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I was singing along with John Lennon when she crowned me from behind: that's how the rape began.

I don't often sing along with jukeboxes; a fellow like me can get hurt that way. It's not just that I can't carry a tune. I seem to have one of those faces that stevedores and bikers and truck-ers—and even the odd minister in his cups—love to punch, just on general principles, I guess, so I tend to avoid drawing attention to myself when I'm in a bar.

No, I'll be more honest than that. I *can* be honest, you see—because it's *my* choice. I'll metaphorically strip myself for you, and then you'll see that it wasn't because she raped my body that I wanted to kill her, or even my mind, but because she raped my soul.

So, being honest: it isn't just for fear of getting punched that I make myself inconspicuous in bars. Contrary to what you may have heard, there aren't that many real bullies in the world; most men looking for a fight will leave me alone, the way a hunter with an elephant gun will walk past a gerbil. What I'm really avoiding when I make myself inconspicuous is pity.

I mean, look at me. Most of the people who ever have, failed to see me at all—the eye tends to subtract me—but those who do notice usually feel sorry for me. My chin and my Adam's apple are like twin brothers in bunk beds. I got this nose. My dad used to say that my ears made me look like a taxicab coming down the street with the doors open. My glasses weigh more than my shoes, and my shoes weigh more than the rest of me.

I mean, I'll bet you think a prostitute will take anybody, that any man with enough money can get laid. It may be true. *I've* never had enough money. Oh, once I got a woman to agree, for three times the going rate ... but the way she went about it, I just couldn't do it—to her total lack of surprise. I've never really given up hope since, in my adolescence, I first heard the term "mercy hump"—but so far, I haven't found that much mercy in the world.

So when the jukebox clicked, and John Lennon began to tell me that he was a loser, I just naturally chimed in on the second, "I'm a l-o-o-oser". And felt something circular and weighty being pressed down over my head—and heard the most beautiful voice in the world, right behind my ear, sing the next line of the song—and spun quickly around and saw her.

Oh my, it hurt to look at her. You're a normal man, friend, no doubt you've won some and lost some but didn't you ever see one that you just *knew* on sight you'd trade your home and wife and children and hope of immortality and twenty years of your mortal life for ten minutes in bed with—and knew just as clearly that you'd never ever get her, even at that price? God, it's a sweet pain, that is, and I know a lot more about it than you do. Every man has in his mind an ideal of the Perfectly Beautiful Woman—she was better looking than that, and better dressed.

"Forgive me, sir," she said.

I guess I should remember that those were the fast words she said to me—if you don't count the song lyric. At the time I remember thinking that I was prepared to forgive her anything whatsoever. It shows you how wrong you can be.

To my gratified surprise, my voice worked. "Forgive you?"

"I just couldn't help myself."

With an effort I tore my attention from a close examination of her parts and perimeters, and tried to imagine why she could possibly feel a need to apologize to me. Oh yes—she had put something heavy on my head. I felt it with my fingertips. It felt like a crown. Reluctantly I took my eyes away from her and looked in the mirror behind the bar.

Yep, that was a crown on my head, all right. A simple, inch-wide band of gold around my forehead, elaborately chased but otherwise unadorned. It was so heavy, it had to be real gold or gilded lead.

Alongside the twin miracles of her existence and the fact that she was speaking to me (and calling me "sir"!), nothing was strange. "That's perfectly all right," I said, quite as though pre-ternaturally beautiful women put thousands of dollars worth of gold on my brow every third Thursday, and I were becoming resigned to it. System crash of the brain.

She did something with her face that I don't have a word for. Deep in the shielded core of my heart, graphite rods slid up out of the fuel mass, and the pile temperature began climbing toward meltdown point. "It was unforgivable of me to intrude upon your privacy."

