

## YOU'VE LOST THAT LOVING FEELING

It was raining like hell the night I picked up Marty Crawford. As I pulled up to the curb my headlights raked over him -- a chubby man with the red swollen complexion of a prolific drunk, beady eyes shoved deep in his skull, wet hair stuck to a balding head. Rain beaded his beard as he crawled into the back seat of my taxi and hollered he was going to 20th Avenue at Geary, slumped sideways in his seat, struggling to catch his breath. The avenues were far, almost too far. I set the meter and pulled the cab around.

I hoped he wasn't a talker, but that went out the window quick. Marty Crawford was bad luck breathing, the kind of guy that would hit on your girl at a bar while you're sitting at her other side, a bad-for-business type under the belief that his every word carried a charm. First he was talking a basketball game I hadn't seen, then some politician I'd barely heard of. He bitched about San Francisco, how it had gone to shit on account of the lazies, the druggies, the lunatics. The *entitled*, he called them.

I was halfway to 20th Avenue when Marty got quiet. I was glad for the silence, until I realized he was patting around at his pockets. I pulled the cab over and watched him dig through his clothes as the meter ran. "My wallet," he said.

"I'm trying to get home, man."

"I can't leave my wallet with those people." He sat back in his seat. "I can't pay you unless we get my wallet."

The rain whispered across the roof. "Where is it?" I asked.

"A place called--" He rolled his window down a crack, to let some air in. "Triple-X. In the Tenderloin."

"Fine," I said.

"You been there?" he asked, hope in his voice, like we were maybe brothers in shame.

"I know where it is."

Marty Crawford listed off everything inside the wallet as I drove -- credit cards, photos, phone numbers, business cards, irreplaceables, and money, a whole lot of money. He said he had two grand in his wallet, and I looked at him in the rearview to see if he was joking. Then he got quiet,

the nervous and jittery kind, until I turned onto Polk Street and pulled the cab up to Triple-X, among the boarded-up storefronts and fratboy bars. When I pulled up to the curb he threw the door open and lumbered across the sidewalk to the entrance. It took a minute for the door to open to let him in. A purple neon sign hung above the door, and the front windows were blacked out. A lady in white high heels and a leopard print skirt walked by the cab hunched under a pink umbrella, and waved at me with two fingers. I listened to the radio until Marty stumbled out into the rain, with the wallet in his hand. He crawled into the cab chuckling. "Fell out of my pocket while I was getting dressed," he said. He rifled through the wallet as I headed back towards the avenues, and heaved a relieved sigh. "I am the luckiest son of a bitch walking. That is not a place I imagine the honor system holds up very well."

"So I've heard," I said.

"You really ain't never gone inside?"

"I drive people there a lot."

"But you've never dabbled?"

"No."

"It's open another two hours," he said. He had a fan of cash in his hands that he struggled to count. "You find a place to park, I got you. For helping me out in my time of need." I told him the offer was kind, but I just wanted to go home and sleep next to my real-life wife. He shrugged and stuffed his wallet into his back pocket. "When I was there tonight... Madonna, circa 1986," he said.

I turned onto Geary. "So what," I said, just to fill the silence. "Celebrities, dead people, cartoon characters, space aliens..."

Marty crooked an eyebrow and smiled, like a professor being charitable with his wisdom. "They got a pretty limited selection of skins, most places -- ones you'd want to spend any money on, anyway -- but yeah, that's about the gist. Usually whatever raggedy-ass collection of skins the joint's bothered to scrape together. Slim pickens, but some of them are ace. If a guy had a Super-Res camera he'd be golden, but those things are hard to get these days, so you settle. Sometimes distributors send out new batches of skins. Those days are like Christmas morning."

I lit a cigarette as he talked.

"I know a guy whose brother-in-law has a Super-Res. He practically lives at a VXP joint in

Miami, with G-discs full of something like two hundred custom skins. Got a hell of a gambling problem too, but that's neither here nor there." Marty took the liberty of lighting his own smoke.

"He's a fuckin nut."

"A Super-Res," I said.

"Yeah. Lucky piece of shit."

It was one of those moments, you find yourself speaking when you aren't sure of the wisdom.

"I got a Super-Res," I said.

Marty was quiet, and I wasn't sure he'd heard me over the engine's rumble, or the rain. But then he sat up and rested an elbow on my headrest. "You're shitting me."

He quizzed me about the camera. I told him it was a V-5, top of the line when I bought it maybe six years back, just before the government put the kibosh on handing out licenses, and the cameras drifted into the depths of the black market. "I used to be a private detective," I said, and looked in the mirror to see his reaction.

"Now I know you're fuckin with me."

So I told him about how the nerds took my job. Private eye ain't a business anymore, not here among the living. The hackers, I told him. Little zit-faced punks worm their way into the National Database, tap into all the information that the United States government has on a person, they have access to more dirt than I'd get tailing someone a hundred years. No better private dick than the fleas on Uncle Sam's nuts, so the business went the way of the dinosaurs. Now here I was, driving a cab. I lit another smoke and cruised through the green lights, cut it close with a couple reds.

I'd shut Marty up. For a little while, at least.

I was a few blocks from 20th Avenue when Marty Crawford invited me into his house. He told me to park the cab in his garage and head upstairs with him. I'd heard of enough cabbies getting robbed, or worse, sauntering into a customer's apartment. Too many perverts in this world to go walking blind like that. When I pulled up to his house, Marty didn't get out of the cab fast enough for my liking. His hands were on the back of my seat, the tip of one of his fingers touching my shoulder. "I got a proposition for you," he said. "Do you want to make some money? I'm talkin

straight cash, no taxes, easy money.”

My mind went to the knife on my belt.

“I will pay you,” he said. “Five thousand -- more, if you want, but I’m proposing five thousand -- to go down to Lucky Sam’s on Masonic and snap some photos for me.” He stared at the side of my head as he waited for an answer. “Five thousand. On my honor. I just need some Super-Res photos.”

“Of what?”

“Just a lady,” he said. “Five, six, maybe up to ten good photos.”

“You need at least a dozen,” I said. “If you want it done right, that is.”

“However many you got to take. Face, full body, whatever you need to create a solid skin. You’re the pro. It’s just got to be on that Super-Res.”

