

ADULTS ONLY

92 pages 34 illustrations

# CITY BOY, COUNTRY GIRL

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack



TRANSGENDER  
TALES OF

Transformation



**J O E   S I X   P A C K**

# ***CITY BOY, COUNTRY GIRL***

**Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack**  
**A Tales of Transformation story**



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## CITY BOY, COUNTRY GIRL

My husband Richard Rubenstein and I lived on the upper west side, where we had a nice brownstone we had been sub-leasing for a couple of years now. He was an investment banker, and I had my work in radio to keep me busy. Public radio, of course. I was twenty-four, and I had promised myself that it wouldn't be more than a year until I was ready to start a family. At least, by that time I would have accrued enough time for a few weeks of pregnancy leave, and we'd be well-off enough that I could hire a quality nanny. Even then, I had my doubts about that timetable. There was a very real possibility I was going to have to re-prioritize my whole lifestyle agenda.

Richard was also twenty-six, and we had been married for three years. I'm Janice Perlman, his wife. We both graduated college early, mostly because of our heavy prep-school credits, and partially because neither of us were comfortable in the adolescent setting of a university. Really, four years is a waste of everyone's time, especially if you're as intelligent as we were. I had grown up in Brookline, Mass. and he in Waterbury. So, although we lived in totally different worlds, we still had fallen in love.

We first met at the Hartsfield, Atlanta airport while our flights were being delayed. With our cell phones both needing a recharge, we talked for what seemed like hours. In fact, it *was* hours, if I remember correctly. Those incompetent idiots at the gate counter couldn't get a plane off the ground to save their lives. Worse than O'Hare.

As it turned out, Richard and I saw the world in much the same terms. We both saw life as the domain of predators. A shark tank, for lack of a better metaphor. If you weren't in on the kill, you were the one being killed. We were very practical people.

So we exchanged numbers before we caught our flights, and we'd text each other from time to time. One night, I found myself screwed over into attending a formal function, and I needed a date. Richard seemed like just the sort of man I could use — a confident, cocksure man. He was a fine prospect with a good future and wonderful table manners.

It sort of grew from there. After we had been exchanging favors by being each other's date at company gatherings and other formalities, it seemed like we were more than compatible. Plus, after we were married, consolidating our finances made health insurance, car leasing and leasing the brownstone much easier. Our combined contacts, references and referrals almost made it too easy. We had the house signed just hours after we returned from our working honeymoon. Plus, we got a prime location for parking as well.

No, it wasn't in a very upscale neighborhood, as we'd rather be closer to the financial district, but I have no doubt that we were well on our way.



Oh, and I would be remiss if I didn't impart his skills in keeping a woman happy. The man is unbridled animal energy in bed. Well-bred, a tenacious businessman and a passionate lover. I deserved nothing less.

It was just after the Holidays when Richard picked me up at the gym with a grin on his face that made me quiver. That was the kind of expression I'd seen of the faces of many powerful men when they were hot on the trail of a blockbuster deal. The look of a jungle predator who's trapped their prey.

"Are you going to tell me, or keep it to yourself, Richard?" I asked him, as he took us home.

"Babe, my number one prospect just came in," he said, his eyes alive with energy. "I've been keeping this one under my shirt for years."

"Really?" I asked, curious as I could be.

"There's an oil field in Oklahoma that's responsible for 2% of crude production in the US."

"Oil? Is there still money in oil?"

"Billions, Janice," he said, rubbing his hand up my stocking leg. I already knew we were going to fuck when we got home, and it would be amazing. He would not be denied in a mood like this.

"Darling, how did you get involved with oil?"

Richard was eager to talk. "It was my first client when I took this job. It involved a lot of research on oil rights in Texas and Oklahoma. I stumbled on this little nugget almost by accident."

"Tell me more." I was getting wet. The idea of being rich, oil rich, was turning me on. Richard was so smart.

"I've done the research, put in the hours. There's a plot of land with oil rights that's been in a small family's hands for eighty years. It's right on the edge of the oil field. If they drilled, they'd have claim to that field, and to any and all oil they could pump. What makes it sweeter is that I'm the only one who knows about it."

"Sounds interesting. Why hasn't this family, erm, drilled?"

"The husband died years ago, and was against drilling for some... Emotional reason. Who knows. Not important. His wife has held the property for the past fifteen years, and honors her husband's wishes. But now... Now..."

"What? What's happened?"

"The *best* thing. The daughter died."

"That's horrible!"

"No, it's wonderful!" Richard said. "The woman now lives by herself. She's put the land up for sale. Lonely, I guess. Anyway, it's the break I've been waiting for."

"You're going to buy it." I assumed.

"No," Richard replied. "Well, yes. I am going to buy it, one way or another. But she refuses to sell to strangers. She's rejected my best offers. I've been in contact her for the past two years, trying to convince her, but as hard as I've tried, no luck."

"You've *talked* to her?"

"Yes. Regularly. She has no idea who I am, though. She thinks I'm just someone who wants to start a family in the country. Imagine!"

"You devious man, you." He really was a true, tenacious capitalist at heart. I knew it from the very start. He may not have been the largest, tallest or most rugged man, but he sniffed out money with the best of them.

"Yes, well, I have my moments." Richard took a deep sigh. "But this isn't going to be easy for us, Janice."

"For us?" I didn't immediately see the reason for concern. "And this affects *me* how?"

Richard's face was dead serious. "I made some promises..." He ran his fingers through his slicked-back hair. "I said I'd come if she ever needed help. She called me this afternoon and said she was feeling weak, maybe a little sick, and needed someone there. I have to go."

"You can *not* be serious," I said. "Just because she can't get out of bed, she expects you to completely put your life on hold for her? That's just selfish."

"We've been talking for a long time, Babe. I said a lot of things. I've got to have this property. This is a fortune like you wouldn't believe. I made this promise to her, that if she ever needed my help, I'd be there. I'll do anything to get my hands on this land."

"You'll go? Just like that? Where is this town?"

"Boregard. Boregard, Oklahoma."

As if I knew where that was. "And for how long are you going to stay there?" I inquired. He knew I didn't like to be surprised like this.

"For however long it takes. It's money, Janice! Besides, she's probably falling apart. That woman lost her daughter, you know. They were close, so she'll be nearly incoherent. It'll take time to get that land."

"You know, they'll never give you that promotion if you just up and leave the firm," I reminded him. "Our income can't survive you being away for too long."

"I don't think it would be more than a week or two. I've been working at the firm without complaint for almost two years. I should be able to spend a little bit of that credibility, and our savings and investments will carry us through."

"So you're actually going to go?" I asked.

"I'll book a flight and leave tomorrow," Richard replied.

"Well, I think it's unnecessary. You should just force the woman to sell. Use a good lawyer to make her leave." I said. "My father used to do that for years. Should I give him a call?"

"No!" He grabbed my wrist, which shocked me a little. Normally he only did that in bed when he was feeling feisty. "No one can know about this! Anyone who gets involved is going to want a cut. This is mine!" Richard said, practical-

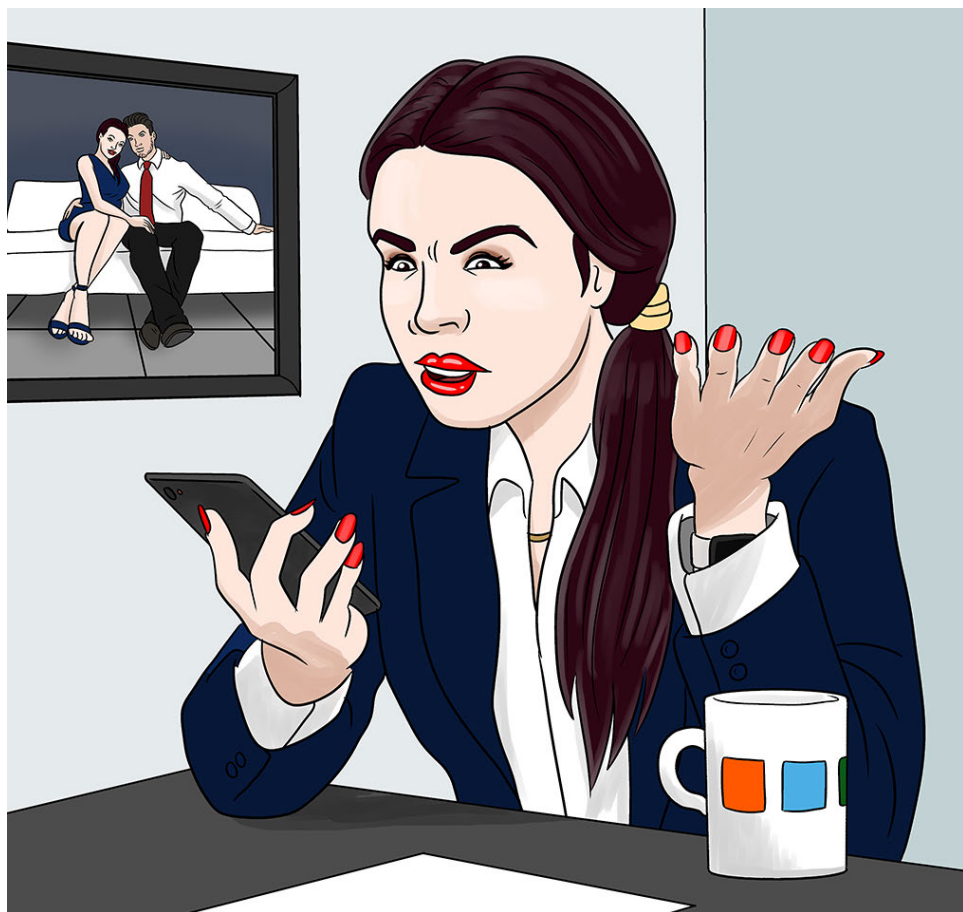
ly frantic. "You can't tell anyone! No one is going to be involved but me and that woman. Mrs. Dilkins."

