

First Impressions

by Gary Jordan

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As I printed the order confirmation from Amazon.com, I was grateful once again for the relative silence of my old Canon ink-jet printer. The last thing I wanted right now was to disturb the two sleeping lumps nestled inside my shirt. At a few days old, they didn't do much besides eat and sleep, and feeding them kept me quite busy, while sleeping meant sharing my personal space and body heat. I'd taken leave from the plant this week and next because there was simply no way I could take them to work and no way I could leave them for more than minutes.

I double-checked the order. "Dragonsinger", Dragondrums" and "Dragonsong" by Anne McCaffrey - replacements for books long since loaned out and never returned. I'd enjoyed them years ago. Now I needed them for research. One of the lumps twisted fitfully, tickling my ribs and making me smile. I couldn't help but reflect back...

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It was the second day of May. I'd just returned from a trip that I'd taken to participate in a Ceremony out of town. Quite a ceremony, and I still wore a blissful expression on my face - but that's a whole 'nother story. My daughter, just recently turned "sweet sixteen" had managed to get herself up and to school, but had left me a note welcoming me home and asking me to pick up a few things from the grocery store and to check on her egg.

I checked on the egg first, even before storing my purple robes. She'd brought it home a couple of weeks before, saying it was for some kind of school project. Details were a little sketchy - I guess I assumed that it was one of those home-ec things where you pretend an egg is your baby or something. Eggzavier, as I thought of it (or him) had started off a bit soft, but had firmed up to a brittle hardness recently. I always thought they assigned regular hen's eggs for these projects, but Eggzavier must have been an ostrich egg or something - he was enormous compared to any grade A large I'd ever seen. Little did I know.

Once I was unpacked, I looked over her shopping list. Most peculiar, the list was heavy on inexpensive cuts of meat, like round steaks and flank steak, hamburger and chicken. Was my daughter planning a lot of barbecues? The other part of the list was skin products, moisturizers and creams. No snacks, no diet soft drinks (an addiction we share), no side dishes made the list. As I said, most peculiar. Well, the budget could certainly afford everything she asked for, and if she were planning a little outdoor cooking, I'd discuss niceties like potato salad and chips when she got home from school.

I checked Eggzavier again on the way out. When I rotated him in his bed of heated kitty litter (my personal coffee cup warmer providing the heat), I swear I felt him shiver. I positioned him a little deeper in his "bed" anyway, and gave him a little pat.

I was home again in under an hour. The clock by the front door indicated 4:20, but it's set five minutes fast anyway. My daughter would be home in another ten minutes, nearly last off the bus, unless she stopped to visit with friends. I hung my car keys under the clock and headed for the kitchen to put up the nearly 20 pounds of meat I'd brought in. I never made it.

Little Eggzavier was rocking around in his bed on the coffee table so hard, it looked like he'd roll out and end up on the floor. I quickly set down the plastic grocery bags and reached for him. No sooner did my fingers make contact than a crack split the shell nearly in two. More cracks appeared as I steadied the shell and I thought I was in imminent danger of having a baby ostrich or emu or some such in my hands.

What *did* emerge, moments later, was nothing I'd ever dreamed possible. In place of some avian oddity, two identical green-skinned creatures with swirling eyes and tiny claws came creeling with hunger from the shell. There was no doubt about the hunger - I felt it in an overwhelming surge of sensation as though it was me and not they. With one hand, I reached into a grocery bag and extracted a round steak, used my teeth to rip off the plastic wrap, then again to rip off a strip of meat to place in their ravenous beaks.

We kept this up through two steaks, until they were sated, me talking softly to my new dependents whenever my teeth weren't busy ripping meat. Their eyes went from a swirling red to green, before both fell asleep. When at last I could look away, I was startled to find my daughter standing in the open doorway, tears running down her cheeks. Having figured out what was going on (I have read all of the Pern novels), I could only look an apology into her blue eyes (my legacy). I could tell she knew as well as I that what was done could not be undone.

I had impressed two green "fire lizards". They were meant for her, but once impression occurs, an irrevocable bond is formed. While we three lived, that bond would bind us together in a kind of telepathic, or at least telempathic symbiosis. I couldn't give her either of my charges, even if I wanted to. And now, while they slept, I needed information.

"Honey," I asked softly, "where did you get that egg?"

"I can't tell you that, Dad. We're sworn to secrecy. I gave my word of honor I wouldn't tell." She wiped her eyes and sat on the floor next to me, reaching out to stroke supple skin.

"All right, I can respect that." For now, anyway, I thought. "Who's 'we'?"

"Me and nine of my friends. We each got an egg. I got first choice and picked the biggest. I was sorta hoping for a queen. You know, a gold?" She didn't look at me, her gaze was only for the fire lizards.

"Looks like we got twins, instead." I had to smile at my green ladies. "Who are the nine friends?"

She listed them for me, all girlfriends who had been to the house for visits or sleep-overs at one time or another. That figured. I was vaguely pleased that no boys were on the list, until that thought caused the hair on my neck to stand up. Inadvertently, there *was* one "boy" on the list, now. My thoughts were interrupted by the ringing of the phone. As I was in no position to answer it (and calls between 4:30 and 10:00 P.M. were never for me, anyway), my daughter answered for us.

The calls were steady for the next 20 minutes, with call waiting getting a workout. The tally was three bronzes and six blues. All males (the fire lizards, that is). My two were the only females. I don't know if any of the girls realized the implications. I wondered if all the eggs were from the same clutch, and whether fire lizards cared one whit about consanguinity.

Nine nubile fifteen or sixteen year olds, each with a male fire lizard, and one old widower with twin female fire lizards. I worked at the Power Plant of a prison, outside the fence. I had no desire to visit the other side. How long until Pat and Julie rose to mate? Would my first indication be a brightening of their green hides? I needed to do some research.

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That was days ago. I knew I had some time, but I was praying fervently that Amazon would not have any “shipping delays”, as I had heard rumored. I’d been a widower for over three years, and I wasn’t sure I could lock myself away when the time came. The image of nine teenagers surrounding me with dragon lizards perched on their shoulders, eyes swirling, while Pat and/or Julie blooded some poor squirrel in preparation for flight...

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I truly enjoyed anointing Pat and Julie with moisturizer. Tactilely, they were soft and pliant and warm - I suppose that stirred other memories. At this stage in their development, they were like babies, puppies, and kittens - they enjoyed physical contact and a soft, reassuring voice. Maybe some day they'd have a few words that they would recognize, but now the tone and volume were the important elements.

Jay had invited one of her friends, Elaine (with bronze Zander) to sleep over. Elaine was the first of her fire lizard-owning friends to visit since Impression (I capitalized the Day in my mind) and I couldn't help but attach some significance to that.

As usual Jay was showing off her domestic skills by doing something in the kitchen. Since her mother passed away, I've only insisted that she know *how*; most times we'd eat reheated frozen dinners or something from the burger joints in town. I always tried to hit the four basic food groups: Stouffer's, Banquet, Healthy Choice, and Fast.

Elaine sat on the couch, Zander on her shoulder. I sat at my computer, a FreeCell game ignored, while tending to my faire. I could feel her eyes on us, but other than my crooning to Pat and Julie, there was no conversation. Then she sighed. I watched surreptitiously as she soothed Zander, who stirred at her sigh, until he returned to his somnolence.

Pat and Julie were more vocal, softly harmonizing their pleasure at being caressed, as I worked Oil of Olay into their hides. One of the fire lizards, a blue, had gone *between* and not returned, possibly a victim to dry, cracked skin in the cold of *between*. Elaine from her vantage and I through Jay had managed to convince the remaining girls of the importance of this ritual.

Jay chose that moment to bring her first platter of cookies from the kitchen. With her mouth full (an unbreakable habit) she warned that they were still hot and we should be careful.

My hands were still covered with moisturizer. I cleared my throat to get Jay's attention and held up my slimy digits; Jay smiled and stuck a cookie between my teeth. I smiled a cookie-faced smile while inhaling air around the cookie to cool it. I winked at Jay.

Elaine took a cookie and held it with just her nails. She took a small bite and had to suck a little cooling air herself. I winked at her, too, eliciting a blush.

I finished my ablutions with Pat and Julie while somehow eating the cookie without dropping a crumb. I reached for a towelette from the dispenser I kept handy and wiped my hands. I then used the towelette to remove a crumb from the corner of my lips before disposing of it in a wastebasket. Pat and Julie both climbed my chest and crawled past the open top button of my shirt to nestle in the warmth between shirt and shoulder.

“Jay tells me you might be able to answer a few questions about fire lizard eggs,” I said, without preamble.

Elaine’s head whipped up, eyes wide, looking for Jay. But Jay was back in the kitchen, busy with the next tray of cookies. She looked at me. I looked back, eyebrows raised slightly. I did my best not to convey anger or accusation, just curiosity. She didn’t know what to say. A silence grew while we looked at each other.

“Jay won’t tell me anything herself.” I broke the silence first. “She’s honoring an oath, and I promised to respect that. But she did say she could introduce me to someone who could answer my questions, and you’re the first she’s invited over since the hatching. Am I guessing wrong?” I never raised my voice, but never broke eye contact.

Elaine wanted to tell someone. I could see it in her eyes. Perhaps she’d shared parts of the story with her friends, but none of them knew it all, just what they needed to know to get their promises of secrecy. Could she tell me? She had to trust someone. She sighed and looked away.

“I read a lot.” It began as simply as that. She couldn’t look at me. “I read a lot of science fiction and fantasy, especially. When I read the Dragonrider trilogy, I fell in love with a place called Pern, and the people who lived there. Do you know the books?” She glanced at me and I nodded, smiling.

“Anyway, I read all the stories about Pern. I loved the ones with Menolly, like Dragonsong and Dragonsinger. I wanted to *be* Menolly, with her talent and her voice, and people loved her, and she had a fair of fire lizards...

“But I can’t sing very well, and I can’t write poems or music, so it wasn’t a very realistic dream. But my dreams at night, they - I - it was, like, I could picture the fire lizards flying around. I could *feel* them in my dreams. I could feel... happiness, and... curiosity, and...” she blushed, looking at her sneakers “other things,” she finished weakly. She looked at me again.

“I could make a fair guess about the ‘other things,’” I said with a trace of a smile, “but I wouldn’t want to embarrass you.”

She blushed again, but continued. “One night a while ago, I was having one of those dreams. One with ‘other things’ in it. And it suddenly turned into a nightmare. I felt afraid, more than afraid. It was like watching a horror movie when the bad guy jumps out, only even more intense. And I could feel heat and fear, and I guess my mind screamed ‘Come to me’ because I was where it was safe, you know? I don’t think I yelled out loud because nobody woke up, not even me, right away.

“And it was, like, gone. Just stopped all of a sudden, and I woke up. And I’m all covered with sweat and confused and still shaking, and it was all so real I don’t know what to think.” She looked at me. “Does any of this make sense to you?”

“Actually, it does,” I nodded. “You may not be able to compose or sing, but if you were born on Pern during the ninth pass, *I* think you’d be able to talk to dragons. You’d be ‘Searched’, and you would impress a queen. I think you’ve been linked with fire lizards on a planet far away, centuries before the first humans will arrive there. What happened next? Or should I tell you my guesses?”

Elaine could only stare, mouth open, for the moment. She had figured out that she was linked to fire lizards, if only in her dreams. But talk with dragons? I thought she would be able to talk with dragons? That idea had never occurred to her. She wanted to be like Menolly; I compared her to Lessa and Brekke. Her mind boggled.

Seeing she was unable for the moment to continue, I did. “You lost the link because the fire lizard you were linked to obeyed you. She went *between*, coming to you. It sounds like she had completed a mating flight when a volcano erupted, and she panicked, and you provided an image, a destination, she could escape to. You were her lifeline to safety.”

Elaine nodded. “I think that was it.” She shuddered at the memory. “After what seemed like forever, sitting up in my bed scared out of my wits, she just appeared out of thin air, and dropped on me. *That* scared me almost as much as the dream.” She paused to swallow. “I had had these vivid dreams, and I knew what a fire lizard looked like, and it wasn’t exactly the image artists have put on the web, but close. But to have one drop on you?” She shuddered again.

“And she was so cold, and still, and I could barely *feel* her. She was afraid, more than anything, but so weak.” Elaine paused again. Her eyes had misted over, and she needed to wipe them before she could continue.

I got up from the computer desk and moved carefully, mindful of the fire lizards, to join her on the couch. I put my arms around her shoulders to comfort her. Elaine was grateful. She needed that, just now, and put her head against my chest. She would have used a shoulder, but those were occupied.

“She had traveled an unimaginable distance *between*, which McCaffrey describes as cold. She must have arrived in hypothermia, and possibly in shock,” I said softly. “You couldn’t know, when you called out to her, how dangerous the trip would be. Remember Lessa’s ride to bring the old timers forward?”

Elaine sniffed, then spoke into my chest; “She was so cold, and tired, and scared. I carried her to the bathroom and ran a sink full of warm water. My mom put my feet in a bucket of warm water when I played outside too long and my lips turned blue. And I held her head above water and rubbed her and talked to her, and she was trembling and twitching and I was so scared...”

“You did good. You did the right thing. You felt her fear, and she felt yours, but you acted; you didn’t give up, and neither did she. That’s important, too.” Elaine rocked in my arms as I spoke softly. Jay handed her a soda, and she drank deeply. Jay sat on the ottoman - she had never heard these parts, and was fascinated.

“Thank you. I didn’t know how much I needed to tell someone.” And she had needed to tell someone. I could almost feel the fear became a more distant memory as she sat cradled in my comforting arms. Finally, she could continue.

“When she seemed warm enough, and stopped shaking, I wrapped her in a towel and put her in my bed. I got the heating pad from the bathroom closet and plugged it in and put the towel on it. It got too warm for me, but I wanted her to be warm, so I stayed with her.

“She never left my bed. She never flew again. Her wings might have been damaged from the cold - I didn’t know how to check. I snuck scraps of food from the kitchen to feed her, and I kept the door to my room closed all the time. At least my family respected my privacy that much. Nobody bothered us.

“I came home from school one day and there they were, she’d laid her eggs on the heating pad. I guess she knew she couldn’t return to her hatching grounds, could hardly move, but she laid her eggs just the same. Oh, Mr. B, she was so weak! Laying the eggs must have taken all her strength. I hoped she would last to see them hatch, like that queen who lost her rider, but she disappeared that night.” Elaine was openly sobbing now.

I hugged her tighter, murmuring softly. Pat raised her head with a querulous chirrup, and began nuzzling Elaine’s hair gently. Julie joined in as well. When Zander awoke on her shoulder and began to stroke his knobby head against her chin, she *felt* the warmth and comfort like a tangible cloak, and her tears began to ebb. I know, because I felt it, too. When Jay wagged a cookie under her nose, she managed a chuckle.

Enveloped in sympathy and understanding, which was magnified by her link with Zander and even sensed from Pat and Julie, Elaine felt better than she had in months. She felt she could remain cocooned in this feeling forever. The links told me as much. Of course, other priorities intervened. I noticed the shift in the color of those swirling eyes first. Someone was getting hungry.

Jay noticed, too, and fetched a prepared platter from the refrigerator via the microwave “Just to take the chill off,” she said. Everyone was soon busy, keeping hungry fire lizards from awakening the neighbors.

Awakening. Sometime during Elaine’s revelations and comforting, the summer sun had gone down. That meant it was probably quite late. A wall clock confirmed it was approaching 10 PM. Where had the time gone?

“Do you have to work tonight, Dad?” Jay asked. It was my normal wake-up time on work nights.

“Not tonight. The Friday Night to Saturday morning shift is the only one where two people are scheduled, and I requested time off.”

To Elaine I explained, “We have five people working four ten-hour shifts each. Two work from 11 PM to 9 AM. One of those works Tuesday, through Friday, the other Friday through Monday - that’s me. The evening shift works from 3 PM to 1 AM, Saturday through Tuesday and Wednesday through Saturday. A day shift guy works 7 AM to 5 PM Saturday through Tuesday. The Superintendent works Monday through Friday, 8 AM to 4:30 PM, and covers the odd day shifts.”

Elaine listened politely, not really caring but I could tell she was glad I was here tonight, and glad I was available to talk to, and easy to talk to. She told me so.

I smiled. “It’s really easy to listen, when you have empathic amplifiers in each ear. Jay can tell you I haven’t always been easy to get along with. Particularly when we first moved here.”

“You had a lotta reasons for being a bear back then, Dad,” she defended. “You’re a lot easier to live with now.”

I laughed. “That’s true, and you were some of them. You’ve gotten easier to live with, too.”

Elaine said, “It’s hard to picture you as a grouchy old bear, even though Jay has told me some things. I see you now, and I can’t picture it.”

“I have trouble picturing it, and I lived it,” I said, softly. “You know the one about the frog and the scorpion?” Elaine shook her head. “The river is rising and a frog and a scorpion are on a little island that’s about to be underwater. The frog, of course, can easily escape. The scorpion pleads, ‘Let me ride to safety on your back.’ The frog says ‘How do I know you won’t sting me to death?’ The scorpion points out ‘If I did that, we’d both drown.’ So the frog agrees. Being helpful is in his nature. The scorpion climbs on his back and they start across. Halfway there, the scorpion stings the frog, and they both drown, because that’s in *his* nature.”

Elaine just looked at me. What was the point here?

“Being happy and easy to get along with is in my nature,” I said. “People have remarked on it most of my life. When things happen to change the way you are, sooner or later, you return to your nature. Even the scorpion could only make it half-way against his nature.”

“Enough of this. Time for you girls to pretend to get ready to sleep. Try not to stay awake past two - if you do, Jay wakes up grumpy. It’s her nature.”

Jay used the bathroom first, emerging in a size XXL Chocoholics Tee shirt. On the front it said 'Chocoholics 12 Step Program'; on the back, 'Never be more than 12 steps from chocolate'. Elaine thought it was cute. When Elaine was brushing her teeth, I performed my own ablutions in the master bath, which shared a wall. A toilet flushed. A sink ran. She left the bathroom as I was coming down the hallway in the opposite direction. I ostentatiously covered my eyes as she went past, causing Elaine to smile.

I almost stumbled when I felt the emotional relay from our fire lizards. Elaine was checking me out! But I continued by without a backward glance. She watched me seat myself in front of the computer. Shortly I heard the familiar sounds of the modem, followed by 'Welcome' and 'You've got mail.' I still felt a tinge of what I guessed was interest, as she continued to Jay's room.

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Elaine and Jay talked for hours. They talked about the usual things, boys, driver's licenses, boys, clothes, boys, makeup and jewelry, boys...

Some time after midnight, Elaine casually asked, 'So, does your Dad, like date a lot?'

'No,' Jay yawned. 'He says he's waiting 'til I move out, 'cause two women under one roof is trouble. That's like a Chinese idiot-gram or something.'

