

## What You Wish For

by Stephen Dedman

Roy woke suddenly, and realised that he was still in Mapurtiti. Partly it was the heat—that, and the residual stink from the kangaroo his predecessor had left in the fridge over the Christmas holiday, when the house had been empty and the electricity turned off. The interior of the fridge had been green with decay when Roy had arrived in January, and despite his repeatedly scrubbing it and the kitchen, and buying the local store's entire stock of air-fresheners, he'd never entirely dispelled the reek. Replacing the fridge would have taken more money than he had and, he suspected, a ream or two of paperwork to the Education Department. Burying the carcass had been the most nauseating work he'd ever done; he'd dry-heaved for hours.

He lay on the bed, the sheet plastered to his body, the stench and the hot dry air moved only by a rattling table fan. The Department had promised him that the housing was air-conditioned as well as furnished, but the air-conditioner had been vandalised during the holiday. Boredom, after the school day was finished (and worse still, over the weekend), was as much a problem as the heat and the lingering stench; the town had no bookshop, and no library except the school library and a rack of rental videos in the general store. The television that had come with the house only received one channel—irregularly—and was too old to be compatible with his VCR. There was no phone jack in the house for his modem; the nearest was a solar-powered phone booth outside the school. Worst of all, Heather was a thousand clicks away, and there were almost no single women living near the town, except in the aboriginal community. There was one part-time prostitute living on the other side of Mapurtiti, but she was ten or fifteen years his senior and, worse still, had a daughter in his class. Privacy, he realised, was as scarce in small towns as books, especially for newcomers like himself.

Roy lay there for a moment and listened, wondering what had woken him, then decided that it wasn't important and rolled over. He closed his eyes, then opened them again and fumbled for the switch on the reading lamp. Something—someone?—was standing in the doorway.

"Hello."

The voice was softly feminine, and sounded faintly familiar. "Heather?" he blurted out, before finding the light-switch. A few seconds later, he could see that it wasn't Heather, or anyone else he recognised.

"No," she said, taking a step closer. The lamp didn't quite dispel the shadows from her face, but she looked close to his own age, several years too young to be the mother of any of his students. Apart from that, Roy could only be sure that she was slim and fairly tall, with shoulder-length dark-brown hair, and as naked as he was. She looked down from his face to his crotch and back again, and her smile widened into something that might have been a grin. Roy looked down, and realised that it was too late to bother pulling the sheet up. "Who are you, and what are you doing in here?"

"Who were you expecting?"

"Nobody."

"That's me." She sat on the bed, near his feet. "What's the problem?"

This *must* be a dream, he thought, an intense—what do they call them? *lucid* dream. He looked at her more closely, trying to read her expression. She was conventionally pretty, but apart from her smile and her enormously dilated pupils, he saw no signs of any emotion. A quick, almost involuntary, glance at her nipples was slightly more informative. "Don't you like me?" she asked.

"I don't know you," he said, hoping he didn't sound as ridiculous as he felt.

"Does that matter?"

"It does to me."

She nodded, without her expression changing at all. "Do you prefer blondes?" she asked. "Pale skin? Blue eyes?"

He shrugged. He didn't have any strong preferences, as far as looks went; he'd decided while still a teenager that, like Phebe in *As You Like It*, he was 'not for all markets' and couldn't afford to restrict himself to women of any particular type. He also believed that personality was far more important than minor details of appearance—especially if, like Heather, they insisted on making love in the dark. He was about to speak when he noticed that the woman on the bed had suddenly become blonde. She giggled at his expression as her golden hair became curlier and longer and her features flowed into a fair likeness of Pamela Lee Anderson. "Is this better?" she cooed. Roy merely stared. "Or would you prefer Cindy Crawford? Elle McPherson? Sandra Bullock?"

"Who are you?"

"Who do you want me to be?"

He took a deep breath. "Okay. Do you have a name?—and *don't* ask me what I want it to be."

"Why not?"

"I don't like being lied to."

She raised an eyebrow in what seemed perfectly genuine astonishment. "Really? Most men love it."

"Really," he said, though with less force than he'd intended. The woman's breasts deflated noticeably, a few faint stretch marks appeared, her smile became a few lumens less radiant and her pupils contracted. "Is this better?"

He took a deep breath. "Look, who are you—or if that's too difficult, *what* are you—and *why* are you here?"

"You can call me Mara, if you like," she said, after a moment's hesitation. "If you want to believe I'm a dream, or a fantasy, that's fine. As for why I'm here..." she reached down for his cock and stroked it gently, making him gasp.

