



By Syd McGinley

Yesterday started so well, but somehow we rubbed each other wrong. Matthew was going to spend the night with me: it shouldn't be such a big deal, but his reciprocal holdout (I can't help seeing it that way) is rarely to let me sleep beside him. Whatever we do in the

evening, I still go home most nights. He won't say so out loud, but sleeping beside him has to be earned. Besides, I do need my morning routine: my workout, my long shower, my commute to the print shop. They all matter in keeping me safe. But some nights, that ride feels so long and cold.

Once in a while I can talk him into letting his crew open the Saturday shift alone, and he'll come into town after Friday closing. We'll see a movie together and get Indian food. He's not a yokel; he just loves his Garden Center. When he gets here, before he'll do anything to me, he'll spend an hour fussing over my plants: trimming, watering, putting in little fertilizer spikes, dusting...

"Plants get rained on," said Matt the first time, and gave me a mister next time I visited him. I do know basic plant care, but it hadn't occurred to me plants need cleaning. He'd frowned at me. "God Nick, how can they breathe? No wonder that philodendron was so lifeless." He stared just long enough; I was busted with my trick. My other plants are doing much better than that sacrificial lamb. The number of plants in my flat still looks excessive to a fresh eye, but there are only thirty left now. I've managed to move twenty to "my" office in Matt's cottage since I first asked him to rescue the philodendron.

My place is neat and clean, but plants grow in dirt for heaven's sake--why should I have thought to dust them? He'll stretch the cleaning to tease me. I've tried impatience. Once I accused him of tormenting me. He just gave a mild smile, and said, "Nick, they're your plants; of course I care about them. Why don't you use that fancy froth machine of yours and make your guest a coffee?"

The first time I stuck out my tongue, but now I always make him cappuccino, and mutter to myself that it's my own fault for having so many houseplants and a gardener for a boyfriend. I've teased him about being a self-sufficiency nut. He just looked at me and smiled. "Sure I eat from the garden--I'm too busy to shop, Nick. Besides, you do that now."

"You need a goat. Oh, and bees. Then you'd be all set..."

He shook his head. "Ah Nick, you're so naïve. You'd be ordering pizza in a week, and getting mad when they won't deliver so far out."

I shrugged. That was unfair--I never order pizza--and, if he's trying to get me to move in, counter-productive. I saw him in my peripheral vision sneaking up, and I made a mock escape attempt.

"Gotcha," said Matthew. "Nick: goats are a pain in the ass. Dad had one. I hate goat milk."

I wriggled a little in his embrace, but he hates fuss, so I winked and said, "I was thinking of what to do with the milk and honey."

Next time I came down, I brought my microwave strapped to the back of my Lambretta. It was a scary ride: it threw me more off balance than I expected. I ignored his raised eyebrows, and said, “zapped pizza is fine with me.” It wasn’t that daring: the spare room office was already “Nick’s office” and full of my plants. It had started with me bringing the neglected philodendron down. Matthew had agreed it could live on the office windowsill while he pampered it. When I’d brought down another plant, he asked, “Did you think it was lonely, Nick?”

“It looks silly being the only plant in your place.”

“And you have them to spare,” he said as dry as the tortured earth in the first plant.

Now we play a game: I sneak a plant into his place, and we pretend it’s been there all along. Maybe blatantly bringing the microwave was a mild risk after all. He rarely lets me stay, but he’ll sometimes stay overnight at my place. The next time, Matthew stretched in bed, and said, “You only use that frou-frou coffee machine on weekends? Bring it down, it’ll be a nice Sunday treat...”

I remember putting my hands on my hips and glaring. “Frou-frou?”

“Nick: Sunday breakfast at my place.”

“Oh,” I said. “That would be nice.” I didn’t dare wonder aloud what I’d done to deserve that concession, but thought perhaps he did understand I wasn’t being a tease.

He seemed to like the direction change in plant traffic even if he didn’t acknowledge it. I may not have bought a new one since my mimosa, but Matt has given me a few to vary my “boring” choices. Some color at least, Matthew had said when he gave me a nice safe, but purple, coleus. The first few times he came to town, he brought me a new houseplant, but stopped after awhile, and brought produce and eggs instead. At first I thought it was his prejudice against non-productive plants, but then I realized: he wants the plants traveling in the other direction. He’s wooing me with his bounty.

Yesterday, as he tended to my mimosa, he said, “It’s spring, Nick. We’ve been seeing each other a year. Don’t you think you’ve stayed buried long enough? Come on back to life with me, please?”

It’s as close as he’s come to an ultimatum. I’m not sure if he’s implying a threat, but I infer one. He did almost dump me once. In one of his rare flashes of anger he’d shouted, “Are you testing me? Waiting to see if I deserve you?”

“No,” I whispered. He had to come closer to hear me, and, as I’d hoped, his anger faded as he saw my genuine contrition. “No, Matt, nothing could be further from the truth. I need to be worthy.”

He sighed. His anger's a summer shower hitting hot greenhouse glass. "Nick, you are. When you're ready babe...but I need more...I want you more...I don't mean like blue balls...you do me great...but I want you more...I want to be in the depths of you...make you mine..." He ran his hand through his hair--it was untied for a change--and pulled me closer. His arms always feel safe even when he's been angry. He was still hard even though I'd pushed him away and made him yell.

"Nick, when you're ready. I'll stop asking, but bring the lube when you're ready."

"Thanks. Matt? No need to stop trying to seduce me though." I'd read his mood shift right. He took it as a come on, not as a tease; we did more than kiss and make up.

Yesterday, he wasn't so easy to distract. He kept clear of me so he was literally not pressuring me, but I couldn't wriggle just right to sidetrack him.

"Nick? Please? Come back to life?"

I looked at my hands and regretted taking the coffeemaker to his place. I'd no excuse to hide in the kitchen. I heard the spritz of the mister, but I knew I wasn't off the hook. I looked up: he was disentangling a tumble of tradescantia. They did well with my care, but they were lush under his hands. I stepped closer; I wanted to answer him. The ruthlessness with which he pinched out a coleus top gave me pause, but he gave a tense on-then-off smile so I sidled closer.

"I want to..."

"What does it take? Nick, please, is Ian so important?"

"Ian?"

"Yes, him. The big love of your life. Why I'm second best."

"Ian?" I repeated weakly. "He's been gone for years. We send Christmas cards, but no, it's not him."

My hands were shaking. Matthew caught and held them.

"Nick, what then? What makes you cry like that? If it's not missing Ian, then what?"

I was insulted Matthew thought I'd be such a big baby about missing an old lover, but my friends thought I over-reacted to Paul. It's always stopped me telling Matt before: what if he thinks I'm obsessing and acting like a girl?

I'm not at all girly, and anyone will tell you I'm a tough little fuck. I'm 5' 4", sure, but I'm all muscle and sinew--and I do not have a Napoleon complex. I am the boss of the office at work, and when bills need collecting, it's me who goes round. But, I guess this

is classic, too, at home, I want to submit. Not big time, not slave stuff, just to be the one not in charge, and in bed nothing's better than surrender. Paul's taken that: I can't surrender to Matt as I want to, as he wants me to...

Neither Matt nor I talk much about deep stuff, but I'd thought he knew what had happened to me. At least, in the abstract. Oh God, he's spent all this time thinking I saw him as a substitute for Ian, and my ass was the last thing reserved for the memory of a rival. I had to say more now I knew what he'd assumed.

"Matt, no, not Ian. He's a nice guy, but we weren't right. We ended up just room-mates...I...uh...I..." My hands were still trembling within Matthew's large tanned ones. All the things my friends said, I'd imagined the police would say, and Paul did say were back pushing at me, ringing in my ears in Matt's voice: *How can it be rape? You must have led him on...why did you let him come home with you? Men don't get raped...why didn't you fight...*

I did not lead Paul on, sure, I let him come home with me, but I changed my mind. I've had faceless sex, rough sex, played bondage games, so when Paul came on to me in the bar, I thought I was ready. Seeing him in the full light alone with me, I got scared. He *meant* his black hanky. Being wrestled into a submission hold and forced to tap out is not the same as consent. I'd gasped that out to him and he'd laughed at me. "Consent isn't an issue--your ass is mine if you've let me come up here."

