

Excerpts (i.e. stuff that was cut, but is still funny) from

## Dear Prudence

A novel by Mark Pritchard

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### Starry Shine Under the Big Top

Toward the end of the day Stella liked to look at the entertainment listings in the Chronicle's website to see if there was anything she wanted to go to. There were a few events she looked forward to and even bought tickets for -- a David Sedaris appearance at City Arts & Lectures, a Donnas concert, the Guided by Voices farewell tour. But she let local stuff hit her as it came.

Nothing looked interesting until she found a listing for a benefit reading. Some local writer and zine publisher had gotten himself queer-bashed in New Orleans and a lot of what passed for star power in San Francisco was coming out to raise money for him to get back on his feet. She recognized the names of a few of the writers and musicians and decided to go and support.

Stella was still wavering but was fairly sure she wasn't queer. The last time she'd had sex with a girl was in college, and though it was fun, it never really fulfilled her. Of course, heterosexual sex never fulfilled her, either. But it seemed more reliable than sex with a girl, where you had to negotiate who would do what, and keep track as you went along so no one would appear selfish. With a guy, it was simple: he was going to fuck you. There might be a few preliminaries leading up to the main event. But like an episode of Law and Order, it always ended the same way: Thump Thump.

Or sometimes dump dump. If the sex were mediocre enough, Stella tended to feel at least half responsible. Then if the guy said something, like it was her fault, it was a real dump, at least a twenty-dollar one. This happened even though they always came and she rarely did. She was aware of how typical her situation was -- some girl complaining about mediocre sex because he came and she didn't. That was what being a lesbian was supposed to remedy, because lesbians never had bad sex -- real lesbians, that is. The fact that she had never had great sex with a girl was what that told her she wasn't a lesbian.

The benefit took place in a cavernous bar in the Mission District. Admission was sliding scale, five to twenty dollars. Stella gave ten, because at least she had a job. Then later in the evening she reflected that she hadn't even given an amount equal to an hour's time goofing off at work, and went back and gave the door person another ten.

The tip for the bartender was easier, you just put down an extra buck or two depending on how complicated the drink was. For a beer, a dollar. For a cocktail, two. The challenge was getting the bartender's attention in the first place. Stella was 5'5", and if there was a line of goofy slackers on the barstools already, it was hard to catch the barkeep's eye.

It was so much easier to pick a single guy who was decent looking, and make him do it. But you didn't just go right up to him and ask him to order you a drink -- that would seem forward. You had to make him think it was his idea.

She picked a guy. He was about 5'9" with a little stubble but no serious facial hair, and lanky black hair that looked like it would be fun to run her hands through. He wasn't so good looking, with a weak chin and a dubious expression. An aspiring writer, here to rub shoulders with a literary crowd.

She went into her act. Standing about two feet from him, she looked longingly at the bartender and ignored the guy. After thirty seconds he was bound to have noticed her. She turned slightly in his direction, and as if noticing him for the first time, glanced over. Predictably, he was looking at her. She held his gaze a quarter-second longer than necessary, looked back at the bartender, then back at the guy. Now he was staring at her.

A few minutes later she was having a drink with her new friend, whose name, he said, was Jed. She found this uncomfortably close to “Chet,” but that wasn’t his fault. Maybe he was striving for some kind of hillbilly flavor, related to that trucker cap mania. Thank God that fad had passed.

Jed had written about fourteen stories, he told her earnestly, one of which had been published in the lit magazine at San Francisco State, so he was applying for a Master’s there. This made him a little younger than her, Stella thought with alarm. For so many years she had always been the mascot, the youngest person, everywhere she went. When she did that photography class in the spring -- youngest person by five years. When she went to that workshop on chanting from the Torah at the Jewish Community Library -- not because she was Jewish but because Jewish guys were supposed to be “catches” -- she was the youngest person by fifteen years. This guy might be three or four years younger than her 26. That gave her pause.

During a break in the conversation -- the show still hadn’t started -- she asked, “So you’re still an undergraduate? How old are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Twenty-five. I was in the Army, so I started late.”

Oh wow. That was a whole new angle. Her first thought was that this guy had probably fucked a lot of brown-skinned child prostitutes. How could she compete with that?

“What was that like?” she asked. “Did you get sent to Iraq?”

“No, I was in Germany. I was just a radar tech.”

Okay, maybe no child prostitutes, then. She thought that if she had been drunk she might have come right out and asked him. She could hear her voice saying, “So, Jed, as a soldier...” and waiting for him to say “Yes?...” and her voice saying, “Did you actually fuck a lot of child prostitutes?”

She didn’t say that, though, because the show started. First, an earnest M.C. thanked them for supporting the bashed writer, then two poets read who were not very ready for prime time. Then a queer fat Asian guy who read a story about trolling for sex on the internet and how unsatisfying it was, until finally it was satisfying. Then a queer boy with a road story that had no sex in it and made fun of Midwesterners. Then a “boi,” that is, a lesbian her age who had groomed herself into male nerdishness until she looked like a geeky thirteen-year-old boy; she read a poem, or maybe it was an essay, about gender. Somewhere in there Jed fetched a couple more drinks. The last performer before intermission was a middle-aged guy who read the first seriously hot story, about tricking in a motel on Lombard St. with a Filipino college student.

