

100%

M. Elias Keller

She was gone. Eighty percent, and she had left him. He had not been quite ready for the relationship to end – he was only at 80% – but ended it was, and definitively, all possibility of reconciliation incinerated. So be it. The initial sting was long gone; even the dull ache had faded – mostly he was left with yet another example of how adept he was at getting himself *into* relationships, even when he was not particularly trying to do so – and how inept he was when actually *in* a relationship. But so be it. They all would leave him, eventually, anyway. The priority was the 20%.

But now with her gone, he was left with:

1. An intense desire for sex and nudity. This was nothing new.
2. Plenty of time to write the 20%.

And after a few weeks, he realized that:

1. Masturbation and pornography were to him like cigarettes to a recovering opiate addict. It helped. But not enough.
2. He was not getting any more writing done now than when he was together with her, despite the glut of time now on his hands, especially on the weekends.

And two weeks later, he further realized:

1. Traditional prostitution also did not help enough and the expense was disproportionate to the pleasure received.
2. He was *still* not getting his writing done and achieving 100%.

During their relationship, there was a stint during which he was absorbed in a writing project, and devoting the brunt of his time (and then some) to his work, and predictably, this caused tension between him and her. He was constantly being forced into choosing between spending quality time with her or getting his work done, and it was impossible: impossible to be fully honest without hurting her; and impossible to convince himself that *yes*, he could take a night off from writing to see the film or have dinner with her family. It was simply

impossible. One of the two things, his writing or his relationship, was going to be neglected; there were simply not enough hours for both, especially given his office sinecure which had to be maintained for solvency and comfort.

But as the days passed and their vociferous arguments accrued, he became distinctly aware of something which he described to a close friend and fellow scribbler like so: “You know, I *do* love her; I don’t *want* to neglect her and force her to adhere to my schedule. But I can’t help but to feel that when people in my life are upset because I’m spending so much time writing – well, that’s when I know I’m doing something *right*.”

“Ha!” was the reply.

“And strange to say,” he continued, “the more she yells at me, the more I want to write, and then the more I accomplish, and then I neglect her even *more*, which means even *more* yelling, and *more* motivation and...” He sighed, and the other replied simply:

“I cannot *believe* you two are still together.”

Now recalling this conversation, he growled and shook his head and thought of the manuscript on his desk. Eighty percent. Eighty *percent*, and he simply could not make the final push. *And*:

1. He clearly needed some sort of external motivation to reach 100%.
2. A proven motivation was the anger of a woman that he was spending more time writing than with her.
3. Prostitutes will do anything you pay them to do and what prostitute wouldn’t want this easy assignment?
4. Nudity and/or sex might result.
5. If not, so be it; the goal was 100%.
6. Nudity and/or sex might result.

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Wednesday. 6:26 p.m. The 22nd Street tenderloin. He had been there before, to buy books, but he had never gone upstairs, through the door of: LES GALS! TOPLESS SHOWS! FANTASY SHOWS! PEEP SHOWS! AND MORE...

And more. He smiled.

This was not an upscale gentleman's club. It was five dollars to enter the stage area, five dollars to smell stale *and* fresh cigarette smoke and sit on a folding chair close to the stage (or a bench attached to the wall that reminded him of a bus station), five dollars to watch the girls come out at the amplified beckon of a lone MC and "dance" under flashing red lights. The floor beneath his feet looked as though it had not been washed in decades.

He was the only audience member right now and he sat as close to the stage as possible and readied his dollar bills. First to dance: "Raven," a tall black girl whose pubic hairs stuck out from the crotch of her bikini when she turned her back to him and bent over. Second: "Duchess." This dance was announced as her "debut." Thin, petite, white, reddish hair, tattoos and laughably high stiletto-heel shoes. She danced shyly, slowly, until the MC boomed out: "Come on, Duchess! Shake those tits! You gotta learn sometime!"