Five thousand bucks to take pictures of some broad didn’t sound like such a bad gig, but I don’t make deals with drunks in the throes of their favorite pastime. I dug through the glove box and handed him one of my old private eye cards, wrinkled and bent in the corners. I told him to call me when he was sober, and when he was serious. He tried to convince me he was serious, there and then, but I waved him away, and finally he opened his door and stepped into the rain. He handed me two hundred dollar bills through the open door. “Tommy O’Keefe,” he said, reading the card I’d handed him. “Warm that V-5 up, brother. You’ll be hearing from me.”

There’s something about driving alone in the rain at three-thirty in the morning that soothes a man. Complete isolation, not a soul to fuck with you. Heater blasting, the rain beating down. The cab still smelled like vodka from Marty’s breath when I parked. I stripped off my wet clothes and crept into bed beside Becky. She stirred, cast me a sleepy look, and rolled her back to me. I lay awake for a long time. The bedroom window was open a crack, and the white curtain fluttered with the wind. Usually the sound of rain helps me sleep. But there was no sleep that night.

My phone rang the next day, and it was Marty. I got the impression he hardly remembered me except for that he could use me for something. He was serious, but I wasn’t convinced he was sober. His offer still stood, he practically begged me to get those pictures for him. He even said he’d pay me half before I snapped a single photo. That was enough. I told him I’d pick him up in an hour.

The fog hung thick over the city. Marty's house didn't look like anything too special, just another white Victorian wedged between its neighbors. When he finally came out of the front door his hair was combed back on his skull and he held a thermos of coffee in his hand. "Take it around the block," he said as he crawled into the cab. "I need to pick up some smokes. There's a liquor store on 23rd and Geary."

He held a picture over my shoulder. A chubby redhead lady smiled at me before a white background. Her eyes were a dull blue and her nose was pierced. "Got that from the Database," he said. "The geeks are good for something after all."

"What's this chick to you?"

"Her name's Eve," he said. "I grew up with her. We went to school together." He handed me the picture. "We hooked up a few times. Only the second girl I ever got with."

"Something special?" I asked, looking down at the photo.

He cleared his throat, but didn't answer.

When I pulled up to his house he handed me an envelope. "Details," he said. "Details make or break the skin." I snuck a peek into the envelope. A whole lot of Benjamin Franklins, lined up like men in a bread line.

"Is she working today?" I asked.

Marty scoffed as he got out of the cab. "What do I look like, a stalker or something?" I didn't have an answer to that question. "Sometimes you just want to relive something. It don't make me weird. You know what I'm talking about, don't you?" He studied my face, waiting on my word. Then he nodded to me and shut the door.

The parking lot at Lucky Sam's was tiny, and a queue of cars stretched down the street and around the corner, a parade of cars waiting their turn to squeeze in. I parked a few blocks away and walked, the V-5 in my hand. Lucky Sam's was busy as a New Delhi flea market. I liked the crowd. Crowds made my job easier.

She was pushing a shopping cart across the parking lot, hair tied up behind her head, a green apron over a pink hoodie, sleeves pulled up to her elbows. She looked like a half used-up housewife, not the object of a man's fantasies. She was helping an old lady load her groceries into the back of a minivan. I sat on a bench beside the sliding automatic doors, camera cradled in my lap, until Eve shut

the back of the minivan and headed back towards the store. Then I lifted the V-5 to my eye. I got six or seven photos before she got too close, but they were good, a handful of close-ups, a couple full-bodies. I dropped the camera to my side as she walked past me and into Lucky Sam's, and I followed her inside. I needed a few more full-bodies, maybe some shots with indoor lighting, to balance out the skin tone. For overall realism.

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I had the pictures on a G-disc and delivered to Marty two days later. I drove in circles through the avenues as he inspected the pictures. He had a pair of reading glasses on, and he was deadly serious as he zoomed into each picture. He asked if there was any way to edit the wedding ring off her finger. Then he changed his mind, he wanted it to stay. He handed me an envelope. I counted -- four thousand. "Consider it a bonus," he said. "Towards a happy future."

I went out for a celebration drink at some bar in the Sunset called the Blarney. It was a quiet night. I watched a boxing match on the TV as a handful of college kids played darts. The bartender was an old Irishman with shaggy sideburns and a missing index finger. Before I left, he was sixty dollars richer. I don't even remember driving home. I woke up sitting in a chair pulled up to the dinner table. A half-eaten microwave pizza lay on the table before me, most of the pepperoni picked off. I ate another slice and went to bed just as the shades started to glow pink with the sunrise. The bed was made, empty. I flung the blankets aside and crawled in with my clothes on.

It took a few days to hear from Marty again. I drove the cab while I waited, but each person I picked up annoyed me more than the last, until I couldn't take it anymore and drove home. I felt a certain thrill when my phone rang that Friday and it was Marty's name on the screen. He told me he needed me to pick him up, but wouldn't say anything more than that. Something in his voice was somber, and I asked if the skin had come out all right. "The skin's been-- something else," he said. But he wouldn't elaborate, except that I should show up, and I should have my V-5.

Marty was in a shape when he slipped into the backseat of my cab. His hair was all fucked up and he looked like he hadn't shaved, hadn't slept, in days. He told me to head towards the Tenderloin. He had someone who wanted to meet me. I told him I wasn't interested, and made like I

was going to turn the cab around, but he told me it was a good thing, so I parked the cab outside of Triple-X and followed him to the entrance. He pressed a button next to the door, and a shrill ringing cranked beyond. A moment later another shrill ring answered, and the door pushed open. The air inside smelled like cheap incense -- I could only imagine the smells it was covering up. Black lights glowed on the walls, bathing Triple-X in a strange, alien purple. There was a small lobby, and a lanky man sat with his feet up on his desk, watching a basketball game on a small television. He treated our arrival as nothing more than a slight itch on his leg. He told us Lex was in his office, and pointed to the door on the far side of the room.

