

# Roger's Box

*by* Dan Kelly

To say Roger Heck Junior and Senior argued suggests father and son communicated. As it stood, they shared a palpable disgust for each other, and speech would only have adulterated their mutual resentment. Every observer inside and outside the family had a theory about their hate. Most cited the disappointment Roger Jr. became by young adulthood and his failure to make the acquaintance of responsibility. A few—Roger, Jr.'s friends mostly—figured the old man was just a goddamned hard-ass, ragging on his son for his scraggly hair and lack of acceptable and respectable employment—in short, his complete success at avoiding responsibility.

In the whole of Roger Jr.'s 28 years, the two men had a bare few weeks' worth of conversation. Most talks were interrogations about how Roger Jr. could increase his life's inherent worth (e.g., sleeping less, waking earlier, dressing neatly, doing a few sit-ups, and acquiring gainful employment), or whether Roger Jr. was even listening to what Roger Sr. was saying. When Roger Jr. moved out, the criticism abated, and during Heck *fil's* very few visits home, the old man's only regular, positive inquiry regarded how his son's car—a 19-year-old rusted-out wreck—was running. "Fine" was the only complete answer Roger Jr. provided.

Roger Junior's halves of the conversations were sodden with grunts. He stayed silent as the old man dressed him down with diminishing emotion, waiting him out until he grew tired and shut up. As the years passed, the talks grew terse and halting, and the silent periods lengthened until they arrived at the current car interrogation script. Regarding that: it couldn't be said that Roger Sr. was worried for his son's safety. He'd simply found a conversational hook and hung from it for sake of family unity.

Roger Sr. saw no mystery in his son. The boy was an aimless lout, not given to dreaminess, only sullen stares into space or television. In the approximation of the older man's generation, he was a directionless lout, intent on rejecting every benefit he had ever enjoyed as the son of Roger Heck Sr.

There was much for him to dislike in his son.

Roger Jr. had no visible means of support. None that seemed reputable.

He was red-eyed, sallow, slightly overweight, and smelled of unplaceable odors.

When he finally moved out—under cover of night, without a word—his parents were unaware of it since he stopped by every night to mooch dinner. It was only when his father decided to break the impasse and suggest over supper that Roger Jr. man up, find a job, and seek an apartment that his son told him to fuck off—he had done all three. This shocked his father into silence, and he was uncertain whether to feel pride in his son's industry, relief at his leaving, or shame that they'd become so disconnected. He chose to feel nothing, imagining his son's absence would bring peace. He worked up enough reproachfulness, however, to leave a note that Roger, Jr. should buy his own damned food. Afterward, Roger Jr. called ahead to see if the coast was clear. If his father answered he'd hang up. If his mother answered, he'd wrangle an invitation to eat when his father wasn't around. It became easier in the ongoing years as his father became absent more often.

Time passed and the battles between the men grew muted and intensely silent. When Roger Sr. considered his son, he noted that, despite previous assertions, he had no fixed income or a home as far as he could tell. He assumed he sold drugs, or something equally heinous, and left it at that, silently praying the the cops would teach

the young punk a lesson (and just see if he'd come and bail him out). As for living space, he assumed his son continued to bumble around, sleeping on couches, temporary girlfriend's beds, or wherever. A part of him still cared, he'd admit to himself privately, and his heart hurt. A tiny, tart pang of regret. "My little boy will always have a home," his father thought, "But that young thug isn't welcome here."

Roger Jr., now, held no interest in his father. The old man was a smudge of grey in the corner of his eye at Christmas dinner. Eventually, he gave Roger Sr. no thought at all, not even resentment at the constant beration. His father was a fool, and when he moved out and returned home for the first time in many months, he was unsurprised that he was still a fool.

The last time they spoke, they actually talked.

"The car doing okay?" the old man asked.

Roger, Jr. prepared to say "fine," but pulled out of the standard flight pattern and said, instead, "No. I hit a patch of ice last week, and I spun out on the highway. Now the engine has a knock."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said his father.

Roger, Jr. flinched and wanted to puke when his father laid a hand on his shoulder. He shook it off and left the house without a word or a glance back.

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A year passed, and Roger Sr. retired. The following summer, he died. Not too terribly old, but not so unexpectedly, considering his fondness for pork and sudden lack of interest in occupying his final years. As Roger Jr. heard it from his mother, his father had taken to sitting in their refurbished basement for many hours. In retirement,

after taking care of the house's basic upkeep—the lawn, the shrubs, the tiny fountain and birdbath in the rock garden—he'd go to the room below the house for a half a day or more. He had taken to falling asleep on a couch that had outworn its usefulness in the recroom.

For Roger Jr.'s mother, his behavior was unremarkable. Even in days of full employment she saw the trip to the basement as an inevitable end to a long and busy day—a little reward for his industry. As to what happened down there, she lacked imagination—as did her husband, she assumed. His mother knew there was a TV, a mini-fridge stocked with beer, and a tin drum filled with snack chips (no good for his heart) which left orange stains on his fingertips until she chided him to wash his hands. The room was a sports temple. Something he could never share with his son, who had shown no interest in sports at any age. One side was covered with thumbtacked banners and posters for the Bears; a local college basketball team; and the little league team he once sponsored and coached, despite his son's obvious omission from the team roster. There were stacks of magazines and books, but no bookshelves, and a plush carpet resplendent and replete with orange, black, and red yarn. At the center sat his chair, before a wonky television set made during the Reagan administration.

Roger Jr. couldn't make the funeral. Honestly. In Texas for unspecified reasons, his car broke down on the way back to Chicago, and he spent a week working his way back up. Not that that excused him in the eyes of his relatives, and not that he would have made any great effort to be there had he been in town. Back in the burbs a day after old Roger was deep in the ground at St. John of God Cemetery, Roger arrived to help his mother clean the house in search of items to hock.

His mother was crying in the kitchen, and he wondered if there was beer in the fridge. Once it would have been unthinkable for his

father to keep beer there. But as age crept over him all the previous prohibitions and inhibitions had fallen away. Opening the door he snapped up a can.

"He was a good man, Roger," said his mother. Her eyes looked like melted mallomars. "A good, good man. It broke my heart how you two fought."

"We didn't fight," said Roger, popping open the can and sitting down. "Nothing I'd consider a real fight anyways."

"Well, I'm so glad you found it in your heart to forgive him. He cared about you, in his own way," she whimpered.

He considered his father a pig, but he at least respected his solidity. His mother, conversely, was an emotional tampon.

"Sure, Mom," he drank the beer, and found another reason to hate his father in his limp choice of brews.

