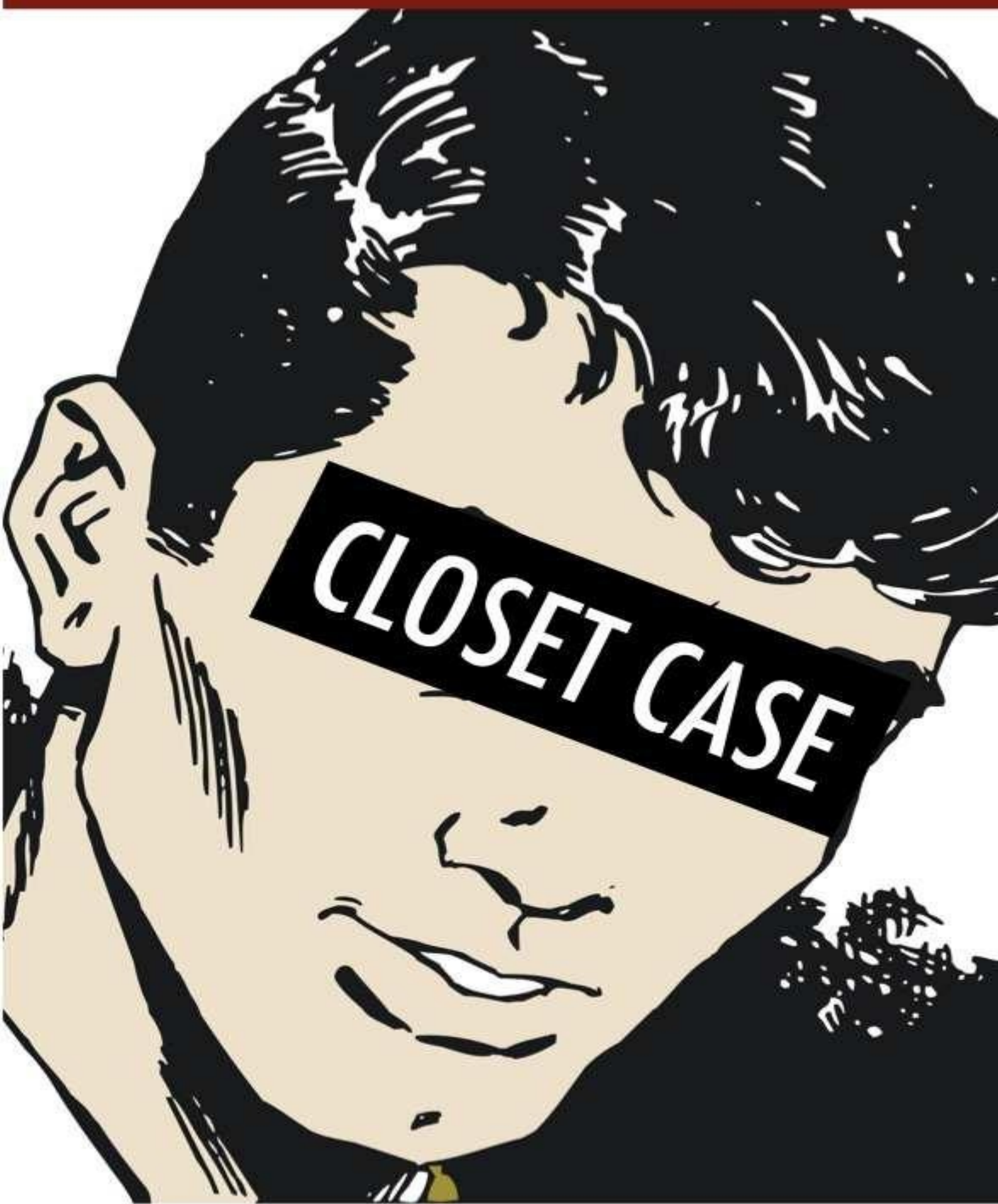


ROBERT RODI ESSENTIALS



Closet Case

A Novel by
Robert Rodi

www.robertrodi.com

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PROLOGUE

It was coming.

Everyone *knew* it was coming.

The floodlights had just gone out with a sharp, electric snap and a brief, otherworldly echo. The set's high-contrast, construction-paper garishness receded at once into the more muted tones of everyday life. The air, too, rushed in cool and sweet the moment the floods stopped their blistering barrage. It was like a return to reality from a gaudy, one-dimensional fantasyland.

The actor, his duties completed, donned his black leather jacket, shook Hackett Perlman's hand, and headed for the door.

And everyone knew it was coming. It was definitely, positively coming.

They'd known it as soon as the actor had displayed his complete ignorance of how to operate an electric chainsaw, which was his sole responsibility in the commercial they were shooting. He didn't even have any lines; he was merely obliged to stride manfully onto the set, fire up that state-of-the-art hunk of hardware, and attack a cord of firewood like a pit bull mauling a ferret.

So when he'd had to be taught how to switch on the saw — and then appeared actually *frightened* of it once it was up and running — virtually every man on the set experienced a little thrill of superiority, a reinforcing jolt of his own unassailable maleness. Every one of them took a figurative step away from the actor, and where their manner toward him had previously been informed by camaraderie, now it was colored by the condescending, anti-male taint of courtesy. Every one of them was thinking the same thing. But who would be the first to come out and *say* it?

