing her fingernails roughly into her side.

## 4

The lights at the police station buzzed an octave below the pitch of the receptionist's voice. She had called Monica over to sit beside her as Monica waited to speak with an officer. A detective, Monica thought. The air conditioning wasn't working there, and the woman (nametag: Don—A joke? Short for Donna? Monica didn't ask) offered Monica a bit of newspaper for a fan. The two women fanned. With athletic force Don spat gum into the trashcan.

"So, I'm not supposed to tell you any of this, but I think you might find it interesting."

Monica had learned to tell which accents were native to Texas. This one was.

"You know how to keep your trap shut, right?"

"Well...yes," Monica said.

"This old lady's got issues. Things have been quiet in here lately—surprising with all this hot weather. Maybe folks are too scorched to cause trouble. I've been doing a little research. Between you and me: she's a druggie."

"Joy—" Monica stopped. She had the sudden sensation that Joyce had crossed her legs in the empty chair to her left.

Don made a phlemy snort.

"What kind of drugs?" Monica asked. She put her fan down and glanced around the waiting room. A fat mother and two fat children sat melting into their red vinyl chairs. The mother, in shorts, disengaged one bare thigh after another from the chair. The suction sound pierced Monica's ears. The boy child showed the girl child how nice cold water from the cone cups felt if dribbled onto the scalp.

"Not the hard stuff, but a total addict. A Valium junkie," Don said excitedly. "It's not her first attempt either. Before her daughter took off in '80, she'd—you know—the bathtub scene. Disgusting. Her own daughter having to pull her out of there."

Monica clung to the ring box with one hand and sort of stroked it with the other. She felt queasy. "Where's the daughter now?"

"Oh, this is good. So she runs off with some boyfriend to San Antonio, buys and renovates this bar in a rough part of town—the boyfriend gets into crack dealing on the side, to help fund the renovations, he's claimed—and then the bimbo gets shot by accident."

"God."

"What do I know, but it seems to me you can't dabble in crack. You either have to be in or out. Half-assed you're bound to get—" Don shoved a finger in her mouth, pulled a trigger with another, and said, "Kapow!"

Monica imagined Don's brains splattered across the yellowing station wall.

"Where's the boyfriend?"

"Slammer." Don looked at the box. "Let's see this rock."

Monica held it tighter for a moment, then handed it over. "There's no *rock*."

"Figures. Doesn't sound like he made that much. Not much on him. Pilot. Cancer."

"What was his name?"

Don crammed the band on next to her own small diamond ring. She admired it.

"Huh?"

"Could you please—" Monica held the jewelry box open for Don to replace the ring.

Don yanked at the ring. "Charlie," she said.

"Charlie Rippenford," Monica said.

"Charlie and Martha."

No, Joyce, Monica thought. Even if she had been Martha, she was Joyce now.

"Where does she live? And what did she say about me?" Monica asked.

"Oh, that's confidential."

"Of course." Monica took the ring, put it away, sat back, and fanned herself. The little girl was now raising and lowering her shirt, fanning her soft belly, and innocently flashing the room. Her mother seemed indifferent or preoccupied. Monica

wondered why they were there, and why it was taking so long for her to be called inside.

Don flipped through papers in a file. "I'm not supposed to be telling you this stuff. You keep your trap shut. But she lives on Howard. It's a short side street south of Guadalupe."

Monica gave her a small nod. "Huh," she said. She knew exactly where that was—a short walk from her apartment. With difficulty, she looked away again. She glanced at the newspaper she'd fanned herself with. The words "Feeling Hot Hot Hotter: Austin's Hottest July in Decades!" spanned the front page. People were dying in the heat. Poor people without air conditioning were naively using window fans and killing themselves by sucking more hot air into their already sweltering apartments.

"I wasn't there, but I heard she said you were *verbally abusive*."

"I was what?" Monica snapped her head back toward Don.

"Said you were personally attacking her like about what she was wearing and her age. Said you made fun of her emotional state."

"What did she say I said?"

"Oh, I don't know, sweetie. I wasn't in the room. But, between you and me, I think she's got screws loose. She comes in here—first of all looking like a pirate, with an eye patch and a cane—she comes in here and doesn't say a word to me for over a half hour. Won't even tell me why she's here. Sitting right there." She pointed toward the mother's chair. The mother unstuck a leg. "And then she gets up, almost falls down, and her eyes are all like she's ready to cry. Says to me in this man's voice 'To see an officer.' Rude like that. And I say, 'What can I tell them you're here for?' And she just says, 'Fern,' which meant nada to me, then, but now I know that Fernanda's the name of that bimbo daughter of hers. But I have a very hard time believing her over you. Just her telling me that much says she's not quite right."

"Personally attacking," Monica said. What's with the flowers then, Joyce? She scowled at the jewelry box.

A balding man with a well-defined gut and skinny legs, in a short-sleeved, yellow-pitted button-down emerged from the door behind Don. "Miss Holliday?" he asked her.

"Yes." Monica stood.

"I thought it was *Hollandaise*," she heard Don cackle as she followed the man through a long, cold corridor. The air conditioning worked fine there. She glanced back just before the door closed and saw Don holding a finger up to her lips.

The cop looked disappointingly unlike a detective. He took off his glasses. He winked at Monica. "I have a funny feeling that this Martha got more confused from this accident than whatever that doctor who diagnosed her said."

"How was she diagnosed?"

"Well, I don't know, young lady, but they sent her off on her own awful fast."

"I see."

"Just answer me a few questions. Did you—now be honest here—were you having a tough morning yourself when Martha asked to drive your vehicle?"

"No. I mean—no."

"Any reason why you would have felt hostility toward the woman? Anything she said or did that made you feel like being a little nasty toward her?"

"A little nasty? No! No. I wasn't nasty."

"Well she—and I feel that I can tell you, I found her very hard to follow—she says you were picking on her. Saying she was a downer and a drag and whatnot. Saying you told her to get a haircut."

"I wasn't. Saying that. I never would—" She stopped. The cop's paperweight had a palm-sized tarantula in it.

He winked again and Monica crossed her arms over her chest. She shivered. "I trust 'ya," he said.

"Well, what else did she say I said?"

"She said you told her Charlie was gone. I guess rubbing in the fact of her dead husband."



"I'm not even aware of Charlie. I wouldn't even know the name to say it."

"Well, you're supporting my little theory about this lady. Now, I'm no expert on the mind or anything, but I don't think it takes a shrink to tell you that this Martha was mixing you up a little bit with somebody else. Somebody called Fern."

"Her dau—"

"Her daughter. Did you know the girl?"

"No."

He sighed. "I wouldn't worry your pretty head about this one, Miss Holliday. I've got plenty of other reasons to take your word over this senile, old— Forget it. Don't worry. Did you bring the collateral, then?"

The word irritated Monica. "The ring. Yes." She passed it to him.

"Yep. It's her wedding band."

"I figured."

"Some people have an impossible time letting go. Makes 'em batty."

"Yeah," Monica said.

"So that's it," the cop said.

"That's what?"

"That's it. Have a nice life. What is that the I-talians say? Arrivadolci?"

"Arrivederci," Monica said.

On her way out Don said to her, "Sigh, Monica. You're done."

Monica's limbs shook and drooped, and her empty stomach churned. She helped herself to a cone cup of water, then another.

"You get out of that heat soon, honey. People are dropping out there." Don was rigging up a fan in the small window on the side wall. The fat family was no longer waiting. No one waited.

Monica wondered if Don had seen the warning about the fans. She put the article in the center of Don's desk. "Thanks," Monica said.

Don blew and popped a bubble.

When Monica got home she called Eli. He talked excitedly about the dinner he was making for his house that night—his signature enchiladas. He was frustrated because the tortillas weren't folding over well. He asked her when she'd be over.

"I have a lot of work to send off tomorrow morning." She wanted only to sleep, and wished she hadn't called.

"Oh. Well, maybe you could just come for dinner? Just a couple of hours? You've got to eat."

