

# She Who Might Be Obeyed

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*We all influence the people around us in little ways every day; some more than others.*

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What Cynthia Binder now called the Obedience came on when she was fifteen, long enough after menarche so that Dr. Rupprecht had eliminated any possible connection, (As far as one could *eliminate* any hypothesis about a unique phenomenon, at least.)

Her father had left when she was three, under circumstances her mother never talked about. She really didn't need to; Gerald Binder never contacted his family again. They weren't even sure that he was alive.

The desertion raised Cheryl Binder's consciousness, to the extent that she switched from playing doormat for her husband to playing doormat for her "sisters." Her daughter was fairly sure that didn't extend to sex with the odd gay or bisexual member of her half-dozen women's organizations, but it covered everything short of that.

Of course, everybody has to have a vacation from being unselfish. Cheryl Binder's vacation was her daughter. All the orders and refusals she wouldn't give her colleagues at work or her sisters at the meetings, she gave to her daughter. The sense of being a Marine boot came to Cynthia fairly soon after she heard of the Marines.

Shortly after that, she took a firm resolution. She was going to be *absolutely* unselfish. She was never going to take out frustrations on her family. She would have a corner to hide in, or a punching bag to use, or some way of handling the bad times besides beating up on the people close to her.

Maybe it was that resolution that triggered the Obedience. Within a year after she made it, Cynthia discovered that if she stood close to someone and asked them in a certain tone of voice to do something, they would do it. She had to speak aloud, she had to watch her volume as well as her tone, and she had to make the request something that helped others rather than herself.

Not that she felt she had to play martyr, either. She was able to use what she then called the Voice (a term picked up from Frank Herbert's *Dune*) on unwanted boys, to keep them out of her pants, tops, or anyplace else she didn't want them, which was mostly anywhere within ten yards of her.

Fortunately she had quite a few classmates who were better-looking and more interested; she was able to direct the boys elsewhere. She never used the Voice on another girl to make her say "Yes," or on a boy to make him ask the girl. She did arrange for a few boys to notice girls they might otherwise have overlooked, then let hormones settle the issue.

That kept the boy problem down to manageable proportions, and let her get on with more important jobs.

There was the time one of the teachers seemed to be having a problem with what they then called Black students. He thought any of them who got an A on the math test were cheating. When the school's best halfback, Rackham Peavey, got two A's in succession, the teacher hit the roof. For a while, it looked as if Peavey was going to be off the team.

Cynthia Binder's commitment to civil rights was offended. Peavey had studied like he'd never studied before, and earned those A's fairly. She was even more offended, because she'd used the Voice on him, suggesting that he might study harder instead of hanging out three nights a week with a bunch of friends who were the next thing to a gang.

(She wondered if he'd thought she would go out with him if he got an A. He'd never seemed the kind of Black guy who thought a date with a white girl was some sort of trophy, but you never knew with men, Black, white, or polka-dotted! Experience might cure the ignorance, but getting the experience could be a pain in the *tuchus*, *zudik*—enough already... )

When she heard the rumors of the cheating scandal, she managed to get close to the teacher, then say, as if she was talking to herself or maybe another student, "He really doesn't want to get Rack Peavey kicked off the team. Rack didn't cheat, and everybody will be pointing fingers if the team loses without him." She didn't add, "That will dump any chances of being vice-principal next year," because she wasn't supposed to know that, even though it was all over the school.

The teacher dropped the charges, Peavey played, and the team went to the regional semifinals. In fact, Peavey got such a habit of studying that the last Binder heard of him, he was a resident in internal medicine in D.C.

Then there was the time she and a bunch of friends had gone out to a party where liquor was served. The guy who owned the old Chevy Impala wagon took on a lot more than he could handle, let alone drive with. He was the biggest of the bunch, though, so even the guys didn't want to argue with him.

Neither did Cynthia Binder. But she didn't want her friends involved in a drunk-driving arrest either, still less an accident. She had to whisper this time, but she'd got the bugs out of the Voice enough to make a whisper count if she kept the command simple.

