The Pleasure Palace

by

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Abstract

The following thesis is a short story collection that delves into the lives and experiences of people living by, passing through, and working at an adult shop in Hell's Kitchen, circa 2005.
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“Richard” originally appeared in Narrative magazine.
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For Scott, George, Jose, Matt, Vadin, Keith, Mizra, and Pish.
My porn family. My boys.

Love you, pervs.
The Following Is a List of People

8:20 a.m.

The early birds. They watch from the door, hands folded, impatient. They stare as we ready the store, unnerved by the passersby; they look to the concrete, pretend to shake out a pebble from their shoe. They look down the stairs, their hands serving as visors; they cling to the glass and search for our shadows. Their frown lines retreat, relieved when they see us. They follow our movements, heads bobbing up and down, side to side, attempting to pinpoint our exact location. They can't stand our absence, the void left behind as we prep the rest of the store. They hate waiting, feeling judged by those around them headed to work. They focus their glares on the lights we switch on, licking dry lips in anticipation. They point to their watches and we nod, let in the mopper and give him his stack. Then head to our stations—make sure all is in place. They knock on the door and plead with their eyes. They nod when we mime *Just a few moments more.*

The door is unlocked, they enter with caution; they know we're hungover, our pores reek of booze. They tell us *good morning,* hang back for a chat. They offer coffee, say that back in the day it cost a nickel. A quarter, if they splurged on a donut. They now brew their own, bring a thermos with them wherever they go. They rifle through rows of adult entertainment. They chatter away, we pretend we're awake. They head to the bathroom, tell us the person working last time let them in. They blame the plumbing in Hell's Kitchen for overflowing the toilet. Never wipe their piss off the bowl and the floor.

They ask us what's new, we mistake that for interest. We tell them we're
tired, and they clear their throat. *What’s new in the titles? What’s new in porn?* We point them to numbers, ascending and large. They take out their glasses, inspect all that’s recent. Our lethargy is catching and they soon yawn, too. They make a decision, hover over us as we match their amateur title to its corresponding number from the rows of plastic bins that line the left wall of the store. We rub our eyes, compose ourselves. We tell them to give us some space, and they put up their arms in surrender. We ring them up and they say they’ll be back soon, maybe even tomorrow. Bright and early, thermos in hand.

11:35 a.m.

The magazine dudes. They never need help, always know where to go. They check out the metal racks—rusted and falling apart. They get a good grip on the mag that they want—*Swank, SCREW, Barely Legal, Juggs, Penthouse, or Oui*—then inspect its protective plastic. They run their fingers along the spine, checking the thickness, then run their palms across the cover, hoping that the pair of triple G tits or the porn star with the shaved pussy or the young girl with pigtails or the legion of naked ladies with pink lip gloss and garter belts will somehow manifest.

They have colds or suffer from allergies. We suspect they hoard magazines in their homes, that the dust that’s settled has taken its toll on their lungs. We look for the raggedy cloth tissues they cling to, doing our goddamn best not to stare at the yellow-green stains on the checkerboard pattern.

They hold magazines up to the light; maybe the fluorescent will reveal the contents inside, serve as a pornographic X-ray of sorts. They put their ears to the covers, like one does to a seashell, then wait for the tide, for the crotch of their
pants to expand and tell them what to buy. They yell out their questions without looking up. Do we have a mag with twins on the cover? Do we still have the *Razzle* from last November? Might we look in the back for the Christmas edition of *Asian Fever*? We yell in succession. It's always a no.

They feel superior to those who buy films. They're old school and refer to porn as erotica. The say the true art of sex lies within still photography; within crisp, clean, numbered pages meant to stick together. They always stick together.

2:46 p.m.

The cheap bastards. They never look at us, just head to the back of the store. They scour for hours in bins and on shelves. Today is the day they will find what they want—that ever-elusive, expensive DVD, marked down by mistake, its price tag or sticker slapped on without care. They sift through hundreds of titles, running their fingers along cool, shiny covers.

They gather in groups and never approach. Their bodies stiff, but greedy for discounts. We watch them on monitors, wondering when they'll give up, taking bets as we look at them thinking, hoping to beat the system, calculating risk and reward. They look up and squint, working out how many times they can jerk off to the same title, hoping that this time, just maybe, they can manage to hang in there for more than a week.

They wear flip flops and sandals, even in fall. Mosquito bites have devoured their shins, a rash from the homeless guy they sat next to on the subway. They bite their nails, scraping the grime underneath with their teeth, liking that it tastes like curdled milk and nothing. They pick one or three DVDs, depending on the deal,
then slowly approach, prolonging their ten-second walk to the register in case they change their minds. When they sigh, we know they’ve conceded to their purchase. They point to the price and demand a discount, refusing to pay the tax. A standoff ensues. It’s their day off; they’ve got nothing to do, so they’re good to just stand there and argue their case. They’re good to try and break us.

4:17 p.m.

The couples. They enter giddy and holding hands. This foray into porn is the litmus test for their relationship. They enter hoping a purchase will justify their dating, validate the notion that they’re meant to be. They’ve never felt this way about anyone before, honest. This time it’s different. This time she feels comfortable letting him watch her masturbate with her eyes open; letting him go down on her as she watches a condom-clad Tommy Gunn or Evan Stone or Kurt Lockwood kiss and fuck and lick and stroke a golden-skinned Keylani Lei or Jessica Drake or Stormy Daniels.

She thinks about their first time together, the night he treated her to Pad Thai in the Village. She sucked on his thumb for three minutes straight, couldn’t believe how much she liked it. She remembers his face when he came, when he asked if she finished and her lie felt okay. Today is about them both—they’ve earned this. Today, she thinks that she might let go just enough to finally come.

The man feigns knowledge, pointing to the glass display cases like he gets why one is next to the other, like he’s deciphered some code that doesn’t exist. He smiles when she blushes, thinks it’s real cute how she’s shy, yet still down for whatever. He hopes she’ll loosen up a bit, maybe do that thing with her finger he
hinted at last time. He won’t tell his buddies about that, just stick to the store. He can’t wait to see the looks on their faces as he relays what he did this weekend.

He lets go of her hand, then places his own on the small of her back, gentle yet firm. He’s got this. They stare at the Vivid showcase and he points to the covers like he knows what he’s doing. Like he knows what she likes. She lets him take the lead, be the man and tell her what’s what. She thinks it’s cool he has a dark side, jokes around and calls him naughty. The word makes her wet. She feels his voice vibrate as she leans on his chest; she’ll tell her girlfriends it’s her crawl space, hoping they say he’s a keeper.

6:43 p.m.

The suits. Stock brokers, lawyers, developers, doctors, ties and suspenders and slick, gelled-out hair. Hands in their pockets, they survey the room. Their eyes land on bondage, their lips stretch and curl; they want to be punished and give up control. They crave a strong woman in rawhide and heels—the kind who will flog them and whip into shape, submission. They have us hold their briefcase behind the counter as they browse, say not to worry—they’re here to spend money.

They pluck their eyebrows and nose hair, get shoe shines at Penn Station. They ask about Hell’s Kitchen strip clubs, wondering out loud if they’re as good as the ones in Vegas. They ask if the S&M club on Lafayette is still closed due to health violations, then joke that someone must have complained about moldy brioche or undercooked steak. They want to know if we party and where. They ask if we’ve heard of Vicky Veron, the dominatrix who charges six thousand per session. She’s worth every penny, but last they heard, she moved to Ibiza.
They want the rough stuff, yearn for restraints and for clamps on their balls. They don't call it porn—too belittling and trite—insisting it's kink. They need to be spanked and forced to submit, give up the power they hold every day. They ache for the sting of the paddle, the throbbing. The moment when leather hits skin. They search for DVD covers with chastity devices, spot the films where metal and buckskin imprison dicks. They long to be pegged and pretend they're that guy—the one with a ball gag, eyes rolled to the back of his head; the guy whose skin reddens and blisters from blows that he's earned. They too want a mistress, a woman who hovers, who governs their moves late at night, in the dark. They covet red nails and latex and cleavage. Rubber gloves and a lashing for their wiggles and squirms. They only want the DVD, no covers. We ring them up, checking out their manicured nails and close razor shaves. Wondering why we never wear ties.

8:06 p.m.

The regulars. Each with a nickname and fetish of choice.

The Troll in Central Park buys scat, while showing us wallet-sized pictures of his three grandchildren: chubby redheads, just like grandpa. We ooh and we ahh. His name is Albert. Maybe Marv. He mentions they're all potty trained, wishes they didn't grow up so fast. Says, That's kids for you, I guess.

Gummy McGee buys blowbangs and wrestling. His one eye is glass, his teeth need adhesive. He thinks it's a gag, thinks we find him funny. His comb over is slick and there's an impressive sheen to his scalp. His brown leather jacket smells of aftershave and cigars. He brings us candy, takes out his dentures and laughs. We keep a glass out for him—saves us the trouble of wiping down the counter.
Elephantiasis Bill loves Long Jeanne Silver. He’s from the Midwest; someone once heard him mention South Dakota. Could’ve been Kansas. Bill sports a large bulge at the front of his high waisted Levi’s. It looks like a gut. He walks like John Wayne and talks real slow. Someone once heard him say Pilgrim. His voice cracks when he’s out of breath, when he tells us about his girlfriend, Gloria—how she cooks and cleans and fucks him. They go to Sarasota every Christmas, eat glazed ham and garlic mashed potatoes with her mom. They drive there, he tells us. Says he started getting air sick in the Navy. Gloria tickles the back of his neck with her nails on the drive back to Brooklyn. She spends half the week at his place, watches amputee porn with him. It thrills her to bits, he says, then winks in case we missed the pun. We laugh when he says it. Every single time.

Ponyboy prefers his women old. Sex with them is what he calls Geriatric Fantastic. He gets off on the boas and walkers and stiff hair and pearls. He’s always been into that lot—used to fuck a friend of his mother’s. He regales us with his conquests of the elderly, takes his hair elastic off and shakes out his mullet before tying it back in a neat, tight ponytail. He dates Sylvias and Mildreds and Barbras and Ruths. He jokes that they give him hard candy and butterscotch when he’s done. Says they worry about him and check his temperature by kissing his forehead. Sometimes, he leaves the mark of their fuchsia lipstick on his brow for hours. Doesn’t care that people gawk. He laughs, kind of wheezes. His breath smells like band aids and clings to the air even after he’s gone. Eventually, one of gets the kiwi air freshener.

9:19 p.m.

The ones who love feet. And tickling. And big boobs. And small breasts. And
high heels. And stockings and stripping and smoking and oil and tattoos and wrestling and cosplay and cuckold and DPs and threesomes and squirting and diapers and midgets and fisting and pissing and lions and tigers and bears. Oh my. They prefer “proclivity” to fetish, insist the latter implies something improper. They like their girls pregnant; the baby bump spells something forbidden. They want them to lactate, prefer they use breast pumps to dole out a steady stream of vitamins B2 and 12. They want to watch others being breastfed, taken care of and nurtured. They want their girls felching, collecting every last drop of semen through a straw. Their girls need to smile at the end. To not just swallow, but gulp it all down with a grin.

They crave creampies, get off on watching assholes and pussies expand to the point of tearing, until warm, white liquid is pushed out with visible effort, oozing slowly in thick, cascading spurts, spelling relief for the girls, leaving nothing but raw budding anuses and labias drenched in jizz. They search for cum swapping squads and long for that moment when eyes and cheeks and chins and brows and hair are covered in cum. The moment when one girl takes charge and directs the others, points and tells them where and who to lick first, orders them to pair up and slowly spit freshly-emitted sperm into one another’s mouth. Repeat and swallow.

They like their girls nubile, Japanese. They don’t mind the pixelated pussies. It’s not about the sex, they say, but the experience. We nod, pretending we know what they mean. They like the way Asian girls smile and coo, remain demure even as one shoves a squid in her vagina. They never say pussy; it’s crude and unseemly. The squid is dead. At least, they think it is. It’s not about the squid, they say. It’s
about the girl’s fingers, soaked in its slime and juices. It’s about the tips of her fingers touching the tentacles, her nails digging into the squid. It’s about the pixels obscuring the cephalopod’s body, still jerking around inside her. It’s about two species intermingling, becoming one.

They look for the movies where men swallow blood, where ruby red discharge stains linen white sheets. Where men shove their faces in mosh pits of cellular tissue, dig deep into seeping orifices. The store is their haven, their peaceful abode. They smile as we swipe their credit cards, and we smile back, tell them to come again. “Come again.” They laugh, and for a split second, we don’t get the joke.

10:14 p.m.

The ones into oral. It’s more than the mere swapping of semen. More than the money shot. They want their girl crawling, hovering over a row of men on their backs, each one harder than the other. They want her on her knees, sheathing her teeth with her upper lip, spitting and jerking and sucking, smiling at the camera, unflinching. Never wasting time or opportunity. They want her on her back. Naked. Filmed upside down, on a chaise lounge in someone’s poolside rental in the Valley.

They want the guys to take turns shoving their cocks in her mouth. They need her to gag and to gurgle as each one of the men pushes deeper. They want perfectly rouged cheeks that soon expose adult acne, as the girl’s heavy foundation flakes and clumps like bits of clay, once her routine of spit-suck-deepthroat finds its steady rhythm. They want multiple money shots, all in sync with a score of relieved moans, groans, and grunts, all differing in clamor and urgency. They want
the girl’s fake lashes—curled and lacquered to the hilt—to come unglued, glide down her cheeks. Slowly. Perceptibly. Incapable of enduring the sheer heft and volume of what the men serve up. They want her body bruised and chafed. They want her mascara to run, her eyeballs to bulge, her pupils to dilate, her blood vessels to burst. They need to see the intricate web of red veins in her sclera, hoping her vision is blurred. They watch her, almost at her breaking point; spit and bile crawling out her mouth. They wait for the snot bubbles to emerge, for that mixture of saliva and mucus, that yellowish tint and gooey texture, like the slimy part of an egg yolk, to slither and stick to her hair.

They ask that we open the showcase—the one that guarantees a barrage of oral delights. They look for the covers that promise gagging and choking; covers that titillate with still close up shots of the girl, letting them know that bile and stomach acid are the only things left inside her—the only things left before she’s soaked in spunk.

They ask us to leave them alone, say they need to take their time. We wait for it. Then, like clockwork, they adjust themselves and rub the cover on the crotch of their jeans. If we’re really lucky, they come in wearing sweatpants. We clear our throats and make our reluctant way to them, pretend we’re reorganizing one of the display cases. They don’t notice us right away, too caught up in the moment, too focused on their fantasy to recognize our presence. We offer assistance, pretend to stretch our backs, just so we have an excuse to look up, a reason not to stare at the wet spot on their pants, dangerously growing in circumference.
The scat men. They look at each cover meticulously, making sure they don't double up on the same title. We want to understand, but pretend not to care. We try to shrug off the subject of smearing and eating shit, of actually digesting it. We fail.

They’re an anomaly; it’s not the sex that excites them. We run theories by each other, speculate as to why these men watch what they watch. We hypothesize that their fascination and arousal stem from the girl’s inability to escape her predicament—from her perseverance in spite of the fecal matter crammed down every one of her orifices. We speculate about their upbringing, about possible abuse and neglect. We conclude that these men were not properly potty trained and possibly abused by a matriarch who yelled at them for shitting their pants as kids; a maternal figure who slapped them across the face so hard it left a mark, and ironically only made them feel safer when they were enveloped in the warmth of their transgression. We figure they were forced to sit in their own filth for hours, no choice but to soil themselves further. We feel bad for them, bad for the girls on camera who feign arousal.

A few of the guys suck their thumbs—further proof of our assumption. We let them exchange titles when they claim the DVD didn’t play properly on their machine at home. We don’t want to shame them, but can’t comprehend how there’s none there. We don’t get how they have the nerve, the audacity to let us know they’re cool with us knowing.

