

Blind Date

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"I hate blind dates."

Sherman put a big-brotherly hand on my shoulder. "Of course you do. And why not? Most blind dates are a total bust."

"Exactly," I agreed, confused. "That's why I --"

He didn't let me finish my objection. "But this one is going to be the exception. Chandra's got the magic touch, buddy; you gotta believe."

"I believe," I insisted weakly. "I believe that this date is a disaster in the making, just like every other date I've been on since I moved here."

That got an exaggerated sigh from my friend. "You know what I like most about you, Jake? Your positive attitude."

I met his gaze with a defeated shrug. In the four months since I'd moved from the Philadelphia suburbs to DC I'd had exactly three dates, each with a different woman. They all ended the same way: a well-rehearsed smile, a polite handshake, and a hasty retreat to the nearest taxi. The women of Washington are experts at date euthanasia.

Sherman had both hands on my shoulders now, his round, black face beaming positive energy down at me. Looking up at him I understood how it was that Sherman could convince inner-city teens that joining a computer club was cooler than hanging out on street corners with the crew.

I made one last feeble attempt to reason with this big, friendly man. "It's not like I haven't tried, Sherm. But I'm not six feet plus, good looking and smooth the way you are. The women in this town intimidate the hell out of me."

"Natalie's not from here," he told me. "She's from Richmond, and she's been here less than a month. I guarantee you'll like each other."

"I'm not going to get out of this, am I?"

"Afraid not. Chandra's taken a major shine to you; she's made it her mission in life to help you find a good woman."

"Lucky me," I said flatly. I'd met Sherman's girlfriend a few weeks before and hadn't yet figured out what to make of her. Chandra dresses smartly, carries a Palm Pilot and makes her living as a data communications consultant. She is also a fourth-generation witch, with a knowledge of herbal medicine and old family rituals that runs every bit as deep as her understanding of transport protocols.

"You don't know the half of it yet," Sherman assured me with a wink. "But you'll do fine. Just relax and be yourself, okay?"

"Got it."

Easy for him to say; Sherman had every reason in the world to be himself, and to enjoy it. Being me seemed like a lot less fun. I was a short, skinny white guy with good teeth and bad hair. It had been over a year since the divorce, and while I knew I needed to get back into the dating pool I still had a tendency to keep to myself. In the four months since I'd taken the transfer and moved to DC, Sherman was the only friend I'd made in or out of work. Despite Chandra's guarantees, my expectations for this date were minimal.

Still, I thought to myself as I rode the Metro home, *it doesn't hurt to make a good faith effort*. So instead of changing into the "business casual" outfit that had so failed to impress my previous dates, I went with a fairly new pair of jeans and picked a Cisco polo shirt from my closet full of high-tech promotional apparel. My hair stubbornly resists all attempts to arrange it neatly, so I just ran a brush over it and let it fall where it wanted.

Chandra had arranged things for everyone's mental comfort. The four of us were to have dinner at Sherman's place and then head over to the Improv in Northwest and take in a show. I took the Metro down to Anacostia and knocked on Sherman's door a few minutes before six.

I'd guessed right on the clothes. Sherman was wearing Dockers and a plain polo shirt, Chandra a plain skirt and a colorful silk blouse. She looked me over carefully, then smiled her approval. "Very good, Jacob," she said. "You look comfortable." Her Caribbean ancestry came through in

her voice -- that smooth, flowing tone so common in the islands, muted but not removed by a lifetime in the States.

"So far, so good," I replied with a wink.

We made small talk for a few minutes, then a knock on the door heralded the arrival of my date. I felt myself tensing up as Sherman opened the door.

I relaxed gratefully the moment I saw her. She was about my height, maybe an inch taller, pretty but not dazzling, with a long mane of cascading curly dark hair. She wore a simple jumpsuit with lots of pockets and a plain white top. Sherman conducted her into the living room for the introduction. "Natalie Simpson," he said simply, "this is my friend Jake Potter."

"Pleased to meet you, Jake." Her smile was warm, her eyes twinkling a little behind wire-rimmed glasses.

"Thanks," I replied, half-offering my hand.

"Dinner's not quite ready," Sherman said when nothing else came out of my mouth in a decent interval. "Can I get anyone a drink?"

"Not yet," Natalie replied.

"I'm fine," I added, and plopped down on a recliner. Natalie took the far end of the sofa, Sherman the near. There was a pregnant pause while I tried to figure out what, if anything, to say.

Natalie spoke up first. "The lab is just wonderful," she said to both of us. "I can't thank you enough for all your work."

I looked quizzically at Sherman, who slapped his own forehead. "I think I forgot to tell you," he explained. "Natalie is the new Computer Apps teacher at the high school."

Now it made sense. Two weeks before I'd spent most of a weekend with Sherman and his computer club helping to set up a new computer lab at a high school near his neighborhood, using equipment donated by local businesses. The assistant principal who had been our contact had said they were getting a new teacher but she wasn't on board yet, so we set things up in a way that seemed to be the most flexible.

Natalie's opening made things easy for me; we slipped quickly into technospeak, discussing how we had set up the network and how she planned to use it in her classes. We were just getting into some of the security options when Chandra came back from the kitchen and shot us all an exasperated look.

"If you three are ready to come back to the real world, dinner is ready. But I'll have no shop talk at my table, do you understand?" All three of us grinned sheepishly and promised to behave.

Dinner was a delight: broiled trout, seasoned rice and assorted vegetables accompanied by a tasty white wine. We kept the conversation casual, slipping only once into a job-related area and correcting quickly at a withering look from Chandra. Throughout the meal Natalie sat across from me and chatted easily with all of us. For me, the fact that she didn't keep looking at her watch was an encouraging sign.

I got up at the end to help clear away dishes, but Chandra beckoned me back to my seat. "Sit, Jacob," she told me. "You and Natalie talk while we clear up. Then, I have a surprise for you both."