The girl blushed and danced with a bit more vigor, but when the MC goaded her again, this time to "flash that puss," she laughed and said: "Stop, Derrick. I don't want *you* watching." And she folded her arms and refused to dance until the MC laughed and lit a cigarette, but went back to his booth and faced his sound mixer and not the stage.

Duchess danced for the remainder of the song. He, the writer, kept his eyes fixed on her: two star tattoos on her waist, aligned under her nipples, and a third tattoo of a roaring lion that occupied her right calf. Small but attractive breasts. She wore a flimsy white thong and he caught glimpses of her labia when she turned her back to him and bent over. When the song ended, he tossed a dollar onto the stage and waited for the next dancer. But Derrick the MC came over to him instead. He was black and not young and more stout than muscular. "That's all I got for the stage right now. But go on to the back. They do private shows, lap dances—"

"Will they do anything I want?"

Derrick looked unfazed and sucked on his cigarette. "That's up to them. You gotta ask them and pay what they say and you gotta follow their rules, or we'll have a problem. Which one do you like?"

"The second one."

"Hey! Duchess!" Derrick yelled over the curtain. "Look alive!" He nodded. "Go on back. And hey. We take credit cards."

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He stepped into the changing room and she closed the curtain behind him. The walls were gray, dingy, and plastic. She was still topless and looked different than she had under the red lights of the stage. Pale, somewhat blotchy skin. Stringy red hair. Straight teeth, but yellowed and too big with a slight overbite. Empty eyes.

“It’s forty for a lap dance. For eighty I’ll give you a long dance and you can touch me a little. Or we can go to the back room. We take our clothes off, watch a movie, and I can jerk you off. That’s \$120.” She made this pitch in a monotone voice and did not look him in the eyes.

“I want something different.”

“I’m not gonna fuck you,” she said, with a tinge of anger in her voice.

“No, not that,” he answered, and then he told her the request.

“*Yell* at you? What, like S&M and shit? That’s not really my gig.”

“That’s not what I mean. Look.” He met her eyes and spoke forcefully. “I want you to *pretend* to be my girlfriend, and call me on the phone, and get angry because I don’t want to spend time with you because I’m writing, and then I want you to yell at me. O.K.? It’s not about sex. It’s about calling and yelling. Understand?”

“I think you want an escort service,” she replied, but now a tinge of curiosity had replaced the anger.

“Fine,” he huffed, impatiently. “Forget it.” He turned to leave the changing booth.

“Wait—how much you gonna pay me for this?”

“Twenty bucks per call and I want at least five this week. Sometimes I won’t pick up and you’ll leave a voicemail: either nasty, or sad, or guiltting me, or threatening to break up... I want variety. Sometimes I’ll be nice and we can talk for a bit like we’re a couple. Sometimes I’ll answer and I want to get in a full-blown fight over how I’m spending all my time writing and how I’m treating you like a part-time girlfriend, and how you’re fed up with begging to see me—”

“This is fucking weird. How’m I gonna know what to say?”

“Haven’t you ever had a boyfriend?” he asked. “Didn’t you ever fight?”

“Yeah, but not about *that* shit.”

He shrugged. “You want the job or not?”

“Yeah,” she answered. “All right, fine. When do I get the money?”

“I’ll give you half now and half at the end of the week.” He pressed a fifty-dollar bill and a slip of paper into her small hand.

“How’m I gonna explain this to Derrick?”

“Don’t. Tell him I chickened out.”

She shook her head, but slipped the money into her boot. “Hey. How about a little something now? You want me to get you off? Sounds like you need it.”

“No. I just want you to call me, get angry because I’m writing, and then yell and threaten me like a pissed-off, jealous girlfriend. Understand?”

The girl reached for her pack of generic-brand cigarettes. “You’re fucking crazy.”

He smiled. “See? That’s the spirit.”

*

Phone call. Monday. 9:42 p.m.

WRITER: Hello?

PROSTITUTE: It’s me. Um, Duchess.

WRITER: Oh, hey. What’s up? I’m kind of in the middle of something.

PROSTITUTE: I thought you *wanted* me to call.

