

Notice

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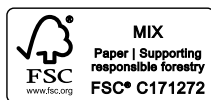
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Notice

Heather Lewis

Introduction by Melissa Febos



Heather Lewis was not the role model my parents would have chosen for me, but she was my ideal. Queer, determined, brilliant, and *tall*, I would definitely have thrown myself at her had we ever met. We overlapped in New York during the last years of her life, which were my first in the city, but I was still a teenager and we surely bought our drugs from different vendors, brought them home to different scenes. If I'd arrived a few years earlier and gotten sober quicker, we might have sat in the same church basements in the Village.

The year I was born, she was a freshman at Sarah Lawrence College, twenty-four years before I'd get there. Her mentor, Allan Gurganus, describes seeing her in riding boots during a cocktail hour for students, parents, and faculty. He took her for a boy, at first. She was like the women I located all my life as best friends, lovers, and heroes. The sort I wanted to be, whose "eyes seemed wise, at some cost."

I was ambitious like her and, even before I read her, aspired to write similar work. I wanted to name things I had not been given words for, to articulate the unspeakable in hope of inuring myself to it. I liked reading hard books and I liked to write things I could never have said out loud. I still do. My young efforts were often shocking,

sexual, and grotesque. I wanted to annihilate my own innocence, before I realized how precious it was. That, Lewis and I didn't share.

When I read her debut novel, *House Rules*, I loved the tough and lucid voice of its fifteen-year-old narrator, Lee, who confessed, "I'd like it better if you thought I just know how things work so work them." Like Lee and Lewis, I had passed for eighteen when I was fifteen, and got up to trouble with people much older. I also liked you to think I *worked* things, rather than was worked by "this stuff [that] follows me around and once it starts I can't move till it's over."

House Rules is a hypnotic and brutal novel—drawn from Lewis's experience as an incest survivor, addict, and competitive show jumper—in which the young riders are treated similarly to the livestock: as assets that can be better controlled with chemical substances. The sex in *House Rules* is copious, violent, and arousing. It scared me, and I couldn't look away.

In that regard, Lewis's first book has nothing on *Notice*. In it, a young sex worker who trolls a suburban train station for tricks becomes embroiled with a sadistic man and his alternately complicit and nurturing wife. The three reenact the death of the couple's daughter, who was molested and murdered by her father. The unnamed narrator of *Notice* is essentially Lee a few years older, and like in *House Rules*, her story is full of violent sex, assault, and plenty in the murky realm between. It is also preoccupied with the dynamic of a destructive triad, the love of a woman who fails to protect her. When she tries to escape the couple, the man has her institutionalized and a sordid trajectory unspools.

In Gurganus's assessment, the book's "truest subject is the cost of early sexual violation," and it's hard to disagree. Lewis's father, her abuser, haunts all of her writing. He is, in the words of Lewis's

longtime partner Ann Rower: “The grand villain of the piece—of all the pieces she ever wrote, every interview she ever gave, every thought she had, every breath she took.” Rereading the book was alternately arousing and sickening. Middle age finds me more penetrable than I was as a younger reader and I often had to put the novel down. It has one of the hardest endings of any book I’ve read. I also felt more alive in its pages than I have reading anything in a long time.

Lewis began seeking a publisher for *Notice* in 1996, but the content was too much for the eighteen editors she queried—“too close to their notions of the author’s actual experience,” Dale Peck suggested in his 2005 review of the book for *New York Magazine*. The events are so brutal and relentless that, as Gurganus writes, “we wish to believe it is happening solely on the level of Allegory.” Any knowledge of the author’s life makes such wishes impossible. Rower writes that even many of Lewis’s close friends couldn’t stomach the book. It wasn’t just the sexual violence that readers struggled with, but the flattened tone. “Heather’s genius creation,” writes Rower, “was the voice of a horribly abused young woman who spoke dispassionately about the shocking scenes of her own abuse.” Only fellow survivors could appreciate it. Lewis was devastated by the book’s rejection and never saw it published. Thanks to editor Amy Scholder, it was finally released posthumously in 2004, by *Serpent’s Tail*, ten years after Lewis had written it.

Her second published volume ended up being her third written. Acquired by Nan Talese and published by Doubleday in 1998, *The Second Suspect* was the third installment in what Lewis considered a trilogy. She transplanted much of *Notice*’s plot (and one notable scene) into the novel, “filtering the central conceit of incest, misogyny,

and murder through a detective's objective gaze," as Dale Peck wrote, "rather than the unnerving subjectivity of a survivor."

