

Permanent Vocation
By vikingbeast69

Roman Healy was watching anime and eating chili straight from the saucepan when a brochure smacked him in the face. The culprit was his mom. Fixing him with her signature pissed-off Italian mother look, she gestured at the pamphlet now laying on the floor in front of him and said, flatly, "Pick it up."

Roman glanced at his left leg, arranged stock-straight on the cushions. "I was resting it," he began.

She snorted. "It's rested *enough*. Your father and I had a talk and we figure it's past time you move forward with your life. You don't wanna find a reason to get off your ass? Fine, I'll give you one. I found this flyer—"

"More like a brochure."

"Don't backtalk me. I ain't the one who put you in this situation, mister. That was all *you*. Call the number on the *brochure* and make an appointment. Right now."

"Okay, okay! Jesus...!" He moved to set the saucepan on the coffee table.

"I ain't cleaning up another a' your messes, Roman." Intercepting the saucepan, she carried it out of the room.

"*Ain't*," he thought ruefully. He had to be the only guy in their little California town with a mother from Brooklyn. And the accent got even stronger when she was mad at him. Gritting his teeth at a practically nonexistent ache in his knee, he retrieved the brochure.

"Vocational Skills For a Better Life" announced the cover in blocky letters. Inside were photos of burly, hairy middle-aged dudes doing things like repairing truck engines and running table saws and looking thoughtfully at fuse boxes with clipboards in their hands. The text raved about "practical skills" and "personalized instruction." The only part that intrigued him was a bit about accelerated learning programs. The quicker he could get this over with, the better.

To his surprise, he snagged an appointment the very next Monday morning at eight o'clock. He would speak with a career counselor and get slotted into one of their career tracks.

At dinner, his folks seemed mildly happier than usual after hearing the news. He managed a smile but didn't say much else. He was sure they resented him for screwing up his future. He wasn't the brightest guy in the world but he had been a damn fine athlete. He'd gotten into a good university on a football scholarship and landed a spot as a kicker on the school's championship team. Of course he had to ruin it by shattering his leg in a drunk driving accident. And it was underage drinking on top of that. Goodbye football career, goodbye scholarship. And he was so angry and depressed that he partied his way through the next semester and flunked out. And here he was now, the tarnished golden boy. Just another washout living with his parents.

His dad could read his face. The old man said, "Your mother and I aren't angry with you. We just think it's past time you pulled yourself back up and moved on from all this. You're twenty years old. You should be happy for a chance at some independence. You'll have your own spending money. You can

find a place to live where you can enjoy some privacy. Hey, finally you can invite your friends to hang out without your folks getting underfoot.”

Roman nodded and took another bite of chicken scallopine. It was a nice thought but it seemed like his friends had all evaporated once it was clear he wouldn't ever make it to the NFL. There had been a lot of unanswered DM's and voicemails and a mass unfollowing on social media. He'd run into a few high school classmates in person since returning home. Most were pleasant enough but their smiles were more like smirks. Like they were happy he had failed.

Then there were the others. Like Barry Milligan, the guy he'd regularly taunted in the high school cafeteria for being a fag. They had noticed each other in a video game store. The guy looked about like Roman remembered except for more muscles and some unreadable cursive script tattooed all the way around his thick neck.

Roman had summoned the courage for a curt nod and Barry returned it. As Roman turned away, he heard Barry make the sound of squealing tires and an explosion. It was humiliating. He had limped out the door immediately, head down, profoundly aware for the first time how much of an asshole everyone must think he is.

MONDAY

He got up very early and showered — not an everyday activity for him, lately. Afterward he doused himself in Eternity Aqua and combed some light pomade through his shoulder-length auburn locks. He even shaved, despite the fact his beard was practically nonexistent. Just like his body hair.

He examined himself in the mirror. He didn't look too bad. Below average height, sure; only 5'7". But he'd been blessed with a decent enough package and a tight ass. Like his father, his pale skin was smooth and unblemished. And he was handsome, with hazel eyes, a strong (if elfin) chin, and prominent cheekbones. Girls were into him.

Well, not lately. Word had clearly gotten out he was damaged goods. And his body was no longer at peak performance. He still lifted every now and then but his abs were long gone. Too much sauced chili. His angular features had gone the slightest bit puffy and his face had taken on a wounded expression. He wondered what girls would even go for that kind of face. And his recovery had left him with a permanent limp. Was he officially a fixer-upper now? Would all his hookups be pity fucks?

Pushing that idea to the back of his mind, he decided to put on his church clothes: a dress shirt, a silk tie and khaki slacks. It was a vo-tech school, he knew, not a job interview. But it would show his mom he was serious. And it might show the career counselor he could be a foreman or a contractor or something and not just one of those fat blue collar grunts in the brochure.

Since his license was suspended he had to use a car service. He hated that. The rides were always overpriced and they just hammered home that he was a loser.

The school was in a failing strip mall and quite a bit smaller than he expected. But he supposed it could have just been an administrative office. He knew a guy who went to art school in Savannah. That campus was spread all over the city.

A tall, portly dude with a chinstrap beard manned the reception desk. He made for an odd sort of secretary. Tattoos peeked out from beneath the rolled-up sleeves of his denim shirt. The shirt itself was unbuttoned nearly halfway down his chest, showing off plump man-tits and a carpet of silvering chest hair. Handing him a thick stack of papers, he asked him to fill it out while he waited for his name to be called.

