

Double Bagger

You take up a lot of the bed for such a skinny man. I don't mind though; I'm happy to sit here in the dark and look at you. The full moon's silver glow pierces the night through a gap between the curtains. It bathes half of your face in a ghostly light. I can see your nostrils flare and your eyes move under their lids. Perhaps you're dreaming of earlier this evening.

It was a relief to find you at last: I'd nearly given up hope. For four weeks on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays I've been going to that club, sometimes with Jeannie and Maggie, sometimes alone. I don't really like clubs. Dancing is OK, but the loud music and pulsating lights give me a headache. And the people! Well, you don't need me to tell you about the type of man you meet there.

I was thinking of going home. I don't have work tomorrow, but when I peered through the multi-colored reflections dancing across the glass of my watch and saw it was nearly 1 AM, I thought to myself, "One last diet Coke, then I'm out of here." But I looked up, and there you were, just stepping onto the checkerboard dance floor, dragging a reluctant woman behind you. She was older than you, in her mid-forties, I'd say, and not terribly attractive. Seeing you with her spurred me on, strengthened my resolve.

You thought that you saw me first, but I'd positioned myself where I knew your eyes would find me. They certainly weren't fixed on your partner. I was close to those two black guys, trying to keep up with their energetic dancing, feeling slightly foolish. It worked though: you started to gravitate towards me, leaving the other woman behind. I felt a pang of guilt when I saw her realize that you'd drifted off, and she moved unobtrusively to the edge of the floor and disappeared into the dark bar area. What is it they say, though? "All's fair in love and war."

When you were opposite me and you smiled, I thought "He's not bad looking, really." You make an effort with your appearance, which puts you in a different league from some of the hopeful slobs who hang around that place. When the song finally ended, you took my hand in a familiar gesture and led me to the bar. I couldn't remember if the lines you used on me were genuinely familiar, or just seemed that way because they were so cliched.

In the gloom of my bedroom, my sense of touch is heightened. If I touch my wrist very gently I can still feel the shallow depression where the scar hasn't quite healed, and there's a tingling sensation caused by the severed nerves on either side of the cut. I was very lucky; everybody told me so. I wonder now at my ability inflict that wound on myself. I pressed the cold steel of the razor blade hard onto my fleshy wrist and made a single

slashing movement. My eyes were shut tight. The pain was sharp and focused, like a deep elongated pin-prick. On opening my eyes, I saw a lipless mouth from which oozed bubbles of blood. When I saw the exposed veins, and the pale ribbony tendons which darted to and fro as I flexed my fingers, I nearly fainted. But I knew I had to keep on slicing.

The doctor at the hospital told me how lucky I was. I lost a lot of blood, but not enough to kill me, or even to lead to brain damage. Enough to make me lose control of my bowels and pass out, my head filled with a chain-saw-like buzzing sound, until Mr. Jenkins from the apartment upstairs saw me sprawled on the bed with my arm dipped in a crimson puddle. I forgot people could see in through the screens when it got dark out. Ironically, the doctor said if I'd gouged just a couple of millimeters deeper, I would have hit a much thicker vein and lost more blood. So the same ugly fat that indirectly caused me to want to take my life might have ended up saving it.

I feel angry again now. I want to wake you, and shout at you and pummel my fists into your hollow chest. Not yet though. I'll just savor this reversal a little longer. Did you sit down and look at me that night? Did you give me the merest thought? I don't suppose so.

It was the first time I'd been out socially since Ted had left me. I'd accepted he wasn't coming back. He didn't contact me, just left the note pinned by a magnet to the refrigerator. "Gone to find someone who I'm not ashamed to be seen with. Ted." I heard he'd headed out East, trying to turn his second-rate screenplays into second-rate stage plays, but that was just a rumor. Deserted as I felt, I didn't really blame him.

I didn't *feel* any different inside, but when I looked in the mirror and saw how overweight I'd gotten, I could understand Ted's abhorrence. I was never skinny, or even slim really, but when mom died, something changed. I would get so depressed and miss her so much, but Ted never wanted to talk about it, or just listen to me. Food was something to distract my mind from the void caused by mom's death. I'd prepare lavish dinners, just to occupy an evening. Then, as I started to noticeably put on weight, eating became a statement. "Screw you, world," I was saying, "I don't care what you think of my appearance." I'd stuff down candy and potato chips in the office and get take-out junk food for lunch.