"I can't. I'm sorry. I lost all this time this morning down at the police station."

"How'd that go?" He sounded angry.

"Fine."

"Well, call me tomorrow, I guess."

"I will. Thanks for understanding. I will."

Nance came over just before seven, wearing a short black skirt, a purple halter top, and thick eyeliner. She'd put on chunky beaded anklets. She looked like a sexy Flintstone.

Monica smiled at her, watching from her stoop, where she'd spent most of the afternoon, post-nap, drinking beer. "Ooh la la," she said, a little envious of Nance's long, muscular legs.

"Hey," Nance said and shrugged. "I told him it was girls' night. He thinks we're trying to get hit on." She laughed.

Monica joined her. "Aren't we?"

"How was your day?" Nance asked.

Monica handed her a beer. "Uneventful."

"Mine was long. I'm exhausted. Got up at four. God knows why I bother to shower before going in to work. I'm always covered with espresso stains by the end of it."

A black Grand Am moved slowly down the street. The two women looked at each other and laughed again, ridiculously. It was Azrael, with his ponytail.

Monica took the front seat.

On the road, Azrael was quiet. Monica looked back at Nance and realized she had carried her open beer into the car. Nance took a swig and winked at Monica. Monica wished people wouldn't wink.

"How are things?" Monica asked Azrael over the soft Joy Division eking out of the old speakers.

Azrael yawned. "Same. Your books came in today. Are they scented?"

"Yes." Monica groaned. "Do they smell okay?"

"Smell like bananas."

"I guess that's better than mouse shit." Monica laughed.

Azrael lifted an eyebrow and said, almost suavely, "Indeed it is." He grinned, and his sharp incisor reminded Monica to be wary.

"So who's the lovely lady in my back seat?"

"Hi, I'm Nance."

Monica watched as Nance and Azrael awkwardly grabbed hands. They looked like inept lovers. Azrael turned up the music and they rode in silence to the diner. Monica stared down Howard Street as they passed. She saw a cat and a couple.

The two women sat stupidly across from Azrael. Since getting into his car, Monica had felt a little off-balance, uncomfortably shy. Even in the sticky booth at Rodeo Rick's, Azrael had a strange authority. The middle-aged waitress with processed blond hair was familiar with him. They sat at his "usual table."

"I don't charge," he said. "Not on the first visit. If you don't like what we do—if it scares you—you never have to do it again."

"Scare me," Nance said. She looked proud.

Azrael cleared his throat.

"I'll buy your coffee," Monica offered.

"That would be fine," he said.

Monica sat quietly while Azrael talked with Nance, perturbed that Rodeo Rick's did not serve alcohol. He asked Nance the kinds of questions she suspected normal analysts asked. How does it make you feel when Clarke suggests you compromise your life plan? (It made Nance feel exhausted. She was sick of reminding him what she wanted.) And, why do you think he forgets—or *claims* to forget? (Nance thought it was because Clarke hoped she might forget too, or stop clinging to her old plan.) And what is that plan, exactly, Nance? Monica wanted to know too.

"Well," Nance said, "I know I don't have a great job. I mean kids—I know—are expensive. But between Clarke and me, I think we could figure it out. Yes. I want to have a baby."

"And he really says *never*?" Monica asked.

Azrael gave Monica a "wait your turn" look and turned back to Nance who was nodding sadly. "Does this child have to be yours and Clarke's? I mean, all kinds of people want to procreate. And you are— Well, it's not really appropriate." He blushed.

Nance sniffled and smiled, wiping a tear from her hollowed cheek. "What?"

"There are other men out there for you."

Monica inhaled to speak, then stopped. Nance's head was in her hands, overwhelmed.

"Let's diverge," Azrael said. "Do you like puzzles, Nance?"

"You mean, like crosswords?"

Monica waved to the waitress. As she whispered to the woman, "No alcohol? Not even wine coolers?" she heard Azrael say: "Some people, if they've got the brains, lead very successful, satisfying double lives."

The waitress—Sam said her tag (What had become of feminine names?)—shook her head no. "Sorry. More coffee?"

But Monica was watching Nance, appalled she wasn't resisting Azrael's suggestion.

Sam tapped her toe several times and walked away.

“But how could I—”

“Clarke would have to be patient. You’d have to disappear for a year or more. I’ve worked on elaborate lie schemes with clients before. Those cost more than coffee, but I’ve never disappointed.”

Monica lightly kneed Nance’s leg. Nance pretended not to notice.

“No,” Monica said to Azrael.

“Excuse me?” he said, as if he’d just noticed Monica sitting there.

“This is crazy.”

Azrael sat back, sipped his coffee. “It’s all relative. But there’s rarely a good reason why a smart and beautiful woman can’t have her cake and eat it.”

Nance sighed. “It’s too much.”

“We’ll start as small as you like. You want to have an affair? We can work that out. No problem. You don’t need acting school to pull off—”

“Azrael!” Monica slammed her coffee mug down.

“Wait,” he said calmly.

“It’s okay, Monica,” Nance said. She pouted her lip unnaturally, seductively. She’d never been a lip pouter.

Azrael took a feather out of his pocket and asked Nance to blow on it lightly. Depending on the way the feather turned she would either have a future with Clarke or she would not. If the feather turned all the way around, there was still a possibility that Clarke would change his mind about children. It was mortifying. Nance was getting into it. Her forehead vein popped out as she prepared to blow on the feather. Monica filed the image, disgusted. She caught Sam staring at them from behind the cash register.

Monica wondered if she should grab her friend and run before she was brainwashed. Nance blew so gently the feather barely moved. It seemed to stick in a spot of syrup or egg or something. Azrael needed to get back to Nance about what this meant. Monica looked out the window at the reflections of the lasso on the

windshields. She fantasized about throwing a steak at Azrael. In her mind, it stuck to his cheek, then slowly slid off.

“And you, Monica,” he said.

She felt the caffeine dart through her bloodstream, and whatever power imbalance she’d sensed when they first arrived seemed reversed. Azrael’s lavender eyes looked like a baby boy’s. His face was suddenly young, not yet fully formed.

“There’s nothing I want to tell you.” Monica took a staged sip of her coffee and set it down, like she was conducting a business meeting. “Except,” she continued, “I’d like to know more about this older woman who you said stopped in to buy some of my books.”

He stared at her. At first she thought this was his true, dulled intellect shining through until she realized he was distracted by a game of footsie with Nance. “Who?” he said. With a dirty grin he added, “I think you need to try a blow on the sensor.”

“What?” Monica asked. He presented her with the feather. There it sat. “I’m sorry, dear. I can’t.”

“Is it the man with the flowers? Is he your burden?”

“No,” Monica explained. “I—” She heard laughter from Sam’s counter. Three thick, tall trucker types were making fun of Azrael with the waitress. One of them pretended to bite her neck. When Sam caught Monica’s eyes she snapped back into waitress mode and guided the men to a table in the center of the diner.

Monica wondered if Azrael had ever been beaten up. She wondered if he’d noticed the men and if his face would register fear, but no. He waited patiently for her lips to part, for her to blow. His foot, she noticed, was now nearing Nance’s crotch. Nance’s face was bright red. She lit a cigarette and stared off as if this would cover up the game.

Monica blew the feather as hard as she could. It floated up above Azrael’s head and landed on a man’s sausage plate, two booths over. The man with the sausage looked pissed, but must have been too bewildered to act on it. His eyebrows were jammed up high. He reminded Monica of MIKA’s latest truck stop culprit. Azrael

walked over to retrieve his “sensor,” and Monica watched the three big guys gawk at his every move.

Nance continued smoking, seemingly oblivious. She turned to Monica. “He’s right, though,” she said. “I need to get out of this.”

“Let’s get out of *here*,” Monica said. She went to the register and paid the leering waitress. She thought of calling Eli for a lift home, but quickly reconsidered. He could never know about this evening. It was dark outside now. She fantasized briefly about hitchhiking, but then thought of crack, guns, and San Antonio. She went to the restroom and rinsed off her face, her dark eyeliner smudging. Somehow, she thought, we must get back into that piece of shit car and get the hell home.

