

Untraceable

“The sex is scary good,” the young woman said to her roommate.

They sat in Elevator Sushi in the college town of Northampton, in western Mass. A small plate of dumplings passed by on a conveyor belt. “I was getting my morning brew at Black Coffee & Bread like usual,” she explained. “Actually, I was pumping an empty coffee carafe when someone called from across the room, ‘It’s dead, I killed it,’ in this sexy accent I’ve never heard before. Then he told me that he liked my boots.” Charly clicked her heels together, all straps, leather, and spikes.

She had two long braids dyed red and green. Heavy eye makeup, clean skin. Heidi on Halloween.

“Hmm,” Marla pondered. “A guy who notices shoes. That’s a first,” she said. Her purple hair was parted on the side and hung long over her right eye. She wore a pearl necklace around her neck, a tiny step toward post-college life. “Maybe he likes to wear women’s shoes,” she teased.

“No,” Charly said. “His name is Konrad. And he’s not like that, but I guess you never know!” She looked away, then added, “He’s here temporarily. He has his own business.”

“Doing what, selling shoes?”

“No.”

“What’s his business?”

“He’s a... what does he call it? A facilitator, yes, at UMASS Medical school. He has a business supplying...cadavers. Drives around the country supplying medical schools.”

Marla put down her piece of sushi. "You have got to be freakin' kidding me, Charly. Dead people? What does he do, raid the cemeteries?"

"No, no," she said, cutting the air with her hands. "He told me all about it. People donate their bodies all the time. It's a great thing. He basically helps med schools teach surgery. It's a required class called Gross Lab."

"Yeah, I can see why they call it that."

"It's called Gross Lab because of the large size of the bodies and macrobiotic stuff. I kind of respect it. I'm a donor now, he convinced me." She downed a small cup of sake. "You should too," she said, casually.

No words coming from Marla's lips. Then, "Well aren't you the little dead girl donor?"

"Not a big deal. Konrad says that it's a gift to the world, and I kind of agree." She fluttered her hands down her body. "Who needs this after I no longer need this?"

Marla's face dissected the information. She let a piece of red fish go by. "And do your parents know that you've sold your body to science?"

"I'm cut off," she said, bringing her fingers into quotes. "We aren't speaking. I'm supposed to support myself, first year out of school. It's a thing."

Marla popped a cucumber roll in her mouth. "Me too, that's why I'm moving home."

“And if it makes you feel any better,” Charly said, “he’s also a visiting nurse at the hospital. He’s a good one, Marla. *And* we both like cats.”

At the table adjacent were two Smith girls on a date, so Charly lowered her voice. “And did I tell you that the sex is incredible?”

“Well, I guess if he’s that good with bodies,” Marla said.

After their second date, Charly found herself outside his apartment, drunk on gimlets as he released a key from behind a hidden panel. The floor-through apartment overlooked downtown Northampton. The bedroom was in the back just past a pair of French doors. A computer workstation sat next to the bed.

In the living room, colorful boxes were stacked in a corner behind the television, a bright orange box on top. An anatomy book was open on the coffee table. Charly chose to sit on the bed. She unzipped her boots. A cat jumped on her lap, all dark coat and wild eyes.

“What’s its name?” she asked. White skin behind fishnet stockings, a small tear in the big toe.

Konrad moved out of view, pouring wine from the galley kitchen. “It’s a she,” he yelled out.

“What’s her name?” she shouted back.

There was no answer. Instead, he appeared with two glasses of wine. He was whistling a song by the Rolling Stones.

Time, time, time is on my side, yes it is.

He was 29 years old, of Turkish descent, with an accent to go with it. He had a strong jawline, and his two-day beard gave him a rugged, sophisticated look.

He held out a glass of Pinot Grigio to her.

“What’s her name?” she asked again. Stroke, stroke.

He hesitated for a few moments, looked away. “Pinot.”

“Pinot? Really? Like the wine?”

“Sure.”

“Vud you like a line?” he asked.

She would have said yes to anything, an ice cream sundae, a trip to Jamaica in December. “Why not?” came out of her.

He climbed over her to the bedside table and took a long inhale of the drug. He balanced the small makeup mirror on his hand and fed her a wormlike line. Rush, rush, then kiss, kiss. Then more, of everything.

