

All My Darling Daughters

Connie Willis

After only a few years writing science fiction, Connie Willis has already won awards and established herself as an accomplished and unpredictable writer. Certainly this novelette about a young woman in a boarding school in space holds many surprises—and some shocks. You won't easily forget it.

Connie Willis collaborated with Cynthia Felice on the novel Water Witch; her first collection of stories is Fire Watch, where this story first appeared.

An AN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

Barrett: I'll have her dog... Octavius.

Octavius: Sir?

Barrett: Her dog must be destroyed. At once.

Octavius: I really d-don't see what the p-poor little beast has d-done to...

—*The Barretts of Wimpole Street*

The first thing my new roommate did was tell me her life story. Then she tossed up all over my bunk. Welcome to Hell. I know, I know. It was my own fucked fault that I was stuck with the stupid little scut in the first place. Daddy's darling had let her grades slip till she was back in the freshman dorm and she would stay there until the admin reported she was being a good little girl again. But he didn't have to put me in the charity ward, with all the little scholarship freshmen from the front colonies—frightened virgins one and all. The richies had usually had their share of jig-jig in boarding school, even if they were mostly edge. And they were willing to learn.

Not this one. She wouldn't know a bone from a vaj, and wouldn't know what went into which either. Ugly, too. Her hair was chopped off in an old-fashioned bob I thought nobody, not even front kids, wore anymore. Her name was Zibet and she was from some godspit colony called Marylebone Weep and her mother was dead and she had three sisters and her father hadn't wanted her to come. She told me all this in a rush of what she probably thought was friendliness before she tossed her supper all over me and my nice new slickspin sheets.

The sheets were the sum total of good things about the vacation Daddy Dear had sent me on over summer break. Being stranded in a forest of slimy slicksa trees and noble natives was supposed to build my character and teach me the hazards of bad grades. But the noble natives were good at more than weaving their precious product with its near frictionless surface. Jig-jig on slickspin is something entirely different, and I was close to being an expert on the subject. I'd bet even Brown didn't know about this one. I'd be more than glad to teach him.

"I'm so *sorry*," she kept saying in a kind of hiccup while her face turned red and then white and then red again like a fucked alert bell, and big tears seeped down her face and dripped on the mess. "I guess I got a little sick on the shuttle."

"I guess. Don't bawl, for jig's sake, it's no big deal. Don't they have laundries in Mary Boning It?"

"Marylebone Weep. It's a natural spring."

"So are you, kid. So are you." I scooped up the wad, with the muck inside. "No big deal. The dorm mother will take care of it."

She was in no shape to take the sheets down herself, and I figured Mumsy would take one look at those big fat tears and assign me a new roommate. This one was not exactly perfect. I could see right now I couldn't expect her to do her homework and not bawl giant tears while Brown and I jig-jigged on the new sheets. But she didn't have leprosy, she didn't weigh eight hundred pounds, and she hadn't gone for my vaj when I bent over to pick up the sheets. I could do a lot worse.

I could also be doing some better. Seeing Mumsy on my first day back was not my idea of a good start. But I trotted downstairs with the scutty wad and knocked on the dorm mother's door.

She is no dumb lady. You have to stand in a little box of an entry way waiting for her to answer your knock. The box works on the same principle as a rat cage, except that she's added her own little touch. Three big mirrors that probably cost her a year's salary to cart up from earth. Never mind—as a weapon, they were a real bargain. Because, Jesus Jiggin' Mary, you stand there and sweat and the mirrors tell you your skirt isn't straight and your hair looks scutty and that bead of sweat on your upper lip is going to give it away immediately that you are scared scutless. By the time she answers the door—five minutes if she's feeling kindly—you're either edge or you're not there. No dumb lady.

I was not on the defensive, and my skirts are never straight, so the mirrors didn't have any effect on me, but the five minutes took their toll. That box didn't have any ventilation and I was way too close to those sheets. But I had my speech all ready. No need to remind her who I was. The admin had probably filled her in but good. And I'd get nowhere telling her they were my sheets. Let her think they were the virgie's.

When she opened the door I gave her a brilliant smile and said, "My roommate's had a little problem. She's a new freshman, and I think she got a little excited coming up on the shuttle and—"

I expected her to launch into the "supplies are precious, everything must be recycled, cleanliness is next to godliness" speech you get for everything you do on this godspit campus. Instead she said, "What did you do to her?"

"What did I—look, she's the one who tossed up. What do you think I did, stuck my fingers down her throat?"

"Did you give her something? Sumurai? Float? Alcohol?"

"Jiggin' Jesus, she just got here. She walked in, she said she was from Mary's Prick or something, she tossed up."

"And?"

"And what? I may look depraved, but I don't think freshmen vomit at the sight of me."

From her expression, I figured Mumsy might. I stuck the smelly wad of sheets at her. "Look," I said, "I don't care what you do. It's not my problem. The kid needs clean sheets."