God, I was in too deep with that guy. He didn't see it as rape, but without prior knowledge of his rules that was not fair. As I said, I like to surrender, but I'm not into all that other stuff. My friends all shrugged. Just more sex to them. They don't get it: I said no, and meant it. I can't talk to them anymore. There wasn't a mark on me. He used a condom--as much for him as me. He didn't even hurt me: no bruises, nothing torn, nothing to show. I've been used more roughly, hurt more, and liked it. With my consent. There'd be more violation and humiliation in reporting it. I didn't know his name, real name that was, he'd said "Paul" when I asked. He even patted me on the ass before he left. We'd joked about the size difference on the way to my place: of course, all my dates are bigger than me; of course, all mine are smaller. It seemed funny. There's nothing to the fact that Matt is ten inches taller than me.

Matt is different. I do want to yield to him. He's been patient: months of wooing and hot sex, but he wants all of me. I do want to be his. If this is the price...price? Is that the word? This what Paul took: he made fucking into a price, something to be borne. Matthew has to trust me. Does it sound like a test? I don't mean it that way. I don't want to analyze, talk, and heal. I just want someone who loves me to be there. But it's taking so long to be brave enough. The sex is more than ok, but he wants more, he wants to fulfill himself and me. I couldn't say any of this last night.

"Matthew, I want to be yours. I just can't explain what happened. Someone did hurt me. But it's not Ian. It's not a good memory. Please, be patient."

He let go of my hands, and turned back to the mimosa. He stroked a leaf, and we watched it fold up. After a moment, Matt said, "It's called vegetable animation. I get phototropic, and I get the flytraps, but I don't get this retreat from touch."

I looked at him to see if he was getting all analogous, but he was straight-faced. We stayed quiet, but amiable, through the evening, but he decided to go home for the night instead of staying as he'd planned. I must have looked scared because he said, "Nick, it's all right. Come by tomorrow, and we'll have our first outside picnic of the year."

I rolled my eyes. He loves eating outside. We've even eaten sandwiches and drunk thermos tea as we paced out the proposed beds in the newly-funded expansion as first snow swirled down, and, as a second best, we've had winter picnics in his orangery.

"It's Easter! Come on Nick. I want to celebrate getting through the Easter rush with no disasters."

Shit, he must be exhausted. He'd still driven into town after the Easter Saturday dementia to be with me, and I gave him more hassle.

"OK, it is meant to be a beautiful day tomorrow."

"It will be. Come here, give me a proper goodnight kiss."

He's a hot kisser, and without intent I was grinding against his crotch. His mouth was right by my ear when he whispered, "My vegetable love should grow / Vaster than empires, and more slow..."

I raised my eyebrows and said, "Highfalutin!"

"Nah, I'm not getting all lit'ry. It's all I remember from my English O level. I liked that vegetable bit..." He grinned at me. "The phallic bit. Night, Nick. Tomorrow!"

He was off down the stairs before I could reply. He is patient, his love is all encompassing, his vegetable gardens are taking over the neighboring property, but I remember the whole poem. I'd sniggered in school, too, but the first lines stuck with me. We don't have world and time enough.

I think about his vegetable love while I go back to the mimosa. It curls and shivers.

I woke up this morning, still tired, scared, lonely, and tongued-tied. I may not be able to say what I need to say to Matthew, but I know what I want and need. I need someone who loves me enough to hold me while I cry as I'm fucked. I need to move through it. Sex with strangers won't erase it. I need someone who matters, who won't be insulted, who's brave enough to fuck me. I'd spent a celibate year in my new flat before I met Matt. I moved after Paul violated my old place. My flat is plain white with big deep-silled windows and abundant light: perfect for plants. Nothing unusual: ivies, spider plants,

tumbles of tradescantia--I hate cut flowers. I was ready to settle down even before it happened. I wouldn't let him win, I wouldn't hide, but I couldn't cruise anymore, or even hook up. I don't know how to date, and I was scared to go looking. I didn't think Paul'd come back. He'd been interested in just a one-nighter, and he didn't think he'd done wrong, but it was no longer my home. I left my bed behind. The old place was a rental, but I bought this new one. I'd been saving for years. I'm not tight, but I am good with my money. I don't spend much after my gym membership, a few drinks, and maintaining my Lambretta--and I do that myself. Meeting the mortgage payments this last year has been no problem. I don't go out clubbing anymore, and this place has a ground floor gym for tenants. I was hurt enough by my friends' reactions to not give out my new address. I figured anyone who cared would drop by work or call me there. I guess I must have scared them, or been too much trouble, because no one's been by. I didn't think I was testing them until they failed.

The strongest support I've had has been from the printers out back at work. Not a direct word from them, but a few nods, and no lack of offers to "come down the pub for a quick one." I'm sort of out to them: no one asks about women, but they include me in the after work drink. It's not an issue. They know it's me who gets the work in, and gets the payroll sorted, but it's more than knowing which side their bread is buttered. It's touching seeing the protection come from these guys. One of them always watches me out of the alley on my scooter. Bless their subtlety: there's always a bin being emptied, or a check of the loading dock, or some chore when I go. I was off work for a week, and I was subdued when I came back. They assume I was queer bashed, and I let them think that. I won't hurt their straight ears with details. They're good boys, but I know where the line is. Someone called me a fairy in the pub once when I was bringing back my round to the table. Part of my boxing training was to control my temper--dad signed me up--but to be honest if my hands weren't full of beers I'd paid for, I might have taken a swing at him. All the printers and loading dock guys stood up as one man and glared at the asshole.

"You need sorting?" said Jimbo. "No? Then fuck off."

I was so proud. Of course, I just sat down and passed the drinks. Saying thanks would have been too much.

They give Gerry, the graphic designer, a hard time. He's straight and they know it, but he plays classical music in his office, washes his hands after he's touched the main phone, makes a face when he goes into the print-shop floor, and, worst of all, he has a degree. They flap their wrists and mince after him. I never say anything. He's okay to talk to sometimes, and he's a kickass layout guy, but he acts like his shit doesn't stink. He throws art names around, says he's really an artist, this is just the day job. No wonder they think he's an ass.

So I was safe at work, but Gerry's not a friend, I know not to push it with the guys, and my old friends were gone. There wasn't much to do except stay home, use the apartment building gym, and fuss with my plants. I've never been a gardener--well, never had a garden--and as I said, I hate cut flowers, but it seemed right to fill my new space with

something green, alive, growing. My Saturday morning ritual was to buy a new plant--so I had more than fifty by the time I met Matt. His eyes widened when he saw them, but I fell a little more for him when he didn't laugh nor point out that, except for the mimosa enthroned with my boxing trophies, everything was a boring, dangling mass. It was an important ritual--it made me go out and do more than the basic shopping I needed to survive. I'd worked my way through the area garden centers--I tried to find a new one every month or so to add to my circuit. Getting a plant at the supermarket was cheating and florists have always made me feel weird, so I had to go to garden centers. Going outside was a discipline. Oh, I'd go to work, meet my obligations, I'm not a recluse and I'm not scared of outside, but, unless I had to do something, I'd stay home. I made going out just for me into the true obligation. I needed living things around me, the building has a no dogs rule, I don't like cats or birds, and fish are boring, so plants were it.

His nursery was further out of town than I'd been before. It was the first day of spring and I felt like taking my Lambretta out of town. In town for winter is okay; I can bundle up to go back and forth to work, but the other, longer plant trips had all been by bus and walking.

I fell for him when I saw him alone in the greenhouse. I'd picked up a likely plant and wandered out of the customer area through the back of the sheds--there were no signs or locks--and I'd kept on to the non-retail area. He was kneeling to transfer a flat of perennials into their own pots. His left hand cradled the roots as his right fingers separated them out, eased through the knots, and patted down the fresh earth in the new pot. I've seen landscapers treat plants like furniture, plonk them down, slam them in place--no, you'd treat furniture better.

I was aware I was a trespasser behind the scenes even as I studied him, and I was hot with instant embarrassment when he caught me treating him like eye candy. He looked up, winked at me and said, "I don't kneel off-duty."

Although I blushed, for some reason--his smile, his calmness, his easy assumption I'd get the joke, the hope inherent in spring--I flirted.

"Would you loan the kneepads after hours?"

