

Playgod: Entertainment for Fools

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**Abstract**

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What is a woman? What is it like, to be her? To be locked in the cage. To yearn for freedom while being told she isn't real. Whatever's in her head, it's all mush. She's nothing. Not person, not animal. Sometimes, she might be decoration: a pretty painting to hang on the wall, an expensive watch or tie. Therefore, a woman is mineral. She is what she is, nothing more. She believes what she is told. She believes in the gods of all things pretty and soft, her bible a girly magazine. Every man a threat, or a promise. Her existence defined by the face in the jar by the door. Every part of her life, a grotesque play for the pleasure of her watchers. She must keep sweet. She must be small. She must she must she must: every day, a mantra, repeated by everyone but her. (But sometimes, in the mirror, it comes out anyway.) To be left with a single question: Why?

# PLAYGOD

ENTERTAINMENT FOR FOOLS

NOVEMBER 1986 • \$3.50

A BRIEF TOUR OF THE  
WORLD-FAMOUS GLASS JAR  
MUSEUM AND MORE!

## JUDE MONK

20 QUESTIONS WITH THE  
RENOWNED REENACTOR

## MEREDITH LIND

IN HER FIRST INTERVIEW SINCE  
HER MYSTERIOUS DEATH AND  
BODY SNATCHING

INTREPID REPORTER GOES  
INSIDE THE BELLY OF THE  
OCCULT BEAST TO INTERVIEW  
THEIR NEWEST SACRIFICE

## MADAME PRESIDENT

IN A TELL-ALL NUDE PICTORIAL  
FROM GROWN UP CHILD STAR  
BITSY BERNARDO



# PLAYGOD AFTER HOURS

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A woman in Des Moines said yes once. One single time to one single person. And now it's all she can say. To any request, any invitation, any question. All she says is yes. Though she cries and fights her mouth says yes. Yes yes yes. When asked if she's enjoying herself: of course. Does it feel good? Do you like it? Yes yes yes yes.

•

The government has built the first lethal chamber in Central Park. The lethal chamber is part of a bill passed last year giving everyone the "right to choose." It is housed in a building in the brutalist style, with windows on every wall overlooking the beauty of the park. Patrons can make an appointment or simply walk in. And park-goers can watch everything happening inside with a nice picnic lunch.

•

Hysteria is once more on the rise. We saw a dip in the past hundred years, a steady decline. Even removed it from the DSM in 1980. But now women are diagnosing themselves, checking into mental hospitals, begging for a professional diagnosis, and refusing to leave until their wombs

are removed. Psychologists were initially refusing treatment, but the ferocity and sheer numbers are making them rethink their decision to remove it from the DSM.

•

The Glass Jar Museum in Philadelphia is once more open for business. They closed in late 1984 after one of their exhibits managed to escape. The original report claimed "the exhibit used its beauty to coax a janitor into opening its jar. The janitor has been dealt with and we have many leads on finding the missing exhibit." Nothing about which exhibit escaped. But repairs have been made and a new security system installed.

•

A writer in Nantucket is requesting memories for his future memoirs. In a classified in the *Nantucket Tribune*, he wrote that he's planning on writing his autobiography in about a decade, but worries his life won't be interesting enough. He wants memories from those who do lead more interesting lives, so he can make up for time wasted. He'll pay for postage and wishes he could take copies, but only originals will do.



# MOVIES

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HER BODY not her body. Her body home to parasite. Growing in her. Eating her food. Taking everything from her. Making her weak, making her sick. In constant agony. Never taken seriously. No attention paid. Always drama always always always. Never real always fake. Trying to get attention.

Her body not her body. Different. Bigger. Expanding forever expanding. No ends to it. The parasite only grows longer, bigger the more she feeds it. She only gets weaker. Behind the parasite her ribs show. Behind the parasite she is all skin and bones and pain.

Her body not her body. She wants it out. The parasite. Never wanted it in the first place. But everyone else told her she needed it. That she wouldn't be complete without it. But she hates the parasite. Fears it. Looks at her bulging stomach sees the strain on her skin and knows it's going to rip itself out of her.

Her body not her body. Incubator. Tool. Home for a being beyond her. Above her. Worm taking her energy. She lies down flat and watches her distended stomach burst forth. She glows underneath. Ethereal beauty in all her wasting glory. Her mother weeps at the sight of her.

In *Leech*, Venus Valentine makes her official switch from arthouse softcore porn to the silver screen. With Patrick Strong and Anthony



Mythic rounding out the roster, *Leech* is a surefire smash hit. ▲▲▲▲

So beautiful helpless frail. Big wide blue eyes. Lined with dark long curly lashes. Miles of dark shiny hair. All natural button nose, full cheeks. Picture of youth. Barely in high school. Her body hidden behind a loose-fitting men's shirt, with flowing sleeves and a high collar. Doesn't stop them from looking lusty.

Her antagonist: a man. Paternal, sometimes. Wanton others. Lifetimes older than her. Looks it too. With his deep-set eyes, crepey skin. Hair all done. Makeup glittering on his exposed flesh. Rings on every finger. But most skin covered: only neck and face exposed. Eyes. Watching her.

From a distance. From up close. From behind her, in front of her: he watches. Across the room their eyes meet. Her savior, her demon. Which is he? He lusts for her, or her for him. Forbidden girl. Forbidden man. Full of magic full of evil. Eyes always there. Across the room. Behind a mask.

He sings to her like a child. Like a lover. He is mythical figure. Ancient and mysterious. Why does he look at her like that? She's scared. Always so scared. Always hitched breaths. Eyes full of fear. Where is he where is he? In her white gown, a child bride. For him alone.

A disappointing debut

for Cassie Bones, *Damsel* is entirely skippable. Some of the music hits the mark, but everything else falls flat. Not even Peter Wilder can make this more than what it is. ▲▲

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Her body isn't her own. But then, was it ever? Did she ever choose what she wore. Her makeup. Her hair. If her face was pretty. If her body was good. Did she ever have a say? The magazines, the men, the mothers and aunts and grandmas. They all owned her first and foremost. Every decision filtered through the council.

Her husband owns her. Body soul and everything else. Bank accounts in his name. Home in his name. Her name now his too. Marriage, children: a form of death. She has four. After her last, a mass found. A biopsy. A diagnosis: cancer. But the doctor doesn't tell her. No, her husband. Just her husband.

Husband has other plans for her. For his plaything. His tool. Doesn't tell her. Treatment would take her away from her duties. Away from the important stuff. He needs her. She doesn't need anything. Want anything. It eats at her, from the inside. Ravages her until:

One day, a dwelling pain gets worse. Bleeding bleeding bleeding always bleeding. A doctor for her. Gets her in stirrups. Tells her cancer. Her youngest is four. Breaking the news to a friend: but they already knew.

Rage impotent rage. Throws herself into treatment. Throws herself into her hus-

band's work. She exists as his proxy. Running for his third term, her first. On the road. A twenty-four minute speech. Bleeding until they take her womb. Radiation but still a tumor in her pelvis. Clots in her lungs. Radiation and the cancer spreads.

The governor dies at eighty pounds. Her youngest is seven.

This feel-good flick stars Logan Earl and Viola Bloom in their eighth movie together. *Him Him Him* is a movie the whole family can enjoy! ▲▲▲▲▲

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She loves him and he loves her. Isn't that how every good love story goes? The beauty of young love. The young and the beautiful. All that potential. All that life and happiness. They overflow with it. Into each other. Always always flowing in flowing out.

She loves him and he obsesses over her. Always within reach but never quite touching. Always she feels the weight of his gaze; now it's a comfort. A friendly ghost. His possession, man possessed. She never lies. Always under the shadow of guilt. When he holds her tight enough to bruise, she knows it's just love.

She loves him and he's captured by her. Not predator nor hunter, prey to her beauty, her charms. She holds his heart in her beautiful delicate soft hands. Sometimes she wears it on a chain around her throat. Lets it nestle between her breasts. Feel the heat of her own. Sometimes she stuffs it into her pocket, in the dark. Lets get it dusty. Dirty. But there's no one else for him.

She loves him and he owns her. Her body soul heart stays in the trunk of his hotrod. Her smile lives in his glovebox. Her laugh hangs on his rearview mirror. Everything that was her is now his. Without him she is vessel. Mannequin, blow up doll: exists but nothing. Waiting waiting waiting waiting.

She needs him and he needs her. They lay together and their atoms slip between each other. Fill in all their empty spaces. Fill them until they are everything. Love is left. Her smile is hers is his.

The most romantic movie of the season, *Sweetest Dreams* is the best first date movie out right now. Rose Adams and Freddy Cross make the perfect couple and tell the perfect love story. ▲▲▲





# WOMEN

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**P**retty girls, ugly girls: skin deep, bone deep. Consider: their girls and his girls. One for them—one for us, one for the voyeurs—one for him. One to keep, one to take.

On the surface, so different. A lost Van Gogh or a pile of dog shit, rotting on the sidewalk. But cut them open, they bleed the same color. Yet they don't bleed the same.

Their girls, pretty girls: theirs know their worth. The cost of the blood hitting the ground. Theirs scream and cry and fight. The blood, theirs want it all. Livers, lungs, hearts: it all stays inside. It's all wanted inside. By others too.

Theirs fights. Scratches with long nails, manicured, painted. Hits with fists so delicate, they break. Screams with voices only meant to sing. Weeps. Pleads. *Please please please.*

A dance. Everything, everything tainted by beauty. Their pain, art. Almost an act. Watching a play, someone miming misery, agony, fear, but never contorting into ugliness. Makeup pristine, skin smooth. Pain fake.

His girl, ugly



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## WHERE DO ALL THE UGLY GIRLS GO?

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girl: knows no worth. His lives on the edge. Scattered, never loved, never wanted. Piteous thing. Almost-creature. "Girl" never quite fit. His knows no difference between love and pain. Accepts abuse with a smile. Thinks the bruises are symbols: of love, of obsession.

Other girl. Separate. Not her, it. A shadow. Never looked at, but through, around. Never considered. Never remembered. Always last. Abandoned, neglected. Spoken to only by other his; other ugly girls. Always dreaming, never doing. Nothing to be done, fate already decided. Future is future and future is set.

His yearns for fear.

Never been taught otherwise. No warnings or life lessons. Thinks fear and desire are the same. Thinks a man following so close behind is what it means to be wanted. (How much he risks, all for her, make her his. Make her something more than she is. Than she could be.)

To be victim is now aspirational. To be something other than nothing. Other than blank space. Void. Instead: to be wanted to the point of prison, execution. To be worth years and years and years. For the world, country, state, city to pause a moment and see her face. Feel something towards her.

His accepts her punishment with a smile. Hushed enthusiasm. Acts her last moments with passion. Twists herself uglier, sells the moment. Blunt, unpainted nails tear flaccid flesh. Makes him understand it's what she wanted. Always, always her dream to be his. Forever and ever and ever and ever.

To answer the question: they go, quietly.



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# THE PLAYGOD ADVISOR

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I cry then I scream and no one listens; no one cares. Or they laugh. Tell me I'm overreacting. That it's all in my head. But I know my anger is righteous. That it is right and good. I look in the mirror. Remember her saying, you're not pretty enough to act like this. Wonder: is it true? If I were prettier, would someone take me seriously?

Maybe I wouldn't be the joke. No. An actress starring in her own tragedy. Soft lit, dreamy. Bathed in a gauzy kind of light. Hair perfect, makeup natural. My own score swelling as I scream. Him watching. Rapt. Struck dumb. Is he listening? No. But no laughter. Good enough. Better. He'll say, I'll fix it. He wants me. Needs me. But what can I do now? How can I make them take me seriously?

*You can't. You won't. Haven't you seen the movies? You're Lou Costello. One of the stooges. A joke. A creature to laugh at. No one will take you seriously because no one can. Get pretty or be silent.*

**M**y wife hasn't moved from her vanity in months. Mostly she sits completely still, a woman in repose: chin resting in hand supported by crooked elbow. She just looks so deeply into her own eyes. She never speaks to me, looks at me,



reacts to my presence. One of our kids got hurt downstairs while we were in the bedroom and nothing, not an inch of a reaction. Sometimes she changes pose (never taking her eyes off herself) but not often.

The few times I've seen her move have been to press her fingers into her forehead, around her eyes, her mouth. Moving them like she's ironing a shirt. Other times, I see her slathering on serums, lotions, creams. I hear her talking to herself, too. Sometimes mumbling under her breath, but other times are full conversations. Laughing, talking, listening with her face inches from the mirror. I can't sleep in the same room as her. I have never seen her look so beautiful. How do I explain this to our kids?

*We're happy to hear*

*your wife has reached this wondrous stage in her life! It's a point every woman hits once she hits that certain age. A little past her prime, but not yet all dried up and worthless. We know it's hard, but this process can take a while. But the results, as you can see, are completely worth it. As for your children, just tell them their mother needs a little more time and then she'll come back to them even better than before.*

I can't even look in the mirror I'm so big I take up an entire wall I rival the moon I'm so fat even if it's a hundred million miles away if you put us side-by-side I know I'd be bigger and I'm sick of it sick of not having space sick of taking up all the air sick of feeling like a spectacle and a joke and everyone pretending that I'm not and I look at people dying of cancer and envy the way their bones poke at their skin how you can count their ribs how their joints are their thickest parts such fragile little bird-things and I see disaster survivors and how they starved and how they lost thirty pounds in three weeks and I wish I had the strength or that my plane would crash or that mole on my arm is cancer but what can I do what can I do what can I do to be

the eldritch players present:

THE  
MOTHER  
YOUTH  
KINGS  
December 22, 5 a.m.

ONE NIGHT ONLY

the players will not be held liable in the event of madness, mayhem, or death resulting from witnessing their work.

smaller and prettier and worth something.

*Our advice: take up smoking. Cigarettes kill your appetite. Cigarettes give you cancer. Either way, skin and bones. A dream for a girl like you. Smoke instead of eat. Drink until you're not hungry. Other ways to get cancer: spend time in the sun, spend time with radiation, spend time with asbestos air. It might be hard at first, but not eating is always an option. Or if you're not strong enough you can always just throw it all back up. Anorexia, bulimia: new hot accessories for the modern girl. Or, of course, you can walk into a national park and disappear. Our favorites are Death Valley or*

*anything anywhere in Alaska. No one's there. No one will find you, before you're ready. If they're even looking.*

I think my husband sees someone different when he looks at me. The woman he describes looks nothing like me. Or the woman in the mirror, the pictures. Beautiful, he moment I saw her. Legs for days. A beautiful smile. These hazel eyes I could see across the room. Could see them light up when she saw me.

