A painting of a young woman with reddish-brown hair tied up, standing in a doorway. She is wearing a brown jacket over a white apron with a lace hem, and a brown skirt. She holds a long-handled broom. The background shows a doorway leading to a brighter area, with a small table and a bowl visible on the right. The painting has a textured, slightly aged appearance.

# Slow-Burn Smut

2,457,906

June 2017

I imagine myself on my knees  
Waiting for you to come over and see me  
I imagine myself on my knees  
Waiting for you to come over and need me  
I imagine myself on my knees  
Waiting for you to come over and feed me  
I imagine myself on my knees  
Waiting for you to come over and free me

— Jill Scott. “Until Then (I Imagine).”



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# Preface



You asked for erotica with “drawn out chase scenes.” Here’s some slow-burn erotica for you.

May your vibrator know no peace tonight.





# Chapter 1

## Vox (Excerpt)

NICHOLSON BAKER

“I called tonight I think out of the same impulse, the idea that five or six men would hear me come, as if my voice was this thing, this disembodied body, out there, and as they moaned they would be overlaying their moans onto it, and, in a way, coming onto it, and the idea appealed to me, but then, when I actually made the call, the reality of it was that the men were so irritating, either passive, wanting me to entertain them, or full of what-are-your-measurements questions, and so I was silent for a while, and then I heard your voice and liked it.”

“Thank you. Yours is nice, too, you know. Very smooth.”

“Thanks. I just had it waxed yesterday. Shall we, do you think, should we perhaps come soon?”

“Yes. You’re absolutely right. Are you naked?”

“Wait a sec. Yes, I am now officially naked, except for the bra.”

“Are your legs apart?”

“My toes are holding on to the edge of the coffee table.”

“Is your right hand touching your clitoris?”

“How impertinent! But yes, the answer is yes. My clitoris is in fact squeezed between my two index fingers, left and right, which are on either side of it. “Yes. You’re absolutely right. Are you naked?”

“Wait a sec. Yes, I am now officially naked, except for the bra.”

“Are your legs apart?”

“My toes are holding on to the edge of the coffee table.”

“Is your right hand touching your clitoris?”

“How impertinent! But yes, the answer is yes. My clitoris is in fact squeezed between my two index fingers, left and right, which are on either side of it.”



“All right. You do whatever you want with those index fingers, and I’ll tell you about a kind of sensing device that I own. What it does, it doesn’t eavesdrop, it doesn’t pick up sounds, it simply senses the presence nearby of any intelligent strumming woman. It looks like an antique pocket watch, it’s gold, with a cover, but when you open it, instead of the dial, there is this mysterious fluid, this very special fluid in there that glows in several colors when the right conditions are met, for reasons that are not clear, except that of course a woman masturbating is so important an event in the physical universe that elemental relations in matter are affected as it occurs, and there are these sort of currents in the fluid that slowly move in a certain direction, like lines of force, which give you some sense of where the masturbation signals are coming from, although it takes years of practice, and of course a great deal of native skill as well, to learn how to read the fluid correctly. It’s called the Bionic Mmmm-Detector, as you might suspect. Well, I’m driving down the expressway of an eastern city one evening around ten o’clock, in town on business, in my rented midsize car, my Ford Topaz, with the radio going, a classics oldie station, playing ‘Ain’t Nobody,’ and I’m just driving along, and as usual I have my Mmmm-Detector open on the seat beside me, but the fluid is dark, and then I start curving through this residential area, very close to the buildings on either side, and I glance down at the seat beside me, and my God, I’m getting a very strong signal, I’m getting wave patterns I’ve never seen before, from very near and to my right, and craning my neck I catch sight of a lighted window, and I know that behind it you are in process, you are beginning. My years of practice in reading the flux patterns in the watch tells me this is something very special, something I cannot pass by, and so I palm the steering wheel around suddenly and veer onto the off ramp and scoot back through the narrow streets, swearing at all the one way signs, and when I come to the door where the Mmmm-forces are flowing from, I park in a place that is sure to get me a ticket, and I leave my flashers on, and I go into the foyer. There’s a row of buttons with names beside them: I hold the detector to each one until one, the third one down, makes the Mmmm-Detector glow with strange colors, and I hesitate, I know that I am interrupting you, and I don’t want to do that, that’s the last thing I want to do, but it seems so clear to me, reading the force waves, that there is a strong possibility that you would want me to interrupt you, if you knew me, and the conviction that this is true grows in me, and my finger trembles at your button, and there is a huge interior war between reticence and attraction, between the fear that I will inspire fear and the certainty that I should not inspire fear and that we would like each other if I could simply push that button, and I look down at the Mmmm-Detector and I see that you are going to come in less than four minutes if you keep on at that rate, you’re really

moving, the colors are increasingly intense, and I'm trembling, I'm shivering, but I'm compelled, and I push the button, *bzzzzt*. You're on your bed, and you're wearing a blue long-sleeved pullover sort of shirt, and black pants and black sneakers, but your black pants are around your ankles, and you've got that tattered, disintegrating issue of *Forum* in your left hand, and you're reading about a job interview in which the woman in interviewer is sucking the interviewee's cock, and you're right in the middle of things, when *bzzzzt*, the doorbell. Who could that be?"

"So I do up my pants and I go to the speaker and I say, 'Hello?' "

"And I say, 'Hi, this is Jim. I know it's late, but I wonder if I could use your phone. My car's engine has seized up, and all the oil lights on the dash are glowing, and I don't dare drive it any further, and the pay phone down the street isn't working.

"I say, 'Why did you buzz my apartment?' "

"And I say, 'The others don't answer. You're right to be hesitant, but this isn't a normal situation, this is urgent, I've got to get back to my hotel, I've got a whole day of appointments tomorrow, I just *have* to get seven and a half hours of sleep or I won't function, and I need to use your phone, and I assure you that I'm reasonably sane and peaceable, and I would not normally do this, invade your privacy, but I'm telling you nothing could be more important than this. Please.' And you hear the conviction in my voice, and you buzz me in."

"Well, no, first I hold the talk button in and to my empty apartment I call out, 'Jeff? *Jeff!* Enough with the weights! Do you and Mojo Cartilage-Popper mind if someone comes up to use the phone for a second?' *Then* I buzz you in downstairs, knowing that I can look at you through the peephole in my door, and call Bobby the super if you look strange."

"Exactly. I run up to the second floor, and I find your door, and before I stand right in front of it, I check the Mmmm-Sensor and find that your arousal has suffered some decline, you are now ten or more minutes away from an orgasm, though the glow faintly persists. I knock, and I begin pacing back and forth in front of the door, distractedly, like a guy impatient to make a phone call. You look through the peephole and you see this guy, middle height, black hair, not bad-looking, somewhat frazzled, pacing back and forth in front of your door, checking a pocket watch. You let me in. And I introduce myself, I apologize for bothering you, I smile at you, and immediately I can sense the alertness and intelligence in your face, and I see that we understand each other, and I know my Mmmm-Sensor hasn't misled me. Ah, but I've lied my way into your apartment, which is a problem."

"It is, because if I knew!"

"Curtains. So you bring me the phone, and I sit on the edge of a dining-

room chair, and I call my answering machine, and I start telling it about the oil lights on my dashboard, I really have to have someone take care of it, I need the number of a cab company, etcetera, and then all of a sudden I stop, in midsentence, and I click off the phone and I say, ‘Nah, I can’t.’ ”

“ ‘You can’t what?’ ”