'Maybe he's seeing someone and not telling you,' Elaine probed.

'I'd know. He's always home. A couple of times he went out to the bar down the street with some people from work, but they were all guys.'

'Does your Dad drink a lot?'

'No. The times he went out, his friends teased him about getting fucked up on three beers. He kept a six-pack of beer in the fridge for, like, a year. We used to have hard stuff around, but he got rid of it 'cause we kept drinking it and he caught on.'

'Did you get in a lot of trouble?'

'No, he just dumped it all down the kitchen sink.'

'Cool. My Dad would've whipped my ass and grounded me forever. Like when he caught me smoking.'

‘I didn’t know you smoked.’

‘I don’t - now. My ol’ man like to tore me a new asshole. Grounded me for three months. Checked my room every day, sniffing for smoke. So I quit. What did your Dad do when he caught you?’

Jay sighed. ‘He got this look on his face, real sad-like, you know?’ Elaine murmured an affirmative noise in the dark. ‘He said, ‘I smoke, so I’m not going to be a hypocrite’ and then he said he was disappointed in me, and he hoped I’d quit before it was too late. Then he started buying my cigarettes, so I wouldn’t use lunch money or steal his.’ She paused. ‘Then he showed me how much my cigarettes were costing every week and cancelled my allowance to pay for them.’

‘He buys your cigarettes?’ Elaine asked.

‘Yeah. He says this way he can track how much I smoke and he gets to give me shit if he thinks I smoke too much. But you and Steph are the only friends I have that don’t smoke, and he doesn’t care if the others smoke at our house. He doesn’t tell their parents or anything.’

Eventually, the two girls drifted off to sleep.

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Elaine woke up confused. It took a moment to remember where she was. This was Jay’s room, in Mr. B’s house, and she was in a sleeping bag on an air mattress on the floor. Jay was in another sleeping bag, her futon arranged as a couch instead of a bed. It was still dark. Why had she awakened?

It was a dream, a hot, sweaty, intimate dream. She could feel her nipples pushing against her tee shirt, very sensitive and the feelings from below...

It wasn’t like the “other things” in her fire lizard dreams she had avoided talking about, and yet it was. Zander was asleep, and the sensations still continued. She squirmed around in the sleeping bag, unable to find a ‘comfortable’ position. It was as though an unseen... what? hand? tongue? *Something* was caressing her, from head to toe and back again, lavishing attention on her erogenous zones - she was turning into all erogenous zone. Her hands went to cover her nipples and pussy, to fend off the unseen, unknown, but thoroughly felt assailant. But there was nothing to touch, nothing to push away, and her hands turned against her as well, rubbing, pinching, and squeezing in concert with the phantom force.

Her climax was sudden and intense. She inhaled sharply and her throat constricted, curtailing what Elaine was certain would have been an ear-piercing scream, if only she could let it out. She rode the waves of orgasm until - again without warning - her body completely relaxed. Her breath came out as one long sigh, her throat now too relaxed to wail.

She lay still, her heart pounding, her breath short and panting, bewildered by what had happened. She had had dreams, and daydreams while she fondled herself, and those “other” fire lizard dreams. None had ever been this personal, this intense. What was happening to her?

She heard the creaking of a bed, then saw light under the door. Mr. B was up. Had he sensed anything? Was he aware of the dream as well? Elaine blushed as deeply as she ever had. She would be mortified if she had sent her incredibly erotic vision to him via their fire lizards. She heard a toilet flush, and a water running. It sounded like a shower. Well, she was hot and sticky; perhaps when Mr. B finished his, she would take one in the main bathroom, if the hot water lasted long enough.

After a short while, the shower stopped. Elaine had had time to catch her breath and calm down. If Mr. B had a wet dream, he probably wouldn't associate it with her - didn't guys have those dreams all the time? She waited until the light went out under the door, then gathered her clean clothes and got out of the sleeping bag. The tee shirt she'd gone to bed in was still damp, and clung everywhere. She left the bag open to air out and dry.

Elaine padded down the hallway to the main bathroom. A nightlight in the bathroom cast enough light to navigate the length of the hallway. Halfway there, Mr. B entered the hallway from the other end, an open diet coke bottle in one hand. They came to a halt on either side of the dimly lit doorway, both mostly in shadow.

“You're up,” he stated the obvious. She could make out that he was clad only in boxers.

“So are you,” Elaine contributed to the scintillating conversation. Could he tell how disheveled she looked? Would he identify that “freshly fucked” look in the shadows? Could he see her blushing?

“I'm sorry,” he said.

“Why?” Elaine took a half-step further into darkness. He could! Somehow he knew, and was trying to save her embarrassment. Elaine blushed more deeply. She’d blushed a lot in the last day - humiliation was becoming a constant companion.

“It was my fault. I should have realized Pat and Julie would pick up my, ah, feelings, and broadcast them. That you would feel them too.” He looked at the floor. “Can you forgive me?”

He thought that *he* had caused the dream. “Elaine blurted, “It’s not your fault! I can’t control my dreams, and Zander must have sent...”

“Mine weren’t dreams,” he interrupted. “I was wide awake. The dream didn’t come from you; it came from me.” Was *he* blushing? It was so hard to tell in this light.

“Oh,” she said in a small voice. It works both ways. Then she giggled.

He looked up and cocked his head. “What’s so funny?”

“I wonder if eight other girls woke up tonight feeling what I felt.”

Distress warred with mirth on his face, and lost. He managed a rueful chuckle, followed by a snort. “I sure hope not. Pat and Julie have met Zander and you, but none of the others, yet. And you were less than twenty feet away. I sure hope there’s a range limit on this sort of thing, or the future is going to very interesting to say the least.”

Elaine thought about the implications for a moment, and clapped a hand over her mouth to suppress the laughter that threatened to erupt. “If any time *any* of us are fu.. fooling around, all of us know about it, we’re all going to spend a lot of time blushing.”

“Are you blushing now, Elaine? he asked, grinning.

“Big time. And I bet you are, too,” she giggled.

“If I blush any harder, I’ll have a stroke.”

They both giggled uncontrollably for some time. When one would stop, the other would continue afresh. Finally, Mr. B regained control.

‘Elaine, you’ve read all of the Pern books, right?’ He turned serious. She wrestled with herself for control, and managed a nod. ‘Do you remember when Menolly and Sebell were alone in the boat and Sebell’s queen rose...” he trailed off.

Elaine’s eyes grew round. She hadn’t thought that far ahead. Now she was contemplating a mating flight. Mr. B was anticipating...

He nodded, seeing that she was beginning to understand the implications. ‘Tonight, Pat and Julie were asleep, and just radiating my emotions. When the time comes for them to rise...”

‘Ohmigod. And all the males belong to...”

“...teenaged girls.” he finished for her. ‘If tonight was any indication, those are going to be some interesting flights.”

Elaine stood in stunned silence, and not a little trepidation. She wanted to take comfort in Mr. B’s arms, but in many ways he was the source of her anxiety. She took a hesitant step forward and stopped, squarely in the light from the doorway. What should she, could she do?

Mr. B could not avert his gaze. Elaine’s damp tee shirt still clung to her body, particularly her breasts. He closed his eyes and stepped forward to envelop her in a loose embrace. Elaine relaxed into his arms.

An instant later, three fire lizards circled over their heads, wheeling awkwardly in the confined space of the hallway. Mr. B raised his arms parallel to the floor and all three immediately alighted. Zander awkwardly climbed to Elaine’s shoulder, sharp claws causing both humans to flinch. Three pairs of eyes of eyes radiated concern at finding their master and mistress gone, slowing to a swirling green now that they were found.

Mr. B turned Elaine in his arms, and propelled her into the bathroom. ‘Clean up,” he said mildly, closing the bathroom door. Elaine spun on her heel, a retort on her lips, to find the closed door ignoring her. Belatedly, she realized that Mr. B was attempting to exercise restraint and self-control. She should too, she told herself, but remembering the feelings of arousal so short a time ago, she wasn’t sure she wanted to.

Elaine pulled the tee shirt over her head and pulled the panties away from her crotch and off. The panties resisted; they were quite sticky. She adjusted the temperature of the shower and stepped in. She lathered a washcloth and passed it over her body, paying an inordinate amount of attention to her breasts and pussy. She dropped the cloth and continued washing her most sensitive areas by hand.

The knock on the shower wall startled her. Mr. B's muffled voice through that wall telling her she was a naughty, naughty girl caused her to miss a stroke, and delayed her climax. But even when she removed her hands to add more soap, her arousal continued to climb; her stimulation was not all in *her* hands or mind. She returned both hands to her pussy and almost immediately came, a knee-weakening, mind-shattering orgasm as good or even better than the last.

She managed to remain standing until the soap rinsed from her body. After toweling herself dry, she donned clean panties and tee shirt and walked the hallway toweling her hair.

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I'm going to hell, I thought. Not that I particularly believed in hell, but I knew I was a condemned man. After I turned off the computer and went to bed, my mind had been preoccupied with the curves and scent of a not quite 17 year old girl who had spent some time in my arms this evening. At no time had my actions been improper. Damn it, at no time had my *thoughts* been improper, at least consciously.

It was that flicker of interest as she went to bed that had triggered it. *She* had considered *me* in a sexual way. All the thoughts and fears that I had suppressed when I learned that I had the only fire lizards of their gender had erupted to the surface. As I lay in my bed trying to bury those thoughts, I could hear the girls chattering away. When at last the sound died off, an image of Elaine came unbidden into my mind. Where my arms had offered only comfort in reality, in fantasy they encircled her, and pulled her to me.

Irrelevantly, some snatch of a description of nudity in Japan tried to make itself clear in my mind. It was looked at but not seen? Seen but not noticed? I couldn't remember. But the way it applied now was that the sexuality of underage girls, after decades of self-conditioning, was noticed but not considered - until now.

From my reading, I believed that I had at least a year before Pat or Julie would rise to mate. By then, Elaine would be 18 and legal, though such a May-October affair would raise a great many eyebrows.

But her tight jeans enclosed womanly hips tapering to a slender waist, her T-shirt covered the curves of pleasantly rounded breasts. No doubt a bra concealed the true shape (I recalled the feel of a strap when my arm comforted her) but I had no doubt they were firm with youth, and more than adequately arousing.

I took myself in hand as I pictured the curves revealed. I pictured her nude form, imagination and experience filling in the blanks where direct observation failed. I pictured caressing those curves, spreading those legs, applying lips and tongue and fingers.

As masturbation fantasies go, this one was a winner. I climaxed sooner than I expected, and powerfully. I got out of bed and cleaned myself up with a quick shower. Instead of returning to bed, I went to the kitchen. I needed a drink, and though a bourbon and coke would have been welcome for once, I settled for a Diet Coke. I returned to my room.

Or at least I tried to. I ran into Elaine in the hallway. From the looks of her damp T-shirt, molded to her breasts, she's been experiencing some physical exertions. "You're up," I said. I'm a clever devil, am I.

"So are you," she replied, breathlessly. From her blush, I could guess what her exertions had been. I could even guess the reason.

"I'm sorry," I said. Did she know why?

"Why?" Elaine backed a half-step and blushed more deeply.

She did. "It was my fault. I should have realized Pat and Julie would pick up my, ah, feelings, and broadcast them. That you would feel them too." I averted my gaze at her half-seen nipples. "Can you forgive me?"

Elaine blurted, "It's not your fault! I can't control my dreams, and Zander must have sent..."

She didn't. "Mine weren't dreams," I interrupted. "I was wide awake. The dream didn't come from you; it came from me." It was my turn to blush.

"Oh," she whispered. Then she giggled.

"What's so funny?" *I* could see humor in this, abstractly. How did she see it?

"I wonder if eight other girls woke up tonight feeling what I felt."

I don't know which of my emotions were displayed. A chuckle escaped which I suppressed with a snort. I hoped there were range limits and told her so. But she thought it even funnier.

Elaine's mouth dropped open. She clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter, but her eyes twinkled anyway. 'If any time *any* of us are fu.. fooling around, all of us know about it, we're all going to spend a lot of time blushing.'

I asked if she were blushing now.

'Big time. And I bet you are, too,' she giggled.

'If I blush any harder, I'll have a stroke.' I could feel the heat in my face. At least that kept the blood from rushing to another part of my anatomy.

We both giggled for some time. When one would stop, the other would continue afresh. I fought for control, and finally achieved some small measure.

'Elaine, you've read all of the Pern books, right?' She managed to stop and nod. 'Do you remember when Menolly and Sebell were alone in the boat and Kimi rose...'

Elaine's eyes grew round.

I nodded, seeing that she was beginning to understand the implications. 'Tonight, Pat and Julie were asleep, and just radiating my emotions. When the time comes for them to rise...'

'Ohmigod. And all the males belong to..'

'...teenaged girls. If tonight was any indication, those are going to be some interesting flights.' Once again, I had that stray image of a bunch of girls and their fire lizards gathered around me while Pat and Julie blooded a squirrel.

Elaine stood with her mouth agape. I could not tear my eyes away. Elaine's damp tee shirt still clung to her body, particularly her breasts. Her nipples were becoming distended. I closed my eyes and stepped forward to hug her. She relaxed in my arms.

Suddenly, three fire lizards circled over our heads. Perfect timing. I raised my arms and they all landed and clung. Zander climbed to Elaine's shoulder, his claws causing us both to wince. Three pairs of eyes radiated concern at finding their master and mistress gone, slowing to a swirling green now that we were found.

I turned Elaine and pushed her into the bathroom. "Clean up," I said, and closed the bathroom door.

I went down the hall to my room. I took a long pull on the Diet Coke. I figured, one last trip to the john, and then off to sleep.

On the other side of the bathroom wall I heard the shower running. My nipples became erect, followed by my cock. Since, at that particular moment, I *hadn't* been thinking of the naked teen less than three feet away, this arousal had to have an outside source.

I rapped on the separating wall. "Elaine," I called, "you are a nasty, nasty girl!" I had to add my own stimulation to what our fire lizards were transmitting. Between whatever she was doing, and what I was doing to myself, the climax arrived swiftly once again.

Lying in bed, I worried that the rapidity of our orgasms was unsatisfying, until it occurred to me that they were both intense and mutual. With that comforting thought, I fell asleep.

~

3

Early on a Friday morning I finally took Pat and Julie outside to acquaint them with the ‘great outdoors’. I stressed to them over and over that they were to remain hidden inside my shirt. Their heads peeked out of my collar while their twirling eyes took in all the new sights and smells.

Before we went outside I had reinforced the feelings of safety and comfort of the indoors, and in particular the safety of my bedroom. I did my utmost to convey that my bedroom was a haven to return to in case of any danger. I looked all around my room and thought calm, reassuring thought and feelings. I don’t know that they understood a word as I spoke of that safety in reassuring tones.

The first test happened at the end of my driveway. My neighbor’s black Labrador retriever obliged by running toward me and barking. I felt a small thrill of fear (I know he wants to lick me to death) and found myself unladen before I could swallow. I patted Rufus on his bristly head and returned to the house.

As I’d hoped, Pat and Julie were on the master bed, wings spread and eyes swirling red in alarm. I gathered them to me and spoke softly, once again thinking calm, reassuring thoughts and images. Eventually, they calmed, and their eyes were a slower green swirl. Tucking them under my shirt again, we returned outside to nature.

This time I avoided Rufus and circled the house instead. In the back yard, the squirrels were racing up and down the pines, and two heads watched intently. I flash-forwarded to a recurring image of nine teens surrounding me while their fire-lizards watched Pat or Julie blooding a squirrel.

I shook that thought off. It would as likely be a field mouse as a squirrel - the squirrels had had ample practice avoiding capture from the neighborhood cats. Except that the squirrels were semi-permanent residents hereabouts, and had never fended off a fire-lizard. And I had never fended off willing, eager teenagers.

Which, as the first creelings of hunger came from my pair, brought me to the immediate problem of Elaine. So, as a mature adult, I postponed that problem a little longer. We returned inside and I prepared breakfast, letting the girls share a slice of toast while I broiled a pound of bacon and cracked eggs for omelettes. Jay came to the table via the refrigerator, where she snagged a quart of orange juice.

While Jay competed with Pat and Julie for the lion's share of the bacon and eggs, I tried to shield my thoughts. Tonight was two weeks since Elaine's sleepover and I had told Jay to invite Elaine and any of the other girls again. I'll admit to a fear that what had happened with Elaine might happen as well with the others. I'll admit that there was some thrill at the thought, too.

But I had some other thoughts that led to a hypothesis which needed testing. Elaine was performing her own tests, and I was... less than pleased. That night two weeks ago had demonstrated that Elaine and I, through our fire lizards, shared any intense feelings and emotions. In the two weeks since that night, I had been inhibited from, shall we say, mastering my domain. Shit, let's call it what it is; I hadn't beat off in two weeks.

But I was in no danger of losing my libido, or lacking for satisfaction. Elaine had apparently had no such inhibitions. When her bedtime corresponded to my wake-up time, I had no complaints at awakening to a throbbing erection. It was a good deal less convenient if she went for an encore while I was commuting to work or while I was trying to get a turnover from the off-going shift, which happened half the time. I had excused myself with stomach cramps each time. The boys at work were convinced I was getting ulcers.

I could tell that her alarm woke her at six for school, because shortly afterwards, so did my cock. At least at that hour, I was alone in the power plant and could plan to be in the rest room.

I shared other strong emotions as well. When I awoke from my daytime sleep shortly after going to bed, consumed in overwhelming anger (which Pat and Julie echoed with orange swirling eyes), Jay confirmed with a phone call that Elaine and her little brother had had a fight. On another morning, just before shift's end, I clung to a handrail on the catwalk above the boilers quivering with unnamed terror. Jay reported that the brakes of Elaine's schoolbus had failed when approaching an occupied rail crossing. Thankfully, the emergency brakes had worked.

On Monday, I had given Jay a note to pass to Elaine:

Dear Elaine,

I think we need to discuss the phenomenom face to face. I told Jay to invite you this weekend. In the meantime, could you please restrain yourself? Some activities should be performed at a less inconvenient hour.

*Affectionately,
Mr. B.*

Since Monday night, I had orgasmed every day at 6 AM, 4:30PM, again at 10:00PM, and finally some time between then and midnight. She must have been alone most of Monday evening, since I got very little sleep before work. At least I was off Wednesday night, when she was suffering from insomnia.

This morning, since I once again had Friday off, I planned to teach her a lesson. My day had started with the usual erection, and I had not only resisted this time, I had taken a *very* cold shower. I suspect Elaine went to school somewhat frustrated.

Jay pecked my cheek and was off to her bus stop. I started the after-breakfast anointing of my ladies with Oil of Olay with one eye on the clock. I knew the block scheduling for classes this year and had planned a little payback. Instead of six 50 minute periods and a 40 minute lunch, this year the county high school lengthened classes to an hour and 45 minutes and provided two lunch periods, alternating subjects. Elaine had classes first and second block and ate second lunch.

