

## Tide Pool

A short story by A.C. Evans

The odor fuming from my armpits made me nauseous. It gave me a tantalizing sickness, which I strangely enjoyed. The gas station was full, and the line was long, which was good because it gave me time to reflect. I decided not to spend my hard-earned money on something as useless as water. I returned to the series of freezer doors and put the bottle I held back in its row . . . just water I don't understand how they get away with charging so much. . . I examined the different kinds of drinks, then smelt myself; it was unavoidable, a nervous habit. I heard the man next to me sniffing the air. Sniff sni sniff in quick intervals. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him look at me . . . wonder if he likes women who smell? Just think of it as "natural musk" . . . The A/C cooled me, and it felt good as the sweat dried. A chiclet-sized piece of dandruff fell to the floor and shattered just after I removed my pink cap. The inside was damp. The black spaces between the metal freezer shelves caught my attention. I slid the door open and closed repeatedly, to create that moving fan effect. It felt like an angel breathing on me. The more I gazed into the blackness, the more I began to think. I had a headache from an empty stomach. I thought about the empty spaces in the world. Some people had the luck of always having an empty stomach. "Empty" reminded me of cracks and gorges. I thought about how it would feel to fall into an empty gorge . . . everyone has stepped on a sidewalk crack, just like everyone has been hungry I love sidewalks, . . . I'm a pavementologist when my other job doesn't pay the bills.

The one thing I've noticed is that sidewalks are one of those really important things that are lost in the grand shuffle. Everyone walks over them, and uses them to get around things easier. I asked myself as I looked into those dark spaces between the drinks . . . does anyone know how important they are?. . . I love sidewalks, they remind me of myself.

The man next to me slammed the glass door. It seemed he was frustrated. The force made the door bounce a couple of times. He walked away with two tall cans of Lone Star beer. I looked at the row of Ozarka water bottles, and a large part of me wanted to splurge and pay the \$1.29, but I knew I would regret it. I couldn't get over how good the A/C felt. I didn't want to leave, but thought about my godforsaken newspapers, and decided that the only way I was going to get food was to sell the rest.

As I walked out of the store a man tripped up the curb. He got up quickly, hoping to lessen his embarrassment. I couldn't help laughing softly. I never understood why someone falling was funny, but I always laughed when someone fell. I looked to see what made him trip: a piece of raised concrete due to a crack. I couldn't help but think of myself, and I regretted not having the presence of mind to get up as quickly as he did. Once you fall, you must immediately get up. When I fell I didn't get up. When I think about it all, there was no "up" to get up from . . . I had been tumbling for a long time . . . I sat there thinking holding my trusty duffel bag . . . I missed the safety ledge a long time ago . . . Where I tumbled there is no "up" and "down", there is nothing. I'd rather you save your sympathy for someone else; someone you love; they deserve it

more. However if your sympathy makes you buy a paper from me, then I'll take it if you don't plan on eating it.

I lugged my duffel bag over to the air and water pump, a four-foot façade with chipped white paint. Rust streaks, dry and crusty, were under the space the water hose came from. I kneeled in a grassy patch and retrieved two old plastic bottles from inside my bag. One bottle had the jagged edges of white sticker paper around the middle; the other said "EVIAN" on the crumpled label. The bottles were slightly bent out of shape. As I was filling the large bottle, a white 1999 Ford Mustang crept to stop. A large man scurried into the store. A tall woman with endless legs, peach skin, long sandy hair, went and withdrew the air hose. Her khaki shorts were the perfect length, her white button down sleeveless shirt and leather espadrilles gave her the magazine look of summer. Her sunglass lenses were the same color as my skin. 'GOHORNS' on her vanity plate, pop music through the open doors, her calf tattooed with a 50-cent piece sized red and blue frog. Under the glare and heat I squinted, and felt sweat run down my back. Water overflowed from my bottle then splashed upon my hideous legs—discolored, too skinny, pus-oozing glob scar on right knee. For some reason her legs made my hunger grow. I wanted to dip those long peach legs in ice cream like they do in Georgia. I shed my low top Chuck Taylor's, then began to refill the other bottle. I wondered if she looked at with the same admiration; the same concern. An accidental glance and smile would have been good at the time. She paid no attention to me. Her calves were firm. I couldn't stop watching. The pump sounded like an old boat motor. RAHHHAAHH CHRAHHH RAAHGAGRAHH CHUCRAH CHOOOGRA-----  
-----PSSSSTTT SHOOOO PSSSSSSST She carefully filled the tires.