When the slab of metal door fell into place behind the actor, shutting him out physically just as the crew had just him out socially, Hackett Perlman got a wicked glint in his eye and glided over to the spot where his client and two colleagues were waiting. He lowered his excessively suntanned head and grinned. And it was he who finally said it — that potent little word, that *oh-so-hilarious* slur, that instant excommunication from the realm of the worthy:

“*Fag.*”

Then Perlman, who was the creative director at Deming, Stark & Williams Advertising, rolled back on his heels and laughed, as though that single damning syllable had been a witticism worthy of the Algonquin Round Table on one of its most memorably epigrammatic days. And sure enough, a little eruption of laughter filled the studio and lightened its mood, and the director and crew felt suddenly free to go about clearing away the debris from the shoot. The tension had been released; the air had been cleared.

But Lionel Frank, who was an account executive at the same advertising agency, seemed to have more to say on the subject. He nodded his head in the direction of the discarded chainsaw and said, “Should've told him we wanted him to *sit* on the thing. He'd have found a way to turn it on, all right.”

Lionel's three companions offered up only token chuckles. After all, Lionel was the junior member of the foursome; the other three men here — Perlman, Julius Deming, the agency president, and Babcock Magellan, their client — were all officially his superiors. He might have to laugh at their jokes, but they weren't required to laugh at his. Still, this was a brotherhood, wasn't it? A fellowship. They were gathered for the manly purpose of producing a television commercial, and now stood together, awash in commingled testosterone, exchanging profanities and merry insults — *bonding*,

the vernacular would have it. If Lionel's high spirits led him to try to claim executive job privileges ... well, they'd give him a little rope.

Babcock Magellan even went so far as to encourage him, by slapping him on the back and saying, "Saw him checking you out, boy. Could be waiting for you out in the parking lot. My advice is, when you go to your car, for God's sake don't drop your keys!"

Lionel laughed far too loudly and too long, and Magellan rang in with his own basso profundo roar, obviously enjoying having his wit flattered so outrageously. As the founder, president, and towering embodiment of All-Pro Power Tools — as well as a millionaire, philanthropist, yachting enthusiast, and somebody or other's Businessman of the Year every year for the last seven — he was accustomed to being surrounded by sycophants and yes-men; but few debased themselves before him as enthusiastically and good-naturedly as these three he'd hired to produce his company's advertising. He liked them for it; and they *had* done a good job with the chainsaw spot. Even the lanky, skittish, perfectly coiffed actor they'd hired hadn't been a disaster, once he'd gotten a little direction.

Julius Deming, his face white as a billiard ball and nearly as shiny, pushed his glasses up his nose and said, "I don't know, Babcock. Lionel's been dressing awful *fancy* lately." He reached over and fingered his employee's expensive silk tie. "Could be he's *trying* to find Mr. Right." And at the sight of Lionel's face, which now fell into a silent-movie spasm of horror, he and the others laughed all the harder.

Deming thumped Lionel on the shoulder to show him he hadn't meant it, and then Perlman gave him a thwack as well, and Babcock Magellan punched his arm and winked at him — an almost unprecedented sign of favor. And then all four men looked at their watches, congratulated themselves on a job well done, and filed out of the studio and into the parking lot, where they paused to congratulate themselves one last time before getting into their cars.

"Well done, assholes," said Magellan as he depressed the button on his keychain that deactivated the auto-theft alarm in his Jaguar. "Didn't think you cocksuckers could pull it off."

"Well, now you know what a couple of real men can do with one of your cheap-shit production budgets," said Deming with a cocky smile as he unlocked the door of his Saab.

"Kiss my ass," said Magellan as he slipped into the Jaguar's driver's seat.

"You'd *like* that," said Lionel from out the window of his Celica.

"You oughtta know," countered Perlman from his BMW, prompting a last spate of laughter.

They all agreed to meet again in the edit suite the next day, then started their engines, backed up one by one, and rolled out of the fenced-in parking lot in single file (Magellan first, of course, and Lionel last).

And Deming drove home to his wife Peg, and Perlman drove home to his wife Becca, and Magellan drove home to his wife Dolores (but not before stopping to see his mistress Wilma).

And Lionel didn't drive home at all. He started out in that direction, but after fifteen minutes a storm of recrimination and self-loathing and anxiety overwhelmed him, and he knew he needed immediate release or he'd do something desperate, like swing his car into the path of oncoming traffic.

From the highway he could see a shopping mall, its parking lot empty at this late hour. He headed down the next exit ramp and made his way there.

He drove to the farthest side of the lot, where the trees were most concealing and the light from the overhead lamps most indirect.

He rested his head on the steering wheel and tried to get a grip on himself, but every time he closed his eyes, one image conjured itself up: that of the actor leaving the set, of those splendid buttocks tucked so beautifully into the faded workman's jeans he'd worn for the filming. It had seemed to Lionel that, at alternating steps, each cheek had waved a sad little farewell to him, the

ardent admirer for so many hours that day.