He laughed, and stood up. "Matthew," he said. "The 'and son' of Preston and Son. It's just me these days." He frowned at my pedestrian choice of plant. I'd found something healthy and prolific-looking. Another spider plant. The trip to get it was half the point. He toured me around the houseplant greenhouse and chose me a plant. The back of his finger brushed the fronds. It shivered and folded up.

I squinted at the tag. "*Mimosa pudica*? A sensitive plant. Me?"

"Yes," he said. He brushed his knuckle across my cheekbone and then tapped it twice. "You."

“I don’t know how to look after an exotic. Let alone one that will ‘develop pink puffball flowers’.” I think I scowled.

He grinned. “I make house calls.” He pulled a china pencil from behind his ear and used the wax to write a number on the plant’s plastic tag. “Call me if it needs an expert touch.” He brushed my arm with the back of his fingers. My hairs bristled and I swear I swooned. I could smell the peat from his fingers all the way home. His knuckles...his fingers...his forearms...his dirty hands...my bones melt just remembering...and I bite my lip. What if I’m losing him? I’ve spent a rotten, guilt-ridden, tormented night. He might have been back in a good mood when he left, but I knew the debate would continue--on his turf this time. Maybe that’s what prompted me to call this morning even before my coffee. I’ve never been so scared to place a call. When Matt first gave me his number and smiled, I knew I’d call, but it was hard, so hard. I’d felt like a fifteen-year-old girl in an American sitcom, picking up the phone and dropping it back, starting to dial and stopping. At least I didn’t hang up on him, not like this morning’s hideous argument when I’d dropped the phone at the first ring, and he’d called back knowing it was me on the line. It was our first real argument. Others have been sidestepped and I suppose all those careful tactful silences on his part and evasions on mine were enough to let him think I’d been cherishing Ian and for me to think he understood I’d been raped. His suppressed anger from last autumn makes sense now.

Matt and I were picking first crop blackberries in his tangled patch. My arms were scratched, and Matt could tell I was grumpy. The heat and outdoors rubbed me wrong. So far the summer had consisted of me swearing as I got sticky and tired, but Matt remained convinced I’d be a nature-lover one day. I loved helping Matthew out in the business on Saturdays, but my frustration level is tied to the thermometer.

“Come in the shade for a bit.” He beckoned me under his tree. “Look.” He poked his toe at the pine mulch by the roots.

“Wild mushrooms. Are they poisonous?”

“Nah, they’re great. Very tender. Beautiful raw.”

“I never had mushrooms at home. Mum thought they were all poison.”

“But you eat them now, right?”

I grimaced. “My first meal alone I ordered mushrooms with the fry up at the motor way caff where the lorry driver let me off.”

Matt had knelt down to pick some. He gave my calf a sympathetic rub. He knows my family disowned me when I came out. Hitchhiking off was more of a pushaway than a runaway.

He pulled out his pocketknife, expertly lifted a mushroom from the ground, its white raw stump startled against the still leafy mulch, and stood back up. He peeled it, and said “Trust me...”

I couldn’t tell if it were a command, question, challenge, or instruction. I was nervous: I’d only seen mushrooms in neat Styrofoam boxes with labels, not growing randomly in dirt. I’d paused too long, and he asked, “Would I offer you anything bad for you, Nick?”

Matt teased my lips with a wafer of mushroom. Pinned by his gaze, I whispered, “No,” and let him slide it between my lips onto my tongue. I told myself: he’s an expert gardener, it’s clean, it was under the skin, it didn’t touch the dirt. It rested there a moment before I chewed once and swallowed fast.

“You look like it’s the first time someone came in your mouth.” He scrunched up his face into suppressed spit-eeew. He had me on my knees and had unzipped himself before I stopped giggling. He leaned against the tree trunk while I worked.

I liked the cool under the tree. Outside is not as horrible as I thought, and nature, well, I still prefer it in pots and in greenhouses, but being on my knees under that green canopy had its own Sunday feel. I groped for a word even as Matt’s thigh muscles tensed, and although I remembered it, I fumbled my explanation to him. I tried to say how out of myself and how receptive to him I felt, but all the words were silly, and he was grinning again. I felt weak, blasphemous, but I persevered. “Like transubstantiation. You become part of me. Your come in my mouth changes to my body.”

He’s not very poetical--when he quoted Marvell last night I was surprised--but he does like analogies: he’s always using plants and earth to show me stuff. “It’s protein,” said Matt stopping my explanation with a hair ruffle as he helped me off my knees. “Of course it becomes part of your muscles, right here.” He kissed my triceps. “Mmm...good horseshoe.”

I knew that’s all I’d get--he’s stubborn about my pleasures--and I wasn’t in the mood to be teased, so I said, “We need more berries. I want to show you summer pudding.”

Matthew leered, but went back to the bushes. He sent me to the mess of raspberry canes and redcurrant bushes, and tackled the higher blackberries for me. He keeps the walkway to his place unkempt as his privacy barrier--You’d not know a cottage was there. It’s at the end of the growing area, down a uneven-flagged path through a tunnel of rhododendrons even I duck to pass through, around an overgrown shrubbery.--well, that dignifies it. It’s a tangle of brambles and elder trees with one tall pine. I feel as if I should leave a trail of breadcrumbs. He does have a tidy square of lawn, and a neat gravel path passing his chicken run to his door. His personal vegetable garden is out back. I laughed the first time I visited: his house is covered in ivy, but not a plant inside.

This started as a good memory, but the summer pudding incident was one of our first awkward days. In retrospect, it carries a load of anger. Having a recipe to show Matt was

a source of pride. I'm not much of a cook. I buy my food as close to finished as I can without being a junk food freak. Getting used to food straight from the ground and worse, Matthew eating it with a quick rinse from the hose or shirt polish, was almost traumatic. I was sure he'd get sick. He doesn't spend much on food, but he's not organic or veggie, although he seemed so at first. He's not cheap either, he just doesn't shop much. He lives on his own fresh food in the summer, and he has eggs from his chickens. I saw him casually kill a bird last week for Sunday dinner. (This is the more recent past.) Eating that raw mushroom suddenly seemed less adventurous. Since he rarely shops, I bring deli treats: olives, taramasalata, and feta. He asked if I'm Greek.

"With these blue eyes? No, Irish if I'm anything. I just theme shop." I paused then said. "We have each other's eyes." He has sun-blond hair in a long braid, and brown eyes; I have almost black hair in a crew-cut and blue eyes. There's almost a foot between us in height. He has natural muscles from work; mine are gym muscles. When I'd commented my abs were better defined, he picked me up and put me over his shoulder. There was little I could do to stop him.

He likes to eat good, simple food, especially outside, and in winter we picnic on the cottage floor. It should be gloomy with the ivy, eaves, and pine tree, but in summer it's shady with green-filtered light, and in winter he builds fires and the dark feels cozy. We eat gazpacho in summer and chicken soup in winter with fresh bread from the machine his mum gave him. She looks nice in her photo. She lives abroad with his step-dad. Matthew's thirty-five, and he's had long-term relationships before, but he's never introduced anyone to his mum. He prefers to stay hassle free and keep his lovers and family separate. I'm used to no parents, but I'm jealous he still has a family who talk to him. Matt saw my expression and said, "Nick, they say they're 'fine' about me being gay, but they also 'don't want their faces rubbed in it.' They do try. They've agreed to meet a partner if I don't bother them with boyfriends." He stared at me for a moment, and then we talked about whether the fire needed attention.

So it was odd that city boy me knew about summer pudding and he didn't. Ian had taught me. He was posh. He wasn't a cook either, but this was his favorite summer treat. His nanny used to make it for him. I noticed a flicker on Matthew's face when I said "Ian," but he knew I've had lovers and he knew I lived with Ian. He didn't say anything, but passed me the fresh bread and watched me assemble the pudding. His face was studiously neutral, but I felt as if every hand motion I made were evaluated for Ian's influence. Matthew stayed friendly, but I was tense the whole afternoon. I wasn't imagining it nor over-reacting. He ate the pudding and said it was good, but never asked for it again. I should have realized what he thought. All my tears and refusals to let him go further, well, this morning cleared that up. I do see how he must have thought I missed Ian, and it makes his patient wooing of me this past year all the more remarkable--except I thought he was being tender and loving about Paul.