"What if I don't want you?"

"I can come back when you're asleep," she suggested. "Most men I've known sleep more soundly than you; maybe they work harder. I was here a week ago, but maybe you don't remember. But while you're awake, I can be whatever you want me to be. You must have *some* fantasies."

I can't believe I'm arguing with a dream, he thought, then shook his head. Mara wandered over to the bookshelf, looking at his small collection of videotapes; she held up his copy of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* and crooned, "Winona Ryder?" Her hair became dark in an instant.

"I'd prefer Sadie Frost," he replied, without thinking. She looked over her shoulder at him, then shrugged.

"Sorry; her I don't know. Is there anyone else?"

"Mia Kirshner?" A slight shake of the head. "Mathilda May? Angelina Jolie? Beatrice Dalle? Amy Yip? Joey Lauren Adams? Uma Thurman?"

"What movie?" She turned around; her hair was auburn, her body stunning—a 20th Century Botticelli Venus, a la *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. "I can't do costumes, not while you're awake; if you want those, you'll have to provide them yourself. The same with whips, handcuffs, or any other toys..."

Roy tried to answer, but his mouth felt too dry. "Okay," she said, kneeling beside the bed. "What do you want to do?"

\* \* \*

The old thermometer in the classroom read 110 Fahrenheit, 43 point something Celsius, but at least the clock said 3:23, only seven more minutes of the school week remaining. The children slumped over their desks merely stared at him listlessly, somehow reptilian, though he knew that—like reptiles—they could move quickly enough when motivated. He knew better than to try to teach them anything in this sort of weather, and was vaguely flattered that any of them had bothered to show.

When the bell rang, the children looked up hopefully, and he nodded. "Okay, see you all on Monday. Don't forget your maths homework." He could hear younger children already walking out of Ms. Kickett's room next door, not running until they reached the sun-baked quadrangle. He sighed, packed his books into his desk, switched off the rickety ceiling fans, and walked out. Ms. Kickett and Mrs. Bach were already in the tiny staff-room, helping themselves to cold water from the fridge. "You look exhausted," said Debbie Kickett, her dark face gleaming with sweat. "Water?"

"Thanks. I'm not used to this heat."

Mrs. Bach shrugged. "We have at least another month of that ahead; it doesn't start to cool down until March. What are you doing over the weekend? Going anywhere?"

Roy shook his head. The nearest town worthy of the name, Meekatharra, was two hours away on mostly unsealed roads—an unpleasant prospect in his un-airconditioned Datsun. "Just doing lesson plans, I guess, and maybe some reading. What about you?"

"Working on my book," said Mrs. Bach.

"What sort of book?" he asked after a moment's silence, suspecting that it was expected of him.

"A historical novel. I'd like to write a history of the town, but most of it was never written down—or if it was, the records were lost. You might not think it, but this must have been a terribly exciting place about a century ago, during the gold rush. Four or five thousand men camped on a dozen acres. All that's left now is the cemetery and the other holes in the ground; the area was all but mined out by 1915. Most of the men enlisted, and almost none of them came back." Roy nodded. There were still mines around Mapurtiti, but with the price of gold at a record low, few of them were being worked. Rich deposits of arsenic had kept the town alive for a few decades, but those mines had also closed. "The difficult part is finding names for the characters; so many of the men used the name 'Smith', it becomes rather confusing. But there was plenty of material—a lot of fights and murders," Bach continued, almost wistfully, "sometimes two or three a month—mostly over gold, or cards, or, um, lover's tiffs. And those are just the ones we know about; no-one thought too much of it if someone disappeared, and there are plenty of places around here where you could bury a body without it being found for a century or more. But these things happen when there aren't enough women around to provide a civilising influence."

"What about the Yamidji women?"

"They didn't go near the mines," replied Debbie Kickett. "There's a...a taboo that seems to pre-date the gold rush days. Sometimes the white men would catch them while they were out gathering food, and sometimes they'd come to the tribal camp with food or booze to trade, but that was dangerous—and illegal, after there were police in town."

Mrs. Bach looked at her as though she was about to speak, then shrugged. "What sort of taboo?" asked Roy.

"I don't really know. Secret men's business, probably, but no-one will tell me. I haven't been initiated into the tribe; I'm actually from Perth myself." She yawned, glanced at her watch, then gulped down another large glass of water. "No point staying around here any longer. Have a good weekend."