As in *Notice*, a rich suburban man with a complicit wife (who shares the name of the wife in *Notice*) has murdered a sex worker after using her to reenact the molestation and murder of their daughter. The real heroine of the book is recognizable as a slightly more aged version of the narrator(s) of Lewis's previous two books. "Carver" carries the memories and scars of *Notice*'s brutalities, and it is her testimony that finally pins the culprit.

The Second Suspect was supposed to be a blockbuster but it was panned by critics, who interpreted its shocking violences as immature and insinuated that serious art could not comprise such transgressive and disturbing elements. How devastating it must have felt to have her work so misunderstood, yet again. In the wake of this disappointment, Lewis relapsed after many years of sobriety, suffered a mental breakdown, and committed suicide in 2002, at the age of forty.

In 1999, Joan Larkin edited an anthology of queer women writers' coming-out stories, *A Woman Like That*. It is long out of print, but I found a battered copy in a used-book outlet. It includes an essay by Lewis that to classify as a "coming-out story" is almost laughable. It describes the long and excoriating series of events that made up her childhood, which included middle school addictions; affairs with adult women that began during adolescence; her father's committing her to psychiatric institutions to "cure" her, a hobby "he worked at with vindictive precision" after they ended up interested in the same woman; and her sexual relationship with a therapist she calls "Beth," and later another older woman named "Ingrid," details that were lifted almost wholesale from her life and used in *Notice*, replete with these names.

Near the end of the essay, she describes a male doctor to whom her father sent her for years. This doctor diagnosed her as “a Virginia Woolf type time bomb. I’d certainly kill myself by forty.” Which, of course, she did. Nearly everything in the essay can be found in her books. It seemed like such a Rosetta stone to her work, and to *Notice* in particular, that my hands trembled after I’d finished reading it. I had suspected that her fiction was pretty true to life. As Rower writes, “I know most of what I know about Heather from her writing.” Still, the confirmation shook me. I had still held out some hope for allegory.

The transparent use of autobiography in fiction—so-called *confessional* work—has long been denigrated by many critics and readers, as if any suggestion of catharsis precludes the aesthetic value of such art. Now, we have the “autofiction” loophole, for memoirists who want to be taken seriously. The power of combing through one’s trauma and transforming it into art, of course, is a proven method of psychological integration. Whether the art will be any good or not is a separate question. Lewis’s is good. Her transparent use of events and dynamics from her own life is as thrilling to read now, decades later, as it is unsettling. “As with the New Narrative writers who preceded her,” writes Peck, “Heather saw no difference between experience and our representations of it.” She could have tried something else (to some extent she did, in *The Second Suspect*), but the work she was committed to doing on the page, that insisted she make it, was irrefutable. She was incapable of pandering, of defanging her instincts.

In a 1996 interview with bell hooks, the artist Camille Billops argued that one of the most revolutionary things an artist can do is make work about their own life. “Put all your friends in it, everybody you loved, so one day they will find you and know that you

were all here together,” she said. Lewis unabashedly did that and she included not only her friends but her abusers, her lovers, her doctors, and some who were all three. When we aren’t calling them “narcissistic,” we like to call the artists who do this “brave,” but I know it has less to do with bravery than necessity, and nothing to do with narcissism. The brave part is mostly done by readers who meet the work on the page, face its hard truth, and recognize its value.

I’ve been thinking a lot about lineage lately. Lewis is unequivocally part of my artistic lineage, and many others, including one of queer writers who straddle the line of horror and the erotic, who are kin across genres. I’m thinking of Dennis Cooper, A. M. Homes, Samuel R. Delany, and so many others. I don’t see this kind of work much anymore outside of the horror or thriller genres and wonder if we have lost something in our squeamishness, our fear of irreducible complexity and of bad faith readers.

What we do see today is a fleet of young, jaded narrators with detached voices. But there is a neutered quality to today’s young, fucked-up narrators, no matter how avid their sex lives. So often, theirs is an affect, a style, steeped in irony, and sure, I believe it makes the pains of such characters’ lives easier, but it has not the stakes of a Lewis narrator. They aren’t cool and detached because the only alternative is to go up in flames.