She had a faint, indefinable accent; I guessed Middle European of some kind. She was ... well, I'd say she was beaming at me, but you'd think I only meant she was smiling. I mean she was *beaming* at me, the way an airport beams at an approaching plane to guide it. I realized with a start that she was looking at me just exactly the same way I was looking at her. Captivated, wistful, yearning—no, outright hun-gering and thirsting. I'd seen the look before, in movies starring Marilyn Chambers.

I ask you to believe that I am not a complete idiot. My first thought was that it had to be a mistake. But the light in the bar wasn't bad enough. So my second thought was that it had to be a trick, a trap of some kind.

That was absolutely fine with me. I tried to visualize the worst possible outcome. Say that, in exchange for being allowed to touch her, to put my hand somewhere on her skin—her shoulder, say—I were to be beaten, robbed and killed. Okay, fair enough; no problem there. A weird little phrase ran through my head: *I'll be her sucker if she'll be my succor*. (I seem now to hear a phantom Kingfish saying, "Boy, you is de *suckee*.") Male black widow spiders obviously think they have a good deal going for them.

"It's uncanny," she repeated, and touched my hand. With hers.

"It certainly is," I said, referring to the astonishing discovery that knuckles can be erogenous zones.

"Would you mind standing up, sir?"

That kicked off an ambiguous reaction. If I stood up, the bulge in my trousers would become visible. Even more embarrassing, it might not become visible *enough*. Conflicting imperatives paralyzed me.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm being rude again. It's just that I dreamt about you last night. It was a *very* pleasant dream."

"I've dreamed about you all my life," I said, "and it has always been pleasant."

You're very beautiful." A happy feeling was growing in me. First, because I had finally managed to say something intelligent and gallant. And second, because she had just named a barely plausible reason why a woman like her could be interested in a guy like me.

I mean, you have to understand that my father always insisted I wasn't his—until my sixteenth birthday, when he gave up and apologized to my mother. "It has to be some kind of mutation," he admitted. "You would *never* have cheated on me with someone who looked like that."

But anything can happen in a dream. Lord, who knows better than I? For the first time I was willing to—tentatively—believe that her obvious attraction signals might just be genuine. The possibilities were staggering.

"My mother was," she answered, dimpling, "the most beautiful Queen that Ragovia ever had."

"You're a princess." Well, of course. Dream logic.

"Only by courtesy. I'll never be queen—Ragovia became a democracy a few years ago."

"I'm *terribly* sorry to hear that."

"Oh, it was a bloodless coup. A telegram to our summer place in Barbados, and that was essentially it. Father moped for a week."

"Well, naturally."

"I can't get over how much you look like the man in my dream. He was wearing Father's crown. That's why I just had to put it on your head—to see if the resemblance could possibly be as complete as it seemed."

I threw caution to the winds and stood up. "And is it?"

Her eyes went down and then up me. On the way down they paused just where I had hoped/feared they would. When her eyes got back up to mine, she was smiling. "The resemblance is exact."

"Princess—uh—"

"Oh, forgive me again. My name is Marga."

"My name is Fleming, Princess Marga."

"Please, Marga alone is sufficient." And without the slightest hesitation or change of voice or manner, she went on, "Fleming, do you know of some quiet, private place nearby where we could be alone together?"

A man next to me made an odd swallowing sound. I dug a finger into my ear. "Too much noise in here. I could have sworn that you just asked me . . ." I could not repeat what I thought I had heard.

"I asked you if you have a place where we can be alone together. As we were in my dream last night."

I drew in a deep breath, and then could not remember what to do with it. "Why?" I croaked.

"So that I can screw you into a coma."

Exhale. That was what you did with deep breaths. No, too late now: I was paralyzed. That breath was going to have to last me the rest of my life.

"—" I said.

"If you have no place near," she went on, "we could find an alley. Or we could lock ourselves in the toilet here. But I am mad with lust for you and must have you

as soon as possible."

People had been surreptitiously watching ever since Marga had sat down next to me, and now there were two small, musical explosions as the customers on either side of us dropped their drinks.