“ ‘I can’t do it. I can’t pretend.’ And I confess to you that I’ve lied, that my car is fine, that I was driving on the expressway, and I got this highly unusual, if not unique, reading on my Mmmm-Sensor, or Mmmm-Detector, whatever I’m calling it, and I pull it out of my pocket and open the finely scratched gold top and show it to you, and I explain, hesitantly, that it, um, picks up the flux currents from intelligent, um, masturbating women, and I show you how it glows, and I point out the wavy flow lines as they move in your direction, and I say, ‘They’re somewhat fainter now, but they’re definitely still there, and they really look great. Now, let’s see what happens if I do this.’ And I stand next to you, so you can see the Mmmm-Detector as I hold it a foot or so from your face, and then I lower it and slowly pass it a few inches in front of each breast, and the pattern makes these complicated shifts. And I say, ‘But as you may be able to see, I’m getting other readings, interference fringes,’ and I hold the thing up and I walk slowly to the walls of your hall, where there is a faint rural pattern showing through the paint, and I say, ‘For instance, the walls, very curious,’ and I shake my head in perplexity, and then I follow the flow lines to a drawer in the kitchen, filled with silverware—very odd—and I follow it into the bathroom, and you follow me in, and I lean into the shower and move the Mmmm-Detector past the fixtures, the drain, the shampoo bottles—beautiful color changes and convergences of flow waves—and I shake my head and I say, ‘Gosh, I’ve never seen anything as rich as this,’ and I follow its lead into the bedroom, and you follow me, and I say, ‘Wow, very high flux levels in here,’ and I pass it over your chenille bedspread and I say, ‘Your feet must have been here and here,’ pointing to two places quite far apart on the bed, and I know that everything I’m doing is forward, is really inexcusable, but in a way you’re curious, and I’m just relaying facts, and I sense your willingness to have this happen, and I push the Mmmm-Detector into the pillow and then reach under it and find your disintegrating copy of *Forum*, and I sit down on the bed and page through it slowly, holding the device to each page, until I reach a certain page, and I peer very closely at the sensor, and then I hold it close to the button on your pants, and I inspect it again, and I look up smiling, and I hold the magazine out to you, pointing at something on the page, and I say, ‘You were reading this sentence, this phrase right here in this sentence, when I buzzed your apartment.’ ”

“And,” she said, “I take the *Forum* and read what you’re pointing at,

and you're pretty close, it's not exactly the right phrase, but you've found the right paragraph, anyway. And I don't know quite what to do. I probably should be calling the cops, because you seem to know all this stuff about me, but on the other hand, there you are, and I am still feeling all puffy down below, and you have a certain amount of charm, and an intriguing pocket watch, and so I offer you a, a what? A dry Vermouth on the rocks. And you accept."

"I do, you're right," he said, "and now I'm sitting on an armchair when you come toward me with the drinks, a low sort of armchair, and I have my legs sprawled open in a fairly innocent way, and I just dust off the area of the armchair that's between my legs, indicating that if you want to, you could sit there with no problem and lean back against me, and you do turn and sit there, but you don't lean back, you're leaning forward, and so I have this warm back, covered in loose blue shirt material, in front of me, this miracle of a back, and I take a sip of the drink, and put it down on the table, on a napkin, so it won't leave a ring, and I reach up and click off the table lamp so it's a bit darker, and I close my eyes and find your shoulders with my hands and you ask where I found the Mmmm-Detector and I describe the table of junk I found it on in a flea market in Anaheim, a hundred and forty bucks, without any manual, and how I taught myself over several years what it was for and how to read it, and as I'm telling you this I'm moving my thumbs in two little arcs back and forth above your shoulder blades, which is as much of a back rub as I can handle, because the notion of something called a *back rub* tires my mind out instantly, and I can't do anything that has to do with that, even though your back and my hands are interested in each other. What interests me is your bra, quite honestly, and so I relax my left hand and let it slide down the middle of your back, just let the fingers slide very lightly down over the material of your shirt, until I come to the place where your bra is fastened, and with my eyes closed, and with your ass warm between my legs, but still innocently there, I feel the three possible places for the hooks on the little fastener to hook, and that you've used the third setting, because of shrinkage probably, and I take my fingers and I follow the upward curving edge of the bra as it rises toward your shoulders, and I ride this curve up a little way over your shoulders and then back down your back and in to the middle again. It's like driving over the Bay Bridge. Then I follow the bottom edge horizontally around, under your arms, until I just reach the seam where a cup begins, and you feel all this somewhat dimly, because it's through your shirt and through the bra, but you are more aware now of the shape of the bra that you're wearing, and then I go back to the fastener and I make that time-honored pinching move and release the hooks through your shirt, and each side pulls away, and now I feel that I have this perfect



central stretch with no interruption, and I press my left palm between your shoulder blades and slide slowly down, moving your shirt, feeling wrinkles in it form and pass, and I can feel some slight bumps of your backbone—what a beautiful back, so warm. I want very much to feel your skin. So I put both hands on your hips and hook my two thumbs and index fingers under the bottom edge of your shirt, or no, I grab hold of it on either side and pull it, because it was tucked into your pants, and I pull it out, and then I hook my hands underneath, and I can feel your skin move slightly as my fingers first touch it, just above your hips, and I run my fingers back along the inside of your waistband, and I can feel the warmth of your ass, and then I flatten my hands against your back and slide them up under your shirt, ah, all the way up so the fingers come out and go a little way along the nape of your neck into your hair before sub siding. It's a loose shirt, don't worry. Am I going too slow for you?"

"No no, keep going, that's fine."

"Oh, I love moving my hands over you under your loose shirt, I love that. I'd slide my hands around over your stomach, so that my fingertips met, and feel it pull in, and slide up slowly along your ribs, and when I got to where the curves of your breasts started, I would trace them around, out to the sides, back to the middle, and I would pass just my fingertips up between your breasts, up along your breastbone, pushing under the loose bra, and then one finger even higher, along your voice box, to where your chin starts, and you'd lean your head back and I would be able to smell your hair, and then I'd pull back down, deliberately avoiding your breasts."

"And I would stand up," she said, "and turn around so I'm facing you, with my shins touching the armchair, and I'd undo the button of my pants."

"And I would reach out," he said, "and take hold of your zipper and push it slowly down, so that I'm pushing against your mound with it, not at your clitoris, but above it, and I'd slide my fingers under your waistband and guide your pants off over your hips and ass, and when they fell to your knees I'd put my foot on the inside of the crotch so you could step out of them easily, and I'd smell how wet you are, and I'd slide my hands up your legs and slip my fingers under the waistband of your underpants, and pull them down a little, and then I'd roll them under my palms, so the fabric just rolled up, and they fell and you stepped easily out of them, too. And then..."

"And then," she said, "you'd undo your belt and the top button of your pants, and the clink of your belt buckle would be like the little bell signaling the start of some thing serious, and I would slowly move the zipper over the high lump of your erection, and you'd lift your hips and I'd pull your pants off, but not your underpants, and then I'd slide one knee on the cushion of the armchair, between your legs, against your balls, and the other out side

your legs, and I'd let my weight settle on your thigh, so we're close but facing each other."

"And first," he said, "my leg would feel the roughness of your pubic hair, I'd feel it scratching against itself, and then I'd feel you open and I'd feel this wet oval of heat on the muscle of my thigh, and I'd look down at your folded legs straddling my leg, and run my hands up them, and scoop up your shirt again, and this time I'd lift it with me as my hands moved up, and I'd watch them, I watch your shirt rising, the seam of your shirt is over my wrists, and then I reach your breasts and I lift your shirt and your loose bra up just a little more, and, ah, there they are your nipples, finally, and you see my hands reveal them, and I see your breasts moving slightly as you breathe, and I sit up and bend toward them, and then on second thought straighten and lick my lips and kiss you, and your tongue is very warm and very friendly."

"Whoo!"

"And I bend back down toward one of your breasts, and I open my mouth, which now finally remembers how to kiss from just kissing you, and I just breathe on your nipple, and the shirt starts to fall down over it, and I nudge it aside with my tongue and then hold it out of the way with my hand, and now I have your breast entirely surrounded with both my palms, and you feel your breast held this way, completely under my care, and I just touch the tip of my tongue once to the almost flat top of your nipple, which is hard, and then I open my mouth quite wide, and draw my tongue way back, and you arch your back slightly, and so my lips make contact with your breast, surrounding your nipple but *not* touching it, and I suck on it without touching it also, so that you feel the pulling as it's being drawn into my mouth, and even becoming soft, or losing its definition, from being drawn in that way, and wanting to be directly touched, and then you feel the tip of my tongue just touch the base of your nipple and then paint a warm vertical stripe up over it, and then back down, and then my whole tongue, much wider and fatter, pushes and moves against your nipple, and then I hold my mouth and tongue still and a little looser and with my hands I move your whole breast in circles and back and forth under them, so that you feel its whole size in my hands, ho, I'm sucking on your breasts..."

"And I'd hold on to your head as you sucked my breasts, and feel your tongue doing all those nice things to me through your cheeks. I am so *wet*."

"Oh, and I'd tighten my thigh muscle where your pussy was pressing down on it and feel your wetness slide against me, and I'd look up at you and kiss you again, and slide my hands down to your hips and push down, so that there was more pressure still against your notch, and I'd feel your hips move slightly, adjusting themselves so that it felt best..."