"He was a good man," she repeated. Pulling a tissue from her sleeve, she dabbed at her eyes as he rolled his. Taking another long draw from the bottle, he silently congratulated himself for his lack of empathy.

"So, whattya need me for?" he asked. She looked aghast, holding the crumpled soggy tissue against her chest.

"I need you to be my son," she said quietly, "I need you to stay here for a little while as I sort out this house so I don't collapse and kill myself. And I need you to get that chip off your shoulder while you're doing it."

He felt nothing when she corrected him like that. When he was 16 he would have stomped out of the house and disappeared for a day.

They looked for him once and only once, but after that they knew he was staying with a friend. Usually illicitly, stowed in an attic or basement. Minding him became too much trouble. Keeping him became painful. Jesus told his mother he was her sacred burden. Common sense told his father he was beyond redemption.

"I didn't like him and he didn't like me. Why you can't accept that isn't my problem."

"Your father loved you," she said, leaning forward across the kitchen table for emphasis.

"Whatever," he replied. "What do you want me to do, really? I hate being here for too long. This place smells like soup, piss, and old people."

"Why are you so vile?" she shot out.

"Why are you such a doormat?" he sniped.

"We spent so many years caring for you, trying to raise you right. You were sweet once, Roger."

Roger, Jr., huffed a quick exhalation of disdain and drank more beer.

"You were. You were sweet, and you were happy. You can see the happiness leaving your face in your school pictures. You grew so sullen and bold, so... I tried to be a good mother..."

If she was waiting for Roger, Jr., to say, "But you were! You were, Mom," she didn't wait long, because she knew it would never arrive.

"I suppose you'll want money?" she asked. Roger, Jr. prepared to name his price, but she cut him off in mid-thought.

"I'll give you \$50, plus whatever food you manage to gulp down this weekend."

"Sounds fair," said Roger, Jr., with a slurp as he finished the beer.

"And then I want you..." she gulped and choked on the words as if they were made of splintered wood. "And then I want you to be gone. Monday morning."

"I can do that," he replied.

"For good," she exclaimed. "Or at least until you can scrape together some god damned respect for your mother."

A clamminess inexplicably gripped his skin. He shook it away.

"That's it, right?" he asked, and he leaned back in his chair, into the scaly psychic persona he'd crafted for himself.

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His mother had one more stipulation: he couldn't sleep in the guest room. Once, it had been his room, but within a month after his leaving they'd obliterated his presence; removing his bed and dresser, tossing the stuff he'd left behind, and repairing the damage he'd done during his 19 years with them. It took a contractor a three days' work to repair the holes in the walls and marks on the ceiling. Roger, Jr. figured they'd never noticed the images he'd drawn in fabric softener on the ceiling, obscene and viewable only under black light. These rested in peace beneath two coats of latex paint.

As to why he couldn't sleep there, she didn't mince her words. He didn't look or smell clean enough. If her sister ever visited from Florida, or a distant cousin stopped by for a weekend, she didn't

want them to wonder at the sickly, sticky scent of marijuana, leather, and unwashed clothes. Throwing two old blankets and a pillow at him, she said the basement couch would be good enough. Besides, she preferred that he clean up the basement. The scent of his father still hung down there, and she didn't want to be reminded.

Revenge was dad's.

It turned out it wouldn't be a quick and easy job. She forbade him from inviting over a friend to help (not that any were likely to drive out to the burbs), and he couldn't just toss everything down there into the trash or his car's trunk. Dragging them out of the crawlspace one by one, his back protested and the waistband of his pants creaked. Sweat poured out, and he wondered if he should have held out for 60 bucks.

After dragging out a dozen boxes, Roger, Jr., sat down in the middle of the stacks. He could barely see over the top. Taking out his lock blade he began opening them. The first, as he presumed for all, contained nothing of note. He doubted their contents carried value even to the old man. Most were cardboard, double duct-taped and stacked. For every one containing a possibly pawnable object, there were five filled with tax forms, earning statements, and, for God knows what reason, phone books and catalogs.

Without sentiment, Roger recognized the many moments his father had haphazardly preserved. A birthday (not his), a day at Comiskey Park (without him), and a forgotten barbecue in the park, probably Memorial Day or the Fourth of July, judging by the flags and presence of old soldiers bedecked in ribbons, medals, and garrison caps. One black and white snapshot showed him as an toddler, perched on his father's knee, a scalp-baring haircut, and striped pants, leaning precariously away, eyes seeking escape. His father still held on to him, looking either annoyed or afraid to let him fall. Roger, Jr., flicked the photo into a box at his left knee, labeled

"SAVE" in fat black marker. Mom wanted those. Maybe his sister would come over and organize them into albums on her next visit from Oregon.

He lit a cigarette and looked around the room, still sitting in his cardboard fort. What was he missing out on right now? Friday night, 9 p.m., and ordinarily he'd be on his third beer at Moseley's, the corner saloon near his apartment. A band would be setting up, though he stopped caring about that shit years ago. But a night at Moseley's was another opportunity to get weed, drunk, or laid (or all three), or just get the hell out of the apartment because there was never anything on TV that he wanted to see anymore.

His father's TV and VCR, on the other hand—now that was a source of amusement. Both were off-brand models, resting between being antiques and utter pieces of shit. He got up to investigate, and discovered his crotch had fallen asleep. As he shot up and knee-walked to the VCR, a thousand needles pricked his dick.

He flicked the TV on, and the picture came up with a blast of static and snow on channel 4 with a greenish tinge. Sucking on his cigarette, Roger Jr. walked around to the back and smirked. The old man hooked up the VCR the hard way, modifying the coaxial cables to attach to the old antennae screws. Roger, Jr. had to give that to the old man. He was handy with basic electronics. Maybe it carried over, hereditarily, since Roger, Jr., could also work his way around anything with solder and wires. Certainly, it led to his side business, procuring, dubbing, and selling what he called exotic videos; the kind you couldn't get at the stores, and a few you shouldn't get at all. That was the source of his cash, and as yet he skirted any legal entanglements. Simply, if he stayed away from the obvious subjects and dealt only through word of mouth, the authorities left him alone. For the obvious subjects, there were ways around that.

"What the hell did you watch down here?" Roger, Jr. asked aloud.

"Are you smoking!?!!" his mother yelled from the top of the stairs.

"Yes," he said before taking another drag.

"Well, stop it!" she answered.

"Come down and ask me nicely," he replied. He flashed a middle finger toward the top of the stairs.

"Just don't fall asleep smoking down there and burn the damned house down!" she said. Her slippered feet struck out an angry drumbeat across the floor.

Flicking an ash on the rug, he lowered himself back to the floor to review the next box, determined to half-ass the job even more. At that moment, he noticed the he VCR was still on—which seemed odd.