"Lou can drive us home. You're a better driver than he is when you haven't had six beers, but Lou's had only two." (Actually Lou had stuck to Diet Pepsi, but she didn't want to make him sound like a complete dork.)

So Lou drove them home, and dropped off each girl at her home, while the original driver—Carl, that was his name!—escorted them to the door. Behaved like a gentleman, too, or so the girls all said the next day. (Cynthia took it for granted that boys would behave like gentlemen around her, Voice or no Voice. Among the boys who classified girls as Do's or Don'ts, she was definitely a Don't.)

It was that way through high school. In college, she set her sights higher, both personally and academically. The academic sight-setting came naturally. She knew she had the smarts and therefore the duty to get high marks and "realize her potential." (Although that potential didn't include medicine; one biology class taught her she'd never have the stomach for that much blood.)

The personal sight-setting was a little more complicated in practice, although her original motive was simple enough. Her sophomore-year roommate was a near-victim of date rape (liberally assisted on both sides by too much beer), and the thought came to Cynthia as she held the roommate's head over the toilet:

*Suppose I can teach the Voice to others? Suppose Jean could have told that jerk to go pee up a rope and made it stick?.*

There were a lot of questions she knew she had to answer before she started setting up as a Voice guru. Did liquor or drugs (on either side) make the Voice less useful? Suppose you wanted a guy, and wanted him to touch you *here* but not there? Could you use the Voice, and would that be selfish? And so on.

By the end of college, she had learned quite a bit about the Voice, including that it absolutely would not work on her mother. (She'd suspected that while she was in high school; more systematic tests made it certain.) She'd learned about problems she'd never read about even in the women's studies and psychology courses, and she'd learned that she could do very nicely without sex for a few years, thank you.

In the year she graduated from Northwestern University, everything happened at once. Her cousin, a Marine, was killed in the Beirut barracks bombing. This left her Aunt Louise, her mother's older sister, a childless, well-off widow.

Cheryl Binder was all over her sister—"like an oil slick on a reef," as Cynthia put it—laying up treasures in sisterhood heaven by "taking care" of her sister. This turned the long-standing tension between the sisters into a full-scale estrangement, which in turn led to Aunt Louise having a full-scale bout of clinical depression.

Enter Cynthia Binder, using the Voice to get her aunt to a doctor recommended by a friend whose father was a colleague of Dr. Eva Rupprecht. Exit depression. Exit also the secret of the Voice—Dr. Rupprecht put the various twos together and came up with a sum so close to the right one that Cynthia didn't feel called on to argue about the rest.

She might have been able to argue more effectively if Dr. Rupprecht hadn't been as immune to the Voice as Cheryl Binder. Rupprecht could neither hear nor learn the Voice. She did, however, suggest a few things that might help Cynthia with her career as a superhero.

"What did you call me?" Cynthia remembered asking.

"A superhero. You know, like Spider-Man and the Black Canary."

Cynthia concluded that Dr. Rupprecht read more comic books than she did. She tried to make a joke of it.

"I don't have the figure to go running around in a cape and tights."

"That could change. But you're right about not being conspicuous." Dr. Rupprecht twirled a lock of her gray hair around one tanned finger. "Keep a low profile for a while. Be sure you can save yourself before you try saving the world."

"I'll need help to save even one street. Or haven't you been reading the papers?"

"You don't need to be sarcastic. You don't need to rush things, either. May I suggest a bargain? I'll help you work out a series of tests to give the people you're trying to teach. That may eliminate a few bad apples. It will certainly save you time."

"What's the catch?"

"You promise to get yourself professionally established over the next five or six years. Then we can go into business."

It sounded like a prison sentence, and Cynthia knew her face must have showed it.

Rupprecht's eyebrows rose. "That's a problem I have with comic books. The world is so grateful to superheroes that they never have to worry about paying the rent, finding a parking place, or changing the diapers. Gratitude doesn't cover those things, as you will learn."

“I don’t see myself with a child.”