All this homosexual content suggested a weakness to her strategy for the evening. “So Jed,” she asked, during the intermission, “just to make things clear at this point, since we’re at, like, a gay event: are you queer?”

He chuckled. “So, just to make things clear at this point, Stella, since we’re at a gay event, would you please come home with me and fuck me?”

She threw back her head and laughed. “Okay.”

“Jeez, that was easy.”

“Wait, you didn’t exactly answer my question directly.”

“Whereas you did.”

She shrugged. She was starting to have a good time. And he showed good form at this point by pointedly changing the subject and not hitting on her for the rest of the event.

Before the end of intermission, a man loomed out of the crowd. He was wearing a sort of blouse and skirt combination but it made him look more like a pirate than a drag queen. “Stella,” he said, with a big joking smile, “don’t you know it’s against the law to hit on the guys at a gay event?”

“Charlie,” she said, hugging him. “You’re right. He’s all yours if you want him.”

Jed straightened up and Stella introduced them. “Charlie’s one of my best friends. He’s a set designer. He worked on this play I was in right after I got to town.”

“Hi. I write short stories,” Jed said.

“Wonderful,” Charlie beamed. “Are you reading tonight?”

“Um, I’m not at that level yet.”

“Well, stick with this one. She’s got more stories than the library. That was very funny today,” he turned to Stella, “where she said that giving blow jobs makes her at least partly gay.”

“I know, she’s so gay,” Stella laughed.

The second half of the show started and Charlie drifted away. “What was that about blow jobs?” Jed wanted to know.

“Shh, it’s a secret,” Stella said. She kept her blog work close to the vest. Charlie and James and a couple other friends knew, but since starting the blog she hadn’t mentioned it to any of the boys she dated. This one might be interested, since he was a short story writer, and what she was doing with StarryShine could conceivably be thought of as short fiction. She decided she didn’t want to have that discussion, though. Besides, if you don’t tell people you’re writing something, then you can use all your interactions with them as material. And StarryShine hadn’t slept with anyone in a while.

They went to his place, a room in a shared Mission District flat. She didn’t get much impression of the hallway -- the usual bicycles, stacked cardboard boxes, sports equipment, castaway bookshelf with someone’s leftovers. In his room, not much besides a desk, a computer, one chair, clothes and books and junk tossed around, and the bed, unmade.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know I was having company.” He picked a shirt off the bed.

Not even bothering to answer, she pulled his face to hers, and they fell kissing onto the bed. She had learned that getting into conversations sometimes led to disclosures you’d probably rather not know about the person you were sleeping with. Not STD admissions, but the other kind -- such as finding out the guy was a Republican or a Mormon or something like that. She remembered he’d said he had been in the Army. That was already more information than she wanted.

They made out for a long time, his erection periodically poking her through his pants. She finally rubbed it with her hand a little and he gave a little groan and took it out. She lay on her back, looking up at him. What would StarryShine do? She rolled up onto her knees, pushed him over, and took his cock in her mouth.

After they finished fucking, she lay with her head on his shoulder. The lamp on the desk in the corner was shining against the wall, throwing a little romantic light on the scene. Before he could fall asleep, she sat up and said, “I have to work in the morning, and I don’t have anything here, so I ought to head home.”

“Oh. That’s too bad,” he said. He reached up and stroked her face. Clearly he didn’t feel like getting up and taking her home, or even walking her to the bus stop. On second thought, taking Muni from the Mission to the Western Addition was a daunting task even when buses were running with daytime frequency.

“I better call a taxi,” she said, standing up and looking around for her jacket.

No offers to pay for the taxi, or even phone for one, came from the bed. She found her clothes and dressed quickly, dug her cell phone out of her pocket and asked, “What’s the address here?”

He told her, and when she finished her call, seemed to wake up a little. “Sorry,” he said. “I’ll wait with you.”

“No need,” she said. She sat on the bed, hand resting on his chest, waiting for the taxi.

After several minutes, he said, “You came, right?”

“You’re asking that now?”

“Oh, God. I’m sorry. Let me make it up to you. Let’s go out Saturday.”

She sighed. “Okay. But a nice dinner. On you. Then we’ll see about the sex part.”

“You don’t have to be a bitch about it.”

“You’re right, Mr. Charm, I don’t. Thanks,” she said, standing up, and pausing before finally thinking of what she was thanking him for. “For the drinks,” she finished. “No, don’t get up, it’s fine. Really. See, there’s the taxi.”

She bent down and kissed him, before he could get his act together, and went home.

## **StarryShine Lights Up a Room**

Every Wednesday night, Stella met Charlie and James for karaoke night at the Mint. Half the room was in drag. For Charlie, this usually meant his everyday mental-patient thrift store blouses and skirts, topped by a turban to make it more festive. And James did drag only on special occasions. But this was a special occasion, so they were both decked out like Elton John: Charlie in the mid-early super-glam period, James in the more subdued stadium touring version of the 90s. Stella just wore a pink minidress and long strings of lemon-yellow beads, with thigh-high white boots, and a wig of long, straight blond hair. That is how StarryShine dressed every day, only StarryShine dressed more outrageously.

