

Jesus Saves
By Paul Kershaw
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Part 1: His

"I'll be honest with you: What this apartment has going for it is the price."

My potential landlady and I were standing in the middle of what was to be my one-room basement studio apartment. Well, two rooms if you counted the bathroom, and three rooms if you stretched your mind enough to allow the closet that was to be my kitchenette.

"It feels like a prison cell," I sighed.

Mrs. Danderly shrugged non-committally. "I live across the hall."

The awkward moment lingered, and then I nodded at the windows, which were covered by industrial stock roll-down curtains. "Where do those open to?"

She tugged at the weight rod of one of the curtains, and it flapped up rapidly to reveal a brick trough filled with gum wrappers, loose change, and various and sundry. Shadows moved across the trough as somebody walked over the grate above it; I could see up to their ankles. "Converse. Good brand."

Mrs. Danderly, a thin but matronly sort who had stopped aging about ten years ago, around her fiftieth birthday, rolled her eyes. She'd heard the joke before, certainly. She had five units on this floor, not including her own. They took up one wing of the building; the other two wings were the maintenance room and the laundry room.

"It's not the Ritz," she said, "but it's easy access to the laundry room. And you can't get \$300 a month in this city anywhere else. At least, not without..."

"Yeah. I know." It was a rat trap, but it was a rat trap in a decently safe part of town. "I just need a place to sleep, anyway."

"This is a place to sleep."

I pursed my lips; I still wasn't entirely convinced, but I'd been looking at apartments for a month now and this was the only one in my price range in a neighborhood I was willing to live in. "Yes, it is."

She pulled the curtain back down daintily, like a morgue worker recovering the corpse's face following next-of-kin identification. We stood for a moment in the middle of the living room (my mind insisted on clinging to the idea that there was another room, somewhere, hidden behind a wall, waiting for Mrs. Danderly to leave so it could reveal itself).

"Once you get some furniture in here, it'll look fairly cozy."

Liar, I thought, but I didn't really have much furniture anyway. "I've got a futon and a TV."

"Are you interested?" She shifted impatiently. "I've got a couple I'm showing an apartment to in a few minutes upstairs, I can't stay here much longer."

"Yeah, I'm interested. What's next?"

She smiled weakly. "What's always next? Paperwork."



The futon and the TV, my primary possessions beyond a few changes of clothing, were gifts from my parents. Moving-out gifts, not housewarming gifts. They'd decided, perhaps correctly, that at 25 I was old enough to be living somewhere other than with them.

The futon was new, because my bed wouldn't fit in my new studio apartment. Well, it would physically, but I had to have some modicum of dignity. Eventually, I might actually want to entertain friends, perhaps even a girl, and that would be difficult to do with a bed in my living room.

The TV was old, something they'd had in the basement and were planning to get rid of anyway. Appropriate that it went with me, given that, I guess.

Thus began my season in the wilderness that is adult independence.



I had a job as a secretary which had me working from nine to five. Well, eight-thirty to five, with an hour for lunch; if I came in late, I made it up on the back end. It was dull work, catching up with the in-the-office paperwork for half a dozen middle managers who spent most of their time on the road keeping their clients happy.

It was dull work, but it was easy work, and it gave me my evenings for... what? Some people have big plans, I guess, and ambitions – dreams of being celebrities, or rich, or powerful. Something. But for me, the point of life was pretty much not being dead. What I aspired to was to one day aspire to something. For the time being, as the days passed me by, my TV and the few books I'd borrowed from my parents at any given time were enough to keep me distracted.

My father was the ambitious one, and the successful one. I sensed that my being sent off to an apartment was something of a trial by fire, his attempt at a life lesson. My parents' house was sprawling, and they certainly weren't hurting for money. Truth be told, I probably could have snuck back in the back door and lived in the spare rooms for months without them noticing.

But there was also something liberating about my basement prison cell. I was on my own, or at least so I told myself. I was paying the rent by myself, and I even started cooking for myself.

There was something zen, something peaceful about sitting on my futon as evening faded into dark, staring at the turned-off TV and listening to the laughter and conversation of people passing by on the grates over my windows.

People watching, from the ankle down.



The first time I heard Rachel, I'd been living in my apartment for a month and a half. It seems strange to think of the time before Rachel, as my mind has come to classify it. The period of time between when I moved in and she moved in: Before Rachel.

Of course, that first evening, I wasn't aware of what a momentous event I was experiencing. In the first minutes, I was actually fairly annoyed. I'd been watching less and less television, opting instead for my ankle watching.

Above the grates, two pairs of ankles were arguing. One, male, wanted to go home for the evening; the other, female, insisted on going to the bar. Dinner had been enough, the male ankles implored; he was tired, and tomorrow was a work day. The female ankles insisted he was being a pussy and a wet blanket. They said they were going to go to the bar anyway, and it would serve him right if they got picked up by some hunk of a man with a ten-inch cock and a tongue that wouldn't stop. The male ankles oscillated between anger, frustration, and sheer flummoxedness. C'mon, baby, don't be like that – that was him being frustrated. Cut that shit out – that was the anger.

Amidst the dispute, in another auditory channel, it rose up: Moaning. Female moaning, rising and undulating.

Let go of me, the female ankles said, and there was a scrabble of heels on the grates as the couple scuffled.

Mmmmm... yes...: The moaning competed for my attention. My mind looked around for its source, wanting to tell the couple to hold on for a second until I could resolve this new, clashing input.

But the ankles continued unabated. He called her a bitch, she called him a cocksucker. She told me, him, and anyone else who'd listen that he'd never been able to satisfy her anyway.

Again, the incongruous swelling noise tugged at my attention: Gods, yes, that's it, baby, yes.

The source of the woman's moaning was the heating vent. She appeared to be somewhere else in the building. Why was it the first I'd heard of her?

The argument outside my window was nearing its peak. There was a slap of hand to face, and then the deep growl that let me know she'd slapped him (and not vice versa).

OH! GODS! BABY, LICK IT! I'M ...

... leaving you, you prick. We're done, I'm ...

... COMING! YES! YES! YES!

