

Love Palace

by

Meredith Sue Willis

Praise for **Meredith Sue Willis's *Love Palace***

This character Martha is so genuine. Every thought and every spoken word rings true. —Shelley Ettinger, whose work has been published in *Newtown Literary*, *Mississippi Review*, *Blithe House Quarterly*, *Lodestar Quarterly*, *Snow Monkey* and many other places.

Love Palace made me realize that a good novel opens like life—with innumerable paths spread out before you....and the reader is eager to follow Martha's. —Rebecca Kavalier, award winning author of the *Further Adventures of Brunhild*, *Tigers in the Wood*, and *Next of Kin*.

Meredith Sue Willis turns her considerable talents to explore a new part of the world: the downtrodden New Jersey waterfront undergoing a radical Gold Coast transformation. In LOVE PALACE Willis has created a memorable cast of characters and a pitch perfect sense of place. The tale of a quixotic battle against redevelopment is narrated by an unlikely heroine. Martha Miller is neurotic, over-educated, under-achieving, over-libidoed, and in a tailspin over being left by Rotter number 3, her long-term boyfriend. (Rotter number 1 was her father; Rotter number 2, her ex-husband). Martha suffers from agoraphobia and low self-esteem, but one thing she's good at is attracting men and enjoying sex. A man/boy half her age (twenty-one), devastatingly good-looking, and sexually conflicted picks her up at a bar and takes her home to Love Palace. From then on the novel is a wild rollicking ride....It is Martha's ability to sympathize with even the creepiest characters which gives nuance to what is essentially a morality tale: pitting the disenfranchised poor against the steamroller of capitalism. Who is stealing money from Love Palace's bank account? Will Martha and Robbie's unlikely marriage work? Can the little guy ever win? We are propelled through action-packed scenes to an unexpected and satisfying conclusion. If at times the personalities are so large that they verge on caricature, they are redeemed by the deftness of the author's touch.

— Deborah Clearman

Wonderful writing--brilliantly drawn characters. Funny and poignant at the same time. Martha is full of sensuality, with an ironic and wary eye on her immediate circumstances and at the same time she is reflective and circumspect. Enjoyable read.

— Mitch Levenberg,

The characters in "Love Palace" were all seriously flawed--like many of us in real life. I saw the preacher for the creep he was right away and had the feeling the protagonist knew John's flaws too but didn't quite want to believe it because he was handsome and charming. Besides, Martha always picks the wrong men. And boy, does she pick the wrong ones in this book! Marrying Robby? The reader KNOWS it isn't going to work, and even Martha knows it. What I like about the novel is that I could relate to Martha's getting on board the train she knows is going to wreck. We all do it sometimes. There's something hopeful about it--that it will turn out okay this time even when we know it really won't.

— Donna S. Meredith,

Also by Meredith Sue Willis

Fiction

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LOVE PALACE

A Novel

by

Meredith Sue Willis

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Dedication

To Andy once again

ONE

I had a meltdown after my birthday. I had managed to slip past forty in a fog, ditto forty-one, which was when I was breaking up with my longtime live-in boyfriend. But birthday number forty-two hit me with the fact that I wasn't beginning my fourth decade but my fifth, and this completely spooked me. I took a step back and saw myself: alone and lonely, chronically underemployed, and barely managing payments on my ill-kept apartment across the river from New York City. My boss was having cash flow problems and hadn't paid me in six weeks, and I hadn't paid my therapist in six months.

During the years of the longtime boyfriend, who I call Rotter the Third (Rotter Two being my divorced husband and Rotter One being my father), I had taken myself out of the job market at a time when I might have been rising toward some reasonably lucrative glass ceiling. Rotter the Third was a bond salesman, and we had a nifty apartment in the city. He did better and better, until he was doing so well, thank you, that he could afford to marry someone half my age. On his tab, when I was out of the job market, I got a leisurely Masters in English and also security for the downscale rental on the Jersey side of the river.

I considered my assets: men, if I wanted them. Men like to look at skinny women, but in bed they enjoy flesh. I'm good in bed, too, by which I don't mean particularly skilled, just happy. I have always felt good when I'm naked in bed with someone.

After that, I ran out of assets and drank a bottle of merlot all by myself and called my boss's answering machine and quit my job. I told him what I thought of his high minded ideology and personal boorishness. I told him I was sick of his grungy office and his cash flow problems, and I quit.

