



— NAKED —
TRUTHS

A Novel by Alex Gruenberg

Naked Truths

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For Bonnie, the midwife of my heart.

Prologue

THE GAME was tied at zero near the end of regular play. Charles hoped it wouldn't go into overtime. He was tired of soccer. He wanted to go home and rest. He didn't want to cheer or listen to chatter from the other parents. Then, his son Donald stole the ball from one of the Rangers.

Charles leapt out of his chair as Donald charged forward, dancing toward the lone guard confronting him. Donald darted the ball sideways around the other player, who hesitated a moment, and Donald drove past him, recovering the ball and quickening his stride, dribbling forward faster and faster, closing in on the goalie's box while everyone was still trying to figure out what he had done, and in an instant, he scored. He took another few steps toward the goal before slackening his pace. The goalie turned around, staring at the ball in the net behind him, unbelieving, while Donald, looking aloof and at ease, trotted off in a wide arc back to his teammates.

Mrs. Merriweather was screaming, like always, and Fat Joe screeched his obnoxious laugh, and under it all, Charles heard an odd, grunting sound, *unnb, unnb*. Donald's teammates surrounded him, shouting and cheering, parents poured onto the field, and noise was everywhere, but riveting Charles' attention was that guttural *unnb* sound from somewhere behind him. He turned, and there wasn't much there, empty lawn chairs, a few little kids playing with a worn soccer ball, and one kid on his hands and knees, facing away from him. It looked like Mickey, who wasn't playing because he had hurt his ankle in practice.

"Mickey, what's wrong?"

He ran the few steps over to Mickey and crouched down in front of him. The boy was purple. His face looked like it was going to explode; he was clawing at his neck.

"Mickey, what is it?"

Naked Truths

That awful guttural sound again and more frantic clawing. Charles realized he must be choking. God, no, not now, he thought. You know what to do. You know.

“Okay, Mickey, I'm gonna help you. Try to calm down.” He positioned himself behind the boy and held both his shoulders.

“I need you to stand up, Mickey,” he said, and started to gently but firmly pull the boy up. Mickey struggled, and Charles pulled forcefully. When he had the boy half upright, chest vertical, Charles reached around him, positioning his hands one over the other, thumb crooked to make a point, and felt for the right spot. You know what to do, he kept saying to himself. Mickey squirmed to get away, but Charles held on, found the crest of the boy's abdomen under the ribcage, probed for a moment, and, gritting his teeth, pulled inward.

Mickey jerked upward, but was still clawing, still writhing in Charles' massive bear hug, still making that awful sound. Charles swore at himself briefly, then gritted his teeth again. Come on, they said you had to pull hard. Now pull. Don't worry about hurting him; he's gonna die if you can't do this.

He pulled, and something hurled forward onto the grass. Mickey drew in a huge gulp of air, and they both collapsed onto the ground, Mickey sucking in huge breaths, Charles panting more shallowly, suddenly drained of energy, feeling the fear coursing through his body. He hadn't felt it before, but he knew it had been there the whole time, driving him, focusing his mind, controlling his muscles, and now, released from need, the fear was simply fear. He had just held a boy's life in his hands, could have hurt him, could have failed to save him, could have . . . It was over, though. Nothing was wrong.

“How are you, Mickey?”

“I'm . . . I'm okay,” Mickey croaked, “I don't even know what happened. I thought I was gonna die.” He spoke between gasps, which were shorter and shallower. His color was returning to normal. He was on his knees again, but now he could look up, and he could look like Mickey again. “I was eating a hot dog . . . when Donnie pulled that move, and . . . I

Naked Truths

wanted to shout, but I was, like, choking, and I couldn't stop. I didn't know what to do.”

“Well, one thing to do is to stop scarfing down those hot dogs like that—you almost killed me,” Charles said. He could tell the boy was looking for a way out of the moment, a way to stop being afraid. Mickey looked up, angry for a moment, realized it was a joke and took it. They both laughed, and Charles inched forward and started slapping him on the back, for no particular reason except that he needed the touch.

By then, others had noticed and were surrounding them, full of questions for the man and boy kneeling on the ground looking like they'd just run a marathon.

Charles answered them. He told what happened simply, but afterward Mickey told a much better version of the story, full of sound and fury, and Charles let him have the stage. He backed away slowly, accepted a few thanks, got a huge hug from Mickey's mom, which he didn't mind, since he'd always thought she was the most attractive of the team mothers, and he turned away to start his ritual of locating all the team's balls, their cones, their water jugs, and stowing them in the back of his SUV. This was Mickey's moment; he was the one with the brush with death; Charles was doing his job, as always. Taking care of business, supporting those who were in the game.

He loaded up the last gear bag and walked back to the crowd, which had moved beyond Mickey's adventure and was focused again on the last minute win, on the usual game analysis, praise for players, exclamations of joy and surprise, hopes for the next game, and general fun. He even joined in. He was part of the team, after all, even if all he did was carry gear.

When they arrived home, Donald ran upstairs to shower up and change. Charles lugged the cooler out back and dumped the

Naked Truths

water and ice into the yard. He hosed out the cooler and left it upside down on the deck to dry. Charles needed a shower too.

For now, the hammock would do. He wanted to rest. He was tired. He supposed he had saved that kid's life. He supposed he was something of a hero. But he didn't feel proud, didn't feel like celebrating. He wanted to rest. The sun was still high, but not too hot; he felt its contrast with the breeze cooling off his back against the rope mesh of the hammock. He closed his eyes. The feeling of Mickey's back against his chest returned, the clammy skin, the perspiration seeping into his own shirt, the tension of his muscles. He felt the boy's abdomen against the edge of his fist, the sudden give when the hot dog finally popped out. It was all present, still demanding his attention, overriding the sun and the breeze.

The images flooded his mind. In a few minutes, he shook himself back to alertness, rolled out of his cocoon, and went inside.

Ellen was making supper. He smelled fresh basil and followed the scent to the bowl she was working on.

"Pasta salad, with tomatoes and basil. Nothing special, I just wanted a light supper today, figured Donnie wouldn't want to load up too much after a game."

Ellen never faltered as she mixed the basil into the pasta. Charles could see the olive oil glinting in the sunlight. He leaned over and gave her a kiss on top of her head. Her mixing spoon never missed a beat.

"Game go well?" she asked.

"Donnie kicked ass," he said, smiling as she flinched slightly. "He did this amazing switch-up right at the end and shot through the other side like they weren't there. Got the winning goal. It was unbelievable. I'm still not sure of what he did; it was like he could change direction in mid-air. That kid's getting good."

Ellen sprinkled in more basil.

"Think they'll make the playoffs?"

Naked Truths

“I don't see how they can miss, unless someone gets hurt. They've been unstoppable lately. Eric had some great plays, too, and Matt's like a brick wall at the goal. Nothing gets by him.”

No response.

“Mickey damn near choked to death right afterward. Got a piece of hot dog stuck in his throat. Turned ten shades of blue. He's okay, though.”

“That's good. Listen, I need to go over to Alice's tonight so we can work on those invitations for the baby shower. You gonna be all right without me? Need anything while I'm out?”

Ellen finished her mixing and turned to face him. Her eyes were a little cold, but the sunlight played through her hair and made it shine around her face like a halo. She was still striking, still the prettiest girl in town, he thought. Despite two children and twenty years, she still had her figure, silhouetted sharply against the counter behind her. He never understood why she'd chosen him of all men, and the sight of her struck him every time.

She stood, unmoving, waiting for his answer.

“Sure, honey, I'll be fine. Have fun.”

She pivoted and got a pitcher out of the fridge and headed for the table.

“Tell Donnie we're ready as soon as he is,” she said, and started pouring iced tea into their glasses. “I think Laura's downstairs on the phone. See if you can pry her off.”

“Sure,” Charles headed dutifully upstairs to shout in to Donald that supper was ready and went into his own room to change out of his sweaty game clothes. He felt slighted because she hadn't asked about Mickey and he didn't get to tell his story. But then, she didn't know he had a story. There was no reason for her to ask. She was busy; she's always busy. He should be thankful he had a beautiful wife who still managed to get dinner on the table for the whole family at least a few times a week. That was a rarity these days. Nothing to complain about. He pulled on a polo shirt and trotted downstairs to look for Laura.

Naked Truths

Laura was curled up in her nest, the huge semi-circular cup of a chair she loved.

“No, like she would even know. Don't listen to her; they're beautiful.”

Her back to him, knees almost in her chest, cuddled into herself against the outside world, Laura pinned the phone between her ear and the cushion while she examined her nails. She was such a kid, he thought. So caught up in her world, so oblivious.

“Laura,” he called quietly.

“What?” She craned her neck backward till she could see him on the stairs. Her mouth stretched open comically.

“Supper's about ready.”

“I'll be there.”

“No, I mean it's ready, come on up.”

“O . . . K.” She stretched out the letters to show how long-suffering and weary she was and retreated back into her phone space, voice hushed so he couldn't make out what she was saying. He waited. She had her mother's hair, radiant and flowing. She lifted her head and caught the phone as it slid down the cushion, and in one incomprehensible, yet graceful movement, unfolded herself, laid the phone on the table, and pounced out of the nest.

“Hi, dad. How was the game?”

“Your brother kicked butt,” he said. “Then Mickey almost choked to death on a hot dog. I had to squeeze it out of him. You should have seen it fly!”

She came up and put her arm around him. She was getting tall, he noticed for the hundredth time, too tall to be his little girl.

“You're a hero,” she laughed. “Did you do that Himmerbach thing? Did it make a popping noise when it came out? Was he jumping around, gagging?”

As usual, she got in about a dozen words to his every one. They climbed the stairs out of the TV room together, and

Naked Truths

Charles squeezed her tightly when she made particularly high-pitched squeals.

“Nothing quite so dramatic. He was choking, and I went over and did the *Heim-lich*,” he stressed the syllables gently. “No big deal, but I was pretty nervous about it. I’ve never done that before.”