So I sat back down, but there really wasn't much to say. We sipped the last of our wine and talked about how good the food was until the table was bare. Then Chandra came out of the kitchen with something odd in her hands and placed it gently in the center of the table.

It looked like a small clay pot. It was basically round, irregular enough in shape to suggest it was hand made. The outside was a medium brown, glazed brightly enough to faintly reflect the grain of the wooden table. Stick figures of dancing people formed a ring around the middle of the pot.

"In my family," Chandra explained, "we have a small ritual that we perform when introducing friends to each other. It helps the bonds of ... friendship ... to form. Will you allow me to show you?"

I had a suspicion that "show you" actually meant "perform the ritual on you," but that didn't bother me. I'd told Chandra on several occasions that I don't believe in witchcraft, a statement she accepted without argument. That didn't mean I wasn't a little curious, though. "Fine with me," I said. Natalie thought a little longer, looking to Sherman as if for guidance, then agreed.

Sherman dimmed the lights as Chandra struck a match and held it at the opening of the pot. The flame caught and rose above the lip -- the pot, I realized, was a fancy candle. "Join your hands, please," Chandra said, "and look into each other's eyes."

I reached across the table to Natalie and our hands met in the middle on either side of the little candle pot. We interlocked fingers, palms down, and then looked into each other's eyes. Natalie's were interesting, a mottled brown with gray specks that seemed to shift around in the flickering light of the candle.

"Keep looking into each other's eyes," Chandra continued, her island accent becoming more pronounced, her cadence more musical. "Breathe deeply and slowly, and as you breathe try to feel your pulse as it beats gently in your hands. Be aware of it, and of the other person's pulse, and notice that as you concentrate the beats will slowly come together."

My nose picked up a strangely soothing scent coming from the candle, vaguely familiar but not quite enough to identify. I inhaled deeply, noticing that Natalie was doing the same, and concentrated on trying to feel her pulse and my own in our intertwined fingers. A warm, peaceful feeling crept through me as I stared into Natalie's eyes, noticing the reflection of the candle flame and of my own face in the lenses of her eyeglasses. Chandra exhorted us to concentrate, continue to breathe deeply and slowly, feel our bodies' rhythms coming into focus.

Then her voice slipped into other words, words from another language. It took me a few sentences to realize it, but it didn't really matter because I somehow knew what she was saying: *Breathe ... relax ... be one.*

Soon Natalie's eyes glazed over and I felt myself sinking into them. Our bodies breathed as one, our hearts beating together in perfect unison, our hands joined as if by glue, inseparable.

Chandra slipped back into English, her voice fading in and out enough that I didn't really catch everything she said. Something about our souls being joined, our spirits combined. "As the candle burns, your desire increases ... your passion grows ..." There was a lot more, but I don't remember it well enough to repeat; I was lost in Natalie's eyes, and she in mine. After a little while, Chandra stopped talking and blew out the candle. The lights came up and we both blinked heavily, as if waking up from a dream. "How do you feel?" Chandra asked.

I needed a moment more to clear my head before answering. "Fine," I said. "A little dazed, I guess -- the lights came on pretty suddenly."

Natalie nodded agreement. "That was ... interesting," she said, looking me over more closely. "Very interesting. I felt really connected, almost soul to soul."

"Me too, " I agreed, my mouth working without guidance from the brain. "I've never felt anything like that before." Looking up at Chandra, who was beaming at us both, I asked, "Was that a spell of some sort?"

"Not exactly," she responded slyly.

I was going to pursue the question further, but Sherman pointed to the clock -- we needed to get going if we were going to be on time for the show. We didn't talk much as we hustled on foot to the Anacostia Metro station. Once inside the train, we were able to sit down and relax a little. Natalie and I shared a seat, with Chandra and Sherman in front of us. We switched to the red line at Gallery Place and emerged from the underground at Farragut North a few minutes later.

Still, by the time we got to the Improv on Connecticut Avenue the house was mostly full. We ended up in the smoking section, on the far right side of the showroom. The warm-up act was only mildly funny to me: another college-aged kid who'd seen too many episodes of 'Def Comedy Jam'. Random vulgarities poured out of his mouth, each sentence containing at least one instance of "fuck", "nigger", or "pussy", but very few of them actually including a joke. There were frequent nervous twitters from various parts of the audience as they reacted to the shock impact, but little actual laughter. At the end he got a polite amount of applause, which he tried ineffectually to bask in, then left the stage muttering under his breath.

Natalie's assessment of the opener's performance seemed to match mine. "What a shame," she said as he disappeared from sight. "I get the feeling he's a really clever guy; he could have been much funnier if he wasn't trying so hard to shock people." I agreed, and we spent the next several minutes discussing other comedians. We had several favorites in common.

The headliner saved the evening. A more experienced comedian, he took the show in a completely different direction. He got us laughing at safe, everyday things: bureaucrats, athletes, the Moral Majority. By the

time he brought the topics back closer to sex and race, the audience was comfortable and ready to laugh.

Some of us were more comfortable than others. Not long into the headliner's set, I felt Natalie shift in her seat; she settled close against my right side, her crossed legs leaning in toward mine. I felt and heard her sigh, and an answering sigh of my own came unbidden from within. A familiar scent filled my nose and I inhaled deeply, feeling myself relax as I let it go. A look to my right confirmed what I had begun to suspect: Chandra had brought the little candle pot with her. It sat there in the middle of the table, the flame burning discreetly inside the opening, the little dancing figures winking at me in the dim light.

It would have been rude to start a discussion about the candle during the show, and the scent of the candle was much more pleasant than the cigarette smoke hanging over the tables nearby, so I said nothing and returned my attention to the comedian on stage.

