

VIRGIN IN ASBURY PARK



One Man's Nightmare Journey
Into Innocence

Virgin In Asbury Park

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As I turned right from Highway 71 and headed along Sunset Park toward the beach, the engine in my Toronado rattled, coughed, then made a sound like a man might make right before he died. I put it in neutral, gently pumped the gas, keeping the thing breathing, sputtering along, a cloud of black smoke pouring out from my exhaust as I passed the famous sign that read “Greetings from Asbury Park” in big, cartoony, bubbly letters.

Ahead I could see the spidery metal sign on the roof of my hotel.

The Empress Motel. It looked like something straight out of the 1950s and stood next to a former Howard Johnson’s hotel, also with a classic, retro look—shaped like a crown.

Some kids were playing in the park—they had red bandanas tied over their mouths, like outlaws from an old western, and had been shouting

“Pow! Pow!” I smiled, remembering my own childhood out in the suburbs of Detroit, playing cops and robbers, but when the kids saw me approaching in my beat up old car they all stopped, froze and stared at me as I passed.

It struck me as strange, and I stared back, then turned my attention to the road, feeling weirded out, only to see a tiny old Italian woman dressed all in black, hunched over like a question mark, leaning on a gnarled old wooden cane. She looked like she wanted to cross the street.

My engine wheezed and coughed. I thought to just roll past. She was glaring at me with her dark, glassy eyes, staring up from under thick, bushy gray eyebrows. Feeling the eyes of those kids on me, and like maybe there were a thousand other people watching, hidden behind the windows of the buildings along the street, I braked, revving my engine to keep it running.

The old woman hobbled forward, her head bobbling up and down with each step, and I kept revving my engine, trying to keep it from stalling out. The old

woman stopped right in front of me, turned and point at me with one long, crooked brown finger. “Patience, you stupid bitch.”

I heard the kids start laughing. The woman turned and walked past, and I put my car back in gear and carefully eased my way forward

while the kids laughed, and then I found myself laughing at how strange and absurd the whole thing had been.

My phone buzzed. Keeping one eye on the road, I looked. A text message from my boss: **I need those pictures. Don't F&* it up. No pictures, no pay.**

I know. I know, I thought, looking in my rearview mirror to see the smoke trailing from my broken down car, thinking about my back rent, my late electric bill.

Parking my car, I grabbed my suitcase and pulled it along behind me as I checked into the hotel. Walking into the lobby, I felt like I had walked back into the 1950s. The floor was a mottled green Formica, and there were plastic framed chairs and couches upholstered with bright orange plastic. In the corners stood more plastic palm trees- somehow wilting.

There was a console television, and on it played an old episode of Gilligan's Island— Ginger had swapped bodies with The Captain, and she was talking in his voice. The walls were wood panel, covered with black and white pictures of Asbury Park during its glory days, as well as a mounted sword fish.

Behind the desk sat an elderly man with neatly trimmed, white hair, wearing a pair of horn rimmed glasses, and a smoking jacket. The brass name tag above the pocket read, “Casey.” He had his head buried in a book and didn't see me approaching. I glanced at the title on the cover: *The Passion of New Eve*.

“Any good?”

The man jumped back, startled, falling off his stool and landing on his back with a shout. I saw he had an erection pushing out the front of his pants and looked away, embarrassed. “Sorry,” I said.

The man got to his feet and stood as far from me as he could, pressing his back against the cubby holes where they kept the keys—just like in the old days. When I glanced back, I saw with relief that he was holding the book over his erection.

“I wasn’t doing nothing,” the man said, staring at me with wide eyes. His thick, New York accent surprised me, though given how close we

were to the city maybe it shouldn’t have.

“No. I’m sorry I startled you.”

“You didn’t startle me.”

“Oh. Good. Okay then.”

The man stared at me. Just stood there and stared.

“I wanted to check in,” I said. “Casey.”

He jumped back, banging against the cubbies. “How’d you know my name? How the hell did you know my name?”

I raised my hands in the universal gesture of I am unarmed and mean you know harm. “Your name tag.”

He looked down, did a double take as if he were surprised to see the tag or the name on it, then eyed me suspiciously. “Maybe that’s how you knew it,” he said. “That *could* be the way.”

I didn’t know what to say or do, really. The whole thing was so strange. He went back to staring at me, then glancing nervously at the door.

“So, I can get checked in? I’ve been driving all day.”

He snickered at that. “Driving all day? Okay. Okay. So you say.

Driving all day. Okay. George!” He shouted. “George!”

“What’s the problem?” I said, getting annoyed. “I have a reservation, could you...”

The man turned and rushed through the swinging door behind the counter, the doors swinging open and closed. Open and closed. I rubbed my eyes. Thought about trying to just get a different hotel room, but the production company had made the reservation, and they were paying, and for me to change it now would require me to pay out of pocket and the problem with that was—well, I’ve described my car to you, right?

So, I rang the little bell on the counter. "Hello? Hello?"

"On my way," I heard a woman call, and a moment later she walked through the swinging doors, looking like a supermodel who'd just walked off a photo shoot. She was one of those women who was so physically gifted, so genetically superior, she belonged to a different

species- tall, long limbed, with perfect skin and long, black hair, she had a playboy bunny figure on an Olympic Beach Volleyball player's body.

I gulped nervously, quickly looking away from her big, bright green eyes. "I, uh, am here to check in." I wasn't usually so nervous around women, but then again I wasn't usually around ethereal goddesses like her.

"Okay. I can help with that." But then she just stood there, looking at me.

Oh no, I thought. *Another crazy person*. "Can I just check in, get the key to my room?" I said, annoyed. "Is that too much to ask?"

"Not at all," she answered. "But you kind of need to tell me your name."

"Oh." I chuckled. "I'm tired. Yeesh. Just got off the road. It's Sam. Sam New."

She pulled out an old, leather bound ledger, and I could have sworn a little cloud of dust wafted up when she opened it. I am all for some old fashioned touches in an old hotel, but this was to the point of the ridiculous.

"I don't see anything for a Sam New," she said, running her perfectly manicured finger down a list of names written freehand in pen.

