

ARE YOU RICHARD?

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When the bell rang I expected it to be UPS or the Jehovah's Witnesses. That's usually all we get on weekday mornings, so I was surprised to find a young woman when I opened the door. She was no more than eighteen, a few years younger than my daughter, and dressed like a student—Nikes, a thin jacket, canvas backpack slung over one shoulder. Except that the students I knew rarely wore miniskirts or used purple eye shadow. She peered at a small spiral-bound note pad clutched in her hand, then at me. A brief smile tightened her lips when she seemed to notice for the first time that I was in my bathrobe and holding a half-eaten bagel slice.

"Hi, are you Richard?" she said. Without waiting for a reply, she hiked up her backpack and started forward.

The correct answer was, of course, no. No is what I should have said, what I started to say. But the word wouldn't come out. Instead, I simply backed away and let her step in past me. In the hallway she leaned left and right, examining the rooms beyond with no real interest. That same fragile smile—a nervous tic, I realized—compressed her lips again and vanished. Not knowing what to say, I waited, staring at her to the point of rudeness. I thought, *Can't she tell something's wrong?* But no. She seemed to have no interest in challenging the obvious. And she was inside now. A line had been crossed. By my silence I had committed myself—both of us—and it was no longer possible for me to admit I was not Richard, had no idea, in fact, who Richard was.

She set down her backpack and unzipped her jacket. "Bambi wanted me to tell you she'll be back next week. She's in California." Again that vanishing smile.

"What's your name?" I said.

She blinked and turned away. "Uh, Dawn. Didn't anybody call you?"
"Dawn."

Freed from the confines of her jacket, Dawn's bouquet spilled into the surrounding air: scent of lilac, a fragrant soap of some kind. And youth—the funky sweet musk of coats hung in a grade school closet, of fresh, unselfconscious sweat.

She wasn't tall, 5'4" or so. With auburn hair puffed up in a style that didn't suit her, she was pretty only in the way that all young women are pretty. We stood close to each other, breathing, her guileless dark eyes refusing to meet mine. Finally she said, "So where do you want to go, upstairs?" and a knot tightened in my chest. Scouting ahead of consciousness, my corrupt instincts had, of course, recognized at once what kind of young woman would arrive at a strange house, ask for a man she didn't know, and not be put off, or at least embarrassed, to find him in nothing but a robe. Now it was confirmed in the rawest sense who Dawn was, who Richard and Bambi were. And knowing had cost only silence—much cheaper in moral currency than a spoken lie. With the terrible feeling that I was observing myself from a distance, I indicated the den, hoping Dawn wouldn't notice my hand trembling.

"In there? Really?" She shrugged, and I was sure she rolled her eyes, though I couldn't see them.

In the den I dragged the coffee table off to the side of the rug. Dawn heaved her backpack onto the couch. Again she squinted at the note pad in her hand.

"Bambi told me what you like. See? I wrote it all down."

"What?" I said impishly. "Bambi revealed all my secrets?"

Dawn faced me. Annoyed? Insulted? "No!—No! She only said—you know—what you like. God, we're not *ever* supposed to talk about clients' *personal* stuff. It's the rules."

"Well, I'm sure you haven't broken any rules," I said. No personal stuff. Right.

When she was convinced I was sincere, she crossed to the couch and rummaged through her backpack. Immediately it toppled sideways and various

instruments of her trade clattered to the floor: vibrators, dildoes, handcuffs, cock rings, ointments and oils. "Oops. I guess I'm a little nervous." She stuffed everything back in except a tube of KY jelly and a pack of condoms.

Was she really this clumsy? Or was it an act to make me think this was her first time? I didn't know yet whether she was capable of subtle manipulation, though I doubted it. In any case, I continued to invest in silence. Whether she would have lied about it or told the truth I didn't want to know. The bizarre momentum of the morning was catching up with me. I realized I was still holding my bagel slice, minus two half-moon bites. I slipped it into my pocket.