Her expression for the mucky mess was kinder than the one she had for me. "Recycling is not until Wednesday. She will have to sleep on her mattress until then."

Mary Masting, she could knit a sheet by Wednesday, especially with all the cotton flying around this fucked campus. I grabbed the sheets back.

"Jig you, scut," I said.

I got two months' dorm restricks and a date with the admin.

I went down to the third level and did the sheets myself. It cost a fortune. They want you to have an *awareness* of the harm you are doing the delicate environment by failing to abide, etc. Total scut. The environment's about as delicate as a senior's vaj. When Old Man Moulton bought this thirdhand Hell-Five, he had some edge dream of turning it into the college he went to as a boy. Whatever possessed him to even buy the old castoff is something nobody's ever figured out. There must have been a Lagrangian point on the top of his head.

The realtor must have talked hard and fast to make him think Hell could ever look like Ames, Iowa. At least there'd been some technical advances since it was first built or we'd all *be floating* around the godspit place. But he couldn't stop at simply gravitizing the place, fixing the plumbing, and hiring a few good teachers. Oh, no, he had to build a sandstone campus, put in a football field, and plant *trees!* This all cost a fortune, of course, which put it out of the reach of everybody but richies and trust kids, except for Moulton's charity scholarship cases. But you couldn't jig-jig in a plastic bag to fulfill your fatherly instincts back then, so Moulton had to build himself a college. And here we sit, stuck out in space with a bunch of fucked cottonwood trees that are trying to take over.

Jesus Bonin' Mary, cottonwoods! I mean, so what if we're a hundred years out of date. I can take the freshman beanies and the pep rallies. Dorm curfews didn't stop anybody a hundred years ago either. And face it, pleated skirts and cardigans make for easy access. But those godspit trees!

At first they tried the nature-dupe stuff. Freeze your vaj in winter, suffocate in summer, just like good old Iowa. The trees were at least bearable then. Everybody choked in cotton for a month, they baled the stuff up like Mississippi slaves and shipped it down to earth and that was it. But finally something was too expensive even for Daddy Moulton and we went on even-clime like all the other Hell-Fives. Nobody bothered to tell the trees, of course, so now they just spit and drop leaves whenever they feel like it, which is all the time. You can hardly make it to class without choking to death.

The trees do their dirty work down under, too, rooting happily away through the plumbing and the buried cables so that nothing works. Ever. I think the whole outer shell could blow away and nobody would ever know. The fucked root system would hold us together. And the admin wonders why we call it Hell. I'd like to upset their delicate balance once and for all.

I ran the sheets through on disinfect and put them in the spin. While I was sitting there, thinking evil thoughts about freshmen and figuring how to get off restricks, Arabel came wandering in.

"Tavvy, hi! When did you get back?" She is always too sweet for words. We played lezzies as freshmen, and sometimes I think she's sorry it's over. "There's a great party," she said.

"I'm on restricks," I said. Arabel's not the world's greatest authority on parties. I mean, herself and a plastic bone would be a great party. "Where is it?"

"My room. Brown's there," she said languidly. This was calculated to make me rush out of my pants and up the stairs, no doubt. I watched my sheets spin.

"So what are you doing down here?" I said.

"I came down for some float. Our machine's out. Why don't you come on over? Restricks never stopped you before."

"I've been to your parties, Arabel. Washing my sheets might be more exciting."

"You're right," she said, "it might." She fiddled with the machine. This was not like her at all.

"What's up?"

“Nothing’s up.” She sounded puzzled. “It’s samurai-party time without the samurai. Not a bone in sight and no hope of any. That’s why I came down here.”

“Brown, too?” I asked. He was into a lot of edge stuff, but I couldn’t quite imagine celibacy.

“Brown, too. They all just sit there.”

“They’re on something, then. Something new they brought back from vacation.” I couldn’t see what she was so upset about.

“No,” she said. “They’re not on anything. This is different. Come see. Please.”

Well, maybe this was all a trick to get me to one of Arabel’s scutty parties and maybe not. But I didn’t want Mumsy to think she’d hurt my feelings by putting me on restricts. I threw the lock on the spin so nobody’d steal the sheets and went with her.

For once Arabel hadn’t exaggerated. It was a godspit party, even by her low standards. You could tell that the minute you walked in. The girls looked unhappy, the boys looked uninterested. It couldn’t be all bad, though. At least Brown was back. I walked over to where he was standing.

“Tavvy,” he said, smiling, “how was your summer? Learn anything new from the natives?”

“More than my fucked father intended.” I smiled back at him.

“I’m sure he had your best interests at heart,” he said. I started to say something clever to that, then realized he wasn’t kidding. Brown was just like I was. He had to be kidding. Only he wasn’t. He wasn’t smiling anymore either.

“He just wanted to protect you, for your own good.”

Jiggin’ Jesus, he had to be on something. “I don’t need any protecting,” I said. “As you well know.”

“Yeah,” he said, sounding disappointed. “Yeah.” He moved away.