I decided that, while this was a splendid moment to die, even better ones might lie in the future; with an effort I got my breathing reflex started again.

"The feeling is mutual. That is, I hope it will be. That is—yes, I have a place near here."

"Let's *hurry!* In my dream we were *won-derful* together!"

A lot of people were watching now. I glanced around as I took her hand, the way I've seen it done in movies, and nothing in my life had ever tasted as good as the sight of all those gaping faces.

Understand, I knew perfectly well that something was going to go wrong. I would never get her to my place, or she'd change her mind, or I wouldn't get it up, or I wouldn't get it in, or I'd get in and it'd be disappointing, or she'd have AIDS, or a bonebreaker boyfriend—the exact nature of the doom was as yet unknown, but I knew in my heart that something was going to go wrong. (And of course, I was mistaken about that.) But I didn't care. The thrill of seeing all those stunned faces watching *her* leave with *me*, rubbing up against me like a cat who's just heard the can opener, was—I firmly believed—worth any disappointment. (And you know, perhaps I was nearly right about that.) As we reached the door, she opened it for me with her left hand, and her right hand settled firmly and unmistakably on my ass to guide me out into the night. There was an audible collective gasp from behind us.

Once we were on the street I flung up my arm to hail a cab. Cabs *never* stop for me, even when I wave large bills at them. I was operating on dream logic.

And a cab pulled up with a squeal of brakes, and the cabbie jumped out and *opened the door* for us.

It was her, of course, not me. I knew just how the cabbie felt. I could sense his astonishment that she was with me, and I agreed with him, and gave him a smile that tried to say, "It's a dream, pal, go with it. For God's sake, go with it!"

When he got back behind the wheel, he adjusted the rearview mirror and I met his baffled gaze. I gave my address, Marga added "*—and hurry!*" in a voice thick with lust, and his eyes widened even further. We started up with a roar and a lurch, and the moment we were up to speed she opened my fly.

The cab seemed to lock its brakes on ice, spin wildly and smash into a gasoline truck. She made a small sound of contentment and continued what she was doing. The phantom flames roared ...

The cabdriver was so profoundly shocked he was actually driving at a safe legal speed, and took us to my place by the shortest, most direct route. Marga appeared to be totally engrossed in what she was doing, and God knows I was, but she sensed when we were approaching our destination somehow, and had me zipped back up as the cab came to a halt. She paid the driver before he or I could think of it. I had just enough presence of mind to hold the door for her as she got out. A group of leathered teens were monopolizing the stoop of my brownstone, as usual. They turned to brown stone at the sight of us, and did not even turn to watch as we walked up past them and into the building.

As the elevator door closed behind us, she shut off the light, leaned back against the wall and pulled me against her. She tucked my face against her neck and hugged me so tightly, with both arms and one leg, that I could move only a single muscle. But she seemed to be under no such constraint: she *rippled*, in several directions at once, and if I lived one floor higher I'd have disgraced myself. But the elevator door slid back and light burst in on us, and reluctantly she released me.

Standing outside the elevator, waiting to board, was Hal Grimsby, the slickest stud in my build-ing, a jock type who had been bringing home a different girl every night for the four years I'd been living there, each girl prettier than the last. He was making no move to get on the eleva-tor. You could have put one of his handballs into his mouth without touching his lips.

Marga straightarmed him out of the way and led me past him. "Hurry, darling," she said clearly. "I'm *dripping*."

Behind us, Hal made a faint gargling sound. The elevator closed and left without him.

And *still* it wasn't perfect yet. As we approached my apartment, the door across the hall opened and Mary Zanfardino stepped out.

For the past four years, Mary Zanfardino had been the leading lady in an endless series of fantasies much like the one I was now living—save that I didn't have this good an imagination. I had never succeeded in starting a conversation with her, but I knew that she was perfectly aware of my attraction to her, and deeply revolted by it. Now she was thunderstruck. I'd never seen pupils that large.