“And while we were kissing I’d reach down and catch my fingers under one leg hole of your underpants and pull it up and over your cock and balls and then I’d hold your balls in my hand for a second and then I’d bring my hand up and squeeze the head of your cock in my fist and kind of pull and push on it while I was squeezing it tightly.”

“And you’d feel my lips making an oh shape while we were kissing, with the pleasure of your hand doing that, and, ho, I’d need to suck your clit soon, because I’d feel the come in me starting to want to spurt out, and so we’d shift positions so that you were sitting on the armchair and I was kneeling on the floor, and you’d scoot your hips forward so that your ass was just at the edge of the pillow, and when you glanced down you could see your own breasts, and your pubic hair, and your knees held together, with my hands on them, and you’d see the glossy wet place on my thigh, and then I’d encircle your legs with one arm, holding them together, and bend toward your bush and breathe on it, the little of it I can see, and I run my fingers just down the long place where the insides of your thighs touch, all the way to your knees, and then I’d let go of your legs, and they’d fall slightly apart, and as my hands started to move up inside them, with my fingers splayed wide, they’d move farther and farther apart, and then I’d lift your knees and hook them over the arms of the armchair, so that you were wide open for me, and in the darkness your bush would still be indistinct, and I’d look up at you, and I’d move on my knees so I’m closer, so I could slide my cock in you if I wanted, and I touch your shoulders with my hands, and pass my fingertips all the way down over your breasts and over your stomach and just lightly over your bush, just to feel the hair, and then I say, ‘I’m going to lick you now,’ and I lick both your nipples once very briefly good bye, and I breathe my way down, and I pass over your bush this time with my mouth, and I see where the tan stops, and where the hair begins, and I keep going, and your legs are spread wide, and so I kiss inside one knee, and then across to the other, and up, back and forth, and at the end of each kiss I give a little upward lick with my tongue, up lick, lick, lick, back and forth, moving closer and closer to where your thighs meet. And then the last time I turn my head, there’s nothing I can do, my mouth is just buried in your pubic hair, and I breathe through it, I fill it with warmth, and I open my mouth more, and I bring my tongue out, and I start low, and the underside of my tongue is touching my lower teeth, and I lick slowly upwards, until I reach the place where the skin is more folded, and I find that beautiful clitoris, and I move over it with my tongue, and then when I’ve found it I close my mouth and sort of burrow my way into you so that all your pubic hair is away from my mouth, and my mouth is entirely around your clit, and I hold my hands very high on the insides of your thighs, feeling those stretched tendons, so you feel how wide

apart you are, and I suck the skin around your clitoris into my mouth, like I did with your nipple, so that you feel it drawn into my mouth, and when you feel it drawn in I take my tongue, very high, right at the base of your clitoris, where I can feel that little ridge beginning, and I start to go back and forth over it, back and forth slowly over it, and you feel the tip of my tongue traveling down toward the part where it's hotter, and then I reach the very full part of your clitoris, and you pull your hips in slightly and re-adjust to that feeling, and I cup my hands under your ass and lift you into my mouth and just suck on you, and I shake my whole head back and forth very fast, as if I'm saying, no, no, no, but I'm saying yes to your clit with my tongue."

"Oh, I'm going to come soon. Put your cock in me, I want to think about your cock in me."

"Are your legs spread apart?"

"Yes."

"Oh, and you're stroking that clit?"

"Yes."

"Okay, so I'd take one last long up-lick on your pussy and then I'd straighten up, and I'd still be cupping your ass in my hands, and you'd be completely visible by now, wide open, sopping wet, and I'd take my cock in one hand and kind of vibrate it over your clit, and you'd slide your hands down and hold your lips apart with your fingers, and then I'd push my cock down and I'd feel how hot you were and I'd have to slide myself slowly all the way in, and then I'd pull almost all the way out again and slide in, into that nice nasturtium, and each time I pulled out I'd be able to see your hand circling your clit, and I'd slide in until my pubic bone thumped against you, and I'd watch your breasts move each time I reached this limit, and we would be fucking, sliding in and out..."

"Oh!"

"And your finger would be flying over your clit, your hand would be lifted and your finger would be flying back and forth, and I'd have your asscheeks cupped in both my hands, so you could feel a pulling on your asshole, and I would be sliding with long strokes out, and in, and out, and in, and I'd see your tits moving each time..."

"Oh! *Oh!*"

"Oh, I'm starting to come for you, my cock is pumping inside you..."

"*Oh!* Nnnnnnnn! Nnn! Nnn! Nnn! Nnn! Nnn! Nnn!"

"It's spurting out! I can't help it! Ah! Ah! Oooooo."

There was a pause.

"Oh man," she said. "Wow. You there?"

"I think so." He swallowed. "Let me catch my breath."



“That was—that was—*man*” she said. “I saw the great seal of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts when I came.”

“I heard you come and I came,” he said.

“Whoo! How long have we been talking?”

“Hours and hours.”

“Hours and hours and hours,” she said. “My mouth is chapped. Too much making out.”

“Is your voice sore?”

“It really is. Whoo! Gee, I’m going to have to call in sick again. I’ll sleep all day, mm, sounds delightful. The hiss on the phone is very loud now, isn’t it? That com panionable hiss. It’s always louder at the end of conversations.”

“Oh, is it the end already?” he said. “Couldn’t we just fade out somehow, talking and talking? I can’t think of a better way to invest my life savings. Not that I’m much of a saver.”

“You’re quite a telephoner, though.”

” You are too! I mean it! I think really this is one of the nicest conversations I’ve ever had.”

“I liked it too,” she said. “I don’t know, though—do you think we talked enough about sex?”

“Not nearly enough. I—”

”Yes ? ” she said.

”D o you think our . . . wires will cross again?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. What do you think?”

“I could give you my number,” he said. “I mean if you still want it. I’ll avoid a possibly awkward moment by not asking for yours. Or we could meet out here again, if you’d rather do that.”

“Out here under the stars? I can’t afford it. Where’s a pencil? Ah, a nice blunt pencil. Tell me your number.” He told her. She read it back to him.

“Call me soon,” he said. “In fact, call me in a few hours, after you’ve topped yourself off in the shower.”

“You know me too well.”

“I like you a lot.”

“I wonder what you look like,” she said.

“Surprisingly normal. Maybe someday you’ll know.”

“It’s a possibility.”

“We’d probably be a little nervous at first, if we met. But then. . .”

“Then we’d start masturbating like ferrets,” she said,

“and that would quickly break the ice.”

“That’s right. I hope you will call. You remember I have this pair of cotton pointelle tights. Unopened.”

“Size small?”

“Size small. In faun. Put Leona to work, get those legs waxed, I’m on my way. No. But call me soon. Soon soon soon. I hope you will.”

“All right,” she said. “Let me think about things. Let me absorb the strangeness.”

“What’s strange?”

“Nothing,” she said. “I guess nothing. I think I should probably sign off now, though. I have to put a load of towels in the laundry.”

“Certainly. Okay. Thank you for calling this number.”

“Thank *you*. Bye Jim.”

“Bye Abby. Bye.”

They hung up.





Dearest — my body is simply crazy with wanting you — If you don't come tomorrow — I don't see how I can wait for you — I wonder if your body wants mine the way mine wants yours — the kisses — the hotness — the wetness — all melting together — the being held so tight that it hurts — the strangle and the struggle.

— Georgia O'Keeffe. "My Faraway One: Selected Letters of Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz."