The requisite throwing of the engagement ring, which happened to rattle through the grate and clink to the bottom. The requisite series of inarticulate orgasmic grunts and groans that echoed through my apartment as if she were right here in my room. In my lap.

After a few minutes, both noises abated, leaving me with the quiet sobbing of the man tugging at the grate. I couldn't tell if he was concerned more about the end of the romance or about the loss of what appeared later, when I climbed out of my window to retrieve it, to be a fairly expensive engagement ring.

That was how I met Rachel, even if it wasn't how she met me.



I first saw Rachel's face that weekend, two days later. Saturday. I didn't know it was Rachel until I heard her speak.

There had been an odd convergence of paths at the mailbox. Usually, I think that the world is random and meaningless, but at times like that, it feels like there's some sort of fate or conscious destiny at work.

In my case, fate has always seemed to come with an undercurrent of sadism.

I'd heard the mailwoman arrive with the mail. On Saturdays, I usually heard her: I was just at the bottom of the stairs, and my door, like my vents and my windows, were annoyingly thin when it came to sounds.

I got my mail, and as I stood by the boxes idly sorting it – no need, I figured, to rush back into my apartment to stare at the walls some more – I was greeted by what would be described in purple prose as an angelic vision, sent directly from the highest of the heavens.

She had long, silky auburn hair that flowed as she walked, and an understatedly perfect body that hinted at curves. She was wearing a t-shirt and jeans, I think, but I really wasn't paying attention. I was enraptured by her eyes, brown like chocolate and passionately deep.

I stopped there, trying not to be noticeably agape. As it turned out, it didn't really matter: I might as well have been painted on the wall. She ignored me utterly as she opened her own mailbox.

"Are you new here?"

I heard the voice, a male voice, and I desperately wanted it to be my voice. I rolled it through my auditory system to make sure it wasn't my voice, even though I knew better. I was mute in her presence.

I looked past her, and standing on the steps above her was Jack. No last name, just Jack. He'd introduced himself to me once, with a smarmy glad-handing smile. A Nordic monolith chiseled (chin first) from the fjords, and the ice could still be seen in his eyes (although I must admit, straight as I am, to have paused a moment to consider the possibilities in his handshake).

"Oh, hi! You startled me!" She looked up and smiled warmly. It should have been my smile, but she gave it to him.

"I haven't seen you before. Did you move in recently?"

"Yes, yes." She moved her mail into a single hand; it was a mass of mostly junk mail. She held out her free hand. "Rachel Plummer."

"Jack." He shook her hand, and passed a momentary glance over at me before focusing fully on her.

"Jack...?" Rachel let the pause linger.

"Just Jack." He moved past her to get to his mailbox. I was standing in front of it, so I slipped out of the way. Neither one paid me any notice.

"So, Just Jack, how long have you been here?"

I noticed my eyes had been lingering on the subtle curve of her breasts, and I noticed that her nipples were now casting tiny shadows.

He shrugged. "A few years now, I don't really remember. Say, are you new to town, or just to this part of it?"

Rachel blushed under the weight of his eyes, and her nipples stood out a little more. "I could use a tour guide, if that's what you're offering."

"I can't say I'm offering anything at all, but I wouldn't turn down the opportunity."

Her eyes fell to his chest – eye level, for her – and she bit her lip playfully. "What's your apartment number?"

"214. Yours?"

She nodded her head upwards, to the door at the top of the stairs. "I'm right here in 102."

Right above mine, and then it made sense. I'd been trying to place her voice, and I matched it up with the one in the vent. My mind started forming a comment around that, but I realized it would have been inappropriate to say... what? "Oh yeah, I've heard you coming." I frowned at myself.

"Well, Rachel, it's great to have met you, maybe we can hook up later." Jack proffered his hand again, and she accepted the handshake. "I've got to get to the gym, now."

Jack winked. He was turned away from me, but I knew he'd winked. It's something men instinctively know.

"Sure, Just Jack. Great to meet someone in the building."

They split up after a few moments of dangling flirtation, and returned to their respective apartments.

I stood in the hall a bit longer, savoring her aroma (peaches and cream, with just a dash of cloves). Then the convergence was complete, and I went back to my apartment.



Sunday passed quietly, and then Monday, and Tuesday after it. By Wednesday, Rachel had begun to slip out of my inventory of real people and into my mental compartment for legends. Part of me was painfully aware that, at night, she was right above me; sometimes I could hear her snoring softly, as I lay awake waiting for entertainment candidates to grace the grates above my window.

She had a one-bedroom apartment, unlike me. Her living room would be above my neighbor's apartment. My neighbor was a rarely-seen Korean lady whose cooking may have been appetizing in Seoul, but its aroma frequently made me nauseous. She seemed to use a large amount of cabbage and fish, both cooked for ponderously long times.

Ms Kim – not her real name, but it will do in place of "the Korean neighbor" – got the pleasure of hearing Rachel's footsteps throughout the evening and the weekend, while I got whatever noises she managed to muster in the bedroom. Perhaps Ms Kim didn't hear anything at all, come to think of it; the floorboards seemed fairly well insulated. The noises I got were mostly through the vent.

I'd rearranged my futon to be closer to the vent, but then wondered if it went both ways; if I could hear her, maybe she could hear me.

The idea both thrilled and terrified me. What did I sound like to an outside observer? Did I snore or talk in my sleep? Did I make bodily noises that weren't fit for sharing with strangers?

By Wednesday, though, after nearly a week of hearing nothing of significance from Rachel's vent, I began to worry if that night had been a quirk. Maybe she'd bumped her vent open and had since covered it. Perhaps it was a one-time event.

I lay in the dark, listening to the world idly passing by outside my windows, and to the subdued ticking of my alarm clock. It was just around midnight.

I thought about Rachel above me. Perhaps she was already asleep. She'd be wearing an oversized t-shirt, or perhaps a man's button-down with tails that went to her knees. Satin panties, white. Her breasts would rub against her nightshirt as she moved, but she wasn't moving now. She was asleep, curled up around an adult-size teddy bear that she'd had since she was 16, when a now ex-boyfriend had won it for her at the carnival.