I spent the rest of that weekend and most of the next week in my apartment watching TV I ordered in pizza and buffalo wings, and when I ran out of cash and couldn't face going to the ATM machine, I ate spaghetti. When the jars of red sauce ran out, I ate it with margarine and garlic salt.

There is something really satisfying about sinking to the bottom like this. I had the image of myself as a girl in a swimming pool, sunny day, shallow end, water warm. As an experiment, I go under and let my breath out slowly. I sink till I am sitting on the bottom in the silence. If I don't go up soon, I'll be dead.

Low self-esteem is a way of life with me and my mother and my sister, although baby sister masks it well, what with being a hot shot lawyer with a fancy condo, also in Jersey, with a spectacular view. Mom works at even lower-level jobs than I do, and some of her men have been true bottom-feeders, Dad being Exhibit A. I used to look up words for the kind of man he was, and my favorites were all Britishisms: blackguard, knave, miscreant, reprobate, and, of course, rotter. It's because the Rotter left us, I believe, that my sister and I have body image difficulties and an impressive laundry list of other problems.

On the other hand, it was Rotter's mother, our Nana, who took care of us. Good old dumpy Nana, our stability while Mom moved around looking for a better job and/or a better man. Nana was our stability even when we were adults. I stayed with her for six months when my marriage broke up, and I somehow always expected I'd go back to her again, but then she had her stroke and went to a nursing home where I almost never visit.

For a long time after Nana's stroke, my therapist Madame Landowska took care of me, until the cash flow tough love crisis, when I couldn't pay. Madame said I could not have an appointment until I paid something on my debt.

"How can I do that?" I wailed. "I don't have a job!"

"I am afraid you are not serious about getting well," she said. "You chose to leave your job. I think you are taking advantage of me."

"I'm desperate!" I howled.

"You are a very intelligent lady," she said. "You are intelligent enough to know it is necessary to be employed in this country."

"I'm not a lady, I'm a deeply neurotic woman."

"Ah," she said, "but you are not sufficiently serious about getting well, Mar-ta." Marta, she calls me, not quite able to do the "th" in the middle of "Martha."

I don't owe her that much anyhow. A number in the medium high four digits. Eight years of devotion, and she throws me out.

To prove my desperation, I stayed in the apartment way beyond finishing the red sauce. I stayed until I got totally bored with watching cooking shows on TV, so I washed my hair, got in my car, which started after only six tries, went to the cash machine and then to Pietro's for the Any Day is Sunday Brunch. I ate at the bar, with a neatly folded copy of the Want Ads in front of me, circling possible job openings with a green pen.

Long before Robby came in, I had begun to circle ads in the social services section. I don't know why, maybe because I had the feeling that the helping professions might help me too. I'd never been a do-gooder—my generation came of age under the regime of Ronald Reagan!—but I needed a change, and I was steering clear of office manager, editorial assistant, and anything too much like what I'd been doing since Rotter Three decided that, unlike his hedge funds, I was not increasing in value.

Then Robby walked in. Everyone noticed him. I didn't know his name yet, of course, but I couldn't keep my eyes off him. He sat at the bar too, and even in the greenish pink Pietro's light, he had magnificent, smooth, young skin. There was one empty stool between him and me. I was drinking Mimosas and eating Pietro's special Eggs Benedictine with Canadian bacon, Hollandaise sauce, and a splash of liqueur.

I couldn't decide if he was a boy or a man. Dark blonde, an all-American jaw, liquid brown eyes, broad shoulders and a long narrow waist. He was dressed for spring in short sleeves and light colors, even though it was a raw cold day. I decided that he was so good looking he had to be gay. He ordered a Coke and ate pretzels from the basket, staring straight ahead at the bottles and mirror.

I felt a familiar rising tide, the beginning of something. An adventure. A lovely self-destructive adventure.

Bi-sexual, I decided, not gay.

Up through my shoulders, in my lungs. Just one more one-night stand. I've done everything else, eaten badly, gotten my therapist mad at me, rent due. I'll take one more step down before I go job hunting. Pick up a baby stranger! Feel totally shitty! Adelante! Yes!

I began talking about eggs and Canadian bacon and Pietro's little flourish with the Benedictine. "It's better than you'd think," I said.

He turned to me and smiled pleasantly and said in a light baritone that he had stopped eating meat when he was a child. He used to get nauseated by anything richer than ginger snaps. No cookies with raisins, chips, or creme. As he got older, he could tolerate nuts in small quantities, chopped fine in the cookies.