## Chapter 2

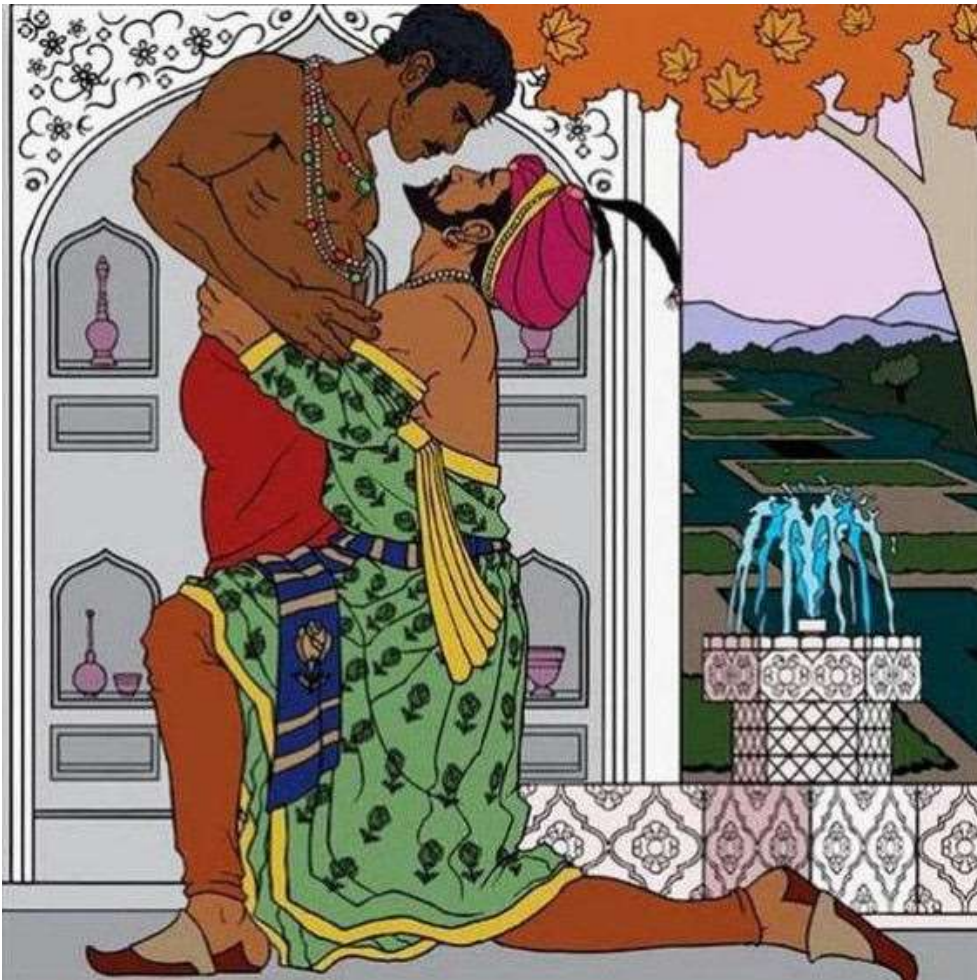
### Please Master

ALLEN GINSBERG

Please master can I touch your cheek  
please master can I kneel at your feet  
please master can I loosen your blue pants  
please master can I gaze at your golden haired belly  
please master can I have your thighs bare to my eyes  
please master can I take off my clothes below your chair  
please master can I can I kiss your ankles and soul  
please master can I touch lips to your hard muscle hairless thigh  
please master can I lay my ear pressed to your stomach  
please master can I wrap my arms around your white ass  
please master can I lick your groin gurled with blond soft fur  
please master can I touch my tongue to your rosy asshole  
please master may I pass my face to your balls,  
please master order me down on the floor,  
please master tell me to lick your thick shaft  
please master put your rough hands on my bald hairy skull  
please master press my mouth to your prick-heart  
please master press my face into your belly, pull me slowly strong thumbed  
till your dumb hardness fills my throat to the base  
till I swallow and taste your delicate flesh-hot prick barrel veined Please  
Master push my shoulders away and stare in my eyes, & make me bend over  
the table  
please master grab my thighs and lift my ass to your waist  
please master your hand's rough stroke on my neck your palm down to my  
backside  
please master push me, my feet on chairs, till my hole feels the breath of

your spit and your thumb stroke  
 please master make my say Please Master Fuck me now Please  
 Master grease my balls and hairmouth with sweet vaselines  
 please master stroke your shaft with white creams  
 please master touch your cock head to my wrinkled self-hole  
 please master push it in gently, your elbows enwrapped round my breast  
 your arms passing down to my belly, my penis you touch w/ your fingers  
 please master shove it in me a little, a little, a little,  
 please master sink your droor thing down my behind  
 & please master make me wiggle my rear to eat up the prick trunk  
 till my ass halves cuddle your thighs, my back bent over,  
 till I'm alone sticking out, your sword stuck throbbing in me  
 please master pull out and slowly roll onto the bottom  
 please master lunge it again, and withdraw the tip  
 please please master fuck me again with your self, please fuck me Please  
 Master drive down till it hurts me the softness the  
 Softness please master make love to my ass, give body to center, & fuck me  
 for good like a girl,  
 tenderly clasp me please master I take me to thee,  
 & drive in my belly your selfsame sweet heat-rood  
 you fingered in solitude Denver or Brooklyn or fucked in a maiden in Paris  
 carlots  
 please master drive me thy vehicle, body of love drops, sweat fuck  
 body of tenderness, Give me your dogh fuck faster  
 please master make me go moan on the table  
 Go moan O please master do fuck me like that  
 in your rhythm thrill-plunge & pull-back-bounce & push down  
 till I loosen my asshole a dog on the table yelping with terror delight to be  
 loved  
 Please master call me a dog, an ass beast, a wet asshole,  
 & fuck me more violent, my eyes hid with your palms round my skull  
 & plunge down in a brutal hard lash thru soft drip-fish  
 & throb thru five seconds to spurt out your semen heat  
 over & over, bamming it in while I cry out your name I do love you  
 please Master.





Pull up to my bumper baby  
In your long black limousine  
Just pull up to my bumper baby  
And drive it in between

– Grace Jones. “Pull up to the Bumper.”

## Chapter 3

# Coming of Age in Karhide

URSULA K. LE GUIN

*By Sov Thade Tage em Ereb, of Rer, in Karhide, on Gethen.*

I live in the oldest city in the world. Long before there were kings in Karhide, Rer was a city, the marketplace and meeting ground for all the Northeast, the Plains, and Kerm Land. The Fastness of Rer was a center of learning, a refuge, a judgment seat fifteen thousand years ago. Karhide became a nation here, under the Geger kings, who ruled for a thousand years. In the thousandth year Sedern Geger, the Unking, cast the crown into the River Arre from the palace towers, proclaiming an end to dominion. The time they call the Flowering of Rer, the Summer Century, began then. It ended when the Hearth of Harge took power and moved their capital across the mountains to Erhenrang. The Old Palace has been empty for centuries. But it stands. Nothing in Rer falls down. The Arre floods through the street-tunnels every year in the Thaw, winter blizzards may bring thirty feet of snow, but the city stands. Nobody knows how old the houses are, because they have been rebuilt forever. Each one sits in its gardens without respect to the position of any of the others, as vast and random and ancient as hills. The roofed streets and canals angle about among them. Rer is all corners. We say that the Harges left because they were afraid of what might be around the corner.

Time is different here. I learned in school how the Orgota, the Ekumen, and most other people count years. They call the year of some portentous event Year One and number forward from it. Here it's always Year One. On Getheny Thern, New Year's Day, the Year One becomes one-ago, one-to-come becomes One, and so on. It's like Rer, everything always changing but the city never changing.

When I was fourteen (in the Year One, or fifty-ago) I came of age. I have been thinking about that a good deal recently.

It was a different world. Most of us had never seen an Alien, as we called them then. We might have heard the Mobile talk on the radio, and at school we saw pictures of Aliens—the ones with hair around their mouths were the most pleasingly savage and repulsive. Most of the pictures were disappointing. They looked too much like us. You couldn't even tell that they were always in kemmer. The female Aliens were supposed to have enormous breasts, but my Mothersib Dory had bigger breasts than the ones in the pictures.

When the Defenders of the Faith kicked them out of Orgoreyn, when King Emran got into the Border War and lost Erhenrang, even when their Mobiles were outlawed and forced into hiding at Estre in Kerm, the Ekumen did nothing much but wait. They had waited for two hundred years, as patient as Handdara. They did one thing: they took our young king off-world to foil a plot, and then brought the same king back sixty years later to end her wombchild's disastrous reign. Argaven XVII is the only king who ever ruled four years before her heir and forty years after.

The year I was born (the Year One, or sixty-four-ago) was the year Argaven's second reign began. By the time I was noticing anything beyond my own toes, the war was over, the West Fall was part of Karhide again, the capital was back in Erhenrang, and most of the damage done to Rer during the Overthrow of Emran had been repaired. The old houses had been rebuilt again. The Old Palace had been patched again. Argaven XVII was miraculously back on the throne again. Everything was the way it used to be, ought to be, back to normal, just like the old days—everybody said so.