“I bet. They showed us this video about it at school, and it looked like the kid was gonna explode when the stuff popped out of his mouth. I mean, I know it was an actor and all, but it was gross!”

“Yup, it was gross,” he said. “I thought about letting Mickey die, saving him being so gross and all, but I figured his mom would have a fit if I did and I’d never get a decent seat at their restaurant again, so I gave in and saved the poor kid. I closed my eyes, though, so I wouldn’t have to watch him explode or anything. That’d really be gross.”

“Oh, dad!” Her exasperation radiated, along with the enjoyment he knew his kidding gave her. Things were so easy between them. He came alive in her presence and laid it on thick, teasing her and putting on dramatic voices, not like the simple conversations he had with Donald or the focused ones with Ellen.

They entered the kitchen, and Laura bounded off to the fridge. Ellen glared at her for a moment, calmed herself and simply said, “It’s all ready. Come on and sit. I have iced tea out for you.”

“Yes, mom.”

Laura made a show of obediently shutting the fridge door and walking daintily over to the table. She sat down with correct, upright posture and elaborately flicked her paper napkin open and draped it on her lap.

“And on what shall we be dining tonight, madam?” she asked.

“Pasta salad, princess, if that suits you,” Ellen answered, and called out to Donald, who was bounding down the stairs, “It’s ready, come on in!”

Naked Truths

Donald swung around the doorjamb, took a couple of strides into the room, lifted a leg over the back of his chair, and plopped down.

"I'm starving!" he declared, and Charles could see his eagerness dim as he spied the casserole dish of pasta salad.

"Well, there's plenty," Ellen said, and she sat down, immediately busying herself by passing the dish to Donald and taking a slice of seven-grain bread for herself.

Laura was downing iced tea. Donald greedily piled his plate with pasta salad. Ellen spread butter-substitute lightly on her bread. Late afternoon sun painted the room in golden tones, adding dramatic shadows to all of them and to the tall, unlit candlesticks on the table.

And Charles watched it all. Indeed, nothing was wrong. Nothing to complain about

The couple was pleased with the house, had the usual questions, made the right noises, said they'd talk it over and promised to call.

Ordinary enough morning. He'd shown this couple three houses already, all in one day, and had recognized the unmistakable signs of a couple in first house purchase syndrome. Usually it took a few weeks at least for these couples to come down to reality. He'd learned not to invest too much time or worry into these preliminary showings. The goal wasn't to sell a house yet; it was to win them over as customers. He needed to convince them he understood what they wanted. As soon as he could see the blinders were off, he could really go to work.

For now, he would go back to the office to check email and phone messages. He still had some paperwork to clear up on yesterday's closing, then he could go to lunch. He had a promising showing that afternoon. Newly married couple in their forties, and they'd each had a couple of houses before, so

Naked Truths

they were sure of what they wanted. Second marriages were a gold mine. Usually the neighborhood would sell the house, and Charles knew the neighborhoods. He knew which ones exuded calm and which seemed active and fun, which gave a good professional aura and which were wealthy enough to be understated. He'd lived in Westbury all his life, and he knew the neighborhoods well. He was looking forward to the showing. The woman had enticing green eyes, and Charles enjoyed being around her. Some showings were better than others.

This house was in a good spot. Very trendy, very upscale, nice entrance gateway, stone lined driveway, solid, elegant brickwork. Floors to die for, matched by well-joined accent panels on the walls and beautifully rubbed built-in china closets. They'd love it.

Maybe not. Maybe it was too traditional. Maybe they'd think it was stodgy for a couple still in their forties. Who knew?

He decided he was too anxious to go to the office. Maybe a quiet lunch and a beer would calm him down. Step out of the sales world for a moment, read the paper, have a good meal. He was heading up Peach Street, a few blocks from The Station House, a small place with good food that usually wasn't too busy at this time. He pulled into the lot, bought a paper from the machine by the door, and walked in. The dimly lit, wooden interior of the place suited him. He sat down in a booth by a window, opened the paper to the sports pages and looked to see they had any coverage of the high school football game that night.

He enjoyed his meal, washed the flavors down with a local lager, read, and relaxed.

He came to the end of his meal, finished reading the interesting pieces on the op/ed page, leaned back, and there was the worry again. He needed this sale. He wasn't desperate for the money; things were going well, but it had been a dry week and he hated to end it with nothing simmering on the burner.

Naked Truths

He straightened his dishes on the table. Tried to take one more swig from his empty beer bottle. Checked his watch. Glanced through the paper again without finding anything worth reading. Checked his watch again. An hour before the appointment. He was stuck. If he went back to the office, he'd barely walk in the door before he'd have to leave; this appointment was on the other side of town, and he wanted to be sure to arrive before the buyers. He looked at the paper again, but nothing seemed interesting. Damn.

Resigned, he got up. He paid his bill, returned to the table to leave a respectable tip, and went out the door. It was a good day for a drive, anyhow. He could go by the lake; the sight of water would relax him. He got in the car, started up the engine, found a quiet station on the radio and pulled out.

Soon, he passed the familiar yellow building. Small, squarish, made of cinderblock, no windows, unadorned with neon, surrounded by a simple parking area. He felt a slight pressure in his gut, but drove on. No time. Not today. He had a showing coming up. He had to stop doing this so often. But at the next red light, the pressure still nagged at him, and he glanced down at the dashboard clock. He had half an hour to fill, and he was only five minutes from the house. He put on his turn signal, doubled back, and pulled in, parking in the back. He got out and walked over the gravel toward the entrance. Damn, hope my shoes don't get dusty from this crap, he thought, and made a mental note to check them when he got to the house. So many reasons to get there first, he thought. So many details to watch. He opened the door and walked in.

Display racks screamed color, mostly pink. Video displays jumped with it, neon signs in the back beckoned customers, and sale signs summoned everywhere. Classic rock filled the room. The counter was off to one side, and the usual guy was talking to a customer.

The place was a visual playground. Video cases were front and center, and there was no doubt about content. Breasts were everywhere; huge, gleaming, bulbous breasts leaned down from

Naked Truths

every cover. The women all seemed slathered in oil, their tanned, supple bodies always open, legs open, eyes open, mouths open, calling to you.

Other racks were filled with men in similar poses, but Charles never paid them any mind. He didn't dwell on the women either, but it was hard to walk by them without noticing at least a few. They were all the same, yet stunningly varied; it seemed each company had some kind of specialty, some kind of focus: large breasts, women on women, young girls, black women, Asian women, women and men, women alone, groups, it went on and on. He walked by, casually glancing over the covers, feeling himself harden as he walked. He didn't want to spend too much time in the open where he could be seen. The viewing booths were more his speed: private, safe, and more appealing than anything on display up front. No matter how enticing a woman was, photos couldn't come close to what you'd find in the videos themselves.

He chose a booth from the stills displayed outside and went in. Closing the door, he felt safe. The booth was small and shabby. At least it was fairly clean; that was one reason he liked this place; it wasn't grimy like a lot of others. He locked the door and started to feed the machine. Soon, he was lost in his thoughts and his eyes. The plot, such as it was, involved a girl coming home to find her roommate having sex in the kitchen. She hid in the doorway watching, getting turned on. The camera divided its time between the couple and the watching roomie. Charles preferred the roomie shots. Seeing sex on screen didn't turn him on as much as watching a woman get excited.

The woman was fondling her breasts through the incredibly thin top she was wearing. He watched her flesh fill and sway as she pressed against herself, watched her rub her nipples through the shirt, and then the shirt came off as Charles grew more and more excited, trying to make it last. She was working her way downward, caressing her bare belly and sliding her hand down her pants, first behind her, grabbing her undulating bottom,

Naked Truths

then in front. The camera moved in and she slid down the wall, opening her legs, the camera moving in closer and closer so he could see perfectly.

Shouting.

Voices.

Shouting. Movement. Pounding. Someone was pounding on the door. He struggled to get himself back inside his pants, not understanding. What was going on? He got himself inside and zipped his pants, and then, as if that simple act afforded him some kind of safety, his mind cleared enough to hear a voice shouting for him to open up and get out—now!

He fumbled at the latch, still afraid, not knowing what he'd find on the other side, wondering what kind of crazed pervert was demanding he get out, but knowing the flimsy door would never stop anyone and knowing the anger he heard in the voice wasn't anything he'd ever heard before. Something else was going on, something he couldn't imagine.

Finally, he got the latch undone and was slowly opening the door when it was jolted out of his hands and he saw the policeman, arm locked, holding the door wide open, eyes fixed on his, and behind him, all around, more police, other customers pushed up against walls, and the end of his life as he knew it.

It was as bad as it gets. Police everywhere. The salesclerk had handcuffs on and was standing stone-faced beside a rack of dildos. Charles and a few others were cuffed, taken outside, separated, and questioned. Charles felt like he was on display, every question an accusation. Even giving his name, he felt like the officer was examining his words for lies and deceptions. What were you doing here? How often do you come here? What do you buy? Ever see anything unusual? Ever offered anything unusual? Charles struggled with answers. What was going on?

Naked Truths

After a few minutes another officer took over and asked all the same questions. Charles asked what was happening and got only another question in return. It went on for half an hour. Cars slowed down as they passed. Drivers gaped. Charles stood on the gravel, sun in his eyes, staring down at his shoes. Dusty. Need to be cleaned. Yes, officer, I've come here for years. No, I never bought anything; I only used the viewing booths. It's hard to remember titles. No, nothing like that.

As it turned out, the police had been working on this raid for months. It was a major bust. The porn shop didn't sell just the usual stuff; if you knew the right people, knew the right questions to ask, they had a special stash in the back, a whole other room Charles had never imagined. They were specialists in child pornography.

There were racks of magazines imported from overseas. Videos. Books. All of it. They did a sizeable web business, too. They had a sham site in Thailand, but the actual business was conducted from this building. A sweaty pedophile in the Rockies could find the site and have his movie in minutes—in regular or high definition format.

