

Terminal Virginity

By Paula Schonauer

It was Rodney Taylor's twentieth birthday. One more year until he turned twenty-one, that artificial watermark of adulthood when a man can do anything legally sanctioned: walk into a bar, buy a drink, carry a gun, join the Masonic Lodge.

He stared out the window of a second floor classroom in the Education Building at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. Class had been dismissed already, but he wasn't going to leave, not yet, not until he examined his immediate surroundings to make sure none of his fraternity brothers were lurking around outside.

Rodney belonged to the Phi Delta Phi fraternity, and they had a tradition of sorts regarding members' birthdays, a game called Lake Throws. When a member had a birthday, his brothers tried to kidnap him, throw him in a car, buy a case of beer and head for Crowder Lake about ten miles south of town. Crowder Lake was more like a five acre pond amidst a series of caverns in western Oklahoma. It was reputed to be very deep since it was fed by underground aquifers, and it was always cold, even in the summer.

Since Rodney's birthday was in late January, he didn't want to get kidnapped. According to the rules, if he could avoid capture for the entire day, he could avoid a lake throw. This was a problem since he lived in the fraternity house. He planned on laying low until after midnight then try to sneak into the house without notice. If some of the brothers tried to kidnap him anyway, he'd assert that it wasn't his birthday anymore, but there was always the possibility they'd disregard his protests, take him to Crowder Lake anyway, make him strip naked and make him go in and out of the lake until they drank a whole case of beer. He shivered just thinking about it.

It was an unseasonably warm day in the mid-sixties but very windy. Rodney watched the other students empty the building. Some of them went to their cars parked on the oval that circled the student union and the library, others walked to their various dorms, while still others lounged around the gently sloping hill that stood watch over the campus and the town of Weatherford, Oklahoma. From atop the hill, one could see miles in all directions. It was the most prominent terrain feature in Custer County. Even the school's motto declared, "Standing Firmly on the Hilltop."

Rodney didn't see any of his brother's cars driving around the oval, none of the brothers walking around on the hill. He hoped they'd forgotten about him. But then he realized they never forgot

someone's birthday. Never.

It was inching past four-thirty when Rodney saw a ruby red Gran Torino with white racing stripes drive up and stop in front of the Education Building. It was Dave, his fraternal big brother. He revved the engine, a signal: All Clear.

Rodney and Dave had made a pact with each other. Since they both had birthdays in the winter they decided to help each other evade capture, take each other out for the night on their perspective turns in the hot seat. Rodney didn't care what Dave had planned just as long as it didn't involve swimming in a cold lake in the month of January.

Rodney waited until the halls were silent before darting out of the classroom. He jumped down the stairs three and four at a time. Turning the corner on the landing, he almost knocked over one of his professors, Dr. Willard, a short man with a beard down to his sternum. He taught sociology and resembled some of the classical 19th century theorists he loved to lecture about.

Dr. Willard dropped one of the books he was carrying, tried to balance a cup of coffee in his right hand. Some of the contents spilled over the lip of the mug. "Mr. Taylor!"

"Hi, Dr. Willard. Sorry."

He jumped down the last flight of stairs, paused to look around. No brothers in sight. He sprinted toward Dave's Gran Torino. All right!

Rodney slid into Dave's car, closed the door, locked it. "Yeah-hoo!" he yelled, chest heaving. When he caught his breath, he looked at his big brother and smiled. "Thanks, Bro. You're the best."

Dave smiled back, a big bright smile full of perfect teeth. He had short, sun-streaked hair, a real surfer dude from southern California. He'd come to Southwestern to major in pharmacy.

"Yeah, bud. Good job." He slid his sunglasses down his nose and winked. "Capture Car!"

Rodney, thinking Dave had betrayed him, brooded in his seat until Dave took a right at I-40 instead of continuing south on Highway 54. They blazed past the Love's Country Store on the west side of town, the last stop for beer. Suddenly, Rodney realized his big brother had come through for him, after all. He hadn't been betrayed. There was another plan, a road trip.

"Where we going?" Rodney asked.

Dave smiled his surfer dude smile. It was hard to believe he was smart enough to major in something like pharmacy. "It's a surprise."

