

THE BEDPOSTS OF LIFE

by Robert Bloch

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He hated what he was doing, but he couldn't help it.

None of them could help it, because their need was too great. The great need for great sex.

Well, they wouldn't find it here. Most of them knew this in advance but still they came, night after night, cruising the street in slow-moving silence more appropriate to a funeral procession than a journey of joy. It was, perhaps, fitting that they should do so, for virtually all those who gathered here mourned the loss of love.

Some had never even known it: the very young, the shy, the awkward and unattractive victims of low self-esteem. But their need was as compelling, perhaps more so than that of the others. When you're hungry the body doesn't demand delicacies; it settles for junk-food. Young appetites value quantity over quality, and the quantity was here. *Great sex*? At this stage in their lives any sex at all was great, just so there was enough of it available.

When you're old, availability becomes a problem once again. Dirty old men get hungry too. Just because you lose your teeth doesn't mean you lose your appetite. If gourmet fare is harder to come by, there's plenty of take-outs for midnight snacks. The street is a convenience-store.

He strolled along, scanning faces crouched over steering-wheels. Along with the generation-gap's extremes were men in their prime, drivers who were themselves driven by impulse impossible to control.

For amusement he made a little game of relating cars to their occupants. The lonesome Audi, stranger in town. Slinky-styled old Bugatti on the prowl for young meat. That dented white Ford wagon conjured up the image of a harried, housebroken middle-aging husband whose spouse selected the vehicle as a convenience for hauling kids. He'd borrowed it to come here in temporary escape from the bonds of unholy matrimony.

Bonds. *Bondage*. That van with the drawn window-curtains — did they conceal contents, cords and cuffs and chains so dearly beloved in sado-masochistic union? One could never be sure, it was all guesswork, really. That old Chevy truck spewing exhaust might have a driver wearing pantyhose under his jeans. This Mercedes might be owned by a substantial stockbroker, or some swinging substance-abuser. And driving a Porsche doesn't guarantee your potency. Wherefore art thou, Alfa-Romeo?

He shrugged the thought aside. It was time to stop searching the street and turn his attention to the sidewalk.

That's where the women waited: the hookers, the hustlers, the broads and the bimbos.

The women were like cars, in a way. Big or small, wide-bodied or compact, flashy models with fresh paint-jobs, old pickups beyond repair. None were brand-new, but when you're looking for a used car you've got to expect some mileage on it. In a case like this you weren't even buying, just picking a rental. And design wasn't as important as locating a comfortable, trouble-free ride.

Never mind the colors, either. He noted a little yellow one, probably a Japanese import, but there was a wide selection in white, black or brown. No sticker-prices, all that was a matter of bargaining, so he might as well be guided by the mood of the moment and indulge his whim.

Just what was his whim in women this evening?

How about that brassy blonde in the miniskirt riding up almost to her thighs? He watched as she strutted along the edge of the walk near the curb, eyeing the drivers and giving them an eyeful. Not his type, he decided. Not tonight, Josephine.

Hadn't heard anyone say that in years. *Not tonight, Josephine.* Now there was an oldie for you. A golden oldie, like the blonde, whose ravaged countenance was clearly and cruelly revealed as she came closer.

He avoided her glance, fixing his attention on the dark-haired girl who stood under a doorway, half in shadow, like a Rembrandt portrait. But there the resemblance ended. When she moved forward into the street he saw what shadow had partially concealed; the body of a woman, the face of a child, the eyes of a whore.

He hurried past her, then shrugged as he continued at a slower pace, reminding himself again that variations in age, build or complexion were unimportant. One size fits all. What difference did it make which woman he chose?

The answer stood on the corner, under the spotlight.

The light was orange. The smooth bare skin of her arms and shoulders was orange too.

The light was red. Her helmet of hair was red too.

The light was green. Under their long lashes, the eyes that stared at him were green.

Colorful. Changeable. And all illusion. Still, it added an element of diversion which might make things just a trifle easier. He didn't like what he was going to do, but that couldn't be helped. And after all, she was only a whore.

So the time had come to make his move. To walk slow and easy, talk slow and easy. Big smile now, that's the trick.

"Good evening," he said.

When the trick said hello she knew he was the one. She didn't like what she was going to do, but a girl has to eat. And after all, he was only a John.

Not a bad-looking one, either, she decided. Tall, dark and handsome, like they used to say in those late-night reruns of old movies. Regular movies, that is, not like the kind you got in motels. God, how many of those lousy porno flicks had she sat through? And why did so many Johns need them to turn on with? No wonder they had problems making it with the wife or girlfriend. But hey, don't knock it, if they didn't have problems she'd be out of business. And right now she needed business, needed it bad because of the way things had been going lately. But to Hell with *lately*, this is *now*. No yester-day, no tomorrow.

She flashed on all this while she was talking to the John, fast-talking, sweet-talking, double-talking, the same line she always handed out upfront to stall for time.

Thing is, you needed time to size up a trick before the deal went down. Maybe in the old days it was easier to go by appearances, like the kind of clothes a John wore. But now everybody tried to look like a slob, so you had to check out details; kind of shoes he had on, did he wear a drugstore watch or a good one, was there dirt under his nails?

