

The Problem of Pleasure

by C. P. Boyko

The first night they unpacked the stereo and the coffee maker. Their plan was to stay up all night and watch the sun come up, as she put it, over the slums where the little people lived.

They played tic-tac-toe on the balcony window with their saliva until she was convinced that two winning strategies inevitably resulted in a tie. They cleaned the glass with yellowing newspapers he found beneath the sink.

She took a shower and emerged with one towel draped around her body and another coiled in her hair. She had to look in the mirror to show him how it was done. He took a shower and put his dirty clothes back on.

They smoked the remainder of a crumpled joint that someone had shared with her at an audition for a chewing gum commercial. She stood on the sofa and delivered her one line with ecstatic glee, with slack-jawed forgetfulness, with shock and revulsion, with Shakespearean gusto: *What's that taste?* She hadn't gotten the part.

He turned off the lights, crouched next to her on the sofa, and traced his index fingers down the ridge of her spine.

How many? he asked.

Two, she said. No, one. I don't know. I have a stomachache, she mumbled, making it one word. Too much coffee.

My head hurts, he said, as though by way of consolation.

Your head hurts?

My head hurts, he agreed.

He brought out his camera. She pressed the backs of her hands against her forehead histrionically, like an ingénue. When she reached for him, he stepped away, raised the camera to his eye, and said: Click.

She fell asleep soon after the sky began to turn blue. He didn't wake her. Instead he made more coffee, turned off the stereo, and unpacked his

computer from a box she'd labelled FRAGILE.

They had a rule. They were not allowed to say "I love you too."

He'd said it once, and she'd said, Ah—no. Not allowed.

What do you mean, "not allowed"?

Empty and/or automatic reciprocation not allowed.

Okay. I *love* you.

Maybe. Maybe so. But how do I know you're not just saying it because it's what I want to hear? Wait a few minutes and try again.

A few minutes later he said, Oh, by the way. It just so happens that I love you.

Sorry. Too soon. I saw it coming. You need to surprise me.

Or you won't know that I mean it?

Her sister liked him. Her brother liked him. Her father liked him. Her mother loved him. Jen liked him. Marco liked him. H  l  ne said he was cute. Roger thought he was intelligent. Elle said he seemed a little shy—but charming, definitely charming. Nan claimed he had "nerd chic." Janice liked him. Wynne liked him. Heather liked him.

Caryn liked him, or said she liked him. She teased him, jabbed him with her knuckles, mussed his hair, called him the Hemogoblin—all playfully, of course, all in good fun. Or was it?

Caryn had liked Anthony better. Anthony had been wild.

But it didn't matter.

Riding home in the crowded, silent, creaking subway train, he made lists.

The colour of her hair when it's drying.

The loose wrinkly skin that appears at her elbows when she straightens her arms.

The way she intentionally bruises her apples before eating them, tap tap

tapping them on the counter or tabletop.

The way she doesn't turn around, like most people, to glare incredulously at the crack in the sidewalk she's just stumbled over, but walks on, seemingly unaware of having stumbled at all.

Her fuzzy earlobes.

Her face.

She taught him how to cook, cut his own hair, buy pants, and play guitar.

He taught her how to get free cable, make mix CDs, register her own domain name, and operate Unix, which she referred to as Eunuchs.

Because she always wanted to come along, and because he could not refuse, sometimes he stayed late at work so that he could take his after-dark walks alone, before going home.

On the phone to her sister he heard her say: No, I *am* still looking. It's just that you have no idea how much time auditioning takes . . . Of course I don't, you know how independent I am. But it's not like *he* minds that I . . . You know, if everything you do is just the opposite of what Mom did, if everything's just a knee-jerk reaction to the old-fashioned . . . It has *nothing* to do with feminism, Laura . . .

And then she softly closed the bedroom door.

Would you still love me if I was fat?

Yes, he said after a pause.

Would you still love me if I was ugly?

Of course.

Would you still love me if I was a hundred years old?

No question.

Would you still love me if I was five?

Would you still love me if I was a man?

If I couldn't speak any English?

If I didn't have any arms or legs?

If I was just a disembodied head?

If I was made out of cheese?

Absolutely.

All of the above?

You mean, would I still love you if you were an ugly fat boy's head, made out of cheese?