WRITER: Well, it’s nice to hear from you, but I’m writing now. Is there something you want?

PROSTITUTE: I thought – I thought I’m supposed to call and yell at you.

WRITER: [*Long pause*] You’re supposed to *act*, Duchess. Act like you’re my girlfriend. If you can’t do that then just leave me alone so I can get some work done. And I’m not paying you for this call.

[END]

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Phone call. Monday. 9:46 p.m.

WRITER: *What?* I said I’m busy.

PROSTITUTE: Hey. Asshole. You’re giving me my twenty dollars for that call. Or Derrick is gonna break your fucking face.

WRITER: Fine. Whatever. Just remember what I’m paying you to do.

PROSTITUTE: I know, man, I just— Hello? You there? Fuck you, then. Fucking weirdo.

[END]

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Phone call. Tuesday. 6:28 p.m.

WRITER: Hi sweetie. How're you doing?

PROSTITUTE: Um... I'm O.K., I guess. How are you? Are you writing now?

WRITER: No, just taking a walk. How was your day?

PROSTITUTE: It was O.K. I slept late, watched some TV. I didn't have to work at the club.

WRITER: Oh, I thought you were there every day.

PROSTITUTE: Some fucking new bitch started and Derrick gave her some of my shifts. Fucking sucks. I need that money.

WRITER: [*Long pause*] Why is he doing that?

PROSTITUTE: Why do you think, man? Cause she's letting him fuck her. That's how he works.

WRITER: Oh.

PROSTITUTE: He's a fucking scumbag. You know, I don't let him do that to me. I mean, I've jerked him off, let him see my pussy, but—I'm not gonna fuck him. Scumbag.

WRITER: That's smart of you.

PROSTITUTE: Yeah. You know, I've never done that. I mean, I dance, but I've never fucked for money.

WRITER: Glad to hear it.

PROSTITUTE: What? You don't believe me?

WRITER: No, I do, sweetie.

PROSTITUTE: So what are you gonna do tonight?

WRITER: The usual. Writing.

PROSTITUTE: You want me to come over?

WRITER: Come over? For what?

PROSTITUTE: I don't know... Let me come over and I'll suck your dick. I'll give you a discount.

WRITER: Thanks, but I have work to do tonight. I want to finish this chapter, you know?

PROSTITUTE: Asshole. Come on. I lost a lot of money today. Look. Fifty dollars. I'm good at it. I am. Come on, that's a good deal.

WRITER: [*Long silence*] I can't, sweetie. I wish I could, but I can't. I have work to do.

PROSTITUTE: Fuck, man. What's your problem?

WRITER: Sweetie, I just have a lot of work to do, and—

PROSTITUTE: Fuck you. What about my work? This ain't what I'm supposed to be doing, making twenty fucking dollars to sit on the phone with fucking weird-ass writers... Fuck it. Whatever. Fuck off.

[END]

*

1. Keep focused on the 100%.
2. \$50 for a blowjob *was* a good deal.
3. Derrick and the new girl.—*Unknown possibilities are always the best results*, his former girlfriend once said.
4. The manuscript was 85% complete and the first hints of the final push were nearing, when his focus became maniacal, and gloriously, deliriously euphoric, the counterbalance to all the struggle and humbling endured.
5. \$50 *was* good.

*

Phone call. Wednesday. 11:06 p.m.

WRITER: Hello?

PROSTITUTE: It's me. Hi. What are you doing?

WRITER: The usual. Working.

PROSTITUTE: Oh. I thought you'd call and say good night.

WRITER: [*Pause*] Well, I'm not going to bed yet, sweetie. I'm working.

PROSTITUTE: But *I'm* going to bed now, so I wanted to say good night.

WRITER: Oh. O.K. Good night.

PROSTITUTE: Asshole. You're not even gonna ask me about my day?

WRITER: [*Audible sigh*] How was your day?

PROSTITUTE: Not fucking good, actually. That new bitch at the club, with her fucking huge fake tits—

WRITER: Sweetie, can we talk about this later? I'm working.