At one point, he bit her tongue. She stopped.

“Is your cat really named Pinot?”

“Shut up,” he said before tipping her glass of wine toward her, so it trickled down between her breasts.

“Oops.”

“You shut up,” she said, sticking out her tongue.

In the morning, no one remembered how the night ended but her head was splitting from the alcohol, cocaine, and all-night gymnastics.

She walked into the galley kitchen wearing little. Charly watched as he ground the coffee beans by hand and served it Turkish style, adding a sweetened milk from a

container on the counter. He served it to her lukewarm. “My own recipe,” he said. It was so delicious, she had thirds.

The next day at Throwback Records where Charly worked she couldn’t stop talking about Konrad.

“I’m kind of in love,” she told Marla when she stopped by the store. A group of punked-out high schoolers flipped through records just out of earshot. “Not love-love per say, but like pre-love. Do you know what I mean?”

“Do you know that you’re bat shit crazy?”

They were two months into their whatever they had together and back in his apartment during another morning after.

“So, tell me. Why did you call your cat Pinot?”

“Vat?” he replied. “I haven’t named her yet.” He tripped over the cat then kicked it. The cat hissed and backed away.

“Don’t kick her!” she said. “But didn’t you say that you drove across the country with her from Colorado?”

“Did I?” He walked into the kitchen. “Coffee?”

“It’s why I keep coming back.” She laughed.

In the open cabinet, mugs of all types of colors: pink, yellow, blue, red, green. He hesitated before picking one out. “Pick a color,” he said.

She looked at the mugs. “The green one, avocado green.”

“Avocado green for Charly,” he repeated under his breath. He prepared her coffee, pouring the thick liquid from an old tin pot. He added the sweetener on the counter and served it to her.

She took a long drink and then circulated around the apartment like it was her own. She looked up at the stacked boxes behind the television. “Christmas shopping in April?” she asked. “What’s in the boxes?”

“Oh, just stuff that I haven’t parted with yet.” He whistled. *Time, time, time is on my side, yes it is.*

The cat jumped on the windowsill. Charly picked up a heavy anatomy book from the coffee table. A few envelopes addressed to Konrad fell out of the book, the senders from six or seven universities.

“Been around the block have we now?” she asked.

He walked around the couch and picked up the letters, placed them back into the book.

“You’re a nosy beach, aren’t you?”

The comment hit her like a punch. “Excuse me?” She wanted to leave.

He relaxed his face, but it took a moment too long. “Kidding,” he offered, then picked up one of her boots that was strewn in front of the couch.

“Vare did you get these?” he asked, holding the boot by its tongue.

He might as well have asked the price of flounder at the seashore.

“In boot camp,” came out as her answer, still reeling from his offending remark.

“They’re trashy...first ting I noticed about you,” he said, before looking up. “You ken leave them here if you vant, vit your toothbrush. You have lovely feet, by the way.”

Trashy?

“Am I supposed to walk home barefoot?”

He placed his arms around her. “Vell, if you have no shoes, then you have to stay here.” He gestured with his fingers like casting a spell. “Forever!”

Her head was throbbing again from the drinking and the cocaine. “Do you have any aspirin, Konrad?” For some weeks now, something had been going on in her gut, and she was having difficulty on the toilet. Her head throbbed constantly.

He disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a large Tylenol bottle. “We give this to patients at Cooley Dickinson,” he said, offering it to her like a pharmacist. “Go ahead and take three, or even four. You can take them home vit you.”

The rough conversation and sex was just a game that she could play along just as well. She could take this guy or leave him, but she was going to decide and she was going to be in charge. She put his comments out of her mind and allowed him to reach under her shirt. He took her by the hand and walked over to the wall, where he pushed against her from behind. She reached around for his pajama bottoms and went down to her knees, but instead of allowing her, he pulled her up by her hair.

“You do what I tell you!” Hand on her chin, eyes locked.

Game?

She mimicked him instead. “You do what *I* tell *you*,” and reversed him onto the wall.

His arms remained spread out against the stucco. But his look...it wasn’t admiration of her. It wasn’t resigned. What was it?