When Ted walked out I became even more depressed. My self-hate fed on my worsening appearance as voraciously as I fed on high-fat foods. My evenings were spent alone and lonely in the apartment. The rent was eating up most of my income but I was too weak-willed to try to find a smaller place. Eventually Jeannie at work took pity on me. Everyone had been sympathetic when Ted disappeared, of course, but fat people only engender a limited amount of compassion. It's not like an illness or a terrible disease where nature strikes cruelly and randomly. Obesity – and I was obese by this time – is self-inflicted. I overheard a couple in a shopping mall talking about me once. The woman said, "Look at her, poor thing." Her husband replied "Why 'poor'? You don't get that way without working at it."

So Jeannie suggested I join her and Maggie for a “girls’ night out.” I would have preferred to see a movie, then maybe go for a bite to eat, but Jeannie assured me that Annabella’s was a great club and I’d have fun. I had my doubts, but I couldn’t stand the idea of another Saturday night on my own, so I went along.

The moon’s beam has moved around and falls across your chest now. Your body is smooth and hairless. The small nipples look dark in the dull light, tiny black peaks that rise and fall with the untroubled rhythm of your breathing.

Ironically, you’re not even a very good lover. Too quick, too mechanistic. You probably think you’re great: you touch the right spots, murmur the expected phrases, but there’s an edge of impatience, as though you’re a dog, straining against a leash to get to cat hissing at you from across the street. When you were on top of me, your furious pumping was like a greyhound, charging round the track. At the end of the race, your race, you lost interest and fell on to your back, spent. That’s all right though. I would have been surprised, even disappointed if you’d been a considerate lover.

If I stare patiently at you for several minutes, I can detect the leisurely movement of the column of gray-blue light down your chest. The moon doesn’t respect my fervor.

At Annabella’s I got some looks, but I was used to that. At least I didn’t make the mistake of trying to dress sexily. Loose clothes, plain, dark colors: the fat person’s camouflage. We bought drinks, the two slim, attractive girls and their overweight companion, and sat at a table. Maggie surveyed the scene, looking for people she knew (or perhaps for ones she didn’t). Jeannie made small talk with me, but soon her attention started to drift too. I didn’t blame her; the wall of music around the dance floor make hearing her difficult, and those clubs aren’t designed for intimate conversation. They got up to dance and Jeannie beckoned me. I waved them away and mouthed “Later.”

I sat and wondered what on earth I was doing there. Around me were confident young people drinking and dancing and joking with their friends. Every time I heard laughter I expected to see someone pointing at me: “Look at the size of that!” I remained sitting, sipping my Coke, trying not to look as a felt: like a sack of potatoes that had fallen off a truck.

Bored, I eventually edged my way nervously to the dance floor and looked for Jeannie and Maggie. They were in the middle of the floor and had two enthusiastic guys dancing opposite them. I moved slowly towards them, swinging my heavy arms in approximate time with the music’s fast tempo, and hoping I didn’t look too ridiculous. Before I could reach Jeannie and Maggie, my path was blocked by a small man in a check shirt. He smiled at me and moved close. I didn’t know what to do. I looked around in panic, seeing snapshots of gyrating bodies and twisting limbs and smiling faces that strobed under the disco lighting. I looked back to the man. He was older than most of the early-twenties

crowd, nearer my age (31 seemed positively Jurassic here). I managed a diffident smile and “danced” – I was still convinced I possessed all the grace of a hippopotamus – opposite him.

My partner didn't say much. He shouted that his name was Dave and he worked at Boeing. He smiled with his mouth and with his eyes and appeared totally oblivious to my physical appearance. He was the first man I'd met for two years in whose eyes I detected no pity or revulsion. I wanted to stay with him.

During the slow dances, he held me gently and I rested my head on his shoulder. I felt as though I was back at the school prom.

When Jeannie came over to announce that she and Maggie were leaving with their men, she asked if I'd be all right for a ride, and looked expectantly at Dave. He told Jeannie that he'd get me home safely, and thus reassured, she skipped off to join the other three.

Dave offered to take me home shortly afterwards. On the way out of the club he nodded and grinned at a younger man. Everyone knew someone else except for me. During the ride home I felt, or imagined, an air of expectancy. There seemed to be an assumption that I would ask him in “for coffee”. But then what? Charming as he'd been, I still couldn't believe he might be interested in me physically. I had been far too nervous throughout the evening to shine conversationally, so it could scarcely have been my personality he was attracted to.

We did have sex. Dave grabbed me as soon as I closed the door behind us. His kissing was urgent and brutal. His passion was detached, almost cold, but I found myself responding to it. It was as though we were satisfying each other's needs. His was animal, unspoken, mine was borne of too many nights of loneliness, too many nights without the warm touch of another human being. I showed him to the bedroom where his urgency was temporarily suspended as he undressed and put his clothes in a neat pile at the foot of the bed.

He had me, roughly, without tenderness. I detached myself from the physical act and got my pleasure from the distilled human presence, the comfort of this stranger.

