

HUNTER/TRAPPER

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CATCHMEFUCAN, late 30s, divorced, graduate school type, nipple and foot bottom, descriptive tinkle torture, only literary straps, no working class ropes or common place marks. Looking for a little pen pal punishment.

This enticed me for solely one reason: This would be the notice I'd post were I hunting for me. Circular logic to most, but to me this entry was bait for a sting. Still, I figured, I have the willpower to finger the flames with-out getting burned. To CATCHMEFUCAN, I wrote back, I'd love to try to be more than a pen pal—GOTCHU.

Well, GOTCHU, you can always try. Just be prepared to join the graveyard of so many others that failed, cause you won't succeed.

Thus we started our little cat-and-mouse relationship. I figured maybe I'd get some pud-pulling tidbits. *Cinch the ropes around my wrists, pour hot wax on my breasts, clamp me if I'm naughty, smack me if I'm nice ...* Blah blah blah, the usual stuff you'd expect from an S&M shatroom. But with her it was different.

She'd have none of that. Whenever I mentioned that I'd love to give her a tweak, she'd write something dismissive like, That's not necessary.

It was as though some ponytailed Dorothy from Kansas had accidentally ventured into this Oz of Bondage and Domination. I could see why she didn't get much action. No one else would have put up with her.

Do you realize that you advertized in an S&M chat room? I finally asked after weeks without so much as a slap or tickle in the endless exchanges.

Course I do, you randy lad.

And yet whenever I make any advances along that line, you seem surprised.

I have to get to know you better before I can fully reveal that side of myself to you.

This is the Internet! We're never going to meet.

I pass a million people every day. You're my only lovebug. A meeting of minds is far more intimate than a meeting of bodies.

So how long do you have to know someone for before we can get intimate?

The longer you can wait, the better it'll be, she replied with all the smugness of a red-hot poker cauterizing my wounded heart.

Her e-mail exchanges always took something out of me. Afterwards, I'd have to nurse myself back to my indestructible self developing the innermost buds of fantasies that one day would blossom. On that fateful day when I finally had her, I could act out all my dreams. But even my dreams were hindered, until I found out what her dreams were. Without her realizing it, I had to learn what scared her more than anything else, to extract the sweetest nectar of her fear.

Occasionally I'd test her borders, nothing gross or icky, just little things, like Why'd you divorce? or, What are your measurements? Wondering if she was actually still married, or if she was in a wheelchair.

She'd invariably turn the questions into sarcastic come-backs.

I divorced cause I knew I'd meet you, or, You see me every night on cable, I'm Anna Nicole Smith.

So soon, in order to keep it earnest, our e-missives became little more than a line or so. One long banal conversation that lasted for weeks and then months. Whenever I turned on my computer, she was always right there. Like warm little homemade muffins just waiting for me, but they always had a little needle inside, some funny little dig. Slowly, like a voice in my head or a low-level addiction, I came to thoughtlessly expect it. I learned to eat around what used to get caught in my throat. At the end of a long, empty day, a day of resisting the urge to follow a thousand lonely ladies home and bring them to my ecstatic world, I knew I could read CATCHME's little

comments du jour. It became something to look forward to. I couldn't go to sleep without an exchange.

* * *

One night about three months into our little chat, she must've had a little too much too drink, because she let out a slip: It's three in the morning and I just made a big boo boo.

What kind of a boo boo?

A naughty one.

How naughty?

Very very naughty.

Naughty girls need to be disciplined, I pushed.

But who will take time to do that?

Just type in where you are, lost little girl, and I'll come get you. When I hit *send*, I knew I shouldn't have. I knew I was pushing too hard.

She didn't write me back for a month after that—punishment by deprivation—and I thought I had lost her until one day I got a new message: Boy, it was a beautiful day today, wasn't it?