I turned to look at Marga. I found the sight of her as devastating as everyone else did. Her hair was disheveled. Her nipples were prominent beneath her silk dress. She smelled like Tina Turner's panties after a concert. Her eyes were heavy-lidded, and her smile would have looked just like the Mona Lisa's except for the smeared lipstick

...

I turned back to Mary, former girl of my dreams. She looked like a mud simulacrum of a woman, fashioned by a primitive and dressed by a small child.

This was no time for introductions. I nod-ded curtly to Mary, brushed past her, and unlocked my door. As Marga came toward me (utterly ignoring Mary) she was unbuttoning her dress, and before I could get the door closed behind me she was out of it entirely. I caught one last flash-glimpse of Mary that made me want to giggle, but I knew intuitively that if I started I might never stop, and this once in my life I did not want to remind myself of Jerry Lewis. Then the latch slid home and Marga and I were alone. I knew that my bedroom was a mess, but I also knew we were not going to get that far.

I can see it in my mind, even now, but I can't describe it. Just say that, even displayed to the best possible advantage—that is, even if Marga were wearing it—there is nothing in the Frederick's of Hollywood catalogue that could ever look half as lovely, as provocative, as inflam-matory, as what Marga was wearing under that dress. Enchanted elves had made it. My mouth had gone drier than a user's manual, and I knew why: some helpful internal resource-dispatcher was rerouting all the moisture in my body to where it was most needed.

"Which one of us shall undress you, my king?" she asked.

We took turns. She left the crown on my head and I didn't argue.

* * * * *

No, I'm not going to cheat you; that was not a discreet fade to black. Those asterisks are there because what she and I did deserves to be set off by itself. It merits special ceremony.

I will admit that part of me wants to take refuge in those asterisks, to leave the lurid details in the limbo which is symbolized by the six-pointed star. I never learned to enjoy locker-room boasting; it never came up, so to speak. But if I don't tell you just how it was, you'll never understand how I felt afterward.

Besides, it won't be a *real* invasion of my privacy. I mean, it's only me *telling* you, and telling you *my* version of things, and only the parts that can be fit into words at that. Not even all of them. I'm trying to make the point that what she did to me was *worse* than anything I could do to myself.

So you want to know, was it good, eh friend?

* * * * *

As I've said, *I knew* going in that it would be a fiasco of some kind; we'd be interrupted, or I'd Fail To Perform and nothing would happen. Probably that's what you're expecting, and I can't blame you.

But then to my vast astonishment our clothes seemed to melt away and we were naked and touching and she was warm and slippery and it was just sort of happening. No: it was not sort of anything. It was most emphatically happen-ing.

And happening.

The Physical Aspect:

I have no frame of reference except for what I've read, and the accounts all conflict. You tell me: is it normal for a twenty-five-year-old male losing his virginity to experience eight orgasms in four hours, without ever completely losing the original erection? Does a woman's tenth orgasm in half an hour usually trigger an hour-long continuous climax? I'd always assumed those *Penthouse* letters were fantasy. And is it always that *noisy*? And wet? And glorious?

For the record, we did everything I've ever heard of that can be done without additional cast or esoteric equipment and doesn't involve former food, former people, or animals. We *did* make use, from time to time, of candles, neckties, scarves, shoelaces, a little water-color paintbrush, her hairbrush, butter, whipped cream, strawberry jam, Johnson's Baby Oil, my Swedish hand vibrator, a fascinating bead necklace she had, miscellaneous other common household items, and every molecule of flesh that was exposed to the air or could be located with strenuous search.

The Mental Aspect:

So that's what it's like to feel virile! Fas-cinating. Heady. As sweet as it's cracked up to be. Potentially addictive. Primitively stirring. Part of me wanted to go punch some son of a bitch—in a little while ...