Most of it, anyway -- a part of my mind kept noticing how close Natalie was, how soft and relaxed she felt against me. I stole furtive glances at her face, her eyes, her legs, anything I could get a look at. I found myself wondering what she was wearing under the jumpsuit; simple, practical undies from WalMart? Lace and satin, a la Victoria's Secret? Nothing at all?

Get a grip, Jake, I scolded myself. What are your chances of finding out, anyway? Probably zero. Definitely zero.

So why was I getting a hard-on?

I put renewed energy into following the act on stage. Focus, Jake old buddy. Don't think about the arm pressing against your side, the leg touching yours all along the outside of your thigh, the way everything presses more closely against you when she laughs.

Big help that was. I took another look at the pot, sitting innocently in the middle of the table, the little dancing stick figures dancing away around the outside. That's when I noticed it -- the postures of the stick figures looked a little odd for dancing. Their arms and legs were intertwined, bodies close together, hips locked tightly ... if this was a dance, it wasn't anything they teach at Arthur Murray.

Under the table, Natalie's hand found mine and our fingers interlocked, bringing back even more of the sensations of Chandra's strange ritual. I

slipped into a daydream, my face watching the comedian on stage but my mind looking into Natalie's eyes again. In my mind's eye I saw myself reaching for her, pulling the narrow-rimmed eyeglasses from her face, bringing her in for a long, passionate kiss. My cock went to Defcon 3 as I imagined her hands running up and down my back, pulling at my shirt, reaching for my zipper ...

A burst of applause brought me back to reality as people all around me stood up to cheer the headliner, who was taking his bows on stage. Natalie's hand left my thigh and she whooped and cheered too. I put on a good show, clapping hard but no way was I going to stand up for a few minutes.

"Great show, wasn't it?" Sherman said as the people began filing out.

"Wonderful," Natalie agreed. Her eyes locked on mine. "Don't you agree, Jake?"

"Absolutely," I replied, meeting her gaze and briefly falling into it. Her expression was distant. I wondered if she had paid any more attention to the show than I had.

It was time to go; we got up together, me maneuvering carefully to keep my erection out of sight as we wove through the tables to the outside. We said our goodbyes to Sherman and Chandra, who presented us each with a little white gift bag. "No peeking until you get home," she admonished us. From the weight of it I had a pretty good idea what was in mine.

Here was where the evening plan had been left open. Sherman and Chandra would be taking the Metro back to his place. It was after 10:30 at night, so going home sounded like a good move. I turned to Natalie. "Where's home?"

"Columbia Heights."

"Not a real convenient Metro ride," I observed. "Want to share a taxi?"

She frowned slightly. "Why don't we get some coffee or something first? We really haven't gotten to talk much."

I was so stunned to have a woman not running for the exit that I opened my mouth without thinking again. "My place is nearby; I can't vouch for the quality but it's never crowded."

"You talked me into it."

It was a little over a mile from the Improv to my house on Q Street -- a little long for a pleasure stroll, especially at that hour, so we hailed a cab. "I should probably warn you," I said as we headed up Connecticut Avenue. "I didn't prepare the place for company."

"That's okay, you should see my place. I'm still living amidst piles of boxes."

"I can relate," I said. "I bought a fixer-upper, and most of it still qualifies as barely habitable. You'll see in a few minutes."

My house is a brick 2-story structure with wood trim and a black iron fence. Natalie gave the front façade a good looking over while I paid the driver. "It looks pretty good from out here," she said.

"I had the brickwork cleaned and the trim painted early on," I explained. "Makes it look better, and lets the neighbors know I'm serious about fixing the place up. The inside still needs a lot of work." I ushered her inside and into the living room, which was presentable enough because I don't use it much. She followed me into the kitchen, though, which was a bit of a fright. "My apologies for the décor," I said. "Most of the cabinet doors were falling off or missing hardware, so I just took them all off; the replacements were supposed to be here this week but they're late."

I hit the button on the coffee maker and listened while it grunted to life. "This'll take a few minutes," I said lamely. "Is decaf okay?"

"Fine. Can I get the tour? I really love old houses."

I hemmed and hawed. "There isn't really much to see right now," I said. "There's the dining room over there, and a den behind it that I'm using as my bedroom right now while I work on the upstairs."

Natalie seemed disappointed, so I took her on a grand tour of the first floor. She liked the dining room set I'd picked up at an estate auction and commiserated with me over the rollaway twin bed I was sleeping on in the makeshift bedroom. By the time we got back to the kitchen the coffee maker was emitting its last few gurgles and groans.

We settled into the living room sofa, setting our mugs on the coffee table next to our white bags. "You can open yours," she suggested. "You're home."

"I know what it is."

"So do I," she countered. "And I'm curious about it. May I?"

I handed her my bag. "Be my guest."

She reached in and pulled out the little candle pot. Her other hand dove back into the bag and pulled out a book of matches. She took a tentative sniff at the unlit candle, then held it up and examined it. "Did you notice the stick figures?"

"It looks as though they're dancing," I offered.

"That's what I thought too, at first," she said, contemplating the tiny figures on the pot. "But now I'm not so sure it's dancing."

I left that one completely alone.

She sniffed at the candle again. "It has the most interesting scent," she continued, "but I can't seem to smell it now. Do you mind if I light it?"

"Go ahead."

She struck a match and touched it to the wick. Within moments that familiar odor began to permeate the room, and I felt myself relaxing in response to it. Natalie brought the candle closer to her face and inhaled deeply and slowly, holding her breath for a few seconds before letting it out again. Her face took on a dreamy, faraway look as she set the candle down on the coffee table in front of us.

"Tell me something," she said to me, watching my face intently. "How does a nice white guy from Philadelphia end up volunteering at a mostly black DC high school?"

"Just crazy, I guess." She had a lovely smile on her face, and a soft chuckle for me. "Actually, I did it for Sherman. He's been a friend since I came down here, helping me figure out where things are, how things work in this part of the company. He didn't have to do that. So when he mentioned he could use some help reworking a high school computer lab, I jumped in."