Dawn undressed methodically from the bottom up. She stepped out of her Nikes and rolled off her white socks. Gripping the hem of her miniskirt she tugged it down. She wasn't wearing underpants. My hands and feet bristled as I watched her. Her pudenda looked brand new, almost unfinished, a mild pucker under the smooth bulge of her belly, draped with a few beige threads that hadn't yet had time to curl. Thighs and buttocks rounded, everything baby-fat plump. Theatrically, in a maneuver I suspected was well rehearsed, she took hold of the tail of her black turtle-necked sweater and worked it up over her head, pausing briefly the instant before her bare breasts flopped loose and again the instant afterward. For one thrilling moment her head and arms were invisible, allowing me to view her body in virtual anonymity. To view this naked young cherub. Ripe and rounded. Here in my den at ten o'clock in the morning. My groin surged and I was angry with myself for responding to such an obvious display. Was the unknown Richard responsible for this bit of choreography? Or perhaps it was common to the trade. Whatever its provenance, Dawn faltered in the finale. Just when she should have eased the sweater gracefully up past her head and flung it away, it caught at her chin. Wrestling to untangle herself, she stumbled backward and slumped onto the couch. "Oof. Damn it!" Sheepishly she peeled the sleeves from her arms. "I'm sorry. They're, like, real tight when they're new."

She *was* a klutz! She had partially annihilated her hairdo in the battle. I could easily have burst out laughing—I was anxious enough—but how

indignant she looked, how mortified, watching me for a reaction. I mounted a sympathetic smile and said, "You have beautiful eyes."

She scrutinized me for a long moment. Finally, a snort bubbled up from her throat and she was back on her feet. Once again she located her note pad and angled it close to her face, eyes narrowed, and it struck me that she was nearsighted. Plain. Clumsy. Insecure. Nearsighted. My God, I thought, what else? And once more my groin stirred, not, I was sure, because of her nakedness—not entirely—or her silly striptease, which had been far from seductive. No, with utter astonishment I realized I was responding to her inadequacy! In some perverse way it was her defects and not her sex that awakened my lust. She blinked at me, this unremarkable, feckless woman-child with pink skin and rosy nipples, round and soft and unblemished and dusted with peach fuzz, and I held my breath.

"Um, so?" she said.

She was waiting for me to drop my robe.

If she noticed that I was grappling with the urge to cringe at her feet and confess my deception, she didn't show it. But guilt nearly did overwhelm me—until she shot a hip and glanced away, twining a lock of hair, pouting absently. Such a perfect angle between head and neck. Such velvety, radiant flesh—such youth! What could I do? I let out a strangled moan and the robe slipped from my shoulders.

Dawn started toward me but pulled up. She was staring at my nearly full erection.

"Um," she said.

I frowned. "Something wrong?"

"Um, no—well, Bambi said—she told me you were uncircumcised. I wrote it down. I'm sure that's what she said." She headed for her note pad and I caught her by the arm.

"Forget it, Dawn. She confused me with someone else. You know Bambi."

Another line crossed. Beyond silence to the spoken lie. But when I saw how quickly Dawn accepted the lie, my erection throbbed and perspiration trickled from my armpits.

"Yeah," she agreed with a private smile. "Bambi."

So naive. So trusting. Never before had such uncomplicated innocence wielded so much erotic power over me. My legs sagged with the revelation, and Dawn must have mistaken the movement for a signal, because she quickly dropped to her knees and gripped my testicles. Startled, I flinched, but she held fast. "Don't worry. Bambi showed me how." Forming a ring with her thumb and forefinger, she tightened and pulled downward, stretching the skin perilously taut and hardening me till my entire belly tingled. "Is this right? It doesn't hurt? Bambi made me practice for an hour on a beanbag, but you can tell me if I do something wrong. I don't mind."

A beanbag! "Perfect," I groaned, almost inaudibly. The technique was a complete novelty. I'd never suffered such exquisite pain.

Years before, when I was in the army stationed in Germany, I had paid once for fellatio that nearly blasted off the top of my skull, so I knew what it should have been. I shook my head in wonder as Dawn slid her small, apricot lips back and forth on me so timidly that I felt almost nothing. (Some things Bambi had not taught her.) Still, I found ineffable pleasure in simply watching her, feeling her labor to please me, however ineptly. When she rolled her puppy-dark eyes up at me for approval I grimaced and nodded, opening my mouth to feign a gasp. To reward her sincerity. And, yes, to preserve as well, selfishly, the root of her strange appeal: her innocence.

I might have gone on forever following the rhythm of those silky wisps trailing from her temples—fresh, glossy girl-hair—but Dawn was tiring. Her strokes became erratic. When she slipped off to catch a breath I pressed her cheeks gently between my palms and lifted her face. She grinned self-consciously, myopically. Her head felt like a small, furry animal in my hands, impossible to resist fondling. I bent to kiss her and she turned aside with a cough. Again I tried, and again she turned away. "Um, maybe we should try something else," she said, hurrying to the couch to consult her notes.

