



Quid Pro Quo

by Constance McCutcheon

THE LAW

It was winter in Annandale. Snow had been falling so lightly all day that the air had become a veil of cold, sparkling moistness that brushed across the faces of those few taking evening exercise. The thin layers of white set down on the humped backs of the quiet streets were slippery. The evening walkers went carefully, making no noise, passing along like ghosts.

The next morning Peggy stared out the window at the small town street sparkling in the light from a nearby street lamp which still added its weak contribution to the awakening day and waited as Michael warmed the coffee. She took milk from the refrigerator to make the strong coffee drinkable, then turned back to the street to stare. The unheated room smelled of winter, leisure and holiday, a titillating sensation of something cold and faraway having entered and settled in their home.

What they would do on their weekend required no discussion: they would do what they always did on their days off. Michael worked on his computer program, a program teaching the history of the world screen by screen. Peggy often heard him screaming "I hate your guts!" and such things in his room. But he enjoyed the work, found it challenging, always came out of the room flushed, whether from rage or satisfaction. Peggy was content, very content, to sit in the living room where her computer was set up and read detective stories and cookbooks. In random bursts, she would type things into her computer, lists, usually of recipes, or thoughts that occurred to her as she read. It relaxed her like nothing else she knew.

On this quiet Saturday morning, as each sat settled and satisfied deep inside his hobby, the doorbell rang, an unusual occurrence in a neighborhood where they knew exactly no one. The sudden ringing jarred them and made them afraid, and each realized he had had way too much coffee to drink.

Peggy, as was expected, answered the door. On the front porch stood a red-faced, slightly built man wrapped in a tailored coat of dark, expensive wool, the wide, notched collar pulled up over his chin. The man peered out meekly at Peggy through unusual jewel-like glasses. The misshapen golden stems dropped down in a conspicuous low curve before reaching back up to clasp the bases of his red ears, thus preserving the view of the man's coarse face in profile, as well as his

peripheral vision. A clipboard clutched in his hand had several documents pinned to it which flapped in the stiff breeze. After winking a few times against the cold wind, he read off from his papers their name and address.

“You have a package for us?” Peggy asked, not understanding and annoyed at being interrupted which her cross tone made quite clear. “I’m not sure we ordered anything.”

The man spoke rapidly:

“Excuse me, but I don’t like being out bothering people on a weekend either. Not only am I inconvenienced, but I hear it from everyone I have to call on.” He shifted his timid gaze from Peggy to his papers to Peggy again, at long last sharing with her the resigned look of a gentle human being having to bear up under circumstances that were unbearable. His skin was so coarse and red that to see him rubbing it against his wool collar made Peggy clench her teeth. He was saying: “... yes, it is a kind of package for you.” He took his hand out of his glove and extended it towards her. It was soft, warm, and moist. “I’m Brian McKelvy from the ... you know ... from the Department of Corrections.”

“From where?” she asked.

He repeated his statement: “From the Department of Corrections.”

As she fixed him with one of her impenetrable gazes, she thought carefully for some seconds. She had heard him correctly, of that she was sure. “Can you prove it?” she asked finally.

He stared back, and then slowly shook his head. “That depends on what you mean by prove. Absolutely prove it? No. But I have an ID card I can show you. I’m supposed to wear the damn thing all the time,” he muttered. “But you look ridiculous standing in line to buy frozen carrots with an ID on. That’s happened more than once.”

Peggy didn’t wait as he began fumbling in his pockets. “Michael!” she screeched, her chin sunk onto her shoulder to direct the sounds backward. “The Department of Corrections! Something terribly ... terribly what?” As she found herself unable to finish the thought, her eyes returned mistrustfully to regard the man, whose wiry, black hair was now standing straight up in the wind. By the time Michael had made his way to the door, Mr. McKelvy had smoothed his thin, unruly hair back down over his scalp. Peggy explained that Mr. McKelvy had come to drop off a package.

“No! Wait a minute,” Mr. McKelvy interrupted, repositioning his clipboard between the buttons of his coat. But instead of continuing, he simply waited until Michael had turned his slow gaze from his wife to him. When he saw that he had the round-faced redhead's attention, he breathed carefully, introduced himself once more, and started again.

“It's not really a package. I shouldn't be trying to be witty all the time. No, I'm here to inform you that you ... you're going to be on duty this weekend.”

“On *duty*, Mr. McKelvy?” Michael asked, his heart skipping a beat. “Explain what you mean, 'on duty.' We are *on* our day *off*,” he said slowly and clearly.

Mr. McKelvy raised his eyebrows slightly in surprise. “My job is not easy. This I know. But as soon as I say 'on duty' people do know what I mean. An unpleasant exchange follows, to be sure, but we all know what we're talking about. You have correction duty this weekend,” he pronounced then waited expectantly, his chin protruding slightly from the wool collar.

