

1.

Nonni wore her latex dress, bronze shoes, and studded collar. In keeping with the fashion, the studs were chrome but the barbs were gold. She stood in a parking lot behind Seventeenth Avenue and watched a cottonwood weep its shadow across the road. Nonni didn't want the shadow to touch her shoes. They were new shoes. She had just bought them at Mindy's, off Eighth. Shoes were clean. Shadows were lonely. Wood was melancholic and parking lots were for plebes.

"I want the blond boy," she said.

A cigarette spark danced on the dashboard. The cherry blossoms slipped past the window and the neon strips dashed along the horizon. She was with her husband. They were on their way to the club.

"Which one?" Gerry said.

"The one who looks like a surfer."

"They're too young." Gerry had on his jeans and sports coat. His ascot, too. He didn't change until after they got to the club.

"They're easier to train that way."

“The young ones are trouble.”

“They don’t argue at least.” She blew menthol on the glove box until the fumes fled over the tachometer.

“Do you have to smoke those things?”

“They turn me on.”

“Everything does.”

“I hope Gwen isn’t there,” she said. “She doesn’t turn me on. She’s a bitch.”

“She’s the owner.”

“She’s always making up rules or saying people have called red when they haven’t. Maybe her husband will be there instead. What’s his name, Dan?”

“Don,” Gerry said. “His name is Don.”

The club was buried in the industrial quarter between a brass piping yard and a cement storage hut. The walls were stucco. The roof was tin. A neon oval with the word *Onyx* hung in the front window. The sign was the only thing that noted the location’s existence and that’s the way everyone wanted to keep it.

Nonni walked across the parking lot. The gravel crunched beneath her boots. She liked the sound of pebbles breaking on the concrete, the feel of concussion, the notion of rapture and wreckage.

Inside the foyer there was a wicket booth, just like a nineteenth-century bank. Gwen stood behind the wire with the member’s book open and a pen poised on the spine. She was a trim woman of forty who always wore a black evening dress and hoop earrings. The club had been registered in her name for over seven years and nobody got through the inner door without Gwen signing them in. Members only. No exceptions, no excuses, no unscreened guests. Memberships weren’t sold at the door.

“Is Don here?” Nonni said.



Gwen handed Nonni the pen. “He’s upstairs.”

A Bluebottle fly buzzed around the wicket. They were the first sign of summer. Soon the skylights would open to keep the club cool and the orange carbolic haze would settle under a warm moon. Gwen reached under the counter and hit the buzzer. The inside door clicked open and the weekend began.

The Onyx was a coliseum shaped cavern with rounded walls and dank light. There was a dance space, twelve tables, a metal cage, and a cocktail bar. On the second floor, open balconies ran around the perimeter where the players watched the newcomers file in through the foyer. Far up on the domed roof, an immense screen played German bondage porn in a never-ending loop. The club used to be a windshield repair shop before Gwen took it over.

Gerry wandered to the change room. Nonni went to the bar. She got a glass of Chardonnay, leaned back, and watched the screen. A woman coated in yellow rubber struck a man with a crop. There were sharp commands in deep garrulous tongues and Nonni liked to think it wasn’t staged, but a real interrogation scene from some forgotten conflict, like Croatia or the Ugandan Civil War.

“Where’s Gerry?” William said.

William was an overweight man of fifty who sported leather suspenders and polished wine glasses for the women who wanted drinks. His chest had an unusual amount of hair and his cheeks were puffed.

“He’s getting changed,” Nonni said.

“You don’t make him wear his leathers here?”

“He runs things over.”

“He needs discipline.” William nodded as if it were a dictionary fact and handed Nonni a plate stacked with strawberries.



“He needs something.” She took a strawberry and pondered the room.

There were fourteen people on the dance floor and Nonni knew them all. There was Heidi and Randle, an anorexic couple in traditional leather who only got off with each other. Halfway through the evening Heidi would take Randle upstairs, tie him to the cross and flog him mercilessly. Every session, he would bleed, he would beg, he would cry, then finally go limp. Nonni liked the part when Heidi wrapped her flogger around Randle’s neck. He’d beg to be choked, but it never happened. That was the only reason Nonni watched, hoping one day Heidi would choke his breath out, and make his face turn blue.

Shannon and Steve lounged by the metal cage. They were both thirty and both muscular. Shannon was Mediterranean, but had yellow hair. Steve was six foot, and unnaturally blond. Mostly the two sat downstairs and talked about their cruises to the Caribbean or Alaska. They were great to look at, but were always pontificating about the meals on the next cruise ship or complaining about the service on the last one.

Jim and Susan came in. They stored their gear in a set of airplane travel bags with wheels that they pulled behind them. The more excited they were, the bigger the bags got. Both of them were marathoners with smooth bodies and they looked like a couple out of a toothpaste commercial. Last month, she had put a plastic bag over his head and made him pass out.