Lex was a weasely-faced black guy with a big mole on his cheek just under his right eye. He kept his left hand in his coat pocket as he sat in a swivel chair behind a large, mahogany desk. I shook his hand, and my palm was cold with his sweat when I pulled it away. "You the private dick this guy been tellin me about," he said. "A man with a handle on a V-5." He had the images of Eve loaded onto the large screen in front of him, a fully 3-D skin. "Some slick shootin," he said, clicking through the various dimensions of the Super-Res image. "When Marty's through I might need a round."

"He's good, ain't he?" Marty asked.

"I hear you drivin a cab these days," Lex said. "That them hackers stole your thunder." I told him it was true. He asked to see my camera, and I pushed the hard case towards him. He popped it open and played with the tuft of hair on his chin as he looked at the V-5. "It's a shame to keep this shit to yourself," he said.

"That's what I told him," Marty said.

"You know how hard it is to get hold of one of these things these days? Let alone find a man who knows how to use it proper?" He closed the hard case and made a face like it hurt to relinquish it. "That shit, you don't press no button and wait for the fare to add up while you drag your ass all over town. You tell a motherfucker what they owe, and they owe it, you know what I'm sayin?" I told him I did. "So why you drivin a cab? Them Super-Res licenses ain't easy to come by these days, unless you CIA or some shit. I need someone like you. And I'm thinkin, you need someone like me. So I ask -- are you in need of a nigga like me?"

It was a good question.

He pushed a binder towards me. On the cover, *First Ladies (20th Century)* was written in

Sharpie. I opened it to a picture of Bess Truman. The next page was a headshot of Pat Nixon. I didn't turn the page, I let the binder sit open before me. "This is what I got to offer my clientele," Lex said. "I got different binders full of different bitches, but they all weak. Who wants to lay down with Nancy Reagan, know what I mean? It's a joke. You know how many niggas I got lined up to fuck Jackie O, on a daily basis? It's my fourth most popular skin, but that ain't demand, it's a lack of supply. You can buy different batches off the Internet, but they some Chinese bullshit, low-res, choppy, full of bugs, not to mention the price. But it also lacks that personal touch I want my business to have. If we could make VXP more personal, like you doin with Marty, we could be millionaires. You and me both. When a man's strapped up for VXP, he know he fakin it, but if it's done right, if he's immersed in it enough, he don't care. He livin somethin he'd never live out otherwise, or he's relivin somethin he ain't like to see again. It ain't about the experience, it's about what's goin on in his head before, during and after. It's about going out into that world feelin like a conqueror. He livin a fantasy, and the fantasy business is a seller's market, feel me?"

I told him I could lose my license, and my camera, if I got caught doing business with him. "Then you drive a cab," he said. "That's what you doin anyway, right? But you got an opportunity, and this ain't something some punk-ass in his mama's basement can fuck up."

I closed the binder and pushed it towards him on the desktop. "I'll think on it."

He looked at me a long time, sizing me up. "When you ready to get rich," he said, "you let me know." But his pride was bruised. He didn't look me in the eye the rest of my time in his office, not even when I shook his hand goodbye. Marty smiled and winked at me as I pushed out the office door.

The sun was coming down as I pulled the cab away. A man in a business suit waved at me from the side of the road. I turned off my available light, and he threw his arms in the air as I shot past. Becky wasn't home when I got there. I popped open a beer and went up to the roof, where I stayed until the sun went away, and its warmth with it.

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I worried that maybe I'd done too good of a job with Eve's skin, because I hadn't heard from



Marty in days. But I was temporarily rich, that much I knew. I also knew if I didn't drive soon, I would probably lose my job with the taxi company. It seemed inconsequential. One night I drank at a bar just off the Broadway strip, until it filled up with people around eleven o'clock. There's something about drinking alone in a crowded bar, loneliness gets at you, your mind wanders, you get bad ideas. So I walked to a VXP joint called Just Like Heaven. It was classy, if classy is a word that can be used. They had a door guy who looked like a bodybuilder, and nice green carpet that swished when you walked. It was warm, and the air smelled like candles. The receptionist was a dark-skinned Indian man with a thick mustache. He handed me a stack of binders, about a dozen in all. The top binder was labeled, *Celebrities 1960-1980*, and the plastic cover was starting to come apart. I took the binders to a plush chair on the other side of the lobby and sorted through them. *Teenage Heartthrobs*. *Stars of the 1990's-2010's*. A couple gay binders. And one labeled *V-Mode*. I opened it up to a picture of Adolf Hitler. I turned the page to a picture of George W. Bush. Barack Obama. Arnold Schwarzenegger. Apollo Creed, from the original *Rocky*.

I went back to *Celebrities 1960-1980*.

A few minutes later I showed the dark-skinned Indian my choice. "Very good," he said, and began typing on his computer. I asked if that's who everybody picked. "It is our most popular skin," he said, and told me it would be eight hundred dollars. I paid in cash, in a mild state of shock. He asked me if I had a preferred scenario. I guess I didn't answer fast enough, because he typed something and didn't bring it up again. He then told me, "Number four." There was a beeping sound and a door on the far side of the room slid open.

I walked into a dark room with a low steel-colored ceiling. Along the wall several black suits hung from hooks. The crotches of each suit had black codpieces affixed to them. All along the suit, wires coursed through the vinyl-like fabric like little veins, from the neck all the way down to each individual finger, down the legs to the toes. I found a suit that fit me and put it on. It was tight around the armpits and smelled like cheap disinfectant, the kind you smell in a highway motel bathroom. At least they cleaned the things. Once I was suited up I walked into a hallway with five doors, each numbered. Doors One through Three had 'Occupied' signs lit up on the face of the door. I tried door Number Four and it opened.

There was a short hallway beyond with an open doorway at the end, and on a pedestal in the

middle of the room was a helmet with a couple cords dangling from it. I put it over my head -- it was surprisingly light -- and connected the plugs that hung just beneath both of my ears to the corresponding sockets on each of my shoulders. I could see the hallway through the helmet's visor once the helmet was plugged in. *YOUR TIME <30 MINS> BEGINS ONCE THRESHOLD IS CROSSED*, blinked in green font before my eyes. I edged forward and peeked into the room beyond the doorway. It was a gray room with a domed ceiling, carpeted floor and padded walls. A simple bed with a simple mattress was against the wall, and a green chair sat next to it. Thick wires and cords were strung along the ceiling, and on the far side of the room was a steel obelisk with six red buttons glowing on its face. I felt silly, like a grown man in a Halloween costume, going trick or treating. I stepped into the room, and the buttons on the obelisk flashed green, and suddenly I couldn't see the buttons, or the obelisk, or the room at all.