Indeed those were quiet years, an interval of recovery before Argaven, the first Gethenian who ever left our planet, brought us at last fully into the Ekumen; before we, not they, became the Aliens; before we came of age. When I was a child we lived the way people had lived in Rer forever. It is that way, that timeless world, that world around the corner, I have been thinking about, and trying to describe for people who never knew it. Yet as I write I see how also nothing changes, that it is truly the Year One always, for each child that comes of age, each lover who falls in love.

There were a couple of thousand people in the Ereb Hearths, and a hundred and forty of them lived in my Hearth, Ereb Tage. My name is Sov Thade Tage em Ereb, after the old way of naming we still use in Rer. The first thing I remember is a huge dark place full of shouting and shadows, and I am falling upward through a golden light into the darkness. In thrilling terror, I scream. I am caught in my fall, held, held close; I weep; a voice so



close to me that it seems to speak through my body says softly, “Sov, Sov, Sov.” And then I am given something wonderful to eat, something so sweet, so delicate that never again will I eat anything quite so good. . . .

I imagine that some of my wild elder hearthsibs had been throwing me about, and that my mother comforted me with a bit of festival cake. Later on when I was a wild elder sib we used to play catch with babies for balls; they always screamed, with terror or with delight, or both. It’s the nearest to flying anyone of my generation knew. We had dozens of different words for the way snow falls, floats, descends, glides; blows, for the way clouds move, the way ice floats, the way boats sail; but not that word. Not yet. And so I don’t remember “flying”. I remember falling upward through the golden light.

Family houses in Rer are built around a big central hall. Each story has an inner balcony clear round that space, and we call the whole story, rooms and all, a balcony. My family occupied the whole second balcony of Erebtage. There were a lot of us. My grandmother had borne four children, and all of them had children, so I had a bunch of cousins as well as a younger and an older wombsib. “The Thades always kemmer as women and always get pregnant,” I heard neighbors say, variously envious, disapproving, admiring. “And they never keep kemmer,” somebody would add. The former was an exaggeration, but the latter was true. Not one of us kids had a father. I didn’t know for years who my getter was, and never gave it a thought. Clannish, the Thades preferred not to bring outsiders, even other members of our own Hearth, into the family. If young people fell in love and started talking about keeping kemmer or making vows, Grandmother and the mothers were ruthless. “Vowing kemmer, what do you think you are, some kind of noble? some kind of fancy person? The kemmerhouse was good enough for me and it’s good enough for you,” the mothers said to their lovelorn children, and sent them away, clear off to the old Erebtage Domain in the country, to hoe braties till they got over being in love.

So as a child I was a member of a flock, a school; a swarm, in and out of our warren of rooms, tearing up and down the staircases, working together and learning together and looking after the babies in our own fashion and terrorizing quieter hearthmates by our numbers and our noise. As far as I know we did no real harm. Our escapades were well within the rules and limits of the sedate, ancient Hearth, which we felt not as constraints but as protection, the walls that kept us safe. The only time we got punished was when my cousin Sether decided it would be exciting if we tied a long rope we’d found to the second-floor balcony railing, tied a big knot in the rope, held onto the knot, and jumped. “I’ll go first,” Sether said. Another misguided attempt at flight. The railing and Sether’s broken leg were mended, and the

rest of us had to clean the privies, all the privies of the Hearth, for a month. I think the rest of the Hearth had decided it was time the young Thades observed some discipline.

Although I really don't know what I was like as a child, I think that if I'd had any choice I might have been less noisy than my playmates, though just as unruly. I used to love to listen to the radio, and while the rest of them were racketing around the balconies or the centerhall in winter, or out in the streets and gardens in summer, I would crouch for hours in my mother's room behind the bed, playing her old

serem-wood radio very softly so that my sibs wouldn't know I was there. I listened to anything, Lays and plays and hearthtales, the Palace news, the analyses of grain harvests and the detailed weather reports; I listened every day all one winter to an ancient saga from the Pering Storm-Border about snowghouls, perfidious traitors, and bloody ax-murders, which haunted me at night so that I couldn't sleep and would crawl into bed with my mother for comfort. Often my younger sib was already there in the warm, soft, breathing dark. We would sleep all entangled and curled up together like a nest of Pesthry.

My mother, Guyr Thade Tage em Ereb, was impatient, warm-hearted, and impartial, not exerting much control over us three wombchildren, but keeping watch. The Thades were all tradespeople working in Ereb shops and masteries, with little or no cash to spend; but when I was ten, Guyr bought me a radio, a new one, and said where my sibs could hear, "You don't have to share it." I treasured it for years and finally shared it with my own wombchild.

So the years went along and I went along in the warmth and density and certainty of a family and a Hearth embedded in tradition, threads on the quick ever-repeating shuttle weaving the timeless web of custom and act and work and relationship, and at this distance I can hardly tell one year from the other or myself from the other children: until I turned fourteen.

The reason most people in my Hearth would remember that year is for the big party known as Dory's Somer-Forever Celebration. My Mothersib Dory had stopped going into kemmer that winter. Some people didn't do anything when they stopped going into kemmer; others went to the Fastness for a ritual; some stayed on at the Fastness for months after, or even moved there. Dory, who wasn't spiritually inclined, said, "If I can't have kids and can't have sex anymore and have to get old and die, at least I can have a party."

I have already had some trouble trying to tell this story in a language that has no somer pronouns, only gendered pronouns. In their last years of kemmer, as the hormone balance changes, many people tend to go into

kemmer as men; Dory's kemmers had been male for over a year, so I'll call Dory "he," although of course the point was that he would never be either he or she again.

In any event, his party was tremendous. He invited everyone in our Hearth and the two neighboring Ereth Hearths, and it went on for three days. It had been a long winter and the spring was late and cold; people were ready for something new, something hot to happen. We cooked for a week, and a whole storeroom was packed full of beer kegs. A lot of people who were in the middle of going out of kemmer, or had already and hadn't done anything about it, came and joined in the ritual. That's what I remember vividly: in the firelit three-story centerhall of our Hearth, a circle of thirty or forty people, all middle-aged or old, singing and dancing, stamping the drumbeats. There was a fierce energy in them, their gray hair was loose and wild, they stamped as if their feet would go through the floor, their voices were deep and strong, they were laughing. The younger people watching them seemed pallid and shadowy. I looked at the dancers and wondered, why are they happy? Aren't they old? Why do they act like they'd got free? What's it like, then, kemmer?

No, I hadn't thought much about kemmer before. What would be the use? Until we come of age we have no gender and no sexuality, our hormones don't give us any trouble at all. And in a city Hearth we never see adults in kemmer. They kiss and go. Where's Maba? In the kemmerhouse, love, now eat your porridge. When's Maba coming back? Soon, love. And in a couple of days Maba comes back, looking sleepy and shiny and refreshed and exhausted. Is it like having a bath, Maba? Yes, a bit, love, and what have you been up to while I was away?

Of course we played kemmer, when we were seven or eight. This here's the kemmerhouse and I get to be the woman. No, I do. No, I do, I thought of it! And we rubbed our bodies together and rolled around laughing, and then maybe we stuffed a ball under our shirt and were pregnant, and then we gave birth, and then we played catch with the ball. Children will play whatever adults do; but the kemmer game wasn't much of a game. It often ended in a tickling match. And most children aren't even very ticklish; till they come of age.

After Dory's party, I was on duty in the Hearth creche all through Tuwa, the last month of spring; come summer I began my fast apprenticeship, in a furniture workshop in the Third Ward. I loved getting up early and running across the city on the wayroofs and up on the curbs of the open ways; after the late Thaw some of the ways were still full of water, deep enough for kayaks and poleboats. The air would be still and cold and clear; the sun would come up behind the old towers of the Unpalace, red as blood, and all the waters

and the windows of the city would flash scarlet and gold. In the workshop there was the piercing sweet smell of fresh-cut wood and the company of grown people, hard-working, patient, and demanding, taking me seriously. I wasn't a child anymore, I said to myself. I was an adult, a working person.

But why did I want to cry all the time? Why did I want to sleep all the time? Why did I get angry at Sether? Why did Sether keep bumping into me and saying "Oh sorry" in that stupid husky voice? Why was I so clumsy with the big electric lathe that I ruined six chair-legs one after the other? "Get that kid off the lathe," shouted old Marth, and I slunk away in a fury of humiliation. I would never be a carpenter, I would never be adult, who gave a shit for chair-legs anyway?

"I want to work in the gardens," I told my mother and grandmother.

"Finish your training and you can work in the gardens next summer," Grand said, and Mother nodded. This sensible counsel appeared to me as a heartless injustice, a failure of love, a condemnation to despair. I Sulked. I raged.