She flipped over a page and read, mumbling to herself as if committing something particularly difficult to memory. Resolved, then, she located the tube of KY jelly, squeezed a dab onto her fingers, and faced away to bend over deeply. She intended for me to watch her press the jelly inside herself. I could imagine Bambi coaching her: "Over more—more. Way over. Okay, now, in and out a couple times, not too fast." And I wondered how much of this was Richard's private script, and if it ever varied.

When she returned to me, a lubricated condom glistened in her stubby fingers. "Um, ready?"

What was expected of me now? What would Richard do? "You're sure Bambi explained this part?" I said.

Dawn looked wounded. "Yeah, of course. Just lay down. She showed me everything."

Lie down. Yes, lie down. I spun tentatively to the floor, and when her face told me I was on the right track, stretched out on my back.

"Oops, look," she said. "You went away." Another quick, nervous smile. She knelt and spit on her hand, gripped me loosely and stroked. And, of course, it was not her clumsy handwork that hardened me again. It was the youthful flex of her arm, the wet point of tongue clamped earnestly between her teeth, the sway of her chubby breasts in cadence with what was truly a pathetic effort.

When I was thick and tight again, Dawn hunkered between my legs and attempted to apply the condom. It wouldn't go. She fought with it, pulling, twisting, finally bending me nearly in half in a desperate effort that culminated with the condom squirting out of her fingers. I could have told her right away that she was holding it upside down, but I found her frustration incomprehensibly arousing. Cruel, I know, but by then my attraction to her faults had me aching with desire. She paused to flick back an errant strand of hair, and I said, "Let me do it," afraid that the rising color in her cheeks meant she wasn't far from tears.

She watched me roll on the condom, smiling gratefully. A charming, vulnerable smile. She said, "I guess I should really get contacts. I'm too vain to wear my regular glasses. Pretty stupid, huh?"

"I think it's wonderful," I said, referring, not to her plans for eyewear, but to the event of this small, personal revelation.

Dawn stood then. Straddling me, she lowered herself, holding her back straight, guiding me inside her with one hand while she balanced herself with the other. When we were deeply coupled, she began raising and lowering herself, at first in measured attacks like a high school gymnast doing warm-up squats, gradually increasing the pace until she was bucking hard. "Is this okay-ay-ay? Tell me if it isn't."

"Great," I wheezed. I lay mesmerized by the spectacle of this artless teenager, bounding on top of me as if she were a five-year-old let loose on a spring mattress. With every bounce she grunted, breasts gyrating, chasing each other futilely. I found myself marveling at the resilience of young knees. After a minute or two her breathing grew ragged. She careened unsteadily.

And I felt myself going soft again.

Dawn felt it too. Something resembling terror drained her face. She doubled her intensity, plunging herself down on me harder, faster. "Don't you like it? Isn't it good? Bambi said—"

"Dawn—Dawn—" I gripped her hips and held on until she stopped moving. She collapsed onto my chest, and I thought I felt a warm tear slip down along my ribs. "Dawn, listen to me. Forget what Bambi told you."

Panting to catch her breath, she said, "I'm sorry. I know she's much better than me. She said I'd be okay, but I'm not. I'm sorry."

"I said forget about Bambi!" The harshness of my tone snapped her head up. Stunned, she studied my face to judge how angry I might be. Oh, those damp, innocent eyes! I felt myself growing again. I pulled her close. Filled with grave sincerity I whispered, "You don't have to be Bambi. You're fine just the way you are—better than Bambi," and this time our lips met briefly before she twisted away. Hoisting her in a bear hug, I sat up and rolled her onto her back. I wanted to kiss her and kiss her and never stop, but her mouth continued to

elude me. Cradling her bottom with one hand, I lifted a breast with the other and crushed it against my face. We rocked slowly together, wrapped in each other's arms. When I suckled her nipple she whimpered, tightening her grip, choking back a cry. I drove hard into her then. Though I wasn't sure, I sensed she was resisting me, but I wanted this for her, needed her to know what she could do. She began to arch her hips to meet mine. By then we were soaked with sweat, honey-tasting nectar I could have happily drowned in. She raised her legs and hooked them behind my back and I knew we were close. I stretched my supporting hand down low along her behind until my fingers found her cleft, played gently with the folds of flesh there. And then: pounding, nuzzling, biting, Dawn lunging to meet me, again and again—a sharp explosion of breath—and finally, God, finally, waves of tight jerky contractions and blessed release, Dawn moaning, clinging to me through a fit of spasms. Deranged by the desire to consume her every imperfection, my mouth ravaged her neck, her ears, her breasts, while her climax subsided in tiny pelvic hiccups.

