

SANE REACTION

A Play and a Story



LISA MORTON

Sane Reaction

A One-Act Play and a Short Story

by Lisa Morton

A giveaway e-book for subscribers to Lisa Morton's Official Newsletter

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“Sane Reaction”: the One-Act Play

Sometime in the early 1990s, I got involved with a theater company in West L.A. called Zeitgeist. Some actor friends invited me into the company after seeing a very simple production of my short play “Sane Reaction” that had been staged at the Iguana Café in North Hollywood.

“Sane Reaction” was my response to the number of works I was seeing at the time about men (usually presented as murderers or rapists) threatening women (usually presented as helpless victims). I thought it was time to explore a different dynamic.

The play was well-received almost immediately. Zeitgeist’s head, an actor-writer named John Martin, wanted to play the male role. I wanted to direct (I’d already directed a number of productions for other companies). For the woman, I cast a gifted actress named Marybeth DeLucia (alternating in that part with Marybeth was another talented performer, Kate McBride). The photograph on the cover is John Martin and Marybeth in a scene from the original production.

“Sane Reaction” opened as part of an evening of one-act plays called *Twisted Romance*; I’d written one other piece for the evening, a comedic short, and John Martin had written the others. *Twisted Romance* ran from December 10, 1992 to January 24, 1993. Because I’d done some tricky things with lighting the piece, I wanted to run the tech myself, which I did for the run of the production. This meant that I witnessed every performance of that first run of “Sane Reaction” (which would go on to be produced by other companies in San Francisco and New York).

The play succeeded beyond my wildest imaginings. Performances sold out night after night, and audiences were left stunned by the piece. Critics were equally impressed. Here are excerpts from the reviews:

“...Of the five, Lisa Morton’s ‘Sane Reaction’, directed by the playwright, is the strongest. It also has the strongest performances – by Marybeth DeLucia and John Benjamin Martin as a couple who met at a party neither was invited to, bound for a deliciously macabre date neither expected, taking ‘Extremities’ to extremes...” T. H. McCulloh, *Los Angeles Times*

“...The production begins powerfully with ‘Sane Reaction’, which re-enacts a familiar scene – girl meets guy at party and takes him home. But the short play, written and directed by Lisa Morton, then takes the viewer into unexpected terrain, offering a unique, surprise twist and adept acting by Marybeth DeLucia and John Benjamin Martin.” Connie Benesch, *Village View*

“... ‘Sane Reaction’ contains moments of incredibly uncomfortable tension as a torturer-murderer (John Benjamin Martin) menaces his prey (Marybeth DeLucia). Surprising plot twists by Morton (who also directed with precision) relieve the tension and make the play work as both pitch-black comedy and frightening drama.” Tom Provenzano, *LA Weekly*

“... ‘Sane Reaction’, written and directed by Lisa Morton, is a chilling and bleakly funny encounter between two strangers whose one-night stand leads to a deadly game of cat-and-mouse... ‘Sane Reaction’ may sound grisly, but Morton springs her deceptively casual script with the precision of a mousetrap. She expertly manipulates the play’s

emotional shifts, from terror to humor and then to perverse satisfaction when Anne turns the tables on her oppressor. While there are moralistic underpinnings about the dangers of promiscuity, the play also comments on the rage women feel at the hands of men who exploit them. Morton's direction is as lean as her script, and McBride and Martin play their game with humorous confidence and grim purpose... " Clifford Gallo, *LA Reader*

That production of "Sane Reaction" remains the high-point of my time spent in theater. It gave me the confidence to continue to push boundaries and explore new directions in my writing. It was a personal game-changer.

— Lisa Morton, July 2020

"SANE REACTION"

Lights come up, and two people walk onto the stage, both dressed nicely as if they just came from a party, both at that slightly-uncomfortable stage in a relationship when you've just met and are beginning to acknowledge a mutual attraction. ANNE is still jingling keys, indicating they've entered her apartment; JOHN is looking around, checking it out.

ANNE: ...it's a little messy. Oh, and I forgot to take the garbage out last night, so please excuse the - ah -

JOHN (*laughing*): It's okay, I can handle it. (He stops, looking around) Hey, this is really nice. What do you pay here - if you don't mind my asking.

ANNE: Seven-fifty, plus utilities.

JOHN (*nodding*): Not bad.

(JOHN looks around a moment longer, then turns to look directly at ANNE, smiling knowingly)

JOHN: Just like I pictured it.

ANNE: Really? I wouldn't have thought you'd had time to 'picture it'.

JOHN: Oh, it's a little game I play, you know, in my head. Whenever I meet someone new, I always try to figure out what their home's gonna look like. I'm usually right, too. With you I guessed loft apartment, floral prints and lots of refrigerator magnets.

ANNE: Yeah, well, you were wrong there. I only have one refrigerator magnet.

(A long beat follows, each of them standing on opposite sides of the stage, waiting to see who will make the first move. Finally:)

ANNE: How 'bout a drink?

JOHN: Sure. What've you got?

ANNE: Vodka?

JOHN: Stolli, I hope. No Absolut.

ANNE: Sorry, it's a generic brand.