I could use your torso as a sundial. Or a moondial, I should say. Another hour has passed and another feature on your body is thrown into dramatic relief by the cold rays. Your navel is shallow, a small crater in the middle of your flat belly. A narrow trail of dark hair leads down to your pubic region, which is discreetly hidden by the twisted comforter. That eight-inch journey from belly-button to groin is thirty minutes by my moonclock.

I had a dream the night I slept with Dave. There was a storm in the dream. Bright orange flashes illuminated a jagged landscape of metal and glass. I could hear the whirring and

clicking of machines. I felt lonely, desolate and saw familiar faces drifting ghostlike before me and then fading from view. Hands reached out and touched me. Ted was there, and mommy, who looked concerned. She was saying something but no sound came from her mouth. I heard a loud crash and I woke.

At first I didn't remember anything about the previous night, but then memories of the nightclub and Dave filtered through. I turned to look at him, but there was just an empty space where he should have lain. I heard a car pull away outside, the tires screeching urgently. I got to the window in time to see his car turning out of the apartment complex's entrance. Sitting on the chair beside the window, I tried to gather my thoughts. It was still early and a pale light filtered in from the east. I saw a shiny square on the bedside table, reflecting the mauve light of dawn. It was a Polaroid photograph. I gasped when I saw its subject: me I lay sprawled and naked on the bed, my legs spread and my head propped on a pillow. The angle of my neck gave me several chins and in the cold blue light of the camera's flash I looked like a bloated corpse. On the white space below the photograph, Dave had written "A \$50 double-bagger. Thanks!" I dropped the photo and sat on my bed, shaking with confused shame.

I busied myself on Sunday and tried to forget about Dave and his childish prank. I tried not to wonder what his message meant. At work on Monday, Jeannie attempted to find out about my "date", as she called it, but I deflected her questions. At lunch time though, my plate piled high with cafeteria food, I couldn't contain myself any longer and asked her, "What's a double-bagger?"

Maggie was with us, and they exchanged looks. "Where'd you hear that?" Jeannie asked?

Deep down, I suspected it was awful, so I lied. "Oh, some stand-up comic on TV said it at start of a joke, and I didn't hear the rest."

"Oh. Well, it's not very nice, actually. Just a bit of horrible male childishness. I heard it from Ralph once. I couldn't believe he could be so cruel." She paused, as though knowing it had significance for me.

"Really?" I tried to sound nonchalant.

"Well, men have this thing where if they're talking about, like, having sex, with an ugly woman, they'll joke about putting a bag over her head while they're doing it, so they don't have to look at her."

"Yes..."

"Well a double-bagger means she's so ugly that they need two bags: one for her, and one for him, in case her one falls off."

Then I understood. I was a joke, or a bet. Dave couldn't find anyone attractive to take home that night, so his friend bet him he wouldn't go off with a double-bagger. I must have been a godsend for him: fat, ugly and lonely, willing to go home with any man who paid me the slightest attention.

I excused myself from the table and kept my composure until I got to the ladies' restroom, where I sat in a stall and sobbed silently, oblivious to the comings and goings of others. There would be four weeks of dark sleepless nights, of misery and self-loathing, before I would try to end my life.

Now I sit calmly on the shore of the bottomless lake of despair that I thought I could never cross, in which I thought I would surely drown. Intensive counseling, drug therapy and some unexpectedly sincere friendships pulled me out of those cold waters. Weight Watchers, step aerobics and more will-power than I knew I possessed helped me lose weight and regain some of the self-esteem I'd lost, or had stolen from me by you. Losing weight was a necessity, too, if I was to use this body as a lure to ensnare the pathetic creature who once trapped me.

People smile at me in the street now instead of looking amused or repulsed. I'm still not slim, and I never will be, but I'm content.

But all of that isn't enough. Throughout the last 18 months, almost from the second I regained consciousness and realized that I hadn't succeeded, that I hadn't been set free of my earth-bound hell, for all that time, the need to avenge has been growing inside of me. The cruel, sadistic way you had to share your "joke" with me can't go unpunished. It's not just for me, but for all those other women, actual or potential, who you could hurt in the way you hurt me. I kept that nugget of hatred well hidden. None of the therapists or psychiatrists could uncover it with their tacit probing. It was my little secret.

The moon has reached its zenith, and the band of light falls across your groin. I quietly open the drawer and take out the especially sharpened stainless-steel carving knife. Its surface is mirror-like and the reflection from the moon dances crazily on the ceiling as my trembling hand grasps the wooden handle. As I lift the cover from your complacent body, I think to myself "Lorena didn't take it far enough. But she had the right idea."

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