Sparky, that was the teddy bear's name. I knew it. He had a big dumb grin on his face, as if he knew (despite his lack of brain or anything resembling consciousness) that he was spending each night being embraced by a demigoddess, an angel sent to earth to tantalize and torment the lesser mortals.

I could smell her hair: Sweet, like candy and flowers, freshly washed from her nightly shower. I'd stroke her hair, pillow soft and delicate under my awkward fingers. She'd smile – not at me, she was so comfortable with my presence that she didn't need to look at me for us to both know she was smiling for me. And that was why she'd be smiling: I was there, she was safe.

I curled around my body pillow and felt it as if it were her, her soft, feminine body spooned within mine. I felt her warmth pressing against me, and I kissed her hair lovingly.

Then, with the aggressiveness of a tiger but the gentleness of a kitten, she rolled over and guided me onto my back, straddling my hips. The satin of her panties slid like milk over my naked belly. Arching over, she let the tips of her hair dance on my face as her hands massaged my chest.

"Do you like that?" she asked.

I moaned softly in assent, and she let the hair brush against my cheeks more vigorously. I groaned louder.

"God, mmmm, that's good," she said, and for a moment I was confused.

Then I realized where I was, and that she wasn't here in my arms but rather upstairs in her own bed, and she wasn't asleep.

"Unh! Yeah, push it in!" she cried out, and I could hear another voice, deeper and quieter, as if (unlike Rachel) he worried what the neighbors might think.

I clenched my fist for a moment in jealousy, thinking of my angel up there with another man, but the jealousy melted back into lust as I pictured myself up there with her, or her down here in my one-room cell.

"Oh, gods, yeah, fuck me harder!" She panted and groaned, and now I could hear the squeaking of the bed, and all I could think was that it was me causing the bed to squeak. If there was another man upstairs with her, I no longer knew; my mind filtered him out. I was there, and she was naked beneath me.

"Yeah, baby, I'm getting close, fuck that pussy, you stud!"

I reached down and stroked myself as I listened to her. My cock was hard and hot in my hand, and I bit my lip to keep from making real-world noise to go with the dirty talk that was inside my head: "You like that, do you? Want it hard? Come for me, angel. I want you to scream when you come."

"Oh gods," she said to me through the vent. And then her words eroded into incoherence, and the smacking of the headboard against the wall, and then she really did scream, and then cry, moans of joy as the surrogate me rode out the cascades of her release.

I ejaculated violently into my body pillow, my mind reeling and dizzy. I'd masturbated many times before, and increasingly much recently, but it had been a long time since it had meant so much to me, been so fulfilling.

I held the pillow close to me, and thought of the future that I would have to make true, where it would be Rachel instead of the pillow.

I cried myself to sleep, although I wasn't sure if they were tears of joy or of sorrow and guilt.



Days turned into weeks, and Rachel's intermittent escapades became a part of my routine.

I passed her from time to time in the hallway, and she seemed oblivious to me. As our vent-based relationship aged and developed, it became harder for me to contemplate interacting with her face to face. The thought was awkward, because I knew that I knew so much about her than she knew about me.

Sometimes her lover was Just Jack. Sometimes it was someone else; sometimes another woman. Some weeks, it was every night; other weeks, her vent was as quiet as mine, and I would grow worried that she'd moved away, or changed her ways or schedule. Then I'd hear her quiet snoring, or the distant clattering in her bathroom as she got ready to spend the night alone.

The quiet nights, once I was assured of her presence, were the most precious to me. I could imagine her and me, together, cuddled in her bed, listening to the gentle rain outside, or the whoosh of the traffic, or the chitchat of passing people who I could know see from the waist up, instead of from the ankle down.



I think it was two months or so after she'd moved in when our relationship changed sharply again.

I'd heard voices in the distance, which meant that she was entertaining someone in her living room. Ms Kim, no doubt, could hear every detail, but I could only catch wisps of voices. Just Jack, I guessed from the low timbre. I could see his Aryan arrogance, his set chin, his weaselly eyes of ice.

The voices got louder, but not because they were approaching the bedroom; they were arguing. The gist floated through: She wanted a more serious relationship, he wanted sex. He told her that she just didn't get what she was to him. Nothing, apparently. A hole in the bed, she said.

I cuddled up close to the vent, clutching my pillow in rage. How could he treat her like that? He was my proxy, he wasn't just abusing her feelings on his own behalf. His insults were my insults, and they stung as I heard them hurled through the vent.

The front door slammed, and the ceiling vibrated as Jack stormed away.

I wanted to follow him; I could see myself with a rope around his neck, choking him. I wanted to kill him.

After the vibrations faded away, Rachel's bed squeaked as she sat down on it. Sobbing, soft and gentle, the ringing of tragic bells.

"Jesus," she said, barely audibly, "what am I going to do? How did I get like this?"

I listened, feeling helpless, wanting to run upstairs, knock on her door, and hold her tightly. I knew what an angel she was; I knew how important she was. I could treat her right, if only I could learn to treat myself right.

Right. I lived in a one-bedroom basement apartment. My worth came from my parents' estate, and they weren't in a sharing mood at the moment.

"Jesus, Jesus, Jesus..." she repeated, and I began to wonder if she was merely emoting or if she was actually praying.

I froze for a second. Being a voyeur to her sexuality was one level of invasion, but listening in on her prayers seemed like a level of intimacy beyond the pale. But I'd also heard too much already – accident or not, I was invading her privacy.

That had occurred to me before, of course. Mixed in with my arousal and my joy at participating in her orgasms, at being united with her even if she didn't know of my existence, there had been the guilt that what I was doing wasn't entirely fair to her. Hence the awkwardness when we passed: "Hi, I'm your downstairs neighbor, I listen to you cum and it gets me off."

"Jesus," she said, and the tone in her voice had changed. I knew now that she *was* praying. "I know it's been a while, I don't... I don't know what to say. I don't suppose you have any reason to listen to me at all. But I'm lonely, Jesus, so lonely. I don't think I deserve this."

We shared the silence that followed, she in her bedroom, her eyes red from crying; me in my bed, shivering in rage and hopelessness. I yearned to be with her; I ached.