As his mother told the story, the old man's last hour was spent in his den. Enamored of the romanticism of the dying, she gave prolonged, descriptive accounts of the last time she saw so-and-so before they perished. Her stories jingled with irrelevant details like hospital equipment beeps and bleeps, strange weather patterns, light fading from the soon-to-be-deceased's eyes, and death rattles as their souls flew from their bodies.

After an evening in the den, Roger, Sr. rose up and walked upstairs where she was sitting up in bed, reading. Barefoot and dressed in a t-shirt and boxer shorts, he was uncommonly shiny with sweat and panting in long, drawn-out wheezes. Fist clenched around his shirt, right above his heart, he made a flower out of the creased fabric.

"I'm uh..." he started to say to her, eyes flickering stroboscopically. "I'm uh feeling a little bit strained." Maybe he said "strange," his mother averred.

Practically falling out of bed to reach him, her nightgown falling and fluttering in the light breeze of her bedside lamp, she leapt up. But he'd already fallen forward, onto the bed, then rolled off and hit the wall with a sound of wet meat. Then Roger, Sr. died, feeling shag carpeting against his right cheek. The last thing he saw was an eggshell-white wall, pockmarked with tiny deformities.

The power button on the VCR shone reddish-orange. Which meant, Roger, Jr. deduced, he'd been watching something.

Hitting the eject button, the VCR stuck out its tongue. A VHS tape, no surprise. Unmarked. Even the label was worn away.

Pushing the tape in, he hit rewind. It slowly whined and hummed to life, the soft glow of vacuum tubes emitting warm orange light from the back. The tape clicked loudly when it finished, and he pressed "play."

The screen and speaker hissed with snow and fuzz before shifting to silence and black.

A room came into view, its sole piece of furniture a queen-sized bed. Seen from the side, the bed held a white mattress—bereft of pillows, sheets, and a bedspread, but, as near as Roger Jr. could discern, covered by a clear plastic tarp, and a mound of black blankets bunched up in the center. The room had no identifying marks, save for a photo of a person on the back wall and a window, shade drawn, to its left. Strains of 60s girl group music played in the background, likely coming from the next room, according to the muffled sound. Shot in black and white, the picture quality was fly

shit, fuzzy, and assaulted by occasional jagged lines. He reached for the VCR's tracking dial to improve it slightly.

The blankets shifted slightly. And he knew it wasn't a pile of blankets, it was a large cloth bag, cinched at the top. Maybe a laundry bag. He'd seen it before. A mummification video. Tame.

The bag continued to move, and the video's girl group soundtrack was joined by a low moan.

"Wuhhhhhhhhh..." moaned the laundry bag. "Wuh, wuh, wuh, wuhhhhhhhhh..." Roger, Jr. cocked his head to listen more closely. The sound could have been pleasant moaning, possibly crying, maybe just primal scream therapy B.S.

"Wuh, wuh, wuh!" Roger, Jr. mocked. "Show me something."

The bag began to unlace, slowly disgorging something soft and furry. As it strained against the tight confines of the bag's orifice, a pair of large felt eyes and ears came out first—large and clear. This was followed by a soft, fabric muzzle. It was a cat mask, a fuzzy felt one, more cartoonish than realistic.

"Man..." Roger said with no small amount of disappointment. "Goddamned furry video." While intrigued that his father possessed it, by his personal standards it remained perfectly vanilla.

"No," said a soft male voice off screen. "No, no, no, no, no."

The cat mask turned toward the voice's source and softly mewled. Whoever was inside was female, obviously petite according to the bag's size, but the other voice. Where had he heard it before?

And then a hand appeared onscreen, stage right, covered with a red kitchen glove.

"No, no," the voice said behind the hand, circling O shapes in the air with its forefinger.

He knew the voice. He knew that particular hand gesture. It was his father.

"Oh, no fucking way," said Roger, Jr. grabbing his head and gaping as the older man stepped into the frame. His father was dressed in a black rubber apron, shirtless, and wearing a domino mask, his well-fed facial features and white hair peeked out around the sides. He held a basket in his left hand and motioned to open it.

The cat mask whispered, "No, no, no," while shaking its head. Roger, Sr. reached into the basket and withdrew a silver, tapered, metallic device. He pressed a button with his thumb and it snapped and clacked with the sound of gears and latches falling into place. The tapered shape expanded into a whirling, fluttering carousel of tendrils and metal leaves. He'd see a lot, more than his fair share in the world. But in all his experience Roger Jr. had never seen anything like that. His first thought ran to vibrators, but as the device came to life he couldn't grasp what was about to happen next. As the leaves flitted and chimed, the cat mask trembled slightly, and he could hear her breathing in anticipation—rapidly, excitedly.

"Please, let me," said Roger Sr., pensively, behind his domino mask. "Let me again."

"Hurts," muttered the cat.

"Not so much. Not so much," he said with compassion. "It grows easier. We've always shared it, haven't we?"

The cat slowly nodded yes, and Roger Sr. approached.

The VCR issued a sudden click and snarl, and the screen went black.

Roger, Jr.'s face fell as he realized the tape had jammed and was slowly unspooling into the VCR's guts. He leaned forward, almost losing his balance. The horrid clicking stopped, and he ran his finger along the top, searching for the eject. The VHS tape popped out, partially, and as he tried to pull it out he rested his hand on the top of the machine. His hand snapped back quickly—the VCR, exactly the kind of knock-off, off-brand crap his father was prone to purchase, was hot to the touch. A melting smell issued from the machine, and as he pulled the tape out he felt no resistance. Strands of polymer ran like spider webs from the slot. Roger Jr.'s face twisted in anger.

"God DAMN it!" he whisper-yelled, not wanting to alert his mother. He looked over the tape, but it was already old and degraded. He doubted he could afford a restoration and tossed it aside. What was next?

Suddenly, he was interested in his father.

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He continued to sort through the boxes, but now with a mission. Research wasn't a thrill; discovery was. Especially when it was steeped in scandal, grief, or sleaze. He liked feeling dirty and this carried the pleasure of despoiling his father's reputation. This...whatever it was.

Clearly, the old man had been unfaithful.

Clearly, he was prone to the same failings as anyone—more so. In death he escaped the revelations and mortification that would have swallowed him whole while alive.

Not so clearly...what the hell were they doing? He'd prided himself on knowing every way a human could debase him or herself. Half his video back catalog bore this out. But his father... he couldn't put a finger to what his father was.

His desire to feel his father's postmortem shame powered his search. Whereas before, with any other job, he would have given up in a matter of minutes, now he felt almost divinely driven to root out and expose the old man's sin.

The grey smudge became a stain.