Azrael and Nance were hunkered in toward each other, elbows on the table, when Monica returned. She told them she was feeling ill and they folded out of the booth and followed her out the door. She heard Azrael say “Until next time” to Sam, who reacted less kindly than she had before the three guys arrived.

Azrael reversed the car seating arrangement. Nance sat beside him in the passenger seat. Monica cringed and held her breath when she noticed Azrael holding Nance’s hand. She hated to see a smart woman act so dumb. When they reached Monica’s house, she practically begged Nance to come in and have a drink with her. But she wouldn’t budge. Said she was tired and would accept the ride that Azrael had offered. He even suggested he drop her off a block away from her house, so as not to incriminate her. To begin her lessons in lying, Monica thought.

“Are you sure?” Monica asked.

“I’ll be fine,” Nance said, as Azrael turned up the music. They rolled away.

Monica felt paralyzed by the hot night air. Her brain was beating from the caffeine and she wanted some motion, something to move, someone to talk to. Her instinct was to call Eli, but it was too complicated. He seemed very far away.

When she opened the door, she saw him sitting on her couch, his head hanging low over her notebook.

"I'm sorry," he said. His voice was shaky and rough. "I thought you were going to be working. I brought you dinner."

Monica ran her fingertips under her eyes to wipe off some of her make-up.

"Where were you?" he asked. "You look weird."

"Babe—" she said.

"I don't think you've drawn my nose right."

He was looking at the picture she'd drawn of him on Halloween. There were others, too. There was one in which he danced with a group of women inside his co-op while Monica waited in the entryway, rapping on the door. There was another of Monica drawing and Eli in the background, making racket with a power drill. And there was the one of Lou, a shy housemate of Eli's with a handsome face. "Those aren't— They don't mean anything. You know how I doodle."

"What do you want from me?" he snapped. "Less or more or someone else?"

Good questions, Monica thought, too bad I can't answer them.

"And I'm not a drunk."

Monica sat beside him. He smelled like whiskey.

"Where were you? Out...drawing?" he said.

She cringed at a mental flash of Azrael's black sock edging under Nance's skirt.

"I had to meet a friend. She needed to talk."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you. She'd be embarrassed."

"Nance?"

"No."

Eli flipped through a few more pages and stopped on the picture of MIKA threatening Azrael. Monica pulled the book away. "May I?" She put it on the floor.

Eli shrugged. He started to cry. "There's a new woman at the house. She's really—pretty."

Monica tried to be cool. She asked, dumbly, "*Your* house?"



Eli looked straight ahead, toward the wall, Monica's dumb painting scowling down at them. "She's from Spain. She pays a lot of attention to me."

Monica stood to fix a drink for herself, but Eli grabbed her arm with a force that frightened her. At the same time, there was something alluringly passionate about the grab. He started to kiss her, but not long into it (a good kiss) he turned his head and threw up onto the rug. "Excuse me," he said.

Monica listened at the bathroom door to make sure he didn't bump his head and pass out. She could hear him heaving and crying.

When he emerged he said, as though rehearsed: "I think I'm going to ask her out."

Bastard! she thought. Be fair, she told herself, feeling her own eyes water. "Okay."

"Really?" Eli sunk, turtle-style.

Monica tried to rationalize. For the moment, she wanted him to stop crying, for him to hold her, but she couldn't see beyond that. She couldn't think of a reason for them to keep doing what they'd been doing—this ugly tango in which sometimes they danced in separate corners, and other times stepped on one another's toes, passing a thorny rose stem from mouth to mouth. She told him to go for it, regretting it instantly. She told him good luck.

He bawled, and Monica softly traced his hairline, moved her fingers over his eyebrows and slid them down his cheekbones, catching the salty liquid, rubbing it in.

"It's not the right time for us," she told him, not knowing what the hell she meant—when the "right time" would ever be. She thought about Spanish women, Latina lovers. What did they do when men invaded their privacy, found them out? What would this woman do with a feather in a diner and a nauseating loneliness?

Eli stopped crying, but continued to stand close to Monica and let her caress his face. She was distressed to realize he had a hard-on. She pushed him away lightly. He stumbled, embarrassed. He collected the things he'd brought over: a ratty old argyle cardigan he wore on summer nights and his keys. Monica noted that he kept her

key on the ring. She would worry about that later. "You want that?" He pointed toward a soggy enchilada on one of his ceramic co-op plates.

"It's okay. I'll get the plate back to you." She pinched hard at the inside of her arm. She hated how every word seemed loaded, and how she couldn't think of anything worth saying. Part of her wanted him to stay, but she didn't want to add confusion.

She walked him to the door and squeezed his arm as he coughed out a goodbye. "We'll talk soon," she said. "I'm sure we'll have things to say."

Eli nodded. He wandered down the block, and Monica watched him until he was a dark outline, with long dangling sweater arms. It was too hot for a sweater. She worried he felt chilled, and almost called the co-op to make sure someone was there to make him drink some water, eat some crackers.

She shut the door and leaned her head against it. And then, with a funny and fierce instinct, she prepared her materials for a session with MIKA. She brought out her favorite pen, the Micron 01, and a crisp piece of paper from the expensive stock.

*MIKA bombed across the country, pink mud flaps flapping on her freshly shampooed truck. She blasted her favorite Bikini Kill album and sang along at the top of her lungs. Something was in the ditch along the side of the road. MIKA's 20/15 never failed her. She turned down her music and slammed hard on the brake, making traffic whiz around the truck, dangerously. Down in the ditch was a woman—maybe sixty years old. She wore dingy overalls and had bruises on her face and arms. MIKA climbed down her truck's sparkly ladder and walked up to the woman, who was shaking and muttering. "What's wrong?" MIKA asked. "Where am I? Fernanda?" the woman responded. "We're in Texas, honey. And I'm saving your life," MIKA told her, scooping her up and carrying her to the truck. As MIKA buckled in the confused old body, the woman's eyes grew lively. Her pupils shot steel bars toward MIKA's. They connected. And Joyce said, "Now what are we going to do with Monica? She goes about things all wrong."*

## 5

*[MIKA illustration: (text: "And what are we going to do with Monica? She goes about things all wrong"). MIKA pulls Joyce up into the truck and they drive off together; they pull in to a wildlife refuge where MIKA wants Joyce to experience the sunrise, surrounded by exotic birds, and there they notice a young woman—Monica—leaning up against an orange car. She's naked from the waist up, except for a few strands of long beads around her neck. In her left hand there is a bottle of booze and in her right a joint. Her legs are composed of wooden beams.]*

Monica woke to the jingle of new e-mail. She unstuck her face from the desk.

Who is Joyce? read the subject line. It was from Victor.

She assessed the scene: half-empty bottle of whiskey, open scanner lid, papers everywhere, sloppy drawings of MIKA (Where were her fingers? Her boots?). The keyboard was damp and smelled of liquor. The stench propelled Monica from her desk chair to the bathroom, where she dry heaved.

What had she done? She couldn't remember beyond Eli leaving. In the mirror, she found an inkblot smeared across her forehead. What would Rorschach make of this one? It looked to her like the profile of a man sniffing a lollipop. What did this mean? She scrubbed at the blot until just the faint grey circle of the lollipop remained. She was dizzy and shut her eyes. Images came to her as though shoved from behind, and on some kind of merry-go-round circuit. First a tree branch, then a woman's torso, Eli, then Joyce, all melting away into twigs and ligaments—everything turning dry and brittle—, and then passing around again. *Keep your eyes open*, she told herself. She made her way back to the desk, collapsed in the chair, and dragged her palms down her cheeks.

Who is Joyce? Reluctantly she opened the message.

Last I knew MIKA was in the Rockies, fighting off the Denver Broncos. Why are we back in Texas? Why is MIKA pulling old ladies out of ditches? And who is this Joyce character?

Also, Monica, I think you're a really fine-looking woman, but bringing yourself into this... I'm not sure it's the right direction.

