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The Reminding

Book Four: Verona

by Matthew Temple

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Verona is dancing in her room. She is spinning. She is turning. She taps the tips of her fingers together as if she is holding tiny cymbals. It's a winter night and the dancing helps her warm up.

She dances in bare feet, in a reddish-orange dress. The dress flails out as Verona turns. She sees herself in the reflection of the window glass. She's lived in this room for eight months now.

Tuesday is in the next room. The two of them share this house. Verona can hear Tuesday playing her drum. Then the drumming stops, and Tuesday is on the phone.

Verona presses pause on her music to listen to Tuesday's phone conversation. She can't quite hear the words. Verona goes into the hall, then the bathroom. She looks at herself in the mirror. Checking this and checking that. Her nipples are hard due to the cold.

Tuesday comes into the hall. She knocks on Verona's door.

"I'm in here!"

Tuesday comes to the bathroom door. "How you doing?"

"I'm fine."

"Um, I'm thinking about going to this party tonight, and I wondered if you want to go."

"What party?"

"It's at Matt's place."

"This wouldn't be the Matt, Julian's friend?"

Tuesday laughs. "That's the one."

"Oooh, I don't know, Tuesday, I was thinking of going to bed."

Tuesday folds her hands together over her chest. "Please. I know you'll have a good time."

"Maybe you should go without me."

"There'll be dancing."

"Wait, how were you going to get there?"

"I was hoping you would drive."

"Aww, Tuesday."

"Please, Verona, this is going to be fun. We haven't gone out in a

long time.”

“I never feel like going out in winter. It’s really a time for hibernation, you know?”

“Oh, Verona, I don’t have any other way to get there.”

“You should get a driver’s licence so you can drive my car sometimes.”

“You know I hate identification. It’s too wrapped up in the government.”

“It’s just a driver’s license!”

“I know,” Tuesday says. “But that’s how they track you.”

“Well,” Verona sighs. “I guess I better take you to this party.”

“You will?”

Verona smiles.

Tuesday hugs her. “Oh, thank you thank you thank you!”

“Are you ready to go?”

“I can be in a few minutes. Are you?”

“Yeah, I’m just going in this.”

“I like that dress on you. Reds are good on you.”

“Technically this is orange.”

“Reds and oranges. Ok, just a minute. Are you going to need the bathroom?”

“No, it’s yours. I’ll meet you downstairs, ok?”

Tuesday goes into the bathroom.

“Ok?”

“Ok. Ok. I’ll meet you.”

—————

When they get to the apartment, they can hear the music from the parking lot. It takes the entire drive over for the car to heat up, so they’re cold most of the time.

“I don’t want to stay long,” Verona says.

“Let’s just feel it out,” Tuesday says.

“I don’t want to stay long. But we can feel it out.”

“I don’t believe you’ve never met Matt.”

“No, I’ve never met Matt. Julian was always trying to introduce me, but..”

“You’ll like him, I think.”

“That’s what Julian was always saying. I think he was trying to hook me up with him or something.”

“He’s kind of..crazy,” Tuesday says. “So you’d have to like that sort of thing.”

“I’m not sure that I do. So you wanna go?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Standing at the door. Tuesday knocks. Music is pumping out through the door seams. She knocks again, harder. The door opens. It’s Matt, dressed in a bra and panties, with cargo pants hanging off his ass. He’s got a glass of Firewater in his hand. He screams when he sees Tuesday.

“What is up?” He hugs Tuesday.

“This is Verona.”

“Verona! Wow. The Verona who has eluded me all these years, who is magically never in the same place as me, who Julian speaks so highly of! Very nice to meet you, Verona.”

Verona hugs him, and she makes it a warm hug.

Matt wraps his arms around Verona and she feels his hot hands and his waist comes into her, pressing. “Well, come in, come in! One of the rules of the evening is that everyone who comes in I have to do a shot with. So the three of us need to do a shot.”

Verona and then Tuesday come into the apartment. There are flashing lights installed in the ceiling and a disco ball spinning in the middle of the living room. The place is packed; there’s no way Matt has done a shot with everyone who came to his party. But Verona follows him to the kitchen and waits while he pours her a plastic cup with some firewater, and a cup for Tuesday.

“Welcome. My old friend. My new friend.”

They all drink and smile. Matt takes Verona’s hand and uses it to feel himself up, her fingers all over the padding of the water bra. She replies by taking his hand and putting it on her breast. Matt is right up next to Verona. He pushes her back against the kitchen wall and leans in and kisses her.

Tuesday is gone into the living room to dance.

Verona wraps her arms around Matt and continues the kiss. The lights, the way everyone is dressed, the incredible pumping of the music..all of this is why she’s kissing a stranger. Her dress is macrame, with many holes on the outside layer which Matthew’s fingers invade. He finds her nipple and brushes it, and she knows she wants to have sex with him. She pulls him even closer and her hand is going for his cock, and he has an erection inside the panties he is wearing, sticking straight up and pressing for her through his cargo pants.

“I like you,” he says.

Verona laughs. “I can tell.”

“I think I want to fuck you.”

“I think I want the same thing,” she says. “Do you have a

girlfriend?”

“No. Do you?”

“No,” she lies. She’s married, technically, but they’re separated.

“Do you want a cigarette?”

“No,” she says. “I don’t smoke.”

“I don’t either but I’m smoking tonight. I’m going out for a cigarette. You want to come?”

She shakes her head. “I’ll meet you back here.”

“Ok.” He leaves.

Verona is stranded in a kitchen of people she does not know. Some of them were watching her make out with Matt a minute ago. They’re probably his friends, and she’s the new girl that just got made out with in the kitchen. She wonders if Matt is making out with some other girl right now. She sees Tuesday dancing in the living room, light streaming over her face, her eyes closed. She feels slightly bad for Tuesday, since she knows Tuesday likes Matt, always has since the tenth grade. And now, to meet this person who has always been described to her by Julian and Tuesday, but who has always eluded her..he’s forward, friendly with everyone, a little maniacal, self-assured, and knows just how to touch her, from the start. He’s nothing like Tim, her husband, though she has such a deep love for Tim, even when they’re separated.

There is a quiet moment when someone is changing the music. Verona sees that Marcus is there. He and Tuesday are talking. Marcus, ever the jester, he is smiling and puts a hand on Tuesday’s shoulder. Then they separate, and the music starts up again, and all the lights have a reason to be there.

Verona wants to wander, but she wants to be there when Matt gets back, too. She stays in the kitchen. A girl with a basket full of confetti walks by her, streaming the kitchen with confetti. Verona brushes some of it off her dress. The girl with the confetti is cute, manga cute, and she walks away into the back hallway. Verona sees two guys go to the freezer, open it, and come away with jello shots. She goes to the freezer after them. Inside are ice cube trays full of jello shots in all different colors, and a big bowl with more jello shots in it. She grabs one, then two, from the bowl. She sees a man in a suit lying on the floor taking liquid from a bong, rubber tubing piped all the way down one of the kitchen columns, with a funnel at the top.

The front door to the apartment opens and Matt comes in with a black-haired girl. She still has a cigarette in her mouth. Matt goes straight for Verona. He pushes her back against the kitchen wall. “I like you right here,” he says.

“Who’s the girl?”

“Who?”

“The girl you were smoking with.”

“Oh, that’s Sara. I took some pictures with her one time. She was the model. But she and I are not together. She’s like a sister to me. Don’t worry.” And Matt kisses Verona again, and she can taste the smoke on him. She doesn’t mind. It gives him a distinct taste.

“I tasted some of your jello shots.”

“Oh, good. Do you remember which color you had, because the red ones are laced with LSD.”

“I had two red ones.”

“There’s no LSD in them, I just felt like saying that!”

“Do you know that your friends call you crazy behind your back?”

“They do it to my face, too! They just lack a certain kind of enthusiasm, that’s why they think I’m crazy. But you need people around like me, to host this party for instance. People need an environment in which to go wild. It’s part of our primal nature. Do you agree?”

Verona nods. She smiles at Matt. They kiss again.

“I really like kissing you,” Verona says.

“I’m enjoying kissing you as well.”

“I can tell,” she says, and reaches for his dick. “Is this how you show me you’re excited?”

Matt nods vigorously. He smiles like a puppy.

“Take me somewhere where we can be alone,” she says.

He takes her hand, and leads her down the dark hallway.

There’s a door on the left with blue light coming out of it. Matt takes Verona in there. It’s the blacklight room. Verona recognizes Janel making out with some guy Verona doesn’t know. There are blacklight-sensitive stickers everywhere, up the walls, on the floor still attached to their backing, so that anyone who wants can put stickers up.

Matt kneels and pulls Verona down with him. She pulls up her dress to sit. Matt’s bra and panties glow pink and yellow. Verona touches him on the stomach. He pulls her in for a kiss. He tastes like firewater, cinnamony and spicy, and he has an extra-wide tongue. She imagines this tongue licking her pussy, with its extra-big lips. Yes, the Mailer girls were born with pussies with extra-big lips. Verona and her sister Verona had confirmed that they had both been blessed with this gift, and Verona had interviewed boys she’d been with about how extra-big pussy lips affected sex with her. Matt has an extra-wide tongue. Maybe that will fit well with her puss. Maybe they will get the chance to find out.

But Matt keeps his hands on the upper half of Verona’s body, and she does the same. She finds his nipple below the water bra and thumbs it

with her fingernail.

“Ah!”

“Did I hurt you?”

“No, no, it feels great. Do you mind if I, ah, do the same?”

“Of course not. Go ahead,” Verona says. She’s not used to having someone ask before they touch her. It could be annoying if overused, but in this instance it has the effect of elevating the act of making out with him.

He goes in through the side of her dress and grabs her nipple with two fingers. Keeps one of them stationary and moves the other. It’s a wonderful sensation.

Janelle makes some noise. Verona looks over and sees her on top of some dude.

Verona turns back to Matt. “Do you have a room we could go to?”

“My bedroom is full. People are playing video games back there.”

Verona looks at him sadly.

“But you can come back tomorrow. You’re invited. If you want to spend some time in private.”

“I do. It’s just. I’ve heard about you for all these years and I guess I sort of figured that meeting you would be a disappointment, but here you are and you’re not a disappointment.”

Matt laughs. “I’ve heard about you as well, and from the moment I saw you at the door, I knew I liked you. Some spirituality you can see on the face, and I think it’s that way with you.”

“You can see it on the face?”

“Yes, I think so. Yes. Like the facial expressions of the person have come to reflect what is within, what is hidden within them. And so there is no longer this idea of the inner you and the outer you, but the two are so connected that you can do things like see spirituality on the face.”

“Oooh. I know what you mean. I think about that in my yoga practice, where you’re shaping the body, but..did you know that yoga is meant as a way to prepare for meditation?”

“No.”

“Yeah, it is. That’s how it was originally intended. Not as a physical practice primarily, but a physical practice designed to get you in the right state for meditation.”

“The mental practice.”

“That’s right!” Verona giggles.

Matt puts his hands on her stomach. He feels her and tickles her.

“Hey!”

“What?”

“No tickling! You’re not allowed.”

Matt stops. “But it’s so much fun.”

“No tickling between lovers.”

“What? No way.”

“That’s the rule. You should know that.”

“I never heard that one.”

“No tickling while you’re making love.”

“We’re not making love.”

“Yes, but closer to it than—. Just follow the rule.”

“Ok, I’m following the rule. No tickling.”

“Tickling goes against the entire feeling of making love.”

“Geez..so serious.”

“I don’t think anyone’s called me serious before.” Verona reaches for Matt’s dick, and she finds it, sticking up out of the panties he’s wearing. She leans down and licks it, sticks just the tip of it in her mouth. She comes up. “Does that seem serious to you?”

“I’d like to get serious with you.”

“But not in here,” she says, looking over at the other couple.

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

“I have class in the morning. But I’m free after that.”

“Come over.”

“Ok,” she says, after a pause. She wants to seem like she considered it, debated it, in her mind, but the fact is she likes him and she wants to fuck him, so she says ok.

“Good,” Matt says, putting both hands on her legs, and pushing them up to where they come together. He feels the edge of her panties with his thumbs, the goes inside them.

“Uh, you better stop that,” she says. She pushes his hands away.

“Why?”

“Because you’re going to make me jump you right now.”

“Why would you be compelled to do that?” he asks innocently, moving his hands back inside her underwear.

She grabs his wrists through her dress. “Stop.”

“Ok.” He withdraws his hands.

“You’re well behaved.”

“Yes, I respond to ‘stop.’”

“Maybe we should come up with our safe word now,” she says.

“Ok, how about ‘kowabunga?’”

“Is that from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles?”

“I have no idea.”

“I was thinking something more like ‘absolute truth.’”

“Absolute truth? What about ‘FREEZE MUTHAFUCKA!’ Ahhh!”

Matt makes claws out of his hands and bares them at Verona.

“Stop doing silly ones. This is something you’re going to say while making love.”

“Or enacting some sick role play.”

“Stop! I don’t think I’m coming over to your house tomorrow after all.”

“You like your sex to be serious.”

“There’s no tickling during sex!”

“I get it. I can be serious.”

“Good, otherwise I’ll have to punish you.”

“Oh, see that’s no good, because I like to be punished.”

“You won’t like this type of punishment.”

“Hence the need to have a safe word. It’s ok, ‘absolute truth’ is fine. I’ll go with that.”

“You will?”

Matt nods.

Verona kisses Matt, a deep, deep kiss with her hand on his cock, pulling it out of his pants and rubbing it inside her fist.

He sticks his hand up her dress, pulls down her panties, and rubs her with his hand flat out, between her legs.

Their stroking catches the same rhythm, and they’re hand fucking each other.

“It’s already exquisite with you,” Verona says.

“And with you.”

“You have, shall we say, well you have a way about you.”

“Can’t wait till you come over tomorrow!”

“Do you like my pussy so far? Can you feel that I have extra-big lips?”

“Yeah, I kinda can.”

“People say that it makes..it..better, you know?”

“I can’t wait to try.”

“If I let you.”

“Well, of course, if you let me. Naturally.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“No!”

“Do you want to get back to your party?”

“No, I want to stay right here with you. The party can handle itself.”

Verona lies back on Matthew, looking at the lights in the room. She can see the motion of Janel and that guy to her right..fucking, yes they are fucking. And the door isn’t closed; light from the living room makes its way back here, disco sparks spinning in the door frame.

Matt puts his arms around her, lightly rubbing her belly.

“It feels so safe with you,” Verona says.

“I’m glad you feel safe.”

“Are you doing this on purpose, are you trying to make me feel

safe?”

“I want you to feel safe. I don’t know if I’m trying to make you feel safe. You make me comfortable, too.”

“Do I? ‘Cause I have this feeling like I’ve always known you, like you’re already one of my old friends. Is that crazy?”

“No, it’s not crazy. I feel the same way about you. Like I’ve known you forever. We’re able to talk. I feel comfortable with your body.”