"Well, I won't stop you." Besides, having Richard out of the area meant I could play the field. "Bring me back a souvenir. Maybe a butter churn or a banjo."

"Thanks for understanding, darling," Richard said, pecking me on the cheek. "Now I've got to get on the phone with my assistant to book the trip." He turned away. "Call Drew," he said to the car's computer.



Richard and I traded messages for the next few days. I was worried that the house would feel empty without him, but I found more than a few ways to pass the time. I hadn't had a chance to go to the clubs for what seemed like years. The things they can do now with drugs are amazing. Even the smallest little hit will send you into ecstasy for hours. It was delightful.



Before I realized it, four days passed without getting so much as a text from Richard. I had previously assumed he was busy doing whatever it was that he was doing, but now he was just being impolite. Finally, eight days after he had taken his flight out, he bothered to call. Eight days. Honestly.

"She's not quite an invalid, but she needs a lot of attention," Richard reported. "She's been devastated by the loss of her daughter and..."

"I have your emails and your phone messages for you," I said, interrupting his prattling. "Would you like me to forward them to you?" I said.

"I've had the town doctor out to look at her every day, and he tells me that he doesn't really know when she'll be ready to hold a conversation. She's been impossible to reach."

I was impatient with him. I didn't call for updates on old whatever-her-name-was. "Do you want your messages or not?" I asked.

"Janice, I can't deal with that now. I have to look after Mrs. Dilkins."

"How much time could that possibly take? Surely you can just use a cell and your laptop..."

"Janice, babe, thank you very much, but seriously, I have all I can handle, keeping the house neat and tidy while attending to this woman."

"Neat and tidy?" I asked.

"She throws a fit when the chores aren't taken care of. She won't sleep or eat her food if the house isn't clean. I have to keep her happy. This is the opportunity of my lifetime! *Our* lifetime! We're talking billions!"

He was obviously trying to oversell his point. Billions? I hardly think so. He still had a job that paid good money, and his messages were too important to ignore. When you're an investment banker, keeping on top of your messages is the most vital part of your job. His clients were not going to be ignored for long. "You're going to have to make some call backs soon, Richard. There are a lot of very important people..."

"Yes, yes. That can wait for now. Getting this land is priority number one," he said, interrupting me rudely. "I'll be back shortly anyway. This can't go on any longer than the end of the month."

"You've already been there too long," I told him. "I can already hear a twang in your voice. Next thing you know, you'll be wearing cowboy boots and line dancing."

"Don't be ridiculous, Janice. Right now, this woman needs my help. If I do this, she'll sell to me, no problem."

"So when do I tell people you'll be back home, Richard?" I asked, making sure he knew I was not pleased with his attitude.

“Tell them I’ll be home when Aunt Elizabeth is out of danger,” he replied, his tone less than cheerful.

He ended the call abruptly, and if I wasn’t very much mistaken he had called this woman “Aunt Elizabeth.” I was worried he was getting sentimental.



It was two weeks later that Richard finally called again. Yes, I know I could have called him, but what would that have proven?

“It’s two steps forward, one step back,” he said. “She’s really trying, but there’s only so much progress one can expect.”

I really didn’t care. “What does the old bag have, anyway?” I asked.

“Her name is Elizabeth. And she’s only about forty-three.” He paused for a moment, probably trying to make me feel bad.

“The doctor says she’s in severe shock and has acute depression. That’s led to fatigue, exhaustion and hallucination. It’s very serious.”

“Whatever,” I said. “Your office called yesterday, and wanted to know why they haven’t heard from you in three weeks. What exactly do I tell him?”

“You can tell Drew that I have to take care of this house by myself, which means I do the cleaning, the cooking and washing. I have to pick up groceries, I have to pick up the doctor in town and I have to do everything else to keep this place from falling into disrepair. You can tell him that.”



"You're honestly doing the cooking?" I asked. "I can't believe you just don't hire someone for that."

"There's no one to hire around here, Janice. You have to do things here yourself. That's the way it is outside the city."

"It sounds *wonderful*." I had had quite enough of this. "Why don't you just tell this Elizabeth person you have a *life* you need to attend to, and you need to come back to New York. Promise her you'll return in a week or something. Tell her anything. *I don't care*. Just get back to work before something serious happens!"

"I know you mean well, Janice, but I can't do that. First of all, Aunt Elizabeth is on medication, and isn't very lucid most of the time. Second, I have no intention of leaving this poor woman to fend for herself – and possibly die – just so I can return some insignificant phone messages. Third, this is an opportunity I'll never see again. I'm not screwing up this chance. I'll do whatever that woman asks. All I need is to make a little sweet talk, show a little politeness and I'll have this land and all the oil underneath it. A few lapsed messages are insignificant."

"*Insignificant*? That's not the Richard Rubenstein I married! You know as well as I that if you show any weakness or lapse in focus, there won't be a job to return to!"

"That's still not as important as her life," he said.

"Don't be so dramatic, Richard. She's probably just lazy."

"I am n... Aaa... not being..." He coughed, after his voice had cracked in the middle of the word 'not.' "I am not being dramatic." His voice cracked again in the word 'dramatic.'

"Well, I certainly hope that her fatigue isn't catching," I said. "Your voice sounds horrible."

"Fatigue isn't something you can catch." Richard was still trying to clear his throat. "I think it's just a minor infection. Just a cold. It's mostly in my chest. It's felt sore lately. The doctor is giving me some stuff for it."

"You *sound* sick."

"I was in bed for a few days. Nothing to worry about. I just needed some rest to fight off this infection or whatever it is. There's been some morning nausea and cramping. I've lost a few pounds since I got here."

"How much?"

"Eight, ten, twenty pounds, I think. I'm taking pills for that, too."

"It's your food. You're probably cooking yourself sick."

"Elizabeth cooked while I was bedridden."

"Hold on, I thought you said she was too weak? You're the one who's supposed to be looking after *her*."

"When the doctor confined me to bed, Elizabeth seemed recovered enough. She's relapsed since then."

"Sounds like a setup, Richard. Are absolutely sure she's sick? Or maybe it's the country air that makes you ill."

Don't be petty, Janice. If anything, the air has been good for my skin. It's never been clearer. My hair is thick and growing fast. Or it could be a side effect of these pills the doctor has me taking."

"Tell him to double it, because it obviously isn't getting the job done. Is he an accredited physician? What's his specialty? Did you get a referral?"

"I'll call you later, Janice," he said. I didn't know what had gotten into him. He was usually so much more practical than this.



It was late February before I heard from Richard again. I had already contacted a lawyer about divorce proceedings. Nothing final, of course, just covering my bases. Still, I wasn't going to give Richard many more chances.

"I'm sorry, wrong number," I said when I heard the voice on the other end.

"Janice? It's me, Richard."

I was startled by how odd he sounded. "Your voice sounds different."

"Just some throat issues," he said. "I need to speak softer to keep from aggravating it."

"Yes, well, how dare you not take my calls! You *are* my husband, or have you forgotten?"

"I'm sorry, Janice. It's been hectic here. It's hard for me to focus on much more than Elizabeth. She's doing better, just so you know."

"Oh, by all means, tell me more about it," I said, sarcastically.

"She's showing some real improvement," he said to me, not picking up on my tone of voice. Obviously, he knew that I wanted him back home. He knew he needed to give me good news, but I was suspicious that he was going to tell me only what he thought I wanted to hear. "She's able to walk around and her breathing is becoming less labored."

"Well, thank God," I responded, dripping even more scorn into my voice so he couldn't miss it. "Thank goodness your little pet project seems to be doing better. I can't say the same for you. The firm has put you on indefinite leave," I told him. I expected anger from Richard.