~~Finally, he could stand it no longer. He unzipped his fly, picked up his car phone, and spent forty five budget-smashing minutes dialing the numbers he'd come to know by heart: 1-900-BOY-TOYZ, 900-HOT-GUYZ, 1-900-CUM-QUIK ...~~

PART ONE

Hackett Perlman didn't so much step into Lionel's office as insinuate himself in; that was his way. He was a slippery man, reptilian, and whenever he sat in the chair that faced Lionel's desk and crossed his legs, Lionel couldn't help thinking of a snake coiling its body before striking.

"Got some news," he said, staring Lionel in the face with a cold smile that said, *I know all your secrets and will not keep them*. It was the look he gave everybody, and one of the chief reasons for his success; it put all of his subordinates in a state of anticipatory terror of him, as though he were a vampire or a Kamikaze pilot or some other inscrutable, alien-brained villain. But Lionel was accustomed to his air of B-movie menace, and knew it was no more than a strategically adopted pose.

He closed his radio rate book and pushed it aside, then sat back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. He thought this attitude made him look very heterosexual. For added points, he rocked the chair back and forth. "Good news or bad?" he asked.

The creative director arched an eyebrow and said "Good" in a way that sounded like he really meant "Awful." Another of his quirks, and another reason for his success; no matter how highly he praised his staff for their work, they always nervously decided they'd better do better next time.

He lifted his hands and studiously pushed back one of his cuticles. "Remember the chainsaw spot?" he said, his dark, wet eyes fixed on his fingernails. His sunned-to-leather face wore a secretive smirk.

"Sure," said Lionel, still rocking gently. "One with the fag in it, right?" It slipped out of his mouth before he could stop himself.

Perlman paused in mid-cuticle and looked up; then he said, "Right. That's the one," and resumed his mini-manicure.

Lionel cautioned himself to be more careful; he'd made a blunder with that remark. It hadn't impressed Perlman as a butch witticism, which, he supposed, had been its intent. To Perlman, all faces were nonentities; he was sure to have long forgotten the chainsaw-shy actor who'd afforded him such mirth during the filming five months before. That Lionel not only remembered him, but associated the entire project with him, was potentially revealing; it had certainly struck Perlman as odd.

Fortunately, the creative director was so eager to deliver his news that he let the peculiarity of Lionel's comment drop. "Been nominated for a Trippy," he continued, referring to a fairly prestigious Chicago advertising award. He finished one final cuticle, then dropped his hands into his lap and looked at Lionel again. "Best Regional Spot, Budget Under Thirty-Thou."

"No shit," said Lionel, thinking that profanity was the best way to restore his masculine credentials. "That's fucking *great* news. Congratulations!"

"Thanks. Anyway, thought you'd want to call Magellan and let him know." He peered at Lionel as though accusing him of murder. "Already reserved a place for him and his wife at our table."

"What table?" asked Lionel, suddenly on alert.

"At the awards banquet," he replied, untwining his legs in preparation for his departure. "Figure on eight of us: me and Becca, Deming and Peg, you and your date, and Magellan and his wife. Magellan can't make it, we'll take that new art director, Donna — you know, the dyke with the hearing aid. After all, she did the storyboards." He chuckled. "Just won't let her bring along another rug-muncher, is all."

Lionel suppressed a little shudder. He was grateful to have a lesbian art director at the agency because she diverted any suspicious attention from him, serving as a kind of lightning rod for antigay sentiments among the staff. But, paradoxically, every expression of those sentiments made him feel more fearful of exposure. (They were so *virulent*.) And now the idea of the Trippy banquet rendered his fears suddenly and terrifyingly concrete.

His foot started tapping on the acrylic pad beneath his swivel chair. “Uh — when’s the banquet anyway?”

“Two weeks,” said Perlman. His tone was perfectly conversational, but Lionel could see the light glinting off his incisors; they looked like fangs. “The sixteenth.” He rose from the chair and took a sliding step towards the door.

Lionel rolled up to his desk and said, “Hey, you know, I — I — I might be — I think I *am* — busy that night. I honestly don’t think I can make it.”

Perlman grimaced. “If Magellan’s there, you’d better be, too,” he said. “You know that. Whatever you have planned, cancel it.” He didn’t say, but didn’t have to, that Magellan brought the agency over a million in billings each year. The partners were in no mood to risk displeasing a million-dollar client, especially since they’d just lost the Romeo Springs sparkling water account which had also, unfortunately, been Lionel’s. (The loss hadn’t been his fault — the company had gone under due to consumer panic following the discovery of traces of ammonia in some of their Light ‘Lemon bottles — but Lionel had taken their departure badly, and was now terrified of losing his so-called remaining account.)

He said. “Right. Right. Course I’ll be there.”

Perlman pursed his lips. “You okay?” His tone made it sound like he was asking if Lionel had any last requests before his lethal injection.

“Yeah, fine,” said Lionel, trying to sound butch and nodding his head like a speed-freak jack-in-the-box. “Totally.”

Perlman nodded at Lionel’s phone. “Don’t forget to call Magellan.”

“No, I won’t, of course I won’t.”