“Oh, I feel comfortable with yours, too. Like we’ve done this before, I almost feel like. Like in a past life we were lovers. But really what I see is that I was your mother, and you were my son. Is that sick? But that’s how I see us in a past life. Does that freak you out?”

“No, not at all. I feel a motherly energy from you.”

“But not in an Oedipus Rex kind of way.”

“No, but in a past life sense, I get it.”

“Yeah, that’s all I’m saying. Though I wouldn’t mind running some mother and son fantasies with you if you don’t mind!”

“Freaky. Yeah, I’d be into that.”

“Tell me a fantasy of yours. Any one.”

“Well, I have a fantasy that I go into the bathroom and open the shower curtain and there’s a girl inside there, and she’s naked, and we fuck in the shower.”

“I could do that for you. You say there’s a woman—or..a girl—inside the shower and you go in? Oooh, I like that. We’ll do that tomorrow.”

“Ok. Tell me one of yours.”

“No, I don’t feel like it.”

“You made me tell one, now you go.”

“I’ll tell you one tomorrow.”

“Liar.”

“Hey! Don’t call me a liar. I’m going to play out your little-girl-in-the-shower-fantasy. What more do you want? You just met me!”

“Ok, little-girl-in-the-shower it is.”

“Yeah, and you’re really gonna like how I play this one out,” she says.

“Do you mind just holding me?”

Matt adjusts her so her head is on his chest, and he’s holding her in his arms. He plays in her hair.

They sit there quietly for a long time. Janel gets up, and it’s just them and some random dude in the blacklight room. Verona wonders what would have happened if she hadn’t driven Tuesday to this party tonight. She would have never met Matt. She wouldn’t be lying here in someone’s arms, with a sex date for tomorrow. She turns her head and

kisses him, and this time it's a tender, slow, lover's kiss. She's happy to be right where she is, right now.

Verona texts Matt the next day. He says she can come over whenever. She gets to his house at five. She wears large sunglasses and a black dress, à la Jackie O. She puts on lipstick. And she wears a special pair of panties, red lace. She knocks on the door.

Matt opens it. He's wearing jeans and a black t shirt, barefoot, with a glass of wine in his hand. "Hello."

"Hello."

"Come in."

Verona does. The apartment is immaculate, all the confetti vacuumed, the disco ball removed from the ceiling, no more bong attached to the kitchen wall. "Did you have help, cleaning up?"

Matt shakes his head. "No, I did it myself."

"What time did you get up this morning?"

"Around ten. I figure after, if you want to go to dinner, we can."

"After..what?"

Matt smiles. "I was promised a girl-in-the-shower-fantasy?"

"Oh, that. Yes, well, I'll need a few minutes to get ready. So why don't you wait out here, ok?"

"Excellent. Can I offer you a glass of wine?"

"Go ahead and pour me one and leave it in the bedroom."

"Ok." Matt smiles, and goes to the kitchen.

Verona goes into the back and closes herself inside the master bathroom. She sets her purse down. She slips off her dress and places it on the counter. She takes off her shoes and places them by the toilet. She stands and faces herself in the mirror. She's not wearing a bra, so all she has on is her red panties and her dark sunglasses. She takes off the glasses. Then she slips off her panties and leaves them crumpled on the bathmat. She gets into the shower and closes the shower curtain. She puts her hands on the wall and leaves her butt facing outward.

She thinks about what she's doing. Playing out a fantasy with someone. She thinks of what he chose as his fantasy. Tame enough. The only red flag possibly is that he described the sex object as a "girl" rather than a woman. But they're in their early twenties, it's still acceptable to call women of that age "girls." There is always the chance that he could get rough with her during sex, but he doesn't seem the type. They've had enough laying-around time at the party for her to reasonably consider herself safe. Still, there is the thrill of having sex with someone for the first time. You don't know what to expect. Hopefully he doesn't let her

down, after she's gone to the trouble to satisfy his girl-in-the-shower fantasy. It strikes her as a rather paranoid fantasy..worrying that there might be someone hiding in the shower.

Then the door opens and Matt comes in. He waits before opening the shower curtain. Then he opens it, and Verona blushes. She starts to feel the truth of the fantasy. She's pretending she is a girl for him, that she is years younger, and she sees the way he's looking at her, like a hungry man, who wants to eat her. They go to each other, and she has her hands on his shirt, pulling it off, then her hands on his waist, unbuttoning his jeans and pushing them off. He's not wearing underwear, and his dick is already getting hard as she puts it into her mouth. It's the kind that sticks straight up, and his is as straight up as she's ever seen. Hope that's not going to hurt him going in, due the bending he's going to have to go through. She licks him more and stands. She guides him into the shower and he's standing with his dick pressing into her. She fumbles for the shower controls, and manages to turn on the cold.

"Ah!" she says.

And he grabs the hot and turns it on, and in a second the water is a decent warm.

"Something almost went terribly wrong with your girl-in-the-shower fantasy, we almost had a cold shower!"

"Cold shower would have been a different fantasy."

"Oooh," Verona says, turning to face Matt. "That sounds like another fantasy we could explore sometime."

Matt grins. His hands go to her vagina. He sticks fingers inside her, and she grips his dick with one of her hands. They find a rhythm again, handling each other, and it only makes her want to try him out on fucking, to see how he acts when he's inside her. So far the signs are good: that he will be a good fucker. But there's only one way to know. "Get inside me."

He's kissing her neck, and he doesn't hear her. "What?"

She slaps his face. Slap! "Get inside me." She turns around and presses her butt out.

He sticks his dick into her, pushing all the way in, putting a hand on her shoulder, nails gripping her skin, and then he starts to fuck her.

She responds to his motion, fucking down and back against him. She grabs onto the shower head to keep her balance.

He fucks her good.

She is very satisfied with her initial impressions of him as a fucker. She feels the shower fantasy is done. She turns around and puts her hands around the back of his ass. She finds his asshole and presses one of her fingers into him.

"I hope this is alright. I don't really like guys who aren't a little

loose about what they allow up there.”

“Fine with me.” He’s licking her nipples.

He’s a good boy. He’s taking care of her even while they’re not fucking. They dry off and go to the bedroom. He has rose petals spread out on the bed, deep red ones on a black sheet. A very nice touch. Totally unnecessary. But a nice touch. She pushes him back on the bed and sucks his cock for a minute. The rose petals deserve a little extra cock sucking. She doesn’t even know if he’s a vegetarian, and yet she’s sucking his cock. Mustn’t fall away from the rules, dear. But he’s worth an exception. She holds the base of his cock and gets herself situated upon him. He lets her do it that way, even seems to like it. He puts his hands on her hips and grinds her ass into him, and he presses up from below, into her, and it feels great. She continues humping him and comes down with her mouth, to kiss him while they fuck. Her reddish-brown hair falls in his face, she comes, and she grips her whole body together as it happens, and she opens her eyes and looks at him. He’s gently looking into her eyes, and she knows that he knows that she came, the first time she’s ever come with him. He’s on top and she’s come two more times before she says, “It’s your turn.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. You’ve made me come three times.”

“Is that good?”

She exhales. “Two is good. Make yourself come then take me to dinner.”

So he does, he works at it and it doesn’t take long. Verona is wondering if her extra-big labia are increasing the pleasure for him. She makes a mental note to ask him later. He comes, and makes good noise about it, and they hold each other, still inside, for moments after they fuck. He’s breathing hard. She can feel his heartbeat against her chest.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah, just, got into it, you know.”

She puts her hand on the back of his head.

“I like fucking you,” he says.

“Did you notice a difference with my labia?”

“Yeah, definite difference, they are bigger.”

“Did they feel good?”

“Yes! Absolutely. Absolutely, dear, you don’t mind if I call you dear, do you? Ahhh.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Oooh, I really like fucking you. I hope don’t mind if I like to talk about it, ‘cause I do.”

“You’re fine,” Verona says. She strokes his back.

“You want to go to dinner?”

“Let’s lie here a bit.”

“Sure, we can lie here as long as you want.”

“You’re taking me to dinner?”

“Yes, if you want to go.”

“Can I pick the restaurant?”

“Pick anything you want.”

“You’re too nice. Nice is such a horrible word, though, I promise never to call you nice again. If you were going to think of one word to describe me, what would it be?”

“Uh..fiery?”

“I like that! You think I’m fiery? You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

“Mmm, good.”

“Do you like spicy food?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like Indian food?”

“I haven’t had a lot of Indian food.”

“I know a great place where we can go. An Indian place, it’s run by this family, they make the best Indian food in the area. Well, according to me. Is that ok with you?”

“Indian food sounds fine.”

“You’re so amenable. You know that word?”

“Amenable? Yes!”

“You’re smart, I can tell.”

“So are you.”

“I like how this night is turning out.”

“So do I.”

“Can I see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I have to work tomorrow, but I can see you after that.”

“Do you get lunch off?”

“Yes, you want to meet for lunch?”

“I’d like that. Look at us! You don’t have a girlfriend, do you?”

“No, I don’t have a girlfriend. Do you have a boyfriend.”

“I’m married,” Verona says. “But we’re separated. I’m going to get a divorce. That’s not weird for you, is it?”

“No.”

“Do you want to go to dinner?”

Matt shifts against her. His dick is getting hard again.

“Oh. I know what you want.” She smiles, and reaches down for his dick. “Make it quick, I want to show you this Indian place.”

Verona and Matt go to India Palace. Matt drives. Verona sucks his cock

on the way there.

“See, isn’t this beautiful?”

“Everything is looking beautiful to me right now.”

Verona grabs Matt’s arm. She laughs. She whispers, “I think you’re beautiful,” and releases his arm.

They’re seated quickly, and Verona goes ahead and orders a spicy chutney appetizer. She lets Matt look over the menu.

“I usually get one of the vegetarian entrées,” she says, and she points to that place on his menu. She’s still wondering if he’s vegetarian. His cum tasted fine, so she’ll be surprised if he isn’t. “Are you a vegetarian?”

“No, but I may eat vegetarian tonight.”

“Huh. Usually I don’t..you know..”

“No, what?”

“..suck dick, for meat eaters.” Verona takes a bite of papad with chutney.

“Oh, really, do you notice a difference in the taste?”

“Well, yeah, but that’s not the reason I don’t do it. I don’t want to..vicariously consume..what they’ve eaten.”

“I see. Well I do eat meat, but not every day. I eat a reduced meat diet but I do enjoy steak every couple weeks or so, and I love seafood.”

“Mmm. That must be it. If you eat mostly seafood then I wouldn’t be able to taste the difference. So you’re..almost..a pescetarian.”

“A what?”

“A pescetarian. That’s someone who eats vegetarian plus seafood.”

“Well..almost, I guess.”

“Does anything look good?”

“Yes, the sag paneer.”

“That’s one of my favorites! Do you mind if we get two dishes and share?”

“That’d be fine.”

“Ok, I’m going to get the paneer masala then. Is it alright if we get them extra spicy?”

“Yes, it is.”

Verona rubs her hands together. “I’m so excited to be able to show you Indian food!” She rubs his leg with hers under the table.

When the server comes, Verona orders, and she throws in a mango lassi for each of them.

“Do you like it?”

“I love it! It’s delicious. What’s in there?”

“Mango juice, yogurt, sugar..I’m not sure what else.”

“But yeah..this is good.”

Verona arranges their dishes on the table. They each serve

themselves a bed of rice, and then take portions of the entrées.

“It’s gonna be spicy.”

“I can handle spice.”

“Some people think they can handle spice, but they try Indian spicy and then..well..”

“I grew up in Texas, and my family lives in Louisiana, so I can handle spice.”

“You grew up in Texas, really? When did you come to Ohio?”

“I came to Ohio in the tenth grade, but we moved before that, to Philadelphia.”

“Why did you move so much?”

“For my parents’ jobs.”

“Is one of your parents in the military?”

“No, my mom is a minister, and my dad..does stuff with housing development. What do your parents do?”

“My mom is a teacher. My dad..works for the school district. He’s in education, too, but, more of a desk job.”

“I know your sister Verona from high school. Do you have any other siblings?”

“You know Verona? Well, that makes it even stranger that we never met till now.”

“Yeah, Julian always used to tell me about you. He’d be like: there’s this girl, you have to meet her. She’s a spark, like us. She’s beautiful—he had a crush on you—”

“I think he still has a crush on me!”

“I think you’re right! So anyway he would tell me about you and say how wonderful you were, and he tried to get us to meet, but you were never around. I thought he was making you up after a while.”

“Sometimes you were never around, too. ‘Cause he told me about you. And it was the same thing..there’s this amazing boy you have to meet, he just came to town, etcetera.”

“One time he actually told me that I was not allowed to flirt with you if I met you, because he knew we would like each other.”

“Yes, I’ve known about Julian’s crush on me for a long time. But I told him nothing was ever gonna happen!”

“I can see why he likes you.”

“Because he knows I’m great in bed?”

“No, because of that energy, that spark. It flows through all areas of a person’s life, even their sex life. You definitely have it.”

“Now, are you just saying that because you want to go to bed with me again, or would you say that anyway..”

Matt laughs. “No, silly, I am not just saying that because I want to go to bed with you. I assume you want to go to bed with me again to see if

we can get it up to four orgasms on your part.”

“We have to get you up to at least two,” Verona says. “I was reading this book, *The Multi-Orgasmic Man*. I think if we try some techniques from there we could make you come twice. Or more. Is this food too spicy for you?”

“No, I love it. It took my mouth a minute to adjust to the hotness, but I’m adjusted now. Spice like this makes me high.”

“I know what you mean!”

“It’s like it operates on me like a drug. About thirty minutes after I eat spicy food, I get this aliveness from inside, it’s like a zing.”

“Yes,” Verona says. “The same thing happens with me. Except it happens sooner than thirty minutes for me. Must be the difference between a boy and a girl. Which do you like better?” She’s pointing at the entrées with her fork.

“Oooh, that’s tough. I’d say the..uhhh..I guess..wow..maybe..the sag?”

“That’s my favorite too. You can stay at my house tonight if you want to. Or I could invite myself to your place.”

“You’d be welcome to come.”

“Would I?..be..welcome to come?”

“Yes, you’re always welcome to come, always, always.”

“You got me so worked up earlier, I can still feel you inside me.”

“I like to hear that.”

“Can you feel me, after?”

“Yeah, I can feel..the motion.”

Verona grabs his hand across the table. She might have to keep this one around, at least as a sex toy, for a while. And yet, there is something deeper, if she allows herself to feel it. It’s not what she feels for Tim, but, I mean who knows what’s happening with Tim. He may be out of the picture forever. It’s hard to know. She lets go of Matthew’s hand, and watches him for a moment, enjoying the spicy food. “I was just watching you. You know. You’re kind of beautiful.”

Matt swallows and looks at her.

“You have this kind of..childlike way that you do things. And yet you’re a man. You remind me of someone..you know Nik?”

“Nik with a K?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah I know him! How do we know all the same people?”

“Well it’s a small town.”

“But how have we never met?”