PROSTITUTE: Fuck! Asshole. It's *always* later, always on your fucking schedule, your fucking rules—

WRITER: Look. My writing is like a *job*. O.K.? Not a game. Not a hobby. You wouldn't talk to me about *my* day while you're shaking your ass on stage, would you? No. And why not? Because you're *working*.

PROSTITUTE: Asshole. I just *miss* you! I never fucking see you! You're *always* working!

WRITER: [*Pause*] Sweetie, I miss you too. Don't you think I'd rather be with you than working?

PROSTITUTE: You're a fucking liar.

WRITER: [*Pause*] Come on, sweetie. This draft will be done soon and then I can relax. Just give me a bit of time.

PROSTITUTE: Yeah, well, let's see if I'm still around when your fucking draft is done.

WRITER: Oh, come on.

PROSTITUTE: Whatever. Asshole. Go do your fucking writing. Good night.

WRITER: [*Pause*] Hey. Duchess.

PROSTITUTE: *What?*

WRITER: Good call.

[END]

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Voicemail. Friday. 3:46 p.m.

PROSTITUTE: Hey. Asshole. It's me. Don't you *ever* answer your phone? I just—I just wanted to tell you something. I'm not working at 22nd Street anymore. I got pissed off at Derrick because he keeps cutting my hours, and he said, "You want your hours back? Stop being a fucking cock-tease and learn what's what around here." So I threw my fucking water bottle at him and left, and now—I don't know. Fuck. What am I gonna do? I'm not like—I can't just get a job in some fucking office. I don't know anything about fucking computers and all that shit. And I'm not gonna get some shit cashier job for

seven fucking dollars an hour, and taxes... Come on, man. Fucking forget about your writing and let me come over and fuck you. All right? I don't do this but I'll do it for *you*. I'll do it for eighty, O.K.? You don't have to tip me or nothing. Come on. I'm clean, and I'm—

Voicemail. Friday. 3:52 p.m.

PROSTITUTE: Fuck, man, your phone cut me off. Look: eighty dollars, whatever you want. Come on, asshole, you fucking owe me, anyway, for this phone bullshit—

Phone call. Friday. 3:54 p.m.

PROSTITUTE: Hello?

WRITER: Yeah. It's me. I was just listening to your message. [*Pause*] All right. I'll do that.

PROSTITUTE: Do what?

WRITER: I'll fuck you for eighty dollars.

PROSTITUTE: [*Pause*] O.K. What time?

WRITER: When I'm done writing. Not before one o'clock.

PROSTITUTE: That's fucking late for me to be traveling across the fucking city, man.

WRITER: Well, it's not really a nine to five job, you know? Besides, I have—

PROSTITUTE: Yeah, yeah. I know. You have fucking writing to do. Fine. One o'clock. Have the cash ready.

WRITER: Yeah. And hey.

PROSTITUTE: What?

WRITER: No bullshit, right? You come here, I fuck you, I pay you, and you leave.

PROSTITUTE: Hey. Asshole. I got it.

WRITER: See you later.

[END]

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1. Eighty dollars. Fantastic deal.
2. But having sex might interfere with your creative energy.

3. How? Why? Do your work and take a bit of time to put your penis in a wet hole. No different than a nice hot shower or a spurt of exercise. If you still had your girlfriend, you wouldn't stop having sex because you were writing, would you?
4. But don't complicate things. You're so close.
5. I'm doing it because this is a good price to have sex. She's a prostitute. A wet hole with a price tag.
6. A wet hole with a price tag.

*

His phone rang at 1:22 a.m. and he went downstairs to let her into the building and lead her up to his attic apartment. She was dressed in simple, tight blue jeans and a black stretch sweater, and adorned with much more make-up than he preferred.

"What is *that*?" she asked, reaching out and feeling the fuzzy brown faux-fur scarf wrapped snugly around his throat.

"My writing scarf."

"You look like a fucking fag."

He rolled his eyes and then looked her over, closing and double-locking his apartment door behind them.

"You have the cash?"

