

**The Poet and the Bastard**

By J. C. Bass

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## The Wager

A homeless man wearing a rough plaid coat sat up against an old building that was covered in colorful graffiti. Next to him was a jug of Wild Irish Rose more than half gone. Grinning wide and toothless, he sang an old nursery rhyme from his forgone youth, patting his hands on the pavement in a maniacal rhythm all his own.

A pristine navy blue BMW M5 pulled up next to him and parked. The vagrant glanced that way but paid it little mind and continued to sing with the perfect confidence of one who knows no audience, his high and toneless voice carrying for blocks around.

The door of the M5 swung open and out stepped a well-dressed blonde man in his mid to late twenties. He wore a dark blue suit jacket over a burgundy shirt and designer jeans. As he shut the door he looked into the glass and adjusted his collar, smiling to himself.

The homeless man stopped singing as he saw the well-dressed man in front of him. He stared for a moment in drunken wonder and then scowled.

"Hey rich man, buy me a hamburger would ya?"

Jon smiled at him but walked away. As he did he glanced back at the homeless man and the BMW and keyed the alarm system to activate. The car beeped in recognition.

The homeless man scoffed. "Bastard!"

Jon's cell phone rang as he walked down the dirty sidewalk. He answered it. "This better be good. I'm already getting accosted by the locals."

"Are you close?" The voice asked.

"I'm coming up Waller. Where are you?"

"Not far."

He turned a corner and kept walking. "Todd, if I get robbed out here, I'm-"

"There," Todd interrupted. "Now look up."

Jon was at the base of a four-story bridge that crossed over Illinois, a street that was notoriously full of bars, gun stores, frequently robbed gas stations and seedy night clubs. He looked up and saw a figure that appeared to be Todd standing on the outside of the bridge railing. The figure waved with one hand, holding a cell phone with the other.

"Do you see me waving?" Todd asked.

"Yes," Jon said, gazing upward. "You chose an interesting place for us to have lunch today."

"We're not having lunch. I'm going to jump."

"Oh," Jon said, staring upward at his friend, cell phone still pressed to his ear. "Well Todd I've gotta tell you, I don't think that's such a great idea."

"I know you're gonna try and talk me out of it, but I really want to do this," Todd said. "I'm too sensitive for this world. You've said that yourself, remember?"

"Yes. But what I meant was I think you whine too damn much."

There was a pause. "You're right," Todd said. "I think you're right about a lot of things. I've got a lot of personal faults. And right now I have no hope and no prospects. I'm gonna end up working in the same laundromat for the rest of my life because I've never done anything else. And my poetry sure isn't going to get me out. I'm just far too naive. America is no place for an idealist."

"Can't argue with you there," Jon said. "But I really do think you should reconsider."

"Why? What's the point? You've said it yourself, I just don't fit. I never have."

"Well, you're right about that, too. But that's not what I meant. I mean I think you're too low."

"What?" Todd asked. The figure on the bridge brushed his hair from his face and moved the phone to the other ear. "I didn't catch that."

"I said you're too low," Jon repeated.

"Too low?"

"Yes. Much too low."

There was a pause. "What does that have to do with it?" Todd asked.

"You said that you wanted to kill yourself. I simply don't think that a fall from this height would be fatal."

Another pause. "Jon, are you messing with me?"

"No. I assure you, I'm quite serious."

"I thought-" Todd sounded out of breath. "I thought surely, you-"

"What would you say that is: forty, forty-five feet?" Jon interrupted, eyeing the bridge.

"I thought you'd try to talk me out-"

"But then again, it all depends on the landing, I suppose," Jon said, musing to himself.

"Jon please!"

"Please what? You called me out here. I'm just trying to save you a little pain and suffering, that's all. If you jump from there, you'll either be paralyzed or, if you're lucky, bleed to death. I give you about fifty-fifty."

Todd let out a groan. "It seems I can't get anything right. Not even the bridge."

"Oh, don't beat yourself up about it. It's a fine line to walk: wanting to leave a pretty corpse, and wanting to actually get the job done."

"Good God, why did I call you out here?" Todd said. "I should have known you'd be like this."

"Now don't be such a baby," Jon said. "Tell you what...I'll bring the car around and treat you to a night on the town. Sound nice?"

"Something tells me that waking up tomorrow morning with a terrible hangover won't make me want to live any more than I do now," Todd said.

"Come on, it'll be fun. We'll go to Slippery Dan's. You can quote Keats to strippers again and make an ass of yourself."

"I feel bad enough as it is, thank you."

"Fine, be that way. But if you're going to jump then hurry up and do it, cause I'm starving," Jon said, glancing at his watch. "Hey, is that burger place still around here?"

"How can you think of food at a time like this?" Todd said. "My life is ending right before your eyes."

"My stomach doesn't know that. Oh and by the way, before you jump, give me fair warning first. I don't want any blood on my shoes."

Todd groaned. "I can't believe this. My only friend in the world is more concerned about his Reeboks than he is about me."

"Reeboks?" Jon said, laughing. "Yeah right. Try Bruno Maglis. Three hundred bucks, too. Met this great cashier chick when I bought 'em. She's got an ass that-"

"Jon, I'm dying here!"

"Oh would you quit whining, already? If you wanted to jump you would have done it by now. Just come down and we'll forget about the whole thing."

"I do want to jump, Jon. This isn't just a cry for help. I meant what I said about everything. It's just...well, I'm afraid of heights."

"Well you chose the right bridge, then. Cause like I said, you're too damn low. Now come on, do you want that drink or not?"

Todd sighed. "Fine, go get the car. But I can't promise I won't find another way to kill myself, even after tonight."

"Whatever. Just do me a favor and take me out of your will first. I don't want to inherit something stupid like your Star Wars Lego collection." Jon hung up the phone and started walking back the way he came.

"God..." Jon muttered. "What a whiner."

"And what is love?" the poet quoted. "It is a doll dress'd up for idleness to cosset, nurse and dandle..."

Garish neon lights oozed onto the glitter covered walls where smoke-stained mirrors reflected a topless woman gyrating on stage. The bass from the music made every surface in the building vibrate, as if even the inanimate things hummed with excitement. One took care not to study the carpet too closely, which had gathered so much grime over the years that it seemed not only alive, but of near enough strength to declare its independence and rise up against the ownership.

Todd and Jon sat in gaudy colored furniture adjacent to the stage. Jon busied himself by meticulously sprinkling tobacco onto oily brown paper. Todd was across from him getting a lap dance from a tall long-legged blonde. "Is that poetry?" the woman asked.

Todd's eyes were glazed over from drink. "It's Keats. *Modern Love*. Do you read poetry?" She laughed. "No, can't say I do. Not that I don't like it, it's just not my area of expertise."

"And what is your area of expertise?" Todd asked.

Jon rolled his cigarette. "Besides lap dances, obviously."

"Interior design," she said.

Todd's eyes lit up. "You're an artist? How wonderful!"

"She's a decorator, Todd. I'd hardly call that an artist."

The stripper gave him a dirty look. "Actually, most of the people who design for a living would call it art."

Jon lit his cigarette. "Imagine that, Todd. A bunch of people hocking throw pillows and paint swatches call themselves artists. As a poet, doesn't that disturb you a bit?"

Todd had his face buried in the stripper's chest. "Not particularly."

The stripper turned to Jon. "Whether or not you'd agree with it, interior design is art. But what makes you think you're so much of an expert, anyway?"

Jon exhaled a puff of smoke, tilting his head back with pride. "I'm a movie producer."

"Anything I'd know?"

"He produced *Night of the Living Squid People*," Todd said.

"...Squid people?"

"It's something of an underground cult classic," Jon said.

"Very underground," Todd said.

The stripper laughed. "Wow," she said, turning to Jon. "So you think making some crappy horror movie makes you an artist?"

"You know, you're not exactly here for your commentary," Jon said. "Why don't you go find us somebody who doesn't talk so much?"

The stripper got up. "Fine by me."

Todd looked suddenly lost without her. "Wait, don't go."

"Sorry, but the money isn't worth your friend's bullshit."

"Well...at least tell me your name."

The stripper gave him a little smile. "Rebecca."

"Rebecca..." Todd said, grinning stupid with drunkenness. She left them and went into the back.

"The nerve of her..." Jon said, puffing away at his cigarette. "Even *Night of the Living Squid People* has an audience. They're a bunch of basement-dwelling neck-beards, but it's still an audience."

"Rebecca the artist..." Todd mused. "Isn't that wonderful?"

"Oh shut up you dandy. She could have said her name was Olga and she inseminates cattle for a living and you'd still be googly eyed."

Todd kept looking toward the back of the club, waiting for her to appear again. "I think you offended her."

"My God, I certainly hope not," Jon said, laughing. "She better bring back somebody clean, last time I got a lap dance here I'm pretty sure the chick hadn't bathed in a week. My clothes ended up smelling like a Walmart bathroom."

"I think she and I had a good rapport," Todd said. "Do you think she likes me?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Rebecca. You think she's dating anyone?"

Jon studied his friend. "Oh boy. I know that look."

"What look?"

"The one that says you're about to confess your undying love to a complete stranger, or something equally stupid."

"She's the one," Todd said. "I can feel it."

"Uh, hello? You just met her. Seems like every time we go out you find somebody else to fall in love with. And you always blow it by coming on too strong."

"I'll admit to jumping the gun a little in the past. But this time is different. I really feel a connection with her."

"She's a stripper, Todd. She's nice to you because you're paying her to be. You ever notice that you only seem to fall in love with strippers, waitresses, and cashiers? I have to say, your standards are pretty low."

"Then what do you suggest I do?" Todd asked.

Jon took a shot of whiskey. "I suggest you drink more and shut the hell up."

"Well what if I just try and take it slow with her?"

Jon groaned. "Todd, you have to keep in mind she gets hit on by every scumbag that comes into this place. Your odds aren't very good."

"I'm not going to hit on her. I'm gonna try a different approach."

"And what is that?"

"I'm going to be her knight in shining armor."

"Really?" Jon laughed. "And how do you plan on doing that?"

"I'll offer to take her away from all this. Maybe we'll run away together, maybe backpack across Europe."

Jon was laughing hysterically. "God, you are so drunk."

Todd rubbed his bleary eyes. "...I'm not that drunk."

"Todd, you've got this ridiculous idea that all women are waiting for a man to 'take them away' from it all. You read too many old novels. Things aren't the way they were three hundred years ago. The modern woman doesn't want that."

"Then what do they want?" Todd asked.

Jon put his cigarette out in an ash tray. "I'll let you know when I find out."

"If you don't know, then how do you know I'm wrong?"

"Even if you're right, which you're not, it wouldn't work. You can't provide any of that for a woman. Look at you. You're twenty-seven years old and you still eat Ramen noodles. You work in a laundromat, for Christ's sake. If you can barely support yourself, how can you support her? A woman doesn't want that life."

"If two people are in love, then the circumstances of their lives don't matter. There's plenty of people going through hard times who are still happy because they have each other."