(JOHN smiles at this and begins to saunter across the stage towards her, finally putting his arms around her, flirting, teasing. She returns the hold, but tentatively, pulling away from him slightly)

JOHN: Generic, huh?

ANNE: Um-hmm.

JOHN: Well, there's a bad habit I'll have to change.

ANNE: Oh, you will, will you?

JOHN: Uh-huh...

(He's leaning down, as if to kiss her, when she abruptly pulls away and heads off the stage, towards the unseen backstage)

ANNE: I'll get our drinks.

(She pauses to smile coyly at him before disappearing. JOHN grins to himself and takes a seat in a large, comfortable chair, still looking around)

JOHN *(calling out loud, to be heard)*: So have you known Patrick long?

ANNE *(from offstage)*: Patrick who?

JOHN *(laughing)*: I guess that answers that question. You know, the guys who's birthday party we were at tonight.

ANNE *(offstage, laughing)*: Oh, that Patrick. No...

(She appears again, holding two small glasses of clear liquid, one of which she passes to him. He examines the glass before drinking)

JOHN: Jelly glasses. I guessed that, too.

(Both laugh and sip the liquor, then)

JOHN: So, about Patrick...

ANNE: Oh, right. No, I went with a friend who knows him.

JOHN: And you abandoned your friend to leave with a stranger?

ANNE: My friend abandoned me first.

JOHN: Oh.

ANNE: What about you? How do you know Patrick?

JOHN: I work with him.

ANNE: Down at - where is it, again? 21st Century?

JOHN: Right. I like someone who pays attention.

(ANNE puts her drink down and sits suggestively on the arm of his chair, toying with his hair)

ANNE: What else do you like?

JOHN: Women who make a habit of picking up men they don't know at parties.

ANNE *(laughing and pulling away)*: Oh, wait a minute, who said I 'make a habit' of this?

JOHN: Don't you?

ANNE: As a matter of fact, I've - *(She giggles in slight embarrassment, then)* Well, I've never done this before.

JOHN: You haven't?

ANNE: No. Usually I have to know someone for a long time before I - do this. Like my last boyfriend, Kenny. We saw each other nearly every day for a year at work before we ever went out.

JOHN: And what happened to Kenny?

ANNE *(strangely suspicious)*: What do you mean?

JOHN: I mean, why'd you break up?

ANNE *(relaxing)*: Oh. We'd been together long enough to know it wasn't working out.

JOHN: How long was that?

ANNE: Two weeks.

JOHN *(laughs, then)*: You sound like you make up your mind fast.

ANNE: No sense in beating a dead horse, right?

JOHN: Especially when there are more interesting things...

ANNE: What about you? Is this your preferred method of meeting girls?

JOHN: Well, to tell you the truth - yes, it is.

ANNE *(surprised)*: Really? At least you're honest. Kenny wasn't. Neither was Aaron.

JOHN: Aaron?

ANNE: The one before Kenny. I caught him with one of my best friends.

JOHN: Very nice.

(JOHN finishes his drink and sets the glass down)

ANNE: Can I get you another?

JOHN: Generic? Thanks, no.

(ANNE makes a face of mock outrage)

ANNE: What a critic! So much for hospitality.

(JOHN rises and puts his arms around her again. This time she doesn't strain against the hold as much)

JOHN: Why don't you show me some real hospitality?

ANNE: Real, huh? Okay...

(She reaches up and kisses him, tentatively, on the mouth. He pulls back first and smiles down at her)

JOHN: Now what would your mother say if she knew her little girl had picked up her first strange man at a party?

ANNE: She'd probably think it was about par for her strange little girl.

(ANNE tries to kiss him again, but he avoids her mouth and moves down her neck to one of her ears. She tilts her head back, eyes closed in pleasure)

JOHN: You have pierced ears.

ANNE *(oblivious)*: Ummm...

JOHN: How old were you when you had it done?

ANNE *(still enjoying the sensations)*: Uh - sixteen, I think. Why?

JOHN: Were you still a virgin?

(Now her eyes open in perplexity, although she doesn't pull back yet)

ANNE: What?

JOHN: Did it turn you on? You know, get you off?

(She pulls back now to look at him)

ANNE: No, of course not.

(JOHN fondles her earlobe as he speaks, fascinated)

JOHN: Too bad. It would have if I had done it for you. First I would have taken an ice cube, and rubbed it on the lobe, until it was numb and tingling. Then the needle, going in the soft flesh, slowly, twirling slightly. Then, when the needle was all the way through, the hole made, I would have put my mouth up to it and sucked the blood away.

(He inclines his head towards her ear, but she keeps him at arm's length)

ANNE: That's sick.

JOHN: How do you know, have you tried it that way? We could do it here, tonight... a lot of people have their ears pierced twice. Or we could do the tongue... or a nipple...

(Now she tries to push all the way back from him)

ANNE: Look, maybe you better go -

(But he doesn't release her, and she struggles in his arms)

JOHN: C'mon, I thought you wanted me.

ANNE: I did - I mean - you weren't like this at the party.

(She begins backing away from him, and he advances on her across the stage)

JOHN: You didn't get to know me very well at the party. *(He's backed her into a corner)* Did you?