"They did what they had to do," was what I got.

"Maybe you don't understand me, Richard. You don't have a *job* anymore."

"As far as I'm concerned, those guys at work can go... They can go... Soak their head."

"Soak their head?" I yelled into the phone. "Soak their head? You just lost a job that paid you over a quarter of a million dollars a year, and all you can say is '*soak their head*'?"

"What do you want me to say, Janice? There's nothing I can do about it."

"Of *course* there are things you can do about it, Richard!" I told him. "You could simply..." I stopped myself from having the same argument with him again. "I just want you to tell me when you're coming home. It's that simple. I need you to set a date. Tell me what day you'll return."

He paused for a long, tense minute. "I... Just can't do that, Janice."

"For God sakes, Richard! How do you expect me to survive? This is a partnership! We're team players! Forget about being there for your little obsession, what about being there for *me*?"

"For you?"

"I can't do everything myself! I need to get money from the bank! I need your paycheck! I need you to make contacts through your network of clients! That's where my best news and interviews come from! *You just can't do this to me!*"

"Please," he begged. "I know it's been tough on you, and I'll smooth everything over when I get back. But I'm so close to getting Aunt Elizabeth able to take care of herself and when she can, I can get this property. It won't be long. I can't leave now."

Fine. Frankly, I was *this* close to giving up on him. But he knew so many people that made for great contacts. It made my job as a radio segment producer so easy. Not to mention his membership at the downtown club was in his name. It would take me years to get that membership on my own. I couldn't just walk out on him.

"Are you over that cold?" I asked, trying to take the conversation back from the edge.

"I think so. The doctor has me taking a lot of medication, it's made me kind of... Woozy at times. It's not easy to think clearly."

That's an understatement. Maybe his strange behavior lately was due to being improperly medicated. It was something to think about.

"What kind of medication is it, Richard?"

"I asked Aunt Elizabeth, but she told me I didn't need to worry about it."

"And you trust her?"



“Of course I do. She’s been like a mother to me since I got here.”

“But you’re out of bed, right?”

“I do have to rest,” he said. “I get tired easily. I’m weaker after the weight loss.”

“That twenty pounds?”

“Oh no. I lost another few pounds.”

“Are you all right? Do you need me to send a qualified physician? I can have you airlifted and sent to the nearest medical center right away!” I could just imagine him lying in bed, sickly, checking his temperature. It served him right. A little health scare might drive him back home.

“It’s okay, Janice,” he replied. “I’m in good hands with Doctor Coonrod.”

“Coon rod? Coonrod? You can’t be serious.”

“No, really, Janice. I’m doing fine. Doctor Coonrod is very good. And he’s on top of everything. My weight loss is finally stopping and...”

I interrupted him. “How much weight have you lost?”

“I’m scared to check,” he said. “Last I weighed myself three days ago, I was down to 137.”

"137! That's... No! You've got to be nothing but skin and bones! Richard, take a photo of yourself and send it to me. I need to see for myself."

"Just a second," he replied. A few seconds later, he came back on the line. "I just sent it to you."

The picture was downloading slowly. "Richard, I don't need to see a picture to know that this is serious!" I started to open up my contacts on my phone. "You need to see a real doctor, not some country bumpkin! Go drive to a hospital!"

"I don't think Aunt Elizabeth would like that."

"Do it anyway!"

"She doesn't want me driving the car... She worries about me."

"I'm calling the med-evac people right now."

"Janice, I'm going to be fine. Aunt Elizabeth brings the doctor to see me every day. I trust him. He gave me a couple of shots. It helps with the swelling."

"What swelling?" I asked. When would this stop? It was health problem after problem for Richard.

"Oh, I've puffed up in few places. Especially my chest."

"Sounds like an allergic reaction. Are you allergic to anything?"

"Not that I know of."

"Richard, you're truly scaring me. This sounds like some sort of chamber of horrors."

"It's not as bad as it sounds. I can walk around in short trips, and Aunt Elizabeth is taking care of me."

"She... *She's* taking care of... *You?*"

"As soon as the doctor told me to rest, Aunt Elizabeth was able to look after me. I guess it's that country spirit of pitching in when someone needs help."

"It can't be a coincidence, Richard. Don't be a fool."

"Well, I think having someone to care for has given her something to focus on," Richard said. "Maybe it's crazy, but I think me being in bed has helped her recovery."

I just couldn't seem to get Richard to break through. He didn't seem even *lightly* suspicious of what was happening. Shots, weight loss, forced bed rest, a suddenly mobile invalid. This wasn't right, and Richard wasn't seeing it.

This whole episode was making me very nervous. I always get suspicious when a bunch of coincidences come together. Maybe that's the journalist in me, but I really didn't like the way this was shaping up. "I guess you're just determined to do this."

“So you don’t mind if I stay here until Aunt Elizabeth is up and about?”

“I mind. I mind a lot, Richard. You’re putting me in a very awkward position. I’m not your secretary, and I don’t like making excuses for you,” I said. “And frankly, this is pushing our marriage right to the limit. Right to the limit – do you *understand* me?”

“Yes, I know, Janice. And I’m sorry. Truly sorry.” It sounded like he was really trying to sound remorseful. Maybe trying too hard, if you know what I mean. “I’ll ask Aunt Elizabeth when it’ll okay for me to come home.”

I was getting tired of making these calls and getting the same answer. I was just going to have to let him come home on his own. If he didn’t want to come back, then I knew where I stood. “Richard, it’s up to you. You need to find your priorities. Okay?”

“I know, Janice. This is hard on all of us. And I’ll find some way to make it up to you.”

Now we were talking. I could use a new car. Maybe redecorate the living room? He was going to buy me quite a bit to make up for this.

“If you really are sick, promise me you’ll stay in bed and take it easy.”

“I will.”

“And just see if you can try and get a few more answers about what’s happening to you.”

He paused. “Okay. I’ll give it a try. I have to go. Aunt Elizabeth doesn’t like me using my phone too long.”

As soon as I hung up, the photo he took finished downloading. After just one quick look, I booked my flight for Oklahoma. It was time to meet “Aunt” Elizabeth.



The flight from New York went into DFW. From there, I took an express flight to Oklahoma City. The only transportation from Oklahoma City to

Boregard was by bus. Yes, by bus. Normally, I'd just get a driver for the day, but the trip was eight hours out to Boregard. I had my laptop with me for the trip, and I caught up on my budget planning for the quarter.

The truth was, I missed him. I needed him, to a certain extent. Maybe I had just gotten used to having him around, but I often found myself daydreaming about him, his warmth, his vitality. I wanted to feel his touch again. I guess this was what it felt like to be lonely. It must be horrible for *other* people.

A few hours later, houses appeared on the flat horizon, and eventually, a gas station. There was a small diner next to it. The bus pulled up, and the driver announced that we had arrived in Boregard. I lugged my carry-on bag with me, and stepped outside into dusty wind. The bus closed the door and was on its way – and I was by myself in the middle of nowhere.

The roller wheels on my bag were useless in the rough baked dirt, and I had to drag it along into the gas station.

“Kin I help you, Ma’am?” The gawky man behind the counter said. The patch on his oil-stained shirt said “Jeter” on it. I kid you not.

“Well, Jeter, I was wondering if you could call me a Uber.” I asked.

He looked at me like I was from another planet. I guess he had never seen a woman dressed as nicely as I was, in my business suit. “You’re not from ’round here, is you?” He said.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m just here to see my husband. Maybe you can call me that car, if that’s not too much time out of your busy schedule?”

“Well, we ain’t got no taxi cabs here in Boregard,” he said, adjusting his oil-stained baseball cap. “But if you’re lookin’ to get somewhere, I can take you.”



“What will it cost me?” I asked.

He looked at me confused. “Cost you?” He asked. “I jus’ need to go pick up some fan belts from my pal Raymond out past there. I’ll drop you off on the way.”

“What’s in it for you?” I asked.

By that time, was already on his feet and headed out. Quickly, he was revving the engine in a rusted tow truck. “Git in if you’re a-comin’.”

I was let off at the beginning of a long dirt road, which this Jeter person assured me would end at Elizabeth Johnsons’s house. I could only barely make out what looked like an old victorian house in the far, far distance. “I can drive you all the way, if you needs me to,” he offered. I assured him I was quite capable of doing this for myself. It must have been three miles, but he turned out to be right. Damn heels nearly killed me.

The house was surprisingly large, and aging badly. The place was probably white originally, but now had collected dirt, blown into the slats of wood siding by the winds which never seemed to let up around here. The bottom few feet of the house appeared caked with dirt.

I rang the doorbell after struggling up the creaking old stairs with my bag. A woman answered the door. “Yes?” She said, a little scared. Then she gave a disconcerting smile. “Land sakes, you must be Janice!”

“Yes. I’m Janice Perlman. Richard’s wife. And you are?”