“I don’t know. Anyway, you and Nik both share that childlikeness. But you’re both grown up. I don’t mean to say you’re childish. But you have the likeness of a child, which translates sexually, in a quite wonderful

way.”

“Have you slept with Nik?”

“No, but I’ve imagined. And he seems like he would have that same quality that you have, which I got to enjoy earlier. Of..willing to experiment..approaching something as if it was the first time you’ve ever done it, even when it’s not..”

“Like fucking?”

“Like fucking, exactly. I know it sounds weird but I can imagine Nik being like that in bed. And I know I’m right.”

“No, I’m sure you’re right, you must be.”

“You know all the right things to say, don’t you?”

“Who, me?”

“You do it innocently, but you’re actually a skilled predator, I’m sure I’m right.”

“Well, if I am a predator, I still have your best interest at heart.”

“I’m glad you admit it, because you are, aren’t you—you’re preying on me.”

“What else would I do?”

Verona eats a bite of food.

“I mean I do stress that my kind of predation comes with every care of you..because I could not fully prey on you unless you were completely happy.”

“So that’s your goal, my complete happiness?”

“That’s part of it.”

“And the rest of your goal..is your own happiness.”

“Basically.”

“I think that’s why I liked having sex with you. Not all guys are like that, you know. They haven’t learned the basics of making the other person happy.”

“Whereas I see that unless you are happy, I can never be. I know that all men are not like this. I actually feel a genuine desire to make you happy..that act gives me genuine pleasure.”

“Not even knowing that I’ll make you happy back.”

“Right. I actually want you to come. If I was your angel, and you could never see me, never interact with me, if you could never give me pleasure, I would still want to make you come, because I genuinely want you to be happy, for its own sake, in the world.”

“Let’s fuck again right now.”

“Right here?”

“Oooh, I wish. Come to my place. I’ll show you where I live. No. Will that be awkward if Tuesday is there? You know Tuesday Fokker lives with me, right?”

“I gathered from here and there.”

“Is that weird for you if she’s there? I know you like her.”

“Well, I do like her. I’ve always liked Tuesday. But there’s a distance between us, since high school. I mean just the normal distance of not being around someone. I think it will be fine. I wouldn’t mind seeing her.”

“But you’re going to stay with me in my bedroom. Are you ok with that?”

“Of course I’m ok with that. Beyond ok. I don’t want to sleep with her.”

“It’s ok if you do. Want it. As long as you don’t..do it.” Verona smiles. “Let’s get the check.”

At Matt’s apartment. It’s Verona, Matt, Tuesday, and Verona’s friend Tatiara. They’re sitting on the floor in the living room, what had been the dance area at the party where Verona and Matt met.

Verona says, “So, does anybody wanna smoke some pot?”

Tatiara says, “Yeah.”

Tuesday says, “Yeah.”

“Do you mind if we smoke in here?”

“No, I don’t mind.”

“Do you smoke pot?”

“No,” Matt says. “I never have.”

Verona feels in her purse. She has a nugget in a plastic bag and her wooden pipe. “Do you want to try?”

“Sure.”

“Alright!” Verona says. “We have a virgin in the house!”

“It might not affect you the first time,” Tatiara says. “It didn’t affect me the first time.”

“Oh it affected me a lot the first time,” Tuesday says.

“I guess we’ll see,” Verona says, taking out her pipe. “Do you get drug tested for your work?”

“No.”

“Great!” Verona watches Matt while she’s taking the nugget from her purse. He’s sitting cross legged, leaning back on his hands. He looks perfectly relaxed. No sign of nervousness. “Have you smoked cigarettes before?”

“Yes. Not often.”

“But you know how to smoke.”

“Yes.”

“This is pretty much the same. Except you put your finger over the carb, then take your finger off after you suck in. Don’t worry, I’ll walk you

through it.” Verona breaks off a little pod and crumbles it up, putting it in the bowl. She smokes, then passes the pipe and the lighter to her left.

It’s Tatiara. She smokes. She holds in her breath, then breathes out and coughs majestically. “It’s better when you cough,” she says. “So don’t worry about it.” Tatiara hands the pipe to Matt.

Matt is right across from Verona. She pantomimes putting the pipe to her mouth and holding the carb. Matt imitates her.

“Except do it with one hand ‘cause you’re going to need the other hand for the lighter.”

He adjusts, and manages to do it pretty well the first time. He takes a huge hit and holds it in.

“Let your breath out, let your breath out!”

“Let him hold it in if he wants, it’s better that way for me.”

“I don’t like holding it in, it makes me cough.”

He finally lets his breath out, passes the pipe to Tuesday, and is settled back into his leaning position before he starts to cough. He coughs, and coughs, and coughs.

“Get yourself some water if you need.” Verona points at the kitchen even though they’re in Matt’s house.

“I’m ok,” he says.

“Good. Do you feel it?”

“Not yet.”

“I never felt nothing my first time,” Tatiara says.

Tuesday smokes. She hands the pipe back to Verona.

Verona sets it on the carpet before her. “Now, let us leave the normal world, and enter the sublime.”

Matt looks at her.

“Isn’t that how you say it?”

“I can’t remember,” he says. “Something like, let’s leave the noumenal world and enter the sublime.”

“Oh, is that it?”

“What are you guys talking about?”

“It’s this book Matt lent me. The Secret History? Have you heard of it?”

“No. Is it good?”

“I don’t know, I’m not very far in. But it’s good so far. It’s about this group of college kids who kill their professor. Or..something? I don’t know.”

“It’s something like that,” Matt says. “Are you enjoying it?”

“Yes. I think so. It has very beautiful language. Are you feeling it?”

Matt leans forward. “I feel..like my brain had a snap go off inside it. I’m spinning a little bit. And I feel like telling you all stories.”

Tuesday says, "I get that. I feel like being a dramatist, like spinning you all stories of the Great One and of us as travellers. Whenever I get a bit of smoke, I feel like writing and telling stories."

"I just want to be alone and work songs out on the keyboard," Tatiara says.

"Mmm," Verona says. "Smoke makes me want to spend time with all of you lovelies. And sometimes I like to make love." She looks Matt in the eye and she doesn't look away. She has chords in her head, Asian chords. She is crossing the street in Tokyo, under a pelting rain. She wears a white dress. The lights from buildings paint her with brightness. She moves at the brain speed of a cheetah, everything slowed down so that she can enter inbetween the frames. She's still looking at Matt.

Will you join me? Will you be a lover I can take with me to those transcendent places? I have been searching. I thought it was my husband. Then I thought it was a deer. We can come together, but can we get into the same speed? Can we be in sync? There are depths that most people never feel, and I want to get to those with you. If possible. If possible. I don't want to force you, if it's something you can't do. I don't want to bend you backwards and cause you to break. But I see it in you, I think it might be there. You might have the depth I have. You might have even been to places I haven't.

Verona is still looking at Matt. She blinks. She crawls across the room and sits herself right in front of him. She puts her hands on his shoulders and pulls him forward. She takes his hands. She puts his hands on her legs and she puts her hands on his legs. She smiles at him. She leans in and they kiss. She closes her eyes. They kiss more. She opens her eyes. His eyes are open, looking at her. This is the type of in-sync-ness that she's talking about. Verona sits upright. She is in her own head, in her own bubble. Columns of sound, a single note each, play for her. "Can we turn on some music?"

"Sure." Matt just sits there.

"Do you have a player?" Verona gives him a slight nod.

"Oh, of course. Thank you. One second." Matt gets up and goes down his hallway.

"I think he's feeling it," Tatiara says.

"Yeah, I think he is," Verona says. Verona lies back on the carpet and runs her fingers along its surface. She hates carpet but his actually doesn't feel that bad.

Tuesday reaches forward and grabs Verona's hand. She squeezes. "We've needed some of this time."

"Yes," Verona says, gripping Tuesday's hand in return. "And I think he can be part of it. I mean I think he has the depth beings like us require."

“I have a good feeling about him,” Tatiara says. “I get a clean energy.”

“Yes, I think so too. When we’re making love, I can almost see his spirit animal and I think it’s..I think it’s a monkey. A monkey to my cat. I see the four of us in a forest clearing, and there’s a table suspended in the trees, and each of us sits at one side. We represent as our spirit animals and there are peanuts on the table, which we’re cracking and eating. The smell of peanuts fills the jungle. And there is no disturbance. Everything is in balance. Do you feel me friends? Do you feel it?” Verona’s voice is tremulous.

Matt comes back into the room. He is holding a boombox. “What did I miss?”

“Nothing, friend,” Tuesday says.

And Tatiara hugs Matt’s waist. “Welcome,” she says, “to a universe of silliness!”

“Silliness?” Tuesday says.

“Silliness.”

“Yes, I guess it is silliness.”

“Welcome to a world of silliness?” Matt says, laughing.

“See, you are silly too!”

“Plug in that stereo. Do you have CDs?”

“You can plug in an iPod.”

Verona looks around. “Does anyone have an iPod?”

Everyone looks blank.

“I’m afraid we’re all out,” Verona says. “Unless you have one.”

“Mine is plugged in already, see?”

“Silliness indeed.”

“Let me pick,” Tuesday says. “Bring it this way, O Silly One. Plug it in. I don’t want to have anything to do with electricity in this state. Let me see what you have..oh yes, we can work with this. Oh! You have some of the old songs, I see, spirit songs which are perfect for this state.” She’s referring to his Dead Can Dance and Lisa Gerrard solo stuff. Tuesday cycles through his songs and finds something perfect for the mood. She lies with her head near Verona’s arm.

Matt lies between Verona’s legs, with his head on her pelvis, his back on the floor, and his legs extended, feet propped against the wall.

“I want in!” Tatiara says, and she snuggles up to Verona. “I love you all. Matt, thanks for helping to make this a good vibe. We always smoke just the three of us—”

“Just the copper triangle.”

“—and it’s nice to add someone new.”

“Thank you for inviting me. This is a wonderful vibe and you three created a safe environment for me to try pot in. So I thank you.” Matt

smiles. He sounds optimistic.

Verona puts one of her hands on Matt's head. What a good boy. He is behaving for her friends. And he likes pot—yay! Tim would never smoke pot with her. Matt is one of the girls in a way. Except that she's fucking him. She wishes the two of them were alone, right now, so that she could ride him and make herself come. Maybe the two of them could just go in the back room for a while. Too many sexual urges! Verona can't help it. She wants it, she needs it, she has to have it at least once a day. More than a day and she gets anxious.

“Have you ever tried ecstasy?”

“No, have you?”

“Only a few times.”

“Oh.”

This is Verona and Matt lying in bed at Verona's house.

“So. Do you want to?”

“Do I want to try ecstasy?”

“Yeah. I think in your case you would like it. I think it would suit how you already are. Some people take very well to ecstasy. You already have sort of a..flow..I can imagine you would do very well on it.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Not if you drink a lot of water. It can be, if you're not careful. But I've never had any problems on it. I think you'll like it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She takes Matt's hand. “It gives you very..intense feelings. Yeah, I think you would like it.” She waits a while. “So do you wanna try?”

“Do you have it with you?”

“I would have to go get it. Or it could come to us.”

“Tonight?”

“I was thinking tonight, yes.”

“Well..can I decide later?”

“Yes. Take your time to think about it. I'll get us some pills and you can decide when they get here. I'll never pressure you to do drugs, you know that, right?”

“I know. I don't feel pressured.”

“Good. Let me talk to Tuesday and then I'll make a call.” Verona gets up out of bed and goes to Tuesday's room. She knocks on the door.

Tuesday opens it. “Yes?”

“I'm thinking about having some freaky..flittery..ecstatic time tonight.” Verona is snapping her fingers. “Are you in?”

“Oh..you know I’d love to, but..”

“But what?”

“Verona, I don’t have the money right now. So, I have to say no.”

“If you had the money, would you still say no?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll loan you the money, Tuesday, I know where you live!”

“You will?”

“Consider it done,” Verona says. “I’m calling Drug Dealer Christine.”

“Oooh..is Soren coming over?”

“I don’t know, why?”

“I don’t get the most positive feeling energy from Soren.”

“They won’t stay.”

“Ok. ‘Cause I don’t really want to roll..if Soren is here.”

“Let me call them and see if I can even get them at all. I might go to see them.”

“Ok. I would really feel better if you did.”

“I’ll see what they can do.” Verona goes back into her room and grabs her phone. Matt is lying in bed facing the other way, his cute ass exposed. Verona likes to finger that ass. She finds Drug Dealer Christine’s number and presses ok.

“Hello?” A scratchy woman’s voice.

“Hi, Christine, this is Verona—Astaria.”

“Hi Astaria. Where you at?”

“I’m at home with Matt and Tuesday is here too.”

“Who’s Matt?”

“He’s a friend of mine. He’s cool. I was thinking..about..you know..some..”

“You want some e?”

“Yeah.”

“Soren, can we please get the fuck out of here? It’s Astaria. She wants us to come over. When do you want us to come over?”

“Any time is fine.”

“Well be there in half an hour.”

“Great. Thanks Christine.”

“Ok. Bye.”

Verona puts down the phone. “Well. They’re coming over.”

Matt turns over so he’s facing Verona.

Verona sees that Tuesday is standing in her doorway. She doesn’t go, even though Matt is naked. “They’re coming over.”

“Yaaaay!” Tuesday says, coming into the room to give Verona a hug. “Thank you for making this possible for me tonight. I’ve really needed some ecstatic time.”

“Yes, Tuesday, Shringara, dear Hasya, I’ve needed it too.”

“Has he ever done it?”

“No! This is his first time!”

“Oh, my spirit friend, you will love this. I promise! It’s so good for the spiritual cobwebs.”

“What’s ‘Shringasa?’”

“Shringara, that is my lovely lovely name I was given at this summer’s Pagan Spirit Gathering.”

“Astaria is mine. Astaria Lightcross.”

“And I am, for you, Shringara Hasya.”

“They each have sacred meanings.”

“We will have to give you a name. So be thinking..”

“You can help name yourself, too. Find some name that represents you, the spirit you, the true you, the you you can only be in the purest of environments, the you that is a height of heights. And we will help name you, my dear.”

“Ok. Sounds beautiful. Can men go to the Pagan..Spirit..”

“To PSG? Of course! There are many beautiful men who were there with us this past summer. It’s for men and women. You could go, next year, with us, if you want.”

“That sounds cool.”

“Well,” Astaria says, “I want to spend some alone time before Christine and Soren get here. Matt, can you find somewhere else to be so I can use my room?”

“Sure.”

“You can use any of the downstairs. You might want to do some meditating before they get here. So..I’ll see you two a little later, ok?”

Matt pulls on his pants and grabs his shirt.

Verona hands him his socks. She kisses Matt, a quick kiss, and closes her door. Here she will spend her time singing and dancing until Christina gets here.

“How many did you want?”

Christina and Soren are planted on the couch. Verona and Matt are sitting on the floor before them. Tuesday is still upstairs.

“Three,” Verona says. She hands Christina the money.

“Do you want any..” Matt asks.

“No. First time’s free!”