"A baby neurotic," I said fondly. His nails had been chewed. Each finger tip had the tiniest lozenge of nail surrounded by flesh.

"My mother eats broiled fish and runs three miles in the morning," he said. "My dad eats what he wants, but he has a workout room at his office."

"I only eat high cholesterol foods with extra salt," I said. Not very witty, but I didn't care. If I slept with him, it would be a lark. I felt like my biggest problem was if I should stick with Mimosas or switch to Screwdrivers. Robby had an innocence, as if he'd been privately educated in a monastery.

We exchanged names. I told Robby I was just coming out of an agoraphobic period. "I'm the star neurotic of Dr. Landowska's string. I have dysfunctions most people have never dreamed of."

Actually, I wasn't feeling particularly neurotic, except for the rush of self-destructiveness, but maybe it was just sexual energy, fuel for an upswing. I told Robby about my therapist and how I had quit my last job and was looking for a new one. Robby ate pretzels. His eyes were big with listening. "I've had my troubles," I said. "The First Rotter—that's my father— deserted us, and our mother was gone a lot too. We usually lived with Nana, the Rotter's parent, source of our Jewish genes. I have my reasons for being miserable, although my therapist doesn't find them as convincing as she should."

Yes? Madame always says. Yes? I am sorry for your family problems. But your mother always came back.

To which I reply, She chased the Rotter and caught up with him long enough to get pregnant! She came back to dump the baby on me and Nana! And she was emotionally absent even when she lived with us for six months or a year now and again.

But your grandmother, says Madame, who raised you and your sister. She was a fine woman. And you too, you are an intelligent lady with many assets.

I'm not talking about intelligence! I scream. I'm talking about feelings!

So, she says. Yes. You feel very bad?

Damn straight I feel bad. And I'm not a lady. I'm promiscuous whenever possible.

Robby had pale bare ankles and docksiders with no socks. He turned his stool to face me and said with unexpected firmness, "You're ready for a change, aren't you?"

"You got that right."

"I mean, you're looking for a job." He pointed at the want ads beside my Eggs Benedictine.

"Yeah, I'm starting tomorrow. To get serious about job hunting, I mean."

He said, "I might know about a job."

"Seriously?"

But it was clear he was a serious person. He looked at me for a long time. Looked at my forehead, at my chin, at my chest, looked at me the way a little kid on the train stares over the seat at you.

He said, "Today is my twenty-first birthday."

"Well, Happy Birthday, baby. That makes me almost twice your age."

"The same as my mother."

I said, "So what are you doing here all alone on your twenty-first birthday?"

"Oh, I'm not alone." He smiled a dazzling smile and began to talk about someone very important to him. I kept having this feeling he was building up to telling me he was gay.

It has always been one of my fantasies, to do what I had let Robby do to me, to observe a person as long as you want. I have an early memory of standing next to the Rotter's easy chair—I would have been under four, of course, if he was still living with us. In my memory, I am watching him nap. I recall giant nose hairs and a field of bristles on his cheek.

I got my turn to examine Robby while he talked about his big shot friend. Robby was pale around the eyes. Institution, I thought, inspired. A woman in my group therapy group who is cousin to a really famous family that we are all pledged (what a waste of good gossip) not to reveal, said you can always tell people who've been In by a certain kind of paleness. Even if they've been in good places where you get to spend time out of doors, they still have spiritual paleness.

Robby was talking about this important person who had done a lot for him. This person who could do things for me. Help me make my change, anything I wanted. Did he mention a job again? Or maybe only that This Person could do anything for anyone.

"This is Fairy Godmother talk, darling," I said, but Robby kept going. I was having a smooth sliding-board-into-warm water buzz. A shaft of sunlight had come in one of the back windows, remarkable in itself at Pietro's. I used to come in here when I first moved into the area, scoping it out immediately as the Right Place to pick up the Wrong Men.

There was a pretty up-front competition in my therapy group over who was most self-destructive. Dr. L. considered that my debt burden made me an excellent candidate for first place. Money grubbing bitch, I thought, missing her sorely. One of my main reasons for starting to look in the want ads so soon was in order to go back and complain to Dr. Landowska.

Robby was still talking about this powerful friend of his. And then, he suddenly looked at me directly and said, "I'd very much like to introduce you to him."

