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“So many smart men go to pieces nowadays”
–Fitzgerald

THE BOOKS

PROLOGUE

(Mark opens a brown package with a box cutter. It is filled with books. The Knicks are playing on TV.)

MARK: Mistress Karen? ... Is Lady Black around? *(To the TV)* Make a lay-up. *(To the phone)* Hi, Lady Black it's Mark O'Connor ... I'm good ... Just wanted to confirm my Friday night weekly ... mm-hmm ... One request ... last Saturday Mistress Chimera wore leather? It looked fine if you're into bikers ... I didn't have the heart to speak up ... two sessions ago she wore ... a rubber outfit ... yeah, you'd think it was made in heaven ... and if you could just tell her in the most *gentle* way ... not to offend ...

(Blast of sound from upstairs.)

MARK: Hold?

(Mark blows a whistle.)

MARK: Feedback? Excellent ... I'm glad you appreciate my business in this difficult time ... and I appreciate the work she's been doing, so ... same to you.

(A racket of arrhythmic electronic drums. Mark blows the whistle again, and goes to the window.)

MARK: I'll kill you.

RICKY'S VOICE: Are you strapped?

MARK: Test me.

RICKY'S VOICE: Aren't you Buddhist?

MARK: I eat coffee and donuts because I don't leave our street. Vegetarian not out of ethical consideration but *circumstance*.

RICKY'S VOICE: My headphones are dead.

MARK: Hold a funeral.

RICKY'S VOICE: Can we take a time out? *(Waits)* Do you hate people?

MARK: Just you.

RICKY'S VOICE: You don't talk to anybody but me. Bro ... it's a new dawn outside, bro ... the pussy-boy on CNN was wearing a party hat ... "world is changing lose the attitude" ... that's the advice my Internet guru gave me.

(Mark starts to leave.)

RICKY'S VOICE: Mark!

MARK: Shit!

RICKY'S VOICE: My toilet!

MARK: I clock at eight!

RICKY'S VOICE: My girl! The stroke of midnight!

MARK: I'm watching *The Knicks!*

RICKY'S VOICE: Why?

MARK: I'm a masochist!

RICKY'S VOICE: Then you should enjoy fixing my john.

MARK: Do you love this woman?

RICKY'S VOICE: She's a woman.

MARK: Where'd you meet her?

RICKY'S VOICE: Online, I think.

MARK: If I come upstairs you gotta cigarette?

RICKY'S VOICE: Lemme check my coat pocket ... I can't make out the brand ... it's got an eagle on the front of the box.

MARK: *If* you love her ... a love that blocks out everything ... an eclipse of love.

(Silence.)

MARK: You got smokes?

RICKY'S VOICE: I found them on the floor of a Korean discothèque. Some chick tried to bite my friend.

MARK: Next time learn how to fix your own goddamned toilet.

(Mark grabs a plunger.)

SCENE 1A

(Mistress Chimera is wearing rubber, sitting on Mark's face, suffocating him.)

MISTRESS CHIMERA: Are you dead?

MARK: *(Fights for air)* What?

MISTRESS CHIMERA: *(Suffocates him)* Human bunny-rabbit ... don't you ever stop moving? Maybe the smart thing to do is quit. Some of us hit jackpot. Win the big *prize* ...

MARK: *(Deep breath)* Prize?

MISTRESS CHIMERA: The lesser names are tossed into the ash heap of history. Wanna know something? I'd die celibate before *doing* you. If we were the second coming of Adam and Eve I'd throw the apple at your face. Let the species go extinct. *(Hits him)* Do you have HBO?

MARK: No.

MISTRESS CHIMERA: Do you subscribe to The New Yorker?

MARK: I read everything online.

MISTRESS CHIMERA: NPR?

MARK: I shut it off during pledge-week.

MISTRESS CHIMERA: He shuts off the radio ... during pledge week ... and allows the magazine and newspaper industry to sink into total obscurity ... I think we get a mental-picture of the *man* we're dealing with ... Now open your mouth ... I promised a reward ...

(She spits inside his mouth.)