(A beat, then she tries to run around him. But he catches her, and flings her roughly into the chair. She's on the verge of tears now, as he eyes her coolly, appraising, circling the chair)

JOHN: Why don't you just try to relax a little? You might actually enjoy it. *(He begins to undress, removing jacket and tie first)* The others did.

ANNE: The others - ?

JOHN: Yeah - all the other little girls from all the other parties. Oh, they screamed, even through their gags. *(He bends down to caress her from behind, now)* But it's so hard to tell a scream of pain from one of pleasure, isn't it?

ANNE: How many others?

JOHN *(removing his shirt now)*: I don't know, I forget.

ANNE: You don't work with Patrick, do you?

JOHN *(mocking her earlier response)*: Patrick who? Never met the man. I just saw all the cars out front, and thought I'd check out the action. *(A beat, then)* You've probably heard of me.

ANNE (*confused*): I don't think -

(*JOHN slaps at a newspaper near the couch*)

JOHN: Fuckin' papers - they're the one who gave me that name, "the Picasso Killer", but will they give me a headline? Shit. Still, it means they know me.

ANNE (*frightened all over again, yet strangely fascinated, too*): You're him...

JOHN: Yeah. See, you know me, too. And none of you are gonna forget me, either. It's not such a terrible name, I guess, because I am an artist at what I do. And because the way I left the third one, she looked like a Picasso painting. Not the Cubist period.

ANNE: They say you've killed - twelve times...

JOHN: But ya know what, little girl? That's just the ones they've found. The ones I wanted them to find.

ANNE: You wanted them to find... ?

JOHN: Of course. We all have to find some way of leaving our mark, don't we?

(*JOHN reaches into the discarded jacket, and removes a small velvet pouch, tied with a wraparound sash. He removes the sash, and unfurls the pouch with a flourish, revealing a neat toolkit of various implements*)

JOHN: Let's see, what shall we start with? (*Seeing her look*) Needles, skewers, knives, butane for brandings - oh, and rubbers. I believe in safe sex.

ANNE (*starting to rise slowly*): Look, why don't I go get us a couple more drinks, and we can -

(*He pulls her back down into the chair*)

JOHN: And go out to the kitchen where the phone is? I don't think so.

ANNE: So you think I'm just going to sit here and let you do this?

JOHN: Why not? The rest did. You'd be amazed. Oh, they'd struggle a little, scream - but they didn't really fight back. Like they'd been conditioned to recognize the superior force, and give in to it. Or like they really did get off.

ANNE: Maybe I'm not like all the rest.

(*JOHN leers as he reaches into a pocket, and withdraws a pair of industrial rubber gloves, which he snaps on with a flourish*)

JOHN: How do you know all the rest of them didn't say that at first?

(Now he reaches into the toolkit, and selects a large needle, only slightly smaller than a barbecue skewer)

JOHN: You're no different. When you feel the first prick - see the blood bead up, and trickle slowly down the needle - you'll scream, and try to fight me. Then I'll hit you, maybe knock out a few teeth, and after that you'll take whatever I give. *(A beat, then)* I think we'll start with this.

(As he advances on her, circling, we see Anne's mind furiously racing)

ANNE: You know, I think maybe this could be a turn-on... *(She tries - badly - to flirt with him)* What if we go slow, so we can both get into it -

JOHN: I've got another idea: Why don't you decide where we should start? *(A beat, then)* No? My choice, then...

(ANNE tenses as he bends over her, the needle tip approaching the skin of her neck - and he hesitates. He blinks, shakes his head, tries again - and actually staggers back this time, unsteady, head weaving)

JOHN: What's happening... ?

(Anne's tension seems to drain instantly, as she rises from the chair and picks up his drink glass)

ANNE: About fucking time. I've gotta find something that'll work faster from now on.

JOHN *(staggering)*: The drink... ?!

ANNE: Yeah, asshole, a muscle relaxant, they use it mainly on horses. A veterinarian friend of mine got it for me. She thinks I get off on it. She's not so far off the mark.

(He drops the needle from nerveless fingers, and she catches it easily, stepping up close to him)

ANNE: It's perfect. See, it'll leave you conscious - even feeling pain - but you just won't be able to move. You probably just thought that weird taste was because of the generic vodka, I'll bet.

(He lunges at her clumsily, and she sidesteps easily, laughing at him as falls to his knees, trying to shake his head clear)

JOHN: Don't... don't fuck with me, bitch...

ANNE *(laughing)*: Oh, stop. Don't you want to know how I knew about you? Huh? *(He looks up at her, confirming the question)* This is the best part - I didn't. We're just - strangers in the night.

(He falls back in shock, leaning against the chair, blearily looking up at her)

JOHN: You mean...

ANNE: That's right, I gave you the drink before you tried anything, didn't I? Maybe that's because - I'm just like you, and neither of us knew it. No, wait a minute - I'm not like you, because I would never be so deluded as to think you might get off on what I'm gonna do to you. You really believe that, don't you?

JOHN: What - what are you gonna do... ?

ANNE *(ignoring him)*: And you're all the same, too. You think women actually enjoy being subjected to your sweat and your ramming and your cum. The truth is that you're only necessary to propagate the species. When we can do that without you... we will, believe me.