“Oh, it’s his first time?” Christina hands Verona back one of the bills. The drug dealer takes out a bottle of ecstasy pills, unscrews the lid, and taps out three in her hand. “There you go! Where’s Tuesday?”

“She’s in her room.”
“Is the coming down?”
“I think she’s wanting to stay up there tonight.”
“What, is she scared of me?”
“Not that I know of.” Verona takes the pills.
“Do you mind if we stay for a while?”
“You’re welcome to stay.”
“Mind if we roll?”
“Go ahead.” Verona hands Matt his pill. “Take it with water.”
“Or put it under your tongue and just let it dissolve,” Christina says. “That’s what we do.”
“But that way burns your tongue.”
“Yeah, it’ll burn pretty bad. But it goes away in a couple days.”
Verona is on the stairs. She goes up to Tuesday’s room.
“Tuesday.”
Tuesday opens her door. She holds out her hand.
Verona places the pill in Tuesday’s hand.
“Are they here?”
“They’re going to stay and roll. You can stay in your room.”
Tuesday crosses to the bathroom and gets her water there. She swallows her pill.
Verona hugs her housemate. “Shringara.”
“Astaria.”
“Have a great trip.”
Tuesday bows. She goes back to her room.
Verona goes downstairs. “Did you take it yet?”
“Not yet,” Matt says.
“He’s still considering,” Christine says.
“Come with me to the kitchen.” Verona leads Matt by the hand.
They stand on the unfinished floor, half tiles and half exposed wood.
There’s a hole in the corner that goes all the way to the basement. “Don’t be nervous,” she says. “You want to take ours at the same time?”
“It’s not going to..rot my brain?”
Verona laughs. “It’s not going to rot your brain.”
“I’m worried I’m going to die.”
“You won’t die. I’ve taken this exact ecstasy from Christine before and I’m still here. Ok?” Verona gets two teacups and fills them each with water. She hands one to Matt. “You ready?”
“Yeah.”
They each swallow their pill.
Verona takes the tea cups and places them in the sink. She goes to Matt, puts her arms around him, and puts her face next to his. “In a little while you’re going to start to feel ecstatic feelings rise from your belly and

flow through all the limbs of your being. You may start to clench your jaw—that's normal. Just drink plenty of water and you'll be fine. I'm going to go in and sit with Christine and Soren, do you want to come with me?"

"I think I'm going to spend some time in the back yard, meditating."

"Ok, good. I think that will be good for you. Find me later and we'll make love."

"Ok."

Verona goes, leaving Matt in the kitchen, and finds her seat again on the floor in front of Christina and Soren.

"Is everybody good?" Christina asks.

"Yep," Verona says. She looks at Soren. "What's up with you?"

"Oh, just getting back into business. You know I do carpentry. I'm setting up a shop out at the lake so I can work out there."

"You guys should come out to the lake sometime," Christina says.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah it's beautiful," Soren says. "We've got a lake, and a little boat, and the other day I saw a red-headed woodpecker out there. I've seen purple martins, I've seen gnatcatchers, I've seen scarlet tanagers. We have everything out there. I've even seen a black-and-white warbler. You should come out sometime. Get out of town for a while. Can't spend all your time in the city."

"I know, I know," Verona says. "We will. Can I bring Matt?"

"Bring anyone you want, as long as they're your people. Bring Shringara if she's in a people mood someday. We've got wood thrushes. You can take our little boat out and sit on the lake, do your meditation. I know y'all like to meditate. Sit out there, sit for hours. I do it. Christina takes it out she'll be out there all day."

"We have ducks," Christina adds. "So tell us about Matt."

"Matt is..let's see. Someone I met at a party. We share a lot of the same friends but we went to different high schools. Tuesday and him have been friends forever, since like the tenth grade."

"And..you like him?"

Verona blushes. "Yes. That is the short answer."

Christina laughs. "Do you think it's gonna last?"

"Um..no. It's too early to say. Really, I shouldn't be damning the relationship before it gets started, but he's..kinda different. He's maybe too wild for me. Just in the way he expresses himself. Don't ask me any questions about it!"

"Should you go check on him, since this is his first time and everything?"

"Um. No," Verona says. "He'll be fine."

The lake house turns out better than expected, with several acres of land, the cute little lake with ducks as promised, and a big house for them to spread out in.

“Did you buy this?”

“We’re renting.”

“It’s lovely,” Verona says. “So what are we doing today?”

“I brought these,” Soren says. “In case you’re tired of the dolphins.” He holds out a handful of pills. Each one is printed with a butterfly. The pills are blue.

Verona takes one and looks at it closely. “Butterflies, eh?”

“I haven’t tried ‘em,” Soren says.

“Yeah, let’s do these, see what they’re like.”

“Ok. Take a couple more for Matt and Tuesday.”

Verona does.

“Those are free, since you’re friends.”

“Thank you, Soren.” Verona gives Soren a hug. “I’m gonna go give these away!” And Verona runs away from the cherry tree that she and Soren had been standing under.

“Here you go. Here you go.” Verona hands out pills to Matt and Tuesday, who are sitting in the lake house living room, listening to Moby. “You two look cozy.”

“Yes, I’m just taking this chance to talk with my old friend,” Tuesday says.

“Do you want me to bring you some water?” Verona asks.

“Um..sure.”

Verona leaves them and goes into the kitchen.

Christina is there, bent over the counter, examining two bottles of wine. “I don’t know which to open. But I want to open one.”

“Open the one Matt brought.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“Let’s all get a taste. Can I use these glasses for water?”

“Yes, Verona, use whatever you want. I think I will open this one.”

“Good!”

Christina takes out a corkscrew and opens the wine.

Verona fills two glasses with water and takes them into the living room. “Here you go. Here you go.”

“Sit with us, Astaria, listen to Matt’s idea.”

Astaria borrows Tuesday's glass and takes her ecstasy pill with a swig of water.

"Tell her your idea."

"It's more of a template really. I just think..that we should have a way of being more autonomous, separate from our jobs."

"Makes sense."

"So this would be a manual, or a template, for creating cellular housing communities that produced their own food and worked in rolling months-long shifts so that, at any time, some people would be working shit jobs, worldly jobs, and others would be making art, doing their crafts..and then the schedule would shift, so that everyone did some of the money making for the house, and everyone had time to do their art. There would be a house budget. And we would invent ways to do urban farming, so that we grew a lot of the food we needed in our backyard and in hydroponic situations inside the house. You see what I'm saying? So it minimizes the amount of time you have to spend working some shit job, and maximizes the amount of time everyone can spend making their art."

"You don't exactly have a shit job," Verona says.

"Everyone's job is a shit job to them," Matt says. "Maybe shit job isn't the right term. But a job you work just for the money."

"I know what you mean."

"It would be like Fight Club..meets..I don't know.."

"The House of Transformation could be the first house like this," Tuesday says.

Verona says, "Our house?"

"Yes! Can't you see it? We aren't even using the back yard. That whole back yard could be a garden. There's room there for vegetables. And my friend Stephen has been talking to me about beekeeping. It's not that hard to get started—"

"You think we can keep bees at the House of Transformation?"

"Maybe. Why not? Stephen keeps bees at a warehouse he's living in up Keowee Street."

"He does?"

Tuesday nods.

"Does his landlord know about this?"

Tuesday shrugs. "The point is he's doing it. He has localized honey right at his fingertips. And you know eating localized honey can stop infection. It fights allergies. I'm not saying we have to keep bees at the House of Transformation I'm just saying we could if we wanted to!" Tuesday gets up on her knees, excited.

"What spawned this idea of yours about the hive house?" Verona asks.

"I was just thinking about all of us," Matt says. "And I want to

come up with a way that more time can be spent making art, less time spent working inane jobs. I see such beautiful things happening, with Tuesday's music, with your dancing, and I want to spend more time painting—"

"Your paintings are wonderful."

"Thank you. I'd like to spend more time working on them. I think if little communes of people got together, maybe we'd be able to keep the warehouse space and use that for more art, more art than just mine. I just see how we could work together to build sort of a family that helped each other survive—and had communal time like meals and weekend retreats to lake houses to do ecstasy like we're doing. I see it already partially in place. But I think with some intention it could be built into something even greater, even more beautiful."

"Who wants some wine?" Christina asks, balancing four wine glasses in her hands, coming into the living room. "What are you listening to?"

"Moby."

"Oh, I love this album. Here, Tuesday, take this. This is the wine that Matt brought us. Thank you."

"Where's Soren?"

"Soren doesn't drink. He likes to roll outside. He'll come in later. Here you go."

"Let's toast," Verona says.

"Ok, to what?"

"Matt you make one up."

Matt sits up. "To..everyone in this room, and Soren. To a beautiful evening that lies before us."

Everyone drinks.

"Just don't set your wine glasses on the carpet. Find a table. Thanks, yeah, I always spill mine, so I'm talking to myself," Christina says. "Are y'all rolling yet? No? It'll probably take another twenty minutes to start feeling it. But who knows with these butterflies. It could be different. What was y'all talking about? Mind if I sit in?"

"It's your house, darling." Verona scoots over so Christina can sit.

"So what was y'all talking about before I rudely interrupted?"

"We were just listening..to this idea Matt has about urban farming and sort-of communes that work day jobs in shifts so that no one has to work all the time, and everyone gets time to do their art. Is that right?"

"Exactly."

"Some of it would be resource sharing like we already do. Like you inviting us out here today. People would do that, but in a more formalized way."

"Is it good to formalize it, though? Isn't it better if you keep it

organic?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it is better if it’s natural. I just think sometimes when it’s natural, it doesn’t actually happen.”

“That’s true.”

“I mean with you it did. You invited us out to share your place. And sometimes there exist natural partnerships where one person works while the other does their art, but this would just be a template for making that happen more fully. I don’t know. Maybe it is a bad idea to formalize it. Maybe nothing needs to be done.”

“No, I like your idea. I just think that sometimes when you formalize things, it can have a tendency to ruin them.”

“That’s true.”

“Are you starting to roll yet?”

“No. Maybe a little.”

“I can feel just the tiniest beginnings of rolling,” Tuesday says. “It’s rising from my belly up into my solar plexus.”

“But guys we shouldn’t do this too much,” Verona says. “I hear it can cause liver damage.”

“No,” Christina says. “That’s a rumor. It doesn’t do any more damage than taking an aspirin.”

“Is that true?”

Christina nods. She drinks the rest of her wine.

“I think it can cause brain damage. But only if you do it a lot.”

“Guys, can we not talk about this while we’re getting high? I don’t want to be thinking about brain damage while I’m rolling.”

Everyone is quiet.

“Thank you. I just want to have a nice roll. Can we buy a second one off you if these butterflies are weak?”

“Yeah.”

“Christina, I want to have some alone time with Matthew. Can we use one of your upstairs rooms?”

“Sure, use the one where there’s clothes everywhere. You can move the clothes off the couch if you want.”

Verona closes the door. She takes Matt’s shirt off and admires him. Skinny boy, good muscles, flat stomach. She rubs her hand over his cock and it gets hard under the thin material of his wrap pants.

Verona unties the pants and lets them fall to the floor. She kneels. She sucks his cock. Then she pulls him down to the floor with her.

“Are you starting to roll yet?”

“A little.”

“I want us to make love while it’s coming on.”

They kiss.

Matt’s hands go for Verona’s breasts.

She undoes her top.

“Can you feel it in your stomach?”

Matt puts his hand on his stomach and nods.

“You won’t believe what it feels like to come on ecstasy. If you can even come. But having sex on ecstasy is better than coming feels normally.”

Matt helps Verona undress the rest of the way. He lies her down on the clothes-covered floor. He gets on top of her and spreads her legs. “Every time I move, I feel it coming on more.”

Verona laughs. “Yep. That’s the way of it. Now go inside me. I want you to be fucking me when we both start to roll.”

And he does go inside. And Verona lies there, and kisses him, and then she just closes her eyes and lets her head fall to the side and back, and she feels Matt moving inside her, and the ecstasy takes hold of her, and she’s clenching her teeth and scratching her nails along Matthew’s back. She feels butterflies in her stomach, both literally and figuratively, and she knows this is going to be a good roll.

Verona gets out of the car in west Dayton. She’s in a tiny parking lot behind Bad Kitty’s Black Box Theatres. She grabs her bag and closes the car door. The walk from her car to the theatres is the scariest part of her night. By the time she gets out it’s light and there’s less to worry about. She goes in the front door. There are a couple patrons in the main room. You can’t smoke inside anymore, which makes work much more pleasant for her. Verona’s in the habit of smoking pot in the dressing room to stay high the entire time she works. She sees Mercy on the pole in the main room, pole dancing. Mercy is her real name; she’s from Kenya.

Verona goes into the office and clocks in. “Hey Mike.”

“Hey Verona.”

She goes into the dressing room and changes into her work clothes. Then she extracts her wooden pipe from her bag and smokes just one hit, covering the bowl with her hand so the smoke doesn’t go anywhere. She replaces the pipe and zips her bag.

There’s a black hallway behind the theatres. Verona goes to theatre #5, her favorite, and flips the switch labeled “LIVE.” Then she sits. There’s a bench along the back wall of the theatre. She picks her nose and flicks it at the plexiglass separating her from her would-be customer. She thinks about Matt, and she wants to tell him what she does

for a living, but now is not the time. He's been cool enough not to ask; maybe he suspects. But probably not. He probably just doesn't care, he's interested in who she is and their sex together but it never crossed his mind to wonder, what does this girl do for a living? She's sitting there twenty minutes before she gets a customer.

He's fat, wearing a cargo vest and he has black-rimmed glasses.

Verona waits till he sits down then flips the "BUSY" switch. "So what do you want?"

"I want you to lick your fingers and stick them inside yourself."

"Whoah there, slick. What if I asked you to lick your fingers and stick them inside your self? Wouldn't you want to get undressed first?"

"So get undressed."

Verona smiles. She starts with her gloves. She inches them off and with each one, lets it fall to the floor.

"Hurry up."

She turns her back to him and rubs her ass against the plexiglass.

"Yeah," he says. "Do that."

Verona turns to him. "Do you want to play with yourself?"

"I'll play with myself whenever I want, bitch."

"Hey!" Verona stamps her foot. "Don't call me a bitch! Who raised you?"

"Yeah, talk to me like that." The man has his pants undone.

"You liked to be spoken to sternly?" Verona asks.

"Tell me I'm bad!"

"Oh you are bad. You thought you could come in here and talk to me like I was some kind of dirty whore. But I ain't no dirty whore, country boy. I have a college degree. Do you have a college degree?"

"No."

"I didn't think so! Now take your pants off!"

He obeys, stripping to his underwear, his tiny erection poking out inside his underwear.

"Now listen to me. From now on you're going to do what I say. How do you like that, bitch? Do you like being my bitch?"

"Yeah."

"Now I want you to take your underwear off."

"Right here?"

"Time's a wasting, bad boy. You wanna show me how bad you are? Show me your cock." Verona stands right against the plexiglass, towering over him. "Show it to me."