It was a familiar experience in my youth, to read a book and feel ravaged by it, just completely fucked up and flabbergasted. To encounter a book in which eroticism and violence and trauma and pathos mingled dangerously. These books didn’t explain themselves, or apologize, or offer a tidy reward of hope at the end, a narrative that reduced their frightful ambiguities to some comforting pathology.

I'm not sure I could handle reading such books today, but I wish there were still room for them to exist.

Fuck that doctor. It was not Lewis but her art that was a time bomb. This book, in particular. It is set to detonate in the minds of readers, generation after generation. To remind us how hard and pure a truthful work of art can be. Here. Brace yourself.

Notice

One

For the longest time I didn't call it turning tricks. When I'd leave work, cross the street to the train station and, if some guy—man, I guess really you'd call him—had come off the train, was on his way home, I'd take his money.

We'd do it in his car. I'd work maybe twenty minutes. Get maybe twenty dollars, which was good compared to what I made at my job across the street. Besides, it's hard to get more in a car. At least I told myself this. Though I guess how much depends on what you'll do for it.

I wouldn't do a whole lot; acted pretty grumpy about doing anything. But then they liked that, one or two of them especially did.

This wasn't something I was looking to do, though by how easy it happened you would've said it was. People have. Still, for me it happened by accident. And while it's true I needed the money that's not all I needed from it. I don't care what anybody says. I understand the reason for telling people that, people outside it. But the thing is, I could never really see anyone as outside it. What the extra need is, the thing besides money? I've never pinned it down. I know it's there, though.

So anyway, every day after work I'd wait. Well, maybe not every day, not at first. Gradually it got to be that regular. And then I got regulars. By then it becomes a two-way thing with them depending on you and you depending on them. Once it's there, who's to blame doesn't matter because you're each getting what you came for.

Maybe it started because I didn't want to go home. Home right then meant my parents' house. It hadn't meant that in a long time and to have it mean that again, so late in the game, relatively, wasn't easy or even simple.

I had, after all, picked the Juvey place over them, but that had turned out nasty. Worse than I'd thought and I'd thought bad. Of course, I'd had a shaky start there and after that was marked. This didn't feel new to me, but the way they went about reminding you daily and in such obvious ways, the way they made you a dog, put a leash on you—and I mean this literally—I had to get out no matter where I'd end up.

I'd ended up at home with a capital H, and so every day after work I avoided going there. This despite the fact my parents weren't living there and wouldn't be for months. It didn't matter. Everything in the place belonged to them. Nothing much belonged to me. They'd tossed my stuff when I got locked up. Anyway, as long as I stayed there it seemed I belonged to them too and I needed not to be reminded of this.

For quite a while I'd gone to a bar after work. One across the street, catercorner to the station. Soon enough that turned into a thing with one of the bartenders. This was based not even on sex but on cocaine and, that not being my favorite drug, I tired of it fast.

Maybe somehow I figured if I hung around outside the bar instead of inside I'd get paid instead of paying, or trading. Trading,

anyone will tell you, ranks as low as you can go and already I'd had years of it. Been born to it really. And so I felt the need to move up. Or I needed to make things plainer.

So I did move up, which meant out, or never going in—the bar, that is. I don't know when the first time was, though I do remember it. And like always, like everyone else, I was thinking, Well, maybe just this once.

The reason it's never just once is the same reason money's only a part of it. Most anyone can take or leave that, though they don't think they can. The cover story of all time, that's what money is. The excuse of excuses no one will question because they so much need to use it themselves.

The first one, I didn't want him to know he was first. Even before it was actual work I didn't want anyone to think they were first.

Later, of course, it becomes good business to convince them all it's your first time, first time for money anyway. Not too many would believe beyond that. And when even that becomes impossible to sell, then you try to convince them they're different, or that what they're asking for is.

Always you try and convince them you like it, or them, whichever seems more important. Unless they could care less about that stuff. Those are the easiest in a way, well, depending.

But that actual first time it's not so likely you'd want him knowing, unless there's someone else in it to profit. And I'd promised myself I'd never have someone like that.

So that first time happened by standing around. By walking past the bar instead of going in. And then past my car and not driving home. It was awkward, but more for the guy off the train. Wasn't his first time, that I could tell, but probably his first time this close to home.