And he extended his arm down the bar. Naturally, I looked to see who I was going to meet. There was nobody else at the bar. A couple in a booth, out of the line of his gesture. A group of guys at a table watching something on television with lots of green grass, golf, or maybe polo. But no one in the immediate vicinity.

"Him," said Robby softly. "Jesus. He's standing right here, next to me, now and always, and he wants to be standing next to you too."

I let out air. Crazy as a bedbug, although at least crazy with a tradition. At one period in my life I tried out churches. The Rotter and Nana don't practice Judaism, and Mom, Baptist trailer trash, only goes to church when she visits her people in West Virginia. So I used to go with friends, a Pentecostal church for a while, and then to a Born-again Megachurch. Nana was a free love atheist old Leftist, which was all the more reason for me playing Born Again to make her mad. She didn't mind when I tried a Church of Holiness so much because they were black. She forgave black people their addiction to religion because of their status as oppressed, and she had a certain respect for the former priest Berrigan brothers, but she didn't like most white churches.

Robby leaned forward. "John says he'll touch your heart and ease the ache."

"I'm having trouble with your pronoun antecedents," I said. "I thought we were talking about Jesus."

"John is our spiritual advisor, and he gave me a new way of understanding Jesus. Jesus doesn't judge you, he lifts up your spirits and makes you free to walk in His path."

I crunched on some ice and wondered if I should have another drink.

"He wants to get to know you," said Robby. "He sent me to find you. Once you have Him in your life, you can have all you ever dreamed of."

"Who are we talking about now?"

"Jesus," he said, closing his eyes. "Jesus sent me, but John gives me direction."

I looked at myself in the mirror behind the bar. My face was framed by José Cuervo and the tequila with the worm in the bottle. I looked alert and receptive. I didn't believe for a second that Jesus had sent the crazy little bedbug, but I did wonder what had attracted him to an old lady like me. Was it my perky smile or my shiny hair? Not my skin, not compared to someone really young like him. Maybe my legs. Had I been stretching a leg when he came in? I have long legs for my height.

I said, "Well, you probably shouldn't waste your time, Robby. I'm half-Jewish, you know, wrong half, but my Jewish grandmother raised me. Although her real religion is Socialism. She's in a nursing home now, not doing so well, congestive heart failure on top of a stroke, but when she first went there she rolled around in her wheelchair bothering all the old ladies with her petitions."

It seemed hard for him to come back from what he was saying, which was practiced, possibly even memorized. He cleared his throat. "That's another wonderful coincidence."

"What is?"

"Jesus was Jewish too."

My God he's dumb, I thought. Unless it was thiorazine. "Listen, Robby. You're a very nice young person, and I hope you have a happy birthday, but I don't want to mislead you. Religion is the last thing I'm interested in right now. Food, a job, maybe sex, but not religion. I have a deep debt to my once and future therapist and I've pretty much maxed out my Visa and MasterCard. Does He do financial planning?"

"All of those things. He can cure you. He cured me."

"Of what? I mean, excuse me, but what did you ever have that needed curing?"

"I've always been. Different."

"Who hasn't?"

"And also—I've been—away."

It was true then; he'd been hospitalized. I was proud of my perspicacity. I said, "What did you need to be cured of? You can tell me. I'm old enough to be your mother." I waited for him to deny it, but he didn't, the candid little bastard. I said, "Go ahead and tell me what you needed to be cured of."

"I was attracted to other men."

"Ahh. Or, as my grandmother would say, nu? Lots of people are attracted to the same sex, you should go and live happy. Properly protected for sexually transmitted diseases, of course."

He shook his head. "My family isn't like that. We don't believe in it."

"Oh please. Sexuality isn't a belief system."

"I hid from it. It was a great burden on my heart. I was in despair, and I—and I—"

"Tried to kill yourself?"

He looked up. "How did you guess?"

"Because I've been around the block. You tried to kill yourself only not very hard—"

He extended his wrists which had bands of thin white scars.

"Poor baby," I said. "And you had a breakdown, and you've been away somewhere—"

"Almost a year. It's a very beautiful place, and they have music in the summers. I prayed for Him to take it away, and He did, and now I'm free. It sounds simplistic, but that's the beauty of it."

A little ditty formed in my mind: The Lord He say, Don't be gay, just kneel and pray, Go free today. Best poem I'd written in years, compliments of this cute, sexually confused little proselytizer. "So now you've switched to women?"

"I've been celibate."