Even in the grass my feet were cooking. I used water to cool my legs, and for a moment imagined myself a little girl wading in a cool stream looking for crayfish. The water was up to my knees, and I jerked when a crayfish crawled over the top of my foot. In reality, the second bottle was full, and I put my mouth under the running water. Shortly afterward I removed my hat, then let cool water run over my head. It took the water long to weave its way through my thick rain forest hair. I let water slid over me, then drank from the smaller bottle, and refilled it again. The large man, muscular and grand, came back to the car. He held a six-pack of longneck MGD's, wore cream Hawaiian shirt, linen khakis, brown cowboy boots. I hoped he would show me some of the hospitality the state was known for and offer me a cold one. As he bent into the car to set the beers in the backseat, she skipped over and smacked him on the ass. He laughed, went after her to return the lick. They kissed, laughed, then kissed again. I thought of my long ago unfaithful boyfriend who kissed the same way: hard but sensual, without much tongue, and just enough lip. My feet were dry, and I let water wet them. My Chucks looked parched, so I quenched their thirst.

The Mustang sped off. He tossed a bottle top out of the window, which bounced near me. I picked it up, smelt it, then flicked it into the grass.

I packed my bottles, then put on my wet shoes. Saturday afternoon near the Galleria meant traffic. As I walked along the sidewalk I studied the various cracks. The traffic was moving, but very slowly, I covered more ground than they did. As I left the Shell station, I looked over my shoulder and saw cars driving underneath red lights as Westheimer Ave. continued east under the 610 overpass. A police officer that directed traffic stood under a huge

umbrella that also covered a big red cooler. All but two of the cars I looked at had their windows up. Through tinted windows invisible hands of car a/c's flipped long strands of hair. I looked inside a shiny 1998 Oldsmobile Intrigue, with daytime running lamps. The windows were dark, and I could see the driver resembled Indiana Jones. I had a long going crush on Indiana Jones. We made eye contact, and I kept staring, then imagined him thinking ... what the fuck is she looking at? . . . I stopped gazing at Indiana, then walked west to the intersection of Post Oak and Westheimer. I looked back and could see my wet footprints, which had literally vanished into air.

About a million cars a day passed through the Post Oak/Westheimer intersection. Above the intersection, thick wire suspended a huge chrome halo, nearly 40 ft. across. The street names were in white. Over my shoulder the Galleria mall loomed, a long flat ground scraper. The Galleria was a commercial complex, that contained a sports club, regulation ice rink, and over 300 hundred stores. I had never been inside. When I thought about the large numbers of people that would make weekend pilgrimages to the Galleria it seemed as if the halo above was built for a holy purpose.

A grassy island divided Westheimer. One direction went east, the other west. I worked the corner on the edge of the island, just where Westheimer began to cross Post Oak Blvd. I sat down on my trusty blue bucket between two thick flows of traffic moving in opposite directions. I looked at my stack of newspapers, held down by a chunk of curb I used as a paperweight. I worked at the busiest intersection in the city, but making my goal (selling all my papers) was hard. I figured then since it was the "back to school" season that there would be plenty of people looking to make a transaction . . .more people more money . . .

Two small boys crossed over to my grassy island. They wore black football jerseys, with faded white numbers. Both boys were quite stocky, but one held a posterboard over his head while the other held a white bucket out in front of him. When the light turned red they quickly went weaving in and out of traffic. The boy with the posterboard placed it in front of his chest, like a breastplate. The posterboard was fluorescent green. The motors revved, and the drivers anticipated the green light.