SCENE 1B

(After the session. Helen browses Mark's books. Mark takes out a shoe-box, and removes fists of cash. He hiccups.)

MARK: Excuse me.

(Outside, a car screeches. Crash.)

HELEN: Somebody just smashed ... something.

MARK: I hear ya.

HELEN: Crap, there's glass. A man is walking through the glass.

(Distant cursing. Mark goes to the window.)

MARK: For all I know you could be talking about a revolving door.

HELEN: He's talking extremely fast in Spanish. It's an emergency.

(A car alarm. Mark looks out.)

MARK: Oh ... he, uh ... stopped in at McCann's ... "Pent-up Carlos." Venezuelan line cook. Looks like he ... tuned up on Red Bull and Vodka and ... what day is it, Friday? Friday, UFC on HD ... let's not ... let's not stare at a man who's been wolfing liquor and organized brutality ... there are better things to do with the night ...

(She looks at him. He takes her arm.)

HELEN: It's ok to just crash your car in Astoria?

MARK: White Ford Taurus? Sure.

HELEN: The doors were blue.

MARK: White Ford Taurus, scrap-heap blue doors, sticker of the Virgin Mary on the back windshield. "Pent-up Carlos." I know him. Yesterday I had to fish hair outta his drain. Must be drinking on account of how he's down a grand. See, some smarmy guy roped Carlos into a Texas Hold 'Em over the Jersey City Sheraton. Carlos strolls in at three in morning, the kitchenette reeks of white widow, and it's packed to the gills with professionals ... hobgobbling peanuts and free wine ... Carlos said one thing that scared me ... He goes ... "Mark? Not one single eye in the suite ... was not covered by Rayban sunglasses ... all that night or all the following morning."... Pent-Up Carlos ...

(He counts the money.)

HELEN: You know? Those are the 1st words I've heard you say. Other than ... "No, Mistress," or, "Can we take a time-out?" Most of my clients ... I can't get them to stop. I'll be the first admit, *yeah* ... It's kind of a 'situation' after a session ... Don't take this the wrong way ...

MARK: No.

HELEN: Sometimes ... I worry you might be doing this for the wrong reason, or ...

MARK: I'm ...

HELEN: Sensitive. Good. I've got an eye for men. Whether they're single ... cheating ... and I don't wanna be a part of anybody's ... silent self-destruction ritual ...

MARK: You mean technically?

HELEN: It's our *ninth* session, and ...

MARK: Eighth.

HELEN: *Ninth* ... I mean, you still don't take your shirt off. Much less go in for the tugjob. I'm not saying I'm nuts about giving it. But in this business it's like a fortune cookie.

MARK: You don't *like* coming here?

HELEN: "Like" doesn't factor.

MARK: I have a condition.

HELEN: I think you *said* that ...

(*He looks at her.*)

HELEN: But then, boy, do you do live in an *odd* apartment.

MARK: Yeah.

HELEN: I mean ...

MARK: This is my *home* ...

HELEN: I'm just being real.

MARK: If I went into your apartment ... maybe I'd find that strange ...

HELEN: You're not coming to my apartment.

MARK: Ok.

HELEN: Ever ... (*Browsing*) ... Just like this *hymen* of silence ... (*Flips through a book*) I've been wanting to ask ... "Philosophy in the Boudoir" ... Do you actually read this? Or is it for show?

MARK: A little of both.

HELEN: "The Buddha of Suburbia." "What We Talk about When We Talk about Love." "The Modern Eveline," is this a lady's journal?

MARK: Edwardian porno novel ...

HELEN: Why don't you just look at fake tits?

MARK: What do you care?

HELEN: Do you *like* fake tits?

MARK: That's not your business.

HELEN: My breasts are natural.

MARK: So are mine.

HELEN: What's The Modern Eveline about?

MARK: A rich chick bangs her Dad.

HELEN: You gotta thing for rich women? (*Waits*) Where does a person *obtain* this?

MARK: I stole it from— (*Hands her money*) The Strand.

HELEN: I go through money like toilet paper. 1, 2, 3 Mm, mm, mm, mm. *Fourteen*. Two hundred, Two fifty. Three. ... Thanks ...