The paperwork had the usual areas for entering education history and work experience. It also wanted his driver's license info, which Roman supposed was in case he wanted to be a truck driver. He hoped the suspension wouldn't become an issue.

And then the form turned into a survey and then the survey got weird. There was a long list of vague statements followed by the numbers one through five. He was to circle a number based on his agreement with each statement, "1" meaning *strongly disagree* and "5" meaning *strongly agree*.

The first section seemed to be about finding a field of interest. This segued into a personality test. Since he was angling to be a supervisor, Roman made a point of *strongly agreeing* with statements about wanting to be in charge.

In a team, I need to be the one running things.

People look to me for leadership.

People often ask me to help them make decisions.

As he worked his way through the form, the sheer amount of statements made his head spin and his eyes water. His vision blurred. It almost looked like the letters on the statements he hadn't tackled yet were moving about on the page. Soon the statements veered away from having even the slightest connection with employment.

I would like to have a man under me.

A real man does whatever he wants.

I'm happiest when I'm indulging myself.

I enjoy the smell of my own sweat after a long day's work.

Fat men are more content because they deny themselves nothing.

He wasn't even sure how to reply. Almost out of reflex he just kept selecting *strongly agree*. Rubbing his eyes, he put his pen down and looked around the lobby. Besides the secretary he was alone. Occasionally a whiskery Gen X tub waddled out of a classroom and through a door marked "Teachers' Lounge" but that was it. And they always had food in their hands. Pathetic. Shaking his head, he attacked the survey again and circled the last batch of fives.

"Mr. Healy!" A low, gravelly voice was calling for him.

Another bulky middle-aged man stood by the reception desk. This one wore a short-sleeved dress shirt and a tie, both constructed from some cheap synthetic material. His salt-and-pepper hair was trimmed into a flattop, adorned by furry sideburns and a dense goatee. Despite the nerdy clothes and a cartoonishly gargantuan belly he had a commanding presence.

Roman hopped to his feet and hurried over to meet him.

The man smiled broadly and proffered what Roman found to be a crushing handshake. "Mr. Healy," he said again. "Welcome! I am Mr. Vargas and I look forward to helping you become the man you were always meant to be."

His office was small but cozy, with brown leather chairs and indirect lighting from a pair of floor lamps. There was a distinct 70's feel to the place, with wide stripes of color winding around the walls, all gradients of various earth tones: brown, orange, yellow and tan.

"This is where the magic happens," Mr. Vargas grinned. He sat down at his desk and motioned for Roman to sit in a chair on the opposite side. Perusing the form, he emitted a few contented murmurs.

Roman didn't want to stare but he was fascinated by just how hirsute the man was. His bare forearms were covered front-to-back in graying hairs so dense they were pretty much fur. More hair protruded from his collar of his dress shirt.

Finally Mr. Vargas set the paperwork down and announced, "Excellent, Mr. Healy. You will be a plumber."

Caught by surprise, Roman gasped "Just like that? I was thinking maybe I should be a construction crew foreman or, I don't know, maybe...?"

"Well, that's the problem, isn't it, Mr. Healy? *You don't know*. That's why I'm here! And don't you worry about working beneath another man. I think we understand each other in that department. At the end of your course I will be happy to set you up in your very own business where you are the boss. You'll also be the sole employee at first. But as your plumbing business grows and thrives you can always add more men beneath you."

It sounded great, Roman had to admit. It was all happening so fast, though. He wondered if the school was even legit. There was no way his parents were paying for him to have his own business. The rent on a storefront property alone would be a deal breaker. They were barely managing to keep him in that university after he lost his scholarship. His mom had even let skip that the school's brochure was just laying on their welcome mat one morning. That was the kind of advertising employed by car washes and take-out restaurants, not accredited trade schools.

When he quizzed Mr. Vargas on this, the imposing man stood up and leaned forward, resting his outsized belly on the desk. A briar pipe lolled forward in his shirt pocket. A ghostly whiff of smoke tickled Roman's nose, followed by Mr. Vargas' own scent roiling off his thick, warm body. It was sweat and pipe smoke and a pungent discount store cologne, all blending together to announce the presence of a *man*. "I know this looks like a small operation," he answered with a demure smile. "But we are actually quite large and growing bigger every year."

No shit, Roman thought, eyeing Vargas' titanic belly.

"I don't make this offer to every student we take on," Mr. Vargas continued. "You're a special case. You're ambitious. I could tell that from your survey. You *do* want to be a big man, don't you?"

Don't back down now, Roman told himself. *Mom and dad probably won't give you any more chances.*

"The biggest, sir," he answered with a confident smile.

"I think we can arrange that," Mr. Vargas chuckled.

"Hey, is there a chance I could do the accelerated learning program? I'm really eager to get going on this."

He bit his lip, then smiled even wider than before. "Believe me, you will be shocked at just how fast the time will pass."

Roman was handed off to yet another tall, hairy middle-aged fat man. This one was a Greek fellow named Mr. Hondros. He also smelled strongly of smoke, although it was a more powerful kind. Like Mr. Vargas he wore a short-sleeved dress shirt. Unlike Mr. Vargas he opted to go without a tie. His shirt was open to the top of his gut like the receptionist's and he was even hairier. A black tailback beard some six inches long decorated the lower half of his pudgy face. Walking behind him, Roman couldn't help staring at the fat rolls that dimpled and corrugated the back of his shaved head.