I felt a pounding at my temples. I wanted to shout, *this is why every other hotel on earth uses a computer!* Instead, I took a deep breath and said, "How about Perfect Productions?"

"Perfect Productions," she repeated in her silky voice, then flipping back several pages, she started scanning entries, and then said, "Aha! Oh, you're the girl the film company sent to scout locations!"

"I am here to scout locations, but I am not a girl."

She laughed. “Of course not. I thought you were a girl, or that you were going to be a girl. I guess my sister made a mistake when she took your reservation, because she wrote down, Sam *antha* New.”

“We all make mistakes,” I said, trying to mask my exhaustion with a jovial smile.

“So you’re sure you’re not a Samantha?”

“Last time I checked.”

She burst out laughing at that and said, “You are such a kidder!”

I just let it pass as she was finally getting a card for me to fill out, handing me a pen, turning and searching for the cubby that held my key, and I couldn’t help but take a quick look at what I expected to be and turned out to be an amazing caboose. She glanced back over her shoulder, and I quickly looked down at the card, writing in my name.

“Naughty,” she said, coming back to the counter and slapping the key down. “But don’t get your hopes up. I’m not into other girls.”

Other girls? Was she still going on with the Samantha thing?

Whatever. One thing that doesn’t look good on *anyone* was crazy, and I had no desire to do anything at this point but get up to my room, which turned out to be another glorious museum of the past. As soon as I walked in I felt like I was on a movie set. Everything was perfect, from the tube television mounted on a wooden stand, to the loud, floral patterned quilts and the little metal coin slot next to the bed to get a magic fingers massage. The room smelled faintly of cigarette smoke, and I smiled to see the little holes and lines burned into the plastic bedside tables from careless smokers. In the bathroom I found plastic cups wrapped in plastic, the little soaps and shampoos. The walls had been painted with seashells and sandy beach scenes. I got out my camera—a digital Sony camera, that compared to the hotel room was like something out of a futuristic alternate dimension, and I snapped some pictures. Our film, the one I was scouting locations for, was set in the 1950s — and the director wanted to use as many of what he called

“lost in time” locations as possible, locations that looked like they did in the 1950s, but with the dusty and exhausted look of age about them, as the whole

movie was supposed to look more like a faded photograph than an in the moment experience.

I checked the pictures, smiling, feeling the energy flowing into me, the excitement. I loved spotting and shooting great locations, and now all woken up and excited to get working, I looked out my window and saw that it was getting late. Asbury Park is on the East Coast, so the sun sets behind it, to the west, which meant we might be able to get some great shadows,

and I wanted to shoot possible locations now, in the moody late afternoon light as well as in the morning and midday, so I slung my camera bag over my shoulder, pulled my hotel room door shut and ambled off down to the famous boardwalk with its crisscross patterns and—

Right behind me!

What the fuck?

I spun around, my heart racing. I could have sworn I'd seen— an evil clown. Right behind me. It had looked like Tillie—the one-time town mascot, a kind of creepy clown of the type that represented seaside towns along the East Coast back in the old days, clowns like *Steeplechase Face* from Coney Island.

But there was nothing there. No one. A warm, salty breeze blew in from the ocean, tousling my hair.

Putting it out of my mind, I went down to the boardwalk. It was September, a weeknight, so most of the vendors who had stands along the boardwalk were gone, and I could see only one other person on the boardwalk—someone about 200 yards away, a shadowy figure walking a dog. I took some pictures of the closed down stands, catching the rays of golden sunlight falling over and between them, lighting the boards, and then I walked out onto the beach, my feet sinking into the sand, to get some medium range shots from—

A hand on my shoulder. Squeezing.

I spun. Tillie. Leering right into my face, smiling, his teeth twisted and rotten.

“Fuck!” I fell backwards. Rolled in the sand and got to my knees.

Nothing. No one. Just the breeze and the crashing of the waves.

This can't be happening, I thought. Not again.

I got to my feet, looking around, trying to figure out if there was somewhere someone could be hiding. There was a tall, wooden chair- the chair where during the season a lifeguard would sit and watch the swimmers, and it was on its side in the sand. It stood about 20 yards away.

There was no way someone could have grabbed me and run there and hid, but it was also the only place they could be hiding on this otherwise empty stretch of sand. They had to be back there. I wanted to go and see who they were, to tell them to fuck off and stay away from me. I stood and looked at the stand, sitting there on its side, the ocean behind it, rolling, crashing, a sold white moon rising in the distance, shrouded in hazy clouds.

I took a step toward the chair. Then another. A terrible feeling of dread came over me, growing stronger with each step, but I stepped closer and closer. I had to see whoever it was, to confront them, to tell them to stay the fuck away from me. Or to see there was no one there. That it had all been in my brain, and that it might be happening again, just like before, that I was...

Close now. So close. I heard it, then. A low snickering sound. A mocking snicker. I was only a few feet away. My heart was racing. I stopped, staring at the white, painted wood of the lifeguard stand, the chipping, peeling paint, the grain of the wood beneath. I stopped. Staring, my heart pounding.

"Come on," I thought I heard a soft voice say. Or was it the wind?

"Come on."

I stepped forward, and again.

"Come on!" It shouted now, clear, loud, a voice like a seagull, squawking at me.

"Come on!"

"Fuck you," I said, lunging now around the stand, to look behind it and see.... Nothing. Just sand.

My heart was pounding. Shit. Nothing. Then, was I?

"Samantha!" I heard that same voice call, that same squawking seagull voice.

I looked up, and there he was, standing at the rail on the boardwalk, holding an Italian ice in his hand: Tillie. Slender and tall in his suit, smiling, showing me those black teeth. He stuck his tongue out between those teeth. I grabbed my camera, but before I could snap a single picture he vanished.

I stood there half-crouching behind the stand, looking around.

Gulls pin wheeled overhead, and the sun was setting now, rapidly, casting the whole boardwalk in shadows. I could hear music from somewhere in the distance, probably *The Stone Pony*, which operated all year long and was a local legend having been the place Bruce Springsteen got started, and where everybody had played. I thought about a nice tall glass of beer, little tears dripping down its sides, bubbles frothing up through the amber perfection...