School started at 8:15. Homeroom ended at 8:30. Elaine's first class began at 8:40, and so did I. With Pat on my left shoulder, and Julie on my right, both tucked in and sleeping, I called up an erotic story on the computer. Next to me was a bowl of cold water and a washcloth. I selected an erotic website, set a story on slow scroll, and added a little more Oil of Olay to my hands after lowering my zipper and fishing out my flaccid cock.

The story was arousing. A nice Catholic kid loses his parents and moves in with a foster family, an attractive mother and two teenage girls. The older girl is a cheerleader who takes their mutual virginity and sets him up to take the virginity of the rest of the cheerleading squad. It got me erect and I took care to stay just at the edge - watching the clock helped. Picturing Elaine squirming in her seat waiting for the bell to ring so she could rush to the girls' room almost put me over the edge, and I had to think baseball to back off. I was as stiff as a bat.

I paused the scrolling a few minutes before the end of her first class and tried to clear my mind. I could tell the instant Elaine reached a stall in the rest room, however, and that was my cue to dunk a washcloth and apply it to the affected area. I gasped as my erection shrank. Poor Elaine.

I was still limp when the clock said Elaine's second class started. I started scrolling and rubbing again, seeking the edge once more. Holding off satisfaction was a more difficult tightrope walk this time. I suspected Elaine was wiggling one crossed leg, trying to get enough stimulation. Maintaining this level without going over was beginning to be painful. Every now and then, Pat or Julie would open barely hooded eyes, swirling in a slight amber tinged shade of green. I maintained the stimulation right through the end of her class into her lunch period.

The phone rang. As I expected, caller ID displayed the number of the pay phone in the cafeteria. I answered, "Hello, Elaine."

"You win. You've made your point and I'm sorry," she said breathlessly. "I won't do it again."

"You sound like you're out of breath," I gloated.

"You're driving me crazy," she whispered fiercely. "If I go to the rest room, are you going to hit yourself with a hammer again, or whatever you've been doing?"

"No. But you'd better hurry because..." The phone clicked off and a dialtone filled my ear. I grabbed a kleenex and chuckled.

I leaned back and waited. It must have taken ten minutes for her to get an empty stall. Ten minutes while I tried to get even closer to the brink without going over. At the first hint of external stimulation, I let myself go. And go. The male orgasm isn't meant to come so long, and I began to wonder if there was a reverse side to blue balls.

Finally, the climax ended, but the stimulation didn't, and neither did my erection, something that hadn't happened to me in at least a dozen years. I needed more lotion. I needed more air. Then I just needed more. I passed out from the intensity of the pleasure.

I awoke to the phone ringing again. Same number on the caller ID. "Hello?" It might be Jay.

“Wow. That was... wow. Thank you so much. I’ll see you later, okay? Wow.” She hung up.

~

I woke up from a short nap around 5 o’clock. Jay’s bus generally drops her off at half past four, so hers had to be one of the female voices chattering away down the hallway. Interwoven with the feminine voices was the higher pitched warbling of an indeterminate number of fire lizards. Julie and Pat were absent from my neck and shoulders.

One of the girls shrieked and I wasn’t surprised to find Pat, Julie, and Zander flitting above my bed, eyes swirling in alarm. When Pat and Julie dropped quickly to my chest, Zander dropped to the bed by my head. I talked to them all softly, scratching behind eye ridges, until the swirling changed back to green. Zander accepted my touch as readily as my girls, and soon all three were curled on my chest. I almost dropped back to sleep myself.

There was a light tap on my door, and Jay opened it a crack. Seeing that I was dressed and above the spread, she turned and whispered something, then she and Elaine entered and collected the limp flits. Elaine had a bemused look on her face. “What’s the matter, Elaine?”

“All the others’ fire lizards returned to their homes. Zander went to you,” she whispered.

“I find that very flattering,” I whispered back. “Why do you suppose he chose here instead of your house?”

“I don’t know. I did what you suggested, I pictured my room as a safe place and all. Maybe that got undermined a little when my little brother or my parents knocked on my door and startled me. Or maybe he just followed Pat and Julie. I can tell he likes them.”

“Well, he’s welcome here any time,” I said, and my subconscious supplied silently, “and so are you.” I really didn’t want thoughts like that coming without my conscious involved. Besides the obvious *jailbait* issue, there was the whole age difference thing. Sooner or later, Elaine would find someone her own age, and we needed to discuss that and the fact that I would know when he reached each base, and would be embarrassingly aware of the day he stole home.

And if I started dating, a teenager would know every time I was aroused. I'm not so old that a women bending over, a silhouette of a breast, a glimpse of cleavage didn't stir my interest. Unless Pat and Julie learned a lot more control and circumspection, *I* would have to learn to be both a voyeur *and* an exhibitionist. Even now, as the girls carried our fair back to the living room and the hallway light exposed the gap between Elaine's thighs through her demure knee length skirt...

Elaine froze in my doorway. Damn. She caught that thought, or the feeling it produced. Was she angry? Shocked? I closed my eyes and tried to think of tomorrow night's worklist.

I opened one eye and Elaine was still in the doorway. She rolled her hips and *undulated* down the hallway. Worse than angry or shocked, she enjoyed my illicit notice and was encouraging more. Not for the first time, I told myself, 'I'm going to hell.'

~

I got up and splashed water on my face and combed my hair. I had no idea how many girls were in my living room, nor how many would be sleeping over, and I felt trepidation (and no small amount of fear) at the answer to that. Worse, I knew Elaine was aware of it, if not the reasons for it.

Damn it, by not taking my own daughter into my confidence, I had exacerbated a situation over which I already had precious little control. In my defense, there aren't many fathers who frankly discuss their sex lives with their daughters, except as examples of What All Boys Want and Why They Should Wait. And what could I tell her, anyway?

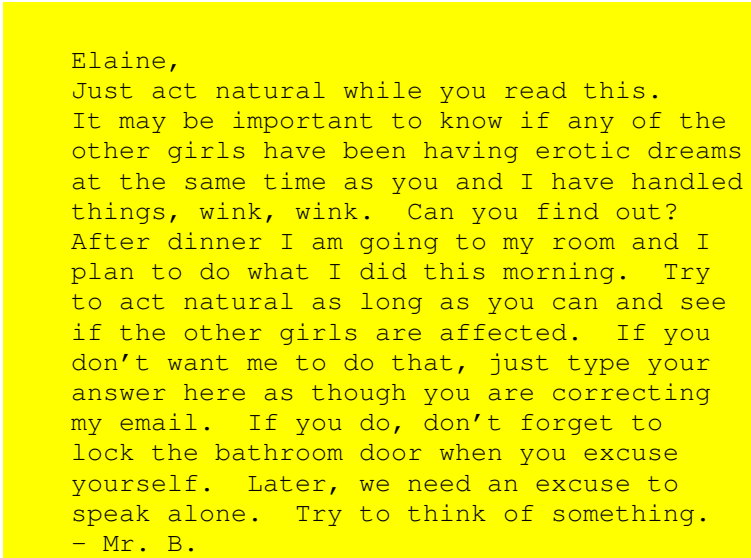
It hit me like a brick. I *did* know what to tell her. Elaine had been telling *me* for two weeks. Waiting and What All *Boys* Want, indeed. A dollar and *those* old paradigms would buy a cup of coffee almost anywhere. Not only did I need to talk to Elaine, but now I needed to have a realistic talk with Jay as well. I wondered what Elaine made of the emotions that had flitted by with the complete upset of my worldview.

I reintroduced myself to the girls in the living room, showing favoritism only to blood kin. I vaguely remembered Brenda, whose brown Keanu was a lazy little butterball; Kimberly, with blue Papa Smurf; and Jessica and her bronze Chandler. The fire lizards chittered, the girls chattered, and I made myself comfortable in front of the computer. Jay, as she had during Elaine's last visit, pattered in the kitchen.

FreeCell was only peripherally on my mind. I eavesdropped shamelessly, wondering what, if anything, Elaine had shared/would share of our fire lizard-enhanced rapport. In reality I knew nothing of importance would be said within earshot except accidentally. When serious topics were discussed, they would adjourn to Jay's room to 'try on clothes' or do each other's hair. With the door closed.

One trend I found extremely interesting. No matter how much the girls teased one another, no matter how much blushing, anger, *whatever* emotion was evoked in the banter the girls shared, the only ones I felt at all strongly were those of Elaine. It was as though the other girls were using their fire lizards like toy store walkie-talkies (emotionally speaking), while Elaine and Zander were a ham radio tuned to my frequency. I refined a hypothesis or two in that light, and relaxed somewhat in its implications.

Since I couldn't exactly drag Elaine aside to talk to her, I began typing an email:



Elaine,
Just act natural while you read this.
It may be important to know if any of the other girls have been having erotic dreams at the same time as you and I have handled things, wink, wink. Can you find out? After dinner I am going to my room and I plan to do what I did this morning. Try to act natural as long as you can and see if the other girls are affected. If you don't want me to do that, just type your answer here as though you are correcting my email. If you do, don't forget to lock the bathroom door when you excuse yourself. Later, we need an excuse to speak alone. Try to think of something.
- Mr. B.

I hit the enter key until the text scrolled off the screen, then turned around and paid attention to the ladies for a few minutes. The discussion centered around 'Buffy, the Vampire Slayer', a television show I had only occasionally glimpsed because Jay watched. At an opportune moment, I inquired about moisturizers, asking what the girls used on their fire lizards. I asked if I could check their fire lizards for patchy spots while they handled mine for the same reason. Jay wanted an excuse to handle the flits as well. I admit it's addictive, like holding a newborn. While this was going on (I checked Zander first, deliberately), I asked Elaine if she would proofread my email before I sent it, and she agreed. I kept the girls' attention on our fire lizards, soliciting their advice and dispensing my own.

I felt Elaine startle as she read my message, but noticed no trace reflected in the girls, even though more than one neck craned in her direction and a few eyes swirled faster, particularly Pat's and Julie's. Zander spread his wings on her shoulder, catching her pony tail. She asked nonchalantly, 'Should I just correct the spelling?' and I responded with an uninterested affirmative. I heard the keys clicking rapidly. She must have taken typing or keyboarding.

I even picked up a tip or two from my diversion. Pond's Moisturizing Cream was just as effective as Oil of Olay, and Wesson Oil or Crisco would do in a pinch, or even olive oil (I managed not to ask if it was extra-virgin). We had all laughed at that, causing some amusing squacking. I thought I might stick with O-cubed because I had started with it, it worked, and my hands were feeling smoother (not necessarily a bad thing, considering what Elaine had put me through for the last fortnight).

When Elaine informed me that my spelling had been corrected, I thanked her and the girls for their help, complimented them on the fine care they had taken of their fire lizards, and returned to the computer. I read:

Elaine,
Just act natural while you read this.
It may be important to know if any of the
other girls have been having erotic dreams
at the same time as you and I have handled
things, wink, wink. Can you find out?

I'll try. You'll know when I bring it
up. (Wink, wink)

After dinner I am going to my room and I
plan to do what I did this morning. Try
to act natural as long as you can and see
if the other girls are affected. If you
don't want me to do that, just type your
answer here as though you are correcting

Are you kidding? I can hardly wait!

my email. If you do, don't forget to
lock the bathroom door when you excuse
yourself.

Good idea, LOL. And I'll take my
purse. You already owe me a new
billfold. My old one has some
really deep bite marks, and it
will have more soon.

Later, we need an excuse to
speak alone. Try to think of something.

- Mr. B.
I'll try. XXX Elaine

I deleted the email.

~

Dinner was interesting. Jay had stayed simple, spaghetti and meatballs in a marinara sauce, with *lots* of little meatballs. A bowl of meatballs without sauce sat in the center of the table, and the table had been set with saucers next to plates. Each girl had a fire lizard perched on her shoulder. Julie wrapped her tail possessively around my neck, but Pat had allowed herself to be cajoled onto Jay's shoulder. Their appetites had been curbed by snacks throughout the evening, so they ate with good manners for a wonder. Each girl served herself and took a saucer of meatballs on the side.

I may have inhibited the normal exuberance of a table full of teenaged girls. It almost felt like one of my juvenile dates, where neither of us took more than a single bite for fear of committing some faux pas. The conversation was restrained at first, too, until someone teased Jessica about the way she ate spaghetti at school. Things were livelier after that.

I answered questions and comments, but turned down thirds (to the laughter of good natured joking) and withdrew, mentioning that it was past time for Pat and Julie's nap, and I'd be reading in my room if I was needed. Elaine's eyes sparkled. I didn't dawdle - I could feel an erection growing. Not *my* fault. I hadn't been in quite that much of a hurry.

I did snag my bottle of Olay from the computer desk. Had a feeling I might be needing it.

In my locked room, I disposed myself and my ladies for a little light fantasizing. I was semi-erect but in no great rush. First I set a mental stage. I tried to picture the young ladies in the living room, sprawled comfortably watching a tape on the television. For the purposes of my fantasy, I made the tape a 'women in prison' movie. I tried to envision each girl separately.

Keanu's Brenda. Tallish. Blondish. Heavy breasts. Not overweight, but solid. She'd been wearing jeans and a pullover of some kind. Sneakers, I think. Then there was Papa Smurf's Kimberly. As tall as Brenda, but thin. No tits. Well, she had the start of tits, but nothing noticeable. Short, hair, curly or wavy, brown, I recalled, or maybe dark blonde. Jeans and a t-shirt. Now Chandler's Jessica. Shortish, maybe Jay's height. No guess about her bust, she was wearing a University of Miami Hurricane sweatshirt, several sizes too large. Jeans again. Dark hair, longer than shoulder length. I grinned - sloppy eater.

Elaine. Tall enough for my lips to reach her green-flecked brown eyes. Her brown hair with its red highlights hung just below her shoulders, except tonight, when her blue scrunchie gathered it into a ponytail, except for the escaped strands that hung in front of her left ear. Her earlobes each had a single piercing in contrast to Jay's seven, and she wore diamond-chip earrings of sterling or white gold. Her hips were womanly, in proportion to her waist. Not a model's pinched waist, a woman's waist. Her breasts were hand-sized, their nipples like thimbles surrounded by half-dollar sized areolas. She was wearing a yellow on blue floral patterned blouse above a knee-length cotton skirt, zippered on the right side. Her blue and white sneakers had a Nike swoop over white ankle socks. I'd noted an ankh ring on her middle finger when she had stroked Zander, and a Timex sports watch with leather band on her left wrist.

Jay, of course, was absent from this fantasy. I may be going to hell, but I wasn't travelling that particular highway. As it was, this highway had no posted speed limit. I was fully erect. I rubbed Oil of Olay between my palms to warm it, then took matters into my own hands.

In the fantasy, the antics on the screen released inhibitions off-screen, and three girls were in a squirming heap. On the sofa, Elaine unbuttoned her blouse to her waist and inserted her right hand to tease her nipples through her translucent green bra. Her left hand slowly lowered the zipper on her skirt, then stole into her matching green panties.

And that was as far as I got before I felt Elaine join in. So much for observing the other girls, I laughed softly. I lay back and stroked wholeheartedly for two.

4

Among the problems posed by working the midnight shift is the complete upset of one's diurnal rhythms. During the work week, you choose a time to sleep between shifts - I usually slept in the evening. But during your days off, you tend to re-orient to normal patterns, to accommodate Life As We Know It. As a result, your (my) body has no idea what normal is anymore. I fell asleep while reading and waiting for Elaine to find an excuse to talk to me.

I woke at 4 A.M. The house was quiet, and except for the lamp next to my bed and the nightlight in the bathroom, dark as well. I left Pat and Julie on my pillow and prowled a bit.

Jay's door was open and her room unoccupied, which meant that the living room was covered with sleeping bags, air mattresses, and sleeping teens. Elaine had evidently found no opportunity to knock on my door, or had been caught up in the joy of sharing teenage camaraderie, for which I would never fault her. I dug out the pajamas I never wear, donned them and a bathrobe, and made my way to the kitchen for a raid on the refrigerator.

As I halfway expected, the sleepover had made serious inroads into the snack and drink supplies. Of course, that's what they're their for, but it always surprises me to find my Diet Coke stash more heavily hit than the Coke, root beer, Sprite and ice tea. I'd long since given up on mixing Kool-Aid or similar drinks; they just weren't as popular today as when I was that age. Come to think of it, they weren't all that popular when I was a teen, if a carbonated alternative was permitted. I snagged a Diet Coke from the fridge and a rolled-up partial bag of Fritos from the counter and headed back to my room.

I paused in the living room and tried to identify the bodies in what little streetlight filtered through blinds and curtains, and reflected into the room from the nightlight. Jay was curled up on the demi-sofa under her mother's afghan. I wasn't sure who occupied the sofa, nor the air mattress stretched before its length; their heads faced away, and in this light hair color was indistinguishable. The chair with ottoman contained Kimberly -bronze Chandler identified her more surely than any feature of hers. The remaining sleeping bag was shadowed from all light, and could be anyone.

I sighed softly to myself. I had the means at *hand* to stimulate Elaine to wakefulness, but without knowing its effect on the others, I was reluctant to use it. In all truth, I felt I'd made a statement yesterday about mutual consent, and any such action on my part would be hypocritical and... rude. Our talk would wait.

On that thought, I returned to my room and picked up where I'd left off in my second reading of The Skies of Pern.

~

I heard the first stirrings at about seven. Left to their own devices (and based on past experience) the girls would have slept until noon after keeping themselves awake until the wee hours. Now they woke whether they wanted to or not in response to the pangs of hunger from six red-eyed flits. I donned robe once more and rushed to the kitchen. I fetched two packages of chuck steak from the freezer to replace the thawed meat which I removed from the refrigerator, and moved the thawed packages to the cutting board, where I began slicing meat into short thin strips. Every ten slices, I diverted strips to the greedy maws creeling on my shoulders. As soon as I had a platter, I moved it to the microwave for a minute and returned to the cutting board.

The '**ding**' of the microwave coincided with the appearance of Brenda in the kitchen, and I nodded and indicated for her to take the meat into the living room while I finished up. Pat and Julie elected to stay with me, despite the aroma of the warmed meat in Brenda's hands, and despite the fact that they only received two strips out of ten between them.

I popped the second platter in the microwave and again hit the minute timer. The edge was off their hunger, but both of my dependents peered through the door as the platter rotated on the carousel. I think the average fire lizard could consume half its weight in red meat, twice each day. I actually began to worry that one of my ladies might try to go *between* into the microwave and took the trouble to picture the inside and convey 'danger'. When the timer '**dinged**' again, Pat and Julie disappeared - not quite the reaction I wanted or anticipated.