What in the scut was going on? Brown leaned against the wall, watching Sept and Arabel. She had her sweater off and was shimmying out of her skirt, which I have seen before, sometimes even helped with. What I had never seen before was the look of absolute desperation on her face. Something was very wrong. Sept stripped, and his bone was as big as Arabel could have wanted, but the look on her face didn’t change. Sept shook his head almost disapprovingly at Brown and went down on Arabel.

“I haven’t had any straight-up all summer,” Brown said from behind me, his hand on my vaj. “Let’s get out of here.”

Gladly. “We can’t go to my room,” I said. “I’ve got a virgie for a roommate. How about yours?”

“No!” he said, and then more quietly, “I’ve got the same problem. New guy. Just off the shuttle. I want to break him in gently.”

You’re lying, Brown, I thought. And you’re about to back out of this, too. “I know a place,” I said, and practically raced him to the laundry room so he wouldn’t have time to change his mind.

I spread one of the dried slickspin sheets on the floor and went down as fast as I could get out of my clothes. Brown was in no hurry, and the frictionless sheet seemed to relax him. He smoothed his hands the full length of my body. “Tavvy,” he said, brushing his lips along the line from my hips to my neck, “your skin’s so soft. I’d almost forgotten.” He was talking to himself.

Forgotten what, for fucked's sake, he couldn't have been without any jig-jig all summer or he'd be showing it now, and he acted like he had all the time in the world.

"Almost forgotten... nothing like..."

Like what? I thought furiously. Just what have you got in that room? And what has it got that I haven't? I spread my legs and forced him down between them. He raised his head a little, frowning, then he started that long, slow, torturing passage down my skin again. Jiggin' Jesus, how long did he think I could wait?

"Come on," I whispered, trying to maneuver him with my hips. "Put it in, Brown. I want to jig-jig. Please."

He stood up in a motion so abrupt that my head smacked against the laundry-room floor. He pulled on his clothes, looking... what? Guilty? Angry?

I sat up. "What in the holy scut do you think you're doing?"

"You wouldn't understand. I just keep thinking about your father."

"My *father*? What in the scut are you talking about?"

"Look, I can't explain it. I just can't..." And left. Like that. With me ready to go off any minute and what do I get? A cracked head.

"I don't have a father, you scutty godfucker!" I shouted after him.

I yanked my clothes on and started pulling the other sheet out of the spin with a viciousness I would have liked to have spent on Brown. Arabel was back, watching from the laundry-room door. Her face still had that strained look.

"Did you see that last charming scene?" I asked her, snagging the sheet on the spin handle and ripping a hole in one corner.

"I didn't have to. I can imagine it went pretty much the way mine did." She leaned unhappily against the door. "I think they've all gone bent over the summer."

"Maybe." I wadded the sheets together into a ball. I didn't think that was it, though. Brown wouldn't have lied about a new boy in his room in that case. And he wouldn't have kept talking about my father in that edge way. I walked past Arabel. "Don't worry, Arabel, if we have to go lezzy again, you know you're my first choice."

She didn't even look particularly happy about that.

My idiot roommate was awake, sitting bolt upright on the bunk where I'd left her. The poor brainless thing had probably been sitting there the whole time I'd been gone. I made up the bunk, stripped off my clothes for the second time tonight, and crawled in. "You can turn out the light any time," I said.

She hopped over to the wall plate, swathed in a nightgown that dated as far back as Old Man Moulton's college days, or farther. "Did you get in trouble?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"Of course not. I wasn't the one who tossed up. If anybody's in trouble, it's you," I added maliciously.

She seemed to sag against the flat wallplate as if she were clinging to it for support. "My father—will they tell my father?" Her face was flashing red and white again.

And where would the vomit land this time? That would teach me to take out my frustrations on my roommate.

“Your father? Of course not. Nobody’s in trouble. It was a couple of fucked sheets, that’s all.”

She didn’t seem to hear me. “He said he’d come and get me if I got in trouble. He said he’d make me go home.”

I sat up in the bunk. I’d never seen a freshman yet that wasn’t dying to go home, at least not one like Zibet, with a whole loving family waiting for her instead of a trust and a couple of snotty lawyers. But Zibet here was scared scutless at the idea. Maybe the whole campus was going edge. “You didn’t get in trouble,” I repeated. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

She was still hanging onto that wallplate for dear life.

“Come on”—Mary Masting, she was probably having an attack of some kind, and I’d get blamed for that, too. “You’re safe here. Your father doesn’t even know about it.”

She seemed to relax a little. “Thank you for not getting me in trouble,” she said and crawled back into her own bunk. She didn’t turn the light off.

Jiggin’ Jesus, it wasn’t worth it. I got out of bed and turned the fucked light off myself.

“You’re a good person, you know that,” she said softly into the darkness. Definitely edge. I settled down under the covers, planning to masty myself to sleep, since I couldn’t get anything any other way, but very quietly. I didn’t want any more hysterics.