As he searched he found more nothing; and Roger cursed at the possibility that this story was about the journey. Journeys bored him—he wanted only the destination, not the blankness between there and here. And the boxes provided much blankness—more forms recording the transactions and health of the dead man; notebooks charting long-gone cars' fuel consumption; receipts for pants and shirts bound for thrift stores; trading stamps, passbooks, and matchbooks from closed downtown restaurants. He found a squiggle on a bar napkin, which he hoped was an autograph from a dead cocktail lounge singer, potentially famous, but a careful perusal in better light determined it was only a doodle. Overall, in every possible socially acceptable way, Roger Sr. left nothing behind to impress his son.

As with all such things, it was the last box, shoved toward the back of the closet, that bore fruit. This one wasn't cardboard, it was made of wood. Cheap pine and measuring a perfect foot and a half by a foot and a half by a foot and a half in length, height, and depth, it seemed clear the old man had thrown it together in what he called

his garage workshop. Locked and latched with small padlock, Roger Jr. smirked and withdrew the multipurpose tool he always carried, opened the knife attachment, and pried off the latch with a quick, sharp bit of leverage.

Opened, the box delivered sordid visual gratification. His eyes immediately locked onto a stack of slick magazines. He dug deeply through a paper timeline, his dad's life measured in inches of porn. At last he found something. He thought he found something, at least. A few somethings in the form of strange magazines from Holland—not-quite illegal here, but disquieting to those who spent their sex lives in three or fewer positions. His Dutch was rusty, if not nonexistent, so he couldn't read the titles, but he got the gist from their contents.

The magazines were accompanied by two dirty books (lame), a vibratory ring (no thanks), two small plastic bottles of lubricant (past the due dates), a pair of yellow vinyl gloves (slightly stained), and, inexplicably, a brace of brass knuckles. Roger Jr. pocketed the latter, threw away the gloves between a pinched thumb and forefinger, followed by the lubricant and ring, and gathered the books and magazines, sure he could sell them. Underneath these he found the device and he choked for a moment.

It was silver. It was smooth. If it came to glittering life, he couldn't see how. The body was seamless. It had no visible buttons, switches, or dials. A brief wave under his nose revealed no scent, though he wondered he'd bothered to do that. If it fit any orifice it would surely hurt. But how to explain the flittering metal leaves? He turned the device this way and that. Tapped it. Shook it. Tried to remember exactly how his father held it in the video and replicate his feat. Nothing. Nothing. More nothing. He dropped it back in the box, annoyed. Digging further, he encountered trinkets of increasing meaninglessness. Marbles. Hairclips. Keys. Rounded stones. All kept in small jars or falling loose into the box. When his father's box was

empty he saw the white corner of a photograph sticking out a crack.

Withdrawing it he saw a woman he didn't know. Pretty in a brat-faced way—straight blonde hair She squinted in what seemed to be a bright day. She was apparently sitting on a bench at the city zoo, a sign behind her showed a silhouette of an ambling bear. She was mostly, in the terms in which Roger jr. thought, doable.

"Tabitha, July 7" was written across the bottom. He studied the brat face again. "Tabitha," he said. "Tabitha." So, this was the girl. Cat mask girl. His father's little secret.

Most would have left it at that, throwing away or burning the photograph to spare the living. Roger, being a bastard wondered whether to tell his mother and get in a final dig, or perhaps leave it out for her to discover on her own. He hated her. He hated them. It was emotion-abusing gold.

But before that, there was another thing to deal with. A bad unknown feeling he felt rising up and pricking at him.

His father was dead, burned, and scattered like fish food across an idiotic pond a hour's ride from the house—the place where he fished from time to time. Roger Sr. never made the scattering request—it was a default location. His true lair, this room, while an entirely proper and appropriate receptacle, would eventually be vacuumed when it came time to show and sell the house. And his mother wouldn't have that.

But though Roger Senior's bits were currently bobbing and sinking and feeding bass, Roger Jr. remained alive, intact, and angry. Angry at his father's secret life. No... Not angry. Jealous? More like annoyed. His dad's dirty past niggled at him. The old man's legacy and history had switched from staid, unchanging lifedeath, to a secret life of doing rather than dreaming. Roger Jr. had done his

share of strangeness, but it was all perfunctory besides his father's unexpected adventures. He couldn't permit the old man's memory to be interesting. Out of annoyance rather than compassion he chose not to tell his mother, or anyone else, about his dad's dirty secret life.

He flipped the photo. A city phone number written in pencil.

"Roger? What are you doing down there?" his mother yelled from the top of the stairs.

"Nothing," he replied, stuffing the photo into his pocket.

"Well, cut it out," she responded.

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The phone's key tones played an unrecognizable song. The phone clicked on the other end, and a crackly yet feminine voice said, "Hello?"

"Hello, I'm not sure why I'm calling, but... Hello?" said Roger Jr.

He heard nothing but a buzz and the air.

"I'm still here," she interjected. Not an overly friendly voice, but politely firm. Willing to listen.

"Listen, I knew... I'm Roger Heck's son. I'm Roger too. I think you and my father, he... Did you know him? Roger Heck?"

Pause.

"I knew him," she said, hollowly.

Pause.

"Is he dead?" the voice sounded a little emptier.

"Yes, he passed away last week," Roger Jr. said.

He might have heard a gasp or a sob, but it didn't last long.

"So, why are you calling me?"

"I was going through," the next word felt strange on his tongue, "Dad's things and I found your picture and your number. Is this Tabitha?"

Silence.

"Have you talked to your ma about this?"

"No!" Roger felt her retreating and tried to smooth out the wrinkle. "No! She doesn't know. She asked me to look through his stuff for her and I thought." A lie was needed, this came easier. "I didn't want to put her through, uh anything."

He was lying. So very easily lying. He delighted in his mother's abject stupidity over her husband's dabbling.

"I thought, maybe we could meet? I was thinking we could meet or talk or something..."

"Why the hell should we talk?" she said with a quiet flintiness.

She had him there. No reason he could conjure up was anything that could be considered a believable reason, or even a worthwhile one beside his own sick curiosity. Reason enough for him, yes, but not a salient selling point. She sounded hard-bitten and perfectly

aware if bullshit was thrown her way, but not necessarily nasty. Someone used to lies, he imagined, but bothered by untruthfulness because she wanted to trust.

Give her a reason tinged with a truth. It lubricates the lie, Roger Jr. thought.

"I didn't know my dad all that well..." he began.

True enough. Though this was because he never cared to know him before his death. His father was an empty vessel. A flaccid bullet.

"All right," she said flatly. "All right. Can you bring anything you found in the box?"