The best part about karaoke night was that it was sake happy hour all night. Sake was the best thing to get drunk on; it made her happy and high and if she stuck to it and ate a little as she went along, she never got sick. At the end of each evening Charlie plopped her in a taxi and she sometimes didn’t think to take her boots off before passing out happily on her bed.

Tonight was the Elton John Challenge, a private event known only to the three of them. Each would perform an Elton John song of his or her choice, and the two who garnered the most applause would receive a special duet. Stella desperately wanted to win. Ever since having an epiphany while singing “You Don’t Bring Me Flowers,” Stella insisted on doing a duet with one of the boys each karaoke night. They’d done the obvious numbers -- “I Got You Babe” and “Something Stupid” -- and some standards arranged for duet like “I’ve Got You Under My Skin.” But everyone knew that the *ne plus ultra* of karaoke duets was “Don’t Go Breaking My Heart.” It’s not as if somebody didn’t do it every karaoke night, but because it was done so often, there was an unwritten rule that you had to save it for special occasions. This week being James’ birthday, and because they had already run through every other so-called duet on the jukebox, tonight’s Elton John Challenge was the culmination of a year of duets.

After some plastered queen slogged through a rendition of “Everything’s Coming Up Roses,” James led off with “Tiny Dancer.” Difficult opening line, four descending notes that were easy to go flat on, but he pulled the last one out. The lines “Lying here, with no one near” were unexpectedly poignant, because they reminded the three of them of the time when Charlie went out of town to a Radical Faeries gathering and James slipped and fell in the bathroom and hit his head and lay there all day until he was able to crawl to the phone. Then Stella forgot about that because she realized he was singing the chorus about the tiny dancer to her. He got a decent hand.

“That was very moving,” Charlie said in a tone halfway between gracious and ironic.

“The only rock song ever to use the word ‘seamstress,’” James said.

“Your big dream, to be a rock groupie,” said Charlie.

“Stella knows what it’s like.”

By lot, Stella was chosen to go next. She knew that Charlie wanted to sing “Candle in the Wind,” and thought of blocking him by doing it herself, but she didn’t want to risk her duet prize on a song she’d never liked.

She tossed back another gulp of sake and had an inspiration: “Saturday Night’s Alright for Fighting.” Nobody ever did that at the Mint. Would it be too difficult? She’d have to get her manitude on. But if Elton John could play the working class tough, why couldn’t she?

She had to wait a few songs. When her turn came, she got a hand just for wearing that minidress. A little difficulty at the beginning -- she’d never paid attention to the melody in the verses, and stumbled a little. Then, attempting to regain control with the chorus, she shouted “We’ve had it with your discipline” into the mike too loudly and it came out sounding like someone shouting through a megaphone at a demonstration. She did nail the “She’s with me” line, and at the end a lot of people sang along on the “Saturday Saturday, Saturday Saturday” coda.

She descended the stage feeling like she’d blown it, but still got a good hand, because of the audience participation and the general relief at hearing a song nobody ever did.

“You rock,” James said when she sat down.

“I do not,” she pouted. “I sucked. You’re going to win.”

“No, you’re going to win.”

“I don’t want to back into this. If Charlie sucks worse than me, then I’ll only win because I sucked less.”

“You’re just saying that because you like saying ‘suck.’”

The tension built as they waited for Charlie’s turn to come around. He flirted with Stella to make her feel better. “Say it for me again, darling.”

“Suck.”

They ordered another round. Perhaps inspired by their choices, someone performed “Daniel,” and slaughtered it. The three of them clapped in polite appreciation. James said the crypto-gay Elton John songs were the worst.

“I had some really bad sex the other night,” Stella said.

“Was it bad in some interesting way?”

“Not really.”

James and Charlie didn’t say anything. The topic died.

No one paid attention as a trim man with white hair and mustache stepping onto the stage, or noticed anything special when the first notes of his accompaniment started. But as he warbled the first words of the song, their heads swiveled in unison.

“Oh my God,” Stella said.

“He can’t... he can’t...” James said. Charlie just stared. The man had chosen to perform “Candle in the Wind.” Not only that, but he did the Princess Di version, even though the regular words popped up on the monitor. The three of them sat stunned.

Stella was also secretly celebrating, because now Charlie would have to go to his second-string number, “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road,” which was a lot harder to sing. When the white-haired guy had finished his number and they had clapped politely, she turned to Charlie and said as sincerely as she could that she was so sorry.

“Not a problem,” Charlie said, tossing off another cup of sake. “When the going gets tough, the tough sing... ‘Honky Cat.’”

“Charlie, you wouldn’t.”

“Watch me.”

James laid his hand on Charlie’s arm. “Honey, you promised not to. You said you’d never do that again.”

“Extreme times call for extreme measures.”

Stella suggested that they call the whole thing off and do it another night. Charlie could go first and get his number in before anybody had the chance to. James seemed to think that if Charlie sang “Honky Cat” the police might have to be called.

Charlie would not be dissuaded. He went up to the k.j. and made his choice, then went to the bathroom. Someone sang the Neil Diamond song “Cherry, Cherry,” in a way that made it sound dirty.

Then it was Charlie’s turn. James was watching from between his fingers.

The music started. It wasn’t “Honky Cat,” it was something they didn’t recognize. At first Stella thought Charlie might be making some obscure choice, like one of the Disney movie songs. It wasn’t until the chorus that they realized it was “Don’t Let the Sun Go Down on Me.”