\* \* \*

Roy slept fitfully for the next few days, and not merely because of the heat. Mara returned on Thursday morning; she still bore a resemblance to Uma Thurman, but it was coarser, the legs longer, the breasts larger, the nipples enormous and almost scarlet, a faint hint of pornographic parody to her hourglass figure. Roy stared at her as she sashayed across the room, wondering how many other men she'd been close to, how many had imposed their fantasies onto her. "Hi, lover," she crooned. "Miss me?"

"Yes," he replied. He had no reason to believe she could read his mind, but she could obviously read his body.

She grinned, and cupped her breasts. "So, what do you want tonight?"

"What do *you* want?"

The grin didn't change, but he had a strong impression of something darker crawling around behind it. "I don't fantasize," she said, softly. "My needs are simple." She knelt beside the bed, craned her neck, and licked the tip of his cock. "Would you rather I were somebody else? I never knew a man who didn't want a harem. You want a blonde? A brunette? A black girl, maybe?"

He looked at her. "Do you know Jessica Harper? *Phantom of the Paradise*?"

"No, but I know Jessica Rabbit." Her breasts ballooned to a preposterous size, while her hair and lips and nipples became bright carnadine. "So, what's up, Doc?" she giggled. "Don't worry, it still feels like flesh. Tastes good, too," she said, sliding up onto the bed until her enormous boobs were hanging just above his face. "So, anything special you'd like to do?"

A few minutes later, he rolled off her and lay on his back, staring at the constellation of cracks in the ceiling. "Hey," she said.

"What?"

"You probably don't know this, but it's not polite not to look at your partner after sex."

"If you can persuade her to leave the light on," he muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing." He turned towards her, saw her licking his semen from her cleavage with a tongue like a sentient pink necktie. The image would have been frightening if it hadn't been so funny. "Is that all you need?" he asked. "A little protein?"

She grinned again, and for an instant, her teeth looked alarming long and sharp and white. "Not all," she said. "Do you want me to come back, Roy?"

\* \* \*

The weather became cooler over the next week, though Debbie noticed that he obviously wasn't sleeping any better as a result, and commented on it in the staff room during the lunch break. "Don't you think you might be pushing yourself too hard?" she asked.

"What?"

"Lesson plans, or whatever it is you're doing. I know there's not much else to do around here *but* work, and that it's your first year in the real world, but you've got to learn to play it by ear, or you'll do yourself some damage." She shook her head. "This isn't what you had in mind, is it?"

"What?"

"Teaching. It's not something you always wanted to do."

"Oh, I don't mind teaching," he said. "I'd expected to teach high school English and Drama, but there weren't any vacancies this year, so I took what I could. I had to borrow a lot of money to get through university, and I couldn't afford to be unemployed for a year or ten. But, no, this wasn't in my plans. I'd expected to be able to take students to the theatre, train a debating team... I miss the cinemas, the bookshops, Japanese restaurants, Planet Video, the internet... I even miss the beach a lot more than I'd expected; I don't think I've ever been this far inland in my life."

"What sort of films do you like?"

"Cult movies, especially old horror films." He smiled, remembering how as a boy, his goth babysitter had brought horror videos and let him watch them if he 'behaved'—which usually meant letting her bring her boyfriend around and fuck on his parents' waterbed. He liked to blame her for infecting him with a passion for vampires, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and other cinematic weirdness; he still owned several books that she'd lent him and not picked up, and that he'd never had the heart to get rid of.

"And your girlfriend?"

"What?" He snapped out of his reverie. "Yeah, I miss her too...though we sort of broke up when I came here and she stayed in Perth. I miss all my friends."

The next weekend he drove down to Meekatharra to pick up the adapter for the television to show videos. While he was there, he dropped into a book exchange and bought some magazines: *Fox*, *Score*, *D-Cup*, *Oriental Dolls*, *Celebrity Skins*. The middle-aged woman behind the counter commented that she hadn't seen him in there before, and he muttered something about passing through. He spent the night in the motel, enjoying the air conditioning, and drove back to Mapurtiti first thing in the morning.

Mara re-appeared a few minutes after midnight on Wednesday, this time in the likeness of Marilyn Monroe. "Didn't have time to change," she said. "There's an old guy who likes—but you probably don't want to hear about him. So, who do you want me to be tonight?"