"Okay?"

"You have to do what I want you to do," Dave asserted. "I kidnapped you."

"I'm not going to go into a freezing lake. You gave me your word."

Dave laughed. "Relax, man. You ain't going to get wet. Well, not all of you, anyway."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You'll see, my friend. You'll see."

Rodney listened to the engine moaning down the road, tried to tune the radio to listen to the KATT, Rock 100.5 from Oklahoma City. They were playing that new song from David Lee Roth, Just a Gigolo, a campy rendition of an old Blues standard. He didn't like it. He missed the Hard Rock, the groaning guitars, the drum solos. The horns and sax, it wasn't right for the Rock and Roll.

"Do you like this shit?"

Dave nodded. "Yeah, it's good."

"I don't. Van Halen messed up when they fired David Lee Roth. They'll never be the same band."

They blazed past acres and acres of brown grass and short cedar trees. The sun was beginning to hover over the horizon as they plummeted down a long hill toward a neighboring town, Clinton. The car's radio lost the KATT's signal, and David Lee Roth got lost in static and distortion. Rodney turned off the radio.

"Dude, where are we going?"

Dave smiled, winking. He'd taken off his sunglasses as the waning light slid toward the twilight of dusk. His blue eyes sparkled with mischief. Rodney was starting to feel nervous as Dave drove onto the exit ramp. The car decelerated quickly, and they came to a stop.

"Like I said, it's a surprise."

They drove west down Highway 183, toward the Route 66 junction. The sun was beginning to set, and the sky blushed a lurid shade of red.

"You know, you can get arrested in Clinton for masturbating in your car while watching another couple fuck in their car," Dave said.

"No, I didn't know that."

Rodney squirmed in his seat. What did he have in mind?

"Yeah, you can."

"What about the couple in the car?"

"It's okay as long as they're married."

Rodney didn't want to know why Dave knew such things. He sat silently in his seat, watched the

fields turn into yards with old wood-framed shotgun houses built decades ago. Some of them had been restored while others languished with neglect. Clinton had a rustic look, like going back into time to the 1940's or 1950's. They passed an old motel, a faded sign out front fringed with blinking yellow lights, some of them missing. They saw an abandoned gas station with old fashioned pumps, the kind with glass jars on top. A sign next to the road said the gas station had been designated an official Old Route 66 historical site. Regardless, it still looked like shit, nothing restored, no lights, boarded up windows.

Framed by the sunset, a tall building loomed over downtown. The top floors had darkened windows, no shades or curtains, like glaring eyeless sockets. Some of the lower floors had lights, nicotine stains on a vertical black plain. As they drove closer, the building revealed some of its details: its red bricked structure, stone arches, and a wire crown. The twisted metal on top had letters, Calmez Hotel. Back in the day, those letters probably sparkled with light and could be seen from miles around. The hotel, sizeable for western Oklahoma, may have entertained prestigious guests at one time, but now, it looked like a flop house.

Dave turned right on a street called Frisco. The street light on the corner flickered. He stopped in front of the old hotel. "We're here."

A biker jumped his motorcycle to a start. The engine rumbled in the darkness and thumped in Rodney's chest. He saw a seductive female figure in the doorway of the hotel. She was barely dressed in a halter top and spandex pants. She tossed her head back as she dragged deeply on her cigarette. As the biker clicked his machine into gear and roared away, she closed the door and went back inside. A haze of smoke floated where she'd stood.

"Ready?" Dave asked.

"For what?"

"For the time of your life."

Rodney shook his head. "Sure... here though?"

"Don't judge a book by its cover, right? This place has a lot of surprises."

Dave led Rodney through the hotel's main entrance. Rodney heard the creak of ancient hinges; saw the old fashioned hexagon tiles on the floor of the foyer, black and white tiles spelling out Calmez. The glass in the doors was thick and full of shimmery distortion. Rodney glanced through the glass into the hotel lobby and saw an older woman sitting behind a desk writing in a ledger. She had wavy blond hair swept back in a single stream behind her neck, large hoop earrings. Through the distortion, she looked young, attractive even, but the way she bent her head and the way she stopped writing to massage her fingers revealed she was actually much older.