Not too high or too fast, a ballad that wasn’t as saccharine as, well, as “Candle in the Wind.” Great chorus. Easy to sing, in fact. But no one ever did it.

When he returned to the table, Stella was gracious. “You guys won,” she said.

“Not that many people clapped,” Charlie shrugged. “It’s not about the singing, it’s about the love. More people clapped for you.”

“You were at a disadvantage,” she protested. “People were tired of Elton John by this time. We never considered someone else would do him. It was like Elton John Night around here.”

They told her she should go ahead, her and James, because it was his birthday. He said it would be a nice birthday present for him. But they had been there a long time and were pretty drunk. Stella wasn’t sure she could make it back up onto the stage in those boots without tripping and splitting her lip open. So the Elton John Challenge ended in a draw.

## Starry Shine the Spy

It was Friday and the monthlies were due at the end of the day. Prognos had already generated reports based on last month's data, and Stella had spot-checked them. All she had to do now was turn the reports into PDFs for Duplicating, but to maintain the fiction that it took her much of the day to perform the task that took the computer five minutes, she continued poking at the data using Prognos.

Sometimes she pretended to be the manager or director or whoever really cared about these reports. What were they looking for? Spikes and trends. An sudden anomalous change in one measure from month to month, like the number of customers using the website suddenly dropping by 90%. That was a spike. Or a steady month-by-month decline in the same figure. That was a trend.

The only thing that resembled a spike was a dip that showed a lot of people in southern California had suddenly stopped using the system. That was because of the earthquake in Santa Ana that had destroyed half of Orange County. The consequent removal from the online universe of thousands of computers, not to mention electric service over a six-county area, was reflected in a nosedive in several figures, like Total Logins and Total OnLine Transactions. Those people had better things to do than use a website to transfer funds, like line up at a shelter for blankets. Drilling down into the region for the month showed the decline had already begun to reverse itself in the last week of the month, meaning the earthquake mattered little in the grand scheme of the bank's internet strategy. For that matter, Disneyland was already up and running again, minus Space Mountain. They were still looking for parts of Space Mountain.

For the thousandth time, Stella wished she had more interesting data to look at. For example, someone should record and catalog every sexual act, solo and otherwise, committed by the students of all the colleges and universities in the country, and then cross-reference it to a database of all the music they listened to. Let her poke at that. Then she could discover, for example, that Stanford students liked playing emo while giving blow jobs (or b10w jobs), while Yale students used alt.country to set the mood for anal sex. If George Bush were a college student today, that's definitely what he'd be doing, she thought -- fucking a cheerleader in the ass while listening to the Cowboy Junkies.

She spent the next hour making wild calculations about what it would take to actually put that data together. Say one researcher for each 10,000 college students, but a minimum of one researcher at each accredited college or university. The internet said there were 12,000 such schools in the country, a ridiculous number, but whatever. So say 30,000 researchers would be paid \$15 an hour for ten hours a week... Stella did some math, but there were too many variables. Like, if a bunch of kids dropped ecstasy and had a clusterfuck while an April Lavigne CD played over and over again, how many sex acts was that? Finally she took a wild guess and decided on a figure of fifty million dollars. Fifty million was insignificant to Sony or Apple; surely they would pay that much to uncover the sexual habits of their customers.

She logged in to her blog. StarryShine wrote about this research as if the whole research study were already complete and she'd just heard about it on Entertainment Tonight. StarryShine burred on about how the study showed her ideal school was the University of Nevada in Las Vegas, where students listened to the Circle Jerks while doing circle jerks. To make the entry look more official, Stella decorated it with a link to a government study she found at random, something about cheese production.

Lunch time. Stella crossed the street and went into an office building that had its own food court. The office building had been created from a Depression-era post office and had a five-story atrium in its core. Beneath the atrium skylight, a fountain spilled water from ceiling to floor, falling five stories into a fountain at the atrium's center and creating a sheet of white noise. Next to the fountain there was a grand piano, which a man in a tuxedo played from 11 to 1, pounding at the keys so as to be heard over the noise of the fountain. Then there were hundreds of people eating lunch and talking with each other, striving to make themselves heard over the fountain and the piano. The total experience was like trying to eat lunch on the deck of that boat that goes under Niagara Falls, the Maid of the Mist.

Stella got a sandwich from the fake Italian sub place and took it into the courtyard behind the building. It was a warm, calm day and she snagged a bench from two women who had just finished. Out there in the courtyard there was only a minimum of urban noise; it was much more peaceful than the atrium, if you didn't mind balancing your lunch on your lap. She was still thinking about all those horny college students. Maybe they did it with their iPods plugged in; what if each person was listening to something different while they fucked, how were you supposed to count that? Half a sex act per song?

She had just missed the iPod in college; it came out the year after she graduated. She was convinced college was much better with iPods and laptops. Having sex while listening to your own music, and -- given the right position -- simultaneously surfing the web. Today's kids had it much better.

On the other side of the courtyard, partially hidden by shrubbery, she spotted Chandrika's bright green sari. She had never seen Chandrika off the 10<sup>th</sup> floor. Even more surprising was that Chandrika was having lunch with Joyce Babbage, whom Stella now recognized by Joyce's frosted perm. Stella tried to remember who Chandrika reported to. It wasn't Joyce, but maybe somebody else under Joyce. The org chart was always getting juggled.