Carrying the platter to the living room, I saw nary a flit in sight. I had been too effective in making my point. I found not two nor three, but all six fire lizards in my bed, eyes swirling in various degrees of alarm and hunger. I called down the hallway to the girls to bring the meat.

Having four teenagers sitting cross-legged on my bed with me prompted a Penthouse Forum thought, the kind that starts, “I never thought this would happen to me, but...”, and I had the predictable reaction until I caught Elaine’s sidelong grin. No one else seemed to notice, and I managed to suppress further thoughts down that slope. I noted Elaine’s smirk for that as well.

At least the fire lizards’ hungers were sated. To prevent any other embarrassing reactions on my part, I offered to make breakfast for everyone. Hunger won over sleep, and we adjourned to the kitchen, where four girls adorned with sleeping fire lizards ‘helped’ me prepare sausage, scrambled eggs, and toast the way a cat helps you walk. I managed to get them all seated with plates and cutlery, while serving eggs straight from my Texas skillet (the largest). The sausage they helped themselves to, still sizzling on the broiler pan atop a hot pad.

Jay woke up in time to rescue her share, but missed out on her orange juice. She settled for milk this once. The girls discussed their plans for today around mouthfuls. I was relieved to learn that Brenda’s mother would be picking up both Brenda and Kimberly within the hour, and Jessica was expected home shortly after (she drove herself). Elaine had no set time. It looked like we might have time to talk after all. I retired to my room to dress for the day.

~

I got to meet Brenda’s Mom when she arrived. Claire was an attractive redhead, with the characteristic freckles that say, “This ain’t no dye job.” I may have flirted a bit. I felt a stab of jealousy from an unexpected quarter, and pled other responsibilities to cut the introduction shorter than it might have been otherwise. The girls said goodbye in the driveway while I returned inside.

Inside the house once again, the girls were talking about Brenda’s Mom. Jessica said that she loved Claire’s complexion and hair color, but would hate to have that many freckles.

I asked, “You don’t think she was offended by my flirting, do you? It’s just part of my nature to flirt with attractive women.” I added that for Elaine’s benefit, but I didn’t know if the feelings of guilt were mine or hers. Jessica assured me that Claire flirted with all her friends’ fathers, and no one took it seriously. It was her nature, too.

I thought I could attribute the increase in guilt properly; I’d expected feelings of relief instead.

Jessica took her leave minutes later, with hugs for everyone, including me. At last, it was time for a talk.

I surprised myself when I said, ‘Elaine, would you mind if I spoke to Jay alone for a bit?’

I surprised Elaine as well, but she said, ‘No, of course not. I’ll just watch TV until you’re done.’

I led Jay back to her room and closed the door. Without preamble, I started, ‘Jay, I think you and I need to have an honest adult discussion.’

Even without my emotional amplifiers, I could feel walls coming up and doors closing. ‘Dad, we already had this talk, remember? I know about birth control, I know how you feel about waiting for the right boy, I know all about the birds and bees from you and from school. Can’t this wait? I have company.’

“*We* have company, and if I thought this talk could wait, it would have waited.” I took a breath. ‘Look, we had a father/daughter talk, and I said all the father things while you closed your mind and nodded a lot. I’m not asking for a repeat of that. What I’m offering is a chance to talk honestly, adult to adult. You get a get-out-of-jail free card - nothing you tell me now will ever be held against you.’

Jay looked at me dubiously, not sure where this was going. That was okay - neither was I. We stared at one another, and I looked -really looked at the young woman I had raised. Her hair was currently Clairol Mahogany. She hadn’t liked it when the blonde locks she had flaunted until puberty had darkened, and was a charter member of the color of the month club. My own blue eyes looked back at me through longer, darker lashes. Was she wearing makeup, or was that natural?

I did **not** look at her bust - I was uncomfortably aware that she had her mother’s genes, too, and might forever have trouble finding a boy who would look her in the eyes. I wondered if her height had changed from the five-three mark on the closet door. She had grown up and out and the time for treating her as ‘my little girl’ was past. I broke the silence.

‘Look, sweetie, I’ve always approached these talks as a parent - a Dad, concerned about his daughter. I know that makes you defensive. What I’m saying now, is that I’m going to treat you like another adult. I’m not telling you not to smoke, not to drink, not to have sex. The *Dad* in me doesn’t want those things for his little girl, he wants to protect and shield her. But the *adult* in me realizes that you can’t be protected from yourself.

‘I’ve lately been reminded that teenaged girls have hormones, too. The boys aren’t the only ones who want to get their jollies.’ I thought I’d lost her there, but her eye-roll was only for my antiquated phrasing.

‘You really want the truth?’ she asked. ‘No punishment for truth? You’ve always said that, but...’ She paused, then looked me in the eyes. ‘Dad, I haven’t been a virgin for over a year.’ She waited for the explosion.

Hey, my view of the universe had been altered repeatedly over the last month. Was I going to get upset over a little thing like some fumbling dirtbag stealing my baby’s virginity? Not after I fumbled with the internal Dad-mode switch. I curbed my first impulse to ask who and instead asked if it had hurt, and if she had used protection. It had and she had. I allowed as how it got better with practice and she agreed, nearly tripping the Dad circuit breaker back in.

‘Anyway,’ she continued, ‘I don’t see what the big deal is. It’s fun, and it feels good, but I could live without it.

I had to smile. ‘Sweetheart, if you do it with someone you like, because *you* want to and *not* just because *he* wants to, and you take your time and do it right, you’ll find out what the big deal is.’

She looked doubtful again, but I wasn’t prepared to discuss technique yet. We chatted pleasantly, if hesitantly about orgasms, protection, drugs (Dad mode: Oh No, Not Pot!), alcohol (how can you drink those disgusting wine coolers?) and boys in general. I didn’t like the fact that she had lost her virginity to a 20 year-old, and said so, but I also admitted that the age thing made me feel like a hypocrite again.

‘Why would that make you feel like a hypocrite?’ she asked. Then her eyes twinkled. ‘Dad! are you seeing a younger woman?’ She broke out in a grin, the first since this heart-to-heart began.

It wasn't actually the ideal segue into the other topic I wanted to discuss with my daughter, but I had nothing better planned, so I told her. Everything, leaving out the graphic details, from the last sleepover up through last night. After the initial jaw-dropping incredulity, I must say she took it rather well.

"So you've been having sex with my best friend for two weeks," she finally observed. "No wonder you're ready to treat me like an adult."

"Not sex, sweetie, we've just been..."

"What is this," she interrupted, "a Bill Clinton moment? You've been *making love* to Elaine, or she's been *making love* to you!" Her brows knit. "The fact that you were never in the same room doesn't matter, from what you said." Then she dimpled. "I think you found the safest way to make love since abstaince."

I laughed with her, as much for her mangling of 'abstinence' as for the observation. Teens. They can't even say it - how could they ever practice it?

Then she turned serious. "Are you going to keep making love with Elaine?"

I turned serious as well. I had just been asked, 'What are your intentions toward my' in this case friend, and since I hadn't thought of it as making love until my own daughter rubbed my nose in it, I didn't have an answer ready. I said so.

"Well, I think I can tell you how Elaine feels about it. I never did it more than once or twice with anyone I didn't want to be with for a long time."

I hugged Jay and thanked her for the talk and her insights, even though my life just got more complicated than I'd ever believed possible. Now, I had to talk to Elaine.

~

Jay announced (in the living room) that she was taking a walk to the store for orange juice and Diet Coke, and would I keep her Best Friend entertained until she got back? I assured her that I would and put a twenty in her palm to finance the expedition.

Elaine and I were alone.

She looked at me, as though I knew what to say. I looked at her, hoping she would say something, anything, that I could respond to. I had no idea at this point how she felt about me, and if Jay were right - I was rapidly coming to that view - I wasn't entirely sure how I felt about her, either. Someone had to say something.

"Would you like something to drink?" My mouth was as dry as sheetrock. Which was odd, since my palms were like sponges. Being squeezed.

"Yes, please," she rasped, and cleared her throat. At least I wasn't the only one.

I gestured to a chair at the dining room table. "What would you like?"

She took the seat and replied, "Whatever you're having."

I nodded, and proceeded to add to my criminal record. I got two glasses, shared a coke between them, and reached around behind the corn flour mason jar where I had hidden an un-opened half-pint of Jack Daniel's "for medicinal purposes." I splashed a bit in both glasses. I wondered about the penalty for providing alcohol to a minor, not that it would stop me.

I set her glass before her on the table, sat, and raised mine to my lips, tipping a healthy amount down my throat. Elaine lifted hers and did the same.

When the coughing slowed down, I stopped slapping her on the back and resumed my seat. I lifted my glass and took another healthy gulp.

She coughed one last time before sipping from hers. "You could have warned me," she accused. "I wasn't expecting Blackjack, I was expecting Diet Coke."

Some small part of me noted that she recognized the flavor. The rest said, "Another surprise in a couple of months that have been full of them, especially the last few weeks." Well, that was one way to break the ice. "Are there other things you expect from me that have come as a surprise?"

"What do you mean?" Her face took on a guarded expression. What I *felt* was a little touch of fear, or maybe anxiety, mixed with confusion.

"Elaine, what do you expect from me?" I asked, wanting to get it out in the open. "What do you see happening between us, you and me?" Was Jay right?

She took another swig before answering. "Why are you so afraid of the answer?" she asked.

“Am I afraid? Do you read my emotions so much better than the emotions I get from you?” That was an interesting thought, and reinforcement for one of my hypotheses.

“I think so. I pick up little vibes from you all day long. Sometimes last night I watched your face to see if you caught things that I felt and there was no reaction unless I *sent* it to you or it took me by surprise and sort of leaked out.” She sipped again, and looked into the glass. “The stronger stuff I can’t hide from you, I know you feel that stuff, mostly.”

I hadn’t realized the exchange was quite so one-sided, and said so. “Elaine...” I struggled with what to say, and how to say it. On an impulse, I chose a different tack entirely. “Elaine, how do I feel about you, and about ‘us’?” I relaxed; she probably knew better than I did.

I could tell it wasn’t the question she expected - an unguarded thrill tickled my spine. She looked me in the eye. “You are very, very fond of me,” she said softly. “You’re attracted to me, but you fight it. That hurts, a little, but I know why.” She sipped again, and looked into the glass. “I’m too young. You want someone like *Claire*”

There was no doubt how *she* felt about *that*. The jealousy was a slap.

“Elaine! Look at me!” The sharp tone startled her, and she once more made eye contact. “Claire means nothing to me - it was harmless flirtation. If your own emotions didn’t get in the way, you’d know that.”

Something occurred to me. “This morning, in my bedroom, when everyone was sitting on my bed and I started to get aroused, I didn’t feel that twinge of jealousy - why not?”

She dimpled. “That’s easy. They all like you, but I’m the only one who... likes you as much as I do,” she finished lamely, her eyes once more lowered to her now-empty glass.

“And I like them, but you’re the only one that I...” I left it hanging deliberately, watching her. There is more than one way to read a mind, if you’re old enough to read the signs.

She looked up at me, her eyes widening and nostrils flaring slightly. “Do you really?” she cried softly. A barrier came down and I was washed over with feelings of longing, tenderness, lust, and yes, love. Jay was right, and I found myself returning those feelings without shame.

This girl's - no, this woman's happiness was important to me, maybe more important than my own, and I'd felt that way about only one other person since her mother had died. There was a sense of relief in the knowledge, shared, of how we felt. There was new tension and fear as well, not least of which was that certain knowledge that I was going to hell.

Elaine started to rise. 'Sit!' I barked gruffly. She sat abruptly, and I felt the hurt. Hurt feelings, not hurt fundament. Whatever her feelings, whatever *my* feelings, Elaine was still an *underaged* woman. I needed her to understand that rejecting physical intimacy at this point was not rejecting *her*.

I took her nearer hand. She looked at our hands, then at me. 'Can we set this discussion aside for a few minutes? There are other things to discuss besides our future, and I need us to think clearly while we talk about them.'

Her eyes were shining from the moment I said 'our future', but I felt the struggle as the emotional atmosphere became less intense. 'Okay. What are we going to talk about?' She radiated calm detachment. Maybe it was a reflection, because that's what I was trying to achieve, too.

'I've been thinking about how you, and I and the others, and all our fire lizards interact and relate. I asked you to note whether any of the other girls reacted to, um, stimulation last night. Did you forget?'

'No, I didn't forget.' She blushed prettily.

'You also didn't watch very long,' I teased.

'Whose fault was that?' she teased back. 'Anyway, Brenda and Jess fidgeted a little about the time I got up, but nothing more than that. Kimmy didn't even react that much.'

'Did you manage to find out if anyone else is aware of the times that we (I paused a second - might as well say it) made love?'

The phrasing didn't disturb her in the least. 'Sort of. We played truth or dare, and I asked some questions that made us all blush, but no-one admitted to feeling anything like that.' The blush was back. 'I think all my friends think I'm some kind of sex pervert now.'

Her embarrassment was contagious, or she was broadcasting. Still, “That falls in line with my leading hypothesis. You remember when I said if you were on Pern, you’d impress a queen and talk to dragons?” She nodded, pleased with that image. Rightfully so, I thought. “You, my dear, are a xenotelepath. Or at the very least, a telepath,” I amended. “Have you ever heard thoughts as words?”

She shook her head, still digesting what I’d said. “How is a xenotelepath different from a telepath?”

“A xenotelepath would be someone who can read the thoughts of an alien or non-human species, but not the thoughts of their own kind. If the fire lizards thought in words instead of images, you could ‘talk’ with them.” I let her digest that. “Can you see the feelings of the others’ fire lizards?”

She nodded, thinking about it. “I usually try to block it out, because it’s too distracting.”

“Them, you block. Me, you read constantly and try to distract.” I snorted. “If I didn’t know how you felt about me before, that would give it away.”

“Oops,” she grinned and blushed again, unrepentant.

I released her hand and got up, waving her to remain seated. I went to the kitchen, and returned with another Coke and the bottle of Jack. Once again, I split the soda and added a liberal dose.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“No. Adults talking about subjects as deep as ours often apply a little tongue loosener. It makes it easier to tell the truth, I think.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” she said, very mildly offended.

“I don’t want to lie to you, either,” I replied. “But I might lie to myself, and tell that to you. This makes it less likely, I think. *In vino veritas*. Latin for ‘booze is truth serum’.”

She reached over and added the rest of the bottle to my glass. We both laughed, and drank.

Now for the hard part. “Elaine, you realize that what we have done, um, apart, is all we can do together?”

Her jaw dropped - not to the table, she caught it before that and seemed to be trying to say something that wouldn't come out. It finally manifested in, "**Why?**" Any parent of a teen has heard that "why". It seemed to have two syllables, with emphasis on the first plaintively wailed and stressed part. It was the kind of "why?" that begs an equally emotional "Because **I** said so", which I could **not** use here. Here, only cold logic would do.

"You are under the legal age of consent. If we had a physical relationship, I could end up behind the fence where I work, for a long, long...."

"That's bullshit! Half the girls I know are with boys four or five years...."

"That doesn't change the fact that you're only...."

"No one has arrested any of them and half the town knows...."

"The law isn't as fussy when there's only a few years...."

"You just don't want...."

"The law says we can't and your parents...."

"I don't care what any stupid law says and I don't care what my...."

"We can't and we are not going...."

"But *why* can't we...."

"Because **I** said so!"

If human eyes were multifaceted, ours would be swirling redly. Others in the room certainly were.

In the heat of the argument we had risen from our seats; in the heat of that passion we had stood, toe to toe, she facing up to me and I glaring down, not letting the other finish a sentence because the thought was already conveyed; in the heat of that moment I had crushed her to me and kissed her, and she had returned that kiss with equal fervor or more. When I pictured my comfortable bed, Elaine had raced me (and our fire lizards) down the hallway, a shove to my chest allowing enough head start to secure that victory.

5

The race down the hallway had allowed me a moment to restore some self-control, though no struggle in my life had been so difficult. Leaning back against my closed bedroom door (was my hand *really* fumbling with the lock?), I closed my eyes to Elaine's hurried shedding and prepared to make one last attempt at restoring "good order and discipline."

Elaine spoke first. "There's an image I get from you sometimes..." That was no revelation. Probably the fiery pits of hell, where I knew I was going. She caught that and laughed. "No! In the one I'm talking about, you are here, in this bed, and me and my friends are around you. Pat is outside, sucking the blood from a squirrel as all the fire lizards watch, humming." Oh. *That* image.

"I know what you've been thinking, if not the exact words. You've convinced yourself you have a year, and I'll be eighteen before Pat or Julie rises to mate."

Saved! She had made my argument for me.

"What you've forgotten is that Pat and Julie are not queens." I could feel laughter and mischief and no small amount of lust, even with my eyes tightly shut. "Greens rise earlier and more often." With that smug pronouncement, I missed the last exit ramp, and the highway to hell became an eight lane expressway, all downhill.

I opened my eyes. Elaine was just removing her panties from her left ankle - she threw them at me. In a sudden burst of modesty, she yanked back the bedclothes and insinuated herself beneath the top sheet.

Taking a deep breath, I picked up her scattered clothing and folded or draped each item neatly over my dressing chair. Then I sat and removed my shoes and socks, keeping eye contact the while. As I slowly undressed, folding each article, I felt Elaine's impatience, her building anticipation, her frustration with my pace and my anal behavior towards the clothes. I didn't change my actions; I was savoring each feeling and hoped that she would feel that, too.

Down to just my tented boxers, I said, "Maybe I should brush my teeth..."

That was it for Elaine. Groaning in frustration, she shut her eyes and thrust her hands beneath the covers. Before she opened them again, I was naked and between the covers. I grabbed her wrists and pulled her hands to my chest. “That’s **my** job,” I whispered.

“Yessss,” she hissed back, “but you’re not *doing* your job!”

“A good worker gathers his tools first and checks out the workbench before plunging right in to work,” I countered.

“What *ever*,” she ejaculated, already tired of the work metaphor. “Hurry!”

I had one more workmanlike thought, and had to share it. “Elaine, this worker has no hardhat.” I raised one of her hands to my lips, and sucked in her index finger.

“What does that mean?” she breathed, squirming beside me. The feelings she projected through our fire lizards threatened to destroy my self control.

“No rubbers. No condoms. Are you on the pill?”

“NOooo.” It was a groan of utter frustration tinged with fear and panic - and wild lust threatening to overwhelm both.

I laughed. I shouldn’t have - the pain that laugh evoked let me know that as surely as if I’d stubbed my little toe. It killed the laugh the same way that act would, too. I released a wrist and brought the backs of my fingernails to the available breast, stroking slowly around the nipple. Elaine gasped, and an instant later so did I. I knew what felt good, without her vocalizations. What had taken years with my wife was instantly apparent with Elaine. I lowered my head to suckle the stiffening nipple.