Michael cocked his head. “This is very interesting, Mr. McKelvy. And just what is correction duty?”

Mr. McKelvy slowly relaxed his face and the look of expectation vanished. “You're on duty for the state for the next forty-odd hours. As you know, or maybe you don't know, we can't give advanced notice. The chances are just too great that you will find something out about the ... the subject of the correction which would invalidate the effect ... of your ... work, of the correction.”

“Does the state pay us for our services?” Michael asked cynically. Mr. McKelvy directed another look at him, this time of undisguised surprise.

“Yes, of course it does. You get paid very well. And the time you lose you get back with excused days off from work. None of this works to your disadvantage. On the contrary, this very expensive process was set into motion to improve the general state of ... correction and ... of the executioners themselves. Apparently you haven't heard much about this, which is good—mostly all rumors anyway, but the process is extremely strict, exact you could say. Everything has to be exactly right.”

Michael muttered something, looked up at the sky, a thin blanket of pearly gray clouds covering everything, and tried to distance himself a little to gain a better perspective. How would the sky have looked on a weekend in the days of Socrates?—his current “History of the World” software topic. The mild voice of the official pulled him back.

“Let me explain something, Mr. Shields. How effective you and your wife are during the punishment determines exactly how effective society is. In a nutshell, that’s it. Yes,” he nodded like a school teacher, “that was also taken into consideration, to strengthen the link between the citizen’s feeling of responsibility—his perception of what he’s supposed to do, although he does absolutely nothing because elected officials do it all, elected perhaps, but total strangers none-the-less. What you can do with a billboard is alarming—excuse me,” he interrupted himself and put a gloved finger over pursed lips. “This isn’t the right discussion for this occasion. Sorry, I got off track.”

“No, Mr. McKelvy, it’s quite interesting,” Michael said.

Mr. McKelvy nevertheless found his place in the appropriate address, but before continuing gave one Shields, then the other a meaningful look to make sure they were with him. “To repeat the last part: How effective you and *you* are during the punishment determines how effective society is. And how correctly you perform the punishment determines the level of protection you provide for yourselves during this potentially scathing experience as executioners.”

“Executioners?” Peggy and Michael repeated as one. But the man rattled on:

“Now, until your duty starts—yes, executioners, but I’ll get to that. Oh! I’ve got a lot of talking to do about criminal rates among career executioners and studies on the state of their mental health. You’re probably not aware of the regularity with which those specializing in punishment, execution and such, suffer mental breakdowns, become alcoholics, grow violent and basically land in jail themselves, and then have to be punished by the next guy, who then suffers the same fate. Naturally this couldn’t go on. We’d run out of people! The only solution was to minimize the specialty as far as possible, and well, being a democracy and all, it was decided, after long discussion, to assign the duty to the citizens of the respective district, much as they assign jury duty. Now *that* was all on the program,” he interrupted himself to look over his notes. “Yes, I’ve also got a lot of important instructions on how to carry out the punishment properly and

effectively. Recommended vocabulary, hidden meaning in body language, tones of voice. Basically, how to look, act, and feel.”

Michael's wire-rimmed glasses were slipping down his nose because of the sweat pouring out from his temples and forehead. Once again he pushed them firmly back up onto the bridge of his nose as he squinted through them at Mr. McKelvy. “What sort of punishment are we supposed to carry out?”

“That's part of the briefing,” the little official said with a significant look. “A very important part. May I come in?”

“Which is the same as saying, we won't find out until we've been sucked so far into this thing as to be guilty ourselves. So to speak!” Michael retorted, not moving his husky frame from the door.

“I wouldn't put it like that at all, Mr. Shields. In a matter like this, you must be careful about the language you use. It determines attitude and,” he held up his irritatingly pedantic little finger, “perception. Perception is the key here to your effectiveness and, as I said earlier, it is absolutely critical that you two be effective. Be assured, Mr. Shields, nothing is being done here to manipulate you. This is not a trick. I've gone through this many, many times. I know what I'm doing. I also get training, you know. Constant training, seminars, etcetera.”

“I don't want to exchange a lot of abstractions with you, Mr. McKelvy,” Michael said, at the end of his patience. “I just want to know what you're talking about!”

“But the entire exercise is abstract, Mr.—may I call you Michael?”

“No! You may not call me Michael!” the forty-year-old man fairly shrieked.

