

## Excerpt from *Tenderloin*, a novel by Mitchell T. Paglia

He sat with his back against the cheap rattan headboard of the bed, hands held out before him. The knuckles bulbous and calcified, misshapen, the knuckle of his ring finger jutting from his fist like an egg. The fingers, short and muscular. Calloused palms a crowded map of wrinkles. Thick pronounced veins twisting the length of his wrists. The small tattoo of a scorpion along the bridge of his thumb smudged by years to something more resembling a bird. Dull pain crept up his wrist, an ache and a numbness. Wade imagined the nerves like wires coursing through a machine, frayed and malfunctioning along the ridge of his forearm, sending haywire signals through his hands, casting sparks to the tips of his fingers. Faulty engineering in a sputtering machine, increasingly obsolete. And his eyes, too—used to be able to read a street sign from two blocks away, and now he couldn't read a billboard without glasses to clarify the blur. He flexed his thumb and his wrist cracked with a sharp pop that roused the form in the bed beside him. He wondered how much worse it would get with age. Forty years old and his hands failing—his best asset, where all his talent lay. As a kid, fending off older boys, tougher boys. And then, his father. In the boxing ring, too—strong, powerful, dense as two mortar bricks. That's how he'd thought of them when he was young and stupid: orbs of shatterproof stone, wielded like twin wrecking balls. Always at the ready. Always prepared for violence.

His mind wandered from his own broken body to Ilya's. If Wade thought his own body was ruined, that Russian was on a different level entirely—that skeleton might as well have been held together by paperclips by the time Wade met him. Impressed by Wade's size, the stories floating the yard of him punching a man to death, the revelation that Wade was a more than capable masseuse. Less than a month inside, minding his own business lifting weights, keeping watch on the crowded yard and its deadly politics, when a couple Russian goons approached, and Wade grabbed a dumbbell from the asphalt. They stopped short, lit cigarettes, smoked them casually. Then they asked Wade to follow them. "Got a smoke for me?" he had asked, and they gave him one. A good sign. Led to Ilya's cot, where the old man lay pale and broken, legs propped on a pile of pillows. Skin loose on account of weight loss, white stubble along his jaw and throat. A smile on his face, like he'd found something he'd been looking for. Everyone has their role inside, their own way to survive. Adaptations, like animals. And now Wade's hands ached from it.

He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke over his knuckles, watching the smoke swirl between his fingers.

The figure next to Wade on the bed stirred, and Petit rolled over to blink at the cigarette smoke curling the air. "Who told you you could smoke that shit in my bed?"

“I didn’t think I needed to ask permission.”

“Well you do, *pendejo*, put that out. I tol you before. Go sit your dumb ass by the window.”

Wade searched the floor along his side of the bed and snatched a piece of junk mail upon which to stub his cigarette. “Already smells like a Mongolose whorehouse in here, didn’t think a smoke would make much difference.”

“Fuck you and your Mongoloid whorehouse,” Petit said, smacking Wade’s arm with the back of her hand. She was lean and muscular with smooth brown skin, a white scar the shape of kissing lips on her bicep, the size of a pocket blade knife. “You can take your sad ass out in the street, you got a problem with how my room smell.”

“Your room smells fine,” Wade said. “Mongolose whorehouse is my favorite odor.” Petit rolled her eyes. “It’s the scent I prefer.”

“Oh, shut up *puto*,” Petit said and rolled over, nudging herself into Wade’s thigh. He went with it, rolling to cradle her body in his. He smelled the floral scent of her hair, the saltiness of sweat. He’d come to like the comfort of Petit’s room, its small low-lit chamber, the temporary creature comfort provided. “I bet this place smell way better before *you* lay around stinkin it up.”

“Forget it,” Wade said. “I don’t smell nothin.”

“Goddamn right,” Petit said. “It smell like a princess castle in here.”