"Yes, yes," he said brusquely, motioning towards his bed, on top of which lay four twenty-dollar bills. "But listen. I have to finish a few more pages. Do you have something to read?"

She scooped up the money and tucked it in her purse, which was the size of a grapefruit, and looked over at him incredulously – yes, even after all this – incredulously. "Something to *read*? Are you *fucking* serious? This isn't a doctor's office, where I sit in a waiting room. Asshole. I came here to fuck you, and then I want to go home."

"Just thirty minutes. I need to finish this. Relax. Or—" He crossed quickly to his bureau and took a bill from his wallet. "Here's another twenty. Just sit down and be quiet until I'm ready."

"Asshole. Fuck you." But she tucked the bill into her purse and sat down on the bed, kicking off her heavy high-heeled shoes, which hit the hardwood floor like bowling balls. He shot her a nasty look over his shoulder at the noise – she muttered an apology – and he then

resumed his scribbling, hunched over his desk, his nose centimeters away from the loose-leaf papers.

“Don’t you have a TV?”

“No. Read a book.”

“Fuck you.”

“Hey, Duchess,” he replied, twisting around to look at her. “Shut up.”

She started picking at her nails and applying some sort of cream to the cuticles. Then she fidgeted with her phone for a while. At one point he chuckled to himself, prompting her to ask: “What’s funny?”—and him to wave dismissively at her without looking up from his desk.

Ninety percent. Glorious, glorious!

“So what are you writing about, anyway?”

“A hooker named Duchess who just quit her job.”

“You serious?” she asked.

“No.”

“Fuck you.”

After a few minutes he heard her rummaging in her grapefruit purse and then the scrape of thin cardboard.

“If that’s a cigarette,” he said, still writing; “go outside.”

“It’s fucking freezing.”

“Then don’t smoke.”

“Asshole. Come on. You almost ready? I should fucking charge you by the minute.”

“Soon,” he answered testily. “Hey. You want something to do? Go wash that shit off your face. You don’t need it and I don’t want it all over my pillows.”

She heaved herself off the bed, and went into the bathroom for a while. When she was finished, she padded over to him and began running her fingers through the hair on the back of his head. Startled, he jerked up from his papers and looked up sharply at her. Her skin was surprisingly smooth and creamy without the makeup.

“Come on,” she whispered, sexily. “Don’t you want to fuck me?” She reached down toward his pants.

Be careful. Bad teeth. Empty eyes. A wet hole with a price tag.

He scooted his chair toward the desk. “A few minutes. I promise. I’m almost done this section. I’ll give you another twenty, all right?”

She rolled her eyes and turned to walk back to the bed, and in the same motion as turning back to his work, he swatted his hand out to graze the back pocket of her simple blue jeans.

Be careful.

*

3:13 a.m. 93% and the 3% he just wrote was fucking *good*. He tottered away from his desk, stretching and shaking his cramped left hand. She, still fully clothed except for her shoes, was curled atop his bed and sleeping. He knew nothing about her: not her real name, her age, her origin, where she lived in the city—nothing.

Quickly he brushed his teeth and used the toilet, stripping down to his boxer shorts and then climbing into bed, wedging his flattened hand under the girl’s torso and lifting her enough to pull down the covers and then cover both of them. It surprised him, how light she was, and how even in her slumber her body intuited what he was doing.

“There’s a condom in my purse if you don’t have one,” she murmured suddenly, stirring but keeping her eyes closed.

1. 93%. Save yourself for the manuscript.
2. But: \$100.
3. Forget it. A business expense.
4. She shouldn’t sleep over.
5. Forget it. You wrote 19 solid pages. 7%! Who cares about her?
6. But those pale eyelids hiding her empty eyes. Those pale lips hiding the bad teeth. That soft breathing hiding the vulgar tongue. *Be careful.*
7. She is a prostitute getting paid to help you finish the manuscript. She is a wet hole with a price tag.
8. She is huddled under the covers and shivering.
9. *Be careful.*

“Just go back to sleep.” Before he had finished the sentence she complied, squeezing herself into the curve of his chest to get warm. He let her clutch him for a few minutes, then wriggled away and turned his back toward her to fall asleep.