Box? What box? How would she know? Did he build it for her? Had she been there before, smuggled in unknown?

"Surely," he replied. "You're in the city right? Is there some place you'd prefer to meet?"

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He arrived first at the coffee shop, commandeering the table farthest from the door. Ordering the house coffee he took it black, getting up twice for free refills. A backpack hung from the back of his chair, filled only with the photo, a raft of papers, and the suspect device. He spun the cup in place a few times, feeling the fluttering of fear and anticipation in his belly. Why was he there, really? What point was he trying to make?

"Hey, Tabitha," said the scraggly, bearded guy behind the counter.

"Morning, Mark," a voice answered. The same tough, crackly timber, somehow fuller and more mature and womanly in person. He looked over, past the field of tables and chairs, but saw no one to connect with the voice. Announced by a series of soft footsteps tapping on the linoleum floor, she came into view. She was well-dressed, nicely made up, well-coifed, a dwarf, and extremely pretty. Prettier in person than in the photo, and his gaze flipped back and forth, appreciating her face's symmetry, studying her small body, her straight blonde hair, and her hands. Her hands fascinated him. In no way did she seem childlike, physically or, especially, in that tough, experienced voice. This woman knew things; she was afraid of nothing. Certainly not him.

She approached.

"You Roger's kid?" she said, pointing at him.

"Hello," said Roger, Jr. "Yeah."

"Yeah, I'm a dwarf," she said. "Let's just get that out of the way."

"Okay," said Roger, Jr.

She came over, pulled out the chair, hung her purse over the back, swung up and and sat down with a fluid effort.

"So..." he started.

"So, this is weird. What do you want from me?" she asked.

"To meet you. To know you. Maybe to know my dad better." that wasn't a lie.

She sighed and looked at him, her eyes a clear, bright green.

"He didn't really, what you call, cheat with me, you know?"

Roger Jr. hesitated. A direct response. He wasn't ready for that.

"Well, what would you call it then?" he asked.

"We were just friends," she responded, now looking at him.  
"Friends who fooled around."

Again, honesty. It was so infrequently used in his family or circle of friends.

"Did he... pay you?"

The pretty face became seared with disgust.

"No! God, no. I'm not a whore," she snapped. "Like it's any of your business. I'm not going to say what we did, but I wouldn't call it cheating."

"Was he with you? Were you naked? Even if it was everything but penetration, my old man was sleazing around with you."

Her lip curled, and that mixture of shame and anger flashed in her eyes again.

"Well, that was your dad's business anyway. I didn't force him to neglect your mom. And he never blamed her for his, whattycallit, infidelity."

Mom. He'd barely thought of her in the last hour. In the last month if he was being honest.

"Look. Whatever his problems. He was real nice, your dad. Once, afterward, we got sandwiches at the deli, drove to the park, and sat and ate them under the trees. Fed the ducks. It was pretty nice."

She paused again, then shrugged.

"What more do you want from me?"

"What do you think I want?" he asked.

"I've no idea," she said. The waiter brought over her coffee, setting it down beside a creamer and bowl of sugar packets. "Thanks, Mark." The waiter nodded, gave Roger Jr. a squinty look of disapproval. Beardy hipster fuck, thought Roger Jr.

She continued.

"I'm guessing, after you called, this kid misses his dad, and is wondering who this woman is in a box he found in his closet."

"How did you know there was a box?" asked Roger. "Have you been to my parents' house?"

She started to add the cream and sugar to her coffee, stirring it and occasionally looking up at him with an expression that said, "leave it be."

"I guess," said Roger Jr. "I, honestly... Here's a guy who's been boring me to tears forever. And suddenly I find out he's a sex hog?"

"He needed it," she answered. "I needed it. We helped each other out. It wasn't for anyone's eyes. certainly not yours."

"You're so...open about it," he said, flabbergasted.

"I'm as open as I want to be about it," she said. "Maybe I'm passing it along because I want to feel a bit better about myself. Your mother never knew, and she never needs to know. Got it?"

Roger smirked.

"Don't you fucking smirk at me," she said, without volume but with much force. "You keep your mouth shut, you hear me?"

He put his hands up and twisted his mouth to the side. "Whatever," he said.

"Whatever," she shook her head, then took another sip of coffee. She sighed again, looked up at the ceiling, and then back down before staring at him. "You know he'd mention you and your mom every now and then. She... she wouldn't indulge him, but he accepted that, and kept our arrangement hush-hush. He loved her, and he loved me, and he loved you too. Sometimes he cried over how much he loved you two. He felt bad, you know."

Years of practiced cynicism attempted to brush it aside, like a windshield wiper blade. The blade was pitted and frayed, however, and he couldn't push it all off and away.

"I can't entirely believe that. I disappointed him. He made it clear how much I disappointed him," said Roger Jr.

"No, never," she said. "He thought you were, he said, disappointing yourself."

His back arched.

"Not true," he said firmly.

"Well, he imagined you were unhappy," she replied. "He wasn't a mindreader, kid."

"Whether I was or not, why did he care?"

She looked at him quizzically.

"He was your dad."

"No," said Roger Jr., slamming a hand on the table. "He was my fucking boss. My parents didn't have me, they hired me."

She snorted and laughed, spilling her coffee a bit. As she wiped it up, she said, "And you didn't ask to be born. And it was just so HARD to be a middle-class white kid in the Chicago suburbs. Jesus Christ, he had your number."

"Go to hell!" said Roger too forcibly.

"Hey!" said the coffee guy. "None of that."

Roger Jr. put up his hands again, closed his eyes, and breathed in deeply.

"Any more of that, and we're through, you understand?" she said. "Look, you wanted to know him better... or to know what I knew about him, so I'm telling you. I'm sorry if it hurts."

"It doesn't hurt," Roger said, slightly hissing.

"Just your guts," she said. "He'd cry about you two. But he said that when he tried to do better, you rebuffed him."

"Rebuffed him? How does a kid rebuff an adult?"

"He knew he screwed up some things," she said.

"Yeah, he did," Roger retorted. Anger and caffeine raced through his limbs, and a dull ache inhabited his knuckles. He screwed up. And nothing can be or could ever have been done about it. It was always on him in the early days, and he chose to pull away. Not me." He stabbed a fingertip into the table. "How did he expect he to develop the ability to care?"

"I dunno," she replied after sipping more coffee. "He's gone. Let it go. It's eating you up. Blah blah blah."

"Hearsay from you means I should let it all fade?" he said, again rising. "Fuck him with a table leg. He's dead. I'll be dead. It's too late, and I never cared to begin with." He shook and sweated, the smell of his personal stench rising and disturbing his own nostrils.

She looked at him with a lack of comprehension.