Her second thought was, Joyce wanted to talk to Chandrika but wouldn't even take her to lunch at a real restaurant, the cheapskate.

That afternoon Stella prowled the 10<sup>th</sup> floor until she saw the flash of green again. Until now, she had never bothered to learn where Chandrika sat.

Chandrika worked with her back to the cube entrance, and Stella paused there unnoticed. Chandrika's cube was bare, befitting a depressive. Not a single picture of a blue, multi-armed elephant god. She seemed to be working on a spreadsheet.

"Hello, Stella," Chandrika said, without turning around.

Stella almost choked. "Hi, Chandrika," she said, blushing. "How's it going?"

"It's going fine, thank you." Chandrika made a few last keystrokes and swiveled around, the green fabric of her sari trailing in the sudden tiny breeze. "Have you come to see me? Please make yourself at home."

Stella sat in the guest chair. "I wanted to ask you something," she said, beginning her feint. "I finished the monthly reports and posted them. I was wondering if you were familiar with them."

"Which monthly reports are these?"

"The customer service reports. Total Logins, Repeated Use by Customers with Multiple Accounts, that sort of thing."

"I think Thomas looks at them."

"Right." Stella glanced at the screen but couldn't make anything of the spreadsheet, which seemed to consist entirely of columns of integers, lacking labels or legends. "Who's Thomas again?"

"Yes."

"Excuse me?"

"Thomas Akin. Senior Manager of New Programs."

"Oh, I thought you reported to Joyce," Stella lied.

"No. Anyway, what were you wanting to know about the reports?"

"I thought I saw you going to lunch together."

"Oh, yes. She wanted to ask me something."

Stella nodded, and then just sat there with an encouraging smile on her face. Silence was terrifying to most people, and therefore a valuable espionage tool. In the middle of a conversation, if you suddenly stop talking, the other person will become uncomfortable with the social awkwardness and try to fill the gap.

It didn't work very well on Chandrika, who sat patiently waiting for Stella to ask her another nonsensical question. Depressed people don't care about social awkwardness.

Finally Chandrika said, "She mentioned she would be talking soon to you."

"Oh, really," Stella said.

"Here she is now," Chandrika nodded.

The hair on Stella's neck rose. Where Joyce roamed, could Kathi be far behind?

Joyce joined them in the cube, which now seemed very full. She wore a grape-colored wool suit with big brass buttons. Like Kathi, she was also fat, though not as much. "I've been looking for you," Joyce said.

Chandrika turned back to her workstation without comment. Stella followed Joyce across the floor to her office; she was relieved to see no sign of Kathi. Joyce mentioned that she enjoyed Stella's monthlies so much, as if they were some sort of appetizer. Stella thanked her. Excruciating small talk ensued. During this prattle, Stella dreamed up a sort of athletic event in which she set fire to Joyce's hair, then handed a fire extinguisher to Kathi. The question was whether Joyce, in her panic, could outrun Kathi, or if Kathi were nimble enough to scramble after her and put the fire out before they both collapsed from heart attacks.

What was Joyce asking her about? World travel? Why did she give a shit? Joyce probably committed world travel on cruise ships. Stella had traveled overseas only once, on a package student tour to Europe that had been advertised on a bulletin board in the dorm, 11 cities in 8 countries in 14 days. They had trundled between cities on buses, sleeping all day and having sex with each other all night, though it wasn't as fun as that sounds. Night after night, each boy turned her over and pulled her butt into the air and fucked her doggy style. It drove her crazy, she wondered why they found her so ugly. Finally she compared notes with the other girls and discovered they were subjected to the same treatment. It turned out the boys on the trip had gotten it into their heads that European people did sex from behind, and as part of their European experience made all the girls perform intercourse that way, even though they were all Americans from the Midwest.

Stella told Joyce she had nothing against world travel or people from other countries. Hadn't she just been chatting with Chandrika? This seemed to satisfy her, and Stella finally got away.

She returned to her desk and looked at the time. The conversations had taken up an annoyingly small amount of time; she still had two hours left in the day.

All the thinking about sex had got her to the point where she felt like having some. She debated whether to pick up someone new or try to see that Jed guy again. While she was trying to decide, she searched for him on the internet. They hadn't gone so far as to tell each other their last names, but she remembered he had mentioned the SF State litmag was publishing a story of his, and tracked him down that way.

Better the devil you know, she thought. A few minutes later she sent Jed an email asking if he wanted to get together again. It wouldn't have taken that long except she went to Yahoo and created a new email account for her correspondence with him. It was standard procedure for her with boys she met -- each got a separate address to use for her. That way, when she got tired of seeing or even hearing from them, she could simply abandon the address and disappear. She must have created and disposed of twenty of them in the last few years.

## Starry Shine in the Marketplace

Stella asked Jed to take her to a Saturday Farmers Market. Not that she was a big cook; she didn't even care if they got to the Farmers Market at all. But she wanted to see what he looked like in the light of day.

It was a fine April day, the fog burning off early. They rendezvoused at the one sidewalk café on Market St., in the Financial District, and had coffee. Stella deliberately got there ten minutes late so she could make an entrance. She was in a good mood for no reason -- or maybe taking the initiative with him had given her more of a feeling of control.