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By the time he awoke, it was a little past noon and his penis was in her mouth. He thought for a moment of stopping it, but he was groggy; it felt splendid; and he *had* paid \$100. Soon enough he climaxed into her mouth; she went to the bathroom and closed the door, to muffle the sound of her spitting and rinsing many times, and then she returned to the bed and slid back under the covers. She was still fully clothed.

1. Be careful.
2. That mussed-up morning hair. *Be careful.*
3. She is a girl, a female body, with empty eyes and a wet hole with a price tag.

“You didn’t fuck me last night, did you?” She asked this more as an accusation than a question.

“No.”

“Well, I’m not giving you back the money. You had your chance. And I just sucked you off for free.”

“Did I ask for the money?” He reached across her for a small remote control and switched on some ambient-electronic music. They listened to three songs in silence.

“I like this music,” she said.

He nodded. “You’re new to the city, aren’t you? Where are you from?”

“I’ve been here about four months. I’m from Butler. It’s near Pittsburgh.”

He nodded. Another song.

“I need a fucking smoke.”

“Outside.”

She huffed and sighed. “Asshole. You gonna let me back in?”

He pointed toward the door. “The key is on that table.”

“Fucking tight-ass,” she muttered, and he waited for her to slam the door; but he only heard a soft click that blended in with the ambient-electronic music.

1. Be careful.
2. She is not. She is *not*.
3. Save your curiosity for the manuscript.
4. But there are things to learn.
5. Learn them later. Finish your work. 7%. You can do it by Monday morning if you stay focused.
6. You don't need her. The whole thing is silly, anyway. You shouldn't have to *pay* to be motivated to write.
7. But it's *working*. And the story is fucking *real* and *good* if a girl ready to fuck can't pull you away. What a gauge.
8. But: be careful.

Then she was back in bed, smelling of cigarettes, but only faintly because of the cold, windy day and breath mints and hand-washing in his small kitchen sink.

"Your apartment's filthy," she told him.

"I'll clean up when I finish the manuscript."

"Hey," she piped up, sounding like a child with a bright idea. "I'll clean it for you. A hundred bucks. I'm a good cleaner."

He shrugged and skipped to the next song on the CD. "I can do it myself."

"Come on, man. I'm spending all this time with you. I could be out fucking *working*."

"You're not a prisoner," he replied. "Leave whenever you want."

"Fuck you."

"Fine," he said after a minute. "But one condition. You clean naked. All the way naked."

"One-fifty."

"You said a hundred."

"A hundred *clothed*, asshole. Not to stare at my pussy while I scrub your fucking toilet."

"Who's staring?" he laughed. "I have work to do."

"One-twenty. Five."

He laughed again. "You better clean it good. The oven, too."

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But he did not have enough cleaning supplies for her to do the job, so he told her he would get them today; he had errands to run, anyway; and besides he wanted to be alone for a while.

“I’ll call you later,” he said, getting out of bed, and fetching fresh clothing from his closet. She gathered her things in a minor huff and started to clomp out in her high-heels; and the last thing he said to her, to her slender back, was: “You still owe me a phone call. Don’t forget.”

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Voicemail. Saturday. 10:53 p.m.

PROSTITUTE: Hey. Asshole. What the fuck? You said you were gonna call about the cleaning. Fuck, man, are you fucking writing? Come on, man, we had fucking plans. Don’t fucking do this shit. We had a fucking deal. Asshole. Look, give me two hundred and I’ll clean naked *and* you can fuck me. I won’t fall asleep this time. Come on. Fucking call me back when you get this.

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12:11 a.m. 97%. *Ninety-seven percent!* And he *could* have been done already, but he had pulled back on the throttle, was working slowly, savoring ... So close to completion, to 100%, and now *knowing* he would finish; now simply watching, listening to the story tell itself, its motor fully humming and buzzing as he had waited for it to hum and buzz so long ago... Glorious! Glorious, glorious! All the struggle and expense well worth it. Like those last few pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, when one lingers and beams over the waiting space for just a moment before snapping that final piece into—

His doorbell.