Perlman slithered out into the hallway and Lionel dropped his head into his hands. He had just come up with a female date for the Trippy Awards banquet! It was enough to make him sick with anxiety. The last time something like this had happened, at the ’91 City Awards, he’d invited an aerobics instructor from his health club, having heard she was a lesbian, only to discover after the banquet, when he drove her home, that she wasn’t a lesbian at all — just very masculine in her approach to things. Lionel had to pay the tuxedo rental store for the damage to his zipper and thigh seams, and the scratch marks on his car’s front seat and dashboard refused to come out no matter how much he buffed them with the twelve-dollars-a-pint vinyl restorer. Even worse, however, was having to go in to work the next day and answer all sorts of jocular questions about how he’d “made out” and what Lisa was “like.” Fortunately, he’d been able to fake some fairly satisfactory replies. The truth — that he’d screamed and flailed like Fay Wray when Lisa commenced her assault on his crotch, and tried a panicked escape through his sun roof — was of course not remotely hinted at. After all, it was inconceivable that Babcock Magellan would place All-Pro Power Tools’ multimillion-dollar advertising budget in the hands of a pansy. And it was out of the question that the scrotum-scratching-belching-contest atmosphere of the Deming, Stark & Williams offices could ever accommodate a queer.

That’s why it was so imperative that Lionel find a date for the awards banquet. To keep his job, it wasn’t only necessary to appear not-gay; he had to appear actively straight, which, since his job involved maintaining that appearance from ten to sometimes twelve hours each workday, was tantamount to actually having to *be* straight.

And yet he didn't consider himself repressed; he would've told you — if you could ever have gotten him to discuss it with you, which you couldn't — that he actually got a kind of charge out of being closeted, that it was an illicit thrill to be in what amounted to the enemy's camp, making money off them and passing among them freely, unsuspected. He might also have told you he enjoyed the challenge — it kept him so nimble, so sharp, so *focused* — and the opportunity to demonstrate (if only to himself) the vast powers of his wit and intellect, as they lifted him safely out of every perilous situation into which he strayed (such as the time he was discovered alone in an absent secretary's office, staring at her Chippendale Dancers wall calendar; he'd immediately explained that he was checking the date to see if it was Rosh Hashanah, which would explain why Mindy wasn't at her desk). It was, in short, a job to have so many opportunities to be so *clever*.

But his cleverness was failing him now. In his head, he ran through the list of single women he knew. They were few, and very far between. In fact, he didn't know many people, period. His life being so bound up in his career, left him little time for friendships outside the office. With the exception of his hairdresser friend Toné, he didn't even have any gay buddies. And he sometimes wondered how often he'd see Toné if he didn't need his hair cut once a month.

No, almost everyone with whom Lionel shared even a passing acquaintance was right here in the office.

That's when he thought of Tracy. She was Julius Deming's secretary, and the object of lust for at least three members of the account staff. She was a petite woman, with bobbed blond hair and a precious pug nose — a woman, in short, with the kind of kid-sister beauty that is at first easily dismissed, but which after repeated exposure proves irresistible.

Best of all, she and Lionel had been openly flirting for more than a year. It had started out as banter, playful exchanges about the weather, the clothes they were wearing, the gossip around the office. Lionel liked the fact that he could make her laugh, and that she laughed so easily and unabashedly. Soon they'd developed a kind of shorthand language of their own. They would, for instance, pass each other in the hallway and sing a monotone “Lalalalala” at each other, which was their way of saluting each other affectionately when they were too busy to stop and talk.

Things accelerated when someone gave Tracy a battery-operated monkey that when switched on repeatedly clapped together a pair of tiny cymbals. One day Lionel, being silly, named the monkey Abner, and over subsequent weeks he would stop by Tracy's office several times a day, gabbing at length with her about Abner, regaling her with tales of his upbringing and early life, how he'd left his native Nairobi wildlife preserve to pursue his dream of being a stunt double for the Prince of Wales, only to learn that the Prince of Wales' duties didn't require stunts. He ended up jailed for the attempted rape of a penny arcade fortune-telling machine, and learned to play cymbals in the prison band. Tracy invariably ended up helpless with laughter. But whenever anyone came in to see what all the mirth was about, she and Lionel would clam up; Abner was their secret reference, and they were unwilling to share him with anyone else. The erotic connotations of this were impossible to ignore.

Once, Lionel made the mistake of telling Toné about his weird office flirtation with this woman.

“*Mon brave,*” Toné had said, yanking three finger-widths of Lionel's wet hair from his head and snipping off the ends with his scissors, “you are setting up that young girl for a disappointment *énorme.*”

“Don't be ridiculous,” he said. “She's got a boyfriend.”

“Whom she would drop *dans un instant* if you bade her come be with you.” (Toné always talked like this.)

“Look,” Lionel said testily — and as he said it a few of his clipped hairs fell onto his tongue, making him even more irritable — “you're always saying straight people are screwing themselves up by not exploring their gay side. Well, I'm just exploring my *straight* side, okay? If I don't do this

maybe I'll screw *myself* up."

—Toné sprayed his head with an atomizer, silencing him. "Just don't screw up that *jeune fille* who you're bounding happily toward self-realization," he cautioned. "No one's mental health is worth the broken heart of a poor, innocent *gamine*. Not even yours."