He’d met Petit the night after his boxing match at Hard Knocks, after Valencio Valle bashed his face to hamburger meat. Wade had been humiliated in front of everyone in the free world he respected, and no matter how many people from the gym came up, patted him on the arm, said “Good fight,” to him with eyes averted—all of it, a humiliation. He didn’t remember much of the night afterward except a terrific headache dampened only after quaffing a quart of vodka, stumbling down Polk Street with the cool air brushing the raw afflictions upon his face. He found himself pulled toward the neon sign of a bar called Divas, two tall figures standing in its light smoking cigarettes in short skirts and high heels. They smiled at him as he passed, and he understood what kind of bar it was. As he eased himself upon a stool at the bartop he caught sight of his reflection in a mirror, and couldn’t believe the mask of battered defeat that stared back. The bartender—fake tits, long pink wig, and a jowly face—served him without a word. As he nursed a beer, elbows propped upon the bartop, a figure slid into the stool besides his—Petit, wig curled and spilling down her shoulders, the strap of her silver dress slipping from a slim shoulder. They took shots of bad tequila together, and she asked what happened to his face. He told her he was a professional boxer, and that he’d stopped in Divas for victory drinks. “Victory, huh?” she asked. “This how you look when you win?” And he nodded. “Celebratin victory all alone don’t sound too fun to me,” she’d said, vodka cranberry crooked between fingers clawed with red fingernails, the sequins on her dress sparkling in the dull bar light. They’d gone home together that night, in the back seat of a

taxi cab he'd paid for. Wade wishes it could have always stayed like that, him feeling beaten and her making him feel there was something noble in it. That was a good end to a bad night, that Friday night he met Petit at Divas. Every other night together since then, stomping across town to her apartment, knocking on the door hoping she'd answer, felt like anything else that's ever good and unrepeatable—a rehash, never to reach such untenable heights.

"Sun's comin up soon," he said, gazing toward the strip of dull sunlight slipping along the side of the crooked polyester curtain. It cast an arched strip of light across the floor toward the bed, a blade slicing low.

"You got to bounce by seven. If you tryin to shower—"

He looked at the strip of light on the floor. "Rub my hands would you? They're keepin me up."

"And you keepin me up." Her hands found his right hand and kneaded, wrestling clumsily with the network of muscles within. He rested his chin on her shoulder and closed his eyes. "Shit, your hands be all jacked up." She isolated the ring finger knuckle in her fingers and clicked her tongue. "What you doin, punchin walls and shit?"

"That feels good."

"You still owe me a massage," Petit said. "Don't think I forgot."

"But it's getting late and I got this shower to take—"

Petit laughed. "You can shower in a Starbucks sink if that's how it is, *pendejo!*"

The deal was he could stay the night—the whole night—if he gave her one of his massages, and if he stayed cool. And that meant *cool*—no drama, no pointless arguments, no rough housing, no picking fights with neighbors. A hard rule insisted upon with Wade a couple weeks back, no drugs or drinking when he visited. He agreed to her conditions. He needed a place to crash, and wasn't holding anything anyway. He dug his fingers into Petit's neck, worked the trenches of her muscles along her shoulders. She squirmed, pencilled brow pinched in discomfort, then the tension melted from her muscles and she went silent. "Shit. You learn this in the pen? Rubbin down all them shower room cornholers?"

"My dad taught me," he said flatly.

"Your dad? That some weird inbreed shit, man . . ."

Wade pinched her neck, and she squirmed upon the bed.

"That *hurt*, bitch," she yelled, slapping him in the stomach just above his crotch.

"It was supposed to." Wade shoved Petit away from him on the bed and threw an arm back over his head. Petit slowly rolled closer to his side. "A garage door fell on him when I was four," he said toward the ceiling. "Fucked up his neck and back. Ruined him. Made him—I dunno, kinda made him—" The blade of light crawled up the steel leg of the bed. "He worked construction, though, he had to keep working, you know . . . so I had to give him a massage every morning before he went to work—before he went to the *bar* before

work—and every night when he came home. God help me if I wasn't there to rub his old drunk ass down.” Wade returned to squeezing the muscles of Petit's neck. “Ain't nothin about cornholers.”

“And you was this good back then?”

He cleared his throat, a sound to clear the subject. “Give me your arm.” He took hold of Petit's left arm and pressed into the muscles, eliciting a gasp from Petit. His fingers found the nooks of her wrist, ran up the lean meat of her flexor muscles. He liked watching the ripple of her skin around the tips of his fingers, resilient clay stretched upon the crest of his fingers.

“What was you in for anyway?” she asked, face locked in a grimace. “You ain't never tell me.”

“No talking.”

“Don't tell me no talking in my own place. That ain't no answer.”

“Why don't we talk about you, huh?” He turned to Petit, who turned toward the far wall. “You see? No one wants to talk about the way it used to be.”

They lay faced away for a time, lost in their own hauntings. Then Petit rolled over to face him, their noses inches apart. Her nose was her most masculine trait—big and hooked, a lump in the middle from having been broken long ago. Her Adam's apple caught in the morning light, slight as a dune in a barren desert. “I could tell you some stuff happen in Honduras you wouldn't believe.”

“I thought you were Mexican.”