#### SHARPSTOWN JUNIOR FOOTBALL LEAGUE RAIDERS

PLEASE HELP US BUY NEW UNIFORMS, was written on the posterboard. A pirate with a dagger in his mouth was crudely drawn in the lower right corner. They walked to as many cars as they could between the red and green interval. They were naturally juvenile and play fought while the light was green. They had sorrow stricken eyes, as if they'd rather be playing football than standing out in that ridiculous heat. I watched them for some time and wished that I would be blessed with kids one day. Each time was the same routine. While the light was green, they sat and waited, red light they went between cars, posterboard high in the air, white bucket near the car windows. About every other red light a window would lower and a crumpled dollar bill would flutter at the end of a hand. The boys would snatch up the money like a pirahna snatches floating surface meat.

By the position of the sun I figured it was nearly four. The humidity and heat were a deadly duo that made me feel as if I was becoming crisp. I felt like a Sunday roast chicken

rubbed with lemon and thyme, then doused in my own sweaty juice marinade. Between and under my breasts the sweat trickled down. The moisture on my shirt outlined my upper body's topography.

I had an even 5 papers. I hoped I would finish before dark, because J & D's next to the Shell station and Dillards had a BBQ plate special from 12 to 7 on Saturday's. I could smell the cooked beef. I was very hungry. I closed my eyes and imagined BBQ sauce on my lips and fingers. A customer pulled up in a white/beige 1998 Lincoln Navigator with lamp guards made of black cast iron. I scurried over, anxious to sell . . . the quicker I sell the quicker I can have my BBQ . . . His window slid down. I could see people behind him, and the seats were tan leather. His forearm, which sat on the door looked like a muscular teardrop. He looked down upon me. I could see how bad I looked in his aviator sunglasses. He gave me two crumpled dollars, and I gave him a paper. Clunk, clunk, I dropped two quarters in his hand. "Thanx" he said as the window whirred closed. It made a suction sound as it slid under the doorframe. Dark human silhouettes moved around in the back rows of seats, as if were looking for something on the floor. The light turned green, a heavy cloud of black smoke hung low. 'I LOVE GOLF' bumper sticker on the rear window. It took me a bit of time to make it back to my throne . . . 4 more to go, I can taste the BBQ cow now, the number of papers is miniscule, learned that yesterday in the library . . .

They gave the women pink hats, and mine was doing good protecting my face. My head itched, and it eventually became a burden . . . remember those ladybugs fell out last week . . . My free hand went through one of the papers. I always kept one to read until it was the last, then I sold it. The different colors on the weather maps always caught my interest. The high for that day was 99, with a heat index of 111. Reddish pink was over Texas and half of New Mexico. The rest of New Mexico, Arizona and bits of Southern Nevada were colored in deep blood red. I looked through the list of U.S. cities in Vegas the forecast was 125. I switched over to the international lists and saw that in Paris it was 76 . . . a bottle of red wine wouldn't be the worst thing now, and maybe one of those French romantic types to go along with it, maybe he'll bring me dandelions, never understood why I liked dandelions so much, their ugly, oui oui voulez vous vous coucher avec moi ce soir hahahhah. . . In Riyadh it was 96 . . . always wanted to ride a camel, and live in the pyramids, maybe I was a queen like Cleopatra . . . The high in Edinburgh was 68 . . . wonder if that Castle on that ledge is as pretty in person as it is in that Scotland book at the library . . . In Dubai it was 128, but if felt hotter where I sat, on my bucket; a plastic throne; a Bayou princess. I'll be the first to tell you that when the sun bakes your skull it makes you see 70's drug style colors.

A large man walked near me wearing a black football jersey. A faded white 99 stretched across his chest. His hat was generic like mine. It was white with 'COACH' written in black. He wore his hat backward, "What's up?" he said as he walked past me. He turned around when I didn't answer, and we traded confused gazes. Streams of sweat ran down his face, as if he had a faucet under his hat. Once there was a red light, he paced between the spaces of cars often going to his brow with a gray towel. That morning when he first arrived it was white. The boys went around collecting money, and he soon brought them back near me. He said they weren't looking sad enough. "Damn", he looked inside the white plastic bucket; "all we got is seventeen dollas."