Sometimes you could get a fix on the kind of car they drove, but a lot of creeps switched to some old junker when they had to purge the urge. Old cars and old clothes helped them poormouth you over the price, so it was up to you to spot phonies. Because the price was same as always — whatever the traffic would bear.

Only this John didn't come with the traffic, not unless he was one of the real smartasses who parked down a side street and walked the rest of the way. Or maybe he'd come out of some motel around here, except he didn't look like the type who'd be staying in these roach-ranches. No tie, but wool dress slacks and a dark jacket; shirt under-neath longsleeved, because the cuffs showed. Leather shoes, too, oxfords in-stead of those plastic slip-ons.

Everything added up — added up to maybe twenty, thirty dollars more than regular, plus a kickback from the motel if he didn't have a flop of his own. She

didn't have a main man to look out for her now, so she'd damn well better look out for herself. Don't go off the turf with a trick, don't cab to his pad. Keep cool, fool.

No problem. Turned out all he wanted was great sex, nothing kinky, no side-order of fries. The price she set didn't seem to bother him and yes, he'd pay upfront, soon as they registered. He left it to her to pick out a place, which is why the two of them ended up in that neat suite at the C'mon Inn.

The open closet space had four of those goddam hangers that don't come off the rack, the curtains smelled of stale smoke, and the bed-lamp was broken, but no problem.

And no problem with the money. All in twenties, she noticed, it came out of a fancy billfold with a zipper. Initials stamped on in gold lettering but she couldn't make them out because the bulb in the corner floor-lamp was too dim. And when he turned it off the only light came from outside the window where the neon sign flickered on and off. Off was black, on was blue, black and blue, jerk better not try beating on her, no S&M, just straight, right?

But he didn't get out of line, just waited as she peeled her things off and stood beside the bed, first a black blur, then a bright blue body with burnished blue hair, blazing blue eyes.

He glanced up at her as he shed his clothes. "Blue angel," he said.

"What?"

"*The Blue Angel.*" He pulled her down beside him. "Old movie. Saw it in Ger-many when it first came out. Before your time."

She ran her eyes and hands over his lean, muscular frame. "Don't con me. You aren't all that old."

"And you're not that much of an angel. Appearances can be deceptive." He chuckled as if what he'd just said was funny, but it wasn't.

A frown creased her forehead and she creased it out quickly. But she might have known what to expect; these neat dressers were always the ones, talk your ear off if you let them. Okay, so she got paid to let them, only she didn't have to like it. If it's talk they wanted, why not spend their dough on phone-calls. Talk is for singles-bars. Way we do business here, buddy, is get it up, get it over with, and get out. That's how she liked it.

Only she didn't like it. And she hated him, hated all of them, talk or no talk. If it wasn't for one of them she wouldn't be here, but too late to worry about that now, all she could do was hate the whole stinking dirty lot —

“What are you thinking about?” he said.

“Nothing.”

He smiled. “Man’s question. Woman’s answer.”

Now he bent forward, searching her face, and his smile faded. Outside the window the neon eye blinked at them, its light sweeping over the moon of flesh suspended above her, searching minute craters and crevasses. Maybe he was older than she’d figured.

That part didn’t bother her, but she was starting to feel a little edgy about the way he looked when he wasn’t smiling. Those eyes of his were some-thing else — every time the neon switched on he was staring at her, staring into her, deep, as if he could read her mind.

“Don’t worry,” she told him. “I’m okay.”

“No you’re not.” His smile came back, but it was different now, like his voice; it belonged in the dark, not the flashing blue light. “You wish you weren’t here, don’t you?”

He *was* reading her mind! She couldn’t find a smile for him now, and it was hard to even manage a voice. “I’m okay, I tell you.”

“Don’t he to me,” he said. “And I won’t he to you.” He was staring, staring right through her. “If it’s any consolation, I don’t want to be here either. But at the moment, there’s little choice.” His voice deepened, and so did the blue flame in his eyes. “Like everyone else, my dear, there are times when our need takes us prisoner. We are all tied to the bedposts of life.”

She felt his hatred then, just as he must feel hers, and it was in hatred now that they moved through the mimicry of love. It seemed to her that the light flashed on and off at a faster tempo in unison with their own.

There was no smile looming above her now and no frown, just the feral sav-agery of flaring nostrils and bared teeth as he rasped in rut. She closed her eyes to shut out the sight but she couldn’t shield herself from sensation, and when he merged pain with pleasure her eyes went wide for a moment, then clamped shut as her head fell back into darkness unbroken by fitful neon glare.

How long she lay there she didn’t know, but when at last her eyes opened again and awareness came, he was gone.

No trace of pleasure remained, but with the coming of awareness, pain

returned. Involuntarily her fingers rose to graze across her throat and came away stained with a trickle of bluish ooze in the momentary flicker of light.

Blood. That's what it was. The old John had bitten her in the neck. And now she remembered when it had hap-pened, when she felt the pain and opened her eyes and the blue light winked on and she stared up over his shoulder at the dressing-table on the far side of the room to see herself as she lay there on the bed. Lay there alone, because he cast no reflection in the mirror.

She'd blacked out from shock then, but at the recollection she started to laugh and couldn't stop; it felt as though she'd never stop until she was dead. Only now she would never die, any more than he could. And both of them would share their pain forever.

He, of course, was a vampire.

And she had AIDS.