“Like your figure, that may change. What do you think.”“

Cynthia’s first thought was that tens of thousands of women were going to be murdered, raped, or otherwise mistreated in those five or six years. Her second thought was that even if she spent all her time finding the mistreaters and using the Voice on them, she’d only be able to save a fraction of the women. And Rupprecht’s offer of help made a lot of sense, if training other women was going to be systematic and effective.

“It makes more sense than just winging it.”

“Most things do,” Rupprecht said austerely.

In the long run, it did not hurt that Aunt Louise died a year later. Cynthia managed not to blame herself for the long-neglected heart condition that finally caught up with her aunt.

She couldn’t help a tormented month of sleepless nights when she learned that Aunt Louise had left half her estate to her niece. Had she somehow conveyed a suggestion of this to her aunt, back when they were meeting almost every day and sometimes talking for hours? Had she used the Power of Obedience (a term Rupprecht preferred to the Voice) to make herself rich?

Time and sleeping pills quieted the agonized self-questioning. (Sleeping pills also knocked out the Power of Obedience, so Cynthia went off them as quickly as possible.) She set up a trust fund with most of the money, swore not to touch her capital, then took enough to pay her way through Northwestern’s Kellogg School of Business. She came out with one of the best MBA’s in the country and was fast-tracked in a major Loop marketing firm for the next four years.

By then she knew that the best place to find women to train in the Power of Obedience was an executive-search firm. As soon as she thought she had the experience and contacts, she downsized her employers by one junior executive, pulled out enough money to rent an office and hire an assistant, and treated Dr. Rupprecht to lunch at Ricky’s.

The campaign to give “empowerment” a whole new dimension had begun.

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*June 17:*

After six years Cynthia began to feel it was like one of those World War I battles. The kind where lots of men marched into machine-gun and artillery fire, and when the smoke had cleared most of them were lying dead on barbed wire or in shell holes and the survivors held a few more miles of mud and enemy trenches.

In fact, there’d been only one dead, but Cynthia suspected that was more good luck than good management. The spring had run her list of failures up from ten to twelve, which was fast going but partly due to luck. Again, good or bad? She wished she knew even that much.

One of the potential candidates, a medical technician, thought Cynthia was trying to seduce her and took off running. She got out of range so fast that Cynthia didn’t have a chance to do anything about her prejudices, let alone give her a thorough testing.

The other was a bookstore manager with her own set of hangups. She was a devout New Ager, and insisted everything Cynthia wanted to teach her be translated into a New Age vocabulary.

What Cynthia knew about crystals and channeling could be written in the corner of a postage stamp. This was inevitable, since none of the literature on the subject seemed to be written in English and Cynthia was relentlessly monolingual. However, it probably cost her at least a chance to evaluate the bookseller.

Or did it? Someone who thought that in a previous life she had been a Tibetan guru and Cynthia one of her students might not be the best candidate for learning the Power of Obedience. Cynthia managed to find the woman a position with a new superstore opening in the North Loop, and hoped that she wouldn't start channeling while meeting sales reps.

This left Cynthia facing the second half of June exactly where she'd been in March. Maybe a little poorer, too. She'd managed her April tax payment without dipping into her capital, but it left her short of liquid cash.

This didn't bother her. What did get through to her was an argument with Pat over a modest, quite reasonable request for a raise.

"The cash flow can't stand it," Cynthia said.

"So improve the cash flow," Pat said.

"How?"

"For one thing, you might spend less time finding accountants for women entrepreneurs just starting up. I know all about the sisterhood side of it. Do you know about the money side of it? Around here, that seems to be the downside."

Cynthia couldn't reply. That, she realized later, was the first piece of good luck she'd had in quite a while. If she'd spoken, she'd have said something ugly enough to make it impossible for Pat to go on working for her. Then the rent-plumbing-diapers side of her super-heroing would be up the creek.

*See if Rupprecht can find a tranquilizer compatible with the Obedience* was her mental memo, before she started flipping through the resumes—

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*June 20:*

Francine Latrilla looked like Barbra Streisand's baby sister, complete with the nose. Cynthia wasn't surprised; Mediterranean, Ashkenazic Jewish, and African-American faces overlapped a good deal.