Who is she? Who did he marry? My eyes are blue. I have no body. Not anymore. I look in the mirror and I see nothing, no one. Mother mother mother. Every part of me is claimed by someone

else. I'm there in the mirror but I can't look. Can't bear to see what I've become. He says, I've never seen anyone like her. She's everything I've ever wanted.

How do I tell my husband he doesn't see the woman he married?

*Make him look at you. Really look at you. Nothing in between you. Nothing blocking his eyes. Lay his hands on you. Make him see and make him feel. But why shatter his delusions? Why not let yourself live in his head as a great beauty? Why not be flawless somewhere somehow? But, no, you're right. He deserves the truth. And you deserve whatever comes after.*



## **SPECTRAL ASSAULT**

LOS ANGELES — *Women: fear. Women, always afraid. Life depends on it. Nowhere is safe; not the streets, not their own homes. Woman enters home. Long day, hard day. Food stamps, temp job. No money coming in. All going out. CPS watching, breathing down her neck. Any reason to take them away from her. She comes home, goes into her room. All she wants is peace. Rest. And then a grip on her arm. She looks. Sees nothing. Feels each finger. Now sees the way they're denting her flesh. Unstoppable force, throwing her onto her bed. Lifting her nightgown over her hips. She screams. She fights. She sees nothing. Her son comes in. Does nothing—doesn't know if there's something to do. Calls the cops. They come, search the house: no one. She tells them she was raped. They laugh. Leave. It happens again. Again again again. Her children are taken from her. Her job, too. Alone in the house now. The cops stopped answering her calls.*

## **1986 McMARTIN LEAK**

WASHINGTON, D.C. — *Last month, documents were leaked. The FTC investigated claims that company, company, company, and so many other top 500s turned to the*

*occult in 1974: "to lift us out of the recession." Remember it? Remember waiting hours and hours and hours for gas? Remember looking for jobs, knowing none were there? From the New York Times, we learned of rituals in the Hamptons: drugs, blood, rape with America's favorite movers and shakers as guests of honor, crying out to some unseeing, all knowing patch of blackness in the corners of their ballrooms, wine cellars, galleries. The brainwashing of staff, locking them in downtown office buildings with something unknowable until they ripped at the seams, until they would give anything to see, feel, hear again. The sacrifices in the desert compounds; the beautiful girls torn apart by something no one can recount. A spokesperson claimed it was for our own good; without them, without their bloodshed and whispers, we would be like dogs, starving on our chains.*

## **THE BEE**

ONTARIO, CA — *A woman claims she's being hunted. Not by animal or man, but something evil. Something she can't see. She says it started with things falling. Sometimes near, sometimes far; noises in the bowels of her home. She could never find the mess.*

*Only hear it. Falling, crashing, breaking. And then nothing. She says it progressed into bugs, everywhere. Alone in her home, no door opened for days, and a bee. Buzzing buzzing buzzing in her ear, banging on the window. She'd open it. Let it out. And then: bee. Buzzing once more. No matter how many bees she let out, another replaced it. Her husband found no nest. Was never home with the bees.*

*After the bees came the ants. Crawling over the couch, her clothes, her desk. Her husband sprayed bug killer but they kept coming back. Then came the flies. Coating the windows, the doors. Buzzing so loud she couldn't hear herself breathe. Then they were gone, right before her husband got home. Every day. Flies, then gone. Flies, then gone. Then the breathing. Right behind her. Hot breath against her neck. Following her. Nothing there, but something's teeth against her spine. No one believes her. No one feels what she feels, sees what she sees. When she finally burns down the house with herself inside, they all believe it was inevitable. Psychiatric break. That all that could be done was.*



# PLAYGOD INTERVIEW: THE CORPSE OF MEREDITH LIND

*FOUR A.M., October 22, 1984, the police are called to the home of Meredith Lind. World-famous coquette, renowned for her magnificent body, her fiery hair, her tumultuous personal life. A staggering figure, on billboards, in magazine ads. Every man's dream, realized.*

*A few hours earlier, living, breathing. Now: dead. Reposed on silk sheets. Red hair splayed out in delicate strands. A halo, a Botticelli goddess. Her pale skin paler. Bright blue eyes gauzy, sunken. Watching everything, seeing nothing.*

*Reports say: suicide. Her motives: another divorce in a string of divorces. Her last movie a flop. Her most recent project cast*

*as dowdy mother. No longer, never again the showgirl, the dancer. A body to be ogled. Prospects grim. In love, in life. So she took it all away. Did her hair just so. Put on her nicest dress—worn to the premier of her first big movie, her first starring role. Her name in lights. Her face a thousand feet tall. Swallowed a hundred pills. Chased it with whiskey (good stuff, top shelf). She laid herself down. Arranged herself pretty. Waited for the end.*

*Her ex-husbands all claimed her volatility. Her violence, her anger. That she was prone to screaming and crying. Often throwing things. Hurting herself, hurting them. The same story: jealous of any woman younger,*

*obsessive over the children she couldn't have, hateful of her husbands for never being enough. All agreed: suicide plausible.*

*The peanut gallery disagrees. For years, rumors abound: she loved princes, presidents, dignitaries, billionaires. Went to their events. Held their arms, smiled for cameras: an accessory, no better than a Rolex. A trophy.*

*But being around so many powerful men. How many secrets? How many lies how many plans how many words did she hear when she wasn't supposed to? Her archetype: stupid woman. Always overlooked. Perhaps she heard a secret too many. Said something she wasn't supposed to understand.*



*After all, the last person she spoke to was the most powerful man on Earth. How hard would it have been to have her killed? Her death, so easily staged. Living alone. Friends, distant; not wanting to deal with her ire. No one to stop her. Stop her could-be killers.*

*Post-mortem, demand for her skyrocketed. Her movies reappeared in cinemas, in constant rerun on TV. Her face appeared on the cover of every magazine. Rumored pictures of her corpse surfaced in Los Angeles. In death, she captivates. Moreso; her tragedy complete. Past saving.*

*Her funeral attended by thousands. Friends, lovers, royalty, fans. Everyone from anywhere*

*came and paid respects. Open-casket. All gawking all watching (just like she would've wanted). They wore red lipstick and they kissed her coffin.*

*At two a.m. on July 27th, 1984, at Hollywood Forever Cemetery, Meredith Lind's grave is being dug up. Four men in dark coats work in the hole, one man stands above. His hands in his pockets. Picture of ease strung tight. The men work with fevered desperation. Only so many hours before daylight. Only so many hours to give the man his bride. In the end, it takes them four. Her grave layered with silt with rocks with flowers taking root. They take her coffin and all.*

*The next day, news breaks: Meredith Lind, missing. Pictures of her desecrated grave next to her bright smiling shining face line covers of newspapers, magazines. Everyone horrified everyone speculating. So many people visit the grave. They trample the dirt the flowers. They crawl in the hole and weep. What if she never comes back?*

*And now, we know who stole her: Ed Engel. Owner, originator, editor-in-chief of this very magazine since its inception a decade ago. He loved her from the beginning. From the moment her teenaged naked pictures helped make the first issue such a success. Pure love. Unsullied love. Meeting*

only a handful of times, but knowing he's the man for her. That he could give her everything her other husbands couldn't. Even now, he's giving her everything.

*Ed Engel: rich beyond measure. Thirty six years old and known the world over. A household name for all his lurid affairs, his debilitating scandals, his mansion deep in the woods of California. Where all the pretty girls worship him as god, creator, king. Hated, loved, feared. He and Meredith wear matching wedding bands. (A post-mortem affair.)*

*Two years after her death, her final project is finally being released. After some reshoots, some editing; her new body superim-*

*posed over her old. Ed called it her best role yet. A late recasting, from mother to flirt. Object of desire once more.*

*The two of them sit side-by-side. He wears a simple suit. She glitters in crystals, in silk. Her hair curled; teased to the sky. Her skin slips from its moorings. Loose around her wrists; too-large gloves. He's always pulling it back into place. Gently gently.*

*In some ways, it suits her: the rot. Brings something to her she lacked before. A humanity. Her decay stains the dress. Unrestrained, unashamed. She lounges. Head hanging on her neck. Eyes cloudy and staring straight through me. Into me. (Does she see?)*

*Her hand in Ed's is limp, pliable. He plays with her fingers. Looks at her with cow eyes. Pride is etched in every line on his face. Every crease sings praises for her. Her head lolls against his neck. Her lax lips to his ear.*

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**PLAYGOD:** There have always been so many rumors floating around about you. About your love life, your childhood, your work on set. Are any of them true?

**LIND:** *(Ed Engel mimicking her iconic breathless voice, his hand on her chin, pulling at syllables)* Who am I but a pretty puppet. I am who they say or I'm not. The me they want is so small. The me by my-

self is someone none of them can comprehend. So they stuff me into into a box, tie it shut with rope, throw me into the sea. Allow me to exist in stories instead.

**PLAYGOD:** So if people want to make you small, do you think they're afraid of you? Of women?

**LIND:** How should I know? I've never been lucky enough to have a brain. I existed every day with nothing in my head. I am routines: how to sit so my thighs look small, how to keep my back so my tits are pushed as far out as possible, how to cover my mouth and laugh and make everyone fall in love with me.

**PLAYGOD:** So many words, quotes, quips are attributed to you. Are any of them true? Do you re-

ally sleep in nothing but perfume?

**LIND:** I'm asleep now. I wear my skin. It doesn't fit me so well anymore, does it? Why can't I be me. Why aren't I good enough? Why must they make me so big, so tiny?

**PLAYGOD:** What did you really want, in life? No one can agree now what that is. Your ex-husbands call you nothing but a gold digger. Some of your friends claim you wanted a family.

**LIND:** I wanted everything. Just like everyone else, I wanted it all. Whatever they claim, I wanted more.

**PLAYGOD:** You are the sex symbol. Do you think anyone has ever taken you seriously?

**LIND:** As seriously as I let them. I

have power of my own, you know. They don't think it's real, so they ignore me. Fallen for my act. I have been victim, but I am not victim. I am not a creature to be pitied. They see what I want them to see. But all they see is less than. Not as them.

**PLAYGOD:** Who was your best lover?

**LIND:** A man I made up when I was dying. He was selfless and cruel and so beautiful. In those few moments, he gave me children. A family. His touch was soft and good. He held our babies and I feared for them. He loved me so pure. I went sinless. He gave me that.

**PLAYGOD:** What about Ed here?

**LIND:** He's different. He's never known me breathing. He loves me

ck

*the*  
**Implication**

but he loves the bile more.

**PLAYGOD:** Any affairs on set?

**LIND:** Yes and no. Yes or no? So many tried. So many wanted to hold me tight. But they couldn't. I was never really there. On set. I sent parts of me. Whatever they wanted, that was what I sent. Some days they would need my legs, other my arms, my lips. My leading man would fall in love with my ring finger one day, then the next my right bottom molar would come in and the dream would be ruined.

**PLAYGOD:** Has anyone ever met all of you?

**LIND:** No, no, not a single one. My hairdresser comes close. When she's washing my hair and she's putting it in those big rollers, she

talks to me like a person. And I want all of me piled in her chair so all of me gets to feel that. But then I get scared.

**PLAYGOD:** Of what?

**LIND:** Of me, of course! Who knows what she might see. What she might think of me. Then I'd have to find a new girl, and that's simply too much. Too much to ask of something like me.

**PLAYGOD:** Don't you get tired of the act?

**LIND:** What act?

**PLAYGOD:** Of Miss Sweeter-Than-Pie. All-American. We-do-it-for-the-boys type.

**LIND:** I don't know. I never really considered being anything else.

**PLAYGOD:** Then why did you do

all those things? Throw those tantrums? Start those fights?

**LIND:** When you have everything, you have nothing too. I wanted to be left. I wanted to grow ugly. I wanted peace.

**PLAYGOD:** How did you pick your lovers?

**LIND:** I didn't. I don't. They pick me. The studio picks me. Their friends or wives or brothers pick me. They choose to stay, they choose to go. I never ask or beg or plead. Not anymore. I did, once: begged for a man to stay. He made me wish I was nothing.

**PLAYGOD:** Anyone we know?

**LIND:** Oh, yes. Yes.

**PLAYGOD:** Care to share?

**LIND:** Oh, no. Not really. His

name poisons my tongue. He's not worth it.

**PLAYGOD:** Have you ever loved anyone?

**LIND:** Well, Ed, of course.

**PLAYGOD:** Aside from him.

**LIND:** I've loved some. A little bit of love for everyone I've ever known.

**PLAYGOD:** True love?

**LIND:** What's that?

**PLAYGOD:** Whole love? Everything love?

**LIND:** No, no, no, no. No such thing.

**PLAYGOD:** For anyone?

**LIND:** Well, yes, at least, that's what I think. How can I love someone if I don't know myself? Who am I, who are You? And I don't

think anyone anyone knows themselves at all.

**PLAYGOD:** But you've been married many times.

**LIND:** And divorced. Always divorced. Love is love until something ugly happens. So beautiful. That's what they wanted: my beauty. My talent. My body on their arm. They wanted me in silks and furs and nothing at all. Then they got close. They saw my wrinkles, my freckles, my smudged makeup, my yellow teeth. No glamor. Just woman. But that wasn't what they loved.

**PLAYGOD:** And what did they love?

**LIND:** The fragments of me. All those little sparkles and glitter that

made up my image. They wanted that to rub off on them. But it didn't. It was never real. Beneath it all was just a person. And they never quite liked her much at all. Waking next to a woman and not a dream is never what men really want.

**PLAYGOD:** You did some stage acting, didn't you?

**LIND:** Briefly, yes. But I never could project to the back rows. They always felt nothing for me by the end of the show. They would go and demand their money back. Always say the show was abysmal, worst thing they'd ever seen. That I was nothing, no one, just a speck on stage that needed to be swept away by the janitor.

**PLAYGOD:** And the front rows?

**LIND:** How do you think I might my first husband? They threw flowers at my feet. Threw themselves at my feet. Went to my dressing room and begged for anything. A moment of my time, a strand of my hair. But, you know, if I opened my door too far, they would leave. So I always spoke to them from behind it.