Mostly, we don’t want to play the movie on the store player. We don’t want to see what they see; the photo on the cover is plenty. We don’t want to normalize
scat, don’t want to be able to eat our lunch from Great Wall III or Fat Sal’s or Hell’s Kitchen Grill while shit is thrust at girls barely out of their teens. We don’t want to be able to lick our fingers clean of duck sauce or marinara or tahini while men squat and smile as they defecate into seemingly willing mouths. While laxative-induced excrement is pressed into acne and delicate pores, until all that’s visible is the color of the girl’s eyes. We know the best she can hope for is a staph infection.

We talk about Brazil, where most scat is filmed. We pity the girls, the poverty that propels them into the game. Lunch arrives and someone mentions a documentary they once watched about Rio. Someone else says their parents were married in Brazil and that “Girl from Ipanema” is their song. Turns out they prefer Henry Mancini’s version to Sinatra’s.

12:46 a.m.

The late comers. Five of them, to be exact. We imagine they’re part of a network, with annual meetings and code names. We wonder if they’ve gone beyond the point of watching, and if they have families. We look for wedding rings. They show up as we’re closing, just late enough for us to miss the train home. But we know better than to not let them in; they’re NC9ers. They have cash to spend and Naturist Competitions, ranging from volumes one through nine, to buy.

They know not to come during the day, when the sun is still out. They’re different—creepy in ways we try not to fathom. They browse the brochure we keep behind the counter, licking their pudgy, pink fingers as they turn the page, as they decide whether it’s five year-old Alex or eight year-old Violet they want to watch; whether it’s sandy-blond boys with freckles, whose front teeth have fallen
out, or blue-eyed little girls with barrettes and stick-on rainbow tattoos—not a hint of peach fuzz on them—who tickle their fancy.

They sweat, tell us they've just returned from Thailand or Belgium or some other country that hints at who they are. We tell ourselves they only go there for vacation, to destress, and that they might actually be nudists. We tell ourselves it's ok—these films have no sex, just naked families at the beach, on a picnic. We tell ourselves that nudist sack races with naked kids are not illegal, just harmless fun. We need the extra money; their hundred-dollar tips aren’t meant to shut us up or make us complicit. We tell ourselves this.

They're too talkative and friendly. We call the mopper, nudging our heads in that way that lets him know we need someone out of the store. He looks at his watch and gives an obligatory yawn, loud enough so they take notice. They thank us, then bang on the counter and leave a tip.

The air is pungent—a sourness produced by their sweat glands and ninety-dollar aftershave. We give them a five-minute head start before locking up and lowering the steel storefront gate. On the subway ride home, we thank our lucky stars we didn’t run into them on the street, rubbing the folded hundred-dollar bill in our pocket,
No one dared call Joe Giraldi anything but an artist. Not to his face, anyway. People weren’t fueled by fear, but felt a sense of pity. The guy who dreamed of becoming the Andy Warhol of porn had ended up more like Ed Wood, without the inadvertent camp. Those around him took to using air quotes when combining Joe and “director” or “artist” in the same sentence, ascribing terms like ‘pornographer’ and ‘has-been’ to the forty-seven year-old. Joe himself displayed a remarkable aptitude for self-delusion as a form of survival. He was more a comeback kid than a has-been more an industry veteran than a washed-up farce. Today’s shoot was all about Joe: Joe’s return. Joe’s additional fifteen minutes. Joe’s art. Joe’s redemption.

A nineteen year-old who’d called herself Angel Annie positioned herself on a large canvas in the center of the wobbly parquet floor of Pleasure Palace. Angel Annie squatted, leaning on the palms of her hands and soles of her feet. She stared at the ceiling, solely focused on projecting an assortment of bright colors from her anus onto the canvas. Every time she squirted, Angel Annie closed her eyes. The shop’s owner left three clerks in charge of guarding the shop’s displays and making sure that Joe’s team—the girl, Joe, and his friend’s nephew, who was in charge of lighting—cleaned up once they finished filming. The clerks leaned against the wall near the foot fetish videos, arms folded, and quipped about Joe’s Technicolor Dream Enema. They wondered why the girl’s vagina seemed so misplaced—high up and eerily close to her belly button. They dubbed her “Zipper Snatch” and watched as she expertly gyrated her hips, increasing the trajectory of purple, pink, yellow, and orange paint spattered onto the canvas.
“You’re rainbow bright, baby!” He yelled to encourage the increasingly suggestive swivel of her pelvis.

The canvas absorbed the paint almost immediately, leaving a colorful yet muddy mark—a Rorschach test no one cared to decipher. Angel Annie swayed her hips from side to side and off the canvas as Joe slid underneath her with his handheld camera. She squatted and he zoomed in on her wet pink flesh.

“That’s it, baby,” he said. “That’s my girl.” Joe kept filming, sliding two fingers inside her and thrusting them up and down, faster and faster until she came.

The clerks continued staring, snickering and blushing with unadmitted discomfort. They didn’t know that three months later, when Joe put together the final footage of Kaleidoscope Kunt, their mocking figures would appear on camera for exactly four seconds. Joe had panned too far off left while he threw handfuls of rainbow glitter on Angel Annie.

Joe was undaunted by the obvious unease and annoyance of the shop clerks, and the fact that his male lead and second female co-star were two hours late, did nothing to deter Joe. He kept his composure and smiled genuinely—the only way he knew how—in anticipation of the inevitable industry accolades. Subsequently he’d hoped for removal from the porn black list, where names of colluding commies were replaced by all those who had wronged the head honchos of the adult film industry in the San Fernando Valley.

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Joe was born Giuseppe Piero Giraldi in 1960, in Staten Island, to Dorria Venucci and Ronaldo “Ronny” Giraldi. He was named after his great-grandfather
Giuseppe, a failed actor who was rumored to have been murdered by the Sicilian mob for sleeping with a Don’s mistress. In reality, Giuseppe was a dockworker who tripped and fell off a pier. Joe’s grandfather Gianni had moved the family to America in 1934. They’d settled in a two-bedroom house on Jersey Street on the outskirts of Richmond Terrace. Joe’s grandfather opened Giraldi & Son, a local pizzeria, and performed with Joe’s father in a few local community plays. Gianni Giraldi died from an aneurism at the dinner table four months after Joe was born. Ronny took over the pizza place and quit the local theater following the death of his father. He dropped dead from a heart attack seven years later at the age of thirty-two, while spreading homemade marinara sauce on raw pizza dough. Dorria Giraldi found clerical work at the local Catholic church, but her trust in God wavered. Joe—an only child—took on the role of man of the house to the best of his seven year-old abilities, and helped his mother whenever and however possible.

Joe watched his first porno, *My Tongue is Quick*, at a friend’s house. Age eleven, he quickly developed a fascination with the film’s star, John Holmes. Five years later, when *Lollipop Palace* was released, Joe was a barely-attending sophomore at Ralph McKee High School. He decided to drop out and pursue a career in porn full-time. Joe’s mother encouraged her son’s endeavor, partly in awe of Joe’s fearlessness but mostly because she worried that her only child would drop dead of a heart attack at thirty-two from the stress of the everyday grind.

Joe gathered bootlegs of movies and marveled at the unabashed intensity and purity of the sex. He viewed porn as the rawest form of artistic expression and was often heard telling friends, “With porn, you can’t hide anything. It’s all literally
out in the open.”

One week after his seventeenth birthday in June of 1977, Joe got a job handing out flyers outside the Cherry Theater on 42nd Street and Eighth Avenue. The area was then referred to as the Minnesota Strip, a seedy reference to the Midwest origin of most of the prostitutes who worked that stretch. The area's illegal live sex shows and adult theaters proved enormously popular and continually attracted locals and tourists alike. The owner of the Cherry Theater, Tommy Dunne, was impressed with Joe's moxie; the eager teen made it his own personal mission to become the best damn street barker that side of Manhattan. Joe took great pride in his work, carefully enunciating, stressing, and deploying a lyrical tone: “Girls, Girls! Live Girls! Sweet Girls! Pop your cherry at the Cherry!”

Joe started off commuting back and forth from his home in Staten Island; his mother liked having her boy near her. She never faulted him for the kind of dreams he had, just cared that he had them. Tommy promoted Joe to head barker for the Cherry Theater after three months; he was impressed and surprised with the kid’s energy and amount of people he attracted to the Cherry. Joe worked seemingly endless hours. He loved the performance involved in attracting people to the Cherry Theater and often found himself sleeping on the floor of the Port Authority. Bored cops with a quota to fill sometimes woke him, took him to the station, hoping a night in the drunk tank would scare him straight.

Months of standing and shouting took their eventual toll. Joe came down with a nasty bout of Bronchitis; His mother refused to let him leave the house. She decided to put an end to her son's street barking days after he recuperated. Joe pleaded with her to no avail. Both he and his mother knew he was too loyal and
protective of her to leave home. Joe called the Cherry to announce his resignation and Tommy asked to speak to Dorria. He assured her that Joe would be working the concession stand indoors from now on, never again would he be subjected to the harsh reality of a New York City winter. Dorria, proud that her son was a valued employee, agreed. Joe became the Cherry Theater’s new concession guy. He sold popcorn, Junior Mints, Milk Duds, watered down Coca-Cola. He served the cheap pungent vodka that Tommy made in his Bronx basement, poured it in closed plastic coffee cups for an extra two dollars.

Joe was the trusted lookout for the handful of cops who couldn’t be bribed. A small white panic button underneath Joe’s concession stand buzzed a red light in Tommy’s office at the back. Tommy immediately alerted Lou, the stage manager. Lou would signal the performers on stage to stop the sex show and quickly usher in one of the seven male NYU acting students who rotated there on a nightly basis. They clamored for the opportunity to perform various Shakespearean sonnets in the nude. A subdued red light shone down, the sonnets varied in length, and the truly ambitious performers went with a soliloquy. The fifth raid inspired Joe to stop by the Book Cellar at Webster Library and buy a used copy of *The Great Tragedies of William Shakespeare*. Joe attempted to read *Othello*, only to return to the Book Cellar and pick up an Oxford Dictionary. He read and read, and it wasn’t until he got to *Hamlet* that he found what he wanted: A dead father’s ghost, betrayal, Ophelia, murder and mayhem, a play within a play. The lust of it all! Joe read until his eyes hurt. Coffee and Advil allowed him to continue. The words made him hard.

Joe watched the live sex shows from the sidelines backstage on his one
night off. He couldn’t take his eyes off the performers, who seemed to move within a separate realm—one in which Joe ached to take part. He would hand the performers towels once they left the stage—an excuse to watch from behind the curtains. Joe never understood why they didn’t let the sweat and oil and grime and bodily fluids that enveloped their bodies simply remain intact, as nature and the porn Gods had intended. He couldn’t comprehend taking part in such glorious acts, only to wipe the remnants away.

That same year Joe lost his virginity to Veronica Vamp, one of the Cherry’s top live acts. The buxom twenty-four year-old liked the dimpled, brown-eyed, long-haired boy with the olive complexion. They often left the Cherry together and headed back to Veronica’s place in Queens. His few weeks with Veronica educated Joe on female ejaculation and how water mixed with saline was the best enhancer of the phenomenon. He learned just how crucial of a component cocaine was in maintaining an erection for a thirty minute show, and that spermicidal cream was advantageous to condoms, both on and off stage. He learned that when a woman truly climaxes, not just flails about and screams out for show, her cervix contracts and serves as a sort of fleshly vise, attaching itself to the penis and vibrating unabated as she orgasms. Joe’s time with Veronica was short and sweet. She became a signature anecdote with which he often obliged anyone who asked, and later those who didn’t, after her body was found in a Village dumpster ten years later.

Joe got his big chance at the Cherry in April of 1981 when Ken, the NYU student on standby that night, failed to show up. The cops entered the theater and the red light buzzed in Tommy’s office. Joe took the initiative and ran onto the
stage, stripped his clothes with lightning speed, and proceeded to recite his favorite lines from *Hamlet*: "There is a play to-night before the king; One scene of it comes near the circumstance which I have told thee of my father’s death: I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot, even with the very comment of thy soul observe mine uncle." Naked, alone onstage, Joe stared at the audience as he spoke, growing harder with each word. He repeated the passage over and over until the cops’ boredom overtook their curiosity and they left. Misty Monroe, one of the Cherry’s top earners, joined him onstage and wordlessly guided Joe through what he would later refer to as a “transcendental moment in time.”

Joe’s career as a sex performer quickly evolved. He became the Cherry Theater’s number one earner. Audiences got a thrill out of Joe’s signature stare as he tore into a myriad of women onstage. He raised his left eyebrow and glared mischievously, the veins and tendons in his upper body straining, sweat dripping onto his lips. Sometimes, when he’d lick his mouth, people would stand up, eagerly anticipating what was in store. The audience would hoot and holler, clapping loudly when he came. Neither they nor Joe noticed when he was the only one left on stage, semi-erect and bowing. Tommy advised Joe to change his name, but Joe opted out of an alliterative assortment of sexual surnames. He imagined that his dead father and the men who came before him would have gotten a kick out of the spot lit Giraldi name, even if that same spotlight often shone on hookers and hustlers and crumpled up flyers on the streets of New York City.

Six months later, Joe moved out of his mother’s home in Staten Island. He roomed with Crystal Waters—an older stripper who worked at a club called Private Eyes—in an old railroad apartment in Hell’s Kitchen. His rent was seventy-
five dollars a month. Joe and Crystal often met at the Skylight Diner on Ninth Avenue after their respective shifts, gorging on scrambled eggs and bacon, cinnamon pancakes and real maple syrup. They’d shower together back at the apartment and have sex until they both passed out. Crystal was seeing a man named Matt at the time, who was one of the bouncers at Private Eyes. Matt would often come by and watch as she and Joe fucked. Crystal explained that Matt was a cuckold and Joe thought he’d never heard such a perfect word. Joe fucked Crystal, made the same eye contact with Matt as with the Cherry’s audience. He was pleasantly surprised at how much more aroused he became when Matt unzipped his jeans and stroked himself. Matt stayed silent until right before the very end, when he knew Joe was on the verge. Then he’d tell Joe how and where to come. Joe obliged. Both men found their respective releases together. Crystal found her own several seconds later. The only sounds that remained in the apartment were of the three catching their breath, and the police sirens out on the streets.

Tommy Dunne sold the Cherry Theater in 1984 to Robert “Olly” Oliveri. Olly, who was rumored to have heavy sanitation connections, took an instant shine to Joe. He was often heard telling Joe to cut his damn hair already, fucking hippie. Joe affectionately replied that Olly was an old bastard who should lay off the cannolis.

Olly told Joe he’d take him to Italy one day. He spoke of the beautiful Italian ladies, swore that no American woman could hold a candle to Sophia Loren or Gina Lollobrigida. Joe often spent his one night off sitting with Olly in his office, waxing philosophical about women and sex and food and family. Olly’s mother, Silvana, made homemade calzones and tiramisu for Joe. Olly warned him not to get fat,
patting his own bulging belly and laughing. He could pay girls to ignore his looks, he’d say, while Joe could not. Olly, twenty years Joe’s senior, had also lost his father at a young age. He never offered details, but Joe got the sense that Mr. Oliveri’s death wasn’t a result of natural causes. Olly respected Joe’s love and protective nature when it came to Dorria, and often slipped Joe a few extra dollars to help out back in Staten Island. Joe took to calling Olly “Daddy-O,” and Olly beamed at the nickname.

Joe poked fun at Olly. “The chicks dig ya, Daddy-O. They’re just hankerin’ for a three-hundred pound dick with a four-inch cock.”

Olly often laughed, his stomach shaking uncontrollably. “The old man would have liked you, kid.”

Joe liked to imagine there was a father out there who would have liked him. He couldn’t remember if his own ever had.