He had a slow, majestic way of moving that put Roman in mind of a large animal. Like an elephant or a moose. Wordlessly, he led Roman into a large, dimly-lit classroom with ancient looking AV equipment. Exposed pipes in various configurations lined the walls, interspersed with fixtures like water heaters and sinks and toilets.

An overhead projector was running, illuminating a drop-down screen with the simple message "I AM A PLUMBER."

"Have a seat in the front row and we'll begin," Mr. Hondros told him.

Roman did as he was told. After a few moments he shot the large man a dubious look. "Shouldn't we wait for the other students?"

Mr. Hondros settled his bulk in a neighboring seat with an audible creaking noise. "You're getting one-on-one training, my boy. Faster that way."

He directed Roman to look at the screen and absorb the sentiment "I AM A PLUMBER."

"Really let that sink in," he said. "We can teach you the skills you need but that alone won't bring success. It's a whole lifestyle. You need to think about how you present yourself. People expect a specialist in your field to look and act a certain way. You should project strength and experience and authority. At the same time you should be approachable. Our school will help you with all of that."

A small remote control was in his corpulent hand. The overhead projector turned off and a slide carousel started up, accompanied by what must have been a very worn old audio recording. "YOUR LIFE AS A PLUMBER," announced a warbling male voice.

Roman realized suddenly he hadn't brought anything for taking notes. He asked Mr. Hondros for a pen and paper. The instructor kindly refused. When Roman took out his phone, thinking he could just use that, Mr. Hondros confiscated it. "Just concentrate on the screen," the fat man said. "Our system works without a notepad or even textbooks."

So it is a scam, Roman thought. *Damn it.*

He wanted to snatch his phone back and walk out of there but the images on the screen kept distracting him. The projector clicked through its cartridge at top speed before repeating ceaselessly, the images somehow layering on top of one another, lacing together into a fascinating pattern. The voices on the recording stuttered and echoed. A monotonous seminar on hydrodynamics merged with a more passionate lecture about the Epicureans. That had to be a mistake, certainly. Roman couldn't imagine why a vo-tech school would include a course on Greek philosophy. Still, what he could understand of it captured his interest. He liked the idea of "pleasure as the highest good" and the notion that the highest form of pleasure was freedom from fear.

In his periphery he could see Mr. Hondros staring at him, a friendly smile on his bearded face. "*Roman Healy,*" he said. "Nice name. I'm not convinced that's a plumber name but we can work on that later."

"Thanks, I think," Roman muttered. His eyes were still glued to the screen.

"I don't suppose you have any Italian in you. You don't look it but your first name got me to wondering."

"My mom's Italian. I got my first name based on her maiden name. *Romano.*"

"That's nice," he said, blandly.

Later Mr. Hondros ordered lunch for the two of them. Italian food. "In honor of your mom," he explained. They ate in the classroom. It was enough food for ten people.

Roman downed more than he thought he could. He was hungry as hell, just starving, but watching his teacher shovel lasagna into his mouth gave him pause.

Noting Roman's stricken expression, Mr. Hondros slapped him on the back, laughing uproariously. Little flecks of tomato and sausage flew from his mouth and lodged in his beard. "Damn it, son—! You really aren't Italian, are you? You need to dig in and fuel up. You're a working man now. You're gonna need the energy."

Roman cautiously eyed an untouched tray of fettuccine Alfredo. He felt odd. Not bad; just different. He had housed more food than back in college when he was weight training and yet he was still famished. But he felt stronger, too. His clothes were tight against his body. All over. He pinched a bicep. It was firmer than it had been in a year. Even his collar felt tight. He loosened his necktie and tried to undo the first button of his dress shirt. It was a struggle, and ended with the button popping off and flying into a container of marinara.

Mr. Hondros nodded approvingly. "That's the spirit, kid." He removed the tie from around Roman's neck. Shaking it, he said, "And these things are only good for wiping your ass. Don't tell Mr. Vargas I said that. But if you want my opinion, a working man needs freedom of movement."

Feeling much more at ease, Roman devoured the huge tray of pasta all by himself. By the time lunch was over, he'd unbuttoned his shirt the rest of the way. His ribbed Polo Ralph Lauren undershirt was spattered with sauce and rode up slightly on his round, hairy gut.

There was a quiz, which he aced. He spent the last few hours practicing with tools on the pipes and fixtures lining the walls. The work came naturally to him, almost like muscle memory. As though he'd done all of this before in a past life. It was a relief. He was sure he could breeze through the training and finally make something of himself.

At the end of the day, Mr. Hondros gave him back his phone and walked with him outside. The pair chatted while Roman pulled up his ride service app.

Eyeing the screen, the older man cried, "What's that for? You have transportation!" He gestured to a beefy panel van with slick graphics on the side. The words "PAPA BEAR PLUMBING" hovered over a chubby cartoon grizzly in overalls and a cap, charging at the viewer with a wrench in one hand.

Baffled, Roman stared at the van, then back at Mr. Hondros. He jumped. Mr. Vargas was suddenly standing next to him.

"A gift from the school," the counselor explained. "Donated by an alumnus." He tossed him a set of keys.

Roman blanched. It was too much, way more than he deserved. And besides...

"I don't think I can drive this," he protested. "My license—!"

"I took care of it," Mr. Vargas smiled. "The title is in your name, too. It's all yours, free and clear. It wasn't difficult. We're an old, old institution with a lot of influence. And you can always have the graphics redone after you decide on a name for your business."

Roman shook his head. "Seriously, I can't."