Who couldn't speak English.

He pretended to consider it. Then: *Yes*, he said bravely. Yes, I think I would. All of the above.

Would you still love me if I didn't love you?

Sometimes Caryn came over to watch the Sunday Night Sex Show.

He hated the bloodless, clinical, cheerfully candid way that the host reduced sex to a game of skill or intellectual problem, the sort of puzzle that, with the latest playbook and a little earnest application, you could not fail to solve.

The girls thought it was hilarious—though he noticed they didn't laugh quite so loudly when he was not in the room.

It's not that bad, she said quickly, to conceal her annoyance. I don't mind as much as I maybe used to. He just has a different outlook than I do. Different experiences. I'm only his second girlfriend, you know. It probably just takes time. But I'm not complaining. It's not a big deal. It's not the most important thing in the world. What? What are you smirking at?

I just wish the you of two years ago could hear the you of today, said Caryn. Or vice versa.

Okay, well, with Anthony maybe it *was* the most important thing in the

world, because that was the extent of our world. He had nothing else going for him, I mean at all. He was an asshole. I hated his guts, really.

Which was precisely why the sex was so good.

I love you, he said.

She looked up from her cross-stitch and smiled gratefully.

I'm very pleased to hear it, sir.

One night he walked home, forgetting it was Friday. Teenagers shouted "fag!" at him from passing cars, laughing groups bound for downtown bars edged him off the sidewalk, men with their dates stared him down, then magnanimously challenged him to a fight.

He wondered if there was something particular about him. Did he look like a dog asking to be kicked?

It never happened when he was with her. Something about her elicited people's respect, almost reverence.

He hurried home.

She was riding home on the subway late one night when three young men sat down next to her, though the car was almost empty. They were drunk. They talked about her loudly and appraisingly, like shrewd consumers. She stared fixedly at the reflection of a Clairol ad in the window. She had pepper spray in her bag but didn't dare make a move to reach for it. She focused on the sound of her clanging heartbeat and pretended she was deaf. Eventually they lost interest in her, and offered only a few parting gestures and perfunctory self-gropings when their stop came.

Was there something about her that invited this treatment, she wondered, or was it simply that she was alone, and therefore vulnerable? Vulnerable and therefore contemptible?

She hurried home, her keys clutched in her fist, her eyes stinging.

He was already asleep.

At night when he walked, so many of the windows were bright, unobstructed and inviting, lit up like the grid of flickering television screens in an electronics store.

Well, how do I look? she asked.

He stepped back and crossed his arms.

You look great.

Good, she said, and kissed the corner of his mouth. Then let's get going.

Why is there a password on your computer? she asked. Don't you trust me?

Of course not, he said.

What have you got on there, porn?

Yes. Kiddie porn. Gigabytes of kiddie porn.

Hmm, she said. Can't say I approve of *that*.

I love you, she said.

He transferred the receiver to his other ear and looked over his shoulder.

Yes, that is most definitely good news, he said.

At first he assumed it was a joke. But the mischievous solemnity with which she made popcorn and turned down the lights told him otherwise.

She giggled and kept looking at him sidelong to gauge his reaction. He pretended not to notice.

I don't understand humans at all, he said at the end of the first scene.

Well, it is kind of silly, she admitted.

It's disgusting.

Watch one more?

I have to piss.

Should I pause it?

No. I'll be right back.

Later, she joined him in the bedroom.

Can I turn on the light?

If you must.

Wordlessly she crawled in between the sheets.

You don't have to do that, he said a minute later.

I don't mind, she said.

He said nothing.

Correction: I *like* to, she said.

It just seems a bit silly, he said, half the syllables coming out as whisper.

He cleared his throat and added: Now that we're living together, I mean.

It was her turn to say nothing.

So it's okay, he said. Don't worry about it.

What do you mean, now that we're living together?

Just that you don't have to . . . try to impress me anymore.

You don't like it?

I don't *dislike* it.

You don't like it.

I just don't feel like you should have to, that's all. If you don't want to.

And if I do want to?

I'd just prefer you didn't.

If I'm doing it wrong you just have to tell me what to do differently.

That's not it.

Then what is it?

He flopped onto his side. You don't find it a little demeaning?

What? For who?