Olly saw potential in Joe but grew increasingly frustrated with bribing the cops and watching the damn red light buzzer go on and off in Tommy’s old office. He decided to revamp the Cherry Theater and turn it into a legitimate adult movie house. Joe helped with the construction: he and three other guys from Olly’s sanitation business took down two walls, built a soundproof partition in the middle of the theater, replaced the plastic chairs with nailed-down faux-velvet movie seats, and painted the walls and bathrooms. The renovation took three and a half weeks to complete. In the end, the Cherry Theater—a classic establishment from the 1920s—boasted two adult movie theaters separated by a black and gold partition. Joe went back to working the concession stand while watching porn on either side of the newly-renovated Cherry Theater for hours at a time.
Everything was an unexplored opportunity in Joe’s eyes and the potential he saw in the new Cherry Theater was no different. He put the same effort into selling candy and soda that he’d previously put into his sexual performances onstage. He worked double and sometimes triple shifts. A disapproving Olly let him sleep on his office couch; even walking those six short blocks back to his own apartment proved to be too draining for Joe. He initiated a two-for-one sale at the Cherry, encouraging customers to come back, and kept Olly company as the latter did paperwork.

The movies justified it all. Joe had never in his life seen sex and kink and passion so tremendously magnified. He’d never seen naked bodies contort and writhe and flex with such vigor. Joe watched the figures on the screen, and in his mind it was as though they moved about in slow motion. He studied the movements of both the male and female porn stars. He ignored the moans and groans from the audience, and the hookers going down on men in the dark. Instead, he paid meticulous attention to the films; he focused on lighting changes and techniques, music cues and angles, themes and set design, wardrobe and makeup, dialogue and direction.

The films at the Cherry Theater began to change. Storylines and intention gave way to a new genre of gonzo films. Joe viewed them as far too disorganized and amateurish. He told everyone who would listen that gonzo lacked essential plot and art behind the sex scenes. It was nothing but lazy porn for lazy people. Joe knew he could do better. He bought a used Bolex 16mm camera for fifty dollars and paid a local prostitute ten dollars to come back to his place. Crystal had
already moved out, and last Joe heard, she’d married Matt and was living in a commune somewhere out in California.

Joe filmed the prostitute going down on him as he recited Shakespeare, wearing a pair of reading glasses he got from the Lost and Found box at the Cherry Theater. Later, he asked if she knew any working girls who would help him out for a few dollars. She advertised for him on the streets and three more girls joined the ensemble. Joe continued filming. He hung an American flag on his living room window and painted himself and the girls in red, white, and blue body paint. Joe taught one of the girls to slowly zoom in as he spread another girl’s legs for the film’s grand finale. He told the girl behind the camera to hold the boom mic as close as possible to Joe’s head. He began going down on his scene partner, and when he got the thumbs up that the camera was zoomed in all the way, he proceeded to hum the Star Spangled Banner until the girl climaxed. Joe kissed the inside of her right thigh, stared straight at the camera, and said, “I’m Joe Giraldi, and I approve this message.” Joe called the film *Patriot Pussy* and showed it to his boss. Olly was impressed, but refused Joe’s request to screen the film: *Patriot Pussy* was not enough sex and too much talking. Joe nodded and left the office. He worked his double shift that day, and quit the next morning. Joe never heard from Olly again.

Joe tried selling his film in local adult bookshops and quickly realized that video was the new name of the game. He pawned everything he owned, including his guitar, 16mm camera, and a few pieces of junk jewelry Crystal had left behind. He bought a cheap projector, a heap of VHS tapes, and grainy stock footage of 1950s Thanksgiving Day parades which he projected onto a white sheet in his
apartment. Joe performed in, produced, directed, and edited a slew of films over the next ten years.

*Diamond Dolls* saw Joe recreating the Kennedy assassination on his bed, making speeches in a semi-coherent JFK voice, fucking a girl in a blonde wig, while slathering both their bodies with chunks of a stale week-old cake bought for a third of the price from a local deli. Joe’s onscreen death occurred after a girl in a dark wig, Jackie O sunglasses, and a pink pillbox hat rode him to climax, after which a gunshot pierced the air.

Joe plowed his way through a barrage of women in *Staten Island Sluts*; he played a leather-clad rock star delighting in his eager groupies. The girls performed what would later be known as a reverse gangbang on Joe, and broke his couch and coffee table in the process. Joe edited Lou Reed’s music into the film’s sex scenes, vowing that one day he’d get a copy to the Coney Island Baby.

*Blue Eyed Belle* cast Joe as a seedy agent to a young Marilyn Monroe, played by a hooker named Tanya Lee. According to Joe, some of the film’s finest dialogue came to him in a dream. He believed that lines like, “I’m gonna fuck the Norma Jean out of you” and “Let me scratch your seven year itch” would one day become just as iconic in the world of pornography as the real Marilyn was in Hollywood.

*Vampire Vixen* was Joe’s homage to Dracula and Bela Lugosi, in particular—his grandfather’s favorite actor. Joe bit the buttocks and thighs of a woman he was dating at the time—a thirty-three year-old waitress named Lorelai Bradka. He drove a black rubber dildo into each of her three major orifices. Joe then raised his bed sheet-turned cape to his face and slowly declared, “I am Dickula!” Lorelai
asked Joe why a vampire would kill another vampire. Joe had simply replied, "My Van Helsing never showed up, baby."

Plot discrepancies aside, Joe’s movies proved wildly popular with local Times Square adult shops, and just as Giuliani made it his holy mission to transform the area into something altogether wholesome and family-friendly—banishing the sex shops and theaters to Hell’s Kitchen—movie technology changed once again: from VHS to Hi8, and finally to Digital8. Joe’s films became more ambitious and the impressive sales of his previous work allowed him to buy a car for his mother and better film equipment for himself.

Initially, the girls Joe hired for his films changed along with the porn industry. Large tits, shaved pussies, and bleached assholes were becoming all the rage in the San Fernando Valley. Joe went with the flow. He quickly realized, however, that artificially enhanced bodies made for artificial performances. Soon he nixed all notions of “professional performers” and “porn stars.” Joe’s insistence on working with “real girls” paid off: he was nominated for a 1996 AVN award as Best Director for his film, *Honey Heathen*. The film’s plot revolved around a young pastor’s daughter from Oklahoma who moves to Manhattan and goes on a fuck spree while reciting biblical psalms and the names of Saints. Joe played the preacher who fucks the young heathen into submission. He lost the award but caught the eye of David Shapiro, owner of Venus Pictures, at the Bellagio Hotel after party.

Venus Pictures, one of the most influential porn companies at the time, was the first to have five contract girls signed to perform exclusively in the company’s films. Venus Pictures also boasted the most watched pay-per-view adult movies in
hotels all across the country. David Shapiro liked Joe’s energy and invited him to his office in Los Angeles. Joe had never flown first class before, and called his mother from the plane. Dorria Giraldi cried from joy for the first time in nearly thirty years and began attending church on a regular basis.

David Shapiro explained that Venus Pictures mostly catered to couples. Beautiful women and handsome men, romantic storylines and dazzling locations, had made millions for Shapiro and his company. He liked Joe’s grittiness—the underground feel of his films. He wanted Joe to give the films produced at Venus Pictures an edge. Joe received a check for twenty thousand dollars from Shapiro that day, to be spent as he saw fit, as long as the film was shot and edited within two weeks. Other stipulations: Joe must use at least one of Venus Pictures’ contract girls, condoms were a requirement for all vaginal and/or anal penetrative sex acts. The movie itself had to contain no less than five sex scenes and run no longer than eighty minutes. Joe left Los Angeles three days later, check in hand, having written what he later referred to as “the unseen masterpiece.”

Joe began production on Alice Through the Looking Ass: An Anal Odyssey as soon as he was back in New York. He envisioned a pornographic wonderland and spent twelve thousand dollars on an enormous glass aquarium which he filled with water and red wine in a friend’s backyard. Devon Davis, the contract girl Joe flew in from Los Angeles, couldn’t swim but Joe insisted she float to the best of her abilities. At the end of the scene, he instructed Devon to smash the aquarium with a mallet. She refused, unwilling to risk getting shards of glass near or on her. Joe tried to take down the tank himself, but ended up asking three of his local buddies
to do the job, as the tank proved too large and sturdy to be destroyed by one person.

Joe spent five thousand dollars on five student dancers from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. They performed an improvised ballet at midnight in a back alley off MacDougal Street. All five were topless; they wore tutus and black stockings on their faces. Joe spent an additional thousand dollars on various local escorts and struggling actors, who performed four out of the five agreed-upon sex scenes: double anal penetration inside an actual dumpster on Christopher Street, or wrestling in a kiddie pool filled with raspberry Jell-O and fingerling the dessert into vaginas and anuses.

Joe performed the final sex scene with Devon Davis at his apartment. She wore a blue and white plaid skirt and wore her blonde hair in pigtails. Joe wore a purple top hat and instructed Devon to go down on him, warning her that he could hold out for a long period of time. Devon got on her knees and went to work, moaning and groaning for effect. Thirty minutes into the scene, however, the only sounds that came out of her were chokes and grunts. Her heavy makeup began to peel off, smearing tan-colored flecks of residue all over her face and Joe’s dick, and exposing her irritated acne. Ten minutes later, an exhausted Devon Davis slid a condom on Joe’s dick, per his instructions, and jerked him off until he came inside the yellow rubber. Joe immediately rolled the condom off and tied it into a knot. He told Devon to “open up, Alice” and dunked the knotted-up condom in and out of her mouth several times. He looked at Devon, shoved his fingers in her mouth and sang, “A very merry unbirthday to you!”

Joe spent the film’s last two thousand dollars, and seven hundred dollars of
his own money, on a three-piece orchestra for the movie’s score; they went with Mozart’s Jupiter Symphony. Joe edited the final footage, which ran well over eighty minutes, and sent it off to Los Angeles.

Two days later, Joe received an enraged phone call from David Shapiro. He accused Joe of breaking the contract and said Devon Davis was traumatized.

“You have her gagging on your cock until her zits are showing!” he raged.

“It’s gritty,” Joe countered. “It’s real.”

David was seething. He didn’t want real and neither did his clientele. “You promised me an underground fantasy,” he said. “You gave me the fucking Princess Bride on meth.”

David went on to complain about the ballet scene, deeming it fartsy and pretentious. He screamed about the double anal scene, demanding to know why Joe filmed it in a dumpster. He reminded Joe that double anal was nowhere near couple-friendly, and therefore of no use to Venus Pictures or its clientele. Why did seven minutes of footage focus on the destruction of a nonsensically huge fish tank? He challenged Joe’s decision to make fellatio the only sex act performed by a contract girl. He protested Joe’s singing as the film faded to black, and questioned Joe’s sanity concerning such unattractive performers.

“They have authenticity, David.”

“What they have is Goddamn stretch marks, you little shit.”

“What about the music?” Joe thought he could still help David see his side of things.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“The music, David. It’s Mozart.”
David hung up.

Three weeks later, Joe received legal documents from Venus Pictures informing him that he was being sued for breach of contract and that Venus owned the rights to his film. David Shapiro, against the advice of counsel, left a message on Joe’s answering machine the day the letter arrived: “You’re done.”

Joe continued making films, but his budget took a major hit when a judge ordered he pay Venus Pictures ten thousand dollars.

The nineties came and went. With them went Joe’s once-loyal fan base. Fewer and fewer stores agreed to put his films on their shelves, partly due to pornography’s ever-evolving nature, partly due to Joe’s esthetic. Pleasure Palace in Hell’s Kitchen remained a haven, the one shop still able to convince people to buy his films.

Joe moved back in with Dorria, who continued to see nothing but a star when she looked at her boy. The two attended services at Holy Family Roman Catholic Church every Sunday morning. Afterward they stopped by Gino’s Pizzeria, drove two miles west and parked beside a vacant lot that used to be Giraldi & Son, eating their pizzas in silence.

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The clerks at Pleasure Palace were getting antsy; Joe’s other two performers still hadn’t arrived and the clock was ticking. Joe understood time was of the essence; the five hundred dollars he’d paid Scott, the owner of the shop, granted him only three hours of filming. He stripped out of his clothes and asked his friend’s nephew to take the camera. He grabbed Angel Annie and lay down on his back, on top of the canvas as she rode him. The shoot came to a close and Joe
thanked everyone, pausing for applause that never came. He asked Angel Annie to sign her name on the canvas next to his own signature, then sprayed the canvas with shellac. He got dressed and sold a copy of *Downtown Devils* and *Gutter Gals* to the store, earning himself a cool twenty bucks.

Joe placed the signed canvas in the backseat of his car. He drove Angel Annie home and headed back to Staten Island, stopping once for caramel ice cream.

His mother was already asleep when he got home. Joe washed his face and climbed up the attic with the rolled canvas. Film equipment, photographs, signed DVDs of his movies, paints and brushes, multiple costumes and old makeup kits, filled the small dusty room. Joe looked around, pleased with all he’d accomplished. He would sell it all one day; these things held great value. All great artists were unappreciated in their own time, and one day these items would be part of his legacy. One day, MoMA would scour Joe’s attic, create a retrospective of his work. He deserved to be recognized as a visionary artist. He unrolled the canvas, placed it against the wall. He turned off the light and closed the attic door. Downstairs, Joe heard his mother snoring from her bedroom. He fed her cat and turned on the ten o’clock news, then dug into the caramel ice cream before it melted.
Alan Spriggs mounted his wife Nina in accordance with Wednesday night’s Rompathon. He was doing his goddamn best to end the evening quickly. The Rompathon began as a weekly tradition, but soon devolved into every other Wednesday. After six years of marriage, and despite the fact that both Alan and Nina were only forty-three, their sex life was at most a twice-a-month affair. A fluke, really. Nina had tried her best to convince her husband not to work so much, tried to entice and seduce him with lingerie, wine, shellfish. She’d even offered to get the Spice channel on a temporary basis. But things at work were hectic and a two-bedroom on the Lower East Side didn’t come cheap. Neither did tuition for Twin Parks Montessori. Alan told his wife he couldn’t just blow off billing hours—he was a crucial part of a family business. Literally, since his great grandfather had co-founded Spriggs & Loeb Fund Management. Still, Alan insisted that having his name on the building didn’t mean shit.

Nina was the one who came up with the Rompathon, thought it was silly and cute. A sex date to keep things on track. She didn’t like it when Alan told her it was just another thing that would eventually become routine. She hated that word. Nina also came up with the name, made it official. She liked the idea of something that sounded as though it was comprised of romp and rumpus, something naughty and mischievous. She said the name also reminded her of a romper, and therefore of their little girl, Nanette. Alan hated their daughter’s name. He’d tried to convince Nina to go the more traditional route—something like Katie or Laura or Charlotte. Even a Libby would do. But Nina had insisted, said it wasn’t fair that boys got to be
named after their fathers because, really, what about the girls? Besides, she told him when they’d looked at the blank space on the birth certificate seven hours post-delivery, with Nanette there’s a little bit of Nina and a little bit of Alan, and really would he prefer one of those Dakota-esque names like Taylor or Lexi or Stephanie with a Y? Alan didn’t understand why those were the only options, but Nina had made up her mind and so he’d agreed. He scribbled Nanette onto the birth certificate, in blue ink and shaky handwriting.