He pushes down his underwear. He isn't even fully hard.

"Do you want to see my pussy?"

The man nods.

"Then pay me! I know you brought some money in here with you!"

Put it through the slot.” Verona plays with her panties, pulling down the elastic here and there but never showing the full thing.

He pulls his pants halfway up, digging in the pockets. He has a bunch of ones.

“Ones are for the stripper pole! In here I need to see at least a twenty if you want to see what you want to see.”

He finds a five and a ten. That’ll have to do.

“Put them in the slot!”

He puts them in the slot. His hands are shaking.

“Come here now, country boy. I’m gonna show you a pussy like I know you never got to fuck. Come close.” Verona stands bent over with her ass against the plexiglass. She pulls down her panties so he can see her ass. The cloth is stuck to her pussy. Then she slides it down a little and reveals her pussy to the fat man. She can hear him whacking his dick, but the “BUSY” switch flips up and the light goes on over country boy.

“Get dressed. And next time bring twenties. You hear? I ain’t showin’ no pussy for less than twenty bucks next time, country boy!”

He gets his pants back on and fumbles out of the theatre. Verona takes the money from the slot and presses it flat. She sets it on the bench.

Her next customer is in a beige trench coat and an old-fashioned hat. He is clean shaven, about fifty years old, and she can tell by the way he walks that he’s well educated.

He comes in, sits down, takes out a long wallet, and pulls three one-hundred dollar bills. He sets one of them in the slot. He sets the other two one on each knee, and puts the wallet back into his jacket pocket.

Verona flips the “BUSY” switch.

The man speaks. “I want to hear about the first time you masturbated.” That’s all he says. He waits, not even looking at her, looking at her feet, sideways.

Verona kneels by the slot and takes the first hundred. “I was twelve,” she says. “I mean of course I masturbated before that but that’s the first time I came. I was in my mom’s house. It was after lunch in the summer. Everyone else was playing outside but I wanted to touch myself so I went up to my bedroom. I put my fingers inside myself. Then I took them out. Then I played around on the top. Then I put my fingers back in. I found that if I played with myself like that, inside and on top, inside and on top, that I got wetter than I had ever been. So I looked out my window to make sure everyone was still outside, that no one was coming in to look. And I took the sheet off, so I was all out in the open. And I

fingered myself real hard, with these two fingers.” She licks them but the man isn’t looking. “And then I played around on top. And it was so good that time. I didn’t know what was going to happen, but it kept rushing and I kept going, kind of chasing it, and I felt better and better until I was full-out coming, and I was—oh—it was like—it was amazing, the best thing I ever felt, and I felt like I had a secret I could keep from everyone, even my sister, I would never tell her what I had learned how to do, and it would be my secret thing I could do to myself whenever I felt bad or lonely or like not being around people. And I’ve been doing it ever since.” Verona smiles. She puts the hundred on top of her fifteen from earlier and sits on the bench. “What’s next?”

The man puts the next hundred in the slot. “I want you to tell me about a time when you hurt someone, on purpose.”

“When I hurt someone on purpose?”

“Person or animal,” he says.

“Well I never hurt no animal, so you’re drawing a blank there.”

“You must have hurt someone..a boy..”

“And it has to be on purpose, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Well, one time I was taking a test in French class and I could see there was this boy cheating, and he was someone who had been very rude to me about the development of my breasts and so I put a note on the top of my test that said, “Vincent is cheating.” Then I handed in my test and waited for Mrs. Hatcher to see what I had written. She looks back at Vincent and sees that he has verb cases written all over his hands. Does that count?”

“It’s not good,” the man says. “But it counts.” He nods toward the hundred.

Verona leans down to take it. She’s afraid he’s going to jump at her or pull out a gun or something. She’s always like this. She takes the hundred and sits up straight. She places it on her ever-growing stack of cash. She waits.

He puts the final hundred in the slot. He leans forward and takes off his hat. Bald head, developing spots. He makes eye contact with Verona. “Now. I want you to listen. I want you to hear the story of the day I killed Paula Martinez. It’s not a long story. It starts in a venue like the one in which we are presently situated—”

Verona stands up and kicks the plexiglass. “We’re done! Get out of here!” She snatches the last hundred. “Mr. Hendricks! Don’t come back here! You hear me? Don’t ever come back to see me!”

She grabs her cash from the bench and turns off the “LIVE” switch.

A springlike day. Verona and Tuesday are having a party at the House of Transformation. Stephen the sculptor is here. Mich Geetings is here—you can always tell by the VW bug painted with giant yellow happy faces all over it. Matt is here, shirtless and candy flipping (that's where you trip and roll at the same time). Verona is here. Claire is here. The house is filling up.

"Looks like the universe is turning up many spirits to commune at our dear House tonight," Tuesday says.

"Yes, I know," Verona says. "I hope we have enough candy for the party."

"There should be enough, or—where is Drug Dealer Christina?"

"She's invited. I spoke with Soren. They might be here."

"Well," Tuesday says, "I'm sure things will work out as the Great Spirit desires."

"I'm sure you're right. Who is that?"

The two girls are sitting on the porch. A man in a zebra-striped shirt wearing leather pants approaches the house. He has black hair, and it falls in his face. When he gets to their path, he turns up it.

"Hello," he says.

"Hello. Who are you looking for?"

"No one." He smiles.

"Can I help you with something?"

"No."

"Well. What are you doing here?"

"I heard there was a party. I figured I'd crash it." He squints in the setting sun. "So did I do the right thing by walking here from downtown? If you want me to leave I will. I was just talking with Pixie and she said to come by."

"Pixie?"

"Pixie Meadows, down at the coffee shop. She told me she was invited to this party but she can't come so she suggested I go."

"Why can't Pixie come?"

"She's moving today."

Verona and Tuesday look at each other.

"She really is moving to Sedona."

"Sedona, that's right. That's where she said she was going."

"And she said she couldn't come to our party?"

"She's packing tonight."

"Oh. Well. I guess you're welcome in her place. I'm Verona."

"Jason."

"Tuesday."

“Hi Tuesday. Verona. So what kind of party is this?”

“Well. It’s a faery party.”

“Yes I see your wings there. Do you have a pair for me?”

“Um..no.” Tuesday laughs.

“But we do have a halo.”

“That’ll be fine.”

“I’ll go get you the halo,” Verona says. She gets up. Inside, the beginnings of a drum circle, forming. Verona looks out the front window at Jason. She supposes it will be ok. I mean, if Pixie sent him, then it has to be. She wouldn’t have sent over just anybody. She must have checked him out. Verona takes the halo from the top corner of a door and goes back outside. “Here you are.” She hands the halo to Jason.

He gently puts it on his head. Then he bows to the two of them.

“How do you do,” Verona says.

“Much better now,” Jason says in a theatrical voice. “How can I be of service to you ladies?”

“You can find Matt.” Verona touches Jason’s knee. “Find Matt and have him show you around.”

“And how should I find him?”

“Go inside and ask around. He’s in there somewhere.”

“Excellent m’lady.” Jason parts the two girls and goes inside the house.

Tuesday laughs.

“He is a bit over the top,” Verona says.

“Yes, just a bit.”

“But if Pixie says he’s ok then he must be.”

Tuesday laughs again. “Oh..my..god,” she says. “I feel such ENERGY!” Tuesday puts her hands on Verona’s shoulders. “I need to LET IT OUT before it takes me over! Oh! Oh! This body cannot TAKE what its spirit knows. Do you feel it, Astaria? Tell me you feel it too.”

“I do indeed, sister. I feel strange energies aligning tonight.”

“You mean Jason?”

“I don’t know what I mean. But I feel things coming together for us, you know?”

“I hope so, dear friend. I HOPE SO!” Tuesday shouts.

“Are you ready to begin..the..ecstatic part of our evening?” Verona takes Tuesday’s hand.

They both stand up.

“I thank you for making ecstatic time happen for me..even though I don’t have any money right now.”

“Oh. Pshuh. Don’t think of it. You’ll be in the money again..soon, I can feel it.”

“Oh, I hope you are right,” Tuesday says.

And the two of them go into the house.

Hours later. Verona is looking for Matt. She asks around in the living room.

“Have you seen Matt?..my Matt.”

“He went outside with that dude.”

“I’ve already looked outside.”

“I saw Matt doing tai chi on the steps. He’s out there.”

Verona leaves them and looks out the back windows. Claire and Verona are there, no sign of Matt. She decides to check the basement.

“There you are.”

Matt is there with Jason. Jason is lying on the basement floor, face down. Matt is sitting on Jason’s butt, rubbing Jason’s back.

Verona goes and sits beside them. “How are you doing?”

“Doing well,” Matt says.

“And I..just..started to come on,” Jason says.

“Did you?” Verona says. “That’s great.” She rubs Jason’s shoulder.

“You have no idea..how good that feels. You too. It’s been a while since I did ecstasy and I have to say I forgot how good it feels.”

“Yes, it’s amazing,” Verona says. She looks at Matt and says, “Are you ok?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. We’re just getting to know each other.”

“Ok, well I’m going back upstairs.”

“No!” Jason says. “Stay and talk!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Um..” Jason turns and looks at Matt. “How I live in a crack house?”

Both boys laugh.

“Jason was just telling me how he came to be in Dayton.”

“And how I live in a crack house.”

“And how, right now, he lives in a crack house.”

“Oh my,” Verona says. “How long has this been going on?”

“About three weeks. But I think things are gonna change because I’m looking to get a job at the coffeehouse.”

“Well, Pixie’s job is coming available.”

“That’s what I’m thinking. What you are doing feels so good right now. I hate to beg, but..please don’t stop.”

“I won’t stop until you’re all the way rolling,” Matt says.

“I think I’m all the way rolling right now.”

They all laugh.

“So where are you from?” Verona asks.

“St. Louis.”

“And why did you come here?”

“This is where I ran out of money. I was on the Greyhound.”

“I’m a Greyhound veteran,” Matt says.

“Yeah me too. So I was in Florida before this, which is where I tried to kill myself. Well not tried, but—thought about it. I climbed to the top of this water tower and was gonna throw myself off. But. Something stopped me. That’s why I got this.” He shows his arm. It’s tattooed “PRIDE.” “I don’t ever want to forget the sin of pride. I don’t ever want to get to the place again, where I want to kill myself.”

“Well I’m glad you came here,” Verona says. “We don’t want you to kill yourself either.”

“I kinda felt that when I walked up to the house. You and—what’s her name?”

“Tuesday.”

“Yeah you and Tuesday were so welcoming to me. Like I’m just some guy who walks up to your house and says he wants to crash a party. You could have sent me on my way. But you didn’t. And then I met this guy. And now I’m rolling! I mean what the fuck!?”

Matt rumbles Jason’s back with a series of hits, little fists, punching the demons out of him. Matt moves off of Jason and sits by Verona.

Verona puts her hand on Matt’s foot.

Jason sits up. “I like this basement. With a little work you could make this into a room. I don’t know why I’m talking about your basement, probably just ‘cause I’m rolling so in a minute I’ll be telling you how much I love your basement. But no, really, I like this basement. See this? You could put some cloth over here to hide this kinda gunky area. And hang fabric here between these lights to create sort of a ceiling. Paint those walls..you’d have a finished basement!”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Verona says. “I never thought of it like that. I always just saw this as kind of a gunky basement, like you said. But you’re right, with a little work we could make this into another room.”

Jason gets very serious. “Do you have an art, Matt?”

“Writing, I suppose.”

“I’m a painter. I haven’t since I left St. Louis but I paint murals. I think I could get this mural job in Dayton down on Third Street. In east Dayton. There’s this mural they’re looking to repaint. And I want that job.”

Verona says, “I’m sure you could get it, if you tried.”

“Should I leave you two alone?” Jason asks.

“No, we have plenty of time alone,” Verona says.

“Yoo hoo,” comes down the stairs. “Hello? Anyone down here?” Footsteps on the stairs. Then it’s Tuesday, her wings just barely fitting through the passage. “There you all are.” Tuesday comes all the way down and situates herself in the cluster.

“Did you know Jason is a painter?”

“No, I did not know that.”

“He is. He’s a mural painter from St. Louis. I think you came here for a reason, Jason. I think you’re meant to stay with Tuesday and I for the time being. If it’s ok with Tuesday I suggest you get some fabric and some paint and set yourself up in this basement for now. Tuesday, Jason can help with the rent. That way it’s not always on you and me to come up with the full eight hundred. Jason, Tuesday is working on finding a day job. Maybe you two can look for jobs together. Does that arrangement sound ok to everyone?”

Tuesday says, “Yes, and I guess—welcome!” She and Jason hug.

Jason says, “Sounds ok to me!”

“Then it’s settled,” Verona says.

All four of them hug, a sweaty, tight, ecstasy hug.

“So who’s up for some water?” Jason says. “I’ll bring it down.”

“Let’s all go upstairs,” Verona says.

And they do.

Three weeks later. Verona, Tuesday, Matt, and Jason sitting on the porch of the H.O.T.

Verona speaks. “I think everyone will join me in saying that you are a welcome presence here, Jason.”

“Yes.”

“Hear hear.”

“And because this is Jason’s birthday, we all pitched in and bought you this. It’s nothing special. But we hope you like it.”

Jason takes the gift and tears a layer of tissue paper away. Inside is a pot pipe, in silver.

“Aww! Thank you.” Jason hugs Verona. “And thank you. And thank you.” He hugs Tuesday and Matt. “Shall we smoke out of it?”

Verona laughs. “I was hoping you were going to say that.” Verona brings out her plastic baggie and hands it to Jason. “Would you like to pack it?”

“I’d be delighted,” Jason says, super exaggeratedly.

“And there’s another matter of business we’d like to discuss with you. And that’s your spirit names.”

“Yes,” Tuesday says. “We all need to have circle names like Verona

and I have.”

“You know me as Verona, but at the Pagan Spirit Gathering and other places, I go by the spirit name Astaria.”

“And I go by Shringara Hasya.”

“You both need spirit names to use when it’s just the four of us, or when only spiritual company is present. Matt, have you thought about your name?”

“I thought of a few things. I was thinking something that has an A in it, as well as a Z, for like beginnings and ends. And so I played around on paper a while and found one I like. It is.. Wow, I’m embarrassed to say it, even in front of you.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. This is hard. It’s hard spiritual work. But we can do it together, in this circle. You are among friends.”

“Yes, truly. Act with the boldness that Spirit has given you.”

“Ok. What I came up with is Zha. Z, h, a. Actually. Inhaesio as a first name. Inhaesio Zha. But I would go by Zha.”

“Mmm.”

“It’s beautiful!”

“Have you thought of a meaning?”

“Yes.”

“Meanings are so special we don’t usually say them out loud. You can whisper your meaning to me if you want.”

Matt whispers in Verona’s ear. Verona whispers in Jason’s ear. Jason whispers in Tuesday’s ear.

“Now you whisper it back to him to make sure we got it right.”

Tuesday whispers in Matt’s ear. “Is that right?”