A hearty voice suddenly exploded into the room. “To the young men of Moulton College, to all my strong sons, I say—”

“What’s that?” Zibet whispered.

“First night in Hell,” I said, and got out of bed for the thirtieth time.

“May all your noble endeavors be crowned with success,” Old Man Moulton said.

I slapped my palm against the wallplate and then fumbled through my still-unpacked shuttle bag for a nail file. I stepped up on Zibet’s bunk with it and started to unscrew the intercom.

“To the young women of Moulton College,” he boomed again, “to all my darling daughters.” He stopped. I tossed the screws and file back in the bag, smacked the plate, and flung myself back in bed.

“Who was that?” Zibet whispered.

“Our founding father,” I said, and then remembering the effect the word “father” seemed to be having on everyone in this edge place, I added hastily, “That’s the last time you’ll have to hear him. I’ll put some plast in the works tomorrow and put the screws back in so the dorm mother won’t figure it out. We will live in blessed silence for the rest of the semester.”

She didn’t answer. She was already asleep, gently snoring. Which meant so far I had misguessed every single thing today. Great start to the semester.

The admin knew all about the party. “You *do* know the meaning of the word restricks, I presume?” he said.

He was an old scut, probably forty-five. Dear Daddy’s age. He was fairly good-looking, probably

exercising like edge to keep the old belly in for the freshman girls. He was liable to get a hernia. He probably jig-jigged into a plastic bag, too, just like Daddy, to carry on the family name. Jiggin' Jesus, there oughta be a law.

"You're a trust student, Octavia?"

"That's right." You think I'd be stuck with a fucked name like Octavia if I wasn't?

"Neither parent?"

"No. Paid mother-surr. Trust name till twenty-one." I watched his face to see what effect that had on him. I'd seen a lot of scared faces that way.

"There's no one to write to, then, except your lawyers. No way to expel you. And restricks don't seem to have any appreciable effect on you. I don't quite know what would."

I'll bet you don't. I kept watching him, and he kept watching me, maybe wondering if I was his darling daughter, if that expensive jism in the plastic bag had turned out to be what he was boning after right now.

"What exactly was it you called your dorm mother?"

"Scut," I said.

"I've longed to call her that myself a time or two."

The sympathetic buildup. I waited, pretty sure of what was coming.

"About this party. I've heard the boys have something new going. What is it?"

The question wasn't what I expected. "I don't know," I said and then realized I'd let my guard down. "Do you think I'd tell you if I knew?"

"No, of course not. I admire that. You're quite a young woman, you know. Outspoken, loyal, very pretty, too, if I may say so."

Um-hmm. And you just happen to have a job for me, don't you?

"My secretary's quit. She likes younger men, she says, although if what I hear is true, maybe she's better off with me. It's a good job. Lots of extras. Unless, of course, you're like my secretary and prefer boys to men."

Well, and here was the way out. No more virgie freshman, no more restricks. Very tempting. Only he was at least forty-five, and somehow I couldn't quite stomach the idea of jig-jig with my own father. Sorry, sir.

"If it's the trust problem that's bothering you, I assure you there are ways to check."

Liar. Nobody knows who their kids are. That's why we've got these storybook trust names, so we can't show up on Daddy's doorstep: Hi, I'm your darling daughter. The trust protects them against scenes like that. Only sometimes with a scut like the admin here, you wonder just who's being protected from whom.

"Do you remember what I told my dorm mother?" I said.

"Yes."

"Double to you."

Restricks for the rest of the year and a godspit alert band welded onto my wrist.

“I know what they’ve got,” Arabel whispered to me in class. It was the only time I ever saw her. The godspit alert band went off if I even mastied without permission.

“What?” I asked, pretty much without caring.

“Tell you after.”

I met her outside, in a blizzard of flying leaves and cotton. The circulation system had gone edge again. “Animals,” she said.

“Animals?”

“Little repulsive things about as long as your arm. Tessels, they’re called. Repulsive little brown animals.”

“I don’t believe it,” I said. “It’s got to be more than beasties. That’s elementary school stuff. Are they bio-enhanced?”

“You mean pheromones or something?” She frowned. “I don’t know. I sure didn’t see anything attractive about them, but the boys—Brown brought his to a party, carrying it around on his arm, calling it Daughter Ann. They all swarmed around it, petting it, saying things like ‘Come to Daddy.’ It was really edge.”

I shrugged. “Well, if you’re right, we don’t have anything to worry about. Even if they’re bio-enhanced, how long can beasties hold their attention? It’ll all be over by midterms.”

“Can’t you come over? I never see you.” She sounded like she was ready to go lezzy.

I held up the banded wrist. “Can’t. Listen, Arabel, I’ll be late to my next class,” I said, and hurried off through the flailing yellow and white. I didn’t have a next class. I went back to the dorm and took some float.

When I came out of it, Zibet was there, sitting on her bunk with her knees hunched up, writing busily in a notebook. She looked much better than the first time I saw her. Her hair had grown out some and showed enough curl at the ends to pick up on her features. She didn’t look strained. In fact she looked almost happy.