Mr. Hondros joined in. "Not to sound like your father but when somebody gives you a gift, the gracious thing is to accept it."

Mr. Vargas nodded. "When you're a success you can pay us back. And you *will* be successful. We believe in you, Mr. Healy."

Mr. Hondros winced. "Oof, that name—!"

Stunned, Roman climbed into the van. At first he thought the seat was pulled back too far from the steering wheel but with his belly it was the proper distance. He forgot he even had such a noticeable belly. He supposed he just didn't picture himself that way.

Rolling up the sleeves of his plaid flannel shirt to reveal his muscular arms, he retrieved the bandana from his back pocket and wiped a spot of grease from the dashboard. Then he caught his reflection in the rear view mirror.

He had a mustache. Nothing fancy, just a basic chevron above his upper lip. That didn't seem right. He couldn't remember growing it. But he had to admit it suited his face, with its square jaw and solidly stubbled chin. It was just a shame his hair was starting to thin in front and recede at the temples. Perhaps a trip to the barber's was finally in order. He hated to lose his long hair. He'd been growing it out since he was fifteen, and that was ten years ago. But he didn't want to end up looking like some weird old pro wrestler either. In the meantime, he needed a hat. A denim baseball cap bearing a patch with the van's logo was resting on the passenger seat. Clamping it down tight, the brim low on his head and casting his eyes in shadow, he gave himself another inspection and grinned.

Now he looked perfect.

TUESDAY

"I bought donuts!" Roman plunked the stack of cardboard boxes on the desk. "Full confession: I already sampled a few on the way over here. Oh, and there's a couple of extra-large caramel lattes in the van. I'll grab those next."

Mr. Hondros wasted no time in swiping a half-dozen for himself. "Thanks, Mr. Healy. But you really shouldn't have."

"Are you kidding? It's the least I could do. I mean, you guys *gave me a van.*"

"Did we? Not how I remember it," Mr. Hondros mused. He punctuated this with a wink.

"Have it your way," Roman shrugged.

"This is an insane amount of sugar, you know. Good work! It's important to feed the beast." He rubbed his formidable belly and then gave Roman's own burgeoning gut a friendly prodding.

"That feels right, I guess. Only... what does it have to do with plumbing? I don't see it helping."

"You need to take up space when you walk in a room, Mr. Healy." He patted his belly. "It shows your clients you're a man of substance... experienced, trustworthy. And that you have a zest for life, which puts them at ease. Oh, and you must exercise as well or else your belly will sag and that's not the effect we're after. But you do exercise, clearly. And regularly. Look at those guns! And your pecs! May I...?" Before Roman could even answer, the big man's sausage fingers were unbuttoning Roman's flannel shirt halfway down his torso. The large hands clutched at his undershirt as the teacher's lips pursed in disapproval. "I'll need you to exchange this conservative thing for a tank top in the future. One with a scoop neck." His hands dipped below the undershirt's collar and felt about Roman's chest. "Hmm. Could use more chest hair. But that's a lesson for another day."

Roman wasn't sure how he could "learn" to have more chest hair. Mr. Hondros' ministrations were making him flustered. And in a few ways he didn't even understand. And then he was flustered about

being flustered. He wasn't used to a man touching him like that. But he kind of liked it. He could imagine laying hands on a guy to show him who was boss. Not just any guy, naturally. There would be some signal he'd have to detect. Maybe Mr. Hondros could explain it to him.

Lunch that day was Indian food. The spices made him sweat through his cap. Roman took it off and dabbed his brow with his bandana. He hadn't realized just how bald he was getting. His hairline had retreated to the top of his head. He was glad he kept his hair shorter nowadays — just about two inches, all over. He was also glad he had a hat to cover all that bare skin. He knew he wasn't a kid anymore but getting older still made him uncomfortable. A few flecks of gray had manifested in his dark brown locks. The hat couldn't hide that. And at the donut shop, the girl behind the counter actually called him "Sir." He had been caught off-guard by this and had even looked over his shoulder, thinking she was addressing someone else.

Lost in thought, he stroked his bushy 'stache, which dropped a half-inch past the corners of his lips. Scratching at the premature five o'clock shadow on his jowls, he felt a massive Vindaloo-flavored belch fighting to escape his belly. "Steady, boy," he said to himself, massaging his furry paunch in an attempt to ease the cramps. His undershirt was riding up again. That was happening more and more.

Mr. Hondros did belch. An explosive belch, rattling through his flab and making his bearded chins wobble. He cast a gimlet eye at Roman. "Just let it out," he said, a spec of irritation souring his voice.

Roman did. It sounded like a calving iceberg. They both laughed.

"We need something creamy and sweet to cool all this heat," the teacher declared. "I'll have some milkshakes delivered. You know what's even better for desert, though...?" He patted his shirt pocket.

Torch lighter, butane, cutter, humidor...

Driving home that night, Roman tried to remember all the cigar accessories Mr. Hondros said he would need. He stopped at an all-purpose smoke shop with a large CBD advertisement in the window. The staff was all dull-eyed twenty-something hipsters. The clerk he was forced to deal with was a willowy, green-haired dumbass with a jaded look on his character-free young face. He reminded Roman of a kid from his old high school. He'd been a Senior when Roman was a Sophomore. This couldn't be the same person, of course. Probably a little brother or cousin. It was just weird they had the same hair.

