

Luciferase

by Bruce Sterling

His flesh lit up with erotic need.

The urge within him was beyond comprehension. It was cosmic: its own pure justification.

Light shocked out of him in a tumbling chemical rush.

Someone smashed into him with a violent scrabble of claws. He lost his grip on the grass stem and fell spinning into the dirt. He lay there stunned, legs folded tightly across his belly.

His assailant plummeted after him from the twilight sky. It was Peck, a spider. Peck hit the rotting leaf litter and rebounded on powerful legs. He spun his spiny carcass, his domed eyes searching for prey like a set of black periscopes.

"Peck, it's me. It's Vinnie." Wisely, Vinnie stifled his tremendous urge to flash. Peck would attack anything that lit his eight black eyes.

"I need to eat you right now," Peck said reasonably.

"Peck, you can't eat me, okay? Fireflies are poisonous."

Peck had molted since the last time their paths had crossed. His bristling, aggressive body had almost doubled in volume. Peck might be as dumb as a clod of earth, but you could never fault a jumping spider for audacity.

The nights were growing longer, and Vinnie wasn't getting any younger. He bent his flat head and striped thorax, tumbled sideways with an effort, then clambered to his long, hooked feet. He'd reached full size for a firefly, and the grueling effort of his nightly displays had cost him a lot of weight. He felt light-headed, giddy, and possessed by a frustrated lust.

Peck's fierce attack had just damaged his left midleg. The complex joint between Vinnie's coxa and femur had gone all leaky.

Peck looked a bit embarrassed. By his nature, Peck was susceptible to good sense; it was just that his all-consuming urge to leap, bite, and devour was more than he could handle. "Vinnie, was that you I jumped just now?"

"Yes, of course it was, and you've busted my leg. Get this straight, Peck: I'm a lightning bug. If you ever eat me, you're going to vomit and die."

"But I thought you were just a nice, tasty beetle."

"We've had this discussion before, Peck. I *am* a beetle. All lightning bugs are beetles. Beetles of the family Lampyridae."

Peck drummed the littered earth with his murderous spiny forelegs. “You’re awfully soft-bodied for a beetle.”

”I don’t need any armor, because I’ve got toxins,” Vinnie snapped. “I’m also built light ‘cause I fly! You want to eat something soft? Kill a snail!”

”I don’t like snails,” Peck muttered. “Snails got no legs and they eat with their tongues. Plus they got big hard shells!”

Vinnie sighed gustily through his spiracles. Why were spiders so mulish and picky? Snails were delicious. Vinnie himself had eaten snails, back when he was a grub.

When he had been a kid, all he had wanted to do was burrow, eat, and grow. No adult airborne displays. No burdensome public reputation as an artist. Yet he’d been so happy and excited, innocently writhing in the loamy dark. Kids were like that.

Vinnie leaned against a tall dandelion stem and unhinged his striped wing-covers. His left midleg was screwed up, but he was itching to get aloft and shine. “Peck, I forgive you. You’re a dumb, meat-eating spider, but at least you don’t use webs. Those are just plain irresponsible, webs.”

”I could chew your broken leg off,” Peck mused. “Your legs aren’t poisonous.”

Vinnie wriggled his damaged joint cautiously. “How’d things work out with that lady friend I recommended?”

”Oh! She was so pretty!”

”How come you’re still alive, then?”

”I tried my best to get close to her,” Peck said gloomily. “I really hoofed it up for that chick. I did my big courtship peace-dance ... But she gave me the brush-off. Wrong species.”

”She didn’t eat you,” said Vinnie. He was genuinely curious.

The spider tore at the earth in embarrassment. Peck was reluctant to engage in such personal confidences, but, being a lone predator, he rarely had the chance to talk things out with a sympathetic listener. “I was so ticked off by that. Really, I felt like attacking her and eating her myself. But ... well ... that’s just the way chicks are ... All dames are trouble, basically ...” Peck’s distress was growing. “When, Vinnie? When will I find a decent girl willing to eat me?”

Vinnie preened both his antennae. “It’s a terrible thing, loneliness.”

”It’s all I can think about. I need to find the woman who’s meant for me. I want to become one with her. I want to lay my body down ... afterward, you know ... Feeling so nice and tired then, done with all this struggle of life ... Complete, like, fulfilledness ... Fulfillitude ...”

”Serenity.’ That’s the word you’re looking for, Peck.”