"That may be true," Jon said. "But like I said before, you just met this woman. If you even so much as mention love, she'll run for the hills."

"Fine, I get that. But I don't see why I can't be romantic."

"You shouldn't if your idea of romance is saying something like you want to take her away from it all. She'll think you're some kind of nut-job."

"Maybe she will," Todd said. "But it seems like every relationship I've had has failed because I wanted something more permanent and they weren't ready for that. I guess I'd just rather be up front with it. Better for them to reject me when we first meet than to break my heart months or years down the line."

"Good luck getting laid with that policy," Jon said.

"But what if I luck out? Maybe she actually wants that. Maybe she wants somebody a bit different from the norm."

"Okay, fine," Jon said. "Care to make a wager?"

"A wager?"

"Yes. When that stripper comes back, you tell her whatever you wanted. Offer to be her knight in shining armor or whatever else. And if you take her home or even just get her phone number, I'll give you a thousand dollars."

Todd laughed. "How about you just wait and pay for our honeymoon?"

"Todd, if you end up marrying that girl, I'll pay for the grandest honeymoon you could ever imagine."

"Okay. And if I lose?"

"Then you have to quit the laundromat and come work for me."

"Doing what, exactly?"

"You'll be my coffee bitch," Jon said.

"...I'm not sure I'd like the job title 'coffee bitch.'"

"It'll pay better than the laundromat," Jon said. "And there's always room for promotion to donut whore."

Todd turned and saw Rebecca walking towards them with another girl. "Okay. You're on."

"Good," Jon said. He eyed the olive-skinned girl that Rebecca brought. "Well hello there..."

Todd stood up, wobbling a bit as he did. "Rebecca, can I talk to you for a moment?"

The cracked concrete parking lot of Slippery Dan's Gentlemen's Club was bathed in an eerie pink light. Even over the bass from the music you could hear the buzz of the massive sign, glowing like an electric Mecca in the dark, drawing all the flies.

Jon stood below the thing bathed in that neon ooze, smoking a cigarette. Beside him, Todd and Rebecca were wrapped in each other's arms, kissing. Jon looked over at them and scowled.

"He's got a cold, you know," Jon said.

They didn't seem to notice him. After a moment, they finally pulled away from one another. Rebecca looked into Todd's bloodshot eyes.

"Say it again," Rebecca whispered.

Todd cupped the back of her neck. "I swear, I'm going to be your knight in shining armor." She giggled and melted into his arms, and they were kissing again.

"You've gotta be shitting me," Jon said, shaking his head. "Well, this has been quite an auspicious night for you, Todd. Certainly better than it started. I suppose you'll want me to drive you back to the bridge now."

"What's he talking about?" Rebecca asked.

"Nothing," Todd said, smiling at her. "He's just making a joke." He turned to Jon. "And remember, I'm going to hold you to that wager of ours."

"Yeah," Jon scoffed. "You do that."

Rebecca leaned into Todd, putting a finger on his lips. "Why don't you tell your little friend to go away?"

"You see? She's already trying to drive a wedge between us," Jon said.

"You're just jealous because you're going home alone tonight," she said.

"Perish the thought," Jon said. He pointed out in front of them. "There are hookers all along this street. A veritable buffet."

Rebecca's jaw dropped but Todd just laughed. "Don't mind him."

"Is that what you two always do?" Rebecca asked. "He says something awful, and you apologize for him?"

"Something like that," Todd said. "But you and I have more important things to worry about. Tonight it's just about us."

"Then let's go," Rebecca said, pulling him toward her car.

Jon watched them go, shaking his head. "I hate poets."

## Giving Him a Chance

Rebecca yawned and stretched her arms. Her eyes fluttered open and she took a look around her. She had to do a double take to confirm what she was seeing.

The cramped one-room apartment was covered in books, notebooks, loose paper, clothes, trash, boxes, and other assorted junk. A cluttered writing desk housed many empty Mountain Dew cans and discarded fast food wrappers. On a shelf was a bunch of action figures in their original packaging.

Rebecca saw Todd asleep next to her. She groaned.

Gently, she lifted the covers and started to step out. The bed creaked as she did, so she took it slower. Her foot landed on a crinkled up potato chip bag. She cringed as Todd grunted and shifted himself around. After a moment he settled back in and it was clear he was still asleep.

Finally making it out of bed, she began hunting for her clothes. She found her pants on a chair full of old books. Her bra had been flung across the room and was stuck on the window blinds. Her shirt was draped over a *Star Trek* DVD set.

"Oh God, you slept with a dork," she muttered to herself. She thought back to what happened the night before. She winced thinking about all the things that Todd had told her, all the promises he had made. He had quoted all sorts of romantic lines from old poems and books and promised to treat her right. He had told her just what she needed to hear. And she had fallen for it.

She slipped her shoes on and grabbed her purse. Quietly, she headed for the door.

"...Rebecca?"

Dolly had long blonde hair and wore a dark tank-top with checkered shorts that really accentuated her legs and spectacular backside. Her eyebrows were dark and her features soft and clear. She was remarkably beautiful.

She was also a drag queen.

Dolly was able to fool most people, but not all. Rebecca had a few suspicions about her neighbor when she had first moved in, but hadn't had them confirmed until she had stepped inside Dolly's apartment. It was just as messy as Todd's had been, with clothes and a wide array of garbage scattered about. A signed Oakland Raiders football jersey was framed and proudly displayed by the front door, so it was the first thing guests saw as they walked in. However, despite the relative normality of a football jersey as decoration, the rest of the apartment was decorated with the most hideous and embarrassing collection of erotic art ever gathered since the days of Caligula.

Though technically still male, Dolly preferred to be treated as a woman, and her friends adapted accordingly. The two of them sat on Dolly's couch eating take-out. Rebecca had managed to brush away enough old clothes to have a clean place to sit, but still felt like there were bugs crawling on her.

"So he's some kind of poet?" Dolly asked, using chopsticks to grab a piece of chicken.

"Well, that's his hobby I guess," Rebecca said. "But he's not making a living off it."

"What's his day job?"

"...He runs a laundromat."

"What, like he owns it?"

"Nope. Just works there."

"Hmm," Dolly said. "Sounds like you're really shooting for the stars."

"I know," Rebecca said, chuckling to herself. "He's definitely not my usual type. But he's still kind of interesting. He's smart, he's sweet...he's very literate."

"Literacy isn't exactly the first thing I look for in a man."

Rebecca laughed. "Yeah...I don't know what I was thinking."

Dolly shrugged. "No big deal. We all go slumming occasionally."

"Well at first I regretted the whole thing and I just wanted to get out of there," Rebecca said. "But he woke up and we talked for a little bit and I realized that all the stuff he had said the night before, all the romance-novel stuff about wanting to treat me right and care for me...I'm not entirely sure that was bullshit."

"But you said you just met him."

"Right," Rebecca said. "I had."

"He hadn't come to see you dance before?"

"No," Rebecca said. "But see, that's my point. If he was just some weirdo fan guy who watches me dance all the time, I'd understand him saying things like that. But we just met that night. So why would he say it?"

Dolly scooped up some food with her chopsticks. "The more important question is why did it work?"

"I don't know," Rebecca said. "Because he didn't seem like the type of guy who goes to strip clubs. He had this sort of lost puppy dog look that I thought was cute. Or maybe I was just lonely."

"That's reason enough. We all have those moments. But I don't know about him, though. Sounds like he's probably just really lonely." Dolly took a swig from a wine cooler. "Or hell, who knows? Maybe he actually feels that way. Maybe he's a hopeless sap who falls in love with every girl he meets. But either way, he's not your type."

"Right. It's over, so I guess it doesn't really matter." Rebecca started to unwrap her fortune cookie.

"Just chalk it up as a desperate night. Lord knows I've had enough of them. I could tell you stories that would make the paint peel."

Rebecca cracked open her fortune cookie and read the slip of paper. "Whoa..."

"What?" Dolly asked.

The fortune read 'Give him a chance.'

Rebecca's apartment was spacious, or at least appeared to be because of the way she had decorated it. Actually, it wasn't any larger than Dolly's was, the space was just better utilized. Being an interior design major in college had paid off for her, even if she wasn't able to practice her true craft for a living yet. She had proudly noted that all her friends considered her apartment to be the best place to hang out and she liked the way they always seemed to think that the items she had chosen were more expensive than they actually were.

Rebecca was putting the finishing touches on her hair. She was dressed in a nice navy blue dress that was simultaneously flattering and conservative. Despite the fact that they had already slept together, she didn't want Todd to get the idea that it would happen again tonight. Tonight was all about getting to know the man who had said all those things to her and finding out why he'd been so willing to say them to a person he had just met.

Rebecca was realistic enough to know that she had probably just used the fortune cookie as an excuse to satisfy her own curiosity. Truth be told, she had second thoughts about this, mainly

for Todd's sake. She didn't want to lead him on if they really had no chance of being together. But still, he was a bit of a mystery to her, and he was nice enough to warrant an actual date. The only way to find out if it's a mistake is to actually try it.

Knock knock.

Rebecca opened it and saw that Todd was wearing a nice black suit jacket and a red shirt beneath. She noticed that the black of his pants didn't match the black of the jacket, but quickly forgave him for it when she saw how nervous he looked.

"Hey," Todd said. "You ready?"

An old beige Volvo bearing the wear and tear of many owners and accidents sat in the parking lot. The hood was tied down with a piece of rope tied through a hole where the ornament would normally be. The front bumper sagged, and the left headlight was broken and had been mended with clear boxing tape. The back left passenger window was permanently halfway down, which had resulted in the beige cloth of the back seat being completely ruined with rain and stained a permanent dull brown. But despite the fact that Todd's apartment had been downright slovenly, the inside of his car had been cleaned of what garbage might normally be there, so it was clear he had at least made some effort.

"Here's my car," Todd said, seeming appropriately embarrassed. "I've had it since I was sixteen," he explained. "Kind of grown sentimental about it. It's got a few problems, but it's treated me well."

Rebecca had an inkling that Todd had given that speech before, and more than once. She tried to find something nice to say, but wasn't sure there was anything that wouldn't sound like a joke. "It's...got character." She went to open her door.

"Oh here, let me," Todd said, rushing over.

"...Guess chivalry isn't dead after all." Rebecca said.

Todd let out a nervous laugh. "Actually, it's just kind of hard to open."

As they drove along, a metallic clatter whirled from inside the dash. Rebecca smiled politely and pretended not to notice it.

"So...where did you meet your friend?" Rebecca asked.

"Huh?" Todd said over the metallic din.

"I said where did you meet your friend? The one from the other night."

Todd gave the dash a good hard slam with his fist and it quieted down. "Oh, Jon? I've known him since elementary school. We were neighbors."

"He just seems really different from you."

"Yeah," Todd said with a laugh. "He is. But when you meet as kids, you don't notice the differences so much. I guess most people eventually outgrow a lot of their friends as they get older, but that didn't happen with us. Everyone thinks he comes off as harsh, but he means well. You just have to get past the rough exterior."