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The candles, sheer teddy, and Celine Dion compilation did nothing to help Alan as he moved inside Nina. If anything, the whole ordeal was worse. He turned off the bedroom light, but she just turned it back on, told him she wanted to see his face. He smiled, moved back, kept a steady rhythm even as Nina’s nails dug deeper into his ass cheeks to move him along. She said that’s it and please a couple of times, even threw in a faster, baby. But Alan had far too much energy and concentration invested in his own orgasm and couldn’t risk losing focus; it only took a miniscule return to reality, a moan or pseudo-sexy giggle from the woman underneath him to cause a breach, some sort of mojo fracture, and make him go soft. Nina mistook the beads of sweat on Alan’s forehead for unbridled pleasure and his exerted grunts for desire, ignoring the fact that he’d been thrusting, squinting his eyes for the past twenty minutes. Nina moved faster and harder, and in the end, Alan came. He knew that after he fell asleep, she’d rub herself with as much vigor as she had all those years ago at summer camp—till her vision blurred and her hand throbbed, and the guy in her head no longer had a face, was just a sweaty torso with strong, veiny limbs.
Nina interrupted Alan’s shower the next day and scrubbed his back until she realized he wasn’t going to reciprocate. He’d told her a handful of times that he didn’t mind showering alone, and she said you’re no fun and there’s nothing like a Nina scrub down. He’d said sex just wasn’t a priority for him and he preferred to just be with her, just hang. A couple of his college buddies told her that she really was marrying the last loyal man on earth. Her girlfriends were jealous, went on and on about how they would have loved to be treated like porcelain dolls. Most men aren’t that caring, they’d said.

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After breakfast, Alan dropped Nanette off at school. She put out her little hand for him to kiss, like she’d seen his mother-in-law do. He kissed it and she twirled. Alan parked his car, watched Nanette greet her friends and teachers. When the bell rang, he drove to work.

The day dragged and he couldn’t focus. He called Nina to tell her he’d be taking a long lunch, like he did every Thursday; just in case she tried to reach him. On his way to the elevators, he told his secretary Trish to reschedule his 3 p.m. meeting, and that he wouldn’t be available for a couple of hours. Trish nodded to herself and said will do.

Alan told the driver to let him out on 48th Street, and walked the five remaining blocks up to Pleasure Palace. He figured it looked accidental, almost innocent, when he finally made it to the street corner. He hoped strangers would view his stepping into the shop as a chore he had to perform, a commitment he had to fulfill while he just happened to be walking in the area. Alan didn’t know the mopper by name; there had been at least five in the two and a half months he’d
been frequenting the booths. He realized pretty quickly, however, that names meant nothing—slipping cash in their hands ensured that the film he chose played continuously on the booth screen, and that he’d never be subjected to the two-minute maximum screen time like the rest of the booth clientele.

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Two minutes had seemed like a lot when he’d first found the porn shop and learned how the booths worked from the mopper. But Alan quickly realized that time was of the essence in a booth, and he needed more, wanted to enjoy the experience properly, without feeling rushed. He didn’t want the interruption of a blank screen, the single-dollar-bill slot or the blinking red dot next to it. In the beginning, he’d felt embarrassed, even bad for the mopper who had to clean up after him. His first week there, Alan had stepped out of the booth when he finished, then quietly apologized to the mopper. The moppers usually ignored him. A few even waved him off. And after several visits to the booths, Alan realized that nobody cared about what he did or how much of a mess he made, least of all the moppers.

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The booths at Pleasure Palace were roughly the size of an airplane bathroom, with a stool in the middle that was bolted to the floor. And just like an airplane bathroom, the booth doors had small, round knobs on which one pulled in order to enter. The doors never locked from the inside or outside, but functioned like the doors of department store changing rooms.

The mopper was in charge of directing the customers and keeping order, making sure no one overstay their welcome, and giving singles in exchange for
the larger bills that customers usually carried in their wallets. Booth goers could not rewind or fast forward the films, forcing them to shell out more money. The mopper also changed the films that played in the booths on a weekly basis, made sure that the one hundred or so DVD players up in the mezzanine—the ones playing the booth films on a continual loop—were always working. This, of course, meant that while customers could peruse dozens of films, they were still dependent on whatever movies the mopper chose to play: all the booths were hooked up to the same bank of DVD players.

A small television screen sat inside the booth, against one of its four walls. A single-dollar-bill slot, as in a regular vending machine, was under the TV screen. Up and down buttons next to the TV allowed customers to browse through and change the channels, eighty in all. The first thirty offered gay porn and the rest provided a mishmash of straight, scat, bondage, and Japanese smut.

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His first couple of days in Hell’s Kitchen, Alan hung around outside the porn shop, pretending to make phone calls and text while his phone was on silent. He’d been a bit paranoid in the beginning, couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching him watching porn in the booth. He’d even looked around before shoving that first single-dollar-bill in the slot, surveying his surroundings, concerned he was on tape or that someone would barge in. Just in case he had to say he’d wandered in by accident, mistaken the booth for a photo kiosk. Alan didn’t jerk off his first time in the booth, even after convincing himself that he was alone and his general privacy wasn’t compromised. He played with the buttons a bit, felt the blood rush to his dick. He was harder than he’d been in years. That day, Alan
skimmed through seemingly endless scenes, dollar after dollar going into the slot. He closed his eyes a couple of times, enjoyed listening to the multiple moans, groans, whimpers, and grunts. They reminded him of the opera. He listened to the sounds coming from the booths beside his, wondered if the heavy breathing and murmurs he heard were merely the films playing.

Alan sensed movement too, felt the bass from the other booths. He imagined that next to him, men were casually thrashing about, eagerly shifting and shaking. He envied those who moved without caution, envied the freedom they must feel and their ability to not give a shit. They just indulged and let go and forgot and ignored anything and everything outside of themselves in the moment. He envisioned their orgasms as monumental and reckless, magical even. Fueled by something he couldn’t articulate. He listened and watched, enjoyed the odd simplicity of just being hard.

Alan had twelve missed calls from the office, and six from Nina by the time he left the shop; it was dark out and he wondered how the hell the hours had just flown by. He called Trish, told her he’d run into an old high school friend who’d offered Alan first dibs on his latest development in Queens. The offer included a tour of the real estate in question. He knew he didn’t owe his secretary any explanations even as the lie came out of his mouth, but it didn’t matter. He lied to Nina too, added that he forgot his charger at the office and hadn’t notice his phone was off until he tried checking his email.

He got back home a little before nine that evening, flowers in hand. Nina loved white roses, kissed his neck when he’d treat her. Alan recognized that she deserved a bouquet, had even offered to cut the stems and fill a vase with water.
Nina took in a long whiff of the petals and winked at him. Nanette was already in bed and Alan didn’t check on her; he was still sweaty all over and felt it was wrong to watch her sleep in the state he was in. Alan kissed Nina on the cheek, grabbed her face with his hands and lay one on her forehead. Then headed for the shower. His dick sprung to life as his pent up emotions and desperate need for release got the better of him. Onscreen images from the booth flashed before him like a deck of cards. Nina stepped into the shower with him, even though it was a Thursday. She put her arms around his waist and kissed his back when she felt his erection. Alan pressed his hands and forehead on the wet marble shower tiles till his head hurt, his eyes closed. He let Nina jerk him off, kiss his neck and rub his shoulders, while he moaned and breathed erratically, flipping through the day’s pornographic scenes, thinking of anything but her.

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Alan waited four minutes and twenty-two seconds before hanging up his make-believe phone call and walking into the shop. He looked at the mopper and nodded; the mopper saluted in return, two fingers at the side of his head. Alan walked down to the basement, where they kept the porn. He’d realized after several months in the booths that he wanted to climax to something more specific than what the upstairs channels had to offer, and so he’d begun frequenting the basement, nonchalantly checking out the inventory. It wasn’t long before his paranoia subsided; he still waited a couple of minutes before walking into the shop, but he no longer felt beholden to those around him. He wasn’t likely to bump into a Tribeca power couple in Hell’s Kitchen.

He’d also learned that a smile and cash earned him the pornography of his
choosing; the sales people let him to pick what he wanted, and wrapped the DVDs up again with a heat gun and some clear plastic paper when he was done in the booths. The employees also knew Alan by name, even said what’s up as he came down the stairs. He’d told them he was Jake in the beginning, Brad and Mike the week after. He quickly forgot the names he’d chosen and eventually grew tired of the failed ruse. The shop employees never mentioned it, were apathetic. And he was glad.

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The guy at the counter said that four new Michael Lucas titles had arrived earlier that week. He unlocked the glass showcase for Alan, told him to holler if he needed any help. Alan looked around the shop. As usual, none of the other customers were paying attention to one another. Each was immersed in his own shopping experience. Alan liked the simplicity of what he thought of as the Blue Basement. He felt anonymous and cool, like he was in on a private joke, or part of a club to which only a few knew existed. His body tingled. He loved that moment before he walked into a booth, when the anticipation felt almost as good as jerking off, and just the thought of the yet-unseen images on the screen sent a rush of adrenaline and testosterone throughout him. Alan felt present and aware. Observant. He had the ability to savor what it meant to be where he was, to understand something other people couldn’t.

Alan watched the two other men in his section, wondered if they too were married. One of them looked him up and down, then put his forefinger and thumb on his chin, in mock-concentration. Alan broke eye contact and stared at the showcase, but kept shifting his eyes, watching the man slowly move closer. He
smelled like cognac and Paco Rabanne and Alan was impressed by his height. The man touched each movie after Alan placed it back in the showcase. He kept clearing his throat, saying *excuse me* and *my bad*. Alan could feel the man smile, brush up against him. Men sometimes watched Alan at the shop, but none had sidled up to him, been so obvious in an attempt to touch him. He sometimes gave himself the once-over, wondered if outside the Blue Basement and the booths people could tell.

The man said, *They have one hell of a selection.* Alan smiled and semi-nodded in response. The man was about Alan’s age, maybe a year or two younger. Alan thought about how much he liked pale blond lashes, wondered how close to the man’s face he’d have to be in order to see them in all their glory, maybe even count them. The man said, *Maybe I’ll see you around*, and walked backwards toward the stairs, hands in his pockets and smirking. Alan shook his head, felt his face heat up. He chose a film and went up to the register. The sales guy unwrapped the DVD, and Alan placed a fifty on the counter. Upstairs, he gave the movie to the mopper, along with another fifty. *Sure thing boss, you got one hour.*

Terrible dialogue coupled with inane, useless build-up toward the culmination of body parts and fluids still embarrassed Alan. Even in the booth. *Fire Island Cruising 7* was no exception. Alan sat on the torn faux-leather seat, pants already at his ankles. He’d taken off his wedding ring and put it in his pocket. It never failed to surprise him how easily it came off. His head tilted as Derrick Hanson and Brandon Aguilar pretend-flirted. Alan wondered what he always wondered when porn stars spoke on film: why even bother?

The moment shirts were off, Alan sat up straight. He spit into his palm and
grabbed his dick. He loved the sensation of his wet fingers on his cock as he grew harder and harder. Bigger. There was a sense of triumph, accomplishment and reward, in being able to anticipate and feel and perceive, and still have no control over his own arousal. A sense of dominion. Alan loved the way his lips tasted and buzzed right then. He watched Derrick close his eyes and tilt his head back, slouch slightly as Brandon took him in his mouth, gagging almost instantly. The sheer effort and willpower the latter embodied was beyond impressive, evident from the duck-like sounds he made, from the tears and red veins in his eyes, the slurping and the way he smacked Derrick’s dick on his cheeks and chin and lips. The generous, downright remarkable amount of spit and drool and sweat on his face.

Alan stroked himself, slowly at first. Kept a natural, steady rhythm. He homed in on Derrick. He liked Derrick, the way he came alive and wild when the talking was over, seemed to put his all into the moment and mean it. Liked that he was muscular but skinny, with an indecipherable tattoo on his left arm, and that his facial hair seemed both groomed and scruffy. Alan liked the absolute concentration of pleasure on Derrick’s face, his pursed lips and flushed cheeks and flared nostrils. He liked the wrinkle between his eyebrows, the one that signaled his utter absorption of the moment. He liked how Derrick moved his hips slowly at first, then faster, back and forth and back and forth, and so goddamn effortlessly, as though someone had choreographed his every movement. Derrick came and so did Alan, in slow, unruly, almost painful spurts. He felt the prolonged, choked groan leave his mouth as much as heard it, loved the furious and undisciplined nature of his orgasm.

Alan leaned back, loosened his tie and licked his lips. He kept watching the
screen, kept stroking his sticky dick with his sticky hand. He watched Erik Grant and Chad Hunt, Kent Larson and John Lamb, felt his eyelids grow heavy. He watched as one fucked the other and shiny body parts were seized and hunted, watched as tongues and anuses collided, and faces pressed into pillows and walls and body parts. He watched as cum hit abs and mouths and hair, was cupped in hands like holy water, ogled and smeared and lapped up. As sounds of pleasure and chaos and frenzy came forth—slick sounds of glazed bodies, of sweat and spit and sperm gliding up and down and sideways, slipping into one another seamlessly. He watched as fingers invaded mouths, as necks were bitten and bruised, and dicks were sucked post-orgasm. Alan was hard and soft and then hard again. He felt his scrotum tense and tighten, felt pre-cum ooze down his fingers and thighs, mix with his sweat and spit, and congeal in a matter of minutes.

The booth door opened and closed and Alan jumped out of his seat, opened his mouth to protest. But the man from downstairs, the one who'd sidled and smirked, pushed Alan back down and kissed him hard. Alan froze, wanted to feel the man’s pale blond lashes against his face. He moved his tongue fast in the man’s mouth, almost frantically. He tasted cinnamon and honey, heat. Alan let the man run his hand up and down his shaft, hard and fast and firm, just on the edge of violent. The man pressed his thumb against Alan’s cock, gripped it with authority, and Alan swallowed hard as he felt the man’s hand—broad and calloused and fine and rough—glide up and down with force and purpose. Alan’s head fell back. He bit his lip and tasted blood, let the copper aftertaste coat his tongue, wanting and needing to feel that exquisite, euphoric torment of being almost too raw and chafed and drained to come again. The moisture in the air left a sour, magnificent
taste on his tongue, and the smell of their sweat and his cum burned him all over. He came and his legs shook and his body convulsed, and he almost slid off the seat. And he wailed something guttural, something so primal he never even knew existed.

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Alan changed his clothes at McHale’s, a bar across the street from Pleasure Palace. He ordered a Guinness, like he did every week, and changed in the bathroom. He put his suit in a clear baggy and smacked his lips. He looked in the mirror as he straightened his tie, turned on the faucet and ran wet fingers through his hair. He needed a shave. He smelled his hands, then washed them again, scrubbed them with liquid soap from the dispenser until they were red and throbbing. He stared at his reflection, pretend-smiled and watched his eyes narrow and wrinkle. He wondered if next time would be more than a hand job. If there would even be a next time. Alan looked at himself closely, speculating whether or not he’d ever be the one to brush up against someone else, barge in and take what he wanted because he was that goddamn confident. He took a deep breath and left the restroom. He sipped his Guinness, liked the way it smelled. Like wheat and coffee, and nothing sweet.

Alan watched the few people around him. Some were deep in conversation, some were loners. Most of them watched the television screen. There was a baseball game on. Alan was more of a basketball guy. He felt what had taken place no more than thirty minutes earlier, closed his eyes tight and shook his head from side to side, almost too fast, as though the mere physical act could wipe everything clean. His phone buzzed. Three missed calls. He called Trish and told her he’d be in
the office in half an hour. He listened to his voicemail: Nina had got her folks to take Nanette for the night. They had the place all to themselves. She sounded happy, optimistic. Alan heard that squeal of excitement at the end of each sentence she spoke, and he hated himself for it. He deleted the message without listening to it all the way through. He thought about texting her that it wasn't Wednesday and that this might disrupt the balance of the Rompathon. Instead he finished his beer and gave the bartender a twenty. He walked to Banya's Laundromat on 59th Street, picked up last week's suit and dropped off today's. Then he hopped in a cab and got back to work. Made a mental note to buy white roses on his way home.