Elaine fought against her arousal, her fear of pregnancy nearly as great as her need for satisfaction. “We - we - we - “; she tried to say can’t, but the word was cut off each time by a gentle nibble. “Ohhhhhhhh,” she said instead.

“Elaine,” I whispered hoarsely, “sex is only one way to make love. There are others that won’t make you pregnant.” I let her chew on that as I returned to gently chewing on her nipple. I pictured my head buried between her upraised thighs while I moved my hand in that direction. The pleasure level leapt; the fear was replaced by uncertainty and a feeling I couldn’t place. If pressed for a word image, I’d have said, “*Nasty*.”

My fingers reached her mound, lingered briefly while testing the texture, then slid middle first into a lake of moisture between her outer lips. Above, I switched breasts and techniques, licking her areola and lipping her nipple; below, I teased open her inner lips and at the bottom of each stroke dipped briefly into the forbidden channel. Her knees had in fact risen to the position I'd pictured. My thumb began to circle and brush lightly over her clit.

I have read stories in which the writer says, "I didn't know where her body ended and mine began." Language, even as florid as that, is **so** inadequate. I *felt* Elaine's/my hand clutch the sheets; I *felt* my tongue flick her/my nipple; I felt my thumb caress her/my clit (*my clit?*). I felt our minds begin to shatter as I/we soared away.

Her orgasm gave her no warning - her reaction gave me just enough. If you could concentrate really hard in the white-hot glare of intensely broadcast imagery, feeling, and emotion, you could block it out. The effort was almost as draining as what you were trying to block, but that hard-won knowledge was interesting of itself. I doubted I'd ever want to block an orgasm again, but holding off was a habit from my previous sex life. It had seemed important at the time.

But not now.

~

Jay opened the front door slowly and listened a moment before entering. Hearing nothing, she grabbed the orange juice bottle from the porch rail and walked in, closing the door with her foot. She let her eyes adjust to the sharp contrast between interior and exterior lighting, then took a glance around. Her dad and her best friend were not in the living room or the dining room - probably in the kitchen. She had stayed away long enough that it was time for dad to make lunch.

She crossed the arbitrary boundary between the living room and the dining room when she heard the wail from down the hallway to the bedrooms. It sent a shiver of fear down her spine. The louder "Yes!" trailing into another wail sent a different type of shiver to erase the first. "All right, dad!" she smiled. She continued to the kitchen to deposit the Diet Coke and orange juice in the refrigerator. Passing through the dining room, she noted the nearly empty glasses and the empty Jack Daniels bottle.

In the kitchen, she checked her pockets. More than enough change to buy lunch somewhere. She didn't think her dad would mind. Smiling, she left through the back door.

~

In the afterglare of that passion, Elaine began to coalesce again into a thinking, rather than feeling, being once again. I struggled to toss off covers and position my face where we had imagined it. When I sensed Elaine returning, I began the first licks, avoiding her too-sensitive clit but covering her pussy from end to end with saliva.

And she was still sensitive everywhere. The spittle on her nipples was drying, the cooling effect still providing a stimulus there. My tongue took her back to the edge, dragging me along with it. When her clit peeked again from its hood and I flicked my tongue at it, it was as though I was giving *me* a blowjob. And when I sucked - this time we soared away together.

My next conscious thought was that it was difficult to breathe in this humid place. Then I remembered where that humid place was, and raised my head a little, trying to focus. My next thought was that there was a hair on my tongue, but when I tried to position a hand to let me scrape it off, the knuckles rubbed against sweaty, lubricious flesh. Elaine groaned, ‘Nooooo moooooore.’

I tried to pull free, but first had to disentangle Elaine’s legs, crossed behind my head. She was as limp as string. I rolled to one side, then straightened her legs. I was limp, too, and copious evidence of my climax adorned the edge of the bed. As I crawled up to hold Elaine in my arms, I had to displace three fire lizards who were caressing her face with their heads, their eyes slowly swirly in shades of green and blue.

With an arm across her chest below her breasts, I fell into a contented sleep.

~

Linda watched her television alone in her room. She had a few hours before her shift at McDonald’s, so she killed time by painting her toenails and tending to her fire lizard. She loved the way Ricky’s blue skin shone when it was freshly oiled, and Ricky always communicated to her the pleasure he felt when she tended him.

Just now, he lay atop the television, where he frequently slept (she thought he loved the warmth it gave off) when he was well fed and groomed.

Linda began to fidget on the bed. Her boobs felt sensitive, almost achy, as though she were beginning her period - but that was a week away, she thought. Her erect nipples pressed against her bra and she hunched her shoulders to reduce the pressure.

Now her legs began to rub against one another. She hardly noticed at first, the feelings in her breast had her so distracted. When she did notice - well, she'd felt those feelings before, so she rose from the bed and locked her bedroom door, then returned to the bed, removing her panties before lying down, smiling.

She unscrewed the cap of her Pond's, and dipped a couple of fingers, readying herself while she conjured up her favorite Ricky Martin fantasy. Long before the fantasy required the laying on of hands, she found her hips rising and falling in anticipation. She rushed the daydream to the appropriate parts and began to apply herself to the problem at hand. She couldn't believe how hot she felt.

The orgasm took her much earlier than normal - not that she was complaining, even though she normally liked to stretch the fantasy out. She tried to catch her breath. Soon she would need to wash her hands.

*And then it started again, while she was still breathing hard. That had never happened before. And Ricky Martin was lifting her knees and placing his head there. **That** had never happened before, either. She closed her eyes and placed her fingers back where they were needed. And it was good, so good. She couldn't remember it ever being that good before. She shook, and shivered, and gasped. Her legs dropped weakly to the bed. And in her mind's eye, Ricky Martin looked up from between her legs and smiled - except Ricky looked exactly like Mr. B!*

As she caught her breath again, she wondered if she could tell anyone about her freaky daydream. Even if she left out the parts about what she was doing during the dream, she'd never be able to face Jay again. Best she just keep this one to herself.

~

Brenda was asleep in the back seat of her father's van. She always ended up in the back, and usually slept on these trips into the mountains. Bronze Keanu slept as well, coiled around her neck like a living necklace. Her mother, Claire, occupied the next bench forward, smiling tolerantly as her menfolk bonded in the Captain's seats in front. Her son Brian acted as navigator, not that one was needed. He and Brian senior talked baseball easily.

Claire thought she heard a soft moan behind her, and swivelled in her seat to check on Brenda. There was that moan again.

Peering closely, she could see that Brenda was still asleep. Whatever her dream was, it was causing her daughter no pain - she was smiling and her breathing was becoming faster.

Claire blushed slightly and smiled. She'd had a few of those dreams herself. Still smiling, she turned to the front and leaned forward. She caressed Brian senior's arm fondly, and asked if he would mind turning up the radio? This was one of her favorite songs.

Brian senior took his eyes off the road just long enough to glance at his lovely wife. He'd never known her to care for country music, especially Shania Twain. She just smiled back so he turned it up.

When Claire checked Brenda again some time later, she was sleeping quietly. She had a huge smile on her face.

~

Jessica had sort of fibbed when she said she had to be home early, but no one had questioned her. Her parents thought she was at Jay's house, and didn't expect her home until one-ish. Instead, she had driven over to Brad's house. Chandler, she sent home to sleep in her room, instructing him as clearly as she could to stay out of sight. Brad's parents were both at work.

They watched a movie on his VCR and did a little necking. As usual, she had to firmly push his hands away during their kisses. If he had his way, they'd spend their time alone in his bed. Jessica didn't think she was quite ready for that.

She had reached the point where she was about to suggest going out for lunch. She was enjoying a kiss, and could feel one of his hands easing itself around for another assault on her chastity. What was it with boys and boobs, anyway?

Her nipples leapt on her chest. She practically pushed her breast into his hand. In his surprise, he merely maintained a firm pressure, instead of squeezing the way he thought he was supposed to, and Jessica moaned in his ear.

Emboldened by his unexpected success, Brad dropped a hand into Jessica's lap, and was rewarded by her pelvis thrusting against his fingers. He desperately wanted to unbutton her jeans, but her gyrations frustrated that ambition, so he settled for rubbing her crotch. When she gasped and stiffened, his eyes widened in disbelief. While she caught her breath, he managed to unbutton the jeans and lower the zipper. When he inserted his fingers above her panties inside her jeans, she began panting and moaning and thrusting her hips at him again.

He could not believe he was this good at it. He could hardly wait to tell the other guys.

~

Donna rinsed soap from her hands with the garden hose before turning it onto her Dad's car. She adjusted the nozzle to a wide spray and began to sweep it back and forth over the roof of the car. Elvis shrieked delightedly and cavorted in the spray, igniting laughter from Donna. Her only concern was that his sharp claws might scratch the finish, but so far, Elvis had been careful.

A slight shift in the wind blew the spray back at Donna, causing her to shiver as the tiny droplets covered the skin bared by the modest two-piece she wore whenever she washed the car. She wasn't surprised by the stiffening of her nipples, but she was a bit taken aback by the pleasant shivers that went up and down her body.

Moreover, the exciting sensations spread throughout her body. She leaned against the car as she sprayed, and the feelings built to a very pleasurable level, and stayed there, before dying away slightly. She caught herself pushing against the fender with her hips, and looked around to make sure that Elvis was the only witness.

She was about to turn the hose on herself to cool off, when the feelings peaked again. She squirmed and pressed against the fender again. She kept the spray moving over the car until the feelings passed, then walked around the car to get the other side.

She smiled. When she was done, she'd take a nice, warm bath, she promised herself, and see if she could repeat those pleasant feelings, and maybe take them a little further.

~

In the hollow of a tree, a small golden creature cocked her triangular head to one side, 'listening.' The images and emotions were clear, if confusing. She had tried to get back to her clutch, she really had. But her wings had still been too weak, then. They were much better now, but the clutch had hatched.

She had become accustomed to her new diet. She still feared the two-legged creatures, except the one, but she did not fear the small furry ones, nor the strange breeds of tunnel snake that slithered across the grass - they had become a mainstay of her diet.

But her cycle was thrown off. She felt the stirrings to rise, nearly triggered by the emotions she listened to, but some instinct recognized that there were no bronzes of sufficient maturity with whom to mate, and quelled those urges.

Soon enough, soon enough, she crooned to herself, her eyes twirling.

~

I woke up with a start. I was alone. I hadn't set the alarm and the room was unlit. But the alarm clock reassured me that it was early evening yet. And I was **hungry**.

But there was no way I could leave the bedroom without a shower. Elaine's scent saturated my senses, and I became half-erect, stumbling into my bathroom. The hunger prevented me from becoming more aroused.

I showered quickly and dressed even more quickly, just underwear and my robe. I hoped we had no unexpected company because my stomach could not be denied. I knew where the source of that hunger came from, if not their physical location at this instant. I lurched down the hallway.

Rounding the living room chair into the dining room I drew up short. Two pairs of teenaged eyes regarded me without betraying anything. Elaine was quite in control of herself. I could not read Jay, either. Two closed books. I felt the blush creep over my entire body.

Their heads turned in synchronous motion to look at one another, and both burst into laughter. Only the hungry creelings of our fire lizards distracted them. Well, that and a 'ding' from the microwave in the kitchen. There was already a platter of meat on the table - what was cooking?

I sat in back of the table, in front of the window. Elaine immediately seized my hand possessively, and smiled at me. Julie fluttered to rest on my shoulder, her cries importuning me to feed her. Pat, on the other hand, bird-walked to the platter on hind legs, and speared a slice of meat. Instead of gobbling it, as her red eyes would normally indicate she should, she folded her wings and carried it to Zander, who took hold with beak and claw and ripped it in two. They *shared* the piece.

I fed Julie and Pat. Elaine fed Zander. But occasionally, Zander and Pat fed one another. Jay remarked on it as she set a chicken and rice casserole on the hot pad. “What’s up with those two?” she asked.

“Like rider like dragon?” Elaine asked me, an eyebrow arched.

“Like rider like dragon,” I agreed solemnly.

“*What* rider? *What* dragon?” Jay interjected, confused.

“It’s an expression from Pern,” Elaine explained. “Have you read ®White Dragon yet?”

“No, not yet,” Jay replied. “*Some* of us actually had to study for finals. Unlike some brainy nerd types I could mention.”

“Speaking of finals,” I started.

“All done,” both teens said at once.

“They’ll mail the results as part of the final report card next week,” Jay continued, spooning casserole into our plates.

“So what’s the last day of school?” I asked. Jay was used to my forgetting ‘minor details.’

Jay looked at me ‘in that tone of voice’ as I referred to it. The look that so eloquently says, “You never listen to anything I say!” Elaine replied, “Monday is the last full day, Tuesday is a half-day, and then school’s out. We’ve made up all the snow days.”

I repressed an urge to once again rant about what our school district considered ‘too much snow for school.’ I had grown up in a more northerly state, better equipped to handle snow. But my parents had paid significantly higher taxes there, in part to have that capability, and teen minds would have tuned it all out as soon as they heard, “When I was your age...”

Instead, I filled my mouth with casserole.

We three chatted while we ate. The girls - no, the *women*, talked of jobs and vacation plans and inquired of me for my schedule (I was expecting a change as soon as the new man was trained). It was a more mature conversation than I would have expected and I wondered if the ladies were trying to live up to their new adult status for my benefit.

I learned that Elaine was expected to vacation at Nags Head in North Carolina for two weeks with her family. I felt an irrational pang of loss for an event that had not yet occurred, and wouldn't for some time. She would be back two weeks before school started again. She smiled for that feeling, pleased that I cared so much, and patted my hand.

Jay asked Elaine if she would be able to sleep over the following weekend, glancing at me for my reaction. We both blushed, while Jay laughed.

"I think," I began, "that you should both plan on continuing your normal social lives, which have always included visits here and at others' homes. Anything else might cause talk and undue attention."

Jay nodded but Elaine looked rebellious. Jay put a hand on Elaine's arm. "It isn't like you won't be together, even when you're not here." Elaine subsided a bit. "And I don't mind being your lookout *sometimes*, but come on! He's my *Dad*. I don't want to know so much about what he's doing. He likes *his* privacy, too."

We did the dishes as a team, and settled in to watch a little television before I had to go to work. Their new maturity hadn't affected their tastes in movies, and I was treated to "The Matrix" again. Elaine and I snuggled on the demi-sofa while Jay stretched out on the couch. For once our fire lizards showed a little independence and arranged themselves across the back of the couch. They were beginning to sleep less between meals, as well.

Finally, I had to get ready for work. I donned a clean uniform and a worn pair of Sears Die Hard work boots, packed leftovers and meat scraps for lunch, and looked for my keys.

Elaine dangled my keys from a finger. "What'll you trade me for these?" she asked.

I plucked the keys from her finger and pulled her into a kiss, wrapping my encumbered arm around her and grabbing her ass with my free hand. We broke the kiss, laughing, when Jay told us we should get a room.

Elaine said, her eyes twinkling, ‘I want you to be more careful at work from now on. Wear a hard hat.’

‘I promise,’ I replied. ‘I’ll get one.’

‘What time should I get in touch with you?’

I laughed. ‘I have things to do tonight, but you can give me a jingle between six and seven. Thanks for asking.’

Another kiss and I was off to work. At my paying job, that is.

6

Work was work. I took readings, cleaned strainers, changed the circular chart paper in our chart recorders, recorded data for various reports in a computer database that our resident wizard programmed especially for that.

The Twenty-first Century offered many marvelous options for the automated control of boilers; the designers of this four-year-old facility had opted for a mechanical linkage system not much more advanced than that of the forty-year-old facility I had transferred from. That meant that vibration changed the “precise” settings of the mechanical levers and bars, no matter how tight the setscrews were tightened. Boiler two was exhibiting systems of maladjustment.

The shape and whorl of the flame pattern at low firing rates seemed to indicate that there was either too much air or not enough natural gas. That and the earthquake rumble when the boiler deigned to light off at all. Troubleshooting Boiler Two would occupy most of my night.

In the end, it turned out to be an air flow guide fin that had changed its angle. My boss is a control systems wizard - he'd have been disgusted at the time I wasted tracking down the real cause of the problem, were it not that the same thing had happened to him.

I'd lost track of time, or Elaine was jumping the gun. I was wiping down the tools I'd used and replacing them on the tool room shadow boards when the first arousing tingle started in my loins. I tried to think calming thoughts as I finished storing the tools. Some weren't cleaned with my usual thoroughness before I dashed to the men's room and washed my hands.

Elaine had been more considerate than the previous week, keeping the arousal at a constant low pitch until she felt my participation. From that point on, all restraint melted away. I used the liquid soap dispenser and both hands to ease things along. I now had a more concrete mental image to enjoy as I tried to keep my strokes slow. She had her own images, and I think they melded in our minds at the point of surrender to bliss.

Afterwards, I washed soap from all eleven digits, and made myself presentable for the arrival of my relief. I was expecting the call when the phone rang, but answered professionally anyway.

Power Plant, Bee, may I help you?"

Good morning,” she smiled through the phone. I could picture it easily.

“A very good morning,” I agreed, to more giggling.

“What time will you be getting home?”

Teenagers never listen. “A little after nine.”

“Fine,” she said. I needed no fire lizards to detect disappointment. Perhaps she had listened, but hoped I might make an excuse to leave early. Maybe I would. “My mother said she’d pick me up at eight.” Ah. Even with a good excuse, I couldn’t leave before then.

It was just as well. I needed to stop at a suitably anonymous store for protection before things in person went any further. I now knew that things would go further, sooner rather than later.

“So, will I see you before next weekend?”

“Well, I’m sure Mom and Dad have something planned for the last day of school, and I wanted to do a little job hunting, but I’ll be by when I can.”

“That’s fine. *I* can wait,” I teased.

“And I can’t?” she replied indignantly. Before I could tease some more, she said in a quiet voice, “No, I can’t. Waiting is so hard.”

I heard my relief pull into the parking lot. I sighed. “Yes, you can. We both have to, and we will. And now I have to get back to work.”

We said goodbye. I very nearly uttered those three words, but I caught myself. Afterwards, I wondered why.

There was a Wal-Mart in the major town up the highway that was more than sufficiently anonymous for my purposes. Three dozen condoms fit right in with shampoo, tampons, soap, deodorant, bubble bath, bodywash, and various male and female necessities. I didn’t limit my purchases to the health and beauty department -why waste a good shopping trip? I stocked up on the usual bathroom , laundry and kitchen supplies, and hit the food department for red meat and frozen dinners.

The house seemed emptier than usual when I got home, however happy Pat and Julie were to see me. Things perked up when Zander appeared, making Elaine a tangible presence.

I couldn't help it - that "going to hell" image was appearing with more and more frequency, but with less and less intensity or guilt. I still knew intellectually that where we were headed was wrong on several levels. My heart didn't care. My heart felt only the right of it. I knew that I'd follow my heart

Secrets are evil. Maybe not intrinsically evil, but a source of evil at any rate. Secrecy is suppression of truth, and truth wants light. Secrecy is suppression of knowledge, and knowledge wants to be shared. Secrecy is power, and power corrupts. Secrecy is an abrogation of human nature, and sooner or later, humans are true to their nature.