Matt nods.

“What about you, Jason? Have you thought of anything?”

“No.”

“I want to name him,” Tuesday says. “I thought of a name, and it also begins with a z. So, if you’ll allow me, I’d like to name you Zochae, and I have your meaning for you.”

Tuesday whispers in Jason’s ear. Verona passes the pot pipe to Matt. They do their whispering of the secret meaning of Zochae and then they’re all smoking, laughing and getting high.

Matt is talking. “We rebuild each other and build each other. We are the place where we go when nowhere else is home. We remind each other of what we’ve never truly forgotten. We teach each other the lessons of the spirit just by watching each other love. We live in a world that has lost itself, lost track of where it came from, doesn’t anymore know what is its essence. This world is blind in a way, and we have started to see again. We have started to go back to those places that are lost and bring them out again! We re-envision what has been dis-envisioned! We love where

everywhere else is hate! We accept when everyone else denies!”

“Truly, you have hit upon the true nature of what it is we’re doing. Truly, my brother, you can see.” That is Shringara, Tuesday, talking to her friend.

“And we listen to your words as they are guided by Spirit, Zha. You are guided by Spirit, Zha.”

“You are guided by Spirit, Astaria Lightcross. You are guided by Spirit.”

“Jason. Zochae! You are guided by Spirit, Zochae!”

“And Shringara. By Spirit. You are guided by Spirit, Shringara.”

They are all smiling and smoking pot. You are guided by Spirit, their chant goes. You are guided by Spirit. And blessings upon you. Blessings upon you. Blessings and blessings and blessings upon you.

They touch each other’s faces and sing on the porch. There is no foot traffic on this street and hardly ever a car comes by, so they have the space to themselves. Verona lights a candle and brings pillows for them to sit on.

“Say more of what you were saying earlier.”

“About losing and finding? About forgetting and reminding? All I can say is that we are in a world who has forgotten, and we need to be reminded. Our job is to remind each other. Not to teach. Because we haven’t really forgotten. We’ve only mostly forgotten. We’re not all dead, we’re only mostly dead. We have been called here to remind each other of what we deeply know already. We have been called here to find us when we’re lost.”

“I was lost,” Zochae says. “And you found me.” He takes Astaria’s hand and she allows it even though she’s uncomfortable with it. She doesn’t want Zochae to think that she likes him in that way.

“I had forgotten,” Matt says. “And you reminded me.” He takes Shringara’s hand.

They all join hands, and now it’s less weird for Astaria.

It’s on the tip of everyone’s tongue, but it’s Shringara who says it first: “You are of the reminding. We are all of the reminding. We are the reminding. You are of the reminding. And you are of the reminding. And you are of the reminding. We are The Reminding. We are of The Reminding.”

“And of The Finding,” Zochae says.

“Oooh,” Tuesday says. “I like that. We are of The Reminding.”

Then everyone says, “And of The Finding.”

“You are of The Reminding,” Verona says.

“And of the Finding.”

“We are of The Reminding. And of The Finding.”

“We are of The Reminding. And of The Finding! We have come to

find those of us who are lost and remind those of us who have forgotten. Wherever there is someone lost, we are there to find. Wherever someone has forgotten, we are there to remind. We are not special in our ability to remind and to find. Everyone can do it if they only decide to. Everyone can find and everyone can remind! Everyone needs to be found, and everyone needs to be rewound! Back through pages of turning and the incessant click of the clock, back through ages of yearning and blessed tick of the tock, we have come to remound you and re-found you. We won't stop with your head and we won't stop with your heart. Both must be found! Both must be rewound. This is what the finding do. This is how reminding's true!"

"Don't stop!"

"That's all I have to say!"

"Well say it again!"

"This is what the finding do. This is how reminding's true!"

"I think you have channeled something of the beyond, tonight, my friend."

"I'm only saying what needs to be said. It needs to be written in a thousand languages and sung in a thousand prayers. It needs to be the blood that flows in our veins. That's how down we have to get reminding. That's how down we have to get finding. We need to find each other first, first remind each other."

"And find ourselves, and remind ourselves!"

"Yes! Only once we have remound ourselves can we possibly claim to remind others!"

"Remind and re-find!"

"Reminding everything. Reminding us since the day we were born."

"Reminding us about our jobs."

"Reminding us about our relationships."

"Reminding us about reminding us!"

"Finding us when we're lost in the world."

"In the money world."

"In the hateful, war, and warrior world."

"Finding us away from violence!"

"Reminding us that it isn't necessary!"

"Re-finding us places to live!"

"Re-finding nature."

"And reminding us about nature."

"Reminding us about the goodness in ourselves."

"Reminding us that we're pure."

"Reminding us of where we came from."

"And who we came from."

“Reminding of our ancestors.”

“Finding our children!”

“Reminding ourselves to be open to new openings.”

“This is a whole church! Or not a church, but—”

“I know what you mean! It’s a movement—”

“It could almost be a revolution.”

“The Reminding is a revolution! It is nothing less than a god damn revolution! It’s a movement of people; people, moving; people moving people. Moving people.”

“Moving people!”

“That’s moving people as in people who move you, moving people as in people who are moving, moving people as in picking up people and moving them!”

“People moving..moving people.”

“Will this ever stop?”

“No! There will never be an end to The Reminding. We will be reminding forever, as long as there is an ever.”

“We will go on reminding after everyone has forgotten even what the reminding is!”

“That’s it! That’s what people have forgotten! They’ve forgotten the reminding, and they need to be remound..I mean reminded! You have my tongue twisted, fire snake!”

“You should write a book,” Zochae says. “You should write it all down, the good, the bad, everything that happened. You should tell the story. Because who else is going to do it? And your book, it will be a bible of sorts. Something to look back on when we forget. Because even the reminders forget, you know we do. We forgot we were reminders until just this night. How could we forget that? How could a reminder forget that it was her job to remind? So write it down, and call it ‘The Reminding and the Finding.’ Would you do that, for your brother? Would you put it all down, so that when I die, my words won’t be lost? Would you put it all down, so that when we all die, our words won’t be forgotten?”

—————

Verona has graduation on the 18th. Summer finally rolls around, and her one last assignment—which is just to write a paper for her Honors Thesis class—is fulfilled.

She hands the paper in, and her honors advisor gives her a B. A B+, which is good enough. Good enough to graduate her. Good enough to get her past this phase of her life and into the next, which is..what? Looking for another job? Maybe one that uses her degree. She has a

vague idea that she wants to teach. But that'll require another degree, and she isn't ready for that.

She knows her mother will be at graduation. And her sister. She picks out a yellow dress, too conservative for her but she knows her mother will like it. She doesn't have the right shoes, so some black dance slippers will have to do. No one looks at your shoes anyway.

"Ok, I'm going!" She knocks on Tuesday's door.

"Ok!" Tuesday shouts. "Don't take shit from anyone!"

"I won't!" Verona goes downstairs. She gets in her car, a black Volkswagen Fox. The day is clear, she's early, so she drives slowly, even on the highway. She stays in the slow lane but people are still passing her. There's a hill going off to the right. That's where her exit is, to Yellow Springs.

On the long road between the highway and the village where her school is located, she thinks about Ohio. The corn fields. This is where she's from. But she wants to see other places. Live in LA, maybe. See Central America. But to travel you need money and money is the last thing she has right now.

What use is a college degree? Sometimes she wonders why she stuck around. But it's been beaten into her, since she was young, that getting a college degree is the only way to get a decent job, the only way to have a halfway-decent life..and it stuck with her.

Cars start to line up on Dayton-Yellow Springs Road. Doubtless, people going to the graduation. Her class is small, less than a hundred people, but people will be bringing family and extended family and friends. She invited Matt, but isn't certain he will come.

The other thing about getting a college degree is her sister, Verona. Verona wants to be that older sister that can be looked up to. She wants that kind of order for her little sister where the older sister is doing well, able to call on birthdays and holidays. Which sounds way more plain and conservative than most of Verona's friends think of her, but it's true: Verona has a regular-ish streak about her. She doesn't want to be the friend who messes up their brain by doing too many drugs. She has a friend like that, and her name is Drug Dealer Christina.

Verona has seen the tragedies happen, and she doesn't want them to happen to her. That's part of the reason she's thinking of getting back together with Tim. Tim is stable. He has a job. He's always going to have the same job. Verona's family likes him. He's a regular man, with man ways and man hands and man hair. He acts like a normal man! It's hard to explain but Verona loves him.

The cars are starting to back up. She presses the brake. The car in front of her is old fashioned, like from the fifties. There's a couple in the front seat. She wears a hat. He wears a suit. They're probably coming to

see their grandchild graduate. From this liberal school that produces revolutionaries—ha! But coming to see their granddaughter, perhaps. Is it someone she knows? She will have to keep a look out after the ceremony.

“Hi Mom!” Verona sees her mom and sister at the edge of the crowd.

“Hey baby! We were just going to find a seat.”

“Well how are you?” She hugs them both. “Good to see you!”

“I just came to see my baby graduate.”

“And that’s what you’re gonna see.” Verona is laughing.

“Do you want to come out with us after graduation? We thought we’d get some lunch.”

“That’s fine Mom but most of the restaurants around here will be crowded. Maybe we could eat somewhere else.”

They small talk more, and Verona is looking around for someone. Not Tim, who wouldn’t come to an event like this, but Matt, ‘cause that crazy guy said he would.

She’s saying goodbye to her mom and sending them off to their seats when Anna comes up. Anna from the lower class. Knows some of her friends who went to Colonel White.

“So what’s up?” Anna says.

“Not much.”

“Are you glad you’re graduating?” Anna speaks in this articulated, scientific-sounding voice.

“I guess so,” Verona says. “I’m more glad to just be out of here, you know?”

“Do you know what you’re doing next?”

“Oh, more of the same. More of the same for me. I’m working now, saving up some money to travel.”

“Where do you work?”

“A bead factory.”

“Really? I didn’t know of any bead factories around here.”

“It’s a small one. Manual labor. One of my friends runs it.”

“Oh really. Well that’s fascinating. A bead factory, huh?”

Verona wishes Anna would just go. “Yeah. See this?” Verona holds out her necklace. “These beads were made there.”

“Hmm,” Anna says. She seems to be doubting what Verona is saying.

“Anyway I better get going. Have to get in my cap and gown.”

“Yeah, you better do that. I’ll see you around Dayton, I’m sure.”

“Sure,” Verona says, and leaves.

During the ceremony, Verona mostly spaces out. She keeps just enough online so that she can stand up and sit down at the right moments, and of course to make her walk, but other than that, she's gone. She's thinking about the trees, and how long they took to grow. Looking around her, at the oaks and the birches, and thinking about them as babies. They grew from seed, these trees, they grew from that tiniest little speck imaginable into tall, tall, magnificent beings the sun shines through, like on this Sunday morning, to illuminate a field of gradulators and graduates, and lookers on, while they go through their also ancient ritual of graduation from the ranks of the student to the ranks of the world. These bright people are expected to change the world, to outshine their teachers. They're expected to use their knowledge wisely. They're expected to start businesses. They're expected to write books. They're expected to teach others as others get their start. Verona likes this graduation; it's better than her high school one. She imagines coercing her mom and Verona into eating Indian food afterward. It is her day, after all. She should be able to pick the food.

Verona thinks about the trees, and how instead of sweating in a cap and gown, she would like to be naked among them, like at the Pagan Spirit Gathering. That is her home, being naked among bark and leaves and streams and pebbles and the whole forest, with her spirit friends, among whom she has found a home unlike any other. Maybe she can write a book about that, about finding community in a pack of strangers, about how community is formed in general. She's certainly experienced enough of it to write about. About how community sometimes works, and sometimes doesn't, like when Tuesday doesn't pay her rent. But Jason is taking care of more than half the rent now, so that's ok. Verona's mother has had some communal experiences in her early days; Verona has to ask about that sometime, get her mother to go into some more detail.

When Verona does her walk, she's humming to herself something from a movie soundtrack. She's not even sure which movie it's from, but it has guitars and layered vocals and she lets it carry her feet to the podium to pick up her diploma. Then she's dancing back to her seat, gives her arms a little flourish, and then it's the rest of the alphabet, a brief speech, and she's done with Antioch forever.

After the speeches are over and everyone on the stage dissipates, Verona has a brief moment where she doesn't know what to do next. Then she

realizes she's staring at someone she knows.

It's Matt. They go to each other and meet near the front of the rows of chairs set out for family to sit in.

"Hey. Congratulations."

"You came!"

"I wanted to. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind? Why would I mind?"

"Anyway wow! You did it."

"Anna's here."

"Oh is she?"

"Yeah, she was cornering me earlier and asking me all kinds of questions about where I work."

"Oh. Really?"

"Yeah. You remember what I told you I do, right?"

"Right."

"The thing I told you not to tell anyone?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"Well I think she suspects."

"How would she suspect?"

"I don't know but I think she does."

"How could she possibly guess that?"

"I told her my story about the bead factory and she wasn't buying it."

"No way. No way she knows."

"Yeah, well, anyway. There's something you and I need to discuss."

"And what is that?"

"I'm breaking up with you. If you and I were ever really..a thing. I'm thinking about getting back together with Tim. I mean, we are married. But I wanted to tell you face to face. And I'm sorry if this hurts you. I know you like me."

"Yeah, I do."

"It's just not right for me. I think before I can be with you or Tim or anyone else I need to be with myself for a while."

"I respect that."

"You do?"

"Yeah, I've been there." Matt smiles. "This does suck, 'cause I really like being with you. But. I understand. Have a good day, Verona." And he leaves.

It can't have gone smoother. And now she is free from her commitments, from Matt, from school, and she can really plan what she wants to do with her life.

“Oh it’s wonderful,” Drug Dealer Christina says. “It’s the best. You’ll absolutely never try anything like it.”

“But is it safe?”

“If you do it with me it’s safe. You’ve just gotta do it with somebody who’s done it before. That’s what some of these kids do, they do it once and then they think they’re ready to shoot themselves up. Then they go home and o.d. because they put too damn much in the shot. All this talk about bad batches of heroin—I mean there are bad batches of heroin but—that’s what happens, some kid gets excited, he’s like, I’m gonna get twice as high if I put in twice as much..or he just forgets how much is the right amount to put in. There’s markers on the syringe! How stupid could you be?”

“But what does it feel like?”

“Uh..you’d need a poet to describe it,” Christina says, in a moment of brilliance. “But..it feels like..air..inside your skin..feel-good air that rushes through you..through your body..and..makes you feel wonderful.”

“Does it affect your thinking?”

“No. You could drive a car on it, if you didn’t take too much. It’s not like acid where you’re pretty much stuck in one place unless you’re stupid. And you’re more awake on it than you are on ecstasy. Or..not more awake..but more in control. It just makes your body feel good. Soren goes shopping when he’s on it. He’ll take the car, come back with loads and loads of stuff from Target. He just likes to shop.”

“That’s funny. What do you like to do?”