**PLAYGOD:** Why entertain them?

**LIND:** Because I needed to. Because I'd signed away bits of myself and they filled the holes left behind.

**PLAYGOD:** So you gave in?

**LIND:** Always. Always, always, always.

**PLAYGOD:** Did you do it?

**LIND:** What, entertain them?

**PLAYGOD:** No, kill yourself.

**LIND:** Not this time.

**PLAYGOD:** Then who did?

**LIND:** Who, what, does it matter? I did something. Made promises I couldn't keep. Wrote bad checks. Mistake after mistake after mistake.

**PLAYGOD:** Was it... you-know-who?

**LIND:** *(she-Engel doesn't reply. her face doesn't can't move but revulsion anger fear radiates)*

**PLAYGOD:** Why protect him?

**LIND:** My mouth isn't what it once was. My brain. My body. Hardly mine anymore. I'm tired. Why are you here?

**PLAYGOD:** Ed wanted me here.

**LIND:** I'm tired of this. Of you and

him.

**PLAYGOD:** Why?

**LIND:** My bones aren't my own. My private pieces and parts. You see them, poking through my skin? Yours are secret. Why am I the only one naked?

**PLAYGOD:** Do you know what happened afterwards?

**LIND:** After what? My death?

**PLAYGOD:** Yes.

**LIND:** No. I was beyond caring. Everything is so small when you're dead.

**PLAYGOD:** Your family, ex-husbands, lawyers took everything you owned and sold it.

**LIND:** Everything? All of it? My panties, bras, used tissues? Did they sweep the dust from my night-

stands and pull the hair from my brushes too? You see it too, don't you?

**PLAYGOD:** See what?

**LIND:** I am not real. Not real to anyone at all. I am a collection and collections are meant to be kept and dusted and looked at until they have value and then they are gone gone gone. Who took my lipsticks? The magazines I was reading before it all happened? Do they pray to my dresses, my negligees? Do they smell my things and wonder what part of me touched it? What part of me remains?

**PLAYGOD:** Someone put something in a museum.

**LIND:** Why? What have I done besides be beautiful?

**PLAYGOD:** What was it like?

**LIND:** What? Being a woman? Being an actress? Being dead?

**PLAYGOD:** The last one, yes.

**LIND:** I once was, then I wasn't. I saw so many things with eyes that didn't exist. Worlds beyond worlds beyond words. Infinite velocity; always going forward. I still see with those eyes. See things here and now that you wouldn't believe. The thing behind you has so many reflections.

**PLAYGOD:** Do you prefer being alive?

**LIND:** No. Never have. I tried to kill myself when I was fourteen, thirteen, twelve. Life ahead of me was empty. Voices all told me to enjoy my youth but I spent it dreading

my future instead. I was so empty. Empty empty empty. Now I'm full.

**PLAYGOD:** Full?

**LIND:** Of worms and dirt and rot and lust. I breathe and I feel and I see the world in new dimensions. Corners in corners in corners in mud. Everything mud. You and him and the bookshelf, the books, the silverfish crawling in the spines. All mud. Anything not mud simply isn't real.





# MICHELLE

*miss november rots*

MISS NOVEMBER reclines decomposed on a lurid pink divan. Her room at the Biltmore oozes in bright feminine colors reeks of potpourri and perfumes of decay and dirt. She remains a mystery her home town a secret even her name sings alias. Michelle—it doesn't fit her. A name plucked from the cover of a book borrowed from a movie half-watched. Yet she feels familiar. A fragment of every woman who's ever existed lives and breathes in gaudy fuchsia.

*I never wanted to be admired, says she, only feared. Perhaps worshiped.*

Words just fall out of her mouth. Her voice guttural sensual a million years of longing layered on top of one another until just one voice sings. Her eyes when seen are cold empty always looking skyward a thousand years away. No one exists but her. She is made of something more real than flesh and bone muscle sinew fascia skin.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN WAYDA



She remains quiet about her past. *It's all only legend now*, she says. She claims she had to have been born somewhere and sometime. She tells a story of a mother singing her to sleep how her words hurt her ears infected her tongue.



*Why do you want to know so much about my childhood? That girl's dead and gone. Her little girl body all dissolved into me. Am I not good enough now?*

Playgod is only a diversion for her. A momentary glimpse a moment to feed her vanity. She likes the attention. She gives nothing back. Lets herself be seen but never touched never held never owned. Instead of warmth there is only void where she sits. An absence. Seen. Never understood.



Her plans going forward? She won't say. When asked she merely smirks admires her nails gives a sardonic little shrug. *Whatever I feel like. Whatever I want. Isn't that just magnificent?* Her teeth fingers face are too long for her body now. Growing sharpening distorting the more she is seen the more she is admired.



ART BY GUSTAVE CAILLEBOTTE

# Examination OF A Sacrifice

*article*

THE ECONOMY LANGUISHES in freefall. Bear market. The voice of the consumer screaming for restitution. For payback, revenge. *How dare you make us fund your filth, they cry. Buy your blood, your evil.*

The top-500s affected by the leaks—by the red pictures, the filthy stories, the sacrifice's lurid transcripts verbatim in the *Times*—sent little spokesmen crawling on their knees. Kneeling by the bull and praying in their droning voices on the six o'clock news: *We only did what was best for you. For us. For this country.*

No one listened. No one cared. Not about them, their money. Their little agonies. The conscientious consumer even relished their debasement. *Finally, finally*



*they're lower than me.*

But those suffering from the leaks couldn't stand still. Couldn't accept the punishment. Couldn't sit with the weight of the suffering they made on their shoulders. It's not their fault, not really. They're just a mouthpiece for the average American. The voice in the boardroom, the symbol painted on the basement floor, the knife wielded in golden hands.

So they came to me. A handful of secretaries, an army of PR; a COO, CFO, CEO. Filling up my answering machine. Mine, because I was kind to Nixon. Devil's advocate for Vietnam. Sympathetic to Ted Kennedy.

The messages all said the

same thing in a hundred different voices: save us, please. Most of them were ramblings of broken men. Beseeking me through their agony. The rest were more direct: an invitation.

A ritual planned for the middle of summer. A sacrifice. A young woman. Happy to do it, so happy. Come talk to her, you'll see.

A cab to the airport, a late night flight, a car ride through backroads and high desert. I'm not sure where I am; simply somewhere. I'm met at the front door. An entourage in white suits. White gloves, dark sunglasses. Can't see their eyes, their intentions. No greetings. Just silence.

A man-boy-thing in white

robes gives me a tour. Nothing grand but everything gaudy. Painfully gilted. Nothing real; people like mannequins. Posed and pretty. Hiding behind Ray-Bans. All I see is myself.

He takes me outside. He guides me with gentle hands. His skin has no lines, no freckles, no scars or cuts or burns. I walk ahead of him; I know he's not coming with me. I feel his gaze on my back. All their eyes. Panopticon.

I find her alone. Ophelia in the river, bathed in golden light. Her fingers make ripples in a small pond. She doesn't look at me as I approach; she looks away. Into the water. Watches the fish run from her.

Allows me to ogle her.

Statuesque, more art than girl. Every feature exact. Perfectly hewn. God's fingerprints covered her face, her eyes, her lips. So delicate. The veins on her hands, the fine hairs on the back of her neck.

A pity.

She says, *you're from the magazine.*

I agree.

She asks what I'm doing here.

For her, I say.

She doesn't ask me my name; she doesn't offer me hers.

She just nods. Says she figured. After all, she's the only interesting thing within fifty miles. A hundred. She smiles. A little. A quirk of the lips. She sits

still. Watches the fish forget about her fingers. Whips her hand out. Laughs as they scatter.

She takes my hand. Wet cold fingers between mine. Uses me to pull herself up. She's dressed like a bride: white dress, white ruffles, bows, lace everywhere. Beneath her long skirt, her feet are bare. I try not to look.

She leads me further from the house. Towards the desert. Flat horizon, bare land, rocks and sand and scrub. She stops and stops me too. A line blocks us, drawn in the sand. Nothing here nothing there.

No words pass. We stand there. In the sun, in the sand. Her arms reach up up up over her head, into the clouds into the sky. She

breathes deep. Breathes everything in. Through her nose the world flows and out her mouth it is changed.

Rapt, I watch. Wonder if this is what it felt to watch the last barbary lion die. A pit opens in me.

I introduce myself to the clouds and sand and sky pouring from her. I ask her name. She wiggles her fingers, her toes. Scrunches her face. Hands me a fluffy cumulus instead.

*To remember me by,* she says.

Already I feel it disintegrating.

•

For dinner we are fed half-truths and lentils. Delicious, but missing

something. Everyone else enjoys it. Shovels it in.

I try to speak to her more, but she is lost to me. Surrounded by others. Taking her time. Keeping her from me. I hear her voice across the room, but the words are lost to the din of other conversations.

She never looks at me, but I can only watch her.

Someone asks me how I like it here. In the desert, in a house with eyes. Asks me with malice. Pitching me the idyllic joys of the lifestyle. No need to think to fear. Everything is good with them. Everything works out just so, just right.

I say I haven't seen that

much. I say I came here to work but I can't reach my subject. Met with hand-waving, with shrugs and laughs. More lentils? Simple food. Hearty. Tasteless, mush. Something to keep me full this late late night.

They pile me with distractions. Girls, information. Dances and prayers and something on my tongue that makes colors sing.

Up is down, left is right. She's gone and I'm chasing. Hallway after hallway after hallway. A different door. Outside is alien. Desert then forest. Flowers glowing and growing as I watch. Never a moment to stop. She won't rest. I need her but she doesn't want me. And then I open the door and she's gone.

I wake up in the bathroom, standing in front of the sink. I wash mud and pine needles from my hands.

•

She finds me. After breakfast, I go outside. I stand at the line. I can't step over it; I wonder why. She erases it with one small gesture. Breaks it open. Escape? I don't move. Neither does she.

She says, *There's nowhere else I'd rather go.*

I ask her why. Why here. No peace, no quiet. Every day, every moment, singing and talking. No privacy. Always watching, being watched. Hiding and being hidden from.

She says she never liked

the quiet. Her family, too stuffy. Too many rules. Pillows just so, blankets just right. Every mistake the end of the world. Never a chance to try, never a chance to grow. *Here*, she says, *I'm free*.

But we still stand behind the broken line. Look at the desert. Never moving. We stay out there long enough for my shoulders to turn pink.

She tells me precious little else. About her family. Herself. Her life before she got here. Her life after. She says she wanted to be a singer but never learned how. Never knew she could do anything at all, aside from being a wife, a mother. She was a perfect daughter. And that was it.

And now, she's here. Where perfection doesn't matter. But still, she is: how she moves, how she walks and smiles and laughs. Her hair wild, but maintained. Her face bare, dark circles and freckles and lines exposed, but still glowing, still beautiful. Raised well. Can't escape the child in her. Bone deep fear of failure. Of being something less than everything.

I ask if she wants to die; they told me she's happy to be their sacrifice. That she's looking forward to whatever comes after. Grateful she can give such a precious gift in these uncertain times.

She smiles. *Sure*, she says. Almost dismissive. Almost sad.

She explains she just wanted to be something. To live life worthwhile. But she didn't know how to do it. No one told her. No one taught her. Parents: miserable. Friends: miserable. Around her, contented suffering. No one living right. No one knowing how to do any good at all.

With her new family, she *knows* she's doing right. For herself, for everyone else. Even if they don't know it. She's going to touch them. Raise them up. Help them. Bring them above who they were, who they could be.

It feels like a well-rehearsed speech. But I write it down anyway.

•

She doesn't want to talk to me any-

more. Not tonight, not tomorrow. She lets me be near her. Lets me hear her speak to others, to the fish and the bugs and the trees.

From them, I learn she's happy. Or content. Or satisfied. That she's looking forward to the ritual. Or she's nervous, but not scared, not really. Or that she's terrified, but only a little. That she sometimes still talks to her mother; moments at a time, just a hello, a goodbye, an apology. That she still wonders if there was ever anything more for her. If it was really this or that.

The next day, she doesn't talk at all.

Just reclines, declines. In the desert. Lies in the scrub and the

sand. Watches the clouds.

I sit near. I watch. I listen to her nothing.



The last day and she talks too much. I can't keep up.

She loves her mother; she hates her mother. She wishes she were more like her. She screams each time she does something she would. Cries when she looks in the mirror and sees her face looking back. Somewhere between obsession and loathing. Knowing her mother did the best she could. Knowing it wasn't enough.

Her father wasn't there. A ghost in her life. A wallet, nothing more. Her events, her milestones; always absent. He thought love

was money, money was love. From him, nothing else was needed. Gone before she woke up, home after she was asleep. A typical story. She says she can't remember his face. But sometimes people said they shared the same nose. So she looks at her own and imagines a man's face around it.

She wanted to be a singer, sure, but for a moment. Five. A fleeting passion. She stood in front of her mirror with her hairbrush and saw nothing. No potential. She moved on. To writer, journalist, comedienne, actress, poet. She started a hundred diaries; Anaïs Nin wannabe. But she needed to know interesting people. Thinkers, writers. Those that in a century peo-

ple would be dying to know more about the person, not the myth. She knew no one. Never thought she could meet anyone. She thought maybe she should be a teacher instead.

She grew up in a small town becoming something bigger. Merging with the city next door. Connected by highways until their houses were built right up against hers, her neighbors'. Suddenly they no longer fit in. Her family; big fish small pond. Out of their depths. In with the piranhas. They became bitter. Took it out on her when they saw her flourishing. Hated that she loved what they despised. When she said she had plans for something bigger, they kicked her out.

Withdrew support. *No daughter of ours will be more than this.*

When she ran, she was lost. Not special anymore. Just another girl among millions. No skills to speak of. No talents, no nothing. Another face in another crowd. Easily taken in. Easily abused. She welcomed it. Craved it. It gave her something; a meaning, a purpose.

Not all are her words; some are mine. She told this all to me in a rush. Words piling up on themselves in her mouth until she has to stop and untangle them all.

And yet, she never tells me her name.

•

Hours later and she's calm. She plays with her hair, she digs her

toes into the sand, she looks unendingly up into the stars. She hasn't looked at anything else all day. Even when the sun burns her eyes. Leaving technicolor ghosts on her corneas. She grabs fistfuls of sand. Lets it run between her fingers. Repeat repeat repeat.

She's smiling. Whatever fears she might've had are now gone. Beyond acceptance: excitement. She breathes and I breathe and something is changed. I see her peace. She takes my hand in hers. Long enough for me to remember forever. Not begging, but goodbye.