Latrilla's resume made her face a secondary consideration. She had a B.S. in computer science and seven years' work experience. The last two were with a games firm in the northwest suburbs. They were downsizing after having to cancel two games because of a religious righteous wing boycott. Francine hadn't been pink-slipped yet, but she knew her next promotion would be after her supervisor died, and the super was two years younger than she was.

"Male, of course?" Cynthia asked.

"As far as you can tell with his clothes on," Francine said. "I never tried to get them off, either. Talk about the classic nerd!"

The interview went on from there. In spite of herself, Cynthia liked Francine's forthright, even salty tongue. It might make her hard to place, and would certainly limit her to firms where she wouldn't have easily threatened males over her, which eliminated a lot of possibilities.

“—move over into educational software,” Francine was saying. “There’s a lot of that action in Chicago.”

Cynthia tried the Obedience, at the lowest level. “You don’t need to tell me so much that I already know.”

Francine blinked. “In a hurry?” She sounded almost petulant.

*Better than being dazed. And I’ve given up hoping for someone to recognize what I’m trying to do*  
—

“I will be. It’s after one.”

“Tell you what,” Francine said. “If you let me go on, I’ll take you out to lunch. Yeah, I know about business etiquette. But my dad always said I could talk a dry sewer into backing up. I figure that if you have to put up with that, I ought to do something for you. What about it?”

It seemed like a remarkably good idea, and she was even willing to trust Francine’s judgement about where. The woman’s clothing suggested that the budget would be halfway between fast food and power lunch, but Cynthia realized that she was almost too hungry to care. Brown-bagging it was fine in principle, but the refrigerator in her studio was not only too small to let her entertain, it was too small to let her keep a week’s supply of lunch fixings...

“Let me check the calendar—nope, nothing until three-thirty. Let me warn Pat and get my raincoat—”

“You’ll melt. The sun’s come out again, and I don’t think the clouds are coming back.”

“Umbrella, then.” And why had she felt as if sweat was oozing on her neck and arms when Francine said, “You’ll melt”?

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*From Cynthia Binder’s Journal:*

*June 24*—Dr. Rupprecht says Francine Latrilla is qualified in all respects to learn the Obedience. (I have decided I am not going to use the word “Power” anymore. I am not living in a horror novel.)

She also says that I may have more trouble than usual, teaching Francine my principles of unselfishness. Maybe she was trying to tell me something, but she’s found at least one dark side to everybody who’s got as far as the examination. Not that she’s always been wrong, either, or Lainie wouldn’t be dead—and I will *not* think of that. Pat’s face these days is giving me all the guilt I can handle.

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*August 2*—First practice session with Francine today. The usual routine, and she’s quite promising. I usually don’t get so much cooperation and matching voice tones until I’ve told the trainee what we’re up to, and not always then.

Or am I using the Obedience on her, at an unconscious level? (Was that what scared off the girl—she acted seventeen even if she was twenty-four—who thought I was a gay seducer?) Check with Rupprecht if that is possible.

Also check if Francine has ever had voice lessons. She certainly has a good ear.

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*August 11* —Francine is definitely moving along faster than usual. Against my better judgement, I am going to try her out in a public setting next week.

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*August 15* - Francine and I attended the Feast of the Assumption Mass at Holy Name Cathedral. Not something I would have done by myself, but somehow **it** doesn't surprise or bother me to learn that she's a reasonably observant Catholic. ("By my own standards, at any rate," she says. "Maybe not the Pope's, but the Pope's a man, so what does he know?")

Got back to find an answer to my query among Francine's co-workers. Nothing that I can really use for her job search, and no record of voice lessons, but one thing interesting if a little kinky. It seems one reason her supervisor was down on her was that he dared her to play strip role-playing. (I've heard of strip poker and even strip chess, but strip *Dungeons & Dragons*?). Anyway, she won by a mile. It was embarrassing to the guy, or maybe em-bare-assing would be a better way to put it—

Come on, Cyn. You have enough vices. You don't need to develop a taste for locker-room puns.