"The kids are going to love it," she said. "You guys did a really great job."

"Thanks. Now you tell me," I countered. "Why does a nice white girl from Richmond come up to DC to teach computers at a mostly black high school?"

"Just crazy, I guess." She paused long enough to take another deep breath; I found myself following suit, not really thinking about it. "My first teaching job was with a private school in the suburbs. Nearly all of the kids were white, from affluent families, and already had computers as good or better than what was in the school. The only challenge to teaching those kids about computers was finding things that they hadn't already figured out for themselves. That's not why I became a teacher, Jake. I wanted to teach kids something that would open up possibilities for them, widen their horizons instead of boring them to death. I want to take kids who think they're too dumb or too poor to get on the high-tech bandwagon and show them that they can master this technology and make it work for them. What better place to do that than in an inner city public school?"

The candle was getting to me again; I heard her answer and felt myself nodding appreciatively, but most of my attention was focused on watching the seductive motions of her throat as she spoke. I found myself wishing she'd worn something tighter or low cut, so I could better watch the rise and fall of her chest. Her left hand started stroking her thigh absent-mindedly, and my cock almost tore through my jeans.

"Do you think of yourself as an impulsive person, Jake?"

"Not me," I replied, fighting back the impulse to dive into that jumpsuit with both hands. "I'm big for looking before I leap. Sometimes I look too long, and leap too late."

"Same here," she said. "I'm a planner. I make my grocery list out a week in advance, research every major purchase before I make it, and keep an extra battery charged for my cell phone. I never do anything rash."

"Good for us," I said unconvincingly.

She moved closer to me on the sofa. "So why is it that my mind is so full of rash, impulsive, wild thoughts right now?"

"I don't know," I said, edging closer, "but I'm having a few of those impulses myself."

"I can see that," she replied. Her hand brushed ever so lightly across the bulging front of my jeans, and the dam of my self-control burst. I pulled her to me and kissed her hungrily, my heart leaping when I felt her lips respond to mine with equal fervor. Our hands slid over each other, learning the territory through our clothing, finding the various snaps and catches that would get it out of the way when we were ready.

We were ready quickly. Strong hands grabbed a fistful each of my polo shirt and yanked it upward, taking the undershirt with it. We broke off our lip lock long enough to get the shirts over my head, then joined again. My fingers found the buckles that fastened the jumpsuit's shoulder straps and released them, then I grabbed the white top and pulled it up. Her eyeglasses came off as the top cleared her head; neither one of us bothered looking for them just then.

The bra had a satiny feel to it, with lace trimming the upper edges of the half-cups. It was also a front closure, so it didn't stay closed very long. I buried my face between her pale breasts, kissing the valley that separated them, kneading them with my hands. Natalie's back arched and her hips pushed against me, grinding our groin areas together in a way that was delicious but not nearly enough.

And then in a flash she was off the sofa, standing next to it, letting the forgotten bra fall off the rest of the way and the jumpsuit drop to the floor. She grabbed my pants legs and started pulling, barely waiting for me to unzip. My briefs came off at the same time.

Natalie stood over me, her satiny bikini briefs looking very damp in the middle, and regarded my private model of the Washington Monument with a look of total lust. She peeled down the sopping wet panties and then, as if struck by a thought, looked back to the coffee table. "I wonder," she began, and picked up the second gift bag.

"You're not supposed to open that until you're home," I reminded her, wondering even as I spoke why the hell I was saying it.

"I am at home," she countered. "Just not mine. And I've got a sneaking suspicion that I'm supposed to open this now." She peeked into the bag and a wicked grin stole over her face. "I thought so." She reached into the bag and pulled out a shiny foil packet. In no time at all she had the packet open and the condom rolled down over my tingling cock. She made sure it was nice and tight by taking me into her mouth and giving a good, hard suck. "Mmmm," she remarked, "mint flavored."

"Chandra thinks of everything."

"Remind me to write her a nice thank-you note." With that, Natalie climbed on top of me and plunged herself down over my sheathed club. She was so wet that we slid together easily and socked down tight, sending a shiver through both of us. I reached for her breasts and she rode me hard, gasping and moaning louder and louder until, with a series of squeaks, she came. I kept in the saddle, fingering her button to keep her in ecstasy, until my own orgasm hit and my body went nuts. I saw stars. Natalie collapsed on top of me at the end of her climax and we held each other, still basking in the glow of our passion and the scent of the candle.

We lay that way for probably ten minutes, perfectly still and content, and then it started happening again. I felt the stirrings of a new erection in my groin and my hands started stroking up and down Natalie's back. My caresses became slower and more sensual, and covered more territory, the longer I went. Natalie stirred and moaned and started kissing my neck, her hands finding places to fondle as well. Her legs opened. She shifted, putting my growing stump right up against her slit, and her hips started gyrating, rubbing her private parts against mine like a cat against a human's leg. In very little time I was fully ten-hut and ready for action, the condom still in place from the last time.

"I should probably get a fresh condom," I suggested reluctantly, not wanting to break off contact.

"You're right," she said, but kept on rubbing against me anyway.

"Okay, here I go." It took all my will to slide out from under Natalie and slip into the bathroom. I disposed of the used condom, cleaned up a little, and headed back to the living room still mostly erect.

Natalie had used the downtime to locate her glasses and was examining our little candle with renewed interest. The sight of Natalie, wearing eyeglasses and nothing else, staring dreamily into the candle flame, is a picture that will remain forever vivid in my mind. She took a slow, deep breath of the candle's vapors, held it in, and then let it out in a long, sleepy sigh. "I can't get over this smell," she told me. "It's just so ..."