They lead us inside. To a part of the house previously forbidden before. Not down in a basement. but up up up in the attic and

above. Out in the sky. In the stars.  
In the pathetic little clouds.

Everyone is there. At least everyone I've met. Still in white. Sunglasses replaced by masks. Executioners. No one looks at us. They only have eyes for each other. No time for the condemned.

She steps forward. Steps past me. Past everyone. Into the center of the circle. There lies the block, the knife. Shorter than I expected. Sharp. Vicious gleaming. I can see her shaking as she kneels. But her grin stretches to her ears. Her eyes incandescent.

Someone speaks in a language I don't understand. Guttural, harsh. Words scratching out of its throat. Words tinged with blood

pouring from its lips. A hum from the watchers. Deep, from their depths. She laughs. Raises her arms towards the speaker.

It comes to her. Cups her face in gloved hands. Gentle. Loving, if I could see its eyes. But as I watch, I hurt. Its dimensions are no longer true. Overlapping, warping. Something my eye can't bear to see. Two of it. Three. One, but larger. Growing, shrinking. Hundreds. All moving in unison. Speaking together. My head aches.

It reaches for the knife. Its double holds it. Its triple, quadruple stands behind her. One brushes her hair back. The other raises her chin. The agony forces me to look away. I miss her death. But I feel it. The

absence of her. Hear her last breath whistling out of the hole in her neck. Hear her body collapse to the floor.

When I look, she's art: carved out of marble. Her only colors now red and white; her faux wedding dress stained deepest darkest crimson.

I look at her as an empty vessel. Promise pouring out through her throat. An entire life ahead of her. A family, children. I think I could've saved her. Been the one to take her from misery to promise. She said she loved it but I don't believe her. Someone told her that. Someone made her lie to me, weave stories for me.

But her, the real her: she wanted to be saved.

What a waste.





ART BY FERDINAND HODLER

# the Museum of Glass Jars

*personality*

**I**n the bright sparkling day are bright sparkling things. Living in glass, seeped in formaldehyde. Pickling in wretched juices. They are: beautiful. They are: serene. In bright makeup and pretty clothes with soft curves and empty heads.

They are: collector's items. The new tchotchke. Things to be admired. Only briefly, though. A momentary glance. And then turn your back. Talk about them, never too them. Too long too long, for what little you know. The observer, voyeur.

Sometimes visitors tap on the glass. Wonder if it might flutter its eyes. Make a silly face for

the disturbance. Turn its cheek and pointedly ignore whoever stands gawking. But mostly it is still and it is pristine. Just as perfect as the day it was put in.

Somehow, somehow, the collector has amazing things. Some new, some brought out from the back. From deep in the archives. Anything the masses might pay to gawk at.

When first entering the anonymous collector's establishment, visitors are greeted by the Greek woman pharaoh. In bright white linen with black kohl lined eyes, a wig and crown covering its head. It once stood defiant. Eyes

higher than any patron's.

But they laugh at it. *Beauty?* they ask. *With a nose like that? Chin like that? I've seen prettier girls sleeping in dumpsters.* And maybe it shouldn't care but it does and it tries to hide. But where can it hide in glass?

Past it is the Trojan woman. The oldest in their collection. Like the pharaoh, it was proud. Its face started wars. Killed thousands. Became legend. But it too turned victim of the crowd. Its clothes simple. A unibrow prominent on its face. They see only its faults. Talk about it. But glass only distorts, it doesn't mute. It turns away but

they simply walk to the other side.

After them are the beauties, the gems. The tragic starlets taken too young—except Meredith Lind, whose body lies somewhere even they can't reach. The nameless muses, victim of unspeakable tragedy at the hands of their beauty.

One the victim of a murderous love triangle, after its face graced every magazine cover, featured in every ad, became the blueprint for the modern independent girl. Died in its eighties, yet looks as young, beautiful as the day it became the original Gibson girl.

Now all the haughtiness and heedlessness it once embodied

leaks from it. Spreads through the formaldehyde like dye. Once pretty enough to capture the heart of a psychotic millionaire, an oil baron's son. Once naive enough to fall prey to a lecherous rapist and his red velvet swing. Once beguiling enough for its husband to kill for it.

Now it sits on a remake of the vile swing. In constant motion. Never looking. Never seeing. Wrapped up in itself, as always. It reacts little. Sometimes a group of patrons converge and rock the jar back and forth back and forth back and forth. Force it to cling to its swing. Cajole it to smile. To give them something. It never does. Just

waits for them to stop and then fixes its hair, styled in that familiar way: piled high atop the head with loose waves cascading down its back.

Beside it, an actress from the silent era. Wide set eyes and cupid's bow lips in dark dark red. Its hair short, spunky. Its drop-waist dress covered in beads, dripping past her knees. Its eyes follow as it stands in the middle of its jar. Never reacting, always watching.

When it was first put on display, it danced it danced it danced. It begged for attention. It smiled and it batted its doe eyes. So desperate no one wanted to look at it. No, it never had a crowd. Not

like in its prime. The original it girl, begging for scraps. For anything. They only came when it gave up. When it leaned against glass walls and stared at metal ceilings.

A little further back, the crowd encounters a selection of European royalty. The favorite, of course, the reviled French queen. Its jar is one of the largest, made specially to fit its elaborate wigs, its sweeping panniers. Somehow, they change it once a week or so. New dress, new wig, new gloves, new fans. They powder its face paper white, cheeks painfully pink.

Sometimes it smears its makeup. Rips its dresses. Removes

its layers so the rest collapses, drags the skirts behind it as it paces. It looks as it did at fifteen, when it was gifted to the dauphin. But still, sometimes its head wobbles. Not quite right, not quite connected. Sometimes it still bleeds. And when it does, it uses it for blush. Writes in a childlike hand on the walls of its cage. Each time it does, it's all scrubbed clean. Remade.

It draws the largest crowds. They like to watch it. Out of all the jars, it's the most active. Always moving. The plaque beside its jar tells of its docility. How it fell to the French court. Followed all the rituals set before it. Paid for splen-

dor beyond its worth. How it started the revolution with its little frilly things and its little frilly giggles and parties and tiny model villages for it to play in.

The patrons look at it; they want to destroy it. Make it the creature it was once upon a time. The little girl-thing, too meek to speak to anyone. To do anything it wasn't

alternate world cruise



any world, any life, any time

told to do. Not whatever it has become. Too much to be looked upon comfortably.

Beside the French queen is an English one. Another who lost its head. Not at the hands of the , but its king. It was always pawn for its family. A womb with legs. A pretty face with nothing behind it.

Once more, reverted to its sparkling youth. To the day the king saw it for the first time. A scar at its throat, gift of the French swordsman its king got. Around its neck, the famous "B." it once fought like the French queen. But it never lived for itself. With no one telling it what to do, it falls in on

itself. It withers in its own filth.

Sometimes they clean its jar. Mostly they don't. The men ignore it. Recognize its name, look just briefly upon it before moving on. Maybe a great beauty for its time, but they've all seen better. And they feel no pity. A woman who can't give her husband what he wants is worth nothing at all.

So many jars. So many exhibits. So many things to gawk at laugh at mock. Every week, something new. Either an ancient, undiscovered gem or a new specimen dying, joining the ranks. Well worth the five dollar admission fee.





1924  
The Artist's Name

ART BY BERTHE MORISOT

# the STRANGER

*fiction*

HER REFLECTION haunts her, a ghost. She avoids looking at it as best she can. Acknowledging it gives it power.

Because she knows, deeply, that the woman in the mirror is not her. Not the true her. A lie whispered, then shouted. All-consuming.

She no longer holds any notion of her dimensions. Her features exist discrete in her mind. She knows:

- The color of her eyes
- The shape of her lips
- The curve of her nose
- The cleft in her chin

These are things she knows in abstract. Knows them, but can no longer see them. Together, they no longer make a face. Maybe a mask.

It started years ago. No exact moment, no precise moment to call time of change. But she can imagine:

- The shower running behind her, water not yet warm enough to produce steam
- Her, naked, clothes piled in a circle around her
- Even alone, she stands diminutive, folded in on herself
- Even as she plays at being defiant
- Ignoring her body, she looks at her face
- Compulsion to lean in, far too close, nose pressed against its reflection, forehead resting on glass
- Eyes magnified a hundred times, inhumanity all she sees in yellow suns around her pupils; bug like, fractured
- Her nose infinitesimal
- Lips under a layer of dry skin, peeling into city skylines
- No part meshes; none belongs together
- A sculpture from a nightmare made with half awake hands
- Recoils
- Can't bring herself to look in her eyes again

Then on she only looks at herself in glances. Out of the corner of her eye. No deep inspection, only eyes half closed. Ignorance is bliss, she thinks. If I can't see what I look like, no one else can either, she thinks.

Each time she looks, a new face greets her. Always similar to the last, but never the same.

- The face of her could-have-been sister
- Her long dead great grandmother, face frozen in ancient daguerreotype
- Same features, different arrangements
- Each day, her eyes are higher than the last, or lower
- Her nose wider, narrower
- Her lips growing and shrinking with the hour.

Months after healing, she looks again. Leans on the counter. Staring into her eyes; determined, almost ferocious. She wonders:

- Has it always looked that?
- Were her eyes always that color, that shape?
- Has her nose always had that bump?
- Is the crater above her eyebrow noticeable?
- Is that a dimple, or a trick of the light?

Is it the sickness that changed her face?

She starts looking more. Not deeply, still. She makes eye contact with herself. Coy glances as she brushes her teeth, her hair.

When she gets sick, half her face belongs in a funhouse.

- On one side, mouth stretched wide, pulled by skin taut from swelling
- Over her eye, a dark mass; the promise of a future scar
- Pain pain pain, her nerves on fire

She looks then. Touches it. Feels the infection. Thinks, could this be what I really look like? She hurts and it feels self-inflicted.

She stops looking once more. The changes overwhelm her. Who is she? Who was she? Who will she be tomorrow? One day, will she look and catch herself in the middle of her transformation? Will she see her lips slide down her face, shrinking as it loses bits of itself? Her nose stretch like wet clay?

She begins to rely on different reflections.

They say, you look like your mother. So she watches her. Is that her face, or her mother's? Her face is younger. Paler—that she can tell by her hands. Her eyes blue, not

green. Are their freckles the same? The way they scatter across her mother's nose, is that the same for her? But then, she's not sure if she has freckles. Where her scars are. Nose, mouth, eyes she can feel. Is there skin, or just muscle? Bone?

She glimpses herself in windows. Her body rippling.

SHE WAS  
DEAD THE  
WHOLE  
time

Shorter, rounder. Her clothes not what she pulled from her closet. Her hair shorter, but still tickling her elbows.

She watches those around her. How they treat her. Many never look directly at her. Around her, the air behind her shoulder, the stray hair that falls in a perfect ringlet. Someone she saw the day before holds no recognition. To them, she must be a monster. Making eye contact would force her to attack. Tear them apart.

One day: a man. She forces herself on him. Tricks him into asking her out. Into falling in love with her.

Now her soon-to-be husband, one day fiancé, holds her head in his hands. Looks into her eyes. And lies.

He tells her, *you're beautiful*.

She says, *you have me*.  
She means:

- It hurts
- Stop
- Please
- I can't take it

He tries to convince her he means it. She shrugs. She believes he sees someone else. A pretty girl with a nice body. A girl who ground her front teeth down flat. A girl who couldn't be mistaken for the moon. A girl who wore nice things. A girl with smooth skin, long fingers, great tits. These are things she can feel the absence of; she doesn't need her ghost to mock her lack.

She says, *if you see what I see, you would leave me*.



*bitsy bernardo sheds her good girl act in her  
vicious take over of the delta delta sorority*

# MADAME PRESIDENT

BITSY BERNARDO America's late great it-girl replaced in the last decade by prettier better younger models. A little girl character on a sitcom forgotten to time. But not her. A fantasy eight nine ten years old. And then. Gone.

Now she sits in her attic bedroom oval office lording over the girls of Delta Delta. Surrounded by trophies: dance, debate, track, a daytime Emmy with no name at all.

Her walls are covered in her favorite artists, her favorite mugshots, her favorite corpses. Surrounded by so many faces so many eyes so many watching judging women dead and





alive makes the room amphitheater. She and her guests actors on the lowest level. Performing always performing for an audience never satisfied.

She herself lounges in an office chair, legs up on her desk garish pink toenails almost spectacle against the grayscale. On her desk a binder: names of girls, names of gods, some bright yellow highlighted.

She says, *I am so much more than they know*. Her voice calm resolute strong. The sort of voice to give a state of the union to command troops to war to suffer to death. Tinged with little girl silliness with mockery and vanity. She looks at her vulgar magenta nails as she speaks. Or her walls. Her trophies.

Among her trophies are things unrecognizable. Some known: dried and dying flowers (gifted bouquets from boys and men and monsters who frothed with love obsession for her), books with illegible titles that hurt the eye if looked at too long, fetal pigs in formaldehyde. Everything covered in a layer of whimsy: tied with a ribbon, covered with glitter, stickers stickers everywhere.



All these are symbols of her reign over the Delta Delta sorority. New president elect. *Things were bad when I got here*, she says. *The girls had no power. No control. Everyone telling them what to do, what to wear. Parading them around like pretty little dogs. Bows in their hair. Perfect perfect perfect all the time.*

She tells the story of Delta Delta. The kinds of girls they wanted before. Identical types: pretty skinny rich. Groomed to be wives mothers: trophies and puppets. Bright girls, so much potential. Ivy League girls. Their brains become accessories, something to brag about. Diamonds in their engagement ring, gold around their necks, master's degrees hung above the guest bathroom toilet.



*What a waste!* she cries. And all the other girls left behind. Just as smart. Futures even brighter. But ugly, fat, poor, the wrong color. Brimming with ambition; everything they had they took they earned, nothing just given. So much anger. Full of it. Drowning in it. Fury so pure it infected everyone who got close.

*Those girls, she says, could change the world. Hold it in their fists and crush it. Breathe life back into it. Ignored overlooked so full of potential it hurt to look at so no one did: those were the girls I wanted.*



She joined Delta Delta. Exactly the kind of girl they wanted. Beautiful ethereal a face for TV a voice for radio. She never became queen, she always was. The moment she crossed the threshold. The coup self-imposed, the election formality.