“It will make things more comfortable,” Mr. McKelvy returned, unruffled by Michael's outburst. “Michael, our link with our fellow man nowadays is abstract. Our understanding each other is through abstractions, our misunderstanding each other is also due to abstractions.” He paused and smiled slightly. “Do you want me to go on? It's all pretty abstract. With only a few words I can make banal statements that you—and anyone—would agree with, such as, the human being is an animal that lives not in a concrete world but in an abstract one, that that is exactly what *he* thinks makes him different from other animal forms, and what's more, you think so too, Michael. And what's more, we're all proud of it. It puts us above the animals.

Many intellectual men have said it. It may all even be true. It's not an unusual or particularly eclectic opinion.”

Michael waved a hand in defeat.

“I’m just trying to say, Michael, that our exchanging what you call abstractions is the only way I know of getting across to you that you and ... Peggy are being called by the state government to perform your civil duty for the next forty-some hours. The duty is training for and the actual performance of ... corporal punishment. I can't get any more specific than that right now.” A pause followed; there had been many pauses during the exchange, and Mr. McKelvy was getting nervous. “May I come in?” he asked frowning. “There's not a lot of time.”

“Time for what?” Michael asked stupidly. The red-faced man's logic had put him into a terrible muddle.

“Your briefing starts at one. You've got the morning to do any shopping you need to do and make any phone calls you have to make before we disconnect it. Whatever plans you've made for today or tomorrow will have to wait, but everyone will understand. They're fairly well aware that it could happen to them at any time. And, as I hope I have already mentioned, we have a long night ahead of us.”

“Why is that?” Michael asked, cocking his head and almost crossing his eyes in trying to regain his ability to concentrate.

“You see, the actual correction duty starts at six o'clock sharp ... tomorrow morning, and, well, I've got to spend my time with you up until the moment the duty begins. We have discovered that your work is much more effective when you are spared the chance of having to sleep on it. But that means a long night to wait.”

“What?”

“No sleep. We'll have plenty to do, you'll be surprised. The time will fly by.”

“No sleep?” Peggy asked weakly.

An uproar followed as this last piece of unpleasant news hit the Shields. That would make the ordeal unbearable, they protested. No, the man assured them, it was always done that way, and they get the time back; they would be excused from work until Thursday; they would get three days off to recover from any fatigue or disruption of

their daily rhythm. They would see just how workable it really was; they ought not to let themselves fly off the handle.

“Soooo, I will be waiting here with you,” he looked at Peggy, “or you,” the look shifted to Michael, “while the other gets, you know, whatever you might need. We have to be able to start the briefing exactly at one. And ... please consider yourselves employees of the state starting now.” With a sigh and a slow lifting of his free hand in which his limp glove lay, he indicated the door against which frame Michael still stood truculently wedged. “Shall we go in?”

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“Let's begin, shall we?” was Mr. McKelvy's impatient greeting as Michael appeared in the kitchen at a quarter to one, very much overheated from what had turned into an unbelievably expensive shopping bonanza.

In the overcrowded store and with an eye constantly on his watch, Michael had had no time to reconsider what he was grabbing from the shelves and throwing into his shopping cart. Once he got to the register and saw the huge sum the cashier had rung up, he knew he didn't have enough money, but she wouldn't take his check, wasn't interested in his credit card, and had no intention of taking any items off, mainly because she had already begun ringing up the groceries for the next person in the long line of impatient shoppers. Michael had been obliged to leave his wallet, including driver's license, with the girl at the counter, drive to the home of a fellow worker who lived near by to borrow money from him, and Tom, his fellow worker and good buddy, wouldn't let him go without seeing that his friend had been provided with his first weekend beer, but that part Michael did not share with Peggy and Mr. McKelvy. He instead chewed breath mints, an unusual occurrence which Peggy found telling enough.

As he stood sheepishly in the kitchen doorway, four plastic sacks hanging heavily from his hands, he drew a most surprised look from Peggy when he apologized to Mr. McKelvy saying he had to return to the car to get the rest. Back in the kitchen, Michael hurriedly set the loads on the floor where they immediately formed so many humps, glistening softly in their white plastic bags. Michael apologized again for having taken so long. He knew that Peggy, having hoped the two

could spend a little unmonitored time whispering together in the living room before the ordeal began, was furious with him.

“Hmpph!” Mr. McKelvy tried yet again to interrupt Michael's wordy apologies. “You can put the things away later. Please come over here, Michael, and . . . all right, the refrigerator items—the time, now, we haven't much time.”

With Michael finally seated in one plastic chair and Peggy in the other, Mr. McKelvy began a kind of dance as he bent and swayed over his notes which lay on the low kitchen table, his hands often held in a praying position at his chest, humming his instructions through his nose, scarcely looking up from what he read.