It looks silly, he said slowly. It makes you look silly.

She allowed a few seconds for this to sink in, but it would not. The light

is off, she said at last.

It's just not necessary.

And what about me? What if I want *you* to?

Instead of answering he said: Should we just go to sleep?

So she let him roll on top of her the way he'd done all the other nights.

Afterwards she whispered: I guess you wouldn't want to try anything we saw in the video?

He wrapped his arms around her tightly, as though she were a waif he'd pulled from a river, and said sternly: Listen. I *love* you. Get it?

I love you too, she said automatically. That's not—

Ah—no, he said. Not allowed.

And he kissed her forehead brusquely.

And you? she said. How's the new stud treating you?

Oh God, said Caryn. He's wearing me out.

That's good, isn't it?

I *guess*. The problem is he won't go down. His idea of pleasuring me orally is to tell a knock-knock joke.

There were two girls he watched for. One lived alone in a creamy, spartan apartment on the third floor of a condo on Eighteenth Avenue. She moved around a lot, from room to room, tidying or rearranging, pausing occasionally to think, with arms akimbo or the fingers of one hand lightly cupping her chin.

The other lived in a cramped, colourful garret in a rickety house on Seventh Street, which she shared with at least three roommates, two of them male. She spent most of her time reading, sitting in a deep chair beside the window with a book propped against her knees. Every few minutes she would turn and stare out the black window, as though mentally measuring the discrepancy between what she had read on the page and what she knew, from experience, to be really out there.

They were both lonely and beautiful. They both seemed to be waiting for something.

Why do we do this? she asked Caryn. Oh, sorry doll, your lips are too thin. Oh, sorry babe, your lips are too puffy. You should *probably* lose about four pounds. You're just a *little* too malnourished. Your eyes are too wide—I actually had someone say that to me the other day. Not too far apart, but too wide, whatever that means. What would you look like with green contacts? Or red hair? Or a C-cup? Or a different head? Why do we do it? Why do we put ourselves through it?

Because, said Caryn, sucking offhandedly at a cigarette, we want all the world to love us, presumably.

Not me. Not anymore. After two years of this I'd settle for loving myself. If I ever get back to that point, I'll quit.

And do what with yourself? Raise babies? Little hemogoblins?

Sometimes I think it's not that we want to be famous or recognized or whatever by *other people*. Sometimes I think it's more about making it easier to recognize and understand and, I don't know, maybe even like *yourself*. Like, maybe if you saw your own face splashed across bus shelters, or if you saw yourself on television or in magazines once in a while, maybe then you could finally—

Finally see yourself for what you really are. Sure.

I *know* I'm attractive, she said defiantly. Directors don't know anything. Agencies don't know anything. I'm always getting compliments.

They don't count if they're from your boyfriend. Oh, I *know*—

No, from all kinds of people. From photographers, hairdressers. Even strangers. In the street, on the bus . . .

You're a goddess, said Caryn, crushing her cigarette beneath the heel of her boot. I was just teasing.

I know.

Let's go back in. Maybe they're almost ready for one of us.

He said his back hurt, so she asked him about work.

I'm sorry, he said. It's just been pretty hectic lately . . .

It doesn't matter. But tell me *about* it. Tell me what you're doing right now. Details. Inundate me with technical jargon.

The only project that interested him at the moment was the new video compression codec. He'd always been intrigued by the possibility of shrinking data, making something large small. In high school he'd spent a cola-fuelled weekend in front of his C compiler, reluctantly coming to terms with the logical impossibility of recursive compression—compressing an already compressed file. But the disappointment was only temporary, and the challenge eternal: how to express the greatest amount of information in the most concise way. What it came down to was patterns, the recognition of recurrent patterns in a set of data. If some string, some phrase, appeared three times—"I love you I love you I love you," for instance—you could store it once and recall it twice—"I love you (repeat 2x). The tricky part was that repetitions rarely came sequentially, so you could search the entire world for another instance of "I love you," wasting valuable time, and it might never reappear. The breadth of your pattern search always had to be weighed against the time required to perform it. Speed came at the cost of quality compression, quality at the cost of speed.

She watched his lips as he spoke. She wanted to lean over and brush them with her thumbs.

You're yawning, he said. I don't blame you.