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*August 19*—Francine's briefing before our first public test. I thought it went well. She did say right off that it sounded like something I'd given before. I did my usual "neither confirm nor deny" routine, and she said that she appreciated confidentiality but that I wasn't a Pentagon press officer. Polite impasse. I suspect Rupprecht is partly right—I can teach Francine my principles, but I can never teach her to carry them out in a way that people will recognize as being unselfish.

Never mind that. The state of mind is what counts, as far as Rupprecht and I have been able to figure it out. What the other party *thinks* the state of mind is doesn't seem to affect results.

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*August 20:*

The trouble started the moment they walked into Martina's. There was a line, every table was filled, and the hostess had no record of their reservation.

"Let's make her remember," whispered Francine.

"It may not have been recorded. We can't force her unless we know it's her fault."

"I know whose fault it will be if we have to stand in line for half an hour, and in these shoes." Francine was wearing a new pair, which supported Cynthia's theory that after foot-binding was outlawed in China, all the Chinese makers of women's shoes had emigrated and infiltrated the West's shoe industry.

"Francine, you are a pretty poor hand at laying guilt trips," Cynthia said, trying to put warning into a whisper. Francine shrugged, but didn't say anything else.

At least not until they were seated, twenty minutes later and in the smoking section.

"Either he puts that out," Francine said, pointing to their neighbor, who seemed to be a chain-smoker, "or I have a fatal sinus attack right now."

"We're in the smoking section," Cynthia replied, with the patience of one speaking to a small child.

"I can read," Francine said, with an adult frown. "Have you heard of secondary smoke?"

“It was as much your idea as mine not to wait for a seat in the nonsmoking section.”

Another silence, which lasted through ordering from a waiter who even Cynthia wasn't too cranky to notice was remarkably easy on the eyes. Francine looked as if she was memorizing his features for her private fantasies tonight, at least.

Then the steaks came, and they were both badly overdone. Cynthia took up knife and fork with the determination of a Crusader riding out with sword and shield, but Francine signaled the waiter.

“I ordered this steak medium, not charred. Could you take it back and get it right this time?”

The waiter was a professional; he didn't look embarrassed or argumentative. He swept the steak off with the grace of a dancer, then returned just as Cynthia found the right words for broiling Francine.

“The cook says those were the last steaks. May I recommend the fettucine Alfredo with chicken? A complimentary round of drinks will come with it.”

Francine nodded, then added hastily, as Cynthia glared, “I'll pass on the drinks.”

“Good idea,” Cynthia said, when the waiter left.

“I did remember what you and Rupprecht said about liquor. How about you remember that people sometimes do civilized things without being asked? That guy's a pro. I didn't need to use any whammies on him.”

Considering that the waiter had been studying Francine almost as intently as she him, that was at best a half-truth. But there was nothing good that could come of calling Francine a liar now.

They munched their way through a really excellent fettucine Alfredo without any further conversation. Cynthia's mind was too busy, turning over the thought that this public test was way premature, to make polite chitchat.

“More coffee, people?” the waiter asked. Even standing still beside their table, he had the elegance of a big cat. Cynthia was trying to keep her eyes off him. Francine wasn't even trying.

“Thank you,” Francine said, but Cynthia put a hand over her cup. The waiter filled Francine's cup, then signaled to the busboy to clear the table.

“I'll bring the dessert menu in a moment, but I warn you we're out of eclairs.”

“Temptation, get thee behind me,” Francine murmured.

Cynthia's temptation was to use the Obedience on Francine, to keep her from making a pig of herself if not from admiring the waiter. She thrust that temptation behind her much harder than Francine looked to be thrusting the desserts.

Francine ordered Black Forest cake; Cynthia ordered *a* brandied pear. As the waiter left after delivering them, Francine's eyes followed him.

“I'm trying to raise barriers to sexual harassment, not increase it!” Cynthia whispered fiercely.

“Admiring him isn't harassing him, or is it?” Francine said. “Have I said a word?”