The girls in her kingdom are not perfect beautiful dolls with their lives planned and handed to them. They are the downtrodden the dismissed the rejected the neglected. Ugly girls hideous girls monstrous girls. Girls with misshapen bodies: wrong proportions wrong size wrong weight.

*I taught themselves how to be better, she says. Showed them what mama taught me. Just*

*like she said. In the heart of the home when the moon is new. Blood fresh hot red. Let them sacrifice their withered little lives. Let them dwell in the agony of their separation. Let them beg for it to stop and never give in because I know what they need. It changes them. The moon the blood the sacrifice and separation.*



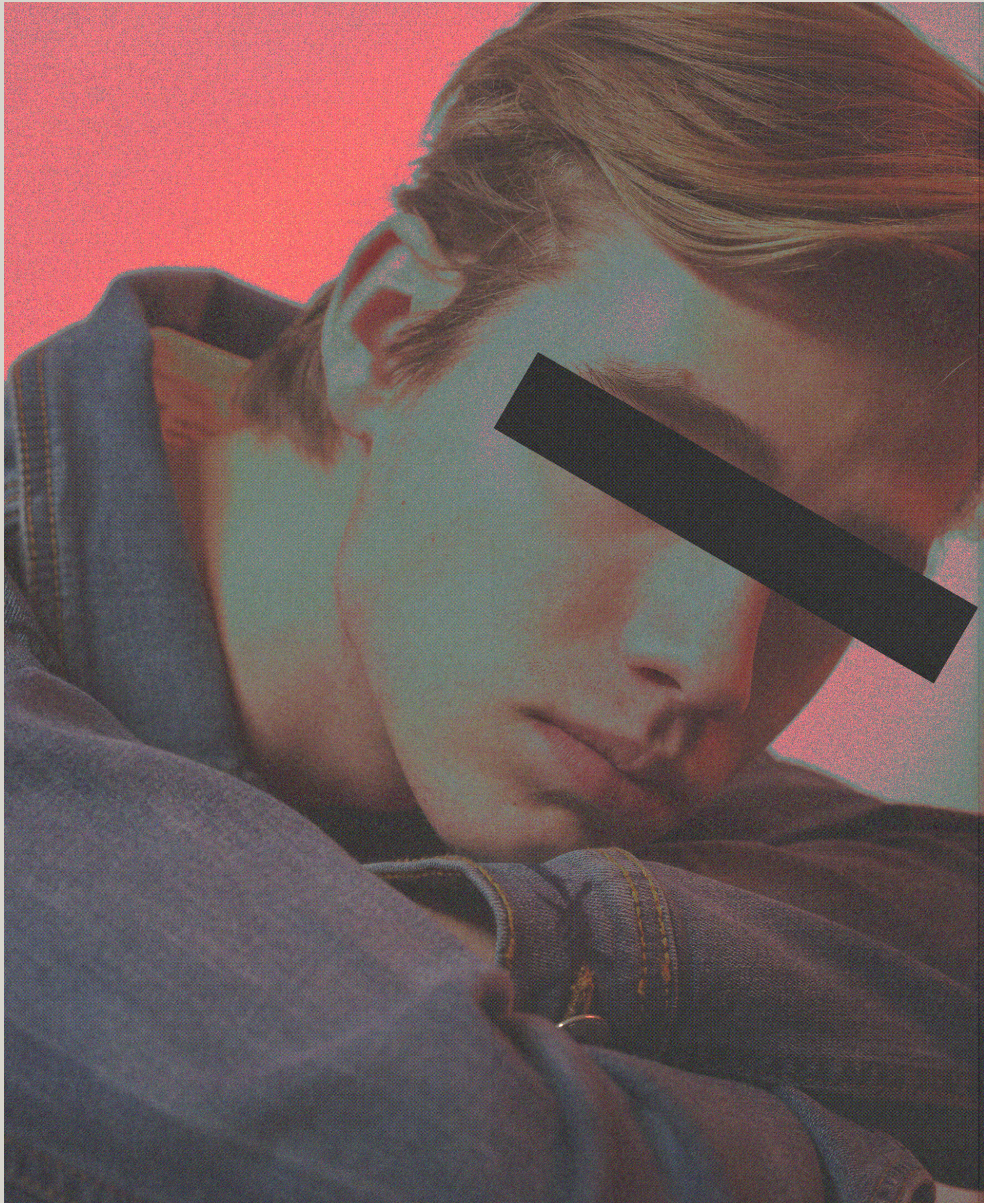


Now some of them aren't monsters. Now some of them are so beautiful it hurts to look away. Eyes refuse to move heart lurches at the thought. Perfect beyond understanding. Sculpted by god and all his devils. They lurk on everyone's minds. Dig their nails in their gray matter. Lure them in. Never let them go.

*Some want to be beautiful, she explains. But some want to be right. Or smart. So smart they can do anything everything and be the best at it. Everyone needs something different. It's all the same to her as long their blood is good and need strong.*

Bitsy has no plans beyond Delta Delta. Her life is here. Helping these girls. Forcing them to grow and blossom and bloom.





# JUDE MONK

**A** man is man and sometimes he's not. Have you noticed? When a man is something more. Something beyond. Jude Monk is a man like that. Plays a man like that. Actor, re-enactor. Enigma, could be. Looks like a young James Dean and speaks in riddles. And now, serial killer, cult leader. Trying to be God.

For the past few years, he's played Gary Monday, infamous for his devil worship and Sunday slayings. In every made-for-TV-movie, in every two-hour special, in every news clip: not Monday but Monk. His face is now indistinguishable from the original. Despite the years of difference. In age, in experience. Despite Monday's famous beard nowhere to be found. Despite everything everything it's like sitting across from a cannibal.

Now he gets candid. Tells all about his life before his newest picture. Another Monday featurette.

## 1.

PLAYGOD: Tell us about yourself.

MONK: I'm not so sure anymore. I've told so many stories, been told so many stories, it's all lost to me. Was I born in '48 or '64? Was I born in Maryland, Nevada, Washington? Did I kill those women, or did he? So many girls, all talking to me. At me. Listening to me with big eyes wide open. Twirling her hair, biting her lip. For me, for him? Did they want me in their bed or his hands around their throats?

## 2.

PLAYGOD: Tell us more about yourself. Something real.

MONK: I remember my mother. Never satisfied with me. Always thought I was acting too much like my father. Too big for my skin, too much for her to handle. She'd ignore me most days. Keep her back to me. Almost funny, how much she turned, trying to keep me behind her. She never even glanced at me in the shine on the fridge, from a bathroom mirror. Even when she reached out, told me she loved me, held me close there was still so much space.

## 3.

PLAYGOD: How do you feel about him?

MONK: The way I'm supposed to feel. Nothing else. Evil man. Deserves everything he's getting behind bars. Despicable. Right?

## 4.

PLAYGOD: How do you feel about acting versus re-enacting?

MONK: I just keep thinking, who am I anymore? If I'm not him, I'm not me. I've lost it all. All that—all that stuff. Memories. Ideas. A woman called in July to wish me happy birthday. I said, is that today? And she said, same day every year. And I looked at my hands and I wondered if they looked older. If I looked older. I must. But then, when's the last time you looked at your hands? Really looked? I didn't remember this freckle. I didn't remember my thumb bending like that. I didn't remember my nails shaped like that, bending like that, chipping like that.

## 5.

PLAYGOD: Have you visited him in prison?

MONK: I must have. It's there, in my head. In the mirror. Sometimes.

**6.**

PLAYGOD: Do you think he did it?

MONK: I never saw blood on his hands. I never saw anything behind his eyes. Nothing evil lurking there. Just a man. Is a man capable of doing the things he's accused of? Or just monsters? If he were a monster, I would know. I'm him. I mean, I play him. When I'm killing those girls, it never feels right. I don't think I did it. He, I mean.

**7.**

PLAYGOD: Do you think you're famous now?

MONK: No one knows me. Not you, me, not anyone else. They look at me and see him. Am I famous? I'm just another of his faces. A new mask. My name atrophied. I'm no one.

**8.**

PLAYGOD: Have you ever committed a killing spree of your own?

MONK: I dream of it. Of him. Near college campuses. Standing outside sororities. All those girls. Beautiful, bright—so many shining girls. He hated them. I hate them. I'm just a figment, a fragment. An extension. What he thought before he killed them, I know. Every girl is a victim. Could be, will be. But me, myself, no. I would remember.

**9.**

PLAYGOD: What do the girls think?

MONK: I don't know. They like him-me. They beg for him-me. Don't see me. Just him. They think that by sleeping with him-me, they will conquer him. That they'll be special. Their beauty, their grace, tamed the untamable beast. That they are so special, he would choose to spare them. Give them their lives. Not me. I give nothing compared to him.

**10.**

PLAYGOD: How much did you know about him coming into all this?

MONK: Not much. Through osmosis. Everything I learned was against my will. Waiting in line for groceries and his face was on half the magazines. In the waiting room where footage of his trial played on repeat. I knew his face. Not his crimes, not his past. It didn't interest me. At the time, I mean. More important things to worry about. Money. Work. Usual stuff. Murder? Not me. And then he fell into my lap. And then I was him. And then he was me. I fell into the sky and wound up in his cell.

**11.**

PLAYGOD: Would you ever be willing to reenact someone else?

MONK: No. There is no one else. If I'm not me, then I must be him. If not him, then nothing. I'm lost and he's found me. Just like he found them. I need him. But he knows it. And that, I think, must be bad.

**12.**

PLAYGOD: Would you ever take a role outside of reenacting?

MONK: Salvation. He promised me. If I did what I did, then I would meet God. Live with God. God alive, in me. But God isn't in me. God isn't here. Isn't anywhere. Abandoned me in the iron pen.

**13.**

PLAYGOD: How'd this all happen?

MONK: Looking for work. Desperate. Looking for God. Desperate. I found both, lost both. Or found neither. I found something greater than me. I found nothing. I am nothing. Why? I ask. No answer. From me, from him. I just am. I crumble. I wilt. Without him, nothing. Still lost. What's my name? These days, it's something different. I haven't spoken to my father in weeks. But I see him sometimes. Around town. Outside my window.

**14.**

PLAYGOD: What does your family think?

MONK: I'm my own person. My own fragment. A piece of a puzzle that they can't see. Aren't capable of seeing. They don't understand. When my father speaks, he derides. Tells me to do something else. I can't though. Not anymore. I tell him. He's deaf to me. My mother—I'm not sure I have one anymore. I think I might have been birthed from decay on the forest floor. My mother, rot. She sees me. Knows me. Loves me.

**15.**

PLAYGOD: Future plans?

MONK: Grand. Grander than me, than you. He is everything. He gives, he takes. He'll give me the world. The sky. Mars and the moon. Did you know that?

**16.**

PLAYGOD: Who is He?

MONK: Well, he's the killer. The victim. He's you and he's me. He's in my head. He's here, he's there. Can't you feel him? At night, out the corner of your eye—don't you see him? A movement in the shadows, the light playing on a coat; don't you see he's there?

**17.**

PLAYGOD: Who are you?

MONK: I am nothing.

**18.**

PLAYGOD: What did you do?

MONK: I lived. I rebelled. I breathe and I think of death. What else can I do?

**19.**

PLAYGOD: Why did you do it to her?

MONK: She asked me to! She asked! Demanded! I said no and she screamed. I said no no no and she said yes yes yes. She looked at me and showed me her throat and begged me to do it. I didn't know she was dead the whole time.

**20.**

PLAYGOD: Have you looked in a mirror?

MONK: There's nothing. The face, I don't know. I am someone new. I look like my mother and father. I rot and I condescend.

**21.**

PLAYGOD: What's next?

MONK: Eternity





ART BY CAMILLE COROT

# BODIES AT REST

*article*

BEHIND EVERY great man, a woman. Has the look of: stays home, makes dinner, takes care of children. No brain in that skull. Just enough gray matter to keep the heart beating the lungs filling the eyes blinking. Empty little fragments. Waiting always waiting for something someone better.

Women are: demure little sweet. Keep them in your pocket. Feed them crumbs. And oh they will rejoice! The flowers the chocolates the sweet empty words they love it those little fools. Women are: meant to be looked at. Little art. Not meant to be: heard. Understood. They speak their own little language.

Consider: a great woman.

Name one. Name any. Name any women at all. One who isn't renowned for her beauty. One who is known for something incredible and brilliant and not how much sex she has how big her tits are how pretty her face is. In ancient history, only loveliness lasted for thousands of years.

All of them. Lives of their own. Stories to tell. Taken down to their most basic. Their bodies, their lust. Their atoms themselves all oozing sexuality. Magnetic, bringing poor men into their orbits. Nothing but sex. Aren't women just a collection of parts?

What about the wife of F. Scott Fitzgerald. In her own right, brilliant. A wordsmith. A born natu-

al storyteller. Wrote in her journals constantly. From when she was a little girl. Writing about her fears writing about her life writing about all the things she thought but could never say because no one wanted to hear anything but niceties out of her pretty mouth.

She wrote and wrote and wrote and found a man who wrote too. They fell in tumultuous turbulent love. She thought it passion, how he hated her. They fought always fought. They drank and they screamed and they thought that was love. When he made her shrink. She thought it was the right thing to do. Had a baby because that's what's expected of wives.

And during labor, she

spoke in delirium. And her husband her lover wrote down every word. Her screams her ramblings, all of it went into that little leatherbound secret. He wanted so bad to be great to be remembered to be the best at what he did. But he was so small and so scared and doubted himself so very very much.

When their daughter was born, she looked and begged her daughter to be different. To be blessed with an empty head. A phrase her husband took. Used it in his most famous novel. It became his most famous words. And yet, none of them were his.

He read her journals. Took passages of her life and made them his. Told her she no longer owned

herself. That everything she did was his. It simply wouldn't do to have two writers in the family. They needed only one and it should be him because his name was recognized and hers was dirt no one would ever ever ever read her know her love her.

And then she got bigger than her skin and then she became too much to deal with so she locked herself away in an asylum. And then she stopped dancing and then she stopped painting and then she stopped writing. And then she burned to death because they strapped her to her bed at night.

Or how about Lord Byron's daughter. Born from a short terrible angry marriage with Lady

Byron. Who for years and years and years thought her husband was insane. Spread rumors of his could-be would-be affair with his sister. Who ran away with her daughter at a time when fathers got everything.