I wanted to write back that she could eat my stinking shit and if I ever saw her I'd strangle her with her own intestines as I fucked her death wounds. Instead I wrote, Sure was With sudden regularity, the e-mails resumed. Though they took on a bit more depth, they still remained along the surface. She'd talk about her little garden, and soon she mentioned other potted plants of domesticity: the old oak trees on her block; the aggravating honks of trucks that double-parked in front of the supermarket around the corner, causing constant traffic bottlenecks. She mentioned that every morning while watering her rooftop plants, she could see the Williamsburg Savings Bank clock from the back of the building and the Jehovah's Witness digital clock toward the front, and the two-minute discrepancy between them. She talked about how she liked going on strolls near the waterfront over the cobblestoned streets in her neighborhood.

I get dehydrated quickly when I go on walks, I replied, and hoping that she'd slip up and tell me the area she lived, I asked, You don't get out much either do you?

I'm not agoraphobic, but I am a bit of a homebody.

One day, when I casually mentioned that I had a birthday coming up, she wrote back, Let's do something for your birthday.

Like what?

A visual date, she proposed. At 6 p.m. tonight, I'm going to be on my rooftop holding a wine glass, toasting the western tower of the Bridge. You do the same.

Which bridge?

The Brooklyn.

It's a date, I replied.

That afternoon I dropped a hundred dollars on a high-powered pair of field glasses. Because she said the western tower I thought that perhaps she was in one of the new high-rises around the South Street Seaport in Manhattan. I arrived a half an hour early and when I walked across the bridge toward the western tower, I spotted a middle-aged woman also holding binoculars. She was in her forties, small, dehydrated, in drab clothes. Nothing to look at, easy to kill. All I could think was, she had the same idea as me. When I approached to make small talk, she suddenly lifted her spy glasses and yelled, "Holy shit!"

When I turned to see what she was looking at, I saw a gentle cascade of grayish feathers.

"What happened?"

"The falcon just grabbed a pigeon."

"What falcon?" I asked.

"A peregrine falcon nest up there with a fledgling." She was pointing to a small stone doorway high above the second pillar. By her general demeanor, I knew this Audubon member wasn't *her*

I still had fifteen minutes before her toast. I spent the time scanning both sides of the river for any glint of a wine glass. After an hour, feeling empty and pissed, I headed back to Brooklyn and walked to the F train stop at York.

A teenage girl was waiting all alone at the farthest end of the platform. I seriously considered dragging her a few extra feet into the darkness of the tunnel. But before I took a step, I realized the token clerk got a good look at me. If she screamed, there would only be

one escape route. I was actually relieved when someone else finally showed up.

Upon arriving home, an e-mail was waiting for me: Happy birthday to you.

I wrote back that I was in agony for her.

Agony?

I know this sounds odd, but I think I've fallen in love with you.

That's funny. Tell me another.

I'm serious. I can't get you out of my head. I'm always thinking about you. Can't we just put all the bullshit aside and meet somewhere like two adults? We'll just have coffee and if you like what you see, we can go on a proper date.

To be quite honest, I'm nothing special to look at. Right now, you claim to be in love with me and we didn't even meet. I've gone on dates with guys who've used me in the most degrading ways and then decided never to call me again. Frankly, I don't even like sex. (I only like what it symbolizes.)

Me neither! We don't have to have a sexual relationship. I can love you as a friend.

We can be friends on the Internet.

In order to assuage my obsession, and allay my fears of rejection, I need to meet you face to face.

And by meeting you, I stand to lose everything, she replied, as though we were corresponding in some goddamned nineteenth-century epistolary novel like two star-crossed lovers.

I promise, even if you're old, fat and limbless, if you got bad skin or an overbite, if you smell awful or can't dress, or your eyes are too close together, or your ears stick out, whatever irregularity or infirmity you got, I will forever maintain our friendship.

I'm sorry but no.

Are you a man? Is that it, because if that is the case, even that I will not mind, but I need to see you.

Please try to understand—I just can't.

I feel that this is cruel and manipulative on your part and I resent it.

I've only adhered to the stated rules of our friendship.

You led me to believe that this relationship would eventually lead somewhere.

And so it has. I feel I know you, and here we are arguing with all the intimacy of old lovers.

Are you married? Or in a relationship?

Not that it matters, but no. Please try to understand that anonymity is for both our sakes.