The boys looked at him; the number obviously meant something different to them. He wiped his brow, "bunch of cheap sons of bitches." He looked at me, and I put my head down.

As a hot breeze moved the air, I'd get a whiff of myself. In the middle of a drink of water, a horn called me over. The car was a 1999 Nissan Maxima. I had been reading about them, they had been redesigned.

"Hot as hell out here today aint'it?" He shuffled around looking for money.

"Yea, trying to keep cool the best way I can."

"You got yoself enough water. You know what they say try to drank plenty of water."

"I got a couple bottles full over there."

"You need a couple bottles of Johnnie Walker, then it wouldn't matta'. You'd be feelin' mighty good then."

"Jerry, don't say that to the poor woman!" A lady in the passenger seat said.

"Some J doubleya wouldn't be that bad to tell the truth." I said.

"Hawwwahhhh awww", he laughed, I handed him a paper. "Yeah I work construction and we were workin' over on 45 the other day, and one of my men fainted."

"How is he?" I asked, the woman flipped through the radio stations, then tried to console a hollerin' baby in the backseat.

"Yeahuh he missed work yesterday, but Lawrence is us hoss man. Strong as on Ox. Shit, a year ago he nearly sawed off his panky finga cuttin' lumber. A week lata' he's back at work with half a panky, all the ole boys callin' him nubby an' shit. He'll be back at work on Mondee, or my name ain't . . ."

Rock music blared on the radio. The baby stopped crying.

"I hope he'll be back to work." I said not knowing a better response . . . I hope I don't faint, nobody will be around to get me up, who knows how long it'll be before someone notices . . . Jerry had a little nick under his eye.

"What's your name?"

I told him.

"Mahn that's a pretty name! Laurie you like thaht name?" He looked at the woman next to him. She nodded in recognition. "Do yuh know where the Galleria is?" Jerry began, "We fixin'

to go . . ." He looked up ahead and the light turned green. The traffic in front of him sped away. He looked at me,

"Well yuh keep cool naw, okay."

"I will."

Jerry had put a smile on my face. He stuck his head out of the window as he drove away, as if he couldn't see out of his windshield. I looked up and was caught in the middle of traffic. I stood between the first and second of four lanes, the middle of my foot bridging one of those white plastic reflectors. An opening developed between a pick-up and a new Beetle, which was frosty silver. I made my move across the first lane, then hopped onto the grassy oasis. The Beetle beeped at me, I glared, then gave them the finger . . . I hope they don't come back and try to fight me like those girls did last week . . . I stood for a while because my ass hurt . . . 3 more to go, just 3 . . . I sat down and looked intensely at the traffic passing on both sides of the avenue. Listening to the grind of so many tires on the hot concrete hypnotized me. The sound stirred my mental stew and chunks of my past broke the surface. I chewed on bits of my childhood and thought about Galveston, an old sleepy coast town overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. I remembered lying on the beach where the ocean's lips had kissed the shore and left it damp. I would lie in the cool as sunrays cascaded into my bony and bare chest. That was the time when I didn't have breasts. As I lay topless I imagined Galveston as an Italian beach and imagined myself as an Italian woman; bronze, svelte, dark irises, high cheekbones. I was beautiful at sea. When I tired of being Italian, I imagined myself as a tropical fish. I wanted to be an angelfish with ribbon like fins swaying in warm water. I dreamt my youth away. The sounds were so-real; the gurgle sizzle of salt water by my ears, the accidental harmony of sea-fowl. All the memories rushed in and I floated blissfully in the past. As I nibbled on bits of what once was, my stomach became jealous. It wanted sustenance, not sea memories. It refused to be ignored any longer. GRUBBLURRBROWWL, my stomach spoke to me in body language. The smell of BBQ became stronger; as did my stomach's voice. The voice made me angry. Everything blissful about the sea was drowned out by the voice, which also startled me awake from daydream. When I came to I was unhappy. My environment: the people, the avenue full of trucks, cars and businesses all floated in stagnant water. As I sat in the heat with sweat saturating my face, I ran my tongue along my upper lip, then took my right index finger and traced the edge of my hairline. Sweat hung deliciously off the tip of my finger. The drop was cloudy with debris. I let it drip, the taste lingered. I hoped the salt would help me recapture the sea. My sweat was sardine flavored, and as my hunger grew so did the pain in my head. In my bag there was a banana. It had brown splotches all over. I ate the fruit quickly, saving the squishy gray parts for last.

