

Babylon Nights  
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9781847374097  
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filed by AScribe v.4.6.383 on 26/07/2010

**1**

The nude photos of her were spread all over the floor. Thirty or forty eight-by-tens, arranged carefully side by side, touching each other so that the images of her lay before him like a carpet. A magic carpet, up here in his hideaway. Up here in his world.

They were computer prints, not particularly good, copied and digitized from the originals, wherever they were. Perec didn't care. They'd cost him two thousand dollars and months of searching, but he'd found them. Perec had heard they existed and searched the Internet, right here in his room, until he found someone who had them. A guy in San Diego. Perec couldn't allow them to be mailed to the house, Maman would have needed to see, she'd have taken them from him, ripped them open, read his mail, looking for whatever filth was meant for his eyes. So Perec had driven to San Diego and given the man his money. On the way home Perec kept touching the package, over and over, as it lay in the passenger seat.

The Internet was wonderful. You could find anything on the Internet, provided you looked hard enough.

Now she lay there, over and over again, pouting, smiling, gazing at him, her bubbies showing and in most of them her Down There showing too, and it made Perec at once sick but excited to see them. He felt like his heart was being torn from his body, but the pit of his stomach ached and his own Down There felt a way he'd never felt before.

Perec took off his socks and slowly, hesitantly, ventured barefoot onto the ocean of her, floating on a raft of her. He could feel her body under his feet, her warmth rising through his soles and up into and through him. He was dizzy. He took a breath and moved another step. A nipple peeked between the toes of his left foot, the edge of his right snuggled her hip like a lover's body.

Perec thought he might pass out. Perec thought he might go mad.

He didn't want to do it. He swore he wouldn't do it. But he stepped off the photos and undressed until he was as naked, as shameless, as helpless as she was. He moved back onto the photos, stepping across them slowly, stepping from one to the other like stones across a stream. She entered his body in a wave, a great rush from the floor up through him, and Perec felt that stirring he could not name, his Down There hard and aching, and he lowered himself onto her, the infinite numbers of her, and he found he could hardly breathe.

He thought about doing that Thing, the one he sometimes had to do after certain girls came into the shop and teased him. Perec knew that it was ugly and it was dirty and he hated himself whenever it happened. He wanted to do it now so bad, the filthy devils in his body screamed at him to do it, but Perec refused. Perec fought them. No, said Perec. No, I will not. It wasn't the sort of thing you did to someone you loved, and Perec loved her with all his heart.

Instead he got to his feet and went over and took the razor from his drawer. His father's straight razor, ivory-handled Solingen steel, when his father died the only thing he could grab before his mother threw it all away and forbid that his name be spoken again. Perec made a small incision on his forearm. It was small but just enough. Perec knew how to do this, he'd done it often over the years, his body now a map of tiny puckered scars. He watched the blood trickle slowly down his wrist and into his cupped palm. Perec moved again among the photos, dipping his other thumb in the blood, kneeling at each picture, carefully leaving a crimson print on each breast and between her legs, at once clothing their shameful nakedness and offering a benedic-

tion, just like the priests his mother hated now, the ones who used to touch his forehead and tell him his sins were gone forever. Perc's heart quickened, his hands shook, he feared he would spill blood all over the photos. He stepped off the pictures just as it happened, he couldn't stop it, his body quivered and he cried out. He felt no guilt now because he had not done it himself, she had done this for him, and it was fine. She had given this to him, she had shown she loved him as well.

Perc sat down and looked at his work and was filled with a greater love than he could ever have imagined. Even in the days when he loved God, there was nothing like this. Perc knew he must show her his love. He must find her and give her his gift.

Perc, for the first time in his life, knew joy.

## 2

Kenny Kingston stood on top of the Beverly Center in Hollywood, California, thinking about Life, Love, and Disease in America during these early days of the twenty-first century.