“All you ignorant white dudes think anyone brown be Mexican.”

Wade pulled her close to him, lifted a leg to trap her under the clamp of his thigh. “Well, you'd believe my story,” he said. “Ain't nothing unbelievable about it.”

She frowned at him, her brown eyes beautiful in the light of dusk. “Your breath stink, baby.”

He rolled away from her, kicking the sheets away from his legs.

“Come on, tell me.”

“No. Story time's over.”

He fetched the cigarette he'd stubbed out from the floor. When he started to rise out of bed, Petit hooked a finger in the waist of his boxer shorts. “Just smoke,” she said. So he lit the cigarette and they smoked together, passing it back and forth, his arm around Petit's shoulder, her head on his chest. She swatted ash from Wade's chest and let her hand linger in the thin hair around his belly button. “Few years back I was kickin it with a dude who spent time inside. Armed robbery. He had a scar right here.” She drew a line with her finger across Wade's abs. “Some MS-13 in the yard cut him with a shiv made out a toothbrush, try to gut him.”

Wade grunted.

“You ain't got no prison scars?”

“No. Not like that.”

“You a good boy in prison? You stay in the library reading books?”

He cast her an annoyed glance. “I had friends. My friends made sure toothbrushes were for tooth brushing.”

“What kind of friends? Aryans?”

“Russians.” Petit’s eyelashes fluttered wide. “I was like right-hand man to the boss. Kept me from havin to trade packs of ramen, all that yard bullshit.”

The slash of light burned across their ankles on the bed, lighting the rose tattoo on Petit’s foot.

“He—the boss—got hit by a car,” Wade said absently. “Hell of a man.” His hand stopped rubbing Petit’s shoulder. “I studied massage therapy when I was inside, to help him out. There’s a vocational program in there, helped give me something to think about. Wanted to get my license, maybe make a career of it. Ilya made sure I got all the stuff I needed, so long as I helped him out. Then when I got out, he got me the job at the gym—”

“Man, what up with you and massaging old men?” Petit interrupted with a cackle.

Wade said nothing.

“You give happy endings too or what?”

“That’s enough,” Wade said, and pulled away from Petit.

She looked at him.

“I said enough.”

Wade finished the cigarette, then stubbed it out on the slip of junk mail. Petit lay her hands on Wade’s and resumed her clumsy rubdown. “So who was this guy you was right-hand to?”

“Ilya,” he said. “His name was Ilya.” He looked away toward the window. “He kept me straight. Wouldn’t let me get involved in bullshit, none of the drugs that got smuggled in . . . Fights, problems with the C.O.s . . . ‘Make sure you don’t give them any more years,’ is what he said. ‘Don’t let these people take more of your life than they already got.’ Didn’t stand for stupidity.” Wade snickered, shook his head. “He’s the kinda dude, he says things are a way, they’re that way, you know? Even the C.O.s listened. One of them started callin him ‘Hot Shot in the Cot’. Soon most everyone in the yard was callin him that, at first all quiet, then it became like a nickname. He didn’t like that name, not a bit . . . dude called him ‘Hot Shot in the Cot’ in an argument over money with one of his boys, got his teeth smashed in on the basketball court not a day later, a guy with a little steel pipe walked up between games, bashed his face in while everyone watched . . . everyone seen it but I tell you, not a single witness when the inquiry came. Ilya had his boys pick the teeth up off the court, and he kept them in this tin cup next to his cot . . . people would walk in his little room, see those teeth at the bottom of the cup while he was just—” Wade laughed. “Just layin there, doin the crossword in the paper, like the world’s most harmless grandpa, like there ain’t nothin to see.” His smile stuck as he stared at the ceiling. “You bet your

ass no one was callin him 'Hot Shot in the Cot' after that. The C.O. that made up the name even ended up comin to him and apologizing. And I was like—well, I guess kinda like his caretaker, and—”

Petit stifled a giggle. Wade looked at her. “Sorry,” she said, biting her lip. “That shit just hard to imagine is all.”

“It’s how it was.”

“And he—he hook you up, the job at the gym?”

“Yeah.”

“And it wasn’t, like—”

“No,” Wade said. “It wasn’t like nothin.”

Petit’s hand fell away from his. “I could use me a dude like that.”

They lay in silence for several minutes. The sunlight cut along the side of the curtain to beam into Wade’s squint. Petit rolled away from his side and checked her cell phone, blue light thrown upon her frown. When he removed another cigarette from his pack Petit put a hand on his wrist. “It’s almost seven,” she said. “You can shower if you quick.”