I was in a fancy hotel room. The bed had changed to a smooth cream color with a large wooden headboard, and the chair beside it was sturdy oak, an old world chair, something an Amish guy would have built. A window appeared where the obelisk had been, overlooking a shimmering crystal ocean under a cloudless blue sky. But the most amazing thing was my VXP suit -- it had disappeared. Or, more appropriately, it had melded into my skin. I no longer felt it at all, but my skin buzzed. I felt the breeze of the room, smelled the salt of the sea. I felt naked, free. The world hummed, breathtaking in its artificial vibrancy. I wanted a cigarette.

And then the bathroom door opened slowly, and a woman stepped into the room, a towel wrapped around her body. She smiled at me from the doorway.

It was Marilyn Monroe.

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When I got home, Trevor's Mercedes was parked on the opposite side of the street from my house, so I went and had a couple beers at the bar down the block. A dog with a red handkerchief around its neck sat on a stool at the bar, lapping water from a shot glass next to its owner, some Filipino guy wearing sunglasses in the dark bar. I tried to pet the dog but it growled at me. When I finally walked home, Becky and Trevor were sitting at the kitchen table. They got quiet

when I entered the room. "You're not working tonight?" Trevor asked as Becky got up from her chair and fetched a beer out of the fridge.

"Taking a siesta," I said. "Grab me a beer, will you Beck?"

I sat with them at the table and drank my beer. Trevor made small talk while Becky sat with her shoulder facing me, drinking in silence. Trevor was wearing a blue T-shirt with a San Francisco Fire Department logo on its chest. He was one of those guys the years didn't touch, he looked the same as he did in college. It made me think of the old days, when Trevor and I had been roommates over in the Sunset and Becky had stayed the night in my room four nights a week. He was an amiable type, charming with his goofy smile and cool blue eyes. He laughed at my jokes, even the bad ones, and he was a pro at pretending the elephant wasn't standing in the room with us taking a dump on the kitchen table. He was a good guy, deep down, and that made everything worse.

At two in the morning Becky got up without a word, went to the bathroom and emerged a few minutes later dressed in her pajamas and her make-up washed off, and disappeared into our bedroom. I suggested Trevor and I play cards, and pulled out a wad of hundred dollar bills, but Trevor gave me a strange look and said he ought to head home. When he was gone, I turned on the television and waited for sleep on the couch with my hands behind my head, thinkin, *Happy birthday, Mr. President.*

I was awoken at noon by the phone jumping around in my pants pocket. It was Marty. He had another job for me. There was another five thousand in it for me, but we had to get it done that day. I told him seven thousand, expecting a haggle, but he agreed. I told him I'd pick him up in an hour.

He had me park outside of a coffee shop on California street. Marty sat low in his seat and stared towards the cafe. "She starts work in fifteen minutes," he said. A massive zit had formed on his chin beneath the scraggly blonde hairs of his beard. "I'm gonna need lots of pictures of this chick. This has to be the real deal." He smoked cigarettes at a rate some people eat potato chips. We listened to the Giants game on the radio as we waited. "You gotta try VXP some time," he said. "I think anyone who ain't pluggin into VXP at least once a week is fuckin up. I'm gonna live ten years longer over this shit. Besides, don't you think you ought to study up a little on your craft?" He looked at me. "What's your take on Lex's offer?"

“It’s in deliberation,” I said.

“I swung by his office the other day. Man, he’s an ornery motherfucker when he doesn’t get his way.” Marty cleared his throat. “He wanted me to tell you, he’s thinkin if you agreed, he’d send you to Los Angeles.”

“He’d send me, huh?”

“To be some kind of paparazzo with that Super-Res,” he said. “There’s some guy who does that for a VXP joint in Oakland. Takes pictures of stars on the red carpet, converts them into skins and distributes them to the VXP joints willing to pony up. Easy money. If you don’t get caught and beat to death by security.” He leaned back in his seat and sparked up another cigarette. “If you don’t take him up on it, he’s talkin about hiring someone else to do it, a friend of a friend who might move from New York.”

I turned the radio off, and in the newborn silence a siren wailed somewhere.

“I think you should stick around here, personally,” Marty said. “Plenty of VXP joints to work with up here. And you always got me. But, you know, Lex told me to tell you, it’s a ball-in-your-court kinda thing--” Just then a girl walked past the cab towards the front door of the coffee shop, wearing a yellow backpack, her hair dyed red. She wore white high-tops and a checkered bracelet. “That’s her,” Marty said, nodding. She wrenched open the door of the coffee shop and disappeared inside. “You get a look at her?”

“Marty,” I said, “that girl can’t be more than sixteen years old.”

“I ain’t touching her,” he said, like he was insulted. “I just need fifteen to twenty good Super-Res images of her, with a close-up of the eyes. Maybe a few, to be safe. She’s got pretty eyes. She’s pretty, right?” Damn near half his cigarette fizzled into his lungs as he waited for my answer. “She’s mature for her age, when you talk to her,” he said. “And she gives me free things every once in a while, when I’m getting coffee. She’ll throw in a croissant or a cookie or a-- Anyway, she seems nice.” He ashed his cigarette out the slit in the window. “And she’s got nice eyes.”

It only took a couple hours after I’d handed Marty the G-disc full of pictures for my phone to ring, a number I didn’t recognize. I let Lex leave a message. In it he told me to come swing by his other place of business, a bar in the Tenderloin called Deep Space. He said to tell Carlo the door guy who I was, and the rest would take care of itself. He said it would be worth my while. I deleted

the message as soon as it was over. I could hear the couple in the apartment next door arguing. I poured myself a whiskey and listened with my feet up on the armrest of the couch. Their voices rose and fell, like music.

I was back at Just Like Heaven, that night or the next. Another Indian guy waited for me behind the desk this time, light skinned, with a goatee and an off-kilter eye. He chewed gum loudly as I handed him the G-disc. "What's this?" he asked.