Roman enjoyed a cigar on the way home. At a stoplight another twenty-something guy stared at him from the corner. There was something bashful, even smitten, in the kid's reverent expression. Roman decided to give the boy a thrill. Solemnly, he nodded and touched the bill of his cap while blowing jets of smoke from his nostrils. Blushing, the youngster looked down at the sidewalk. Roman thought the boy was kind of hot. Especially with all those cursive letters tattooed around his neck.

As he walked through the front door, Roman's mom rushed at him like she was Emmitt Smith. "There's my honor student," she cried.

"Ma, its been a long day," he warned her.

"Just one hug," she squealed, wrapping her arms around his husky frame.

His father groaned. “Knock it off, Marie. He’s a thirty-year-old man for God’s sake.”

This earned his dad a sideways glance. “I’m proud, Danny. Okay? Nothing criminal about that. You knocking me up when I was *fifteen*, now *that* was—”

“Christ, forget I said anything.” His father pointed at the tool belt slung low beneath Roman’s protruding beer gut. “What’s with the, uh, wrestling trophy there?”

Roman had forgotten he was wearing the thing. “It’s homework, if you can believe that. Mr. Hondros wants me to walk around with it on as much as I can. So I can get used to it or break it in, something like that. It’ll be more comfortable if the leather conforms to my body.”

“You gotta watch out for those things,” his father advised. “They’ll make your pants sag and then your ass is on display.”

“Heavens to Betsy, what *will* the neighbors say,” Roman grinned.

His father frowned at this and walked off.

Grabbing a beer from his private stock in the fridge, Roman chugged it down while he walked to his room. He hoped his sarcasm wasn’t out of line. His folks were doing him a big favor, letting him move back in while he got back on his feet.

His left leg ached a bit but it was nothing he couldn’t handle. Sitting in the bed, he doffed his ever present cap, ditched the flannel and pulled off his damp undershirt. Catching a hint of acrid perspiration in the cotton, he buried his nose in the fabric and breathed deeply. He enjoyed the smell of his own sweat after a long day’s work.

Time to wash up for dinner. After taking a soapy washcloth to his moderately hairy pits, he immersed himself in a cloud of generic body spray. He wondered what his mom had prepared for dinner. There was sure to be plenty of it, whatever it was. She joked that he was eating them into the poorhouse but he knew she loved cooking big meals. She was even fixing extra desserts, just for him.

This evening he finished off a whole bunt cake in one sitting. His father regarded him with an expression halfway between horror and admiration. Roman washed the cake down with a few more beers and then jogged a mile to the all-hours gym for some power lifting. Just like he did every night.

WEDNESDAY

The sound of tearing fabric jabbed into Roman’s ears. He stumbled upward from his crouching position in front of the practice jacuzzi, swearing. This was the third time this morning.

“I can get you another pair,” Mr. Hondros said, sweetly.

“*How—?!*”

“It’s a plumbing course. This happens more times than you’d think.”

“Not just that,” Roman grumbled. “I mean how does this keep happening to me? It’s like every time I bend over my ass gets bigger.”

“That would be impossible,” Mr. Hondros said in that dramatically unassuming way that always made Roman feel like he was plotting something. But the man was right. They were at a vo-tech school, not Hogwart’s.

“See if you have any pants that are stretch fabric,” Roman sighed. “I feel like that’s my only option at this point.” He hoped Mr. Hondros would be occupied for a while. It was genuinely difficult to look at him this morning. Instead of his standard unbuttoned dress shirt he had donned a very tight polo and it showcased his freakishly large nipples. And now they were all Roman could think about.

He was already self-conscious of his own body. He had tried wearing just a scoop neck tank today. It was comfy but it also made him acutely aware of just how hairy he was. His forearms had been completely coated in curly black hair since he was seventeen, yeah, but now that he was more than twice that age the pernicious follicles were popping up on his shoulders and his back. Not to mention, his armpit hair was out of control. It looked like he was trying to shoptlift two miniature toupees. At least he had his mother’s olive tan complexion and not his dad’s pasty white skin. That softened the contrast of hair and flesh a little.

You can handle dressing like this, he told himself. *Just take a breath.* He took a deep, wheezing inhale and made a growling exhale. He could still smell the smoke from his morning cigar wafting from his walrus mustache. That helped calm him.

Breeze from the AC caressed his navel. The damned undershirt was riding up on his washtub belly. He kept going up in shirt sizes and his gut kept outpacing them. And now his nipples were itchy. It was turning into an annoying day all around.

Mr. Hondros returned with a fresh pair of work pants and a set of pricey-looking brown leather suspenders. “Try these,” he said.

Figuring the idea of modesty had gone out the window some time ago, Roman changed into the garments in front of the man. If the teacher noticed the bulge of his foot-long hog and bull balls through the fabric of his boxer briefs, he didn’t say anything. *Okay, so maybe Mr. Hondros’ nips are doing something for me,* he thought. *I wonder what it’s like...*

Mr. Hondros helped him adjust the straps on the suspenders. “You want them tight enough to keep your trousers up without making the waistband sit on top of your belly,” he said. “You don’t want to be the second coming of Fred Mertz.” His own iconic gut pressed into Roman’s only slightly smaller stomach. It made Roman’s monster cock perk up even more. He felt disoriented. He also could have sworn the Greek fellow was much taller than him but he couldn’t recall why. In reality they were nearly the same height.