Take a vacation?

V.

Monica sifted through the papers. She could recall making some of the pen strokes, but not others. It was obvious the point at which the whiskey had started to affect her, where the drawings became surreal and, she realized with a lump in her throat, fun. For a moment, she delighted in looking at her strange creations. But embarrassment returned in a wave when she looked again at Victor's message. She massaged her temples and whispered a panicked, "No." She tapped "Reply," and began typing. Nothing. Apparently the keyboard had not survived the whiskey flood. She would have to call.

Victor's answering machine message had been the same for the five years Monica had worked with Gentrix. It opened with bad techno music, suggesting an office dance party. Then the music faded and there was a casual just-got-out-of-the-shower, "Oh, hi. This is Victor. So sorry to have missed your call. I'm probably at an important meeting. Heh-heh. Or out to lunch. Leave your info and I'll get back to you." And the music cranked again.

"Victor, it's Monica. I'm so sorry about last night—I mean—the stuff I sent you. Please disregard all of it. And call me if you have any questions. And... bye."

Monica much preferred e-mail.

The room was uncomfortably silent. She picked up a pen and drummed with it, wishing the air conditioning would kick on, or the phone would ring. She wished Victor had been in his office. He would tease her about her drunken mistake, and she wanted to get that over with. She wouldn't have told Victor about Eli or Joyce, but she

would have let herself be distracted by his funny bi-coastal accent and stupid ideas about marketing. She pressed her fingers against her head veins, feeling the blood thump through them. *Eli's gone*, she thought. A tear navigated its way around the edge of her nose. *I really liked him*. The sentiment had never come so purely, so easily. No one has died, she reminded herself.

But nothing stirred. The silence was her punishment.

She thought of buying a gift for Eli, maybe a book of poetry—no—a Spanish–English dictionary with a little note on top: “Buena suerte!”

“Ha ha,” she said, loud, without feeling. She focused on tugging in her stomach as she repeated, “Ha ha haa,” turning the last one into a musical note. *Eli's gone*.

She turned on the stereo. To punish herself further she flipped to the oldies station. *Rubber ball I keep bouncing back to you*. The wretched, dopey sounds made Monica feel appropriately foolish. Good god, she thought. This was something Victor always said, good god. She pinched at the skin opposite her left elbow, and the tiny pain felt right also. She turned up the music, until she was sure the upstairs neighbors would hear—something she was usually very careful about. But it was Tuesday afternoon. Were they even around? Was anyone around? She thought of the stupidest dance sequence, involving forward jumping jacks, a shoulder shimmy, and a pelvic thrust. She put on a wooly magenta cap that she kept for visits home to Wisconsin—it had been a few years—and danced the dance. No one is around, she thought. And she was embarrassed, still, acting this way. Embarrassed why? This is a problem I have, she decided, as she jammed a pen cap into her stomach, making a satisfying bright pink circle on her skin. *Rubber ball I keep bouncing back to you*. And then, *Let's go surfin' now, everybody surfin' now! Come on and safari with me!*

The phone rang and Monica leaped to quiet the stereo, dizzy again with hangover, and answered the phone with solemnity, assuming it was Eli.

“Monica, it's Nance.”

She tried to keep the disappointment out of her voice. "Nance, how're you feeling?" She removed the hat and frowned at her clothes—the same clothes she had worn to the diner.

"Notsogood," Nance slurred.

Monica could hear the crash of ceramic and the suck of the steam wand: Café Beatrice. "I'll be right down," she said.

On the walk, Monica stopped to pick up some Alka-Seltzer. As she wandered through the drugstore, she imagined asking Nance, "So, did you sleep with Azrael?" and contemplated possible responses. "No, but I slept with his roommate." "Yes, and I even tried drinking a little blood." The best answer: "No, and I'm so glad. I went home and had some tea, snuggled with my man." *Wise-woman Nance in the lotus position, incanting oms.* The worst answer: "He forced me." *Azrael pinning Nance's wrists back against his Grand Am, his smirk turned into a cavernous, toothy growl—the feather floating off, a prop forgotten.* Monica puked a little in her mouth. She stole a "Travel-Pak" of tissues to spit into.

From the drugstore, she took a shortcut through a long alleyway. Generally she avoided alleys, but she felt brave, or careless, and she remembered what Don had told her about the heat and the lack of crime. It was hot, hot, hot! The trashcans were lined up in the neatest of rows. Monica liked how, out of thirty grey cans, one was red, shiny plastic. It was beautiful, in its way. They were all beautiful, and they reeked of sweat and mustard. Monica puked into one, careful not to use the red. And then she saw a person. The person's bare legs were splayed out into the alleyway between a grey and a grey. A brown dog's head was settled onto the woman's ample brown thigh. Her eyes were closed. Dead, Monica thought. She shivered.

The woman's head bobbed a little, and she lifted her chalky eyelids. "You got some change for some sup-sup for my baby-puppy?" She lifted the dog's chin for Monica.

The dog may have been a puppy, long ago. White hairs framed its snout. "Yes." Monica blinked. She fumbled through her army-shorts pocket. She handed the woman a twenty, memorizing where the woman's raw fingers rubbed her own. She wondered if puke lingered on the corners of her lips.

"This is nuthin," the woman mumbled, stuffing the twenty into the cleavage above her wet tank-top.

Monica stepped back, insulted. But the woman was right. "I—" She stopped. What to say? "She's a sweet dog."

"He's a grumpy mutt." The woman rubbed her nose with her palm, sniffing.

"Sorry I can't do more," Monica said.

*"Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone,"* the woman sang.

Monica continued down the alleyway, counting cans.

Café Beatrice was "charming." It was part of a strip of stores built to resemble the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, where Dante first laid eyes on his love. You had to climb a few steps of the "bridge" to get to the shop entrances. There were goldsmiths bookending the café, which drew in a crowd of insecure and wealthy females—lots of golfers. The bridge was over pavement, which did, in a fashion, resemble the dirty waters of the Arno.

When Monica found Nance, she held up for inspection the purple halter top she had worn to the diner. A pair of older ladies wearing pink and yellow pastel baseball caps—brims wide, like sun hats people put on babies—sat at a corner table. Their postures were easy to read: one lamented, the other consoled. Monica noticed how the consoler's body hunkered maternally toward the lamenter, but her eyes wandered all over the store. She seemed to be taking note of the dates on the Austin Symphony poster, which dominated the eerily organized bulletin board. One of Nance's teenaged employees hung his head over a *Chronicle* at the front counter. His hair was the color of trout. Lite Jazz was on. This meant Nance had forgotten to bring her CDs, which confirmed she'd had a late night.

"I got this wine stain," Nance said to Monica, without looking away from her shirt. She bent down to retrieve a bottle of Windex and began spraying random sections of the shirt—and beyond the shirt, nothing.

"What are you doing?" Monica said.

"It'll take out anything."

The two ladies in the corner were glaring at Nance. The consoler was covering her nose and mouth.

Nance continued to spray around the shirt, her gaze now fixed on Monica. "How was your night?" she asked, an insane glint in her eyes.

"Okay," Monica said, deciding that she would keep the talk with Eli to herself. She gently grabbed the Windex away from her friend.

Nance's fingers slipped away from the bottle as if thanking Monica for taking it.

"How was yours?" Monica said.

"I did a very bad thing." Nance organized the spoons by the cream, cradling them neatly together into one big orgy of spoonage. She knocked the cup of stir sticks onto the floor ("Shit!" she said. Monica checked the ladies. They still stared—) and began picking them up one by one and throwing them away, holding her forehead with her palm.

Monica squatted down to help her and whispered, "Do you want to go in the back to talk about this?"

"Oh, I don't care!" Nance sat and wailed into her knees. "I don't care who hears me!" She groaned, "I'm so fucking tired."

Monica helped Nance stand up and ushered her beyond the pink beaded curtain to the tiny back office. On the way, she glared at the ladies, who were collecting their bloated khaki purses and heading for the door. The trout-haired boy turned a page of the newspaper.