But no. No. That wasn't the answer. I wasn't crazy. Someone was fucking with me. I felt pain in my temples, anger growing in me. *Why the hell couldn't they just leave me the fuck alone?* I was looking around, trying to find something or someone to smash, and I looked down at my camera, my hands trembling as I thought about bashing it against the lifeguard stand.

But no. I needed to... work.

Work. I always liked to focus on my work when I got upset. It took me out of myself. I made my way back to the stairs, back up to the boardwalk, and I wandered toward Convention Hall, a crumbling monument from the 20th Century that looked like it belonged in downtown Brooklyn instead of perched on the side of the beach. It was festooned with old school decorations—leering faces, gargoyles, and I wanted to get some pictures. I walked along, frequently rotating 360 degrees, glancing over my shoulder, constantly watching for anyone trying to sneak up on me. I had to pass Madam Marie's Fortune Telling Booth, which had been there for decades, had been celebrated in a Springsteen song. I felt a chill as I looked at it, a dread just like I had felt with the lifeguard stand, and I gave it a wide berth, watching it nervously, certain that something terrible waited inside for me.

I crept along the boardwalk, as far from Madam Marie's as I could get. Painted on the side was a giant eye, and the words Reading, Tarot cards, Crystal ball—it felt like the giant eye was watching me, tracing my movements. I kept moving forward, the night getting darker, the fading sunlight replaced by the cold light of the moon, and then I passed the booth and...

Nothing happened. I walked past. The feeling of dread seemed to vanish, and when I got to Convention Hall I smiled with relief and delight to discover it was full of something I had never expected to find: people, light, and the smell of coffee.

The inside of Convention Hall had a high, cavernous roof from which dangled old-fashioned, incandescent bulbs that filled the place with warm, comforting light. Restaurants and coffee shops lined the space, with fenced in areas creating the sense of outdoor seating though we were actually inside. People were laughing, smiling, and everything seemed normal and right, and I pulled out my camera, took off the lens cap and started snapping pictures, thinking the director might want to shoot some stuff inside this very cool space.

“Awesome shoes!” a woman said as she walked past.

“Thanks?” I said absently, barely registering the comment. I asked someone why the place was so crowded, and she told me that Cyndi Lauper and Boy George were playing in the Paramount Theater, which was part of Convention Hall. “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun!” she said, raising her arms. “But you know that!”

I moved along, shooting the space from different locations, kneeling down to get the lights above the people. My stomach was rumbling, and seeing an empty table at the Asbury Oyster Bar, I put the cap back on my camera and walked over to the smiling hostess. “One?” she said.

“Yes. Can I have that table over there?”

“Of course.”

She led me to my table, and when I sat down she said, “Your shoes are sooo cute.”

“Okay,” I said, looking down at my shoes. “Thanks?”

She walked away, and I looked at my shoes. No one really ever paid attention to my shoes, and looking at them I found myself wondering why all of a sudden they were getting so much attention. They were just regular old saddle shoes—white and black, with big, floppy white laces and thick soles that...

Wait. Saddle shoes? Did I ever own saddle shoes?

I looked at my feet. At the shoes. I didn't remember ever buying shoes like these, let alone wearing them. In fact, on the beach I was sure I'd been wearing sneakers. Seeing these shoes, I felt strange again, like I was being watched, and I looked around, but saw nothing.

"Are you ready to order?"

I looked up to see a smiling young waitress wearing a headscarf.

"Yes. I think. Can I get a dozen oysters? The Maine Blues? And then I'd like the seafood pot pie?"

"Anything to drink?"

Beer, I thought. Or a bottle of wine. Something to take away this eerie feeling. *But no. I couldn't let that happen. I had work to do.* So I just said, "unsweetened ice tea."

"I'll be right back."

I relaxed, but then the girl stopped and said, "I just love your shoes."

I found myself fidgeting nervously. Checking my camera.

Looking over my pictures. I decided to go ahead and upload everything I'd taken so far to the cloud, and put them all up there, immediately regretting it as my self-censor took over and told me they were all terrible, that the director would see them and I'd get fired. I was sure everyone was looking at my shoes—they were women's shoes, I realized, looking at them, though how different women's saddle shoes were from men's was not something I could explain—and with all the weird stuff that had been happening I couldn't help but wish I had a spare pair, or could find some way to hide them, but I just kind of hooked my feet behind the chair legs and hoped no one else would notice them.

The food came, and I ate, glad to have something to focus on, to get my mind off Tillie and everything. The oysters were fresh and tasted of the ocean, and they slid down my throat slick and salty, and after eating the first three plain I smothered the rest in horseradish and savored the tangy burn that brought tears to my eyes. The Seafood Pot Pie came out

steaming, a flaky brown crust covering a mélange of shrimp and crab and clams and all manner of glorious things in a sweet, red sauce, and even though I felt full halfway through I kept eating, because the food was so good, and I just couldn't stand the thought of wasting it.

When I finished and had paid the bill, I felt good. Oftentimes when I am hungry I get nervous and anxious, and I... see things. Or imagine things. I forget, though, and so now full, I knew that all of the stuff that had happened before was all just my anxiety playing with my mind.

Even these shoes. Of course, I must have bought them at some point, and I must have worn them when I left the hotel. How else could they have gotten on my feet? Always get back to reality, I reminded myself. The obvious answer is the answer, and so I must have bought these shoes because the alternative was what? Tillie had put them there?

The crowd was moving into the theater, ready to see the concert. I decided I would head back to my hotel room, get some sleep. I wanted to be up before dawn to shoot some sunrise pictures through the various stages of the sunrise, and with all that food in me now I was feeling drowsy, my eyes drooping closed. I stood up, stretched, slung my camera over my shoulder and started toward the glass doors that would lead me back to the boardwalk.

"Excuse me. Don't forget your purse," the waitress called.

I turned, feeling my cheeks flush, and saw my camera bag hanging from the chair. "That's my camera bag," I said with a little laugh.

"Oh," the girl said. "Well, it's really cute."