That is so fucking patronizing! And I resent this mock legal formality as if you have some bullshit authority!

You're right, I'm sorry, but frankly you're scaring me.

I don't mean to, but if I can't find some resolution to this, you'll leave me with no recourse other than to cease this relationship as it presently exists.

When did you become such a needy person! The thing I always found most attractive about you was that you always sounded so firm and strong. I took you to be a lone wolf but here you are a braying little lamb.

I didn't respond.

Perhaps we can work something else out.

I didn't respond.

Perhaps I can speak to you on the phone. Would that be acceptable? You can give me your number and I'll call you at some specified time.

I didn't respond.

What exactly is it you hope to gain from our meeting? If anything, I believe it will kill the love—a word I don't use lightly—that does exist.

I didn't respond.

Do you want me to be more vulnerable, is that it?

Though I wanted to respond, I didn't. I really was half hoping she'd just go away—for her own sake.

Suppose I send you a nude photo of myself—deleting my face of course—my nudity will be fully vulnerable for you to see. If you respond to this, I will e-mail the photo. I will also trust that you won't simply laugh at my less than perfect body and then never return my messages. This is my last and best offer, and let me assure you that even if we were to meet (which we won't) you'd never get such a

candid view of me. If you don't reply to this final offer, I will be compelled to bid you farewell and give up this e-mail address.

I finally responded: I am inclined to accept this offer, but I suppose I must do so with a word of caution. In matters of the heart, there are no lies, nor is there right and wrong. Despite all the cliches to the contrary, the heart is a shark. It consumes what it must, and turns its back on what it cannot use. This photo might very well do the trick, and satiate the hunger of obsession, but there is a chance that I will still find myself pining for you. If so, then I'm truly sorry.

Spare me the bad Tennessee Williams prose. If I am going to stand naked before a mirror, and snap a goddamn polaroid of myself, then scan it into my computer and e-mail it to you—some whiny clown whose name I don't even know—I damn well insist that I get some assurances for it. Specifically promise me that you will continue our correspondence without any more bullshit. Otherwise, goodbye forever.

It wasn't exactly like I had a lot to lose. Still, in an effort to drive a hard bargain, to get the very most I could, I said, All right, but let me begin by saying, I can spot a phony picture right off. If you do take a self-portrait, I expect it to be well lit, well focused, and in color. In addition to your body, I will require your hair—not just pubic, but head hair. And if you dye your hair or put on a wig, and I sense that too, the deal is off. I understand you don't want to show your face, fine. But a woman's hair is very important to me, it allows me to grasp some sense of her character and identity.

Although I'm beginning to fear that I seriously miscalculated you, she replied, an offer made is an offer kept. I suppose I can reveal my hair, but first I plan to wash and brush it, so if you find that "phony" say so now. Let me also specify that the photo will not be some raunchy piece of pornography. I will stand nude, in a lit room at a distance of several feet, and snap the photo using my polaroid camera, but I'm not some hussy, so if that is what you're expecting, say so now as I do not want to degrade myself any more than I have to. If you send me a follow-up e-mail saying you were expecting to see "pink" or some crap like that—just forget it, buster. It'll be a straight-forward shot, minus my face.

I replied: I know you well enough to know that you wouldn't pose in some pornographic fashion, and you should know me well enough to know that I wouldn't expect such a tawdry thing. Though you probably don't believe me, this is not for erotic purposes.

* * *

Three days passed without a word. Then on the night of the fourth day, checking my e-mail account, I saw it: her e-mail with an attachment had arrived. The re: said, Why not take all of me.

When I hit the attachment, I slowly watched a naked form loading onto my screen. As she was revealed, I could barely catch my breath. I didn't remember seeing anyone quite as erotic. The entire time I knew it was her, simply because she really was quite ordinary. Her brushed-out shag of red hair, then an oval whited-out face, strong shoulders, a firm, lean torso. Beautiful breasts, a flat unscarred abdomen. Below that was an untrimmed tangle of reddish brown pubic hair, so rich I could smell her. All unscrolling into a typical, intelligent, early-middle-aged woman, who clearly watched her diet and occasionally exercised.