A few minutes later a man came out of the back. He was chubby with glasses, gray hair pulled back into a ponytail. He introduced himself as the manager, and took me back into his office. As the images loaded onto his computer, he swiveled his chair towards me. "How'd you get these images, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I downloaded them from a distributor," I said. "From China."

When all was loaded up, two skins floated on the screen, like specimens in a glass jar, and the manager clicked between them. "You got these from China?" he asked. I shrugged. "Well, which will it be? Or, we can do both, but it'll cost you a bit more."

I studied the two skins. Then I pointed to Eve.

"That other one's a baby," the manager said as he programmed the skin. "Now, these are raw data Super-Res source images. Normally these things are converted into the proper format before they're distributed, with pre-programmed nude body templates. Now, where from China did you get these, exactly?"

"Just some Chinaman," I said.

A short while later I was lounging on a bed beside a waterfall nestled in a lush canyon. Its mist floated through the air, brushing cool against my skin. A group of horses drank from the far side of the waterfall's basin, tails flickering. The sun shone down upon my naked body, illuminating the desert valley that stretched beyond the canyon. The manager had called the scenario, "The Oasis".

Eve stepped out from behind the waterfall in a black two-piece bikini. She walked down the stone pathway towards the bed, and smiled as she sat on its edge. She patted the mattress, beckoning me to sit next to her. I scooted along the edge of the bed until our thighs touched. Her skin was warm. She rubbed my back with the flat of her hand. I touched her leg and squeezed the

flesh. She leaned over and kissed my neck until I shirked away.

“Stand up for me, will you?” I said. “Let me get a look at you.”

She stood, servile smile beamed towards me, like an obedient mute. “Turn around,” I said. She turned, and I studied her legs. Plump, pale, without blemish. “Lift your arms,” I said, and she complied. The muscles moved under the skin, an orchestra of organic machinery. “The detail on you,” I said. “My god.” I told her to turn around and look at me. Then I told her to do the splits. Without hesitation, Eve plunged downward, her legs scissoring open wide until her pelvis rested on the ground beside the bed. She did it so quickly, so fluidly at my request, I had to laugh. “Jackie fuckin Chan over here,” I said. And still, laying split like that, she smiled at me.

I told her to have a seat on the bed.

“This place is beautiful,” I said. “I could live in a place like this, couldn’t you?”

“Yes,” Eve said. Her voice was flat, high-pitched. It sounded wrong, coming out of that face.

I pointed towards the horses drinking from the pool. “I haven’t ridden a horse since I was probably eight years old,” I said. “When I was a kid, there was a park near my house where you could ride horses. Nice healthy horses, just like these ones. I fed them apples and carrots. I remember those big yellow teeth, gnashing those apples. People treat them like living, shitting motorcycles, but they’re beautiful creatures.” Her hand was on my back, rubbing between my shoulder blades. “You don’t see them too much these days,” I said. “Only time I see them in the city, a cop’s riding them.”

She leaned close and kissed my neck. I pulled away. “For all I know, Lex might have distributed you all over the world by now. There could be hundreds of guys doing this same thing with you right this minute.” Her hand was working its way up my thigh. “Can I ask you something?” I asked. “What do you-- Do you-- *feel* anything?” I felt like an idiot, talking to a skin like it was a person.

“I get so much pleasure from this,” she said in that unnatural voice. “I get so much pleasure, making you feel good.” I watched the fake horses lap at the fake water as Eve kissed my neck, her warm hand sliding over my skin.

A little over an hour later, I was in the manager’s office getting interrogated about my Chinese distributor again. I stonewalled him until he dropped it. “Let me ask you something,” I said

before I left. “Why’d her voice sound all weird?”

“This skin, is it anyone you ever met, you ever talked to, or heard talk, at least?” he asked. I told him no. “Well, how VXP works, it uses your brain, your memories, to piece together what it can’t replicate itself. It tricks your brain into a sort of dream-like state and projects the image of the skin for you, but the program can only do so much. All it does is put up the images and turn on your brain’s receptors. The rest is on you. The program uses an algorithm to convert clothed images into nude bodies, but your brain connects the dots. It’s really quite amazing, all we got stored up here. All you’d need is to hear the lady say two words, and her voice would sound right as rain in VXP til the day you die. The brain doesn’t let anything go. It holds on, forever.” The manager walked me to the door. “But I suppose you would’ve never met your lady to know what her voice sounds like,” he said. “Seein as how she’s from China, right?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Lex kept calling. On the third day, I answered, and agreed to meet him at Deep Space. When I showed up Carlo greeted me at the door. He was a hulk of a man with tattoos up his neck, a tiny cross under the corner of his right eye. Deep Space was a large room with a circular bar in the middle, and a mirror along the wall gave the impression the bar was twice as big as it really was. Carlo led me down a dark stairway in the back of the bar to an office, where Lex was waiting before a wall of security screens. He didn’t show any emotion one way or the other as I sat opposite him at the desk. “Maybe you got a certain proclivity for poverty,” he said. “Maybe you think good things can’t happen to you. You think money’s somethin that ain’t comin.” He studied me broodingly. “Or maybe you one of them shit-don’t-stink motherfuckers, think my line of business is beneath you. Is this what you tellin me?”

“I ain’t said a word.”

“Well, say a word,” he said. “And I’ll make you rich.”

He told me a lot of the same things Marty had already told me -- the guy from New York was house hunting around Beverly Hills the next week. “But that cat’s work ain’t shit compared to yours,” Lex said. “The only advantage he got is that he don’t play me like no bitch. I appreciate

when someone got the initiative to grab what's offered and show a little gratitude, feel me?" I told him I'd let him know by the end of the week. I guess Lex didn't like hearing this, because he said something about keeping our meeting brief, and told Carlo to walk me to the door.

The only people in Deep Space were a trio of trannies, drunk and giggling and talking too loud. One of the trannies, a tall Latina with eyelashes like spider legs, gave me eyes as I walked past and out the front door. I sat in my cab smoking cigarettes for a long time, watching the traffic pass, the crazies stumble their way down Polk Street talking to themselves, the trash-swept city come to life, like a lunatic den under a full moon.