“Now, it's a mistake to feel funny or self-conscious about this. The person with whose punishment you have been charged is a criminal, a person who has been indicted for committing a crime, given a fair trial with representation, and been found guilty by a jury. It's much more expensive this way, but under these circumstances, fully justified and, in fact, required. Juries are now mandatory no matter how trivial the charge. No charge is trivial nowadays. That could be considered an improvement in itself.”

Mr. McKelvy seemed to be aware of the Shields' unfriendly looks. Otherwise they could not explain why he avoided all eye contact, even when he strove to explain things that were obviously not to be found in his notes.

“You might draw stray or irrelevant conclusions about a crime or about the criminal, but just remember, the jury gave it careful, intense consideration. You must remember from the moment the accused—and convicted—enters your domain up until the moment he leaves it, twenty-four hours later: *The person has been sentenced because he has been found guilty.*”

Mr. McKelvy rubbed the dark spots that patterned the skin on the back of one hand. He still stood dressed in his wool coat, which he had declined to take off although Peggy had offered him a coat hanger. His sore-looking red skin bloomed over the dark material like a decaying rose. A long pause followed during which Mr. McKelvy paged through his notes. Finally he looked up, clearing his throat quietly. “Shall we begin?”

Michael's impatience was evident. “I thought we *had* begun.”

Mr. McKelvy gave him a shy smile. "Well, we have. I think that's just a manner of speech with me."

"I thought speech was very important," Michael returned bluntly.

Peggy leaned forward quickly and laid a restraining hand on her husband's thigh. Michael moved his knee violently, jerking her hand away. She removed her hand to her chair and pinched its plastic edge as hard she could to avoid pinching Michael as hard as she could.

Another stately smile from the state official. "Yes, it is, and that's all a part of it as well. Please, let me get on with my work."

"So get on with it!" Michael retorted aggressively, all trace of self-control gone. "We didn't interrupt you."

Mr. McKelvy got on with it, spreading out his papers and making himself at home, even to the extent of showing the brightly-colored kitchen curtains to one side to give himself the proper light in which to better read his notes. The instructions he intoned, gruelingly tedious and largely repetitive, lasted all afternoon, all evening, and on into the night. The two listened, seated with their chins propped on the watching devices that Mr. McKelvy had mounted for them and which they were to use during the punishment. They had been brought to a state of mind by the official's voice, and probably by the things he said, that was not sleeping, not waking, but watchful. This was the skill they were learning. This was probably why they were losing an entire night's sleep: to practice.

Mr. McKelvy's voice did not stop its peculiar intonations until fifteen minutes before six o'clock the following morning, but at that time he ended abruptly, like an hour glass that had run out of sand. After directing a look at the two, not so mild this time, in fact frighteningly severe, he wheeled, dropped to the spot on the floor where the telephone had been put out of the way, and caught up the receiver. But Michael had already lurched up out of his chair, was at his side, was plucking at the thick woolen sleeve to detain him, was saying rapidly:

"This is all well and good, Mr. McKelvy... Wait a minute. Put down the phone for a minute. Thank you ... that you've come here and told us all this. We've learned a lot about the judicial system and department of corrections, the poor plight of the ... of the executioners ... disgusting jobs ... and theory. That's fine. But you can't expect us to believe any of it," he exclaimed, his voice rising

wearily. “We've sat through your instructions about how to behave under all this, but we're not interested and personally, I think it must all be some kind of practical joke. I said, we're not going to do it!” he exclaimed again. “How could you, the state, or anybody expect us to sit here for twenty-four hours and watch a criminal? What kind of punishment is that supposed to be? Not move our eyes from his ... from his ... intentions embodied by his ... by his being. It's not possible, Mr. McKelvy. It's not possible.”

“Michael,” Mr. McKelvy answered him patiently. “You have just done it.”

“I tell you ... we're not going to do it.” Michael stared hard at him with a look as full of determination as surprise at his own words. He felt dizzy from lack of sleep, his head ached, and he was absolutely miserable. There was no way he could go through another twenty-four hours of whatever it was they had just done.

Thoughtfully Mr. McKelvy tapped his fingers on the receiver which his hand still clutched, the toe of his foot resting on the phone cradle, the means by which he had broken the connection. He replaced the receiver and moved softly to his clipboard. Carefully he flipped through the papers and after a moment pulled out a single sheet. “You refuse?” he asked simply.

“Mr. McKelvy, it's not got to do with refusing. We don't believe any of this. I'm telling you this is all a lot of nonsense!”

Mr. McKelvy laid the sheet of paper on the kitchen table, just beside where his notes now lay in a neat stack. The sheet was covered with fine print, obviously a contract of some kind. The official then drew out a fountain pen and extended it to Michael. “Refusals are naturally all a part of your freedom as a citizen. Just sign—the both of you—in the appropriate places and I'll go. Nothing more to it than that. I just wish you had mentioned this yesterday afternoon, before all of this began.”