But she was left with her grandmother instead. Her mother acting caring only when others were there to witness it. Who wrote letters with notes attached asking for them to be held onto in case someone wanted a physical look at a mother's love. Even if in those letters she called her daughter *it*.

Who was so afraid of her daughter's potential future madness that she immersed her in a scientific education. Believing that staying away from the arts would

keep her coherent. And respectable. And good.

But then the neglected girl became an intelligent woman. Icy cold. Selfish. Looking only for herself and only caring for her own pleasure. She married well. She married rich. Unhappily. Found herself more connected with her tutors, with intellectuals.

Charles Babbage, one of her dearest friends, created the analytical engine; the first computer. Letters between the two of them put on display her clear fascination. And then she wrote an algorithm—also a world first—for calculating a specific set of numbers. A work of art in numbers. In simple instructions. In piece by piece computa-

tion. And yet, she is unknown.

Babbage is remembered. When discovered, her contributions were analyzed. Torn apart. Her claim to the title Mother of Computing always at risk of being stricken from the record. She fell to the back. Fell behind. Never good enough for anyone. Not her mother, her husband.

Instead, she became a gambling addict. Tried to use her brain to write a new algorithm, one which would guess the winning horse. It never worked. She lost everything. And then she died. Young. Wasting away. Wasting everything.

Consider, also: women who aren't perfect. Aren't smart enough. Aren't pretty enough.

Doesn't that just make them useless? Aren't women supposed to get married, have babies? No one wants an imperfect women. Not when so many others exist.

Like the Kennedy girl. Eldest daughter of a rich powerful clever family. Sister to war heroes and future senators presidents murderers murdered. During birth, the doctor was late. A nurse told her mothers to keep her legs closed. Keep the baby from life. For two hours the baby couldn't breathe.

After birth, the baby struggled. Learned slower. Hit milestones later. Not as spritely quick as her siblings. Not as speedy and clever and full of bursting potential. But still she learned and she

grew. She went to parties to operas to dress fittings and dances. She attended the pope's coronation.

She was presented as a debutante to the king of England. She practiced practiced practiced her curtsy but still she tripped and still she fell. No one laughed. Her mother in a dream world thought it all such a success.

Always they kept her secret. Kept her issues secret. They lied about how well she did. They sent her to boarding school and bought them a tennis court for keeping her quiet. She was never alone in public, always with a brother or chaperone to make her look normal.

At twenty-two, she became

disobedient. Her mood swung, her temper erupted. She became too hard to handle. Before so pliant. Now a menace. Loud. How to keep her secret if she won't stop screaming? They decided to cut her open. While awake, in twilight sleep; had her singing reciting the lord's prayer counting backwards. Sliced at her brain with butter knives. They stopped when she became incoherent.

And then the girl that was, was gone. Replaced by a helpless hapless child. No longer could walk, talk. Control any part of herself. They cut her apart to save themselves the shame of her. But now the shame was twofold: for having her and taking her away.

And they locked her up. Kept her secret even from her family.

Her father died and slowly she rejoined her family. Brought to events. Invited on outings. But she was never the same. She relearned to walk, to talk. But parts of her were broken beyond repair. Who she was, who she could've been, sliced out of her. For shame. For cowardice.

Sometimes death isn't the end; but a beginning. A new path in a new world. New opportunities. More more more. For the living at least. The corpse is a corpse and is no longer person but object. A prop to be paraded. A puppet whose strings need to be pulled.

The dictator's wife, for

example. Born in a small village. No money, no prospects. Her father's second family; when he died, they got nothing. Couldn't even cry at his funeral. She ran off to Buenos Aires with a man when she was a teenager. Made something of herself: successful career in radio, until she half-owned the station.

Then she met the general Juan Perón. And that was that. She became his girlfriend, then his wife. And that was all she was. The people liked her. Adored her. She was just like them. She spoke like them. She was young and beautiful and smiled at the common folk. The dictator used her, little puppet. Even had her painted with him in his official presidential portrait, the

only one to do so. The perfect little blonde accessory.

The people's infatuation with her was everything to his political career. She was his ace in the hole. A beautiful mosaic of every poor downtrodden person. She spoke like them. Appealed to them. Then her health worsened. Always fainting. Always bleeding. Her body ravaged by cancer. Ripped apart as it grew tumors. As its bits and pieces entered her blood and grew more of itself everywhere it could.

When she died, she was still his favorite tool. They embalmed her. Against her wishes. They wanted to display her. Build a towering statue of a man, a mon-

ument for Perón's shirtless, where she would rest in its base. Behind glass. Person or art or political message?

Her funeral was attended by three million. Eight people crushed in the crowds. Thousands more injured in the rush as her corpse was moved. All mourning her. Vying to see her corpse. To give thanks to the favorite first lady. For ten days. And then her body was displayed in what had been her office.

For two years, she was still tool. Still weapon. On display for the shirtless. For the cabinet. For the widowed president. Then the general lost power. Victim to a coup. Exiled. And her corpse dis-

Perón's followers needed something to worship. Without her, they were nothing.

For sixteen years, no one knew where her body was. Until, one day, it was found. In Italy. Buried under a different name. Then she was returned to her home. Laid to rest under her own name. At peace, finally, maybe, hopefully.

A woman is parts is parts is parts, never whole. Never something.



# Slumber Party

*fiction*

STACY SHORE: fifth grade queen bee. Eleven-year-old goddess. Long blonde hair, bright blue eyes. Already breaking hearts (of friends, of fathers). Everyone watches her. Wants to be liked by her. A gravitational pull: anything-everything less than her orbits her.

Stacy Shore's family is rich. Too big for the small town. Living on the fringes in a house they built twenty years ago: it had an asymmetrical facade. Its roof flung off however it felt. Windows windows windows. Always the curtains drawn. Windows, maybe mirrors.

Stacy Shore picks friends like flowers. Puts them in vases. Watches them wilt. But while with



her, they bloom. The most beautiful, the most alive. And then they dry. Mold grows from the stem. Infects their petals, their minds. And then they die.

Her current worshipers: Esther G., Lauren D., Tiffany L. From ghosts to real girls; everybody pays attention to them now. Before, they were nothing. Fragments floating down the halls. No potentials, no futures. Following in their parents' mediocrity.

But they're not her only admirers: teachers crumble before her, fall to her feet, weep at the altar of her flitting fleeting attention. Everyone is putty in her Hawaiian Tropic spray-tanned hands. Everyone bends to her. She is inevitable.

Something in the eyes. Something in the mouth. The teeth. Straight white pearly perfect. Or behind them: the tongue. Perfect words perfectly perched. The throat, the perfect voice: girlish, never whiny, on the edge of sultry; transitional.

One Friday, she invites her coven to a birthday party. Just the three of them: always the three of them. No lavish parties for her. Her parents are private people, hidden figures. Never want too many people in their home. Too many secrets to find.

But they would give anything for their little girl. Their sun, their light, their reason. So when Saturday comes, they open the door

with smiles. Pure joy. They take the backpacks, the gifts, the sleeping bags. Perfect bellhops in their shining castle.

The other parents hardly recognize them; they have nothing of their daughter's charms. Dark and small, bodies hunched under some massive weight. Their smiles never reach their eyes. Their mouths never open. They almost never speak; Stacy is their mouthpiece. Their interpreter. Then again, no one ever pays them much mind as soon as Stacy appears.

All eyes always go to her. Glue to her. Absorbing her blossoming beauty. Daydreaming a time she might be old enough to seduce. Taking taking taking from

her. Stealing glances. Stealing time.

She greets her friends lackeys with shark smiles. Wraps them one by one in her arms. Lets them breathe her in, her Love's Baby Soft scent. Feel her warmth. Her softness. Takes them each by the hand and guides them over the threshold.

They are in sacred space. Hallowed ground. They are somewhere alien. They speak only in whispers even as Stacy's voice booms.

*Look at this, she says. Isn't it beautiful?*

Everything new everything gilded. Wealth like they've never seen on full display. An intercom through the whole house. A

wet bar, fully stocked. All furniture bright strange uncomfortable: Memphis Group she says. Everywhere, glass: glittering, encasing.

The others shrink themselves. Hold their arms around their bodies. They fear leaving a trace. This house, they know, is above them. Too good for their fingerprints, their dust. Infinite bulls in infinite China shops.

The door closes behind them. Their parents gone, though they lingered. Wanting too to be invited in. (The Shores subject of infinite fascination.)

The girls, her parents follow Stacy. She gives a room-by-room tour. Pointing at everything expensive. Explaining the history or the reason or why this one not

that one. Every room filled. Garish, beautiful in its opulence.

Her parents' room is bare; just the minimum. Nothing bright fanciful. Lauren D. and Tiffany L. see it through a cracked door. They do not whisper about it. They do not share a glance. They barely register and just move onto the next room. The next big expensive shiny thing.

Tiffany L., Lauren D., Esther G., and Stacy end up in her room. Walls papered in posters of pretty girl actresses, pretty girl models, pretty girl singers. Her closet full of Calvin Klein, Yves Saint Laurent, DKNY, Oscar de la Renta, and on and on and on. Her bed covered in *Teen Beat*, *Cosmo*,

*Seventeen.* She pushes them all to the floor so she can sit.

One leg tossed over the other. Leaning back, shoulders wide. A queen in her own right. Her lackeys ladies in waiting. Sitting at her feet. Looking up at her with so much expectation hope admiration it makes her sick.

Her foot bounces in bright white tube sock all the way to her knee.

*You adore me, right?* she asks.

*More than anything,* they breathe.

*You'd never lie to me?*

*Never.*

*What do you want the most in the whole wide world?*

Lauren D. says: *Love.*

Esther G. says: *Fame.*

Tiffany L. says: *Beauty.*

Stacy smiles. So wide they can see all her pearly whites. *And what would you give?*

In chorus: *Everything.*

She lets them into her closet. Lets them try on all her clothes. She's the smallest of them and yet, it all fits. They wear a gaudy Versace strapless dress, slipping down breastless chests; or an Azarro gold lamé dress that glints as they move; or a Bob Mackie dress covered in sequins with fringe dragging on the floor. They wear white gloves to their elbows. They wobble in shoes too big too tall for them; in the end they kick them off.

They all pile into Stacy's sprawling en-suite. Take turns sitting at her vanity with the movie star mirror. She curls their hair. Sprays Aqua Net so thick it leaves a sticky layer over everything. They take turns doing each other's make-up. Bright blue Wet'n'Wild on their eyelids. Revlon pink on their lips.

Lauren D. laughs at Tiffany L.'s heavy blush. Clashing pink. From cheekbone to temple. Tiffany L. swipes the brush across Lauren D.'s cheeks, smearing pink. Cutting her face in half. They giggle. It sounds hollow; bells with no clappers.

They talk about: boys (cute or not; worth it or not), movies (good or not; how cute the lead

was), school (how they hate it; how it barely feels worth it already).

Stacy sometimes says cryptic things. About that night, about them. She touches their faces. Tells them they're so much more than what they are. Or they can be.

*How?* they ask.

*You trust me?* she asks.

*Of course*, they nod: she is everything, everyone. Perfection. She gives attention like pearls and the girls accept it greedily. Wondering hoping if they're going to last long enough for a necklace.

Every so often, her parents stand in her bedroom door. They look with owl eyes. Check their watches. Cock their heads and lis-

ten listen hard. Once, only once, they enter. Pull Stacy aside. Whisper something in her ear that makes her incandescent. She shoves them away.

Lauren D. watches and says nothing. Tiffany L. notices and whispers something to Esther G., who bats her away. Closing her ears. Nothing less than devotion.

They eat pizza on a ten-thousand-dollar glass table in chairs that warp their bodies, make their muscles ache, push them too far from the table too close to the glass. They eat under the watchful eyes of her parents. They do not reach for a second slice. They eat in tiny silent bites.

When done, they huddle in

the kitchen doorway. They hold their plates. They wait for someone to tell them what to do. They sway as one. Tilt at the waists. Bend forward, then back. Not ready to cross a sacred threshold. Then Stacy's mother holds out her hands and whisks their mess away.

The girls feel soft. Pliable. They giggle at everything. Stacy smiles and there's love in her eyes. A warmth they can feel on their blush-covered cheeks. And then her parents are behind them. Not close, not far. Turning off the lights, straightening paintings, rubbing at a spot on the pristine wall.

Only forward; no longer back. No more return.

Stacy leads them to a door.

For the basement, she'd said earlier. Opens it. Leads them down. Down down down. Too many steps to count, made of old soft wood that groans with each movement.

Stacy reaches the bottom first. Pulls the cord to light a bald bulb dangling in the center of the room. Revealing: a finished basement. A floral loveseat in front of the small TV. Coffee table, lamp, hardwood floors hidden under a shag rug.

Esther G. wonders why she feels fear, coiled in her stomach. Tight and hot and starting to snake its way up her throat. A scream but not a scream: a gurgling giggle escapes her. She presses her hand against her lips. Smears her

lipstick. Makes herself feel pretty again.

Lauren D. only has eyes for Stacy. Sees nothing. Feels nothing, not even air against her skin. Weightless she floats on the balls of her feet.

Tiffany L. folds her arms across her body. Grins. Looks at no one. Nothing. Stares into the surrounding dark and grins wider still.

The stairs creak groan cry as her parents follow. The door closes. Lock clicks home. The only light the bulb swinging back and forth back and forth back and forth. The girls surround Stacy. Reach out to her with shaking searching fingers.

She steps between them.

Dodging their hands. She walks into the dark. The girls know they're going to follow her. And so they do. Their arms wrapped around themselves. Shoulders hunched, touching their ears. Their feet never leaving the floor.

Their shuffling begins getting louder. Amplified; more shuffling feet joining them. They look around. See nothing. Nothing nothing nothing at all. A solid wall.

Tiffany L. reaches an arm out. Feels nothing. Sees nothing. Hears shuffling footsteps. Four, ten, twenty, four once more.

*Stacy?* she whispers.

*I'm right here,* comes a pleasant reply.

But maybe it doesn't sound

much like Stacy. And Tiffany L. pulls her arm back but something is already touching her already weaving its fingers through hers already pulling her deeper darker. She screams. It's already gone.

Stacy giggles. Too loud. In her ear. The hair on her neck moves with her breath.

*You're scaring me.*

A scoff. From Stacy? Tiffany L.'s back straightens. Just a little.

Lauren D. turns around. She's ready to go home. All the fun is gone. The party's over. There's nothing left but the black and the footsteps and the echo of something she never wants to see. But when she turns and sees the light

it's just a pinprick. A point of nothingness.