"I know." She handed the candle to me and I did the same thing, taking a long deep draw and letting it out again. That long whiff of candle scent didn't get me any closer to figuring out what it smelled like, but it certainly put iron in my britches (if I'd been wearing any).

Natalie saw the immediate effect of the candle scent and grabbed it with both hands, tugging on my stiff member teasingly, raking fingers along the sides. My knees bucked and I almost dropped the candle. I heard a tearing sound and then Natalie was unrolling another condom onto me, an action which sent what little blood was left above my shoulders rushing south. I was ready when I felt her give a quick suck again, as she had during the first round; I was not ready for her to keep going, teasing me with her tongue and playing with my balls. I was about to lose it when she finally stopped and looked up at me. "Banana," she explained with a playful grin.

I started to grab for her, but she scooted out of reach and back onto the sofa, stretching out seductively and giving me a look so hot it melted my fillings. I took one more long pull of candle scent, then blew it out and set it on the coffee table. I held my breath until I was hovering over Natalie on the sofa, then I slowly let it out as she breathed in. While she was savoring that last bit of candle scent, I settled in for a nice long suckle at her breast.

She let me play with her breasts for a little while, getting them nice and ripe and ready, then pulled me up for the grand finale. I slid easily into her. She hooked her legs around me and pulled me in deeper. We established a rhythm, in and out so easily, and kept it up until we both dropped over the edge into bliss.

As our breathing slowed to normal, I looked down at Natalie's glowing face and broke out laughing. Her glasses had slipped halfway up her forehead and were thoroughly fogged up. As soon as Natalie saw what I was laughing at she joined in. The laughter subsided into happy sighs and we sat up together, Natalie tucked neatly inside my arms, letting the air conditioning dry the thin film of sweat from our bodies.

Natalie broke the silence. "What the hell just happened?"

Uh-oh. "What do you mean?" I asked warily, my body starting to tense.

She took my hands and kissed them, sliding herself away a little bit so we could talk face to face. "That didn't come out very well; let me try again. Jake, what we just did was wonderful, exciting, incredibly fulfilling ... and completely out of character for me. I don't even kiss on the first date, let alone jump into bed with people. So what I really meant was, I don't understand what's gotten into me." Nodding toward my sticky crotch, she added, "Aside from the obvious, that is."

"I know exactly what you mean," I assured her. "I don't do this sort of thing either. Not that I've had that many opportunities, mind you ... but even if I had, I really don't believe in bed-hopping. It's not smart, and it's not safe."

"Which makes it all the more bizarre that we're having this conversation while sitting naked on your sofa." I watched in silent appreciation as Natalie stretched over and grabbed the candle from the coffee table. She examined it again, turning it slowly in her hand. I looked again too, especially at the little stick figures. Natalie sniffed delicately at the opening. "There's hardly any scent now," she observed. "But when it's lit ..." She started to go for the matches.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" I asked. "Whenever that thing is lit, my libido seems to take over."

"Mine too," she said. "Maybe this would be better investigated in the daytime."

I nodded agreement. "This is a convertible sofa," I offered. "I could pull it out and make it up real quick if you like."

She seemed to think about it for a second, anyway. "No, that's okay. I think I need to go home now. I've broken enough rules for one night."

I was a little disappointed, but I could understand. "Can I call you tomorrow?"

"Sure," she said, gathering her clothes together. "Let me find my things and we can exchange numbers."

We both cleaned up and dressed quietly, a little bit of post-coital awkwardness starting to settle in. I put my home address, home phone and PCS phone numbers on the back of one of my business cards for her; she wrote hers on a note card she pulled from her purse.

I waited outside with her in silence until her cab arrived. We shared a brief, sanitary kiss and then I watched her ride away.

The next day was a Saturday. I got up early, my head still in a twist from the night before. "I don't get it," I complained over breakfast. "I mean, at first I was my usual lame self, but during the show, and later back here, it

seemed like everything was going my way. Then, at the very end, it was as though someone threw a bucket of ice water on us. What the hell happened?"

As usual, the cartoon characters on my cereal box had nothing to contribute. Useless little buggers.

After breakfast I threw on some old, grungy sweats and headed upstairs to what would eventually become my bedroom. When I'd bought the house the master bedroom had been done in the most hideous paisley wallpaper I've ever seen. Not only was it butt ugly, but it had been on there so long it proved impossible to get off. I tried the usual solvents, even a little device that scores the paper with jillions of tiny holes to help the solvent get through to the paste, but in the end all I did was put a shitload of little tiny holes in the plaster and make the wallpaper even nastier. I ended up stripping off the entire inside walls, plaster lathe and all, and putting up new drywall in its place -- an act that qualifies as sacrilege in the eyes of a purist, but I have neither the patience nor the skill to deal with new plaster myself and the exterior facelift had put a big crimp in the budget.

Hanging drywall, on the other hand, is a snap; it took me longer to haul the sheets upstairs than to cut them and put them up on the walls. That's the beauty of it. The downside -- and it's a bear -- is smoothing the joints and covering the screws that hold the wallboard to the studs. You do it by putting tape over the seams and applying a series of progressively thinner and wider coats of drywall compound, called 'mud', to cover the joints and smooth it all out so it looks like one unbroken plane. Spreading the mud is possibly the most obnoxious, tedious, pain-in-the-ass job an amateur remodeler can do. On the other hand, on that Saturday morning a dull, repetitive task was exactly what I needed to help establish some order between my ears.

While my body spread drywall mud in the appropriate places, I replayed the previous night in my head. When I'd first met Natalie, I'd been nervous; that had shown, probably, in my monosyllabic sentences. Then the conversation turned to work stuff, and I was able to open up. Nothing new there, I've always been better at directed conversation than at making small talk. After dinner, while Chandra and Sherman were clearing up, I'd fallen back into awkward mode because we didn't have anything specific to discuss. I remembered Natalie watching me, feeding me leading lines only to have me fumble on the return. She'd been trying to help me, and I'd missed it completely.