Michael picked up the contract, read the first paragraph, repositioned his thumbs, read the last, then lowered the paper and looked away exhausted. It was legal language, the complicated, deadly dull, but critically weighty language that he himself had always joked about with friends. He felt a chill on his cheeks and forehead and realized he was sweating again, not a normal sweat. He was sweating profusely. His collar was soaked and his clothes itched. His

discomfort and nervousness made it impossible for him to read the document, yet he forced himself to sit down to begin the task.

Mr. McKelvy cleared his throat. "I'm afraid we don't have much time."

Michael's resulting gaze expressed an utter disbelief which Mr. McKelvy chided implicitly: "You should have expressed your doubts yesterday. We don't have time now. Let me tell you the upshot of signing the paper. It says nothing more than that the banks will be careful about extending credit to you if they do at all, or you'll have to get someone to co-sign who is willing to assume the debt in case you default on a loan. You lose your credit rating, in short."

"Listen, Mr. McKelvy, I don't believe you and I don't believe this paper."

"It's something you voted for some time last year."

"We didn't vote for it some time last year, we didn't live here some time last year! Can you finally get that through your head? We're new. We came into the county and the state last month. We know nothing about this. We didn't vote for it. We only moved here to be close to the office. We don't even like it here."

"I'm sorry," the state official returned, his own impatience becoming evident. "But you're here now and you're bound by the laws of the state. That's the way it is everywhere, it has never been otherwise. You had and have every opportunity of reading for yourself—"

"What were you going to say?" Peggy shot out suddenly, not letting him finish. Her head felt heavy, unwieldy and curiously cold, as if it had been chiseled from marble. "That we should read through the entire set of state laws? And just where are we supposed to get the time to do that?"

Mr. McKelvy shrugged. "You have the freedom ... "

"No, we don't! How are we supposed to know what to read?" she retorted, goaded into rage. "We can't go into an attorney's office and ask to have the books of law for the state of New Jersey because we're new and want to read them. That's ridiculous. No one can do it. We can't do it. It's completely unrealistic. By the time we were done, they would have changed."

"It's nonsense," Michael added quietly. He had regained his self-control on seeing that Peggy had finally lost hers.

“Well,” Mr. McKelvy was at a momentary loss for words and merely raised his eyebrows. “You can't expect to get a very sympathetic ear. You were somewhere else then and you're here now. You made the move yourselves. When you make a move between states, you should be aware which categories of laws could change. You're responsible for informing yourselves. That's part of your freedom. I don't think you'd stand for it if the state required you to take a six-week course after moving here and provided you with the books you had to read during that time. You'd consider it brain-washing. Even more unrealistic is to ask citizens to take such a course because they're considering moving to this state or that. And I can't lose any more time with explanations or sympathetic statements. I'm telling you now, officially, to either sign the statement of release from responsibility, or to let me make my phone call. If you don't, the charges are much worse—obstruction of the judicial system ... of justice.”

Helplessly Michael rubbed his head. He and Peggy were considering the purchase of an insignificant piece of land for which they needed, as most normal citizens did, credit, a hefty credit from the bank. His face had become spotted, unevenly flushed red with stark patches of white just under the eyes. The sight frightened Peggy. She had only seen him that upset as he had gazed at the wreckage of the car his mother had driven in the accident that had broken the old woman's leg a few years before.

For a long moment, Michael was silent, the paper still in his hands. Then he looked up at Peggy, a clear look, and said: “We can weather it, Peggy? Twenty-four hours ... more hours, and it's over.”

Peggy stared at him and nodded slowly. Her eyes were not focused and they burned. A crease had appeared in her forehead, but she continued nodding slightly, like the toy animal with a spring neck that invariably got allotted the back window ledge of the car and which never again stopped nodding from the movement of the vehicle.

“All right, Mr. McKelvy,” he said bitterly, turning to the official. “All right.” He laid the paper down on the table. Mr. McKelvy reached over and reinserted it carefully into the papers pinned to the clipboard.

“You're on board, then?”

Michael gave him an unfriendly look, considered how to answer, then at last repeated: “Yes, we're on board.”

Mr. McKelvy made his phone call, ending with the instruction that the telephone line be disconnected until six o'clock the following morning and hung up. He then asked the Shields if he could seat himself, did so, and the three waited in silence for five long minutes until the doorbell rang. A strange, faraway panic shot through Peggy, that strange sensation she had had the day before of something cold and faraway having entered their home. In turning to Michael, she detected the same panic in him; as if night were closing in for a child away from home for the first time. Not a child's panic, not a child's terror, but experienced most commonly by children, now gripped them both.