***

Nina had ordered in Italian. They passed around the bread and antipasta. He ate from her lasagna and she took bites from his Penne ala vodka with clams, mentioned they were an aphrodisiac. He said that she probably meant oysters, and she looked at him, said what's the difference, anyway? Then she talked about her sister's upcoming anniversary, brought up her father's refusal to wear a hearing aid, even though he was going deaf and driving her mother crazy. Her parents called her to complain about each other, all of it being just too funny, but also kind of sad, didn't he think?

Alan nodded and picked at his food. He focused on the table and tried his best to steady his fork, get it to make perfect straight lines on his napkin. He knew Nina was watching him, impatient. He moved the pasta around, examined the vodka sauce—orange and oily, with miniscule, hardly-there bubbles. He listened to the sound of the fork moving on his plate, that screeching sound that made his
teeth hurt. It was still better than thinking about the lashes and the booth and the smell on his hands.

***

Nina kissed Alan and undid his pants. She sat on their bed and Alan stood in front of her, his arms at his sides. She kissed his stomach and licked him. Alan winced, swore he could feel her lipstick. She grabbed him by the waist and pulled him into their bed, on top of her. She wrapped her arms around his back and kissed the side of his neck. He smelled her perfume and bit his lip, was immediately hard. Nina groaned and grabbed his dick, slowly massaging it. He told her to go faster and she complied. He buried himself in her neck and sucked on her earlobe. She was wet and grabbed his hand. *Do you feel that? Do you feel what you do to me?* Alan couldn’t avoid it, even felt it on her inner thigh. He was mad at the both of them, because all he wanted to do was wipe it off on their $500 sheets.

***

Alan flipped Nina over and she giggled. He hated that giggle. He steadied himself on the bed, told her to get on all fours, then rammed his dick inside her. She cried out and moved back and forth, told him to go faster. Alan stared at his hands on her lower back, saw the pink prints his fingers left on her flesh. He watched himself thrusting in and out of her. His ears clogged and his nose ran as he pushed even harder into Nina, felt her body shiver, knew she was spent, but kept going because he needed to keep going. And when she told him to stop, he pushed even harder, wanted to hear his pelvis smack against her ass, needed to hear it resonate in their bedroom. Alan felt his blood boil and his ears pop and he burned something awful. He felt Nina move again. Thought she might have said something,
but couldn’t be sure and didn’t really care. He pulled out as fast as he could and came on her back. He fell on top of her, catching his breath, then rolled onto his side of the bed. She said, *what was that?* in an awed tone. And he hated her for it.

***

The bed dipped and Alan heard the bathroom door close. He lay naked in their bed, no longer pretending to be asleep. He heard the shower running and set his alarm for 6 a.m., turned off the lights and stared at the wall. Nina came out smelling like patchouli, which he never minded, even kind of dug. But not now. Nina put her arms around the side of Alan’s body, and he took her hand out of his and inspected it. He barely blinked, focused his gaze until her hand no longer looked like a part of her. Alan twirled his wedding ring around his finger and clinked it against Nina’s. He liked the tinny, barely-there sound, the sleek sensation the ring left on his skin. Alan took his ring off, then put it back on. Knew if he put it in his mouth, it would taste like copper.
Snappy

Snappy was an SDBH. Single-Dollar-Bill Handler. Self-proclaimed. Determined to go through the stack of fifty single dollar bills that were exchanged between the moppers before and after each eight-hour shift. He’d look up at the fluorescent lights and squint, visually dissect each bill three times to ensure that no counterfeits snuck into the stack. Routine was important, kept things running right. The others watched his pointless commitment, mesmerized, mystified, annoyed. They wanted to throttle him, watch his beady little eyes roll back. They wanted to know him, ask questions. They couldn’t get enough. The physical distance between the first floor and the basement made it easier to brush him off, act like there was nothing to him. A pseudo non-entity they pretended didn’t fascinate them. A needed nuisance from 1 at night till 9 a.m. sharp. No hellos, no goodbyes. Just the same three words, *It’s not funny.* Then SNAPSNAPEACP.

He watched Eighth Avenue fill with morning commuters on his walk home, bought two bagels, cinnamon-raisin and sesame, smeared them with imitation cream cheese he’d once heard a guy named Koobey recommend. They’d met at a Brooklyn bar back in the early 60s. Bar’s name was Charlie’s. Maybe Mel’s. (He could never remember.) Koobey had a glass eye he’d take out and pretend to swallow. Snappy got a kick out of it, called it a neat party trick. He’d wondered how Koobey had lost the eye. Koobey’s stories about his eye changed every other day, from birth defect to bar fight, jealous lover to unfortunate infection. Snappy wanted to feel bad for him, but couldn’t. He wished he had something that nifty, something unique and eerie and mysterious and grim. Something slightly
frightening that’d make people gather around him and ooh and ahh and ask questions, listen to his answers and keep coming back.

He’d once convinced Koobey to let him see the hollow gap left in his eye socket, the one he covered each time he popped out his glass eye. Koobey was drunk, said *what the hell, we'll all be dead soon anyway*. Snappy expected, even hoped for something obscene, something wrong and raw. But the hollow eye socket turned out to be nothing more than some slightly irritated scar tissue, with just the tiniest hint of a dark void. He was tempted to yell into it, wondered if his voice would echo back to him. He told Koobey an eyepatch might be nice. Ladies liked pirates. They laughed and finished their beers. They yelled, *To Captain Blood!* Then went back to sit at the bar. They weren’t exactly lookers, but had a good rapport, an honest kind of energy about them that helped them pick up a gal or two back in the day. Back when men had charm, a real zest for life they called gusto, and ladies were demure even when they weren’t; when men donned tailored hats and their fathers’ watches, and ladies immersed themselves in rouge and perfume. Koobey would say it all came down to timing. They didn’t make demands of one another and that was fine with them both. A couple of years passed and the eye trick got old. Koobey eventually stopped coming to Charlie’s or Mel’s, and Snappy eventually gave up on finding his bar buddy.

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Snappy ate his cinnamon-raisin and sesame breakfast bagels as he stared straight ahead at nothing in his room and bath at the Chelsea Mews Guest House. He closed his eyes, took steady, deep breaths in and out, timing them as he bit into the bagels and ate. He guessed this was what hippies meant by Zen. He hummed,
too. Usually it was “Johnny Angel,” but really anything by Shelley Fabares was fine. Fine as fur. Kids used to say that. He thought of Shelley’s slick, red bob, her wholesome smile and the way she tilted her head just a smidge to the right on her TEEN magazine cover photo. He thought of the ring she wore, how her knuckles curved and the way her hand touched the side of her face. He thought of the yellow sweater that covered up just about every inch of her pore-free, almost-translucent arms. He thought of her as Mary Stone on The Donna Reed Show, prim and proper, never broke curfew. He remembered her TV mom, even more beautiful and enticing: Donna Reed, just Donna in his dreams (once she was Mrs. George Bailey), warm and soft and swell and perfect. He remembered waking up sweaty and sticky, kind of confused but also thrilled and eager, knowing better than to tell his folks. Snappy squeezed the bagel slices together, licked the imitation cream cheese that oozed out the sides. Sometimes Snappy looked up as he ate. He chewed and felt his jaw click. Sometimes he wondered whether the faded brown stain on the far right corner of his popcorn ceiling was blood or shit. He called it muck. Maybe crud. He was classy like that.

Snappy read Soap Opera Digest, tore out recipes recommended by the likes of Deirdre Hall and Eric Braeden. (Marlena’s PB&J Pot Luck Delight! Victor Newman’s Vermicelli Noodles!) He watched his soaps in the lobby of the Guest House. The communal television’s antenna was bent, and the people onscreen had a permanent curve, an unnatural bulge to their foreheads, as a result. He hollered every time Susan Lucci appeared, ranted about her long overdue Emmy to no one in particular. Sometimes he flailed his arms about out of exasperation.

Back in his room, he’d snack on anchovies carefully placed in diagonal rows
of three. Ma’s Afterschool Special, he called it. Day-old French bread was a steal at forty cents a loaf. And he loved the way the soft part had hardened, never crumbled under the pressure of cold butter, hard and salty. He referred to it as Baguette with Savory Spread; the words made him feel exotic and distinguished. He saved the ends of the baguette for last, took out his dentures and pierced the bread with them. He washed his teeth off, savored the squeaking sound they made when he wiped them dry. He snapped them back into place and ran his tongue over their smooth, marble-like surface, then ate the cut up ends, sucking on them first, wetting them for an easier chew. Something about controlling the bread, molding the hardest parts into what he wanted, made it worthwhile, onerous yet productive. And god knows Snappy liked a challenge.

He always swept up after a meal, used an old roll of duct tape to get the crumbs off his faded Betty and Veronica sheets. He never took the sheets off to shake out the bits of food; he loved the tearing, the crunch-like sound the tape made each time it unstuck from the fabric. Like Velcro. He thought of Velcro each time. Velcro and Pop Rocks. Goddamn, he loved those things. Cherry and punch and melon and lime. Bubble gum and cotton candy. He used to binge on Pop Rocks with friends after school (they really could taste the explosion). He’d loved the special powdery sugar, the kind that crackled inside, like his mouth was its own soda fountain. It was like biting into and swallowing tiny bits of sweet fragrant glass, pint-sized shards of dissolved sugar; the feel of an echo and unclogged ears as he’d pour the popping candy straight into his mouth, like magic. Pink and purple and orange and blue. He felt the candy jump up and down on his tongue and hiss, sizzle really.
Snappy washed his hands. No soap. He sniffed his fingers each time, index to pinky, reveling in the fishy after smell of the anchovies. When he was a third grader in Hunts Point, Queens, Ma would watch him during meals. She’d make sure he chewed slowly, sipped water or apple juice as he ate. She’d ask him if he liked it and he’d nod, smile. Cover his mouth if she pointed to her teeth. She’d wipe her anchovies-scented hands on her apron, then grab her son’s face. Gently. Like he could break at any moment. She slowly brushed his cheeks with both thumbs as she fixated on the beauty marks underneath his hazel eyes (Butterscotch Peepers, she called them), and the constellation-like pattern they formed. She never blinked when she looked at him, never broke eye contact. Her nails were short, what she called the two P’s—presentable and practical. His pupils dilated from the scent and trace of her fingers. She’d smile, call him her magic Star Cluster, then tap him on the nose. He had Little Lulu sheets back then, even though his father disapproved. When Ma smiled, he inhaled, held his breath for as long as he could. Held it till his throat burned and his eyes watered, till he felt like his head was about to burst. He’d loved it when she smiled.

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McHale’s, a bar one block over from Pleasure Palace, became Snappy’s go-to place once he was hired at the porn shop. At least three times a week he would sit at the bar, order one Lime Ricky after another. He’d insist on Torani raspberry syrup and three lime wedges. No more, no less. His father used to say, I like it the way I like it and can’t nobody argue with that there logic. Snappy had stopped drinking in the mid-70s, around the time Carla left him. Said he drank too much,
stunk like riff raff. He hated that word. He’d stopped drinking, told everyone about it, about how he was now a teetotaler. He corrected people who corrected his pronunciation.

In the end, it didn’t matter: Carla had moved on with a man named Mac O’Houlihan, a boy really. A hell of a lot younger than Carla. (A hell of a lot younger than Snappy.) Tabloid journalist. Snappy loved telling people this Mac fella sounded like an oxymoron, minus the oxy. He ran into them once at Sunshine Cinema on Houston. She looked beautiful, all gussied up. Still smelled like Chanel No. 5. He’d approached them, wanted to show her what she was missing. Mac’s arm was coiled around her waist, like a snake. Snappy couldn’t help himself. *This guy's stamping your time card is he?* Mac threatened to clock him. Carla said not to. She looked at Snappy, put her gloved hand on his arm, told him she wished him the best. He watched them leave, heard her say, *he ain’t worth it.*

Carla was a wild one. Classy and wild. Carla reminded him of Liz Taylor. Snappy told her that, called her National Velvet, and she joked that he was more Eddie Fisher than Richard Burton. He laughed even though he didn’t get the punchline. He was just happy not being Mike Todd. They used to go to matinees when going to matinees was exciting and fun and not about saving a few bucks. He’d wrap his arm around her and place his free hand on hers. He never noticed when his thumb ran up and down her nail, red polish and all. He loved the effect she had on him, and the way that she pretended she didn’t know the effect she had on him. She did his laundry, even though he never asked. She’d joke that separating whites and colors made her uncomfortable. He bought her sorbet, anticipated the chill that ran through her body when she took her first lick.
At night, she’d warm up milk for him on the stove, said it was best when it was seconds from burning. She’d bring it to him in bed, touch the lines on his forehead as he drank, said it was like tracing a map and they should go to Europe, see the sights. Then she’d kiss him, the milk residue above his upper lip mixing with his mint toothpaste and the taste of her saliva. She’d run her nails along his forearm, knew it relaxed him, helped him fall asleep. He would treat her to two bars of Cadbury’s Dairy Milk Turkish Delight. Bought it every other week on the east side from an Indian bodega near the United Nations. He loved watching Carla devour the bars, how she sunk her teeth into the crisp toffee flakes and never took a break between the two. She closed her eyes when she ate, let out a guttural kind of hum when the flavors hit her. He’d loved the way she tasted right after, like fruit and nuts and chocolate. She never shared and he never minded. There was a time when he’d lived to hear that moan of hers, that purr she purred.

He got plastered at Charlie’s or Butch’s the day he saw her with Mac, bought drinks for everyone. The bartender told him to slow it down buddy, but he was happy and sad and too old to be ordered around by some dumb kid wearing mascara and a spike through his nose. He yelled Opa! with each drink, each shot, even though he wasn’t Greek. He declared himself Zorba and said he’d lost the love of his life. People put their arms around his shoulders, promised him the bitch would get what was comin’ to her, she never had it so good, and he slouched under the pressure of the slur, shook his head, then rubbed his eyes as hard as he could till he saw stars.

He didn’t remember being thrown out of the bar or losing his wallet. People yelled at him, did anything they could to avoid walking on his part of the sidewalk.
He didn’t remember crying when he thought he saw Carla, vomiting or swallowing snot and bile, thinking his hands were gone because he forgot he’d somehow managed to put his gloves on earlier. He didn’t remember the cars swerving as he walked into 46th Street traffic, didn’t remember the make or color of the car that hit him, the ambulance that took too long to arrive or the crabby desk nurse at St. Vincent’s emergency room. He spent two weeks in a hospital bed with a piece of metal in his pulverized hip. The doctor told him to exercise on a regular basis. No magic pills for a shattered hip, you know. When the nurse asked him who’d be picking him up to take him home, Snappy said he needed more morphine. And maybe some Jell-O. The red kind.

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He owned a tweed jacket and a pair of corduroy slacks. He’d run a comb through wet hair and go to Columbia every weekend. He took the 1 train to campus, where he he’d taken a few classes back in the day. The old security guard liked him. Gary. They were fans of Gene Kelly, loved the hell out of Anchors Aweigh. They agreed he was probably a fruit but when you danced like that, what difference did it make? Gary clapped, stomped one foot on the ground as Snappy looked around in mock embarrassment, sat in Gary’s security booth chair, then hop-shuffle-stepped (TAP TAP TAP) as best he could, winking twice at the invisible cartoon mouse to his right. They both subscribed to the Orvis catalogue and made plans for fly fishing one day soon. They discussed the merits of line dressings and strike indicators and agreed that creels and wading staffs were too damn expensive. Snappy ate a late breakfast at the campus cafeteria—they served borscht on Saturdays. Borscht was his favorite. Ma used to make it on special
occasions. He’d watch her peel and shred the beets, chop onions and cabbage and tomatoes and garlic. She sang as she cooked, let him bark twice—his hands out like a puppy’s paws—after she sang how much is that doggie in the window? Sometimes he’d sit on the counter and splash water on her from the kitchen sink. She’d let him help her, add the salt and pepper and sugar and parsley to the oversized pot she’d bring out on special occasions. He liked it when she’d place the big wooden spoon in front of him, let him have the first taste. She’d blow on the spoon first, make sure it wasn’t too hot to burn his tongue.