I have tried to move toward him. I let him slide just a finger in, and he was taken aback at how roughly I shoved him away, but for all his firm smiles when he pushes me to my knees, he takes "no" whether said or not. The first time he was tender and said nothing,

well, he'd been unable to get a word in--I broke and cried like a baby and that's not a metaphor--I bawled and sobbed with big hiccups and red-faced whoops. The second time I freaked, he asked as he held me, "Should I know something?"

And I'd said, "Yes, no, I'm working on...give me time...I don't want to 'talk about it'...please stop asking..."

He's a good guy: he held me and let me weep. I clutched his braid like a lifeline and he rocked me to sleep. We had a semi-joking conversation the next day about topping from below. He's not a heavy top, not into much, but he is controlling in a laidback way. "No smart-mouthed subs here," he said with a wink. And so he knew as much as either of us wanted said. Or so I thought: how dumb I've been not to see he'd have thought it was all about Ian. I guess I never told him Ian and I drifted apart--no huge fights or dramas--so I speak of Ian fondly, and, no, with hindsight I haven't explained about Paul. Of course Matthew has seen it all as about Ian...shit. I always thought farce movies were stupid, "Say what you mean!" I've been known to yell at the screen (at home, I'm not a yob) so this misunderstanding is justice, I suppose. I thought I had been clear, but Matthew was insistent on the phone this morning he hadn't had enough information to conclude I'd been raped. He thought I was refusing to give my ass up to him from misguided loyalty to Ian and to test his commitment. He thinks I've been holding out waiting for a move-in offer.

And he did take it slow. He was such a gentleman, but after awhile, he started to be obsessed with my ass. We established I'm not a tease, and he worked on seducing me. I liked that and he was clear that a real "no" had no recriminations. He'd get so earthy. Last summer he had his hand plunged into the compost bin--each shed has its own small tumbler as well as the huge heap outside--and he beckoned me over. "Put your hand in, too." He saw me hesitate. "City boy, you live in the filth up there. This is clean country dirt. Good compost doesn't stink. Come here, feel the heat." He took my wrist with his free hand and guided it in until it met his other hand. Our forearms entwined at the wrist and his fingers curled between mine. God, it was hot in there, but he was right: it didn't stink like I thought it would, but smelled of forest floor. He bent to kiss me. His tongue probed and pushed and he made a slight thrusting motion with our joined hands and his free arm pulled me closer.

"You know what I want."

I couldn't do much except groan and put my head against his chest. I wanted it, too. I was afraid one more freak out would scare him off, but what would one more refusal do?

He didn't say more, but put my hand on his fly. I undid him, then myself when he told me to. We stood in the humid greenhouse, joined arms in the hot rotting compost, and jerked each other off. Our come made a dirty gooey paste when we wiped our hands together.

"Primordial soup," said Matt. He smiled, but I knew he wasn't going to forget I'd evaded what he wanted yet again.

I don't really have to do anything to my plants--Matt pampered them last night when he arrived--but I need to smell the dirt. I rub peat moss between my fingers, and whisper his name. I'm terrified. What if he turns me away when I show up, penitent, at his door? What if I never smell his country earth again and only have these plants? I'd hated digging in the dirt at first, but my fondest memories are now embedded in his territory. We'd been prepping Matt's personal beds for an autumn crop. As usual, I felt hot, sticky, and ineffectual. My back and knees hurt. I almost snapped at Matt when he came up behind me and kissed the back of my neck.

"Little grub...all city white..."

I bit back a smart-mouthed remark, and wanly said, "City muscles, too. You were right: they look gym-good, but..."

Matt rubbed my deltoids, and they yearned into his hands. "You've done a good job."

I looked up; I'd been focused on the ground under my spade for so long, I didn't realize how far I'd come.

"Stop for the day. You've been digging for hours--you must have been *in the now*."

I looked askance at him, and he gave his best lopsided grin back.

"Nick, I'm not getting all New-Agey, so wipe that sass-face. You know I've no patience with all that Zen-Gaia crap."

I snorted. Some of the garden center shop's biggest sellers are wind chimes and goddess junk. He can't stand wind chimes. Damn tinkling, he'll say, and shut the window of his store office. I like their green man wall plaques, but I didn't know him well enough then to say so. I couldn't gauge how risky an eye-roll from Matt was yet. He saw my smirk though and flicked my shoulder with his fingernail.

"Nick, digging a vegetable bed is the cheapest and best therapy in the world. At the worst, you get a dug patch of earth, and it does make you just be. Come on, there's Grölsch back in the cottage. And you can get that real dirt off you, city boy."

I look at my dirty fingers: potted plants may be contained, but it's still dirt. I wash my hands and scrub my nails. I'm full of nervous energy. There's nothing to be done to the plants or to the flat, but I can't make myself shower and leave. I compromise and head downstairs for the gym. It's often quiet on Sunday mornings--even bodybuilders go to their mums for Sunday lunch--and today's Easter, so I'm all alone. My pick of the machines doesn't compensate for the emptiness. I decide to work on my arms. Matt likes my muscles. He often asks me to help on Saturdays, hauling flats of perennials or big bags of peat around, and loading older customers' cars. He prefers muscles to work, not just be there. He teases me about gym muscles, and thinks people acquiring muscles they

don't use to work with is funny. His come from his work, but I've noticed he does have a few hand weights to supplement what his job misses, and I've seen him do endless crunches. Last time he drove me back into town, he pointed out the nearest gym. "Only ten minutes away on your Lambretta, Nick. There's a pool, too." I know he thinks that trumps my apartment's gym. I nodded, and we stopped talking. We feel too close to the edge so often these days.

I finish my reps on the triceps machine--ever since Matt complimented my horseshoes I've been vain about them--and head for the showers. I'll miss this building. As the water hits me, I realize what I've just thought. I've known for a while Matt wants me to move in; we've both avoided the conversation. He'll ask me to move in if I give my ass up, and he won't throw ultimatums at me. After this morning's fight, it doesn't seem the bomb we've both built it up to be. I laugh ruefully. I feel like a virgin, a fifties girl bride trading her body for a wedding, and if only I can find the courage to see it through, I'll earn Matt. And, in truth, I want him in me erasing Paul's touch. Sometimes, if I close my eyes, he's back. He took daydreams and fantasies from me, too, but last night in bed while I tried to figure out what to do I'd drifted into memories of why I adore Matthew so much. Trying to bolster myself, I suppose. I'm so scared of sleeping with anyone. But Matthew is a good man and a kind lover so, trusting Matt would dominate, I let myself snooze and remember...

After hours, between the long tables of tomato seedlings, or in the forcing house, on the duckboard over gravel paths, the air humid, the white noise from the big fans in summer, or the heaters in winter, and occasional hiss from the automatic water sprays turning on and off, I'd lie stretched out on the ground looking up at the cloudy plastic side panels and green-streaked glass roof. Matt's nails dark with peat and his palm creases and knuckle lines traced in a darker shade than his tan, peat dust in the gold hairs of his forearm...

"No knee pads for you today." He kneels astride my chest. "Put your hands behind your head." He slides forward so his knees snug into my armpits...he smells of sweat, basil, manure. The diffuse light, the green green green, the grit in my back...he unzips...oh God, he's beautiful...I tease his foreskin with my tongue...he's not all the way hard and his head isn't revealed...I worm my tongue, unfurling petals, and his head slides forward through the skin...a time delay rose bloom film. Thank God dick doesn't scare me...his cock is gorgeous...my ass being touched terrifies me...he wants me to blossom for him...he wants to plow me...plant his seed in deep...oh God I want it, too...he says my ass is sweet, he longs for it, his hands always stray there and stroke my crease, knead my cheeks, tickle my bud...but he always says, "You offer it to me, you bring it to me." His cock's not willing to be teased any longer and he leans forward...his weight is on his hands and toes...he doesn't need the kneepads either...he's letting me tongue him, but that's not what he wants today...not a cock sucking, no licking and teasing. He's not unkind, but if he can't fuck my ass, he'll fuck my throat. He's into it now...his hands by my head, one holding my wrists--as if I'd move, but it feels good to be pinned--and the other by my ear, supporting himself...his thumb lifts up to caress my neck and ear... Paul intrudes, but I sternly reminded myself this is Matthew pinning me and not Paul's submission hold. I remembered harder as I wriggled in bed and stroked myself. I thought

of Matt's practiced hand motion as I watched him plant a huge bed of bulbs. He had me come to carry loads. He doesn't do landscaping, but this was a pro bono for the hospice his dad died in. He pays for the flowerbed maintenance, and personally adds a new bank of flowers every year. He's moved through the safe, crowd-pleaser daffs, and red and yellow tulip displays, now he's planned a swathe of white tulips.