Thirty minutes had crawled by. I kicked my shoes off, and my feet were still ugly. The blister on my big toe had opened again. A horn blared in the distance followed by a "HEY YOU!" The concrete was hot. I ran over on the balls of my feet with a paper. The woman drove a 1997 Toyota Avalon with an added spoiler (Avalons don't come with spoilers.) A/C air spilt out and I couldn't help from basking in the cool. She wore a halter-top and I looked directly down her blouse, then felt like a dirty man.

"So do you like em'?"

" . . ." . . . hope she's not talking what I think she's talking about . . .

She repeated her question, then shuffled through an ashtray for spare change. "They're two weeks old, I can't stop looking at them myself. Do you think they're too big?" She checked her makeup in the rear-view mirror.

"No." I didn't want to answer nor did I know what to say.

"Yours are pretty big sweetheart." She looked through my eyes.

The transaction was made she gave me a handful of change.

"So do you want to see em'?"

. . . what a crazy bitch . . . "No" I paused, "Not really."

"I can get you in to where I work for free. I'm over off Richmond at the Men's Club. You should come along. Better than this paper shit I bet, all you got to do is shake what the lord gave you. Anyways we need sumore of you ethnic girls. If its one thing men like it's somethin' exotic. You got a name, sweetheart?"

I told her my name then said, "I'm not really interested in. . ."

She cut me off. "Shit! Honey, with a name like that you won't even need a stage name. You don't know what you're missing. The men there are such dumbasses. You see this car?"

"Yea."

"Because of the tits." She had beer in a koozie nudged between her thighs. She took a drink.

"Really?"

"Hell yea. See this diamond necklace?"

I nodded my head.

"Because of the tits honey, and I got free room and board too."

"All because of the tits?" I asked.

"That's right! I'll give you the number to my surgeon if you want. You got a nice face, and good hips, all you need is a little work, get rid that shit on top of yo' head you call hair, clean your legs up a bit and nobody'll know the difference. Shit, I used to be just like you until I got me some tits, now I'm set. I ain't got to do shit. As long as you got tits, they don't care about

nothing else girl. Don't let me get started on the . . ." BEEEEEP BEEEEEP BEEEEEP, a 1996 F-150 was behind her, she rubbernecked her head and glared at the man behind her. The light had turned green. She waited a bit to piss him off, looked at me, remained silent, then sped away quickly under and through the halo.

The next customer came not too long after the woman who worked at The Men's Club. He was muscular and drove a 1999 Toyota Tundra pick-up with mud smeared all over. I walked up to the truck; the window was already down.

"YOU FUCKIN' IDIOT!!" were the first words from his mouth.

". . . ." I was speechless. A sports broadcast blared inside. "AND APPLEWHITE THROWS FOR HIS SECOND INTERCEPTION OF THE FIRST HALF, JONES BREAKS A TACKLE AND IS BROUGHT DOWN ON HIS OWN 35 YARD LINE." The voice was clear, like a radio voice should be.

"Sorry not you." He looked at me then continued, "I'm yellin' at this FAG MAJOR APPLEWHITE! I mean haha MAJOR ASSWIPE IF YOU ASK ME! I'm mean you're a woman, I know this and what I know is true, but we're in the freaking red zone man, the RED ZONE and he throws a godforsaken interception. HEY MACK PUT THE FRESHMAN IN!!" he yelled at the stereo. I wanted to curse him out.

"What's the score?"

"42-7."

"Who's playing? What sport is it?" I asked, fully knowing what sport it was.

"It's football baby, pure Texas football. The Horns are whuppin' up on Stanford."

"Really?"

"Hell yeah, you think we'd lose to a bunch of rich Cali boys?"

"So do you want a paper or what, man?"

"How much are they?"