They had coffee and she quizzed him about what music he listened to, and less directly, about his sex life. He didn't have much to say about either. He mentioned a few college radio type generic alternative rock bands without seeming passionate about any. As for sex, it didn't sound like he had had that much of it; since coming here after graduating from college in Massachusetts, he hadn't really had a steady girlfriend.

Since his alternatives were few, she concluded that he was easy to get and would, if granted a steady relationship that included sex, do just about anything to maintain it. He even admitted that when she went home with him the other night it was the first time something like that had ever happened to him. Usually they "got to know each other" for a while, which was another sign he was timid.

Stella forced a smile. He was a writer. They were supposed to be introverts. If he had any large ideas, as one of her college professors used to say, they were still hidden away. It didn't mean they weren't there.

They walked down Market St. to the Ferry Building location of the Farmers Market. The street trees were leafing out, and though a cool wind blew through the skyscrapers, it was warm in the sun. Stella told him about her desire to survey college students for their music listening habits during sex. He seemed to take it in the humorous way it was conceived, but said, "Why just during sex? Wouldn't a music company want to know what they're listening to while they're studying, or eating, or working out?"

That's right, she told herself. College kids "worked out" now. Depressing thought.

"I guess so," she said. "But I'm not a music company. I just want to know."

"I guess you could install spyware on their .mp3 players," he went on. "When they download stuff, include a little bit of code that keeps track of what they listen to, and then the next time they download, it also uploads the data into your internet-linked database."

"Internet what?" she asked. "I thought you were a writer."

"I am. Sorry. I majored in marketing. I guess they got me thinking that way."

Well, stop it, she wanted to shout. "Anyway, with your idea there's still no way to know what they were doing when they were listening to a particular song."

"Put spycams on the .mp3 players."

"Oh, stop," she finally said. That was the trouble with kids these days. You started a conversation about sex, and they thought it was about business and the internet.

They walked down to the market, where long rows of white canopies sheltered produce stands. A packed crowd was browsing, made more complicated by people pushing bicycles and baby strollers. Stella and Jed wandered through without stopping, up one row and down another, before Stella realized that if she didn't draw out the experience a little, it would be "Okay, what's next?" without them really having an opportunity to bond.

Neither of them cooked, so it would be hard to work up anything around that. Asking the vendors about their organic farming techniques? She didn't know a thing about it. Shopping for a vegetable for use as a sex toy? Too soon in the relationship.

But she had to do something. Halting in front of a stand selling "heirloom" tomatoes, Stella chirped to the middle-aged, fanny pack-wearing farmer, "Tell me about these."

The guy had a lot to say. Jed stayed by her side listening politely, but unengaged. After several minutes she got a word in edgewise.

"But why are they called 'heirloom'? Are they really, like, your great aunt's tomato plants, or something?"

The guy chuckled. "Not my great aunt. Maybe somebody's great aunt. I don't breed them, I just grow them."

Right. They moved on without buying any. "That's kind of a disappointment," she said to Jed. "I was hoping he'd have some interesting story about his great aunt in Salinas or something."

"Salinas," Jed replied. "Steinbeck's from there."

"So he is. That's the first writer-like thing you've said yet."

"Yeah, well..."

"I know, you majored in marketing. But you're a writer now, right?"

"Knowing about marketing is more important than people think. Publishers don't do as much as they used to for publicity and all."

"Okay, but maybe actually writing a book first is also an important skill."

She was being too bitchy, she told herself. Even if the guy was malleable, she didn't want to create a negative atmosphere. She told herself to stop being sarcastic. "Sorry, I mean, I don't know anything about writing. All I have is a blog."

"Oh. Okay, sure," he said, with some condescension. Her ploy worked, it made him feel superior. Now if she could just keep from being sarcastic, she might make it through to the sex part.

It was almost time for lunch, but she sensed that spending an hour across a table from each other would involve a lot of conversation, and conversation was the problem. She suggested going to the Embarcadero multiplex. That way they would not have to talk, could make out instead, and would kill two hours in the bargain. She remembered from their first bout that Jed liked to kiss a lot, so this tactic was bound to please him.

Four movies were being shown at the Embarcadero Cinema. She suggested the impenetrable European job -- those were always good makeout movies. She suggested seats in the back, and before the lights went down, whispered to Jed, "Let's make out a lot." That was what Kathi was always saying Joyce wanted to do, set expectations.

They spent the next hour and a half ignoring the movie. For the first twenty minutes they just kissed. When their necks got tired, she came in front of him and faced him and they made out some more. Gyrating her crotch against his, she wondered, was this what a lap dance was? She even crouched on the floor and pressed her face against his crotch, though she wouldn't let him take it out. By the time the

movie was over, he was nearly bursting. When she said, "Now let's go to your place," he couldn't even speak. He just nodded sort of frantically.

He took charge when they got to the street. He hailed a taxi and gave his Mission District address; on the way, they kneaded each other's crotches through their jeans.

"Do you think your housemates are home?" she asked as they climbed the steps.

"I doubt it," he said. "One always does long bike rides on Saturdays, the other's in law school."