The turning point, of course, was that ceremony with the candle. I remembered the weird feelings I got staring into Natalie's eyes, feeling her pulse and breathing synchronize with mine. Everything had faded out there for a while, everything except her eyes. The connection that had opened up between us during that had made all the difference for me; after that, I had no more problems talking with Natalie. I remembered making pleasant chitchat with her on the train. Nothing technical, nothing too serious -- exactly the kind of social chatter I'd been failing miserably at before and during dinner.

We were doing well at the club, too, watching the show, commenting on the opening act. We laughed at a lot of the same lines from the headliner. I wouldn't have said sparks were flying, but it was definitely going better than any other date I'd been on lately. Then that candle made an appearance.

What the hell was it about that candle? The smell? There was something familiar about it, something I thought I should recognize but couldn't quite place it. The little stick figures, humping each other in a ring around the pot? Was the ritual itself some kind of spell?

Logic demanded that I address that last question immediately. Of course it was a spell. Chandra is a witch, from a long line of witches, so naturally her 'old family ritual' would be a spell. That would be Chandra's way of helping things along -- she was trying to get me laid.

Uhh, Jake? You don't believe in magic, dude.

True. Still, there was no denying that something happened at that table after dinner. There had to be a logical explanation for it.

Just as I was going into vapor lock over what that explanation might be, the phone rang. I grabbed the cordless. "Hello?"

"Jake?"

I knew that voice. "Natalie?"

"Good ear," she said. "I know it's short notice, but do you think I could stop by for a few minutes?"

"Sure, no problem. How soon will you be here?"

"Just a minute or two, probably. We were already on the road and I realized this was your neighborhood."

"We?" Oops -- I hadn't meant for that to be out loud.

"My roommate is with me. I want to show her that candle, and maybe try an experiment. Would that be okay?"

I looked at my half-full pan of drywall mud. "I suppose," I said. "I'm in the middle of something that I sort of need to finish, but if you can wait twenty minutes or so ..."

"That's fine," she agreed. "We'll just park outside, and you can come let us in when you're ready."

I put down the phone and made a mad pass through the first floor, picking up stray things. Fortunately there wasn't much; the place was in basically the same shape as the night before. I was just about done when I saw a yellow Neon pull up outside. Leaving them waiting at the curb seemed a bit unfriendly, so I stepped outside to invite them in.

Natalie was in the passenger seat. The driver was another white girl about the same age, sandy-haired and plain-looking. They got out when they saw me coming down the steps. Both were dressed down: Natalie wore long shorts and a tank top, her companion khakis and a tee.

Natalie got the introductions out of the way quickly. "Jake, this is my roommate Rose. Rose, this is Jake."

Rose gave my hand a perfunctory squeeze. "Nice house."

"Thanks," I replied. "The inside still needs a lot of work. In fact, I was spreading drywall mud when you called. I need to finish what I have out, but you two are welcome downstairs while I do it."

They were amenable to that, so I showed them into the living room and left Natalie in charge while I went upstairs to finish my trough. I was right over their heads, but with the thickness of the floors in my old house and the scratchy noises of my drywall knife swiping over the walls I might as well have been in another county. I was just about through when I heard Natalie's voice on the stairs.

"Jake?" She called.

"Yeah?"

"Stay up there for a little bit more, would you? We're going to try something down here."

A strange request; then again, it had been a pretty strange weekend so far. "Okay," I shouted back. "I'm just about done here, so give me a shout when the coast is clear."

I only had a little more to do, so I added another bit of mud to my trough and finished up that coat. A minute or so into it, the faintest suggestion of a smell registered in my nose. It smelled like ...

The candle -- they lit the candle. What the hell?

I got a grip. Natalie had said they were going to try an experiment, so they probably lit the candle as part of that. So in a few minutes, they'd tell me to come on down and everything would be normal. Probably. Just in case, though, I flipped the register closed in the floor. Somebody should have a clear head, I figured.

I went back to work on the wall, but even as I smoothed out the remaining few joints I couldn't stop myself from wondering what was going on downstairs. I pictured Rose and Natalie sitting on the sofa, looking at the candle. Commenting on the scent. Getting aroused. Pulling at their clothing. Removing their clothing.

By the time I finished the last joint, my cock was hard enough to hang a bucket from -- and I couldn't even smell the candle anymore. I waited, listening for the moans and sighs that my fantasies expected to hear.

Instead, I heard the front door open and close. My fantasy bubble burst; and though my cock was reluctant to let go of the idea, I assumed that my living room was now empty. *They didn't even say goodbye*, I complained silently to myself. With a heavy sigh, I picked up my trough and taping knives and took them to the bathroom to wash them out. Not the nicest thing to do to an old bathroom vanity, but it was going to get replaced anyway along with most of the pipes.

I might have had a second's warning if I hadn't already taken the old mirror down. As it was, I was concentrating totally on getting the dried goop out of the plastic trough when a pair of arms encircled me at the waist. One squeezed me tightly while the other set something down on the counter in front of me. The powerful aroma from the candle rose

straight up and into my head, making me instantly dizzy. Both arms were on me now, one pulling up on my shirt, the other snaking into my pants, seeking and finding the hardwood handle inside. I felt the condom slide over me and roll down toward the root.

In seconds my clothing was on the floor. Natalie pressed close into my back, letting me feel her breasts against my skin while she pumped my cock with one hand and teased my nipples with the other. I was hyperventilating, which of course pulled even more of the stupefying vapors into my head and made any rational discourse impossible. So I reached behind me with my right arm, turning the palm, searching for the hot damp spot I knew had to be right behind my butt somewhere. I found it, and probed as far as my fingers could reach. Her legs opened and she shifted to the side a little, giving me just enough extra room to find her button. She let out a delighted squeal and let go of my shaft for a moment, which was all I needed.