To be more specific, he was thinking about genital herpes. His own were acting up this morning, as they always did when he was stressed. He scratched his crotch through his jeans and shifted uneasily. To the east a lemon-colored sun cleared a pinkish L.A. skyline, a scene not devoid of beauty until you thought about the sheer number of airborne carcinogens that made this possible.

Kenny was slightly below-average height for a California male. He had dirty shoulder-length blond hair, and wore a black T-shirt featuring the Jägermeister stag. His blue jeans had been worn for a week and the knees were gone. He wore Birkenstocks on his bare feet, and if you got close enough there was a fungus beginning under his left big toenail. Kenny looked much like the talented and extremely dead Kurt Cobain, a fact not lost on him. This too made him popular in certain circles. That and his access to many amusing chemicals.

It was seven-thirty in the morning and Kenny's twenty-year-old green Porsche was the only car yet parked on the top tier of the structure. Kenny leaned on the short concrete wall, gazing downtown and smoking a cigarette. He'd read somewhere that one out of three people in Los Angeles had herpes, making L.A. a garden spot for the disease. Meaning that out of ten million people in L.A. County, over three million had it, and maybe a million of those didn't know it yet. Meaning that, unless you were of a very cautious nature, if you didn't have the herp by the time you got to L.A., you'd probably have it by the time you left. Of course, once you had it, an entire world of unprotected sex

opened up, given all those diseased people who were grateful to find an equally diseased partner. Kenny had even joined a club, which eliminated that awkward prefuck “Do you or Don’t you” question, since, of course, they Did. And there were online dating sites as well. In the three years Kenny’d had the disease his social life had improved enormously. He hadn’t even gotten laid until his junior year in college, and now he got laid all the time. Kenny sensed that there might be something a little weird about living in a world where it was better to be diseased than healthy, but who was he to complain?

He had to be in the lab by nine, working on a project that was going nowhere, since Kenny could not get the results they wanted. By eleven o’clock his supervisor, who also happened to be his graduate sponsor, would be yelling at him again and Kenny’s schlong would feel as if it had been bathed in acid. In all likelihood the project wasn’t going to get funded for another year, depriving Kenny of incomes both legal and illegal and the American covert intelligence community of one more nifty way of assassinating foreign politicians. There was also the matter of Kenny’s doctoral dissertation on nonsoluble alkalids, which had ground to a halt. Kenny seriously needed the money he was about to make.

Kenny turned to watch a large black Lincoln Navigator pull up onto the deck. It didn’t park next to his car but stopped in the middle of the deck, straddling the spaces and lines, as if making some kind of statement, which is exactly what it was doing. Her making a fucking entrance, thought Kenny. He took a last drag off his cigarette and dropped it over the parapet and down onto the hood of a Mercedes, where it lay sizzling.

She took her time getting out of the car, but when she did you

had to admit it was worth the wait. She was no spring chicken anymore, but she was tall and blond and that famous body was still tight. She wore a pale silk blouse that drew attention to the gentle motion of her breasts as she walked, and designer jeans that did what an expensive pair of designer jeans are meant to do. The high heels made her taller than she was, and she was already a tall woman. And sunglasses, for chrissake, at this time of the morning. She smiled and walked toward him like a goddamn Amazon. She meant to impress him, and Kenny had to admit she damn well did.

“This is a great city until people actually get up,” said Kenny. “Then it sucks.”

She leaned next to him and the wall and pretended to take in the view.

“Everybody slams L.A.,” she said. “Me, I love the place. I always have.”

She turned to face him.

“I came out here from Texas once when I was a cheerleader in high school. You know, those competitions they have. Rah-rah, you get all psyched up, they treat it like the well-being of the nation depends on it. Anyway, once I got out here I didn’t want to leave. Screw cheerleading, screw Dallas. I saw the light. I saw Faye fucking Dunaway coming out of Spago.”

She paused, turned back to the view. Get on with the fucking story, thought Kenny.