"Sublimation works for some people," I said. I could feel my neuroses clearing away like a stuffed nose shot up with Afrin. I could feel the breezes. I'd take a poetry workshop. I'd get a job counseling teenagers. "Did you ever do it? With men?"

"He was protecting me, even before I knew Him."

"Let me get this straight, so to speak. Are you saying that you, a twenty-one year old American male in the twenty-first century, have never had sex?" I had a wonderful rush of energy and lovely bad thoughts. "That's fairly remarkable, but it doesn't prove you don't love men. It only proves you've repressed your sex drive. Don't you think you should sleep with a

woman, just to prove you've really changed? This is only if you really want to be changed, of course. I know you trust him. But look what he's thrown in your way." I was suddenly a force, a devil bubbling with persuasive powers. "Here you have before you a woman who has ceased to believe she can be loved—"

"He loves you—"

"But I don't believe it. I don't know him. I only know you. I need to be convinced that I'm lovable. Me, without a job, slightly overweight—"

"And getting older," he added for me.

"You're not supposed to agree with me that I'm unlovable, Robby. You're supposed to come home and love me."

Robby closed his eyes: "He loves you! He loves all of us, right through the blemishes and the sickness at heart. I know because I've been there!"

"Have you? Well, you may have been there, but you haven't been to my apartment." I was feeling unreasonable joy. I was going to expose my apartment to this boy—a far more difficult thing than to undress and have sex. My actual body, as opposed to my body image, is the least of my problems. I've never looked especially good in clothes because of the big breasts, both sides of my family, Jewish and hillbilly, have way too much bazooms for fashion, even including my size two baby sister. Naked, however, I am ample and graceful. And I have great faith in the power of men's libido to overcome their socialization. In this area, I have experience.

I decided that if I could get Robby to come home with me, my luck would change. I would make the phone calls. I would have a job within the week. A good job, enough money to go back to Madame. Get rid of the five pounds I'd picked up, and be so self-confident and svelte that I could bid farewell to Madame and the group forever by August when Madame went to her house on Long Beach Island.

Dr. Landowska says there are worse reasons to have sex than in order to feel beautiful, but there are also better ones. And much better ways to feel worthwhile. It was like a lot of what Dr. Landowska says: practical, true, and way beyond my ability to put into effect.

One of the best things about therapy is that I have interesting dreams as Dr. Landowska likes to hear about them. I said, "There's a place that recurs in my dreams. I call it Ramshackle Street. It has lots of jerry-built, jury-rigged tenements like the city, but it's really in that stupidhead industrial hell hole of a town in New Jersey where I lived when I was a kid."

"Yes?" said Dr. Landowska.

"There are frame houses with wooden porches, balconies, fire escapes, twisted hallways, deep stair wells. The sky is like a little channel overhead, deep greenish black if it's night in the dream and yellow if it's day. A depressed street. Nothing growing, no plants, some pathetic four-

legged animals of indeterminate species. Lighting so poor you have to peer and squint. Nothing is ever clear except the buildings."

"Ah," said Dr. Landowska.

"Ah yourself, Dr. L. I'm trying to create an atmosphere. So in my dream, we—you and I—are in one of those buildings trying to find a room where we can have our session. And every room is occupied. In some of them, people are sleeping or having meals on boards laid between twin beds. Middle aged men are smoking cigars in their underwear. I get anxious because I'm afraid we're using up my time looking for a room. The last door opens onto the street, where, under an extremely Freudian lamppost, lies this little small dog with its entrails spilling out onto the cobblestones. I say, 'Someone should put it out of its misery.' You give me a disapproving look and, then, with your knees carefully aligned, because you have on a tight skirt, you lower yourself to crouch beside the dog. You are wearing this suit with big shoulders, like a career woman in an old movie, you know, what's her name. Joan Crawford."

Dr. Landowska said, "I never liked big shoulder pads."

"Well, it looked like they had made this suit just for you. You squatted down and cooed and babytalked the dog, and then pulled a nickel-plated gun out of your hand bag and shot it between the eyes."

"I am so cruel!" said Dr. Landowska.

"The dream isn't over. I made this dramatic gesture, stood back and pointed at you—*j'accuse*, you know. 'You!' I shouted. 'You shot it!' But the dog wasn't really dead. It had a small red hole in its forehead and it couldn't get up, but it kept panting and wagging its tail."

I stopped and pressed my lips closed. Dr. L. steepled her fingertips, a ring on just about every finger. She said, "And you think?"