All the emotion just crept up and slipped out before I could stop it: "You deserve better," I said.

In the next silence, my mind raced with scenarios: She was angry, furious that some stranger was listening in; she was scared of a stalker; she was relieved that I'd finally come forward, after all this time. Sometimes, though, people hear what they want to hear.

"Jesus, is that you?" she said softly.

There are so many moments in my life where I've looked back and asked myself why I did what I did, but it feels like instinct just takes over, or perhaps it's fear that I've dug myself in and the only good way out is deeper still. I mustered up my best deific voice and said, "Be still, my child, rest your body now, and your soul will be cleansed."

More silence, more infernal silence that passed through seconds that felt like minutes. "Thank you, Jesus. I didn't expect... I've never..."

"Sleep now, for I am with you."

"Yes, I will... I..."

She trailed off, and I could tell from the lack of noise that she was sitting, thoughtfully, on her bed; I envisioned her in a satin dress, with nothing underneath. She'd had plans for the evening, after all, that involved getting undressed quickly. I felt mildly perverted, my cock growing hard at the thought of her vulnerability while she was perceiving me as a divinity. There was the irony: I saw her as an angel sent from the heavens, and she saw me in about the same way. Except she wasn't seeing me at all, but that didn't matter to me. It was enough that she was aware that I existed, even if her understanding of who I was was completely wrong.

That she spoke to me at all was enough.

I've heard tell of the quiet before the storm, but I think the reverse is true: Sometimes the sun is brightest after the storm.

Jack and I had been fighting. It was our first fight, because in order to have fights, you have to have a relationship. I'd come to realize that, as far as Jack was concerned, I was a hole in the mattress.

Don't get me wrong. I like sex. I love sex. And Jack was as good as the next person; better, if only because he was convenient.

And his looks, too. His looks were to die for: Strong and sturdy, the sort of looks that come only with living a physical life.

Eyes so blue I could swim in them. Skinny-dip in them, really. Which is what I seemed to do so much time doing, each time he looked at me.

I undressed me in those eyes: He did, too. Mutual objectification of me.

Jack was one of the first people I'd met when I moved into town.

I was starting Graduate School. I'd taken an apartment off campus because I didn't want to be on-campus. Living on campus had seemed so confining as an undergraduate.

Mrs. Danderly, the landlady, had been nonchalantly pleasant in arranging my apartment. I'm not sure she particularly approved of me. I have this tendency of exuding sexuality: Not as a come on, at least not to her, but just by my presence. She could tell that I was "one of those," no doubt. The slut that she'd refused to allow herself to be.

The mantle of judgment, it was something I'd gotten used to wearing.

But she needed to let the flat, and I needed a flat to let. It worked out, despite the friction.



I met Jack a few days after I'd moved in. I was getting my mail. There had been someone else standing there, some guy who I'd noticed out of the corner of my eye. He was ogling me while trying not to look. Enraptured, it was a look I'd seen too many times before.

I don't mean to sound arrogant. It's not arrogance, it's the truth. I exude, I enrapture.

I was pulling my mail out of the box when I heard a voice that startled me: "Are you new here?"

The voice rolled through the air like a thunderclap beneath the clouds. I looked up, and standing on the steps above me was Jack. He struck me as a God, as if he'd been chiseled from the side of a Nordic cliff.

And, like the stone from which I'd come to learn he'd been chiseled, he had no soul. All looks, no depth.

Ah, though, what looks they were! They melted me on contact, and I swam through the goinness that were my legs to respond.

"Oh, hi! You startled me!" I looked up and smiled, trying to fill it with warmth instead of blatant lust.

He smiled back, and his eyes danced impishly. "I haven't seen you before. Did you move in recently?"

"Yes, yes." I rearranged my mail to free up a hand, and held it out. "Rachel Plummer."

"Jack." He shook my hand. Strike one: He stole a predatory gleam at the man behind me. It wasn't needed, it was mocking, and for a moment I considered just dropping Jack before anything had even started.

But, those eyes. Ice. Appropriate, but mesmerizing.

"Jack...?" I waited for a last name. I'd given him mine, after all, even if it had been merely symbolic (my name was Dymoed on the mailbox I'd opened).

"Just Jack." He sidled around me, feigning a need to get to his mailbox. More predation: He moved between me and the nebbishy ogler. Strike two. My instincts stood up and shouted at me to let this one swim away, but my hormones traced the line of his chin and drowned out the complaints.

"So, Just Jack, how long have you been here?"

I bit the inside of my lip. I'd noticed that I was dampening my panties, and worried if my nipples were starting to show.

He shrugged as he pulled his mail out of its slot. Dammit, his nonchalant indifference was effective. "A few years now, I don't really remember. Say, are you new to town, or just to this part of it?"

Just Jack looked back at me, and I felt my cheeks flush. "I could use a tour guide, if that's what you're offering."

He looked away, acting innocent. I was being played, but I didn't really mind. "I can't say I'm offering anything at all, but I wouldn't turn down the opportunity."

I bit my lip playfully. "What's your apartment number?"

"214. Yours?"

I nodded my head upwards, to the door at the top of the stairs. "I'm right here in 102."

"Well, Rachel, it's great to have met you, maybe we can hook up later." Jack proffered his hand again, and I accepted the handshake. "I've got to get to the gym, now."

That was almost strike three, the sheer pretentiousness of it, but his wink turned it into a foul ball, so I let him walk.

"Sure, Just Jack." I winced a bit at that, and decided to check for his name on his box later. "Great to meet someone in the building."



The next time I saw Jack, he invited himself back to my apartment. I was horny; I was always horny, and never seemed to have a problem picking up someone, male or female or some of each, to help me out with that.

We called out for pizza, and by the time the delivery guy had arrived, Jack had gotten my blouse off and was working on my skirt. I'd gotten him even further, so when the doorbell rang, I was the one to go to the door.

The delivery guy was having trouble making eye contact, and that was what clued me in that I was standing there, door flung open, in a black satin bra with one strap down around my elbow.

I adjusted the strap back up to my shoulder and exchanged pizza for money. He stammered a thank you and dashed off, his heavy footsteps clunking in poor rhythm.