MARK: You're welcome.

HELEN: Are there even society women anymore? In that classic sense?

MARK: Yes.

(*A subway car rushes past outside. They wait for it.*)

MARK: Ok ... I don't have any ...

HELEN: No ...

MARK: I mean to say I'm not ...

HELEN: Yes?

MARK: I *like* it.

HELEN: Can I get a glass of water?

MARK: Yes.

HELEN: Would you get it?

MARK: Yes, Mistress.

HELEN: I'm not in Mistress mode.

MARK: Neither am I ... I was just ...

(Exit Mark.)

HELEN: I guess I didn't think people read books anymore ... I walked into the Strand a week from Thursday ... used the bag check and the bathroom and left ... I mean, I used to read left wing publications ... got bored with that ... now I'm down to US Weekly and Star ... fluff articles about Joe Biden's model train collection ... what kind of animal Scarlett "Whatsheername" would be if she was an animal ...

MARK (OFFSTAGE): What kind of animal would she be?

HELEN: A gazelle.

MARK (OFFSTAGE): That sucks.

HELEN: But there *was* a time when I always had a book in my hand ... a *play* ...

MARK (OFFSTAGE): What plays?

HELEN: Lillian O'Neill ... Eugene Hellman ... dead white people.

MARK (OFFSTAGE): You should be an actor.

HELEN: I am.

(Reenter Mark, carrying a glass of water.)

MARK: Good.

HELEN: They classify us into types. "*This Italian has a wide midriff, we'll make him "crime drama Eddie"...*"

MARK: What type are you?

HELEN: Terrorist's wife #4. That's how the dungeon website advertises me too ... "*This sassy little Arabian Princess has been repressed for years under Islamic law, and now she wants to take it out on your spoiled Western ass ...Incall, outcall, book NOW ...find your imperialist arrogance melting away under her sun-soaked desert charms ... You're sure to find her positively Egyptastic!*" ... I, ah ... I memorized it.

MARK: What kind of animal would you be?

HELEN: Nobody wants to know.

MARK: *I do.*

HELEN: I'm not blonde like Scarlet Whatsername.

MARK: Right but ...

HELEN: I'd be a panther.

(Silence.)

HELEN: Can I *borrow* a book?

(Mark looks for a book.)

HELEN: Gimme a tear-jerker and I'll give it back next session. Something *extremely* depressing with a teeny touch of hope. Not *too* much hope, please. Just enough to make it pathetic. Nothing from the beat generation ... if I wanted to read a collaboration between a crazy person and a bottle of grain alcohol, I'd open the emails of my Aunt Dahlia in Philly ...

(Mark shakes his head in mild confusion.)

HELEN: No 'contemporary middle-brow' shit ... "Snow Falls on Cedars" ... I'd rather be tied to a tree and raped by wolves ... Ever cried reading a book?

MARK: *(Without looking)* The only times I cry come when I'm reading!

HELEN: Why do you keep your money in a shoe-box?

MARK: Why do you keep it in a bank?

HELEN: Lotta Egyptians are bankers. Gotta a family?

MARK: *(Hands her a book)* Nope.

HELEN: *(Starts to speak)* Wh- *(Looks at the book)* Yeah.

MARK: End of the last story ...

(Helen turns it over in her hands.)

MARK: Heard of it ...?

HELEN: Just a little heavy ... not in terms of weight ...

MARK: Your coat.

HELEN: Winter won't stop. Next week? Same time same place?

MARK: I'll be here ...

HELEN: You promise this is fun?

MARK: Always.

HELEN: That's all I needed to know.

SCENE 2A

(One week later. A new session. Mark is cleaning the floor with a toothbrush. She surveys his work.)

MISTRESS CHIMERA: Of the many things we are told as *children* ... and I was told a great many things by the aristocratic women of my family ... in French, high-English, and Arabic ... I wish I was forewarned of how boring life really *is* ... I mean, you get yourself a manservant ... a groveling fool and feta cheese munching *floor-monkey* ... and you're forced to sit and watch him clean the sandy filth you've tracked off of your desert ship-ships ... I mean, *fuck*, it'd bore *any* woman to tears, even someone as beautiful as *me* ...