The police had been thorough. They had already made a number of buys over the net and in person. They were sure. They'd been watching the place by camera for months, had records of who came and went, checked out every license plate number, every employee's identity. They had the goods on these guys, and, to make sure they got as many fish on their line as possible, they sent officers to the homes of every customer found on the premises. A neutral expression and a simple request to enter the home was often enough for a woman like Ellen to allow them to search. In her case, they found nothing—but they left behind knowledge.

Her husband had been found at an adult book store. He was being questioned. Child pornography was involved. She was stunned into silence and doubt.

Charles, though, had no idea what was happening to Ellen. He also had no inkling of the child pornography. He was so

Naked Truths

dazed by the questioning and his fear that he didn't notice a reporter from the local paper had arrived and recognized him.

Eventually, the questions stopped and Charles was released. He made his way to his car, struggled to fit his key into the ignition, and sat silently, drained. Where should he go? To the office? Home? What do you do when you've been exposed to the world?

He drove home to a wife who was waiting for him with the memory seared in her brain of walking into her bedroom and finding a police officer kneeling by the bedside table with her vibrator in his hand. The redness of her eyes told Charles she knew. The conversation wasn't easy.

A few hours later, the newspaper arrived, and the kids were home, and Charles was lost.

Chapter 1

THE SUN was already over the broad expanse of the service building when Charles arrived for work. It was May, and every morning the birds were singing even before he woke up. Charles couldn't stand it. Back when he had a good life he was too busy to notice such things. Now, when life was empty, he had nothing to do but notice. Instead of mornings filled with the noise and confusion of a busy household, he faced a bowl of instant oatmeal, instant coffee, and emptiness.

So here, in his new life, he noticed where the sun was rising. He marked its progress against the landscape. Noted who was walking a dog, who was jogging. He noticed traffic patterns, progress on construction sites, daily specials on diner windows, and changes in billboards. He drove past the sign proclaiming "Free Oil and Lube for 24 Months!" and pulled into his usual spot behind the main building.

Charles had been selling cars for almost two years. It wasn't a bad job. At least he worked for a friend who ran his business on a reputable basis. He didn't care much about cars, but that didn't matter. Selling was pretty much selling, and as long as he could be honest about it, he didn't mind.

He said hello to Tricia on the way in. She looked droopy today, her clothing running in the drab range of her outfits. But, she did smile and say, "Good morning, Charles," as he passed her desk. Bill was facing away in the showroom, examining some detail on one of the new brochures, so Charles took the opportunity to walk silently by and pass unnoticed into his own sparse cubicle.

Naked Truths

Taking off his shades, Charles settled into his swivel chair and looked over the day's calendar. New car delivery in the afternoon. Couple coming in to look at a minivan later. Finally, that hasty note at the bottom, the woman from the school picking up a donated car. Harry had buzzed him about that right before closing the day before. He was donating a used car to a raffle for a private elementary school. The woman was supposed to come for it Wednesday, but had called to change the time and Harry couldn't make it. He told Charles the car was prepped and Tricia had all the paperwork. All Charles had to do was show it to her, have her sign the papers and be gracious. Nuisance job; he wasn't even sure when she was coming over, morning was all Harry had said. Nice. Well, mornings were usually slow.

He was busy preparing a set of brochures about minivans when the woman arrived. Charles noticed her striding through the door and scanning the room, clearly not pausing at the various cars on display. She stopped suddenly, and began to repeat her scan when their eyes met, and he put his paper down. She focused on him openly and seemed to gather herself for their encounter. He could see her squaring her weight on the balls of her feet, and he thought for a moment she was preparing for a fight. But she was still smiling, and he noticed the dimple in her right cheek. She had warm brown eyes and full lips. Her hair was mid-length, swept back from her face casually, waving around to the back. She was slim and neat, her outfit a touch on the casual side of business casual, but somehow still very tidy, very much in control. This is the woman from the school, he instantly knew.

She started walking toward him. Although slightly too deliberate, her movements suggested a gracefulness of her body, that she was very comfortable with how it worked and how she moved; her legs flowed easily from step to step, and her hips swayed smoothly. He stood up to approach her, and as she neared, he could see more into her eyes and caught a playful

Naked Truths

glint. She was exactly the type of woman he would have been attracted to before.

Before.

Before what? Before everything. Before he lost it all. Before he crawled in a corner to protect himself and gave up on life. Before everything had been swept away in a tornado whose eye was squarely on him.

She was exactly the kind of woman he would have been attracted to in the old days, but now, attraction held in it some kind of negative charge. He felt tension. It was a familiar feeling. It happened whenever he was near an attractive woman and even when he saw one on TV. He had been so devastated by the whole incident back home that he literally couldn't even look at an image of an attractive woman without going on the defensive.

He'd learned to cope, though. Tensing up whenever a female customer walked in was no way to make a living. He had to be warm and friendly. Fortunately, the last thing he wanted to do these days was cross any personal barriers; he didn't want to get close to anyone or flirt with anyone. All he wanted to do was make his sale and retreat back to his cubicle where he was safe and all he had to worry about was the local news, the new traction system on a crossover SUV, and paperwork.

He met her on the sales floor. "Janelle O'Brien?"

"Yes, thank you; I wasn't sure where to go."

"Harry told me you'd be here this morning. You were the first person to come in, actually, and you weren't looking at the cars, so I figured it must be you."

She seemed to relax.

"We're so grateful for this donation. I was surprised when Mr. Fleming said he could help us out, and to be given such a fabulous car . . . I couldn't believe it. We were expecting some old clunker at best, something people would buy chances on for

their high school kid, not something a real person would want.” She halted, seeming embarrassed about the “real person” comment.

“To tell the truth, I was surprised myself. We got that one on a trade last week, and I thought we'd turn it over in a heartbeat. It's a hot-looking car. I had a few people in mind myself, but Harry said he was donating it and we had to leave it alone. I was a little ticked; I thought I'd lost a sale. But, that's Harry; he's always been unpredictable, and in his way, he's a decent guy. He must believe in what you do.”

He gestured toward the hallway that led past the office area to the service lot and started leading her out. He had only taken a step before he realized he was going overboard. He didn't need to demonstrate that much warmth and interest in her before moving in to make the sale. There was no sale to make. But despite the tenseness that still charged his muscles, he liked talking to her. He liked watching the dance of her features as she spoke.

He held the door open for her, and she nodded a thank you; he watched her as she walked through.

“Here it is,” he said, gesturing toward a gleaming torch red convertible.

“I still can't believe it he's donating this. It's so wild!”

“See what I mean? I thought it was gonna be an easy sale.”

“I'm blown away. Tell Mr. Fleming how thrilled we are. I'm going to call him later, but tell him anyway when you see him. We should sell a million tickets on this!” She ran her hand over a fender and peered inside at the leather upholstery.

“I'm glad you like it.” He looked at her, feeling the ease with which he met her eyes, and he was startled. He hadn't been looking anyone in the eye lately, unless he forced himself as part of his friendly salesman act. But he enjoyed looking at her, seeing her energy, enjoying the fluid movement of her lips as she spoke. He wished there was more to do, some details to iron out. Some way to spend more time with her.

Naked Truths

“Well, I guess all we need to do is go in and sign the papers. Are you taking it with you?”

“Yes, I can’t wait to try it out; it’ll be a letdown to go back to my old beater after I drive this to school!”

He wondered what she drove, and felt it should be a sleek, powerful and agile beauty, something exotic. He didn't think anything they had on their lot would suit her. Something fun and earthy, but elegant. Several classic European sports cars ran through his mind.

They walked back in the building, and sure enough, Tricia had all the paperwork ready. For once, Charles was irritated by her efficiency. Rustling through files searching for the forms would have given them more time, but it was all over in a few minutes. Janelle took her file of papers and tucked it under her arm.

“Well, Mr. Stanton, thanks again. I love the car, and thank Mr. Fleming again for me, too. We couldn't be happier.”

She flashed one more smile, one last glistening of her teeth and appearance of her dimple, and she walked away.

This time he wasn't watching her body move or noticing her features. He was taking in all of her at once, seeing her presence, feeling the energy she radiated, and lingering on the feeling of life that filled him while she was near. He watched the bounce of her hair as she went out the door and walked out of sight. She was still present in his mind. He didn't want to let go.

His cubicle awaited him. He had coffee. He had the paper. He had his day to get through. He sighed and walked toward it.

An hour later, Charles heard Harry bustle through the back door and sweep by Tricia's area, calling out a boisterous “Good morning, doll,” and telling her how great she looked. Then he went into his office and slammed the door. Nothing subtle about Harry; he was always the center of a whirlwind of activity, and if nothing was going on, he'd stir something up.

Naked Truths

Harry could be overbearing, but Charles couldn't complain. He'd known Harry for almost 25 years, since they roomed on the same floor in college. Harry had given him a job when no one else would. He couldn't forget that.

Days were pretty easy now, anyway. Customers rarely crowded the showroom, so he could take his time with them, and the paperwork involved in selling cars was nothing compared to the details of real estate. Of course, some customers were never satisfied, some deals don't go through; some people were plain obnoxious—but at least it was all easy. Easy was about all he could handle these days.

Back home he had enjoyed his job and his kids, but all that had blown apart.

At soccer practice, a few days after the police raid, no one talked to him. No one. He did his thing, dealt with all the equipment, made the Gatorade, did his cheering act, and it was as if he wasn't even there. The worst part was when Mrs. Leary pulled her kids in close when he walked onto the field. She actually reached out both arms and pulled them a few inches closer, as if he was going to charge the stands, grab her kids, throw them to the ground in front of everybody and rape them. It was a long practice. So was the next one. Then, about an hour after that next one, the coach, Benny called.

“Charlie, glad I caught you. Hey, I gotta talk to you about one thing. It's a little weird, but it's the way it is. Some of the parents, you know, they're . . . Listen, guy, I know you didn't do anything, right? I know that was all a big mistake. But, some of the parents don't want their kids riding to the game with you tomorrow. Weston's mom said she could drive her van, so we got that covered. You can meet us. I don't think this'll last long, but it's the way it is. You know?”