". . . you can't read anyway you idiot . . . "\$1.50"

"You got change."

I nodded my head. He gave me two singles, and I gave him a paper and two quarters. His shirt was off, and he had what looked like barbed wire tattooed around both forearms.

"Sure is hot out here."

. . .sure is dumb in there. . ."Yeah pretty hot." I responded.

"You know on the news," he began, the radio voice loud in the background. I could hear the ROOARCHAWW of the crowd. "Last week I", he listened to the radio, "MACON OUT OF THE BACKFIELD WHOA NELLIE HE'S HIT COMING ACROSS THE LINE OF SCRIMMAGE, AND THE BALL POPS LOOSE THE BALL IS LOOSE!!!! ROBERTS PICKS IT UP AND HEADS FOR GLORY, AT THE 30, THE 20 . . .The light turned green, and he zipped away yelling "GO YOU SONVABITCH GO GO!!!" I thought about how the Oilers used to bring that excitement to the city. As I walked back to my bucket then I was distracted when someone yelled, "GET YOUR DIRTY ASS OUT OF THE ROAD!!" as they drove by. I laughed sitting myself down . . .I am pretty dirty though, it would have been worse had they called me a whore or a pigeon, then I really could've gotten mad. I can't really get mad at them for telling the truth can I? . . .

For a little while a thick cloud floated in front of the sun. I felt relieved and lucky. Blurry patterns of heat in the distance resembled floating water. I wished I could magically sell the remaining two papers, I just wanted to eat something. I couldn't stand the heat any longer. To satisfy my boredom I began counting American sedans in the westbound traffic, while counting foreign sedans in the eastbound traffic. Ten Ford Tauruses would drive by, then as if someone knew I was counting, a mixture of Accords, Camries, and Volkswagens would scurry past. For a while I counted just to make sure I could still do so . . . it's hot, need water, too much stuff in this stupid bag, uhh my god that's disgusting I need to throw that away, there we go, gulp gulp gulp ahhhh that's good even though its hot as shit man I can't wait to sell these damn things so I can eat, I hope Joan is working today she always give me extra beans and cole slaw . . .Force of habit made me place my fingers in my mouth. I was disappointed, because while expecting BBQ sauce, I was blessed with a salty grimy taste tainted with traces of newspaper ink.

. . . 2 more to go, can't wait to get some food, its been a while. . . A bearded man called me over to his car, which was a 1986 Ford Tempo. It needed a paint job badly. He was sloppy, sweaty, and overweight. All the windows of the car were down . . . no A/C . . . his motor made the noise a rusty door hinge makes, it whined. His hair was a peculiar red, skin pink orange because of the heat.

"Aren't you a cute one."

" . . . ." . . .here we go, you probably think the Goodyear blimp with a skirt on is cute. . .

"Why are you out here in this heat, you know there are other ways to make money."

"I just love selling papers so much, I can't bring myself to leave."

"What do you love most about it?"

"The heat and the hunger."

"You know there are a lot of lonely men out here who need some company."

I looked inside the car his stomach sat between his legs. There were all sorts of wrappers and used cups piled in the backseat. I saw a way out of my suffering.

"Are you lonely?"

"Yes I am," he said, as if he would've had said anything else.

"Do me a favor and buy these papers, then we can talk."

Surprised at my statement he bucked his eyes and said coyly, "'How much?"

"75 bucks."

He mulled it over while I purposely looked annoyed then said, "Sure".

We traded possessions, I placed the money in my pouch and he tossed the papers in the backseat. I ran back to get my duffel bag then slid around the car, he cleared trash from the other seat. I tossed my bag in the back, and sat in the front where cracked leather jabbed my skin. "Give those kids a couple of bucks." I said. He looked at me funny. "Come on, do it for me okay, I'll make it worth your while later on." His expression quickly changed, and then he called over one of the young footballers. He placed two singles in the white bucket, I smiled at the young boy when he looked inside the car and said, "Thank you sir." I knew my trusty blue bucket would be okay. The next day I would have to do it all over again.