I wasn't. I'm listening. I can yawn and pay attention at the same time. But I wasn't yawning.

Well, the codec we're working on is for live webcam feeds. With those the picture doesn't usually change very much. Often as not it's just some guy's empty dorm room. So there might be shortcuts. We might be able to cheat and—Never mind.

Sorry. That was a yawn. I confess. Not because it's boring. Go on.

No, you go on. Tell me about the photo shoot. Was it a photo shoot?

Ah—no. Not allowed. Still you.

There's nothing else to tell.

What about that gadget you brought home? Is that one of these camera deals?

Yeah. Prototype from the client. I thought maybe I'd point it out the window, down at the street or something. Just to get some different data to work with. I've got hard drives filled with the back of Nathan's head and the inside of the server room.

So you'll, what, be able to watch it from work?

Well, yeah, if I leave my computer on.

Will anyone else?

Not without my password, no.

Then why don't you just, I don't know, put this one in the corner over there or something?

What? Why? So I can spy on you? Is that—

I don't know. I kind of like the idea of you watching. Even if you're not watching. It'll be like having you here, maybe, a little bit.

At first she seemed guarded and self-conscious. She did not look directly at the camera—she was too much of a professional for that—but every time she went into the bedroom her awareness of the device permeated all her movements, tainted them ever so slightly with an air of deliberateness and calculation.

But soon enough the self-consciousness faded. Soon she seemed to forget that she was (at least potentially) being watched. Soon she was spending most of her time in the bedroom.

And soon he found her every gesture, her every pose, her every facial expression, endlessly gripping, inexhaustibly fascinating.

Do you have a picture of me on your desk? she asked.

No. But I have three in my wallet, he said, as though it were only a joke.

Well, she said, now you do.

For her birthday, Caryn bought her a toy.

For when you're out of town, Caryn told him.

But neither of them found it funny. So Caryn gave him one for his birthday, too.

For when she's out of town.

He threw his away. She kept hers, hidden beneath shoes and books in her closet.

I love you, he said.

She rolled over and blinked at him with pink eyes.

What time is it? she asked.

Colin told them about an implausible liaison with a policewoman who had almost written him a speeding ticket. Geoff related an Ecstasy-fuelled night spent with a cute green-haired girl he'd met at a rave in San Francisco. Nathan recounted in great detail the predilections and perversions of a high school chemistry teacher who'd approached him—"practically tackled" him—in a bar.

He was surprised that in each of their stories the girl had been a complete stranger. Their best experiences had all been one-night stands.

Then it was his turn.

I don't know, he said. I guess it would have to be with my girlfriend, but—

They all groaned.

Well, okay, but there was this one time that was pretty . . . exceptional. We were both sick. We both had the flu. Fever, runny nose, sore throat, nausea, the whole thing. Mountains of used kleenex all over the floor. Anyway . . . I don't know. It was just memorable. She was so *hot*. And the whole

time I was having these hot flashes and cold flashes, alternating one after the other. Goosepimples appearing and disappearing in waves across her skin. Both of us just dripping with sweat. The sheets were soaking. And the whole time we were coughing and laughing and our noses were running all over each other . . .

Jesus Christ, said Nathan.

But no, it was nice. I don't know how to explain it. Like huddling around the fire when the wind's howling outside. Only the wind and the fire were both there, inside us, at the same time.

They stared at him incredulously.

Something like that, he muttered, and lifted his beer.

The way she punches only multiples of eleven when using the microwave.

The way she fidgets in her sleep. And when she's not tossing or turning, when she's completely still, the way she seems to be biding her time, planning the next move.

Her habit of quoting herself. Not elaborately or pompously, but reflexively, almost apologetically. As though she doesn't want anyone, even herself, to be able to accuse her of unoriginality. As though her biggest fear is that someone should roll their eyes at her.

Her tendency to weep.

Her tendency to exaggerate.

Her use of the word *whatever*.

The bloody floss she leaves floating in the toilet.

Jackie liked him. Susan liked him. Rachael liked him. Fiona liked him. Elisabetta liked him. Penny liked him. Casey liked him. Quinn liked him. Paula liked him.