Part of me wanted to dedicate my remaining life to thanking her, even though—perhaps *because*—she was making it clear that she wanted no more thanks than she was getting. Hyperalert for pretense as only a virgin can be, I was certain I was genuinely pleasing her.

We *knew* each other, in more than the purely Biblical sense. At least, I seemed to come to know her more intimately, more quickly, than I have ever known anyone, not excepting my parents, and she, being more experienced than I, surely learned more than I did. She learned things about me that no one else had ever cared to, things that I didn't know. My grandmother's heirloom rocking chair collapsed under us and we howled with laughter together.

We *touched* each other.

The Spiritual Aspect:

Oh my God I'm not alone anymore! Even if I never see her again after tonight, I'm not alone anymore. Trillions of my cells, stamped with my identity, have left my shores and established colonies in another being—and it doesn't even matter if all the colonies end up as dead as Jamestown or Jonestown: I'm not alone anymore! This isn't another test shot, another dummy run targeted for a handful of Kleenex, this is a genuine launch. My sperm have achieved spaceflight. God, they cry, dying on Mars, we made it!

Thank you, God, for this crazy stranger, for granting me these memories to cherish; I never really believed in You before ...

And inevitably there was an ending. I think that in my last round I finally lost the last shred of fear—the subconscious suspicion that any minute I was going to wake up from a coma or a jealous husband was going to kick in the door or some other slapstick disaster would spoil it—and was able to fully relax and enjoy myself. To lose myself, to throw myself away, to expand to the size of the universe and trust that there would still be someone to be when I recondensed.

Perhaps, indeed, I became someone else in that timeless time—or perhaps it was the glorious hours that led up to it which worked some kind of change on me, developing, or maybe only tapping, wells of unsuspected strength.

Because I'm fairly sure the man I had been when I'd walked into that apartment would have concluded such stupifying carnal excess with a deep sleep of hours, if not days ...

Whereas I returned to something resembling normal consciousness, to a vastly changed but basically recognizable reality, only a few minutes after the last generation ship left the launch pad. I waited until my breathing slowed, and lifted myself up onto an elbow which was missing considerable skin, and said, "Tell me about yourself, Marga; what do you do with your life?"

Something infinitely subtle changed in her face, and even without my glasses I sensed she was unhappy with the question. The man I had been would have sprained his tongue changing the subject. I waited, forcing her to make some reply, and the wait was just long enough for me to notice that the silly crown she had insisted I leave on was heavy enough to strain my neck; I reached up to remove it.

"Don't!" she blurted. "It's still saving—"

There was no pause at all; I'm breaking the sentence only to indicate a barely perceptible alteration in the tone of her voice as she finished, "—the sweat from running into your eyes, my love."

A moment before I'd have been prepared to cut my throat if she wished it. But she herself had recently and repeatedly wakened in me the primitive male essence, the killer-ape ancestry I had always thought to be purely theoretical. The old ape is paranoid.

I removed the crown.

"Darling," she said, her lighthearted tone perfectly plausible, "don't spoil it, now. You look so handsome with it on—come, let me put it back on and I'll tell you anything about me you want to know. How I lost my virginity, perhaps...?"

As she reached coyly for it I pulled it away and sat up. "Just a second, Marga." I switched on the table lamp—we were on the floor at the time—and turned fractionally away from her to study the crown. She made a grab for my elbow, aborted it quickly.

The light was just a little better than it had been in the bar. I held the crown close to my eyes, tilted it so the light picked out a portion of its interior surface in high relief. Most of the intricate engraving was unfamiliar to me, seemingly purely artistic in design, like the elaborate chasings on the outer surface, but a portion of it I recognized. Rotating the crown slightly I made out another such portion, extra-polated a total of three. It reminded me of a mouse I knew . . .

"I was afraid the sweat might be tarnishing the gold. It is pure gold, isn't it?"

"Yes, Fleming, but it's sealed against corrosion. Please put it back on? To please me?" She sat up beside me and tugged playfully at one of my nipples.