I wheeled around quickly and grabbed Natalie's naked body in a bear hug, lifting her off the floor and walking her over to the someday-bedroom. When I got to the canvas drop cloth I had laid out to protect the floor, I dropped to my knees and laid her down on her back. Before she could do anything else I pinned her legs down and I spread them apart slightly to make room for my face. She didn't resist once she knew what I was doing. I ate her with gusto, probing and teasing and learning the territory as I went. Her body writhed and her fingers played in my hair while I worked on her until she shuddered and screamed through a nice climax.

I let up for a second and Natalie took the opening. She pulled her legs out of my grip and started to crawl away, laughing wickedly. I managed to grab her by the hips and pulled her back toward me, the drop cloth providing her with no traction to resist even if she wanted to. But she didn't -- instead she looked around at me, wiggled her shapely ass, and winked. "Go ahead," she said.

No further prompting was necessary. My cock was aching for release, so I pulled her up to me and entered her canal from behind. She pushed up against me, rocking and panting, and before long I was grunting and pumping into her. My knees held up just long enough to finish, then deposited me on the drop cloth where I flopped, gasping for air.

"So ... did your experiment turn out the way you expected?"

It was lunch time. Natalie and I were washed and dressed, and feasting on sandwiches from my fridge. The candle had been doused and returned to the coffee table without further drama.

Natalie finished chewing, her eyes still glowing from earlier. "I didn't really have an expectation," she explained. "I wanted to take some pictures of the candle and email them down to Dr. Jenkins, my anthropology professor at VCU. Then I decided to light it, just for a minute, and see if it affected Rose the same way that it seems to affect us."

"And?"

"Rose was unimpressed. In fact, she said it smelled vaguely obscene, like some kind of animal musk. So I let it burn a little longer. After a few more minutes, I thanked Rose and told her to go home without me."

"And the rest is pornography?" I quipped. Natalie snorted and threw her napkin at me. "Okay, okay," I conceded. "So what have we learned from this experiment?"

"Point One: the candle doesn't seem to affect other people, just you and me."

"Point Two," I added, "it doesn't take a snoot full of it to work. I closed the vent upstairs, but I was practically having wet dreams just knowing that you had the thing lit."

"Oh?" Her eyebrows lifted inquisitively.

"No way," I declared. "Not until we know each other a helluva lot better."

Natalie raised her Pepsi can with a smile. "I'll drink to that."

That smile opened up places in my gut that I hadn't heard from in months. "This is the strangest relationship I've ever been in," I remarked. "We've known each other only a few hours. We've spent an astonishing amount of that time either eating or making out. What do you say we get out of here and go do something normal?"

"Okay," she said. "What do you have in mind?"

I didn't have anything particularly in mind, so we brainstormed for a few minutes. It was summer, we were both new to the city, so ultimately we

decided to be tourists for the afternoon. I changed from my grubbies into jeans and a Legato Systems golf shirt and we headed for the Metro.

It was an exhilarating afternoon for me. We went down to the Mall and walked around, touring the sculpture garden, riding the carousel, paying a short visit to the Smithsonian Natural History museum. We spent a long time just sitting on a bench watching kids play on the grass. She told me stories about life at VCU and her family in Richmond; I told her stories about life at Temple University and a little bit about the Philadelphia suburbs. She asked about my family.

"Ever been to the Capitol?" I blurted out.

She gave me a mildly suspicious look. "No."

"Let's go see it now," I suggested. "It's only a few blocks away."

"You're changing the subject," she noted, "but okay."

A lot of the buildings in DC look more impressive on postcards or television screens than they do in reality. The US Capitol is not one of them. It rose majestically in front of us as we approached, tall and wide and impressively gray-white. Bright-colored dots of tourists lounged in front of the building, enjoying the reflecting pool, reading, maybe watching out of the corner of an eye for a familiar face from the news. Four hours were over when we got there, so we parked on a stone slab and looked back down the mall, over the reflecting pool.

Natalie didn't push. I was half expecting her to, so when she didn't I actually felt more compelled than if she had insisted I spill my guts.

"I don't have much family," I said slowly, staring into the distance. "My folks are retired, living in Harrisburg. I have an ex-wife in Conshohocken with a 5-year-old girl who used to call me Daddy."

I was looking down at the ground now, fighting back the tears as I thought of the little girl. Comforting arms encircled me, pulling me close. "I'm sorry," she said softly.

"It's okay ... you couldn't know."

"I'm still sorry."

"So am I," I said, my head resting on her shoulder. "It wasn't supposed to be like that. Trish and I were high school sweethearts. We both went to Temple so we could be together, and we got married while we were still in college. I worked nights to support us, and when Annabelle came along she dropped out of school to take care of her and I got a second job. I got my degree, dumped the two jobs for one good one, and thought everything would be okay. Two years later Trish filed for divorce; she wanted to marry the guy she'd been sleeping with behind my back for almost the entire marriage."

Natalie made a sympathetic noise.

"The real kicker," I continued, "was the custody hearing. I wanted joint custody of Anna; failing that, I wanted as much visitation as I could get. Trish's lawyer dropped the bomb right up front: blood tests proving that Anna isn't my daughter. Not only did I get no visitation, but Trish's lawyer actually said he'd seek a restraining order to keep me from trying to see Anna. It was the worst day of my life."

"Jesus, Jake," she said, holding me. "What did you do?"

"I totally caved. I let her have everything: the house, the car, even the goddamn dog, just to get it over with. I moved into a cruddy little apartment on the edge of Jersey and licked my wounds in solitude for a year. Then this DC job opened up and my boss recommended me for it, so I moved down here to try and restart my life."

"I'm sorry, Jake," Natalie said one more time. "I don't know what to say."

"Try, 'Shut up, you whining little twerp.' That's usually what I say."