He didn't like her friends. He thought most of them were obnoxious egoma-

niacs. He didn't understand why she surrounded herself with such people, or indeed why she wanted to be an actress. She was too intelligent to dedicate herself to the glorification of wine coolers or luxury sedans or athlete's foot powder, and too modest to treat herself as a commodity, to mythologize herself, to construct, in her own person, a monument to her everlasting greatness.

He never said any of this, of course. But he didn't have to.

Now he often stayed late at work to watch her. One night his heart plastered itself against his chest when she suddenly looked up from her magazine, turned to the camera, and plaintively mouthed the words, *Where are you?*

One night he watched her until she fell asleep. He had been waiting for her to grow anxious and alarmed. Waiting for her to call him, to ask if he was all right, would he be home soon? Waiting for her to begin waiting.

Use your hands a little more, she whispered.

How?

Here. And here. Good. Only not so . . . mechanically.

It's hard not to act mechanically when you're giving me instructions.

I'll shut up then. Do whatever you like.

I thought I was doing that.

And your mouth too.

Can we turn out the light?

They had made a kind of game of it, he realized. They blurted the three words not like an endearment but as an incantation or a hex, one that would only take effect if the victim had let their guard down.

But the game had spoiled the sentiment. Instead of "I love you," all he heard now was "Sorry, not fast enough," or "Tag, you're it."

On her bedside table he found a piece of paper on which she'd been experimenting with her signature. Just once, as though by accident, she'd scrawled his last name instead of her own.

On his desk she found a piece of paper on which he'd written

The problem of EVIL. Never the problem of GOOD?

The problem of PAIN. Never the problem of PLEASURE???

Sometimes I think I can tell when you're watching.

T E L E P A T H Y ? he spelled out with his finger on her belly.

No. I don't know. Just that sometimes I'm aware of it and sometimes I'm not. Sometimes I suddenly *become* aware of it. Like eyes staring at the back of my head.

O N E E Y E, he spelled.

Is it always on? Is it on right now?

N O, he spelled, then said: Well, not exactly. It only sends when someone—when *I* log in to the server. So it's on, but the picture's not going anywhere. It's not recording or anything.

This wasn't precisely true. In fact, his computer at work saved everything, but he often deleted the previous day's footage without watching it.

Could you? she said after a minute.

W H A T, he spelled.

Could you turn it on? So that it was recording?

W H Y.

She looked at him. I don't know, she said knowingly.

F I L T H Y S L U T, he spelled quickly.

What?

L O V E Y O U.

Oh. Thanks, she said, and fell silent.

I'm surprised your boyfriend doesn't do this.

Well, he does do *that*, she said, laughing metallically. In fact, he's usual—He's the only one who does.

The photographer pursed his lips in a little moue of playful disappointment but withdrew his hands from the collar of her dress, which he had been arranging.

Not for lack of offers, I hope.

I wouldn't know, really. Lack of interest, rather. On my part.

I find that almost equally difficult to believe, he said through a leer. Before she could object, he went on: Of course I was referring to the delicious headshots in which we are about to immortalize your immortal visage.

She blinked at him. Her mouth was dry. She felt dizzy. What? she said.

He put one hand on his hip. You said he was a photographer, didn't you?

Oh. No. Did I? Well, he's not really. I mean he is, he does, but only as a sort of hobby. Not professionally.

I see, he murmured, retreating as far as the nearest spotlamp, which he began fiddling with to no obvious purpose. And what does this tyro hobbyist of yours shoot?

What? Oh. I don't know, really. Landscapes and objects, I guess.

And do you fall under either of those headings?

Do I—what?

Surely not even the most bumbling neophyte could resist the temptation to, how should I put it, map out some of that exquisite geography?

He fixed his eyes on her. She couldn't find her voice. Suddenly he laughed, a low, booming laugh that belied the delicacy of his speaking voice.

But *Why so pale and wan, fond lover?* You know of course that I'm only playing with you. You must be familiar with the method by now. A little innocuous flirtation, a little insincere badinage. It puts some colour in your cheeks. There are certain effects you can't simulate, you know. It's why men dominate this industry, I'm afraid. Heterosexual men, I might add. We have our tricks.

She caught a sigh and stretched it into a normal, nonchalant exhalation.

So, she said hoarsely, you weren't trying to seduce me?