The peephole across the hall flickered back to reveal light, meaning that someone had been blocking it. Mr. Franklin, no doubt. An older guy who I'd caught looking at me before.

I let my bra strap drop back down to my elbow, torn between amusement at the delivery, annoyance with the Peeping Tom, and enthusiasm to return Jack's cock to my mouth.

As I turned back into my apartment, I heard a noise sliding across Mr. Franklin's door. He was probably peeking again.

I playfully unhooked my bra with one hand, holding the pizza boxes in the other and closing the door with my foot. Blue balls would serve him right.



I peppered my interactions with Jack with other play, sometimes involving him. There was a particularly hot evening I spent with him and an undergraduate couple I'd picked up at the library. It was sheer joy, watching Jenny on her hands and knees on my bed, mouth and pussy filled, tits swinging loose as she was push-me-pull-me'd to orgasm, while I lay against my dresser rubbing my clit and savoring the odors of sweat and spunk in the air.

A few days later, Jenny and I got together, just the two of us. As I licked her sweet peach, I thought of seeing Jack's cock thrusting away at it. And for a moment, I felt hollow, as if I were missing something.

I'd been feeling that way more and more. Sex was all right, sex was fun, I didn't want to stop having sex. But I wanted something more, as well.



Jenny called me later that week, in tears. Justin, her boyfriend, who had willingly fucked me raw while she sucked my nipples, was upset that she'd seen me alone. He was jealous, and didn't think that "this" was such a good idea.

Apparently, during the course of the discussion, Justin had called me a dirty slut.

Through her tears, Jenny admitted she'd agreed with him. They were worried about catching something. They were worried about going down "the wrong path." To hear her tell it, they'd built three or four nights of sex into a lifetime commitment, and now they wanted to break up with me.

Me, their dirty slut.

After I hung up, I sat and stared at the phone. I felt filthier than I ever had before, and meaningless. I knew that people judged me – I could see the effect my variety of partners had had on Mrs. Danderly's reactions towards me.

But this stung, probably because I'd actually thought of Justin and Jenny as decent people. And if decent people thought I was a slut, maybe I really was.



I didn't see Jack for a few weeks after that. He'd gone back home to visit his mother, who'd had a stroke and was in the hospital. I picked partners up now and then, as my hormones dictated, and while I was ecstatic while I was in the moment, the letdown got harder and harder.

Jack showed up the evening after he got back into town. He called me and asked if he could see me. I told him to come on down.

As I waited, I thought about what I would tell him: That I was thinking about the next level, that I wanted to maybe think about the future, that I'd been thinking about a lot of things.

He met me with his shirt unbuttoned, his nipples rigid, his washboard abs, his golden-boy hair... and I found myself drifting towards thoughts of his hard prick inside of me.

"Hey, baby, how ya been?" he asked, striding past me and plopping down onto the couch.

"I missed you," I said.

"Sure." He shrugged. "Me too. Missed that hot action." He chuckled, and each laugh was an arrow in my chest.

I closed the door and sat down in my recliner. "How's your mother?"

"Back home." He frowned at me. "What are you doing over there?" His eyes motioned me to the empty space on the couch next to him.

"I missed you," I said again, trying to form the words to start a conversation that I didn't know how to start.

"You said that." He patted the couch next to him. "Get that pretty ass over here and give me a welcome back kiss."

I sighed and did what he said, sliding onto the couch next to him and offering a dainty kiss.

He responded by pressing his tongue between my teeth. In a moment, from the heat, the longing, the missing-him, I responded in kind. He pulled me closer, his hands moving up my back and flicking at my bra clasp.

I moaned, feeling betrayed by my lust, melting under his touch despite myself. And then, somewhere in the quiet of my soul, a little voice cried out, "Stop!"

That little voice, somehow, took momentary control of my hands and my mouth. I pushed him back onto the couch, breaking the kiss. "Stop. STOP!"

Jack Just Jack looked stunned for a moment, confused. "C'mon, sweetie, what's up?"

"What's up? You haven't seen me for weeks, and the first thing you want to do is fuck?"

He looked from side to side in bemusement. "Duh. We fuck good. I'm horny."

"I want a relationship that's more than just sex."

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, Christ. Not this shit. Let me get my hankies, maybe we can put in an Oprah Winfrey flick and cuddle."

I blinked, and suddenly the Nordic veneer that Jack had honed so well began to thin away. I moved back to my chair, curling away from him.

He sighed. "Look, I didn't mean it that way – " But his tone revealed that he had, and now he was trying to save the evening for at least something resembling sex. That boat was sinking fast, and he was bailing water in desperation. "You just don't understand, you know, the way we are."

I shot bolt back at him. "How are we?"

"You know... Our relationship just isn't... like that."

I raised a brow. "Our 'relationship,'" I said slowly and deliberately, "involves me being a hole in your mattress."

"Whoa, now, that's not fair. We always do it in your bed."

An attempt at humor, and a horribly mistimed one at that. "Get out."

"Baby, you know I love you."

That was too much. He'd never said that before, ever. He was saying it for one reason and one reason only, and it was the harshest lie he could have dared to level in my direction.

"Get the fuck out of here!"

He sighed heavily, angrily, and looked out my window, considering his options. Finally, he stood up. "Fine. Have it your way. Crazy bitch, probably on the rag anyway."

I stood up at that, raising myself up to every inch even though he still towered over me, and met him in the eye.

I could see his arm twitch as if he – well, he wouldn't dare have done that. Too much to lose, and he knew it.

Instead, he turned and went to the door. He opened it and paused again; I could see over his shoulder that Mr. Franklin's peephole had no light on the other side, meaning he was watching us. Good. Let him look, let him watch.

Let him see a woman no longer being a hole in a mattress to a hollow hunk of a man.

"You're really fucked up, you know that, cunt? I just hope you didn't give me AIDS, you cumdumpster."

He slammed the door, and I stood there, rigid, ready for him to come back in, ready for more of a fight, searching for any grasp on the image I'd once had of him now that he'd dropped his mask and I'd been left looking at his real self.

And then, pulled down by a sudden emotional undertow, I collapsed.



