

## Killing the Good Girl

By Christine Stewart

Perhaps she was a little naïve, but Leigh liked The Block—the seat of Baltimore’s adult entertainment industry that time, developers and protestors had reduced, literally, to one block. Clubs, bookstores, sex shops, video stores—she liked knowing there were places to indulge that secret sexual identity that was a kind of mysterious tornado in everyone, sometimes dormant, sometimes insistent, full of power and high winds, even a little destruction, places for it to expend itself.

There was the usual sub-culture of drug dealers, hookers, addicts, strippers, pornographers, panhandlers etc., but there were some who weren’t on the fringe, who had husbands, wives, children, corporate jobs, mortgages, and came, driven by that tornado spinning wildly inside them, to slip off the good life and go under the darkness. It didn’t really have anything to do with morality. It had to do with stepping out of the line you moved along every day, the way you took a different route to work or spontaneously dyed your hair. You did it to uncover a little more of the person who slept inside you while you did the laundry, took the kids to soccer practice, had dinner with the neighbors. The Block was different from Times Square with its flashy self-consciousness. If Las Vegas was hip and rich and trashy and New York was old world, violent slime, Baltimore was worn seediness, comfortable with itself, harmless. Just business--non-apologetic faded grit.

In a way, Leigh admired the people who went there without caring who saw them or what anyone thought. She herself was not quite that casual. The worst possible thing would be to see your own father coming out of The Swedish Revue, which advertised a live sex show. Second worst: if your father saw you.

It was only seven o’clock on a Thursday but the street was fairly full, mostly of men, standing around in the doorways of the clubs and bars smoking. As they passed The Gentlemen’s Club the bouncer, a heavy man with a ponytail and sunglasses leered, more than smiled at them. Usually this made Leigh uncomfortably aware of what she was wearing and if her hair was too big but now she was too fascinated by everything she saw to care.

"This is it," Claire squeezed her arm. They stopped in front of The Gayety. A group of four young black men were gathered around the door of the nearby KittyKat Lounge smoking and yelling at one another. Several of them had their t-shirts off and hanging from the back pocket of their jeans. They stopped talking to look at Leigh and Claire. One of them tipped his Orioles cap, "Ladies," he smiled showing a gold tooth. The other two looked them up and down, whistling. "Hey girls, can we be of some assistance?" one said so carefully and seriously Leigh couldn’t tell if he was mocking them or not.

The attention of the men was suddenly diverted by a woman coming up the street. She had a bright blue tote bag and a long, red wig in her hand. She wore a small, white t-shirt, so tight it curved cleanly around each breast, cut-off jeans shorts and two-inch white mules. Even under all that lipstick and eyeliner Leigh could see she was about nineteen. The girl scowled at her, pursing her frosted pink lips. She took a final drag from her cigarette and tossed it so that it landed near Leigh's feet, then she turned to the men at the door.

"Get the fuck out of my way," she said and jostled through. The one with the Oriole hat smacked her on the ass, hard. She quickly came down on his foot with her thick heel, then ducked behind the club door. He howled, "Bitch!" while the others laughed.

Leigh took that moment to pull Claire into the store. Barry Manilow's "I Can't Smile Without You" was playing. The lights were dim and a line of pink neon traced the top of the walls all the way around the store. Below hung various outfits—french maids, one-piece leopard print leotards, a lime green rubber dress, crotchless underwear, etc. Two racks of racy greeting cards framed the entrance area. The man behind the counter looked up from his magazine and smiled. Automatically, she smiled back. It was just like shopping anywhere else only the clerk knew you had crossed off everything on the list entitled "Mainstream Sex Acts" and were looking for something different. They knew what you wanted. He looked fairly normal, with graying hair and mustache and a beer belly straining against a Metallica t-shirt. He wore a braided gold chain around his neck, and a big gold watch.

Two men passed by them on the way to the videos that lined the walls to the right. Leigh caught the tail end of their surprised expressions.

"I don't think they see many live women here," she whispered.

"Think again," Claire pointed towards the back of the store where a sign read 'Peep Shows – 50 cents' above a doorway covered by a heavy, velvet curtain.

"What did you want to get?" Leigh asked.

"A vibrator," Claire answered promptly.

Leigh pulled her off to one side, away from the doorway. "Pardon me?"

"I'm 30 years old, I'm getting married tomorrow and I don't have one. Isn't that some kind of transgression against the current laws of female sexuality?" Claire asked.

"I am not going to buy a vibrator with my sister. That's just...just...gross. Besides, no one knows what the current laws of female sexuality are, they change every day."

"You wanted to know a secret. This is it. I want a vibrator."

"I wanted to ease into it," Leigh protested too much, "Not get quite so intimate so fast. Besides, I'm not sure I approve."

Claire eyed her carefully. "You don't want me to know you already have one."

Leigh laughed. "I already have one."

"You do not! Wow. How is it? Oh—don't tell me." Claire waved untoward images from the air.