He knew. And over the coming weeks he came to know only too well. Suddenly, he wasn't welcome at school functions. Laura wasn't asking if he'd come to her hockey games. He wasn't even welcome at the supermarket or the mall. He'd see people notice him, cringe, and turn to their friends to talk.

Naked Truths

People even pointed him out. He didn't go out much after that. When he tried to talk to Ellen, all he got were the right words, the supportive words, but no heart, no sympathy, no understanding of what he was going through. After the first few days, there had been a cold emptiness between them.

When Edwin let him go at the office, it all came apart. Ellen said that was the last straw. She felt betrayed by his use of pornography and didn't see much point in trying to patch up a marriage she felt was based on a lie. She never said so, but he always got the feeling that she didn't quite believe he was innocent. So, she bailed. No, she stayed. She kicked him out instead. He spent a few nights at a motel, exploring daytime TV and depression, then realized he needed to get into action.

His only piece of luck was that Harry was delighted to hear he wanted to come work at the dealership. Harry listened to the whole story on the phone and let Charles talk uninterrupted. When it was over, his answer was simple.

“Charlie, boy, you got handed a pile of shit on a stick. Believe me, I know how hard people can be. It happens around here all the time. One slipup, one rumor, and you get crap for years about it. Just when you think it's blown over, someone says something and you're right back in the shitpile. Don't worry. No one here knows a thing; I hadn't heard a word till you told me. Get your ass down here and let's get to work. I lost a guy a couple weeks ago and I haven't replaced him yet. Didn't have anyone come in I thought could pull his weight. You, I expect you'll pull your weight and pull along the other guys, too. Get your ass down here.”

And that was that. Charles talked to the kids, told Ellen, gathered up his clothes and a few books and things, and he was on his way to Hartleton. Telling the kids wasn't fun. They were upset. The worst thing, though, was that among all the other reactions, he saw relief. This had been tough on them. They hated having suspicions about their dad. They hated hearing what other people said. They were glad it was over.

It was Tuesday, so after work he had his meeting.

When the marriage counselor had first suggested a Sex Addicts Anonymous meeting, Charles almost thought it was a joke. It was hard to tell, with his low-key manner and voice. But Jim reached over to his desk, picked up a little card, and handed it to Charles. There it was: location and time. Sex Addicts Anonymous. How can you be addicted to sex? Everyone had sex, you were supposed to, for god sake. Hadn't Jim said a dozen times that a lack of interest in it was a sign that something was wrong?

But Jim was insistent. He said if Charles was serious about trying to save his marriage, he needed to confront this issue, and SAA was about the best way to do it. There wasn't a meeting in their town, but there was one about a half hour away. Wasn't his marriage worth half an hour drive once a week?

He started going to meetings. He owed it to Ellen, he thought.

The meeting in Hartleton was held in an uncomfortable church basement. It was about half-way over, and Charles was barely listening. The front of the folding metal chair seat was digging into his thighs, and he was on edge. The room was warm and the air stale. Jimmy was going on and on with a dull story. The coffee was lukewarm. His feet hurt. His gut felt wrong.

Jimmy wound up.

“Thanks for listening, guys.”

“Thanks for sharing,” they all echoed.

“Hi, my name is Charles, and I'm a pornography addict,” he found himself saying.

“Hi, Charles.”

Naked Truths

“I'm not sure what I wanted to say. I didn't even plan to say anything. Nothing's really going on, days are pretty much okay. I go to work every day, I take care of what comes in the door.

“But something bothered me today, and I didn't even know it bothered me till I got here. It happened when a woman came in this morning to pick up a car.

“The moment she came in the door I noticed her. Man, she was pretty. I kept checking her out the whole time we were talking; I watched her face move, and her eyes. When we went out to look at the car, I held the door open and watched her walk away from me. Nice.

“Best part of my day.

“The problem was, I liked her. I liked talking to her. And the whole time, I kept getting distracted by what she looked like. It's not even that I was getting turned on. It's . . . it's like I was running over some kind of checklist, like we do with the new cars when they come off the truck. Checking out her face, her hair, her chest, her hips, her legs. Everything. The works. I had to check everything out and make sure she measured up. And I didn't like that I was doing that. But there it was.”

“Thanks for sharing,” everyone chimed in.

“I get what you're saying,” Gary said. “I have that trouble with my ex.” And he went into some story about his latest confrontation with her about their kids. That's often the way it was. Everyone told their own stories, and half the time it didn't even seem like they had heard what you said. Sometimes they did have good ideas and could help you understand your situation, but other times, it was just people taking turns venting. He was tired of it. If he had anything else to do, he probably wouldn't come any more.

But it helped to tell his story. Telling the story was the only way he could discover what it was that had eaten at him all day. He wanted to talk to her. He wanted to see her again. He liked her, and somehow the fact that she was good-looking got in the way of liking her.

Naked Truths

He sat for a while, thinking about comparing women with the checklist in his head. How he made sure he knew what every woman around him looked like and how she stacked up. It wasn't something he thought about doing, but he always did it. Every time a woman walked in the showroom. Every woman he saw on the street, on TV, in ads. At conferences he'd check them all out on entering the room and make sure he would be near, or next to, the most attractive women. He never came on to them, but he always made sure he knew who the best prospects were and positioned himself to take advantage of their presence. It was like a game; he won by being near them, talking to them, having them like him. Where did this need come from? Why did he need to “command” every attractive woman around him?

And then he knew.

It was the porn. He'd always pick the most attractive women. It was always like that. Way back in the garage.

Way back.

Fifth grade. That's when it all started. He started being interested in girls. He started noticing who was pretty. He started getting hard-ons. It was a whole new world. Suddenly, the romantic parts of movies made sense. Talk with his best buddy Jerry was more about who was hot than it was about cars or science fiction movies. His days were filled with looking at girls and talking about girls.

They'd find magazines and paw through them in the garage for hours, commenting on the shape of a breast or its size, and how it would feel. They had their favorite magazines, the ones with the prettiest girls and the best photographers. They avoided the trashy ones, where the girls weren't as pretty or as alluring. The sleazy ones. And the ones that wasted too many pages on articles.

Naked Truths

So that was the beginning. Charles kept adding to the collection hidden in his closet. He'd pull it out every day and spend hours looking at all of it. So many women! So many. Hundreds of them. He developed favorites, developed his "tastes," such as they were, and in all the hours he spent looking through those magazines, pulling out his favorite shots so he could fit more into his precious secret storage spaces, he was comparing them, judging them, always deciding who was the prettiest, the sexiest. This one had an alluring look, this one's breasts were too small, this one had short legs, this one had great cheekbones, this one had nice nipples.

He even spent time looking at them with their clothes on. Sometimes there were "real life" shots of the models, and he'd look at those photos so he could learn how to translate what he saw on the street into what the women would look like naked. He didn't spend as much time on that, of course; the naked shots were what he wanted, and he always wanted more. But when he was out, he was looking at all the women. He was imagining what they would look like, based on his studies. He noticed the hints of breast exposed by blouses and then imagined the whole breast. He watched legs. He became a connoisseur of women. He had an opinion on all of them. He and Jerry talked a lot about who was prettiest in each class, which teachers were hot, which women on the street were sexy. They were the experts. And, of course, they were also the keeper of the standards; they had them all at home in their stashes.

He'd imagine personalities for them based on the way they looked in the photos. He'd imagine encounters with them. And, of course, they'd always be wildly attracted to him. All he had to do was look a certain way, make a sly comment or two, and they'd be in his arms, and they'd be having sex. Of course, he still didn't know what sex was, really, but they'd be doing it in his dreams. And when they did, they were all so appreciative, because he was such a good lover. That was always part of it—he always saw himself as satisfying them beyond all expectations. It

Naked Truths

was important that they liked him and appreciated him. That was his own little bit of compensation, because, of course in real life, women didn't have much interest in him at all. He didn't have the chiseled face or strong muscles women would want. He knew somehow he'd have to attract women by satisfying them.

They had to like him. He got them to like him by being good to them. Back in school it was being friendly and helpful. Now, in the adult world, it was being a nice guy, a good guy. Someone they could talk to and feel safe with. That's who he was. Mr. Nice Guy. The one women would talk to and like.

And in return, he got to check them out and rate them, like they did the photos in the magazines.

That's why he was here. That's why it bothered him to talk to Janelle. He was making her one of those magazine photos. He was making her porn and he didn't even realize it.

Nice guy.

The meeting was breaking up. Everyone emptied and threw away their cups; a few were talking over in the corner. Charles was cleaning out the coffee maker and putting it away.

Edward came over. He was another older guy, about Charles' age. He didn't say much in meetings either, but he showed up pretty regularly. He tended to wear jeans with a dress shirt and loafers. Too proper for this crowd, but it was who he was. It went with his Rolex.

"Charles," he started. "I heard what you said before."

"Yeah, well, it didn't make a lot of sense," Charles said. He was gathering up the creamer and sugar packets to put in the box with the coffee maker. Somehow he was always cleaning up at the end of meetings.

"It made sense. It always makes sense. You just don't always see it at the time," Edward said.

Charles looked at him.

Naked Truths

“You have to let it go,” Edward said.

“Let what go?”

“All that judgment stuff. All that looking through the keyhole. That's what you're doing, you know. You're sneaking peeks at them out in public and putting them in your collection. It's the same thing as looking at them in magazines or online.”

“Yeah, that's it. I got that tonight. I'm checking them out. I never thought about it before.”

“You have to let it go. Stop doing it. That's all. You'll be happier for it. You'll get along with them better, too,” Edward said.

Then he walked away.

Charles finished packing up the coffee supplies and put them in the cabinet where they belonged. Edward had already left. Charles was alone. Four other guys were still talking, but Charles was alone. He closed the cabinet door and walked out. It was a clear night. Stars were visible overhead away from the street lights. The air was cool and crisp. When he got to his car, he kept walking. He needed that crispness, that clearness. He walked on, aching for it.