"What's wrong with the furniture shop?" my elders asked after several days of sulk and rage.

"Why does stupid Sether have to be there!" I shouted. Dory, who was Sether's mother, raised an eyebrow and smiled.

"Are you all right?" my mother asked me as I slouched into the balcony after work, and I snarled, "I'm fine," and rushed to the privies and vomited.

I was sick. My back ached all the time. My head ached and got dizzy and heavy. Something I could not locate anywhere, some part of my soul, hurt with a keen, desolate, ceaseless pain. I was afraid of myself: of my tears, my rage, my sickness, my clumsy body. It did not feel like my body, like me. It felt like something else, an ill-fitting garment, a smelly, heavy overcoat that belonged to some old person, some dead person. It wasn't mine, it wasn't me. Tiny needles of agony shot through my nipples, hot as fire. When I winced and held my arms across my chest, I knew that everybody could see what was happening. Anybody could smell me. I smelled sour, strong, like blood, like raw pelts of animals. My clitopenis was swollen hugely and stuck out from between my labia, and then shrank nearly to nothing, so that it hurt to piss. My labia itched and reddened as with loathsome insect-bites. Deep in my belly something moved, some monstrous growth. I was utterly ashamed. I was dying.

"Sov," my mother said, sitting down beside me on my bed, with a curious, tender, complicitous smile, "shall we choose your kemmerday?"

"I'm not in kemmer," I said passionately.

"No," Guyr said. "But next month I think you will be."

"I *won't*!"

My mother stroked my hair and face and arm. *We shape each other to be human*, old people used to say as they stroked babies or children or one another with those long, slow, soft caresses.

After a while my mother said, "Sether's coming in, too. But a month or so later than you, I think. Dory said let's have a double kemmerday, but I think you should have your own day in your own time."

I burst into tears and cried, "I don't want one, I don't want to, I just want, I just want to go away..."

"Sov," my mother said, "if you want to, you can go to the kemmerhouse at Gerodda Erebb, where you won't know anybody. But I think it would be better here, where people do know you. They'd like it. They'll be so glad for you. Oh, your Grand's so proud of you! 'Have you seen that grandchild of mine, Sov, have you seen what a beauty, what a *mahad*!' Everybody's bored to tears hearing about you..."

Mahad is a dialect word, a Rer word; it means a strong, handsome, generous, upright person, a reliable person. My mother's stern mother, who commanded and thanked, but never praised, said I was a mahad? A terrifying idea, that dried my tears.

"All right," I said desperately, "Here. But not next month! It isn't. I'm not."

"Let me see," my mother said. Fiercely embarrassed yet relieved to obey, I stood up and undid my trousers.

My mother took a very brief and delicate look, hugged me, and said, "Next month, yes, I'm sure. You'll feel much better in a day or two. And next month it'll be different. It really will."

Sure enough, the next day the headache and the hot itching were gone, and though I was still tired and sleepy a lot of the time, I wasn't quite so stupid and clumsy at work. After a few more days I felt pretty much myself, light and easy in my limbs. Only if I thought about it there was still that queer feeling that wasn't quite in any part of my body, and that was sometimes very painful and sometimes only strange, almost something I wanted to feel again.

My cousin Sether and I had been apprenticed together at the furniture shop. We didn't go to work together because Sether was still slightly lame from that rope trick a couple of years earlier, and got a lift to work in a poleboat so long as there was water in the streets. When they closed the Arre Watergate and the ways went dry, Sether had to walk. So we walked together. The first couple of days we didn't talk much. I still felt angry at Sether. Because I couldn't run through the dawn anymore but had to walk at a lame-leg pace. And because Sether was always around. Always there. Taller than me, and quicker at the lathe, and with that long, heavy, shining

hair. Why did anybody want to wear their hair so long, anyhow? I felt as if Sether's hair was in front of my own eyes.

We were walking home, tired, on a hot evening of Ockre, the first month of summer. I could see that Sether was limping and trying to hide or ignore it, trying to swing right along at my quick pace, very straight-backed, scowling. A great wave of pity and admiration overwhelmed me, and that thing, that growth, that new being, whatever it was in my bowels and in the ground of my soul moved and turned again, turned towards Sether, aching, yearning.

"Are you coming into kemmer?" I said in a hoarse, husky voice I had never heard come out of my mouth.

"In a couple of months," Sether said in a mumble, not looking at me, still very stiff and frowning.

"I guess I have to have this, do this, you know, this stuff, pretty soon."

"I wish I could," Sether said. "Get it over with."

We did not look at each other. Very gradually, unnoticeably, I was slowing my pace till we were going along side by side at an easy walk.

"Sometimes do you feel like your tits are on fire?" I asked without knowing that I was going to say anything.

Sether nodded.

After a while, Sether said, "Listen, does your pisser get. . . ."

I nodded.

"It must be what the Aliens look like," Sether said with revulsion. "This, this thing sticking out, it gets so big. . . it gets in the way."

We exchanged and compared symptoms for a mile or so. It was a relief to talk about it, to find company in misery, but it was also frightening to hear our misery confirmed by the other. Sether burst out, "I'll tell you what I hate, what I really hate about it—it's dehumanizing. To get jerked around like that by your own body, to lose control, I can't stand the idea. Of being just a sex machine. And everybody just turns into something to have sex with. You know that people in kemmer go crazy and *die* if there isn't anybody else in kemmer? That they'll even attack people in somer? Their own mothers?"

"They can't," I said, shocked.

"Yes they can. Tharry told me. This truck driver up in the High Kargav went into kemmer as a male while their caravan was stuck in the snow, and he was big and strong, and he went crazy and he, he did it to his cab-mate, and his cab-mate was in somer and got hurt, really hurt, trying to fight him off. And then the driver came out of kemmer and committed suicide."

This horrible story brought the sickness back up from the pit of my stomach, and I could say nothing.

Sether went on, "People in kemmer aren't even human anymore! And we have to do that—to be that way!"

Now that awful, desolate fear was out in the open. But it was not a relief to speak it. It was even larger and more terrible, spoken.

“It’s stupid,” Sether said. “It’s a primitive device for continuing the species. There’s no need for civilized people to undergo it. People who want to get pregnant could do it with injections. It would be genetically sound. You could choose your child’s getter. There wouldn’t be all this inbreeding, people fucking with their sibs, like animals. Why do we have to be animals?”

Sether’s rage stirred me. I shared it. I also felt shocked and excited by the word “fucking,” which I had never heard spoken. I looked again at my cousin, the thin, ruddy face, the heavy, long, shining hair. My age, Sether looked older. A half year in pain from a shattered leg had darkened and matured the adventurous, mischievous child, teaching anger, pride, endurance. “Sether,” I said, “listen, it doesn’t matter, you’re human, even if you have to do that stuff, that fucking. You’re a mahad.”

“Getheny Kus,” Grand said: the first day of the month of Kus, midsummer day.

“I won’t be ready,” I said.

“You’ll be ready.”

I want to go into kemmer with Sether.

“Sether’s got a month or two yet to go. Soon enough. It looks like you might be on the same moon-time, though. Dark-of-the-mooners, eh? That’s what I used to be. So, just stay on the same wavelength, you and Sether. . . .” Grand had never grinned at me this way, an inclusive grin, as if I were an equal.

My mother’s mother was sixty years old, short, brawny, broad-hipped, with keen clear eyes, a stone-mason by trade, an unquestioned autocrat in the Hearth. I, equal to this formidable person? It was my first intimation that I might be becoming more, rather than less, human.

“I’d like it,” said Grand, “if you spent this half-month at the Fastness. But it’s up to you.”

“At the Fastness?” I said, taken by surprise. We Thades were all Handdara, but very inert Handdara, keeping only the great festivals, muttering the grace all in one garbled word, practicing none of the disciplines. None of my older hearthsibs had been sent off to the Fastness before their kemmerday. Was there something wrong with me?

“You’ve got a good brain,” said Grand. “You and Sether. I’d like to see some of you lot casting some shadows, some day. We Thades sit here in our Hearth and breed like pesthry. Is that enough? It’d be a good thing if some of you got your heads out of the bedding.”



“What do they do in the Fastness?” I asked, and Grand answered frankly, “I don’t know. Go find out. They teach you. They can teach you how to control kemmer.”

“All right,” I said promptly. I would tell Sether that the Indwellers could control kemmer. Maybe I could learn how to do it and come home and teach it to Sether.