It beggars belief, does it not? I think . . . Well, perhaps not. I was about to say that you'd know with absolute certainty if I were attempting to seduce

you. But I'm not sure it's true. I'm not even sure, in your case, whether I'd know myself. Would you mind putting this strand of hair here behind your ear, I think? Like so. Almost. May I?

She cleared her throat, trying to make it sound like an expression of dubiousness. In my case? she said.

He stepped back, crossed his arms, and looked her up and down.

You're very much my type, you see, he said abstractedly. Very much indeed. Naughty in all the right places.

Now that, that's the method again, right? Putting a little colour in the old cheeks, is that it?

Of course, he said blandly, almost impatiently. He retreated behind his camera and sighed: I don't suppose you'll ever reconsider vis-à-vis the nudes?

How do I know they wouldn't end up on the Internet?

My dear, he said, you should *be* so lucky.

The girl in the garret had disappeared. Someone else was living there now.

He felt responsible. He had been away too long.

At least he had pictures.

He caught her looking in the mirror one day, evaluating herself methodically from every angle, for nearly an hour.

What's that? said Nathan, suddenly behind him. Porno?

Nothing, he said, closing the video window.

Live nude girls? Barely legal coeds?

Just data, he said. Just collecting some new data.

Nathan slapped him on both shoulders. This is a great job we have, isn't it? Say, you coming with us to the Grove tonight?

I don't know. I don't think so.

Nathan peered at him, as though at some rare insect.

He straightened his posture and said: It's just that the wife is dragging

me to a goddamn play or something.

That's right. I keep forgetting. You've got pussy at home. Why eat out?

They threw a party to celebrate the airing of her first commercial. Thirty of her friends crammed themselves into their two-bedroom apartment. They all hooted and cheered when at last her face appeared on the tiny television screen, smiling archly yet admiringly at the computer-generated anthropomorphized cereal bar who was showing her, and a number of other young on-the-go professionals, how to slam-dunk a basketball.

When it was over, she took a solemn bow. Someone called for a speech. Others began tapping the rims of their wineglasses with their fingernails.

Six hundred dollars, she said slowly, with drunken fastidiousness, six hundred dollars . . . for two seconds . . . of screen-time.

That's on par with Naomi Watts, you know. Second by second.

Well, Meg Ryan, maybe.

Rebecca Pidgeon, anyway.

Kirstie Alley, at least.

Just imagine what you'll make for your first feature film.

Or solo commercial, for that matter.

Later she cornered him on his way out the door and asked him what he really thought.

You were good, he said. Real convincing.

And what is *that* supposed to mean?

I don't know. You looked like you were, you know, really feeling it.

It's just a commercial. It's not supposed to be a great work of art. She poked him in the chest with an index finger, sloshing white wine onto his shirt. You know what you are? she said affably. You're *jealous*.

Yes. And you're drunk.

In the other room Caryn had climbed onto a chair and was launching into what was apparently an elaborate toast, one which for some reason began with a not much abbreviated account of her own childhood.

Not *envious*, mind you. But *jealous*. There's a distinct—a distinct—dis-

tinct-ion. You're possessive. You want to own me. You don't want anyone else to . . . own me. Where are you going?

I'm going to get some fresh air. He kissed her quickly at the corner of her mouth and ducked out into the hallway.

And why aren't you drinking? she shouted.

Yes, said someone behind her, doors are notorious teetotallers.

Anthony! She flung her arms around his neck. When did you get here?

Just a couple minutes ago. I guess I missed the big event. Will there be an encore?

Supposedly it's going into regular rotation. But it doesn't matter. It's dumb. It's nothing. And I know how you feel about TV and all that.

Maybe I've mellowed in my old age. You look great, by the way.

So do you. As always.

Ah—no, said Anthony. Reflexive reciprocation not allowed. Do me a favour and tell me I look great in twenty minutes or so.

You look great in twenty minutes or so. Can I find you something to drink?

After the tongue-lashing that door received, I don't dare say no.

The next day he fast-forwarded through most of the evening. The guests had generally stayed out of the bedroom. They stood silhouetted in the doorway, their heads bobbing and hands fluttering at triple speed, then drifted away. Occasionally, individually or in pairs, they would venture a rapid reconnaissance of the room, glancing critically at the books on her shelves and the software on his, peering cautiously into the tangled junglescape of her closet or the cluttered drawer where he kept his "valuables": diplomas and certifications, expired prescriptions, the journal he had kept for six weeks while in Montreal four years ago, every letter and note that she had written him and most of the ones he'd written her.