Dave knocked on the glass.

The woman looked up, sighed, placed both hands on the top of the desk and stood up with deliberation. She ambled toward the door, peered through the glass.

Dave waved at the woman. "Ana, it's me, Stephen."

"Stephen?" Rodney said.

"Shut up. Just be cool."

Ana smiled, grunted with recognition. "Goodness, boy, third time in as many weeks."

"Yes, mom, nice to see you, too."

Ana opened the door. "I ain't your mother. If I was, I'd paddle your behind. You're a naughty little boy."

"Hmm, sounds fun!" Dave said.

They followed Ana into the lobby of the hotel. The whole place smelled like cigarettes and spilt beer, a moldy undertone. The windows had garish, gold curtains. The staircase had intricate curves carved in the banisters with the stairs climbing up into a disturbing, melancholy darkness. The carpet on the stairs had been gold with burgundy swirls, probably beautiful at one time, but now it looked like bile laced with blood.

"How can I help you boys?"

Dave patted Rodney on the back, pushed him forward. "Believe it or not, Madame, I'm not here for myself this time. I brought some new fish."

Ana peered at Rodney, lifted a pair of glasses to her face. "What a handsome young man."

Rodney couldn't speak. He was beginning to understand where Dave had taken him, a whorehouse?

"What's the matter, cat got your tongue?" Ana teased.

"He's really shy, Madame. He's a virgin"

"Hey," Rodney protested. "That's a lie!" He balled his fists.

Dave stepped back, raised his hands defensively. "Calm down, bro. It's no big deal. Everyone has a first time."

Ana walked up behind him, placed her arm around his shoulder with maternal reassurance. "Don't worry, boy. There's no shame in being a virgin." She and Dave exchanged knowing glances. "I'll be right back."

Ana padded down a corridor lined with doors. The hardwood floors creaked beneath her steps. She wore house shoes, the slip-on kind, and a red kimono. She could have been a grandmother, probably was.

Dave nudged Rodney in the ribs. "You want to back out?"

Rodney nodded. "I've never done anything like this. This isn't my scene. I don't want my first time...."

"Hah! I was right. You are a virgin."

Rodney looked down, mollified, shaking his head. "I am not..."

"How old are you?"

Rodney walked toward the glass doors at the entrance. Dave jumped after him, grabbed his shoulders and held him back. "How old are you, bro?"

"I'm twenty years old."

"Dude, you're a twenty-year-old virgin. Isn't it about time you got laid?"

Rodney stopped, smoldered in silence.

"You'll feel better after you've been laid. You got twenty years of pressure built up inside. I can tell. All the guys can tell. You've been impossible to live with lately, and we need a break."

Rodney tried to hide his embarrassment. Tears came to his eyes, and he blinked them back.

"C'mon, you'd think by the time a guy got to college, he'd at least have had a blow job."

Rodney shoved Dave. "Fuck you."

Dave feigned a shocked expression, a comical exaggeration. "What? Did you just say the f-word?"

Rodney felt emboldened. "Yeah, fuck you."

"Yeah, that's my bro."

Ana entered the lobby followed by a trio of barely dressed girls, all of them staring at the floor. Rodney couldn't help staring at them.

"Which one?" Ana asked.

Which one? The girl on the left was small and wore her hair in pigtails like a little girl. She was dressed like a baby doll: a short pink slip, black mary-janes with white anklet socks. Her face, though, had accumulated some mileage, contorting the illusion of youth. She glanced at Rodney, smiled vacantly and looked away.

"That one is Cindy," Ana said. "She's very popular."

Rodney's skin tingled with revulsion. He didn't need to know that.

He eyed the girl in the middle. She was young, too, but taller and very skinny. She had no breasts to speak of, and though she tried to hide it with makeup, she had sunken eyes ringed with darkness, a skull wrapped tightly with skin.

Rodney imagined she was the kind of whore who sold her body for drugs, probably infested with

disease. Nix that one, he thought.