Grand looked at me with approval. I had taken up the challenge.

Of course I didn’t learn how to control kemmer, in a halfmonth in the Fastness. The first couple of days there, I thought I wouldn’t even be able to control my homesickness. From our warm, dark warren of rooms full of people talking, sleeping, eating, cooking, washing, playing remma, playing music, kids running around, noise, family, I went across the city to a huge, clean, cold, quiet house of strangers. They were courteous, they treated me with respect. I was terrified. Why should a person of forty, who knew magic disciplines of superhuman strength and fortitude, who could walk barefoot through blizzards, who could Foretell, whose eyes were the wisest and calmest I had ever seen, why should an Adept of the Handdara respect me?

“Because you are so ignorant,” Ranharrer the Adept said, smiling, with great tenderness.

Having me only for a halfmonth, they didn’t try to influence the nature of my ignorance very much. I practiced the Untrance several hours a day, and came to like it: that was quite enough for them, and they praised me. “At fourteen, most people go crazy moving slowly,” my teacher said.

During my last six or seven days in the Fastness certain symptoms began to show up again, the headache, the swellings and shooting pains, the irritability. One morning the sheet of my cot in my bare, peaceful little room was bloodstained. I looked at the smear with horror and loathing. I thought I had scratched my itching labia to bleeding in my sleep, but I knew also what the blood was. I began to cry. I had to wash the sheet somehow. I had fouled, defiled this place where everything was clean, austere, and beautiful.

An old Indweller, finding me scrubbing desperately at the sheet in the washrooms, said nothing, but brought me some soap that bleached away the stain. I went back to my room, which I had come to love with the passion of one who had never before known any actual privacy, and crouched on the sheetless bed, miserable, checking every few minutes to be sure I was not bleeding again. I missed my Untrance practice time. The immense house was very quiet. Its peace sank into me. Again I felt that strangeness in my soul, but it was not pain now; it was a desolation like the air at evening, like the peaks of the Kargav seen far in the west in the clarity of winter. It was an immense enlargement.

Ranharrer the Adept knocked and entered at my word, looked at me for

a minute, and asked gently, "What is it?"

"Everything is strange," I said.

The Adept smiled radiantly and said, "Yes."

I know now how Ranharrer cherished and honored my ignorance, in the Handdara sense. Then I knew only that somehow or other I had said the right thing and so pleased a person I wanted very much to please.

"We're doing some singing," Ranharrer said, "you might like to hear it."

They were in fact singing the Midsummer Chant, which goes on for the four days before Getheny Kus, night and day. Singers and drummers drop in and out at will, most of them singing on certain syllables in an endless group improvisation guided only by the drums and by melodic cues in the Chantbook, and failing into harmony with the soloist if one is present. At first I heard only a pleasantly thick-textured, droning sound over a quiet and subtle beat. I listened till I got bored and decided I could do it too. So I opened my mouth and sang "Aah" and heard all the other voices singing "Aah" above and with and below mine until I lost mine and heard only all the voices, and then only the music itself, and then suddenly the startling silvery rush of a single voice running across the weaving, against the current, and sinking into it and vanishing, and rising out of it again. . . . Ranharrer touched my arm. It was time for dinner, I had been singing since Third Hour. I went back to the chantry after dinner, and after supper. I spent the next three days there. I would have spent the nights there if they had let me. I wasn't sleepy at all anymore. I had sudden, endless energy, and couldn't sleep. In my little room I sang to myself, or read the strange Handdara poetry which was the only book they had given me, and practiced the Untrance, trying to ignore the heat and cold, the fire and ice in my body, till dawn came and I could go sing again.

And then it was Ottormenbod, midsummer's eve, and I must go home to my Hearth and the kemmer-house.

To my surprise, my mother and grandmother and all the elders came to the Fastness to fetch me,

wearing ceremonial hiebs and looking solemn. Ranharrer handed me over to them, saying to me only, "Come back to us." My family paraded me through the streets in the hot summer morning; all the vines were in flower, perfuming the air, all the gardens were blooming, bearing, fruiting. "This is an excellent time," Grand said judiciously, "to come into kemmer."

The Hearth looked very dark to me after the Fastness, and somehow shrunken. I looked around for Sether, but it was a workday, Sether was at the shop. That gave me a sense of holiday, which was not unpleasant. And then up in the hearthroom of our balcony, Grand and the Hearth elders formally presented me with a whole set of new clothes, new everything, from the boots

up, topped by a magnificently embroidered hieb. There was a spoken ritual that went with the clothes, not Handdara; I think, but a tradition of our Hearth; the words were all old and strange, the language of a thousand years ago. Grand rattled them out like somebody spitting rocks, and put the hieb on my shoulders. Everybody said, "Haya!"

All the elders, and a lot of younger kids, hung around helping me put on the new clothes as if I was a king or a baby, and some of the elders wanted to give me advice "last advice," they called it, since you gain shifgrethor when you go into kemmer, and once you have shifgrethor advice is insulting. "Now you just keep away from that old Ebbeche," one of them told me shrilly. My mother took offense, snapping, "Keep your shadow to yourself, Tadsh!" And to me, "Don't listen to the old fish. Flapmouth Tadsh! But now listen, Sov."

I listened. Guyr had drawn me a little away from the others, and spoke gravely, with some embarrassment. "Remember, it will matter who you're with first."

I nodded. "I understand," I said.

"No, you don't," my mother snapped, forgetting to be embarrassed. "Just keep it in mind!"

"What, ah," I said. My mother waited. "If I, if I go into, as a, as female," I said. "Don't I, shouldn't I—?"

"Ah," Guyr said. "Don't worry. It'll be a year or more before you can conceive. Or get. Don't worry, this time. The other people will see to it, just in case. They all know it's your first kemmer. But do keep it in mind, who you're with first! Around, oh, around Karrid, and Ebbeche, and some of them."

"Come on!" Dory shouted, and we all got into a procession again to go downstairs and across the centerhall, where everybody cheered "Haya Sov! Haya Sov!" and the cooks beat on their saucepans. I wanted to die. But they all seemed so cheerful, so happy about me, wishing me well; I wanted also to live.

We went out the west door and across the sunny gardens and came to the kemmerhouse. Tage Ereb shares a kemmerhouse with two other Ereb Hearths; it's a beautiful building, all carved with deep-figure friezes in the Old Dynasty style, terribly worn by the weather of a couple of thousand years. On the red stone steps my family all kissed me, murmuring, "Praise then Darkness," or "In the act of creation praise," and my mother gave me a hard push on my shoulders, what they call the sledge-push, for good luck, as I turned away from them and went in the door.

The doorkeeper was waiting for me; a queer-looking, rather stooped person, with coarse, pale skin.

Now I realized who this "Ebbeche" they'd been talking about was. I'd

never met him, but I'd heard about him. He was the Doorkeeper of our kemmerhouse, a halfdead—that is, a person in permanent kemmer, like the Aliens.

There are always a few people born that way here. Some of them can be cured; those who can't or choose not to be usually live in a Fastness and learn the disciplines, or they become Doorkeepers. It's convenient for them, and for normal people too. After all, who else would want to *live* in a kemmerhouse? But there are drawbacks. If you come to the kemmerhouse in thorharmen, ready to gender, and the first person you meet is fully male, his pheromones are likely to gender you female right then, whether that's what you had in mind this month or not. Responsible Doorkeepers, of course, keep well away from anybody who doesn't invite them to come close. But permanent kemmer may not lead to responsibility of character; nor does being called *halfdead* and *pervert* all your life, I imagine. Obviously my family didn't trust Ebbeche to keep his hands and his pheromones off me. But they were unjust. He honored a first kemmer as much as anyone else. He greeted me by name and showed me where to take off my new boots. Then he began to speak the ancient ritual welcome, backing down the hall before me; the first time I ever heard the words I would hear so many times again for so many years.