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He used the sauna at Columbia before taking a swim. The pool did wonders for his hip. He sometimes thought people were waving to him. Sometimes he’d wave back. When they’d stare, maybe make a face, he’d point to his eyes, nonverbally blame any misunderstanding on the drops of water and condensation that had settled on his goggles. When a young lady, mostly a brunette, made her way into the water, he watched how she moved, admire her gams. He couldn’t help but think of Esther Williams. He would suck water into his mouth and let it out in perfect streams, like a human fountain, then sink to the bottom of the pool until his butt hit the concrete floor. He sat Indian style and opened his eyes, then counted off in his head, hoped he’d be able to beat the previous week’s non-breathing record of forty-two seconds. When his lungs refused his goal of fifty seconds, he shot back up and took in steadily ragged breaths. Snappy hoped someone was watching, would ask how he was able to stay in the water for so damn long. The cold tiles on his underarms felt right. He’d lay his head sideways on his arms and kick his legs back and forth in the water. Lick his lips and smell the bleach-like
scent of chlorine on his body. After he washed and dressed, he’d take a deep breath in as he smelled himself; the slight pungency of the chlorine mixed with the shower room shampoo and conditioner and body wash soothed him. He’d rub his eyes on the subway ride home. He liked the soft burn of the chlorine, wondered if it might cause an eye to fall right out of its socket.

Saturday’s lunch was courtesy of Temple Emanu-El on 14th Street: free, kosher, and loud. Just the way he liked it. He’d grown up with Jews, appreciated the cuisine, even though they’d cheated his father at work. Snappy snuck in, chatted with the pretty receptionist while the cantor hit the high notes a few feet away. When the singing stopped he headed inside, stopped to shake hands with a few people and pretended to find hard candy behind the ears of some of the kids. He then went straight to the bagel section of the buffet, took his time smearing real cream cheese, then placed three pieces of perfect, pink lox on an onion bagel, still soft.

He made conversation, what he called chit chat, with the congregants. He knew about Sadie Tamarkin’s son’s impending divorce from Leah Applebaum’s daughter. Never took sides, just nodded a lot, shook his head when he sensed a tone of indignation. Told each lady, you don’t say, and moved ahead in the buffet line. He helped himself to a piece of kugel (he preferred the egg noodles to potato), hoped there’d be brown sugar in the mix. Mitsi Greenblatt sidled up to him, smiled and asked, you like? He took a bite, knew she wanted to watch him, then told her, you’ve done it again, Mitsi. She laughed, put her hands together in victory. Out of the corner of her mouth, she told him to stay away from Rhonda Sokoloff’s brisket, and he pretend-spit on the floor three times. Mitsi pinched his cheek, looked
around conspiratorially, and mentioned what she wouldn’t do with him if she was just ten years younger. He watched her walk away, heard her tell the folks at the end of the line, *you gotta try my kugel*. Someone had made latkes, a rare treat outside the High Holy Days. He took four and piled on the applesauce. Murray Feldman patted his back, called him boychik, even though he couldn’t have been more than five years older. They talked about the Mets, complained that Beltran and Glavine were overpaid sons of bitches. They dissected the team’s losing streak and whether or not Fred Wilpon should trade Reyes and Offerman. Dae-Sung Koo, too. What’d Orientals know about baseball anyway?

He watched *Paint Your Wagon* in the lobby of the Guest House that evening. He sang along, remembered some of the lyrics, then closed his eyes. He pictured Ben Rumson and Edgar Crocker and Raymond Janney and Mike Mooney, Jennifer and Julio. Still, it just felt off to watch Clint Eastwood and Lee Marvin try to sing.

He’d seen the original Broadway show with Ma in 1952. She’d bought him a lemon ice at intermission, and a knish and slice of chocolate babka topped with streusel at Barney Greengrass when the show let out. They’d taken the train and she let him cling to the pole, then kneel on the seat beside her, press his forehead against the glass and watch the darkness of the subway tunnels speed by. She’d sung “They Call the Wind Maria” at home, danced with him right there on the kitchen linoleum. She said they’d all drive, maybe even fly, to California one day, go on a real family vacation. She told him they’d be just like the prospectors in the show, only happier. Maybe they’d even find gold, maybe he’d find love. She’d laughed when he made a face, told her he hated girls. She sang the beginning of “Carino Mio” to him at bedtime, kissed his forehead when he drifted off.
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One of his Guest House neighbors woke him up. The movie was over and Snappy held the remote in his hands, under his folded arms. He wiped the drool off the side of his mouth and went upstairs. He drank a shot of Sambuca before bed; he’d read somewhere that anise was good for the hip. He stretched a bit, thought he saw the stain on the ceiling grow bigger. He showered, brushed his teeth. His toothbrush smelled funny. In bed, he hummed “Wand’rin’ Star,” didn’t notice when his feet moved along to the rhythm. Didn’t remember falling asleep.

Snappy worked at Pleasure Palace every weekend. He counted the stack of singles. Three times. He wondered what the moppers were saying—they just talked so goddamn fast. He knew it was Sri Lankan, knew the overnight guys were staring. (They didn’t understand what it meant to have a work ethic.) He heard people’s yells and laughs from the bar next door, thought about his Lime Ricky. He only opened the door a handful of times that night; Sundays into Mondays were usually dead. He smiled at each customer who walked in, nodded a greeting. His hip hurt. He watched the hookers and johns, the people pretending they just happened upon the shop and figured what the hell, might as well go in. He listened to the two overnight clerks mingle with the few people who came in, laughing and blasting music. He realized he only knew one of their names (Kyle), and made a mental note to ask the mopper. At 9 a.m. he signed his name in the employee hour log. SNAPSNAPSNAP (they snickered). Then he walked out.

He wanted a bagel, but took the train to Queens instead. He hadn’t stepped foot in Flushing Cemetery in over a decade. It looked different, nicer. Lots of green. He’d only found out about Carla’s death by accident, in the paper. There was no
service, no one to pay their respects. According to the groundskeeper, her niece from up north had reluctantly paid for the funeral over the phone, shoved Carla in a pine box. The cheap kind. She hadn’t mentioned any family when they were together. The paper said she’d jumped in front of the L. One witness thought they saw her heel break before she fell onto the tracks. She’d never married, didn’t have any kids. She was barely fifty, worked as a clerk at a check cashing spot in Astoria. He wondered if she still looked like Elizabeth Taylor when they lowered her into the ground.
Antoinette opened the medium-sized box first, already aware that it contained four bags of powdered, generic Metamucil. She placed the thirty-ounce packets near the orange tang she still kept neatly lined up in the cabinet above the kitchen sink. Charlie’s favorite.

The second box was the heaviest: fifteen pounds of Mr. Chicken’s tropical bird food. None of the employees from the downstairs shop had been around to help carry it up for her. Thankfully, George the delivery guy had offered to bring Antoinette’s boxes up to her apartment. She liked George. He had an accent she couldn’t quite place, thought he might have been mixed because of his green eyes and dark complexion.

The third and final box was the smallest and the most difficult to open. Antoinette had to repeatedly stab at the layers of duct tape before she made progress and finally unsealed the package. She took out the bonsai tree carefully, inspected it from all sides. The tree was prickly, its soil soft. It sat in a dark chestnut wooden bowl. The bonsai took up three quarters of the dish; the remaining space was a hollowed out section that Antoinette assumed was nothing more than a quaint holder for loose change. The envelope attached to the tree informed the new owner that this, in fact, was a Green Mound Juniper, and that bonsai was Japanese for “tray planting.” She stared a bit longer, admiring the emerald-like quality of the tree. The bonsai leaned to the right, like it was assessing something. Antoinette took this to mean the tree had personality.

She picked up the discarded box. The package was addressed to
Pleasure Palace, c/o Scott Lipmann. She couldn’t imagine why a store like that would order a bonsai. She didn’t mind Scott so much. He was the one who usually helped bring her mail and deliveries upstairs if the shop wasn’t too busy. He’d ask how she was doing, sometimes nod if he saw her coming down the stairs or waiting outside for the mail. But niceties aside, Antoinette hated the store, saw it as filthy, and the employees knew it. The neighborhood had always been tough, but she’d felt a sense of safety and ease and home there once, and couldn’t believe her street had turned into a boulevard of smut. She remembered Sundays at the church across the street, and meeting Sal at Benny’s, a luncheonette two blocks down. Years ago, Benny’s had turned into another seedy store. One more forgotten relic.

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Benny’s had served the best pastrami on whole wheat outside of Queens. Antoinette used to go there twice a week, sometimes alone, sometimes with a girlfriend or two. The owner knew her by name, yelled it out along with her order. Benny’s had introduced them. Sal saw her there for the first time. Sal loved her name and said so the day they met. He’d watched her eat by herself, then sat down beside her at the counter. He couldn’t believe a pretty girl like her was all alone at Benny’s, and the way he almost whispered it made her blush. She liked how he smelled, like pomade and sawdust. Sal ordered a tuna melt on rye with a pickle on the side, crossed his eyes and smiled when pickle juice dripped down his chin. Antoinette couldn’t help herself and dabbed at Sal’s face with a napkin. She reveled in her newly found nerve and the ease with she felt with him. Sal let her dab at his face, pretending not to notice that she took longer than necessary.
He kissed her hand and apologized when she flinched. He told her she was beautiful, that he could tell she was Italian from her Monica Vitti eyes. She let him know her last name was McGill and that her daddy, God rest his soul, was Irish. Sal joked that he wouldn’t hold it against her, that she’d never have to worry about him straying, since being with her would be like having two women. She’d laughed, told him she doubted he could even handle one, and he’d called her *sassy classy*. Said he’d never met a girl with much of either before. He was going places, he said. Was an honest to God carpenter’s apprentice. A lot of people needed carpenters and real men knew how to build things, or didn’t she know?

He bought her a strawberry float and watched as she sucked the pink foam and ice cream through a straw, her eyes closed the entire time. She tried her hardest to swallow quietly, like a lady, but the sugar and whipped topping proved too delicious and she gulped, turning bright red again. She put a hand on her cheek to try and hide her embarrassment, but Sal gently grabbed her hand and held it. They sat like that, hand in hand, stool by stool, till she finished her shake and he took his last bite of tuna.

He hadn’t asked her out that day, took his sweet falootin’ time, as he called it. Antoinette had mentioned going to Benny’s a couple times a week for lunch, and Sal showed up every day, sat and ate at the counter, hoping it was her every time the door opened and the little bell rang. She finally walked in on a Wednesday. Sal would later tell her that his legs went numb that second time he saw her. He’d never seen a girl in a red dress look so good.

She pretended not to see him from the other end of the counter. Sal didn’t waste any time, took the stool beside her and asked if she was all gussied up just
for him. She pretended to forget his name and he said hers out loud. More than once. He told her everyone would be calling her Double Ant once they were married. Antoinette Antomucci had a nice ring to it, didn’t she think? She had shrugged, told him she was already kind of involved with a boy from school. She wanted to be a shrink and was taking a couple of psych courses at Hunter College. Sal was impressed, couldn’t believe his good luck at meeting a girl with all the goods. Called her *wit and fit.* Antoinette feigned annoyance and mentioned the boy from school again, but Sal just shook his head. He paid both their checks and said, *What you need, Double Ant, is a man.*

***

The bonsai tree came with a set of instructions. Antoinette read them carefully, running a slightly chipped, red fingernail down the list of directives:

- Place your bonsai tree outside when the temperature is 40°F or above.
- Water your bonsai regularly; the soil must never be completely dry. Remember: every tree is different, so adjust your watering schedule to accommodate your bonsai. Do not over-water your bonsai, as this can cause permanent damage to the soil.
- Pinch and trim your bonsai tree’s new growth to the farthest safe point, but never remove the new growth in its entirety.
- Remember: your bonsai loves you as much as you love it. Always be kind, caring, and cultivating.

Antoinette placed the tree on her living room windowsill. Mr. Chicken whistled and squawked from his cage. His legs moved up and down the perch, his green and yellow body convulsing with excitement. Antoinette stared at the bird and rubbed his head with her finger through the cage.

She sat on the torn-up loveseat Sal had bought her when they first moved to Hell’s Kitchen, and stared at the bonsai. She reached for the shipping box, heard something jostle inside. She took out a small velvet sack, untied it and emptied out
the contents. A little plastic boy with a fishing rod came along with the tree. Antoinette placed him in the soil, facing the hollow end of the bonsai dish, which she realized was meant to be filled with water. The little boy sat Indian style, and Antoinette noted the tiny markings that made up his toes. The good people at BoNsai BoNaNza had painted him tan, with a red shirt and white swim trunks. The boy wore a hat, and what looked like a piece of plastic straw hung from his mouth. The fishing rod was made of string, but its handle was a sturdy plastic that easily hooked into the boy’s open fist. Antoinette looked at the water in the dish, half expecting to find a plastic fish or two floating out of nowhere. She stared at the boy’s face, swore she saw him smile, then turned to the parrot. “This boy needs a name,” she said. “What do you think, Mr. Chicken?”

The bird trilled, “Charlie! Charlie! Charlie!”

Antoinette smiled. “Charlie it is.”

***

Antoinette and Sal were married in a small ceremony at the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, six months after their initial meeting at Benny’s. Antoinette wore her mother’s good pearls and old wedding dress that was part Chantilly lace. People said she glowed, and no one but Sal’s Aunt Gina and Grandma Loretta mentioned the bride’s slightly swollen belly.

The newlyweds moved into a two-bedroom, second-floor walk-up on 53rd Street and Eighth Avenue. The neighborhood had its difficulties, like most areas of Hell’s Kitchen, but both Antoinette and Sal loved it. Theresa protested and begged them to move to Flushing, but they told her they preferred character to convention. Their floors creaked and the living room wallpaper wouldn’t stay in
place, but they loved having something all their own. Loved the undeniable energy of Hell’s Kitchen.

The Pioneer, a blue collar Irish pub that catered to locals and the nearby unions, sat below the three floors of apartments. Antoinette and Sal frequented the bar, as did most of the building. The Pioneer was just one more energetic component of living in Hell’s Kitchen—dark, fun, loud, yet somehow subdued and always respectful.

The owner, Eddie “Boss” Callaghan, wasn’t one for shenanigans. He was a family man, as were the majority of the building’s tenants and his clientele. Boss had opened the pub thirteen years earlier. He was stout and always smoked a cigar. He usually watched people as they drank and talked, slamming his fist on the bar counter every so often when patrons took back the singles he’d given them as change. He mostly communicated through a series of grunts, and on the rare occasions he spoke, his heavy Irish accent made it damn near impossible for people to decipher what he was saying. His wife was never allowed in the pub, and he shut the place down at nine every night, except on Saint Patrick’s Day. Then he kept the place open all night. He was a surly bastard. Rumor was he’d killed a man back in Galway for looking at him cross eyed. The hookers and hustlers who plagued many of the area’s blocks and back alleys all knew Boss, respected him and his infamous past. They set up shop three or four blocks in the other direction.

Sal had joined the United Brotherhood of Carpenters Local Union 608, and was one of the only Italians in the mostly Irish charter. He went to meetings, introduced some of the men to Benny’s. He got a kick out of telling the guys that his wife was part mick, and they got a kick out of joking that his people were really the
ones in charge, and even though legs might be broken, could he just ask them to not aim for the kneecaps?

Antoinette stopped taking college courses. She preferred to stay at home and put her cooking skills to good use, and delighted when Sal approved the inclusion of Irish cuisine in their kitchen—colcannon and boxty were his favorites. Antoinette focused on her role as wife, homemaker, and soon-to-be mother. She never had to worry about Sal coming home drunk or not coming home at all. People had warned her that would happen, including her former girlfriends and her mother. But Sal was good to her. Antoinette made the beds and dusted, washed the windows and made sure each room had fresh flowers. She sewed curtains and mopped the floors, folded clothes and flushed the toilet a second time after Sal used it. Their bedroom had an adjacent shower they never used, both of them convinced that the pipes were cursed as the water was always inexplicably cold.