"I think the dog is me. Foolishly, I keep coming back to you for more. The end was that you stood up and looked at me. I was noticing everything about you, you were monumental in this suit, wearing gold around your wrists—and don't tell me you don't like gold, I know you like gold jewelry."

"I do," said Dr. Landowska, "I do like gold."

"Well, in this dream, it was on your arms and in your ears, and around your neck, and you had a big gold tooth."

"Like a pirate."

"Yes, and your hair was all waved and blonde, raised over your temples by decorative combs, gold of course. Czarina of all the Russias, Valkyrie of the West."

"You know nothing of European history or geography, either, Martha."

"Queen of Poland, then, and probably Hungary and Yugoslavia too."

"And all the time the poor little dog lies there bleeding," she said. "You must be very angry at me."

"I think I am always spilling my guts. Like the dog."

"Ah. Yes. You would find this painful?"

"What do you think, Dr. L.? Must you be so obvious? I'm the disgusting little doggy with its guts hanging out and no one loves me, and you come and shoot me down."

"Tell me how you feel about the waved blonde hair."

"Your vanity astounds me. You don't even pretend to hide it! Sometimes it's like you're from another dimension."

"Start wherever you want. "

"How about the cigars? How about the lamp post?"

"You may start with lamp posts and cigars if you prefer," said Dr. Landowska serenely.

I do a lot less hooking up with strangers these days, thanks to Dr. L. and the general slowing down of my metabolism with advanced age. I have less tolerance for drinking and the noise in pick-up bars, too. Mostly in the last year or two I have held off till Rachman is in town on business, which isn't very often because Rachman's travel to the U.S. has been sharply curtailed since the World Trade Center. Also, he has become more religious, he tells me. He has a very Muslim family life back home in Egypt, although he refuses to tell me how many kids he has. He still likes to wine me and dine me, but he is more conflicted about it. He does not drink back home. What I like about Rachman is that I know exactly where I stand.

I thought I knew where I stood with Robby that night too. Enjoying something fresh and new. Recalled to life. Robby seemed to consider me therapy, or maybe visible proof of the Power of Jesus. He was sweet and sort of breathless, so proud of himself, and fell asleep immediately afterward, on top of my green satin comforter that still isn't paid for. I doubled the other half of the comforter over him and took a shower. I was so energized by having sex for the first time in six weeks that I wiped the hairs out of the sink and gave the toilet a quick swabbing. Then I straightened the apartment. I had already kicked a pizza box under the bed when we first arrived. Now I made a laundry pile and gathered up two black plastic bags of garbage and stacked newspapers.

I was doing all this naked, and I jumped when Robby spoke: I had almost forgotten he was there. He said, "You have a soft body." He was all wrapped up, just his face showing, very cute.

I said, "Do you want some tea or coffee? I don't have any food, but I have tea and coffee, and I think maybe some packets of instant hot chocolate."

He chose the hot chocolate, of course.

While I was boiling water and washing out a cup, I said, "You were really a virgin, weren't you?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, don't know?"

"I don't know what counts."

"You mean, like, does there have to be penetration or whatever? So, what have you done?"

He murmured, "Touch."

"Touch what? Yourself? You can answer yes or no. You and someone else? You touched each other. You and another boy. You and another boy touched each other?"

He nodded. I stirred the powder into the hot water and brought it to him. He had to get out of the covers, bare torso, a little silky brown hair in the middle of his chest.

"And you felt bad about it? I hope you don't feel bad about today."

"Jesus sent me to you."

"Did he, honey? That's nice." I always love a good rationalization, and confessions. Confessions have a dramatic quality that intensifies everything else. "I could make some confessions too," I said.

He sipped hot chocolate and said, "Tell me."

"When I was in high school, this football player liked me, or pretended to. Anyhow, I accepted his invitation to go to his house even though I knew his parents were away, well, actually I invited myself. And his friends came over."

I have told this so many times, in so many variations. In group therapy they used to roll their eyes: Oh please, not Martha and the Randall Football Team again. It wasn't the entire team anyhow, just three boys total. The only one who never got tired of the story was our middle-aged business owner, some kind of paper product imports, I think. He loved to hear about sex.

"Go on," said Robby. "Tell Him."

"I'm telling you."

"He's listening, let it out, doesn't it feel good to tell it?"