The next day, Charles worked on not judging women. Even driving to work gave him lots of practice. He saw women in other cars and was amazed, now that he was paying attention, at how quickly and dispassionately he sorted them into categories: too old, too heavy, too plain, nice cheekbones, nice smile, sour look, nice skin. The list was endless, and it all happened so quickly. It seemed like hardly a second passed between first sighting a woman and having her categorized. Once she was in her file, Charles lost interest in looking at her. It became clear to him that he really didn't have any interest in the women at all, but only in judging and categorizing them.

So he practiced not doing it. At first, all he could manage to do was to not look. He kept his eyes riveted on the road ahead

of him, noticing nothing but traffic, lights, and signs. That took too much energy, though. It was amazing how hard it was to do nothing but drive.

So, he tried something else.

He tried looking at them, but not judging. The first try was a dismal failure. He saw a very attractive, slender woman driving a German sports car. That was too loaded a sight. His mind went right away to fantasies of what else that car suggested to him, and he had her clearly labeled as attractive, adventurous, sexy, and desirable. So, he deliberately slowed down, forcing a couple of people to pass him.

The next experiment went better. This was also an attractive woman, but she was driving a mid-size sedan, was dressed for the office, and was intently focusing on her driving. He was able to watch her in his mirror for quite a while. At first, the tendency was simply to categorize again, but he kept looking. Who was she? He noticed she was wearing fairly heavy makeup, clearly more than she needed. Was she insecure about her looks? Did she work in a place where the women were very competitive? Was it simply a matter of style for her? After a block or so, her expression didn't seem so intent as it did deliberately focused, as if she were nervous about driving. Maybe she's nervous about something else, he wondered. From time to time she took sips from a stainless steel travel mug, and even her sips seemed very controlled. Control freak, he thought. No, it wasn't control. She was being careful, like she was afraid of spilling on her clothes, or maybe she was careful about everything. Maybe she had to be. Maybe she was trying to work her way up at work and had to watch her step. She seemed subtly filled with tension. Yes, that was it, tension. It was controlled, it was tension she was used to, but it was real. She turned off onto another boulevard, and Charles was left alone with his thoughts.

In his real estate days, when he was driving a female client around, he made studiously sure he only looked in her face when he talked to her. He didn't want to create any impression

Naked Truths

that he was checking out her legs or body. He was distinctly professional. He had to be, if he wanted to be successful. As soon as that thought crossed his mind, he realized how deceptive he had been. He had learned that in the course of spending time with a woman, eventually he would always see how she looked, so he didn't need to go out of his way. He didn't have to crane his neck or look down at her body. He hadn't been professional, he hadn't been courteous. He'd been sneaky.

That thought brought him up short. Edward was right. He had to let all that go and see the people he was with instead of simply playing his games with them. He wondered how long he had been playing that game and how he had managed to get that good at it.

Charles arrived at the office and got out of his car more slowly than usual. It seemed like he was seeing the details of the building and all the cars lined up more clearly, as if he hadn't really seen them before. The bricks stood out as being more clearly textured, a deeper shade of red. He noticed the curve of car hoods. The sparseness of the gravel in the employee parking area behind the building, the scuffs on the door, the faded chrome of the handle.

When he went inside, he saw Tricia working at her desk. She always arrived early so she could start the coffee and check the calendar to see who needed to be reminded of what. Suddenly, Charles realized how conscientious she was. She was one of the givens of the dealership. She was always pleasant, always said hello, always did what was asked without complaint. Charles had quickly learned to assume that she would do her job well. He rarely spent much time with her or said much to her outside of what was required by the job. Part of that was his own funk, he knew. But part of it was that she was so ordinary looking. He hadn't noticed before, because in his way of dealing with women, being ordinary-looking got her placed in a huge file that didn't deserve any more consideration.

Naked Truths

She didn't look up from her desk right away, which was unusual. Most days, she greeted him with a quick hello and a smile. She had a sweater pulled over her shoulders, and she seemed hunched over.

"Good morning, Tricia," he said to her.

She looked up, and he could see the usual sparkle in her eyes was missing. He realized it had been missing for a while.

"Hi, Charles," she said.

"Have a good ride in? It was sure a nice morning today, wasn't it?" he asked.

She looked right at him, and he could see she was only half-forming a smile.

"It was pretty nice. I saw a goldfinch in my yard when I was going out to the car."

He didn't have much idea what a goldfinch was, other than a bird, but he figured it was important to her.

"Great."

He couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Anything happening today?" he asked.

"Not much. Delivery of new cars. Harry is gonna be out for the morning. Not much."

"Okay," he said, and moved on toward his cubicle.

"Hey, Tricia," he called back. "Thanks for making the coffee."

It was the only complimentary thing he could think of to say. But, at least he was being nice to her and seeing her. It was a change, and it felt good.

"Sure thing," she said as he reached his area. He noticed more energy in her voice than when she'd first said hello.

Imagine that, he thought.

Chapter 2

SATURDAYS COULD be difficult for Charles. The best Saturdays were when he worked. Work filled the day with familiar events and filled his mind with simple ideas. The Saturday shift was a prime one, however, and there was a rotation among the sales staff. Most were conflicted about Saturdays; they liked time off with their families but also liked the opportunity for fat commissions. Charles had no conflicts. He liked working Saturday; it was safe. Saturdays off were the problem.

Saturdays home had to be filled. He went to do laundry. He did his grocery shopping. He tackled what few projects or repairs cropped up at the apartment. He went to movies alone. He read. He rented movies. He did whatever he could manage to fill the day, and he waited for it to be Sunday.

Sunday was easier. On Sunday he drove three hours each way to see his kids. They spent the afternoon going to the movies; going out to eat, going to parks to play soccer together, going to fairs, whatever they found to do that would allow them to be together comfortably. Awkwardness still hung over everything they did, but they were getting good at dealing with it.

This Saturday morning, while the wash was sudsing away in two machines, he was reading the paper. Looking for something to do. Soaking up time while water soaked away dirt.

Today was the fair at Janelle's school where they were kicking off the raffle campaign on the convertible. It looked like an all afternoon affair with lots of activities for kids: face

Naked Truths

painting, games, a magician, music, food. A typical fundraising event, the kind he'd been to a hundred times. Very family-oriented. Not for him. He passed over it.

Not much going on at the movies. Mostly action-adventure stuff. He'd lost interest in all that. The fight scenes had gotten so ridiculously exaggerated and the action sequences so impossible that he couldn't get involved. He didn't get involved in much anymore. Date movies were out. Kid movies were out.

High school musical. Classic car show. That had some possibilities. Church bazaars. Neighborhood yard sales. Usual Saturday stuff. The one washer buzzed, and he went over to unload the wash and start the drying process. While he was unloading, the other machine finished, so he was able to get both loads in the dryers at once. Small victory.

Several hours later, having done his shopping, put away the groceries and the laundry, and polished his shoes, he was on his way to the movies. There wasn't much playing that appealed to him, but it was the best option he'd come up with. Traffic was light. He wasn't observing people today; he didn't feel up to it. At least, though, he wasn't checking out women as he drove by them. He mostly minded his own business and devoted what attention he could muster to a small clicking sound in the car he hadn't noticed before.

He was driving a different route than he ordinarily would have taken. Exploring. No, soaking up time. Not much happening here. Neat houses. Neat yards. Kids riding bikes. A skater from time to time. Nice trees, lots of shade. Then he came across a crowd. Lots of activity, signs, balloons. A banner across the street. It was the school fair, the one that was raffling off the car. Looked like a good turnout, lots of kids running around, laughing. Some light music made its way into the car. He slowed down to watch. A clown was making balloon animals for kids swarming around him. A pair of kids in huge padded Sumo wrestling outfits were bobbing into each other, trying to knock each other down, their arms useless in the bulbous suits. Two kids wearing brightly colored helmets

struggled partway up a portable climbing wall. Things had sure changed since the penny-pitching games he was used to as a kid.

Without even thinking about it, when he came to an empty space a half block away, he pulled in, locked the car, and made his way back to the crowd. Kids were everywhere. Half of them had their faces painted as kittens, clowns, devils, the works. Music filled the air; kids were laughing and talking. Parents seemed to be having a good time, too. Most were holding hands of little ones, talking to friends, or getting in on the games themselves. Family clusters lingered at a petting zoo, and a pony was carrying a pirate-hatted girl around a small ring. Some things hadn't changed.

At one end of the field, he saw a large sign advertising the car raffle propped up on the convertible, which had been smartly polished and decorated with bows and ribbons. Nice car, he thought again. He was really surprised Harry had donated such a sweet ride. Several people were filling out slips at the table next to it.

He kept walking around, watching kids playing, hearing voices calling out and laughing. He missed taking his kids to carnivals. They used to have fun. He decided to buy a hot dog and got on line. When he made it to the front, he was surprised to see Janelle busily trying to serve customers while loading up the grill and keeping the hot dogs from burning.

"I didn't expect to see you slinging hash," he said, when she looked at him for his order.

"Pardon?"

"I'm Charles, from Fleming Auto World, remember? I helped you when you came to pick up the car?"

She seemed flustered for a moment, then she recognized him and smiled.

"It sure seems to be a hit. Can I help you?" She was too busy for small talk. She was clearly frazzled, her hair falling into her eyes, her shirt stained and clinging to spots of perspiration.

"Looks like I should help you."

Naked Truths

“Yeah, there aren’t enough volunteers to go around. I’ve been working just about every stand all day.”

“Really? You should be organizing, not serving up hot dogs.”

“No choice; Louise had to get home to take care of her kids when her husband left for work. That’s how it goes.”

“Well, I don’t have to rush off. Need another volunteer?”

“Really? We can use all the help we can get.”

“I see that. I put in a lot of hours behind a grill when I was in college. Want me to take over here? Doesn’t look like anything I can’t handle.”