As I grabbed the shoulder strap, I looked at the glossy, black leather bag. It actually didn't look quite right. It had a golden clasp, and a little golden plate that read Juicy Couture. I opened the clasp and looked inside to see my lenses, wipes, map of Asbury and— a compact, lipstick, mascara wand. I closed the bag, worried the waitress would see my makeup—no, the make-up. It wasn't mine. I slung it over my shoulder.

"Thanks again," I said, hurrying away.

Outside, the boardwalk was deserted. The wind had picked up, and the night was turning chilly. I hugged myself, trying to stay warm in

the wind, and looking up saw that big, ever watching eye of Madam Marie's, and with a shiver I stopped, thinking maybe I would just go around the...

I felt a hand on my ass, cupping and then pinching it. I shrieked and jumped, then spun around to see Tillie. His eyes were glassy, and his mouth was open, his tongue sticking out all black and swollen, and glancing down I saw he had an erection. "Stay away from me!" I said, my voice cracking.

Tillie walked toward me, dropping one hand down to cover his throbbing member, his eyes locked on mine. "You know you want it," he said in that squawking voice.

"No," I said, backing away. "Just... just.... leave me alone.

Please?"

Tillie stepped toward me, slowly at first, then faster. My heart racing, I spun and ran, my saddle shoes clomping loudly on the boardwalk.

I could see the skeletal metal framing of the Empress Hotel sign in the distance, and I ran blindly down the boardwalk in the cold moonlight, my eyes searching desperately for someplace to hide, or someone to save me.

"Help!" I called out in a high-pitched voice. "Help!"

I could hear Tillie running after me. Glancing back, I saw him lumbering along, running with great, bowlegged leaps like an ape, and his arms were raised above his head in a U shape. He was laughing, squawking.

Tears blurred my vision, turning the boardwalk into a murky, undulating world of moonlit shadows and shifting sights, and I could hear the ocean waves pounding on the sand in the distance. Pounding.

Pounding. Pounding. I ran, my eyes fixed on the sign, Empress Motel, and then I felt an arm slip around my waist while another snaked up and fixed itself over my right breast, and I screamed.

Pounding. Pounding. Pounding.

I sat up with a start, looking around the room in a panic—tube television, seashells on the walls, cigarette burns on the tables. My hotel

room. I looked down to see I was wearing a silk slip, and I absently reached up to pull my bangs from my eyes.

Pounding. Someone was pounding on my door. I climbed out of bed, felt something brush against my cheek, and reached up to find I had hoop earrings in my ears, bobbling as I moved.

“This is the police,” a man’s voice said. “We are going to open the door.”

I backed away, terrified of the voice, of the thought of having them see me dressed like this. “No. Wait,” I called out in a soft, woman’s voice.

“I’m....” I searched for an excuse. “I’m not decent.”

“Well, get decent and open up.”

“How do I know you’re really the police?” I said.

“I’ll hold my badge up to the door.”

Looking around the room in a panic, I didn’t see my clothes. My suitcase was on a chair, open, but when I looked inside all I saw were women’s clothes. Grabbing the quilt from the bed, I wrapped it around my shoulders and went to the door. Looking through the peep hole, I saw what looked like a legit badge and a uniformed officer. I took a deep breath.

“Just to warn you. I look... well, a little odd right now.”

“It’s okay. This is Asbury Park. Just open up.”

I turned the lock, pulled the door open, keeping the quilt around my shoulders, so he wouldn’t see my slip. The cop was tall, with a square jaw and cleft chin. I looked up at him and shrugged. “What is it, officer...?” I asked, ashamed at my soft, feminine voice as much as my earrings. I saw the name on his badge. “Officer Courage?” I noticed his badge read “Ocean Grove.” That was actually the town next door. Had I wandered there somehow?

“You Sam New?” He said, matter of factly, not seeming to notice anything odd at all.

“Yeah?”

“You been here all night?”

Had I? I thought back. The last thing I remembered was Tillie grabbing me, and then... the pounding. Still, I lied out of some instinct. “I went out for dinner earlier, but I’ve been in since then. What’s this about?”

“We found your purse on the boardwalk.” He held up a black bag, the Juicy Couture bag from the restaurant.

“It’s a camera bag,” I said, reaching out to take it, and noticing my finger nails were long and painted a soft pink color.

“Tomato, tomaaato,” he said with a chuckle. “I suppose you dropped it?”

“To be honest, I don’t remember,” I said.

“Yeah, we hear that a lot. Maybe go a little easy on the hooch, okay? Have a good morning, sir.”

“Thanks, Officer Courage,” I mumbled.

“Oh, and you don’t look strange at all,” he said. “Actually, pretty hot.” I flushed. The cop turned and walked away. I found myself checking out his butt, and quickly closed the door, putting my back to it, clutching my purse—camera bag—to my chest. My head was spinning. What had happened? How had I gotten home? Had Tillie... done something? I mentally checked out my body... but nothing seemed sore — or sticky.

I put my purse—my bag—on the bed and went to the mirror in the bathroom, and when I saw myself I shrieked, putting my hands to my cheeks in surprise. What the hell? My hair had been dyed a platinum blonde color and styled into a bob, and my face was made up—lipstick, blush, eyeshadow, and what had to be fake eyelashes ringing my eyes.

With the golden hoop earrings dangling from my ears, I looked like a young woman—and a pretty one at that. I had some kind of fingernail extensions on giving me long, square-tipped finger nails, a coral pink color, as I said, and

looking down at my body I saw I was now completely smooth—all the hair from my body had been removed!

I turned on the sink and filled my hands with water, splashing it onto my face and taking a washcloth, I wiped it gently over my cheeks, my lips. I looked at the white cloth. Nothing. I looked at my face—little droplets of water glittered on my soft skin, but my makeup was perfect,

unchanged. “No,” I whimpered. “No!” I tried soap. I went to my purse—camera bag, damn it!—and got some of the wipes I used to clean my lenses— nothing. The make-up would not come off or even smear or smudge.

I stomped my foot angrily. I looked at my earrings. I couldn’t see a clasp. They seemed like solid rings that had somehow been inserted into my freshly pierced earlobes. *No. No. No!* This wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be happening. I washed my face again. Again. That same pretty face looked back at me, that same perfect make-up highlighting my feminine features.