"Well, I'm just passing it along. I'm sorry things sucked, and I guess things wouldn't have ever gotten better between you. What are you gonna do?"

He calmed down a bit, closed his eyes once or twice, and looked away and back at her.

"What did you think?" he asked tiredly.

She shrugged. "I don't know you. I only knew him for a few years, in short bursts." she leaned back in her chair. "You really don't care about your dad, do you? Wow."

"Don't judge me," he said quietly. She clucked her tongue.

"I'm gonna judge you," she said, "The way you present yourself, I'm gonna judge you. The way you act; the way you're acting right now, you're damn right I'm gonna judge you. You're pissed at your old man, fine. I'd get it more if he'd neglected you, beat you, but... I don't know what's bugging you. I wasn't there when you grew up."

Roger slumped back in his chair. "He'd never lay off me. He'd never stop judging me. He never..."

"He stopped," she said, putting both hands palm down on the table. "Before he stopped for good, he stopped, I'm guessing. And you rebuffed him, as he said."

"It's not my fault," said Roger.

"It's not anyone's fault. It just happened. And now it's over."

"No..." he replied. he stared at her for a moment, then reached back, into the backpack, and recovered the device. He set it on the table and could practically feel the frost from the chill running down her spine. "What's this?"

She was paralyzed, eyes locked onto the device, hands wringing themselves beneath the table. "Oh, Jesus," she muttered, and she reached for it.

"No, I don't think so," said Roger Jr. snatching it back.

"That," she said, not looking at him, "That's personal. This didn't really become personal until you pulled that out."

"What is it?"

She blinked. "You don't know?"

"In the video, he..." he started to say.

"You saw the video!?! " she raised her voice. Coffee guy perked up and looked up from his copy of Naked Lunch, then looked down again after Tabitha waved an apology.

"No I didn't. It stopped before..." Roger Jr. caught himself.

"What? It got good? You little creep, where do you get off..."

"Where do I get off?" he said with raised eyebrows. Now he was back in his element. He'd shaken her up; this ensured the upper hand. "You know, yeah, I'm going to stop pretending. You and the old man were skulking around, doing God knows what, helping him cheat on my mom... and you're giving me attitude? Don't pull me into your reality, lady."

She cooled down, but her thick eyebrows remained low.

"Okay, okay," she started. "No one is untouched here. And I'm real sorry for your mom. But that's..." She pointed at the device. "Can you just give it to me, please, and leave?"

He delivered a look of softened contempt. She returned it with one of resignation, looking at the device with sad longing as he stuffed it back into his backpack.

She rose up and extended a hand. Surprised, he took it without thinking. "Later, Tabitha," said the guy behind the counter, but she only nodded, leading Roger Jr. up, away, and out the door.

\* \* \*

"This is it," she said, standing at the door of an apartment building just around the corner—a three-story structure with a

courtyard, lacking in ornament, with a single old woman and her doberman standing watch from the second floor on the right. She said nothing, nor did the dog acknowledge their presence. Tabitha gave her a short wave, returned by the old woman—who resembled an old Russian witch in Roger Jr.'s approximation—with a sharp nod. The dog still didn't move, and Roger suspected it was either blind or stuffed. As Tabitha opened the lobby door, Roger started imagining what her apartment would be like. A two-room with scaled-down furniture, stepladders, and lowered doorknobs, perhaps. He imagined ducking down as he entered the front room, finding the ceiling lowered to five feet, but that, he knew, was asinine.

Ascending a steep flight of stairs they came to another door on a short landing, which she opened fluidly. Following her in he found nothing remarkable about the place, save for minor differences. A stepstool near the light switch, a smaller easy chair, a slightly reduced table and chair set in the kitchen. No erotica or whips and chains on the walls. What it was was sparse. He wasn't used to a home bereft of books and records, videos and newspapers. Aside from a few basic pieces of furniture and the television set (stuck away in the bedroom, not front and center in the main room, a corner visible from where he stood but otherwise invisible), the place was placid, uncluttered, and devoid of personality. Truthfully, it was calming after the previous days of sorting through his father's detritus. His mother, she must be wondering where the hell he was.

"Come in," Tabitha said. "Sit on the couch. Take off your coat and sit on the couch." He shuffled off his leather jacket and handed it to her. Although he wasn't a large man, the jacket now looked oversized in her hands. He kept his backpack as he crouched and sat down, holding it greedily and crunching up the fabric.

She sat in the chair opposite him. She looked adorable. Would it offend a little person to say they were cute? He never cared if he

was being an asshole—why start now? Instead he politely asked, "Did he ever come here?"

"Of course he did," she replied. "We couldn't pay for a hotel room every time."

"How many times?" he inquired, suddenly looking at her.

She glowered, then crossed her arms and brutally assayed him. He stood and took it.

"I brought you back her because I like that coffee shop, and I think this conversation might get obnoxious."

"Why?"

"Let's just finish up. That, in there," she pointed at his backpack, "Is not yours. My relationship with your dad is also not yours. If you keep it polite we can talk about your dad and some of the things we did. After that, you leave it, and me, and we never see each other again."

Roger blinked and tightened his lips. But he found himself nodding in agreement.

"So ask," she said, crossing her legs. "I'll let you know when you're done."

He drew a blank.

She tapped her fingers on the armrest.

"You're losing time and my patience, little man," she said quietly and firmly.

"Okay, okay," Roger said. "Why you, why my father? Where and when did it all start?"

She breathed in deeply.

"Four years ago. He placed an ad in the local free weekly under 'no strings attached.' I like older men, and he liked ladies like me. We met, clicked, and started having fun," she answered. "Next question?"

"Ladies like you?" he asked. "My dad was into..."

"He wasn't specifically into little people," she said with slight disdain. "He was into someone with similar inclinations."

"Inclinations?"

"Adventurism. Willingness to explore," she threw the words out like sharpened darts. "An ability to enjoy what isn't enjoyed by most people."

"You mean S&M?" Roger said, feeling he was on more solid ground.

"We thought that was trite," she replied with a slight sneer.

He began to feel like he was back in elementary school with his bitch teacher Miss Mackey. He could never win with her. When he was 10 she decided he was a worthless piece of shit and never let him forget it.

"Any other questions?" she asked.

"Only the obvious one. What's the thing in the bag?" he asked.

Now her face fell, and he was back in control. Maybe. He'd learned not to underestimate her.

"I don't know," she said quickly.

"What?"

"I don't know. I really don't know. Your dad never named it. I only know what it does," she replied.

"He never told you what it was?" Roger Jr. said, disbelievingly. "Where he got it, or anything?"

"I assumed he built it," she replied.