I met Marty at the coffee shop near his house a couple days later. The girl with the red hair was working, wearing a white dress with blue polka dots. I ordered a coffee from her. Her eyes were green. Marty nudged me with a grin and led me to a table on the far side of the cafe. I sat with my back to the counter. "I got another job for you," he said. "Finish up your coffee and we'll take a walk. Bring your camera." I drank my coffee, nice and slow, while Marty's eyes wandered past me towards the girl behind the counter.

We walked towards Golden Gate Park, just a few blocks away. "So you tried VXP yet?" he asked as we crossed Balboa. "I'm giving you all this money, I'm kind of hoping you're using it to educate yourself on your career path."

I hesitated, then told him yeah, I had.

"And? What'd I tell you? It's the fuckin best, right?"

"It's all right," I said. "Maybe it just ain't for me."

His beam went dull. "Ain't for you? What do you mean-- Maybe you need to open up one of them folders full of dudes." I shot him a look. "You're right," he said. "Maybe it ain't for everyone." We walked the next block in silence. "You really ain't into it?"

I struggled for the words. "That moment, when your time is up, and the warning flashes in your face sayin you got two minutes. Then that two minutes runs out, the room disappears, the lady vanishes, and you're standing in that weird dome room all alone, dressed like a futuristic scuba diver or something, all... soiled." I dropped my cigarette to the ground and kicked it to the curb. "I guess I just feel in the end it's like... humpin the refrigerator."

Marty scuffed his feet as he walked. "You try Marilyn? Tell me Marilyn ain't the shit." I



shrugged. “Humpin the refrigerator,” he repeated. “I’d like to meet your refrigerator, is what I got to say to that.”

Twenty minutes later I was crouched in the bushes while Marty stood on the sidewalk, peering up and down the street with his hands stuffed in the pockets of his sweatshirt. “Anytime between five and six,” he called to me. “I see her all the time when I’m walking my kids across the park from daycare, the days I’m with ‘em. Maybe she’s one of them exercise addicts or something. It’s like a form of anorexia. Very common.” This was the first I’d heard of Marty having kids, the poor little bastards. After waiting for about ten minutes a blonde lady in tight green jogging pants and a black tanktop came jogging down the path. Marty whipped his map open and peered at it as she approached. He stepped in her path and asked for help finding the Academy of Science. She pointed over her shoulder, jogging in place as she talked. I made my work quick, though it was difficult focusing on her with all that movement. I got off a quick dozen shots or so before she jogged away.

I scrolled through the pictures. They weren’t half bad, all things considered. “She looks pissed,” Marty said, peering over my shoulder at the camera’s screen. “The skin ain’t gonna be scowling like that, is it?”

\* \* \* \* \*

I hadn’t had so much money in years. I bought a new jacket, and a nice silver Zippo lighter made of steel. I smoked cigars. I sipped at high balls of top shelf liquor. I was king of any bar I pulled a stool at. The tenders knew me by name. I spent a lot of money, didn’t cause any trouble, and they liked me because of it. I was the ideal customer. It was important for me to be the kind of person I liked dealing with, back when I used to drive a cab.

I did a couple more jobs for Marty over the next couple weeks -- the asian lady who lived next door to him with the pekingese, the chain-smoking hostess at a restaurant in the Financial District called *Mineral*. As we cased the hostess from across the street, Marty told me Lex’s guy had given up the search for a place in Beverly Hills, and had moved to Japan instead. Marty told me Lex was about to hire some guy who had a Super-Res v-3. I told Marty a V-3 wouldn’t do the job for

shit. "I know," he said. "But Lex is desperate, I guess. The market's moving quick, gold rush status. Lex is under the impression he's falling behind. If he wants to compete, he needs a bodysnatcher down where the stars are to be snatched." I looked at him. "That's what they're calling them. *Bodysnatchers*." He watched the hostess as she lit up another cigarette across the street. "Gold rush status."

That night I cleared out half the top shelf at a bar called McCovey's and got cut off at around midnight, for reasons I can't recall. As I drove, I rolled down my window and smoked a cigar. *You've Lost That Loving Feeling* was on the radio. I turned that shit up, all the way. I think I was heading towards North Beach. I veered off the road and poked the nose of my cab through a chainlink fence. Some people down the street started hurrying towards the cab. I tried to back out of the fence but the cab was stuck, the broken chain link clawed the paint from my hood. The taxi was bathed in the light of a billboard above, a lipstick ad with three models pouting their blood red lips before a white background. *A Kiss That Leaves a Lasting Impression*, it said. Finally the cab wrenched loose of the fence, and I took off. The next morning I discovered a hole burnt through my new jacket, as big and round as a quarter. The cigar lay dead on the floor of my cab, half-smoked under the brake pedal.

I started getting calls from strangers, references from Marty, their voices low and conspiratorial. I told them I didn't know what they were talking about and hung up. Then Lex called. I let it ring three and a half times before I answered.

I was on the roof when I heard a car park in front of our building. I peeked over the edge as Trevor wrenched open the lobby door and held it for Becky. He touched the small of her back as she passed, and her laugh echoed from the lobby just before they stomped up the stairs to our apartment. I met them in the entry hallway with two beers cracked open for them. Trevor accepted his bottle and clinked it against mine. Becky set hers on the table and disappeared into the bedroom. I sat on the couch as Trevor leaned his weight on the far armrest. I told him I was thinking we could go out to dinner, the three of us, somewhere nice. He said that was a great idea, with that 'gee gosh' quarterback smile he got when we talked these days, like he was embarrassed over something. Becky emerged from our bedroom wearing a slim black dress, hair up, all made up for a night out. She snatched her beer from the table and took a good swig.

As we tried to hail a cab, Trevor asked why I was bringing my camera. I told him I wanted to snap some photos, get some use out of the thing. Once we snagged a ride, I directed our taxi towards Mineral. The hostess -- the hostess I'd cased just a few days before, whose image Marty was probably befouling that very minute -- told us it would be an hour and a half wait. I handed her a hundred dollar bill, and we had a table within two minutes. Trevor laughed as we were shown our seats. Becky looked at me strange as she unfolded her napkin across her lap. She looked lovely, with her black hair pulled up and her long slender neck showing, smooth despite the years. I ordered a bottle of top notch cabernet, the most expensive on the list. The waiter poured my glass first and held the bottle up for me as I sipped. "That's damn good," I said, and he topped me off, then poured the other two glasses, like I'd granted him permission, some sacred rite of gentlemen, passed down since the time of emperors.