No! I grabbed my suitcase intending to throw it across the room, but it was so heavy I couldn’t lift it and instead just dragged it pathetically from the chair, where it clomped to the ground and fell on its side, spilling out leggings and bras and panties. I kicked it, hurting my foot, then hopped awkwardly to the bed and grabbed a pillow, throwing it down with a high-pitched “damn” and then falling onto the bed, punching it furiously with my little hands. And then I saw the clock. 5:37. Sunrise was due at 6:40. Shit.

I had to get out there and shoot my pictures. No pictures, no pay. And no pay meant I would be homeless. But, go outside like this?

I looked at myself in the mirror. At the girl in the mirror.

Samantha. That’s what everyone had been calling me. Was it some kind of game? Some trick? What or who was Tillie and why had they done this to me? I thought about George at the front desk, and Casey. Had they all been in on this prank?

Or was I just going insane? Again?

The cop. He’d looked at me like I was just any Joe on the street.

Hadn't batted an eye. Had called me, Sir. I looked in the mirror. Was I imagining all of this? I tugged on one of my earrings, felt it pulling on my earlobe. Part of me said— *forget about work. Forget about the job. Get out of town. Run while you still can.*

Oh, but you need the money so very badly.

5:40. I wanted to catch some pics pre-sunrise, and then in that great time between when it starts getting lighter and the sun actually starts to crest the horizon. *Get the pictures. Get them now.* Then figure it out. Or

run. Or something. I went to the suitcase and fished out a pair of skinny jeans—they had sunflowers stitched on the back pockets, but I wiggled into them anyway. I grabbed a grey hoodie that had V-Secret on the sleeve in white letters, pulled it on, pulled the hoodie up to hide my blonde bob and shield my face at least a little, grabbed my camera and my—camera bag, I thought, willing myself not to call it a purse—then slipped into my saddle shoes and hurried out the door, determined to get my pictures.

I glanced around nervously. It was dark. Would Tillie be out here? I remembered him leering at me, his swollen black tongue, his erection, and I stopped, looking back at my room. This was crazy. I needed to hide. To get help. It was too dangerous for a single girl like me...

I looked East and saw the dark waves crashing against the sand, heard the roar of the ocean. I could see rolling, cotton candy cumulus and wispy stratus clouds in the sky, black against the grey horizon, and I knew the sunrise would be magnificent. I had to get it. Had to. I tugged on my earring. *Be brave,* I thought. *Be brave.*

I looked in my bag. Dug around. *Yes!* A small can of pepper spray. A pretty bracelet with a rape whistle. I slipped the bracelet onto my slender wrist. I tucked the mace into the pocket of my hoodie. Let Tillie show his stupid face! I would pepper spray him and blow my whistle so loud everyone in town would hear me! I was not going to be afraid!

I strode down the hotel stairs, feeling confident, and headed toward the old carousel house, which I wanted to photograph before and during the dawn. How different childhood used to be, I thought, looking at the round building with its tall glass windows and lacy steel framing. At the top of each window was a horrifying face, like a screaming Medusa. Inside, nothing but darkness.

The city had sold the historical, steam-powered carousel and its hand carved and painted horses years ago as part of its long decline from a New Jersey shore hot spot to a crumbling, seaside ghetto. I started taking pictures, kneeling to find different angles, my pants so tight I worried they would tear, but they were made of a kind of stretchy material that clung to my body, and though they made my movements harder, they didn't prevent them. The boardwalk was deserted here in the pre-dawn

murk, which was a relief in that I didn't need to worry about my Victoria's Secret hoodie and women's jeans so much, but it also meant I wasn't at all surprised when a door swung open with a creak, and I looked up to see Tillie suddenly standing in the middle of the empty carousel house, his legs spread, hands curled into fists, smiling at me with that rotten toothed smile.

I froze, staring back.

"Come here," he squawked.

I lowered my camera, stood, slipping one hand into the pocket of my hoodie, finding the can of pepper spray. I started walking toward the door, smiling, letting a little swagger into my step.

Tillie tilted his head to the side. "I didn't expect you to actually come to me."

I didn't answer, but walked up to the door, paused at the threshold, then stepped into the darkness, staring right into his eyes, feeling a little surprised myself at how brave I felt.

"You're supposed to scream and run from me," Tillie said, shaking his head. Then, he let one of his wrists flop and sliding into a falsetto he said, "I'm just a little girl! Someone save me!"

I didn't answer. I felt my silence gave me power, feed the growing feeling of strength I felt. I could see Tillie now—his face was lined with a zig-zag pattern of hairlines, like an old painting, and his hair looked like a bad wig, all thin and dry and wispy. I thought I could see straw sticking out from the sleeves of his coat, and from the collar of his shirt, and inside here, in this room, he smelled of cotton candy and funnel cake—sweet and greasy and a creature of the summer, but with just the faintest trace of rotting seaweed, the smell of the ocean at low tide lingering beneath it all.

We were standing close now—just outside arm’s length from each other. Tillie was staring at me, his smile getting wider and wider. He licked his rotting teeth with that fat, black tongue, and then running his eyes up and down my body, mentally undressing me, he said, “You know I’m going to fuck you now.”

I shook my head, *no*. I didn’t feel afraid of him at all, and I was loving this feeling, knowing what I had in my pocket, the pepper spray I

was clutching with my perfectly manicured nails, the surprise I had in store for this freak.

“Boo!” He said, suddenly, leaping in the air.

I stood, looking at him, waiting, calm. I remembered a line, an idea, from so many horror movies I’d seen— *he feeds on your fear*. Well, I wasn’t afraid, and now he had no power.

“Fuck this!” He snarled, reaching toward me.

I pulled out my pepper spray and squirted it right into his eyes.

He screamed, throwing his hands over his eyes, recoiling backwards and falling on the ground, writhing. “I’m blind!” He screamed. “You bitch!”

“I’m not afraid of you!” I screamed back. “You asshole! Now, just wait until the police come and take you to jail!” I brought the rape whistle to my lips.

“Nooooooooo!” He screamed. “Please!”

I blew on the whistle. Bubbles poured out of it, and it made a noise like a fart.