“We’d all lined up out front to see the stars—no goddamn idea what sort of place it was, I’m not even sure if I knew it was a restaurant, just that this was where stars went. Sure enough, we’re waiting there, watching people go in and out, can’t recognize anybody, then—Faye fucking Dunaway strolls out. And

she's gorgeous. She sort of floats out. Even in the middle of the day, coming out to eat a hamburger, she looks like a goddamn million dollars. A goddess. A car pulls up, a guy gets out and opens the door for her. She drives away.

"And I'm standing there on the sidewalk in front of Spago with a bunch of giggly cheerleaders and not one of them had an idea of who she was. But my life had changed. I knew that was what I wanted. I wanted to be like that."

"Faye Dunaway," repeated Kenny. "She's like fucking how old now? And she's got this thing with her teeth. I mean, in *Bonnie and Clyde* her teeth didn't look like that. What the fuck is up with her teeth? She got dentures or what?"

She stared at him.

"I think you're entirely missing the drama of the story, Kenny."

"You ever meet Monica Bellucci? Now there's a hot babe."

"And I hear her teeth are in pretty good shape. You want to hear about Harrison Ford's bridgework?"

She did that, the superior number, the little dig to remind you of who she was. Kenny felt it was time to level the playing field, so he went to the Porsche and took out a tiny cardboard box about the size of a wristwatch package. Then she let him stand there holding it while she dug around in her purse, like she might not be able to find the money. He'd sold stuff to popular actors before, and it irritated Kenny that these goddamn people always seemed to think they were still being filmed.

She took out a wad of bills and put them in his free hand.

"Count that."

Kenny put the box on the hood of the Porsche and counted the money. "Fifty-five hundred."

She dived back into the purse and came up with another wad.

“That’s sixty-five hundred,” Kenny said.

One more dive like a fucking cormorant.

“Seven thousand even,” she said, as if she was waiting for a fucking pat on the back.

“You always this organized?” Kenny asked her.

He handed her the box. She opened it carefully. There was a tiny vial resting in a nest of tissue. She started to pick it up but Kenny stopped her.

“Whoa! You want to play with it, you take it home, not with me around. Lady, that’s a synthesis of five of the ugliest fucking toxins on the planet. It ain’t no Coca-Cola.”

“I thought you said it only worked if you swallowed it?”

“I said ingested. You fucking drop it and it breaks and one drop, just a single lousy drop, splashes in your eye or on your lip or something and you’re as good as dead. You get it on your skin, you wash it off real quick. You got an open cut and you’re fucked. Any way it can get inside your body, that’s it, good night, nurse, you got maybe fifteen seconds, max. And you got enough there to kill maybe thirty people if you give it to them with an eyedropper. A hundred, you want to pour it in their Kool-Aid and you don’t mind waiting.”

“And not painful, right?” she asked, for probably the millionth time since they started all this.

“You black out,” said Kenny. “It’s like somebody switching off a light. Then the nervous system shuts down, only by then you don’t know it.”

“You sure? How do you know?”

“Because,” said Kenny, “the fucking U.S. government paid for tests on ninety-pound apes, that’s how I know. I read the re-

ports, they got the files locked up in the lab. Us grad assistants aren't supposed to see this shit, they'd bury my ass *under* a cell in Leavenworth they found out I stole this. Look, I don't want to know why you want this stuff. I don't care. I just want to finish my degree and get a nice safe research job somewhere and not starve in the meantime."

She smiled. "You sure you don't want to know?"

"Rats," said Kenny. "Fucking moles in the backyard. The neighbor's barking dog. That's what you'll use it for. By the way, we never meet again."

"Oh, I don't think that's going to be a problem, sweetheart," she said dreamily. "Not really."

Kenny got into the Porsche and drove away. She stood there with the box, looking out over Los Angeles as if she were deciding whether to move it or just leave it where it was. She plucked the vial out of the box, tossed the protective box on the ground, and gingerly dropped seven thousand dollars' worth of neurotoxin into her cute little Gucci handbag.