“That’s great. I can’t tell you how great. Here, come around, I’ll show you where everything is. It’s pretty basic. Hot dogs, buns, cash. We do have someone running around to replenish supplies for you. If you get low on anything, look for a blonde woman in a red shirt like this. I can’t thank you enough.”

He took up his position behind the counter. The setup was all too familiar to him from his days at a department store restaurant. Keeping hot dogs on the grill circulating was nothing compared to serving up a full menu. He took the tongs from her, noted the condition of the dogs on the grill, added a dozen more, and turned to face his first customer.

“What would you like, pal?” he asked a boy sporting a bright yellow t-shirt.

Charles was back in business. He was a cook, he was busy, and Saturday was filled.

The afternoon moved along nicely. It took him a while to get in the swing of cooking, serving and making change, but not too long. All afternoon he served up hot dogs to a wide range of kids and parents, most of them grinning and laughing. Kids had their faces painted in all manner of animals and characters, many had balloons, some were muddy from playing kickball, and all were having fun.

Naked Truths

Sweat poured off his face. He felt pretty damp and wondered how he looked. All around him, most people were in the same boat, but the atmosphere remained upbeat. Once in a while he found himself checking out a woman, but he reminded himself to look more deeply, and almost instantly he would see the mother in her as she looked after her kids, the wife in her as she talked to her husband, the volunteer helping out a school, the friend out for a light afternoon with a buddy. The transformation was remarkable, and Charles wondered that he'd never noticed all these details before. It was like obsessing on women's appearances kept him from seeing them at all.

The kids were the best, though. They entertained Charles all afternoon. How could they be so full of energy? He could see the climbing wall from his booth, and he never got over the looks of determination, fear and triumph he saw on kids in helmets scaling their miniature Mount Everest. One little girl's face went from freckly paleness to an intense red as she made her way up the wall. He could see her trembling the whole way up, and he wondered what inner demons she fought to make her twenty foot climb. She threw one arm high in the air when she reached the top and shouted something Charles couldn't hear. An answering cheer arose from a group of kids and parents at the base of the wall.

From time to time Janelle came by to check on him, face flushed with energy and anxiety, and he kept assuring her he was doing fine. The runners kept him supplied with hot dogs, buns and condiments, and he made his corner of the carnival a successful, smoothly running enterprise.

"You back again?" he asked one kid in line for his third hot dog of the afternoon.

"Yeah man, this rocks!" the boy said, and as soon as Charles handed him his dog, he was slathering it with relish and mustard and jamming it in his mouth, turning to rejoin the activity around him.

Moms and dads seemed relieved when he chatted with their kids, giving them a brief reprieve. Many of them looked more

relieved to get some food in their systems. The kids were running the adults into the ground, as usual. But the atmosphere was good, people were enjoying themselves, and all the stands were bustling.

Gradually, things wound down. The crowd thinned, the line disappeared, many booths and activities started shutting down. The climbing wall was closed and the attendants started stowing gear. Charles allowed his supply of dogs on the grill to dwindle, and he started organizing to shut down as well.

Janelle came by and gave him the go ahead to close.

“You know how to clean that thing up?” she asked, motioning to the grill.

“No problem.”

She told him where to go in the school to find the kitchen and some buckets. She thanked him again for filling in. In a moment, she was gone, off to take care of yet another detail. She and the other red-shirted volunteers looked beat. He scraped off the grill and poured on some water to work out the grease. It bubbled up satisfyingly, and he went into his old routine of cleaning. He looked around and saw other people struggling with rakes and trash bags, policing the area until it looked good as new. Aside from trampled grass, you couldn't tell the field had been full of people an hour before. About a dozen volunteers remained, and as Charles dragged the grill inside, he was beginning to feel like there was nothing else for him to do. He had nowhere to go, nowhere but home and the TV. Charles was washing his hands when he heard a large group goodbye, and he turned around to see Janelle standing before him, a few hairs straying from beneath her baseball cap, still looking flushed.

“I can't thank you enough,” she said. “We were hurting for manpower, and you were a godsend. I was so glad I didn't have to worry about your end of the world; every time I looked over, things were obviously going well. Thanks a million.”

“Not a problem,” he said. “I've worked enough of these things to know you never have enough people. I didn't have

much else to do today, so this was actually a blessing. I liked hanging around with all the kids and seeing them have fun. You put on a great event here.”

“It *was* great,” she admitted. “The kids were happy. Parents were happy. I noticed a lot of people here that weren’t even from the school, so we may have landed some new students, too. The car raffle got off to a fabulous start. We’ll be selling tickets till the end of the month, and I think we’ll make a lot of money on it.”

“You did fine,” he said. “I can tell this thing was well organized and the people involved believed in what they’re doing. The atmosphere was exciting; everyone was having fun, even the people working. Even you.”

She looked startled.

“You know, I did have fun,” she said. “I didn’t take the time to enjoy it, but I did. Everyone was working hard. Everyone was feeling good, and that made me feel good. I didn’t have a spare moment to breathe—but I was having fun. Thank you for making me notice.”

He laughed.

“Did you even take a moment to eat?” he asked.

“Eat? No, come to think of it. I made sure everyone else had whatever they needed, but I don’t think I stopped moving until right now. I’m starving!” It was her time to laugh.

“Well, how would you feel about a pizza and a couple gallons of something cold to drink?” The invitation was out of his mouth before he even realized it.

“Now? I’m a mess, look at me!”

“No worse than I am. Well, maybe worse. At least I didn’t have to run around all afternoon. I had a nice cushy job in one spot. But, who cares, I’m not talking about the country club; let’s just get a pizza, put our feet up and relax.”

She looked thoughtful for a moment.

“You’re on,” she said. “Do you know Mannie’s, up the road here about half a dozen blocks?”

He didn’t.

Naked Truths

“You can’t miss it. It’s on the right, big yellow sign. They have outdoor seating and the best pizza in town.”

“I’ll find it,” he said. “Thanks. This was fun. I liked filling in, and, well, thanks.” He halted a moment and looked around. “I’ll see you there in a few minutes.”

Janelle noticed his uncertainty. What’s up with that? Probably tired. It’s hot. He was working hard. Seems like a nice guy, though. Has to be to put in a Saturday afternoon working for no reason. She noticed his ambling gait as he walked away, and wondered.

The wondering didn’t stop with him.

She got into her car and shut the door. She took a moment to settle into the well-worn seat.

She hadn’t dated anyone in, how long? Four years. Not that she had ever dated much. Not that this was a date. Was this a date? It seemed natural to say yes; she was starving, she owed him a favor, and he had offered. She’d agreed without thinking. She didn’t even know this guy. She didn’t know what to say to him. So far, all they’d ever talked about was the car and the fair. Very simple, obvious business stuff. Safe stuff. Stuff she could be on top of, stuff she knew about.

Well, it was only pizza. One hour. What would it hurt to spend an hour with him? The worst that could happen was that she’d be bored. But at least she’d be eating. A beer would be nice, too.

So would some company.

She was approaching Mannie’s. Traffic was pretty light for a Saturday evening. Saturday evening. Date night. What was she doing? She flashed back to the few attempts at dating she’d made after the divorce. She always managed a good dinner. She could listen with interest, laugh in all the right places, ask good questions. She gave great dinner.

Naked Truths

The problems came later. Sooner or later, the tone would shift from getting to know one another and having a good time. At some point, the guy would want to close the distance between them. It might be some gentle touches at the dinner table or at the movie. He'd lean in so their shoulders touched or he'd take her hand. One way or another, he'd move in on her space. She allowed it, but she always tensed up, like for the first cold shock of a swimming pool. Always. Some would be persistent. Some would give up. Some would simply retreat back into pleasant evening mode. But he'd always make a move, and she always resisted, and they always noticed. Sometimes it took another night or two, sometimes not. But men stopped calling her. And she'd be disappointed, but only for a few days.

So she had given up and filled her life with work, reading, painting, and nice long baths.

And here was Mannie's.

"I got such a kick watching those kids on the climbing wall. Some of them were scared to death. I saw the attendant have to go up and help a few down. Then there were the real gung-ho kids who got right up to the top and wanted more. They seemed so comfortable with themselves and what they do. Wouldn't you like to be that comfortable with yourself?"

Charles' eyes were gleaming. His interest in the kids was genuine. It seemed to be a real passion for him. You don't find many men that enjoy kids. Their own kids maybe, but most of them get impatient with other people's kids, and none of them would be entertained like that for an afternoon in the heat selling hot dogs to an endless crowd. Janelle wondered who this man was. He shone with energy and happiness whenever he talked about kids, and he didn't talk about much else. He told her about teasing them because of their face-painting or their appetites and making jokes with them. Consoling them when they dropped their hot dogs.

“I always gave them a new one when that happened, is that okay?” he asked, and she could see he sincerely hoped it was, although he would have done it even if it wasn’t. She was able to pretty much sit back and listen to him, and for once, she didn’t mind. She enjoyed the cool night air and let her muscles relax, hand nestling her beer mug on the white steel table.

“That one guy must have come back a dozen times. I don’t know where he put them all, but we got to be buddies pretty soon. He’d slap the counter and say, ‘Gimme another round, partner!’ I don’t know where he got that, but it killed me.”

So, she listened. And she wondered. And when the conversation finally died down, she took a bite of her pizza, savoring the saltiness of the cheese, and asked the question.

“So, what about you? You have any kids of your own?”

And his face fell. Not an out and out crash, no plunging onto jagged rocks at the bottom of a ravine, but it fell nonetheless. He leaned back in his chair and took a long breath. He looked beyond her at some distant point in the sky.

“I do. Two. One of each. Donnie’s in 11th grade. Laura’s in 12th. She’ll be graduating in a month or so.”

He paused. His eyes turned inward, and she knew she’d made a mistake.

“What’s going on with them,” she asked. “What’s wrong?”