Nance wadded up the shirt she'd been spraying and slammed it into the trashcan. "I'm so stupid!"



"Are you okay—physically? He didn't hurt you?" Monica asked. She arranged two chairs for them.

"No, no, no." Nance thrashed her head back and forth. "We made a little—" and she broke down again.

Monica gave Nance a "just a sec" finger and left to plunk the two Alka-Seltzers into some water. When she returned, Nance had stopped crying and was nervously twirling her hair.

"We made a video," she said with disgust.

"Video?"

"I put on some red leather get-up he 'happened to have lying around' and then—yeah—took it off...Oh..." Nance groaned and held her stomach.

Monica held the cup out. "Alka-Seltzer," she said. Nance sipped it. Monica imagined Nance and Azrael choreographing this video. She bit her lip to keep from smiling. Nance was a hippie who made beaded jewelry, not a leather-bound dominatrix—not even much of an exhibitionist. "Did you—" She paused to find her tact, but it wouldn't come, "take it all off?"

Nance winced then put her fingers over her eyes. "So much booze," was all she said.

"I'm sorry," Monica said.

Nance cried with trembling hiccups for several minutes, and Monica put her arms around her and stroked her hair. She could hear a rapid turning of newspaper pages and wondered what the boy had heard. She wondered what Eli might be up to. Her imagination took her where she wished it wouldn't: *Eli and his senorita, making their own pornographic video*. No. That wasn't Eli. He would be writing right about now—a very logical thing for him to be doing. A nice poem. Nothing sexy, and certainly nothing cruel.

Finally Nance said, "You have to get it from him. Get it and we'll destroy it."

"Get what?" Monica didn't feel the medicine kicking in.

Nance looked at Monica, irritated.

"Video. Right." Feeling guilty for introducing Nance to Azrael, Monica agreed she would retrieve it. She had wanted to go to ComZone to check on her new book display anyway.

"I told Clarke you spilled the wine on my shirt," Nance said, as if this was Monica's thank you.

"Oh, good." Monica smiled.

*Eli playfully pouring wine onto his bikini-clad senorita. Hot fun in the summertime!*

On her way to ComZone, Monica spotted her. It was Joyce; she had no doubts. She hobbled with a cane about a hundred feet in front of Monica. She wore her pristine overalls, and she indeed wore an eye patch. It was startling to see her, but Austin was that way. It was an enormous small town. And they weren't far from where she'd been told Joyce lived. Where might she be going? She recalled what the cops had told her Joyce had claimed: "verbally abusive," "personally attacking," "nasty." She slowed her pace considerably and crossed the street to spy. She wasn't ready for a confrontation. Not on this hot and complicated day. She envisioned a calm and collected discussion over tea on a sunny September afternoon. "It had to do with very old wounds," Joyce would say. "You had my daughter's spark was all. Reminded me of her. But that wasn't what—I had already decided what I wanted to do with the car. I'm sorry." Monica would listen compassionately. She would reach across the tea table and hold Joyce's hand. She would be the mature one.

Two women who resembled the pastel-capped ladies at Beatrice bounded out of a store and almost plowed Joyce down with their wide paper shopping bags. Monica felt a protective violent surge shooting out to her fingertips. If she had been closer, she would have strangled the women. Joyce continued walking, as if she hadn't noticed the near knock-down. She stopped there, and Monica wondered if Joyce sensed her presence. Monica ducked into a doorway, still watching. Joyce was frozen mid-stride, her cane and foot out in front of her. Sweat trailed over Monica's temples.

She imagined Joyce turning around with a vicious face, her teeth bared to bite. The woman was a monster. Monica pulled a nickel from her pocket and threw it onto the sidewalk in front of her, to make a noise. Quickly she reeled behind the corner, hiding. When she looked again, Joyce had crossed the street. She was heading away, in the direction of her home. Monica's heart boomed. She thought she could see her chest beat. The doorway she had been hiding in swarmed with the smell of beans and meat. A Mexican restaurant. She moved out of the way of an emerging couple. Business people. Their tidy suits annoyed her.

Monica took a detour through the parking lot of the organic foods co-op and scanned the bulletin board. She took tabs with phone numbers for "Tennis Lessons," "Wymns' Book Club," "Learn to Juggle," "Knowing Jesus," "Basic Guitar," "Power Yoga," and "Tarot Club." She grabbed the phone number to inquire about a motorcycle. Beneath the tab was a familiar eye. She tore off another motorcycle tab, then another, and confirmed her suspicion: one of Azrael's doctored book signing posters. She thought of the ridiculous drawings she had sent Victor and ripped the poster down and tore it into tiny pieces that fell to the sidewalk, continuing on toward the comic book store. She almost cried.

The spinning flashes of faces and limbs from the morning came to her now with her eyes wide open. She thought of wool circling endlessly and the contraption her mother used to wind her homespun yarn on. Monica used to lie on the floor and stare up at the intricate system of wood as it collected more and more yarn and organized it brilliantly into floppy columns. She felt like the images were spinning too close to her face, almost punching at her nose. In the thick heat, she longed for space.

ComZone was unusually busy for a late Tuesday afternoon. Azrael seemed surprisingly alert. He even had a bit of color at the tops of his snowy, angular cheeks. Monica noticed a stack of *MIKA V* on a small table near the bunny window. She could smell the banana from a few feet away. She dawdled near the stack, wanting not to

appear too eager to talk to Azrael. She counted the books to figure out if any had sold. It was futile; she didn't know how many the store had ordered in the first place.

None of the kids in the checkout line held a copy of MIKA. Maybe I will keep that naked picture of myself in the next volume, she thought. Of course my tits will have to be bigger. She scanned the room and was reminded that much of this fantasy comic business was tits. She was a tiny speck on the gigantic teat of the comic book industry.

She looked at Azrael, who was handing back change and staring at her. She felt her face turn red, remembering that she had not been especially polite toward Azrael, with his funny feather, the evening before. She moved toward the counter.

"Display satisfactory?" Azrael said.

"Oh," she said. "It's fine. And you were right—bananas."

"So, what's up?" he said, a mild violence in his voice.

"Yeah, I'm here to check on book orders and," she mumbled, "to get that video."

"What video?"

His playing dumb confirmed it, Monica thought. "Nance wasn't in the frame of mind—"

"She signed the contract," Azrael snapped.

"Drunk," Monica added.

"You weren't there. You have no idea what she said or signed. And anyway, I already sold it. Online. It's already Fed Exed."

"You're full of shit," Monica said. She felt a surge of rage and a weird sense of power. She grabbed his long index finger and bent it backward, like a bully on the playground. She hoped he didn't enjoy it. "Get me the video," she threatened, shocking herself. She heard someone come in the door and she quickly released his finger.

"Monica," Azrael said slowly, winking at whoever had just walked in, "I'm impressed."

She trembled. She could tell the person who he'd winked at now stood beside him, but she refused to move her eyes from Azrael, determined to stare the video out of him.

"I'll see if I can track it down," he said to her. He curled his long arm around the waist of what Monica saw was a tall, slender woman with long purple-red hair and a complicated black lacy dress. She wasn't sweaty. The two kissed, the woman's lipstick leaving a smudge on Azrael's chin.

Monica was glad that Azrael didn't introduce her to his gorgeous (she had to admit) angel of the night. Instead, he ogled his friend with a look of dramatic infatuation. Monica became acutely aware of the air conditioner vent, its position directly above where she was standing. Icy air blew down the back of her t-shirt. She told Azrael she'd be back soon to pick up "the thing."

When she walked back out into the street the sky was dark, darker than she'd seen it in days, and she was glad. Austin could use a watering. Cool drops started to splash and steam onto the sidewalk, onto her bare arms. She turned toward home, planning to shower and eat a decent meal, to call about tennis lessons, or the Wymn's book club, or to buy somebody's old motorcycle.