JOHN *(ragged, desperate)*: WHAT ARE YOU GONNA DO?!

(As Anne speaks, she kneels down and peels off one of the gloves to place it on her own hand, smoothing it on suggestively)

ANNE: Maybe I'll give you a taste... *(A beat, then)* Look at it this way: It takes most couples ten, twenty years to find out the truth about each other. But we already know the truth, don't we? That there's no such thing any more as safe sex. And there are worse ways to die - much worse ways - than from some disease.

(Anne picks up the velvet tool pouch, examining the implements with obvious interest)

ANNE *(admiringly, to herself)*: You sick bastard. *(then, to him)* I'd use my own, but I'd have to go back out into the kitchen, and I'd rather not, with Kenny there and all.

JOHN: Kenny... ?

ANNE: Yeah. That smell? Kenny. All six pieces of him. *(She remembers and giggles)* Make that seven. And I'll tell you something else, sweetheart: They'll never catch me, because I don't want a headline. I just wanna pay you back and then get rid of you. Every one of you. And look what I got this time out! How lucky can a little girl be? Let's see - what shall we start with?

(She kneels down, straddling him, her back to us, and he begins to scream. Lights out)

END

“Sane Reaction”: the Short Story

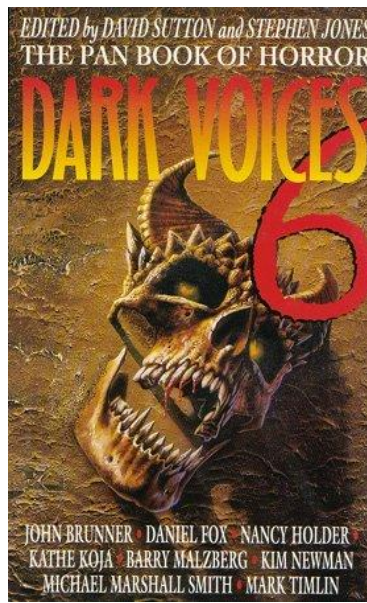
In October of 1993 – nine months after the play of “Sane Reaction” completed its initial run – I attended my first World Fantasy Convention (in Minneapolis). Earlier that year, I’d decided it was time for me to commit to getting serious about writing short stories, and I’d put together a notebook of eight or ten (of that first batch, I think only one saw print, as “The Slasher” in my collection *Monsters of L.A.*). I was fortunate enough to have two insanely talented authors who believed in me: Roberta Lannes and Dennis Etchison. Roberta convinced me to come with her to Minneapolis to network, and Dennis made sure I met the right people at the convention.

One of those people was the esteemed British writer and editor Stephen Jones. I’ll never forget meeting Steve that first time, at a party in Minneapolis. I immediately felt as if I’d known Steve for years, and he invited me to send him stories. The first one was a submission to *The Mammoth Book of Werewolves*, a story called “Howlin’ Monck and the Death of Music” that also later wound up in *Monsters of L.A.* (and that I would also later turn into a one-act play, for the production *Spirits of the Season*). Steve passed on that story, but invited me to submit for the book *Dark Voices 6*. I wanted to send him something strong, so I adapted “Sane Reaction” into a short story.

It worked, because Steve and David Sutton bought it for *Dark Voices 6*. It was my first real prose sale, and the start of a long working partnership with Steve Jones which has been one of the great pleasures of my writing career.

The short story version of “Sane Reaction” has been reprinted many times since, so apparently it still works. I hope you enjoy it here.

—Lisa Morton, July 2020



“Sane Reaction”

Anne leads him through the front door of the duplex, keys still jingling in one hand. She glances around nervously, wrinkles her nose slightly.

“It’s a little - messy,” she stammers, “and I forgot to take the garbage out this morning, so please excuse the - you know...”

John sniffs the air, but detects only pine and lemon, air freshener and cleanser. He sees her flutter at an already-tidy stack of mail on a table by the door, and has to laugh. “It’s okay, really, I can handle it.”

She tries to return his smile, then watches uncertainly as he strides past her into the living room. She locks the front door, then follows.

He’s in the middle of the room, examining the Brian Davis floral prints hung beneath the 1930’s ceiling molding, the crowded entertainment center, the pastel couch and chairs, coffee table, scattered papers and magazines.

He completes his circuit of the room and turns to her approvingly. “This is nice, I mean it. In fact, what do you pay here? If you don’t mind my asking?”

“Nine-fifty, plus utilities.”

“No roommate?,” he asks carefully.

“No roommate,” she grimaces slightly, “I’ve done my roommate time already. Of course I’ve been here for five years now, and we have rent control.”

He glances around once more, then turns that critical eye on her. “Just like I pictured it.”

Anne realizes she’s still clutching her purse, and she sets it down in its usual spot on the chair by the wall. She feels slightly uncomfortable - she’d say ‘naked’, but it sounds so clichéd - under the weight of John’s assessment, but she tries to sound nonchalant when she answers, “Really? I wouldn’t have thought you’d had time to ‘picture it’.”

John takes a step closer to her, his eyes never leaving her face. “Oh, it’s a little game I play, you know, in my head. Whenever I meet someone new, I always try to figure them out first - what their place’ll look like, what kind of music they’re into, that kind of thing. I’m usually right, too.”