Lionel didn't give Toné's words a second thought, until some of the women in the office began making subtle remarks — in his presence! — about his and Tracy's possible future together. Then he panicked and, pleading busyness, dramatically curtailed his visits to Tracy's office. When the agency lost Romeo Springs, his workload temporarily lessened, but he didn't take the opportunity to renew his platonic courtship. He was too frightened to do so. It was a shame, really; he missed Tracy.

Well, this was the perfect chance to see more of her. She was still involved with her boyfriend but he'd heard through the grapevine that they were feuding at present, so there was no barrier to his accepting Lionel's invitation. And she *would* accept, he was sure of that. They *liked* each other; they *could* have fun, and she would know that.

Best of all, she was ... well, not innocent, exactly; but kind of proper. A real *lady*, that rarest of beasts, almost extinct in the postwar prairie states — like the bison, only less intensely mourned. There would be no attempt at date-rape in his car if Tracy were his companion. And the day after the banquet, they could simply resume their friendship, just as it had been before. Tracy might be a little mystified, but ... she still had a boyfriend, didn't she? She wouldn't complain.

Thrilled with this brainstorm, he wasted no time but marched through the maze of corridors to Tracy's office. He poked his head around the doorframe and caught her typing out a letter, one key at a time, as she read aloud from a steno pad. "A..." Clack. "L..." Clack. "S, E..." Clack, clack.

"Show-off," he said.

She looked up and blushed crimson. He liked that about her. No one blushed as deeply, or as easily, as she did — excepting characters in cartoons. "*Pig*," she said. "I can't *believe* you caught me doing that. It's this guy's name. It's got about twenty-three letters and I can never spell it from memory."

He strode in and sat before her desk. "Why don't you just ask Abner? We all know he's quite a bit smarter than you."

She leaned over and flicked Abner's switch; nothing happened. She looked at Lionel sadly and said, "Abner's on the roof and I can't get him down."

He laughed. "Get some batteries from Elsa."

"For an office toy? A *personal* item? I can just see her deducting the cost of two triple-A's from my paycheck."

"Yeah, there's that," he said, nodding. There was a brief, rather unwieldy pause.

"Listen," he said, looking down at his shoe, which he ground into the floor as though there were a palmetto bug beneath his heel. "I've been working like a sonofabitch, and —"

"I know, I know, I see your light on every night when I leave." She turned away from the typewriter and folded her arms over her blotter. Her attention was completely his.

"I have no life, Tracy. I admit this." He ripped a page from her *Far Side* desk calendar and started to fold it into a tiny accordion. "I have a parrot at home who doesn't recognize me. He's bonded with the mice in my absence."

She didn't laugh; she wore a look of almost luminous expectation.

He cleared his throat and said, "Seriously, I have to go to the Trippy banquet and if I don't bring a date Magellan's going to start thinking I'm queer." He occasionally said things like this, to present the idea of him being gay as so utterly ridiculous as to be funny. "And, well, I know you're still seeing Guy, but if he —"

"Guy's a pig," she said. *Pig* was her all-purpose slur.

“Well, if the pig can let you go for a night, maybe you’d like to come with me ... to the Trippys mean. It’d be a blast.”

Her eyes actually flashed. Lionel had always thought that a mere figure of speech.

And suddenly she looked incomparably lovelier than she had only a moment before. “Be your sympathy date to the Trippy Awards?” she said, smiling brilliantly. “I assume there is a large fee involved.”

He laughed, delighted and terrified by her acceptance, but mainly terrified.

The dance bar called The Hague was a safe place for Lionel to frequent, because its clientele wasn't exclusively gay — just predominantly. Male strippers might strut across its strategically placed platforms in G-strings and snakeskin boots, but on the dance floor itself, yuppies, dinks, japs, and other acronymed members of mainstream Chicago rubbed elbows with drag queens, hustlers, and lipstick lesbians. The music was the attraction: gay clubs were known for playing better dance tracks than their straight counterparts, and The Hague was arguably the best gay dance club in town.

Having successfully arranged a heterosexual, if platonic, liaison during office hours, Lionel felt he could allow himself a little side trip into the gay nightlife on his way home from work. He hadn't left the office till seven-thirty, so by the time he arrived at the club, it was just past eight. For a weeknight, that wasn't too early to see some excitement.

He walked in the door and loosened his tie. He liked appearing here in his workday garb; it was off-putting. It made him look, not gay and available, but hip enough to be in a gay club even though he was evidently straight.

Heads turned briefly at his entrance — young heads, long and angular, with manes of wavy hair and swooping sideburns — before turning away, unimpressed. Lionel knew he was good looking enough, but he deliberately made himself bland; he didn't want to appear too conscious of his appearance, lest someone at the office find it suspect. Still, he'd spent so many years playing down his attractiveness that now he wasn't sure he could remember how to play it up again, and the absence of the kind of lingering glances he'd hoped for caused him a little pang of regret.

But then, from the far side of the bar, he felt the unmistakable pressure of eyes on him, and his spirits lifted; he was being cruised. Careful not to meet the gaze of his admirer, he went to the bar and ordered an Amstel Light. (In non-gay bars, he always ordered a Rolling Rock instead of a light beer, wouldn't do to have anyone think he was watching his weight, like some prissy queen.)