“What are you doing?” I hoped I said. The first couple of sentences out of float it’s anybody’s guess what’s going to come out.

“Recopying my notes,” she said. Jiggin’, the things that make some people happy. I wondered if she’d found a boyfriend and that was what had given her that pretty pink color. If she had, she was doing better than Arabel. Or me.

“For who?”

“What?” She looked blank.

“What boy are you copying your notes for?”

“Boy?” Now there was an edge to her voice. She looked frightened.

I said carefully, “I figure you’ve got to have a boyfriend.” And watched her go edge again. Mary doing Jesus, that must not have come out right at all. I wondered what I’d really said to send her off like

that.

She backed up against the bunk wall like I was after her with something and held her notebook flat against her chest. “Why do you think that?”

Think what? Holy scut, I should have told her about float before I went off on it. I’d have to answer her now like it was still a real conversation instead of a caged rat being poked with a stick, and hope I could explain later. “I don’t know why I think that. You just looked—”

“It’s true, then,” she said, and the strain was right back, blinking red and white.

“What is?” I said, still wondering what it was the float had garbled my innocent comment into.

“I had braids like you before I came here. You probably wondered about that.” Holy scut, I’d said something mean about her choppy hair.

“My father...”—she clutched the notebook like she had clutched the wallplate that night, hanging on for dear life. “My father cut them off.” She was admitting some awful thing to me and I had no idea what.

“Why did he do that?”

“He said I tempted... men with it. He said I was a—that I made men think wicked thoughts about me. He said it was my fault that it happened. He cut off all my hair.”

It was coming to me finally that I had asked her just what I thought I had: whether she had a boyfriend.

“Do you think I—do that?” she asked me pleadingly.

Are you kidding? She couldn’t have tempted Brown in one of his bone-a-virgin moods. I couldn’t say that to her, though, and on the other hand, I knew if I said yes it was going to be toss-up time in dormland again. I felt sorry for her, poor kid, her braids chopped off and her scut of a father scaring the hell out of her with a bunch of lies. No wonder she’d been so edge when she first got here.

“Do you?” she persisted.

“You want to know what I think,” I said, standing up a little unsteadily. “I think fathers are a pile of scut.” I thought of Arabel’s story. Little brown animals as long as your arm and Brown saying, “Your father only wants to protect you.”

“Worse than a pile of scut,” I said. “All of them.”

She looked at me, backed up against the wall, as if she would like to believe me.

“You want to know what my father did to me?” I said. “He didn’t cut my braids off. Oh, no, this is lots better. You know about trust kids?”

She shook her head.

“Okay. My father wants to carry on his precious name and his precious jig-juice, but he doesn’t want any of the trouble. So he sets up a trust. He pays a lot of money, he goes jig-jig in a plastic bag, and presto, he’s a father, and the lawyers are left with all the dirty work. Like taking care of me and sending me someplace for summer break and paying my tuition at this godspit school. Like putting one of these on me.” I held up my wrist with the ugly alert band on it. “He never even saw me. He doesn’t even know who I am. Trust me. I know about scutty fathers.”

“I wish...” Zibet said. She opened her book and started copying her notes again. I eased down onto

my bunk, starting to feel the post-float headache. When I looked at her again, she was dripping tears all over her precious notes. Jiggin' Jesus, everything I said was wrong. The most I could hope for in this edge place was that the boys would be done playing beasties by midterms and I could get my grades up.

By midterms the circulation system had broken down completely. The campus was knee-deep in leaves and cotton. You could hardly walk. I trudged through the leaves to class, head down. I didn't even see Brown until it was too late.

He had the animal on his arm. "This is Daughter Ann," Brown said. "Daughter Ann, meet Tavvy."

"Go jig yourself," I said, brushing by him.

He grabbed my wrist, holding on hard and pressing his fingers against the alert band until it hurt. "That's not polite, Tavvy. Daughter Ann wants to meet you. Don't you, sweetheart?" He held the animal out to me. Arabel had been right. Hideous little things. I had never gotten a close look at one before. It had a sharp little brown face, with dull eyes and a tiny pink mouth. Its fur was coarse and brown, and its body hung limply off Brown's arm. He had put a ribbon around its neck.

"Just your type," I said. "Ugly as mud and a hole big enough for even you to find."

His grip tightened. "You can't talk that way to my..."

"Hi," Zibet said behind me. I whirled around. This was all I needed.

"Hi," I said, and yanked my wrist free. "Brown, this is my roommate. My *freshman* roommate. Zibet, Brown."

"And this is Daughter Ann," he said, holding the animal up so that its tender pink mouth gaped stupidly at us. Its tail was up. I could see tender pink at the other end, too. And Arabel wonders what the attraction is?

"Nice to meet you, freshman roommate," Brown muttered and pulled the animal back close to him. "Come to Papa," he said, and stalked off through the leaves.