He reached under the bed for the copy of *Oriental Dolls*, and turned to the pictorial of an especially pretty porn star, a callipygous Asian woman with a beautiful elfin face and long black hair. Mara looked at the pictures, and smiled as she transformed into a clone-copy of the woman. "Nice," she said, "very nice," then turned around and looked up at Roy from between her legs. "Is this what you had in mind?" she asked, her hands on her lovely rump, opening herself to his view. "Don't worry, it's perfectly safe." She giggled. "It's even legal, and if it weren't, I wouldn't tell anybody. I won't even scream, unless you want me to. Or do you want to spank me first?" He said nothing. "You teachers don't get to do that any more, do you?"

"Why the Hell are you here?"

She looked innocent. "Don't you know the saying? Never look a gift whore in the mouth. Come *on*. Your head may be saying no, but your cock isn't listening to it. Come *ON!* Trust me, you'll think more clearly afterwards." Roy didn't move, and finally Mara turned around again and sat on the bed. "Okay, okay. If it's missionary position you want, again, fine, but do *something* or I'm going to fuck off and never come back, and you wouldn't want that, would you?"

"Why are you here?" he asked again, stubbornly.

"I told you; to get laid. It's why I exist, how I feed. If there's nothing for me here..."

"Feed?" A faint memory murmured in the back of his brain.

"Uh-huh. Oh, not on flesh; a few mouthfuls of protein won't get me very far. If you're worried, you can wear a condom, that's not a problem; Hell, we could do it over the phone, if you had a phone. I feed on lust and fantasy; I am what I eat." She licked her lower lip, slowly.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"You want to talk, that's okay, lots of men like talking. You said you didn't want to be lied to, so I'm telling you the truth. We aim to please."

"We?"

"Did I ever say I was unique? I have sisters in every city, everywhere where the feeding is good. It's not as good here as it once was, but I get by." She looked down at her slender body. "Are you sure this is what you want? I can't stay here all night."

\* \* \*

The next week, he picked another porn star from another magazine, a more voluptuous darker-skinned woman, but the same act. It lasted longer, though that didn't make any apparent difference to Mara's enjoyment. The week after that, a blonde with huge, nearly spherical breasts. That lasted little more than a minute, and when he looked at her afterwards, lying on her back with the huge domes sitting on her chest like half-deflated basketballs, her ribs prominent, he noticed the scars under her breasts where her implants had been inserted. "What's wrong?" she asked, her tongue flicking out like a chameleon's.

He shrugged. "I guess some fantasies are better not realised."

"Nah. Some—a lot—don't work twice once you've tried them, but that's not the same thing. Don't forget, I *live* on fantasies."

"What do you do when they all stop working?"

"Almost never happens. Men will always create new fantasies—why do you think there are always new magazines, new videos?—and if that fails, every man I've ever known has fantasies he hasn't dared tell anybody else about, but he'll tell them to me—and not just tell them, usually. They may be old fantasies, adolescent lusts buried away for decades, but that doesn't worry me."

"You like your food rotten?"

"Matured," she said, and transformed back into the Asian woman from a fortnight before. "Like wine. Is this better? Or should I just go?"

"Will you come back?"

Her smile became wider, much too wide for that pretty face, until it reminded him of a horror movie he'd seen as a boy. "Yes," she said, "yes, of course."

\* \* \*

Mara didn't return for nearly two weeks; she didn't offer an explanation, and Roy didn't ask. He chose three porn stars from a magazine—their obviously fake names and ridiculous 'quotes' made it easier to think of them as fantasies, not real women—and had Mara assemble that night's perfect woman Frankenstein-style from spare parts; this one's pretty face and creamy skin, another's spectacular but natural torso, a third's peach-shaped ass, Barbie-doll legs and shaven cunt. The sex was less time-consuming than the creation, and less satisfying, but good enough that he thought he might be on the right track. "I won't be here next week," he said, with genuine regret in his voice. "It's the Easter break; I'll be going back to Perth for a few days." She said nothing. "I'll be back the Saturday after Easter." Mara looked at him coolly, then shrugged. The gesture might not have been intended as seductive, but the movement of her breasts dragged his gaze downwards. "I promise," he said.

\* \* \*

Roy arrived back in the city early on Easter Saturday—

Shut-In or Shitten Saturday, to the Victorians, and after a drive of more than a thousand clicks, much of it on unsealed roads, he was feeling both shut-in and shitty. Two long showers and an interrupted sleep at his parents' Mount Lawley home improved his mood only slightly, and he was still looking distinctly corpse-like when Heather arrived at seven.

Dinner, at one of their favourite Japanese restaurants, was awkward; Heather had found a job at a Catholic girl's college, and everything she said seemed to emphasize the distance between them. They both soon regretted having pre-booked seats for *Romeo and Juliet*, but tried to tough it out. After the show, they walked back down Pier Street to the car park, both wondering if it would be wiser not to spend the night together. "Are you seeing anybody else?" he asked.