He turns to indicate the framed posters, then picks up a CD cover, reading over the artist’s name and album title. “With you I guessed the floral prints, new age instrumentals and lots of refrigerator magnets.”

“Yeah, well,” she returns, as she steps up and plucks the CD from his fingers, “you were wrong there. I only have one refrigerator magnet.”

She steps around him to slide the disc into the player, John admiring the movements of her long, slender fingers. The resulting music is synthesized, sampled, sensual. They both sway to it slightly, until he steps forward, as if intending to pull her into a real dance.

She backs away involuntarily, then smiles to hide her embarrassment. “Ah, how about a drink?”

“Sure,” John responds sarcastically, “that’s what we’re here for, right?”

When she doesn’t come back, he adds, “What’ve you got?”

“Vodka.”

“Stoli, I hope. No Absolut.”

Anne tries to decide if he’s serious or not, then gives up on figuring him out and says simply, “Sorry. It’s a generic brand.”

“Generic, huh?,” John responds with a moue of disappointment.

Then he saunters towards her, and she wills herself to stay, remembering what they are here for. “Um-hmm.”

He puts his arms around her, without force, a soft motion. “Well, there’s a bad habit I’ll have to change.”

“Oh you will, will you?”

He’s bending down, tilting his head - but when she sees the slight smile still on his lips, she abruptly pulls away and slides gracefully to the doorway. She pauses there, just long enough to offer her own coy grin. “I’ll get our drinks.”

John lets her go, appreciating her new understanding of the game. He absentmindedly picks up a newspaper, sees it’s a week old and features a headline about the death toll in the latest natural disaster. He calls out in the direction of the kitchen, “So how’d you find out about Eileen’s parties? Do you know her?”

Anne doesn’t look up from the ice cube trays as she cracks them. “Eileen who?”

“Guess that answers that question,” John notes to himself, setting the paper down, then raising his voice to her, “we met at her introduction party tonight, remember?”

“Oh, that Eileen...”

Anne reappears with two small glasses, one of which she passes to him. He accepts it with raised eyebrows. “Ikea glasses. I guessed that, too.”

She watches as he downs half the contents of the glass in one gulp, then she raises her own for a small sensible sip.

John flops heavily onto the couch, spreading his arms along the back as if measuring the extent of his property, holding the glass balanced there.

“So about Eileen...”

“Oh, right.” Anne moves to the far end of the couch and perches on the arm. “No, I went with a friend who found out about these singles parties from the classifieds in the back of City magazine.”

“And you abandoned your friend to leave with a stranger?”

“My friend abandoned me first.”

“Oh.” He tastes the vodka again and looks away.

“What about you? Did you read the same ad?”

“No,” John responds, “in my case Eileen is a friend. She doesn’t even charge me.”

“So I guess I’m a freebie, huh?”

John does look at her now, sharply, then he sets his empty glass on the coffee table, rises and walks the length of the couch to her. “No, no. I’d like to think there are some things money can’t buy.”

Anne eyes his leather jacket, smells his expensive cologne, and again wonders if he’s truthful or toying. “What else do you like?”

He leans over her, supporting himself with one arm against the sofa back. He’s so close she feels his warm breath on her hair when he murmurs, “Women who make a habit of picking up men they don’t know at parties.”

Anne barks out a disbelieving laugh and slides out from under him. “Oh wait a minute, who said I ‘make a habit’ of this?”

“Don’t you?”

She turns away, feeling the heat rise to her cheeks. “As a matter of fact I’ve...well, I’ve - never done this before.”

“You haven’t?”

“No,” she begins, pacing around the couch, “usually I have to know someone for a long time before I do - this. Like my last boyfriend, Kenny. We saw each other nearly every day for a year at work before we ever went out.”

“And what happened to Kenny?”

“What do you mean?,” she blurts out, turning to watch his response with something like suspicion.

“I mean, why’d you break up?”

She sighs, lowers herself onto the chair next to her purse. “Oh, we’d been together long enough to know it wasn’t working out.”

“And how long was that?”

“Two weeks.”

She joins John’s laughter, then is finishing her own drink when he notes, “You sound like you make up your mind fast.”

“No sense in beating a dead horse, right?”

Her tone is unmistakably flirtatious, and John rises, goes to her, finds she doesn’t resist as he pries the glass from her hand, sets it down. “Especially when there are more interesting things...”

She lets him put his arms around her, and asks, “What about you? Is this your preferred method of meeting girls?”

John considers. “Well, to tell you the truth - yes it is.”

She pulls back, actually surprised. “Really?”

John watches as some shadow crosses her features, and he reluctantly relinquishes his hold.

“At least you’re honest. Kenny wasn’t. Neither was Aaron.”

John, sensing this is her last line of defense, plays along. “Aaron?”

“The one before Kenny. I caught him with one of my best friends.”

“Very nice,” John interjects with what he hopes is the right amount of disgust.

A small silence follows, and John intuits that the queen in this match has just been checked. He lets his eyes obviously consume her, imagining the lean muscles beneath the tight jeans and silk blouse. She smiles when she looks away this time, her gaze settling on his empty glass. “Can I get you another?”