The light turned green soon after I adjusted myself in the uncomfortable seat. The car smelt peculiar, and when I looked in the backseat it appeared as if a garbage bag exploded. We drove across Post Oak under the halo, and he put his hand on my thigh. My short shorts started to ride up. His hand was fat, heavy, and sweaty. It made me feel dirty.

"So where do you want to go?" I asked.

"Are you hungry?"

"I'm always hungry. . .How about BBQ?" I knew he would say yes.

"Thank god you're a real woman, not one of them that likes all that fancy stuff like Chili's or Taco Cabana." Westbound we drove on Westheimer past Barnes & Nobles and FAO Schwartz.

"I eat regular food."

"I like a woman who's down to earth." He ran his hands through his hair. No hands on the steering wheel. The hair on his temples was sticky and damp. One hand on the steering wheel. I convinced him to return to J&D's, we made a U-turn and headed east on Westheimer.

The traffic was thick, as if someone had added cornstarch to the mix. We crossed back under the halo, and then made our way to the parking lot at J&D's. I saw a bulge in his pants as he threw the gearshift into park.

I got out of the car. He didn't raise the windows up or lock the doors. I pulled the wedgie from my crotch, and waited for him. He looked in the rear view mirror and tried to comb his stringy red hair over his balding patch. As he got out and walked around towards me I looked at his old sandals, and his feet spilt from all the open areas. We walked inside. I smelt horrible. We looked horrible. I wore a pink shirt that said 'HOUSTON CHRONICLE', white cut-offs, and ratty low top Chuck Taylors. He had thick rimmed glasses; a sweat drenched white button down shirt with khakis. The smell of bar-b-que'd meat overwhelmed me; my mouth watered; as people left while we waited to be seated I wanted to steal their doggie bags.

"Table for two please." The worker in black tie, "Jonathan" name tag, polyester slacks, looked at us funny. I couldn't have blamed him. We were soon seated, and I felt there was a God because Joan turned out to be our waitress.

Smelling of cigarettes and cooked meat she said, "Hey girl how you doin'? Still sellin' them papas?"

"Yea, still goin'. How you been?"

"Aww, same ole, I caint complain. I got thaht tooth that's been botherin' me fixed, cost me a damn arm and a leg though." She coughed a smoker's cough.

"How's Cliff doin'?" I asked.

"He at home watchin' football, supposed to pick me up when I geht aff, said he was goin' to take me out for a steak dinna."

"Is that why you did your hair?"

She was glad I noticed. "Used nearly half a can of spray dis mornin' You like it?"

"Yea, its nice on you."

"It looks nice on you." He said.

"Who this nice young man, you dragged in here witcha?"

"I'm Herbert, and you are" he looked at her name tag, "Joan, how you doin' Joan."

"Nice to meet ya Herbert."

"Yall' look hot and thirsty, whut can I get chall to drank?"

"Ice tea."

"Two big glasses of water?" I said.

"Y'all need sumore time or y'all know what chall wan to eat?"

"I want my usual."

"I'll have that plate y'all serve from 12 to 7."

"You wan links or ribs?"

"Ribs"

"Jalapena?" Joan asked.

"Extra jalapena."

"What two sides you wan with that, do y'all wan rolls or cornbread?"

"I have some fried okra, and green beans."

"I want rolls." I interrupted.

"I wouldn't mind some cornbread."

"I'll bring y'all both then." Joan said.

"Uhh, miss," Herbert said just as Joan began to walk away, "Can you take out that okra, and can I have some kernel corn. I'm sorry." He peered into the laminated menu as he spoke.

"That's all right, so you want green beans and kernel corn then?"

"Uh-humm."

"If you don't mind me askin', where you get Herbert from?" I asked as Joan walked away.

He paused as if he had forgotten, then said, "Well it's my daddy's name."

"Herbert what?" I posed.

"Horse. Herbert H. Horse. You can go on and laugh now."

I laughed softly he giggled along with me . . . I hope he doesn't think I believe that's his real name . . .

When Joan brought our food I was so happy, I had been eating all the bread, and Herbert sweated across from me nervous, hungry, and horny. He tucked his white cotton napkin inside his shirt collar. He grabbed a rib and started to slowly tear the meat from the bone. I started by drowning my drumsticks in honey BBQ sauce. A couple of heavy globs plopped over my kernel corn.