He ignored it at first. Often food deliverymen mixed up the first- and fourth-floor buzzers.

But again.

And again—

And then there she was, Duchess, on the front steps of his building; again in tight blue jeans and a black low-cut sweater, but this time in sneakers and without makeup, and wearing a bright blue bandana like a maid would wear.

“Asshole. You were supposed to call me.” She was finishing a cigarette and blew the smoke directly in his face as she spoke.

It was drizzling, but he did not invite her into the foyer. “I was working,” he said. “I turned my phone off.”

“Asshole. Either give me the money you promised me, or let me clean, or I’m gonna ring all four of these fucking doorbells all fucking night.”

He looked at her, stared her down, rummaged through her empty eyes. “Little late to start cleaning, isn’t it?”

“Whatever. I’m here already.”

“All right. Fine.” He shrugged. “But you gotta be – or, if you’re real quiet while you’re cleaning, I’ll give you an extra twenty.”

On the way up the steps, she asked him if he had listened to the voicemail she had left him.

“No. What’s on it?”

“Nothing.”

Once they were in the apartment, he quickly pointed out areas in the kitchen he wanted her to make sure were cleaned: the oven range, the microwave, the refrigerator shelves, the crumb-tray in the toaster oven.

“Did you get shit to clean with?” she asked.

“I did, actually.” He pointed to an assortment of generic-brand sprays, wipes, sponges, and a disposable floor-mop. “There’s a broom behind the fridge.”

He followed her into the bedroom area, where she propped herself into the corner and took off her clothes: first her sweater, then her jeans, which she had to forcibly yank off her body, then her lime-green bra.

“Hey. Asshole.”

“What?” he asked. He had watched her disrobe with mild interest and was now back in the kitchen to make a fresh cup of blueberry-flavored green tea.

“I don’t want to take my panties off. The chemicals could splash on me. Will you still give me the \$125 if I leave them on?”

1. Be careful.
2. You don’t need her anymore. You have 97%.
3. She is a girl, a female body, with empty eyes and a wet hole with a price tag.
4. *Be careful.*

“Whatever,” he answered.

“I’ll start in the kitchen,” she said, and he grunted and asked if she wanted tea.

“You got coffee?”

“No. Just green tea. You ever try it?”

“Sounds fucking gross.”

He smiled and prepared a second mug, teabag, sugar packet and red plastic stirrer, the last two pilfered earlier today from a nearby convenience store.

“I saw Derrick today,” she said suddenly. “I stopped by the club.”

“Did you fuck him?” He poured the water into the mugs, dunked the two bags up and down as though he were balancing a scale, and then dropped an ice cube into each mug.

“Asshole. No.” She spoke scornfully. “But he gave me a shift for tomorrow afternoon.”

“He just gave it to you? For free?”

She glanced away and pretended to read the label of the cleaning spray. “A blowjob. Whatever.”

“Here.” He gave her the tea. She took a sip and wrinkled her nose.

1. Be careful.
2. She sucked some scumbag’s dick so she could have the chance to show her tits to other scumbags for dollar bills.
3. A female body with empty eyes and a wet hole with a price tag.
4. But: be careful.

“You like this shit? Tastes like blueberry dirt water.”

He almost laughed. “It grows on you. Coffee’s bad for your teeth, anyway.”

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2:40 a.m. 99%. *Ninety-nine percent!* She had cleaned the kitchen and bedroom and was halfway through the bathroom. Rising from his desk, he went to use the toilet and found her seated in the bathtub, spraying cleaner onto the faucet and wiping it vigorously with a paper towel. Her forehead and upper lip were damp. Her auburn hair looked stringy and dirty under the bright blue bandana and her breasts had streaks of soot on them.

“What do you want, asshole?”

“I have to piss.”