She hugged me warmly. “I’m Elizabeth!” She said. “Ritchie didn’t say you were coming, or else I’d have prepared a room for you. Come in, come in.”

As I stepped inside, I swear I could hear fiddle music. It was like they weren’t even aware of the clichés about life in the country. “I’m not staying,” I said, “and Richard didn’t know I was coming, either.”

I’m not sure what I was expecting, but Mrs. Dilkins was far younger than I had pictured. In my head, she was a bony old crone, I suppose. This woman was just slightly older than my own mother, although not nearly as well-kept.

“Well, you sure do know how to surprise someone,” she said. “I saw you coming down the road, and I was worried you were lost, or a car had broken down.”

“Where’s Richard?” I asked.

“He’ll be so glad to see you. He’s up in in his room. Did he tell you he’s had an awful time with a cold?”

“He mentioned it.” I took a skeptical look at Mrs. Dilkins. She seemed to be perfectly alert and healthy. It was hard to believe she had been sick at all.

I mean, it was *truly* hard to believe.

“Can I see him?” I asked.

“Oh!” She said, embarrassed. “Where are my manners? Why don’t you leave your bag here, and we’ll go upstairs and see him. The dear should be done by now.”

Done with what? “It’s quite a large house,” I said.

“I fear it’s too big for just me. It may be time to let it go.” Richard had read her correctly. She was ready to consider an offer. “What brings you out here so suddenly, if you don’t mind me asking?” She headed to a set of wooden stairs at the side of the room.

“Well, of course I’m just a concerned wife,” I said, playing on her simple-minded emotions. “And I do need my husband to take care of a few financial matters.”

I followed her up the stairs, and noticed how briskly she was moving. Some kind of miracle recovery, surely. She didn’t seem to be mentally incapacitated, either.

“New York must be such an interesting place to live. So many people.”

“Yes, yes,” I replied. “It’s everything you’ve read about, I’m sure. Although I’ll be leaving for Los Angeles soon.”

“You don’t say.”

“I’ll be working out of LA for a few months, temporarily. That’s why I couldn’t wait for Richard any longer.”

“Oh my, oh my. Such a busy life you city folk lead.”

It really was a huge house, with far too many rooms just for one woman to use. There was kind of a folksy charm to the place, if I was being honest. If this house had a little work, some paint and some decent landscaping, you might put it on Airbnb and get some big returns.

Except that we were out in the middle of nowhere. Come to think of it, we were out even further than that. Even the people who lived in the middle of nowhere hadn’t even heard of Boregard.



“Ritchie has had an awful time of it the past two weeks. He’s just been so difficult,” Mrs. Dilkins said.

“Yes, it must have been hard to take care of him while he was sick.”

“Well, yes, it was a trial, but that’s not what I’m talking about, dear. It’s his ornery disposition that’s been a problem.”

I couldn’t believe she had actually just used the word ‘ornery.’ “He’s been difficult?”

“I suppose you know, being his wife and all, but Richard can be downright stubborn sometimes.”

Like when he’s trying to take care of some random lady in Dumbfuck, Oklahoma? “Yes, he certainly can be that way at times. I hope he hasn’t been too much to handle.”

“Oh, he was fidgety and fussy when Doc Coonrod ordered him to get some bed rest, believe me.” Her cross face then brightened. “He just has trouble accepting his situation, and what this illness has done to him. He can’t look after his own affairs anymore, and needs a firm hand to guide him. It’s almost like raising a child at times.”

We passed by a brightly colored pink room, with gauzy curtains, lacy bedspreads and a slight smell of sweet perfume coming from it. I looked in the open door and saw a wreath of black flowers positioned inside. A picture of a buck-toothed, red-haired, freckle-faced girl rested in the middle of it. She was pretty, in a common kind of way.

“That was my daughter’s room,” Mrs. Dilkins said. “Daisy Mae. God rest her soul.”

That was what Richard had said, that this woman had lost her daughter. He mentioned that they were very close, and that was the main reason as to why she was selling. I also noticed that the dyed-black flowers were fresh. She was supposed to have died at least a couple of months ago, wasn’t she? Had Mrs. Dilkins kept buying fresh wreaths for her daughter? Creepy.

Mrs. Dilkins knocked gently on the third door she



came to. "Ritchie dear, are you awake? Oh, I have such a surprise for you!" She opened the door and as she did, that screeching fiddle music became much louder.

I really didn't have time for this. That bus was due to come back through here soon, and I had to get back to New York and run the production meeting on Monday morning. I only had an hour or two to make my connections to get to the airport by midnight. At the very least, I needed to get his signature on a small pile of documents, get his PIN number for the debit card and the bank accounts. I had bills to pay.

The door creaked wide open. I strained to see if I could see Richard, but Mrs. Dilkins was blocking me. "Wait until you see who came to see you, dearest," she teased.

Finally, I could see Richard, and he could see me. It was then that I could see that my husband — my strong, virile husband — was standing at a music lectern, in a ruffled, cotton nightgown. He had been the one playing the fiddle.

He raised his hand to his mouth in shock. "Janice!" He yelped.

"Hello... Um, Richard," I said. The sight of him had taken my breath away. Not only was he dressed in women's clothing, but he was quickly discarding the fiddle he had just been playing. *My* Richard? Playing the fiddle? He had always scoffed at anything that wasn't cool Jazz.

His hair had grown a little, hanging from the back of his head. His body, neck and arms looked bony thin. If I hadn't been told that it was my husband, I might not have recognized him.

"Don't look at me!" He cried. Childishly, he ran to the nearby bed and flung the covers over his head so I couldn't see him.

Mrs. Dilkins was angry. "Ritchie!" She yelled. "Don't be a nuisance! Janice has traveled all the way from New York City to see you, and you will behave!"

The covers stayed up.

"Ritchie! *I said behave!*" Mrs. Dilkins commanded. "He has been acting so immaturely lately," she said to me.

Slowly, the covers dropped, but Richard turned his face away, so he didn't have to look at me. "I don't want to talk to her," he said. I couldn't believe what I was seeing, or believe this petulant behavior. This was a man who could stare down a boardroom of a Fortune 500 Company and win every time. He ate billion-dollar hedge fund managers for lunch. Now he couldn't look me in the eye, and I could see him trembling.

"Ritchie, you will talk to Janice or I'll put you over my knee and give your backside a good spanking!" She threatened.



The look on Richard's face and the flinch in his body seemed to tell me that it wouldn't have been the first spanking he had received. How was that even possible? Richard would never allow such a thing. Although in his skin-and-bone state, he probably wouldn't be strong enough to fight her.

"Say hello, Ritchie. Say hello to Mrs. Perlman," Mrs. Dilkins told him. "Say hello, or no tapioca pudding for desert."

Reluctantly, Richard looked in my direction. "Hello," he said, clearly embarrassed. "Hello... Mrs. Perlman."

"Richard," I replied. I was still in shock. I turned to Mrs. Dilkins for an answer, fearing Richard didn't want to talk. "Why is he dressed..."

"Oh, the nightgown," she said, smiling mischievously. "I simply don't have any proper bedclothes for a man. I only have nightgowns. As you might reckon, living out here with just my daughter... I mean, by myself... I don't have much in terms of clothing for men."

It made sense. She was a lonely spinster. That didn't explain *everything*, though.

The next thing I was worried about was how Richard felt. Did he feel good enough to get on a bus and a flight, if I wanted to rescue him? He looked awful. Oh, he was clean and groomed, but he was rakishly thin and frail, just like he had been in his photo. "Richard? Do you feel all right? You look like hell."

With his eyes cast down, he looked up at me and then down in his lap again. "I'm okay."

I really just needed to talk to him. "Um... Mrs. Dilkins, could you give us..."

"Of course. You probably have so much to talk about," she said, smiling. "Will you be staying for dinner?" She quickly added on her way out.

What, and miss that delightful pudding? What was the main course? Road kill? "I'll have to be on my way," I said.

"I can make more, it's really no trouble."

"I have a bus to catch," I explained.

"Well, if you change your mind, let me know," she said before shutting the door.

I turned slowly to Richard. I looked him up and down. "I don't even know where to start," I said.

Richard shook his head. "I'm sorry, Janice. I just... I just really didn't want anyone to see me like this... Before I was back to health."

I did not like his explanation. "You could have simply asked me to send you some decent clothes, Richard. Does Amazon not deliver?"

"I... I guess I... I didn't want to refuse her hospitality. She would have been crushed if I didn't accept her nightgown."

I gave him a longer, more careful examination. He was in his bare feet, and his toenails were gleaming in the light, as if they had a clear coat of polish. What I could see of his legs were shaved clean and smooth.

I had many questions, one of which was the music he had been playing. "The fiddle? The fucking fiddle? What the hell happened to you, Richard?" He was a mess. In this state, he wouldn't have been able to attend even the most casual of dinner parties. I wasn't sure about his behavior, either. I leaned in close to him, to make sure no one listening in could hear us. "What has that woman done to you?"