With a last sweet shudder she exclaimed, "Oh," as if she'd been quietly surprised. Of course, in my arrogance I expected to find a beatific glow on her face when I lifted on one elbow to touch her hair. Instead her eyes were flooded with tears.

"Dawn! What's wrong? Did I hurt you?"

"It's okay."

"No, tell me, please." I longed to lick away every salty drop from her cheeks. "I didn't know I was hurting you."

"You weren't. It's not that." She glanced backward as if to assure herself that her backpack, or perhaps the note pad, was still there on the couch.

"Just—I didn't want to—you know, come. It's this stupid thing I have."

"Dawn, I'm sorry. I didn't know." But I think I had known. And I understood. The kiss withheld, the orgasm denied: small, vital untouchables she kept locked away at her core to prove that she owned at least something of herself.

She sighed and snuffled. "It's okay. Don't worry about it." And this time the shy, nervous smile lasted far longer than it had before—even managed to reach her eyes. "It was kind of nice."

I have no doubt that when I've forgotten everything else about Dawn, I will remember those words: *It was kind of nice*. I was a stranger, a dirty old man, a john—worse than that, a cheat—and I'd selfishly taken something that wasn't for sale. And she had forgiven me! *It was kind of nice*. I wanted to smother her against me, to envelope this poor defenseless cherub and rescue her from the rest of her life. But she was already up and fumbling with a box of tissues.

"Um," she said, wiping her nose. "Where's the bathroom?"

"Out the door and to the left. Middle of the hallway."

I stood, the spent condom dangling stupidly between my legs. Afraid of spilling it on my expensive Turkish rug, I left it in place and wrapped myself in my robe. At the sound of the bathroom door closing I located her note pad. Her handwriting was girlish, all loopy scrawls and circles for dots. I paged backward until I found the entry for the day. Ten o'clock. Richard—with a street address of 5335! I could barely stifle a chuckle. My address was 3553. Fate? Ha! Nothing more profound than her own dyslexic transposition had brought Dawn to me! And, yes, deprived Richard, though I persuaded myself that whoever he was he would have mocked her, abused her, not cherished her as I did. (I had already begun picturing him as some misshapen, jaundice-eyed geezer reduced to the callous purchase of human beings for his pleasures.) Tossing the book onto the couch, I thought, *Oh, Dawn, my poor, simple Dawn*. I was still grinning when she returned.

"What," she said suspiciously.

I shook my head. "Nothing. I—feel good."

"Um."

She dressed quickly. When she was ready to leave she presented me with a pen and a Visa charge slip made out to an escort service in the amount of \$300.

"I wouldn't blame you if you don't sign it. I'm sorry I wasn't any good."

I lifted her chin with my fingertips. "Dawn, listen to me. You were terrific. Here. Give me that."

I carried the slip to the coffee table, wrote \$100 in the tip box, and signed "Richard Lionheart" as illegibly as I could. Her eyes widened when she saw the total. As an afterthought, I said, "Wait here."

"I really have to get going."

"Just one minute. Please."

I raced upstairs and pieced together nearly eighty dollars in mixed bills from my sock drawer and my wallet. When I handed them to her, she graced me with a smile that made me shiver with shame.

At the front door, I watched Dawn slouch down the drive to her rust-bitten Honda Accord, watched her sling her backpack into the passenger seat, crawl in behind the wheel. My heart was thundering in my chest. I wanted to run after her. I wanted to warn her to expect trouble when she reported back to her office, or wherever they dispatched her from. I wanted to warn her about people, about me, about comparing herself with Bambi. I wanted to shake her until she promised never to grow too wise or too bitter. But once again I was mired in silence. She would survive, I told myself. To those, like Dawn, who bumble through life in earnest incompetence, we grant special dispensation—even, as I did, special affection. Dawn would never be a Bambi. She shouldn't try, or she might lose the one real asset that was hers to sell: her talent for evoking protective instincts.

She pulled out of the drive and I shut the door. I checked the hall clock. My wife was due home from her hairdresser's in half an hour—more than enough time to shower, though it saddened me to think of soaping away the precious elixir that was already drying to a salty film on my skin. Bargaining with myself for just a few minutes more, I headed toward the kitchen to see whether the other half of my bagel might still be edible.