But one couple who entered the bedroom lingered longer than the others. These two displayed little curiosity about the room or its furnishings.

She stretched out supine on the bed while the other one paced languorously. They talked for a few minutes, animatedly but without eye con-

tact. Then the other one, the ex-boyfriend, nudged the door shut with his toe.

He watched the next five minutes of the video very carefully. Then he watched it again. Then he watched it three more times.

Before he left for home he logged on to his news server and uploaded the clip to the alt.binaries.multimedia.erotica group, inserting it amidst the garish promises and nauseating claims of “Amateur teen sucks off two guys at once,” “World’s biggest transsexual orgy,” and “Cumswapping brunettes get DP’d.”

“My girlfriend,” he typed, “caught cheating. (5 minutes, 15.5 MB.) Comments welcome.”

You can either be famous, said Anthony, or the cause, in a small way, of everyone else’s fame. You and I have made our choice.

Sure, said Anthony, everyone is the star on his or her own stage. That’s obvious. And every one of us is also a bit player in everyone else’s show. But this is really a most efficient arrangement, after all.

To paraphrase Freud, said Anthony, the one thing that everyone wants is, basically, to feel important.

Other than sex, you mean, she said through a yawn.

Well, yeah. Other than sex. Obviously.

She remembered now why they had broken up. He was an obnoxious egomaniac and he bored her silly.

Speaking of which, she said, how’s Kimberlee with two E’s, or whatever her name was?

Kimberli with an I. I have no idea how she is. Can’t say I care, either.

I can’t believe you left me for a Kimberli with an I. It’s disgraceful.

I didn’t *leave* you. As I recall, you told me you never wanted to see me again.

Yes, because of assorted shenanigans involving Kimberli with an I. I hope she was at least more fun in bed than I was.

You know that no one was more fun than you, he said softly.

Oh, don't, she sighed. You shouldn't say such things.

Why shouldn't I?

You'll make me believe it yet.

Maybe you shouldn't be lying there like that and not expect my mind to wander down certain avenues.

She lifted her head and looked at him through narrowed eyelids.

I can lie here any way I like, she said slowly, with drunken fastidiousness. Thank you very much.

Is that so? said Anthony. And he nudged the door smoothly shut with his toe.

Attn: Vulcan.

Re: My girlfriend, caught cheating.

Picture quality rather poor, no? Way too dark & low contrast. Good clip otherwise. Your girlfriend's totally hot!

More light next time please! Sound too!

He walked for four hours. He took more than a hundred pictures.

Hey! someone shouted. What do you think you're doing?

She left the curtains open, he muttered. They all leave the curtains open.

I love you, she said, with a slight rising inflection.

Super, he said.

You seem a little spacey tonight.

Do I?

Maybe a little.

Just thinking, I guess.

What about?

He lifted his head from the pillow. That camera, he said.

She propped her head up with one bent arm and looked at him. What about that camera?

He lowered his head again. I don't know. Maybe we should use it sometime.

Use it in what way, she said slowly.

Maybe we should shoot ourselves.

She was silent for a moment. He gave her a sour glance.

You know what I mean.

In flagrante delicto? she asked, beaming at him.

He tossed a sheet over her naked body.

What's that for?

I don't know. You look . . .

Like I've just been ravished?

Cold, he said.

Should we watch it? she asked.

What, right away?

Sure. I want to see us.

I guess. But put something on. It's not exactly summer.

She hovered on the edge of the bed, wrapped in bedsheets. He sat on his swivel chair, in boxers and T-shirt.

On the computer screen, she was crouched on hands and knees upon the bed, wearing only her underwear. She twisted her head to one side and looked back in the direction of the camera. She said something and laughed. Then she lowered her head and pushed her backside into the air.

You look good there, he murmured.

I think you enjoyed this part the most, she said. Playing director.

On the screen, she struck a few more poses. Then he stepped into the frame, gripped her throat delicately with both hands, and pulled her face towards his.

They watched themselves—he with growing disgust, she with growing regret.