I rubbed my poor wrist. Please, please let her not ask me what a tessel's for? I have had about all I can take for one day. I'm not about to explain Brown's nasty habits to a virgie.

I had underestimated her. She shuddered a little and pulled her notebooks against her chest. "Poor little beast," she said.

"What do you know about sin?" she asked me suddenly that night. At least she had turned off the light. That was some improvement.

"A lot," I said. "How do you think I got this charming bracelet?"

"I mean really doing something wrong. To somebody else. To save yourself." She stopped. I didn't answer her, and she didn't say anything more for a long time. "I know about the admin," she said finally.

I couldn't have been more surprised if Old Scut Moulton had suddenly shouted, "Bless you, my daughter," over the intercom.

"You're a good person. I can tell that." There was a dreamy quality to her voice. If it had been anybody but her I'd have thought she was masting. "There are things you wouldn't do, not even to save yourself."

“And you’re a hardened criminal, I suppose?”

“There are things you wouldn’t do,” she repeated sleepily, and then said quite clearly and irrelevantly, “My sister’s coming for Christmas.”

Jiggin’, she was full of surprises tonight. “I thought you were going home for Christmas,” I said.

“I’m never going home,” she said.

“Tavvy!” Arabel shouted halfway across campus. “Hello!”

The boys are over it, I thought, and how in the scut am I going to get rid of this alert band? I felt so relieved I could have cried.

“Tavvy,” she said again. “I haven’t seen you in weeks!”

“What’s going on?” I asked her, wondering why she didn’t just blurt it out about the boys in her usual breakneck fashion.

“What do you mean?” she said, wide-eyed, and I knew it wasn’t the boys. They still had the tessels, Brown and Sept and all the rest of them. They still had the tessels. It’s only beasties, I told myself fiercely, it’s only beasties and why are you so edge about it? Your father has your best interests at heart. Come to Daddy.

“The admin’s secretary quit,” Arabel said. “I got put on restricks for a samurai party in my room.” She shrugged. “It was the best offer I’d had all fall.”

Oh, but you’re trust, Arabel. You’re trust. He could be your father. Come to Papa.

“You look terrible,” Arabel said. “Are you doing too much float?”

I shook my head. “Do you know what it is the boys do with them?”

“Tavvy, sweetheart, if you can’t figure out what that big pink hole is for—”

“My roommate’s father cut her hair off,” I said. “She’s a virgie. She’s never done anything. He cut off all her hair.”

“Hey,” Arabel said, “you are really edging it. Listen, how long have you been without jig-jig? I can set you up, younger guys than the admin, nothing to worry about. Guaranteed no trusters. I could set you up.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want any.”

“Listen, I’m worried about you. I don’t want you to go edge on me. Let me ask the admin about your alert band at least.”

“No,” I said clearly. “I’m all right, Arabel. I’ve got to get to class.”

“Don’t let this tessel thing get to you, Tavvy. It’s only beasties.”

“Yeah.” I walked steadily away from her across the spitting, leaf-littered campus. As soon as I was out of her line of sight, I slumped against one of the giant cotton-woods and hung on to it like Zibet had clung to that wallplate. For dear life.

Zibet didn’t say another thing about her sister until right before Christmas break. Her hair, which I had

thought was growing out, looked choppy than ever. The old look of strain was back and getting worse every day. She looked like a radiation victim.

I wasn't looking that good myself. I couldn't sleep, and float gave me headaches that lasted a week. The alert band started a rash that had worked its way halfway up my arm. And Arabel was right. I was going edge. I couldn't get the tessels off my mind. If you'd asked me last summer what I thought of beasties, I'd have said it was great fun for everyone, especially the animals. Now the thought of Brown with that hideous little brown and pink thing on his arm was enough to make me toss up. I keep thinking about your father. If it's the trust thing you're worried about, I can find out for you. He has your best interests at heart. Come to Papa.

My lawyers hadn't succeeded in convincing the admin to let me go to Aspen for Christmas, or anywhere else. They'd managed to wangle full privileges as soon as everybody was gone, but not to get the alert band off. I figured if the dorm mother got a good look at what it was doing to my arm, though, she'd let me have it off for a few days and give it a chance to heal. The circulation system was working again, blowing winds of hurricane force all across Hell. Merry Christmas, everybody.

On the last day of class, I walked into our dark room, hit the wallplate, and froze. There sat Zibet in the dark. On my bed. With a tessel in her lap.

"Where did you get that?" I whispered.

"I stole it," she said.

I locked the door behind me and pushed one of the desk chairs against it. "How?"

"They were all at a party in somebody else's room."

"You went in the boys' dorm?"

She didn't answer.

"You're a freshman. They could send you home for that," I said, disbelieving. This was the girl who had gone quite literally up the wall over the sheets, who had said, "I'm never going home again."

"Nobody saw me," she said calmly. "They were all at a party."

"You're edge," I said. "Whose is it, do you know?"

"It's Daughter Ann."