Trevor and Becky shared a pizza and salad. I got the veal cutlet, rare.

The wine got us loose. We were talking, joking, laughing. I ordered a second bottle.

Becky excused herself to the bathroom, and I craned my neck to watch her walk away. "She's lovely, isn't she?" I asked.

Trevor sipped his wine and arched his eyebrows in agreement.

"You're looking good these days too," I said. "You been taking care of yourself?"

"I've been running, when I can make the time," he said, looking down at his stomach, like he'd never realized how flat it was.

I told him I wanted a picture. We were getting old and it was important to capture it while we were still young and handsome. For the memories, I said. Trevor was bashful about it, then he got confused, then he stood up and let me snap some pictures of him, his eyes darting around the restaurant as he stood there awkwardly. I didn't let him sit until I had a dozen pictures or so and Becky had returned to the table. She watched the photoshoot with her arms crossed. I said I wanted a picture of both of them together. He put his arm around her, but his hand hovered an inch over her shoulder, like he was afraid to touch her.

When we got in the cab I told the cabby Trevor's address. Becky squirmed in her seat, smoothing her skirt over her legs. When we pulled up to his condo he insisted on leaving a twenty dollar bill for the fare, and his eyes brushed past me towards Becky as he climbed out of the taxi. On

the ride home I let my hand linger on her thigh. She looped her pinky through mine and we watched the city pass in a rush of orange lights.

“This is nice,” I said. “It’s been a nice night.”

She let go of my pinky a few minutes later and leaned her head against the window beside her.

In the dark of our bedroom, Becky struggled to peel a stocking from her leg and asked me how I was throwing so much money around. I told her I’d gotten a private job for a client who bled money. She didn’t ask any more questions as she changed into her pajamas. When people see money, they don’t do anything to jeopardize something they might see as a mirage, they take any explanation you give them. They want to believe in the money. Like a ghost, if you believe, it’s more likely to stick around. We all believe in ghosts, sometimes. She said the wine had gone right to her head, and was soon breathing soft and measured in the bed beside me.

“I’m not an idiot, you know,” I said.

I don’t know if she heard me. She rolled her back to me and lay very still.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was in Deep Space the next night -- business was finished and drinks were on the house. The bar was empty but for a handful of sullen drunks and the three resident trannies, looking towards me with a mixture of boredom and interest. I got the impression they were on the house as well. I told the bartender to pour me a double of whatever Lex drank. It was scotch, and it went down like velvet fire. I sat in the corner near the window facing the street. Carlo stood just beyond the glass with his back to me. Beyond him, the city glowed neon. You couldn’t see the stars behind the haze. Space was a blank slate, kind of black, kind of orange.

All the seats in the waiting room of Just Like Heaven were taken up by shifty men reading dirty magazines. I passed the the G-disc to the Indian receptionist and told him to upload the images. He gave me a look and picked up the phone.

When the Super-Res images of Trevor popped up on the monitor, the manager was very quiet as he inspected the images. Then he removed his glasses. “What can I do for you here, friend?”

he asked.

“V-Mode,” I said.

The manager loaded the images with a curled lip. “Don’t believe I’ve done a customized V-mode skin,” he said. “A first for everything.” The manager used the mouse to turn Trevor all around on the screen, like a toy soldier on display. “Those Chinese are doing some amazing things these days,” he said, and looked at me over the top of his glasses. “What personality profile would you like for the skin?” I told him I didn’t know what he was getting at. “Do you want him to be submissive, do you want him to fight back, do you want him to be a kung fu master? He can scream, be quiet, cry, he can insult you. Or do you want him to beg?”

“He can fight back,” I said. “But don’t make him no kung fu master.”

As the manager programmed the skin, he said, “When you’re done, maybe we can come back here, have a little chat about these images. I’d like to know more about what you’ve got here, while you recuperate. You’re gonna want a soft chair and an ice pack, anyway.”

“An ice pack?”

“You’ve never done V-Mode, have you?” he asked. “You’re not gonna need it, really, but your brain’s gonna sure as hell think you do. Sometimes that ‘mind over matter’ malarkey don’t work to your advantage.” He removed the G-disc from the computer and handed it to me. “Let’s suit you up.”

He led me to the room with the suits hanging on the wall, but he picked out a different suit, one without the codpiece. “Trust me, you don’t want your beanbag to be that sensitive,” the manager said with a grin. I pulled the suit on and followed the manager to Room 3. I slipped the helmet over my head, and he clipped the plugs to my shoulders. “Eye of the tiger,” he said, and pat me on the back before he walked down the hallway back to his office. *ROUND ONE <3 MINS> BEGINS ONCE THRESHOLD IS CROSSED*, blinked before my eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

The water steamed as I sat in the tub, feet propped up on the porcelain, holding my bottle just above the water. My phone rang from the lip of the bath, and echoed through the stillness of

the bathroom. I entertained thoughts of letting it vibrate into the water. But I answered, and it was Marty. He said it was his birthday in a couple days, and he was having a dinner for the occasion. He offered to let it be a going away dinner for me as well. I told him maybe we ought to keep our relationship professional. "Come on, Tommy," he said. "Get a little festive with me, one last time. You owe me that much, with how I've hooked you up." I hung up the phone, lifted myself out of the tub, and took a leak. The bastard had got me good in the kidneys, but I wasn't pissing blood, I just felt like I ought to have been. I put on my bathrobe and went back into the living room to finish packing. I didn't plan on taking much of anything with me to Los Angeles. Becky could keep it.

We had the back room at Don Gianni's reserved all to ourselves, a dozen of us. It was like a scene out of a low-rent gangster movie. A fat man with a gray goatee and bald head was sat next to me. He dabbed at his forehead and upper lip with a maroon napkin as he told me he was an investment entrepreneur before he even told me his name. Whatever the hell that means. I was thinking maybe this entrepreneur should invest in some deodorant. "You're Marty's private dick, aren't you?" he asked.

"No."