"Well he certainly does have a rough exterior," Rebecca said.

"Anyway, we went to the same high school and everything. He went to college here in town, but I started working instead. It was easy for us to keep in touch, though."

"So you never ended up at college?"

"No," Todd said.

"Well my dad's a biology professor, so I was pretty much forced to go. My mom's a doctor, so between the two of them you can imagine the response I got when I told them I wanted to go into interior design."

"They were upset?"

"Oh yeah," Rebecca said. "I still get crap over it. They've always been the pushy type, so ever since I was five they've had everything planned out for me. They pictured me as some type of doctor or lawyer. Needless to say I disappointed them."

"How do they feel about...well, what you're doing now?"

Rebecca laughed. "You mean me stripping? They'd freak."

"They don't know?"

"Hell no," she said. "They think I work at Starbucks. They're super conservative, so if they knew, they'd probably disown me or something. When I find a design job I can quit, but so far the only stuff I've been offered isn't anything I want. I don't mind working my way up, but fetching donuts for actual designers isn't what I went to college for."

Todd steered them along a busy thoroughfare. They passed by several cafes and restaurants where couples were sitting outside, talking. A quiet moment passed between them.

Rebecca sighed. "Okay, I think we need to get this out of the way."

"What?"

"About the other night..." Rebecca said. "First off, I don't want you to think I make a habit of going home with customers. In fact, I never have. The club has a rule against it and even if they didn't, I still wouldn't do it because most of the guys there are creeps or assholes."

"...Okay," Todd said. "That makes sense. So why me?"

Rebecca shook her head. "To be honest, I'm not really sure. Don't take this the wrong way, but you're not my usual type of guy. I just...well, it was all because of the stuff you said. And then the morning after, I got the impression that you weren't just saying that stuff to get me in bed. So honestly, I don't really know what to think because if you weren't just saying that to sleep with me, then you must have meant it. But you can't possibly have meant it because you just met me."

Rebecca waited, wondering if her blurted explanation would suffice and how Todd would explain himself. He seemed to be thinking very hard, trying to choose his words carefully. Finally he seemed to come to a conclusion.

"Well..." he started. "Here's the thing..."

"You're a fucking idiot," Jon said.

Todd was outside an old dilapidated movie theater with his cell phone held to his ear. He pulled up his collar to keep away the night's chill. People passed by on the sidewalk as he paced around. He brushed the hair out of his eyes, sighing deeply. "Yeah, I know."

"But just in case you forget, allow me to reiterate. You're a fucking idiot."

"Thank you Jon, I realize that."

"I don't know what offends me more..." Jon said. "...The fact that you told her you meant everything you said the other night, or the fact that your idea of a date is taking a girl to see *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*."

"Okay fine, I messed up. But what do I do?"

"Oh, I don't think you have to do much of anything. I think the situation will handle itself."

"What does that mean?"

"It means she's gonna run like her ass is on fire," Jon said. "Look, I can't believe it worked the other night, but you have to realize that was one in a million. Telling that sappy bullshit to a stripper actually got you laid. That's something for the record books. You should have your name on a plaque somewhere. But you can't stick with it, Todd. It's just too weird."

"Well I already said it, okay? I can't take it back now. And she's still in there watching the movie, so she hasn't ran away yet."

"Has she said anything?"

"...No, not really."

"Then trust me, it's just a matter of time. She'll be gone before the movie is over," Jon said. "Look, you do this with half the girls you meet. If any woman so much as smiles at you, you fall in love with her. You're a total sap that way, and you always have been. You've got to realize that you don't actually have real feelings for them."

"What is it then?"

"Simple. You're just horny like the rest of us."

"No, this is different," Todd said. "I know you don't think it is, but it's different. There's something real here."

"Ugh, stop saying that! Don't you realize how pathetic that sounds?"

"It may be pathetic, but I can't deny the fact that I actually feel it. If that makes me an idiot, then fine, I accept that. But what I want to know is how to make this work now that I've gotten to this point."

"I don't know, Todd. I truly don't. You're in unknown territory, man. But I'm gonna bet that she'll realize real quick that you're not the kind of guy that she's looking for."

Todd brushed his hair from his face and looked down at the pavement. "Yeah...story of my life, huh?"

"Look, if you can't help but fall in love with every girl you meet, fine. But for Christ's sake, don't tell them. You're too damn old to be wearing your feelings on your sleeve like a high-schooler."

"Yeah, I know," Todd said. "Well, thanks for the help. I guess I better go back and get this over with."

Todd hung up, took a deep breath, and trudged back into the theater.

Rebecca had no idea what she was watching. Something about aliens taking over. She knew that much at least.

Rebecca wasn't sure what she had been expecting when she asked Todd to explain the things he'd said the night they met. She thought surely he'd shy away from it, or at least from most of it. Maybe he'd say he was drunk and had gotten carried away or something along those lines. He'd admit to being the sappy romantic-type, but blame most of it on the alcohol.

But saying that he actually feels that way? She hadn't seen that coming.

Todd returned after a few minutes. Rebecca noticed that he didn't look the same as he had when the date began. He was nervous before but now seemed calm, though not particularly happy. He gave a polite smile as he sat back down. He looked almost apologetic. Maybe he was regretting what he said.

Rebecca couldn't help but feel bad for him, or any other guy that was so up front with their emotions like that. They're the most sensitive type and the most likely to get their hearts broken.

But pity was no basis for a relationship. He would just have to understand.

On the way to drop her off, Todd made casual chit-chat, and Rebecca seemed happy enough to oblige him. Though Todd knew that he couldn't salvage the date or whatever snowball's chance in hell that he might have had with her, he wanted to at least try and come out of it with a little dignity.

They pulled into the parking lot of her apartment complex. Todd had planned on just saying goodnight and leaving it at that. But before he knew it, he was spilling his guts again.

"Look, I know I made things strange with what I said, but-"

"You don't have to explain," Rebecca said.

"Well, I feel like I should. I just want to say I'm sorry. I've got a bad tendency to fall for women I feel a connection with, even if I just met them. And when I do that, I can't help but be honest about the way I feel. I've had girlfriends in the past that appreciated me being up front like that, but most people simply aren't that way. I have to adapt. So for making things uncomfortable on what could have been a nice night, I apologize."

Rebecca nodded. "Well I appreciate that. But don't be too hard on yourself. You're a sweet guy and you'll find what you're looking for."

"Thanks," Todd said. "Oh, and I'm sorry about the movie too. I'm a nerd at heart, so *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* seemed perfect. Sorry for making you sit through it."

Rebecca laughed. "You're forgiven."

"Well...goodnight then."

Rebecca gave a polite smile. "Goodnight."

Bernie was a short, chubby girl with an old-fashioned bob haircut. She had thick red glasses and rarely if ever wore make-up. When they had first met as roommates freshmen year, Rebecca wasn't sure how well they would get along. But what Bernie lacked in social graces she made up for with cleanliness and a love of peace and quiet, which had made her an almost ideal roommate. They shared their first apartment as juniors and after college was over Rebecca got her own place, but they still remained close friends.

Bernie's apartment was decorated with black and white art photographs and Andy Warhol paintings. Bernie sat on a plaid upholstered couch, eating popcorn. On the TV was a reality show where a bleach-blonde woman was crying into the camera.

Bernie scoffed. "Idiot."

Rebecca grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and sat down. "What are we watching, anyway?"

"It's the one where people abase themselves for cash and prizes."

Rebecca smiled. "Oh. That one."

Bernie watched and shook her head. "There are some things about humanity that I'll never understand."

"Then why do you watch it?"

"Cause there's nothing else on." Bernie popped the tab on a diet Coke. "So how did your date go with the laundromat guy?"

"I let him off easy."

"What went wrong?"

"He's just not my type."

Bernie laughed and shook her head. "God..."

"What?"

"Your type? You mean he wasn't an asshole."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rebecca asked.

"I mean you only date assholes. And he wasn't an asshole, so you didn't like him."

"I do not date assholes."

"Should we go through the list?" Bernie said. "What about the last one, the rocker guy who cheated on you?"

"Okay yeah, Steve was an asshole. But everybody has at least a few guys they date that have turned out that way. That doesn't mean I only date assholes."

"Okay, how about the guy before that? The tennis instructor?"

"Lars was a nice guy, I thought you liked him?"

"Uh no? He treated you like crap, Bec."

"He may have been a little rough around the edges, but deep down he-"

"Was a nice guy?" Bernie interrupted. "Yeah. That's what you always say. They're all nice guys deep down. But on the surface, they're assholes."

"Okay, what about Tony?"

"The mechanic?" Bernie said. "Are you kidding me?"

"What was wrong with him?"

"He made you pay like half of his bills and then never paid you back for them."

"He didn't make me do anything," Rebecca said. "I just helped him out, that's all."

"And what did you get in return? A messy break-up?" Bernie asked. "Bec I love ya, but you have a bad habit of dating guys that don't really care about you. You think that there's something more beneath the surface but they always prove you wrong and you end up hurt. I can't remember how many times you've come to me crying because some two-timing low-life that you fell in love with broke your heart. I can't stand seeing you like that."

"Sure, I've had my fair share of bad luck. But I don't think that means that I'm only attracted to the type of guy who will always treat me that way. I've dated guys that you've liked."

"A few. But to be honest, not that many," Bernie said. "I just think you need to face the fact that you've basically been dating the same guy over and over again. You're just not going to meet the right one by doing that. You need to break the cycle. Branch out a bit."

"But how? I wouldn't even know where to start."

"It's easier than you think. Just start dating guys you might not usually go for. I mean, they don't have to be too radically different. Just make sure that they're nice guys. Maybe even call laundry boy back."

"Todd?" Rebecca said. "Really?"

"Sure, at least you know he's genuine. He may not be perfect, but at least he's different than what you're used to."

"I don't know..."

Bernie shrugged. "Do what you want, it's your love life. But if you get your heart broken again, just remember I told you so."

"...Come again?"

Todd sat at a coffee-stained card table in the laundromat. The machines were all around twenty years old and each had a ruckus all its own. The floor was covered in cheap tiles that crackled underfoot. A bucket hung from the ceiling, collecting rain water from a leak. There was only one customer, an elderly lady, who had fallen asleep in her chair waiting for her clothes to dry.

Todd had his cell phone pressed to his ear. "I said she wants to go out again."

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. "...You must be joking," Jon said.

"No, I'm not. You see Jon? Sometimes honesty pays off."

"I refuse to believe that."

Todd laughed. "What, you think I'm making it up?"

"The only explanation is that she's gotten a severe head wound recently and forgotten the stupid ass things you said to her."

"No, this is for real," Todd said. "She wants us to go to this art exhibit downtown. I checked it out and it's supposed to be pretty nice, so I want to make sure I do this right. Can you help me?"

"Help you?" Jon said. "Todd, you've gone against everything I've told you so far. And for some crazy reason, she still wants to see you. I wouldn't even know where to begin."

"Well there's got to be some kind of advice you can give," Todd said.