The third girl was refreshingly pretty compared to the other two. She was shapely, healthy looking with a pudge of fat around her waistline, but she had a bruise over her right eye. When she leaned over to whisper to the girl in the middle, Rodney saw a dark gap in her mouth, missing teeth.

Rodney shrugged his shoulders and looked at the Madame.

“Like a kid in a candy store, huh?”

Dave flirted with the little girl prostitute, puckering his lips and blowing kisses. “She’s a good one, Joseph. Pick her.”

Rodney looked at the third girl again. He just wanted to get this over with. This wasn’t the way he imagined losing his virginity, but here he was in a whorehouse. If he backed down, now, he was going to get teased forever. No doubt Dave would tell the other guys, and they would jump in on the fun. It was only the beginning of the semester, and he couldn’t afford to move out of the fraternity house if things got too bad. It was time.

“C’mon, bro, don’t chicken out.”

Rodney pointed at the girl with the bruised face.

“So, you’ll take Ginger,” Ana said, smiling. “Very well.”

Dave handed Rodney a wad of money. “There’s sixty dollars. It should be enough for a half-n-half.”

Rodney stared at Dave.

“You know? A blow-job and a screw.” He slapped Rodney’s back.

Rodney felt deflated. “Thanks....”

“Ginger, take him to room six,” Ana said. She waved a set of keys. The tinkling sound of keys unnerved Rodney a little. He’d heard a story once about the origination of the term dead ringer, about how people used to attach a string to a dead person’s toe, run it out of the coffin and up through the ground. A family member would post vigil at the grave for a night or two, listen for the bell to ring. If the bell rang, they’d dig up the body expecting to find the person alive. That’s how he felt, buried by circumstance, immobile by the weight of expectation.

Rodney followed Ginger down the long hallway lined with doors. It reminded him of the Ripley’s Believe it or Not Museum in San Antonio, a place his family visited on vacation when he was eight years old. He remembered being petrified with fear, unable to choose a door to walk through. In his morbid frame of mind Rodney smirked to himself, “What’s this? A gallery of horrors?”

Ginger turned toward him, frowning. “I’m not a whore,” she said. “I’m a prostitute. There’s a

difference.”

Rodney shrugged, unable to understand the difference between terms. He didn’t want to argue nor did he want an explanation. Semantics.

Ginger opened a door about halfway down the hall. It was a small room, a bed jammed into the far corner with only a yard between the foot of the bed and the wall. Next to the door was a small sink, a tiny mirror above it, and next to the sink was a small chest of drawers. Ginger opened the top drawer, pulled out a handful of condoms.

“Do you need a rubber?”

“Do I need one? Do you think?” Rodney asked. It hadn’t occurred to him that he might need a condom.

“It’s up to you. I’m clean.”

“Well, I’d feel better if we did use one. You know how it is with AIDS and all that other stuff.”

Ginger raised her eyebrows, shook her head. “It’s all the same to me.”

Ginger was wearing a pink teddy underneath a gray housecoat. She disrobed quickly and stood nude in front of Rodney.

He didn’t know what to do. He had an impulse to take her in his arms and start off with a long kiss, but somehow that didn’t seem appropriate. After some deliberation, Rodney decided to let the professional kick things off.

“Are you going to undress?”

“Of course. Sorry.”

Somehow, he felt disappointed, imagined himself being seduced, undressed one button at a time, opened like a present. Ah, but this was business, he reminded himself. He kicked off his sneakers, undid his pants, letting them drop to the floor. He pulled off his shirt and stood in front of Ginger fully erect, clad only in his socks.

She looked down at his groin. “First time, huh?”

Rodney felt a rush of heat, nodded, realizing he couldn’t sustain the lie he’s been telling for at least five years, now. Apparently, he hadn’t been fooling anyone.

“How can you tell?”

“It ain’t too hard to spot a virgin.”

The word virgin stung when she said it. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to seem so eager.”

“Now that’s funny,” she said without laughing, not even a smile.

Ginger stepped toward him, grabbed his penis and led him to the sink. This excited and puzzled Rodney who submitted readily to her control. She turned on the water, let it run until the cold liquid became comfortably warm, then she squirted some soap into her hands.