The one detail that particularly caught my eye was just above her ankle. It was a small green sea horse.

The correspondence had quickly devolved into a game of stud poker. After seeing the photo, I had this instinct to fold. The little voice in my head said, *this is as much as you can ever hope to hurt her*. So, if only to do that, it made sense not to reply.

Therefore I made no response. Of course, she grew indignant sending her own unrequited e-mails. But I never opened them and I only read the re: line Where are you? and, Am I that Ugly? and, I thought you were a man of your word. Finally, after the second week, I got a re: from her that read, I forgive you, I only hope this the worst thing you ever did.

When I opened the message, it said, If vanishing after seeing me nude is the worst thing you've ever done, I'm glad I could sacrifice myself for you—if only to give you a taste of the darkness.

No, I've done a lot worse, I replied.

Thank god, and I was beginning to think you a boy scout.

That's funny coming from such a girl scout.

Oh, I do a million little, awful things every day.

Like what?

Like ignoring the elderly lady who sits outside my building and greets me every morning. Or yelling at mothers whose children scream too loud in the playground across the street. Or just contributing to the mediocrity of the routine world by filling up space, taking resources and only leaving a trail of excrement behind.

None of those are even illegal.

Perhaps, but how many awful legal acts equate to one small illegal thing? For that matter, are certain illegal acts really even that awful?

Murder is illegal, but is it always awful? Do most people even earn their right to exist? I think the worst things in life are actually quite legal.

That's true in theory. In a world of six billion people in which most contribute nothing, I'd rather live among fewer people of a high quality. However, I am not a murderer.

What does that mean? To be a murderer, you simply commit murder.

Actually there are common traits that go into the composition of many homicidal minds. For starters, psychologists found that babies who aren't held and shown affection during a crucial period of their infancy lose a basic human empathy that flowers into compassion and understanding.

How do they test for compassion among infants?

They found that babies who were held and hugged and kissed and loved will cry when other babies are crying, demonstrating empathy (not to be confused with sympathy), while infants that were not loved remain silent while other babies wept.

I didn't remember other babies crying when I was growing up, but if they did, I probably just found it annoying. I wrote back, asking about other ingredients that go into the murderous cookie dough.

They found an inordinate amount of killers suffered from some kind of head trauma.

I did remember hitting my head as a kid, but I also remembered other kids of my age group suffering from head injuries. In my old

neighborhood, kids fell out of trees, off bicycles, down stairs all the time.

What else? I persisted.

Many violent personalities were victims of violence themselves during their childhood.

You sound like you've read your stuff, I fired back, pissed at her simplistic, Martha Stewart recipe for how to shake and bake a murderer.

Only because I live in constant fear of crime. Is that so wrong? Don't you have any fears?

Sure.

What are they?

It was the perfect opportunity, so I wrote back: I'll tell you mine, but only if you tell me yours.

Fine, you first.

Attempting to be truly macabre, I wrote: Having my penis slowly dissected with my own scalpel. What about you?

Being cut off. Just floating in a bottomless pit of blackness, still alive, with only your own worthless existence to contemplate. That's the most harrowing thing I can think of. Apparently she had given the question some thought.

That engendered my newest fantasy. When I finally found her that's what I'd do. After blinding and paralyzing her, I'd submerge her in a sensory-deprivation tank with water matching her skin temperature so that she'd feel nothing. Then I'd slip a tube down her throat for oxygen, and an IV drip in her arm for nutrients. I'd just leave her alive for a month or two until she slowly starved to death.

* * *

Some weeks later, two events occurred within days of each other. The first was a simple warning from my e-mail server, stating that I was running out of space for my account. Always a pack rat, reluctant to delete anything, I was forced to download all the e-mails she had sent to me. Upon doing this, I reread all her little messages—they had all the tedium of a drawing-room romance. Aside from

that, though, I became aware for the first time exactly how many little geographic references she had made over the weeks and months.