Ten teenaged girls were privy to a secret. How it had remained a secret from the day the eggs were distributed until the day of the hatching is a tribute to Elaine's skills in convincing them of the importance of that secrecy.

Following Impression, a measure of that secrecy escaped the tight circle. First, Mr. B became a conspirator by virtue of being in the right place at the right time. Other parents and some siblings were included in the circle almost immediately, all sworn to secrecy. The one girl who failed to take at least one parent into her confidence had lost her fire lizard, an apparent victim to cracked skin and the cold of between.

Even in as rural area as they lived, Mr. B was not the only aficionado of Anne McCaffrey's works. Several parents had guessed the origin of their daughters' "pets." One other besides Mr. B had recognized the significance of the colors of those pets and the genders of those to whom the pets looked - and some of the significance of her daughter's frequent calls and visits to the B residence. She was undecided about that as yet.

Even so, the main secret was confined to parents and their children in ten families, and would remain so for a long time to come.

Even in the best conspiracy, there are secrets within secrets. That Elaine could "hear" all the fire lizards was known to only three...

Jay considered Elaine one of her best friends, but Jessica was her very best friend, and Jess had just confided that she'd almost gone all the way with her boyfriend.

“I don’t know what came over me,” she almost whispered, glancing to make sure no one could overhear. “I was just thinking it was time to push him away - you know how he gets - and instead I made him get me off with his hands. I’m afraid to be alone with him again.”

“When did you say this happened?” Jay was pretty sure she knew “what had come over” Jessica. She looked around the Burger King as well, but no one was near their corner booth.

“I was at Brad’s house a couple of hours after I left yours, why?”

“Well...” Jay wasn’t sure how much to tell. She reminded Jess that Elaine had given everyone their eggs, had called the golden queen from somewhere. That Elaine could communicate with fire lizards that she *hadn’t* Impressed.

That was as far as she got in her explanation before Jessica’s face turned white. “Oh. My. GOD!”

Startled, Jay only said, “What?”

“If Elaine can link with anyone’s fire lizard, she knows everything... everything!”

“Well, that isn’t exactly what...” Jay tried to explain, but Jessica was too distracted to listen.

“It isn’t like I wouldn’t have told her, if I wanted her to know, but... Oh, God.” Jessica slid out of the booth. “I... I’ve got to go. I need to... I’ll call you later.”

“Wait...” But Jessica was gone, leaving her half-eaten fries and untouched drink behind. Jay worried; worried that her very best friend was upset; worried that she had said too much; worried that she hadn’t had time to say enough. On top of it all, she worried about whether she should tell her father or Elaine, and what she would say if she did.

Fire lizards, particularly young ones, communicate emotions more strongly than anything else. Elaine was beginning to communicate images with Zander, as when he pictured the fuzzy view from the roof of her house or a vivid image of Pat offering a sliver of meat - he liked that one. Emotions still came through clearest, but Zander was young.

When Elaine felt a strong twinge of fear and anger, she knew it wasn't from Zander, though he felt it too. One of her friends must have a problem, but that wasn't unusual, and she did her best to block it out, and was mostly successful. She'd had a lot of practice. Elaine was acutely aware that post-pubescent females were bundles of raw emotion, aware in a way no adult -except maybe Mr. B - could be. Blocking her friends' mood swings was becoming second nature.

Her block was successful enough that she didn't notice when a second source of fear and anger added itself to the first. She couldn't know, but a partially understood truth was being shared among the members of the conspiracy.

Closer to home, she was busily completing her Sunday chores, including folding and hanging her laundry, when she noted her mother engrossed in a book. She liked her mother, although she was certain her mother would never understand her. She asked, "Whatcha reading, Mom?"

Her mother looked her in the eyes and held up the book, so Elaine could read the cover. Elaine recognized the old bookclub edition of the 'Dragonrider Trilogy.' She felt her face grow warm. 'I didn't know you liked science fiction, Mom.'

'I haven't read this one in years,' her Mother replied, 'but I always liked some authors. Marion Zimmer Bradley, for one. Anne McCaffrey for another.' She put the book down, marking her place. 'I recognized your pet the moment I saw it. I only pretended to buy that 'Borneo Dragon' nonsense.'

'Mom...'

'Don't you think it's time we had a little talk?'

'Mom...'

'I believe you mentioned that 'Mr. B' has a pair of greens -females - and all your friends have males. You do realize the significance of that, don't you?'

'Mom...' Elaine's face had grown quite hot and she didn't need a mirror to know her blush was giving her completely away. But her mother was still talking.

'I can see that you do. Does *he* understand that significance?' There was no doubt who *he* was.

Elaine dropped her face to both hands, tears beginning to flow. Her embarrassment was total.

‘He does, doesn’t he.’ It wasn’t a question, and Elaine could only nod. ‘Perhaps we’d better go see ‘Mr. B,’ then.’

Elaine was mortified, and could only nod. Zander chirruped his distress for her, eyes swirling in various shades. Whatever she had said about not caring what her parents thought, she did love and respect them, more than even she was aware. As they all went to the car, she couldn’t know that the fear she felt, and the embarrassment, were accelerating the rate at which a certain morsel of half-truth was being shared.

~

I wasn’t completely unaware that events were unfolding that would soon be coming to a head. Not with Pat and Julie shivering on my shoulders. Despite my best efforts at comforting them, both their eyes swirled in varying intensities of alarm and dread, fear and... shame. At one point I had a vivid image of Elaine and her mother, no doubt from Zander through my ladies. It *felt* like they were approaching.

I prepared to meet them. I shaved and dressed casually, tidied up a bit. Then I waited, reassuring Pat and Julie.

I didn’t wait very long.

I stood in my open doorway as Elaine and her mother exited a Ford pickup truck, one of those long-cabbed models, I don’t know which one. As they approached, I backed up holding the door for them to enter. Elaine’s mother (had Elaine ever mentioned her name?) regarded me warily.

Elaine said, ‘Mr. B, this is my mother; Mom, this is Mr. B.’ We shook hands very briefly.

‘Eleanor,’ her mom said as she dropped my hand. ‘What kind of name is ‘Mr. B’?’

‘It’s short for Bdziejalski. My first name is even worse,’ I said. ‘I hate being called ‘Ski’, so everyone says B, or Mr. B.’ Eleanor laughed. I smiled. Good start.

‘Your daughter’s name?’

‘Named after my grandmother. That’s why she goes by Jay.’ Eleanor laughed again.

‘You seemed to be expecting us.’

I nodded, glancing at Elaine, who was silent through this exchange, still bordering on tears. “Are you familiar with the nature of our... pets?”

Eleanor nodded back. “I’m an old fan of Pern. Haven’t read the newest ones, yet.”

“As an old fan, try to picture your daughter as Lessa or Brekke, able to talk with all the dragons. Or to all the fire lizards, in this case. I think there is a Pern, though there won’t be any dragons there for hundreds or even thousands of years.”

“I’d say you were crazy if not for the evidence on your shoulder and curled around Elaine’s neck.” She cocked her head. “Why Lessa or Brekke?”

“Elaine ‘hears’ all of the fire lizards, not just Zander. None of the rest of us do.” Eleanor looked to Elaine for confirmation. Elaine nodded.

Eleanor opened her mouth to voice her next question, then closed it again. She turned to Elaine. “Elaine, please wait outside. I need to speak to Mr. B alone for a few minutes.”

Elaine looked to me. I said, “Do as your mother says.” I’ll never forget the hurt in her eyes, as she obeyed. Whether she was obeying me or her mother, I can’t say.

When the door closed, Eleanor turned back to me. “Have you had sex with my daughter?” The set of her jaw belied the calm manner in which she asked the question.

I recalled a conversation with my own daughter while delaying my answer. Eleanor interrupted my reverie with a sharper “Have you?” I framed an answer. “Eleanor, I’m not Bill Clinton, so I won’t argue definitions. Yes, Elaine and I have made love many times, once in the same room.”

I suppose my answer confused her. It would have confused me if I hadn’t been a participant. “Once... do you mean to say you were having sex with someone else? That she ‘listened’ in with her... powers?”

For the second time in a week, I found myself explaining the initial incident and the following weeks. Eleanor wouldn’t settle for euphemisms or evasions. She blushing insisted on details, halting my story repeatedly for clarifications. She also listened to my misgivings and self-recriminations at each stage, and to my realization of my affection for her daughter, before the events of last night.

Throughout the recitation, Pat and Julie became increasingly distressed, their eyes radiating the swirly shades of fear. I stroked them both and reassured them as best I could, hoping to send that reassurance to Elaine.

“What a bloody mess.” I might have missed Eleanor’s murmur had I not been so intent on her reactions. She looked at me. “Would it do any good if I forbade her to see you again?”

I slowly shook my head. “Distance has no meaning, under the circumstances.”

“Would you send her away if I convinced you it was the best thing?”

I shrugged my shoulders, disturbing Pat and Julie. If anything, their fear had grown. It was all I could do to block it out; reassurance seemed beyond my grasp. “I tried to be the adult, to reason with her. Whether my love is a reflection of hers, or springs from the depth of my heart, it is as intense as what I once felt for my first wife. Her happiness is the most important thing to me now.”

Eleanor was silent for a time. I tried again to calm the swirling-eyed flits on either shoulder. Their tails around my neck threatened to strangle me.

Eleanor searched my face. “Do you want to marry my daughter? To make Elaine your wife?”

I was surprised to hear myself say sincerely, “With all my heart.” And then I wasn’t surprised. I knew it was true.

Eleanor nodded. “Do you think you can postpone physical consummation until after the wedding, as a favor to me? Her father and I will sign the papers, but there are blood tests and licenses... Can you wait that long?”

I felt the grin stretch my face. “I’ll try my damndest - she may be harder to convince.” My grin left. “Eleanor, we’ve got to get her back inside. Pat and Julie are letting me know that she is absolutely terrified!” I stood and headed for the door, stumbling from the emotions.

Eleanor beat me to the door and opened it, to find a shivering Elaine clinging for her life to a porch rail.

We guided Elaine to the sofa, each holding a hand and trying to reassure her. Eleanor told her she could marry me - it only brought a moment’s respite to her shaking and tears. Something else entirely had my beloved at the verge of hysteria.

I closed my eyes and opened my mind to the link with Pat and Julie, with Elaine and Zander...

I closed my eyes and opened my mind to the link with Pat and Julie, with Elaine and Zander. I charged in as the “White Knight,” ready to place my greater maturity and experience at dealing with strong emotions between Elaine and the unknown terror.

Bullshit.

That might have been in the back (maybe even the front) of my mind - “rescuing” Elaine - and who could blame me? The woman I loved was in mortal terror of *something*. I wanted... I *needed* to help.

Fear, alarm, consternation, dismay, dread, fright, horror, panic, terror, trepidation, trepidity... all mere *words* from some thesaurus. Emotions are not words, and the words we create to represent those emotions... have you ever noticed that we have to attach qualifiers when we use them? *Sheer* horror; *depths* of despair; *blind* panic. No, I hadn’t noticed either.

I fainted.

Elaine wrestled with the living, writhing *feelings* that threatened her sanity. She was aware of her mother and B trying to comfort her, and when her mother said “permission to marry” that broke through to beat back the demons for a moment. A flash of radiant joy that startled her and her oppressor, if only for an instant.

She turned to B. His face took on that distracted, “seeing in the distance” look. She felt concern, love, even courage... then her demons washed over him. Surprise, shock, agony, and his own fear! More than anything that galvanized her to action, gave her strength.

~

Nobody knew what happened. Nobody told exactly the same story afterwards. I was there, at least while I was conscious, and I am the last person to ask. I’ve tried to reconstruct events. Where the stories don’t conflict, I have a fair picture, but it certainly isn’t all-inclusive.

Take Eleanor’s eye-witness account:

“One moment we were holding Elaine’s hands, trying to calm her down. You started to collapse - Elaine shook herself and eased you to the floor. She screamed, ‘Stop it!’ in a voice that rooted me where I stood. She was breathing hard, and where a minute ago she was scared out of her wits, now she was angry and concerned and totally focused... on you.

“She yelled, ‘Here! Now!’ and the air was full of fire lizards screeching and flapping. She just kept looking at you. The big one browbeat the rest into settling down, even hers.

“I pulled my daughter out of the way and checked you myself. I was a nurse for a while. You were showing signs of shock. You know, skin pale, cool and clammy; pulse weak and rapid; shallow rapid breathing, and unconsciousness. I loosened your shirt, elevated your feet, got a blanket and covered you. Elaine talked softly to you the whole time. Don’t ask me to repeat it; a lot was just reassuring you that you were going to be all right, some was more personal, and I blush easy.

“I wanted to call 911. Shock can be nasty, even fatal. Elaine wouldn’t let me - how would we explain the fire lizards? And you started responding to her. Your pulse slowed and got stronger. Your breathing, too.

“The big fire lizard, a gold I think, was practically crooning in time to Elaine’s words, and they all seemed to take it up. Your color returned, and you seemed warm enough, so I didn’t make the call.

“Then your daughter showed up with Jessica and Brenda. I kept them on the porch, except when your daughter called you in sick to work. Within half an hour, all the girls were gathered. Jay kept them supplied with drinks through the back door, and they were all talking quietly.”

She told me all this just before she went home with Elaine. But she did allow us a few minutes alone.

“How are you feeling?” Elaine asked.

“Weak,” was what I managed to get out. I would have liked to have said physically exhausted, mentally beaten, and emotionally drained, but I wasn’t quite up to the effort. ‘Love you.’ That part hadn’t drained, seemed ready to overflow.

“You need to rest. Jay said she’d watch you like a hawk.”

“Gold?” I hoped she’d understand what I was asking.

‘She was here! I didn’t realize it until you were out of danger, but Mom said she showed up with the rest. She *isn’t* dead! But she isn’t Impressed, so she’s been alone out there, somewhere. I can’t quite get a lock on her unless she wants me to - I guess she’s learned to guard her feelings, something we all need to do.’

I barely nodded. I was in no condition to guard mine, so Elaine knew I felt love and gratitude. She kissed my forehead. ‘You rest now. Pat and Julie will let me know if you don’t.’

I smiled feebly as she got up to leave. At the door I was looking at her well-rounded ass, departing. She whirled around and said, ‘You are much too weak for *that* kind of thought.’ She grinned wickedly, though, when she said it, and winked. She closed the door behind her.

I was asleep within moments of closing my eyes.

~

I got more of it the next day. But first, I saw my doctor, who prescribed 72 hours’ rest and faxed his report to my boss. The boss called shortly after I got home to express his concern but told me not to worry about work - the new guy was covering my shift. As for explaining things to my doctor... he has a daughter, and his daughter has a rather strange pet. It was an interesting examination. The report cited ‘job-related stress.’ Had Elaine or her mother known, he offered, they could have called him instead of 911.

Actually, I felt much better, and probably could have returned to work that night, but I was warned to expect company after school. Doctor Orsten thought he might drop by as well. He had a few more questions than my ‘exam’ covered. At my request for a blood test, he allowed as how Virginia doesn’t require one for a marriage license but worked up a blood test anyway.

Eleanor came by around noon. ‘Jeff was... less than thrilled with the idea of our daughter getting married, particularly to a man old enough to be her father. How old are you, anyway?’

I smiled. ‘Jay and I celebrate our birthdays together on July 14th, but mine’s actually the 16th. She was my ‘twentieth birthday present,’ her mother always said.’

Eleanor did the easy math. ‘So you’re thirty-six going on thirty-seven? You’re my age?’ She shook her head, resignedly. ‘If you ever call me ‘Mom,’ you’re a dead man. I won’t be thirty-seven until October.’

I laughed. “I hope you won’t stop me *completely* from teasing my mother-in-law. It’s a time-honored tradition.”

She just snorted. “You just watch out, or I’ll let your future father-in-law kick your ass.” She sighed. “I made a few calls. The license comes from the clerk-of-court at the circuit court. Only one parent of a minor needs to give approval, so Jeff realized it was going to happen either way. There’s also no waiting period, and our court clerk is a certified justice of the peace. There’s no requirement for witnesses, either, but if you two don’t invite the other girls, at least, you’re both crazy.”

“You seem to have it all figured out. Did you set a date for us?” I wondered why she was rushing this along. She didn’t seem all that enthusiastic.

“I’m thinking that the Court House is a mile past the high school, and school lets out tomorrow at noon. You pick up the bride and her maid of honor and I’ll bring the van for the bridesmaids. The rest can come in someone else’s car.” She sighed. “We’ll hold the... ‘reception’... at the Denny’s down the road from the circuit court, my treat.”

I had to ask. “Why all this haste? I have to tell you, just the fact that you’re willing to let us be together at all is amazing enough. This breakneck rush to the altar is astounding.”

She half-smiled. “I know. I’m surprised at myself.” She barked a small laugh. “Call me old fashioned. I’d rather the man that my daughter is making love to is her husband, not sneaking around and hiding things. Besides, it’s a small town. Do you really think it would be a secret for long? So, are you in, or do I need to bring the shotgun?”

My turn to laugh. “You won’t need it. I’ll be there, if Elaine accepts. You realize,” I pointed out, “that I haven’t even asked her, yet?”

“You have any doubt she’ll say yes?” Eleanor looked at me as though dementia was already settling in.

“I’ve tried not to make a habit of taking things for granted, especially where women are concerned.”

Eleanor cocked her head, “You’ll probably make her a good husband, if for that alone.” She finally showed me a genuine smile. “She’ll say yes. She’s been remarkably changed these past few weeks, all to the good.” She suddenly looked startled, then gave me a devilish grin. “She’ll eventually want children of her own, you know. A step-daughter isn’t going to satisfy her maternal instincts.”

I nodded. I hadn’t thought that far ahead but it was fairly obvious, once she’d said it.

The grin became more evil. “You share feelings in a way I can’t fathom. Will you share morning sickness? What about labor pains?”

The hair on my neck came to attention. “You have a sadistic streak, you know that?”

“Just paying you in advance for the mother-in-law jokes you threatened me with,” she snickered. We talked a bit longer before she left, nothing consequential.

As soon as she was gone, I made a dash to the mall. There were a few things I figured I’d be needing soon.

~

I was home before the bus was due, but Jessica’s car was already in my driveway, so I parked at the curb.

I was welcomed home by Jay, Elaine, Kimberly and Jessica. Once again I marvelled that the warble of the fire lizards seemed a higher pitched echo of the teenagers’ chatter. Jay kissed my cheek, Kim and Jessica waved. Elaine went tonsil diving, to everyone’s (especially my) delight. Pat and Julie vied for the shoulder Elaine didn’t take control of.