Rodney shuddered, pleasure convulsing through his body. His knees weakened, and he grabbed the sink to steady himself. He tried to fight the pleasure, wanting to save his climax for more advanced activity, but nevertheless, once the surge began he couldn't stop it. He came right there in the sink.

"You liked that, huh?"

"Yeah... I did."

There was an awkward silence. What now? Was it over? Oh, God, he thought, I hope not. Dave was going to give him shit forever if he walked out of that room after only two minutes. He'd be calling Rodney things like the minute man.

"Is that it?"

Ginger almost smiled. The corners of her lips curled upward, but the lips didn't part. The eyes gave it away more than her facial expression. She seemed amused. "Well, we have a policy here. One orgasm per trick. No extras."

"Then we're done, aren't we?" Rodney said with relief and disappointment. Then he had an idea. "How long do you give a guy to have an orgasm?"

"About thirty minutes, I guess. No longer."

"Would it be out of the question for us to stay here until thirty minutes is up? I'll pay you extra. Please..."

Ginger's eyes glowed more intensely now. For a moment, she looked truly beautiful with her long brown hair curling around her oval face. Her cheeks didn't seem as sunken and dark as they did when Rodney had first seen her.

"You're funny," she said.

Ginger reclined on the bed, pulled her knees close to her breasts and rested her chin on her kneecaps, studying Rodney for a moment. He wondered if she was having fun, wondered if he was a better than average customer, perhaps a nice change of pace.

"Since this is your first time and all, I guess I can spare the time."

Rodney almost jumped with joy. He tried to suppress his glee but couldn't, dancing an awkward gig, penis flopping. He tried to cover himself.

"Thank you," he said. "You're really sweet."

He reflexively bent to grab his clothes, meaning to get dressed. Ginger grunted a note of disapproval. "No clothes. You have to stay naked like me, and you have to pay me an extra fifty bucks."

Rodney nodded, a little disappointed she was actually going to make him pay extra. He thought he might have merited some special consideration since it was his birthday and all. Needless to say, though, the extra money was worth being spared the hassle from Dave.

The room became vacuously quiet. Rodney heard rock music somewhere in the background, a heavy metal song. He tried to place it, but the volume was too faint. All he could hear was the beat, the reverberation of a thrumming bass guitar amidst the counter rhythm of a headboard banging against the wall somewhere down the hall. He heard a man moaning, wondered if Dave had connected with the prostitute masquerading as a little girl.

"So you're in college?" Ginger asked, breaking the silence.

Rodney was a little surprised at the banality of her question. "Yeah, I'm majoring in pre-law," he said, feeling like he was at a university social event. He almost asked Ginger what her major was.

"You're going to be a lawyer, huh?"

Rodney nodded, not knowing what to say. He wanted to ask Ginger how long she'd been in business, but he felt stupid, like a hopeless geek.

"You'll make lots of money someday, I guess. I'll bet you'll have a pretty wife, too, and about two kids, a dog, and a big old house with a white picket fence."

Was that his dream? Yeah, it was. She'd pegged him.

"You're very sharp," he said.

Ginger laughed, placed a hand over her mouth to hide the gaps between her teeth. "Yeah, the American Dream. Everyone wants a slice of that pie."

Rodney felt vaguely defensive. He grabbed an old wooden chair next to the bed, turned it around backward and sat down. This way, he wasn't as naked, at least partially concealed.

"Well, what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. I just wonder, though. Where do I fit in your dream?"

Rodney shrugged. He wanted to ask her about her dream, wondered if it entailed living in a trailer park, driving second hand cars, shopping at thrift stores. And the biggest question of all, what happens when she's too old to sell her body? It's not like she has an investment portfolio, a retirement plan.

"There's a down side to your dreams, though," Ginger continued. "Guys like you want to have a princess on your arm but a whore in your bed. But you can't have it all, boy. Someday you have to make a

choice.”

Her comments stung with truth, but the truth seemed somewhat remote since this pretty wife was so obviously in the future. Ginger’s smug prophesies had stopped being amusing, and he felt a rising tide of anger seasoned with revulsion.

“If you’re so smart, why are you a goddamn whore?”

The words felt righteous.