“They’re fine. Nothing wrong with them, I guess. I don’t see them much these days. They live in Westbury with their mom. I usually see them on Sundays. They’re good kids. Laura’s gonna be going to the state university in Rutland next fall, going for a bachelor’s degree in psychology, then on to grad school to specialize in something or other. She loves theater, too; she’s always in the school plays and musicals, but she knows that’s a rough career choice. I expect she’ll always be doing something on stage for fun; she loves it. She’ll be Dorothy in *The Wiz* in two weeks. I can’t wait to see it.

“Donald, he’s mostly into soccer. He’s a real jock. He does all right in school, pretty well, in fact, but soccer’s what he cares about. Plays for the school in the fall, indoor in the winter,

league in the spring and summer. He's amazing. I used to help out with his team, and I couldn't believe some of the things he did. I can't handle a ball with my hands the way he does with his feet. He's a good kid."

He was finished. He picked up his pizza and studied it for a moment, then took a bite. He was chewing slowly, and she could tell he'd come to the end of the story. It was clearly his "my kids are great" story that he told whenever they came up in conversation. It gave information and told you about his kids, but it didn't answer any questions, not any real ones, like why someone who's so into kids wasn't with his own, no matter what happened to his marriage. Why he was here talking to her about someone else's kids with so much energy and joy. Why his face fell the moment his own kids were brought into the picture. He was still chewing. She looked down at his hands, and saw they were trembling. He had a certain delicacy when he held his pizza that she recognized as tentativeness, like if you challenged him for that slice he would hand it over, not because he couldn't claim it, but because he wouldn't.

"I know I should be polite here and ask you about your children," he said. "But, I won't. I'm not sure why, but I won't."

Her eyes raced to his for a moment, held them, and then set them aside.

"Thank you," she said.

That was the question she dreaded. She had heard it a hundred times, working with kids as she did. Parents always asked. Kids asked. Everyone asked. You see a healthy adult woman and you ask about kids, she figured. She had her answer, too. No, I don't have any, she'd say. Didn't work out that way. I have enough kids here to keep me busy. That usually satisfied people. She hadn't told her story in a long time. She'd managed not to think about it much for a long time. She was getting good at that.

Naked Truths

She realized she'd been off in her own world for a moment, and she looked over at him. He was watching her quietly and patiently, but he wasn't pushing her.

"Thank you," she said again, and even though she had closed a door, she felt the distance between them lessen.

The next few days dragged.

Charles couldn't keep his mind focused on work. Every time he had a woman customer, he found himself comparing her to Janelle. She wouldn't ask a dumb question like that, he'd think, or she's taller. Her smile is broader. She's more animated. Suddenly, instead of lining up every woman he met against his internal standards, they all had to measure up to Janelle. When he tried reading the paper during his down time, he'd have to read an article three or four times to remember what it was about. Talking to men was easier, but still he couldn't pay much attention to them. On the showroom floor he ran on autopilot.

At home, he found he couldn't turn on the TV. Every romantic situation reminded him of her. Even cop shows and action shows were full of love stories. In desperation, he tried focusing on nature and history programs, but found he couldn't concentrate on those very well either.

He replayed every bit of their conversation in his mind, noticing every nuance, every joke, every smile. He thought of her eyes and rediscovered their depth, their warmth, the subtle gradations of color and striations of the iris. He remembered how the laugh lines on her face formed and reformed as she spoke and how clear and fair her complexion was, hardly showing her age.

But it was her energy and her spirit that most interested him. He felt good when he was with her. He felt alive. Maybe he should call her.

For what? For a date? What was he thinking? What would his kids think? How would they react to the idea that he was dating again?

Naked Truths

Dating again? No, that was out of the question. He had happened upon the fair and helped out. Nothing was wrong with that. Afterward, two tired, hungry people shared some food and talked. That was all. It was over. He decided. It was over, no more, no more dates, no more pizza. He'd never even drive down that road again if he didn't have to. No reason to.

He sure was spending a lot of time on something that was over, though.

Janelle was flustered. Myron was insistent.

"You have to go. We have a great car here; we need to get it out in front of people so they can see it and want it. We already got our usual people to buy tickets, now we gotta get people who never heard of us. You gotta go!"

It was Thursday, and her principal was telling her she needed to take the raffle car out to the spring county fair and drive it around the race track between acts at the concert Saturday. Francine had painted beautiful huge signs to mount on the trunk, and he'd arranged to be able to show it off between the local country singer and the headline act. Thousands upon thousands of people were expected, and he hoped to sell a lot of tickets. That'd be her job, too, sitting at a booth outside the bleachers selling raffle tickets all afternoon in the hot sun.

"Myron, it's gonna be 90 degrees. There's no shade. I'll be alone all day, so I'll feel guilty if I have to close down to go to the bathroom or something. It'll be awful."

"Janelle, girl, don't be defeatist. We can work this out. I'll call around; I'll find an awning we can set up. You can bring a cooler with drinks and food. We can live with a break once in a while; don't worry. We'll sell a million tickets; we can do this."

She cringed inwardly at his use of "we" to describe her sitting alone at the fair.

"You sure no one can go? You ask Kelli?"

“Yes, and I asked Cory and Mary and every parent I’ve seen for the past few days. Everyone’s either already got family plans to be at the fair or they’re busy. Hey, maybe if someone’s gonna be at the fair anyway, they can take an hour off to relieve you.”

“You forget what having kids is like, Myron. You don’t take them to the fair and leave them. It takes two to make sure kids don’t disappear and get lost.”

“Single parents do it.”

“Not by choice, they don’t, and you’ll usually see them teamed up to improve their odds, too, if you look.”

“Well, Janelle, I know you’ll find someone. We can do this. Don’t let a little thing like this stop you. A journey of a thousand miles . . .”

“Begins with one small step. I know.”

“So you’re already one step on the way. Stick to it girl!” he turned and made his way quickly back to his office. Janelle was left standing in the hallway feeling abandoned and abused.

He was right; they would sell a lot more tickets this way, and someone should go. As fundraising chair, she was the one who was nominated, unless she could find someone else to do it. She’d endure. Too bad Charles couldn’t help out; he’d be fun. He could get pizza. She imagined him fishing around in a cooler and handing her a drink, and before she got the imaginary top open, she caught herself. What was she thinking? Why was she even thinking of asking a man she’d just met, who had no involvement with the school at all? How could she call him, anyway? It was too soon, and she shouldn’t be the one to call.

She realized she was back in dating mode. She was back to wondering if a guy was going to call her again after a date, figuring it would be at least two days because he wouldn’t want to look too anxious, but hoping he would anyway. But why was she even thinking about that? They hadn’t had a date. They’d gone out to eat after a long, tiring afternoon to unwind, chat and relax. Besides, she didn’t call guys. She simply didn’t.

Naked Truths

Janelle sighed and walked back into her classroom. The school always seemed extra empty when the kids were gone. It felt eerie, in a way, like the familiar halls were someplace else, someplace she didn't belong. She slunk into the hard wooden chair and stared at the calendar. Two days. Two days till Saturday. She'd called everyone she knew who had the slightest connection with the school and a few friends who were helpful and loyal. She was out of options. In a moment, she was rummaging through the drawer for Charles' business card. She picked up her phone and dialed.

"So, how did your first race go?" Charles grinned.

"I felt like such an idiot," she said. "The emcee told me to take two laps and drive slowly so people could get a good look at the car. You ever drive five miles an hour? With the top down, I was right out in the open! I never want to drive a convertible again!"

"Sorry, I couldn't see a thing from out here, but at least I didn't hear the crowd laughing," Charles said, "so you must have done okay."

They had taken turns wandering around the fair to get some exercise and ease their tired behinds, but most of the day they had been together chatting. Both focused mostly on kids, and kids were an endless source of amusement. They were doing fine together. Weirdest date I ever had, Janelle thought. If this is a date. She still wasn't sure. Charles had sounded glad to hear from her when she called, and he only hesitated a moment before agreeing to work the fair with her. She had worn a comfortable sun dress that was loose and airy for the heat, but still showed off her figure, which was pretty good for a woman of thirty-six, she thought. She liked the way her leather strap sandals looked against her skin, and she'd added, at the last moment, a simple turquoise beaded necklace. She looked good,

but still casual and appropriate. Charles was wearing khaki shorts and a polo shirt. Nice, she thought. Ordinary, but nice.

The day went well, and they took in almost five thousand dollars. She was very pleased with the take and kept telling Charles to thank his boss for donating such a good-looking car. When the various booths in their area started shutting down, they decided to wait another half hour before leaving. The crowds had thinned considerably once the concert started, and the guy in the booth next to them said that once it was over, people would pretty much go home. They took down their table and stashed it in the back seat.

“Want to take one more walk around?” Charles asked.

“No, I’ve been ready to go for a while,” she answered, and they climbed in the convertible. Janelle drove. She navigated confidently in the general direction of the main street through town, and once they reached it, she turned toward Hartleton.

“Long day,” she said. “How’d you hold up?”

“Not so bad,” he answered. “I thought it would drag more than it did. We had a pretty steady flow of people, and,” he paused, “I liked talking with you.”

She stared ahead at the road, her confidence shaken. Was this happening?

“Would you like to stop for a drink?” he asked.

Janelle hesitated. “I don’t drink much.”

“Coffee’s a drink,” Charles said, sounding a little uncertain himself.

“Sure,” she answered, and in a few minutes she turned into a cafe on the edge of town. They ordered a couple of decaf cappuccinos and found a pair of soft upholstered chairs in the corner.

They settled in, luxuriating in the deep padding, such a relief after a day in folding steel cafeteria chairs. The room was dimly lit, with soothing soft music in the background. It felt like relaxing in a familiar living room after a hard day.

“What are we doing?” Charles asked suddenly.

Naked Truths

“Drinking coffee?” She focused on the few swirls of dark in the foam on her cappuccino.

“Besides drinking coffee. What are we doing? Are we dating?”

She felt his eyes on her and continued examining the dark swirls. She was trying to see exactly where they ended, but couldn’t. They seemed to dissipate into the soft foam without clear boundaries.

She started to say, ‘Do you want it to be dating?’ but stopped herself. She didn’t want to be too flip. She didn’t know what she wanted herself.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “That’s not what I had in mind.”