"...I guess just try to act normal."

"Normal?"

"Yeah, normal," Jon said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Like people, Todd. Normal people unlike yourself. Act like them."

"Should I dress formal?"

"I shudder to think what your idea of formal is," Jon said. "I'd suggest you don't overdo it, but wear something sharp. And you can take heart in the fact that despite your best efforts to scare her away, she keeps coming back for more. So I guess it really doesn't matter."

"Well, I'll think about it and let you know how it goes."

"I'll be on the edge of my seat."

The stars were out bright and full along with a little sliver of moon. The night was warm and comfortable and the streetlights made the wet pavement beneath their feet glitter as they walked. They had nowhere in particular that they were headed, but that didn't seem to matter.

"I thought the Klimt paintings were amazing," Rebecca said. "I really liked the *Forest of Beech Trees*."

"I did too," Todd said. "I used to have a print of that on my wall. There's a forest out by my grandma's house that looks similar to that, so it always reminds me of my childhood when I see it."

"I have to admit, it's been a while since I came to an exhibition," Rebecca said. "I used to go to them back in college but now it seems like I never really have the time. And to be honest, I wasn't sure I should even suggest it. I didn't know if you'd like it or not."

"Oh, I loved it," Todd said. "I'm always going to art shows. I've tried to take a few of my friends to things like this, but they never seem interested."

"Yeah, mine are the same way."

They strolled along for a while, content to enjoy the warm night and the soothing sounds of the city. Light traffic passed by, swishing about the wet streets. Somebody somewhere was grilling meat, and the sweet smell wafted over to them as they walked.

"You know, I have to be honest..." Todd said. "After the way our first date went, I never expected to hear from you again."

Rebecca chuckled a bit. "Yeah, I was wondering when we'd get to that."

"I have to ask. What made you change your mind?"

Rebecca took a moment and considered how to answer. "A friend brought to my attention that I have a bad habit of dating the wrong type of guy, and that's why I get my heart broken more than I should. I thought that maybe she was right."

"I see. So since I'm not your usual type of guy, you thought you'd give it a shot?"

"...I hope you're not offended by that."

"No, I'm not. It makes sense, actually. And for what it's worth, I'm glad you did. I had a really good time tonight."

Rebecca looked him over. She noted how Todd always seemed to be truly content in every moment, no matter how mundane. He often had a look as if he were daydreaming, his mind a million miles away in some other place, yet when she spoke to him it was clear she had his attention. And as different from her as he might be, she had a strong feeling that she could rely on him.

"Yeah," Rebecca said. "I did too."

"I think you're wasting your time, hon. You're not going to get anything out of him," Lorna said, pouring herself another glass of wine. She was a very tall, very fit woman wearing a red designer top and black slacks. Her diamond bracelet sparkled in the fluorescent lighting of Rebecca's kitchen. She and Lorna had first met when Rebecca started working at Slippery Dan's. Rebecca had been a nervous amateur and though Lorna was only a few years older, she had been stripping for years and carried herself with the grace and poise of a seasoned veteran, and had guided Rebecca through those first shaky performances.

Rebecca was in the living room with Dolly and Bernie. On the TV played old reruns of *Friends*. "You really think so?" Rebecca asked.

Lorna brought the wine bottle with her. "Honey, listen. You're twenty-five, you've got a college degree and a good-paying job. You can do better than some guy who works at a laundromat. I mean, just look at what his idea of a first date was. And with all those things he said to you the night you met..." Lorna laughed. "Please. He's obviously got no idea how to treat women. I don't even know why you went home with him in the first place, but for God's sake don't do it again. You're in a good spot in your life. The last thing you need is a clingy loser boyfriend to take care of."

"Who says she's going to be taking care of him?" Bernie asked. "They just started going out, it's not like he's moving in with her."

"He's poor," Lorna said. "It's only a matter of time before he asks Rebecca for money. Trust me on this. And Rebecca, I know you probably think that I'm skipping too far ahead, but you've got to think long-term. Better to end it now so you don't have to deal with that stuff later."

"Actually, I can vouch for that too," Dolly said. "If you're making a lot more than what he's making it's just going to cause problems."

"Who cares how much money anybody's making?" Bernie asked. "I don't see what that has to do with it. The only thing that matters is whether or not Rebecca likes him."

"Oh honey..." Lorna said, laughing. "I'm sorry Bernie, but with all due respect you're a little out of your element here. When's the last time you even had a boyfriend?"

Bernie looked more than a little hurt. "I dated Mark from the book store."

"Okay, and how long ago was that?"

"...None of your business how long."

Lorna chuckled a bit. "Point proven. Bec, you should listen to the experts. Ditch the guy."

"But Todd isn't the kind of guy who would date somebody just for the money," Rebecca said.

"Even so, it could be a problem later," Dolly said. "And it might not even be his fault, really. It's just human nature. People resent what they don't have."

"But he could be different," Bernie said. "Not everybody would do that."

"True," Dolly said. "You can't know for sure until it happens. But there's nothing that causes more problems in a relationship than money."

"That's right," Lorna said, sipping her glass of wine. "That's why you should never date a man who makes less than six figures a year."

"You've got to be kidding me," Bernie said. "You actually live by that?"

"Absolutely I do," Lorna said. She flashed her diamond bracelet and rings. "You think these rocks bought themselves?"

"No, but I figured you bought them."

Lorna laughed again. "Oh Bernie, that's why I love you." She patted Bernie on the knee. "Dear, real women don't buy diamonds for themselves. They're gifts only."

"Who says?"

"Elizabeth Taylor, that's who."

"I'm sorry, but I just don't see the money thing being an issue with Todd," Rebecca said. "He's just not the type."

"Alright, well let me ask you this," Lorna said. "Can you possibly see yourself being with him in six months?"

"I don't know him well enough to really say that."

"But you think you know him well enough to say that money wouldn't be an issue."

Rebecca sighed. "Okay, just going off of first impressions, assuming everything goes well, I guess it's possible we could still be dating in six months."

"What about a year?"

"I don't know, I can't say."

"Well I don't see it," Lorna said. "I just don't see that happening at all. You're too different."

"Well that's what I thought too, at first. But the more we talk, the more we find things in common."

"He's a nerd!" Lorna said. "What could you possibly have in common with him?"

"We talk about art, music, books...things like that. I haven't always been able to do that with the guys I've dated."

"So? Big deal."

"She needs something new," Bernie said. "She just wants to branch out a little bit. What's so wrong with that?"

"Branch out all you want," Lorna said. "I know how you feel, I've had to do the same thing. But that doesn't mean that you have to start dating nerdy guys with no job prospects."

"But she likes him," Bernie said. "That's all that matters."

"Then keep him as a friend," Lorna said. "But for God's sake, don't date him."

Dolly studied Rebecca for a moment. "Of course, it really doesn't matter what we say. After all, even if he's not right for you, it's not the end of the world if you keep seeing him. I mean, how many of us have dated the wrong guy just because it felt right at the time?"

Everyone nodded, even Lorna.

Dolly continued. "Now, do I think it will work in the long-term? Probably not. But just because we may think he's not the right guy for you, that doesn't mean that you shouldn't give him a chance if that's what you want to do," Dolly said. "So I guess the only real question that matters is: Do you want to see him again?"

Rebecca thought for a moment, and then slowly began to nod. "Yeah. I think I do."  
Lorna groaned. "Jesus wept."

There was a knock at the door. Rebecca adjusted her dress and took one last look in the mirror. They were going to opening night at a new cafe where a local band they both liked would be playing. She hoped they would be early enough to get a good table.

Rebecca went into the living room and opened the door. Todd swiped his hair out of his face and smiled at her. "Hey. You ready?"

At that moment, Rebecca realized that she had been right to give Todd a second chance. It was still early and only time would tell, but she had a good feeling about him. Wasn't that enough? Wasn't that all she needed, really?

"Yeah," Rebecca said. "I'm ready."

## Pushing Thirty

The laundromat smelled of warm lint and cheap detergent. The motors of the old washers and dryers roared their rusty sing-song, each in a different pitch. A loose piece of change continually smacked the interior of a dryer with a resounding clang, giving the metallic orchestra an ever-shifting time signature. The string section was an old General Electric that had a tendency to whistle during the peak of its cycle. But the familiar whine that usually served as accompaniment to the rest of the machines had become a sharp chaotic scratching.

But still, the poet wrote.

An elderly couple at the other end of the laundromat heard the screeching of the old GE and visibly winced. The husband clenched his dentures together, as if bracing for the lash. Several feet away, the attractive middle-aged woman who was using the malfunctioning dryer busied herself by reading a magazine. She pretended not to notice the sound.

The poet didn't have to pretend. He heard nothing and continued to work.

The dryer rocked back and forth, as all of them did, but whatever was causing the high-pitched squeal was making it shake harder than usual. The violinist was stabbing maniacally at imaginary notes, following the patterns of schizophrenic scales that led nowhere. Though the other machines still ran, they seemed almost to hush in anticipation. This solo would be the last.

There was a sudden boom like a car backfiring. The elderly couple who had been watching the dryer intently from across the room both jumped at the sound. Even the middle-aged woman put away her magazine and stood up. The machine's wail had ceased and now there was only the steadily slowing death-rattle of outdated parts scraping together in ways the manufacturers had never intended. The machine shook gently one last time, and then fell silent.

The poet raised his eyes slightly, seeing only just beyond his spiral notebook. He blinked once or twice, as if trying to determine whether the boom existed outside of himself, or if it had only been the product of his overactive imagination.

The middle-aged woman walked to the coffee-stained card table where the poet sat.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Huh?" Todd croaked, now fully shaken out of his creative stupor. "I mean, can I help you?"

"I think something happened to my dryer," she said, pointing to it.

Todd glanced behind him to where she pointed. He saw that there was the slightest wisp of smoke drifting above the old GE.

"Ah. I'll get my tools."

The woman stood by the broken dryer. Todd returned with his tools and scooted the machine out so that he could unscrew the panel in the back.

"Phew," he said as he caught a whiff of burnt rubber and wiring. He narrowed his eyes and surveyed the damage. "Well, the belt is torn. That can be replaced, but..." He looked closer at the motor and frowned. "The wiring is shot." He stood up, unconscious of all the grease that now covered his soft hands. "Oh well," he said, an unmistakable hint of sadness in his voice.

"She had a good run."

The lady simply looked at him. "So, can I get my clothes or what?"

"Oh. Sure," Todd said, taking the tool box off the top of the dryer.

She opened the lid and pulled out a shirt. "These aren't even dry yet."

"Here." Todd reached in his pocket and pulled out three quarters. "You can use the one beside it. It's on me."

"Uh-uh. The last time I used that one I got chewing gum all over my nice pants."

"I'll make sure there's no chewing gum."

The woman sighed, tossing the wrinkled shirt into the other dryer. She muttered something in Spanish which Todd thought was probably a really impressive string of curses.