He nodded. "It's been a tough few weeks."

"It's been *two months*, Richard," I told him.

"Glory be. That long?" He answered. *Glory be?*

"Your voice, it sounds awful." His tone was more breath than voice, and what voice he was able to muster had a distressing high-range sound to it. "You sound like a teenager."

"It comes and goes," he said. "More coming than going, lately. The doctor said it will settle, in time."

Then something occurred to me. "That's not Mrs. Dilkins's nightgown," I said. "That's a girl's nightgown. Are you wearing her *dead daughter's* nightgown?"

"I didn't have any choice," he said. "Aunty Elizabeth is punishing me."

"Punishing you? You let her treat you like this? Richard, I'm appalled!"

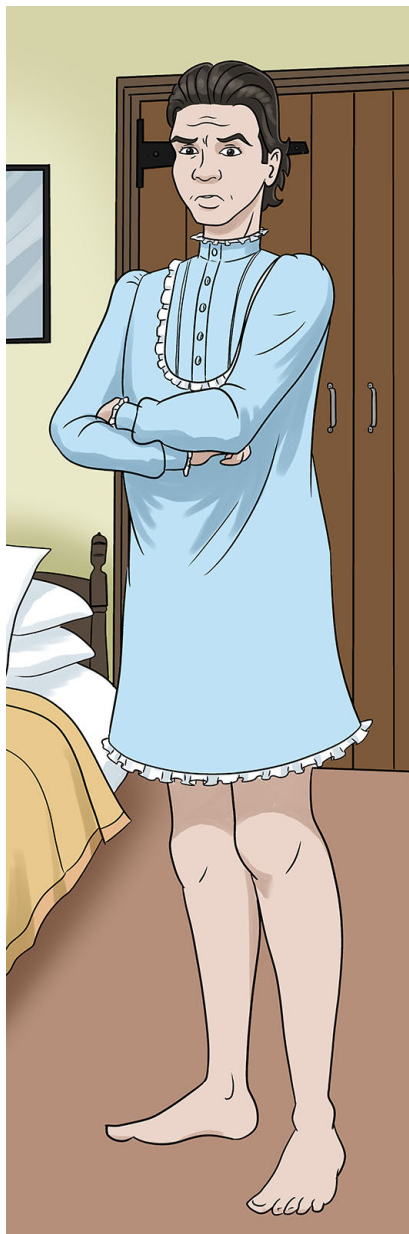
"I... I... I just wanted to..." he said. "I've been working so hard for so long to get this property. The money — I have to get the money. It's all I've ever wanted! I can't risk it by upsetting Aunty."

"She's not your aunt, Richard! Stop calling her that!" I said. "Now, are you coming home with me or not?"

My husband didn't take very long to respond. "Just when I'm getting her to trust me? Not a chance, Janice!" He lowered his voice. "I know it looks strange, but do you think I can't take a little bit of embarrassment in exchange for the billions I can get from this deal?"

I had figured as much. "Have it your way." I got the papers I needed him to sign out of my bag. "If you're going to stay, there's a lot of things I need you to take care of, babe. There's bills, we have a new lease to be signed for the next year..." I spread the papers out before him. "What is she punishing you for?" I asked, unable to resist.

"Talking back," Richard said.



I just had to keep reminding myself he was doing this for money. Lots and lots of money. He was a grown man, who made adult decisions, and he was in control. That was the Richard Rubenstein I knew. He would come out on top. He always did.

"I need to know our PIN number," I asked. "Write that down too." I took away the yellow pencil he had grabbed. "In pen," I told him.

"It sure does pile up, doesn't it?" He said as I handed him a ballpoint.

"Yes, Richard. It does. Especially when you're not even thinking about it."

"I've been thinking about it!" He objected. "I've been thinking about you all the time!"

"Well, I can't cash a check made out to 'Good Thoughts' can I?"

He pursed his lips, and squinted his eyes. Was he was getting emotional? My Richard? Unthinkable. Besides, I hate emotional.

"Never mind, I just need the papers signed." I pointed to the pen in his hand.

He signed the half-dozen papers he needed to. I didn't even recognize his signature, it was so labored. Once he was done, I quickly collected the papers and put them away. "Now, since you're obviously not in good health, I suppose it's best for you to recover here. When you're ready to come home, just let me know and I'll take care of the arrangements." I bent over so I could look him in the eyes. "I'm trusting that you'll know when you're ready to leave, and not let that lonely woman or that crazy doctor talk you into staying, all right?"

"I... I'll do that. I promise," he said.

I decided he needed a little reminder of what he was missing, and I kissed him. Hard. He was hesitant, almost recoiling when my lips met his, but he relaxed quickly and let me do the work. I ran my fingers through his unusually soft, longish hair. It reminded me of the college kid I had slept with last weekend. Richard's face was soft where I usually felt the grip of stubble on his cheeks.

Mrs. Dilkins interrupted us by entering the room. Perfect timing. Perfect if you were listening through the door and trying to keep us from being intimate. "Is everything okay in here?" She asked. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

"Of course you're not interrupting," I said, coating my voice in restrained anger. I stood up and dusted off my skirt. "So, 'Aunt' Elizabeth. Tell me about the doctor you have helping my Richard. What was his name? Crumbberman?"

"Doctor Coonrod. He's an old friend. He's treated the last three generations of Fletchers. Old Gene Coonrod's the best doctor this side of the Mackford ridge."

"And what does he say is wrong with Richard?" I asked.

Mrs. Dilkins looked at Richard, who was looking back at her with anticipation. He wanted to hear the answer as much as I did, it seemed.

The woman gently touched me on the arm and guided me towards the door. "We'll be right back, Ritchie. I have to talk to Janice now," she said, sweetly. "Why don't you read one of your books? I think you're almost finished with 'The Black Stallion.'"

Richard wanted to hear the discussion. "But I..."

"Hush!" Mrs. Dilkins said, cutting him off. "I won't hesitate to punish you again! Read your book and we'll be back in a moment."

Richard looked like he wanted to say something, but he held back. Dejectedly, he pulled a beaten old cloth-bound library book from his bedside table and opened it to the bookmark. He watched us leave, rather than read it, though.

Once we were outside, Elizabeth still kept her voice low. "I didn't want to say anything in front of little Ritchie, but the doctor thinks it could be some sort of problem with his pitrararay gland." She reconsidered what she had just said with a funny, concentrated expression on her face. "Pit-oo-itary? I think that's what it's called. It regulates the hormones?"

I nodded. "That's right. The pituitary gland."

"He said that it was a correctible problem, and a combination of drugs and rest will have it fixed lickety split."

Well, I had to admit, this *did* sound serious. Country doctor or not, this was a significant condition. "Will he be in bed much longer?" I asked.

"Well, all of us are optimistic, but he's going to need someone to look after him for a while. Doc Coonrod said it could be just a few weeks, but he's seen this sort of thing take several months. Sometimes a year."

This *was* serious. "Well, what if it *does* take months?"

"Whatever my little Ritchie needs. He was so kind to me looking after me. It was nice to have someone in the house after Daisy Mae's passing."

Then it was settled. I could leave him here and not have any major interruptions in my life. "If you ever need anything. Money. Just give me a call," I said. "I'll be happy to help out with the expenses."

"How very generous of you to share the burden like that, dearie. But I think I'll be able to handle it. I live on a sizable land trust that takes care of everything I need." She patted me on the shoulder. "I know you'll miss Ritchie, but this time will pass by so quickly. You'll see."

"Yes. Yes." Speaking of time, I had to check my watch. I needed to think about meeting that bus. "Oh, look at that. I'm going to have to run soon."

"I'll be happy to drive you out to the gas station so you can meet the bus. It's due at five seventeen. It gives us a few more minutes. Maybe you'd like to say goodbye to Ritchie?"

"Do you have a phone?" I asked. I really needed to make some quick calls, and my cell had no reception and was almost dead. "I need to touch base with my people back in New York. Let them know what my schedule is."

"It's downstairs," Elizabeth said. "I'll show you."

I pulled out my phone. "Can I recharge this?"

"Anything you need."

I plugged it into the wall and found some phone numbers. The reception was almost non-existent out here, and wound up using Elizabeth's land line. I made the calls I needed to make, and confirmed the times of the meeting I need to attend tomorrow. Our lead reporter had been assigned to a story by the network, and we'd have to have our b-team fill in. We had a solid fifty minutes or so, but we needed another two hours worth of material. I told them what to do, mostly to fill the space with interviews. By the time I had taken care of that, it was time to leave.

"We only have a minute before we need to go," Elizabeth said, putting on a pair of white gloves. For driving? How quaint.

"I'm ready," I said.