I pondered for a half second. "Anything to please you, Marga." I swept back my damp hair and put the crown back on my head, allowed her to adjust its position slightly. "Now if you'll excuse me for just one second, my ... bladder is bursting."

I got up and padded toward the bathroom. Everybody has some cliché they use: my back teeth are floating, or, my eyes are turning yellow, or, my cup runneth over. My own custom-ary euphemism is, "my buffer needs purging," and I was glad I had caught myself. It might have warned her.

I have never been a decisive, quick-thinking quick-responding kind of guy. It's easy to play practical jokes on me; I'm slow to catch on and even slower—days slower, usually—to figure out what to do about it. Maybe a dozen times in my life I've had one of those flashes of satori, those moments of insight in which a whole, long logic chain appears at once before the mind's eye—and each time it came in my work rather than my social life.

So maybe it helped that this one was work-related. Maybe it helped that I had just had the best confidence boosting of my life. Maybe there is a kind of preternatural clarity of thought that comes with total physical satisfaction ... and how in Hell would I know?

It just seemed so simple, so obvious. So inescapable—

"Don't bang your elbow on that chair behind you, darling," I called back over my shoulder, and as she turned to look I bent down.

Just as I had guessed, the time machine was in her purse. It wasn't hard to recognize. It looked like a bulky watch with no band. I was interested to find that

there was a weapon along with it, an unfamiliar but unmistakable handgun. I spun and leaped, whipping my head to shake off the crown, and the distance was short; as she was turning back toward me I cannoned into her and we went over in a heap, my cheek against hers and my arms tight around her. For perhaps a second she mistook it for clumsy erotic play, and that was enough time in the lamplight for me to read the little word *Qun* and thumbnail the tiny recessed button which it labeled on her "watch."

The light changed drastically, became labor-atory bright. Appropriate, as we were now in a laboratory.

So was an astonished man in a white smock of odd design, and a shorter, weasel-faced man in red high heels, pink patterned stockings, and a loudly-clashing maroon kilt. Marga and I looked down on them slightly from a railing-encircled platform whose height must have been calibrated to a high degree of precision.

Weasel-face was the loudest of the pair in more ways than one, and slowest on the uptake; as the other man gaped, he was booming cheer-ily, "Welcome back, pixel, did you get a good—*crash*, Marga! What did you bring the mark *back* for?" His face curled reflexively on itself. "The frotter wants points, eh?"

"*Jimby, help!*" Marga screamed, and he step-ped back a pace, high heels clattering on the lab floor. She tried to break my embrace, and should have succeeded, but now I was as strong as a normal roan. I not only held her, I got my thumbnail back on that button.

The lights dimmed again suddenly, and my rug prickled once again on my bare skin. I let her go and rolled convulsively clear, sprang to my feet clutching her time machine. She started to rise too. Halfway up she saw her gun in my other hand, and sank back down. I must have been holding it correctly.

I knew that if I said anything my voice would crack, so I waited until I was sure I had con-trol.

"Did you ever think to wonder," I asked at last, "what a guy like me would do for a living?"

"Do you want me to guess?" she asked sul-lenly. "All right. A janitor? An accountant? A fast-food cook? A painter? A writer?"

I nodded. "You wouldn't know, would you? This is too good an apartment for any of those. But that aside, even in those professions you have to be ... more impressive-looking than I am."

"I can believe it," she said. "All right, surprise me."

"I write software, for a mouse-driven com-puter called the Macintosh. Independents can't make a lot at it, but no one ever has to see your face."

"Frot," she said. It was some kind of obscenity where she came from.

"You may have heard of hackers. A vanguard subculture of today, like the beatniks and the hippies of earlier days. Just like with them, some expressions that will be common idiom in another ten or twenty years are familiar to me now. When you said the word `save,' I heard it the way you would."

"Frot," she said again, a little more forcefully.