"My dad could fix stereos and shit, but he wasn't this good," he said.

"Maybe. He always talked about how good *you* were with projects," she said off-handedly. "I just figured mechanical skill ran in the family."

"What are you talking about?"

"He liked that about you. He admired your skill with machines. He talked about how you built your own radio when you were nine." She was rocking slightly in the chair now, staring at the bag.

"It was a kit," muttered Roger Jr.

"Yeah, but a kit for an older kid. And he said something else... About how you used to make these furniture sculptures."

"Dollhouse furniture, though I never had a dollhouse. He caught me building a ottoman and said he didn't want me to grow up to be a faggot."

"Faggot," she said, slightly dreamily, still gazing. "No, I can't see him saying that. No."

"Maybe not 'faggot.' He thought I was acting like a girl. he implied it." He seized up. "I wasn't building hi-tech sex toys, that's for damn sure. And I doubt he was either. Hey? What?"

She was looking down, at the bag, here eyes soft and dreamy. At his exclamation her gaze snapped back alive and locked with his eyes.

"Nothing, nothing," she answered, licking her lips.

Roger looked down at the bag, still scrunched in his hands. Looking back at her, then down again, he started to unzip it without a word. Reaching in he withdrew the device, which shone more silvery than he recalled.

"Do you need it?" he asked, smiling badly. "You do, don't you?"

"Shut up," she said, disturbed, and looking away. "No, it's not addictive. It's just... It's really something when it works."

He started to sway it back and forth.

"Do you want me to use it on you?"

Silence. Deep silence. Embarrassed silence. Anticipatory silence. Silence thick as meat.

She got up and walked to another part of the room, shaking her hands.

"That is so inappropriate in so many ways."

"That's not a no," Roger replied.

"Yes, that's a no," she said, suddenly turning. "I've known a few guys like you. You're not scratching an itch or living a lifestyle. You're just visiting, and snickering. I may be a degenerate, but you, you're nothing much."

"That's still not a no," he said again. "How do I turn this on?" He ran a dirty finger across the silver metal. It never smeared.

"My God, you're doing it all wrong," she said, sliding down from the chair. She extended a desperate arm. "Please, let me..."

"Let you do what?" said a smirking Roger Heck, Jr.

\* \* \*

They moved to her bedroom. It was much the same as it seemed in the video, though without the grit of the screen, and a homier feel. A small high table held a white vase full of peonies. The photo on the wall was a Man Ray. He had an art school girlfriend to thank for recognizing that.

Tabitha pulled open her bureau drawer, took out a handful of ropes, and gestured at the bed.

"You first," she said. "Lay down."

"No fucking way," he replied. Though he wanted to.

"Scared?" she asked with a nasty brat smile.

"Yes. I've done enough to know not to put myself at anyone's mercy. One time laying in my own filth in a bathtub is enough."

"I get it," she said. "But it's not bondage. Really. It's for your safety."

"My safety?" he asked.

"Well, your security. When it works, you lose control. Your body might do things that could get it hurt. Slamming into walls. Hitting your head," she gestured to the left "Your dad clipped his ear on that night stand the second time."

He remembered that. The old man coming home with his ear satcheled in a gauze wrap. He tripped and fell on the way to lunch. Didn't want the wife to worry, etc. It healed, but left a notch that made his ear look like an ashtray.

"Okay," he said. "Do I have to get undressed or..."

She breathed in and out with disgust.

"I'd rather you not," she said. "Just roll up your sleeves and lift up your shirt."

He did so, his soft white belly exposed..

"Now, now..." she seemed more nervous, but excited, the tones rising in her voice. He didn't arouse her, rather it was the act, the undefinable act that she was about to perform. "Can you just maybe turn around for a few minutes?"

"Why?"

"Because I want to be properly... p-properly p-prepared," she stammered. He liked that, and indulged her by looking around. More drawers were opened, and he could hear the whisper of her clothing being shed and dropped. Small zipper teeth fastening; the slight taste of rubber in the air.

"Okay, you can turn around. But don't you dare laugh," she said. "Don't you dare."

The cat mask faced him, looking up with its two big eyes.

"What the fu..." he started, smiling.

"This is my thing," she said, presenting herself. "It's none of your business. It's none of... Oh God, why am I even doing this with you?"

"I'm guessing no one else would?" he asked.

"You Oedipal fuck; that's what this is, isn't it?" she snapped.

"Shut up, you're not my mom!"

The cat head shook for a moment, maybe amused, maybe annoyed.

"Now, lie down, like I said, so I can tie you up," she said, whispering. "Don't shout. My neighbors might be home."

As the last rope cinched tightly around his left wrist, he was aroused. She noticed, but simply shook her head, murmuring and sup-supping to herself at the utter wrongness of it all.

She activated the device by stroking the base twice. It whined and whirred, and he watched, slightly fearful, slightly thrilled.

"Just let it go to work," she said, "but I can't promise it won't..."

It came to life again, the flittering leaves slowly dislodging themselves from the device, attached to silver tendrils that started to spin.

"It looks like the most perfect object in the world," he said, wondering aloud.

"What?" asked Tabitha, just as the first of the leaves latched onto his stomach, followed by another.

"Ow! Jesus!" he shouted.

"Shh... Sh, sh, shhhhh. It will all be over, eventually," she assured him. Another one latched on, then another, he looked down, now afraid.

"Jesus, they're... They're fucking sticking... Get them...!" he bellowed as three more latched on to his arms. He felt paralyzed and cold.

"I told you to be quiet, dammit," the cat mask said, grabbing and stuffing a sock into his mouth. He spat it out. "Calm down, and don't bite down!"

Now he was writhing. It wasn't unendurable. It was a series of mosquito bites, really, maybe if he just...

He felt the first begin to burrow into his belly's skin.

"Eeeeeeeeeee..." he softly whined. He expected a scream. Where was his scream?

"First charge, prepare yourself," said a voice inside his head.

First charge?

The shock ran through him like tiny ricocheting fireballs. His head exploded and his body shut down. Then, the sensations.

What did he feel? What did he feel?

Not orgasm, though crumbs and drabs of that were in the mixture, trammeling and oozing about his heart and head. Cylindrical satisfaction and slithering relief. A velvety texture of velour words paneling and carpeting his skull's interior.

He felt at ease and he felt alert, strings and cables of tension wrapped around warm towelettes tinged with rosewater. Fight or flight? He wanted to fight and fuck with running men and women as they scampered over acres of flesh, colored black, colored red, colored invisible green and yielding with audible sighs attached, blowing and with soft poetic footfalls.

His destination was ahead, a blue light, flickering. Where was he going?

Into his big toe. Then out of it. Around it and through, up into the corridors of his tarsals and metatarsals, stopping and returning back to the tips.