"Do you want to say goodbye to Ritchie?" She asked.

I was so short on time. I quickly jogged up the stairs and stuck my head in the room. He was still in bed, and had been reading that book. He was totally engrossed in it, mouthing the words as he was reading.

"Ritchie?" I said. "I mean, Richard?"

He turned his head and set the book down. "Janice. Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine. But I have to run and catch the bus. Are you going to be okay here with 'Aunty' Elizabeth?" I said. "I'm going to be preparing no to go to Los Angeles for a while, for work. That'll give you plenty of time to reel this pigeon in and get her to sell. Or plenty of time to learn the fiddle."

"It was Daisy Mae's hobby. Aunty said I might like it."

"Do you?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Janice. I'd burn that awful thing if I could. You have to go right now?"

"Elizabeth's warming up the car."

"That wasn't a lot of time."

"I have meetings," I said. "I'll come back out and we'll have a little more time to spend together. I promise."

"I'm sorry you had to see me like this," he said.

"Don't worry about it," I reassured him. "After all, we're married. I'll send you some of your clothes. Just remind me."

"All right," he replied. "Oh, I wanted to give you this. I made it." He looked for something at his bedside. It was a small swatch of fabric. "Home Sweet Home" was stitched on it with a flowery detail around the edge.

"You're *sewing*?" I asked, barely disguising my shock.

"It's needlepoint. And it helps pass the time. Auntie is showing me how."

I took the fabric and folded it up and stuffed it in my pocket. "I'm sure it's very nice. Now I want you to be nice to Elizabeth, but please be careful. I'm not sure I entirely trust her or the Doctor."

"I can't say I haven't been suspicious," he said, "so I'll be careful."

"Are you being nice to Mrs. Perlman, dear?" Mrs. Dilkens said as she entered the room. "I don't want her to leave thinking my little Richie is rude."

"Yes. Ma'am," Richard replied.

She turned to me. "I'll be in the car. We'll need to get a move-on."

"I'll be right there," I said.

She turned to Richard again. "And what do you say when someone's come all this way to see you?"

"Thank you Ma'am," Richard said to me.

"Very good," she said, and then left.

"What was that all about?" I said, laughing. "Yes Ma'am, 'no Ma'am?'"

"What?" Richard said, staring at me blankly. He didn't seem to think there was a problem. I just decided to move on.

"I really do have to run," I said, as I hugged him. As I did, my head was behind him, and I glimpsed down where he was sitting on the bed. The nightgown had ridden up, and I was sure I could see a pair of pink



panties on his butt. With my head beginning to swim with crazy and bizarre images of what Richard was really going through, I finally had enough. I just had to get out of this place and back to civilization.

“Oh, Aunty wanted me to give you my phone. It’s no good out here anyway. No towers.” Richard fetched his trusty phone, which I had never seen him get farther than three feet away from in my life, and handed it over to me. It almost looked like he was getting emotional again, like he was sacrificing his beloved pet.

This may have distressed me more than him. He’d never give up his phone willingly. He once punched a man in the street who had tried to steal it. He had lost it once in an Uber and had told the police he had been sexually molested by the driver to force them to track the car down. “Okay... I have to go now.” I kissed him on the cheek. “Now, be good.” I said. “Get her to sell,” I added in a low whisper.

Richard’s expression was one of concern — and maybe some fear? “Oh... Okay.” He said, less sure than I ever remember my husband being.

I hated to leave him like that, but there just wasn’t time. To make my point, Elizabeth’s car honked outside.

“Bye-bye, Babe,” I said, leaving the room. “I’ll call you when I get back to my house. I mean, *our* house.”

“Bye,” he said. He did sound sad. He’d get over it quickly, though. I had other things to worry about. Richard’s strange illness would have to resolve itself for the time being.



Before I knew it, six weeks had passed. I had been insanely busy at work, preparing my replacement before I was off the to west coast. Total moron. They’ll sink with that idiot in charge. It’s not my problem, though. I was looking forward more than ever to my time in the Los Angeles studio, putting together a new morning show. I was very ready to put my New York job behind me. By the time I came back, I’d have a promotion and be the returning hero, saving them from this pinhead who I was leaving them with.

I didn’t miss Richard, frankly. I was getting more work done than ever before. We had never been a particularly clingy couple, and were very independent, but eliminating the brief periods of time we spent together doing “couple” things made me even more productive. I’d have to readjust when he came home, but for now, I was loving all the extra time I had.

Six weeks was probably too long to go without seeing my husband, so I had set up a video call to check in on him. I didn’t expect that the connection

would be very good, but I did want to see his face and how he was doing with his hormonal problem.

“Janice!” Elizabeth said as she saw me. I had been expecting Richard to answer my call. “Ritchie told me you were calling sometime today. I’m so glad to see you again. And I’m sure little Ritchie will be overjoyed. You look well.”

“Thank you,” I said, skeptical of her cordial greeting. “Why do you call him ‘Little Ritchie?’” I asked. He was five-foot-six, and quite defensive about it. His temper would boil over if anyone dare called him ‘little.’

“It’s a term of endearment, Janice. I want him to feel like one of the family.”

“Where is Richard?”

“He’s been making wonderful strides in his recovery. He’s up all day long now, and finally starting to put a little meat on his bones. He still has to take his shots and his pills, but Doc Coonrod tells me it’s just a matter of time before things work themselves out.” She turned to the kitchen. “Ritchie, Janice is here, come say hello!”

She turned back to the camera with a broad smile. “I can’t imagine what it must be like to live and work in New York City. It must be an adventure every day.”

“It’s a busy place all right,” I told her. “But I’ve always thought that it’s the most important place in the world, and if I’m going to live somewhere, I have to live in the most important place in the world. Everything you could possibly imagine is in this city. I love it. I’m going to miss it when I’m working in LA.”

“How wonderful.” Her attention returned to the kitchen. “Ritchie! Where are you? Janice is here to see you!” She was immediately frustrated. “Sakes alive, I have to look after little Ritchie every moment.” She left the room. “I’ll be right back.”

Shortly after she left, I could hear some fussing off-screen. Elizabeth’s voice was loud and harsh. The second voice was soft and hard to hear.

“Yes you will!” I could hear Elizabeth shouting. “You’ll go out there this second!” There was another pause. “Right this very second!” Another pause. “Well, she’s going to see you sooner or later! Everyone will! You’d better get used to it!”

“Please, please!” I heard. It was a girl’s voice. “Please don’t make me!” I felt a shot of fear go through me as I realized that I wasn’t hearing a stranger’s voice. I had to have been hearing Richard’s voice.

“Now!” Elizabeth bellowed.

Without much delay, I could see the door to the kitchen as it slowly opened. Behind it, what used to be my husband appeared.

I say what ‘used to be’ my husband, because this person didn’t bear much of a resemblance to my Richard. My Richard was a proud, sharply dressed and

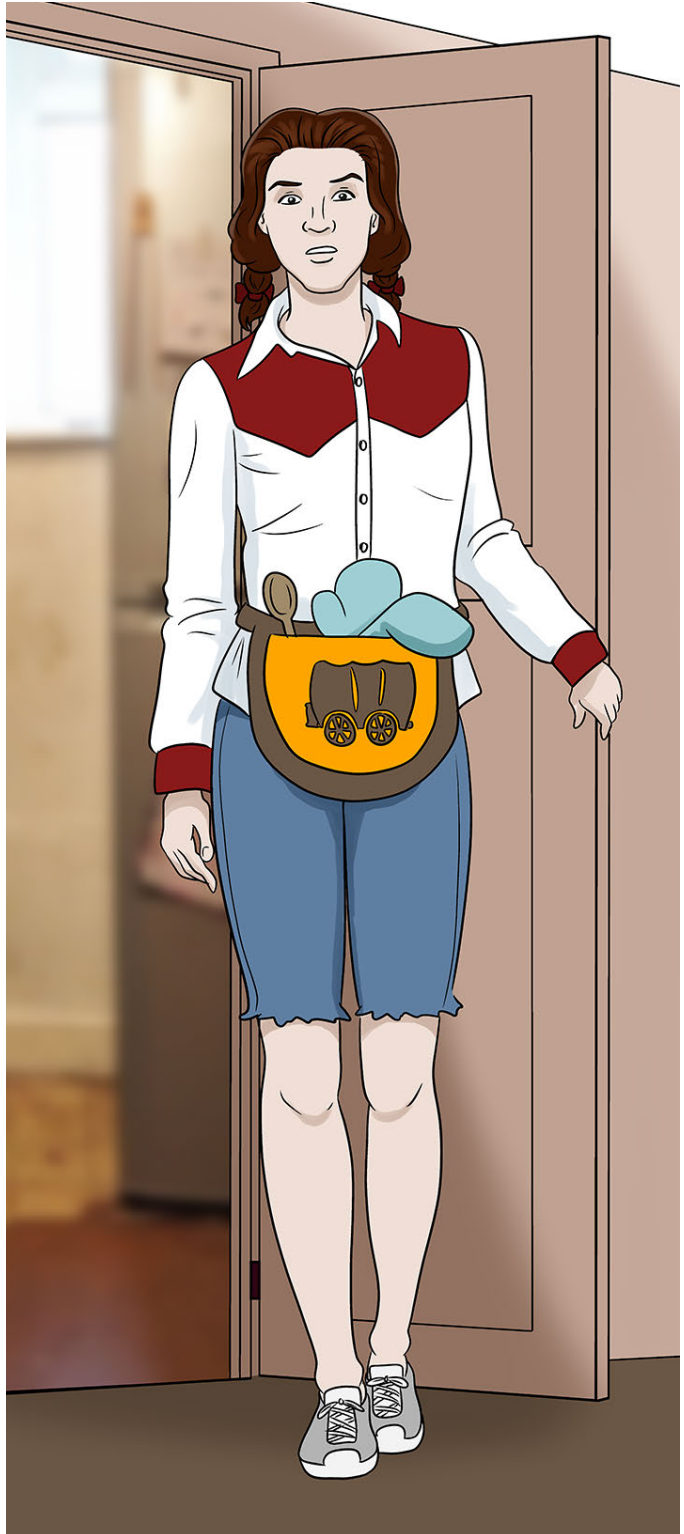
handsome man who looked you in the eye and told you what he thought. The person who emerged from the kitchen was a faded memory of that man.