There were a few others off the dance floor that she couldn’t name. A gay couple who did bone piercing. An anthropology student into Fascism. A blond woman who sat in the corner, looking ill at ease, wearing too much makeup. Her face was Pro-Domme and Nonni thought of a mannequin in a fur salon near Banff. Gwen would never let her upstairs dressed like that.

Downstairs was where the common people talked and negotiated, but upstairs was where the savage grace happened. Upstairs were the racks and couches, broad clamps and wooden crosses. Upstairs was the screaming and the strict language of satisfaction.

“Who’s the new one?” Nonni said to William.

“Never seen her before.”

“She doesn’t fit.”

“Some don’t.”

Nonni filed the girl far down on the list of possibilities. In club language, a chokecherry slow. William examined a glass and put it up on the rack.

“Have you seen Daniel?” Nonni asked.

“Who?”

“The surfer.”

“Never have.”

She leaned over the bar and wrapped her hand around a cedar beam. There were grease stains engrained in the wood. Perhaps from an automotive spill. She liked the ancient scent. She had a theory. Everything erotic in the cosmos left an imprint and she was the one designated to measure the torque. She was the one to decipher the dead.

Nonni was thirty-three. She had no children. She was five foot eight, and one hundred and thirty pounds. She had platinum hair owing to her Nordic descent and it fell in two halves like clam shells on each shoulder. Her complexion was marble. Her nose was small and her face slender. She looked something like a china doll. In fact, her friends in school had called her China Doll because her skin resembled porcelain, but that was decades ago. She had new breasts that had cost Gerry eight thousand dollars and a lip puff that she had spent five thousand on. Once in a while she worked out, but most

of her body had come to her through genetics rather than ardour. From time to time she thought she looked too docile, too obsequious — so after she had surveyed the crowd, she reached into her pocket, pulled out a tube of blue lipstick, and gave her mouth a thick coat.

Gerry came back to the bar with his tungsten chest harness made up like a Roman Gladiator and a pair of leather pants.

“Kneel,” Nonni said.

“Wait until we go upstairs.”

Nonni shrugged and tipped her wine glass for William to fill. Gerry sipped on his mango drink. “Where did Jim and Susan go?”

“No idea,” Gerry said.

“They have the knives.”

“What knives?”

“We said we’d do a knife scene with them.”

“Right,” Gerry said.

Gwen came over and put her hand on Gerry’s hip. A sprig of lemon perfume hung on her shoulders.

“New outfit?”

“Nonni got it for me in Rome.”

“Fabulous,” Gwen locked her fingers together. Her teeth where square pearls and always looked wet. “What did you think of Italy, Non?”

“They speak Italian.”

“She got it near the Trevi Fountain,” Gerry said. “They took measurements. It took three months and I had to clear it with customs because the buckles are magnesium.”

“What’s the fantasy?” Gwen said.

“To have him gladiator fight in the Roman Coliseum.”

“Imperial or senatorial Rome?”

“No clue.”

“Thumbs up I hope.”

“That depends on how he does tonight,” she said.

Gwen smiled with one side of her mouth. Gerry inspected his buckle then gazed up at the wall. There were paintings and photographs. Black and white with pictures of stern dominatrixes and muscular men slicked with oil and rust. The new painting was an acrylic in decrepit orange. A couple from industrial Britain ascended through a thunderstorm in state of steam driven climax.

“Who did the new one?” Gerry said.

“Got it from a local artist for the price of a membership. Sort of the dirty-Victorian-nineteenth-century feel.”

“Like what’s-his-name?”

“Wardle?” Gwen said.

“That’s him.”

Nonni finished her wine. She wished she had gotten Okanagan over something from California.

“What’s the show tonight?” she asked Gwen.

“Lisa and Terri are going to pierce Brian.”

“They’re going to do a man?” Nonni leaned back over the bar. A piercing might be good. She felt a quiver start near the bedrock of her heart.

“They couldn’t find a girl.”

“They’ll castrate him.”

“I’ll make him sign a waiver.”

“Why?”

Nonni imagined an uninitiated so horny he’d do anything without thinking, even if it meant getting pin cushioned by a pair who probably despised him. A heavy shape lumbered across the floor and the plumbing pipes in the attic bent over, and then there was a splash of red and chocolate on Nonni’s boot.

“You dropped your strawberry,” Gerry said.

“It fell. I didn’t drop it.”

“Maybe you should have your blood sugar checked,” Gwen said.

“My blood sugar is fine.”

The chocolate dribbled over her laces. The strawberry followed and Nonni thought of lava chunks flowing down a volcanic slope. Will examined a wine glass and scraped off the detritus with a dental pick. Nonni snapped her fingers and pointed at the boot. Will came over, tucked the towel into his belt, then lowered his hulking frame to the floor. He bent down and his tongue lapped over Nonni’s toe while his chest hairs brushed the cement.

“Who’s the woman with the god-awful makeup?”

“She came with a blond,” Gwen said.

“Did she give you ID?”

“Driver’s licence.”