“No, but you've been thinking very loudly. What if he hears?”



“If he hears, then I’ll wait and see what he says.”

“What if he’s gay?”

“Wouldn’t it be nice to make him straight for a day? Or a night?”

Cynthia glared. “If that’s your idea of a joke—”

“Ease up, Cyn.”

*My god, what have I done, loosing Francine on the world?* Her face twisted, and she barely recognized her own words, there was so much rage in them. “Are you going to treat the whole Obedience as a joke? Are you going to go around playing with people’s minds for fun? You selfish, bitchy pseudo-male—”

For a moment she thought Francine was going to slap her. The waiter, just coming out of the kitchen, seemed to think the same.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Cyn. Lighten up and get off my case. Or drop dead!”

Sweat not just oozed but poured out of what seemed every square inch of Cynthia’s skin. Lights flashed behind her eyes, blurring her vision of the dining room. Her right ear felt as if she’d ruptured an eardrum, and other pains throbbed in her jaw and rumbled in her stomach.

She tried to stand, held out a hand toward Francine, and felt her grab it. Then Cynthia’s legs were giving way under her. She had enough control to guide her fall—or was that Francine and maybe even the waiter guiding her?—to miss the table. Her chair crashed over, though, and her dessert slid off the table and landed on her J. C. Penney’s executive ensemble.

Snatches of dialogue, heard through a green fog (why green?) shot with orange flame—

“—call the manager—”

“—paramedics on the way—”

“—diabetic or epileptic? I had a girlfriend who had petit mal epilepsy.”

That was the waiter. So much for his being completely gay. Good luck, Francine. Whether from Obedience or not, her hostility to the other woman had faded.

Cynthia’s last conscious thought was that whatever her “mal” was, there was nothing “petit” about it.

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*August 21:*

Cynthia Binder’s first conscious thought was recognizing that she was in her own bed at home. Her second thought was that it was a good sign she could recognize that much. Whatever had hit her at the restaurant hadn’t given her amnesia.

Francine Latrilla’s face loomed above. Cynthia focused enough to see that the other woman looked exhausted. She might even have been crying, which would be a first for their association.

“How are you feeling?”

“Tired. Confused. Not disoriented—confused. Just—wondering what happened. The last thing I remember was you telling me to get off your case or drop dead.” She forced a smile. “The next time, give me a chance to take the first choice before you hit me with the second.”

Francine winced. “That—look, I have a confession to make.”

“You spent the night with the waiter.”

“I spent the night right here, on your floor, rolled up in a sleeping bag the waiter loaned me. Not with him in it, either. That’s for another day.”

“Did the paramedics come?”

“Yes, but all your signs were normal by the time they got you to the ER. You were even awake and talking normally. Do you remember that?”

Now that she concentrated, Cynthia did remember bright lights and people in scrub outfits asking remarkably rude questions. She’d thought it was a flashback to her aunt’s death, but the calendar on the wall wasn’t right.

“I do now. So confess. I won’t use Obedience to make you, but—”

“If you did, you might put the same sort of whammy on me that I did on you. If we each knocked the other ass over elbow in two days, somebody might get suspicious.”

“Somebody is suspicious. Me, and right now.” Cynthia sat up. She still had yesterday’s underwear on under her nightgown.

“All right. I’ve been in your files.”

Cynthia didn’t throw anything. She simply sat staring at Francine until her eyes blurred again, this time with tears.

Francine patted her shoulder. “Remember, I know computers, and I have a few contacts in the hacker community. I called in markers, and they helped out without knowing what they were helping me with.” She went off into a long monologue on the security problems of Cynthia’s software.

Cynthia blinked and cleared her throat. “Francine, if you don’t finish your confession before I stop crying, I am going to get out of bed and strangle you with my bare hands.”

A moment later, she realized that she’d slipped into Obedience voice. Francine’s eyes widened, and she put a hand to her throat, as if she already felt angry fingers tightening on her windpipe.

“All right. I peeked. I think I’ve figured out what’s wrong. You need to be selfish.”