Of course, I was royally chewed out for being out, once I had been welcomed back. I assured everyone that I was fine. Well, I was a *little* tired and Pat and Julie ratted me out to Elaine, but she didn’t tell the others.

On the other hand, Jessica and Kimberly became apologetic. “We didn’t know - well, we knew that Elaine could ‘read’ our fire lizards, and that made us a little scared...” babbled Jessica.

“*You* were scared; I started off angry! I didn’t get scared until Papa Smurf started feeding me the fear that she” meaning Elaine “was getting from you and Brenda and the others,” Kimberly interrupted.

“That’s the point!” Jessica said, heatedly. “Individually, most of us were a *little* scared. Some of us were angry; some were jealous; some were worried. Elaine picked up on *all* the fears, and leaked it back out. The little fears got bigger, which Elaine picked up separately and combined, and leaked out as even bigger fear.” Elaine nodded. “It was one of those viscous circle things.”

“Vicious circles,” interjected Jay.

“I *know* that!” Kimberly said. “We talked about it last night. I’m just saying...”

I winked at Elaine, and said, “Ohhhhhh,” as I slumped into her arms. Pat and Julie squawked and took wing, mildly annoyed. Elaine wrapped one arm around me and brushed the back of my head as I snickered into her shoulder. Elaine said, with mock sternness, “Do you two think you could calm down?”

Both girls were immediately contrite and subdued, until I made a loud smacking noise against Elaine’s neck, and sat up grinning. Much giggling and teasing ensued; an argument was averted.

Donna stopped through on her way to work, just to check on me and the others. Brenda was still on her way back from the mountains with her family, but Keanu popped in and out a few times. I found out I might have a hefty collect call charge from a KOA campsite pay phone. It was how they (Brenda and Claire) had participated in the previous evening’s aftermath. The call had run so late that they’d stayed over another night.

Linda popped in for a time with Elvis. So did Debby with blue Skyler and Sara with Fido, another of the blues. Pat and Julie were meeting the last three for the first time, and exchanged excited trills and warbles for a bit before settling down.

Jay was in some sort of hostess zone, distributing drinks and snacky things, and a huge tray of meat strips, which the flits enjoyed. I knew there would be no frenzied, red-eyed feeding tonight; they were being stuffed to immobility, teens and fire lizards alike.

As things calmed down, I decided it was time for a bit of ceremony. Linda and her dad, Doctor “call me Bill” Orsten were on the demi-sofa. Debby, Sara, Jessica and Kimberly were squeezed together on the couch. Elaine sat in the single chair with Eleanor perched on its overstuffed arm. I sat on the ottoman, near Elaine, while Jay fluttered about. Unlike Jay, the fire lizards were arrayed around the room on shoulders and seat backs, quite comfortable.

I pushed back the ottoman and told Jay to sit for a minute. I asked Jessica to pass me a small throw pillow. I think, despite my best efforts, Pat picked up a mental image of what I was about to do; she scrabbled down my right arm. I hoped the pair of fire lizards were enough to distract Elaine from what I intended.

I fished one of my mall purchases from my left pocket, and tossed the throw pillow at Elaine’s feet. Good; she looked perplexed. Now I knelt with my right knee on that pillow, and took Elaine’s left hand in my right. Pat chirruped happily - she’d moved to my forearm for a ringside seat. I moved my left hand toward Elaine’s, asking, Elaine, will you...”

“YES!” she shouted before I could finish. She let me slide the engagement ring onto the appropriate finger. Pat supervised the process, trilling happily. Without more than glancing at it, she was off the chair and into my arms. Overbalanced, we tumbled to the floor, upsetting not only our flits, but the others as well. We hugged and kissed and laughed.

Of course, we couldn’t stay on the floor. There were more hugs, and kisses, and the ring was displayed and inspected. Doctor Orsten was slightly bemused but congratulated me anyway (probably glad it wasn’t *his* daughter.) He kissed Elaine’s cheek and congratulated her. He turned to Eleanor and said, “Look at it this way, Elle; you’re not losing a daughter, you’re gain-“

“Don’t even *think* about finishing that!” Eleanor cut him off. “I warned *him* that’d I’d sacrifice his ability to give me grandchildren if he calls me Mom. *You* don’t even get that much consideration.” He bellowed a laugh.

Jay had held back while the others hugged and kissed Elaine. She had a huge grin, and had hugged me, beaming, but was waiting for the crowd to thin around Elaine. Jessica noticed, and turned Elaine to face her. Jay threw her arms wide, shouting “Step-mom!”

“Step-kid!” Elaine squealed back, and they shared an enormous hug.

‘Do we have to wait until after the ceremony before we talk about raising my allowance?’ Jay stage-whispered.

Elaine looked surprised. ‘I just realized I lost mine, permanently,’ she replied, winking at her mother. ‘Does this mean I can ground you if I don’t like the boys you hang out with?’

Jay looked even more surprised. Without releasing Elaine, she looked at Eleanor. ‘You don’t tell her father *everything* you know about your daughter, do you?’ Eleanor only laughed - so did Elaine and I. Jay decided it was best to laugh along with us.

From that amusing note on, the impromptu engagement party gradually dwindled to just Elaine, her mother, Jay and me. On his way out the door, Bill shook my hand again, shaking his head. ‘I think I have a lot of questions for Linda. But they’ll wait. Congratulations, again.’

Eleanor turned to Jay. ‘C’mon, step-granddaughter. Let’s get all this stuff to the kitchen and give these two some time alone. Say, ten minutes or so.’

‘Ten Minutes!’ Jay was indignant. ‘That’s hardly enough time to...’

‘More than enough time *to*, on the night *before* the wedding, kiddo. Grab those empty cans, too,’ Eleanor grinned. ‘Let’s move it!’

‘Okay, step-Granny, whatever you say,’ Jay grinned back. Eleanor’s mouth dropped open.

It took two trips, with me and Elaine helping for the first one. Eleanor looked at her watch, then pointedly at us, as she disappeared into the kitchen. To the background music of running water and clattering dishes, Elaine melted into my arms.

The kiss ate up eight of ten minutes, and ended with hands in each others back pockets, crotches rubbing through cloth. I murmured to Elaine, ‘You should probably get plenty of sleep tonight, tomorrow’s going to be a long day.’

She whispered back, ‘You should probably be in bed pretty soon, too. I don’t want you to stay up too long, either.’ A slight emphasis on the word up told me we were on the same wavelength.

Eleanor's throat-clearing told us our time "in the flesh" was over for tonight. We touched lips one last time and exchanged "I love you's" until her car door closed. We waved as she went out of sight.

Jay waved as well. I put an arm around her shoulder. "You okay, kiddo?"

"Yeah. I think so, she said. 'all day, and epecially after you proposed, I was thinking how neat it will be to have a step-mom who's my age, and a good friend.'" She swallowed. "Her crack about grounding me... Wham! A totally different perspective I hadn't thought of. It kinda threw me."

I smiled. "I hope you'll stay friends forever, but I don't think she'll be partying quite the same. At least I hope you're not out trying to pick up boys together."

"Elaine was never like that. She had guy friends, but she was never serious enough about anyone to, you know, get physical. Not that I ever knew about, anyway." I filed that away. I must have raised an eyebrow, because Jay continued, "Hey, don't take that as gospel, I don't know for sure, Dad. That's between you and her."

I nodded. "You haven't spilled any big secrets; you're just speaking your mind. And don't worry about Elaine spilling all of *your* secrets, just because she'll be my wife. She won't tell me anything I don't need to know, before I need to know it." Jay relaxed, visibly. "Of course, I expect I'll be much better informed about your dates than you were ever willing to share. Can you deal with that?"

"I guess I'll have to, won't I?"

"In the meantime, I have a favor to ask of you."

Jay was wary of a trap. "What?"

I just laughed. "Come on, you can show more enthusiasm than that! I want you to be my 'best man' And I won't even make you throw a bachelor party."

Now she laughed, too. "Cool! Um... what does a best man do?"

"Besides the bachelor party? Carries the rings, and enough cash to pay for the license and the minister or justice of the peace. Stands next to the groom at the ceremony. Makes a toast at the reception. Soaps the words, 'Just Married' on the trunk or rear window of the groom's getaway car, or makes a cardboard sign. Can't cover the license plate, though. Can you handle it?"

“I think I can handle that,” she grinned. “Are you staying here or going out of town for the honeymoon?”

“Why? Are you thinking of inviting some bachelors to a party if I’m gone?” I asked, making a stern face.

She just laughed again. “No, nothing like that. I just think you better put some distance between you guys and here, unless you want all the other girls saying, ‘I know what you did last summer’.”

“What?” *This* was a piece of the puzzle I hadn’t seen!

“You didn’t know? That’s what started fright-night! While you were unconscious, the rest of us figured out that you and Elaine were broadcasting. And it was an x-rated video, from what Jessy and Linda said.” She giggled. “I think they got the clearest, um, reception, so to speak. But they all got a bad case of the hornies. Even Brenda said she had a wet dream, and she was like sixty or seventy miles away, at least.”

I must have turned pale. Jay told me, “Sit down,” then made me do it. “Does Elaine know about this?”

She opened her mouth to say yes, I could tell by the beginning of a nod. Nothing came out while she paused to think. “I don’t know,” she finally answered. “She was inside with you while we all talked about it. But her mother knows. Wouldn’t she have told her?”

That was a question I couldn’t answer. “Let’s get some sleep. One of us has school, and both of us have a wedding to attend tomorrow.” We went to bed.

Despite the excitement of the engagement, and the expectation of being “joined” by Elaine, I hovered at the edges of sleep. The exhaustion that the doctor had diagnosed was real enough, if not job related. I thought I should be planning a honeymoon, since the wedding was out of my hands, but the concentration required was beyond my grasp.

For months now, I had pictured myself going to hell for coveting an underaged woman. Truthfully, underaged women, plural, now happily narrowed to a single woman whose age would be rendered irrelevant by a simple ceremony. I had pictured fiery pits, and demons with pitchforks.

I now knew the inadequacy of my imagination. I had visited hell. Worse, I had recognized the landscape; I had been there before, the memories suppressed. Feeling Pat and Julie stir uneasily against me, I suppressed them now. Elaine had seen the abyss as well, and triumphed. She knew that hell was a bottomless well of fear and hopelessness - I would not willingly visit those memories on her again.

Even so, I felt a welling of concern and comfort, and the trembling bodies on my pillow eased to restful slumber. I should have known that Elaine would be 'listening.' I would never be alone again.

I did my best to send those feelings of warmth and security back to Elaine, to let her know she had affected me and to reassure her, as well. She was taking the same giant step tomorrow.

For all the pent-up lust with which we had said goodnight, the mutual admonitions to hurry to bed, the next thirty or forty minutes were spent just mentally cuddling one another. Whatever your mental image of gender-roles, believe me when I say that men appreciate a good snuggle every bit as much as women. True, the physical and visual cues might trigger arousal, but that works in both directions.

I don't know which of us "made the first move." I know that I was perfectly happy basking in Elaine's comforting thoughts and I'm certain I was projecting the same warmth and all-around good feeling back. Whichever of us had the first stray image of physical contact, it quickly evoked shared memories of our only time together physically. That led to tactile sensation, and mounting arousal for both of us

I stroked; she plumed; we soared. Afterwards, we luxuriated. Sleepily, we let contact abate. We slept.

~

The morning went by in a blur. Showered. Shaved. Dressed in my good suit. Jay went to school in a *dress*. A **dress**! If you knew Jay, you'd know this alone was a major event. The last (only) time I saw her in an honest-to-goodness dress was for her Junior High School Prom.

I ran into Eleanor at the local florist and she ran me right out again, claiming that flowers were *her* responsibility. She *also* suggested I make reservations somewhere out-of-town for a few days, and offered to look in on Jay. I accepted the offer and the suggestion.

I remembered to ask if she had mentioned the exhibitionist/voyeur aspects of the preceding day's discussions to Elaine. When she grinned and said, "Oops," I groaned.

A high-rise hotel on the beach in Virginia Beach accepted my booking, despite the short notice. It was a weekday, but more importantly, I didn't quibble about the cost. I could easily afford a few days without dipping into the long-term savings from my late wife's insurance.

Something reminded me to check in with my boss, so I was pleasantly surprised to find that my new schedule was Sunday through Wednesday, ten-hour day shifts, effective this Sunday.

Finally, it was time to go. Driving toward the high school, my mind whirled with the breakneck speed of events. I was about to marry a woman half my age. We hadn't discussed any of the typical couple topics. Did she want kids? How many? Would she take a job? What about college? Hell, she had a year of high school left, never mind college! Would she finish? (I'd vote yea, and urge college, too.) What side of the bed did she prefer? What was her favorite color, for crying out loud?

All good questions, which I now hoped we would spend a lifetime answering. I had a truckload of uncertainties, but I had one certainty. I wanted this; it felt *right*. I no longer felt like I was going to hell. I know it's silly. A marriage certificate is just paper. It wouldn't miraculously age Elaine. And that paper isn't what made it feel so right.

We'd be together. Everything else was just detail.

~

Arriving at school, I learned of the first change of plans. Several of the girls came out and informed me (without allowing for discussion) that I would be taking Jay, Kimberly and Brenda to the courthouse, and should leave right away. The rest would be split between Eleanor's van and Jessica's car. I wasn't permitted to see the bride before the wedding, and the girls riding with me were to enforce that.

I let the "Best Man" drive. Kim and Brenda rode in back, and Jay ordered seatbelts without my saying a word. I looked back, but evidently Elaine was waiting out of sight until we were gone.

At the courthouse, I passed Jay a wad of cash. We met the Clerk of Court, who would also be performing the ceremony, and filled out my part of the license and marriage certificate. Jay explained that the others would be along momentarily, and how many were expected; he sent us to conference room 1, a medium sized empty room, except for U.S. and Virginia Flags and a wall-sized Seal of Virginia. Jay and I stood to the right side of the wall opposite the door, waiting nervously.

Eleanor entered just minutes later with Elaine's brother, carrying several items. She pinned a carnation on my lapel and on the shoulder strap of Jay's dress. She set up a camcorder on a tripod near the door, which her son (what was his name? I'd forgotten!) would evidently operate. He had a digital camera on a strap on his wrist as well. He set a "boom box" on the floor.

The Clerk of Court entered, and took position directly opposite the camcorder. Jay and I adjusted our positions to his left, allowing more room on the bride's side.

My "almost-a-brother-in-law" leaned down to push the play button, and some classical wedding march began to play. One after the other, other the girls entered, each carrying a bouquet. They stepped in time to the music, the single step typical of bridesmaids and brides, and I briefly wondered if they'd ditched classes to practice. It was quite lovely. They formed a semi-circle enclosing the Justice of the Peace, Jay, and me. Jessica, as Maid of Honor, entered the semi-circle and stood opposite Jay.

There was an awkward moment while Elaine's brother (David! His name was David.) switched tapes, starting the one I can only think of as "Here Comes the Bride." Finally, Elaine entered the room.

My God, she was beautiful! She was wearing a white pleated skirt, and a white blouse under a white jacket. White nylons (pantyhose? Stretchtop? Stockings with garters? I looked forward to finding out.) in white flats. She even wore a sheer white veil that just hung below her eyes.

Our fire lizards were nowhere in evidence, but I could feel her excitement, her anticipation, her love, and I know she could feel mine.

As important as the vows were, I drifted through them. My eyes were locked on Elaine; hers were locked on me. I snapped out of my intoxication when the JP intoned, "...man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

It was one of those slow-motion movie scenes. Somehow our hands were together between us; she let go with one hand and raised it to lift her veil out of the way, leaning toward me. I leaned toward her, sliding my freed hand around her waist. Our lips barely touched, but our minds were in a full-frontal clench. That kiss lasted only seconds (I've since watched the tape many times) but the emotional link seemed an eternity of bliss.

The best man had, in fact, arranged to have "*Just Married*" spelled out on the trunk in flexible magnetic letters. I know she didn't do it herself; she was with me the whole time.

Elaine hadn't seen it yet. I noticed it after I seated her in the car, brushing birdseed from her shoulders, and circled around the back to the driver's side. I didn't think my smile could get any wider, but it tried.

We caravanned to Denny's, lights on and horns honking. In my rearview, I could see a budding photojournalist still shooting tape. At Denny's, I parked the car nose out, so the "Just Married" sign would be facing the windows. It would also make for a faster getaway. I'd have a word with Jay as well, to make sure Jessica didn't try to follow.

To my surprise, we were expected. The staff had reserved tables in the back of the dining area, and even had placecards. They had sacrificed a lot of seating to push long tables together to form a square, four seats on a side. Just enough for our party, as it turned out. Denny's was no Sheraton or elegant ballroom, but they had gone to some trouble.

Elaine and I pecked at whatever was on our plates and smiled at each other a lot. I suppose everyone understood why our plates were barely touched when they were cleared away.

Jeff (Elaine's father) arrived just as the plates were cleared, bearing a simple white cake with white frosting. A bride and groom adorned the cake in glaze - no plastic figurines. David filmed and Jeff snapped photos as Elaine and I cut the cake together and served it on plates provided by the waitstaff, who stood beaming nearby.

After Elaine fed me, and I fed her, Jay tapped her tea glass with a spoon and offered her toast. ‘I had all night to plan this toast. I tried to figure out how to tell my Dad how much I love him and how happy I am for him, and to tell Elaine how happy I am that she is becoming part of my family. But I couldn’t. So I’ll just say, ‘To the Bride and groom!’”

Everyone raised a glass and repeated those words. Elaine shed some happy tears as she hugged everyone. Jeff pulled me aside.

‘Elly tell you my first impulse was to visit you with my hunting rifle?’ he asked.

‘I expected as much,’ I shook my head, ‘but she only said you were upset. Not that I’m complaining, but what changed your mind?’

He looked embarrassed, and glanced to be sure no one would overhear. ‘She reminded me what she and I were doing at Elaine’s age, and how long we’d been doing it. She reminded me I’m six years older than she is, too.’ He sighed. ‘I’ve still got mixed feelings about this, whatever my own sins. So you’d best take damn good care of my baby.’ With that, he shook my hand. ‘Welcome to the family.’

I couldn’t resist. ‘Thanks, Dad.’

While he was still laughing, I collected my bride and we made our farewells, waving until we were out of sight.

The drive to Virginia Beach’s oceanfront took well over three hours, with almost no traffic until the end. We started in companionable silence, enjoying the feeling of ‘just married.’ We waved whenever someone honked, seeing the sign on the trunk. We squeezed hands, and traded looks and smiles.

One of us mentioned moving in - we discussed dresser drawers and closet space, places for possessions that Elaine wanted from a place she was only now realizing she would not be calling ‘home’ anymore.