Once I saw his hands, the way they fiddled with his wallet, I didn't so much relax as switch. We were still talking about him buying me a drink. He was asking how much that would cost and worrying about the cash he had on him.

I don't know, maybe he thought we were talking about a motel. I wasn't. Knew while I'd cost more, I'd pay more, so I wasn't going any farther than this parking lot. I just wanted him to show me his car.

Finally he said, "Where do we go?"

So I said, "You got a car?" And that was that. That part was settled.

The car was nice, nice for this. One of those ones with a front seat that moves back all in one piece. Not so good for driving, but good for sitting in.

Like I said, he didn't know how to act, so he started walking me around to the passenger side. He stopped somewhere near the hood ornament.

Anyway, he let me walk the rest of the way by myself and I got to my door before he got to his. Had to wait for him to pop the locks.

I was wearing kind of a short skirt. He had on a suit, a light-weight one sort of olive-colored. It was almost too late for dressing this way, too far into fall. Far enough that I was wearing stockings, black ones, the kind with a seam up the back.

I guess what I'm saying is we both looked the part and that made things easier. Easier for me at least. And he was young and not bad looking, and this helped me too.

I'd gotten my money already, outside the car. Not much left to do now but do him, so I put my hand in his lap. Got him the rest of the way there, then unzipped him. Touched him some before I put my head down.

It was fine really, was no big deal. He took maybe four minutes, and when he came I swallowed because neither of us had planned

any place else to put it. Besides he'd been decent so it seemed wrong to leave him a mess to clean up.

I didn't wait around, mostly because I could tell he didn't want me to. I just got out of his car and started walking to mine, then kept walking past it again.

Wound up going into the bar after all.

I spent some of the twenty drinking because the bartender I knew came in late. Once he got there I stayed as long as he did. Sat at the bar until they closed. Then sat at a table until he finished locking up, counting the drawer, drying some glasses.

When he got done, he came over. He pushed aside the table I sat behind. Got down on his knees so he was in between mine. Afterward we did maybe half a gram, though it was more like speed cut with coke than vice versa and this wasn't the first time. Still, I wasn't ready to start anything over it. Not yet. Just noticed and knew I'd have to say something sometime soon.

My end of this deal had been short to begin with and was now getting shorter. Like I said, I'd seen I was paying too much for too little. I guess getting paid out there in the parking lot made me really feel it. Before it'd been more of an idea.

I guess you'd call this a transitional period.

Two

The transition didn't last very long. Lasted only until this new one walked up to me. It couldn't have been more than a few weeks later.

I went with him a few times there in his car before he asked me to come home with him. That's not something I'd usually agree to, never had in fact. I'd made up my mind not to when I began this. But he was kind of a rough guy, which made it harder to refuse. Not for the reasons you might think, but because that thing pulls me. And then, too, he'd dangled a carrot, which was his wife.

So we drove to his place. It couldn't have been even ten miles from the station. Going up the driveway seemed to take longer than getting there.

Once inside he sat me down on the living room couch with a drink and then called his wife to join us. I couldn't tell yet how he wanted it played so I stayed put—drank my drink, smoked my cigarette, and kept quiet.

His wife was good looking, nothing suburban or matronly going on, which was a decided relief. I looked her over pretty carefully because I knew he'd want at least that much. She acted shy of me, fidgety. He'd told her to expect me, or to expect something. I

could tell by what she was wearing—a long black negligee that trailed a little behind her when she crossed the room.

She sat down beside me. I still waited for my cue, didn't touch her. I understood they'd scripted things this far and so I put out my cigarette, not wanting it to get in the way.

The wife touched my cheek, still awkward and shaky like she was trying to find the right way to go about it. When her fingers got to my neck I found myself borrowing her shivers. Found myself trembling all over and so already I knew this was not a good thing to pursue. That it would make me feel something, which naturally is about the last thing you want.

I turned my head away so I didn't have to look anywhere near her eyes, great big brown eyes I could tell were sad every night and not just this one, not just because of this. Hers was the last sort of headset I needed to slip into. I knew I couldn't afford to get that kind of sloppy around her husband.

By now she'd begun touching my breasts so I took off my shirt, left my bra on because he told me to. He told me to hike up my skirt and open my legs, and I did these things too. All this time I looked at my bag. I'd put my underwear in there when he'd had me take it off in the car. I'd put the first half of the money there too.