Richard was dressed in cutoff denim shorts and a western dress shirt with red panels on the top half. Over that, he wore a small apron that had a spatula and two oven mitts tucked into it. His legs were smooth, hairless and perfectly flawless. His hair, which now looked less black and slightly copper-toned, was tied into two pigtails fastened with ribbons that rested just above his shoulders.

“What did I tell you about smiling, honey?” She asked.

“A smile is a ray of sun into everyone’s life,” Richard said, in a soft, lilting voice I could barely hear.

“And you wouldn’t want to block out the sun, would you?”



Richard immediately painted a smile on his face.

“Hello, Ma’am,” he said to me.

The blood rushed from my head for a moment, causing me to forget what I was doing, just for an instant. This was Richard? I could hardly believe it. My husband was the man I had shown with pride to the world. I’d never be seen with this... This sissified version of that man.

“Hello, Richard,” I said coldly. “I see you’re on your feet.”

“Yes Ma’am,” he said, as he dipped his head. I think he gave a slight curtsy, but I wasn’t sure.

“Are you wearing makeup?” I asked.

“Little Ritchie’s complexion has gotten quite pale due to his illness,” Elizabeth said, coming in to view. “He wanted to look a little less sickly, so I’ve been showing him how to add some color to his skin with makeup.” She stood behind Richard, which made him look small and slight by comparison.

“What about his legs? Why are they shaved?”

“We had a little problem in the shower. Little Ritchie mistook my Nair for body soap. We had a good laugh over that.”

“I see.” From Richard’s face, I don’t think he was sharing in the humor of the situation.

“What about his hair?”

“The town barber is going through a bit of a spell, I’m afraid. He hasn’t been cutting hair since February,” Mrs. Dilkins said. “I told Ritchie he could either have me cut it — and my arthritis gives me some shaky hands — or we’d have to make it more manageable. Pigtails seemed practical.”

“Practical?” I said.

That woman was spewing pure nonsense. I held back on eviscerating the bitch, because I wanted to get a moment to talk with Richard — alone.

“And his color?”

“His hair is a lovely copper once all that gunk gets washed out. It really brings his face alive,” she said, finding a seat on a nearby chair. “Oh, show Jan-ice what you made!” Mrs. Dilkins said to my husband.

Richard looked uncertain. “I... I’m not sure...”

“Don’t be shy!” She said. “Get a move on!”

He hung his head and left through the kitchen door again.

With him gone, I had some urgent questions. “Elizabeth, why is my husband dressed like that?” I said, angrily. “I asked you to look after him, not turn him into some freak.”

"Hush, now," Mrs. Dilkins said, without even batting an eyelash. "Haven't you noticed how slender he's become? The only clothes I have that will fit him are some old things I had around the house."

"I sent him some of his things to wear." I pointed out.

"They just drape all over him. He's just not comfortable in them. Besides, his skin is so sensitive right now, he's likely to break out in a rash from those machine-washed clothes."

"He's my husband, Mrs. Dilkins, and he's a fully-grown man. You're just being cruel to him. This is not doing him any good. You're ruining him! He'll never be confident of himself if you're putting him in girls clothes!"

"I'm *building* his confidence *back* up. The poor dear was near suicidal when he first saw how much weight he had lost and how weak he was feeling." She turned toward the kitchen. "Do you need me to come in there and help you, Ritchie?" She yelled, more as a threat than as an offer.

"No Ma'am!" Richard called back, in a feeble voice.

I wanted to lurch through the screen and strangle her. I wasn't used to losing arguments. "You could cut his hair short, give him a pair of pants and let him get involved in his work again. That would help him feel like himself again. It would give him the confidence he needs."

"Oh," She said, "that may work for a busybody like you, dear. But little Ritchie is a bit more delicate than that. He needs that feminine touch to soothe him back to health."

I bristled at that insult. Was she insinuating I wasn't feminine? Yes, I wore my hair in a tight ponytail, worked hard and wore slacks most of the time, but that didn't mean I was any less of a woman, God damn it. Who did she think she was?

Before I could make any more points with the old woman, the kitchen door opened and Richard returned, with a tray. An ornately embellished golden brown pie rested on it.

"Is that a pie?" I asked.

"Pecan," Mrs. Dilkins said. "Isn't that right, little Ritchie?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

He held it closer to the camera and I could see that the decoration in the crust must have taken an hour at least. I'd never known Richard to have the patience for that kind of thing. I also noticed his fingernails were polished to a shine as he handled the tray.

They seemed to be waiting for me to comment. "It looks very nice," I said.



“With his new cooking skills, along with his housekeeping skills he developed while taking care of me, little Ritchie is becoming quite self-sufficient! I’m so proud of him.”

It almost sounded like she was boasting about how well she was raising a child. “I’m sure he appreciates it,” I responded.

“Oh,” Mrs. Johnson said. “Mrs. Perlman was asking if your clothing bothered you, Ritchie. Do they?”

“No, they’re the only clothes that fit me,” Ritchie answered in what sounded to my ears like a rehearsed statement. “I don’t want to be a burden.”

Mrs. Johnson looked very satisfied with his answer. “And your hair has just gotten so long that braiding it just makes sense, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he responded, unenthusiastically.

This woman was full of it. She thought she was so clever in always having an answer for why she was torturing Richard, but I knew her game. She was trying to get more money. Yes, she had probably figured out his scheme, and was

now going to push him as far as he would go, until he finally surrendered and paid her price.

I decided that rather than be confrontational with Mrs. Johnson, I should just let this go for now. Richard may have been acting submissive in her presence, but my Richard was never helpless.

"Anyway," Mrs. Johnson said, putting her hands on Richard's shoulders, "we do have to get back in the kitchen. I'm teaching Ritchie how to make my famous Dilkins Family cornbread."

"Richard," I said. "I called to talk to you."

My husband looked nervous. "Aunty needs help in the kitchen," he said. "I need to go."

I was so disappointed in Richard. I expected at least some attempt to reassert himself.

"I'll call you when I'm settled in in LA," I said.

"Oh, okay," Richard replied. "Bye, then."

It was an abrupt end to the conversation. I welcomed it, though. My nerves were on edge, and I was exhausted. Dealing with Richard was becoming more and more taxing on me.

I had already begun to put my laptop aside when I heard the incoming call chime. It was from Richard. I nearly didn't answer it, because I wasn't sure how much more I could take, and if it was that woman calling me back, I didn't have any desire to talk to her for any length of time.

I picked up the call anyway. The screen came up with Richard's face. "Janice?" He asked with urgency.

"Yes, Richard? What's wrong?"

"She went to take a nap," he said, quietly. He looked over both shoulders before continuing. "I had to talk to you without her around. That woman isn't what you think. she's out of her mind."