He said, "It'll be sumptuous!" and we laughed. He thinks big words are inherently funny especially those smacking of the rhapsodic. Matthew's not stupid, but he pokes fun at pretensions. One reason among many he doesn't like florists and landscapers. Unlike Gerry, I'm smart enough to not let on at work that I have more between my ears, but I'd been thinking about doing an evening course. Writing Matt's business plan reminded me of my de-railed tech writing plans. Damn, I lost focus, I was thinking about Matt's hands, and business slid in. His dibble would part the earth so smoothly, as if it opened for him, he'd twist and withdraw, drop in a bulb, and cover the wounded earth with a firm tender pat...so practiced, so assured...I got hard just watching him.

He won't blow me. He'll sometimes jerk me off, but mostly lets me finish myself while he watches; he doesn't give head. He's more of a top than he'll admit to in his attitudes, but he's such a mellow guy and not much into roles or rules especially since I've gratefully settled into unquestioning acceptance of his few "requests"--except for the all-important one. I think he's holding out on me. He laughed when I dared say it. "Yeah, I'll make you come, but with my dick in your ass...you'll get it then. No pressure."

I scowled at his teasing. He grinned back at my sulky face, and I hid how I melted under his hands.

"Babe, I'm not holding out. It's how I fuck. It's under your control--when you say 'yes' you'll have it, right? I'm not depriving you am I?"

I shook my head. He's a creative lover. A rare hand-job from him beats half the blowjob's I've had. He's not a tease, he knows I'm working on this, damn, I've drifted too far again. I give up and focus hard on the original greenhouse session so I can come...I jump back to when he started pushing in deep...and...oh God he's deep in my throat now...I love this...he's so silky smooth...so hypnotic. I start to sob as I come hard. I won't survive without him. I have to let him fuck me. I have to call him tomorrow before I ride down.

Scared it'd go wrong, I put off the phone call. I pattered around the flat straightening things already in perfect alignment. Procrastinating isn't me, and I'm bad at it. Bad at explanations, too. I remembered last time I thought I had the right analogy, but it backfired. Matt collects old botanical prints, it's his sole "hobby." He loves his job; it's literally how he lives. We spent a rainy Sunday afternoon leafing through the folio; I suggested he could hang them around his new business office. He grimaced. He was still not convinced he should borrow money to develop the market garden and get away from the flower business.

“I’m going to lock myself away with your books soon and write you a damn plan. You have the land, and the bank will see how strong the current business is. I...oh...” Matt distracted me from my business talk with a kiss, and then showed me a print of a mandrake. I listened, intent, to the myth. It gave a name to how I felt. I snuck my hand into Matthew’s, and gathered my courage. “Matt, that’s how I feel, like a mandrake torn out from the earth.”

Matt squeezed my hand, and let go to give me the print. “Take it; see if it helps you work through...” He trailed off, and turned to another print.

Shit, looking back he must have thought I meant Ian left me bereft, rootless, and I thought I’d given him a good clue about how scared and lost I felt. Paul hit me in my guy-ness, where I live. What must Matt have thought when he saw the print in my flat? I put it by my boxing trophies to act as a goad. I was a bantamweight boxer in school, and I was good. The first time he visited, Matt inspected the trophies, batted my speed bag, tickled me and said, “so what are you now, a featherweight?” He’s right: I’ve topped nine stone once or twice, but I’m still a small man. I was no match for Paul and his submission holds. A good left hook doesn’t matter if you can’t reach the target. He thought my resistance was a game, thought my struggles were part of a fantasy...shit, I even make excuses for what he thought. I said no.

I have to get a grip. I can’t call like this. (It was my understanding that he had already called Matt on p 9?) I’ve seen Matthew angry a few times, it’s not something I care to witness, and I hope never to be on the receiving end. Sometimes I use the idea of Matthew furious as a comfort; if I could tell him what happened, he’d kill Paul. I think. I save that image for the bleakest of days: Matthew snapping Paul’s neck and tossing him aside. Matt’s not sentimental: he handles his plants with respect and has a contemptuous affection for his chickens, but he’s ruthless when he prunes, tosses diseased plants aside, wrings a chook’s neck for special dinners. I have seen him tie a weak plant to a stake, soothe a silly bird as he disentangled it from fencing, but, I recall with a chill, when that plant still didn’t thrive he tossed it on the compost heap, and when the bird did it again, it was the next dinner. I groan; I’ve pushed my luck this last year. I’m lucky he’s a gardener and works on a long timeframe. He’s patient man.

He’s so calm and surface-lazy; at first glance you’d think Matt were a slob and me a neatnik, but he has a deeper order in his life and I have a lot of surface fuss. He laughs at how much I disinfect things and scrub myself clean. The first I saw him eat straight from the garden I freaked. He’s taught me a lot: I ate that mushroom after all, but I also see why he was so mad about the tomato plant with fusarium. I’d assumed everything in a compost heap rots down, but Matt shouted at me about it. He’d never been mad with me before, and, I admit, I sulked. I’d never heard of fusarium or verticillium or any other tomato diseases. He knows that. He didn’t apologize, but did put a plant diseases chart above my computer. I was shocked the first time I saw him spray pesticides. I’d assumed he was organic.

“Chemicals are fine, in their place. Nothing wrong with using what we know to get what we want. Sometimes there’s nothing wrong with being radical.” He waved his pruning shears.

I moved from shocked to puzzled, until I remember last week’s roast chicken, and how many plants end up composted rather than pampered. He expects attrition. But there’s something so decent about Matt. He may be dirty-handed most of the time, but there’s a healthy respect for dirt and disease. We’re both negative. If I can stay long enough we can fuck bareback, and that I think I could bear. The sound of Paul tearing open the condom wrapper and the feel of his rubber-sheathed cock pushing against my clenched butt is a nasty synaesthesia in my memory: the sound and sensation taste bad in my mouth. Maybe I’m fooling myself, but Matt and I have talked about barebacking. We’re both very careful lovers; all our sex has been safe. I believe him. Is it naïve of me? Of course *my* lover is telling the truth.

“I’ve been tested several times. First time I was twenty-two, and I’ve been very safe all my life. Any incubation--even the decade mark--has passed.” He waited for me to reciprocate. I’d never been fucked without a rubber, but I had swallowed come. I told him so and he nodded. I showed him my collection of test results. They don’t go as far back as his, but I check every year. We’re both the sort who’d have to know, and even though we’re careful, we get paranoid. He leafed through the dates on my tests and put on his “doing arithmetic in my head” face he uses to make me laugh when we look at the books together.

“I’ll do you bareback one day, Nick, after you get lucky seven done.” He didn’t add: assuming you’ll let me. I didn’t push it. I knew the conversation was a risk. We got tested together after a month of dating even though we knew we were negative and again several months later. He’s started getting impatient to fuck though: he knows I’ve done it before, and I swallow him, so of course he feels justified in his attempts to get me to give up my ass. When he knows I’m freaking, he does back off. He won’t make me do anything I really don’t want. He’s too lazy and mellow to be a real top--or perhaps too tired from his job. He likes little attentions, but he doesn’t demand them. He likes it when I defer, but he’d hate it if I were unhappy with a decision, and he doesn’t mind when I present plans. But now I look back on the HIV tests and think: was that leading him on?

I had to call him. I couldn’t go down there without telling him about Paul. I didn’t think I could do it face to face. I’ve tried. Matt’s kind, disconcerted face when I weep is too much to bear. I screwed up right away. I panicked at the first ring, and hung up. Matt doesn’t have caller id, but my phone rang back immediately.

“That was you?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled.

“You all right? You’re not canceling are you? I’ve got the picnic half made already.”

“No, I’m coming down. I thought we should talk first. More about last night. Matt, it’s not Ian. It’s never been about Ian. I’m sorry if I made it seem as if it were.”