He slid a trio of dollar bills across the counter, then turned away quickly, still acutely aware of the pair of eyes across the bar that were boring into him like All-Pro power drills. Growing a little uncomfortable with the attention, he lifted the bottle to his lips and took a long, cold swallow, then sauntered over to the dance floor, where colored lights flashed in counterpoint to the heavy thump, thumpa-thump of the music video being played on the various monitors around the room's perimeter. Men were dancing with men by the dozens. It was *really* gay in here tonight; there were almost no breeders to be seen. Which of course increased the homoerotic charge in the air, and made his predicament even worse. He kept thinking, *I'm being watched, I have to look hot, I have to look available. But who's cruising me? And why can't I bring myself to cruise back?*

He started sweating at the idea of meeting someone in a bar; someone he might even take home to bed. It had been — God — more than a year since he'd done anything like that. He'd never be able to go through with it tonight; he'd lost the knack ... he was terrified. He kept hoping that the eyes would just leave him, melt away, or at least move on to some other, more responsive target. They followed him more than long enough to gratify his ego; now it was just plain awkward to be visually stalked this way.

Finally, he could bear it no longer. He had to confront his admirer. Taking a big, straight-guy chug from his Amstel, he casually turned his head and let his glance fall, as if accidentally, on the man

who had been ravishing him so insistently.

— Jesus H. Christ on a moped.

It was *Toné*.

The hairdresser lifted his glass — it looked like he was having his usual brandy Alexander — and nodded his head in salutation.

Lionel stormed over to him. “For Christ’s sake, *Toné*, why were you *staring* at me like that? Almost gave me a fucking *heart* attack.”

Toné swept back his jet-black, shoulder-length hair in indignation. “*Excusez-moi, mon brave*,” he chuckled. “One didn’t mean to cause discomfort. One simply recognized one of one’s *intimes*, that’s all.”

“Then why didn’t you just yell out a hello, for God’s sake?”

Toné put one of his spectacularly manicured hands over his heart, as if appalled at the suggestion. “Because, *mon brave*, one does not *yell out* in polite society. Aside from which, one suspected you might be, ahem, on the *prowl*, as it were. And one enjoyed the idea of watching you make a connection with some *garçon* of great beauty and loose morals.”

Lionel blushed crimson. “I didn’t come in here for *that*.”

“Well, that makes one of us.” He took another sip of his drink, apparently ready to dismiss the subject.

Lionel, however, wasn’t quite so ready. True, he didn’t want to have a sexual encounter with anyone tonight, but the possibility that he *could* excited him, and he wanted to hear *Toné* conjecture about it at greater length. “Anyway,” he said, prompting him, “who would I even pick up here? Not one’s my type.”

Toné looked around the bar; Lionel hoped he would select a possible hook-up for him just so he could protest that whoever it was would never accept him, causing *Toné* to reassure him that that wasn’t the case, and so on — all material Lionel could use to build a whale of a fantasy during his next jerk-off session.

But after a moment more, the hairdresser disappointed him by sighing and saying, “You’re right, *il n’y a personne* for you here tonight. But then, one is less inclined to place blame on them than on *you*.” He looked Lionel up and down, appraising him as if he were a prize heifer at a 4-H convention. “When one dresses in a blue suit from Capper and Capper, *cheri*, accented by a tie spangled with mallard ducks that one is certain has a twin in Dan Quayle’s closet — well, one mustn’t expect to be the cause of much swooning at The Hague, any more than one would wear a red silk teddy and fishnet stockings to apply for membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution.”

Lionel frowned. “I look fine.” He angrily tried to salve his pride with a swallow of beer, but the bottle hit his tooth like a sledgehammer. He spat out the beer and clutched his mouth in agony.

“One might say that your *hair* looks fine,” said *Toné*, who, being half Japanese and therefore well-versed in the sophisticated art of saving face for others, pretended not to have seen the mishap. “One *might* say that, but one’s modesty prevents one.” He finished off his brandy Alexander and handed the empty glass to a passing busboy, smiling coyly.

Lionel leaned against a post, holding his mouth. “I fing I broag my fugging toof,” he moaned.

Toné, not about to let Lionel embarrass himself by admitting to self-inflicted pain, continued to ignore the incident. He rolled up the sleeves of his linen jacket and said, “So, tell one, how is the *jeune fille* who slaves away in the salt mines with you? You know, the one whose heart you have so treacherously ensnared?”

“Oh, shud ub,” said Lionel, testing his tooth with his thumb and forefinger. It felt whole, and seemed relatively sound. Fear and pain subsiding, he removed his hand and said, “How many times do we have to go through this? She’s got a steady boyfriend.”

Toné rolled his eyes. “Of course she does. Stupid of one to forget.”

~~“Look, we’re just friends. For God’s sake.”~~ He took another swig of beer, more carefully this time.

At that moment, the video screens went blank, and the crowd on the dance floor gathered around a platform. It must be time for the first of the strippers to come on. Lionel shrank back into a shadow not wanting to be seen ogling any nearly naked men. But his pulse thrummed with excitement; even from his irregular visits to The Hague, he’d become familiar with some of its regular strippers, and he had his favorites. Would it be Jerry the cowboy tonight? García the construction worker? Bill the fireman?