The trousers were definitely a stretch fabric, comfortably hugging every one of Roman’s curves. His football-sized calf muscles, his bulky, crisply defined thighs. And especially his chunky bubble butt, which looked like two soccer balls pushed together. Stepping behind him, Mr. Hondros fiddled with Roman’s tool belt until it pulled his waistband down and allowed for a tempting glimpse of his hairy crack. That

was somehow tradition, Roman had been taught. He just went along with it. The feel of his teacher's hands on his ass made him harder still.

Just in time, Mr. Hondros finished and moved back a tad to admire his work. He whistled appreciatively. "I'll be damned," he remarked. "You really are the very image of an Italian plumber."

"Too bad I'm only half-Italian."

Mr. Hondros cast his eyes wistfully to the heavens for a moment, then smiled his innocent little smile. "Agree to disagree," he purred.

The kid at the gym's customer service counter turned the key card over in his hand, examining it like it was a clue in a murder mystery. "And *what* was the name...?"

"Roman Healy. I told you that already. A few times." His porcine fingers were clenching and unclenching. He tapped them on the counter just to give them something to do.

"It's not coming up in our system. Are you *sure* this is your gym?"

He removed his cap and gestured to his balding dome. "Do I look soft in the head to you? Why the fuck would I not know what gym —? Okay, this shit right here ain't working for me. Don't you got some supervisor I can talk to...?"

The youngster flounced away and spoke confidentially with a slightly older youngster. Roman dug his wallet out of his pocket and opened it, ready to turn in his membership card if need be. He strained to hear the pair's conversation. He caught the especially young employee say something disparaging about "Millennials."

The supervisor bustled over and smiled. He had an interesting build. Wasp-waisted with a brawny chest, wide neck and a boyish face. He wore his ginger hair in the typical undercut style of his generation. Strong brows and dense week-old stubble hinted that he was a naturally hairy man, no matter how smooth his powerful arms and legs looked. There was something familiar about him. A name badge on his polo shirt read "Barry". But Roman didn't know anyone with that name.

Barry glanced back at his sourpuss subordinate. "I'm SO sorry about that. I want you to know we appreciate all the years you've been giving us your patronage, Mr. Romano."

The large man was so distracted by the cursive letters tattooed on the kid's neck he barely heard what he had said. He only knew it wasn't right. "Hold the phone, 'Mister WHAT—?'"

"Oh my GAWD," the boy giggled. "I am usually so good with names, I am SO sorry. I legit thought you were Mr. Aldo Romano. Is that not correct...?"

Dazed, the large man obeyed a sudden compulsion to look at his own driver's license. There it was in laminated ink. "Aldo Francesco Romano." He chuckled to himself. Thirty-five was awfully early for a "senior moment" but then he was pushing himself pretty hard lately. "Naw, you got it, son," Aldo said, softly. "You gonna help me with my key card now?"

Barry stopped ogling the pepperoni-sized nipples thrusting out from Aldo's stupendous pecs and said with charming earnestness, "My number one goal is your satisfaction... sir."

Aldo could feel a smile forming beneath his lengthy horseshoe 'stache. He kept it in check. His dark eyes twinkling, he growled, "I don't think you understand what you just got yourself into, boy."

They screwed around behind the building after his session. The kid was super into getting pushed around by Aldo's belly. While Aldo ravished the boy's neck, he tried to read the barely legible tattoo. It finally revealed itself to be a poem:

*Forward out of darkness
Leave behind the night
Forward out of error
Forward into light*

Aldo thought it was a beautiful sentiment. He was going to ask Barry about it but the next thing he knew the lad was begging to be fucked in the ass. Every other thought in his brain turned to helium and floated away.

THURSDAY

Aldo was using his beard trimmer to tame his mustache when his sister Marie popped into the bathroom. "You forgot again," she said.

He warily eyed the soapy hairball in her hands. "I am so sorry. Next time...!"

"Danny don't want no next time, Al."

"I told you before, I can't fit in this dinky bathtub you got. I need me a walk-in shower!" He tried to make his six-foot-four, 375-pound frame look as helpless as possible.

Marie waved the disgusting clump of wet fur in his face. "I can't have this! Okay? I don't need the aggravation!"

He backed up as far as his bulk would let him. "I get that. Tell you what, after I'm a huge success, I promise I'll redo all the plumbing in this joint, no charge. Fancy as you want. Walk-in showers everywhere."

"I'm gonna hold you to that. And no more fur left behind. We clear?"

"Yes ma'am." He saluted.

Her face relaxed. "Okay, ya big goofball. I'll square things with Danny."

Aldo kissed her on top of the head. "Thanks, sis."

After she left he put a guard on the trimmer and evened the length of his stubble. He was glad he had invested in the little gadget. It got tiring having to shave twice a day. And the stubble was so much hotter. Like Barry's.

Concentrate, horndog, he scolded himself.

With the stubble sorted out, he scrutinized his scalp. Age and excess testosterone had taken most of his hair save for a close-cropped band around the base of his skull. The hair was all that was left of his younger days, when he'd enjoyed lustrous locks hanging down to his shoulders. When he had been a different man. A world-class jerk, honestly, arrogant and selfish. A lot of young men were like that, he supposed. Not Barry, of course.

Forward out of error.

He shaved it off.

Lunch that day was Lebanese. Between bites of lamb meatballs and stuffed grape leaves, Aldo and Mr. Hondros discussed the future.

"You'll be graduating soon," the teacher said. "I hope your family is getting you a nice commencement gift. Are you a jewelry guy?"