Roger Heck, Jr. felt his big toe expand and dip into Limbo and Purgatory. But that, he agreed with himself, was impossible, and ridiculous, and fitting.

Where was he?

Midgard, they called it. Who called it that? The Gods. The Gods chattering over a late breakfast or brunch of dragon feathers and demonstrations of...

A second wave of shocks ran through him, gripping his forelock and shaking him at thrice the speed of sound. And he felt the leads digging farther, further into his flesh, gripping his stomach and filling it with affectionate nausea.

"It's okay, it's okay," he found her over the humming and thrumming of the device. He was a steel drum, ringing and resonating and resounding with the device's hum, the apartment's silence, and her voice, her crackly, lovely voice. He fell into the eyes of the cat mask which restructured itself like animated clay. He felt a feeling beyond a mere high. Beyond well-being. He felt self-actualized and terrified and defined. He felt useful and happy. He'd do whatever she said, whatever she said, if only it wouldn't stop for even a moment.

Where did his father get the wherewithal, not to mention the technology and knowledge...

O, dear God!

"What do you see?" she asked. From the corner of his teary eye he watched her push a dial higher and his body jerked up in the middle, forming an upside-down U.

"I see flashing bright bacteria floating in the air," he replied, not bothering to think about the words. "I see puffs of smoke issuing from inappropriate objects. Fingertips. Baby carrots. Furniture... Oh, Christ," he seethed, arching again. "Get me some water, please. Get me some. I'm cold. And this is how the prisoners of war felt in... Ah. The air is ripping and melting away!" He shouted.

"Shhh!" she replied.

He saw his father approach in the air. The old man smiled and extended his arms. And he wanted to live in his father's arms, to feel the hate and love he felt for the man burn away.

"Daddy? Dad? Dada? I'm shredding apart."

"What?" she said, faraway. "I *never* saw the dead, I..."

Roger Heck, Jr's body ripped away and gently sailed an air currents to Hell. His mind, lucky bastard, tumbled silently to Heaven. Daddy greeted him, embraced him, told him he loved him unconditionally, then booted him to the ground for goodness sake. He, they, both understood the meanings and matters of things, and reciprocated with adoring fist-smashings across one another's faces.

"I loved you!" they screamed, with tears in their mouths, punching their smiles into a scattering, glittering cosmic constellation of calcium stars flung across the black universe. And the old man loved him back, with kisses and with killing.

He scream-wept aloud.

"Goodbye, Roger. I loved you best I could," said his Dad, now turned to ice and melting away into space.

"No, no, no," said Roger Heck Jr. empirically, grabbing, "You're not getting away, you're not going away you miserable old... Get back here. Let me hurt you some more. Let me love you some more, you..."

He shook and trembled with earthquake force before his wrists broke free of the ropes. At once she shut off the device. The hooks

burrowed out and the tendrils snapped back, leaving the device smooth and pure and silver again.

"Wait! Wait! I can never tie a proper knot..." she said. "Lay down! Lay down you stupid kid, lay..."

He was in control. He looked at her ferociously. One hand snatched at her, and grabbed her hair. The other took the device.

"Argh," he said dispassionately, but without letting go. "I love you. I love my dad. I love all mankind. Let's fuck."

She was slapping him back, gouging his arm with her nails, shouting at him to snap out of it, but he felt nothing. After the afternoon's tipping of power, his body was eager to perform a hideous act.

"Calm down! Calm down!" she said, still poking and scraping with her nails, slapping and smacking him with her hard little fists. "You've gotta snap out of it, idiot. You're not used to..." And her voice went in and out.

"I love you," he said. "Please, hold me close, kitty."

Roger Jr. reached forward and snatched at her. She was faster, more nimble, and fit. She wrenched away, jumped backwards, and ripped away the kitty mask, as if she'd prepared to move just so throughout the visit.

"Motherfuc..." she yelled and started to turn away, out of the room, snatching a nightstick from beneath her bed.. He stumbled and launched himself at her, grabbing her shoulders. Where he expected her to be light as a child, he felt an adult's solidity. He reached, he grabbed, he barreled over her and they rolled once, into the opposing wall. He took the brunt of the collision. He

momentarily grabbed a breast because he felt that he could. It was the proper size.

She landed a hard blow against his temple with the nightstick. Roger Heck Jr. saw an explosion of starlight. She was ungodly strong.

"Wake up you silly goddamned son of a bitch!" she screamed, and as regular sensation returned he felt her knee his testicles. With that starburst of groin pain, he felt sanity return and saw the world slide back into place. And he felt a sorrow and a shame that had been strange to him for very long. He couldn't look at her. He couldn't look inside himself.

"Oh God," he muttered, covering his face. "Oh God!" He stood up quickly, slightly jostling her to side, and he ran to the door. He needed to get away, far away from it all. From the emotion and revelations. He wanted to be sick. So sick he would vomit up the rotten banana of his brains.

"Oh God!" he said again, and he recalled an embarrassing thing he said in junior high and felt all the worse.

"Roger, stop, you're in no shape to go out. You need to return, you need..." she grabbed for him again, but he was already turning the knob and halfway out the door.

He forgot the smallness of the landing and the steepness of the staircase.

The ground disappeared for a moment, and he was flying for a full few seconds before he smashed and bounced into the first of three steps and hit the Byzantine mosaic at the foot of the stairs. He expelled a great whoosh of lung wind when his head met the floor.

He couldn't move, at first, and watched the liquid show of his blood sprayed across the hard floor. Tonguing his cheeks and gums he discerned that he'd lost a tooth, probably, but was sure he hadn't swallowed it. But despite the coming pain and hospital visit and surgeries and expense, he felt the afterglow of his experience. Embarrassment passed, he felt satiated and loved, and vindicated and in pain. He was feeling good, but it a tired kind of good. And best of all, his knuckles still stung from a final battle with his father.

He turned and looked up the stairs, where little Tabitha, his sweet stepmother-mistress looked extra beautiful in the sunlight streaming through the moldy skylight.

"Are you all right, Roger?" she asked. Then her look of concern turned to one of loss. She was looking to his other side, and he knew what he would see there. The device, shattered and bent, springs and diodes and silver threads and sharp little hooks spilled out across the floor. But when he managed to turn and see it he saw a dent, a rift in the metal, and a loose screw of two. He hocked a loogie of gum blood onto the floor and picked up the device. Looking at it, really looking at, and seeing the possibilities his father still offered him.

"I'm okay. It's okay," said Roger Heck Jr., lying on his back, smiling. "I can totally fix this."

"No, you can't," she said crying. "No you never could, ever."

The End

