

# No Pretty Boy

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Janice liked me being in the closet while she brought dudes home from the Mack. We both liked it, but sometimes, sitting on that folding chair for that twenty minutes among her clothes, all perfume-stanky and leather-smell, it felt like the whole world was waiting for me to breathe, and I couldn't, my tight heart all up in my chest. Sometimes, you do things you might not because the other person wants it. I didn't own her because nobody owns anybody, but if they want to, then why not?

I'm no pretty-boy, but I knew I could give her what she needed emotion-wise, just not the kind of variation. I never asked her why she wanted it, just watched as she bought fresh-cut orchids and put them on the bedside table beside the condoms, though half the time she didn't use them. Because I liked it, like the idea of these guys and her, liked the whole thing, watching and seeing, and the truth was, they would finish, leave, and she would sleep her exhausted sleep curled into me like a cat.

Janice moved like nobody I've ever seen. She never wore slutty clothes, just regular jeans and blouses, maybe with a pair of heels, her regular old Keds, but with her black hair down and that long neck she'd bend just right when she was looking to score, I knew she was special, that chick that comes along only twice in your life. Guys would buy her drinks because they're guys, but maybe too because they could sense she'd give in to them. She was like a guy that way. I would watch her work the room, like some boss who knows they have the key to it all, and it's everybody's job to kiss their ass and get it. Then I'd leave, which was her sign to bring it all back home.

We had five or six bars, The Mack, Cudjoe's, Salty Tim, the Horizon, a pattern where we'd arrive separately. I'd pick someone out who seemed pretty safe, and I'd give her the high sign. She'd

bring them home and then I'd come out and Janice, my god, could she lay a fucking on me after those nights, and I knew it was not typical, this thing we had. But I convinced myself it could work.

I came home one night from working the door at Sally's, and I saw the lights were on in the bedroom where they wouldn't normally be, and I had a suspicion. So I went around to the screen-door and popped the latch with a screwdriver. Her clothes were scattered across the rumpled bed, and a new vase was on the floor, a piss-dark stain like an inkblot on the gray carpet. They were mottled, these orchids, some kind of white and lavender hybrid. She'd explained it to me once, how these things were named and ordered, but I couldn't remember. I could hear the shower. The closet door was open, empty, and I stepped into the bathroom, and she was there on her knees, guilt running down her chin. I could see she'd gotten a Brazilian wax, her crotch all puffy and red from it and her hair hung like fine thread, drying as she blew this guy. He didn't look familiar from the angle.

Her eyes got wide when she saw me and she opened her mouth from around the guy, and I didn't think about it, what this ought to mean, what we both felt about how shit ought to work. I just blew into the bathroom and sank the screwdriver into the meat of his shoulder. She screamed, he screamed, but he was a bigger guy than me and I was up against the wall in a second, him head-butting me. I could feel my nose ripping, and he kept hitting me.

When I came to, Janice was dabbing at my eye with a cold cloth. Her hair had dried, she'd drawn it back in a ponytail, and I could see a mushroom bruise on the side of her face, the guy's come drying on her breasts. I couldn't feel my face, but the dude had stomped my hand before he left. I could feel that much. I could see another vase of new orchids on the back of the toilet. I wished I could smell them. I couldn't bring up the right emotion. I felt empty-like, but she hadn't even bothered to clean herself up after the fight, just put her hair back, and come to me, to clean me up. That should have made me feel good. It did make me feel good. So I relaxed and let her

bathe my face, waited to feel something else. It would come in time,  
right?