“So do it. I don’t give a shit. I’m in the middle of something.”

With a grin: “So much for the mystique, eh?”

She looked up at him and wrung out the paper towel, the dirty water dripping onto her pink panties. “I don’t even know what that word means, asshole.”

While he urinated, she said, once again like a child with a bright idea: “Hey. Asshole. You got any friends that need their places cleaned? I’d do it topless. And if they want to pay, I’ll – you know. I’ll jerk ’em off or something.”

“What do you need all this money for, anyway?” he asked. “You got a kid?”

She did not answer for a moment. “No. I’m saving up. For school. Beauty school. This is the fastest way to make money.”

“You don’t seem to like it very much.”

“Whatever,” she answered. “It’s just for now. Besides, I have shitty taste in men, I know I do, so I might as well get paid for it.”

He grinned at her quip and sat down on the toilet lid. “Beauty school? Can’t you do that in Butler?”

“I had to get away from some people there,” she said, giving the faucet a final wipe. “And you can make a lot more money as a stylist in the city.” Now she stood up and stepped out of the tub, carefully, so her dirty hands would not touch the tile. Then she bent over the sink to wash her hands, and said: “See, once I learn to do hair and nails and color and all that shit, I can go anywhere in the world and get a job, you know? I mean, hair’s hair, right? Hawaii, I think, I want to live—”

But he had left the bathroom at the first glimpse of the seat of her pink panties, soaked and clinging; and now he was back at his desk, his nose almost touching the paper; his eyes wide and his pupils dilated; and now into *tenths* of a percent...

“Asshole. Fuck you.”

*

3:19 a.m. 100%. Done. One-hundred *percent!* The final flourish, the date and time, his street address. 100%. The clenched fist and adrenaline grunt over a vanquished foe; the inimitable joy, brief but tangible, before the revision process, the cleaning up of this mess...

But for now: 100%.

100%.

He took a moment to tidy the stack of papers, but averted his eyes from reading anything he had written, except the perfect last line. Then he blew out the scented candle on his desk and went to the bathroom.

She was doing a final wipe of the toilet seat. “Fuck, man, you have to piss *again?* I just cleaned this.”

But he shook his head at this and wrapped his arm under her firm belly, pulling her up toward him until her back was curled into his chest, and at the same time he plucked the soggy grayish paper towel out of her hand and threw it in the sink. “Hey—”

He whispered fiercely directly into her ear. “I want to fuck you. *Now.* How much?”

She flustered and did not give an answer, so he picked her up, crossed the floor and dropped her onto his bed.

“How *much?*”

Again no answer. He yanked her panties off with two hands and bore his eyes into her. “I’m serious. How much? Or get the fuck out.”

She looked up at him. One of her empty eyes filled with a tear. “I don’t want to go to the club tomorrow. And I don’t want to fuck you for money.”

He expelled an angry breath and threw his hands up. “What the fuck, Duchess?”

“My name’s Heather.”

“I don’t care.” He looked away from her.

“Hey. Asshole.”—the bright-idea voice—“You good with computers?”

He cocked his eye at her. “Not bad.”

“Will you help me put a cleaning ad online? And maybe help me with job applications? I was thinking maybe I could get a job as a receptionist or hair-washer at a salon.”

Be careful. Be careful.

“What, for free?” was his reply.

“I’ll give you phone calls.”

“I don’t need any more calls. The manuscript’s finished.”

“Oh. Well, congratulations, asshole. I guess you’re all done with me, then.” She looked down and picked at her cuticles.

“Look.” He went to the bureau and took a dollar bill out of his wallet. “I’ll pay you a dollar to fuck me, and you pay *me* a dollar to help you get a job. Come on. That’s a good deal.”

He dropped the bill on the bed and then stared her down, looked directly at those empty eyes, up to her dirty, stringy hair, down to her small breasts, her belly and the two stars, her slender legs, the roaring lion on her calf. She picked up the dollar, and then he pounced, ferociously, claiming his reward; *his*, his prey and his kill—his wet hole with a price tag of 100%.