"I was always a fan of chains but necklaces tend to disappear into the *Black Forest*, if you get my meaning." He touched his chest. The first two knuckles of his hairy fingers were swallowed up by the dark carpet of fur there.

"How about a ring?"

"I'm gonna be working with pipes all day. It'd get banged up."

"I didn't mean on your hand." Mr. Hondros' gaze slid down to Aldo's crotch. "If you get *my* meaning."

Aldo playfully leveled a finger at him. "Dirty old man. That's not really my scene."

"Old man' my *ass*," the teacher scoffed. "I'm pretty sure we're the same age. Forty-five, right?"

Aldo found he actually had to think about it. "That can't be correct... I thought I was more like thirty-five... maybe?"

Mr. Hondros flashed his trademark obsequious smile. "Let's say forty-five."

Aldo unleashed a grandiloquent belch. Then another. Pressure had built up in his timpani stomach and it wasn't letting up. He grasped at his belly, grimacing. "Damn it. I guess we can add Lebanese to the list of foods I can't handle."

Mr. Andros wiped the excess hummus from his lips and stood up. "Don't be melodramatic. You just need to do your stretches. I'll help you."

Aldo reluctantly got out of his chair. "Do we *gotta*? I always feel real weird after these."

"No arguments. Mr. Romano. I'm the teacher here."

Except you almost never teach me about plumbing, Aldo thought.

Still, he allowed the Greek man to pull on his arms and legs and massage his belly for a good long time. It felt wonderful but it did make him logy.

The pain left his stomach muscles but he still felt bloated. Through half-closed eyes he observed his belly inflate as Mr. Hondros worked it with his chubby hands. Already beach ball sized, it seemed to swell even more, growing as large as an exercise ball, jutting thirty inches out from his mammoth body. His back muscles bulked up further and even his glutes felt like they were expanding in order to serve as a counterweight.

"Feelin' funny," Aldo mumbled.

"Still too tense," Mr. Hondros said, sharply. "Just let me finish."

His fingertips were on Aldo's face now, stroking it. The teacher tenderly rubbed his forehead and the area around his eyes. Then he dug his nails into his student's flesh, stimulating the nerves. To Aldo it almost felt like he was carving painlessly through the skin, crafting wrinkles. Pure fantasy of course but the feeling was powerful. Then Mr. Hondros rubbed Aldo's mustache and beard, mussing it, fluffing it. Again Aldo was struck by an odd sense of *expansion*, as the whiskers seemed to be getting longer and thicker the more the teacher played with them. The narrow legs of the horseshoe 'stache tripled in width and flared out on the bottom, while a long, broad soul patch he couldn't recall having before bloomed on his chin. His bushy brows were manipulated to be a full inch in height, the hairs a couple of inches long. The fingers caressed his Adam's apple, making him groan with pleasure. A groan that cracked and dropped several octaves from the baritone range down into the lower reaches of the bass.

Aldo's sixteen-inch long shaft slipped out of his briefs and shot its load, marking the left leg of his trousers with a large dark stain. "Enough already," he grunted. "I can't take no more."

"I was finished anyway," Mr. Hondros said, simply.

Aldo looked helplessly down at the 6'2" teacher and asked for a fresh pair of pants. "If there's any left," he added.

"For you? Always." He waddled off.

"You have that many pair in my size...? Who was your last student? Dave Bautista?"

Mr. Hondros was already on the other side of the room, rummaging through a supply cabinet. "Bautista is 6'4". You're four inches taller than *him*. Oh, and I think I better switch you over to something baggier and in a heavier fabric. I can see the outline of your Prince Albert plain as daylight through those things."

Mortified, Aldo looked down and saw he was right. The shape of his 0 gauge PA was evident through the stretchy cloth of his pants. He was just grateful the Jacob's ladder of frenum piercings were still hidden.

The new trousers were loose-fitting black denim. They made him look even larger but he didn't mind. The provocative piercings were artfully hidden. However his black leather harness-style suspenders with their many grommets and studs still hinted to the discerning customer about his hobbies. Those and his shiny black boots with their multiple wide straps and hefty silver buckles. And the black leather strap around his left bicep. His black leather ball cap with the "Papa Bear Plumbing" patch matched the accessories nicely.

"Now I'm put back together," Aldo said, "I guess I'm ready for my next lesson."

"We're done for the day," said Mr. Hondros. "I wanna talk to you for a minute about your dreams. About what you wanna do in the future, I mean."

"My own business. You know that."

"I mean personally. Anything else that you want from life?"

"I'm a simple man," Aldo smiled. "It don't take much to make me happy. I just wanna do good work and have some security. And friends."

"Nothing else?"

There had been a beautiful young man at his gym but that seemed like ages ago. "Huh. Not sure yet."

"Fair enough. But I need you to listen because this is important: if you think of *anything else* that would bring you contentment, I want you to concentrate on it tonight when you go to bed. *Tonight*. You never know when an opportunity is going to pass you by. Promise me you'll do that."

Grinning, Aldo tapped his noggin with his forefinger. "Locked and loaded, teach!"

At the gym that evening he ran into his old fling. Barry was the youngster's name; he had nearly forgotten. The lad looked amazing. "You're taking good care of yourself," he told the kid. "I swear you haven't aged a day!"

Barry just stared at him, his smooth forehead furrowing in consternation.

"Aldo," the large man prompted. "Goddamn but you're looking good."

"Thanks," Barry mumbled. "And you... um... look at you...!"