"For Christ's sake," Michael burst out, unable to bear his fear. "You can't think that we believe that we're going to carry out the punishment of a convicted criminal, that we're going to receive this ... this murderer, into our home—alone—to punish him and he's going to stand there for twenty-four hours and let us?"

"Of course he will." Mr. McKelvy smiled slightly as he rose from his chair. "He stands to lose his credit rating as well."

THE CRIMINAL

They took things in so slowly now, couldn't think, were nervous. What if they didn't do everything right? Thank God there was nothing really to do. And they were doing it, weren't they? The criminal stood and was. They were sitting and staring. The punishment had begun. The sentence was being carried out. What did they have to be worried about?

The Shields had found their subject on the porch where Mr. McKelvy had stood the morning before, packed in a black leather sack to preserve anonymity, very important in the execution of fair punishment. The sack was secured with cord at the neck and waist, and had slits for the ears, mouth and nose, but none for the eyes. On hearing the door open, the subject had shuffled forward towards the sound only to stumble over the threshold and stagger off balance. Michael had lunged forward to steady it, and the contact soiled him, changed him in some way, but there was no help for it; if the subject

got injured in their home or on the property, there would be hell to pay.

Intensifying their discomfort was the unexpected fact that the subject exuded an overpowering stench of old sweat and urine, perhaps phlegm and the dried blood of its victims. The Shields' duty as representatives of society's better citizens was to plant their noses firmly in this piece of societal shit and absorb it for twenty-four hours. Would that purify it, or make puke of them?

With great care, they guided the subject down the hallway to the kitchen and placed it in the corner where it now stood perfectly silent, perfectly still, to endure its punishment. Not even its black leather casing creaked. Only the hands, the single body parts exposed, moved uncertainly yet constantly, looking very pale and vulnerable against the black leather, labile and inquiring like the expressive tip of the snail on the move.

To overcome their repulsion, the Shields had to concentrate with unnatural intensity on the malodorous figure. They sat and stared, helpless to do anything else, and their thoughts began to move along strange lines similar to those traced by the writhing white snail hands. Strange thoughts, disturbing patterns. Such as: What had this nuisance done to have the right to impose such confinement on them? Such as: Why did it reek so foully? That was just its way of spitting on them, and the state had decreed that they sit close by, holding their perfectly attentive faces up for it. The Shields were the ones being punished. Why? Such as: The stink was the vomit of its victim, spurted out in its death throes. It had been clubbed senseless, parts of it amputated, then came that final, the merciful blow and the spewing out of the mess that had been inside. The end had been preceded by sadistic exercises of sweet delight and the stink, long may it persist, was a token the criminal smeared on himself like warrior's paint, the guts and blubber of the successful Eskimo hunt. No, the Shields' subject was just a common murderer. It had been the victim all along, the victim was the guilty one, had provoked his fate, had been willing, oh yes! quite willing, eager, had begged, naked but for a hood, clowning, flaunting its gleaming haunches until, the moment of fatal ecstasy come, the slit was made to preserve forever the excursion in bliss ... The disturbing images came faster, more vivid, ever crueler, until they became a source of unbearable stimulation in the perfect stillness of the room.

“No!” Michael cried out before an hour had elapsed, his patience and credulity overtaxed in that short time. “No! No. First you, over there. You tell me what the hell you’re here for, God damn it, or I’m not going to sit here a minute longer—I’m telling you, I’m not,” he directed the last remark to Peggy. “What have we done to be ... to be ... what have we done to be ... ” He could hardly finish the thought. “—subjected to this ... this ... trash? In our own home? On our weekend?” He turned away from her in shame. Silence enveloped them again.

Hardly a half an hour had crawled by when Michael grew restless again. He began to breathe heavily, then he fell to grunting, to chewing his lips, to grinding his teeth. He rocked forward in his chair, the watching device rocking with him, then back, forward, back, then having made his decision, he leaned forward heavily one last time and asked in a low voice: “What were you doing, Jack?”

The pure white hands began a slow up-and-down motion, the obscene implication of which they immediately understood, and despite their flaming faces, neither looked away. They weren’t allowed to. The oppressive silence was audible. The hands continued their slow motion for a long time before they finally stopped.

“We should write this down in our report to Mr. McKelvy,” Peggy whispered, reaching out for Michael’s arm. To her extreme irritation, he wrenched it violently away from her, nicking his chin painfully on the edge of the watching device in the sudden movement. The sight of the bright fleck on his stubbled jaw, blood, enlivened her. She breathed in deeply in one of those rare, exhilarating moments when one suddenly and completely believes in the reality of one’s own existence.

“What were you doing, Jack?” Michael muttered again.

The figure muttered back: “... pants.”