“Queef!” Tillie said, popping up onto his feet like a ninja. “You queefed! You’re a slut!”

I looked at the whistle, the can of “pepper spray” in my now shaking hand. Turning, I realized that Tillie had moved between me and the door.

“I’m the one who put that stuff in your purse,” he said, giggling.

“You’re such a ditzy, air-headed bimbo!”

I backed away from him now, my heart racing. I dropped the can of fake pepper spray. “Stay away,” I heard myself say with a whimper.

He walked toward me, grinning, giggling. I ran to the right, but he jumped to block my path. I tried to run left, he blocked me, meanwhile herding me back, back, back until I bumped against the wall, the glass, with a thump. I put my arms back, my palms against the glass, my knees together. I was shaking my head and pleading, no no.

He made a gesture with his hand, like a magician, but instead of flowers appearing a long, thin knife appeared, silver flashing in the darkness.

I screamed, cowering away from him.

“Time to die,” he said.

Terrified, I swung my purse as hard as I could, catching him in the temple. He reeled, and when he regained his balance I set off my camera flash, right in his eyes, then kicked him in the shin as hard as I could.

“Owwwwwww!” He fell over, rolling around.

I didn’t wait, but ran. My eyes were filled with dancing light from my flash, but I had marked the position of the door right before I set it off in his eyes, and I ran toward that space, feeling the cool morning air on my face as I made it out the door, my saddle shoes clomp, clomp, clomping on the boardwalk as I ran out into the morning—the sun was rising in the East over the ocean, lighting the clouds in purples and pinks— it pained me, but I had no time to take the glorious pictures, as I ran back toward the hotel, to the safety of my room, running to the stairs, up the stairs, my legs and lungs burning, I didn’t dare look back to see where Tillie was, how close, I just wanted to get to my room, lock the door, get under the covers and as I got to the top of the stairs I skidded to a halt. The door to my room opened. Tillie stepped out wearing a robe, smoking a pipe, a pair of rectangular Ben Franklin glasses perched on his greasy head. “Darling,” he squawked, smoke pouring out of his mouth. “What’s for breakfast?”

I screamed, turned and ran, back down the stairs. Looking left and right, filled with terror, I ran to the office, but it was dark, locked and a sign on the door said, “Be Back in 15 Minutes.”

I heard feet pounding down the steps, and so I ran back to the boardwalk, back toward Convention Hall, where I could see light. I raced down the planks, my camera and my purse bouncing wildly around my neck. I risked a glance

back—and there was Tillie, loping after me again with that ape-like gait, his arms above his head. I ran, my heart pounding, my lungs burning, I didn't know how much longer I could run before I just collapsed, and the light at the end of the Boardwalk was soooooo far....

“Here! Here!” I heard a woman's voice call to me. “Over here!”

I looked. There was a small, hunch-backed woman with long, crazy hair and a shawl and a long, old world dress, and jewelry on her wrists. She looked exactly like a gypsy from an old movie, and I saw she was standing next to Madam Marie's booth, holding the door open. I froze.

Again, the very sight of the booth filled me with dread—like something terrible had happened to me there, like a memory from a past life.

“Hurry!” The woman hissed. “Tillie!”

I looked back. Tillie. He was closing in. I only had a few seconds. The knife appeared in his hand, catching the rays of the rising sun and flashing, the light blinding me for a second. I ran to the woman, rushed through the door, and fell to the floor, sobbing as she came into the booth, yanked the door shut and then slammed a big, iron bar down, locking it closed.

Pow! Tillie slammed into the door so hard the whole booth shook.

I shrieked, but the gypsy woman pulled some medals out of the pockets of her voluminous dress and began to chant something in a guttural, Eastern European tongue. The slamming stopped. Suddenly, everything grew calm. “Is it safe now?”

“For the moment,” the woman said, helping me to my feet, setting me on a stool that sat in front of a round table, with a crystal ball.

“Are you Madam Marie?” I said, pulling down my hoodie, running a hand through my blonde hair.

“Yes, child,” she said. “The one and only.”

“Can you tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Yes,” she said. “I can.”

I folded my hands in my lap, glancing down to see my French-tipped nails. I felt my hoop earrings brushing against my neck, and noticed that Madam Marie was wearing golden hoops as well. Thinking back on my image in the mirror, with the perfect make-up and my long, black lashes, I said, "I'm not a woman."

"I know," Madam Marie said. "But you need to become one."

"What?"

"Tillie has chosen you," Madam Marie said. "He means to make you his victim— his sacrificium."

"I don't understand."

"Tillie is an ancient spirit. He came here long before the first men, cast out of the ancient world by the Priests of the Four Quarters. When they hurled spirit from the ancient lands and sent him here, Tillie was enfemmed, meaning they took all his masculine power, and Tillie was fated to grow pregnant each year, and give birth to a sea-turtle, which he then fed and mothered until the next cycle. Tillie hated his fate, the feeling of being pregnant, having a baby in his big, fat belly. He resented the responsibilities of motherhood, and so when the first men came to these lands, Tillie stole the masculinity from one of them, and then made of him a sacrifice—a victim—which allowed Tillie to be spared his pregnancy and retain a male essence for a year."

"It sounds insane," I said.

"Nice nails," Madam Marie said. "And I love that shade of lipstick. Where did you get it?" She pulled a leather bound book from the shelf behind her and plopped it down on the table, flipping it open. "Look."

I flipped around. Inside, under plastic, I found clippings, diary entries and even pictures—sketches and paintings, then photographs—

going back to the 1700s. All of them reported men who had been found in Asbury Park, dressed as women and brutally murdered. The early reports often came with moralizing commentary on how it was all clearly God's punishment on those who chose to walk a wicked path, but there were also diary entries from widows expressing puzzlement and confusion, a certainty

that their husband's had "not been inclined in any manner toward womanly ways."

As I moved into more modern times, the reports were always about people from out of town, often travelling salesmen, men who'd come to town alone, who no locals knew. Men like me. I looked up at Madam Marie. "So, this has been going on for hundreds of years? How could this stay a secret?"

"Because," Madam Marie said, "it sounds insane. Because even in a town like Asbury there is violence against cross-dressers, against people who are different. Because even here when some stranger comes to town and is found dead, dressed like a woman, there are people who don't care."