“Generic? Thanks, no?”

“What a critic! So much for hospitality.”

Maybe it’s the way she puts a hand on one hip during her mock outrage, or the way her eyes seem half-lidded when she tilts her head back. In any case, John knows he’s won. Checkmate.

“Why don’t you show me some real hospitality?”

“Real, huh?” She appears to consider, then drops her shoulders as if acknowledging defeat, surrender. “Okay...”

She approaches him this time, puts her arms around his neck, pulls his head down for the first kiss. It’s tentative, cautious, and he pulls back easily.

“Now what would your mother say if she knew her little girl had picked up her first strange man at a party?”

“She’d probably think it was about par for her strange little girl,” she slurs, pulling him down again.

But he only brushes her lips, moving his mouth instead along her cheek, down her jawline to neck, up to one ear. She closes her eyes and gives herself over, not even noticing when his tongue lingers too long on the lobe.

“You have pierced ears,” he breathes.

She barely reacts to the comment, gasping instead as his tongue circles the inner rim of her ear.

“How old were you when you had it done?”

Her eyes flutter but don’t open, even though his suddenly strange words war with the physical sensations created by his mouth.

“Uh...sixteen, I think...”

His breath hot on the ring in the lobe, he asks, “Were you still a virgin?”

Now her eyes do open, but his hands are on her head, holding it. Even the new age instrumental seems to shift to something no longer soft, lulling. “What?”

“Did it turn you on,” he asks, ignoring her alarm in his arousal, “you know, get you off?”

She jerks her head back out of his grasp, but he moves with a swiftness surprising in such a large man, encircling her narrow waist completely with one arm, still massaging her ear with the other.

“No... “

His eyes are glazed, his respiration quickening. “Too bad. It would have if I had done it for you.”

He seems unaware of her squirming in his grip, continuing the seduction with both tongue and touch. “First I would have taken an ice cube and rubbed it on the lobe, until it was numb and tingling. Then the needle, going into the soft flesh, slowly, twirling slightly. Then, when the needle was all the way through, and the hole made, I would have put my mouth up to it and sucked the blood away.”

He leans down to kiss the ear again, but she dodges the move, and instead he finally looks into her face as if gauging the effect of his foreplay.

So she tells him.

“That’s sick.”

“How do you know, have you tried it that way? We could do it here, tonight. A lot of people have their ears pierced twice.” His fingers move from her ear to the corner of her mouth. “Or we could do the tongue...” Then, before she can stop it, the hand is on her breast, squeezing through the silk. “Or a nipple...”

He tightens his arm around her, and when she feels the erection she puts both hands on his chest, trying to push him away. “Look, I don’t think this -”

“C’mon, I thought you wanted me,” John grins mirthlessly, grinding his hips against her.

She tries to move from side to side, panic spilling out in her words. “I did - I mean, you weren’t like this at the party -”

“You didn’t get to know me very well at the party, did you?”

And with that he throws his arms wide, releasing her, daring her.

She looks around frantically, sees the doorway leading out, away, and takes the dare. But she’s forgotten how fast he moves, and he catches her easily, hurling her into the entertainment unit all in one smooth motion.

Her back impacts painfully with a hard wooden shelf, and the CD jams in the player, repeating one shrill note over and over. It sounds like gunfire.

BAM - BAM - BAMBAMBAM -

John leaps forward and grabs the player, ignoring the sparks that explode out as he hurls the unit across the room to crash against a floral print. Then he takes Anne in the same way and throws her to the couch.

She lands and twists her head, a new agony in her neck flaring to join the one in her back. She doesn't even wipe away her tears, but watches him through them, trying to make herself small against the cushions.

"Why don't you just try to relax a little?," he tells her coolly, appraising her, "you might actually enjoy it. The others did."

He takes the leather jacket off and lays it carefully out on the coffee table. Then, as he works at his retro gold cufflinks, he circles the couch confidently, sure of his ability to prevent any escape.

"The others?" Anne can't make her head turn, but she tries to follow his movements from the corners of her eyes.

"Yeah. All the other little girls from all the other parties. And singles ads, and dating services, and dark overpriced bars. Oh, they screamed, even through their gags..." He bends down from behind and clamps a hand to her mouth. Then he moves the hand down teasingly, caressing her tight, tense shoulders.

"But it's so hard to tell a scream of pain from one of pleasure, isn't it?"

"How many others?," she asks in a small voice.

John leaves off the caresses to consider, walking around to the front of the couch, where she sees he's gotten the cufflinks off and is working on the buttons.

"I don't know, I forget."

"You don't know Eileen, do you?"

"Eileen?" He smiles in appreciation of some private joke. "Afraid we haven't had the pleasure yet."

He turns his back to her again, searching for something in his jacket, and her eyes leave him to weigh the possibilities. The path to the exit is clear, if she can just outrun him. She thinks of the knives in the kitchen -

- and leaps to her feet. But once more he catches her effortlessly. She tries to lash out at him, and succeeds in inadvertently scratching his cheek. John feels the sting of her nails, his eyes widen in surprise and rage, his arm comes up and swings back, and he backhands her powerfully. She flies to the floor, landing on the old Persian rug, but too dazed to be grateful for that much. Black stars implode in her vision, slowly turning purple.