They sat suddenly alert, but without comprehending. They grew uneasy, then fearful. They had been trained to watch, but nothing had ever been said about listening. Or talking. Was that dimension to be disregarded like a color not in the rainbow? A difficult order to carry out, as their hearing seemed to be especially keen.

“ ... move only in his sleep now, ain’t that right, doll? When he could reach right over and grab you, but ... you see ... ” They strained to hear. “... he ain’t itchin’ for you.”

The heat in Peggy's face increased.

“Strange, new ... you know ... cunt.”

Peggy pressed her lips together to hide her panting—were those the pants he meant? She was grateful for the steady chin cup.

“You want him to get it, too, don't you? You hate him for it, though. But you kinda like hating him wanting it, maybe getting it when you don't know it. Kinda turns you on.”

Was Michael listening to all of this? Why was her face so hot? They had been trained to comply with a very strict reaction pattern to keep them watchful and awake but not ... not exactly intelligent. It wasn't working. Peggy felt extremely intelligent and awake and ... and alive. Michael had broken the rule, and the criminal, what was he doing? He wouldn't stop:

“... wanting to get that olive skin, melting eyes, slavish obsession with his ... ya know ... libido ... just as long as ... as long as ... ya see, it's nasty disappointment of Snow White that really revs him up ... ”

“I don't think we can handle this,” Peggy managed to whisper. “We have to write this down in our report to Mr. McKelvy.”

“Oh, yeah?” Michael lashed out at her unexpectedly, but he was whispering, his mouth thrust so near that his lips grazed the pink shell of her ear, so near that his breath moistened its gleaming hollow. With her chin held firmly in the watching device, she couldn't move her head away. She was exposed and vulnerable. He was muttering furious things in a voice that sounded strange and dangerous, things she could not understand but seemed to fully absorb they so completely charged her blood, stimulating her more intensely than she ever remembered. Those lips, that voice, close but unknown, unknown but intimate, in power but kept in abeyance, for the moment. Such tension she had sensed in him before, during their courting time, when she had been electrified into the object of his obsessive desire because that object had not yet been conquered. As she dropped her eyes to hide her excitement, Peggy saw that her husband had an erection.

Abruptly, Michael turned from her to taunt their prisoner in the same low, dangerous-sounding voice: “What did you do, Jack?”

The sacked figure growled, “Hell, I was only paying attention to my neighbor.”

“After a little cunt yourself?”

Peggy's fixed eyes grew wide. Never had she heard Michael talk like that before, and it was making her eyes very dry. They hurt. She began blinking repeatedly to try to moisten them.

Their subject finally divulged, relieving their suspense: “They really get to pumping their ass when they think you’re watching. All part of the show. Her shirt was fitting pretty good, too. I had no trouble giving her all my attention. Hell, I was only being polite. If she got off on it, shit, I could do her the favor. But then she sorta got outta control and I kinda got caught up in it, doing her that big favor. You know. All alone on that side street. Not a soul in sight. Part of the thrill was whether anyone would come around the corner. Sure, I kept watching. Then someone did come around the corner, and she kicked up a big fuss, making it look pretty bad for me. I mean, who was going to believe she had gotten herself into that state of undress all by herself? But I sure as hell had been watching. Yeah, call me guilty for that. But then someone tell me just what the hell you two are.”

“What was she doing?” Michael asked, cool now, matter-of-fact, the architect of a software program relating the history of the world screen by screen.

“Ha ha!” The figure bowed slightly and laughed a tired laugh. “You'd like to know, wouldn't you? Ha ha. Son-of-a-bitch. How dumb do you think I am? Nah. Not this go-round. Ha ha. Aaah, the bitch was too good-looking for her own good. Sucked up too many advertisements with tits and legs and wet mouths selling pens, perfumes, and motor oil. She didn't accuse me of ripping off her shirt under which she wore exactly nothing, hiking up that little skirt under which there was nothing but her, and trying to hump her there on the curb. Nah! She accused me of following ... sneaking up ... trying to get into that sweet moist mound of hers every day, adding that I often succeeded. Someone clever in the jury might have asked why she waited so long to ... you know... complain, but ... no one clever was there.”

“You humped her but good,” Michael murmured. “Couldn't control yourself. She didn't like it.”

The figure did not respond. Instead, a foul silence filled the room like sewage seeping soundlessly into an underground pool. It grew unbearably still and cool.

“How’d she like it?” Shame buzzed in Michael’s reddening ears as he heard his own words, but why should this bum stop now? Didn’t they have the right to hear the details? Maybe the no-good would describe Michael’s lust for primitive women again, what they would do and how, the way they would sweat in the early morning riding him in their drunken passion, pulling at him from the core of his pleasure, eyes half closed gleaming with black mystery and their own deep desire. But the convict had become as lifeless as a statue.