I shook my head, not wanting to believe it, but the feeling of my hoop earrings brushing against my cheeks reminded me of the truth of my situation. "Can this be stopped?" I gestured down toward myself.

"No," she answered. "But I can save you."

"How?"

"By turning you into a woman."

"A woman?"

"If I turn you into a woman and a virgin, you will no longer have any masculine energy for Tillie to drain, and you will be protected by your maidenly virtue. Tillie will not have a reason to kill you, and he will not be able to kill you. Further, tonight is the harvest moon, and he will find himself with child, and he will have no choice but to spend the next year in female form."

"And that's it? I either let you turn me into a woman, or else I get murdered?"

"Tillie is out there right now, waiting for you."

I thought about Tillie. About that knife. About I shook my head. This all seemed impossible. It was impossible. Like some kind of insane nightmare- or another psychotic break from reality. "You can't just turn a man into a woman," I said.

"Then, why not take part in the ritual? If you are right, nothing will happen. What do you have to lose?"

I felt it again. That feeling of dread, like I had been here before, and something terrible had happened. I stood up. "No," I said, pulling my hoodie back up to hide my blonde hair and make-up. "This can't be real.

None of this can be real." I pulled my purse strap, adjusting it on my shoulder. Pushed my camera back onto my hip. Madam Marie just watched me, her face grave.

I lifted the iron bar, and started to open the door...

A hand reached in and grabbed my arm... Tillie's hand... and he started to yank open the door.

I screamed, my skin crawling where he touched me, and I pulled back on the door with all my strength. "Help! Help me!"

"I'm gonna fuck you, and I'm going to kill you!" Tillie screamed, clawing at my arm.

Madam Marie rose, grabbing a dagger from the wall, and once again shouting in Romanian, she plunged the dagger into Tillie's arm. Tillie screamed and yanked his arm away, leaving behind a trail of sulphurous smoke that stung my eyes, and Madam Marie and I pulled the door shut and slammed the bar down. My chest was heaving, my heart racing. I looked at her, my eyes wide with terror.

"Well?" Madam Marie said, still holding the smoking dagger in her hand.

"Okay. Okay," I said. "Make me into a ..." the words wouldn't come out. "Um, let's do it."

"Smart girl," Madam Marie said. "Very smart."

Girl? I thought. If this worked, I would have to get used to that.

Could I?

Madam Marie wasn't waiting around for me to work out my feelings about giving up my manhood. She was pulling open a hatch in the floor, which led to a spiral stairway, the kind that circled around a pole.

"Follow me," she said. "The conjuring room is below."

“Will people know who I am? Can I change back? Will I remember who I am?”

“No time for questions,” she said, as we circled down, down down. “No time for doubts. We must hurry.”

I found myself standing naked in the middle of a pentagram.

Candles burned at the corners of the star, filling the low ceilinged room smoke and the smell of tallow. Madam Marie handed me a scroll, and rubbing some sort of oil on my forehead, my sternum and across my belly,

she stepped outside the circle and withdrew into the darkness. “When I finish my summoning, open the scroll and read it. Remember! You must not stop no matter what happens! To stop is to die!”

She began to chant in that strange, guttural language, her voice seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere, and as she chanted, the smoke from the candles began to swirl and take on the shapes of four slender young women, who began to swirl around inside the pentagram, giggling and laughing, talking in soft voices, speaking in some strange language that filled me with pleasure and dread. Madam Marie stopped chanting, and the four shapes gathered near me. I opened the scroll, my skin in goosebumps, and I started to read:

I reject all that is male in body mind and spirit I stand before you spirits of the feminine divine And I plead with you to remove all that is male and weak and bless me with a feminine form, a feminine mind, a feminine spirit Give me the power of a woman's life and body I am ashamed of my manhood, appalled by it, and I ask with all my heart to bless me with a maiden's breasts, so soft and full The breasts of a woman that I might one day suckle a child And know the blessed joys of motherhood

The shapes giggled and drew close, running their smoky hands over my body, and I shivered as I read, thinking—this is real. I am about to become a woman! The thought filled me with terror, but I read on....

I felt my nipples tingle and grow hard, and then my chest become warm as the eight smoky hands began to play across my pecs, and then they began to coax

and tug, and I watched as my chest began to grow, soft white breasts swelling, swelling, seeming to almost pour out of my body, and I felt them, their weight, pulling on me, on my back, and they grew and grew until I felt like I had two firm, soft cantaloupes swaying on my chest... I had breasts now, big breasts, and I felt myself flush with shame.

“Keep going,” Madam Marie hissed.

Ignoring the impossible feeling of my swaying breasts, I read on—

I plead with you, sweet ladies of the shadows, take this ugly manly shape give me the long, lithe limbs of a woman. I plead with you to take these Arms, these legs, these ugly stumps of clay, and replace them with the Perfect rounded limbs of a woman, that I may feel pride when I walk in the world

And that none may feel threatened by my small, little arms Arms made to hug and nurture and love

I felt the changes, but tried to ignore them as I read on....

Please take from me this ugly bull's bellowing voice box Let me speak in the sweet pleasing lilt of a woman The pretty and melodic voice meant to bring pleasure And support but never condemnation

My voice rose even as I read, sliding up and up, becoming even softer and more pretty, musical, and I blanched in shame at what I was pleading for, was becoming, and my hands trembled and I looked out into the darkness, trying to see Madam Marie. “I’m scared,” I called out in my sweet, pretty voice. “I don’t want this!”

The spirits hissed and swirled about me, making claws of their hands.

“Read on or they will kill you!”

Bless me, sweet spirits of all that is pure, bless me now with the soft folds of a woman

Take from me the floppy tool of a man, that silly stick and sack so soft And bless me, please, please, please, three times I ask that you bless me with

a woman's slit, that you give me those sweet lips between my legs that all men desire

I could feel it, my body reshaping, the giggling spirits pushing and tugging, my penis vanishing as they took away my manhood, and a perfect pair of lips formed, a vagina between my legs. My eyes filled with tears and my knees came together, and I wept as I read, struggling to see the words through the tears falling from my eyes

Goddesses, I thank you with all my heart and soul for delivering me from manhood

For blessing me with a woman's sex

And I ask now for the greatest blessing of all For a gift I do not deserve nor any man

I ask for you out of your love and generosity to grant me A womb that I may one day know the ultimate joy Of motherhood, that blessing denied all but those Few men lucky and brave enough to cast off their weakness And embrace the power of the feminine

Please give me a womb!