They took baths together. Weekends mostly. Sal would step into the porcelain clawfoot tub first, then help Antoinette in. She would lean into her husband, place her feet on his. She’d pretend that his protruding toes were an extension of her own, scratch his knees and rub his forearms. She took pleasure in exfoliating that part of his body and didn’t mind the dead skin that sometimes came off him and fell on her belly or into the water. Sal would rub their pruny fingers together, lightly press his thumbs against her fingernails, since it helped her relax. Sometimes he’d make use of a few drops of Sandalwood, let the oil absorb in his palms and finger tips, then rub her temples and massage her scalp. Her pregnancy fascinated him. He couldn’t get enough of feeling the baby kick and was mesmerized by Antoinette’s ever-darkening nipples. He liked running his
forefinger along the thin patch of hair that started at the bottom of her navel and continued downward, joked that it was her Italian roots showing, even after she teasingly smacked his arm and explained that this happened to all pregnant women. And really, it was just a bit of peach fuzz.

Sal had plenty of work come his way and they were able to afford a phone. Antoinette mostly spoke to her mom, who helped her make a nursery in the second bedroom. Theresa McGill knew her daughter and son-in-law were going to have a girl, claimed she saw the birth in a dream. She told them her granddaughter had strawberry blond hair, just like Antoinette’s late father. Sal thought his mother-in-law was a kook, told Antoinette to simmer down and not get too excited about something her mom imagined. He half-joked that Theresa had her dream in the middle of the day, and that Antoinette should check on that bottle of rum her mother never used for cooking. But Antoinette saw the excitement in his eyes. When she suggested Josephine as a possible name, Sal didn’t argue about the sex of the baby, just told her he preferred Antonella, after his great grandmother. The woman was a goddamn saint. There wouldn’t even be no Antomucci’s in America if it weren’t for that precious lady’s sacrifices.

Double Ant Junior had a nice ring to it, too.

***

Antoinette touched the tiny plastic boy; the thread of his fishing rod swayed for a moment. She wished the manufacturer had given him more intricate eyes, rather than slap two brown dots on him. She stared at the bonsai. Mr. Chicken stared along with her, whistling and flapping one wing, thrilled by the new addition to the household. Antoinette looked out the window. She saw one of the
employees of Pleasure Palace helping someone parallel park outside the building. He was the employee with piercings all over his face and stretched out earlobes that she could never bring herself to look at for too long. She thought about his mother, wondered if she knew where her son worked and the kind of people he interacted with. She supposed not. The Pleasure Palace employee stopped waving at the person in the car to turn the steering wheel to the left, and the stranger finally slid into the parking spot. She watched dozens of men enter and exit the shop throughout the day. She watched as these men, these customers, left the store nonchalantly. Not a single one of them looked rushed or pretended to scratch their face in a failed attempt to hide their embarrassment. She couldn’t fathom their lack of shame, was almost desperate for some sort of sign, anything that would indicate they knew what they were doing was wrong.

Antoinette felt the all too familiar rhythmic vibrations from the downstairs booths through her floor. It had been a few years since the booths were installed. She thought of Sal’s interest in their construction and his surprise at her inability to comprehend their ultimate purpose. She couldn’t help but smile.

The sounds from Pleasure Palace had always bothered her. She hated the store, but the booths were the true bane of her existence. Sal had told her what the men who entered did in there. She hadn’t believed him at first. But when the muffled noises from downstairs became more and more frequent, and the seemingly endless succession of strange men walking in and out of the store was more apparent than ever, she’d been forced to accept that what he’d told her was true.

Sal was dead, going on twelve years now. The store was alive and kicking.
Antoinette was largely able to ignore the obscure noises coming from the television screens in the booths. But whenever she had to concentrate or focus on something, as she currently was on the bonsai tree and the little boy with the brown dots and plastic straw in his mouth, that disruptive, stifled sound devolved into an incessant, inescapable thumping.

She closed her eyes, willing the muddled noise out, but it seemed to get louder. So she did what she always did when the reverberation from downstairs wouldn’t cease. She walked around her living room, stomping on the floor as hard as she could. She brought a broom in from the kitchen and banged the wooden edge on the scuffed hardwood floor.

Mr. Chicken whistled, helping Antoinette out with intermittent calls of “Pervert!” and “Sick! Sick! Sick!”

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The baby arrived one week past Antoinette’s official due date, in May of 1961. Both she and Sal felt a tinge of disappointment when the doctor informed them it was a boy. Their discontent, however, dissipated the second they saw their son and held him. Sal kissed Antoinette and cried along with her. He would later deny it, claiming she was wonked out from the drugs they gave her and the nineteen and a half hours of labor.

They named the baby Charlie, after Antoinette’s late father. She worried Sal would veto it, that it wasn’t Italian enough. But Sal kind of liked having a Charlie in the family, said his union buddies and bosses would appreciate it. Charlie Antomucci was a name that people would never forget, he told her. A name that deserved to be announced.
Charles Carmine Antomucci was baptized in front of fifty people at the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Coworkers, friends, neighbors, and family, of course, all attended. Sal’s younger brother, Carlo, and Antoinette’s second cousin, Rita, were named Godparents. Everyone gushed over Charlie, couldn’t get enough of his blue eyes and pudgy face. Antoinette and Sal delighted in the compliments. Carlo claimed that despite the baby’s blue eyes and pale skin, he had inherited the famous Antomucci eyebrows. *The kind that give Sophia Loren a run for her money.*

Theresa scoffed, said eyebrows were overrated. She went into a rendition of “Choo Choo Charlie,” and announced that her grandson was the real Good ‘N Plenty. She walked from pew to pew with Charlie in her arms, insisting that he took after her late husband’s side of the family. She told everyone who’d listen that Charles McGill had the same chubby cheeks, right up until the day he died. Sal asked his wife if her mother had finished off all of the communion wine, and Antoinette laughed, then kissed him on the cheek. *Probably.*

***

Antoinette filled a measuring cup with water from the kitchen sink. She sat by the living room window and moved the bonsai tree to the left, hoping it would get more sun. She dipped her fingertips in the cup and sprinkled the bonsai with drops of water, then pressed lightly on the soil, making sure it was just wet enough. She put her index finger under her nose, wondered if the miniscule bits of dirt smelled like actual earth. She touched the plastic straw hat on the boy, hoping it would come off. It didn’t.

The smell of fried donuts and exhaust from the cars below wafted through the window and into her apartment. That distinct smell of dough and fumes was
the one thing that didn’t change. She closed her eyes and tried to remember the first time she’d noticed that odd mixture of scents, and realized how much she liked it. Someone outside honked their horn, interrupting her thoughts. She didn’t mind the noise from outside so much. Not during the day.

Nighttime was different. She hated the noises and the people that made them. She hated the men outside the Pleasure Palace, the ones who shouted maniacally at passersby, encouraging them to shell out dollar after dollar of hard-earned money, enticing them with promises of willing girls down in the basement. She hated the sounds of the drunks and the whores, the strippers from the surrounding clubs, the loiterers. The kind of people her mother, may she rest in peace, would have referred to as Riff Raff and misfit scum.

The thuds and stomps from the first floor booths grew louder. Antoinette tried to remember the sounds of her former neighbors, especially those who lived on the two floors above. She opened the door and stepped out of her apartment. The hallway was dark, and even though she knew it wouldn’t work, she hit the hallway light switch. She looked around, didn’t like the feel of the air, didn’t like that it smelled old and musty, like it was rotting.

She thought of Sal. He’d died nearly seven years before the owner of the building, some God forsaken real estate company that bought the whole place back in the mid-seventies, gutted the basement and first floor. They’d rented it out over the years to bodegas and local business owners. The Pleasure Palace set up shop in 1990. Dozens of other sex shops soon followed suit, all kicked out of the now tourist and family-friendly Times Square area. Her former neighbors shook their
heads, called it *the beginning of the end*. Antoinette mostly nodded, said things like *you can’t predict the future and just take it one day at a time*.

The real end had come after Sal had a heart attack and the real estate company bought out the tenants who’d lived there for as long as she and Sal had. The company simply sealed off the doors of those who had died. The tenants who came after—the artists and the dope fiends and the single mothers—were forced out by the outrageous rent increase. But not Antoinette. She didn’t need the money; Sal’s pension was more than enough. This was her home, always would be. The real estate company sent threatening letters every now and then, made sure the building superintendent never fixed the broken lights, or saw to other small repairs that wouldn’t result a messy lawsuit. Antoinette was holding up three floors of prime New York City real estate, and they couldn’t do a damn thing about it.

She walked back inside and made a cup of tea. Caffeine used to keep her up, but not anymore. She felt the bonsai tree’s soil again, making sure it was still hydrated. “Nappy nap,” she said.

Mr. Chicken squawked, “Nappy nap! Nappy nap!”

In her bedroom, Antoinette turned down the blinds and climbed on top of the sheets. She still kept to the right side of the mattress. She placed a pillow on the left side of the bed, sprayed the pillowcase with Sal’s cologne and a few drops of Sandalwood oil, then wrapped her arms around it. She tried to adjust to the dark, knew it would tire her out. Her gaze landed on the sterling silver framed photo of Charlie. He was smiling, red popsicle juice all over his face and clothes. Antoinette
turned the picture to get a better look. When he squinted and smiled, Charlie’s eyes
looked an awful lot like the plastic boy’s.

***

Charlie was a dream child. Everyone said so.

Blue-eyed and dark-browed, Charlie was a small, rosy-cheeked, pudgy force
to be reckoned with. Antoinette and Sal doted on their son, their own little cherub,
and rightfully so. Even strangers could tell this kid was special—sweet and
curious, easy to be around. No small feat for a toddler. Charlie was patient and
never rowdy. He loved his Nana Antomucci’s homemade caramel gelato, as well as
his mother’s shepherd’s pie. A little crease of concentration formed between his
brows whenever Sal showed him the correct way to cook Marinara. *You gotta let it
simmer, and never ever forget to add paprika.*

Charlie made up songs and danced for his parents and company. He walked
around the house and pretty much anywhere he could with his green stroller,
lugging around his favorite Tonka dump truck.

At the age of four, Charlie made known his appreciation for Zsa Zsa Gabor,
despite his inability to pronounce her first name. *Za Za Antomucci,* he called her.
He’d imitate Arnold from *Green Acres,* his favorite show, making even Boss down at
the Pioneer laugh and clap his hands.

The family escaped the rain and snow of New York in November, and flew
to Boca Raton for a long weekend in celebration of Antoinette’s twenty-fifth
birthday; she’d always wanted to sip piña coladas by the pool, underneath a palm
tree. She’d even bought special sunglasses for the occasion, called them *Florida
fancy.* Sal and Charlie wore matching swim trunks—yellow with red and green
pineapples. Sal threw Charlie into the air and caught him, told Antoinette it was perfectly safe with the water. They splashed each other, and Charlie rode his father’s back, as the latter made whale sounds and swam lap after lap. Sal held Charlie and submerged his head in the pool, made bubbles come out. Charlie clapped, wanting to do the same, but both his parents said he was too young. They splashed around some more, with Antoinette applying a fresh coat of suntan lotion to the both of them every ten minutes.

They emerged from the pool smelling like Hawaiian Tropic and chlorine. Charlie sat on his mother as she dried him off with a Mets beach towel. She wrapped him up in it, then gave him a banana and a sippy cup with water. An old couple walked past them; the woman wore three diamond rings and a tennis bracelet. Sal pointed to them and told Charlie to watch closely. That’s how you retire, kiddo. Learn from the Jews. Antoinette told her son not to listen to his father. Sal just shrugged and said, You gotta hand it to them.

On their second to last day in Florida, they went to the Palm Beach Zoo. Antoinette and Sal each held one of Charlie’s hands, running and lifting him up in a swing-like motion. When he got tired, Antoinette sat him in his green stroller. Sal said he was too big for a stroller, told her that people were staring. But she’d insisted, said he was still a baby and that she liked watching his little feet kick as she strolled him along.

Charlie was particularly drawn to Angelica, a yellow-billed Amazon parrot. He jumped up and down and squealed with joy when she yelled Hello! over and over again. He tried whistling, tried to imitate Angelica and talk to her. His parents
watched him communicate with the bird. After two hours, they realized he’d lost interest in any other animal the zoo had to offer.

Antoinette and Sal surprised Charlie with his very own Amazon parrot a couple of weeks following their return to Hell’s Kitchen. All he could talk about was Angelica and her feathers and her voice, and how she was so polite and funny. But the clincher had been when he’d said the bird’s name and followed it with an Italian-style kiss, complete with all five of his tiny fingertips balled up together, and a loud smacking of his lips as they met.

Charlie named the bird Mr. Chicken; Antoinette had taken him to see The Ghost and Mr. Chicken at the beginning of the year. The film had proven to be just a little on the scary side, but Charlie couldn’t get enough of Don Knotts’ goofy face.

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Antoinette woke up at midnight and stared at the ceiling for a few minutes before she peed and brewed up a cup of tea. She got out of her clothes and put on the pink bathrobe Sal had bought her from Macy’s. He’d had her name embroidered on the left breast in gold thread. They’d misspelled it and left out the second “t.” She returned to the bathroom, sat on the tub and turned on the faucet. She felt the water heat up, then placed the rubber plug in the drain.

She fed Mr. Chicken and cleaned out his water dish, then sat down by the living room window. It was already dark out. The lights from Pleasure Palace—blue and red flashes screaming at everyone on 53rd Street and vicinity—shone in the night sky.

“Dinner!” Mr. Chicken squawked. “Dinner!”

Antoinette smiled, took a sip of her tea. “I’m not hungry, buddy.” She didn’t
hate the lights, had almost come to rely on them in a way. They comforted her; Sal had come to expect his dinner when the store lights came on from the street below. Then a nightcap and bed.

She touched the little plastic boy, moved him so that his position was firmer. She felt the soil to make sure it was dry, in case she was about to overwater it. Antoinette tipped the measuring cup, slowly pouring water onto the bonsai and its surrounding soil. The red and blue lights from the store hit the window and the tree. The constant flashes hit the shadows of the plastic boy’s face and made it seem as though he was smiling. She thought the lights looked like fireworks. Red and Blue fireworks for the plastic boy, while he fished on the fourth of July.

She smelled cigarette smoke. Sal had taken to smoking pipes a few years before he died and she’d loved the smell. Cigarettes just weren’t the same. She looked out the window. The store employee with the facial piercings was smoking and stretching his back.

He looked up and waved at her. “Hey, Miss Antomucci.”

“It’s Mrs.”

He took a long drag and nodded, blew out the smoke. “My bad.” He watched her in her pink robe, leaning out the window. He put out the cigarette, then pointed to his face. “Kyle,” he said. “We’ve met.”

“I’m not senile,” she said, although she couldn’t remember him ever telling her his name.

“No, I know—”

“Kyle from the store, yes,” she said. “I also know Scott.”

“Boss man, yep.” He scratched his neck and cleared his throat, then pointed
to her window. “Never thought I’d ask anyone this, but is that a bonsai tree by any chance?”

Antoinette stood up straight and didn’t move.

“I think that belongs to Scott,” Kyle said.

Antoinette took the bonsai and closed the window.

“It’s not a big deal,” he shouted.

Antoinette stood still for a few seconds longer, then opened the window.

“I’m not gonna say anything, Mrs. A.”

“Why does he need a bonsai tree anyway?”

Kyle put his hands in his pocket. “It’s for his kid. Culture Week at his school or somethin’.”

“Culture Week? He’s not Japanese.”

“His ex-wife is.”