"Don't be too impressed, I couldn't bring myself to even open the package. Using a vibrator seems so economical. If you can have an orgasm in less than two minutes, whenever you want, where's the tension, the frustration, the fantasizing? You can have it. It's in my car somewhere." She'd thought owning one would be enough to make her feel more experimental, catapult her to a higher level of ease with her sexual identity. Whatever the fuck that meant. It hadn't. She was a little afraid of it.

"No! Use my sister's vibrator? Now that's gross," Claire made a face. "I want my own."

Leigh quickly surveyed the store and spotted what they wanted to the left. She grabbed Claire's hand. As they moved through several racks of girlie magazines, she noticed that any men in the area immediately drifted off to the opposite side of the store. Their presence was probably disturbing the delicate, invisible testosterone balance that permeated the air. When she looked back she saw that Claire was following her with her eyes closed. She smiled, turned beyond the last rack and there it was: the largest wall of sex toys Leigh hoped she would ever see. "Open your eyes," she instructed her sister.

"Oh...my....God," was all Claire could manage.

On three sides, from floor to ceiling were vibrators and dildos of all colors, including neon and glitter, in sizes ranging from index fingers (there were those too, made of rubber), to what Leigh thought an aroused elephant might look like. Some even ejaculated whatever you filled them with. There were strap-on penises for women, strap-on vibrators for women, penis pumps for men, jellies, creams, leather straps and whips, chains, handcuffs and an entire wall dedicated to butt-plugs alone—dual headed, vibrating, black, white, red and on and on and on.

"Look at that!" Leigh turned in the direction Claire was pointing. The 'Fist of Adonis'. A life-sized arm and hand, the hand shaped into a closed fist. Leigh pushed Claire's hand down.

"Let's not appear quite so virginal, shall we? I'm going to wander over here and you pick something out."

"I can't. I'm a little nauseous. I thought this would be fun but . . . it's creepy to think that you can just go to a store and buy the plastic part of a person that you need instead of dealing with the real thing," Claire said.

"But just think—24 hour service and no telling it to take out the trash."

Claire grimaced and Leigh nudged her. "Just do the best you can. Pretend you're Madonna." She wandered off, trying to browse, reading the names of items to herself in a mixture of amusement and disgust, (and, she had to admit, a little bit of interest)—Joy Jelly (in strawberry and pina colada flavors), High Motion Lotion, Sports Vibes (mini-vibrators for those on the go go go), The Oro-Stimulator for Men. Despite these distractions, she couldn't help glancing over at the velvet curtain. What was it like back there? She imagined a hallway of cubicles like dressing rooms with cheap folded chairs facing a wall of darkened glass. Once you put in your money the lights came up on a naked woman who did whatever you asked her to do. She wanted to see it. The urge was so strong she grabbed one of the racks to keep herself from walking towards that curtain. The man behind the counter was still reading his magazine; she was sure she could sneak back there if she went right now. But then there was Claire. Claire would never understand it and Leigh wouldn't want her to know. The only way to do it was to come alone so you did not have to appear to be the person you were for family and friends or for anyone you passed on the street. There was a deep sense of anonymity here. You were never entirely seen and you would be forgotten the moment you left. She wanted to sit and watch one of these women, see their faces as they touched themselves. See if they cared—if they liked being watched. What did they think about? She wanted to learn how to see her own body as something separate, given without consideration of virtue. She wanted to learn to shut off her mind—that running commentary on right and wrong which sounded like her mother's voice condemning the unknown because she was frightened of it. Her mother had given her the 'sex is a beautiful thing between two people in love' speech when she was five years old and followed up with the 'tell-me-when-you're-ready-we'll-get-birth-control-but-I-really-hope-you'll-wait-until-you're-married' speech afterward. All her life Leigh had been fighting it. Life wasn't clean and compassionate and fuzzy with secluded neighborhoods full of well-mannered children, yard sales and carbon-copy homes. That world she'd grown up in wasn't real. It was just the persistent illusion of the middle class. You weren't protected from getting dirty, you weren't always safe. She wanted real. To see things as clearly as possible, to look at everything without flinching, including the slippery black parts, the undersea creatures that lived in the deepest part of the mind where sunlight never reached. That was where she found herself during sex—kicking her arms and legs against her own resistance, ending up in a darkness without sound, invisible waves splashing against her skin. She wanted to hold these blind, instinctive, disembodied parts and feel them wriggling against her bare hands. They were hers and she should know them.

She stopped in front of a device for women called The Butterfly, a bright pink strap-on vibrator, shaped as the title indicated, with adjustable speed settings. The picture on its case showed an attractive blonde sitting on a fluffy white couch, naked except for a sheer white robe. She was leaning back against the pillows with the speed controls in her hand and a beatific look on her face. The caption read: 'Use in the Privacy of your own Home or Improve Your Productivity, Wear It At Work!'

Maybe she should find her vibrator. What if she was missing out on something really big? Wasn't it incredibly sad when you found that you were trying to spice up your sex life with yourself? She was still standing there, transfixed, when Claire found her, clutching something long, pinkish and plastic close to her chest.

"I got it. Cover me."

