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DREAMING

Shanna Roggow

I lay in bed and stare up at the ceiling. The fan whirls around and around, giving off a quiet whine. I count the tiles on the ceiling. Fifty-nine. Fifty-nine perfectly symmetrical tiles, yellowing with mildew.

I turn my head to stare at the guy next to me. Brad? Steve? Hmmm. Girls aren't supposed to end up in these situations. We're supposed to be innocent and pure, and only fuck guys whom we're deeply in love with. Mark? Yeah, that's it. Maybe. I feel like such a whore right now.

I'll blame all this on society. A guy can sleep around and it's perfectly acceptable. He's called a ladies man, a charmer. A girl sleeps around and she's a slut. I'm making a statement against society. That's right. I'm a feminist flaunting the hypocrisies of this male dominated world. Right. I'm a powerful woman; independent and completely comfortable with my sexuality. Damn society and its narrow-mindedness.

I still feel like a whore.

I roll over. A huge crack runs the entire length of the wall. I close my eyes. I need to get some sleep. I have class tomorrow morning at nine. Ugh. Philosophy lecture. Another mindless discussion about how our world is only real based on our perceptions and our acceptance of said perceptions. On a brighter note, it gives me an extra hour of sleep. I'm pulling a B in the class. Everyone informs me I could do better. I get that a lot. Whatever. We all have our own special talents. Mine just doesn't happen to be philosophy.

I spare another glance at the man sleeping next to me. Not bad looking. Not great, but not bad. There was definitely something there last night that no longer exists in the early morning light. Odd. I'm not one to argue though. Paul?

I sigh, and bury my head in the pillow. What a night. I toss one last time before giving up. I can't sleep with this nameless body lying next to me, snoring. I swing my feet over the edge of the mattress, and rise unsteadily to my feet. Out of the corner of my eye I can see the mirror that hangs above my dresser. It's cracked, a remnant of the last

guy I was seriously involved with. It's useless to me now, showing nothing but a cracked image. I'm not sure why I keep it up on the wall. Probably just laziness. Growling low in my throat, I shuffle over to the couch. I just need to sleep to escape from all this madness. Dream a happy dream. Butterflies and rainbows. Funny how my dreams are less odd than my life.

I reach for a cup, but my hand passes through it. The smell of coffee is reviving me. I feel my body slowly waking up. I rub the palm of my hand against my robe. The material is soft, worn smooth in some places. I pull a glass of milk out of the cupboard.

"What are you doing?" asks a voice from behind me.

I spin around to face the man. I hold up my glass. "I'm having coffee, Paul."

"My name is Jason," he responds. "Slut."

I turn as someone taps me on the shoulder. A bald man in a powder blue tux is standing in front of me with his hands folded in front of him. He has a chicken on his head. "Just because I'm wearing the chicken, doesn't mean that I am a chicken."

"Yeah, okay." I respond. I turn back to Jason. "Don't call me a slut."

He shrugs. "What would you prefer?"

I stammer out my name. Jason raises an eyebrow. "Why on earth would I call you that?"

"It's my name." I'm in a state of shock. I don't know how to respond to this verbal assault. I push hair out of my face.

Jason reaches out to grasp a lock of my hair, rubbing it gently between two fingers. "There's so much more that you could be doing, and so much more that you could be doing better," he said softly. "You're just wasting all of your talents."

"We all have our own special talents," the man in the blue suit pipes up. He begins to tap dance with the chicken balancing precariously. The chicken fluffs up its feathers, and then settles down to enjoy the ride.

"What talents?" I ask dryly. "I certainly can't tap dance. What's left? Philosophy? I'm certain that will leave a big impact on the world." I look down at the plate in front of me. I can almost make out my reflection on the gleaming white surface. It looks cracked. "I guess I could make some breakfast. Would you like some breakfast?" I ask hesitantly. I look down at the plate again. "I have a toaster. Would you like some toast?"

Jason sneers at me. "Like you could cook. You can't do anything. Slut."

I glare at him. I pick up a piece of bread and drop it into the slot. I go to push it down, but it won't budge. I try three or four times, with no success. Jason chuckles.

"You're so stupid. You have to put the change in first."

I look on the side of the toaster. There's a slot for quarters. I blink at it for a moment, and then reach into the pocket of my robe. I pull out a dollar bill. "I don't have any change. Do you have change for a dollar?"

Jason reaches into his boxers. He pulls out some change, and jingles it in his hands. "I have fifty cents."

"So you don't have change for a dollar."

"I have fifty cents."

I stare at Jason for a moment. "That's nice." I turn to the bald man, who is now playing the piano at a recital. A sea of blank faces stare back from the audience in the living room. "Do you have change for me?"

His fingers dance over the keys in a rendition of chopsticks. The tails of his tux float in the breeze. He smiles sadly at me. "Change is a state of mind sweetheart. You will never

change unless you decide to." He begins to weep, and the audience applauds. As the spotlight comes on and the man stands to bow, I turn and walk away.

I walk down a long, endless hallway. There are doors on all sides. They are different shapes, sizes, and colors. A feeling of terror settles over me. If I open the wrong one, all is lost. A monstrous decision, with overwhelming odds. I reach toward a black door with a silver handle. There are whispered murmurs coming from the other side, so faint that they're almost silent. All of the sudden, someone starts screaming from behind the closed door. I turn the knob, but it won't open. The screaming becomes hysterical, high-pitched and painful. And then the pleading begins. "Help me! Please someone help me! Please, someone, anyone!" I recognize the voice on the other side, but can't place it. It sounds so familiar. I pound on the door, trying to break it down. I step back, and slam my shoulder into it. Suddenly it gives and I fall forward. Incredible darkness rushes around me, and intense nothingness. It overwhelms me, destroys me. I keep falling into the nothingness, further and further when . . .

I jerk awake, sweating. My arms are braced against the couch cushions, locked and tense. I breathe heavily for a moment, trying to get my bearings. Beads of moisture are dripping down my face, as my whole body trembles. Overhead, the fan continues its endless drone. I stand up and wander over to the bed and lean against the mattress, the coolness of the sheet in sharp contrast with my skin. I flop down on the bed. "What the hell was that?"

The man lying next to me rolls over. He blinks sleepily at me and smiles. "Morning, sexy."

I snort. "Well, that's a change," I mutter.

"Hmmm?"

I shake my head. "Nothing. Would you like some coffee?"

"That would be great."

I leap out of bed, pulling on my robe. I run my palm down it. The material is soft, worn smooth in some places. I start out of the room, and then turn back. "You want cream with that Jason?"

He just stares at me for a moment, silent.

"What?" I push hair out of my face.

"My name," he said softly. "Is Paul."

"Right."