Todd thought about telling her that he believed the machines had character, even if they barely worked, but realized she was in no mood to hear his musings. "Sorry about that," he said. The woman ignored him and Todd went back to his card table.

He looked down at his notebook. It was the final chapter of his *Cantos*, an epic poem about a young musician in ancient Rome who is confused and terrified by the state of the world around him. He sets off on a spiritual journey to try and understand his fellow man and possibly undo some of the damage that has been done, believing that if he can find the source of humanity's pain, he can compose a song for the Gods that will move their hearts and hopefully convince them to change the world so that humanity will no longer have to suffer.

Todd picked up the notebook and read over what he had written, unconscious of the little shadowy blurs of grease that he was getting on the pages. He had begun the work seven years ago, and though at times it seemed like it would never be finished, he knew that if he avoided distractions it would be completed by the end of the day. After a lifetime of travel, the main character had just finished his song and was awaiting a response from the Gods. However, he was now an old man, and the effort from composing such a plea had put a heavy strain on him. He believed he would die before he found out if it had worked.

Todd had lost sleep for a week leading up to this day. It was hard to stop writing, knowing that the end of his *magnum opus* was drawing near. Worst of all, he didn't know how it would end. He felt that restless excitement that a writer feels at the end of a project, when he knows that it is only a matter of concentration and avoiding distractions.

The bell above the laundromat door chimed as it opened, and Todd looked up to see Jon standing there. He wore khaki shorts and a polo shirt and as he sauntered over toward Todd, he took a long and obvious look at the woman's ass as she bent over to put clothes in the other dryer.

"Aren't you supposed to be at work?" Todd asked.

Jon pulled up a chair and sat down. "They're finishing shooting the last scenes of the Shiddy movie downtown. I was planning on going over there in a little bit."

Todd raised an eyebrow. "...Shitty movie?"

"Not shitty," Jon said. "Shiddy. With a 'd' sound, not a 't'."

"It sounds the same either way."

"I know," Jon said. "But anyway, it's called *Shiddy the Magic Dragon*. It's gonna be fun, I haven't been on the set for this yet."

"Isn't that the one that you came up with?"

"Yep. That one was all mine. Story, characters, everything. And naturally, it's the one that Hollywood came and bought. For the first time ever, we've got A-list talent we're working with. Ben Stiller is the voice of the dragon."

"Wow," Todd said. "I've always wanted to see Ben Stiller play a dragon."

"Well I'm about to head over there now," Jon said. "Oh, you'll never guess who called me the other day."

"Who?"

"Eric."

"Eric from high-school?"

"Yeah," Jon said. "Just called out of the blue. I haven't seen him since he got married, and that was just after graduation. It's been like eight years. I thought we could stop by his place after we go on set."

"I can't, I have to work. Besides, I was planning on finishing my *Cantos* today."

"You can finish that any time. And as for work, it's not like anybody will notice if you knock off."

"What if old man Carter calls? If I'm not here, he'll get mad at me."

"Yeah, God forbid he fires you," Jon said. "He works you like a slave, Todd. You deserve to knock off every now and then. Besides, when is the next time you'll get a chance to come on a movie set?"

"Well what if somebody robs the place?"

"This place? Are you serious? They'd make more money checking coke machines for lost change." Jon got up from the table and grabbed his keys. "Come on, I want to get there before Lindsay Lohan leaves."

"She's in this too?"

"Yeah," Jon said. "She plays a talking toilet."

Many of the downtown streets had been blocked off for filming and were busy with employees rushing back and forth. Small trailers lined the set, housing the more important members of the crew. Tall lights illuminated the area, reflecting off the wet streets. A dozen cameras were stationed at the end of the intersection where a green screen stood along with several wrecked cars, one of which was smoking. The actors were getting their make-up tended to; streaks of blood and smudges of dirt for the most part. People watched from the buildings surrounding the area.

Jon and Todd stood about thirty feet behind the cameras. Jon inhaled deeply. "You smell that, Todd? That's the smell of success. When Hollywood comes to town, everybody gets rich."

"All I smell is burning rubber from the car fire." Todd craned his head around. "What scene are they filming?"

"I don't know, actually. From what I've been told, once Hollywood took over, they changed a lot of my original story."

"Wasn't it supposed to be a romantic drama?"

"Yeah," Jon said. "Now it's a kid's movie about a dragon. Don't ask me how that happened."

A young man who was carrying part of a light fixture walked over to them. "Excuse me, are you the producers?"

"I am," Jon said, extending a hand. "Jon Lowry."

The young man shook. "Nice to meet you. I'm Brian Pulaski, I'm doing some of the lights. Listen, do you have a minute? I've got this great idea for your next movie."

Jon laughed a bit. "Kid, I hear movie pitches all the time. If you-"

"Just hear me out," he said, gathering himself. "Alright, there's this diner in a small town in Mexico, right? And working there is Elvis, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, and Kurt Cobain."

Jon raised an eyebrow. "Um..."

"I know, I know," Brian said. "They're all dead, right? Well what if they're not?"

"...But they are."

"But not in the world of the show," Brian said. "They all faked their deaths because they couldn't handle the fame. And now they all work at this diner in Mexico making fajitas."

"That sounds awesome," Todd said.

Jon gave Todd a look. "Shut up."

"And I was thinking that we could do it as a made for TV movie first," Brian said. "And then, if it's successful, we can do a series. I've got tons of ideas for episodes. There's this one where-"

"Kid look, I'll be honest," Jon said. "We're a really small studio. We mostly do films that go straight to DVD. We wouldn't even be equipped for a TV series."

"But what about all this?" Brian said, pointing around them. "You got Ben Stiller here. This is going in theaters."

"This is the first of our movies that has had Hollywood involvement," Jon said. "If it goes well they might buy another idea from us, but there's no guarantee."

"But you've had some big successes before, right?"

"Yeah," Todd said. "They did *Night of the Living Squid People*."

Brian gave him a funny look. Jon cringed.

"I wouldn't consider that a success," Jon said.

"Really? I thought it was awesome," Todd said.

"Yeah, you would."

"Well can I at least give you my card?" Brian said.

"Sorry kid. I'm just not big on the idea," Jon said.

Brian trudged off, going back to his duties.

"I hate to see an artist's dreams shattered," Todd said.

"Oh please. He plugs in light bulbs for a living, I'd hardly call him an artist."

"Still, maybe you could hire him as something else. Let him work his way up."

"I'm not going to hire everyone who pitches me some dopey idea," Jon said. "I get them all the time. I heard one the other day about a singing cup of coffee."

"That was from me. I thought you said you liked it?"

"No. That sucked."

The director began shouting commands, and the actors moved back into position. One of the special effects team pressed a button to make the car start smoking again.

"Come on, I'll get us closer," Jon said.

The two of them moved up until they stood right beside the director, a short stocky man with an overgrown beard and sunken eyes. Jon gave him a nod. "Is it alright if we're up here, Paul?"

The director looked on the verge of collapse. "At this point, I don't give a shit." He turned to a man beside him. "Roll film."

Two actors, a woman and a man, stood next to the wrecked cars. The woman, a buxom bleach-blond with spacey blue eyes, was muttering to herself.

Paul groaned. "Crystal, stop rehearsing your lines."

"Oh, sorry," she said.

After a moment, Paul raised his hand. "Action."

The cameras rolled as Crystal walked over to the man standing next to the burning car.

"Bernard, Bernard! Shiddy is coming back. He's going to use his magic fire breath to roast us!"

Bernard gripped Crystal and looked into her eyes. "No baby. We're gonna roast him."

"Cut," Paul said. "Dear God, cut."

Crystal turned to them. "Did you hear me, Paul? I got my lines right this time. Yay!"

"Yes Crystal," Paul said. "And it only took you all afternoon." He turned to Jon. "Kill me, won't you?"

"Has it always been like this?" Jon asked.

"You have no idea," Paul said. "Hollywood gave us Stiller and Lohan, but the rest of the actors we got ourselves. And because those two cost so much, we had to hire people who would do it for almost nothing. Believe it or not, Crystal is the only other person here with real acting experience."

"Seriously? What was she in?"

"Escape from Booty Island. She's a porn star."

Jon looked around. "Well at least these sets look good. What scene is this, anyway?"

"It's the final battle between Shiddy and the forces of evil."

"I don't think that scene was part of my original plan."

"Oh really? Well directing a porn star and the guy who cleans my gutters wasn't my original plan, either," Paul said, rising from his chair. He turned to the cast and crew. "Alright everybody, take five." He glanced back at Jon. "I'm gonna go hang myself."

Food tables were set up against a few of the trailers and the crew was taking their lunch. Todd was chatting with the special effects guys while Jon and Crystal stood off to the side, talking.

"You know, me and George Clooney are actually brothers," Jon said.

"No way," Crystal said. "Are you serious?"

"Of course," Jon said. "Don't you see the resemblance?"

"Not really. Do you mean like, step brothers?"

"I mean real brothers," Jon said. "He just looks different cause he's so much older than me."

"Wow," Crystal said. "Did he get you into show business?"

"Actually, I got him into it. Got him his very first role. He's always calling me for career advice too. It's kind of annoying, actually."

"That's so cool," Crystal said, moving closer. "You know, I've been trying to get my big break for a while now. Do you think you could help me with that?"

Jon flashed a smile. "I might could make a few calls."

One of the stage-hands got on a megaphone. "Alright people, break is over. We need the actors back on set and the crew to get ready for the shark scene."

"Shark scene?" Jon asked. "Since when is there a shark scene?"

"Ooh, that means I need to get changed," Crystal said, scampering away. "Call me, Mr. Clooney!"

"Well this is just great," Jon said. "Yet another departure from my actual idea."

Todd walked over, munching on a small plate of food. "Don't worry about it, Jon. I think the movie is gonna turn out great. I've never seen a dragon fighting a shark before."

"Then why do I get the feeling that this is gonna be the worst movie ever filmed?"

"Well if you don't like it, look on the bright side," Todd said, patting him on the back.

"You'll always have *Night of the Living Squid People*."

Eric's backyard was filled with toys of all kinds. Barbie dolls with missing limbs were scattered about, like the gory remains of some long-forgotten battle. A Fischer-Price graveyard of discarded or broken tricycles sat in a corner in a patch of overgrown grass. A sand box was

filled with little buckets and plastic balls. Four girls, all under the age of eight, ran around the yard screaming.

Eric stood by the barbecue along with Jon and Todd. Eric was the same age as them, but looked older. He had bags under his eyes and his hairline was receding fairly quickly. He wore a dirty work shirt, tight across the stomach from where his potbelly bulged out. He flipped a burger. "Girls, can you be quiet for a while? Daddy's trying to talk with his friends."

Gemma, the eldest at seven, glared at him. "Mom says that when we're outside we can yell all we want."

"Well, she meant that you can yell when nobody else is trying to talk."

"Mom yells when you talk all the time."

Eric glanced at Todd and Jon, then blushed. "That's different, honey. Parents do that sometimes."

"My friend at school says that means you're gonna get divorced."

"No Gemma," Eric said, trying to laugh it off. "We're not getting divorced."