I made my way to the bedroom and sat down, the full weight of my body hitting the springs. I was self-conscious, the springs squeaking loudly in the quiet room.

"Jesus," I said under my breath, "what am I going to do? How did I get like this?"

I cried softly, my mind racing. No, Jack hadn't changed: Jack had been exactly who I'd seen that first day at the mailboxes. A sex-crazed jock. Out for himself. He'd never been anyone other than that. I'd changed, and I'd thought he'd change, too. As I'd changed, my perception of him had pulled him through, until my perception and the reality no longer matched.

"Jesus, Jesus, Jesus..." I chanted, and I began to wonder if I was merely crying or if I was actually praying.

That's what I needed: Prayer. A light, a beacon, a change. I was never much of a Christian; it didn't really match who I was, or even who I wanted to be, but it was what I knew.

"Jesus," I said, changing the tone of my voice. I was determined, now, to change. "I know it's been a while, I don't... I don't know what to say."

What would I say to a God that didn't really exist, anyway?

"I don't suppose you have any reason to listen to me at all. But I'm lonely, Jesus, so lonely. I don't think I deserve this."

I sat in the silence, and for some reason I didn't feel quite so alone. I felt as I was being observed, in the same way that every now and then, during sex or just getting ready for bed, I felt observed. Not like Mr. Franklin, but as if someone were in the room with me.

Jesus? Had Jesus really been with me the whole time?

And then a voice, distant and tinny, broke the silence: "You deserve better."

I blinked. It had been real, it had been... terrestrial. Of this planet, not divine. I was confused, though. Who was talking to me? If they could hear me now, could they hear me... whenever?

I tested to see if I could track down the voice: "Jesus, is that you?"

Much of my sorrow had been replaced by a quest to determine the answer to this sudden riddle that had presented itself.

The voice, again: "Be still, my child, rest your body now, and your soul will be cleansed."

This time, he (for it was a male voice) was trying to sound deeper, more full of... something. Identity. Self. Power. Earlier, the voice had sounded tentative, but now it seemed to be filling with an energy and self-confidence that was hard to describe.

My eye caught the apparent source that my ears had tracked: The vent. My God, the vent? A neighbor? Had a neighbor been listening to me all this time?

Distracted, I responded. "Thank you, Jesus. I didn't expect... I've never..."

The vent spoke back, "Sleep now, for I am with you."

"Yes, I will... I..."

I didn't know what else to say, so I didn't say anything at all.



My first reaction was anger, that somebody had been listening in all these months and not said anything.

But there was a saving grace in the voice, a tenderness. Love, not lust. And confidence.

As the voyeuristic freak pervert neighbor, he was a coward. As the voice of Jesus, he was confident, tender, and loving.

I longed to be in his arms. The arms of my Jesus, that is, not in the arms of the pervert. Superman, not Clark Kent.

Even though they were the same person.

As I fell asleep that evening, I gave a body and a face to my Jesus. He was quiet and slight, indeed – perhaps, no, perhaps he was on the heavy side. Not ugly, but not attractive. Forgettable. Someone that would slip into the stream of people that I passed everyday.

After all, I must have passed him, and I didn't remember seeing him.

It wasn't Mr. Franklin: I knew that. Our apartments didn't touch anywhere. Next door to me was a woman who lived alone. Above me, below me – I didn't know.

I thought about looking for him, knocking on the doors of the apartments that shared my ceiling or floor, but then I thought about the lonely, voyeuristic perv that he was, and then I thought about the Jesus that he thought I thought he was.

And in my drowsy dreams, as I faded into sleep, he came to me, and held me, and I could smell the rancid odor of sweat under his aftershave, and it smelled like roses in honey.

He pressed against me, and I pressed into him, spooning under a full moon in a quiet meadow somewhere. I decided then, in the haze of my half-awake mind, that this is how it had to be, at least for now: Him dreaming of me and me dreaming of him, both of them illusions.

My last vision, before I faded into the irretrievable depths of unconsciousness, was of his soft lips covering my body.

I purred, feeling his unshaved whiskers playing at my belly; I cooed, rubbing my hands on his shoulders; I sighed as he tenderly kissed my thighs.

And then I begged him to enter me, and then he responded by spooning up with me again, his half-flaccid penis laying harmlessly between us, and said, "Not tonight, my angel, not tonight."



The next night, I prayed again.

I knelt next to my bed, feeling my nightgown pulled taut by my knees. I'd picked out a red satin gown because it made me feel more sinful, more justified in speaking to my fantasy voice, more in need of purification.

"Jesus, are you there?"

There was no response, and I thought maybe that meant that he wasn't around, or that last night had been a quirk and he couldn't normally hear me after all.

"Jesus?" I asked tentatively again.

I sighed and stared at my bedroom ceiling. Seconds passed like minutes.

"I'm here," he said at last.

"I've been wondering, Jesus... how long have you...?"

"I've been with you the whole time, my child."

My heart skipped more than I expected it to. I bit my lip and thought of him, or at least of my constructed image of him. How would I speak to him, though, without destroying the fantasy that he was Jesus?

I closed my eyes. I had so many questions, but I wondered how many of them really mattered. What did he think when he heard me? Had he touched himself, or had he tried to drown it out? I thought of him stroking himself while listening to my bed move, and I felt myself blush; my vagina stiffened at the thought of it.

“You’re lonely,” he said. “We all get lonely sometimes.”

“Even you?”

The silence was long and gave me the answer. He couldn’t respond within the context of the fantasy. Maybe he was cursing himself for the slip.

I tried again: “Jesus, I’ve been having thoughts. Impure thoughts, about you.”

After a pause: “Go on.”

“I dreamt last night that you were with me, holding me, touching me.” I licked my lips and thought about it again. “Is this wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong if it comes from love,” he said, using his best Divine Voice tone. He was getting better at it, quickly; it echoed in a rich baritone around my bedroom, and my ears reached out for it hungrily. “Tell me more about your thoughts.”

“I imagine you, and you seem so different. Gentle, tender, sensitive.” I stroked my sheets with my fingertips as if it were his chest. I leaned over and rubbed my face in them, and could almost smell his tang on them.