”And I want her to eat me. I do. Maybe she’ll eat me real nice and slow, while I’m all full of venom, paralyzed, and still alive!”

"Romance," Vinnie sighed. "No, Peck, you won't see me scoffing about it. Not after what I've been through."

Warmed by his own dreams, the spider danced on the tips of his spiny feet. "Some nice girl should be drinking my vital fluids. Think of the size of that egg sac and the pack of kids she'd have!"

"You're a one-womanguy."

"I want true happiness. It's my right!"

Vinnie sniffed through his vent-holes. "Romance is one thing, kid. Happiness, that's another."

"I just don't get it. Am I so bad? I'm trying to do the decent thing!"

"Let the ol' firefly give you a tip here, kid. You're being a chump. You could court three spider ladies, fertilize the eggs of the first two then sacrifice your body into the gut of number three. That way you'd convey the metabolic benefits from being devoured, plus you'd get a lot more genetic variety in your progeny. You follow me? Let the first two pay the price for their own child support!"

Peck thought this proposal over. "Hey, that's cold-blooded!"

"So?"

"You'd really treat women like that? What is with you?"

"Well, it's not like I'm given a choice." Vinnie had never met a woman who showed any interest in devouring him. On the contrary, once the night's glowing courtship was consummated, Vinnie's ladies simply scrambled down from their leafy boudoirs to lay some fresh eggs in the dirt.

Once his supple aviator's body had given women what they craved, they never wanted to talk to him again. All that bioluminescent signalling and sophisticated communication, then a moment or two of physical bliss, then that sudden cold and that lasting emotional silence. The irony of this had not escaped Vinnie. It gnawed at the core of him.

"Can I ask you something personal?" said the spider. "How many girls have you been with?"

"Oh, about as many as I have legs," said Vinnie airily. "And I was right to do it. They were gorgeous! Every moment was so deeply felt! Who wouldn't go for such classy dames!"

"Was it that good for you?"

"It was tremendous! Except for Sylvia ... That tramp!" Vinnie couldn't restrain his bitterness. He missed Sylvia worst of all. Sylvia was the one who just wasn't taken in by the story: the gallantries, the calculated showmanship ... Sylvia frankly understood what a man really needed in life. And boy, could she ever give it. Yet she'd walked off to lay her eggs just like the rest of them.

"You sure are lucky, Vinnie. I've never even *met* a woman of my own species. Us top predators are rare!"

Spiders seemed pretty common to Vinnie. If there was a local "top" predator, it was the grass snake.

The grass snake had teeth, a tongue, bones, scales, ate anything, never stopped growing, and apparently lived forever. Vinnie had been tempted to communicate with the grass snake, maybe ask for its name, but he didn't quite know how to open the conversation. "Did you try signalling for some women, Peck? Flashing? Make a loud mating call of any kind?"

"I can't pull stunts like that!" Peck protested. "Because my flesh isn't poisonous! Some bird would pick me off in a hot second." Peck ran one foreleg through his venomous fangs. "All this sex talk sure makes me hungry."

"Don't you dare bite me," Vinnie said.

"But I'm ravenous! If I don't eat, I'm gonna die!"

"How about a tasty mosquito?" said Vinnie. "A female mosquito with a belly full of fresh blood! That's mammal blood! Right off the top of the food chain."

Peck perked up. "Now that's what I'm talking about!"

Vinnie loathed mosquitoes. Their brainless whining spoiled the limpid beauty of his evening flights. When mosquitoes were full of blood, they were a serious collision hazard. "Over there at streamside where the water smells bad, those parasites are out of their heads on pheromones. There's a cloud of 'em there tonight, a big orgy. I'll take you there right away. You follow my taillight and you'll make out like a bandit."

It was an enticing prospect and a genuinely friendly offer, but romantic rejection had made Peck jaded. "You know that I can't fly."

"You can hop! You can jump! I'll fly low for you," Vinnie promised. "I'll glow bright, just for your weak spider eyes."

"Look, my eyes are just fine," Peck lied. "I'm great at tracking motion! It's just, well, I can't focus too good. So once you're up there flashing, well, those big blurry lights could be anybody."

"Peck, give me a break. You'll know it's me, because my skills are second to none. Now pay some attention and learn about the state of the art in aerobic luminescence."

The tough climb up the tall stalk got Vinnie warmed up. He poised himself under the canopy of the dandelion bloom, flapped open his casings, extruded filmy black wings, and took flight.