"Yeah. As in `saving the changes to disk.' The inside of that crown thing looks a lot like the ball-cavity of the mouse on my Mac, two little phototransistors and a reference point. Yours wouldn't be optical, though, would they? Other than that, the

analogy is pretty good: you ...'turn the head around,' and the sensors translate it into data. That's ROM circuitry around the sensors, sure as hell. The rest of the crown is storage space, right? Hell's own data capacity, from the size.

"So the rest was logic. The only thing you could possibly be recording from my head that required that kind of byte room was ... my memories, my *thoughts*. My feelings. That told me you had to be from the future: even the Japanese don't have brain interface *yet*. You had to have a way to get back to your own time, and I was certain you were not wearing it, externally or internally. But you wouldn't go far from it, so it had to be in the purse. The only thing I don't understand is why your brain-robbing Peeping ROM takes so infernally long to write the data."

She looked up at me. There was none of the new respect in her eyes that I had earned. "Fool. We cannot get at short-term memory; Heisenberg effect. If we could we'd have effective telepathy, wouldn't we?"

I was feeling telepathic. I sensed her thinking about trying to take the time machine from me; with great pleasure I felt her decide against it. "And mind-control," I agreed. "I'd never have reached the purse. You have to wait for the memories to seep from short-term to long-term storage—and I came out of the fog too soon." I grinned. Taking off that crown must have been like yanking a disk out of the drive while it's spinning, huh?"

Her eyes flashed. "I could have killed you. After all I did for you—"

Give me this much credit. I did not kill her then.

When I had myself back in control, I spoke very softly. "Recorded memories must have beat out most other artforms and recreations. I'll bet the pornography is sensational by my standards. But even my primitive pornography has taught me something interesting, and you confirmed it earlier tonight: *there is a finite limit to the possibilities*. There are only so many ways to do it for the camera: at some point even you people must get jaded. So you'll pay extra for the candid-camera kick, for the memories of someone who *doesn't know you're watching*, somebody with no copy protection on his head.

"More: for recordings of someone who's given up all hope of ecstasy, falling suddenly into the middle of his wildest wet dreams. For recordings of the ending of despair, the ending of a solitude such as none of you must ever have known. Heightened dramatic effect. Casanova may be happy, skillfully plundering his hundredth willing wench, but not a fraction as happy as I was tonight. Your world must not have pain like mine any more—you had to come back here to find it."

I shifted my weight, and my foot touched something cold. I glanced down and saw the crown.

Suddenly I was roaring in a voice I had never known I had. "Do you know that the moment a pain is fast relieved is the moment you learn how large it truly was? Agony is *defined* by relief! I learned tonight just what a horrible joke my life has been and will be *and I didn't even mind!* I was *grateful* to you for calibrating my misery! For showing me *exactly* what I'd been missing!"

I crouched and came up with my ultimate wet dream in my fist. I was dimly astonished to realize that I was not crying. Rage had always made me cry. "This is solid gold you've got here," I said, brandishing the crown. "You're very good at what you do. Not hard, I suppose, when you can rent—or more likely, copy—all the

tricks there are."

She scowled.

I looked at it for a while. "Can this thing play back by itself," I asked huskily, "or do you need other equipment?"

She looked me in the eye. For the first time since I'd gotten up to pee, a smile touched the corners of her mouth. "There's a thumbnail toggle inside. Once to stop, twice to rewind, three times to play back. You'll get the whole thing in six seconds of realtime."

"Slick."

I tore my eyes from the crown, and made a small gasping sound. In the soft lamplight, with-out my glasses, her naked body was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Even more beautiful, perhaps, than that same body had been four hours ago. She did that thing that women have been able to do since Eve. There are no discernible gross muscle movements, but the whole body seems to rearrange itself . . . to *beckon* to you, somehow.

I didn't want to ask. The words were torn out of me. "It was all faked, wasn't it, Marga?"