“I like to lie on the floor. Sometimes I masturbate. Mostly I like to just lie there and feel the way I feel. You want to try it don’t you.”

“I don’t know. It’s pretty intense. I’ve never done anything with a needle before.”

“The needle is no big deal. Everyone’s like, ‘I would never touch a needle,’ but, I mean, once you do it it’s better than great, Astaria. I’m telling you, I know you’ll love it once you try. I’ve got some here if you want to try today.”

Verona shakes her head. “I don’t know Christine. It’s a little more than I’m willing to try just on the spur of the moment.”

“I understand. Do you mind if I shoot up?”

“No, go ahead.”

So Christine gets her stuff, a square box with lacquer designs on the top, and she sits back down with Verona. Christine opens the box where she has fresh needles, a Ziploc bag of white powder, a spoon with residue on it, a torch-style lighter, some cotton balls, and who knows what else.

Verona watches while Christine, bone thin, removes her belt and wraps it around her arm, leaving it loose for now. She heats up a little of the powder with some Evian spring water, lets it cool, then uses a half a cotton ball as a filter when filling up the syringe. She tightens the belt and holds it with her teeth. Then she shoots herself up, quickly and cleanly. She lets the belt drop. She puts the needle on top of the junk in her box and wipes up a spot of blood with her t-shirt.

Verona takes Christina's hand, holds it in both of hers. The look on Christina's face is one of pure, flat bliss.

"So it's not going to kill me?"

"No. Not at all."

"You'll give me like half of what you take?"

"I'll give you a small amount. To start with. Then you can have more."

"I must sound like a real boob!" Verona says. "I mean noob!" She snorts laughing.

"You sound fine."

"You know what I sound like? I sound like Matt the first time he tried ecstasy. And I was in your place, leading him through it."

"I bet you did well as the mother," Christina says.

"And now I'm the child! Well, I guess we best be getting on with it. Wait. Those needles are clean, right?"

"Brand new. I got them off the internet."

"Ok. Ok. Am I forgetting to think of anything?"

"You don't have to think, at all. You just have to lie back and enjoy it."

"Are you sure?"

"Do you have to be anywhere?"

"Not till tomorrow."

"Ok then."

Verona lies back and gets the belt ready. Christina puts just a little heroin into the syringe, then puts a little more. "You want to feel it."

"Ok but that's enough!"

"Don't worry. This'll be just right. I want to you to have a decent hit for your first time."

"Are you sure it's not too much?"

"Chill, girl, chill. It's perfect. It's about two-thirds of what I used to do before I started doing a lot more. You'll like it. Promise."

"Ok."

"Hold that belt tight. Tighter. That's good. Here's a good one."

Damn you've got punchy veins. They're sticking right up. This is gonna be easy."

Verona feels the needle go in. She feels the stick of it. Then she's looking up at Drug Dealer Christina. Christina is straddling Verona. Verona sees Christina looking down. Then the plunge hits her, and it hits her everywhere at once. Her lips, her mouth, her brain, her spine, her legs, everything is warm and holy. Then Christina is removing the needle, and wiping Verona's arm, and Verona is shrouded in warmth, wrapped in this magic blanket and she lies all the way back, and starts to laugh.

"Oh, you weren't kidding," Verona says.

"Nope."

"Oh, oh, oh. Oh!" Verona laughs. "It really is the best thing there is."

"That's why when you guys are always doing ecstasy I'm always like..try this."

"Well it is hard to get over the needle thing."

"You got over it."

"Oh-le-oh-le-ohhhh.."

"Right?"

"I mean whoah."

"Right?"

"I mean.." Verona laughs. "You know what I mean."

Christina laughs. "Yes, I know what you mean."

"This is one of the best things people can do together."

"Yes girl."

"You know what, I hate to say OMG but O-M-G!"

Christina laughs again. "Next time I'll give you a little more."

"This is good, though."

"If I give you any more you'll probably throw up."

"That's what I hear."

"Don't worry..bathroom's right there. Do you feel like you have to throw up?"

"No."

"That's because I'm an expert doser. I gave you just enough for your first time."

"I think you did. How long does this last?"

"Um..the major effects: 30 minutes. The minor effects: 8 hours. You'll probably want more for that initial rush in like 30 minutes to a couple hours. That gets shorter the more you take it."

"Don't tell Shringara I did this."

"I'm not gonna tell anybody you did anything."

"Has Shringara ever done this with you?"

"I'm not tellin'."

“Oh, god, this kinda makes me re-think my whole life.”

“Does it?”

“Yeah,” Verona says, and then she’s silent for a long time.

“Why does it make you rethink your whole life?”

“Because if you can feel this..” she starts, but she doesn’t finish.

“Because if you can feel this..” Christina says.

“Right, if you can feel this..”

“If you can feel this..”

“Well for one, if you can feel this, what else can you feel? It opens up the question. There must be other plants that make you feel things. Herion is opium, right? What happens if you smoke the petals of roses? Or snort the pollen right out of a flower, like bees do. I think that bees get to have their fun—why should we outlaw heroin, for example, so that people don’t get to have theirs, too? I’m changing fonts in my life. You know when you’re in a document, and you change fonts, and everything feels different? I’m doing that in my life. My new mental font will be..Sanskrit. What if you suddenly saw everything in Sanskrit? I think everything has to change. Or I might just lie here.”

“Lie there. You don’t have to start a revolution just ‘cause you tried heroin.”

Verona sits up. “But I do. I do.” She grabs Christina’s arm. “That’s what I’m always trying to get you and Soren to see. That this is spiritual. It can be. When we take x we speak in tongues, invent entire new techniques for civilization, make up spirit names..you and Soren could have that too if you just chose to see this as spiritual.”

“It’s just not part of our trip.”

“That’s so funny because ever since high school, when I smoked pot, it was always part of the trip. It was about dancing, feeling elated, feeling those exalted wings that we’re all born with..and this..this substance you have introduced me to today, is so powerful, it could be used so powerfully for spiritual ends..I don’t see how you don’t see that when you do this. I guess maybe what I think of as a choice to see things spiritually might not actually be a choice, but maybe is more of a personality sort of thing. Do you want to dance with me?”

“Go ahead and dance.”

“Won’t you join in?”

“If I feel like dancing, I’ll get up and dance. I’m not much of a dancer, Astaria.”

Verona spins around on the carpet. She feels such an elation, like nothing she’s ever felt before. It comes from her feet, it goes through her legs and her womanly areas, up her spine and around her stomach, through her breasts, and neck, and head. As she spins, she eyes the lacquer box lying on the floor, from whence this feeling came.

Verona lies in her own bed, feeling the aftermath of the heroin. A warm glow still left, and sounds sound louder than usual, and she wants more. She can hear Tuesday's phone conversation through the wall.

"Mmm-hmm. I want that too. I've been thinking of you too. I know! You have to let me show you some things I think you've never tried. What? Just certain things. I have learned them in my eastern books on the subject. Not just that one, I have other books than the Kama Sutra, you know. No. I didn't learn this from Matthew. You don't know anything about the relationships that exist, do you? None of your business. That's between me and him. So, you thinking of coming over? Yes, I would like that. Mmm-hmm. Ok. Bye."

Verona lies there. She knows exactly who Tuesday was talking to, even though Tuesday is stupidly trying to keep it a secret. Like Verona hasn't been noticing whose car has been parked in front of the house while Tuesday has her secret little meetings with someone in her room. It's too small a town not to know.

Verona thinks about Matt for a second. She wonders how much Tuesday and him did in high school, and she's starting to think it wasn't much. Too bad for Tuesday, Matt was decent lay.

She slips in and out of sleep, and yawns so big tears form in her eyes. She will have to remember to masturbate before she goes all the way to sleep.

Soon she hears Tuesday go downstairs. Then everything is quiet for a while. Then the front door opens. Closes. Tuesday and her visitor come up the stairs. Go into Tuesday's room. Close the door.

Then Verona hears the sounds of fucking. Not right away. They tease themselves for about twenty minutes. No doubt that's as a result of Tuesday's reading *Tantric Love: A Nine Step Guide to Transforming Lovers into Soul Mates*. She showed it to Verona months ago. For a while it seemed Tuesday was shopping around for lovers to try her new techniques on. Nik, who is clearly who is in the other room with her now, is who she settled on.

Now Verona gets to hear them make love. She can't tell which techniques Tuesday is using just by hearing them, but it is clear they're having a good time, and they can keep up a good long lovemaking session. Verona is for a moment jealous, then remembers she has exiled herself from the sphere of love, all except self love, for the time being. She lies quietly and listens to a man pant, and she can feel the movement of Tuesday's futon against the wall. Then silence. Then Tuesday's breathful "oh!" They must be having trouble keeping themselves quiet, and

doubtless they imagine, as all lovers do, that they are truly inaudible, when it is exactly clear to listeners what is going on.

After a long time, it is quiet. Verona imagines that one or more of them has fallen asleep. Then she hears muffled talking between a man and a woman. It is obviously Nik's voice, and Verona can hear most of the words they say if she sits up in bed.

"Are you saying that I should go?"

"No, no no, my dear, I am saying that I will be sad when you do go, when you must go, eventually."

"There's always tomorrow."

"I know, but I so wish that today could last forever."

"That would be nice. Except I have some things I have to do tomorrow." (Silly boy: just agree with her.)

"Oh, oooh, I think you know that I'm speaking metaphorically."

"I know. And I do have to go. Whoah. Look at the time."

An hour later Tuesday knocks on Verona's door.

"Yes?"

"Are you sleeping?"

"Close, but no. Come in."

Tuesday rushes in and kneels on the corner of Verona's bed.

Verona props herself up on her elbows. "What are you so excited about?"

"Well," Tuesday giggles, "as I'm sure you've guessed, I'm happy to be with a boy as of late."

"I have noticed some mysterious sounds coming from your room," Verona says.

"Yes, I'm sorry about that. I'm afraid our walls are a bit thin in this wondrous house you have got for us. Have you been disturbed?"

"Not disturbed, no. Perhaps a bit jealous!"

"I am so happy with the love that has given itself to me in these last days." Tuesday twists her arms up in a weird way. "I can't describe..!" She exhales, lets her arms untangle. "I could truly cry," she says. "I have been envisioning blessings and I expected something or someone to come into my life but I didn't imagine how great it could really be!" She looks up at the ceiling. "I am flowing..I am flowing with a river of love." She laughs. "Quite literally."

"Oh, I'm so happy for you. Who is this man, if you want to tell me, is it someone I know?"

"Well, that is the thing. He is someone all of our friends know, and I'm afraid for this development to get out, among everyone. I want to

keep it sacred, you know, and there's something that happens when you tell people. It's like..they own a piece of your..of you. And I don't want that to happen with us."

"You don't have to tell me."

"It's just that it's so fresh, and so new. I don't want it to get bogged down with other people knowing. But I will tell you, because I know you can agree not to tell anyone..for now."

"I won't tell anyone."

"It's Nik. What do you think?"

"I'm happy for you."

"Do you think it's weird since he's friends with everyone?"

"No, I think it's unavoidable. We have a tight friend group and it seems like sooner or later everyone's going to fuck."

"It does seem like that, doesn't it?"

"I mean just look at the history. Well, you know the history."

"I know. Anyway it's Nik! What does your intuition tell you?"

"My intuition..about you and Nik? Well, I think the only thing that matters is what you want, and if he's who you want.."

"He is. He is. Astaria you can't believe..you cannot believe the love making that has been going on."

"Yeah?"

"It's been tantric, it's been slow, it's really been the union of two people. I have been having trouble keeping myself quiet, as I'm sure you have heard. It's been a lovemaking I've been able to control—as much as a thing can be controlled. I mean in terms of controlled flows..do you know what I mean? Like these gigantic controlled flows of energy that are coming from us both, I can see them as these giant ribbons, with a color for each of us, and they're wrapping us up in passion—pure passion!—not just the..you know..the normal passion that people talk about when they talk about having sex. This is the passion of love! I can't help myself when I talk about it, Astaria, it's been so..so..much."

"And he's feeling about it the same way you are?"

"He has to be. During it, it's so passionate. Is that a word? I can't even tell you, I can smell his pheromones I think."

"Have you guys been talking a lot, I mean about non-sex stuff?"

"We've been talking every day. I can't wait till I get to see him again—it's that type of.."

"Love?"

"I don't know I don't know. I'm hesitant to use that word because it's so new but it might be a thing somehow approaching love."

"Just make sure you feel the same way about it he does."

"I do, I will. I'll be careful. I will. I know you're worried about me 'cause of some things that have happened in the past, but—ahhh, I think it

is love, I think it may be.”

“It’s not really things in your past I think you should worry about. It’s just—I mean think about Nik. You know him better than I do, since you went to high school with him, but..does Nik..really seem like the kind of guy who falls in love? Don’t think I’m trying to mess up what you have going on here, but I think you should take a serious look at whether this is the same for him as it is for you because..Nik..I’m sorry, Nik is a player.” Verona’s shaking her head.

Tuesday moves back a little on the bed. “Do you think that player is really the right word to use to describe Nik?”

Astaria nods.

“Do you think he’s playing me?”

“I’m not saying that, I’m just saying, be careful that it’s not just..all inside your own head.”

“It’s not. We’re not just having sex. You can’t fake what just happened. I know you’re worried but I’m telling you, he and I are on a different plane right now.”

“Ok. Ok. You know what you’re doing, I just thought I’d share my opinion.”

Just then Jason comes up the stairs. He pops his head inside Verona’s room. “Are you two having some girl time?”

“Hey Zochae.”

“Hey Zochae. No we were just talking. You’re welcome to come in if you want.”

“That’s ok. I just wanted to check on you two up here and see how you were doing. I’ve been painting downstairs if you want to come see at some point.”

Verona starts to get up.

“At some point. At some point. Doesn’t have to be now.”

“No, unless—do you want to go see?”

Tuesday says yes.

Verona stands. “Here we go.”

Twenty-forty-sixty-eighty-one-hundred. First of the month. Rent is due. Verona has a drawer full of twenties from the Theatres. Where the fuck is Tuesday?

Tuesday is not even at the house.

Verona calls her.

“Hello?”

“It’s Verona.”

“Oh hello. I’m on my way home. We had to make a stop to get

some food.”

“Where did you go?”

“Huh?”

“Where did you go for food?”

“Oh we got Indian, it was lovely.”

“So how long until you get home?”

“We’re right by the Dayton Mall. Should be just a few minutes.”

“Ok, I’ll see you when you get back. We need to talk.”

“Ok, see you soon, my lovely.”

Verona ends the call.

A hand is on her shoulder. It’s Jason.

“Oh, you startled me.”

“I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Not to be rude, but what are you doing in my room?”

“I came to pay you my part of the rent.” Jason fans out a bunch of twenties.

“Let’s talk downstairs,” Verona says.

Jason walks downstairs and Verona follows him.

“So. You wanted to talk about the rent?”

“I brought you my part,” Jason says. “See?”

“That’s way too much.”