"Man it don't make no sense to be that hot." He looked out the veranda window we sat near. "I don't see how you sit out there all day."

I could smell myself over the aroma of the food. "It's funny what you can do when you try not to think about it."

"What do you do to pay the bills, Herbert?" . . . he looks like one of those chubby internet geeks . .

"I work with computers." He had barely swallowed his food as he spoke.

"You married?"

"No."

". . . ." . . .why the hell did I ask that, like it really matters. . .

"Even though it's hot as hell," he said ending the lull in conversation "I sorta kinda like it."

I took two bites of food and asked, "Why?", just before a long drink of water.

"Because," he chewed food "when I walk around or take I drive, I sweat buckets, and I end up losing 20 to 30 pounds just by going out, I don't even have to exercise!"

"That's neat. . .buckets of sweat,, how did I get myself into this?"

We talked a bit longer, he asked Joan for more cornbread and sweet butter.

"So uumm what's your favorite position?" He asked with nervous confidence.

He spoke through food I understood him but asked, "What was that again, Herb?"

"Your favorite position, how do you like it?"

. . . how do you answer something like that, stay cool, can't get nervous now . . ."Well you know Herb you being such a big healthy man, I'll have to be on top so you don't crush me."

"I'm big in other places too you know." He began nibbling on a rib. He smiled coyly.

"I bet you are." . . . can't believe I said that, it was funny, I sorta like this . . . My cold nerve made him excited, but it was really nervous improvisation. He seemed to think I had it all figured out. My hunger subsided with every bite, and some of his remarks on the surface made me want to throw up on him, but deep down below I had a strange enjoyment of it all.

After some time bare ribs and chicken bones piled high on the mess plate in the center. His napkin was stained with deep reddish brown splotches. I felt mixed emotions, happy because I was full, sad because I would soon have to endure sex with him, happy because I would have some cash in my pockets. We talked over our empty plates and glasses; as the inevitable crept closer, I made myself think of him as attractive. Everything that made him hideous, obese, and plain ugly, I turned into its opposite, and so by the time I was done I actually lusted for him. I decided I was going to make myself enjoy it, because there was no way I could get through it any other way.

As a lull of conversation set in, I wiped my mouth and took the last swallow of water from my glass. Next I said with all the confidence I could muster, "I'm going to be a real woman and say what I feel."

"Ok" he said, licking caked-on sauce from his fingers.

"Why don't you pay for the food, go in the bathroom, wash up. When you're done, buy a couple condoms, and meet me back at the car. I know a place that we can go, it's nice and not too far."

He wiped the corners of his mouth with confidence. "Finally, a woman who knows what she wants, a woman who's going to tell me what to do." He shuffled through his wallet, and slapped a twenty dollar bill on the table, then strutted away in his best masculine wobble. I waited until I knew he was in the bathroom, then I made my move.

Quick I slid from around the table and in one motion snatched the twenty. It felt like an eternity to get to the front door. The restaurant was full, clank of china against silverware and roaring kitchen flames the soundtrack for my getaway. Small baby screaming to left with BBQ sauce in hair, mother flustered, far right corner man and woman alone she picks from his plate, then makes eye contact with me as if she knew, I think she's Herbert's wife or lookout. He has no wife. She looks away. At front door, people nudged in as I wanted to nudge out. I squeezed through . . . fuck shouldn't have drank all that water, I got to pee . . . Everyone watched me run. I knew they knew my sin. I knew he would be waiting for me in the car. He was not there. Through open back window, grabbed duffel bag and because of adrenaline it didn't seem heavy. Panting I ran through car park, every stride my last. The traffic heavy, I knew he would be wherever I went; paranoid. I wished then I could vanish or fly away. Sweat tickled me, then streamed down face and dangled on chin. My gyrations cast the sweat away. As I ran all disjointed, the bag tapped my back with rhythm. I felt it, Ptap . . . . . Ptap. . . . . Ptap. . . . . Ptap. . . . .