"In the sense that all performance art is faked."

A graceful out. I wouldn't take it. "You know what I mean. As the cliché goes ... *was it good for you, too?*"

I saw a flicker of pity in her *eyes*, I know that one real well, and I saw it die in the instant it was born. She knew I couldn't be conned any more. She glanced down briefly to my groin, and back up. "You notice I didn't wear a crown myself," she muttered.

Again I didn't kill her. I didn't do anything at all, as far as I know. I'm sure I stopped breathing. I remember hearing the fan in the next room in the sudden silence. How long did I stare at her in the stillness, feeling the metal crown cool against one palm, the time machine and gun faintly warm against the other? My medulla licked in finally, and I sucked in a deep breath.

And she said, clear as a bell and twice as pretty, "But you *were* sweet, and you're taking it like a man. All right: nine percent of the net, my final offer. Jimby will be furious—that's a point over the going rate."

In that instant I became, not merely a func-tional male animal, but a man.

I put the time machine gently down on the couch. "All right," I said, "you got me good. I guess the joke's on me. And as long as you're prepared to give me a whore's usual cut, I guess I really have no kick coming, have I? Oh, I admit, I'm tempted to give you a good spanking—"

Her eyes showed genuine interest for the first time.

"—but why give you more good material for free? Tell you what: make my *ten* percent why should I pay an agent's commission?—and you can have your time machine and gun and crown back."

She relaxed. "Fleming, you're a sport."

"Damn right." I smiled. "A contact sport, as clumsy and laughable as professional wrestling. But at least I'm well-paid."

And I gave her back her time machine and gun and crown, and she went back home to her boss Jimby. I'm still waiting to hear back from her, but I assume the

check is in the mail.

Perhaps the delay has something to do with what I did *before* I gave her back her things. While I still held the gun trained on her lovely face, I took that crown and crushed it flat in my hands, and ripped it into pieces, and hammered the pieces into gold leaves with a ball-peen hammer, and made multiple passes over each leaf with my tape-head demagnetizer, and scrubbed them with steel wool, and heated them just to melting point with a blowtorch, and I really *had* had to pee for quite some time so I cooled the pieces the way they used to temper swords, and finally I wrapped the damp and sizzling shards up in her dress and handed her the whole bundle with my compliments—

--yes, now that I come to think of it, *I do* seem to recall a rather unhappy expression on her face as she winked out of existence for the last time.

I don't see why. I let her live ...

There was a whole lot of tedious low com-edy then, which lasted several days. Too many people had the vivid memory of Marga coming home with me indelibly engraved on their brains, in persuasive detail; too many neighbors had heard our frenzied athletics and shouted quar-rel and the sound of repeated hammering; no one had seen her leave. No clothing or ID was found. I had not cleaned up the suggestive clutter in the apartment. I flatly refused to hear any questions whatsoever concerning her, let alone answer them. I declined a lawyer. I ignored the third degree treatment, the good cop/bad cop and the threats and all that.

What kept it from mattering was that they lacked a corpse and they lacked a missing person from which to infer one. All witnesses were unanimous and emphatic in describing the kind of woman who could not conceivably disappear from the world (by any means known) without being missed. There was no Marga missing. The bartender and two patrons remembered the name "Ragovia," and of course there is no such country. The only people who were *certain* where she had gone had, in all likelihood, not been born yet. The police, growing more indifferent as they sensed a conviction receding out of probability, finally stopped bothering me.

Mary Zanfardino knocked on my door a few days after that, and a few days later she became my girlfriend. She has never once asked me about Marga, and she has no complaints about my lovemaking, and all things considered we are reasonably happy. One of these days perhaps we'll come to know each other so well that we'll be inside each other's skull—and since she'll be there by *invitation*, I don't plan to charge her.

I know *exactly* how happy we are, and exactly how happy we are not. And she and I are the only persons anywhere in space and time who know that ... and that suits me fine.