MARK: Life's boring ninety-seven percent of the time ... it picks up in that one percent where things are happy ... or in that one percent where things falls apart ...

MISTRESS CHIMERA: Did I *ask*?

MARK: No, Mistress.

MISTRESS CHIMERA: That's only ninety-nine percent. One percent shitty. One percent unshitty. Ninety-seven percent dull. That's ninety-nine percent, slave. You really *are* a moron if you think I'm going to swallow bad math.

MARK: The extra one percent is a spiritual-transcendence I've only read about in books.

MISTRESS CHIMERA: Ha! What are you, *deep*?

MARK: No, Mistress Chimera.

MISTRESS CHIMERA: Do you think you're Edward Said?

MARK: No.

MISTRESS CHIMERA: Then shut up and clean my floor! (*Pacing over him*) You're not entitled to any kind of *spiritual* transcendence ... even if it does exist ... only rich people go to heaven ... when I'm at the salon with my lady friends ... let me rephrase that ... when I'm

MISTRESS CHIMERA (cont'd): at the salon surrounded by *hand-maidens* ...stuffing our satisfied faces with lady-finger sweets and triple-filtered Algerian caramel ... when we're not reading reviews for trendy little spas in Bahrain ... when we're not doing *that* ... we make fun of you ... it's a sport. One of us will make a joke ... "*What's a fate worse than death?*" Another will respond with "*what?*" The 1st will volley something back something to the tune of ... "*French-kissing you know who.*" (*Smacks him*) Clean that spot! ... I was thinking maybe in that arthropod head you might be imagining ... "*something*" ...

MARK: Something?

MISTRESS CHIMERA: Wanna *have* me?

MARK: Never allowed myself to ...

MISTRESS CHIMERA: Liar ... wanna ... lay me on the ground and take me? My big fat brown ass in the air? My head heavy against the newly cleaned floor? The North African moon through the window and the sand stretching ever onwards ... dripping with repressed lust, the desert wind ripe with pussy scent, the beggars outside banging their cans with anticipation ... of every ...

MARK: Thrust?

MISTRESS CHIMERA: (*Softly*) Perhaps.

MARK: An *honor* ... it *would* be ... an honor.

MISTRESS CHIMERA: Ask me.

MARK: Can I?

MISTRESS CHIMERA: What?

MARK: Fuck you?

MISTRESS CHIMERA: Fuck! (*Hits him*) You!

MARK: *May* I?

MISTRESS CHIMERA: (*Definitive*) Absolutely not.

(*She stands on his fingers.*)

MISTRESS CHIMERA: Know what men I like? Pay attention!
Know what men I like?

MARK: No!

MISTRESS CHIMERA: Dark men from the Sudanese border. Human stallions. I knew a Nubian boy. Going on 16. He could bench press a milk-fed camel and make a woman cum just from the look in his eyes. *Fifteen inches!* Can you match it?

MARK: Fifteen *inches*? ... You might be stretching the truth, Mistress ... that's mammoth.

MISTRESS CHIMERA: Don't talk back to me!

(She crushes his hand with her heel.)

SCENE 2B

(After the session. Mark grips his hand with an ice pack.)

MARK: There it is.

HELEN: Does it hurt?

MARK: I'm tough.

HELEN: Nice to meet you, I'm wimpy.

(She holds out her hand. He looks at it.)

MARK: If I wanted you to stop I would have used the safe word.

HELEN: We have a safe word?

MARK: Lollipop.

HELEN: Are you a boy?

MARK: No.

HELEN: Do you have a high tolerance for pain?

MARK: Is this a survey?

HELEN: Another Mistress working in Lady Black's Dungeon, Mistress Petra. She's a sexy Czech with piercing blue eyes and this great big *whopper* of an ass. Boy, what an ass! You could maybe rest a cold glass of ginger-ale on top of it, standing up, without spilling a drop.

MARK: I've seen it on the website.

HELEN: Doesn't she have the *greatest* ass?

MARK: It's not bad.