“Oh.” She stood still. Then held the tree in both hands. “So, he said something.”

“Scott?”

“Yes.”

Kyle nodded. “Kinda, yeah.” When she didn’t respond and just kept standing in place with the bonsai in her hands, he shrugged. “He wasn’t mad or nothin’, just assumed the package got delivered to the wrong address.”

“I see.”

“Hey,” Kyle said, “it’s honestly not a big deal. He already ordered a new one. Straight to his house.” He snapped his finger with one hand and gave her a thumb’s up with the other. “Problem solved.”
“I don’t want to get George in trouble.”

“George?”

“The delivery man.”

“Don’t worry about George,” he said. “I got George covered. Scout’s honor.”

“Thank you.” She held out the bonsai in front of her, so Kyle could see. “I’ve been watering it,” she said. She removed the plastic boy and presented him. “It came with a little fishing boy.”

“You should call him Kyle.” He made a muscle. “Good, strong, sturdy name.”

“I already named him,” she said. “Charlie.”

“Charlie! Charlie!”

“That’s Mr. Chicken,” she said.

Kyle laughed. “Scott said he heard someone else in there a couple of times he brought packages up for you.”

“He’s a parrot.”

“That’s cool.”

“Pervert!” Mr. Chicken called out from the apartment, then whistled.

“I guess he knows us pretty well,” Kyle said, smiling.

“He’s a smart cookie.” Antoinette carefully set down the bonsai tree, then pointed to her face. “Do those hurt?”

Kyle’s hand instinctively went to his own face. “What? My piercings?”

She nodded.

“Nah.” He pulled at his lip ring. “See? I can do this, and nothin’.”

“Don’t do that!”

Kyle laughed. “It’s all good, I swear.” He looked around him, then at the
store entrance. “My break’s over.”

Antoinette wished he didn’t have to go. “It was nice chatting with you, Kyle.”

“You too, Mrs. A. And maybe move the bonsai to a different window? You know, just in case.”

She nodded.

“Anyway,” he said, “take care of Charlie.” Kyle opened the door to the first floor entrance, but stopped midway. “Charlie,” he repeated, then looked back up at Antoinette. “I like it.”

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Charles Carmine Antomucci died on March 12th, 1966, two months short of his fifth birthday. The official cause of death was drowning. But no one, including the doctors and nurses at Mount Sinai West, knew for sure what had happened.

Sal was at work when Antoinette and Charlie had returned from the Prospect Park Zoo. Charlie talked about zebras the entire bus ride back, promised he’d take real good care of his zebra if his folks got him one. He’d already thought of possible names—Pebbles for a boy and Bamm-Bamm for a girl.

Antoinette ran him a bath, told him he could get a zebra when he was much, much older. Mr. Chicken joined them in his cage, and Charlie and the bird made weird noises together and called out to each other. Charlie splashed the water and Mr. Chicken whistled and trilled. Antoinette soaped up her son. She made his hair stick up before scrubbing shampoo into it, and he laughed. He liked Sandalwood oil at bath time, told her it smelled like Poppa. She used the shower nozzle to wash out the shampoo from his hair, and Charlie instinctively tipped his head back, shut his eyes real tight. As the water washed over him, he inexplicably stretched out
both of his little arms, and Antoinette laughed, then kissed the dimple on his right elbow.

She left to get a towel, heard splashing and Mr. Chicken’s hoots and hollers as she searched her bedroom closet for one that wasn’t rough or scratchy. She made a mental note to change fabric softeners, and hadn’t noticed when the splashing ceased and the bird was silent. It all happened so goddamn fast.

Charlie was floating on his stomach when she returned, his limbs spread out. A thin red streak from the direction of his head colored the water. Antoinette stood in place, her hands clutching the towel. She didn’t scream or cry out, just froze. A few seconds passed before she turned him over. He was smiling and she cleaned his wound. She called Sal two minutes later. He called the ambulance and rushed home.

Dr. Avedo told them that Charlie had drowned. He’d suffered a blow to the head from the bath tub faucet. Antoinette said she was only gone for a minute, repeated it over and over, till Sal hugged her. Dr. Avedo asked them what kind of games Charlie liked to play in the water. They mentioned bath time with Mr. Chicken and whale-riding on his father’s back in Florida. Dr. Avedo told them it was likely that Charlie had tried to hold his breath underwater and hit the back of his head on the faucet when he came up for air. Though he couldn’t be sure. It was no one’s fault, really.

After the funeral, Theresa had to be sedated. She wore black for a year straight, then moved in with her sister in Yonkers. The Pioneer held a memorial service for Charlie, and Boss gave everyone rounds on the house, even offered up and supplied free food. Boss never charged Antoinette or Sal a cent.
After the funeral, Sal got rid of Charlie’s green stroller, said he couldn’t look at it. He and Antoinette sat on the edge of the tub and cried. He asked her if Mr. Chicken might have witnessed anything, and she didn’t know. She told Sal that Charlie had smiled, and Sal said she must have imagined it. Then he gathered all of Charlie’s bath time toys, said he’d donate them. Instead, he put them all in a trash bag, which he later threw down the garbage chute outside their apartment.

Antoinette took a bath that evening, and Sal just watched. She said it was fine, that they’d both feel closer to Charlie that way. But Sal left before she was done speaking, told her he didn’t want to be in that bathroom ever again. He took a cold shower that day, and every other day until he passed away.

Theresa had told her daughter that this kind of thing tore couples apart, because how could it not? She feared Sal would come to resent his wife, maybe even blame her for what had happened. But he never did, at least not out loud. They didn’t speak much after, and Sal went to bed earlier with each passing night. Antoinette thought he was depressed. He got mad when she mentioned it—a couple of college courses didn’t make her Freud. She told him Freud was dead. He said so is Charlie.

Sal bought them a dog four months later. Antoinette made the puppy a small, round bed with real down feathers sewn in. But the dog preferred sleeping in their bed. Sal didn’t mind. One night, with the dog’s tail wagging on both their legs, Sal told Antoinette that he threw away the green stroller. Then he said he didn’t want another kid and that neither one of them could go through something like this again. She was surprised to feel relieved.

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Antoinette disrobed and slowly sank into the tub. She picked up the bonsai tree, and placed it on the little side table, on top of a folded towel. Mr. Chicken flapped his wings and squawked, watched as Antoinette dabbed her temples with Sandalwood.

She clapped her hands and the lights went out. She liked the red and blue flashing coming from the store, made subtle and serene in the dark bathroom. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath. She thought of their dog, long dead now. Mr. Chicken had hated him, even as a puppy. She’d suggested naming it Pebbles or Bamm-Bamm, but the idea creeped Sal out. In the end, they chose Lassie; According to Sal, originality was overrated anyway.

She took another deep breath, tried to picture the dimple in Charlie’s elbow. For the life of her, she couldn’t remember the green stroller, couldn’t conjure up a clear image of the day she took a picture of him with popsicle juice running down his face and shirt. Her memory, especially at night, was hazy. Except for that smile. That goddamn smile on his pudgy little face.
Richard was a mopper. Like all moppers, he went by on name—like Cher or Madonna, minus the fortune and fame. We called him Richard because that’s the name he chose. Weeks later, he told us his name was Rajapaksa. We asked him why he didn’t go by his real name, said we could have called him Raj if only we’d known, not recognizing the gross irony of answering our own question. Not recognizing that the mopper before him—the one who just up and left one day, as they all eventually did, because moppers don’t get fired and they don’t quit—went by Joe, and the one before him by Nick, and the countless others before them who we pretended we couldn’t remember, when the truth was we just didn’t care. We couldn’t and wouldn’t be bothered to remember another Steve or Frank or Howard. All moppers. All from Sri Lanka. All with perfect all-American names.

But Richard thought he was different—thought he was more. Richard took pride in his work and it bothered us. It bothered us that he didn’t fall in line with our well-established porn-shop employee hierarchy. He wore suits for mopping duties at the Pleasure Palace, where the booths were located at street level, making it easier for customers to slip in and out unnoticed. He wore ties as though he were the face of the store and mopping bodily fluids a dignified task. As though it mattered.

Richard came to work early and left without bothering anyone, always carrying a mysterious blue gym bag. We’d joke that he kept stolen cleaning supplies in it, or food from the Papa John’s next door—his second job—as he often
liked to pretend they’d made an extra pizza by mistake, and we went along with his charade, if only for the free pizza.

Richard thought we were friends, and we never bothered to correct him. He thought that when his manager next door called him “portly,” he meant that Richard was like a fine wine. He thought the large mole on his upper left cheek gave him character, while we joked about it changing colors and transporting him back and forth from Sri Lanka, if he just believed hard enough. He thought that finding a Snickers bar in one of the booths and eating it was normal. He thought being a mopper was noble, or that he could somehow make it noble, and we just watched as he’d lick the pad of his right thumb after touching each and every single dollar bill before handing it over to the next customer eager for his two-minutes-for-one-dollar-session.

We watched as he got ripped off by a hustler selling junk laptops outside the store, and as he made friends with one sex worker in particular: Sheila the redhead, who walked with a limp, whose painted-on eyebrows smeared in the rain. Sheila, who smelled of stale cigarettes and Jean Naté and was bruised all over, with pockmarks and a mole of her own. We watched as they drank coffee together and shared a Danish in the morning. We watched as he protected Sheila from the cops harassing her, from competing workers and angry clientele, bringing her into the shop and letting her take refuge, if only for a little while. We watched and decided he gave her most of his money. We laughed at him, unwilling to acknowledge his isolation or our role in it, unrelenting in our assumption that he paid Sheila for sex, and that there was something wrong with it. We mocked his stupidity, not knowing that back home in Sri Lanka, in his hometown of Weligama, his parents,
Thamil and Anura Mahinda, were receiving 90 percent of his paychecks. We didn’t know that he was building a better house and life for them, that he had promised his siblings, Niman and Herath and Asha, that they could live at the house once it was built, and never have to worry about adequate shelter again.

We didn’t know because we didn’t care. We didn’t know because we didn’t want to know. Richard was just the mopper. The mopper who worked more hours than the law permitted; the mopper who pretended to leave the shop at 8 p.m. but secretly hid in the closed-off mezzanine so he could sleep at the store and avoid paying rent; the mopper who kept clothes and soap and a toothbrush and deodorant in that blue gym bag of his; the mopper who worked each shift with a genuine smile on his face while we could barely stomach the incessant perversions of New York’s porn-obsessed masses; the mopper who believed we saw him as one of our own, when in reality he was our source of entertainment; the mopper who wasn’t broken, like the rest of us, by seeing the worst Hell’s Kitchen had to offer.

We’d come into work hungover or still drunk from the night before, willing our bodies to cooperate with our minds. But not Richard. He’d flash a smile and ask about the weekly roster, with a rolling r and a toe at the end. We’d laugh behind his back and wonder why the hell he didn’t just call it a schedule. We would make jokes about his football team mentality, his unwavering determination while surrounded by filth. We wanted him to acknowledge the hideousness of his situation.

We resented Richard. He knew the men who frequented the booths by their first names; he’d joke around with them as he made change with more dollar bills, their laughter reaching us all the way down in the basement; he’d use his breaks
between mopping to read Lee Iacocca’s *Where Have All the Leaders Gone?* He’d mop and Windex and disinfect even when there were no customers around, and hum and sing and dance to Bon Jovi as he worked, thinking the lyrics held mysterious, deep meaning. He’d call the owner Mister and Boss and Sir, while we just called him Scott. Richard almost cried when a customer brought him a brand-new leather briefcase, like he was *somebody*. The lack of heat in the store during the winter never seemed to bother him, while we pissed and moaned for months at a time. He’d look at us when we drank on the job or did coke—not judging us, but radiating something more like pity. Something so much worse, because who the fuck was Richard the mopper to pity us?

We pretended not to hear him when he’d politely yell from the booths that he needed help with a difficult customer. *Smile and shake his hand, Richard,* we’d say to each other. *Think, Richard—what would Lee Iacocca do?* We pretended not to hear the yelling from the booths, or Richard apologizing to angry drunk assholes who’d been hustled into buying fake tickets made at Kinko’s for services we didn’t offer, like sex in a booth, or the magic of a glory hole. We pretended that the dead tooth in the front of his mouth didn’t repulse us, but not really, since we laughed about it. We pretended not to notice how much his back ached from bending and leaning and mopping, from sitting on a rickety stool with nail heads protruding from the torn-up faux-leather, while we sat on real chairs with real backs behind a counter, watching eighties’ movies and catching up on *The Office*. We pretended not to notice the black nail on his left forefinger, his punishment for playing around with the fuse box because we refused to get off our asses. We pretended not to
laugh when he fell off the ladder, fell between the rusty metallic rungs, all in an attempt to fix the flickering fluorescent lights to which the rest of us were resigned.

Richard shared more than pizza with us. He’d treat us to beetroot curry, and we accepted, congratulating ourselves on waiting until his back was turned to spit it out, because there was something off and not quite right about the flavor, like a salty mango. We imagined that’s how his tears must taste. We imagined he thought he was better than us, and pretended that he wasn’t.

We homed in on the fact that he had hair growing out of his ears; that one of his temples—we never remembered which—was badly scarred; that his right eyelid drooped; that his over-waxed eyebrows gave him an alien look; that he wore shirts labeled Guccini and Armana; that he’d run his hands through his hair, leaving a coconut-scented sheen on his fingers; that he’d eat Starbursts as a substitute for breath mints, marking his teeth with sticky globs of red, pink, and orange goo. We homed in on the fact that he’d eat brown bananas and red apples, stickers and all; that his right eye was constantly red from a burst blood vessel he said ran in the family. We homed in on the fact that we couldn’t tell whether he was twenty-five or forty; that he had a weird patch of hair on his neck; that he’d pick and prod at the archipelago of skin tags plaguing his upper body; that his breath smelled like coffee and peanuts, and sweet and sour soup.

When the booths weren’t too busy, Richard would open and close the entrance for customers he thought were real people, real friends. We’d watch in anger and disapproval as he’d smile, stretching his arm out for them, saluting and tipping an invisible doorman’s hat on his balding head. We’d watch as he’d scratch
an imaginary itch on his forehead, when the hat he pretended was there failed to materialize.

We didn’t notice how he’d clean our display cases, straighten up the movies and organize the scat videos in chronological order, even though it was an exercise in futility. We didn’t notice when he could no longer stand up or sit on the stool from hell, and had to grab the second-floor railing for dear life while vomiting. We didn’t notice that the day before, a man had defecated in one of the booths and smeared it all over the walls and TV screen, and Richard, good ole’ all-American Richard, took it upon himself to wipe it clean, using Windex and not wearing any gloves. We didn’t notice until he passed out and someone called 911. We didn’t notice that he was gone for nearly a week, hospitalized with E. coli. Not one of us went to visit him; not one of us picked up our goddamned phones to see how he was doing. We didn’t know that Sheila, with her red hair and limp and pockmarks, was the only one who sat beside his hospital bed, the only one who brought him flowers. We didn’t know that daylilies were his favorite.

We didn’t welcome Richard back with hugs or pats on the back, but chastised him for not hosing down the booth and bleaching it. We didn’t notice that he looked at the floor the entire time, nodding and scratching the back of his neck. We continued to sell every style of pornography, every fetish imaginable from every corner of the world, while Richard kept mopping, now abandoning the smile and the humming and the doorman duties with the invisible hat.

We didn’t say anything when he stopped showing up; we didn’t say anything when a new parade of moppers made their way through the Pleasure Palace—Mark, Lou, Carl, Bob—all from Sri-Lanka. All with perfect all-American
names. We didn’t say anything when the incessant flickering of the fluorescent lights returned, when our display cases were dustier than ever, when the electricity was driving us mad because no one cared enough to check the fuse box. We didn’t say anything about Richard, never wondered why and where he’d gone. Because moppers don’t get fired. And they never quit. They just leave.