His breathing had become labored, and I dared to wonder what he was doing on the other end of the vent. “You need to learn to love yourself, dear one,” he said.

“I want to touch myself the way that I know you would touch me.”

I could almost hear a whimper, but he regained himself: “Yes, beloved one, I think you should.”

I stood up and looked at myself in the mirror above the dresser. I had a glow around me, a strong bright aura that I wasn’t used to seeing. The nightgown lay across my breasts, and fluttered in a red curtain down to my knees.

I saw myself as I imagined he’d look at me, letting my eyes trail longingly over my curves, my lips moistening as I spied that hint of a triangular shadow.

My hand moved slowly up my thigh, lifting the gown up a few inches, just far enough to entice. I inhaled deeply, aching for his touch, afraid of shattering the illusion.

“Jesus, I’m standing before you now. You can see my nipples hardening through the fabric of my lingerie.”

I could hear his breathing more clearly now, and it was indeed irregular.

“I’m letting one strap fall, and then the other. My breasts are bare now.” I let the nightgown fall down around my ankles, and stepped out of it. “And now I’m naked in front of you, my lord.”

I watched myself in the mirror. I was naked, and nude. My fur glistened with a light dew. I pet it as if with his fingers, and parted the lips, cupping one of my breasts with my other hands.

“Please, Jesus, please... treat me like a woman should be treated.”

He groaned, then cut it off. "You are doing very good, my sweet angel."

I massaged my breast, pinching the nipple, and let one finger slide into my moist snatch. Moaning through lightly parted lips, I felt my legs tremble under me. But still I took glances at myself between rolls of my head.

"Oh, Jesus, you're inside of me now, cleansing me, purifying me with your sweetness."

I slipped another finger inside, leaning against the wall of my bedroom and thrusting harder. I steadied myself with my free hand, flicking my two fingers rapidly inside. My muscles tensed, and I thought of my Jesus grasping his cock and listening to me.

In those moments of ecstatic crescendo, my mental image of the pervert in the other apartment and the divine loving Jesus began to merge together, blurring into one.

I thought of burying his cock in my mouth, smelling the musk in his fur. I pushed a third finger into my tensing pussy, abandoning decorum as I began to cry out. "Oh, Jesus, yes, Jesus, that's it."

His breathing was extremely heavy now, and I could tell he was close.

"Yes, Jesus, that's it, cleanse me, fill me with your love, make love to me, please, Jesus, make love to me."

That's what I'd meant to say, at least. Somewhere in the middle of it, I lost coherence as an intense orgasm washed over me.

A few moments later, his grunts told me that he'd cum as well. That brought about a second wave in me, and as I started to come back down, I looked at myself in the mirror again.

I was flushed and crying. It was the best orgasm I'd had in months, because it was more than just an orgasm... it was a release. A full-fledged, total release.

Eventually, I slid down to the floor and fell asleep there. We hadn't said goodbye because we hadn't needed to: He was there, I was here, we were somehow together.

I had a peaceful sleep; somewhere during the night, I moved to my bed and curled up around a pillow.



I prayed several times over the next few weeks, feeling no need to go pick up strangers for sex. I had Jesus.

I saw Jack once or twice in the hallway; he was polite, in a way that suggested he was hoping I would take him back in. I didn't. I had Jesus.

I'd found Jesus, and he was keeping my needs satisfied.

Part 3: Theirs

A month had passed since Craig had first spoken to Rachel through the vent, and over three months since she'd moved in.

Rachel had found herself aching for more. As she passed male neighbors in the hall, she found herself wondering if they were her Jesus – she rejected them as they failed to match up. They went into the wrong apartment. Their voices had the wrong tone. They had the wrong aura. They just plain didn't feel right.

Craig, meanwhile, had come to avoid Rachel, afraid that his chicanery would be uncovered. Every day, every prayer session, he felt himself sliding deeper into a lie from which he couldn't escape.

Part of him wanted to just stop answering, but as his angel's voice beseeched him to visit her, he couldn't deny it. He couldn't refuse her. He just couldn't.

It was an addiction, and like any other addiction, it was difficult to resist.

His heart hung heavy. He came to realize that he didn't even really know Rachel, he only knew his own fantasy of who she was.

Regardless, she revealed herself bit by bit in the sessions, letting him know about past traumas, fears, anxieties. She laid her soul out to him, building up a version of him in her own mind.

They were once again locked in a standoff. It was time for intervention.

It was the weekend of Thanksgiving, which meant that many of the residents of the apartments had abandoned it for family dinners elsewhere in the city, the state, or the country.

Jack had tried to cook a turkey in his oven. He was too morose to go home to visit his mother, who had always made the turkey before. Besides, it was about time he learned how to do it himself.

He managed to set the turkey, then the stove, then his kitchenette on fire. By the time the fire engines had made it to the scene, most of his apartment was gone, and the flames had started on the neighboring flats.

Rachel stood outside in the small group of evacuees, watching the orange glow coming from the windows of the second floor. Jack was standing nearby, pouting in a way that suggested that he was thinking that she should have been making him the turkey in the first place, so somehow it was her fault.

Craig was standing next to Mrs. Danderly, staring at Jack, fuming at Jack for his recklessness. He'd learned to be invisible around Rachel, but he was too annoyed with that idiot jock to think about actively hiding.

Rachel looked idly around the small assemblage, feeling vaguely tired and nervous about the inferno, when suddenly she caught her breath.

There, next to the landlady, who was that? She'd studied every man in the complex, and he didn't look familiar. At first she wondered if it was Mrs. Danderly's son, but she didn't have any children. She'd said so.

And then he said something. Bitter, jaded, about Jack, muttered to Mrs. Danderly.

It was that voice – her voice – the voice that had wrapped itself around her and given her hope and comfort.

He looked like she'd imagined. Not the specifics, of course – the specifics were way off. He looked nothing like she'd imagined, but he blended into the background. He was someone she would not normally have noticed at all. He had no beauty to him at all; he wasn't even noteworthy in his ugliness. He was utterly... nothing.

In that moment of recognition, he was the most beautiful man in the world.