While walking home the next day, I noticed that the decennial census had just commenced. Young folks with shoulder bags that read *U.S. Census* were tramping around my neighborhood. Immediately, it struck me that this would be an ideal cover for someone who wanted to inconspicuously canvas an area. I let out an accidental squeal as I realized that an excellent opportunity existed for me to find her.

I had planned to simply join up and work for the census, but the very next afternoon I stopped at a local Burger King. That's when I saw a group of them. Four census enumerators were going over their forms with what looked to be a supervisor. I bought a burger and coffee, and taking off my jacket, I headed to a small table at one end where they were sitting. Slowly sipping my coffee and eating my burger, I waited.

When one census enumerator was up getting food and another was in the bathroom, only two remained at the table. I approached discreetly and draped my jacket over the nearest *U.S. Census* bag, which was sitting on the floor. Then, pulling it under my arm, I dashed out.

Now it was a question of which neighborhood. All the clues were there. It was simply a matter of triangulating the various details she had mentioned in her e-mails. I extracted and isolated every single geographical reference into a list. The three most significant details were that she lived a few blocks from the river, and that there was a view of both the Brooklyn Bridge and the Statue of Liberty. In Dumbo you couldn't make out the statue. From Cobble Hill you couldn't see the Bridge. Only Brooklyn Heights allowed views of both—it was just that easy. In fact, those two simple variables only allowed about a three-block stretch of real estate. She had to either be on Montague Terrace, Pierrepont Place, or Columbia Terrace. Montague Terrace had a play-ground across the street that she had mentioned. Behind the Breukelen, a door-manned apartment building, was a row of three small brownstones. She had to be in one of them. Two of the brownstones were single-family occupancies. The last one had apartments.

I came early the next day, ready to wait her out. Try to see if I could spot a curly-red-haired middle-aged woman with a dark green sea horse tattoo on her ankle. Red is a minority hair color, so the fact that I had insisted she show it was further proof of my superior intellect.

Her sea horse would be the confirming mark, yet she would have to be wearing a dress or shorts in order to spot the tattoo. As this was unlikely, I realized I might have to subtly interrogate any possible suspects. After four hours, a half-dozen women had come and gone from the buildings, but no big red.

Finally, around 4, before everyone came home from work—and the risk of her sharp screams could get me caught—I pulled on the census bag, put on a hat, a pair of tortoiseshell glasses, and decided to knock on a few doors.

In the first brownstone was an old lady that loved to talk. In the second building was a shy kid whose parents weren't home. Each of them was a perfectly useful victim, and though I couldn't help but think that the police would eventually interview these two, I was hopeful that the disguise might work. After all, most people aren't very observant.

When I finally came to the old outdoor intercom of the last building, I felt my heart beat in my ears, and I knew she was here. Ringing the first-floor and then the second-floor apartments, I got no response. Upon pressing the loose top-floor button, I wondered if the buzzer was even connected to anything.

"Who is it?" a woman's timid voice peeped out.

"Census."

A buzz sounded and the downstairs door popped open, allowing access to a musty, dark stairwell. There were no bikes, shopping carts, or baby carriages in the hallway. If there were other tenants in the building, I saw no immediate signs of them. By the time I got up the stairs to her door, it was slightly ajar. I opened it and called out, "Hello, U.S. Government, anyone home?"

"Hi there," a middle-aged woman muttered.

"Hi, we didn't get your census form," I began, looking her up and down. Her hair was a brownish red bundle, so she could've been the one, but it wasn't decisive. She was wearing loose shapeless pants,

so it wasn't evident if she had the tattoo on her calf. As I took a form out of my bag and started slowly going through the questions, she spotted the fact that the sides of my shirt were wet with perspiration—the result of hours in the sun waiting for her. I kept wiping off my forehead to keep the sweat from dripping on the form.

“Would you like a Coke?” she graciously asked, taking a can from her fridge.

“No thanks,” I replied. “Are you married, single, divorced?”

She opened a water faucet and just let it run until it was cold. The slight spray of cool water splattering on my hot neck finally compelled me to say, “Actually, a cup of water would be perfect.”

She grabbed a glass from a high shelf, filled and put it down before me. While I pressed it to my forehead, she said, “If you don't mind, I'll fill this out myself.”