John looks down, sees her unfocused eyes and the trickle of blood from her cracked lip. He finally pulls off his shirt, tosses it onto the couch, then settles to his knees over her, straddling her.

When the stars finally fade to pain, Anne realizes she's seeing two things.

One is the tattoo on his chest. It's a figure, crucified, but wholly without religious intent, because the thing is demonic, deathly - hollow banshee face shrieking into a blistering wind, tinted rags blowing around a skeletal body. The bony hands end precisely at each of his nipples, and the thick length of metal that crucifies them is real, embedded in his own flesh. A final stud crucifies both the ghoul's feet and John's navel. The chest is clearly shaven, the prickly stubble only adding to the terror of the entire creation.

The second thing Anne has noticed is the erection, pressing even more harshly against the cloth of his pants.

"You've probably heard of me."

She can only gape, all too aware of her pain and his threat.

He glances at the paper on the nearby table. "Fucking papers. They're the ones who gave me that name - 'the Picasso Killer'. But they won't give me a headline. Shit." For a moment, he

looks genuinely disappointed, then he shifts his gaze back to her, grinning. “Still, it means they know me.”

As Anne’s overtaxed mind makes the connection, he sees first terror, then a strange fascination wash over her.

“You’re him...”

Pleased at her recognition, he bends down over her. “Yeah. See, you do know me. All of you do. And none of you are gonna forget me, either.”

John remembers what he was searching his jacket for, and he stands, leaving her to crawl the two feet to the couch, where she props herself up, trying to regain strength, calm.

“And it’s not really such a terrible name, I guess,” he muses while rifling the jacket, “because I am an artist at what I do. And because the way I left the third one, she looked like an abstract painting. Maybe even Cubist.”

He stops talking, having found what he was lacking. Anne can’t see what it is yet, his broad back blocking her view - but to keep from finding out, she knows she needs to keep him talking. “They say you’ve killed twelve...”

He smiles in satisfaction. “But ya know what, little girl? That’s just the ones they’ve found. The ones I wanted them to find.”

“You wanted them to find...?”

“Of course. We all have to find some way of leaving our mark, don’t we?”

He spins now, leering down, holding a velvet pouch in one hand, the cloth the deep maroon of blood clotted in a bruise. With a flourish, he unties the sash holding the pouch rolled, and shakes it out for her inspection.

Held in loops and pockets of the pouch are the tools of his trade: “Needles, skewers, knives, studs, rings, metal molds for brandings...” He unsnaps a compartment and withdraws a square foil packet. “Oh, and rubbers. I believe in safe sex.”

Now he turns the pouch to his own speculation. “Let’s see, what shall we start with?”

“Look,” Anne moves warily, slowly rising to her feet, “why don’t I go get us a couple more drinks, and we can -”

John uses one hand to push her down onto the couch. “And go out to the kitchen where the phone is? I don’t think so.”

“So you think I’m just going to sit here and let you do this?”

John selects an item from the pouch, and holds it up before her, letting her see the scalpel’s blade before he circles the couch. Once he’s behind her, he leans down and gently, almost lovingly, begins to cut away the costly material of her right sleeve. She’s paralyzed as the skin beneath is laid bare.

“Why not? The rest did. You’d be amazed. Oh, they’d struggle a little, scream. But they didn’t really fight back. Like they’d been conditioned to recognize the superior force and give into it.”

He finishes cutting, and puts his face down tenderly next to hers. “Or like they really did get off.”

“Maybe I’m not like all the rest.”

John chuckles as he starts around the couch again. When he reaches into his pants pocket for the surgical gloves, he responds, “How do you know all the rest of them didn’t say that at first?”

Almost as if he senses her sudden urge to flee, he’s on her, wrestling her down until he’s on top, her breath crushed out of her, pinned beneath his weight. Once he’s balanced there, he calmly reaches to his toolkit for the first needle.

“You’re no different,” he murmurs, sliding the needle tip so lightly along the skin of her vulnerable arm, “when you feel the first prick, see the blood bead up and trickle slowly down the needle - you’ll scream, and try to fight me. Then I’ll hit you again, only this time I’ll knock out a few teeth, and after that you’ll take whatever I give.”

Now he moves the needle up her neck to her face, causing her to inhale tightly. She manages to free one hand, and she tries to stop her fingers from shaking as she draws them down his arm.

“You know,” she tries not to gasp, tries to entice him, “I think maybe this could be a turn-on...”

John hesitates, intrigued, as she tries to move suggestively beneath him. “What if we go slow, so we can both get into it -”

The hand stroking his arm attempts unobtrusively to push it back, but he suddenly reverses the hold, forcing her arm back down.

“I’ve got another idea: Why don’t you decide where we should start?”

But he’s already resting the needle on her cheek. She tries to turn away, unaware that she’s only exposing herself more to him. She cries out, raw, as she feels the needle pierce the flesh, sliding in, blood spilling out -

- and then his hand begins to shake.