"Then why is mom moving her stuff in with the mailman?"

Eric blinked. "...Pardon?"

A blonde and very pregnant woman stepped out onto the back porch. Her hair was wrapped up in pink curlers.

"Hey Donna," Jon said. "Looking good."

She glared at him. "Shut up, Jon."

"Er...okay then," Jon said.

Donna turned to the girls. "Mattie, what the hell did you do with my conditioner?"

The youngest girl had a small bottle in her hand. She put a dab on her fingers and ate it.

"For Christ's sake Eric, can't you watch her?" Donna said. "That stuff is fifteen dollars a bottle."

"Sorry," Eric said. He ran over and took the bottle away from her.

"Well I'm not taking her back to the damn emergency room," Donna said. "If she needs her stomach pumped again, you're gonna have to do it."

"How?"

"You're a plumber," Donna barked. "Figure it out."

After Donna went back inside, Eric turned to Jon and Todd, forcing a smile. "She didn't mean that. It's just hormones talking."

"How far along is she?" Todd asked.

"Eight months," Eric said, his face becoming grave. "Triplets. All girls."

"Wow," Jon said. "Congratulations...I guess."

Eric forced a laugh. "Yeah...lucky me."

"So what's been going on with you?" Todd asked. "We haven't seen you in ages."

"Oh, just the same old stuff," Eric said. "Just working, taking care of the kids. You still work for old man Carter?"

"Sure do," Todd said.

"Man, we really used to give him hell on Halloween, didn't we?"

Jon laughed. "Yeah. I remember when you climbed on top of his house and threw stink bombs down his chimney."

"Yeah, I remember that," Eric said, laughing. "So you're producing movies now, Jon?"

"Yep, sure am."

"Wow," Eric said. "That's amazing."

"Yeah. One of our movies is being filmed downtown. You might have heard of it, it's called *Shiddy the Magic Dragon*."

"Shitty?" Eric said.

"No, Shiddy. With a 'd' sound."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

Todd nodded. "Yeah, pretty much."

Gemma ran up to them. "You made *Shiddy the Magic Dragon*?"

"I sure did," Jon said.

"I heard about that," she said. "My friend at school says they should call it A Very Shiddy Movie, cause that's what it's gonna be."

"...That's funny. Your friend is real funny."

"Why did you call it Shiddy, anyway?" Eric asked.

"The title wasn't my idea," Jon said. "In fact, my story didn't have a dragon in it at all. But Hollywood came and-"

"Hey, I have a cool idea for a movie you can make," Gemma said. "There's this guy who makes bad movies, right? Like, really crappy ones. And he gets real sad cause nobody likes him anymore. Then he dies old and alone."

Jon glanced at Eric. "Your daughter has quite the imagination."

Eric took a swig of beer. "She gets it from her mother."

Todd glanced around to the front of the garage. "Hey, I don't see the old Charger. Is it in storage?"

"Oh yeah, your car," Jon said. "God, I almost forgot. We should take it out for a spin, it'll be just like old times. Are you still working on it?"

Eric shook his head. "...Actually, I sold it."

Jon's face went blank. "You sold the Charger? But that was your dad's."

"I know," Eric said. "It's just that I kept putting money into it, and after Mattie was born...well, I just didn't see the point anymore."

"I'm sorry," Todd said. "That must have been hard for you."

Eric laughed it off. "Nah. It was just an old rust bucket anyway. It was the right decision. Besides, we needed the van."

Jon looked in the driveway where a hulking purple mini-van sat. His eyes bulged.

"It drives pretty good, actually," Eric said. "I kind of like it."

Todd glanced over to the end of the yard. "Uh, is mulch edible?"

Eric looked around and saw that Mattie was standing near the house, putting clumps of mulch in her mouth. "Mattie, what did I tell you about eating stuff from outside?"

"She should be full," Gemma said. "She had three grasshoppers already."

Donna came out onto the porch again. "I thought you fixed the toilet, Eric?"

"I did this morning."

"Well it's clogged again, so get in here and fix it."

Eric nodded and picked up Mattie. "Will you guys watch the barbecue for a minute?"

"Sure," Todd said.

Eric walked up the porch with Donna glaring at him all the way. After they went back inside, Jon turned to Todd.

"That poor bastard," Jon said. "He's fallen far."

"Really? How so?"

"Are you kidding me? Just look around."

"It doesn't seem so bad to me," Todd said. "He's got a great family."

"Donna obviously isn't happy. And to be honest, I don't think he is either. Would the Eric you and I knew in high-school trade in his dad's Charger for a mini-van?"

"Jon, things change. High-school was eight years ago. Besides, it sounded to me like he was doing what was best for his family."

"Still..." Jon said. "It's like somewhere along the line, he lost himself. He's not at all like I remember."

Todd laughed a little. "Jon, nobody is the same way they were in high-school."

"I am. And proud of it."

"Okay, maybe with the exception of you," Todd said. "But it's natural for his priorities to change more than yours have. He's got kids to take care of, you don't."

"Yeah, but he was the star running back, he had scholarship offers. He was gonna go to Ohio State before Donna got pregnant. His future was great."

"I remember," Todd said. "But life doesn't always work out the way you want it to."

Just then, they heard Donna's shrill voice from inside the house.

"ERIC YOU IDIOT, CAN'T YOU DO ANYTHING RIGHT? NOW THE KITCHEN SINK IS BACKED UP!"

Jon finished off the last of his beer. "Well dinner should be fun."

The high-school football field was empty and lit only by the moon and a blanket of stars above. Jon and Todd walked along the track surrounding it until they came upon a set of metal bleachers that lined the side of the field.

"God this place brings back memories," Jon said. "I spent a lot of time out here."

"So did I," Todd said. "I used to hide from Clint Fowler under those bleachers."

Jon laughed. "Isn't he the guy that pulled your pants down in the cafeteria?"

"Among other things."

"You know, you probably shouldn't have read poetry aloud every day during the lunch period," Jon said. "That might have been the core of your problems."

"If Clint Fowler didn't like sonnets, he should have said so. He didn't have to humiliate me."

"Well it's all part of growing up, isn't it?" Jon said. "I mean, you weren't the picture of popularity, but even you had some good memories here."

"Oh of course. I had some great times. When I was in the chess club, we would come out here and practice our Nimzo-Indian Defense."

"Damn Todd, it's a wonder you survived at all."

Todd laughed. "Yeah, I guess so. But I wouldn't do anything differently."

"Really?"

"Of course not. Why, would you?"

"Hell yeah," Jon said. "I would have done things a lot different."

"Why? You were pretty popular, what more could you have wanted?"

"I'd have banged Lonnie Moore."

Todd laughed. "Seriously? That's what you would change?"

"Of course. She ended up posing for *Playboy*. If I could go back, I'd spend all my time with her."

"I'm talking about serious stuff, Jon. Most people wish they had studied harder or chosen a different career path or something along those lines. Would you change any of that?"

"Nope. Pretty much just Lonnie Moore."

Todd took a seat on the bleachers and looked around. "Well, I guess if I had to do one thing differently, I'd try to study harder so I could go to college. My grades were good, but not good enough for a scholarship. And at the time, it made more sense to start working than to try and go to college. Now I kind of regret it."

Jon paced around, kicking a stray piece of trash. "I bet Eric has a few regrets. It kind of makes me feel old, seeing him that way."

"Why?"

"I dunno. Just seeing him struggling to provide for his family, I guess. It makes me realize we're going to be thirty soon."

"We still have a few years, but so what?" Todd said. "I don't mind turning thirty. As you get older, you get wiser."

"I don't want to get wiser. I want to stay twenty-seven forever. It's the perfect age. From thirty on, it's just bills, work, and a steady decrease in the attractiveness of the women you date. And then one day your prostate messes up and you find yourself bent over a doctor's table wondering where the hell things went wrong."

"I like to think of aging as life's natural progression," Todd said. "Not something to be dreaded. And I think most people who are afraid of aging generally feel like they're running out of time to do something. So is there a part of your life you're not satisfied with?"

"Not at all," Jon said. "I have a great career and I just got my Hollywood breakthrough. And yes, I'll admit that *Shiddy the Magic Dragon* isn't exactly what I wanted my big-screen debut to be, but whatever. I've got my foot in the door, that's the important part."

"What about your personal life? Does the divorce still bother you?"

Jon burst out laughing. "The divorce? Hell no. Amanda was the biggest mistake I ever made. I'm glad to be rid of her."

"Okay, but you can't deny that you once loved her."

"Sure I did," Jon said. He took a seat on the bleachers beside Todd. "But we were only together three years. If I ever had any lingering feelings about that, they died when I saw the way Donna treats Eric. If Amanda and I hadn't divorced, that would have been me."

Todd flashed a smile. "So as far as aging goes, you're just afraid of prostate exams?"

"Pretty much," Jon said, laughing. "But what about you? You're the one who's still working the same job you've had since you were sixteen. Surely that wasn't part of your original plan."

"I'll admit, I figured I'd be doing a little better by now," Todd said. "I thought I'd have my *Cantos* finished by the time I was twenty-two. So according to my high-school plan, I'm five years behind."

"Well with you being a hopeless romantic, I know you figured on being married already. What was the name of that chick you dated in high-school?"

"Martha Ingram."

Jon laughed. "Yeah. God, you were nuts about her. Where'd she end up?"

"She went to Brown. Last I heard, she was married and working for the UN."

"Does it bother you?"

"I think about her sometimes," Todd said. "But she was going places that I wasn't. Sometimes I think we could have made it work, but other days I don't."

"You moped about her for a long time."

Todd laughed a little. "Yeah, I guess I did."

"And then came the Kelly years."

"Don't remind me."

Jon laughed. "Come on, you don't miss her? How could you not miss the most overly attached girlfriend ever? She was like your little shadow."

Todd just shook his head. "Everybody makes mistakes."

"I thought you'd never get away from her. Does she still send you letters from prison?"

"The terms of the restraining order won't allow her to."

Jon laughed. "Well, at least you have Rebecca now, for as long as that'll last."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Er...nothing."

Todd and Jon peered out onto the empty football field. The end-zone was painted scarlet, and in gold it read 'Knights.' A battered scoreboard loomed over it all.

"I guess that's kind of the thing about life," Todd said. "You never really know if you're winning or losing. You may not like Eric's life, but for all we know, this could be what he always wanted."

"Todd, once Donna gives birth Eric is going to have seven daughters. Is there anyone in the world that wants that?"

"Maybe they do. But don't waste time judging the way other people live their lives. Just figure out what you want with yours."

Jon thought. "I want to be Hugh Hefner."

"I mean realistically, Jon."

"No seriously. I want to be Hugh Hefner."

Todd laughed. "Alright, fine. You be Hugh Hefner then. I guess I'll just be Todd the poet."

"How about Todd the laundry boy? I think that has a nice ring to it."

Todd gave a little smile. "...Bastard."