Not looking at his wife didn't exactly solve all my problems. She'd solved some of hers though, and was no longer so hesitant. She'd slid onto my lap, was facing me. By then I had to turn my head back to her and besides, like I said, not looking wasn't working anyway.

I took the negligee off her shoulders, began to kiss her there, held her around the waist and she let the negligee drop.

Her husband, by now he'd sat down. I could catch sight of him over her shoulder. Could smell his cigarette, hear the ice in his glass.

At first, closing my eyes helped. But I found I liked keeping them open better. Felt safer that way.

She was wearing one of those female-lingerie things I couldn't name. All I know is you unbuttoned the front of it. Well, I did. She started to take off my bra, but her husband still didn't want this. And he didn't want us lying down on the couch either. What he wanted was her on the floor on her knees and everything taken off her.

This was the point I got nervous, began searching for a way out. But I had no idea why because what she did to me now had me leaning back one minute and grasping her the next—back and forth like this until he got out of his chair.

The only thing he took off was his belt. He put it around her waist and pulled up. This made her stop what she was doing to me and that made him mad, or gave him the excuse. He'd gotten down behind her and was pulling harder on the belt, was rubbing against her, pressing into her. She'd laid her head across my lap and I was holding on to her. I put my fingers into her mouth because I didn't like how she sounded. I couldn't listen to it.

When he put his dick in her ass she grabbed hold of me. She had her arms around my waist, her head tucked into my stomach. I probably should have held her too, but instead I tried pulling away, but getting leverage was impossible. It was then I noticed him watching me.

He fucked her methodically. Slammed her pretty good, and it was clear this hurt her. She was crying into my skirt. But the look on his face? There was nothing there, a hint of a smile but that was it. Maybe that's why I was trying to get away.

He hadn't paid me enough to watch something like this. He'd paid me enough to do it to me, but not to watch him do it to her.

And if this sounds like a pure thought, understand it as purely self-serving. Believe me, getting it would've been way the hell easier.

When he'd finished with her, we left her there on the floor. I put my shirt back on, picked up my bag, followed him out to his car. I knew we weren't done yet because he hadn't come off. Turned out, he was always like this—he got his money's worth always.

Now, outside, he took my bag from my hand. Put it on the hood of the car and then pressed my head down beside it. He held my hands together behind my back and I didn't mind any of this. I was kind of sleepy about it and didn't struggle. I just waited.

I felt his dick through his pants before he took it out and then I felt it between my legs, rubbing me. He let go of my hands. I tried to find something to hold on the hood of his car, but couldn't. There was nothing there. And so when he pulled me back, I turned my face into my bag because it smelled smokey and leathery; it smelled familiar.

I don't know whether this would've happened without having his wife, but when he fingered me I got edgy. I knew he was bringing me close and I didn't think I could stop it. Worse, I knew he could tell. Not that he said anything. He didn't have to. What he did was put his dick in my cunt and not my ass. And this not being his style made it clear to me he really wanted to be sure.

I didn't take long once he'd done that. And though I was silent about it, I knew he felt it by the little tug he gave my hair. And just to ice it, he pulled out. Jerked himself. Had his dick up close to my ass when he did this, but then slipped it away. Pulled my skirt down and leaned into me.

This wasn't entirely new. He always jerked himself. But he'd hand me his handkerchief, let me clean myself off. Tonight,

though, he was rubbing me in it. Tonight, he wanted me taking this home.

After, he walked around and got in the car. I wasn't completely sure I could move but I did. Moved my hand first, toward my bag, and then moved the rest of me. And while my legs were shaky, there wasn't too far to go.

I opened the door and sank into the seat. He started the car. I had my bag on my lap and was rummaging for a cigarette. Soon as I'd lit it, he took it from me and so I had to start over. We didn't say anything, not until we got out on the road. Then he was asking where to drop me because before we'd always been in that parking lot.

That's where I should've gone back to. My car was still there and I knew it wasn't good for him to know where I lived. My faculties let me down, though. And there he was suggesting he just drop me at home. "Wherever that is," he said.

So this man, this regular, he drives me right up to my door. And without me having to ask he gives me the rest of my money. And though I'm thinking it's not enough and never again, instead we're making another date, and he's saying he'll pick me up here instead of the train station, and while this is all bad precedent I'm agreeing.