I grabbed the top sheet off my bunk and started lining my shuttle bag with it. Holy scut, this would be the first place Brown would look. I rifled through my desk drawer for a pair of scissors to cut some air slits with. Zibet still sat petting the horrid thing.

"We've got to hide it," I said. "This time I'm not kidding. You really are in trouble."

She didn't hear me. "My sister Henra's pretty. She has long braids like you. She's good like you, too," and then in an almost pleading voice, "she's only fifteen."

Brown demanded and got a room check that started, you guessed it, with our room. The tessel wasn't there. I'd put it in the shuttle bag and hidden it in one of the spins down in the laundry room. I'd wadded the other slickspin sheet in front of it, which I felt was fitting irony for Brown, only he was too enraged to see it.

"I want another check," he said after the dorm mother had given him the grand tour. "I know it's

here.” He turned to me. “I know you’ve got it.”

“The last shuttle’s in ten minutes,” the dorm mother said. “There isn’t time for another check.”

“She’s got it. I can tell by the look on her face. She’s hidden it somewhere. Somewhere in this dorm.”

The dorm mother looked like she’d like to have him in her Skinner box for about an hour. She shook her head.

“You lose, Brown,” I said. “You stay and you’ll miss your shuttle and be stuck in Hell over Christmas. You leave and you lose your darling Daughter Ann. You lose either way, Brown.”

He grabbed my wrist. The rash was almost unbearable under the band. My wrist had started to swell, puffing out purplish-red over the metal. I tried to free myself with my other hand, but his grip was as hard and vengeful as his face. “Octavia here was at a samurai party in the boys’ dorm last week,” he said to the dorm mother.

“That’s not true,” I said. I could hardly talk. The pain from his grip was making me so nauseated I felt faint.

“I find that difficult to believe,” the dorm mother said, “since she is confined by an alert band.”

“This?” Brown said, and yanked my arm up. I cried out. “This thing?” He twisted it around my wrist. “She can take it off any time she wants. Didn’t you know that?” He dropped my wrist and looked at me contemptuously. “Tavvy’s too smart to let a little thing like an alert band stop her, aren’t you, Tavvy?”

I cradled my throbbing wrist against my body and tried not to black out. It isn’t beasties, I thought frantically. He would never do this to me just for beasties. It’s something worse. Worse. He must never, never get it back.

“There’s the call for the shuttle,” the dorm mother said. “Octavia, your break privileges are canceled.”

Brown shot a triumphant glance at me and followed her out. It took every bit of strength I had to wait till the last shuttle was gone before I went to get the tessel. I carried it back to the room with my good hand. The restricks hardly mattered. There was no place to go anyway. And the tessel was safe. “Everything will be all right,” I said to the tessel.

Only everything wasn’t all right. Henra, the pretty sister, wasn’t pretty. Her hair had been cut off, as short as scissors could make it. She was flushed bright red and crying. Zibet’s face had gone stony white and stayed that way. I didn’t think from the looks of her that she’d ever cry again. Isn’t it wonderful what a semester of college can do for you?

Restricks or no, I had to get out of there. I took my books and camped down in the laundry room. I wrote two term papers, read three textbooks, and, like Zibet, recopied all my notes. He cut off my hair. He said I tempted men and that was why it happened. Your father was only trying to protect you. Come to Papa. I turned on all the spins at once so I couldn’t hear myself think and typed the term papers.

I made it to the last day of break, gritting my teeth to keep from thinking about Brown, about tessels, about everything. Zibet and her sister came down to the laundry room to tell me Henra was going back on the first shuttle. I said goodbye, “I hope you can come back,” I said, knowing I sounded stupid, knowing there was nothing in the world that could make me go back to Marylebone Weep if I were Henra.

“I am coming back. As soon as I graduate.”

“It’s only two years,” Zibet said. Two years ago Zibet had the same sweet face as her sister. Two

years from now, Henra too would look like death warmed over. What fun to grow up in Marylebone Weep, where you're a wreck at seventeen.

"Come back with me, Zibet," Henra said.

"I can't."

Toss-up time. I went back to the room, propped myself on my bunk with a stack of books, and started reading. The tessel had been asleep on the foot of the bunk, its gaping pink vaj sticking up. It crawled onto my lap and lay there. I picked it up. It didn't resist. Even with it living in the room, I'd never really looked at it closely. I saw now that it couldn't resist if it tried. It had tiny little paws with soft pink underpads and no claws. It had no teeth, either, just the soft little rosebud mouth, only a quarter of the size of the opening at the other end. If it had been enhanced with pheromones, I sure couldn't tell it. Maybe its attraction was simply that it had no defenses, that it couldn't fight even if it wanted to.

I laid it over my lap and stuck an exploratory finger a little way into the vaj. I'd done enough lezzing when I was a freshman to know what a good vaj should feel like. I eased the finger farther in.

It screamed.