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said a voice over the speaker system, “The Hague is proud to present for the very first time on our stage, ‘Father’ Todd!”

A new disco number started up, and after several tantalizing beats, a tall, bearded man in priest drag gyrated onto the stage.

Lionel, who had spent his formative years sitting quietly at Sunday mass imagining that his parish’s handsome young assistant pastor was wearing nothing at all under his cassock, felt something lurch forward and drop in his stomach. This was an irresistible, powerful fantasy figure for him; the horny, hairy, hot-tamale pastor; the priest who puts out; the father confessor with bikini tan lines. His throat went dry and his palms started to sweat. He really had to get out of here; and yet he was equally compelled to stay and watch. The warring imperatives clashed in his head and in his loins, and made him itchy and fidgety and nervous.

When “Father” Todd teasingly began unbuttoning his cassock, revealing a blood-red rose nestled in the crevice of an extraordinarily woolly chest, Lionel had to fight back faintness. Since he couldn’t bear to watch, but couldn’t bear to leave either, he decided to try to distract himself by continuing his conversation with Toné, whose own taste in men tended towards the slim, hairless, and almost illegally young, and who was tapping his toes to the music rather dreamily, paying only the most obligatory attention to the show.

“As a matter of fact,” Lionel said to him now, in as confidential a tone as the booming bass track would allow, “I *do* have a sort of platonic date coming up with her. The *jeune fille*, I mean.”

Toné turned his head slowly, like a crocodile. He raised an eyebrow and said, “*Oh?*”

“It’s for a business function,” he explained, trying not to stare at Father Todd’s cassock, which was now gathered around his waist, catching the beads of sweat that fell from his naked torso as he writhed to the music. “The Trippy Awards,” Lionel continued, his speech becoming both faster and more halting. “We’ve won an award — for — a commercial we did — for one of our clients — we — He finally had to turn away from the strip show entirely. He set his back against Father Todd, fixed his eyes on Toné, and said, “It’s just platonic. She’s from the office. It’s a work function. She works there. So ...” His voice trailed off in defeat. Even he could hear how flimsy his argument sounded.

Toné raised his other eyebrow, and Lionel thought, *Why the hell did I even bring this up? If I didn’t get so goddamn disoriented at the sight of a half-naked man ...*

The hairdresser put a hand on his shoulder and said, “Lionel, you *must* tell this *pauvre petite* that you’re gay before she accompanies you to this event.”

Lionel’s jaw dropped. “Are you *crazy?*”

“*Pas du tout*. Trust one on this, *mon brave*. She has entirely different expectations from this *soirée* than you do. Business affair or not.”

“You don’t even know her.”

“One doesn’t need to know her. One has heard all the stories you’ve told one. That girl is in love with you.”

Lionel shook his head in earnest. “She’s not, Toné. She’s not, she’s not, she’s not.”

“She is, she is, she is.” He smiled and took back his hand. “Oh, dear, this *is* regressing in nonsense, *n’est-ce pas?*” He took an appraising look at the back of Lionel’s head. “You’ll be needing a trim before the evening in question, of course.”

Lionel shrugged. “Guess so.”

“Then by all means, call one *à demain* and make an appointment. And in the meantime, consider what one has just told you.” His eyes darted across the bar. “And now, if you’ll excuse one, one thinks one might be about to meet the love of one’s life.” He leaned over and gave Lionel a swift peck on the lips, then trotted away.

Unsettled by the conversation, Lionel turned around in time to catch Father Todd tearing away at his leather panties, revealing a purple satin G-string with a crucifix on the pouch. A dirty-blond treasure trail crept up his taut abdomen, collecting in a little furry circle around his navel.

Transfixed by the sight, Lionel stared in helpless lust as the stripper put his hands behind his head and commenced bumping and grinding, bumping and grinding, until his pelvis seemed to generate enough kinetic energy to fill the electrical needs of the better part of Chicago’s lakefront. Lionel’s jaw hung open, like a trailer hitch.

A medium-size eternity later, he noticed someone waving at him. He managed to tear his gaze away from Father Todd and looked to see who it was.

There were two women, arm in arm, like lovers. And the one waving at him was Donna, the agency director at the agency.

All color seeped out of his face; his blood seemed to stand still in his veins. How long had she been watching him? How much had she seen of him staring, mesmerized, at the crotch of a male stripper? Had she witnessed the feline, effeminate Toné leaning in and kissing him?

An even worse possibility occurred to him: Donna, who was deaf, was an accomplished lip reader. Lionel had once heard her brag that if there was enough light, she could “eavesdrop” on private conversations across the full length of a crowded restaurant. Had she been privy to every word to pass his lips the entire time he’d been talking to Toné?

It was his worst nightmare come true: being busted by someone from the office. For years, he had been so careful, not letting any hint of his sexuality leak out to even the farthest removed acquaintances of his colleagues and clients, only to blow it now with someone who worked just down the hall from him!