HELEN: She told me about this *client* she used to have, an anchor-man.

MARK: What's his name?

HELEN: Confidential.

MARK: Which channel?

HELEN: You wanna push me? *Fine.* MSNBC. So, this big-headed *man* had a secret letch. He liked Mistress Petra to fart directly into his nose while he masturbated ... with clothespins attached to his finely shaved ... *scrotum* ...

MARK: You're *kidding*.

HELEN: No, and a fart isn't the easiest thing to whip up on the spot.

MARK: No, I guess not.

HELEN: She took lots of really intense fiber supplement, and ate large strips of cabbage en route to Rockefeller Center once every two months to achieve this task. The relationship ended because he was a closet-chauvinist. He was like, "*I've been in this business forever, honey, I've got a high tolerance for pain, yadayadayada.*" So, she *branded* him.

MARK: Like a cow?

HELEN: The wound got infected and the next day she *saw* him. And this crude *man* ... someone she privately called 'Stinknose' ... kept blinking ... *itching* his thigh under the desk ... Because men can't handle pain like women ... we're ... we're meant for child-birth, you know.

(Helen opens a pack of gum and offers Mark a piece. Mark waves her off. Helen pops the gum into her mouth.)

HELEN: Wanna take it up a notch?

MARK: How?

HELEN: I do golden-showers.

MARK: Because the website specifies "no deal." In clean, red, Ta-homa font.

HELEN: But you and I have trust going after the book loan.

MARK: You'll piss on me?

HELEN: Want me to?

MARK: In my mouth?

HELEN: I could do the chest.

MARK: How's this supposed to happen?

HELEN: We'll put plastic on the floor.

MARK: Fuck that. No space. The books'll get wet.

HELEN: But the *humiliation*.

MARK: I'm only gonna say this once. I've got an unpleasant dark side. I'm capable of violence.

(Mark counts the money.)

HELEN: We'll use your tub.

MARK: Don't you have to drink something first?

HELEN: Probably.

MARK: What beer?

HELEN: Stella Artois.

MARK: Arabs drink that too?

HELEN: I'm an American citizen, dumbass, I'd expect more from a sensitive bunny-rabbit like you.

MARK: Sounds like a beer brewed by Disney.

HELEN: Well, I live in Dumbo.

MARK: Well, there it is.

HELEN: You gotta problem with Brooklyn?

MARK: Queens *owns* Brooklyn.

HELEN: It's funny because you're really serious about it!

MARK: Hope you like Miller, Mistress Chimera. Champagne of beers. That's my refrigerator. Twelve cans of High Life. Two empty things of mustard. And I really don't feel like buying some eurotrash lager ... to produce *urine* for the sake of a golden *shower* ... You may or *may not* be bluffing about ...

HELEN: My real name's Helen.

MARK: These are brand new twenties, Helen. They stick together. My boss. "Stevie Sweatpants" ... cashed them.

(She counts the money lazily, without really looking at it.)

HELEN: Where'd Stevie get his nickname?

MARK: His pants.

HELEN: I like him.

MARK: He cheats on his wife.

HELEN: How do you know?

MARK: Be serious and count it.

HELEN: I trust you.

MARK: Nobody should trust anybody. Everybody's onroids. Everybody's shaking down a children's hospital. Count the money.

(She puts the money in her purse.)

HELEN: Good session.

MARK: You didn't count it.

HELEN: You threw me off when you broke character.

MARK: When?

HELEN: I know ... I take a slightly comic tone ... My mission is to laugh, and have fun ... to make you forget about your problems. The three word mantra Lady Black gave me when I took this job was "keep it kinky." So, that's it. I'm trying to please.

MARK: Mission accomplished.

HELEN: You over-tip me.

MARK: You have to *be* with me, right?

(Helen looks at him, blankly.)

MARK: Look, you're the Sandy Koufax of female domination. My only complaint is that fifteen inches is huge. Fifteen is like a souvenir baseball bat. And, I need some semblance of reality in my fantasy.

HELEN: *(Pops her gum)* Sometimes I wish I had a dick.

(Silence. She taps the book with excitement.)