They went inside and he did a quick search, leaving her by the front door. As she waited she realized the hours of foreplay had had an effect on her, too. Her strategy had worked. They had gotten to the sex part without him spoiling it though a lot of stupid conversation.

He came back, saying "Nobody home," and she pulled him to her, kissing him as hard as she could. Then she pushed him down on the floor, pulled out his cock, and thrust her mouth down on it. He came almost at once, noisily.

It was cold in the shadowy foyer, so they moved to the warm, sunlit kitchen at the rear of the flat. There was a small glassed-in porch on the back of the kitchen that had been turned into an office. Sun was streaming in its windows. She pulled off her skirt and panties and sat down in the office chair.

"This isn't actually my office," Jed said.

She noticed the law books on the desk. "Then you better not scatter any papers. All I'm going to do is sit in this chair. What are you going to do?" She opened her legs.

They had sex there, then in the kitchen, and finally in his bed. Like every commodity, sexual access and pleasure operated according to the law of supply and demand. Stella was the holder of the pussy commodity, which was in great demand by men, in this case by Jed. But only someone eating her pussy the right way could make her come, so he held an option on her pleasure; he too held some control, and he was not likely to relinquish it until he was assured there was a surplus of what he wanted. Stella therefore had to maintain a balance. She had to assure him a surplus existed -- that not only could he fuck her as much as he wanted that day, but could do so in the future -- and yet not satisfy him so completely that the commodity became devalued or, in the short run, he was so sated that he went to sleep. At the same time, she had to maintain the requisite sensitivity in her clitoris and vulva, and too much hard fucking would desensitize it and make her unable to come.

Usually this balancing act proved too difficult, but on this day, perhaps because of the absence of alcohol in their systems, or the way the afternoon seemed to stretch out indefinitely like a drug trip, or the sense of privacy in the empty flat, or the fact that Jed was so much of a blank slate that no resentments or scorekeeping entered into the equation, at last she managed to get on her back with his mouth avidly working between her legs, and finally, and for the first time in several months, came.

## **Starry Shine on the Launching Pad**

Now that the monthlies were finished, Stella got to work on other aspects of her job. When someone wanted to change or create some aspect of OnLine Services, they wrote a project plan, and she was on the list of reviewers. Several projects were in the pipeline, and it took an hour or more to go through each plan.

She appreciated being asked her opinion and always marked up the plans with great care. The plans explained how the people doing the project -- one or two coders, a designer, a producer -- would get from the idea stage to the point of actually launching the new feature. They were always written in the same format, and tended to resemble each other, especially when the same producer had written more than one of them. She had become so familiar with their contents that she often found things to question or comment on. "Need measurable metrics," she wrote on one. "Where are resource allocations for this?" she wrote on another.

No one ever responded to her questions; the report would either simply sail through despite her comments, or she would eventually get another version, sometimes changed where she had commented, sometimes not. She saved xeroxed versions of her commented reports so she could compare them.

Toward the end of the day was her weekly one-on-one with Genady, her boss. Genady was a large, very easy-going person. He had been passed over for promotion in favor of Joyce a couple years before, during the internet bubble when the bank had been in good enough financial shape to actually give people raises and promotions. Though that time would never come again, Genady was playing out a strategy designed to keep him in the loop. He had jars on his desk filled with bite-sized Hershey bars, mints, and Gummi candy. This was to encourage people to stop by and talk to him. It seemed to work, because Kathi was always in there eating and chattering, and after one of her visits Genady would know just who to call or visit to insinuate himself into a role on their project. In this way he managed to keep a finger in a lot of pies, performing work that was often lower than work a manager would usually perform, but becoming useful to enough people that his position was safe.

This meant that most of the work he was concerned with had nothing to do with Stella or their department, and her work didn't contribute to his goals. She sent him a status report every week, but they seldom even discussed it. Mostly they gossiped about something Kathi had said to one of them.

Stella told him about Kathi's question about whether she had ever done training, and that she was supposed to go find her flippers. Genady said in his Boris Badenov accent, "Did you know that Kathi used to run day care center?"

"Kathi? No. It makes sense, though." Stella envisioned Kathi standing in the middle of a dozen toddlers, issuing commands in a loud voice and waving her hands a lot.

"Got closed down. It wasn't up to code, and she couldn't afford to get work done. So she went into finance, and here she is."

"You don't know anything about this training stuff?"

"With Kathi, what she says directly is never what to focus on. She always speaks with at least one level of indirection. Have you ever taken programming class? In computer code? I don't recommend it, it's real mind-fuck. Instead of just straight instructions, 'do X, then Y, then Z,' programmers have to use indirection. Instead of saying 'do X,' where X means X, they say 'do X' where X really means do A, B and C, and then you find out A means do J, H and K. All these things actually referring to something else. So if Kathi says training, you know she means something else."

"Was she a programmer too?"

"No, in Kathi's case, just perverse."

She had an hour left before the end of the day, and had one more project plan to go through, but she had skipped lunch and was feeling hollow; eating a tiny Mr. Goodbar in Genady's office had only made her feel worse. She went downstairs for some air, but feeling somewhat chilled by the air conditioning, went out the back of the building, on the sunny side.