Three

Walking into my parents' house felt even worse than it should have so I headed straight for the living room, for the bar in there. Open their liquor cabinet and the smell of gin is enough to knock you to your knees. I'm used to it, though. I got out a bottle of vodka, opened it and poured a short one into the nearest glass. My parents are not the highball type, tall glasses I guess being frivolous.

Now I had the drink, I put my bag down on the coffee table and dropped onto the couch. I was thinking how at their house—the couple—there was no coffee table, nothing in front of the couch to block his view.

The date I'd arranged was two days off, which occurred to me meant the weekend. Well, Friday night. I still had my day job, the one I was supposed to go to in the morning, but this seemed less and less likely.

I began taking things out of my bag. First the cigarettes, then my lighter, then the cash. Laid the four new and now-wrinkled hundreds across the table. I nicked the edge of one with my cigarette, and I might have kept it burning, except I'm a little too practical for that. Last I took out my underwear.

If he wanted a weekend, we'd have to talk about money. But the problem was he'd pay it. This was why he'd become such a

staple. The reason I told myself anyway. The excuse for why I did and let him do things I'd never agreed to with the others. I mean, the very first time he'd gotten me in the backseat on my stomach and for just forty bucks. Then I wised up and told him that sort of thing cost more.

I poured another drink and took it to bed, that and the cigarettes. The rest I left spread across the table. I didn't sleep a great deal, and when it got light I thought it'd be easy to just get up and go to work. I'd planned to wear the same skirt. That was the hitch, the thing reminding me that maybe something had actually happened or changed.

I'd been keeping my regular job for all the reasons you always hear. The convenient division between night and day. A way to insist nothing's unusual.

I was nearly out of the house before I remembered my car wouldn't be there. I got as far as dialing a taxi and then as far as the train station, but what I did then was get into my car and drive home.

I called in sick that day. It was the next day I told them I quit. Asked them to mail me my check. I spent both of these days half-asleep. Was really just waiting for his car in the driveway, and before I heard it I put some extra clothes in my bag in case things dragged out.

We didn't talk about money and he didn't give me any up front. Just on principle this was something I should've challenged but didn't.

Once we'd gotten to his house, the two of us sat downstairs for a bit, though this time you could tell we'd be going upstairs. I'm not exactly sure why we were killing this stretch of time but since I wasn't in a questioning mood, I let this pass too.

When we did go up the stairs he stopped at the landing, began pointing out pictures of his children. One daughter in particular he

said I reminded him of, and I thought, At least for now you're doing to me what you want to be doing to her. At least she's off at some school like the rest of them.

We continued up the stairs and into their bedroom. His wife was taking a bath. She'd left the bathroom door open, so from the tub she could see us come in.

He told me to sit on the bed, on the edge so I faced her. He sat in a chair opposite, a straight-backed one that looked like it didn't belong in here. This chair was against the wall, near the doorjamb and so his wife could see me. And she could see that he could see me, but she couldn't really see him, not more than his elbow.

I sat there waiting because I knew he liked giving instructions. I hadn't worn any underwear this time because, let's just say, I learn fast. He'd reached over to me in the car, smiling when he'd discovered this. It was the sort of thing I thought might get me more cash. It might with someone like him who liked you paying attention.

So anyway, when he told me to touch myself I didn't have to take anything off. And I didn't even consider unbuttoning my shirt or anything like that because already I knew that was part of it to him. Having me dressed and her not.

It seemed odd that I could see both of them. It should've given me some kind of command but instead I felt nervous. I looked first at him. But then my eyes went to her. When that happened, he said, "You look at me."

He'd carried his drink up here. Was still holding it and so that's what I focused on. But he didn't like that either. He said, "At me," again and louder so I knew to meet his eyes.

I was beginning to think his eyes never changed. That they looked this same way always—guarded but not entirely cold, not

quite closed off. There's so much more someone like this can accomplish if he keeps himself just that little bit open.

That's the pull. And the kicker, too. That it's absolutely you he's fucking with. Not anyone else. That's the thing you've probably always wanted. Someone's undivided attention. And you've wanted it so much and for so long that the form it takes no longer matters.

So he was holding my eyes and I was holding myself. But I wasn't doing much of anything. I knew that couldn't last long. Still, I needed to get my bearings because he wasn't going to just let me pretend it all and be done.

"Come on, now," he said, and so already I'd used too much time.