Cynthia heard the words but no sense in them. “Run that past me again. Slowly.”

“Look. Take the time you saved that football player. You wanted the team to win, didn’t you? That meant more parties, maybe enough for somebody to invite you to one?”

*If it’s Confession Time—*

“Yes, I guess I did.”

“Right. So I suspect that your Obedience worked a lot better, because you would get some good out of

that halfback's staying out of trouble."

Cynthia tried to clear her head by going back over the details of the Rackham Peavey affair. She finally had to get up, take a shower, and call up the Obedience files on her computer.

She was red-eyed from fatigue, not weeping, before she finished, but by then Francine's off-the-wall hypothesis began to make sense. Enough sense that she felt a wave of guilt sweeping through her, from not considering it before. A good many other incidents took on whole new dimensions, when looked at in this new light.

Take the case of Lou the designated driver. Cynthia hadn't wanted her friends to be hurt. But she was going to be in the car too. And she hadn't wanted the two-block walk home from the usual drop-off point, so that probably accounted for the door-to-door service.

Probably. She wouldn't go farther than that. She knew that some of the reluctance was not wanting to admit how wrong she'd been, or what her being wrong might have cost others.

But—

"What about the failures?" she asked, between bites of an anchovy pizza that Francine had somehow caused to materialize on the coffee table. "What about the ones who couldn't even use Obedience against a polite pass? It worked well enough when I was a teenager, even in college."

"Maybe you need to be in some sort of danger, or the pass needs to be less than polite?"

"Maybe, but how many polite passes have you had in your life? Enough for one hand and maybe a couple of fingers on the other?"

"About that. You're right. If a little selfishness helps, then Obedience ought to knock out *any* kind of pass. As long as the woman using it has her mind made up, anyway."

Cynthia said nothing. It was nice to think that women always had their minds firmly made up about sex or no sex, unambiguously and finally, before the date reached the prepositional phase. It was also unrealistic.

"What about laying the whole thing before Dr. Rupprecht?" Cynthia said. She really wanted for the first time to dump responsibility for the Obedience in somebody else's lap.

Then she realized that Francine was sitting down by the telephone and punching in Dr. Rupprecht's number. She had slipped into Obedience—and there was just enough selfishness in her wish to get in touch with Rupprecht that Francine was snapping to it like a Marine boot or a trained dog.

"Hey, wait," Cynthia said. "What about an experiment or two first?"

Francine stopped dialing. Her eyes were blank for a moment, with the familiar stare of someone coming up from under Obedience without realizing they'd been there in the first place.

Then she smiled. "I think we just had one. I *had to* call Rupprecht. I would have tried to call her if the building had been on fire and the roof ready to fall on me."

Cynthia curled up in her sling chair and contemplated the rug. She wanted to believe Francine. But short of hooking her up to a lie detector, there was no way to be absolutely sure. (And Obedience might scramble a lie detector. A lot of things did.)

“Maybe. We need another. What about the waiter?”

“Now who’s treating people as pawns? I was thinking about your assistant Pat.”

“Pat? I’ve never tried Obedience on her. It would have been— selfish.”

“You told yourself it would have been selfish to exploit a black woman trying to make good. But have you really helped her that much, running your business so that she’s making twenty percent less than she could make elsewhere?”

“Maybe not.”

“No maybe about it. Cyn, you zigged when you should have zagged. You were so damned determined not to go your mother’s way that you set yourself an even higher standard. One that screwed up your talent, if I might be crude about it.”

“Don’t be that crude around Pat. Her dad’s a Baptist minister.”

“I won’t. How about calling her?”

This time Cynthia knew that somebody was using Obedience on her, and that it was working. Not enough to wipe out her own firmly held convictions, though—which might have something to do with the sex problem.

“Look, let’s agree on what experiments we’re going to do with Pat,” Francine suggested. “Then maybe we should run the list past Dr. Rupprecht first. She knows Pat. She can tell us what would be safe.”