The spirits plunged their hands into my belly, and I could feel them reshaping me from the inside, giving me the internal organs a girl needed to have babies, and I sank to my knees, weeping, bewildered, and then I felt one of the smoky goddesses put her hand to my chin and tilt my head back, and I looked up at her through my tears.

Welcome, my sister, she said. You have been elevated.

I didn't know what to say. I just nodded, still crying.

She smiled and said, "I want you to be pretty for the ceremony" and then she kissed me, and they all vanished, the candles went out, and the lights rose.

I slipped my hands down between my legs, placed my fingers on my vulva and pulled them back, terrified. My breasts shook, and I felt my nipples getting hard in the cold air, and instinctively I crossed my slender little arms over my big, bouncy breasts. I was a woman, though I still couldn't believe it, couldn't register it.

Madam Marie cackled. "She fell for it!" She called.

“What?” I said softly.

A door opened. Tillie walked in along with Casey and George from the hotel as well as a dozen other people I didn't recognize. They were all looking me over, smiling. “Great,” Tillie said. “A virgin, and just in time for the sacrifice.”

The people closed in on me. I was kneeling on the cold stone floor, my arms across my boobs, my long, blonde hair tumbling down over my soft, slender shoulders. “No,” I called out in my little voice. “No!

Please!”

Someone yanked a hood over my head, and everything went dark.

I found myself tied to a wooden stake, standing on top of a large pile of firewood. The chill, night breeze caressed my body, and my nipples stood out, pointing up toward the huge, orange harvest moon hanging in the sky above me. A crowd was gathered around me, chanting in some ancient tongue, and Tillie sat on a throne of bones, grinning maniacally as Madam Marie circled the woodpile with a blazing torch in her hand. “We offer you, Tillie, and the goddess moon, the blood and body of this virgin girl!”

“No!” I cried out. “I'm a man!”

The crowd laughed, as did Madam Marie. She brandished the torch, and I saw a cinder drift down toward the woodpile. My heart leapt.

“I'm innocent!” I called out. “I've done nothing wrong!”

“That's why you must die!” Madam Marie said.

The crowd chanted, Madam Marie joining her voice with theirs.

The wind picked up, and a cloud that looked like a hand, with long, bony fingers began to move slowly across the moon, causing the night to grow darker. “When the moon has been hidden from the eyes of the innocent, then she will give her blood to appease the hungry gods!”

“Help!” I cried out. “Someone! Please! Save me!”

My only answer was the rushing of the wind, the distant sound of the ocean waves, crashing against the sand. I watched in terror as the hand crept across the face of the moon, the crowd’s chanting growing louder.

Some of them began to howl and call out in the voices of animals, while others began to dance in a spasmodic, herky-jerky fashion, all the while they swarmed around me, and Madam Marie stood with that torch high above her head, waiting to touch it to the wood below me and burn me alive!

I felt urine dripping down the inside of my thigh, and I called out one last time—“God, please help me!”

The cloud covered the moon. The crowd raved and roared. I closed my eyes, and waited for the end, standing there impossibly, a woman, a virgin, a sacrifice...

I heard a pop, and then another, following by the roaring of engines. I opened my eyes. The crowd was running, and Madam Marie had fallen to her knees, a blossom of dark red blood spreading across the front of her dress. In the distance I saw a phalanx of 4 wheelers racing across the sand, men on each one with rifles, and at the lead was Officer Courage! The man who had found my purse!

“Kill her!” Tillie screamed. “Kill her!”

Madam Marie lunged forward, throwing the torch into the lumber, which immediately burst into flames. I screamed as I felt the heat of the fire rising toward me, smelled the bitter smoke. I looked around wildly, and there was Officer Courage, bringing his 4-wheeler to a skidding stop, throwing a wave of sand against one side of the woodpile and dousing those flames. Then, he leapt from his bike with a blanket in hand and bounded up the woodpile. “Thank god,” I said, looking up at his handsome face as he untied my hands and feet. He threw the blanket over my shoulders, then scooped me up into his strong arms. I threw my arms around his neck as he carried me to safety, just before the pile exploded into flames. Oh! I wish I could have just stayed there, cradled in his arms!

But, he set me down, looked into my eyes. “Are you okay? Did they hurt you?”

“No,” I said. “I’m safe, thanks to you!” Tears started to fill my eyes, and I threw my arms around him, hugging my soft, naked body against him.

He hugged me back, then put his hands on my slender shoulders and said, “Go with Sister Grace. She’ll take care of you.”

A young woman took my hand and led me away. I glanced over my shoulder and watched Officer Courage as he strode off into the night, shouting out orders to the men, who instantly obeyed, and I felt a trembling in me, deep in my heart, as I formed my first crush as a girl, and followed Sister Grace into my new life.

I was a girl, pretty sweet and helpless, but I knew deep within me that my future now was to be a wife, and a mother, and I accepted that. As we walked along, I saw a rusty old Toronado parked in front of the Empress Motel. I vaguely remembered that had been my car once, back when I had been an ugly, brutish man. I shivered at the thought, and whispered a prayer of thanks to the goddess for blessing me with my new shape and new life.

Grace led me to Ocean Grove, where I bathed and then slipped into a simple brown dress and a white blouse. When I came out of the bathroom, she braided my hair and pinned it up on my head, then kissed me on the forehead before kneeling next to me. “It’s going to be okay,” she said, looking up at me. “You’ll find out it’s good to be a girl.”

“I already know,” I answered, sweetly.

Had it been God? Or had it been the goddesses? I didn’t know.

Couldn’t think of such things. Once I had a husband, maybe I would ask him, and I would believe whatever he told me to believe. All I knew for sure is that I had become a woman, and that was a miracle, and I was sure I would be happy now.