*You cross earth now.*

*You cross water now.*

*You cross the Ice now. . . .*

And the exulting ending, as we came into the centerhall:

*Together we have crossed the Ice.*

*Together we come into the Hearthplace,*

*Into life, bringing life!*

*In the act of creation, praise!*

The solemnity of the words moved me and distracted me somewhat from my intense self-consciousness. As I had in the Fastness, I felt the familiar reassurance of being part of something immensely older and larger than myself, even if it was strange and new to me. I must entrust myself to it and be what it made me. At the same time I was intensely alert. All my senses were extraordinarily keen, as they had been all morning. I was aware of everything, the beautiful blue color of the walls, the lightness and vigor of my steps as I walked, the texture of the wood under my bare feet, the sound and meaning

of the ritual words, the Doorkeeper himself. He fascinated me. Ebbeche was certainly not handsome, and yet I noticed how musical his rather deep voice was; and pale skin was more attractive than I had ever thought it. I felt that he had been maligned, that his life must be a strange one. I wanted to talk to him. But as he finished the welcome, standing aside for me at the doorway of the centerhall, a tall person strode forward eagerly to meet me.

I was glad to see a familiar face: it was the head cook of my Hearth, Karrid Arrage. Like many cooks a rather fierce and temperamental person, Karrid had often taken notice of me, singling me out in a joking, challenging way, tossing me some delicacy—"Here, youngun! get some meat on your bones!" As I saw Karrid now I went through the most extraordinary multiplicity of awarenesses: that Karrid was naked and that this nakedness was not like the nakedness of people in the Hearth, but a significant nakedness—that he was not the Karrid I had seen before but transfigured into great beauty—that he was *he*—that my mother had warned me about him—that I wanted to touch him—that I was afraid of him.

He picked me right up in his arms and pressed me against him. I felt his clitopenis like a fist between my legs. "Easy, now," the Doorkeeper said to him, and some other people came forward from the room, which I could see only as large, dimly glowing, full of shadows and mist.

"Don't worry, don't worry," Karrid said to me and them, with his hard laugh. "I won't hurt my own get, will I? I just want to be the one that gives her kemmer. As a woman, like a proper Thade. I want to give you that joy, little Sov." He was undressing me as he spoke, slipping off my hieb and shirt with big, hot, hasty hands. The Doorkeeper and the others kept close watch, but did not interfere. I felt totally defenseless, helpless, humiliated. I struggled to get free, broke loose, and tried to pick up and put on my shirt. I was shaking and felt terribly weak, I could hardly stand up. Karrid helped me clumsily; his big arm supported me. I leaned against him, feeling his hot, vibrant skin against mine, a wonderful feeling, like sunlight, like firelight. I leaned more heavily against him, raising my arms so that our sides slid together. "Hey, now," he said. "Oh, you beauty, oh, you Sov, here, take her away, this won't do!" And he backed right away from me, laughing and yet really alarmed, his clitopenis standing up amazingly. I stood there half-dressed, on my rubbery legs, bewildered. My eyes were full of mist, I could see nothing clearly.

"Come on," somebody said, and took my hand, a soft, cool touch totally different from the fire of Karrid's skin. It was a person from one of the other Hearths, I didn't know her name. She seemed to me to shine like gold in the dim, misty place. "Oh, you're going so fast," she said, laughing and admiring and consoling. "Come on, come into the pool, take it easy for a

while. Karrid shouldn't have come on to you like that! But you're lucky, first kemmer as a woman, there's nothing like it. I kemmered as a man three times before I got to kemmer as a woman, it made me so mad, every time I got into thorharmen all my damn friends would all be women already. Don't worry about me—I'd say Karrid's influence was decisive," and she laughed again. "Oh, you are so pretty!" and she bent her head and licked my nipples before I knew what she was doing.

It was wonderful, it cooled that stinging fire in them that nothing else could cool. She helped me finish undressing, and we stepped together into the warm water of the big, shallow pool that filled the whole center of this room. That was why it was so misty, why the echoes were so strange. The water lapped on my thighs, on my sex, on my belly. I turned to my friend and leaned forward to kiss her. It was a perfectly natural thing to do, it was what she wanted and I wanted, and I wanted her to lick and suck my nipples again, and she did. For a long time we lay in the shallow water playing, and I could have played forever. But then somebody else joined us, taking hold of my friend from behind, and she arched her body in the water like a golden fish leaping, threw her back, and began to play with him.

I got out of the water and dried myself, feeling sad and shy and forsaken, and yet extremely interested in what had happened to my body. It felt wonderfully alive and electric, so that the roughness of the towel made me shiver with pleasure. Somebody had come closer to me, somebody that had been watching me play with my friend in the water. He sat down by me now.

It was a hearthmate a few years older than I, Arrad Tehemmy. I had worked in the gardens with Arrad all last summer, and liked him. He looked like Sether, I now thought, with heavy black hair and a long, thin face, but in him was that shining, that glory they all had hereall the kemmerers, the *women*, the *men*—such vivid beauty as I had never seen in any human beings. "Sov," he said, "I'd like—Your first—Will you—" His hands were already on me, and mine on him. "Come," he said, and I went with him. He took me into a beautiful little room, in which there was nothing but a fire burning in a fireplace, and a wide bed. There Arrad took me into his arms and I took Arrad into my arms, and then between my legs, and fell upward, upward through the golden light.

Arrad and I were together all that first night, and besides fucking a great deal, we ate a great deal. It had not occurred to me that there would be food at a kemmerhouse, I had thought you weren't allowed to do anything but fuck. There was a lot of food, very good, too, set out so that you could eat whenever you

wanted. Drink was more limited; the person in charge, an old woman-halfdead, kept her canny eye on you, and wouldn't give you any more beer

if you showed signs of getting wild or stupid. I didn't need any more beer. I didn't need any more fucking. I was complete. I was in love forever for all time all my life to eternity with Arrad. But Arrad (who was a day father into kemmer than I) fell asleep and wouldn't wake up, and an extraordinary person named Hama sat down by me and began talking and also running his hand up and down my back in the most delicious way, so that before long we got further entangled, and began fucking, and it was entirely different with Hama than it had been with Arrad, so that I realized that I must be in love with Hama, until Gehardar joined us. After that I think I began to understand that I loved them all and they all loved me and that that was the secret of the kemmerhouse.

It's been nearly fifty years, and I have to admit I do not recall everyone from my first kemmer; only Karrid and Arrad, Hama and Gehardar, old Tubanny, the most exquisitely skillful lover as a male that I ever knew—I met him often in later kemmers—and Berre, my golden fish, with whom I ended up in drowsy, peaceful, blissful lovemaking in front of the great hearth till we both fell asleep. And when we woke we were not women. We were not men. We were not in kemmer. We were very tired young adults.

"You're still beautiful," I said to Berre.

"So are you," Berre said. "Where do you work?"

"Furniture shop, Third Ward."

I tried licking Berre's nipple, but it didn't work; Berre flinched a little, and I said "Sorry," and we both laughed.

"I'm in the radio trade," Berre said. "Did you ever think of trying that?"

"Making radios?"

"No. Broadcasting. I do the Fourth Hour news and weather."

"That's you?" I said, awed.

"Come over to the tower some time, I'll show you around," said Berre.

Which is how I found my lifelong trade and a life-long friend. As I tried to tell Sether when I came back to the Hearth, kemmer isn't exactly what we thought it was; it's much more complicated.

Sether's first kemmer was on Getheny Gor, the first day of the first month of autumn, at the dark of the moon. One of the family brought Sether into kemmer as a woman, and then Sether brought me in. That was the first time I kemmered as a man. And we stayed on the same wavelength, as Grand put it. We never conceived together, being cousins and having some modern scruples, but we made love in every combination, every dark of the moon, for years. And Sether brought my child, Tamor, into first kemmer—as a woman, like a proper Thade.

Later on Sether went into the Handdara, and became an Indweller in the old Fastness, and now is an Adept. I go over there often to join in one of the



Chants or practice the Untrance or just to visit, and every few days Sether comes back to the Hearth. And we talk. The old days or the new times, somer or kemmer, love is love.





Sketching all night—useless. W. beautiful beyond the scope of line—the beauty of singularity, cohesion, rooted in absolute devotion to demands of his specialized body. In feeding (woman in taxi), utter absorption one wants from a man in sex—no score-keeping, no fantasies, just hot urgency of appetite, of senses, the moment by itself.

His sleeves worn rolled back today to the elbows—strong, sculptural forearms, the long bones curved in slightly, suggest torque, leverage. How old?

Endurance: huge, rich cloak of time flows back from his shoulders like wings of a dark angel. All springs from, elaborates, the single, stark, primary condition: he is a predator who subsists on human blood. Harmony, strength, clarity, magnificence—all from that basic animal integrity. Of course I long for all that, here in the higgledy-piggledly hodgepodge of my life! Of course he draws me!

— Suzy McKee Charnas. “The Vampire Tapestry.”