I told her that she would call her parents’ house home until a day came, when she’d be visiting there, and caught herself saying, ‘Time for me to go home,’ and realizing it meant to leave theirs and return to ours. We all go through it, and it brings a sense of both loss and happiness when it happens.

We even discussed high school. She said she wanted to finish, and I happily agreed. I warned her it would be difficult, that she would resent her teachers treating her as just another child, and she'd find less and less in common with her friends who wanted to talk boys and clothes - at least I hoped she'd not be talking boys...

We talked jobs, too. I told her there was no need for her to take one, just for money. I could adequately provide for all of us. But I did suggest that the glamor of being a housewife would rapidly turn to boredom. She would need something, whether volunteer activity, job or hobby to help her keep her balance.

"I hadn't thought of being a volunteer. Before us, I'd planned on working," she said. She was thoughtful for a bit. "What do volunteers do?" she finally asked.

"Just about anything," I replied. "The difference being, they don't get paid and don't have benefits. Think public service. They love volunteers at the library, any of the schools that have summer classes, probably at city hall or the courthouse." I thought a moment. "A lot of those jobs actually provide work experience, good for a resume. Or you could take classes at the community college, things like first aid and CPR, and become a licensed day care worker." I winked. "Get a head start on knowing how to raise children."

She laughed. "I could get a head start on that starting tonight, if you want." The hair on my neck stood up. Something else tried to stand up, and Elaine noticed. "I think somebody likes that idea," she smirked, pointing and reaching.

I intercepted that hand. "Please, not while I'm driving!" She laughed some more. "I admit that a part of me loves the idea of you, barefoot and pregnant," I said, glancing at the incriminating evidence. "More of me wants you to finish high school first, and maybe college."

"I don't want to wait *that* long," she pouted.

"You don't need to. I could stay home with our kids while you're in college."

"You mean work the night shift? We'd hardly ever see each other!"

I shook my head. "Have you and Jay ever talked about how her mother died?" Elaine nodded. I could tell there was some small reluctance to discussing my first wife, but she needed to know about the family finances, things I had never told Jay. I plunged ahead.

“Valerie was on her way to San Francisco. The first stop was in Charlotte, to change flights. The plane crashed shortly after leaving Norfolk, in North Carolina. Something about pressurized containers.” Elaine squeezed my hand.

“When Jay was born, Valerie and I bought a lot of insurance. Mostly term, because it was cheap. Anyway, when she got on that flight, she had me buy flight insurance - I’ve often wondered if she’d had some kind of vision...”

Elaine squeezed harder. I smiled at her. This wasn’t a time for those memories. But I went on, anyway, cutting to the chase. “Elaine, between that insurance and the various policies from work and on our own, I have nearly five million dollars in secure investments. Neither of us *has* to work, ever.”

Only the road kept me from watching continuously as my bride’s eyes grew enormous. She was speechless. Jay never knew what Elaine now knew.

Elaine found her voice. “Why do you still work if you can afford to retire?” She sounded... surprised.

“A lot of reasons. One of them is, I like to work. I’d have driven Jay crazy being home all the time.” Two fingers stuck out from where they were intertwined with Elaine’s. “You know kids whose parents have a lot of money?” I had to glance to see her nodding. “What do you think of them? Salt of the earth, are they?”

She snorted her disdain. “They’re mostly stuck-up snobs who think they’re better than everybody else. The only exception I can think of is Donna. Dr. Bill makes lots of money, but he doesn’t spoil her at all. Her allowance is... was as small as mine.”

I nodded. “What do you think of Jay, compared to them?”

“There *is* no comparison! Jay is one of my best friends...”

I nodded. Seeing that she got the point, I lifted a third finger. “Jay has no idea how much money I... we have, and I don’t plan to change that. You need to know, and you’re my wife.” That got a tight squeeze, and I ‘squoze’ back. “I would appreciate it if you keep this secret from Jay with me.” She squeezed again.

We agreed that kids would wait until after high school. Elaine wanted at least two, one of each. Three at the most, if the first two were the same sex. That suited me; I said so. I left the door open if she changed her mind either way. She did put in a good word for increasing Jay's allowance. I left that open, too. Jay would be working this summer, earning her own money - an allowance increase might undermine that.

Virginia Beach, like most tourist towns, exhibits a split personality. The beach strip is high rise hotels and tourist shops, limited parking and public access to appease the natives. There are any number of attractions to visit; Ocean Breeze Park with waterslides, miniature golf, go-karts and batting cages; the Marine Science Museum, with educational exhibits and interactive displays as well as aquaria; an Amphitheater with concerts and plays; major shopping malls, arcades and amusements. All of these co-exist with rural farming along a shrinking "green belt."

The surrounding cities (Norfolk, Portsmouth, Chesapeake, Hampton and Newport News) boast even more attractions (Busch Gardens, Water Country USA, the Mariners' Museum, Nauticus, etc.), and taken together the contiguous metropolitan area is called either "Hampton Roads" or "Tidewater," depending on which ad council has ascendancy. It is a tourist Mecca.

Elaine and I ignored it all, checked in, and went straight to our suite.

It wasn't a honeymoon suite, nor a penthouse suite. It was only twelve floors above the beach, on the Atlantic side, with a king-size bed in one room, and a second room intended (my guess) for conferencing. A large screen television in that room had a built-in VCR as well as cable television. Elaine and her small suitcase made a beeline for the bathroom; a squeal of delight drew me in as well. Elaine had discovered an oversized tub with typical Jacuzzi controls. Before I could suggest we explore those possibilities, she gently pushed me out.

I glanced at the controls for the TV. The cable included piped in music radio stations; I selected a romantic easy listening station. With volume low, the sound was a pleasant background.

After removing jacket and tie, shoes and socks, I took in the view while Elaine enjoyed the bath. Sunrise over the Atlantic would probably be spectacular, if we didn't sleep through it or weren't otherwise occupied.

Standing on the balcony, I was joined by Pat and Julie, who let me know in no uncertain terms that they resented being left behind. They also resented my enjoinder not to investigate the inviting warm sands and surf, but obeyed. I wondered about Zander, and whether he had arrived as well, until I heard delighted trills from the bathroom. Pat and Julie went *between* again, and the volume of trilling and squawking in the bathroom trebled.

Elaine emerged shortly, laughing. Her fresh-scrubbed look was very enticing, and I couldn't resist interrupting her laughter with a long, slow kiss. She cooperated, pulling my shirttail out and running nails up and down my back. Then she pushed me away, but very gently, and told me to look in the bathroom.

Our fire lizards were having the time of their lives. The tub was fully activated, hot water jetting and bubbling, and the flits were cavorting and diving to ecstatic sound effects. I was wondering how I could take my own bath or shower when Elaine's hands wrapped around me from behind, undoing buttons on my shirt.

"You can take a bath after," she murmured. "While the 'kiddies' are occupied, I've thought up something else for us to do."

I undid my own cuffs, then removed the shirt. Elaine, still behind me, had unbuttoned my pants and lowered the zipper. Her hands nimbly lowered pants and boxers to the floor, and I stepped out of them, turning to face her.

She was kneeling, clothes in hand, now face to... er, "face" with the erection she had caused. She reached one hand to examine it. She squeezed gently.

As I had discovered, Elaine now learned that anything that evoked the kind of response her hand had evoked from me was transmitted via the fire lizard connections to her. That squeeze caused her eyes to widen and her knees to clamp together, sharing the sensation at her core. It also caused her hand to slide, still squeezing gently, along the shaft of my cock, increasing both our sensations. We both moaned.

Aroused and curious, Elaine extended her tongue to the tip of my cock. Do you remember what I said about not knowing whose body parts were whose? Elaine now experienced those sensations from the other side. I braced my arms in the bathroom door, barely able to stand. Now my body told Elaine what felt good, what was arousing, and I felt her as well, though not as intensely as the last time.

When Elaine took my cock into her mouth, her tongue playing along the underside, that was it for me. I started coming, and so did she. I doubt that she had intended to swallow, but the intensity of the orgasm kept her lips glued to me, her tongue swirling.

Finally, too weak to stand any longer, I started to collapse. Breaking contact, Elaine collapsed as well. We ended up on the floor outside the bathroom, side by side, breathing hard.

“Was.. was it like... that for you... when you ate me?” Elaine panted.

I nodded, but her eyes were closed. “*Oh*, yeah,” I managed when I had enough breath.

She smiled, still breathing hard. “If the foreplay. Is like this. Sex is. Going to kill us.” She managed a giggle.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “But whataway...” She giggled again, releasing me from finishing that thought.

In Jessica’s room, Jessica was busily burning another CD full of wedding pictures. It had been her camera, after all. Jay had hers, and copies for Eleanor and her Dad - it was a two-CD set. Chandler perched on Jess’s shoulder, watching the proceedings with interest. He suddenly cocked his head.

Several moments later, Jessica sat straighter and emitted a little moan, followed by a giggle. Jay looked at her, curious.

Jessica giggled again, blushing. “Not enough distance,” she said to Jay.

Jay blushed as well. “Did you... Did they just...” She was unable to complete the question.

Jess nodded, grinning. “I think so. Nothing like the last time, though. Just a little tingle, and no ‘pictures,’ if you know what I mean.”

Jay didn’t *exactly* know, but she had a vivid imagination and plenty of descriptions from her friends. She nodded, still embarrassed. She wondered what the other girls had felt.

We helped each other to bed on wobbly legs, laughing the whole way. Elaine still wore the bathrobe provided by the hotel, and I helped her out of it, appreciating for the first time the curves and angles I had denied myself before, only glimpsing. I should have been sated, but her youthful beauty caused a stirring, which echoed between us.

“Maybe we should wait until we’re more recovered,” Elaine whispered, running the backs of her nails along my arm and glancing down to my rising organ.

“We probably should,” I replied, stroking her hair, ending with my hand on her shoulder.

“But we probably aren’t going to, are we?” Elaine said, as she tweaked my nipple.

“Probably not.” I returned the favor. I leaned closer for a kiss.

After that exchange of caresses, our hands stayed away from the more obvious erotic zones, rubbing and fondling other skin while kisses alone built the ardor we shared. It made no difference, the arousal grew, if more slowly than before. At some point, Zander, Pat and Julie alighted on the headboard, humming as master and mistress played erotic tag.

The golden queen had “listened,” feeling the stirrings again. Her skin shone. It was time.

Taking wing, she screamed a challenge, echoed from her mind. There! Answers came. But first, she must prepare for flight. She spied one of the smaller furry creatures, and dove. She snatched it from the ground and with teeth and claw, snapped its spine. Dropping back to earth, she began to tear it apart.

Jay and Jessica had bolted to the window when they heard the screech. They’d witnessed the queen’s pounce on one of the feral cats that shared the neighborhood. Then Chandler disappeared.

He reappeared to land on the branch of a tree overlooking the grisly feast on the lawn below.

Jay turned to Jessica to ask what the hell was happening. But Jess’s eyes were unfocused, her hands outstretched like claws, opening and closing.

Jay returned her gaze to the window. Keanu and Papa Smurf and another blue were just landing on the branch, and there was Elaine’s Zander as well.

“OhmyGod!” Elaine cried. “The queen is rising!”

I could feel an echo of what Elaine felt through our links. Her Zander had disappeared - was now perched side-by-side with Chandler and Keanu, Papa Smurf and Ricky - evidently all the firelizards of sufficient maturity to attempt to fly the queen. Neither Pat nor Julie seemed more than vicariously affected by the queen’s mating urge, even exposed as they were to Elaine’s unguarded thoughts.

Through Elaine’s link, as though she were perched on that branch, I watched the queen voraciously feeding, eyeing her suitors and screaming challenge. She leapt into the air, startling all the males, and climbed skyward. Raced aloft. Pursued.

Elaine possessed enough of herself to observe, “Keanu has the advantage! He’s ahead of the rest of us!” Her voice was tinged with challenge and envy.

I folded her into my arms. “Don’t hold back,” I murmured. “Make him earn it.” Softer I said, “I just hope the others are alone, or with someone they *really* like.”

Elaine rubbed herself against me, obviously aroused, a wild gleam in her eyes. I don’t think she cared where the others were, or whom they were with. This time, the arousal had little to do with me.

The queen stroked for altitude. If she had been fully recovered, none of these fledglings would have a chance of catching her. She screamed her opinion of their chances even now. They were unworthy.

Even so, Keanu nearly caught her, the quickness and agility of the browns giving him an early advantage. Papa Smurf was a wingspan behind, prepared to take advantage of any attempt to dodge. Ricky had already given up, circling below in case she dove. The bronzes were almost ready to overtake them.

A glance told the queen that the second blue had fallen out, that the bronzes had drawn abreast, then passed the brown. He, too, began to circle. She challenged the bronzes again, taunting them, grabbing more sky.

Zander and Chandler flew wingtip to wingtip, both straining to reach the queen. Then Chandler pulled ahead. He had eaten more recently if not fully - Elaine had been too preoccupied to feed Zander, and Zander had spent the afternoon cavorting with his friends in a tub of hot water. It was a small advantage, but...

The queen was reaching her limits as well, and was prepared to change to level flight. She looked down disdainfully at the blues and brown so far below. A moment's inattention to the nearest pursuit...

Caught! Chandler intertwined his neck with the queen's and grasped her, penetrated her as instinct knew he must. He extended his wings, to prolong the mating flight.

Elaine felt the disappointment of her own Zander, but she also sensed the triumph of Chandler, as did I through her. She mounted me, thrust herself upon my cock, pounded me in lust, furiously.

I was barely conscious of myself. I was Chandler/queen/Elaine/me, thrusting and being thrust into and upon. I was lust. I was ecstasy. Then I was nothingness...

It was dark when I awoke to the warbling of the phone. Elaine was asleep straddling me, so it took some time to make my way to the handset. Elaine stirred, and smiled a very contented smile as I picked it up.

'Hello?'

'Dad? Is this a bad time?' Jay asked.

I smiled. 'No, not a bad time. What's up?'

Elaine tilted the phone so we could both hear. Jay told us that the golden queen had appeared at Jessica's house; had feasted on one of the neighborhood's stray cats, a surprising feat considering their relative size. We pretty much knew the rest of the flight, but listened to it from her point of view.

'Have you talked to Jessica? How is she doing after this?'

A silence stretched until I asked again, 'Hello?'

'I um, I was with her.'

'Oh,' I said, startled. Elaine's eyes grew round again. 'How do *you* feel?'

'Well... Now I know what the big deal is about sex.' She giggled.

Elaine looked a question at me. I covered the mouthpiece. 'First orgasm,' I whispered. Elaine covered her mouth with both hands. Uncovering the mouthpiece, 'So, are you switching to girls?'

Jay laughed. ‘No, but I’m adding them to the list. Is that okay with you?’

I laughed back and said, ‘Either or both is fine.’ Elaine looked startled. I smiled at Elaine while speaking to my daughter. ‘Did you want to talk to Mrs. B?’

‘No, you guys go back to what you were doing. Whatever you were doing.’ She said she loved us and hung up.

I turned to Elaine. ‘So, what were we doing?’

She giggled. ‘Whatever it was, it left me pretty damned sore. Could we do something else?’

‘Sure,’ I replied. ‘After all, we have the rest of our lives.’

The End

Acknowledgements

No story utilizing the Fire Lizards of Pern could be considered complete without acknowledging the creator of these marvelous creatures, Anne McCaffrey.

Anne has an official site for which her son Alec is Webmaster: <http://www.annemccaffrey.org>. This contains a chat site. It is rumored (I can't confirm) that she visits most nights at around 1-2 am Australian EST. I'm (quite frankly) afraid to bring my story to her attention.

My guidelines for not egregiously violating Anne's copyrights are based on Anne's Letter:

08-Oct-92 11:39 BST

Sb: InterNet Pern rules

Fm: Anne McCaffrey

The rules are that my characters may be referred to but not used. BUT there can be no adventure/stories set on Pern at all!!!! That's infringing on my copyright and can bear heavy penalties - particularly right now when there's a film deal (yet another) which has bought and paid for the right to use the material - which, I fear, e-mail users have not.

On CIS, I have asked people to limit Pern material to a discussion of their persona and dragons, fire-lizards, etc., in a diarist form. Fanzines have slightly more latitude as the zine is usually mailed only to members so that's limited publication, and a due copyright notice is included. As there is no such protection on electronic mail, we authors have to be insistent on these safeguards.

I know this can be confusing since Paramount and Star Trek are handled differently, but that's the point: they are, and have been. Individual themes and characters of s-f/fantasy novels are not. And such indiscriminate usage of our characters, worlds, and concepts on a *public* media like electronic mail constitute copyright infringement AND, which many fans disregard, is ACTIONABLE! Both the e-mail company AND the person. My publishers are most insistent on that point! So it's to safeguard the interested e-mail user that I make these very strong, and perhaps unpalatable points.

A partial list of the books and stories Ms. McCaffrey has written about Pern and its inhabitants must include:

- Dragonflight (Jul 1968)
- Dragonquest (May 1971)
- The White Dragon (Jun 1978)
- Dragonsong (Mar 1976)
- Dragonsinger (Feb 1977)
- Dragondrums (Mar 1979)
- Moreta: Dragonlady of Pern (Nov 1983)
- Nerilka's Story: A Pern Adventure (Mar 1986)
- Dragonsdawn (Nov 1988)
- The Renegades of Pern (Nov 1990)
- All the Weyrs of Pern (Dec 1991)
- The Chronicles of Pern: First Fall
- The Girl Who Heard Dragons (May 1994)
- The Dolphins of Pern (Oct 1994)
- Red Star Rising (The Second Chronicles of Pern) (Aug 1996)
- Dragonseye (Feb 1997)
- The Masterharper of Pern
- The Skies of Pern (Feb 2001)

Let me extend my gratitude to those who have written:

Thanks, Stasya, for your encouragement on ICQ; thanks, Wil, Jake Z, GaryLee, Bergy, Hopeless Romantic, ByteBiter, Bill, Jonathan, Chaz_G, Frank, and *all* you others; thanks, too to all you anonymous remailers from Stories Online; and finally, to Denny, my editor (and assistant muse), without whom this story would not exist.

Personae Dramatis (in order of appearance)

- V. Bdzjalski, ‘Mr. B’ - greens Pat and Julie
- J. Bdzjalski, ‘Jay’
- Elaine - bronze Zander
- Eleanor and Jeff, Elaine’s parents
- Jessica - bronze Chandler
- Brenda - brown Keanu
- Kimberly - blue Papa Smurf
- Linda - blue Ricky
- Donna - blue Elvis
- Sara - blue Fido
- Debby - blue Skyler
- Dr. Bill Orsten

Now I have to thank any or all of you who nominated or voted for me for a Golden Clitoride Award for “Author of the year”, or ‘First Impressions’ for ‘Long Story of the Year.’ I highly recommend you check out all the fine stories nominated for Golden Clitties. ‘First Impressions’ shared the winning honors.