## Premier

Paparazzi lined both sides of the red carpet and their flashbulbs pulsed, the life-blood of Los Angeles. They shouted names, desperate like drowning men calling out for a life preserver, their voices full of ecstasy, vice, hate, love, envy, adoration. And all the while their bottled lightning struck in rapid flashes, a storm of still digital images being produced, the vast majority of which would be discarded, never seeing publication. The names the photographers called were those that everyone would know, the glorious chosen people, the few and magnificent. And that pantheon was out in full and brilliant force this evening. Handsome male stars and their gorgeous female cast mates schmoozed amongst the dozens of reporters, smiling their flawless white smiles, wearing fine-tailored suits or dresses, epitomizing the height of fashion. They posed with a grace and candid poise that mere mortals never know and can only mimic in their wildest fantasies. Talk show hosts raved giddily into microphones, eyes wide before the onslaught of cameras, gossiping and speculating with their massive but invisible audiences.

A stately limousine pulled up to the venue and all of the closest cameras turned toward the back of it, waiting to see what new brilliance would emerge. The news reporters quickly turned their cameramen toward the limo and began jockeying for position to determine who would interview first. The paparazzi, who were the most cramped and squeezed together of all, were unable to vie for position as their TV comrades had, save for those few on the end nearest the street. And of those, many began flashing their bulbs prematurely and calling out names from the copious list of those expected to arrive, hoping that by virtue of invoking the right one, fortune would smile upon them and they'd be granted the perfect shot. As many of the photographers turned, so did the stars themselves, who eyed with steady caution the back of the limousine, waiting to see who had come to challenge them for the love and adoration of the masses.

An older chauffeur exited the cab. With the steady and humble nobility of a man who had spent his adult life lingering just meager inches away from the spotlight, he walked with purpose toward the rear of the limo. Despite the cacophony of flashbulbs and feverish voices calling out, he didn't hurry his pace, but didn't dawdle either, walking with a simple and stately purpose toward the back of the vehicle. And when he arrived, he gave the photographers a brief look-over, scanning their readiness with the objective and discerning eyes of a man well-practiced in the subtle arts of preparation. Several of the photographers were taking advantage of the lull in the action and reloading their cameras, and similarly, a few of the reporters gave the briefest of swipes to their hair, and adjusted their cameramen ever so slightly. Silently, the chauffeur acknowledged their preparations. He buttoned his jacket, raised his chin in the picturesque quality of high state, and at the moment when all seemed to come together in equal readiness, he opened the door.

The reporters surged forward, vying with sharp elbows toward the front of the line. Flashbulbs strobe in their manic light and the paparazzi began calling names even more earnestly.

Brad!

Scarlet!

Jennifer!

The chauffeur held the door and bowed his head ever so slightly, extending an open hand, inviting the occupants toward the red carpet. A scuffed brown shoe covered in kiwi polish with its laces untied was the first glimpse the photographers had of their star.

It's a man!

Matt!

George!

Ashton!

The identification of the occupant's gender had only piqued their interest more. The flashbulbs continued as the leg of an ill-fitting red polyester suit was revealed, hiked upward and showing the crumpled white cotton sock and pale hairy leg of the unfortunate man who had donned it.

Robert!

Daniel!

Clive!

One of the reporters tripped and stumbled forward, nearly doubling over trying to catch herself. She glared at the woman beside her, apparently the one who had delivered the unwarranted blow. The once subtle reporters were beginning to lose their patience, and the air of civility they had all once shared was drifting steadily toward barbarism. The barely contained rage of the scorned reporter tripped some unconscious trigger in the rest of them, and they suddenly bounded toward the back of the limo, bumping one another like newborn piglets after their mother's teat.

After long anticipation, the man in the back of the limousine gripped the door and propelled himself fully into the light, putting an abrupt and final end to the rude jostling of the reporters, who now stood awestruck and silent. The flash-bulbs from the paparazzi had stopped, and though they had once been desperate enough to call out random names, they now stood as silent and dumbfounded as their television counterparts.

Joining at long last the great pantheon of Hollywood's highest elite, was the poet Todd. He buttoned his gaudy red jacket, an outfit that had once belonged to his uncle Vinny, a man notorious for many things, the least of which was his deplorable fashion sense. Todd flipped his shaggy hair out of his eyes and gave a meek nod and smile to the incredulous reporters before him.

An impatient voice erupted from within the limousine behind him. "Hurry up you dandy, you're hogging my spotlight."

"Oh," Todd said, moving to the side.

Jon came barreling out of the limo, wearing an exquisite black Armani suit and immaculate Italian shoes. One hand gripped a crystal glass filled with scotch.

"Here, hold this," Jon said.

Jon raised his hands in the air in a victorious pose, grinning madly from ear to ear. A smattering of polite applause rippled through the crowd, most of whom had recovered from their dumbstruck silence at the gauche and awkward Todd. However, the crowd still had the forlorn look of those who don't quite get the joke. Many of them consulted their press list, searching for names that might match the faces.

A beautiful, buxom blonde woman stepped out beside Jon and he held her hand as she rose. The flashbulbs were rekindled again, and everyone nearby couldn't help but stare at the woman's enormous breasts, which were magnified by the low-cut, practically non-existent nature of the garment she wore. Unlike Jon and Todd, Crystal was recognized instantly. The paparazzi, who

were by majority a male contingent, shouted her name with glee. The beautiful Crystal posed for the cameras while another woman was trying to get out of the back of the limo.

"Excuse me?" Rebecca said. Crystal was standing right in front of the door, giggling and shifting her hips seductively for the paparazzi. "Excuse me?"

Crystal was oblivious, but Jon wasn't. He grinned down at Rebecca. "Don't rob dear Crystal of her moment. She's been waiting her whole life for this."

Rebecca glared at him. "Fine. Have it your way."

With the end of her stiletto heel, Rebecca reared back and kicked Crystal square in the ass. Crystal leapt forward gripping her posterior, a wide-eyed look of surprise and pain on her face (oddly, this would be her only photographed pose to make the tabloids). The media throng in front of them giggled maniacally.

Rebecca rose from her position in the car with Todd's help. She was wearing a delightful black Cartier gown with an elegant diamond necklace and earrings. The flashbulbs erupted for her, and while not quite as much as they had for the curvaceous Crystal, the paparazzi nonetheless showed their interest in this new beauty in front of them. They didn't know her name, but called out for her anyway, eager to get her attention. Though Todd had been shunned by the photographers when he first arrived, as he stood beside the regal and elegant Rebecca, they seemed to forget entirely about his attire and photographed the two of them anyway.

A reporter pulled her cameraman toward Jon. "Can we do an interview?"

"Sure, of course," Jon said, straightening his tie. "I've been waiting for somebody to ask me."

"Your name is?"

"Jon Lowry."

She nodded, looking over the press release. "...And how are you associated with the movie?"

Jon hesitated. "I'm the creator and co-producer," he said. "I should be in the press release."

She looked over the list again. "Well we have everybody from Warner Brothers here, but I don't see-

"No, I'm not from Warner. I'm from Bombshell."

She looked puzzled. "Bombshell?"

"We're the studio that actually shot the movie," Jon said. "Warner is just distributing it."

"Okay, sorry. They don't always give us all the info," she said, laughing it off. "So you said you're the creator?"

"That's right, I am."

"Tell us, how did you come up with the idea for *Shiddy the Magic Dragon*?"

"Well at the center of the movie is the romance between Darla and Steven, who are actually based on my grandmother and grandfather, who met just after World War Two. They fell in love despite the fact that their parents didn't approve of them being together. They eloped and even though they were poor, their love carried them on."

"Oh that's sweet," she said. "So what made you add the talking dragon?"

Jon gave a nervous laugh. "Well actually, in my original story, there was no dragon. That was an addition to the script by Warner and their people."

"I see. So you guys wanted to make it a more family-oriented movie instead of a romantic drama?"

"Well truth be told, most of the changes weren't my idea. But even with all that, I still think it's more of a drama than a family movie." Jon laughed a little. "Then again, I never got to see the final cut."

"As far as I understand the premise, the focus of the movie is actually Shiddy falling in love, not the couple."

"Well yes, but-"

"Shiddy falls for a female dragon named..." She looked at her press release. "...Biddy?"

"...Yeah. That uh-"

"And then they go on a magical quest to save the world from the forces of evil?"

"...Uh, yeah. Basically."

The reporter nodded. "It just seems more like a kid's movie than a drama for all ages."

Jon wiped away a bead of sweat. "Well, that's one interpretation. But at the heart of everything is the relationship between their human counterparts."

"One of which is played by Crystal Clap?" she asked, flashing a smile. "I understand her last movie was called *Blonde Hookers from Outer Space*?"

Jon glanced over and saw Crystal still posing for the paparazzi, blowing them kisses and flirting with them. The men were clearly enjoying themselves. He nodded.

"Yeah, she's used to more...revealing roles."

Rebecca and Todd stood off to the side, waiting for Jon to finish. Todd looked tense, fake-smiling for the crowd of photographers.

"I'm so glad Jon invited us," Rebecca said. "I've always wanted to go to one of these."

"Yeah, but I feel kind of strange being on the red carpet when nobody knows my name," Todd said, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Rebecca watched Crystal, who had gone from blowing kisses at a reporter to actually kissing him. The flashbulbs went wild. "God, would you look at her? She's shameless."

"She does seem to love the limelight," Todd said.

"She's practically groping that guy."

"I guess that's one way to keep them interested."

"What does Jon see in her, anyway?"

Crystal shook her copious bosom in front of the group of photographers.

"I can't imagine," Todd said.

"Are you okay?" Rebecca asked him. "You seem wound up."

"I just feel a little out of place." He faked a smile for the cameras and tried to talk at the same time. "Why is everyone giving me a funny look?"

"Well for one thing, you're smiling like Norman Bates at the end of *Psycho*."

Todd tried to give a more natural smile. "Better?"

"Much. Now loosen up a bit. You look like a rubber band about to pop."

"I'm just not accustomed to this much attention."

Rebecca saw that Crystal had dropped her purse and was very slowly bending over to pick it up, much to the delight of the paparazzi.

"Well if it makes you feel better, I don't think anybody is looking at you."

"I think maybe it's the suit," Todd said. "I've never felt entirely comfortable in uncle Vinny's clothes, but it's the only formal-wear I have."

"You look well enough," Rebecca said. "A little eighties, but not bad. Don't worry, you fit in just fine."

Just then, a valet who was also wearing a red suit ran up toward Todd and handed him a pair of keys.

"Lot four, and make it snappy. Clooney needs his Aston."

The inner lobby of the grand theater was draped in luxury, with a magnificent wine and gold carpet that extended throughout. The high-vaulted ceiling left one with the impression that this was a place of worship, and was rife with delicate carvings. Along the walls were Greek bas-reliefs of ancient warriors, political figures, and intellectuals. Paintings on the walls depicted the ancient Olympics and the Greek theater. Todd studied them closely, completely fascinated.

The rest of the stars and Hollywood types milled about the atrium. The atmosphere inside was much more relaxed than it had been out amongst the reporters. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves now, talking casually with one another and sampling the wine that was being served.