As she marked in the various boxes, I sipped the water and surveyed the room. Floral wallpaper, evenly spaced reproductions, various pictures and knickknacks—all the trappings of middle class housekeeping. I was desperately trying to ascertain whether her spouse or lover was in the other room. If she had a dog or cat, I would've seen it by then. But was a kid or parent sleeping in the back? All was quiet as she checked through the income boxes and then onto the questions of ethnicity.

“All done,” she replied a moment later, folding the form in half and handing it back to me.

“Can I get another glass of water?” I asked. When I offered her my empty, holding it up to the light, I could see traces of some powder sliding down along the sides. She drugged me! “Holy shit!”

She bolted into the bedroom. I jumped to my feet and raced behind. Inside was a queen-size bed with four metal posts—perfect.

“What the fuck did you slip me?”

“Nothing! I swear!”

With my right hand I yanked her wrist up tightly behind her back, painfully. With my left hand, I reached around front, ripping open her shirt so that her breast tumbled out.

“What did you slip me!”

“Nothing, I swear! It must have been soap from the dish-washer.”

I shoved her face forward and yanked up the right leg of her pants. There it was—the dark green sea horse.

Suddenly I felt myself growing weak.

“You drugged me, you bitch!” I grabbed some ties dangling from her doorknob and had to work quickly, securing her before I passed out. Then when I came to, I could finish the job.

“I can’t believe I found you,” I said, circling the silk tie around her right wrist firmly, pulling it tightly around the post, knotting it again and again.

“Please leave me alone!” she begged as I began with the second wrist. Tying the knot, twisting, cinching, retying, until all she could do was wiggle.

“You know who I am, don’t you?”

“No!” she groaned. “Who?”

“It’s me! I reached right up the ass of the Internet and pulled you out,” I explained, as I secured her right ankle to the right post of the bed. I felt her head shaking violently. She was weeping as I collapsed on top of her. “You must have known I was coming for you,” I added, feeling so little keeping me conscious. “You had something ready for me. Didn’t you?”

That’s when I saw that she wasn’t crying at all, she was giggling, but I had her arms and one leg tied tight. I hit her hard across the face. My lids and limbs were so heavy, and her free leg was kicking—I couldn’t lasso it to the post. Sluggishly, I raced up and fit the tie into her laughing mouth. I tied it again and again. *She’ll be ready for me when I ...*

* * *

Smacks across my face, whack upon whack, till I start blinking. I’m handcuffed and she’s looking down on me.

“Men are such half-wits,” she says.

“What are you talking ...?” I’m barely able to speak.

“What’s your handle?”

“My what ...?”

She smacks me some more. As I awaken, I see I am in a stone room, probably her cellar. I’m spread out on the frame of an old

metal army cot without a mattress. My wrists and ankles are cuffed to the four corners. In the bright light, crusted splotches of blood are visible on the floor. She keeps hitting me hard across the face.

“What the fuck!” I yell out.

She empties the contents of my wallet on my chest. She is holding my knife. I can see that she has clipped a square of my pants away so that my genitals are exposed.

“Listen carefully, because I don’t want to lose my temper. I’ve been e-mailing with five of you little piggies. I got the first one immediately, and the second one three months ago, so that leaves three. What name do you use when you e-mail me?”

“I’m GOTCHU.” I can barely open my mouth.

“Oh, you’re the idiot that I sent the faceless photo to,” she explained. “The others all insisted on seeing my face.”

“But ... but *I* caught *you*,” I say groggily.

“You caught me?” she asks. “I sent enough geographical references for a retard to figure out where I live, and it took you what, six months? The other guy figured it out in six weeks.”

“Witnesses saw me come into your house!”

“Who’s going to find you missing?” she asks. “You don’t work for the census. You don’t live around here.”

“What are you going to do?” I’m slurring, barely able to keep my eyes open. “Are you going to kill me?”

“On the contrary, I’m going to do everything I can to keep you alive as long as possible,” she says. “Oh, but don’t worry, your scalpel is going to get used, after all.”