"No. Oh, I go out to movies and shows with friends occasionally, but no-one special. What about you?"

"In Mapurtiti? You must be joking. There's nobody there; the town's been dying for more than fifty years."

"Aptly named, then?"

"What?"

"Mapurtiti. It means 'Spirits of the Dead'."

"Oh; I thought it might be something to do with Nefertiti—you know, 'The Beautiful One has Come'. Where did you hear that?"

"A lecture at the Art Gallery, last month. Of course, that might be in another dialect; I didn't get a chance to ask." She opened her door, sat down, and fastened her seat belt. Roy leaned over, kissed her, reached for her breast, then gently bit her neck. She neither repelled him nor reciprocated, and after a few seconds, he returned to his own side of the car.

"Are you tired?" she asked. "I mean, you've had a long drive down here..."

"Not too tired."

"Okay," she said, neutrally. An hour later, they were both staring at the ceiling of her bedroom. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Can I turn out the light now?"

"Sure." She turned away from him, and reached for the switch. "I'm sorry," he repeated, sourly, "I really thought it would help. Why do you insist on doing it in the dark, anyway? Do you have to pretend I'm somebody else?"

"Roy..." She considered rolling over and touching him to comfort him, but decided against it.

"Is that it?"

"No. It's me, not you; I don't much enjoy looking at myself, and I think...no, forget it."

"Forget what?"

She sighed. "I like the way sex feels, but not the way it looks; it looks...gross."

"Gross?"

"Well...sometimes, yes. Sometimes it looks violent. Sometimes it just looks funny. Okay, maybe I'm

a hopeless romantic or something, but I wish it looked like it *felt*. Why do you like having the light on?"

"I like to see who I'm with."

"Why? Can't you remember?" He didn't reply. "That was meant to be a joke."

"Ha ha."

They lay there for another few minutes, not speaking. "Do you want me to drive you home?" she asked, eventually.

"Don't you want me here?"

"Not while you're like this, no."

"It'll be better in the morning..."

"I don't think so, Roy. I'd rather you left."

"Fine. I'll call a cab."

"I can drive you..."

"No, I don't want to put you out. I'll call you, okay?" He was still feeling frustrated and flaccid, tense in all the wrong places. As the cab drove towards Northbridge, he considered going to a strip show, or maybe a brothel, but decided against it; live girls and mass-market fantasies weren't what he wanted, needed. Memories of Mara were more potent than sordid fleshy reality. He went straight home, paid the driver, and hurried into his bedroom where he masturbated until he felt like screaming.

\* \* \*

He spent the next few days watching videos and shopping for another car, finally choosing an old but unbeaten Land Rover with air conditioning. He stuffed his suitcase with books and videos and skin magazines and left three days earlier than he'd originally planned. Mara came to him the morning after he arrived back in Mapurtiti; she still wore the top-heavy, long-limbed, angel-faced Frankenhooker body. "You knew I'd be here, didn't you?" he asked.

"It seemed likely. Not certain, but likely."

"I nearly went looking for your sisters. Where can I find them?"

She smiled beatifically. "You don't. We find you. Oh, you can try calling the phone sex lines, or the escort agencies, or some of the sex shops that offer private strips, and there's a *small* chance you'll get lucky, but we can't work crowds, we never have addresses, and you'll never see us during the day. So, what do you want tonight? Another mix and match?"

"No..." he said, after a moment's thought. He reached for his wallet, and removed the photo of Heather. Mara looked at it dubiously. "I can't see her body," she said, her face broadening into Heather's, her hair turning from black to ash-blond. "You'll have to describe it."

"Oh...about five five, rather plump...no, the breasts sag more than that, no lower, yeah that's okay...fatter thighs, wider across the hips...her nipples are paler than that, with almost no areolae, and the pubic hair's sort of mousy brown, the stuff on her head is dyed...yeah. Yeah."

"This is what you want?" asked Mara, her voice and expression neutral.

Roy nodded. Jesus, he thought, she's even uglier than I am; no wonder she hates having the light on. "That's great. Now get turn around and get down on your hands and knees. Make that elbows and knees. Yeah. Yeah. Now, her voice...nah, forget it, just don't say anything unless I tell you to. Yeah."