He should’ve been more careful of her. He’d known Donna was gay from the day she started – *everyone* knew it. To *look* at her was to know it. (She wore a crew cut and had shoulders like a linebacker! She wore Doc Marten boots! She chewed tobacco!) And the relentless, increasingly filthy dyke jokes that had subsequently been told behind her back (sometimes *literally* behind her back, there was no danger of her overhearing them) had the effect of pushing Lionel even farther into his metaphorical closet, until he was trapped behind metaphorical tennis rackets and ski boots and piles of old, metaphorical magazines.

Accordingly, he’d distanced himself from Donna, and had felt safe in doing so; after all, there was little enough chance of ever running into her on gay turf, since Lionel seldom ventured there; and even when he did, well, lesbians had their own stomping grounds from which they seldom strayed. But Lionel hadn’t considered The Hague. *Everybody* came to The Hague.

Donna was still waving at him, her eyes wide and excited. He managed a trembling half-smile, then mouthed the words *See you tomorrow* and bolted from the bar.

In the cool night air, away from the press of bodies and the smell of sweat and the stinging aura of cigarette smoke, he felt as if he’d just awakened from a bad dream. *I shouldn’t be so silly about this*, he scolded himself; *Donna isn’t going to say anything. It’s ridiculous to worry about her tattling on me, like some snotty second-grader.*

Even so, as he walked to his car, he couldn't help dreaming up increasingly outlandish attempts to *ensure* her silence. He could, for instance, try to get her fired; he could steal art supplies from the storeroom, then say he'd seen her take them. He could even hide them in her office, to be discovered by Elsa, the office manager (who was certainly the type to go and look). But didn't all art directors steal supplies all the time?

Then he considered that he might plant cocaine in her desk. But hell, half of the management team would just offer to buy it from her.

Or, he could spread a rumor that she was mentally unstable and had been fired from her last job for irrational behavior; but that came pretty close to describing the work history of about half the creatives in the advertising business.

By the time he caught himself considering ways he might slip cyanide into her morning Diet Coke, he decided he'd better stop this deranged panicking and just face the problem like a man. If he couldn't bring himself to trust Donna, he'd just have to talk to her, tell her flat out that he'd appreciate her keeping mum about his unorthodox sexuality. It was his private business, after all. Wasn't it?

Well, *wasn't* it?

Lionel pulled up in front of the Victorian six-flat he called home. It was only nine-thirty but it felt like four in the morning. As he let himself in the front door and began his lonely trek up the stairs, he tried not to think about Tracy anymore, and certainly not about Donna. All he wanted was to settle into bed, dial a 1-900 number, and ask if they had any hot priests he could talk to. Would they think he was kinky? Might they laugh at him? Well, he'd risk it. As disturbed as he was about having been caught at The Hague by Donna, he didn't actually regret having been there, not with Father Todd still gyrating seductively in his head.

"Forgive me, Father, for I haven't sinned," he muttered to himself as he rounded the second-floor landing and continued the ascent to his apartment. "At least, not nearly enough for someone my age."

He sighed mournfully as he put his key in the lock. To his surprise, the door swung open without his having raised the latch. He furrowed his brow, took a step inside, and set his briefcase on the floor of the hallway. The lights in the apartment were already lit. "Hello?" he called out, shutting the door behind him.

"Oh, Lionel, hello," came a voice from the far end of the railroad apartment. Then Yolanda Reynoso darted out of the kitchen, dressed to kill. "I am sorry for being here so late," she said breathily, her stiletto heels clacking against the hardwood floors as she scurried down the hall to greet him. "I heard Spencer just screaming and screaming, so I came up to see if something was the matter with him." Spencer was Lionel's pet cockatoo; since Yolanda lived in the apartment directly below his, she couldn't help hearing the bird's blood-curdling shrieks.

Lionel undid his Dan Quayle tie and let it hang like a stole around his neck. "You don't have to apologize," he said. "I appreciate you coming up to look after him." Yolanda worked most nights as a cashier in a science-fiction bookstore, so Lionel had given her a set of keys to his apartment and invited her to come up during the day and visit his bird. "I mean, if it weren't for you, he'd get no companionship at all."

She smiled brilliantly, then leaned over, kissed him on the cheek, and headed back to the kitchen. Lionel followed her, appreciating — in a purely aesthetic way — the gorgeous roundness of what Toné would call her *derrière*, which tonight was being hugged by an exquisitely clingy rose cocktail dress. She had also donned dangly-jangly earrings and teased her hair into the kind of wild, Medusa-tendrils state that drove straight men into a condition of sexual frenzy. *I wish someone from the office could've been here, he thought, to see me greeted with a kiss by a woman who looks like this!*

"You look sensational," he said, doffing his jacket and slipping it over the back of one of the cane chairs in his sparsely furnished kitchen. "Going out?"

"Yes, I am having a late dinner with Bob." She picked up Spencer from the floor, where she'd spread out Lionel's pots and pans for the bird to play with (he was entranced by his reflection and loved the sound he made when he banged his beak against the lids). "I am not used to eating so late; he may die of hunger before he gets here." She ran her hand over the cockatoo's back; the bird responded by making his pigeon-toed way up her arm and perching on her shoulder, where he snuggled against her ear and clucked contentedly. "What a good boy," she cooed at him. Then she turned to Lionel and said, "I think a firecracker must have gone off in the alley and frightened him, but he is feeling better now."

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