Light shocked out of his slatted belly and the world exploded with meaning. He was a glowing arc across the nullity of darkness. His very being was focused: to connect.

He and his fellow artists were chips of sunlight smuggled from day into gloom. Illumination streamed from his being. When a woman responded from her private world in the vital undergrowth, he did not so much see her message as become it: that female response pressed directly on his soul.

He felt too bright to eat, these days. He knew that it was important to chew, to swallow, but he couldn't seem to focus any interest in anything but mating. It was as much as he could do to suck a little nectar in the after-hours, during the blue glow of dawn. Even tasty loaves of pollen seemed boring now, beneath him somehow. There was a clarity, a purity in this radiant giving of his essence.

It could not last, he knew that. Yet each new gout of light, as it burst from his flesh, each bout of soul-bruising carnality, pushed him closer to wisdom.

Once airborne, he forgot Peck at once. It made no sense to waste his art on some dirt-bound spider. The evening air was a pageant of glittering rivals. The ground below was bejeweled with willing women.

The night was splendor itself. The air had just the right level of dampness to avoid desiccation, and a light, assisting breeze that was perfect for stunting. His powerful wing muscles blew heat through his long body. He lit up like a falling star.

He was reaching a personal best, this evening: he felt calm, mellow, yet tingling with anticipation. He looped, he swirled: masterful accents against the velvet darkness. No frenzy anymore, never too much zeal: his glittering arcs were a languid commentary on the universe, an invitation to enhance one's state of being.

The other flyboys in the evening air with him tonight ... Yes, these were his rivals, the genetic competition, but Vinnie couldn't help but admire their skill. Some ugly bitterness had died within him tonight. Even the worst among them the guys pulling cheap stunts, the vulgar ones who just trawled the briar patch, same old same old ... At least they had heart. They had desire, need. Life meant something, even to them.

Then he saw her.

She had a woman's glow. Women didn't glow in the way men did. They didn't glow for the sake of fame: they glowed in response to others. He'd come to know them as practical, single-minded. There was a perfunctory quality to the signals they sent up from their posts on leaves, stems, blossoms. As if they had watched his antics long enough, and now they were saying: Very well. If that's what it takes to make you happy, here I am.

But this dazzling, feminine glow ... It was very bright, and there was some piquant quality about it ... A teasing lag, a kind of ironic awareness ... He circled and sent a response. A query.

Her answer came, a bit too quickly. Bold, assertive. As if he were being a little foolish not to already know who she was, what she was, what their game was. An implicit challenge there. No coyness needed, no quarter taken or given.

He sent a long reply, a rising note, sustained.

Her answer was the very soul of allure. It was rich, self-conscious, and burningly voluptuous. It astounded him. He could no more have resisted that siren flash than a moth could resist a flame. His airborne body reoriented itself almost against his will.

She was on the broad leaf of a nettle. Vinnie wasn't crazy about nettle plants; the gummy, stinging barbs weren't likely to hurt a creature of his size, but they were inconvenient. The leaf was sticky, and his left midleg was wonky, so it wasn't the elegant, poised landing a man come courting would have hoped for.

Then she pounced on him. She came running from the base of the nettle leaf, and for all her great bulk—she seemed three times his size—she was lethally fast.

She knocked him backward with her headlong assault, and in a confused, writhing mass, they fought. They battled in a jumbled mess of multilegged wrestling, and somehow, the two of them ended up

jammed down and half-trapped among the nettle barbs. She couldn't get the lethal grip she wanted, the crushing bite that would have finished him off; she had his bad leg in her huge jaws, but her wing-case had gone askew in the struggle and the tender veil of her wing was crumpled and stuck into place. They were stalemated.

"Okay," he gasped. "Now you're going to tell me what this is about! Who are you? What are you?"

"I'm a Photuris," she muttered around the shaft of his leg. "So I'm eating you."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you're a Photinus. Or you taste like one. And I'm a Photuris, so I prey on you."

"Would you stop chewing, please? Can't we discuss this matter like adults?"

"Adults?" She pulled her fanged mandibles from the badly dented chitin of his leg. Her mouth looked somewhat like his own, but much larger and highly suited to ripping men apart. "Do I look like a pupa to you, shorty?"