"It turns you on, doesn't it?" They're all voyeurs, I thought. Robby and the old guy in group and maybe Jesus too. I ran a finger down the little diamond of silky brown hair on his chest, and he closed his eyes and smiled. I said, "I wasn't sorry, either, until afterward, when they passed the word around to everyone. Good old Randall. Ring-Around-the-Blue-Collar hellhole Randall. For a while, those three or four months, I did it all—I got laid, went all the way, came across, went down, went under. You name it. I think I wanted to make them notice: Nana, my MIA father, my mother. My sister the little academic star."

Robby sipped hot chocolate.

I said, "Nana was oblivious. She didn't notice, and she was committed to free love anyhow. And my mother never even found out. I ran out of steam, and stopped doing that. I found myself a couple of friends, and calmed down by smoking marijuana at lunch hour." I waited. Finally, I said, "Your turn, Robby. You have to tell about what was good and what embarrassed you."

"This guy. I thought I loved this guy, the one I told you about."

"Yes, you touched each other and you don't know if that counted. You were just kids."

"We were in the youth group together at church."

"I love sex that starts in church. It's so transgressive."

"We prayed together. We knew we were doing something bad, so we prayed in church. And—"

"Started feeling each other? In church?" My group would have liked this a lot, well the importer guy would have, anyhow. "Where in the church?"

"In a pew, we were just sitting there, praying. In the dark. After youth group. We made a date to pray again, but really pray. Only the next time, he didn't come, his father did. His father was the head pastor."

"Omigod."

"I was expecting to meet the boy, and instead, his father—he had told his father—his father went up to the pulpit and threw on the lights, and started preaching a sermon just for me—"

Robby's face crumpled, and tears ran out of his eyes. "Oh Robby," I said, "poor Robby. There's nothing like expecting something nice and getting something bad. It's like biting into a piece of candy and breaking your tooth."

"He told me that it's bad enough, to do that, to be that—but the ones who seduce others into it, they're the worst—"

"You were just two kids experimenting!"

"But if I hadn't wanted it—it wouldn't have happened. What I went through—it was from my own sinfulness."

"Poor baby."

"I like you so much," he said.

And this time, after he'd carefully set his cup on the floor, he was the one who leaned over and kissed me first.

Later, I said, "This is a gift, you see, for both us of us. It's what we need."

There was a crooked little smile on his face.

"You just like doing it, don't you?" I said. "You don't care who you do it with, you just like it. Am I right?"

His skin was so smooth and damp. I could feel the springiness of muscle and the tremor of life under his skin. I had a flash, just a passing hunch. that he really did like boys best. It was not his—how do you call it—performance. That was just fine. Couldn't have been better. But there was something about the way he spoke about that preacher's son, and John, and Jesus.

He said, "We could get married."

That got my attention. "You and I?"

"Listen, come and have supper at the Love Palace."

"I forgot," I said. "I forgot you were supposed to be converting me."

"Just come, I want you to meet people. It's not a church, it's sort of a community center. We help people."

Why not, I thought. Get out, meet some nice Christian boys. "Okay. Should I wear anything in particular?"

"He doesn't care. And we can give you a job, too, you know. Jesus is arranging all this. I know you're looking for a job." He pointed at my newspaper I brought home with me. "We advertised. That was how I knew in the bar that you were what I was looking for. We've had an advertisement in the paper for a couple of weeks. Jesus made you circle it."

"I circled the job at your place?"

He picked up the paper and studied it. His face fell. "No, you didn't circle it. But it's in the same section where you did circle things."

He handed the paper to me and pointed. I remembered the ad. I skipped over it because even though it was in the social services section, it was for an Administrative Assistant/Executive Director, which has sounded to me like they had no idea what they wanted. "If you've been advertising for weeks, how come the job is still open?"

"Because Jesus has been holding it for you. He's been holding you for me and the job for you."

Okay, he was a nut case. But I liked his smell and his smile. I put on fresh underwear, fresh jeans, my nice denim shirt and my denim jacket. Robby helped me carry out the garbage.

"Don't you have a coat, Robby? It's the middle of March."

"I always go inside," he said. Then, "Martha, I know you don't believe it yet, but He brought us together for a purpose. You aren't married, are you?"

I controlled my impulse to tell him how cute he was. "I'm divorced. I'm just coming to have supper and see what kind of place produces you, Robby. I don't want to get married, but thanks for asking. I have a lot on my mind."

"He'll take care of it," said Robby.

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