A long silence.

“Ok, but you see why I thought you were hanging on to his memory?”

“Yeah.”

“Then what is it if it’s not Ian and you’re not testing me?”

I babbled out the story, and I garbled it, but Matt got the main facts before I started crying. Until I met Matt, I hadn’t cried since I left home. Even when Paul happened, I stifled the sobs. The storm that erupted on Matt when we’d first tried to make love held sixteen years of tears.

“Matt, if you don’t get it, I’m not sure if I can try again.”

He made soothing consoling noises down the phone while I snorted and snuffled. “Nick, shush, Nick, it’s ok, it’s ok.”

I calmed down a little. I’d finally told him, and he was still listening to me. He didn’t hang up. How could I have thought it of him? He didn’t say any of the stupid things my two a.m. fears projected: *men don’t, you asked for it, get over it, it’s just fucking*. Instead he told me he loves me. He’d never said those words before. I hate that my first ‘I love you too’ was said through a snotty nose over a phone, but at last we’d said it to each other. He kept sending comfort down the phone until I’d stopped even sniffing.

“Now Nick: get a cup of tea in you and get on that scooter. We still have a picnic. When you get here I can give you the hug you need.”

Then I got chills. He said, “We’ll talk about why you didn’t trust me when you get here.”

“What?”

“I love you, Nick, and I have every sympathy for what happened, but how the hell could you not tell me? How could you imagine I could figure it out from what you let drop? Who else could I think it was except Ian if you didn’t tell me? Don’t you think I’d have handled the last year differently if I’d known what you’d been through? Oh God, Nick, I could have helped you. How could have put me in the position of pressuring you? Shit, Nick, when I think of how you looked at me sometimes, Jesus, I feel like you let me hurt you. You put me in an abusive position.”

My brain locked, my heart squeezed, my balls shrank. Matthew was angry beyond all his rages I’d seen. And so was I. So unfair, how dare he be angry, I’m the one who...

“Fuck off then,” I said before my mind started processing again. “Just fuck off, you bastard.”

There was a moment of pure “sir” from the other end as Matthew started a sentence as he’d never addressed me before, “Boy! You...” but I’d hung up on him before I heard the rest. I usually make it to my speed bag before the punches start, but today a spider plant, pothos, and coleus crashed to the ground as I flailed at whatever was in my way. Then, disastrously, I punched the pot of my miniature rosebush. I gave a cry of rage and sat down on the floor moaning Matthew’s name. He gave me the rosebush for Valentine’s Day. He knows I hate cut flowers--we are in synch about that. It was very nice of him as I’d freaked out on him a few days earlier.

We’d been in the rose hothouse, surveying the masses ready for the pre-14th frenzy, and Matthew had leaned me back against a support pillar to kiss me. His hand strayed down to my ass and squeezed hard. “Nick, don’t make me plead with you, I need your ass.”

I felt heady with the scent of all these roses around me, I moaned, and let him push his hand down the back of my jeans inside my boxers. He was cautious; he’s experienced my panics enough times, and he’s always scrupulous about my consent. It’s one more reason I find it hard to grasp he thought I was just enshrining Ian. How could he be so patient and so gentlemanly?

“Nick, say yes.”

I hated myself, but I pulled back. “No, Matthew, no.”

His hand was gone and he looked away to hide his anger. I resolutely stayed up against him. “I’m sorry, Matt, I feel out of season. I need the time to be right. I can’t force myself.” I wanted to be his, I wanted Paul’s touch erased, but I couldn’t yield. “Matt, I’m not one of those Valentine’s roses. I can’t bloom out of season. I’m sorry.”

Matt put his arms around me, and squeezed. “I hate these forcing houses.”

I thought he was changing the topic, but when I looked up he was staring into my face. I’d always known he doesn’t much like flowers or dealing with them, although he’s fond, even proud, of his orangery and grapes. He likes things that sustain you and give flavor. I rubbed away treacherous tears and said, “flowers can feed your soul.”

I knew he was thinking of his flowers at the hospice because he nodded. It’s the cutting of flowers, and the unnatural blooming he hates. Although he makes money from it, he feels dirty. A few weeks ago he’d canceled a Friday trip because his usual flower specialist was off sick and he had a huge order for one of his best customers. When he called, even before “Hello Nick,” he said, “Florists are the pimps of the growing world. Mr. Tommi said brides should tremble on their way to the altar. That’s why florists put so much baby’s breath in bouquets, did you know that Nick? So her trembling can be seen. Shit, I hate supplying florists.”

But his hothouses and his Zen-Gaia shit make the money so he has vast greenhouses and forcing houses to produce delicate flowers for winter brides and Valentine roses. At least Easter lilies last the season. He wants to expand to become a market gardener, and bought the disused pasture next door two years ago. It was a bargain price, but he bought it outright and now he has no cash to develop the land. He was right to snap it up when he did, but it cleaned him out. The nursery was his dad's business and Matt inherited when his dad died. His parents were already divorced, and his mum has no share of the business. He doesn't enjoy the "business" part, but he's doggedly done the books himself to keep his hand firm. He likes the basic chores: re-potting, being among the plants, available to his staff, not trapped in an office, but ready to troubleshoot and pitch in. He saves his paperwork for the evenings. He has good employees: they run the registers accurately, treat the customers well, tend the plants, and order supplies in time. All the daily routine is covered, but no one is looking after the real business: no plans, no cash flow analysis, nothing. It makes me itch. I've taken over his books for him. Matt doesn't let people run credit, and he pays his own bills on time, but he has no idea how much more he could achieve. They make enough money for the business to run well, for his employees to be well rewarded, for Matt to live as he wants, with enough for any repairs or equipment after the inventory. Matt looked blank when I asked him why he didn't get a business loan to develop the market garden. He had a vague idea it's the same as an overdraft. "But I'd be in debt to the bank" is all he'd say and, later, once I'd gotten him past that, "Why would they give me money?"

I asked how he'd feel about outside investors. He hated the idea. I must have looked angrier than I thought, because he looked puzzled. "Why, Nick? Did you have someone in mind?"

"Never mind," I said. I'd been going to ask: if I sell my place, can I buy a share of the new market garden? My flat had appreciated a fair amount in the two years I'd owned it. I'd been in a hurry to move after Paul, but I'd bought a hot address by chance. I didn't want to trespass on his inheritance, nor be his dependent. I'm not that starry-eyed, all my work could disappear if we split up. I'd have no job, no home, but I do want to commit. I don't want to keep a personal stash of money. It's a dilemma I'd thought investing in the new business would solve. I'm usually good at finding middle ground. After all, I smooth things out between Gerry and the printers, get the bills paid and collected, jobs scheduled right, and keep the customers happy. I spend all day at work putting out fires. Matt's not bothered by temporary chaos. He seems so lazy sometimes, but he's a steady, patient, unhurried man. I never understood how I could bustle around and still have projects left at the end of the day, and Matt will have ambled along but have everything he planned on done. He says my to do lists are unrealistic and I fight the day, while he lives the day. "Carpe diem," he said with a dismissive laugh. I was puzzled. It seems like a good motto to me.

I don't think Matt understands what an office is like, but he must have been a little curious about how I spend my days because soon after my Valentine's Day freakout he picked me up from work. I was out of the office delivering a blueline to a client. If we're

not too rushed, I do it myself instead of using a courier service. My Lambretta gets me there just as fast. Matt teases me for riding it, but I don't feel right on anything bigger. Sure, I'd love a Harley, but I want my feet firm on the ground. I know my limits. Besides a courier can't answer questions and I know enough about printing from the guys to be able to answer the basics. I had another reason: they hadn't paid their bill yet, and I wasn't going to sign off on this rush job's production run until they gave me at least a partial payment.

I was triumphant as I pulled back in--a full payment and an approved blueline--and saw Matt waiting in his truck in the dock area. The guys' glares didn't seem to bother him. He jumped out, beamed at me, and, before I could say anything, he'd lifted my scooter into the back, tied it down, and turned to open the passenger door for me. He'd stayed calm and amiable, but he had five rough tough printers glaring at him the whole time.

I couldn't think what to do except give Jimbo the approved print job and ask him to put the check in the office safe. "I...um...I'm skiving off early. Tell Gerry to lock the front."