Vinnie heaved himself vigorously, struggling to find his feet in the gummy footing of the nettle leaf. She wasn't really three times his size—more like double it—and now that her sudden ambush had failed, she had a fight on her hands with him. Vinnie knew that she could kill him, and it was clear she intended to eat him. But he'd been in some fights of his own in younger days, and he knew how to handle himself. She could lose an antenna, maybe a leg.

"Look, back off, lady—or whatever you are."

"I just told you what I am: I'm a female Photuris. We lure and eat Photinus males. That's our niche; it's what we live for. I was luring you—practically perfectly—so I should be eating you right now. Stand still, and I'll make this quick."

"You're 'luring' me?" Vinnie scoffed. "Your head is three times too big! Your mouth is a mass of fangs! And your ass is enormous. You know what? You're not alluring. You're a giant, ugly cannibal."

"That's not fair. I'm not a cannibal. You're my prey species."

"But we're both beetles of the family Lampyridae. Plus, you used my own Photinus style of flashing!"

"Not exactly," she said. "I improved your style. Given my profession, I'm better at flashing than any Photinus—male or female."

"Okay," said Vinnie, "I admit it, your display was fantastic. I never saw the like. It's a pity that, face to face, you're so hideous."

"Look, fella, I happen to be extremely attractive to Photuris men. Your limited standards of female beauty, those I don't care about. I don't need to please you. All I have to do is rip your head off then eat you."

Vinnie considered this. He could recognize that his cannibal remark had been a little ungallant. Several million years ago, Photuris and Photinus had probably been the same species of beetle, but beetles had a genius for radiating into every conceivable evolutionary niche. That was why there were more beetles in

the world than any other kind of creature.

It shouldn't have entirely surprised him to learn there was a class of firefly that ate fireflies.

"Okay, I guess I can accept that, but tell me something. Where are these Photuris men that you are supposed to attract?"

"What do you mean?"

"I wasn't hatched yesterday. I know every guy around here, by his style and his signal. If there were any Photuris men around, I'd know that. So where are they?"

"Top predators are rare," she admitted.

"You've never met a male at all? Getting pretty late in the season."

"I've met a lot of men of your species. Your type is very common. I ate about as many of you as I have legs."

"What were their names?" Vinnie paused. "Never mind that. You just kind of jumped on them out of the darkness, eh? Never bothered to, uh, get to know them as people."

"I knew what they wanted," she said. "What's to talk about?"

"Everything," he said. "There's everything to talk about. Love is a carnival! It's an adventure! There should be tenderness in all this, there should be soulfulness! The unexamined light is not worth flashing! A man and woman in sexual union are the very hinge of futurity! They are the opened door to the renewal of life. Flesh in a fertile unity, that is the gate through which all else must pass ..."

"You're kind of a cute guy, for a Photinus."

"I keep in shape."

"You came here to mate, not to talk philosophy. Sex is what you wanted, isn't it? Go on, admit that."

"Well, yeah. Of course I wanted it."

"Well, you're not so bad-looking. Suppose that I let you just do it. When you're nice and tired afterward, will you let me devour you without putting up a big fuss about it?"

Vinnie looked her over. She was colossally huge, crazily powerful, treacherous, grisly, and fanged, but she was kind of growing on him. A flash burst out of him, involuntarily lighting the leaf surface.

"We have chemistry," he admitted. "Frankly, I'm tempted."

"Well, what's stopping you?"

He drew a breath. "I've got a counter-proposal. Why don't you let me go? Then, as a reward, I'll send you three or four other Photinus males to make up for the loss of me."

"Would you really do that? Why?"

"I've got my reasons. It just so happens that certain flyers are aesthetically offensive. Those guys are unfit, and they shouldn't be reproducing. Seriously."

"I'm supposed to eat rivals whose work isn't up to your artistic standards?"

"Have you seen those clowns by the bramble pile? Every night they fly those tight little circles ..."

She laughed. "You mean them? They're the shallow end of the gene pool! They couldn't tell my sophisticated repartee from some dirty come-on! They're beneath me."

"You're not being reasonable here. Do you want someone to appreciate your charm, or do you want food?"

She pulled in irritation at her soiled wing. It peeled free from the nettle's furry surface. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Vinnie."

"I'm Dolores."

"Hi."

"I've heard stories about situations like this," she said slowly. "Once I heard about a sister who actually fell for a Photinus guy."

"No kidding."