\* \* \*

She returned a week later, still looking like Heather, and he asked her to change into somebody else, *anybody* else. She transformed instantly into the likeness of a pretty dark-haired girl of about ten. "No, Jesus, that's worse! Can you do, oh God I don't know, Drew Barrymore? Look, I'm sorry about last time," he said, as she changed yet again.

"Don't be."

"I mean it."

"So do I. That's why I'm here."

"What?"

"Fantasies you don't like to admit to are the best sort, the tastiest. Lust is nice, but shame...shame is even better."

"I don't understand."

"For some men, it's a particular woman. Best friend's wife. Teacher. Mother, sister, daughter. Little girls, little boys. She-males. Hermaphrodites. Amputees. Corpses; you remember my Marilyn Monroe?" She smiled. "One of the most delicious I can remember was from a young man who used to go out at nights with his best friend bashing gays, then go home and fantasize about sucking his best friend's cock. Sometimes it's not a person that's important, but an act. Violence. Humiliation. Whatever. Often it's incredibly old, a first

sexual urge, and incredibly deeply buried or suppressed. You're coming closer to yours; you should be ready in a few more weeks. Real flesh isn't good enough for you any more, is it?"

"And what happens then?"

"Do you still want me to tell you the truth?"

"Yes!"

She shrugged. "It depends. Sometimes it burns out all other desires, and sometimes *all* desire. Some commit suicide, though not many. Some recover. I don't know what *you'll* do."

"And what do you do?"

"Eventually, I stop coming back. After all, the best is gone; all that's left are the dregs."

"And you're not scared that telling me this is going to warn me?"

She threw back her head and laughed loudly. "Oh, sure. Like putting warnings on cigarette packs? Face it, you're hooked...but okay, I'll make you a promise; I won't come back until you know you want me, whatever it costs. Now, what do you want to do?"

\* \* \*

Mara returned three weeks later, this time in the exaggerated likeness of a comic-book superheroine, unrecognisable without her costume. "Teenagers," she explained. "So, what's it going to be?"

"You think I'm ready?"

She grinned. "You've been ready for weeks; I waited until you were about to boil over. This must be *good*."

He shrugged. "I've been doing some reading. About succubi." She looked innocent. "Sexual vampires," he explained. "They're supposed to turn into incubi on the other side of the world, carrying the sperm they've stolen from men to impregnate witches."

Mara laughed. "Yes, I've heard that one. It comes from the idea that sperm is sacred; besides, it helped explain how so many nuns mysteriously became pregnant. I can be male if men want me to be, but I don't do it regularly. Is that what you want?"

"One of the books mentioned your name," he continued. "Mara. It's the Danish word for succubus, or vampire; she visits sleeping men, and if they fall in love with her, she strangles them. It's where the word 'Nightmare' comes from."

"Really? I didn't know that. 'Mara' was just what one of the miners called me—I'm not sure where he was from—and I liked the sound of it. We have to take names the same way we take faces, so I took that one."

"What happened to this miner?"

"Oh, I strangled him while he was dreaming," she replied, her tone sugary with feigned innocence. "It's what he wanted. What do *you* want?"

"So you *are* a succubus?"

She yawned. "If you like. I'm what men want me to be. I didn't make up the stories; they did."

Roy reached for the remote control for the video. "Can you switch the TV on?"

"Sure. What are we watching?"

"*Dracula*." He pressed the 'Play' button, and they watched as Keanu Reeves wandered through the ruined castle to the bedroom where he met Dracula's brides. Mara smiled as she saw the women emerge from the dark sheets. "Is that what you want?"

He nodded. "The blonde?" He slid off the bed, and she lay down, face up, and pulled the sheet over her. A moment later, she slid out slowly from between the sheets, to see Roy standing over her with a short fire-hardened wooden spear and a rubber mallet.

He plunged the spear down between her breasts with all his strength, then swung the mallet, forcing the spear down until the point emerged between her back ribs. She stared up at him, as he dropped the mallet and reached under the bed for the axe. She screamed, but there was no-one around to hear, and the axe fell a moment later, decapitating her. Roy dropped the axe as Mara's head rolled off the bed and fell at his feet, but he didn't move until he was sure he felt no desire to ever enact *that* fantasy again.

Burying the carcass was the most nauseating work he'd ever done—he dry-heaved for hours—but he was confident that it would never be found. He stayed in Mapurtiti until the end of the year, then accepted a job in a high school in North Perth.

He lives alone, but is careful never to be alone with anyone, especially after dark. And sometimes, late at night, he calls a phone sex line or an escort agency and listens for a few seconds, but he always hangs up without speaking.