“All right, I’ll show you,” Ginger growled.

She launched herself off the bed, pushed the chair backward to make him stand up. She grabbed his penis. The sudden act was so animal it startled him, froze him in place, and he squealed like a frightened rodent, pain mixed with astonishment. She quickly worked him back into an erection; let him linger for a moment groaning with discomfort.

Ginger sank to her knees in front of him, and he felt a warm, moist sensation, a chill coursing through his body. He looked down at Ginger, watched her head moving back and forth and thought about how unreal this experience was. He’d never seen this girl before tonight, and now she was performing oral sex on him.

To control himself, he thought of the most depressing things possible: a visit to his great grandmother’s nursing home, hospitals, funerals. The word sodomy crept into his mind, and he realized for the first time he was doing something immoral. The thought of sodomy scared him, made him think of sin and hell. He became numb though no less erect, and he realized he wasn’t going to ejaculate prematurely, not this time. This made him happy.

Ginger did not relent. She pushed him against the bed where his knees collapsed beneath him. He fell back onto the stiff mattress, the filthy bed spread. She hovered over him for a moment then resumed her quest to stimulate him into a fit of ecstasy, this time through the act of sexual intercourse. She moved up and down frantically, and he watched her breasts wiggling wildly back and forth, frightened by their violent contortions. He closed his eyes, the light squeezed away into squiggling lines like drops of water down a windshield. He stiffened, tried to fight the intense erotic thrill that seized his body, ready to rupture, sure he’d die if he didn’t find release, and soon. For a tense moment, he feared he’d remain suspended in this sensuous agony indefinitely. Then, she stopped, and he burst.

The pressure of twenty years surged through him. He gasped for air, seized by a spell of paralysis. The release of tension created a new bliss, very intense at first, dwindling away into a cool feeling of ease. Dizzy, inebriated by the incredible experience of climax, he laughed a laugh of pure joy. After a while his

bodily awareness spread beyond his groin. He noticed goose flesh raised on his skin, on his belly, his arms, up and down his back. The hair on the back of his neck tingled. He lay there motionless, gripped by a curious lethargy.

Ginger stood up, glared down at him with a triumphant but disgusted look on her face. She hopped over to the sink, turned on the spigot, scooped mouthfuls of water, and spit into the sink, hawking up gobs of phlegm. When she turned around she had a wet smile, stretched wide with bitterness. The gaps between her teeth yawned like dark chasms of despair, black holes in outer space.

“Now, kiss me.”

Rodney’s skin crawled with revulsion. He moved back toward the corner of the bed like a frightened child, pulled the bedspread over his naked body. Ginger moved closer, her face looming toward his, her grin growing larger with malevolent glee. He turned his face away from her, cringed beneath the covers and shuddered with fear.

Thankfully, Ginger moved back with a disgusted grunt. She stood up, glared down at him. “That’s why guys like you can’t have wives that do to them what I just did to you. You can’t kiss a whore. Now, you know the difference.”

Rodney found the energy to move. He bounded off the bed and darted toward his clothes. He dressed quickly while Ginger stood aside, aloof and yawning. All in a night’s work.

“What are you going to tell your friend?” she asked.

Rodney felt shame for what he’d done, wishing he could take it all back. All this erotic trickery was meaningless. He looked down to hide his embarrassment. How did he let Dave talk him into this? It was a degrading thing to have one’s first sexual experience with a whore. He knew he’d never speak of it. He wanted to suppress the experience deep into his subconscious.

“I know what you’re thinking, boy. You’re thinking sex will be better with your wife.” She really laughed this time, the laugh of a cackling crone, giddy with sadistic pleasure. “But you’ll remember this when you’re less than satisfied with her performance in bed. You’ll fantasize about me while you’re fucking her.”

Rodney didn’t want to hear it anymore. He raised his fist to strike her down, to shut her defiling mouth. But just at the verge of violence, he stopped. She stood there with an expectant grin, offering her chin. This wasn’t turn-the-other-cheek. This was something insidious, something he couldn’t comprehend; it seemed like she actually wanted him to hit her.

A loud knock filled the room. “Times up,” Ana’s voice squeaked through the thin plywood door.