"He was so sweet that she just chewed his two midlegs off. Because she wanted him to fly off and reproduce and put more men like himself into the breeding population."

"That's a great evolutionary gambit, but I don't want my legs eaten off," Vinnie said. He lost his composure and began to flash uncontrollably.

"You should watch it, carrying on that way," she said. Reflexively, she flashed in response. Her flashes were hugely powerful, torrents of carnivorous vitality. "A little guy like you, you could blow some valve in your abdomen."

"Does that matter, Dolores? Summer's going to end! I'll die of natural causes! Let me go. I'll creep on back to you at the end of my lifespan. You can eat me then! What difference does that make to either one of us?"

"I might die before you came back," she said. "I might starve to death."

"So what? So what if we both burn out tonight in one last great performance? You don't scare me."

She backed away. "You have guts and talent," she admitted. "You can glow."

"I thought I was hot stuff till I met you," he said. Light poured from him. Now they were duetting. She had a wild, feral, overwhelming gift for expression. It was like standing next to the sun.

The nettle leaf trembled gently. Another lightning bug had arrived.

He was long and spindly and thin. He was too tall, and his proportions were off.

"What have we got here?" he drawled.

"I'm Vinnie. This is Dolores. Now get lost."

The stranger looked at Dolores quizzically. "Why is this piece of meat talking?"

"You're a Photuris male," said Dolores in awe. "At last! Where have you been all my life?"

"I'm a rarity, babe, the only one in these parts. You and the supertime here sure are making a big, bright ruckus. I never flew by this little nettle patch before, but you're hard to miss tonight. When do we eat?"

"Did you flash on your way here?" said Vinnie. "It would have been more polite to flash."

"Why would I bother? I know where she is." He turned to Dolores. "Would you kill him now, please? I'm hungry."

"Wait a minute," said Vinnie. "What flashing system do you use?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's a professional interest. She's a mimic, right? She mimics how a Photinus flashes. Are you a mimic too?"

"I can mimic fourteen different genres of flashing," said the stranger.

"Okay, fine, yeah, I get that, very impressive. You're great at pastiche. But I'm asking you: how do *you yourself* flash, as a Photuris? What do you bring to the table, creatively speaking?"

"Well," said the stranger, "with an incident like this one, I don't need to flash at all. I can just watch her mimicking you. Then we eat you, and we reproduce, and everything's hunky-dory."

Vinnie turned to Dolores. "You know what? This creep can't flash for himself. He's got nothing authentic to say!"

"Is that true?" said Dolores.

With a groan of disbelief, the stranger lit up. "Okay, fine, be that way! You want a guy to flash at you, no problem, I can ripple through all kinds of patterns. You name it, I can do it. Whatever the market demands."

"That's not his point," said Dolores. "His point was, you can't communicate with me as a man of my own species should communicate with a woman."

"But we're carnivores! We exploit the flashing system in order to eat people who flash."

"Does this mean you're incapable of a sincere expression in your own idiom?"

"You need to knock those weird ideas out of your head," said the stranger. "So what I don't have a unique Photuris signal! Who cares? I don't need one, and I don't want one. I'll tell you what I *do* want and need—and you'd better give it to me. I want to eat his head and thorax. You can eat the rest of him, but leave those parts for me."

"Why?"

"Especially those big glands in his neck."

"Why is that?" she insisted.

"Because that's where he manufactures 'lucibufagin,' the firefly poison. Once we eat those poison glands, we absorb the poison. Then we become poisonous too."

"We're not poisonous by nature?" said Dolores.

"No. Not until we eat Photinus beetles. See, we have no need to create our own poison. We just suck poison out of their flesh, and then it belongs to us."

"Okay, that does it!" Vinnie announced. "I was sympathetic to the situation up to this point, but that's just a plain rip-off! You've got no lightning pattern, and you've got no poison either? You're not a predator at all! You're a parasite!"

"Watch what you say," said the stranger. He shielded his eyes from Vinnie's angry flashing.

"You want a piece of me? Come on, give me your best shot!"

"Kill him," the stranger urged.

"She doesn't *need* any more poison," Vinnie pointed out, "because she already killed and ate six men. You're the one who's begging her to do your dirty work."

"Why am I listening to this?"

"What kind of man do you call yourself? You're a complete poseur! You're a drone."

The male Photuris took a cautious step back to the edge of the nettle leaf. "I'm far too valuable to risk my unique genes fighting prey animals."