“That still leaves the problem of working with Pat afterward. I don’t want her to quit—”

“Cyn, let me make you an offer. If Pat quits over this, I’ll go to work as your assistant. I’ve sneaked a look at most of your files anyway, and I certainly know office equipment. I even have a little money to throw into the pot.”

“Not on pot, I hope?” Francine’s cheerfulness was infectious. Did Obedience need a little fun along with a little selfishness, for full effect? *That* might be the key to the sex problem.

One thing at a time, though.

“You’re on. Now, which of us orders the other to call Pat over here? And this is not an order, but I wouldn’t mind a beer. There’s some Michelob in the fridge.”

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*From Cynthia Binder’s Journal:*

*September 13*—Dr. Rupprecht has finished analyzing the results of our experiments with Pat and the waiter. (At least Francine says that she experimented with the waiter. Either she is telling the truth or has a very good imagination. I could hardly ask the two of them to let me videotape the proceedings.)

She agrees with Francine. A little selfishness, like a little garlic, does a lot for Obedience. She is not sure why it worked for me in sexual situations when I was younger but hasn’t worked for the adults I’ve taught since.

She does have several theories, connected with age, hormones, sex drive, self-esteem—any or all, take your pick. She also suggests that while she’s working on the Big Problem, all is not lost. Spreading

Obedience around could reduce teenage pregnancies, waitresses getting their bottoms pinched by the cook or the customer, female executives having to attend skinny-dipping parties, pornographic pictures hung up in offices—a whole bunch of things.

Rupprecht says that the largest building is built one brick at a time. I told her that metaphor is out of date. She said all right, call it one girder, but the principle is the same. I have to agree.

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*September 22*—Gave Pat a twenty-five percent raise. We can afford it. I have placed four women in the high five-figure brackets, and I have one nibble from a woman whose asking price is in the low sixes.

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*October 19*—The first six-figure placement! Francine and I went back to the restaurant where it all started. Her friend Mel is now the headwaiter. Has she been teaching him Obedience without a license, or just self-assertiveness?

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*November 23*—Our business needs a lawyer on retainer. I tried Obedience on one, to make her speak English instead of legalese. It worked! This might be a bigger breakthrough than a cure for sexual harrassment!

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*December 11:*

“Hello, Cyn. I have the position.”

Francine sounded so delighted that Cynthia had to laugh. “Good. Anybody there looking for a position?”

“You kidding? They were hanging on for dear life with three people. They may need a fifth before long. And do you know who our newest client is?”

“Mel?”

“I didn’t know you were telepathic as well. Yes, Mel. He’s opening his own restaurant and wants to subcontract the payroll. It was his own idea, too.”

“Good. Let’s get together next week.”

“Fine. Call you Saturday?”

“Perfect.”

The line went dead. Cynthia swiveled her leather chair, resisted the temptation to put her feet on the new rosewood desk, and frowned.

Mel might have decided on his own to open his own restaurant, and as long as he was using his own money (or money the bank intended for him), well and good. But—had she accidentally set somebody up in business as an embezzler as well as a restaurateur?

Well, she could at least get to the truth, since it involved money, not sex. Surprising how many problems had money at their roots, not sex.

*Memo to Pat: Buy four dozen "Girls Just Wanna Have Funds" T-shirts, in assorted sizes.*

She'd wanted to have something to hand out to clients for fun. The "She Who Must Be Obeyed" one didn't quite make it (besides maybe giving too much away).

She started sorting her mail. The newspaper was near the top. On the front page was a grim-looking couple and a headline that Cynthia realized she'd been dreading to see for months.

*Cynthia Binder, closet monarchist.* Cynthia remembered when the couple had been a good deal younger and not nearly as grim. She remembered when the wife was a classic English-rose beauty instead of looking as if she'd been to the wars.

*That woman needs Obedience, even if it violates all kinds of protocol. Now, how to get access to her?*

*Memo: check out health clubs.* Cynthia now had a one-bedroom apartment, but there still wasn't much room for fitness equipment since they delivered the new computer. A little trimming down wouldn't hurt, just in case she wound up having to look good in a cape and tights.