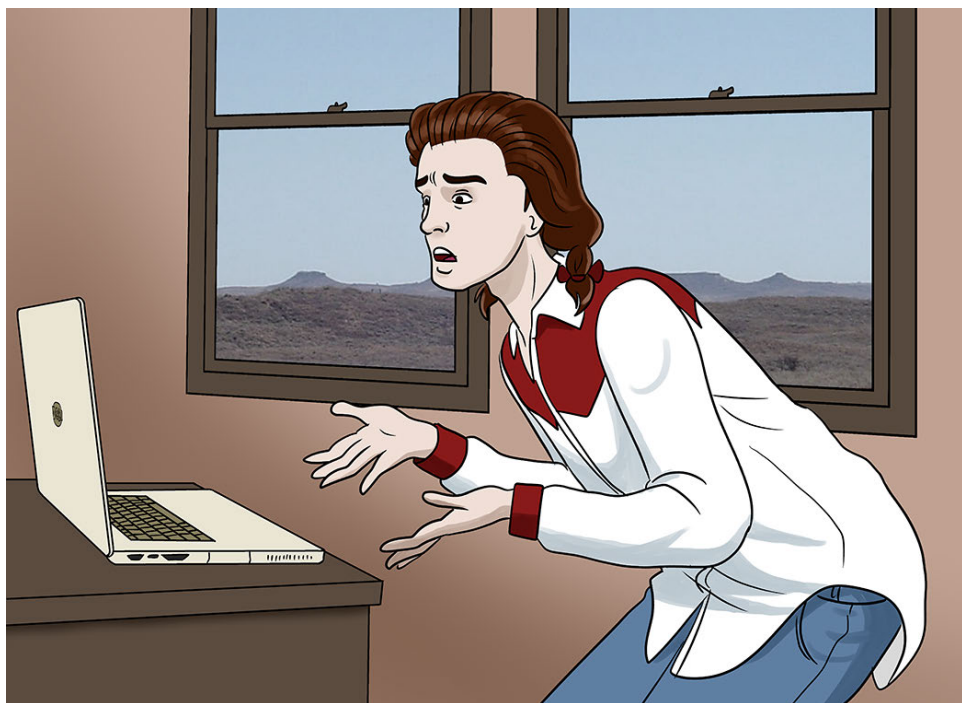
"Well, she certainly is rude, I'll say that."

"No, I mean she's not right in the head. Just about everything she told you was a lie. A total fabrication."

"Well, I know that, Richard, I'm not an idiot."

"You don't even know how far she's gone. That woman is treating me like her dead daughter!" Richard said. I was used to this kind of energy and drive from my husband. He was more focused than I had seen him since this started.

"I don't know how you live with such a rude person," I said. "She treats me like I'm a second-class citizen. As if! She's the one dressing in dollar-store dresses and living in dilapidated shack..."



“Please, Janice!” Richard interrupted. “She won’t leave us alone for very long! You have to listen!” He begged.

He knew I wasn’t very pleased with him. In fact, disgusted was the word I’d use. “How could you let her do this to you?”

“Janice, let me talk!” He said, looking as scared as I’d ever seen him. “I know this is all insane, but you don’t know the whole story!”

“Well? I’m waiting.”

“All that stuff she’s telling you is a lie! I haven’t agreed to any of this! She’s forcing me!”

“Everything?” I said. “It looks like you’re just letting her have her way with you.”

“Yes! She uses threats of drugs and taking me out in public to control me! I know it sounds nuts, but I think she’s trying to really make me into a...”

“Into?”

“She’s trying to make me act like I’m a girl. A young girl,” he said. “And she’s starting to make me look like one, too.”

“Making you *look* like one? What do you mean?”

“Look at my skin!” He held his arm out for examination. “Look, it’s soft and smooth. Somehow, my skin has been changed!”

“How?”

"The doctor is always giving me shots and pills. He won't tell me what they are. I think M... Auntie is telling him to give me things that change me."

"You've almost called her something else several times, Richard. What does she want you to call her?"

"M... Momma," he said. "She makes me call her Momma. I've been doing it for weeks, and she told me to call her Auntie only when you're around."

Amazing. "What *else* happens when I'm not around?"

"She always has me in dresses. And what she told you about the clothes you sent isn't true. She took them out back and burned them when they got here. I wear nothing but dresses from the dead girl's closet and she has me learning to play her fucking fiddle!"

"You think she's trying to pretend you're her daughter?"

"Pretend?" Richard sniped. "She's trying to make me into her."

"Don't exaggerate, Richard. You've been sick, you know."

"I don't think I was ever sick, Janice. I think they did this to me. Intentionally."

"Did what?"

"My weight loss, my skin, my weakness... I can't even lift a chair. This wasn't a cold or a flu or whatever they called it, I'm almost sure. That addle-brained doctor and Mrs. Dilkins did this. They're trying to make me an invalid, or something. I'm almost completely dependent on Mrs. Dilkins to do anything."

"So leave, Richard. If what you say is true, get the hell out of there."

Richard looked down, pensively. That was not the Richard I knew. He was not a man who hesitated. "There's too much money on the line, Janice."

"Richard, I don't trust any of these yokels. You should leave now and move on. It's costing you too much."

"I can deal with this, I know I can. What I need you to do is..."

"I'm not your mother, Richard. I'm not there to clean up after you. If you want to risk everything, that's on you." I paused to let it sink in. "I'll get you a ticket out of there right now, and get you back here where you belong. But I won't nursemaid you."

"It's humiliating," he said.

"How?"

"The women of the town get together every Sunday afternoon and go this one woman's shed in her backyard, where she has a bunch of hairdressing stuff. They call it their salon day. Auntie... Mrs. Dilkins... brings me along in a dress."

"So she *does* bring you outside in girls' clothes."

"They took my beard away," he said. "At the backyard salon, they teach me how to do my makeup. This one woman uses some kind of electrical needle that they say will remove hair permanently."

"Electrolysis," I said, filling in the blanks for him.

"Mrs. Dilkins has had me doing it for two months, now. Yesterday they said I was finished. I'll never be able to grow a beard again, and that story about Nair in the shower was a total lie. She makes me get my legs waxed every three weeks."

"Why are you telling me this, Richard? If you can't handle it, get out. We can make a fortune doing something else. We're young. We have time."

"No," he said. "This is my one opportunity that I may never have again. This is my one shot."

"Then, that's your decision."

"Will you come see me again?" He asked.

"I'm in LA for three months, Richard. I'm going to be very busy."

"I'll be done with Mo... Mrs. Dilkins by then, probably," he said, but he didn't sound exactly confident about it. "Of course I will. I'll be back home by then, contract in hand."

"Well, I'll see you then," I told him.

"They punished me at the salon," he then said, reversing course. I got the feeling he just couldn't make a decision. One moment, he was certain he could endure Mrs. Dilkins's trials, and the next he wasn't. It was so unlike him, as if he had a different personality mixed in with his.

"Punished you? How?" I asked.

"As punishment for not doing my daily chores, I had to show all the women that I was wearing panties..."

"Panties?"

"Mrs. Dilkins says I can't wear a skirt without panties."

"Are you wearing them now?"

"Yes," he said, sheepishly. "Anyway, I had to show all the women that I was wearing panties and a gaff."

"What in God's name is a *gaff*?"

"It's something to hide my genitals so they're flat, just like a woman. I have to wear it all the time now. Mrs. Dilkins inspects me every morning."

"She makes you do this?"

"Yes. And I have to play the fiddle for them. Sometimes I have to dance."

"She's pushing your buttons, Richard. She's not going to give up her land so easily. She's playing tough on selling her house."



"I don't think she even knows that's what I want."

"Why else would she do this? It's a bargaining tactic."

"I don't think..."

"Trust me, Richard. If you weren't so deep in it, you'd see the same thing. You'd recognize all the signs of someone trying to bully you into worse bargaining position. Don't lose your leverage. If you're going to stay, and you really shouldn't, stay focused."

"Okay, okay, I guess I can see that. But I'm sure she hasn't figured out what I want."

"Never underestimate your opponent," I reminded him. "That's what you've always said."

"Yes... I remember..."

"How long have you been wearing that gaff thing? Is it uncomfortable?"

"It used to be," he said. "It drove me nuts for a long time, but now I'm used to it. I've been wearing it for three months, now, so I guess I've adjusted. Sitting when I go to the bathroom is natural now."

I hated to even think what this was doing to his dick and balls, but he had never been the most... *Endowed* man I'd ever met.

"You haven't gotten off in forever, I would think."

"You know, it's strange. I barely even think about it. What about you?"

"I'm... Okay," I said. That reminded me, I had a date tonight, and I wasn't going to play too hard to get. I had my needs, after all. "I should go," I added.

"I've changed my mind. Please come get me. I need to get out of here."

"Richard, I can't drop everything! I'm due in LA on Monday. If you want to come home, it's up to you."

"But she won't let me drive the car!"

"Then don't ask!" I said. "Just go!"

"I tried that and..." He sighed.

"You've tried to leave?"

"Kind of. I was in town and I decided to try and sneak away. Then the policeman found me."

"What happened?"

"He laughed," Richard said, his face blushing. "An' he said I was a sissy, an' he said I was a fag, and' he said..."

"You told him you were a grown, man right? And they didn't believe you?"

"No," Richard said, looking down at the floor. "So he took me back to Mo... Aunt... Mrs. Dilkins."