She kissed me tenderly and dabbed at my face with a hanky. "I was thinking more along the lines of, 'Let's go back to my place and I'll buy you a drink.'"

I thought about it for a second. "That works, too."

We got back on the Metro, walking hand in hand this time, and took the green line to Columbia Heights. The row house Natalie shared with Rose was in a well-kept area; a notch or two above my digs, but still middle class. Over beer and pizza I learned that Rose was also a teacher, but at a different school. Their living arrangement was the result of good luck and careful reading of the classifieds, as they hadn't met prior to Natalie's move.

Most of the evening is a blur for me. We spent hours sitting around the living room, sipping beer and talking about innocuous things. With Natalie by my side I had no problem talking to Rose, although most of my remarks seemed to be addressed to Natalie. Eventually evening gave way to night, and Rose discreetly excused herself and wished us goodnight.

We sat on the couch and cuddled, listening to the radio and just being close to one another. After a while I decided it was my move. "It's getting late," I observed. "I should probably be going."

Natalie grunted a little and stood up. "Come on, you."

She took my hand firmly, turned, and gently pulled me toward the stairs. I stumbled out of the couch and followed, not resisting. We turned right at the landing and went into her bedroom, closing the door behind us. By the time I had done that and turned around to face Natalie, she had already kicked off her shoes and was pulling the black tank top off over her head. She pushed her glasses back into place, leaned back against the dresser, and watched for my reaction.

It was largely hormonal, of course. My pants started to feel tight so I followed suit, peeling off my polo shirt and draping it across the back of a nearby chair. Natalie smiled lustfully and dropped her shorts; she was now wearing only a black strapless bra and matching bikini brief. Not to be outdone, I kicked my shoes off and let my pants join them on the floor, kicking them aside to keep the floor clear. Natalie reached behind her back and the bra came free. She dangled it in front of her, teasing me with it for a few seconds, before tossing it aside. My undershirt landed on top of it immediately.

We stepped slowly towards each other, clad only in our underpants, and met in the middle of the floor in a long, loving embrace. We kissed deeply, our bodies pressed together, loving the skin to skin contact. When we paused for breath I held her back slightly. Dropping slowly to my knees, I slid a finger into each side of her panties and pulled them down, leaning my face into her center region to fill myself with her scent. She lifted a leg to clear the underwear and I grabbed it, pulling it out slightly so I could put a line of kisses up the inside of her thigh. I kissed her mound and began to probe lightly with my tongue.

"Get up here, you," she commanded in a half-moan, and she pulled me up to my feet. "My turn." Pulling me closer, she slithered down to her knees, letting her breasts rub against me the whole way down, even

catching the bulge of my extended cock between them. She pulled down my briefs, freeing the anxious contents thereof, and began kissing the side of my shaft. A free hand worked into the space behind and played with my balls in a way that sent shivers through me. My knees bucked and I staggered backward, landing with an awkward thump on the edge of her bed.

Natalie didn't miss a beat. Like a hungry lioness, she crawled sensuously over to the bed and up onto my lap. She gave my chest a playful push and I went down flat on my back, my pop-up timer sticking straight up and proclaiming to the world that I was ready. She climbed up higher, rearing over me and looking down through the lenses of her eyeglasses with lust in her eyes. She took my scratching post in her hand and used it as a toy, rubbing the tip of it up and down her slit, until it was dripping with her own juices. When my face told her I couldn't stand the teasing any more, she plunged herself down over me and locked in tight, giving me a good squeeze with her inner walls. I was in ecstasy and intensely afraid of popping too soon, so I reached up and pulled her down on top of me, hugging her tightly, giving myself a few seconds to calm down.

Our lips met and our tongues met and soon I felt Natalie's hips rocking, moving me in and out. She sat up, sinking me deeper inside her, and we both started pumping in earnest. Our eyes locked and we gasped and moaned as one, faster and faster, until we both went crashing into orgasm together.

Afterwards we cuddled together on the bed like spoons, Natalie tucked neatly under my arm. "Point Three," she said contentedly on the verge of sleep, "we're just as good together without the silly candle."

Chandra surprised me by showing up at the office Monday. "I owe her an expensive lunch," Sherman explained.

"That he does," she confirmed with a broad grin. "So tell me, Jacob -- how was your weekend?"

I smiled back, feeling 10 years younger than I had on Friday. "Good," I said coyly. "I got all the drywall taped in the bedroom, and the joints smoothed over. A little sanding, and it'll be ready for primer and paint by next weekend."

Chandra frowned disapprovingly at me. "That's not what I meant, Jacob."

"I knew that," I retorted. "Everything else went according to plan -- your plan, I assume."

Sherman cleared his throat. "Actually, buddy, it was my idea to put you and Natalie together. Chandra just provided the means."

"I see," I said. "Well, Chandra, your means were damned effective. Natalie helped me finish up the drywall work yesterday, after we spent Saturday doing the tourist thing on the Mall. And when we weren't looking at monuments or making out like horny teenagers, we were trying to figure out how exactly that little candle works."

"Oh, really?," she said slyly. "And what did you conclude?"

"We didn't," I confessed. "We know it isn't magic, because neither one of us believes in magic. We know it isn't some kind of drug in the candle, because it didn't affect Natalie's roommate when she smelled it. The best idea we could come up with is that you did something during the ritual itself that messed with our minds."

Chandra said nothing; she simply smiled at me like a black Mona Lisa.

"Well?" I prompted. "Are you going to tell me if I'm right?"

"Answer me this first," she said. "Do you love the girl?"

My answer came straight from the gut. "Yes," I said, surprising myself at how certain I was. "I love her, and I'm pretty sure she loves me. And the more time we spend together, the more I think it would have ended up that way even without your voodoo spell."

"In that case," she replied, an unmistakable note of triumph in her voice, "does it really matter?"

She had an excellent point there.

-wg
9/6/00