Out of the corner of my eye I tried to find his wife. From the little I could see she hadn't moved a muscle since we came in. And while I knew how she'd gotten that way—I understood it completely—I still couldn't figure what would cow a person so. I mean look, will you, at who's saying this.

Without him telling me to, I leaned back some, opened my legs more. I started touching myself in a way that seemed to help all of us.

He stayed in his chair for the longest time and so I was caught in limbo, not sure how far to take myself. But then finally he got up. Did that same thing of taking off his belt, only this time he put it around my neck. This didn't feel so bad as you might think. Not at first it didn't.

He stayed standing in front of me. I was looking where his belt used to be until he tugged on it. Until he pressed himself into my face but with his pants still zipped, which left me licking cloth.

He pulled at me with the belt some and pulled my hair a little too. I couldn't see anything but knew what his wife saw. I found myself wondering how things between them had gotten here. Or if they'd always lived this way, and I was just one of many they'd tried.

Thinking this way made me a little too nervous and so I started to unzip his pants. Did this to have something more to do, but he stopped me. Put my hands back between my legs where they hadn't been in a while.

He unzipped his pants. I kept touching myself even though I knew he'd put my hands there simply to keep them away from him. That was the real trouble—him playing my end better than me.

He put his dick in my mouth and still the only thing he let me touch was myself. That made him the one keeping me upright—doing this by yanking his belt and my hair. It wasn't the most comfortable arrangement anymore but each time I went to put my arms behind me, just to help prop myself up, he smacked me. So I'm getting it slow, but I'm getting it.

He had his legs between mine, nudging them apart, and was hard enough now to take up most of my throat. Between that and the belt, breathing wasn't so easy.

When he took his dick back, I got a pretty good breath but I couldn't get it past the belt. He pushed me down. Had his hand on my chest now, and so there wasn't any place for the air to go anyway.

I'd left my hands where he'd put them and his were there, too, opening me up, sliding his dick in. Soon as he'd done that, he took hold of my wrists, held them down at my sides. His dick helped me by the way it hurt. Kept me from thinking anything for a while until it got where it didn't hurt, but did the opposite. When that happened I couldn't stay with him anymore.

Like he knew this, he pushed my arms over my head. Caught hold of his belt again too, so that each time he hit into me, he choked me. This wasn't the way he usually fucked me, though I expect it's the way he usually fucked her. The other night he was

showing her what he'd been doing to me, and now was showing me what she got.

I wasn't used to having his face near mine and here he was staring right into my eyes with that same look as when I'd watched him do her. I couldn't hold his gaze. Closed my eyes and opened my mouth; figured having his tongue there would be okay, that it was something I needed, that I needed something to suck on. But none of this mattered because he wasn't thinking it, I was.

He said, "Don't you look away from me. Don't you ever."

I opened my eyes and it meant I felt all of it. Felt his dick up in me and worse than before because now he held it nearly still. Moved just a little until I found my eyes closing again, my legs wrapping around him. Until I found myself pressing against him.

"Look at me," he said, but this time not harsh. This time nearly teasing, putting me in a place in myself I thought would break me apart. And again like he knew, he let off me and got up. Left his belt around my neck but let go of it. Left me to turn on my side and pull my legs up underneath me, left me clutching myself.

He got his wife out of her bath. Brought her in still wet and laid her down on her stomach right next to me. Then he lifted her up on her knees and after that I stopped watching. And I pretended I didn't feel anything either. I even got up, took his belt off and went and sat in his chair, finished his drink, lit a cigarette, and wondered how long he'd let me do these sorts of things.

Sitting there behind them I still wasn't watching. Out the window you could see their pool lit up in the dark. That's what I stared at. This didn't keep me from hearing her, though. I'd found no way to stop that, but if I looked hard enough at the water it muffled her some.

It was me he jerked off on—my face and my neck, while I still

sat in his chair. He'd caught me off guard, what with the way I'd put myself out on the lawn and so already I knew that solution had limits.

Soon as he came, he went into the bathroom, which meant I couldn't go in there, couldn't clean him off me without searching the house. And what with the state I was in, with what I'd been trying to maintain, that was just too far to go.

His wife had the bedspread pulled up around her and seeing her this way I realized we hadn't been alone before. That we'd never been introduced. And then I asked her her name and she said, "Ingrid." All of this happened before I'd had a chance to think whether her name would be a good thing to know. Already I knew it wasn't. As soon as she said it, I knew. And I liked her voice, which could only make everything more difficult.