They nodded at me on Monday, and said, "all right?" I think they get my better moods now. No one's said anything, but they've noticed I laugh more. I'll miss them. I'll be sure our catalog is done by them--as soon as Matt wises up to the mail order idea. God, I'm assuming so much again. He has to let me back in. I realize I've planned my life around his. Even about going to night school once the new business is running. I used to want to be a tech writer before my parents threw me out and refused to sign any college financial forms. Matt says I could have a company writing business plans for small business. But what does he know? He's just heard of business plans; mine's the first one he's seen. He's still stunned by the favorable reception he got at the bank with my plan. He doesn't understand he's a sure thing to them: his business is solid and has been around for years, and the bank has a local business program. He's so pleased and proud; both touched I admire his work, and impressed his Nick can write. I know he's noticed I implied he had someone who knows how to handle bids, contracting, and project management as well as bookkeeping. It can't be so different from the printers. He runs his garden center well, but no one's steering this ship. If his staff ask him for a decision, they get it--and a good one--but as I said, he's a lazy top. He needs a good first officer is what I think. He knows it, too. I've seen him watch how I pitch in on weekends, and he's seen how the printers nod at me when I leave work. He wants more than my ass. I'll float my investment plan again when we're safer.

I look around my flat, I've cleaned up my punched over plants. I take a resolute breath, put a plastic bag over my mimosa, snap a band around the pot and wedge it into a box that will be safe on my Lambretta. It's spring--Easter is late this year--so it should be okay. Matt wants a first picnic in the market garden field. He likes winter camping and cold walks. Give him a doorstep sandwich and a thermos of tea and he's happy. We picnicked under the pine last November wrapped in blankets, and had Christmas lunch from a hamper in the orangery.

I pull up to the Sunday chemist's and buy lube. I'd planned on this earlier before the phone call, but then I intended to give him the lube as we finished lunch. Now, I think I should offer it as humbly as I can to even get over the threshold. I bite my lip. I despise how abject I feel, but the threat of losing Matt has let me know how much I need him.

Easter Sunday was forecast as sunny and warm, but halfway out of town a downpour begins. I'm not dressed for it, but I continue to Matt's. I have to get there, and I'll get just as wet turning around and giving up. I park in the nursery car park next to Matt's truck. His cottage can't be reached from any other direction--his dad converted all the spare land, including the house driveway, to nursery use, only sparing the cottage's private garden. He'd coveted the meadow Matthew bought. The rhododendron leaves dump extra water on me as I scoot through the shrubbery clutching the mimosa and the chemist's bag. The final cold drips from the leaves make me shiver as I arrive. Matt's face is so stern when he opens the door. I'm already drenched and his expression makes me distraught before I even try to say anything. My planned speech is ruined by my shivers, and by the paper bag from the chemist disintegrating and letting the lube fall to the doorstep.

Matthew takes everything soaked and ruined from me and, when I'm naked, he lifts me into his shower and washes me clean, and bundles me warm into his huge toweling robe. He gives me a big mug of tea with whiskey and sugar in it. He won't let me talk until I've drunk it all and have settled into his arms on the sofa.

"Matt--I'm sorry--I'm sorry I wasn't honest, and I'm sorry I swore at you. Please, let me try again." I wave ineffectually at the lube lying forlorn on the coffee table.

"Nick, I still love you. It'd take more to make me walk away from my beloved. But, Nick, you have to trust me. I can't take being feared. Don't look at me as if I were Paul when I touch you."

I swallow. "Matt, we have to fuck--we have to get him gone. I need my memory to be you making love to me--not of him being the last person who fucked me."

Matt nods. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Please Matt, don't ignore 'no' if I say it, but I need you to persevere if I cry, and, please, don't ask questions until we're done."

Matt leans over and kisses me. He hugs me, holds me, and seduces me all over again. The rain is still coming down, rustling through the ivy and dashing through the gutters. Matt has an open window protected by the eaves. The white curtains billow with the rain's breath and the clear scent of the wet shrubbery comes in. He has Satie playing--the cd has started over again at least once since I've been here--and I'm drowning under Matt's kiss and hoping for his hands to slide under the terry cloth. He finishes his kiss and lies still for a bit on top of me. I know he's listening to the spaces in the music.

“Bedroom?” he whispers at last.

I nod; he stands and scoops me up into his arms. I feel obliged to smile, but I’m terrified. He grabs the lube without putting me down and sets off across the room. I don’t mean to stall, but I notice my plant still hasn’t unfurled. The trip down has sent the plant into its most folded up stage. I’m worried I’ve damaged it. I hadn’t expected the rain. When I arrived, Matt took it from me, undid the tight band holding the protective plastic over it, and set it on the mantelpiece.

“Matt, the mimosa--is it okay?”

“It’ll be fine, Nick. The journey’s over, but it needs time to adjust.”

“Oh,” I say weakly, and cling on as Matt continues across the room. He’s petting me, caressing me, and I can’t bear it. I don’t want to annoy him--I know this is hard for him, too--but I blurt out, “Just do it and free me...just make it right...”

The sound of a condom wrapper tearing open makes me sob, but that too must be borne. The first touch of lube makes me rear back, but I force myself back down. When I feel the latex, I want to scream ‘no’, but I stay silent and still. Matt’s face is a mask; when he enters me, he knows he’s performing a service. He’s killing a blight, performing a radical pruning, consigning a feeble plant to the compost heap or a diseased one to the bonfire, culling the dimmest chicken...

“Do you need more? Should I be gentle? Rough?”

“No,” I whisper. “Just be you there. The rest doesn’t matter--but let me see you. I need to see it’s you...”

We’re face to face, and he’s settled into a rhythm. When I feel him tense, and his cock give a knotted pulse, I pull him down so I can hide my face against him. I end up with my face in his armpit. His sweat stings my eyes and mixes with the tears. I’m covered by him. He’s cleansed the desecrated heart of me. He’s made me new. He lets my tears flow. He kisses them away, but doesn’t comment.

“Thank you,” I say after awhile. “Thank you.”

He tousles my hair. “No more secrets, boy?”

“None...”

We sleep for a while. The same passage of Satie seems to repeat as I doze, and the rain blankets out the outside world. I think about everyone else bustling around with Easter eggs, roast dinners, and saccharine church services, and I snuggle back into Matt’s arms.

Later, we drape ourselves in sheets and parade into the front room for our picnic. Matt teases me with offered and withdrawn delicacies until I snatch away what I want to eat and demand he open the champagne I can see hidden in an ice-bucket behind the hamper. He hasn't asked, but we know I'm not going home tonight, nor to work tomorrow. This is where I belong.

"Stand up," says Matt as he pours the champagne.

I think he's planning a formal toast, but he takes a sip from his own glass as he stands, and then walks me over to the mantelpiece. He points to the mimosa.

"See," he says. "It unfurled again."

Epilogue

Most of the plants from my flat decorate the garden shop office now, but the mimosa keeps pride of place in our bedroom. I've finally written the catalog for the mail order business, and Matt's so occupied with his market garden project and his new crew that he signs off on what I want after a quick check. The garden shop is my territory now, and we've promoted Jamie, the greenhouse foreman, to manager of the retail nursery side and florist supply. Matthew was devilishly gleeful the first time a florist called and he could say "Jamie, it's for you..."

We're kicking butt. Matt sold me ten percent of the business in exchange for my apartment proceeds and, a few months ago on our first anniversary of living together, he gave me another five percent as a present.

"Don't expect it every year," he said gruffly, when I hugged him hard.

"You can stop when I own forty-five percent." I hastily added "Sir," as he looked a bit miffed at my cheek.

I'm off to town today on my trusty Lambretta with the finished catalog text. I could e-mail it to Gerry, but I want to visit the print shop. We scrupulously divided up what Gerry would normally do at the print shop, and what he does as freelance. He wasn't blowing smoke about bring an artist. I'd assumed he'd do crappy concept pieces, but he's a very precise representational artist. He's done some phenomenal botanical line drawings, and a glowing painting for the cover. Gerry gave the original to us as a thank you for the catalog commission. They've learned to rub along without me always running interference. They still don't like each other, but apparently Jimbo doesn't spit anymore as soon as Gerry's around a corner. They both agree the new manager isn't as good as me. Jimbo hurt his back in the winter and is having trouble handling the loading dock--the new guy isn't cutting him any breaks--so I'm planning to hire him as foreman of our new shipping department. Once we launch the website and mail the catalog, we'll need a full-time guy.