“Well, Jack,” Michael began again, once again rational, indifferent, but his voice betrayed him, breaking in his excitement.

“He’s done something unspeakable,” Peggy spoke up, lisping slightly. Her eyes dropped to her pearly fingernails gleaming softly in her lap. Slowly she ripped one off close to the finger’s quick. “Some people get off on punishment,” she said.

“Masochists,” Michael intoned quietly. “They get off on it. You know what we’re talking about, Jack, don’t you?”

“I’m tired,” the voice from the corner said. “I wanna lie down.” This he was entitled to request. “Where’s the can and where’s the bed?”

After the prisoner had been very gingerly helped down onto a cot set up for that purpose, it may have fallen asleep right away. In any case, the Shields were left to suffer through the night, craving sleep but bound to watch something that seemed quite dead.

With her fingers firmly anchored in his crotch on that block of an erection, such as she had known how long ago, it was now Peggy who began whispering furiously, urgently, her lips so close to his ear he could feel their movement and her humid breath. She made sure her words were clear: How? Tell her the truth. When. How often. Tell her. Had he been able to hold off. Had it come fast and frothing. Had he shot up to the sky.

The Shields’ slow whispered fight, their sleep deprivation, Peggy’s graphic questions, Michael’s graphic responses aroused them to a peculiar intensity, the necessity to restrain themselves bringing their act to a rare, honeyed conclusion.

(2)

The evidence of the night's activities were to be read in the large black marks on Peggy's neck. The marks on her breasts and groin were not visible. Two streaks of red slanted down over her cheeks. The rest of her face was as opaque and white as ever. But her eyes had grown small and glittered like raisins, a particular but unmistakable sign of her heightened state. Michael felt hollow and completely without substance but for his loins through which his force still pulsed with uncomfortable vigor. He rubbed his chafed chin self-consciously. Careful as they had been, they weren't sure if their subject had slept through the night or not.

As they awaited Mr. McKelvy's ring with both dread and longing, the figure tossed, heaved once, then exactly at 6 a.m. rose from the cot. Slowly lifting its arm, it slid the hood forward to reveal the red, meek, and excessively sweaty head of the diminutive Department of Corrections official. A stupefaction beyond mere exhaustion paralyzed the Shields as they stared up at him.

"Thank you *very* much," Mr. McKelvy said softly, smiling apologetically. Then with a swift, adroit movement, he opened the kitchen door, strode out onto the snow-encrusted back porch and hopped hurriedly down the steps to disappear through the gate. A strong gust of winter wind whipped in after him, stinging the Shields' nostrils but rousing them only slightly.

They remained seated for some time like husks ready to be blown away. Michael continued to stare at the empty cot where Mr. McKelvy had lain, then tried to fix his attention elsewhere, avoiding Peggy's eyes. His face was spotted, unevenly flushed red with patches of white.

"What if he reports us?" he muttered.

"Idiots," Peggy moaned faintly. "What does he want with a report? He got what he was after." She rose wearily, pale but especially shiny under the eyes, and shut the door slowly, firmly, almost gently. At the kitchen counter, she pulled down a can of coffee beans, poured one handful then another into the hand grinder and began the slow circular motion of grinding them. The thought that they would have to leave for work in an hour scared her. "Fold up the cot and put the shelf back the way it was. Set the plants on top of it. I don't want to be reminded of any of this when we get back."

Michael rose, stuporous.

Peggy stopped her grinding, stared, then whimpered: “I won’t be able to make it till tonight.”

“It had nothing to do with our credit rating,” Michael muttered. It was all dawning on him so slowly.

“Idiots.”

“And the days we were to get off to ... to compensate?”

“Just don’t ever tell anyone about this,” Peggy warned, but her tone was vacant. Her lackluster eyes scanned the room—the ceiling, the walls, the woodwork, the cornices, anything—but they returned irresistibly to the disheveled cot where Michael stood stupefied in mid-gesture.

“Leave it,” she commanded softly.

“Huh?”

“Leave the cot.” Her limbs were red-hot and pulsed. The core of her being flamed. Her skin was wrapped too tight. She needed, she needed now. Rapidly, she moved across the room, pressed her sweaty body up against Michael’s and squeezed his hard limbs. “See how I’ve ripped myself,” she moaned, showing him her bloody cuticle.

As he looked down, she grabbed his head and pressed it against her, whispering urgently: “We can’t stop like this. We’re sick. We’re not done. You have to fix me, fix me ...”

The advancing winter morning bathed the pale bodies in its weak light as they writhed like the damned then, in perfect, sudden stillness, lay fast asleep, peaceful as newborn babes.