“Bored?” Marla asked as they sat on the couch in their apartment the next day. “You’re giving him head in his living room at 9 am and he’s bored?”

“I don’t know. I think maybe he just likes being in control? The sex, as I told you, is rough.”

“Good rough, or bad rough?”

I don’t know.

Charly opened the now half-empty bottle of Tylenol on the coffee table and took two more capsules.

Marla pressed the wrong button on the remote. “Maybe you should go see a doctor or something. You’ve been sick for weeks.”

“Maybe I’m pregnant.”

“Are you?” She wheeled around.

“I don’t know, but I don’t feel myself.”

“Go get yourself checked out, Charly.”

“I’m fine,” she said, grabbing a pillow and blinding herself with its form.

Charly was working at the record shop on Pleasant Street when Marla walked in with two smoothies. Charly declined, citing continued stomach pains.

“Help me figure out what to do for Konrad’s birthday on Wednesday,” she said.

“What do you have in mind?”

“I’m planning Turkish food, lingerie, and a lot of sex,” she said. “But no gift yet.”

“Sounds like you’re the gift.”

“I’m going to surprise him, blow his mind.” She would sneak into his apartment while he was at the hospital.

“Are you at the toothbrush stage or set of keys stage of your relationship?”

“Toothbrush stage, but there is a loose shingle outside the door where he hides a key, and I know how to hit it *just right*.” She mimicked the motion with her right hand.

“I won’t be home tomorrow night, roomie.”

“Good, more places for Chuck and me to get wacky in the apartment.”

Wednesday morning came and Charly made her way to his place. After finding the key behind the shingle, she entered the narrow apartment and slipped into the red negligee she had purchased on her way over.

She walked barefoot into the kitchen and placed the groceries on the counter. The menu would be a traditional Turkish dish that resembles pizza. She sauteed the ground lamb, added the sauce she had made, and turned the burner down to simmer, setting the timer for an hour. She went into the living room and picked up the anatomy book from the coffee table and brought the volume into the kitchen to pass the time.

The cat stared at her from atop the counter.

She noticed a large pile of leftover cocaine that was still on the counter. She placed a finger on the substance and brought it to her nose, drawing the powder deep into her brain.

The rush hit her instantly. She stepped backward against the wall, and in her delirium, caught the edge of the saucepan and sent it tumbling to the floor, thick meat spreading across the tiles. As the anatomy book went flying with her, the addressed envelopes tucked inside came out like splattered mail in a hallway. That was not cocaine, that was something else entirely, she thought as she made her way to her feet.

Charly examined the white substance more closely. A Tylenol bottle stood next to the white pile with several capsules that split apart.

“What the fudge?” she said aloud. Her foot slipped on the gooey meat that covered the floor and she fell to her knees, staining the hem of her red negligee. She picked up one of the envelopes and opened the letter inside.

From the University of Colorado: *Mr. Bata: The Policy Committee at CU has serious questions regarding the legal source of your cadaver specimens and further requires....*

From Arizona State University: *Mr. Bata: Your services as an Approved Supplier of Anatomical Specimens for ASU are hereby terminated and we request that you immediately vacate....*

Five more letters.

She stood up and began opening cabinets, not knowing what she was looking for. One contained the colored coffee mugs. Another, bowls and plates. The third contained spices and oils. She pushed them aside and stared at the sight before her.

A dozen or so prescription vials with their contents written by hand on masking tape. Ethylene Glycol. Paracetamol. Boric Acid.

Charly grabbed a pencil from the drawer and wrote down the names of the drugs. She left the kitchen, her feet trailing the half-cooked meat, cat in tow. Lick, lick.

She reached the computer and logged on.

Password?

“Damn it!” she screamed and punched in Konrad’s name.

“Incorrect Password.” She tried a dozen random ideas. Pinot, Pinot123, anatomy, anatomy 123, doctor234. Desperate, she typed her own name.

The computer unlocked. She felt like she had gone past the dark doors on the whirl-a-wheel.

She googled the drug names.

Ethylene glycol. *Tastes sweet if added to drinks*

Paracetamol: *Found in Tylenol. Common overdose cause*

Has been used to poison victims.

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Footsteps in the hallway. She signed off the computer, stood up, and ran around the wall to the galley kitchen. The apartment door opened.