"You don't like this?" said Vinnie. "You're shaking all over! Come back here and tussle, you lackluster, poison-free wimp!"

"You know what he's up to, don't you?" called the stranger to Dolores. "If I get injured, there could be any number of women in this area who go unfertilized. Including you!"

A black shape hurtled from nowhere with a sudden jarring collision. It was Peck. In an instant, Peck's jaws had crunched fatally through the stranger's back.

"Fly away!" Dolores screamed. In her panic, she failed to unfurl her gummy, delicate wings. Her heavy body collided with a dozen nettle leaves on her way to earth.

"Wow, he tastes fantastic!" Peck muttered through a mouthful of pierced integument. "I always knew that a lightning bug would taste great!"

Peck hauled the stranger's paralyzed carcass toward the smooth base of the leaf. "Ow! Why'd you have to pick a nettle plant, Vinnie?"

Vinnie left. With a few discreet flashes, he located Dolores. She was terrified and cowering under a wilting toadstool.

"What was that?" Dolores gasped.

"Jumping spider," said Vinnie. "Came out of nowhere and nailed him."

"What a horrible monster!"

"I've been around," said Vinnie. "They're all the same." He examined himself. His left midleg had frozen into position. One of Dolores's antennae was wrecked and cockeyed. Both of them were smeared with gum and flecks of dirt. "Look how screwed up we are! Why'd you pick a nettle for a perch?"

Dolores loosened her enormous jaws. "That makes it harder for prey to get away."

"Well, we got away, anyway."

"Yes, but now I'm starving!"

One of the Photuris's legs came tumbling down. It stuck to the side of a fallen leaf. It was followed by the entirety of his severed, glowing gut. Vinnie limped forward and sniffed. "Spiders sure are picky eaters. This leg here is practically whole."

"You can't eat that," she said.

"Are you kidding? Sure I can eat it."

"Well, save some for me!"

Vinnie reached out and sampled a bit of the broken, glowing abdomen. "You know what this is? This is practically pure luciferin! And that tangy spice is its catalyst, luciferase!" He stuck his entire head into his rival's exploded gut. It was as if the core of the sun had been made out of jam: yellow, rich, and thick.

Vinnie pulled himself free, and for the first time in his life, he glowed from both ends. When he swallowed, he glowed so hard that light shone through his thorax.

"You shouldn't eat that stuff."

"What, like I can't metabolize my own biochemistry? You go ahead and eat his leg! Go on, chow down, you've got the fangs for it!" Vinnie opened his wing-cases. His back glowed straight through the veining of his wings. He glittered all over. It felt completely sublime.

"I couldn't possibly eat my own species," Dolores said primly.

"Oh, come on, I won't tell! I bet I'm the first Photinus to devour a Photuris in about a million years."

Vinnie burrowed right in and began to glut himself. “I haven’t had a serious meal in ages! This is giving me my appetite back!”

”I’ve lost my best perch. I’m going to starve,” said Dolores, bursting into sobs. “I’ll never reproduce. I’m an evolutionary failure!”

”Quit fussing,” shrugged Vinnie, wiping bright goo from his jaws. “I did my own bit for posterity. So what? It’s not like we ever live to see posterity.” He groomed his damaged leg, licking his own seeping juices. Maybe he would heal, if he swallowed enough protein. Fireflies were quick to heal.

”I’m totally disillusioned, Vinnie. Because I now know that there can be no true sincerity between a woman and a man. We can never have a genuine meeting of minds. Language fails us.”

Suddenly Vinnie disgorged. “Oh, dear. Oh, that was just too rich to keep down.”

Dolores examined the brightly glowing pile of masticated paste.

”That’s interesting ... Now that you ate this and barfed it up, it smells just like a Photinus smells.”

”Sure. We’re all the same chemistry under the skin.”

”It even tastes like you taste. It tastes pretty good, actually.”

”I told you it was terrific.” Vinnie burst into triumphant laughter. “Look at me now! Look! I’m glowing fore and aft, port and starboard, inside and out! I have achieved the height of artistry! This is the happiest night of my life!”

Dolores dabbled her cruelly hooked feet in the glowing paste. In a mix of despair and frivolity, she anointed herself with gold. It made her gorgeous, splendid, luminous. She was terrible and beautiful, like a flaming angel.

Clarity flooded his mind. “I love you! Let’s fly till dawn!”

The End

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