“New people make me nervous,” Gerry said. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The eagle icon on his shoulder strap tinkled.

“Don looked her up in the phone book,” Gwen said.

“The bathhouse raid last month made me nervous.”

“The police can’t raid bathhouses anymore. This is a private party.”

“Says who?”

“The Supreme Court,” Gwen said.

“Who listens to them?” Nonni said. She dumped the wine into the sink.

The minutes passed and another dozen people filtered in. Nonni recognized a few. There was a couple that they had been to a house party with the month before. She was dressed up like a geisha and he wore latex. Nonni couldn’t remember their



names. Names didn't seem to matter much. Names came and went. Then there was the Spanish couple. The gay couple. No names there, either. A professional dominatrix came in with two of her boys. Mistress Marble or Goddess Granite. Those names she didn't want to know. Pro-Dommes were trouble. Gwen wouldn't let them upstairs for sure.

People lingered. The porn looped across the screen. Che Guevara foot worshipped an industrialist with black pumps. A woman was eaten by a plastic alligator. Then the air smelled of ozone. Nonni's nape prickled and she played a dozen scenes in her head: two girls getting perforated with swords, men choking on turbines, Gerry having his throat slit by a gladiator while she gave him the thumbs down.

"Let's go," she said and pulled down on his collar. This time he didn't mind. Maybe the mango drink was working.

Upstairs, the club was divided into four balconies. The first balcony had a row of crosses and hooks dangling from the ceiling, and looked like an abattoir. Basic industrial flogging. Beyond that there was the bedroom balcony with its red plastic sheets and vinyl pillows. That was for screwing. The medieval room had stocks and an ion machine that produced electric arcs in a film of humidity. But Nonni's favourite place was the fantasy room with its dungeon walls and vaulted ceiling. Here there was a padded electric garrote and a brick well. She liked to think of all the ancient souls that were stuffed down the well in the moment of pleasure and suffering.

Susan bound Jim to a Saint Andrew's Cross and lashed him with an elk-hide flogger. Every time she brought the tails down, he seized up, and his cries echoed down to the bar where William smiled and polished glasses.

"Give him a go," Susan said. Her face was pink.

Jim's body was too trim to leave unbruised, so Nonni picked



up the tails and counted out the strokes. The welts rose on his back, his mouth fell open, and she wished Gerry got like that when she beat him.

Nonni ran her hand over a dozen chrome instruments on the wall that might have been stolen from a dentist's office. Then the mood took her, because she wanted it too, and she grabbed her husband by the hair. He cursed. He sank to his knees. His face shattered in a grimace that looked like glass.

"What's your issue?" she said.

He lingered on the ground. Nonni swept that leaf aside and forgot. The party went on. Life was short. Terri tied up Brian with a length of Newfoundland fishing twine. Nonni found a metal pinwheel with spurs and rolled the darts over his scrotum. The blood formed such gorgeous pulpits. In the next balcony a domme had suspended her slave from a hook in the ceiling and shoved a ball gag in his mouth. It went on and on. Nonni marveled at what beautiful, still, wooden faces they all had in their moment of bliss, and she wanted a menthol.

Daniel leaned up against the door of the fantasy room. He was tanned and slender, with curly blond hair and the flat stomach of youth. A pair of rubber boxer shorts hung off his hips and exposed his beach-browned thighs. Beside him lilted the new girl with the plaster makeup. She was blond and bored. She surveyed the crowd for admirers. A man in a military costume asked if he could get her champagne. She smiled a coy yes and left. Daniel was alone and so Nonni went in.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello ma'am."

He'll do, she thought. "I've seen you here before."

"I come when they will let me."

"Now that you're in, why aren't you playing?"

"Can't find anyone."



His voice was detached and he spoke with a slight accent, although Nonni couldn't place it.

"Doesn't your friend play?"

"Not here," he said and glanced to the stairwell.

"That's too bad."

By the bar, the military man made large circles as if driving a tank and his new date seemed to be impressed.

"They're talking torque conversion," Daniel said.

Nonni adjusted her corset and moved the zipper down an inch. The bubbles that clung to the inside of Daniels' gin and tonic crept up and around the straw.

"So why did you bother?"

"A single man has to take what he can get."

Those were the facts. Single men couldn't get into these kinds of clubs alone. Single men needed a ticket to get into a club. The dating columns were filled with men wanting tickets. They were answered by women who knew what men could provide and so if events worked out, they both went as a couple.

"Now that you're in, what are your turn-ons?" Nonni tapped an unlit cigarette against his lacquered chest and consulted a distant star.

"I don't know."

"Ambiguity is a non-combustible."

He thought. His eyes were as green as quartz. A smell of singed wire crept through the room. Maybe the fuse box. "I'd like to be choked by an obscene creature."

"Might be dangerous."

"You asked."

Nonni pictured his eyes rolling back, egg white in their sockets, as his air ran low and his scrotum engorged. The singe smell grew and Nonni half expected a door to burst into smoke.