“I happen to know that Tuesday is short on her part this month, so I figured I’d pick up the slack.”

“No. What I need you to do is pay your part of the rent. I need Tuesday to pay her part of the rent. I’ll pay my part of the rent, and that’s how it goes.”

“Well do you mind if I loan Tuesday the money, because I know she’s had trouble finding work.”

“Yes, I do mind. I don’t think it makes for a very good house dynamic to have one member who isn’t doing their part. This isn’t just about rent with Tuesday. She’s not doing her part of the chores. It’s none of your business but she’s smoking all of my pot! I just—thank you Jason but I don’t want all that money from you. You’re working harder than either me or Tuesday. Do you think Tuesday would ever do day labor?! No. She’s looking for a certain type of job and a certain type of job only. I just need her to make the rent!”

Jason puts an arm around Verona and she’s not exactly sure she wants it there.

“I talked with Tuesday. Earlier in the week. She wants to help make rent but she’s feeling frustrated with the types of jobs she can get. We talked about it and we both feel that it’s right if I can help take up some of the slack while she gets settled into some type of job that she’s ok with.”

“She’s not about to ‘settle into’ a job. Her standards are too high!”

“She and I talked about some types of jobs that she might be able to do that would work with her standards.”

“Like what?”

“Well, the cashier at Second Time Around is leaving. That would be a job where she’d be able to talk with people, and be around vintage things—which I know she likes.”

“How soon does it come available?”

“I don’t know, exactly, but I think she’s looking into it.”

“She’s out having Indian food with our friends, is what she’s doing. With Matt paying for her, no doubt. They don’t even invite me! And I’m stuck here trying to make the rent. Do you know what I do for work?”

“No. I know when not to ask a question.”

“Well ask me. I’m telling you to ask me.”

“Astaria, what do you do for work?”

“I work at Bad Kitty’s Black Box Theatres. Do you know what I do there?”

“I can guess.”

“I get off psychopaths! I get off fucking psychopaths so I can pay my part of the rent, have money for pot, have money to go out to eat! I don’t want you to pay her part of the rent, or ‘loan’ her her part of the rent, because I want her to have to work like I do. Not at the same job, necessarily, I’m just saying I want her to work. None of us have trust funds, so we have to find something to do to make money.”

“Does Tuesday know where you work?”

“Yeah, I’ve tried to get her to get a job there. She could easily do it. There’s plexiglass between you and the customers, it’s not like you have to touch them! But she won’t do it. It’s above her morals. Does she think that maybe this bends my morals just a little bit? Or a lot, with some customers? But I do it, because it’s a decent way to make money for a girl.”

“I bet it’s a great way to make money.”

“It’s not bad.”

“I wish I could do it. I hate day labor.”

“I bet there’s some gay clubs you could do it at.”

“If you hear of one, let me know.”

“I know, Zochae, I know you work hard for they money you do make. I wish you didn’t have to do day labor, there’s got to be a better job we can find you. Why don’t you work as the cashier for Second Time Around?”

“No, it’s ok for now. I’ll find something better later. We need the money, right?”

Verona shakes her head. “Yeah, we do.”

“So take the money. I’m glad to help. It makes me happy to fill in for Tuesday when she’s short.”

“She’s always short!”

“Well, even then. I don’t mind. You two have made me very happy to have a place to stay. Think about this from my perspective. I was living in a crack house. Now I’m living with two beautiful friends and I have a place to paint and you’ve introduced me to so many beautiful people. I feel like a rich man. Let me help with rent this month. Shringara is looking for a job. She’ll find one. I’ll help her, ok. She’s not the kind of person who can go out and interface with the world like you or me. She needs people like us to connect her to the world.”

“I think she just needs to learn how to do it!”

“Be gentle with her, though. Ok? She needs your care. Your her girl friend and there are things you can do for her that I can’t. She needs you, Astaria. This is tough for her.”

Tuesday comes home right then. Verona and Jason hear the car stop in front of the house, a door open and close. Then Tuesday is standing in the living room, looking at a pile of cash.

“Are you talking about rent?”

“Yes,” Jason says.

“I’m really sorry, Astaria. I’m working on getting a job that will pay the rent and I know I’ve been borrowing from you a lot lately and I feel really bad. Truly, I do.”

“It’s ok. Sit down. I’m not mad at you. I’m really not. I just think you could have been doing more, sooner, so that it wouldn’t have come to this. It’s not fair to Zochae.”

“But I don’t mind.”

“I mean when you came to live with us, Zochae, I was worried about you taking advantage of us. Now it’s the first month and it’s we who are taking advantage of you.”

“But I don’t mind.”

“You keep saying that but really, you don’t mind paying Shringara’s part of the rent this month?”

“I don’t mind.” Zochae pushes the money toward Astaria.

“There’s more than enough there. Use it as you wish. I am happy to be at home with my new sisters, in a house that lets us all do what we want, make our art, be ourselves, have people over. I was wondering if we can have Matt over..or if you think it would be a good idea if I went over to his place..for a couple days. I have been wanting to get to know him better.”

“Oh I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.”

“No, he likes you a lot.”

“Or maybe the four of us should do something.”

“You should go over to his place. Call him. You can use my

phone.”

“Oh I’m getting a phone,” Jason says. “It’s prepaid with cash. I’m going to get it tomorrow.”

“Look at you!”

“So I’ll call him.”

“Good. You two could use some time just as boys.”

“I need a hug,” Shringara says. She leans into Astaria.

Zochae scoots in and joins them.

Astaria can smell Zochae’s armpits, and she doesn’t mind. She doesn’t mind hugging him, either, in a group like this.

“You have given me a beautiful home,” Zochae says.

“You have filled it with your wonderful soul,” Shringara says.

“Yes, I am very happy with how this is working out,” Astaria says.

And she is. She’s ok with Zochae paying Shringara’s portion of the rent this time. It’s not exactly fair to everyone, but Zochae seems to need to do it out of some soul-cleansing aspiration. Astaria gets up and goes upstairs. She gets her wooden pipe and packs it, brings it back downstairs. She sits in the circle. She smokes, then passes to Shringara.

Shringara smokes. She passes to Zochae.

Zochae places the pipe in the middle when he’s done. “I feel like we were brought here to do something,” he says.

“Oh, I do too,” Shringara says. “I have felt it deeply. Ever since you came here especially, I feel we are being gathered by the Great Mystery for some purpose. I have been listening.”

“I have been listening, too,” Zochae says.

“Have you heard anything?” Astaria says. “I’m just kidding y’all. I have felt it, too, since last year’s Pagan Spirit Gathering. I think it has something to do with making communities. Building spirit communities.”

“Oooh,” Shringara says. “I feel it. I feel that so deeply. I know I keep saying that but I can’t describe how deeply I’m feeling things lately. It’s like there’s something opening up with my soul.”

Astaria grabs the hand of her old friend. “I know you feel things deeply. I think sometimes that’s why you were sent to us.” She grabs Zochae’s hand. “And you, I don’t know why you were sent to us. Maybe to help us pay this month’s rent! No, but your generosity is part of what’s keeping us together at the moment, so thank you.”

Astaria and Zochae are downstairs doing yoga. Astaria is leading. Shringara is sitting on the couch reading.

“Do you want to join us?”

“No, although, what you’re doing there looks really fun.”

“It is really fun. That’s why you should join us.”

“I must read. Thank you though.”

“Was that—” Astaria says. “Was that the door?”

“No.”

“I thought I heard the door move.”

“I’ll get it,” Zochae says.

“No I’ll get it,” Shringara says. “I don’t want to interrupt your yoga.” Shringara goes to the door. In a minute she comes back with a folded piece of paper. “It’s for you.”

Astaria takes the paper. She unfolds it. It’s from Matt.

“What does it say?”

Astaria looks over the note. She folds it back.

Zochae and Shringara look curious.

“It says..that our friend..needs a visit!”

Zochae says, “Who needs a visit?”

“Someone you need to spend some time with.”

Shringara says, “Is it Zha?”

Astaria nods, fanning herself with the note.

“I knew it. I didn’t look inside, but I knew it was from him. Are we going over?”

“I think we better. He sounds pretty sad. Can you two be ready in five minutes?”

Matt’s apartment, affectionately known as the House of Shimmering Velvet. Verona knocks on the door.

The door opens. Matt is dressed in sweats. “You didn’t have to come over.”

“No. I wanted us to.” Verona gives him a one-arm hug. “I’m still your friend, you know,” she whispers. “Anyway we needed to get out of the house. Do you mind giving us a moment to talk?”

Tuesday and Jason go to the couch.

“Now, I wanted to talk to you about some things contained in your note.” She’s still holding it.

“I’m sorry about that, I’m just—I’m lonely, Astaria. I miss being with you and coming over. And I feel like I can’t come over now that you and me split. But I still need to see Shringara and Zochae. And you.”

“I know. I need it too. You and I are friends. I’ve been meaning to invite you over. I’m glad you wrote me this note but I admit I find part of it alarming.”

“Which part?”

“This part..right here. I don’t think that level of sadness is

necessary. We were just a couple who broke up. I think..I think you should see someone, professionally.”

“You mean a hooker?”

“No, silly, I mean a psychiatrist. Being sad is one thing but I think when you feel sadness, you really feel it. I think you might be bipolar.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“And what did you think?”

“I think I don’t want to go to a doctor who’s going to prescribe me medicine to take. I’m just against medication because of the whole illegal drugs thing.”

“I don’t follow.”

“This drug is illegal, but this other drug over here, which is sometimes just as dangerous, is almost required, by a doctor. I don’t believe in prescription medication.”

“I know what you mean. And I’m not that big a fan of prescription medicine myself. But. My mom was depressed. And now she takes pills which make her happy. Sometimes that way..can be a way to go. And I think you should lay off the alcohol.”

“I don’t drink that much.”

“Just a suggestion. But I find that doesn’t help my mood.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Will you think about seeing someone, please, for me?”

Matt exhales. “I’ll think about it, but I’m already going to counselling and I don’t want to see a psychiatrist.”

“What does your counsellor say?”

“That I should see a psychiatrist.”

Verona cocks her head. “Let’s go play with the others.”

“So is everything alright in there?” Tuesday asks.

“We were just coming to see you.”

Jason puts his arm around Matt. “How’s my Zha?”

“Your Zha is fine, he’s just a little sad tonight because he thought he lost a friend.”

“But he didn’t,” Verona says.

“Oh, good,” Tuesday says. “I’m glad we’re all back together again. I need my soul brothers and sisters.”

“And we need you,” Jason says.

“I’m so glad we all came together,” Tuesday says. “I feel we’re going to do something powerful.”

“Like what?”

“Like I don’t know if Zha has told you, but me and Zha have discussed making a powerful energetic circus that would travel and visit all over the United States. And we could even do Mexico and Canada too.” Tuesday looks at Matt.

“Yes, we discussed making costumes and doing these like live puppet shows where we act out different types of soul transitions, like coming alive or being cut out in the darkness. We were talking about how to best express what I guess we’re now calling The Reminding, to people who aren’t familiar with it. We came up with the idea of these puppets—”

“Yeah and some of them would be huge!”

“Yes, some of them would be operated by more than one person, like these huge multi-story puppets that would act out emotions and they would have relationships and they would come together at the end—”

“And dance together!”

“And they might even make love. Like not sex. But they might literally make love..make it out of themselves into something else!”

“That sounds so much like my forest vision,” Verona says.

“What’s your forest vision?” Jason asks.

“I see us all in the trees in the jungle as our animal archetypes—”

“Yes, these puppets, these costumes, would be archetypes.”

“We could look into the Jungian ones.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Do you have internet here?”

Matt says, “No.”

“That’s so great. You’re a computer programmer and you don’t have internet at your house.”

Verona turns around. “Did you notice something else, Zochae?”

“I’m looking..I’m looking..I give up, what?”

“No clocks.”

“Ah, very nice, brother. Can I call you brother?”

“I love it. I never had a brother growing up.”

“Julian is sort of a brother of yours.”

“Yes, Julian is a brother. Zochae is a brother. I have brothers now!” Matt stands up and screams it.

Verona tugs on his pants leg. “Remember. No going to extremes.”

“But I love extremes!”

Tuesday tackles him. “I know you do!” They’re laughing and rolling on the carpet together.

“Come on, Zochae, let’s go to the kitchen and make something.” Verona stands up.

Jason goes with her.

“Is it ok if we make something?”

“Sure, but I don’t have many ingredients!”

“Can we open this bottle of wine?”

“Weren’t you just telling me not to drink?”

“I was, but this wine looks so wonderful.”

“I’ve got something better.”

Everyone's eyes light up.

Tuesday says, "What do you have?"

"Hallucinogenic mushrooms," Matt says plainly.

The apartment is quiet.

"You do?" Jason says. "You do!"

"I do indeed."

Verona parks her hand on the wall. "And where did you get these hallucinogenic mushrooms?"

"From our common friend."

"Oh! I thought you dug them up or something. I'm like: I don't want to get the wrong mushroom and die!"

"No, these are safe. If you trust the source."

"Oh, I trust the source, darling," Verona says in this wacky voice.

"Can we do them?"

"Does anyone have anywhere they have to be?"

"Just work in the morning," Jason says.

"Oh you can skip that for a day, can't you?"

"Well, we paid our rent. What the hell, I'll take tomorrow off."

"Yay!"

"Then we can all go out tomorrow and do something. Wait, Matt, do you have work?"

"I took this week off."

"You took the whole week off?"

Matt nods.

"Why did you take the whole week off if you're not going anywhere?"

"So I could do mushrooms."

"You've already been doing them?"

"I've been doing them for days."

"You're high right now?"

"I'm..between highs."

"Have you been doing them by yourself?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that scary?"

"No, I've done them before by myself and it wasn't scary."

"I did have one bad trip."

"When?"

"Today. Before I wrote that note. I had this trip where I was like out in space with no one else with me, and it was just my existence, and it was super, super scary. It took me a long time to get out of that trip, I had to lie in bed for a long time and just let it wear off and come to realize that I wasn't in space and I wasn't all alone and..oh..it was..crazy."

"That sounds kind of like what happened today. I mean..with your

note.”

“What?”

“You felt alone and sort of ‘in space’ like you weren’t a part of the group anymore.”

“Right. Exactly. That’s exactly what it’s like. And my hallucination was exactly the same thing, except metaphorical. Don’t you love mushrooms?”

“Are you ready to trip again after the trip you had today?”

“I’m still tripping! I can’t trip anymore! To me, tripping and not tripping are the same thing again!”

“Do you have enough for all of us?”

“I have a huge bag of them. Zochae, open that cabinet above your head.”

Verona turns to look. Jason opens the cabinet and takes out an industrial-sized Ziploc bag. It could hold a gallon of water. It’s half full of little mushrooms.

Jason says, “Oh. My. God.”

“You could trip for a month on that!”

“How much did that cost? Don’t answer that, don’t answer that. See, Zochae? This is what this motherfucker can do with that high-paying job.”

“I’m glad,” Jason says, “that you did this for us.”

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