Her answer swirled around with the foam for a moment.

“But this is nice,” she said finally. “I like spending time with you.” She paused. That much was true.

“So, if you’d like,” she said. “I guess this can be a date.” She kept staring at her swirl. It seemed safe. It seemed like a problem she could handle.

He didn’t know what to say. He watched the curves of her cheekbones.

“Well, I guess I should ask you out sometime,” he said. “I can’t expect you to keep finding jobs for me to do.”

She glanced at him and smiled.

“I guess this isn’t exactly how it usually starts,” she said. “Hey, you’re cute, wanna sell hot dogs? How about working a county fair for eight hours?”

“I could find some excuses of my own,” he said. “Wanna come wash cars for a day?”

They laughed, and each felt a layer of tension release, and they resettled themselves in their chairs.

“I’m rusty at this,” he said. “I haven’t dated in a long time.”

“Me either,” she said. “I used to, but it wasn’t going so well, so I sort of gave up on it.”

“How about if we do this real slowly, then? Let’s not rush anything.”

Naked Truths

“Slow is good,” she said. “I like slow. And gentle. Don’t push me.”

“I won’t. Let me know if I do.”

“All right.”

Charles was softened by the look of vulnerability in her eyes. She was staring down at her coffee cup again, cradling it in both hands as if it were a crystal ball. He wished he had a way to tell the future—or even the present.

“How about this,” she finally said. “How about if we figure it out together. What I mean is, let’s not play the game. I’m sick of the rules, I’m sick of the whole thing. Let’s do what we decide to do, and if it seems wrong to either of us, if we don’t feel comfortable with something, we’ll say so and drop back and figure out where to go.”

The rush of words surprised him.

“All right,” he said. “That sounds good to me. I don’t even know what the rules are these days, anyhow. If I tried to follow them, I’d be following twenty-year-old rules that probably don’t mean a thing anymore. You’re on.”

“Good,” she said, and she faced him squarely. He looked open, and sincere. Can I really trust him? Can I really believe him? She saw the same kinds of questions playing in his eyes, and she felt the muscles in her neck relax.

“So,” he said, “to start things off . . . Janelle?”

“Yes?”

“Would you like to go out with me tomorrow night?”

She giggled.

“Charles, I thought you’d never ask. Certainly.”

“A nice, traditional date? Dinner and a movie?”

“Sounds delightfully traditional.”

He hesitated.

“This is where I’m supposed to be suave and thrill you by mentioning a lovely place to go, but the truth is, I have no idea where to go. I don’t know the night spots in this town at all.”

“Well, leave that to me. Pick me up at seven?”

“Seven it is.”

Naked Truths

The ride back to his place took only a few minutes. She pulled up in front, parked easily, and turned to him.

“Thank you again for helping me out today, Charles.”

“My pleasure. I can honestly say I haven’t had a better day in ages.”

He saw she’d half turned toward him and was looking at him with a mixture of expectancy and hesitation. Easy, he thought. Slow is good.

“Thank you, Janelle, for asking me, and for being so easy and fun to be with.”

She smiled. He unfastened his seat belt and turned toward her.

“Since this isn’t our first real date, let’s skip this moment of uncertainty. I’ll just say goodnight, and we can look forward to tomorrow.”

She nodded, and he saw her relax. He’d made a good call.

“Thank you, Janelle. Good night.”

“Good night, Charles.”

He got out of the car and shut the door slowly, but firmly. As her tail lights eased up the street and finally turned off, he looked up at the stars. They were there. He smiled.

The next evening, Charles picked up Janelle and she directed him to The Olive Branch, a small, cozy restaurant run by a Greek woman who plainly took great pride in her food and service. She advised them energetically on their choices, and every selection was a treat. The crust on the spanakopita was flaky and dissolved instantly, leaving a gateway for the delicately spiced filling. They had a lentil soup flavored with fresh thyme, and a lamb main course she said was marinated with rosemary. They finished up with baklava and a cup of authentic cappuccino.

The movie was good, a light romantic comedy that entertained and surprised. Halfway through, Charles reached

Naked Truths

over to take Janelle's hand, and he marveled at the touch; he had not had any kind of intimate contact with anyone in so many years.

After the movie, they stopped in a quiet café and had a glass of wine. Janelle chose a cabernet, and Charles, not having been much of a wine drinker, had one as well. He was surprised at how good it tasted, the initial tangy impact, followed by a mellowing and a slow cascade of flavors. He couldn't remember having had such a complex response to a drink before.

Their conversation flowed. They joked, they talked about the movie, they reminisced about some of the fairgoers of the day before, and at times they were content to allow a few moments of silence between them to taste the wine and look at one another. Janelle wore a simple black print dress that shimmered slightly as she moved, drawing his attention over and over again. Her hair was brought up in a casual, almost careless way that made her look even more alluring. He had chosen a striped dress shirt and solid sport coat without a tie. He hadn't been sure about that. He was pretty sure people weren't too formal these days, but he didn't want to look too casual, either. This was a special night, and he wanted it to go right. So far, it had. He was floored. He hadn't even thought about dating the whole time he was in Hartleton, and here he was with a beautiful, tantalizing woman. How could this be happening?

When they were finished, he drove her home. She lived on the northern end of town, in a small brick building designed with small lawns and staggered fronts so each unit gave an impression of being a separate house. Small maple trees lined the street. The night air was clear and cool, but not cold. He got out of the car and came around to open her door. He was pleased that she allowed him that bit of graciousness.

He walked her to her door, and she turned to face him. Her eyes were bright, and he was sure she had enjoyed herself. He felt a huge weight in his chest, but he breathed through it, then bent down to kiss her. She raised her mouth to him, and when

Naked Truths

her lips met his, his heart swelled. He held the touch of her lips for a moment, and drew back. He took her hands, squeezed them gently, said good night, and returned to his car.

The night was perfect. She was perfect. The weight in his chest was gone, and he could scarcely force his attention from the memory of her kiss to the road ahead of him.

Two weeks later, Janelle was doing battle with her dreams.

Light filled the sky; the whole world was filled with light, and she floated along aimlessly in it, as if she were a dandelion puff in the breeze. She rode undulating currents, carefree and easy. Then, darkness intruded ahead and she feared she'd be thrown into a terrible storm. She cringed and drew herself in. Soon, the darkness somehow transmuted into a cave and she was trapped within it. She was human-shaped again, trying to squeeze through narrow, twisting passages, wincing as the rock cut into her. Sharp, overhanging jagged edges forced her to squeeze and contort as she desperately tried to discover a route through the rock, and soon she became aware she was being chased by something. She was quite sure it wasn't a person, but she couldn't tell what it was. It could move easily through the cave, and her only advantage was that it didn't know exactly where she was. She tried to be evasive, changing her direction over and over. Gradually, her limbs grew sluggish and stiff. She had more and more trouble contorting to fit through the crevices, and her progress slowed. Her fear grew, and she was sure the menace would find her at any moment. She longed to give up and simply lay down to be devoured, but some spark of hope pushed her forward.

She awoke from the dream tense and frightened. It took her a few seconds to assure herself she was indeed in her bedroom

by looking around and taking inventory of familiar objects. Once she felt safe, she burrowed deeper under the covers. Her sleep had been troubled for several days, and she was getting frustrated.

Janelle knew the dream had to do with Charles, but she wasn't sure how. She was puzzled by her response to him. She definitely liked him, but his polite, almost deliberate gentleness confused her. He was clearly going out of his way to fit into her life, but he also made his opinions and preferences clear. He was always willing to help her, but usually waited to be asked, and he seemed to enjoy the fact that she would take charge of the situation from time to time. He was an old-fashioned gentleman in that he'd hold doors for her and would pour her wine first, but yet with him she felt more like she was being respected than pampered. He never pushed himself on her in any way, yet he was neither passive nor pandering.

Something else bothered her, too. Whenever she looked into his eyes, she saw nothing but enjoyment and adoration for her. But, on that first real date, when he held her car door as she got out, she noticed that he had looked away from her. She had actually had a moment's anticipation of enticing him with her legs as she pivoted out of her seat, but he wasn't even looking. Wasn't he interested? He often complimented her on her appearance, but she never caught the admiring gazes at her legs or chest she expected from men. He seemed to studiously avoid looking at her body, and she wasn't sure why. In some slight way, she was relieved; it took some pressure off her, but she was puzzled. Was he gay? She didn't think so, but she was confused. Likewise, he had never tried to do any more than kiss her goodnight. Granted, they'd only had three dates, but most men pushed harder. And, weren't people a lot more forward now? She wasn't at all ready to sleep with him; that wasn't it, she was just surprised she didn't have to fend him off. Besides, she wouldn't mind a few more and longer kisses and the occasional more intimate touch. She would turn him down if he asked to sleep with her, but it might be nice to be asked—and,

Naked Truths

somehow, she knew he would ask. He wouldn't plow in like so many other men. And, when she said no, he'd stop. She knew it.

On the whole, life was good. Janelle was having more fun than ever with her kids at school. She was winding down the last few obligations as fundraising chair and looking forward to having her time to herself again, well, to herself and Charles. Even simple phone calls and grading of homework went more quickly as she was filled with the first flush of happiness over a new honey. Her days were cheerful and bright. Her time with Charles was fascinating. Her time alone was filled with musings.

And her nights were just as full, incomprehensibly, with fear.

If you loved this sample, you can buy the entire book at VerdantMountainPress.com, Amazon, or at your favorite bookstore!

About the Author



Alex Gruenberg is a man of many interests and capabilities. He can sail a tall ship, build a guitar, roof a house, refurbish a horse trailer, work wood, and draft a legal argument. After teaching high school English for 35 years, he began a second career as a paralegal. Gruenberg crafts romantic human dramas with themes of emotional transcendence and healing. He is currently working on his second novel, *Caught in a Storm* which combines women's issues and sailing reproductions of historic ships. He lives with his wife in Strasburg, PA.