Behind the building, there had once been a freeway which had fallen down in an earthquake fifteen years before. Now behind the building there was merely a curved empty space, as if a little girl sitting on

the beach had drawn a broad, curving line in the sand with her toy shovel. This empty space, about two hundred feet wide, had been blacktopped over and turned into a parking lot, which at this time of day was emptying out.

Stella strolled through a thin line of poplar trees at the edge of the empty space and onto the warm asphalt. Her boots clacked on the surface. The nearby streets had little traffic, and the sounds of the city bounced off buildings and reached her only as an indistinct soft roaring sound. She blinked in the sunlight, struggling to adjust her eyes after being in the office all day.

She walked up one row of cars and down the other, as if she were shopping at a used car lot. Having a car was indeed useful for romance. Almost immediately after coming to San Francisco, she sold her car and used the money to survive until she got a job. That was five years ago. Before it transported her and her meager possessions out to California, she had lived on campus and used the car primarily as a makeout pit when her roommate was studying. Now she thought about taking refuge with Jed in the capacious back seat of one of these Volvos. Jed had his own room, but it was bothersome hearing the housemates come and go, and Stella felt she should invite him over to her place to even things up. She knew that affairs tended to be rooted in one person's apartment rather than the other even when there was no good reason for it, and she didn't necessarily want to get into the habit of screwing in Jed's room, which she found slightly tawdry. Not that her apartment would win any decorating prizes, but at least her bed was up off the floor.

When coming to San Francisco, young people went through certain stages. The first was sharing a flat with someone and sleeping on the floor on a futon or a foam pad. Then at some point you somehow got a real bed, even though you still had to share a flat for financial reasons. The next phase was either that you moved in with a lover or you got your own apartment; this depended on whether you got a corporate job first. Of course there were always young trust fund kids with their own apartments; that didn't count, unless they were the lover you moved in with. Then when you broke up it was usually because the trust fund kid had been unfaithful, accustomed as he was to always getting his own way. Then you could probably guilt-trip him into leaving you the apartment, the rent of which you could now afford, though you could never have afforded the initial deposit. You repaid your now ex-boyfriend his deposit over several months, and then the place was yours, because you had also guilt-tripped the guy into making the landlord extend the lease to you. This is how Stella got her place, anyway.

Since breaking up with that first guy, David -- she didn't even like recalling his name -- she had hardly ever had someone over. She always went over to the guy's place. The longer she stayed in the city, the more she cherished her privacy, even though she didn't use the apartment for any particularly privately needful purpose other than to live. She didn't write or paint or sell drugs out of her apartment. She just lived there.

On the other side of the strange blank space, there was an odd, curving two-story building that had been built up against the vanished freeway. This was a bar called the On Ramp. The on-ramp itself was gone; the On Ramp remained.

She went in and sat at the bar. The last hour of her workday was ticking by, and it felt like playing hooky to be sitting here. Swigging Calistoga out of the bottle, she looked around the bar. There was a small party of office girls in a booth having what looked like a goodbye party. Then, to her shock, beyond them she saw the top of Joyce Babbage's head. She was sitting in a booth with Chet Pratt, who was looking this way. She spun away. Had Chet noticed her? How could she get out of there?

Too late. "Stella," she heard Joyce's voice. "We're down here."

She eased off the stool and went down to them, carrying her bottle of water, having decided she would brazen this one out. "Joyce. Chet," she said, nodding to them. "Meeting offsite."

“Thanks for coming on such short notice,” Chet said. Joyce moved over so Stella could sit down. “We’ve been impressed with you, Stella,” he went on. “You’re very sharp about, um...”

“The business space in general,” Joyce said.

“And your background is broad in very significant areas.”

“How do you feel about going to India?”

“Off-shoring.”

“You mean politically?”

“I mean personally. I’m going to share this with you, but this is strictly *entre nous*. CaliMort is opening an office in Bangalore. We need someone intimately familiar with customer service, furthermore someone with multicultural experience.”

Multi-cultural? If you counted her high school as an exchange student in Quebec, when she learned the French Canadian teen dooper slang of the mid-90s.

“And training.”

“Kathi told you about my gig at the Y?”

“This is a big commitment, Stella.”

“Requiring dedication and professionalism. The ability to improvise. Cut some slack. And most important, manage.”

“Let me make sure I understand. You want me to go to India?”

“For six to nine months. You and Kathi.”

“Wow,” is all Stella could think to say.

“They’re sending me to fucking Bangalore,” Stella told Jed the next time they met.

She didn’t say it right away, or even after they’d sat down to dinner at a restaurant -- a “real” date for once. She arranged the dinner so they could talk, but when she looked at him across the table, she decided she didn’t feel like talking about anything important until she felt, through sex, intimacy with him again. So at dinner they talked only about movies, music, the latest season of “Big Brother,” and the other pop culture chat that takes up so much conversation with people you hardly know.

It was after they went down on each other, and she came again into his mouth, then stuffed him deep in her pussy and rocked him to satiety, that she told him about her big trip.

“Bangalore,” he repeated dreamily. “It always reminds me of that T. Rex song ‘Bang-A-Gong.’”

“Don’t go to sleep, this is important. I’ve been waiting to talk to you about this all evening.”

“Bangalore,” he sang, “Get some more, Bangalore.”

“For six to nine months. Gone. In India.”

He was silent, then said, “Better not catch anything.”