They fucked around in the executive bathroom that night. After Aldo spent some time fingering the young man's *very* loose hole, Barry attacked Aldo's prodigious nips like a starving man, chewing them raw.

Aldo couldn't stop staring at himself in the mirror. He wondered what the gorgeous boy saw in him. He was a gorilla. He'd been wildly hirsute by the age of thirteen. At forty-five he looked like Bigfoot. Almost every inch of skin below his neck was hidden by lush, long black hair. Well, silver on his chest and back. Again, like a gorilla. The silver had also touched the bottoms of his massive biker 'stache and soul patch.

Like they'd been dipped in paint. But he supposed his eyes were kind, even merry. He was usually a fun, easygoing, generous guy. He could be a stern daddy in the clubs but that was all play acting.

After Barry's shift, Aldo invited him to his van for an encore. He had a mattress and plenty of blankets and pillows there. He smashed the lad into the mattress with his monumental gut and pinned his arms down while whispering sweet little threats in his ear. Later he leaned back on pillows and savored a cigar while he allowed the youngster to explore every inch of his giant body, culminating in the best head of his middle-aged life. The kid knew how to work his piercings for maximum effect. Aldo rewarded him with a face full of cum and a cannonade of deep, smoky kisses. As they cuddled, Aldo asked Barry about neck tattoo.

"I saw the words in an old photo," Barry explained. "In a history book back in high school. They were on a big banner a suffragette was holding. I was in a pretty dark place at the time and they gave me hope."

Aldo gave the kid a squeeze and kissed his neck. "That's real sweet."

"It's why I came out. Even though a bunch of people were shitty to me after, at least I was being real. And I still have family that shuts me out; they say I'm selfish, like what I did proved I only cared about my own needs. They're those types of religious nuts who think we're only about sex. But you know it's not like that. When I was out it was like, I dunno... like I was finally at peace."

Aldo rolled some smoke around in his mouth and slowly exhaled, thinking about this. Then he said, "Good on you, Barry. 'Pleasure' really just means the absence of pain in the body and trouble in the soul. Epicurus said that. Sounds like you and me are on the same wavelength. The Epicurean philosophers were some deep motherfuckers, actually. They weren't a bunch of mindless partiers. They thought the ultimate pleasure came from living simply, surrounded by friends. That makes a lot of sense to me."

He could feel Barry's taut, hairless body shiver in response. "Holy fuck," he rhapsodized, "who even *are* you—?"

Wrapping the lad in a hearty bear hug, Aldo mused, "I hardly know myself, sometimes."

Barry snuggled deeper into his furry chest and yawned.

Aldo could feel his eyes flutter closed. Barry was exactly the type of guy he could imagine himself settling down with. It was just a shame the boy shaved his body and kept his beard so short. But he was certain he could persuade the youngster to change his ways. Some piercings would look good on him too, Aldo thought. And a few other alterations might be fun. If the kid was into them of course.

He could just picture the two of them with their own place, maybe an apartment in the old part of town. Someplace roomy, where he wouldn't be hitting his head against the doorframes. Maybe they could get a dog and...

FRIDAY

Aldo woke up in the driver's seat of his own van, still naked, washed in the strawberry soda colors of the newly rising sun. He could hear Barry snoring in the back.

He looked all around, trying to figure out where they were. Not the gym. Just a big parking lot and a very long one-story building on his left. As his eyes adjusted to the morning light he realized it was the strip mall. The vo-tech school was at the far end.

Or it had been.

The sign was gone, the windows boarded up. Weeds and garbage marred the sidewalk in front. A faded placard over the door read "SPACE FOR RENT."

Footsteps behind him. Barry. Aldo heard him say, "That coffee place open yet, Papa Bear? Oh *holy shit—!*"

My thoughts exactly, Aldo thought.

"You're still naked," the kid laughed. "Aw, fuck it. I am too. Might as well join you up here.

The sexiest cub Aldo had ever seen sat down in the passenger seat. It was Barry but definitely New & Improved. His musculature was augmented by a healthy layer of fat, gifting him with some handsome curves and a cute little tummy, all of it covered in thick red hair. His head was shaved and his auburn beard was lordly, grown out to over a foot long and ornamented by a stiffly waxed handlebar mustache. Heavy silver rings pierced his ears and nipples. And his cock.

Barry caught him staring at that last body part and laughed again. Aldo adored that laugh. "Easy, stud," the cub said. "Maybe after breakfast but I'm still worn out from before." As he spoke, he helped himself to one of the cellophane-wrapped cigars in the glove box. "We need to get our clothes back on," he added. "If a cop found us like this I'd die, I'd simply DIE."

None of it seemed real. But Aldo wanted it to be. So he went along. "Some, uh... some night we had," he ventured.

Creamy smoke settled into Barry's auburn whiskers. "Our five-year anniversary. We deserved it. You're taking today off by the way and I'm not going to hear any arguments. I'll change the outgoing message on your work phone and reschedule your appointments. Let 'em drown! We'll just say you're under the weather."

Cloudy memories were drifting into his consciousness. He welcomed them. There were names...

"Mario and Luigi," he said, suddenly.

"We can pick up the boys at your sister's house *later*. No rush, sweetheart."

The boys. He remembered now. Their pit bull and their Dalmatian.

He could remember more. Their wedding, their loft apartment, their game nights with their buddies, their own private game nights with their restraints and paddles...

He looked again at where the school used to be. It was a damn shame. Not that he was surprised. Attendance must have been dismal.

The whole time he had been there, he had never seen any other students.