I always drop by the market garden's office before I go into town. 'Office' is too grand a term: Matt has a small trailer on the far side of the plowed-up meadow, but there's a desk and a phone. The new vegetable beds are just a bit too far to always come back to the store. They mostly use it as a break room/tool shed. Besides, I know he likes the privacy over there: no customers, no questions to deflect on to me or Jamie, no damn wind chimes tinkling...just him and his veggie crew. I've taken over the main office and the cottage office is now my workout room. I never make it to the gym anymore, but Matt's bought me some weights last Christmas and set up my punching bag. We've been happy this past year; Matt's only complaint is that he never gets a blowjob anymore. Now that I'm freed from Paul, I'm offering my butt up every chance I get.

Matt's sitting on the trailer steps drinking a mug of tea. No one's around.

"The guys are off with the tractor," says Matt when I comment on the lack of activity. "They're picking up some fertilizer from the storehouse. I saw you coming."

He winks and I know they were dispatched on purpose. He offers me the mug of tea he's had waiting for me. I sit one step lower and scootch in next to his knees. We're quiet for a while just looking at our domain. Matt's fingers are ruffling my hair--it's longer now than my in-town "I'm tough" crew-cut--and suddenly his fingers are tangled in and tugging. My knees are water right away and I feel my spine slacken...God...all this man needs to do is tighten his grip and I'm so his...

"Inside, boy..."

He lets go and I scramble past him into the office as fast as I can. My hands are fumbling at my jeans.

Matt grins: "God, you're a slut.... And did I say you were getting it? What if I want a blowjob?"

"You don't," I gasp. "I know you want my ass." I'm already bent over his metal desk hoping my pale butt--my ass is milk-white compared to my new countryside tan--is going to tempt him too much. I want to get fucked, and Matt's only messing with me. He reaches for the lube he hides in his locker. His other anniversary gift to me was to fuck me bareback. That was the final freedom for me--Paul was truly erased when I felt Matt's naked cock ease into me the first time.

I groan; Matt's finger fucking me hard as he lubes me up, then I squeak indignantly--he's slid in the handle of his wooden bulb planter as a butt plug.

"Splinters!" I yell. "I get a single sliver and my butt's off limits mister..."

Matt laughs. "Who says that's not my agenda? You never blow me any more..."

I groan. I know he's only joking. About deliberate slivers, I mean. I trust he checked it over, and I also know his tools are all lovingly maintained. But the blowjobs...maybe I'd better mollify him.

I slide down to my knees. "Finish in me though?"

He nods and then shuts his eyes in delight as I get to work. He's been working since dawn, so although it's only 10:30, he's already got a good musky scent in his pubes. I bury my face deep: he smells like home. I back off and start teasing him. I keep just his head in my mouth and swirl my tongue around. He's maneuvered us both around to the floor and has hold of the end of his bulb dibber. He takes control of the blowjob by moving the plug as he wants his cock to be treated. I'm used to this silent signal by now. He doesn't much like saying what he wants unless he has to--it pleases him a lot to have me do what he wants without words--so when he starts an insistent but tender thrusting with his hand I match my head's movements and switch to sucking busily in a matching rhythm. I love having his heavy dick bump my throat, and I'm nearly ready to let him finish there, but my cock is throbbing and he's ignoring it. It's not totally fair of him to complain about no blowjobs since we started fucking--he's dropped his rare hand-jobs and expects me to come from fucking, just like he promised. Believe me, getting his prick up me is a more than fair trade, but I miss him jerking me off.

Shit! Just as I think that I feel Matt's hand fondling my balls, then circling the base of my shaft...

"Want it?" he demands and all I can do is groan around his swollen head. I can tell he's close to coming and my fingers are frantically searching for the right pressure point to make him slow down. He just laughs and backs out himself. He stays still with his hard-on bobbing by my nose.

"Don't touch it for a sec," he says and I can tell he's focused on not coming. He's still twisting and pushing at the butt plug and for a moment it's me in danger of spurting early. He's idly moving my foreskin around and tormenting me.

"Okay," he says at last, "pick your position, boy."

For quite a while I could only feel okay face-to-face--being able to see Matt was vital--but over the last few months I've settled back into good old-fashioned doggy style. I scramble onto my hands and knees. Matt laughs at my eagerness and slaps my ass fondly before he slides the plug out and his cock in. He's a perfect fit; he fills me without stretching my ring too much, but he's got a good length to him. Just fucking perfect. I may be a short guy, but I can take plenty and I can take it hard. Matt gives a couple of slow thrusts to finish opening me up and now he yells and slams in hard so his balls slap my thighs. He does it over and over and we move across the trailer floor in fits and starts as he hammers away.

The trailer smells like mint today; he has a bowl of drying mint leaves. He'd glared the first time I'd noticed and teased, "Jeeze, Matt, potpourri. Isn't that a bit frou-frou?"

"You have four sweaty laborers drinking tea in a rain break," he'd snapped, "and you'd want something better to sniff. And I'm not having those sickly sprays. Besides a dried herb is not the goddamn same as potpourri..."

I fuck with him by sneaking dried flower heads into his herb mix in a silly parody of how I got my plants down here originally. The herb dish is on a shelf he rarely checks so I can often get quite a collection in. The veggie guys and I have a running pool on how many varieties can I get in the boss's bowl before he notices. I screwed up last time--the rose petals still smelled and he couldn't pretend he hadn't noticed. I win the pool if I make it until he brings a different dried herb to add. Since he knows about the game, it's pretty well rigged in my favor, but sometimes he'll give a yell and dump a bowl of flower heads out of the window. He always times it to land on a crewmember who can be teased as flowerboy for the rest of the day. Matt's good-humored about the pool and figures it's his boss role to take some good-natured ribbing from his crew. I know his limits, too; I'd never really embarrass him in front of his guys. They know we're a couple, but I never play on it.

Right now the mint has undertones of jasmine. Matt hasn't noticed that I've begged the trimmings from when Jamie tidied up the jasmine plants. The flowers are a little browned but still have some white to their delicate cups, and a heady scent if you get up close.

My head bumps the bookcase and a shower of dried leaves and wilted jasmine lands on us. "Oh God," yells Matt and shoots hard. He reaches round and pumps my cock swiftly and my come makes a mint-jasmine yogurt in his palm. Matt crams his cupped hand to my face and I obediently lap it clean as he continues to pulse into my ass. We fall sideways and breathe hard for a minute. I realize the steady thrum isn't either of our hearts, but the idling of a diesel engine. The tractor's back, and has been for a while.

"You lost that pool." Matt picks a blossom out of my hair.

"Worth it." I sigh and squirm my ass back against him. I don't want him to withdraw yet.

"What do you owe them?"

I yawn. "Just an extra round on me next time we go to the pub...more than worth it."

We'd both like to snooze, but the crew is outside, and I have meetings and Matt's crew has fertilizer to spread. I reluctantly let Matt back away and accept the damp washcloth he tosses to me. I mop up and wriggle back into my jeans.

"Catalog day, huh?" says Matt grinning proudly at me. He knows how much I've cherished this scheme and he's given me free rein over developing it.

I nod. I'm going to buy Gerry lunch, take the printers out for a drink after work, and then carefully poach Jimbo away. His wife and I have already plotted it all out. Nice lady. She dropped by a few weeks ago to tell me Jimbo and the guys missed how I ran the place, that her man was hurting too much to keep up, was too proud to quit, and that sooner or later he and the new guy will come to blows.

Matt's staring at me with a serious look all of a sudden.

"What?"

"Nick," he says slowly, "you'll have some time to kill in town between Gerry and Jimbo. I've got an errand for you: drop by the travel agents and get us a good deal on a flight to Gran Canaria. Sometime after the fall crops and before the Christmas crazies."

"A holiday! We'll deserve one by then. Thanks, Matt."

He's still frowning, and I feel very small and still until he squeezes my hand.

"Not quite a holiday, Nick. Time for my mum to come through on her promise. Time for her to meet my partner."

Mimosa

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