I yanked the hand free, balled it into a fist, and crammed it against my mouth hard to keep from screaming myself. Horrible, awful, pitiful sound. Helpless. Hopeless. The sound a woman must make when she's being raped. No.

Worse. The sound a child must make. I thought, I have never heard a sound like that in my whole life, and at the same instant, this is the sound I have been hearing all semester. Pheromones. Oh, no, a far greater attraction than some chemical. Or is fear a chemical, too?

I put the poor little beast onto the bed, went into the bathroom, and washed my hands for about an hour. I thought Zibet hadn't known what the tessels were for, that she hadn't had more than the vaguest idea what the boys were doing to them. But she had known. Known and tried to keep it from me. Known and gone into the boys' dorm all by herself to steal one. We should have stolen them all, all of them, gotten them away from those scutting god-fucking... I had thought of a lot of names for my father over the years. None of them was bad enough for this. Scutting Jesus-jiggers. Fucking piles of scut.

Zibet was standing in the door of the bathroom.

"Oh, Zibet," I said, and stopped.

"My sister's going home this afternoon," she said.

"No," I said, "Oh, no," and ran past her out of the room.

I guess I had kind of a little breakdown. Anyway, I can't account very well for the time. Which is edge, because the thing I remember most vividly is the feeling that I needed to hurry, that something awful would happen if I didn't hurry.

I know I broke restricks because I remember sitting out under the cottonwoods and thinking what a wonderful sense of humor Old Man Moulton had. He sent up Christmas lights for the bare cottonwoods, and the cotton and the brittle yellow leaves blew against them and caught fire. The smell of burning was everywhere. I remember thinking clearly, smokes and fires, how appropriate for Christmas in Hell.

But when I tried to think about the tessels, about what to do, the thoughts got all muddy and confused, like I'd taken too much float. Sometimes it was Zibet Brown wanted and not Daughter Ann at all, and I would say, "You cut off her hair. I'll never give her back to you. Never." And she would

struggle and struggle against him. But she had no claws, no teeth. Sometimes it was the admin, and he would say, "If it's the trust thing you're worried about, I can find out for you," and I would say, "You only want the tessels for yourself." And sometimes Zibet's father said, "I am only trying to protect you. Come to Papa." And I would climb up on the bunk to unscrew the intercom but I couldn't shut him up. "I don't need protecting," I would say to him. Zibet would struggle and struggle.

A dangling bit of cotton had stuck to one of the Christmas lights. It caught fire and dropped into the brown broken leaves. The smell of smoke was everywhere. Somebody should report that. Hell could burn down, or was it burn up, with nobody here over Christmas break. I should tell somebody. That was it, I had to tell somebody. But there was nobody to tell. I wanted my father. And he wasn't there. He had never been there. He had paid his money, spilled his juice, and thrown me to the wolves. But at least he wasn't one of them. He wasn't one of them.

There was nobody to tell. "What did you do to it?" Arabel said. "Did you give it something? Samurai? Float? Alcohol?"

"I didn't..."

"Consider yourself on restricks."

"It isn't beasties," I said. "They call them Baby Dear and Daughter Ann. And they're the fathers. They're the fathers. But the tessels don't have any claws. They don't have any teeth. They don't even know what jig-jig is."

"He has her best interests at heart," Arabel said.

"What are you talking about? He cut off all her hair. You should have seen her, hanging onto the wallplate for dear life! She struggled and struggled, but it didn't do any good. She doesn't have any claws. She doesn't have any teeth. She's only fifteen. We have to hurry."

"It'll all be over by midterms," Arabel said. "I can fix you up. Guaranteed no trusters."

I was standing in the dorm mother's Skinner box, pounding on her door. I did not know how I had gotten there. My face looked back at me from the dorm mother's mirrors. Arabel's face: strained and desperate. Flashing red and white and red again like an alert band: my roommate's face. She would not believe me. She would put me on restricks. She would have me expelled. It didn't matter.

When she answered the door, I could not run. I had to tell somebody before the whole place caught on fire.

"Oh, my dear," she said, and put her arms around me.

I knew before I opened the door that Zibet was sitting on my bunk in the dark. I pressed the wallplate and kept my bandaged hand on it, as if I might need it for support. "Zibet," I said. "Everything's going to be all right. The dorm mother's going to confiscate the tessels. They're going to outlaw animals on campus. Everything will be all right."

She looked up at me. "I sent it home with her," she said.

"What?" I said blankly.

"He won't... leave us alone. He—I sent Daughter Ann home with her."

No. Oh, no.

“Henra’s good like you. She won’t save herself. She’ll never last the two years.” She looked steadily at me. “I have two other sisters. The youngest is only ten.”

“You sent the tessel home?” I said. “To your *father!*”

“Yes.”

“It can’t protect itself,” I said. “It doesn’t have any claws. It can’t protect itself.”

“I told you you didn’t know anything about sin,” she said, and turned away.

I never asked the dorm mother what they did with the tessels they took away from the boys. I hope, for their own sakes, that somebody put them out of their misery.

The End.

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