## 6

Monica reached her apartment drenched and fixed on change. She assumed, though she did not know why, that her old surroundings would appear different—that her wood floors would shine, her sage walls would look brighter, her thin-cushioned chairs plumper. She closed her eyes and twisted the doorknob. All was as she had left it. She let out her breath and pressed the flashing button on the answering machine. Nance had left four messages, each one more desperate. She wanted that tape, *now*.

There was also a message from Victor. “Monica, hi. Look, change of plans here. I showed Annie the drawings. I’m sorry—I had to.” He laughed. “She’s amused by this whole personal spin you’re giving MIKA. Let’s conference call tomorrow. Nine a.m. your time, kay? Sure-sure, talk to ya.”

Monica groaned and kicked her couch, hard. This hurt her toe, so she punched at the back of the couch. How stupid of her to assume Victor wouldn’t show anyone the drawings! And Annie always liked the bad ideas. Monica’s fists and toe ached, and her rain-drenched clothes clung to her. She did not want to play a role in MIKA. Previously, the only pictures she’d drawn of herself were required projects in art school. She hated being scrutinized for how she represented her features. Too flawed, too flawless, too chubby, too scrawny, too unrealistic, too real. She stormed through the apartment to the mirror. Maybe they think I should be the plain Jane in MIKA, she thought. Every superhero needs a dopey right hand woman, right? Fucking Robin. Monica noticed how her nipples poked out beneath her wet shirt. Could I be sexy, she wondered. She messed up her hair and pouted her lips. No, she decided, and went impulsively in search of a beverage.

The refrigerator held limes and lemons, pickles, cherries, beer, and tonic water. Facing this collection of molding garnishes, Monica hungered for substance. She craved avocado, on top of a big juicy burger. Eli had made these for her once. They’d made margaritas to go along and sat out on her front stoop, happily chomping. Eli indulged in beef only at Monica’s house, too ashamed to stink up the co-op kitchen. Animal would have made Carrie, his housemate, cry.

Something about the comfort and pleasure of that evening of burgers had given Monica the false sense that it was a ritual. *We had burgers every third Thursday of every month*, she mused. But they didn't. Too many good things happened only once. Only once did Eli kiss her neck during a rock show. Only once did they visit Eli's mother in her space age condo. And only once did Eli suggest they elope and make a go of a life together. Monica had smiled at him as if to say, "Wouldn't it be nice," but changed the subject.

She grabbed the pickle jar and ate three pickles. The salt gave her tongue a satisfying singe. She considered a Bloody Mary, but thought better of it. Tonight she would purify her body—drink water, take a bath.

She drank so much water her naked belly bloated out in the bathtub like a pregnant woman's. I could be pregnant in MIKA, she thought. I could have a big belly—and big breasts, for Victor. She smiled and imagined Viking Vic trying to pick up a pregnant woman, oblivious to her stroller full of first born, or the loving husband at her side. Monica dunked her head under water. She came back up and amused herself for a few seconds by making suction sounds, slapping flat palms on the water. And then her upper portion was cold, her fingers pruned, her mind alternating from racing to empty to desperately bored and anxious. This is why, she realized, I don't take many baths.

Eli has been my best friend for five years, she thought. There is no reason why I couldn't call him, tell him about my day, in some veiled capacity. She could tell him Victor and Annie were interested in a fictional Monica, but she wouldn't tell him what had sparked the interest. She could tell him she went to Beatrice and that there was a new boy working there—his hair the color of trout. He would like this. She could tell him that her books were in at ComZone and that nobody was buying them. If Eli asked if Azrael was working, she would lie and say no. And then she would tell him that she thought they should have rituals, that they should really make a list of all of the wonderful things they had done together and then repeat them, regularly and passionately. She would make drawings of their rituals. Burger night.

She picked up the receiver. A woman answered the co-op phone. This was usual and expected, but this woman's voice was low and flowing Spanish. A chocolate stream with hints of spice and orange.

"You want to speak with Eli? He's busy right now, I think. Writing. He said he doesn't want to take calls. May I tell him who is calling?"

"Monica," she said, straining to sound pleasant.

"Oh, Monica," the woman said, as though she knew too much. "It's possible he would want to talk with you. Hold on please."

Monica could hear the woman laughing and calling to Eli. "Eli, oh Eli, you must put down your pen. A special woman is on the telephone for you." Her laughter a waterfall of chocolate. Monica didn't hear Eli's reply.

He picked up. "Monica. What's—" He stopped, abrupt and awkward before he added "going on?" He sounded hoarse.

Monica forgot why she had called. She trembled and said, "Oh, nothing. I just wanted to see how your day was. And...do you still have that CD?"

"I have lots of your CDs. Which one are you looking for?"

"Uh...U2?"

"Do you need it this instant?"

"No, no, whenever you get a chance. You can just put it in my mailbox, I mean, if that's easier." Tears.

"I'll look for it, and get it to you. ASAP," he said, like a businessman. "Just a sec." Monica tried to quiet her sniffles, so she could make out what he was saying. He said the name "Camilla," and the words "stereo," "disaster," and "after dinner." Monica assembled the words in variations. *Camilla, her CD is in the stereo, it's a disaster in there, I'll check after dinner. Camilla, is there a U2 CD in your stereo? This situation with her is a disaster. Let's fuck after dinner. Camilla, you have a hot stereo. Let's ignore this disaster and fuck after dinner.* Monica was sure he must have said, "fuck after dinner," not because it was something he would normally say, but



because it was something he wouldn't normally say. And he sounded changed, unwell, impulsive, maybe high.

He got back on the phone. "I'm going to look for it tonight. I'll probably swing by with all of your CDs tomorrow."

"Okay. Well, thanks," Monica said, and waited for Eli to say something else. He didn't. "I hope I'll be around when you stop by."

"Yeah, that'd be good," he said finally. "I'll talk to you later."

Monica felt that the blood had stopped flowing to her extremities. She stared at her plaster white hand, wiped tears onto the back of it, and ate another pickle. She flipped through her Maxfield Parish book, trying to meditate on his graceful curves and warm colors. The blissful, serene scenes irritated her and she tossed the book aside.

She called Nance. Clarke answered the phone. "Sounds like you two had a wild night on Sunday," he said. "Nance is still walking around a little rough."

"I guess we got a bit carried away," Monica said, forcing a laugh.

"You wanna talk to my gorgeous woman?"

"I do." Monica smiled. The video thing would blow over, she thought.

"Monica. What's up?" Nance asked, clearly acting nonchalant for Clarke.

"He couldn't get it to me today, but he will within the week. He promised."

"Oh, sure, sure. I was just hoping I could borrow that book *tonight*."

Nance was a terrible actress.

"I'm sorry," Monica said. "He was at work... I'll make sure it's in my hands by Wednesday."

"It's very important that I get that *book*," Nance whispered.

Monica tried to imagine what would calm her down. "He knows exactly where it is, and said he's happy to turn it over. I'll call you as soon as I get it." She could hear Clarke saying something to Nance.

Nance snapped into a different voice. "You and Eli coming out on Friday? Half price rail drinks at Grover's."

"We'll see," Monica said. She reached again for the Parish book, smoothing its pages, sorry she'd tossed it. "I know it sounds ridiculous for a Friday night, but I've got a lot of work to do. I've been slacking."

Cryptic Nance returned for some final comments. "I'm pretty eager to read that book, Monica, so as soon as you know anything about its status, you just let me know. I'm at Beatrice every day this week, six to four."

"I'll get it to you. Don't worry."

The next morning, Monica fixed herself a proper breakfast in preparation for her conference call. She had risen early and walked in the already oppressively hot morning air to the food co-op. She bought half a dozen eggs, some crusty rosemary bread, bacon, and even a mango. While there, she passed by the bulletin board she had been so intrigued by the day before and found none of the little tabs enticing. She was too hungry to entertain fantasies. Now, she moved frantically around her kitchen, trying to time everything just right. Bacon grease splashed onto her wrists and tingled. She gasped and rushed to hold her arms under cold water; meanwhile, her overeasies were congealing. This was a production she put on with Eli a few times. Not quite a ritual, but a dance with assumed roles. Eli knew that Monica usually screwed up the eggs, so that was his job. She would be on toast and coffee duty. Coffee was, perhaps, the most distinct ritual. The morning routine—one they shared with much of the world, she regretted—his creamy, hers black; his steamy, hers perfect to chug. She had forgotten, in her frenzy, to make coffee. This, on top of the ruined eggs, broke her. She thought she must pull herself together. The mantra of this week, she decided: pull yourself together. Okay.