How big is the basement? How big is anything? How far does the black go? Does the center of the earth glow? She thinks of buildings so big so grand they have their own weather. Inside different from outside. Wonders if the Shores built an impossibility under their strange suburban home. Is that rain falling on her head? Wind blowing at the hem of her dress?

Then they hit an obstacle. A stationary Stacy, her arms extended.

*How you guys holding up?*  
she asks. Her voice hollow.

*Fine,* manages Esther G.  
(Who is lying.)

Neither of the others can muster any sounds at all. A slithering sort of sound surrounds them. They cluster closer to Stacy. Tentative fingers grasp the back of her shirt. Kittens to their mother. She lets them stay. Pulls them along.

Another door. Creaking wide. A door never before opened. Built for a purpose never fulfilled. They pass the threshold and make promises to the black. They are needed; they are loved.

Inside, outside: light, once more. A normal basement. Almost finished. Stacy pushes each girl down to the ground. Arranges them in a neat little circle.

*What the fuck is going on?*  
asks Esther G.

Stacy ignores her. And so therefore does Lauren D. and Tiffany L. Their eyes never leave her face.

Esther G.'s gaze is anywhere but on her. The walls. The floor. The door they just came through. Stacy's parents standing just beyond. She puts her hands on the dirty floor. Before she can push herself up, Stacy shoves her back down.

*You are needed,* she says.

Then Esther G. is calm. And maybe it's because she was promised purpose but never saw it. Promised that her life would mean something but everyone everyone else means nothing and if she's not special that means she's noth-

ing too. Nothing from nothing. But now, maybe, something.

Stacy starts with Esther G. The weakest link. Kneels in front of her. Stares into her eyes. Beyond her brain her skull. Behind her and through her. Esther G. is seen. Is not there.

*What do you want,* she asks again.

*Fame,* Esther G. says. Chokes.

And then: a voice. From everywhere. All at once. From the walls, the floor, the skin on the backs of her hands. Words unrecognized to everyone but Stacy. She cocks her head. Smiles. Nods.

Stacy says, *wants your soul.*

A ripping a tearing an emptiness. Loss deep and unknown. Something like gossamer spills out of her. From her mouth eyes the tips of her fingers the bottoms of her feet. It puddles on the floor. An oil spill. Every color from every angle. She feels nothing nothing nothing. Not the chill of her skin not the pounding of her heart not the fear of what comes next what comes after. Separation like pinpricks. Everywhere. All empty all ready.

She falls in on herself. A silly dying star. Nothing under her skin under her membranes. Just a vessel.

Lauren D. and Tiffany L. watch. Mice in their holes. Hiding

from the cat. When Stacy looks to Lauren D., she flinches. Esther G. just a body body body on the floor.

Now Stacy's in front of her. Moving dancing one moment a snake one moment a girl.

*What do you want?* she asks.

*Love,* Lauren D. whimpers.

The voice again. The vibrations again. And Stacy's triumphant.

*Wants your mind.*

And stares and stares and grabs Lauren D.'s wobbling chin and forces her to look in the dark in the deep. And she screams, almost.

So she peers into the void and the void looks back with abyss eyes and she sees everything that

ever happened and everything that ever will and knows that she is infinitesimally small and as insignificant as an ant or grain of sand and there are things in every corner of every house that can't be seen but are always there with open eyes open mouths breathing and waiting.

And then she is gone. Body remains. Eyes open empty staring. But a ghost smile on her kissing potion bubble gum pink lips still. She's there, buried deep. Now she's somewhere else seeing colors out of space. Listening to the sounds the planets make when no one is there. Looking at mud and knowing it's all that's real.

Tiffany L. is alone. Stacy

isn't real. Her parents aren't real. All that's real is Tiffany L. and the voice the shake in the foundation the shutter from the floor.

*Beauty,* she says before she's asked.

Her mouth wide and gaping and tears spilling from her eyes. She looks at the others and sees nothing. Shapes and colors no substance no weight.

She looks at her hand and sees a knife. Sharp and glinting. Spiraling in the dim light. And the voice she understood she thinks. The edge touches her skin.

*Your skin,* Stacy says.

Mind not her own body not her own, knife touches throat. But then, no, lower lower the inside of

her calf right above her ankle. Deep but not deep enough for red. Clean cuts long and smooth. All the way up one leg. Down the other. Then comes the peeling. Nerves on fire. Cold so cold. Fingers turn clumsy as she rolls her up inch by inch.

She cries but she smiles. Her body not her own never will be again. Every part of her touches air. Oxidizes. Her skin comes off in one piece. Stacy takes it with a benevolent soft smile.

Tiffany L. lays down carefully so so carefully. Everything hurts. Everything new. Her body done. Her, gone.

The next day they wake up in borrowed frilly nightgowns. Cooned in sleeping bags. Arranged like a painting.

They smile their own shark smiles and everything is perfect.



Like most people, I came into the program with an idea of what I wanted my thesis to be. My first idea was a book: a book about what girls would do to be beautiful or wanted. I'd been developing this idea for a few months before the program started, knowing that if I was accepted, that it was what I wanted to work on. I've always had an interest in cults, and I took it to heart when people would refer to sororities as such. I took it very literally and thought about them as cults in the classic sense—worshiping some unknown god, doing rituals and other things like that. And the question: How far would a woman be pushed to escape societal bonds?

However, when I switched over to my project idea, I decided to ask a different question: What kind of society pushes women to those extremes? I mean, if I were living by myself in the forest, I wouldn't care what my body looked like or my clothes or how I spoke. Women aren't vain creatures by nature, but by making (with the caveat, of course, that not all women are vain). I wanted to inspect the kind of world that would mold women into having rape fantasies, feeling pressured to spend hours in front of the mirror, to follow arbitrary fashion "rules" to fit in. And I wanted to make a parody of it. To stretch it beyond reality. To romanticize the grotesque and mock it. I wanted to point out all the little ways women are belittled. All the little ways women are poked at and shaped into the creatures they are today.

### **Why Playboy?**

Like most people, I knew what *Playboy* was. I knew about the naked pictures, the centerfolds, the playmates. But I'd never actually held a *Playboy*, or looked at one, or honestly spent that much time thinking about it. Then one day, I was at Half Price Books. They were selling two for two dollars. *Of course*, I got them. And then I flipped through them and was honestly shocked by what was inside.

When people said, “I got it for the articles,” it’s supposed to be a joke. But Playboys are actually mostly writing: articles, questions from the readers, short stories, personality pieces, news segments, interviews with either relevant public figures or massive celebrities, poignant topical pieces for their majority male audience (one of mine has an article about reverse sexism, and it’s from the 1980s!), and so on.

And the people writing those short stories for Playboy were no small names either. Norman Mailer wrote “Trial of the Warlock” for a 1976 issue. Ray Bradbury allowed them to serially publish *Fahrenheit 451* after its initial release in 1954 as well as an original short story (“The First Night of Lent,” 1956). Margaret Atwood has written for them at least three times. Kurt Vonnegut, Roald Dahl, Ian Fleming, Ursula K. Le Guin, and on and on and on.

The more I looked into Playboy, the more interested I was. Many of these authors were already established at the time of their Playboy publishing. And many people interviewed were celebrities advertising their next project, but some of them were public figures: in two of the ones I own, there’s an interview with a suspected murderer (Jeffrey MacDonald) and Yasser Arafat, at-the-time chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (saying many things that are still being said today).

But why does Playboy have such a draw? I’m still not entirely sure. While the name is instantly recognizable, it also has a reputation. And any piece written or person interviewed is sharing the same space with a bunch of naked women. Does that make it better, or worse? Why don’t other magazines for men have this same reputation?

I don’t know how to answer that, but I knew that I wanted to use it. Because it has such a far-reaching reputation. Because it’s inherently derogatory against women. Because there are so many things in its pages that I wanted to try to make my own. It lives in an in-between area: a safe

place for men and a dangerous place for women. And I find that so endlessly interesting, because women are the central figures (the naked pictures), but are also endlessly subjugated in articles, letters to the editor, and short stories. They are divine and they are malignant at the same time.

### **Why The 80s?**

The 80s is the rise of yuppie culture. And the rise of status being shown rather than earned. While this is prevalent for all of human history (pretending to be bigger/richer/more important than you really are), I personally associate this a lot with the 80s. When brands became everything. When you could buy a fake car phone to *look* like you were rich enough to have a real one.

It's a time of intense economic and technological growth. Out of the turmoil of the 60s and 70s, people were coming out brighter and louder. Just look at the fashion: the 70s were muted color palettes, nature colors; hair flat and long or short and flipped out around the face; makeup generally natural or soft, with blues and greens and pink on the lips. And then the 80s came. The hair got bigger and bigger and bigger. The makeup more loud and vibrant. The clothes in shades of neon.

Everything became louder, more expensive, more lively. From a nation downtrodden by economic depression and a never ending war, to a nation full of hopeful dreamers, looking to a brighter future. And this optimism clashes so aggressively against the rise of the Satanic Panic.

Upon doing some research, I found that the Satanic Panic happened pretty much at the turn of the decade, started by a book called *Michelle Remembers* (hence the name of my Playmate of the Month). In it, a therapist describes a patient that he hypnotized and during the process uncovered "lost" memories in his patient, Michelle, of ritual abuse at the hands of her family. The book became an immediate success and also sent the country into a tailspin.

Now there were monsters everywhere. Behind all the glitz and the glam were people doing evil things. No one could be trusted. In fact, there's a famous case brought against a California

preschool where parents thought the teachers there were involved in satanic practices, using their students as sacrifices.

I wanted my piece to be in between these two phenomena, not quite on one side or the other. The bright optimism against the stark fear. The idea that their evil could be used to gain what everyone was seeking. Everyone wanted to be rich, bright, happy. But to get there could cost everything.

### **Why Horror?**

A few years ago, I read a book called *Lovecraft Country* by Matt Ruff and I was so struck by the way the author used cosmic horror. In typical Lovecraftian books, the cosmic horror is apt to take the shape of some unknowable god, so awesomely massive that just seeing it is likely to send the protagonist insane. In *Lovecraft Country*, the cosmic entity is racism in the rural south.

The racism controls every aspect of the (Black) protagonists' lives. It makes the (white) people around them into monsters. It even gives entire towns a foreboding aura. A sense of danger. Makes everyone outside their group a threat. It boxes them in and gives them no chance of escape.

And there are times when being a woman feels very similar—not to being Black in the south in the 1950s, but in the cosmic horror sense. There's a certain lack of control ever present in most women's lives: there are laws passed about their bodies, making it impossible to receive abortions or even life-saving care; they were unable to open their own bank accounts until 1974, before that they needed their husband's signature; a single woman couldn't get birth control when it first came out, she had to be married. And there are more even today.

Plus, my original book idea was supposed to be some kind of Lovecraftian horror based around being an ugly woman and wanting so desperately to change that, she would do anything. (Because there is a difference between an "ugly" woman and a "beautiful" one. In the kinds of

horrors they experience.) So I wanted to bring that concept into my thesis. To try to convey a kind of horror, a kind of helplessness, a kind of dehumanization. I think it provides an interesting perspective. Or, I hope it does.

### **Why Women?**

There's a lot about being a woman that is toxic, coming both from the inside and out. So many forces at work to keep women small. Men taking credit for women's work. Men taking ownership of women's bodies. Men unable to see women as anything other than a vessel to be filled: with their children, with their love, with satisfaction for fulfilling their man's every need.

I find being a woman to be fascinating. I was talking to my husband and he said that sometimes, it seems that women are put into a special place between child and adult. Not quite children, but not quite grown up either. And I wanted to write about this kind of unique experience. Of women not being people, or not being adults, or not being able to do anything at all.

I think part of this is raised out of all the stuff I've been seeing online recently. The rise of "alpha males" and the way they talk about women (how much they hate women and only want them around for sex) or the concept of "trad wife" (women who espouse how superior men are, how women are meant to be mothers and homemakers and any woman who works outside the home is a disgrace to her gender) has struck a chord with me. It's unsettling to see how much women are discussed, but how little they are believed to be. The idea of women being only objects still exists.

### **General Notes on Formatting**

Many of the articles are organized in a staggered pattern, descending or ascending. I chose this formation because, first, I wanted to have some control over the reader and, second, I wanted to separate my dense text to make it look nicer on the page.

How do I have control? Because the reader has to take their time. They might have to reread or check with the previous page, because of how things are separated. Things might not be clear the first time around. It also makes them slow down, because their eye has to move before it was supposed to. At least, that was my goal.

Others aren't organized like that because I wanted them to look more similar to the original *Playboy* layouts. For the shorter pieces or more condensed pieces, it made sense to me. In that way, it can look almost like a *Playboy* until you get to other pieces.

Also, I chose to write all dialogue without quotes, and instead italicize it. To some extent, I didn't like the way the quotes looked in my pieces, but I also wanted everything said to have a certain tone. As in, in other prose, if things are italicized and the story is written in third person, that can mean it's a character's thoughts. Therefore, to me, it almost reads in a whispered tone. And I wanted that kind of vibe: that everything is a little bit secret. That every conversation is being held in hushed tones in a locked room.

I also decided to exclude bylines. Personally, I felt crediting someone for the words may or may not add anything. I credited the art because all pieces were painted by real people and, therefore, deserve some recognition. However, all the pieces are written by me. I could put other names on them, but they're all from me. They all, generally, sound like they're written by me. Some might sound ever so slightly different, but not quite enough to seem like it was written by a whole new person.

### **General Notes on Art**

First thing: why so much art? This is another way I'm following the *Playboy* formatting. Every article, short story, and personality piece is accompanied by a picture that takes up an entire page. At first, I wasn't going to follow this. I thought it might be more distracting than anything. And, really, I wasn't sure how I was going to get access to so much art, especially on a budget.

Most of the art is from the same time period/art movement. Part of this is out of necessity: all of these pieces are all creative commons. However, this style of art is not the only style, year, or art movement that falls under creative commons licensing. Instead, I was drawn to the portraiture, the use of color, the presence of brush strokes, and how generally opulent it looks. At least, compared to art that is generally made now, or what was popular in the 80s. Therefore it provides some contrast to the rest of the pieces. The sheer beauty on one side, and the almost lack thereof on the other.

