



Second-Floor Girls

Kadrey, Richard

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About Kadrey:

Richard Kadrey is a novelist, freelance writer, and photographer based in San Francisco.

Kadrey's first novel, *Metrophage*, was published in hardcover in 1988 by Victor Gollancz Ltd., and went on to various other American and foreign printings in paperback. Mac Tonnies' *Cyberpunk/Postmodern Book Reviews* calls *Metrophage* "one of the quintessential 1980s cyberpunk novels," going on to describe "a gritty acid-trip through an ultraviolent L.A. where nothing is what it seems... . Alongside novels such as [William Gibson's] *Neuromancer* and Lewis Shiner's debut novel *Frontera*, *Metrophage* helped establish the cyberpunk aesthetic: relentless, paranoid and playfully cynical."

Kadrey's second novel, *Kamikaze L'Amour*, is described by the same source as "mesmerizing... a surreal (and distinctly Ballardian) account of synesthesia and mutant desire set in the jungle-choked ruins of L.A."

Kadrey's short story *Carbon Copy: Meet the First Human Clone* was filmed as *After Amy*.

The publisher website, Amazon booksellers, and other sources list a July 15, 2007 publication date for Kadrey's next book, *Butcher Bird: A Novel Of The Dominion* (Night Shade Books). Other works include collaborative graphic novels and over 50 published short stories.

His non-fiction books as a writer and/or editor include *The Catalog of Tomorrow* (Que/TechTV Publishing, 2002), *From Myst to Riven* (Hyperion, 1997), *The Covert Culture Sourcebook* and its sequel (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1993 and 1994); Kadrey also hosted a live interview show on Hotwired in the 1990s called *Covert Culture*. He was an editor at print magazines *Shift* and *Future Sex*, and at online magazines *Signum* and *Stim*. He has published articles about art, culture and technology in publications including *Wired*, *Omni*, *Mondo 2000*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *SF Weekly*, *Ear*, *Artforum*, *ArtByte*, *Bookforum*, *World Art*, *Whole Earth Review*, *Reflex*, *Science Fiction Eye*, and *Interzone*.

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Brought in by their families, the country girls were usually modified at puberty. Coming in on their own, the city girls were usually modified later. Each girl was permitted to store her excised flesh and organs in canopic jars, in liquid nitrogen, 300 degrees below zero.

The girls were each given a crystal card on which her jar's ID number was holographically inscribed. Losing or breaking a card was a major tragedy. A retiring girl couldn't retrieve her former flesh without the crystal card. "No tickee, no laundry," the older girls were fond of saying.

Sonja was the first girl to get the chromatophore treatments. She was transformed into a living mood ring. Thought and emotion registered in her skin as anything from a simple color change to a complex cascade of neon brilliance. With a little practice, she could make her skin undulate with light and color, a living aurora borealis. The effect was particularly effective around the six vaginas that ringed the lower part of her head, where her mouth and ears should be.

Some of the older second-floor girls were jealous. Everyone knew that Sonja was pretty, but not exactly bright. They kept their revenges to petty theft and, occasionally, to seducing an unpopular girl's clients away from her. They knew that if they did any real damage to another girl, say the reviled Ptitsa (Cossacks were invariably thieves and smelled bad; everyone knew that, even in Vegas), the repairs would be deducted from their account. Even a minor scuffle could add years to a girl's servitude.

And they weren't just saving money to bankroll their freedom and retirement: on top of that, they needed enough to get their original bodies out of cold storage. The older girls remembered poor Shekhar, a sweet child modified with multiple anuses and prehensile tongues that hung from a dozen quivering, toothless mouths. Shekhar had returned to her native Bangalore without the restoration surgery. One of her male cousins, Ranjit, had raped her, doused her with gasoline and set her ablaze, declaring that her returning home in her unnatural condition bought shame to the family. Convicted of murdering Shekhar, Ranjit had served less than a month in prison.

As much as the girls were jealous of Sonja's new skin, their deepest jealousy was reserved for the girls on the third floor. Those were the truly modified girls. Far from the simple good-time fuck dolls, as the second-floor girls saw themselves, the girls upstairs were an entirely alien species. Crossed with a fortune in state-of-the-art nanotech and genetically altered animal organs, the third-floor girls could reproduce. They

squeezed out perfect autonomous sex organisms — living masses of genitalia and sense organs that ran around on their own and could be kept as pets by the wealthy patrons of the house. Among themselves, the second floor girls referred to the third floor girls as "penny slots." Their offspring, no matter what their appearance, were always "squids."

One night, the police came to the house, and not for the usual fuck-party pay-off. The girls were locked in their dormitories, even the pampered third-floor freaks. Not that locks ever kept the girls in their room. Dora Lee, who specialized in bondage and discipline, bristled with silver needles, like a porcupine. She could also deliver a stiff electric shock through her lamprey-like mouth. Fastening her soft undersea maw onto the door handle, the cheap Vietnamese electromagnetic lock shorted-out when she jammed her stiff needles into the mechanism and gave them a jolt. The conjoined twins, Kumi and Laura, were still ambulatory enough to sneak out and listen to the commotion downstairs.

When the girls came back, they were pale and shaken. The row of penises along Kumi's spine stood straight up, like raised fur on a scared cat.

Johnny Crenshaw, their pimp and the owner of their brothel, had been murdered, Kumi said. To make matters worse, it looked like a couple of the house girls had done it. About then, some of the second-floor girls noticed that Sonja and Ptitsa weren't there.

Kumi went on to explain that whoever killed Johnny had chopped up the body. The hands and eyes had been taken and kept warm long enough to use as ID for online money transfers from the house's accounts to a bank in maybe Luxembourg or Egypt. The transfers had drained the house's accounts almost to zero.

Dumb little Sonja and stinking Ptitsa.

The two girls' canopic jars were also missing. That was the part that hurt the second-floor girls the most. With the house's money, the run-aways could buy their way into a Mexican black clinic and get a nice fix-up job. In a week, they could be walking the streets of New York or Sao Paulo, just a couple of cute tourist girls. A couple of tourist girls with enough cash to buy an aircraft carrier.

The dormitory went quiet. The cops left without questioning the girls.

The girls knew that, in their modified state, the cops couldn't bring themselves to deal with them as truly human. It was the small bit of power they still held dear. Men could fuck them, but not ask for their help. In the quiet, the girls envied Sonja and Ptitsa. At that moment, all

the resentment they'd ever felt for the pair transformed into a kind of savage love. They'd done something each of the others had dreamed of.

Of course, the second-floor girls also knew they had been doomed. With the house's accounts zeroed out, their accounts were gone, too. They'd each have to start over, earning back their flesh and their freedom. It was an acceptable loss, though. Picturing Johnny, reeking of sweat and Old Spice, scattered in pieces across his gold-leaf-and-glass office, made even servitude bearable.

The downstairs matrons turned off the dormitory lights around 3 AM. They handed out sedatives and reminded the girls of the aerospace convention coming into town tomorrow. One by one, the second-floor girls closed their eyes — the ones who still had eyes — and fell into a dark and dreamless sleep.

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