She put the bacon and the toast in the oven on low. She flipped the egg pan over the trash and started melting a new pat of butter. She cracked the eggs, gently but assertively, like her mother had shown her years ago. The two eggs were perfect spheres, diagonal on the pan. Their golden centers swelled. *Pull yourself together!* She forced a TV smile. One must simply focus on the moment. A friend of a friend was

into some Buddhist monk named Thich Nhat Hanh, and he says *do the dishes to do the dishes*—or something—so Monica fried eggs to fry eggs. She focused on the look of the cooking eggs, trying to push thoughts of the future—the pepper, the flavor—away. It didn't matter *Now* what might happen after her eggs were fried. The phone rang.

"Fucking fuck!" Monica shouted. She turned off the burner and grabbed the phone.

"Morning, Monica," said Annie, "Sorry we're early. Victor, you there?"

"Barely," Victor said. He and Annie had a good laugh.

Monica didn't get it. She continued with her eggs, determined to fulfill her breakfast fantasy.

"Okay, Monica," Annie began, "I love what you're doing here. Monica meets MIKA. What an interesting twist. And I think readers are just starting to figure out who you are. You know, your personality. Your dark, sort-of 'art school' look could really sell this thing. Forgive me for stereotyping."

Monica crunched angrily on her overcooked bacon and said, "I really don't think—"

"This is your chance," Victor said.

"Huh?" Monica ground coffee and considered holding the receiver up to the grinder to remind Annie and Vic that they had called too early.

"I know every woman has a little exhibitionist lurking inside of her. Trust me." He chuckled. "Annie's convinced me. Try some more frames. Give it a chance. Make it sexy. Make it pop—but maybe kick this Joyce character."

"Victor, I was drunk." Monica knew this wouldn't faze them.

"Get drunk again," Annie said. "Actually, Monica, I've been meaning to e-mail you. I have this niece—poor darling, her name is Faith Hope (her mother is a Born Again *again*—my sister if you can believe it!, and her father is classic redneck—no longer in the picture, thank god). But she lives near Dallas. Anyway, I'm visiting and miserable about it. But Austin's doable, right? Would you entertain me for a night, is what I'm asking. Next week. Thursday."

Monica had never met Annie, only heard stories about her. Victor often described her as “vibrant,” “uninhibited,” sometimes “obnoxious.” It would be good to see what Annie had to say without the umbrella of him. “Of course,” Monica said. “You can stay here, if you’d like.”

“I’d like. You should know I’m on a budget, honey. Victor, did you hear that? Your poor publicist is on a *budget!* And what do I do for Gentrix? Oh, that’s right, I make us lots of *money.*”

“We’ll talk later,” Victor said to Annie, as if this were a running argument he treated as a joke. “Monica, try this change for us? I think you’ll end up pleased by what you come up with. And MIKA doesn’t have to stick with Monica forever. You know how she gets bored with people.”

It hurt her to hear it. And it fueled her with the energy of a dare. “Will do, Chief.”

“I’ll call you with details on my arrival,” Annie said. “Probably will drive up in some kind of rental Yugo. I mean, unless Victor fires me, in which case I’ll be hitching or walking,”

“Annie,” Victor said, like he was beckoning his lover. “Let’s not bore Monica with this.”

“There’s no sense in secrets,” Annie replied smugly.

Monica thought it would be good to wrap this up, whatever it was. “I’ll give it a whirl. I’ll try not to ‘bore’ MIKA with me.” She dunked a piece of rosemary toast into her perfect, oozing yolk.

Victor and Annie each logged on separately right after the phone conversation. Victor’s message: “I hate to be predictable, but you’re going to have to accentuate ‘Monica’s’ natural gifts, if you know what I mean...” Annie’s message: “Don’t let that little bitch Victor ask you to change your perfect figure on the page. I want you looking like you do in that photo. Readers need to know this is you, the real you. Looking forward to our rendezvous. —Annie P.S. Don’t scrap Joyce so soon. I’ll convince High and Mighty.”

Of course Annie knew nothing about the real Joyce; still, the suggestion shook Monica. She wondered if she would ever get to confront Joyce. The more time passed, the more preposterous it seemed, but Monica longed for a resolution—and assurance she could stop scouring the obituaries. Might Joyce still follow through on her suicide? Monica realized her shoulders were pinched high and tight together. She pulled on her arms to relax them.

Draw to draw, she thought. Monica and MIKA. She swiveled from her tiny breakfast table to her drawing surface.

~~MIKA made a stop off in Austin, Texas. She spotted a flat chested art school type walking down the street. MIKA zipped up her silver jumpsuit and stole all of the toiletries from her motel bathroom before she hit the road. She added them to her "treasure chest" she kept behind her seat in the truck. (A lady never knows when she's gonna need an extra bottle of coconut conditioner and a fresh razor!)~~

*Driving along she saw a billboard for Historic Downtown Austin. She squealed, impulsively—the only way—off the exit ramp. How darling: historic downtown Austin. Maybe she would lick down a strawberry ice cream cone and skip along the cobblestone streets.*

*She pulled her truck up on the curb in front of the capitol building and parked it. The flags and statesmanship amused MIKA. Security guards came running toward her, but she quickly did away with them with a few karate punches and daring glares. A female guard in a sexy uniform, clearly hot for MIKA, asked her kindly, "Ma'am, would you please take this truck elsewhere? I know of an alleyway where you can leave your flashers on. It'll be fine all day." "Of course," MIKA said, and winked at the security guard.*

~~In the alleyway there was a woman, an art school type.~~

Monica desperately wanted a mid-morning mimosa, but resisted. Draw to draw.

*MIKA parked the truck in the alleyway. She spotted the security guard gawking at her as she walked back toward and past the capital building, now bored with the*

*idea of this place of old politics and old men. She gave the guard a flirty wave over her silver shoulder and shouted, "Get out while you can!" Then MIKA took off running, observing the town fast, the way she liked to do things. She sped by a bar, "Dueling Pianos," an import shop, and a funny little knitting store. Ice cream beckoned. She could sense it was near. People on the street stood and stared in amazement at MIKA, running faster than Superman. They licked ice cream cones. She had reached her destination. The shop must have been built for MIKA. Everything was pink and silver. There were couches against each wall, fuzzy pink with fluffy pillows.*

*MIKA caused a stir when she entered. She was used to this, and put her palms up to show she wasn't there to cause trouble. "Got strawberry?" she said to the pimply clerk. "Of course," he said, wide-eyed.*

*Just then MIKA sensed trouble around the corner. She told the clerk to load up a cone and she'd be back in a flash.*

*Next door, in a comic book store, an innocent lady with a short brown bob and chunky black glasses was being harassed by a pseudo-vampire. ~~Monica~~ MIKA crept up behind him and put a hand softly around his neck, her claws poking into him ever so gently. "Do you value your breath?" she asked the man.*

*The man trembled, but spat, "This girl needs to learn a thing or two about compliance."*

*MIKA pushed the man into a rack of comics, positioning herself between him and the poor art-student type. Comics fell all over the floor and the man whimpered an apology and ran away. MIKA Volume Three fell face-up in front of MIKA. "Looks like a good one," she said, and grinned at the woman she had saved. "Ice cream?" she asked and took the woman's calloused hand in hers. She led her over to the ice cream shop. "My, your hands are rough. Are you an artist?" "Something like that," ~~Monica~~ the woman replied.*

*A knock at the door. Monica checked the time: 11:00. Eli, probably. She moved her eye up to the little hole in the door to have a look. She gasped when she saw it was Azrael, in black leather pants and a white T-shirt, now trying the doorbell.*

He had hacked his hair and spiked it. Monica wanted so desperately not to feel it, this sensation she could call nothing else but *attraction*. Physically attracted to this evil man. She thought back to the feel of his finger in her hand and the bitterness and frustration that compelled her to threaten him. She swallowed and told herself the attraction was dangerous and misdirected. A bad man. She opened the door to him.