The fat man's mouth bobbed for a retort. Then he drank his wine.

Lex sat across from me at the table with his arms crossed, Carlo at his side looking out of place and bored. Lex raised his glass towards me and I nodded. Marty sat at the head of the table, clean shaven and drunk. He clinked a fork against the side of his wine glass and stood from his seat. Alcohol fed Marty's delusion that he was the second coming of Johnny Carson, he had a monologue memorized that he told with one hand on the table to steady himself. A few guys in the crowd snickered at some of his more off-color jokes, mostly at the gall. Then his eyes locked on me. "This is also a bittersweet night for me," he said. "My man Tommy over there is leaving me for greener pastures. I've given him a whole lot of my time and money, and now he's grabbing the cash and running." Everyone at the table turned to look at me. "He was driving a cab when I discovered him. Driving a cab, begging for fare, with a Super-Res gathering dust in his trunk. How's that for fuckin' silly?" A subdued chuckle went up around the table. "But I came into his life, and now look at him, belly-up to the big boy table. I introduced him to my man Lex, and now he's Mr. Hollywood. I'm lucky if he returns my calls!" He took a long sip from his drink. "Anyway. Enough bustin' balls. This

guy is quality when it comes to collecting skins. There ain't anyone who comes close. He's got a bright future, and I'm proud to have been the man to set him on that path. He's not only going to make a lot of people a lot of money, but I'm going to have the greatest collection of skins in the entire fuckin world. Maybe if you fellas are lucky, you'll get my sloppy seconds." He raised his glass. "To Tommy. And to my own happy birthday, you sons of bitches."

We raised our glasses and drank to that.

I went outside. I was out of cigars. I bummed a cigarette from the valet.

Marty stumbled out of the restaurant a few minutes later, a bottle of champagne in one hand, three skinny glasses in the other. The host followed after him, saying Marty couldn't bring the bottle of champagne outside. Marty said with how much money we were throwing their way in the back room, he could drink champagne on the roof if he wanted, and the host recoiled back into the restaurant. Marty handed me a glass and filled it until it overflowed all over my hands. "I told Lex to come out and have a drink with us," he said. "The three amigos." We turned and looked towards the front entrance.

I asked Marty what the fuck. He turned and looked at me. I asked what the fuck was that.

Then his head was under my armpit. I was squeezing his head against my chest, as hard as I could. His bald spot was under my chin. I squeezed until his little ears poking from the sides of his skull started turning red. Then the valet grabbed me from behind and pulled, and I tossed the bald spot away, like a fish too small for eating. Marty stood there rubbing his neck, looking at me in horror. I could still feel his warmth in the crook of my arm, just above the ghost ache in my ribs. He hurried into Don Gianni's. The valet told me I should probably leave. I walked into the restaurant.

Carlo met me just inside the door. He pushed against my chest and told me to head the other way. Lex was talking to Marty behind him. Marty's thin hair stuck from his skull, and he looked at me with wild eyes, eyes that couldn't decide if he wanted to come at me swinging or go hide under a table. Carlo grabbed my sleeve and told me I was headed the wrong way, my way was out the front door. He was polite about it, civil even, and that's why I listened. I walked past the limo and waved down a cab. It wasn't until the cab pulled up to the curb that I realized the glass of champagne was still in my hand. I drank the rest, set the glass on the curb and hopped into the taxi. It was a big van cab, enough to fit at least six people. I sat in the middle seat with my arms draped

over the entire back bench.

I should have gone home. The cab dropped me off in front of Deep Space. A different bartender was working, a woman with a loose black tanktop and bags under her eyes. I told her Lex opened the bar for me, but she wasn't having it, so I paid for my drinks. It was Friday night and the bar was standing room only. I stood in the corner by the mirror wall, holding my drink. On one side of me was the bar, on the other its reflection. The two sides moved, in sync. In the reflection I noticed a shape move towards me and stand at my side. I turned, and the tall Latina tranny was smiling at me, with those spider leg eyelashes flitting. She draped an arm over my shoulder and asked if I needed a friend. I told her I did. She ordered us a couple whiskeys straight up.

We found a couple stools in a dark corner. I could see our reflections in the mirror on the other side of the bar. Our images were small and indiscernible in the low light, figures in a tumult of figures. Her name was Julita and she didn't take no for an answer, for a while at least. When she finally did, she scooted her stool away from me with a hurt look on her face, like it was personal.

"Let me ask you something," I said. "What's a normal day like for you? I want to know."

"Shit, my days be boring," she said.

"Somehow I doubt that," I said. "What about your customers? How are they?"

"They pay, and they get what they pay for. It obvious." She looked at me. "You police or something?"

"That's a familiar transaction for most people. But I mean--" She squirmed in her seat and her eyes combed the bar desperately. "All those people. How's it feel, something so intimate, with so many strangers?"

"Shit, a body's a body," she said, irritated. "As long as they treat you right and you get paid, no bullshit, ain't no problem. When they wild out, then you still ain't got a problem, they the one got a problem comin. I can defend myself."

"And Lex," I said. "How's it working for him?"

"I ain't gonna talk about Lex," she said. "This his club. This his whiskey. He run this joint. I ain't gonna talk about him, one way or the other. We his employees."

"Employees," I said. "I guess that makes us co-workers, huh?"

Her face flickered with confusion.



“They call guys like me *bodysnatchers*,” I said. “Quite a title, huh?”

“Better than any title I got,” Julita said. “That’s just what it always is, anyway. Bodies snatchin bodies snatchin bodies.” It was my turn to look at her in confusion as she got up from her stool. “Just act like you like it, and don’t waste nobody else’s time.” She walked away, balancing on her heels. I sipped my drink and watched her disappear into the crowd.

A few minutes later Lex walked into the bar with Carlo at his tail. Carlo stuck by the door as Lex pushed his way through the crowd, and I stood from my stool. He frowned when he saw me. I started to apologize but he waved a hand dismissively. “Nah, fuck that fat bull-in-a-chinashop motherfucker,” he said. “No time for bad memories like him. They just somethin gone.” He led me down the stairs to his office. I looked over my shoulder towards the mirror against the wall. Our reflections were two vague shapes in the background, disappearing down a dark hole.