Leigh walked in front of Claire to the counter. They stood in line behind a businessman in a well-cut, expensive navy suit who was talking on a cell phone while the clerk rang up his video selections: 'Jack-U-Later' and 'Fuck Sluts 4'. Two men got in line behind them. Feeling self-conscious she focused on the 'Manager's Video Pick of the Week' that was propped up on the counter. It was a lesbian film. She read the plug on the bottom of the box: 'Women with a preference for their own plumbing do each other while you watch!' Looking for somewhere else to focus she turned to the display case. Laid out on a bed of red and blue netting were vibrators no shorter than 12 inches, with the circumference of a small child's leg. One of them would make a good weapon if she ever found herself in an alley on a dark night.

Leigh had begun examining the animal print nipple tassels in the next case over when the peep show curtain parted. She couldn't help looking to see what kind of a man came out. He was big, tall and broad-shouldered, so that he had to duck a little. He was in his forties, with longish hair he brushed away from his eyes, wearing jeans and one of those short-sleeved fifties-style shirts that had become so popular. His face was long, a little pointed, he was smiling, or rather suppressing a smile. His skin looked hot to the touch. Clean. Respectable. He could be a poetry professor; he could be a doctor. He smiled at her because she was openly staring. He had all his teeth. Leigh looked away, remembering where she was. Tonight he's jerking off in front of a stripper, tomorrow morning he's scrubbing up for surgery or giving a lecture on Keats. Whoever he was, he was very comfortable being there. This intrigued her. Third worst thing: finding yourself drawn to a man coming out of a peep show.

The suit had left with his evening's entertainment and Claire quickly put the vibrator on the counter. The peep show man walked over and handed a folded fifty to the clerk.

"Give this to Katya for me, Steve."

Steve nodded and took the money. Peep show man was close enough that Leigh could see his eyes. They were gray-blue and tilted down just a little at the corners. They made him look honest. There was an intelligence, a politeness in them. And he smelled good. Warm and tweedy. A total contradiction to her preconceived idea of a sex shop pervert.

"Make sure you test that out for her," he said in an amused voice, seemingly enjoying their embarrassment, as he moved away from the counter. He went to the door but he didn't leave.

Steve said, mock-seriously, "Of course."

Claire turned red. "That's not really necessary is it? I'm sure it's fine."

"It's our policy. You want to be sure it works, don't you?" Steve asked.

Leigh could see Claire couldn't decide how to react. "Go ahead," she said for her. She could feel the peep show man smiling.

Steve opened a drawer and took out two AA batteries. As if in slow motion, Leigh watched him slip them in one end of the vibrator, put the end cap back on and turn. Nothing happened. He shook them out and threw them away.

'Probably old batteries," he said reassuringly.

Claire nodded. They watched Steve reach back into the drawer for two more and drop them into their slots. Another turn and the vibrator hummed to life, loud enough for all to hear. The men behind them in line applauded.

Steve grinned as if he had jump-started a dead car. "Batteries included."

It was all so ridiculous that Leigh began to laugh. She couldn't help it. Claire elbowed her but she was smiling as she handed Steve her money.

Leigh suddenly had an idea. "Steve," she leaned casually on the counter, "do you have any of those glow in the dark, multicolored condoms?"

"With or without ticklers?" he asked.

"With." She watched him bend down and bring a small box up from under the counter. He opened the lid. Inside about 30 condoms of different, bright colors glowed faintly, were knobby, almost translucent, like jellyfish.

"How many?"

"I'll take them all," Leigh said. Claire watched, open-mouthed, as Leigh paid. Steve handed both of them a discreet brown paper bag.

"Thank you for shopping The Gayety, ladies."

As they passed Leigh met the eyes of the peep show man head on. "Lucky man," he said quietly and smiled, almost shyly. A little thrill shivered through her. She didn't push it away

Walking back to the car Claire found her voice. "What was that all about? Who did you buy all those condoms for?"

"Ryan, of course," Leigh said. She could see that Claire was surprised.

"Is that still going on?" she asked.

"I really don't know." Leigh said. She'd send the box and find out. "Hey, you do know you're supposed to name those things." She pointed to her sister's bag.

"Oh, that's really going too far," Claire shook her head. "I know men name their penises but--"

"Women name their vibrators. They do." They reached the car. Claire unlocked the doors and they got in.

"Well, like what?"

Leigh ran through some possibilities in her head. "It has to be something silly but sexual." Duke? Caesar? Brando?

"One of Dean's brother's got really drunk a few Christmases ago and told Dean he calls his penis 'John Deere'. But that gets confusing. Last time Dean talked to him he said he was having trouble with his John Deere and Dean couldn't figure out if he was talking about his penis or his mower. He didn't want to seem insensitive so he didn't ask."

Leigh laughed. "I like it though."

"I don't want to take someone else's name. Besides, that's a guy reference. I have to name it something silly, something patronizing. His is, after all, my little plastic love-slave."

"In that case I've got the perfect one--'Little Brutus'."

Grinning, Claire pulled the vibrator out of the bag. In the blue neon light from the Two O'Clock Bar it looked vulnerable and harmless. She patted it.

"It suits him," she said. "Little Brutus it is."