He releases the needle, blinking, and sits up, confused. He shakes the hand once, twice. But when his whole upper body begins to weave, she ignores the pain and pushes up against him. He tumbles to one side of the couch like a rag doll, she wriggles out from beneath him, still trembling. She slides to the floor, weak at first, but regaining control with each passing second.

“About fucking time. I’ve gotta find something that’ll work faster from now on.”

John, slumped against the couch, tries to command his failing muscles to carry him up, but he only succeeds in staggering a few feet to a side table, where he loses his balance and crashes heavily to the floor.

“The drink...,” is all he can splutter.

Anne’s fingers probe her face and find the needle still impaling the skin there, blood streaking freely. When she turns to him, her face is almost as distorted as his sideways vision, from pain and rage. Her voice is a hoarse shriek.

“YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH, WHAT DID YOU DO TO ME?!”

She pulls the needle out and stares at it - or, more specifically, at the blood. When he groans lightly behind her, she whirls and plants a firm kick in his chest. He cries out, testament to his still-active nervous system.

“Yeah, asshole, a muscle relaxant. They use it mainly on horses. A veterinarian friend of mine got it for me. She thinks I get off on it.” Then, with a giggle, she adds, “She’s not so far off the mark.”

John struggles, limp, to an all-fours position, and Anne kneels beside him, fascinated. “See, it’s perfect. It’ll leave you feeling pain...”

She runs the tip of the needle along the skin of his unsteady face, resting the tip against his cheek in precisely the same place where he pierced her. She holds this for a moment, relishing the terror in his eyes - then pulls her hand back.

“...but you just won’t be able to move. You probably just thought that weird taste was because of the generic vodka, I’ll bet.”

He lunges - although it might be more correct to say he lets himself fall - at her, and she jumps back easily, laughing as he smashes against the couch. He winds up with head and back propped clumsily against the bottom, legs splayed out on the floor. He musters as much bravado

as he can for a final threat. "Don't fuck with me, bitch...," is what he means to say, but somehow what comes out sounds more like, "Do fu wi me, bi..."

Anne laughs like a child delighted by the antics of a ridiculous clown. "Oh, stop."

Then she feels the blood drip off her chin, and her mood abruptly shifts. She wipes an angry hand across her face, spreading crimson.

"Don't you want to know how I knew about you? Huh?"

She drops down next to him; only his eyes move in response. "This is the best part: I didn't. We're just...strangers in the night."

John can barely force words out of his deadened lips now, although his mind is racing behind his dilated eyes. "You mean..."

She steps away, lithe, to pick up his toolkit with interest. "That's right. I gave you the drink before you tried anything, didn't I? Maybe that's because -" she pauses to draw forth the scalpel, "- I'm just like you, and neither of us knew it."

Then she reconsiders. "No, wait a minute...I'm not like you, because I would never be so deluded as to think you might get off on what I'm gonna do to you. You really believe that, don't you?"

Anne kneels beside him, running one hand dreamily along the rasping skin of his chest, the other hand still holding the open blade. "And you're all the same, too."

"Wha'...wha' are you goin' do...?"

She leans down to kiss him, and John feels that, too; but he can't take his eyes off the hand circling his crotch - the hand with the blade.

"You think," she begins, moving her lips down his throat to his shoulders and chest, "that women actually enjoy being subjected to your sweat and your ramming and your cum. Don't you? Just like my daddy. But the truth is that you're only necessary to propagate the species. When we can do that without you, we will - believe me."

She raises her head to see his reaction, and she sees his bulging eyes fixed on the knife. "WHAT ARE YOU GOIN' DO?!"

She kisses his pierced nipple, the taste of metal cold on her tongue; and the knife point rests on his shrunken crotch. She smiles, considering, prolonging the moment, his fear -

- and without warning she takes the ring penetrating the nipple in her mouth and jerks her head back, tearing the ring through the sensitive flesh. John cries out, as much in surprise as pain.

She smiles at him, the gruesome ring still held in her teeth, then spits it aside. She abandons the scalpel, takes one of his inert arms, and peels the glove off to try on her own hand, smoothing it on sensuously.

"Maybe I'll give you a taste..." she starts, then trails off at a new thought. "Look at it this way: It takes most couples ten, twenty years to find out the truth about each other. But we already know the truth, don't we? That there's no such thing any more as safe sex. And there are worse ways to die - much worse ways - than from some disease."

John, still panting in agony, groans, a sound of pure despair that pulls her from her reverie. She shucks the contemplative mood like an old skin, turning happily to his toolkit.

"I'd use my own, but I'd have to go back out into the kitchen, and I'd rather not, with Kenny there and all."

"Kenny," John croaks.

"Yeah. That smell? Kenny. All six pieces of him." Then she remembers, and giggles. "Make that seven."

Anne begins matter-of-factly pulling needles from the pouch, seeming to examine each with an experienced eye - and a slow simmering of rage.

“And I’ll tell you something else, sweetheart: They’ll never catch me, because I don’t want a headline. I just wanna pay you back and then get rid of you. Every one of you.”

She pulls the other glove off of him and onto herself. “And look what I got this time out - how lucky can a little girl be? Let’s see - what shall we start with?”

She selects a long, thick implement, then straddles him, bending close.

His cries echo for a long time through the tastefully decorated living room.

END