Craig suddenly felt someone looking at him, and he turned to find out who it was.

It was her: His angel. Looking directly at him. Staring at him with a faint smile on her face. When he made eye contact, her smile grew wider.

He froze. What now? He was poised to run. He wanted to run. Now there would be the confrontation: The smile was a ruse. A gambit. Or she was mistaking him for someone else, but his secret would be out now.

He wanted to run, but his legs ignored the command. His legs had sunk down into a bed of concrete.

She mouthed a single word: "Jesus." He knew it; he knew the shape of that word on her lips, having seen it in his visions over and over the last month.

He wanted to run even more now. He was out: It was sunk. Game up. Gave over.

And now, his lips betrayed him as well, mouthing, "Yes, angel." Further: "My angel." Damn those lips of his! Damn those legs!

Rachel was walking towards him now, and he could vaguely sense that Mrs. Danderly was eying him suspiciously. So was Jack, for that matter, turning his head warily between him and Rachel.

"Hi," Rachel said at the end of a very long tunnel. "I don't think we've met. I'm Rachel."

Craig stared at the hand that was outstretched at the end of a twenty foot arm. Everything was distended, and he was worried that he was going to pass out. Oh, wouldn't that be a good reaction? Oh, wouldn't that just make everything worse?

"I'm... I'm Craig." Betraying lips! Now he was sunk for sure!

Rachel hugged him then, abruptly, holding him tight, like a puppy that's been lost in the rain and which has finally made its way home. It was his voice all right, he was her Jesus.

What evil taunt was this? Was he dreaming?

Yes, he was dreaming.

He would wake up. He was dreaming.

"It's all right," she whispered. "I know."

He reeled back, suddenly realizing: How long had she known? How long had she pretended?

Now his legs were working, and he tugged away from her, ready to run.

"It's all right," she whispered again. "I know."

The second time she said it, it felt right. The illusion was over, and now reality would be whatever reality would be. They were done living in their constructed impressions of the other and stuck, for better or worse, with the reality of the other.

"It's all right," he said, and despite his own fear, hugged her tightly. The anxious voices were already crawling back in, trying to tell him that this just wouldn't work, but he ignored them. Now was his time, they could whittle away at his self-confidence later. Now was his time, and he was acting on it.



Jack's apartment was destroyed; there was some smoke damage to some of the neighboring apartments, but it wasn't considered to be permanent. Even Jack's apartment would eventually be rebuilt; that's what the property owners decided. They'd hide the flaws and rent it at bottom dollar for a while until the smell fully faded. Insurance would pay for most of their losses.

Only the basement escaped totally unscathed, so the basement tenants were allowed to stay if they wanted to. The first floor tenants were asked to find somewhere else for a few weeks.

Rachel found somewhere else: Craig's place.



It was odd, being told to sit outside of one's own apartment. Craig did as he was told nonetheless.

Rachel was inside, "getting ready." "It's not as if I can send you to the other room," she'd said. He briefly thought about the bathroom, but decided that wouldn't do it.

Mrs. Danderly passed by once while he was sitting out there. She gave him a disapproving glare, sighed about some important crisis (she was usually sighing about some important crisis), then went into her apartment.

After fifteen minutes that seemed like two hours, Craig heard Rachel's voice: "Come in."

He opened the door. It was dark inside, and it took him a few moments to adjust. She'd curtained over the windows, and moved the few pieces of furniture out to the fringes of the room, giving herself a large space of floor in the middle of it.

There was a ring of candles lit (wouldn't Mrs. Danderly have a fit?), and he could smell a gentle air of incense burning.

She was lying on the floor, stripped naked, propped up by her elbows. The candlelight played shadows across her pale flesh.

"It's time to pray, dear one," Rachel said, her honey voice pulling him into the room.

He knelt down, and crawled towards her. She watched him hungrily, motionless, her legs spread.

He kissed her ankle, letting his tongue taste her warmth. Cream, silky smooth. Bliss.

Is this what angels tasted like?

He stroked her skin, and she moaned. She could feel her hairs tingle; he wasn't rubbing her skin, like so many other lovers had: he was moving above it, excruciatingly close.

She squirmed beneath his touch as his tongue moved ever-so-slowly up one calf, and then the other, taking ever inch of her in.

His hands moved under her: He had had a few other partners, but they were awkward and clumsy. He wasn't working on lessons learned there, he was working on pure instinct. He did his best to block out thought, because thought was critical and judgmental and would tell him he was doing it wrong.

Instinct would simply let him be, and let him do, and that's what he wanted to do.

His nose took in the scent of her thigh, and he could feel the warm air above her sex caressing his cheek. His mouth watered for the taste of her sweet kitten, but his instinct told him to resist.

He looked up at her; her head was thrown back, and her stiff nipples cast shadows in the candlelight that danced across her belly.

Her breathing was shallow, and expectant.

He nuzzled her fur with his nose, and she gasped. He smiled coyly, savoring the scent. Massaging her buttocks, he nuzzled her again. Again, she gasped, and she pressed into him. "Please..." she whispered.

He nuzzled a third time, and blew a warm breath against her glistening lips.

"Unh!" she groaned, and growled lustfully. "Please..."

His instinct told him to press on, and so he did, curling his tongue and flicking it against her clit.

It was a sweet syrup, and he savored it on his tongue. He pulled her close to him, and began licking in earnest, moving his tongue up and down her lips, and then thrusting into her with it.

She shrieked as she came. It was sooner than he'd expected. She wrapped her legs around his head and squeezed, bucking violently.

"Oh, Jesus, oh God, yes! That's perfect!"

He rode out her crescendo, licking her slowly to coax her gently back to reality.

As he sat back, she sat up, smiling blissfully. "Oh, Craig, why did we wait so long?"

He didn't have any response, because in the cocoon of candlelight and incense, he had no sense of time. There was only her, and him, and the four walls.

They made love there, for the first time, and it was rapture. Late in the night, they fell asleep in each other's arms, and some time later, Craig woke up long enough to blow out the candles and curl back up with his beautiful angel.

As he slept, he dreamed dreams that no longer shadowed over his reality. Because reality had caught up.