She watched the bathroom door pretty intently, never let her eyes leave it for long. I stayed planted in that chair, though I took my shirt off, used it to clean myself. I kept trying to pretend I didn't want to go and lie down with her. I understood this was why he was taking so long to come back. That he wanted to see us together when he walked in again.

I looked at the pool some more. Lit another cigarette and just about when I thought I wasn't going to, I got up and went to her, sat beside her and let her smoke through my fingers. Other than that I didn't touch her.

She touched me, though. She seemed to want to undress me because she kept running her hand under my bra the way someone does before they unfasten it. So far, I hadn't even taken off my shoes, nothing but my shirt and I'd had a reason for that.

I stopped her hand, got up to put out the cigarette, though I didn't have to. There was another ashtray right there on the

nightstand. She asked me my name and I gave her the one I use in these situations. I felt a strange twinge, though, as if somehow I owed her the truth.

She said, "So, Nina, did you come here only for him?" And when I didn't answer she said, "I asked him to bring you. He brought you for me."

I think she said "brought." She might have said "bought," I'm not sure. The thing I do know for sure is women do everything differently, though not so much so you can't catch it.

I took off my skirt but just stood there, still in my shoes and stockings, and the bra I hadn't let her take off me. I was trying to decide how hard a time to give her. But this wasn't something I ever did with the men. When I realized this I slipped off the shoes and lay down with her.

I wasn't sure how she wanted it. The men always say. Not real clearly, but enough so you know what they mean. She didn't say anything. She tucked me under the bedspread and helped me out of my bra.

I lay back because she wasn't letting me do anything, not right off. I let myself close my eyes again. This was something I wanted to do all of the time with all of the men, but I never chanced it. And here I was tonight giving in to it over and over. Giving in, though it should've been clear these two put me more at risk than anyone I'd ever encountered.

And it should've been clear by now, too, which of them put me most at risk. Still, I couldn't help it. Her mouth on me had me needing too much to care and so even when I heard the door, knew he'd come in, I kept my eyes closed.

Her concession was to push the bedspread off us. And I was glad for it because it'd gotten too warm under there. She kept up her

lead, which still wasn't how I thought it should play. She kept me off balance, kept me flat on my back.

She'd taken off my stockings and so I had nothing on. He didn't have to say a word for her to begin nudging me over. She did this a little at a time, until we lay across the bed instead of lengthwise.

I knew what his view was, and then she moved so she lay by my side instead of on top of me. I didn't exactly care but it wasn't so far from my mind anymore—him watching us. Maybe it never had been. I can't say it really bothered me. I just thought it should.

She still kissed my breasts, was moving her hand across the top of my thighs, anywhere but in between them until I couldn't keep still anymore and opened my legs. Even then she played me, said, "Come on and turn over."

I did what she said, turned onto my stomach and then felt her hand on my back, her mouth near my ear. I was rubbing myself against the bedspread and she kept doing the same things, touching my ass, the back of my thighs, and then she slipped onto me. Caught my wrists and held my arms over my head the way he had. And still she kept her mouth close to my ear, though she didn't say anything and neither did I.

I heard him before I felt him. Heard him pick up the chair and put it down again. He pulled my legs apart, just held them open.

She still wasn't saying anything and she wasn't doing anything but holding me, using all her weight, as if she needed to. He started to touch me. He used just one of his fingers and so slow and soft I nearly bit into my arm.

He did this a long while before he stopped. I heard him light a cigarette. Heard him take several draws before touching me again. And when he did, he rested the hand with the cigarette on my ass.

By now I either wanted to get off or get up. Had gone from being lulled to uncomfortable. He took his hand off me and I forgot myself. Moved to shake her off me.

Suddenly I felt her fear. And I felt him pressing his dick into my ass. The weight of him pushing her onto me. And that hand with the cigarette wasn't on my ass anymore.

She let go of my wrists and cuddled into me like a child. Whimpered like one too. And I thought, Son of a bitch.

Then the way she moved—shuddering first, then going rigid. I could smell the burn. I could almost hear it. The worst was she didn't make a sound. Just whimpered close to my ear.

He let her off me. And it left me with him. With him fucking my ass and her curled up into herself right beside us. I turned my head away from her because he let me.

I thought, I'll be leaving here soon.