"Times up," Ginger chirped mockingly.

Rodney tossed a wad of bills on the bed, the sixty dollars Dave gave him plus the fifty Ginger charged him for the extra time. He left the room. Ginger slammed the door behind him, the loud bang oddly reassuring.

When Rodney and Dave walked outside, the air had cooled substantially. Winter had returned. The cold air felt good, crisp and cleansing, the sky clear, filled with stars, not a cloud in sight. The flickering street light on the corner gave the illusion of dancing shadows, clawed hands reaching out and retreating.

"Let's get out of here," Rodney said trying to suppress a note of pleading in his voice.

Dave lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply. The smoke swirled in the air. The acrid odor stung Rodney nose.

"First, tell me how it was. I've never done Ginger. Is she good?"

Rodney seized the first opportunity to repress the truth of what happened. "We just talked."

"What?"

"We talked. She's an interesting girl."

Dave frowned. "I gave you sixty bucks, and you just talked to her? You wasted my money?"

Rodney nodded.

"C'mon, you got to be bullshitting me."

"Nope, I'm not. She's a fascinating girl. When she gives up prostitution, she's thinking about going to school, maybe Southwestern."

Dave eyed him, his frown turned into a smile. "Then you're still a virgin. Holy shit. You can't get laid with a sure thing. Are you sure you're not gay?" He laughed, loud and unrestrained like he'd heard a great joke. "I can't wait to tell the guys."

Rodney fought the urge to punch Dave in the face, to make him pay for this godforsaken night by putting the hurt on him, but he repressed his violent desires when he remembered Ginger's defiant face, beckoning him to act like a thug.

"Let's go home."

Dave took another drag on his cigarette. "I'm not finished."

Dave started walking back toward the glass door, but a cop car rounded the corner at Frisco, paused beneath the malfunctioning street light. Dave threw down the cigarette and got into the car. They drove up to Gary Boulevard and headed east toward Route 66, back to Weatherford.

When Dave drove up to the Phi Delta Phi house, a large red brick house just south of campus, the members were on the porch waiting. They rushed the car, opened Rodney's door, all of them fussing about almost missing his birthday.

"Wait," Rodney protested. He tried to stay glued to Dave's seat, tried to stay inside the car. "What time is it?"

Larry, the chapter president checked his watch. "It's only 9:30, bud. Plenty of time to have a party."

He offered his hairy wrist to Rodney so he could see for himself. Rodney didn't have to look. He knew it was the truth. After everything else that had happened that night, it was no surprise Dave would go ahead and betray him.

Larry lugged a cooler over to Dave's car, opened the lid and revealed a case of Schaffer's Beer, the cheapest available.

"We're thinking about going to the lake. What do you think?"

Rodney looked over at Dave who smiled mischievously. "Time to cool off."

The collection of members started chanting, "Lake throw. Lake throw. Lake throw."

Rodney opened the car door, tried to make a run for it. He managed to make it a half block before Dave grabbed him, tackling him to the ground. Rodney twisted away from Dave, slammed his fist against the side of Dave's face.

"Fuck!" Dave yelled. "Is that how you thank me? For all I've done..."

The brothers descended upon the two young men, continuing the chant, "Lake throw. Lake throw. Lake throw."

They lifted Rodney on their shoulders, carried him to Dave's car and tossed him into the back seat. They piled into the car, penned Rodney in the middle between two of the biggest brothers. He could smell their sweat, the beer on their breath, and he felt rage at their jolliness.

"Time to get baptized," Dave joked.

A trickle of blood slid from Dave's nose, running down a laugh-line at the bottom of his right cheek, into the corner of his mouth.

Rodney struggled against his captors who kept laughing and chanting. He knew the water at Crowder Lake was going to be freezing.

"I've already been baptized," he said.

Dave placed the Chevelle into drive, lurched the car forward, spinning the rear tires, a loud squeal

punctuated by maniacal laughter.

“Then, it’s time for your confirmation,” Dave said.

They raced down Custer Avenue, toward the outskirts of town, everything outside the car, that cramped little world of brotherhood, flashing by in a blur of movement.

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