“Azrael, you chopped your hair.”

“Madeline’s idea. I was roasting. What do you think?”

Madeline. The woman he was courting yesterday? Was he trying to make her jealous? “It’s short.” Not offensive at all, she thought. “It shows off your nose.”

“Yeah, thanks,” he said, seeming insulted. “I don’t really like it either.”

Monica thought of his stupid feather. She pitied him. But there was business. “Video?”

Azrael slapped his forehead and stomped his foot. “Video! I completely forgot. Kidding!” he handed her a brown paper bag.

Monica reached in and retrieved an unmarked VHS tape. “How do I know this is it?”

“Well.” Azrael beamed. “You can watch it.”

“Stay right here,” she told him. Upon further consideration, she decided she didn’t want anyone passing by to see Azrael standing at her door. “No, come in. I’m going to check it before you leave.”

“You don’t trust me at all, do you?”

“No,” she said, and shut the door behind them. She sat him on the couch. Without reason, she pocketed her Swiss army knife from the kitchen junk drawer. When she returned, Azrael had popped in the video and was patting the couch cushion next to him for her to sit down. She sat on the floor, several feet away from him. “We’re just watching a few seconds,” she warned.

Sure enough it was a red leather outfit Nance wore. Mostly composed of straps, no real section of clothing larger than the size of a palm. Nance was talking

through it all, obviously plastered, giggling and shouting, "Yeah, I'm shexy!" It was miserable.

Another knock at the door.

"Shit," Monica said, and rushed up to answer. If it was Eli, she didn't want him to think she was stalling—especially if he were to see Azrael. He would wonder if she was racing back into her clothes. "Turn it off," she hissed at Azrael, "and be quiet."

Eli had a big heavy box. Had she really left so many CDs at his place?

She opened the door just enough to slip out, then shut it again.

"Hey," he said nervously.

"Thanks," Monica grabbed the box awkwardly and set it on the step by the cactus. "How's it going?"

A sweat bead began to make its way down Monica's forehead. "Good. It's going good. I made eggs this morning."

Eli laughed, sort of like he normally would. "Did they turn out?"

"The second round did." Monica smiled.

"Mind if I come in?" Eli asked.

It was strange. The Eli she knew would have read her shutting the door as a sign that she didn't want to have him in. He was sensitive and generally assumed the worst, like her. She wondered if he had seen Azrael at her door, and decided that if he had, there was no point in lying about it. "It's fine if you come in. You should know that Azrael's here." She hated the sound of it and had no idea what to tell him when he asked why.

"From the comic book store?"

He looked confused and hurt, as Monica had expected. Her stomach made an ugly creak and thunk, audible to both of them. Eli looked at her stomach as though it had said something profound. She put a hand to it. "He was dropping off some of the new MIKA books." Eli knew Monica got her promo copies directly from Gentrax, but it was the best she could do.



He shrugged and stood as if he needed her to either push him toward home or pull him inside. She couldn't push him; he might never come back.

When she opened the door she heard a lusty drunk woman ("Shexxy!") "Turn it off!" she shouted at Azrael, not surprised he had betrayed her wishes and left the tape playing. Azrael turned off the video but gave no indication he was moving off the couch. She shut her eyes for a moment of peace before looking back at Eli. He probably hadn't seen what was on the screen, but there was no question he had heard it. He grunted a hello at Azrael.

"The flower boy," Azrael said. "Greetings."

"You have to go," Monica told him.

"No drinks? You promised." He crossed his legs and folded his hands on his knee.

"Drinks! Fine!" she shouted. "Sit!" she ordered Eli.

Surprisingly, Eli followed her orders. He sat at her desk where she'd been working on MIKA.

"And don't look at that!" She lunged toward the desk and turned the papers over. "It's just new MIKA. It's embarrassing. Crap work." Her voice softened as she explained. "What would you like to drink?"

Eli's eyes were wide, as though he was hoping to read Monica's subtext by refusing to blink. "Water would be fine," he said.

Azrael stared at Eli as he said, "I'll have that beer you promised."

Monica glared at him and felt the lump of the knife in her pocket. "Coming right up," she said.

She thought of the rat poison under her sink. As she poured the water, then snapped open the beer, she wondered who would be best to knock off. She ruled out Eli, Azrael seemed too obvious, so she was left with herself. She opened the cabinet and stared at the little jar. She imagined reaching for it and then the feel of MIKA's claws gently around her wrist, pulling her arm away. "Girlfriend," MIKA would say,

"Don't fuck with that. Come with me." She would take her away to the ice cream parlor.

When she returned to the living room Azrael was looking through one of Monica's Surrealist art books and Eli was hauling in the box from the porch. "Figured you didn't mean to leave this outside."

"Right." She smiled at him. "Thank you." She held his eyes and tried to convey to him that she was sorry, that Azrael was not a friend—a nobody to her—and that she certainly wasn't watching porn with him, and that, if she were, the star was most definitely *not Nance*. She handed him his water.

"I like this stuff," Azrael said, as he reached up to receive his beer.

Monica noticed he was looking at Kay Sage's "Le Passage." She was sure he didn't get it. "The woman is looking away from us, see." She pointed. "She may be half naked, but it's not for you. This picture has nothing to do with you."

Azrael lifted his hands in dramatic apology. "If you say so, Madame. I was going to say I like the background detail."

Eli glanced at the book over Monica's shoulder. She resisted the urge to give his hand a squeeze. "How's Camilla?" she said, relieved to turn the pressure on him.

"Camilla?" He had never actually told Monica her name. "She's, uh, fine." Then he changed his expression. He half-grinned, eagerly. Perhaps pleased by the opportunity for revenge. "We saw a movie last night. Some comedy..."

"Romantic?" Monica tested him with a large false smile.

"Kind of, yeah. It was about this couple that breaks up, but it's for the best."

The rat poison was only twenty steps away. Perhaps Camilla would be the most logical victim. Why didn't he bring her along for this little show? Azrael could put Camilla in one of his films.

"Who's Camilla?" Azrael shut the book and put it on the floor.

Monica grabbed it, brushed it off, and placed it back in its spot on the shelf. "She's Eli's new girlfriend." She looked at Eli for confirmation. He glared at her and

said nothing. "She's Spanish," Monica continued. "Where in Spain is she from? Barcelona?"

The room festered.

After a pause, Eli said, "Madrid." He stared down into his water glass.

"Been there," Azrael said. "Oh, the women of Madrid. So forward."

Eli interrupted. "Well, I'm gonna go." He handed Monica his glass. "Azrael, it's been a pleasure," he said, and nodded toward the couch.

Monica tried to touch him on the arm as he opened the door, but he shrank away from her. "Call me?" her voice was weak, pathetic.

"Yeah." He left.

Monica shut the door and turned toward Azrael. "Get out! Get out! Get out!" she shrieked.

"He doesn't deserve you anyway," he said calmly.

"Get out!"

He set his beer on the desk, nestled it right up against the keyboard. Monica was quick to grab it. She gulped down the remainder of it and then pointed toward the door with the empty bottle. "Get out," she said in an alien, gruff voice.

"Say hey to Nance for me." He smirked as he headed for the door.

Monica determined never to set foot in ComZone as long as Azrael worked there. She would probably have to find a new hometown shop for MIKA. She never wanted to see his pointy face and his snazzy new haircut and his damsel Madeline and his greasy feather again. An image of his leather-clad butt was unfortunately burned into the naughty part of her brain. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to hex him, to doom his ass to inflate, day by day, until it was a balloon, full of hot air, that would carry him off to some flaming sphere, tended by beefy cowboys and strict old biddies, for ever and ever.