Whoever it was seemed to sense that someone was in the apartment and moved cautiously. She suddenly saw it was Konrad when he peered around the galley wall at her standing in her now stained teddy, destruction everywhere.

His eyes went straight to the drugs on the counter.

The next moments came quickly. He ran out of the kitchen and seconds later ran back toward her. She saw a fat needle in his hand just before he injected it into the flesh of her shoulder. She collapsed instantly; her eyes locked in his as she drifted off.

When Charly awoke, she was lying on the couch, surrounded by gifts. Boxes, all different colors. She was still dressed in her red negligee and noticed that she had soiled herself.

“Help me,” she uttered, looking into his eyes.

“Bye,” someone said. Another syringe. “You are a nosy Bee’ch,” the person said.

She dreamed that she couldn’t dream anymore. She awoke again on the couch to find Konrad standing behind a cloud of confusion.

“You know Charly, I don’t sneak up on your house, go nosy all over your cabinets, and track rotten meat all over your floors.”

He was not looking at her.

“I was going to sur-sur-surprise you,” she managed to say. She then noticed that she had vomited on the couch.

“OH, YOU DIDSURPRISE ME, CHARLY,” he said.

“Kon, Konrad, help me. I need to go to the hospital. Something’s wrong.” She reached for his hand, and he took it in his.

“I can’t do that Charly,” he said softly. “I tink you know that.” He counted out her fingers. “One-two-tree more days, and by that time...you will be in peace, Charly.”

“What’s happening to me?” she asked no one.

Konrad took on the tone of a lab technician. “Like the others, you are experiencing the toxic build-up of ammonia, mercaptan, benzodiazepines, serotonin, and tryptophan, which affects neurotransmitters. Vant to know the good news?” He shook her shoulder.

Charly gave an inquisitive stare.

“The vorst of it is over, Charly,” he said with excitement. “And I can get rid of that nasty cat I got for you.”

He continued. “Now, let me introduce you to some of your new friends, my permanent collection,” he said, touching one of the boxes. He touched Charly’s negligee. “I love your outfit by the vay,” he added. “I don’t do this for everyone,” he said. “You are special. I knew it the first time I set eyes on you, and those beautiful feet.”

Her eyes went side to side.

He opened up an orange box. “Here is Teddy. He was a musician and he loved orange sunsets and cowboy boots.” Inside the box were the remnants of human feet, cleanly sawed off at the ankle. Blood and veins had hardened into plaster.

“And here is Agnes....”

“And here is Vilma....”

“And here is Constantine....”

Charly played with consciousness.

“And here is your box, Charly. Avocado green, just like you wanted!” He cocked his head to the side.

Her body was prisoner to the couch.

“Don’t worry, now your life and death will have medical purpose....” He opened the box. Inside were her boots with the buckles and the tassels. He took them out and touched her feet on the couch. “Soon these beautiful feet will join your tacky boots.”

Through the window, she saw a squirrel on a branch peering inside, deciding if it was safe. It scampered away.

“How long have I been here?” she asked.

He counted the fingers on his own hands. “Three days now, Charly,” checking his watch. “It shouldn’t be long now. Cause of death: overdose. It will be quiet, I promise.” He hit the remote and brought the TV alive.

She drifted off to sleep. When she would awake, sometimes Konrad would be beside her, other times he was nearby, washing dishes, putting things away, whistling.

Time, time, time is on my side, yes it is.

The TV flashed its lights.

“Charly?”

Knock at the door.

Then again. "Charly?"

Someone. Somewhere.

"Charly?" Female voice, outside the door. A pause. A male voice with her.

Charly opened her eyes, tried to stand. Instead, she saw Konrad frozen in the living room.

"I'm hare, high-ar, here," she attempted, trying to sit up. "Marla, I'm here....," but there were no words to accompany her struggle.

She heard mumbling outside the door. Some was saying; "she said there was a key behind a shingle..." Then pounding on the outside wall. A key in a lock.

Cat's blinking eyes.

Konrad ran back and forth in the apartment, frantic. He grabbed the large anatomy book and raised it high over Charly's head. His eyes went dark. As the heavy volume came down on her head, the door of the apartment flew open.

The End