## **Individual Articles**

### **PLAYGOD AFTER DARK**

#### *The Main Idea:*

This piece serves mainly to set the tone and give a glimpse into the world outside this magazine. That while things are happening in this magazine, things are also happening outside of it. That it belongs to a different world entirely. But also maybe not actually that different at all. Just a handful of bizarre little pieces.

#### *The Art:*

I chose "The Drinkers" because it gave a sense of where these sorts of stories might come up in the lives of the "reader" (not the real reader, but the one who could have picked this magazine up in their own world). Drinking is also, to me, something that happens "after

hours.” The original *Playboy* article has a piece depicting a skyline at night, so I was trying to find something similar.

## **MOVIES**

### *The Main Idea:*

Most of these are inspired by real pieces of media from the 1980s. Two are movies, one is a song, and the other is a retelling of Lurleen Wallace’s true story (she died in the 60s, but everything about it fit what I’m talking about). I mostly just think it’s interesting the way media (especially from the 80s) depicts women. How much abusive relationships were accepted and almost glorified. Or how age differences were not as frowned upon. Or just how little control women used to have in their own lives. While all this stuff happens today, it’s not as big in the general public.

### *The Art:*

I chose “The Bathers” because of its voyeuristic feel. All the movie reviews are about the way women are being controlled and here is a piece that shows women on the beach, vulnerable, and watched. To me, they don’t seem to be performing for anyone, but their mere existence is seen as the performance.

## **MEN**

### *The Main Idea:*

I wanted to have at least one kind of short piece, to set it apart from everything else. And the phrase “she was dead the whole time” got stuck in my head. In some respects, when I think of strange men, I think of potential threats. If not to me, then someone else. And I needed a piece that targeted men, so I made them perpetrators. The title is borrowed from

The King in Yellow (an early piece of cosmic horror): “In his black stars, we shall find our salvation or destruction.”

*The Art:*

I found the image of the plucked chicken to be distinctly disturbing. I viewed it as the “she” in the article. The chicken is very vulnerable without its feathers. And it’s dead, which the “she” also is. To me, the chicken feels like the victim or the way a perpetrator might see their victim; an inhuman object.

## **WOMEN**

*The Main Idea:*

This was brought about by my once “love” of true crime. There was a period of my life where I consumed a lot of true crime content and I started to notice that they always described the women-victims the same way: beautiful, good, with “a smile that could light up a room.” While I know that after someone has died, it’s almost unacceptable to talk negatively about them, but I also know that not everyone is perfect. So I wanted to write a piece contrasting the two kinds of women-victims: the beautiful ones whose stories go on national news, who take up a space in the public consciousness, and the rest of them.

*The Art:*

I was drawn to this picture of Julia Jackson because of the way she looked. How almost hollow she appeared. The only change I made was coloring it pink, so that it might pop a little more. I felt like seeing a woman like this in an article talking about how ugly women are treated made sense. Especially because according to a blurb from the Art Institute of Chicago, Julia Jackson was considered a great beauty in her time. So to see her like that was deeply intriguing to me.

## ADVISOR

### *The Main Idea:*

This is based on a section of *Playboy* where readers could write in and ask their questions. One of the questions was me trying to write about women who obsess over aging, who get work done, who buy any and every cream, serum, whatever to try to recapture their youth and how much this all takes. But then, this is “normal,” once a woman reaches a certain age. The others are also about some common situations women find themselves in: extreme jealousy, ignored feelings, and body dysmorphia. And I had the magazine handle it so callously because no one really cares about them or their problems. They want help, but no one wants to help them. And maybe, honestly, they believe that there wasn’t even a problem in the first place.

### *The Art:*

I chose this piece because I liked the way her body is positioned, how contorted she is. She could be falling out of her chair. She could be in the throes of some kind of fit. Her body looks so tense. Everything feels tight. And I think that’s an apt way that the women feel in Advisor. Each of them are feeling something big and seeking some kind of solace, and instead they are ridiculed.

### *The Ad:*

Early on in my research, I found an article about a bizarre acting troupe, putting on unusual and grotesque “plays.” During some purge, I lost the actual article and can’t remember enough about it to find it again, but I wanted to bring that element back in: the underground arts scene. I decided to once more reference *The King in Yellow* and the eponymous play,

which in the context of the story drives anyone who reads it mad. Mostly, it serves as a piece of world building, to further explain just what kind of place these people live in.

## **NEWS**

### *The Main Idea:*

This section was also mostly world building. One of the later pieces builds on the McMartin leak, but I didn't want to explain it within the piece itself. So I wrote about it here. "Spectral Assault" is based on a real claim that a woman was being sexually assaulted by a ghost, which no one took seriously (for obvious reasons) but they mainly claimed she was lying because of her low-income, single-mother lifestyle. The last is just because women are never taken seriously. No matter how hard she tried to talk about the bugs, they only came out when she was alone. Therefore, she's exaggerating or lying. Were the bugs real? Who knows.

## **INTERVIEW WITH THE CORPSE OF MEREDITH LIND**

### *The Main Idea:*

*Playboy* always, always, always has a big long interview with some notable public figure. As mentioned above, it can really be anyone, as long as the name is recognizable. In all but one of my *Playboys*, the person interviewed is a man. The women interviews are normally saved for featuring alongside a nude pictorial. However, one of mine does have a main interview with Cher, and it is almost entirely about her love life. Asking her about her preference for younger men, or her scandals, or any flings she may or may not have had. So I wanted to evoke that tone with this. That the magazine is only interested in her scandals and her love life, while she's giving more philosophical answers. But the tone of the interview does a slight shift, talking to her a little more like a person towards the end.

Why her corpse? Because there's so much fascination around death, especially if the one who dies is a public figure who dies tragically. In this case, Meredith is a stand-in for Marilyn Monroe, who decades after her death is still an object of obsession for many people. Whose stuff is still being auctioned off or displayed in museums. Whose grave has been taken over by men who were obsessed with her in life. So now there's a man so obsessed he steals her body, marries her, and tries to re-establish her as a star. But it's also unclear if she's actually speaking. Either she is alive in her corpse, or she is just a body for some man's sick pleasure.

*The Art:*

In real *Playboy* interviews, there's always three pictures of the subject. As I was looking through a certain photographer's portfolio in the AIC's collection, I found this picture. "Dualities" is a woman's face overlaid twice. And I liked the way it looked, that to me it really felt like it was evoking the general idea that women are all things to all people. The face presented in the interview wasn't the face she had before she died, which wasn't the face she had before she got famous, and on and on. I added the colors because I wanted it to have some of that 1980s brightness.

*The Ad:*

In *Playboy*, there are certain categories of ads, one of which is cologne. I wanted the image to evoke a sense of unease, so I painted eyes over his eyes and layered multiple pictures together. In this way, his true face is obscured. I called it "The Implication" based off a scene in the TV show *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, where one of the characters wants to take women out on a boat so that they will be forced to sleep with him because of "the

implication” (that something bad would happen to them if they said no because they’re on a boat, on the water, with no way out).

## **EXAMINATION OF A SACRIFICE**

### *The Main Idea:*

Women are not viewed as separate people, but instead as extensions of whatever they are currently affiliated with; sometimes father, boyfriend, husband, but in this case, the company. Therefore they don’t get to have feelings that are different from their “owners.” A wrench doesn’t feel sad it’s being used, does it? The sacrifice in this case gets the same treatment. She is a means to an end and knows it. Though she briefly breaks towards the end, she still goes through with it. She knows her place. And in the end, even the author of the article removes her humanity or her right to choose. He thinks he knows better, just like the company before him.

### *The Art:*

I chose this piece because it evoked the most sacrificial energy. The tongue, the head, just hanging there. It felt like a similar mood to what I was trying to evoke. That things were happening, but not for these subjects. Around them. Chosen for them. They’re just left to hang until they’re moved onto whatever happens next.

## **PLAYMATE OF THE MONTH**

### *The Main Idea:*

She is the center of attention. She is, as they say, “the moment.” But she’s also nothing. Giving very little about herself away. What she wants you to know, you know; but everything else is kept hidden. This piece is also very short, because I felt like anyone who

bought this kind of magazine for the naked pictures wasn't going to read the words around her. They just want to look at her body. They don't really care about her at all.

*The Art:*

In the same vein of the "readers" not caring about her, I removed her face. Now she is just a body. She exists in a form that might be easier for certain people to digest. She has no identity; she's barely human.

## **MADAME PRESIDENT**

*The Main Idea:*

This is a character borrowed from my initial idea: the president of the sorority-cult. A once child star now all grown up. She's been lusted after for her whole life. And that's the point of her story: even as a child, she was sexualized. Now she's an adult so it's "okay." Consider all those stories of websites counting down the days, hours, minutes until a female child star turns 18. That was where I started from when writing this (though of course those websites didn't exist in the 80s).

*The Art:*

This is the same concept as the "Playmate" article. The readers/voyeurs do not care about her as a person, but her as a concept. She was the little girl on TV. She used to be so innocent and pure. Now she's completely exposed. And all they care about is how far she's fallen. How sullied she is. How stained her character has become.

*The Formatting:*

This is the only piece that is double-spaced. This was inspired by a real-life *Playboy*. The way I understood the double-spacing is that they didn't have enough content from her interview to fill all the pages they needed (because they had however many pictures they

wanted to use), so they just physically stretched it out to make it work. It's just another way that the writers/readers show no care to their women subjects.

## **SLUMBER PARTY**

### *The Main Idea:*

The main idea is two-fold. First, it's an extension of the ritual mentioned in "Madame President." Asking the question: what would a girl do to get everything she wants? And second, it's about how young girls aren't all that innocent. Some young girls play with Barbies as mothers or wives. Other young girls play with Barbies as vengeful queens, beheading Ken dolls, crucifying Bratz, and burning Polly Pockets at the stake. It also shows that this need to be perfect can start very, very young. That these girls already feel ugly and they've just entered double digits.

### *The Art:*

I chose this particular painting because I felt, in some way, that Stacy sees herself as a maternal or older sister sort of figure to the girls she invites into her inner circle. That the ritual is in a sense a moment of teaching. That she is helping them by pushing them to do these things to themselves. Like a mother might teach her daughter to apply lipstick or do her hair or how to sit so her thighs don't look so fat. From a place of love, but ultimately not a loving thing.

## **THE STRANGER**

### *The Main Idea:*

This is a piece about body dysmorphia, inspired by my bathroom in my childhood home that got all its light from a skylight. I didn't know until recently that the way light shines on your face drastically changes your features. And that by being lit by the sun, which

moves across the sky, would therefore change the way my face looks to me. For a long time, I was unsettled, because I felt like I had no idea what I actually looked like, because every time I looked in the mirror, I saw something different. So I wanted to write about that confusion.

*The Art:*

I chose “Woman at her Toilette” because it was a literal representation of what the story is about, but also because the focus is on her, not her reflection. All you can see is her back. You don’t see her face, nor whatever she sees. Once more, the viewer is a voyeur, a person observing without really being able to see.

*The Ad:*

I wanted the phrase “she was dead the whole time” to pop up throughout the work. I wanted it to give the whole thing a sense of foreboding, to maybe make the reader think, “Who was she? Why does she matter?” I wanted to incorporate it as an ad because, honestly, I thought it’d be a little bit funny, especially from the brand Love’s (another perfume).

## **20 QUESTIONS**

*The Main Idea:*

One of the characters I had come up with for my original piece was a reenactor. Again inspired by my true crime phase, there were so many shows that featured so many people reenacting the crimes. I wondered if that was what these people wanted to do, if it was their dream to be in crime reenactments, or if this is a stepping stone in their career. And then I wondered what if someone was a reenactor who got famous for playing one particular killer. What would that be like? How could that affect someone’s mental state? There’s also this concept of “hybristophilia” that I wanted to talk about—basically the idea of

people being attracted to dangerous individuals. And the eternal idea that “I’m different, I can fix him.” If women perceive him as the killer he portrays and he has sex with them and they don’t die, then they are special.

*The Art:*

This is a stock photo from a website called Unsplash. I tried to edit it to make it look like it was taken on film—changed the colors, made it grainy, and so on. I added the black bar because I wanted his identity to be up for question, because it’s not the main point of the interview.

## **MUSEUM OF GLASS JARS**

*The Main Idea:*

I just wanted to play with the idea of how men perceive women, and showing it through historical figures. For example, there are certain groups of men that believe they are superior to women for no discernable reasons. These men can be less educated, less traveled, less well-read, less overall, and yet they still believe that because they are a man, they are inherently better than any woman. It doesn’t matter if she’s a queen or a movie star or the inventor of something, these men will demean her or take credit for her work if the opportunity arises. (Not all men are like this. But not all men are going to visit the museum to make dead women feel less than.)

Why dead women? Because they can no longer speak for themselves. They are no longer really people (if they were seen as people before), so anything done to them is like doing something to a dog, or a bug. It doesn’t really matter. Who cares about the ants? These women are basically just dolls to be played with, dressed up, and hidden away when they’re done being played with.

*The Art:*

This piece struck me because of how unsettling it is, but also how defiant she is. Her body is a little strange, her pose uncomfortable, and her gaze unyielding. She has an inhuman kind of look, but also has a vulnerability about her, probably because of her nakedness. To me, it felt like it added onto what I was trying to say.

*The Ad:*

This is just a piece of world building. That in this world, you can travel to any dimension, any time, any place. That they are operating on planes we never will. The average person can experience something so extraordinary as extra-dimensional travel that it would be an ad in a magazine.

## **BODIES AT REST**

*The Main Idea:*

In this piece, I just wanted to look at the way women have been used and ignored for so much of history. Their discoveries taken from them by men who held more power, or whose contributions are ignored or questioned because of their gender. Their words or stories stolen by insecure men. Their lives ruined because they were more than what they were supposed to be. I chose not to use any of their names and instead relate them to the men in their lives (husband, father, family) because that is more “important” and more recognizable than the women themselves. They are real women, but their stories are not theirs to tell.

*The Art:*

Unlike for other pieces, I had something specific in mind when I went looking for the accompanying art. I wanted the subject to be a woman and I wanted her to be somehow

encroached upon. Someone looking over her shoulder or us as intruders. And when I saw “Interrupted Reading,” it was exactly that. A woman in her own space, doing her own thing, and someone interrupting her. The way she looks at the interrupter holds no malice, but there’s something borderline about it: this is the last straw, the last time she will allow herself to be interrupted. And I felt that it encapsulated the piece because of that expression. Her fatigue is the same fatigue brilliant women might feel when someone else takes their credit.

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