Todd and Rebecca stood aside from them all. Rebecca sipped her drink while Todd studied the artwork.

"Exquisite. Absolutely exquisite," Todd said.

"You've said that."

"I just can't get over these paintings. Simply stunning. Remarkable detail."

"You know, most people are talking with one another," Rebecca said.

"This painting's a Schubert. I've only seen his work in museums."

"Are you listening to me at all?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry. I'm just a bit caught up in the moment."

"Well get out of it, somebody's coming over." A distinguished gentleman with salt and pepper hair walked toward them. Rebecca gave a polite smile.

"Hello," the man said, extending his hand. "And who might you be?"

"Rebecca Tollier," she said as the man kissed her hand. "Oh, how sweet of you."

"How sweet of you to allow me," the man countered. "I'm Peter Yuma, vice president of distribution down at Warner. I say, you look stunning this evening."

Rebecca flashed a modest smile. "Thank you. This is my boyfriend Todd."

Todd was still staring at the art. "Huh?"

The man extended a hand. "How do you do?"

"Oh I'm good," Todd said. "How about you?"

"I'm well," the man said, giving Todd's suit a curious look. "So, what kind of business are you in Todd?"

"Business?" Todd asked. "Oh. Well, laundry actually."

Rebecca winced.

"I beg your pardon?" The man asked.

"Laundry," Todd said. "The laundry business."

"Oh," the man said, clearly puzzled. "I see. You're a business owner?"

"Oh no. No, old man Carter owns the business. I just manage the laundromat for him."

Rebecca gave a nervous laugh. "Actually, Todd here is a poet. He only manages the coin laundry due to his affection for Mr. Carter."

"Ah," the man said. "A poet, you say? That's interesting. Written anything I would know?"

"I once had a haiku published in Western Alaska Tech's annual newsletter," Todd said. "Do you subscribe?"

Across the room, Jon and Crystal were chatting with several people from Warner.

"And that's why, like, I've always wanted to act," Crystal was saying. "I mean, I always played dress-up when I was little, and my friends and I used to put on little pageant shows. I mean, well, I guess it's not, like, exactly the same, but I've always been on stage, you know. Ooh, and this one time, my high-school put on a show of *A Race Car Named Desire*. And our school newspaper said I did really well."

The businessman glanced at one another. "Race car?" One of them asked. Jon took a big gulp of his wine.

Another one cleared his throat. "That's great, dear. What part did you play?"

Crystal giggled. "Oh. I was the race car driver."

Jon nodded, stifling a smile. "Naturally..."

Rebecca was glaring at Todd. "What the hell was that?"

"I'm sorry," Todd said.

"You're the world's worst at small-talk, you know that?"

"He asked me about my business, what was I supposed to say?"

"Something interesting," Rebecca said. "You're not supposed to bore him to death with statistics about which laundry detergent is better."

"Sorry, I ramble when I'm nervous," Todd said. "Every time I have to wear one of these suits I feel out of place. Sometimes I wish uncle Vinny hadn't even given them to me."

"Well why did he if you don't like them?"

"After he died, nearly everyone in the family got a piece of his wardrobe. He had over three thousand different outfits. I got his suits cause we were the same size."

"Wow. What did he do for a living?"

Todd let out a nervous laugh. "Well, he was kind of in the mafia."

"...Your uncle Vinny was in the mafia?"

"Kind of."

"Todd, nobody is kind of in the mafia. He either was or he wasn't."

"Okay, he was."

"How did he get in?"

Todd thought. "I guess the same way my other uncles got in."

"All your uncles are in it too? Do they still work for them?"

"Well yeah," Todd said. "It's not like busing tables at Ruby Tuesday's. You don't just quit."

Jon wandered over to them. "Well somebody just made the mistake of introducing Crystal to Lindsay Lohan. I listened to them talk for five minutes until I felt my mind turning to mush. What's going on over here?"

"I just found out half of Todd's family is in the mafia," Rebecca said.

Jon laughed. "Yeah, that's a nice little bombshell, isn't it? I was wondering when you'd hear about that."

"Are you the only one in your family that isn't a criminal?" Rebecca asked.

"No, my mom and dad have nothing to do with it," Todd said. "It's really nothing to worry about, Bec."

"At least not until Thanksgiving," Jon said. "Then you get to meet them."

"Oh joy," Rebecca said.

A chime came over the speakers in the ceiling. "Attention patrons, the feature is about to begin. Please take your seats."

Todd flashed a smile. "Alright, Jon. Time for the moment you've been waiting for."

Jon took a deep breath. "I know."

"Relax," Rebecca said. "I'm sure it'll turn out just fine."

"Really? You mean that."

"Of course I do."

The three of them walked toward the screening room where all the patrons were filing in. Rebecca nudged Todd's arm. "Make sure I don't fall asleep during this thing."

After the film was over, the patrons walked back into the lobby. Many had a mystified look about them. They spoke to one another in hushed whispers, constantly glancing over their shoulders to make sure nobody around them heard what they said.

Jon came out looking ill. He stared into nothingness, like a shell-shocked soldier coming back to the front. Rebecca and Todd followed behind, with Rebecca covering her mouth to hide her yawns.

Crystal, on the other hand, couldn't stop laughing. "That was amazing. I had no idea it would be that funny. That lady in the fat suit who kept farting was priceless."

Jon said nothing.

"And those dogs were awesome," she said. "How long did it take to teach them how to sing?"

Jon gave her a look.

"Ooh, there's Ben Stiller," Crystal said, pointing in the crowd. "I'm gonna see if I can get his autograph." She scampered off to find him.

Jon glanced over to Todd and Rebecca. "Well?"

Todd took a moment to think. "I think it was...well received."

"Rebecca?"

She pretended to be busy staring at the paintings.

"...Rebecca?"

"Huh?"

"What did you think of it?"

"Do you want my honest opinion?" she asked.

Jon considered. "On second thought, no."

"I think it could have been much worse," Todd said.

"A stunning endorsement. Thank you."

"Look, I'll say this in the nicest possible way," Rebecca said. "I thought it was awful."

Jon nodded. "Fair enough. I appreciate your honesty."

"And when I say awful, I mean really awful."

"I get it."

"I mean that it was like a car crash, except three hours long."

"Okay Rebecca, damn."

"Well you said you appreciated honesty."

"Look on the bright side, Jon. I'm sure kids will like it," Todd said. "And it really doesn't matter what any of us think. What's most important is how you feel about it. I mean, this movie was your baby for months."

Jon gave a bitter laugh. "You know how much of my original story they kept?"

"How much?"

Jon raised a single finger. "One line. Not a single plot point, not a single scene, not even a single character. One line. The rest was theirs."

"What was the line?" Rebecca asked.

"Pick up some milk on your way out."

Todd thought. "I don't even remember that." Rebecca elbowed him.

Jon let out a heavy sigh. "Well guys, if you don't mind, I think I'm gonna go out for a minute and have a smoke. I need to be alone for a while." Jon walked off.

"Wow," Rebecca said, watching him go. "I've never seen Jon like this. Normally he never shows what he's feeling, to the point where I've wondered whether or not he even has feelings at all. But now he's so vulnerable..."

Todd was looking amongst the crowd, craning his head as he looked.

"Todd? Are you listening?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry. Hey, I think I just saw Lamont Doogans."

"I was saying something important, Todd."

"This is important too. Lamont Doogans was in *Attack of the Forgotten Beast*. It's a sci-fi horror classic."

"Todd, there isn't a single movie you like that anyone but you considers to be a classic."

"You said you thought *This Island Earth* was passable."

"Passable is still very far from classic," she said. "And I was just being kind. Don't you think you should try and talk to Jon? This seems to really be bothering him."

"Of course it's bothering him," Todd said. "They demolished his original vision and turned it into this. I can totally relate, too. This one time in high school, my poetry teacher insisted on putting a semi-colon after one of the lines when I thought that a simple comma would suffice. I felt totally violated."

"So don't you think you should talk to him? Maybe there's something you can say to help him out."

"Look, I've known Jon a long time. There's nothing that I can say that will change the way he feels about this movie. He's just going to have to deal with it in time. Jon handles things in his own way, I think it best just to leave him alone for a little while."

"Well if you think that's the right thing to do, then fine," Rebecca said. "I just hope he'll be alright."

"He will be," Todd said. Suddenly, he gasped and pointed into the crowd. "There he is!"

"Jon?"

"No, Lamont Doogans. I'm gonna go see if I can get his autograph."

Jon was leaning up against a light post in between the parking lot and the theater, smoking a cigarette and looking out into the night. Most of the photographers and reporters had already left, but a few stuck around to interview those they might have missed before the showing. Nearly all of the actors had long since gone, and the only people who were still standing around chatting were people who'd had a hand in making the film.

Rebecca came outside and spotted Jon. "There you are. I was beginning to think you had left."

"Nope. Still here."

"Is it okay if we talk for a minute?"

Jon gave a wry smile. "Let me guess. You want to make me feel better? I'll save you the trouble. I'm fine."

"I may not know you as well as Todd, but I know when somebody is hurting. And there's nothing wrong with you admitting that."

"Rebecca, there's really nothing you can say to make me feel any better about this movie."

"Oh trust me, I know," Rebecca said. "Todd told me as much. But still, I don't think it would hurt you to talk about it anyway."

"What is there to say? They ruined the thing. Whatever part of me was in the original idea was completely destroyed. It's done and there's nothing I can do about it."

"But you feel guilty for selling it to them, don't you?"

Jon took a long drag of his cigarette. "Doesn't matter. I knew that they would make some changes to it. I didn't know how many, but I knew and I cashed the check anyway. So there's no use dwelling on it."

"Still, you can't feel good about it."

"No, I don't. But like I said, there's nothing I can do."

"Well for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

Rebecca watched some of the photographers gathering their gear and preparing to leave. About a dozen staff members began rolling up the red carpet and preparing to haul it away.

"Guess this shindig is about over," Rebecca said.

"Looks that way. But it was fun while it lasted."

"Even though you hated the movie?"

Jon nodded. "It's still an experience I'm glad to have. Not many people can say that they've actually been to one of these."

"True. Thanks for inviting us, by the way."

"You're welcome," Jon said. "Hey, have you seen Crystal, by chance?"

"Er...yeah," Rebecca said. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I saw her leaving with one of the Warner guys."

"Damn them," Jon said. "Piss on my movie and steal my date? That's just wrong."

"With all due respect, Crystal is a vapid, classless, trashy moron and even you can do better."

"Glad you said 'with all due respect' first, or that might have sounded harsh,"

Jon said, smiling a bit. "But it doesn't matter, she and I weren't serious."

"What did you see in her, anyway?" Rebecca asked. "Your taste in women really leaves something to be desired."

Todd came running out of the theater with a big grin on his face. "There you are. Come look Rebecca, I got Lamont Doogans to sign my stomach."

Jon flashed a smile at her. "And I have bad taste?"