

Hey there, sweetie. My family moved to Wyoming last fall. Come visit me. Hope you're good. Would be a blast to see you again. Best always.

Cindy

Wilma kept staring at the postcard showing a vivid Wyoming sunset and at the return address in the upper left corner on the back. This was the first contact she had had with her high school best friend in nearly six years. Cindy, gorgeous but economically underprivileged, had moved back to the family group in the "old world" after graduation and that was the last Wilma had heard of her. Apparently, her parents had decided to give America another shot, in the west this time. That was the problem.

Wilma pushed her long, scraggly hair back out of her face and squinted at an imaginary map on the grooved and stained wood of her desk. Cindy was in Wyoming, somewhere about there, she placed her left fore finger on an ancient worm hole, while she, Wilma, was in Pennsylvania, way over here. She pointed at the opposite side of the desk. Thousands of miles of road and she without a car to drive on them. It wasn't that Wilma didn't have a job. She had a perfectly decent one running after school and summer programs for kids, making full use of her degree in child psychology. But it wasn't enough to justify buying her own car, especially because she would never use it again. Normally, she just took her parents' car whenever she needed it for something. But she couldn't really ask them to do without for the whole time it would take her to drive to Wyoming and back.

Oh yea, Wilma still lived with her parents. She bared her teeth in a snarl, as if daring the world to find fault with her. So what? She had gone to college out of state, done her time, and gotten a degree. But, afterwards, she had had no where to go and nothing to do. Yes, she'd gotten offers, but nothing that really spoke to her, that she could even vaguely imagine spending the rest of her life doing. So she had come back to the brick house, too old to have air conditioning, that baked like an oven in the summer, when the smell of the parching earth and the sound of the crickets outside her window at night stirred some vague, half remembered longing inside her.

She wondered absently why she was so eager to see Cindy, who had always made her feel inferior. Not that Cindy had meant to, but putting gorgeous Cindy and homely Wilma side by side just brought out Wilma's plainness all the more. And yet... that was probably where a big part of the pull had come from. She had been overwhelmingly flattered that Cindy had been willing to associate with her, had sought her out in fact. Was it still the remains of this star-struck worship that was tugging her halfway across the country? Or was it just that it would give her life direction and purpose for however brief a period of time? Wilma collapsed into the oversized bean bag chair that served her as a bed. Curling into a fetal position and holding her head in her gangly hands, she covered her face with her hair as she tried to sort out her thoughts.

When she was young, Wilma's hair had been a beautiful golden blond but it had gradually faded to ash blond and now, in her twenties, it was essentially a colorless gray. She was chunky below the waist and a skeleton above. All her ribs showed and the bones of her elbows stuck out like chicken wings. The freckles and, thankfully, the acne that had peppered her face during her earlier years had dulled to a pale, doughy pulp.

What to do? Her current summer program, an art class, was ending next week and, after that, she had several weeks free to drive across the country in her non-existent car. She had the money too, saved from work, since she rarely spent it on anything. She could afford to pay for hotel rooms, food, and putting gas in the non-existent car. Here, again, lay the problem, Carlo's Bend being far too much of a back water to have access to either an airport or a train station, certainly for someone who didn't have a car. Yes, she was still at the age where "road trip" was a semi-acceptable summer pass-time. But all her old friends, especially the ones wealthy enough to have cars, had all moved away to have real jobs and real lives. No, no, she reminded herself fiercely. She did have a real job, real enough to pay for at least a crappy apartment for herself...if she had had the need to live all alone in a dump just to prove she could do it.

There was one though, one person she knew would still be here and have a car too and who, moreover, knew Cindy, since she couldn't really justify showing up with a total stranger. But no, not Him. Anyone but

Him. There had to be another way. Wilma wrestled with herself for another two days before admitting the truth that there was no other way and then for another day more before deciding that making the trip was worth the sacrifice.

The town of Carlo's Bend was neither farm land nor urban. It was a mass of long yellowed grass and scrubby brush with hidden stagnant lakes. Most of the houses displayed faded siding and "rustic" fences, now actually semi-rotted. The residents had a penchant for lawn gnomes and rows of sunflowers and some yards proudly displayed chicken coops but the chickens were all of the white ceramic variety. Not that Wilma's family had ever sunk to this level of tackiness.

But there was one house that broke the mold, in the style of a colonial era lord of the manor house with a huge third floor balcony and classic pillars, although it probably only dated from the 1950s or even later and was made of some kind of imitation granite that Wilma had often vindictively hoped was really concrete. A wrought iron fence ran around the outside, coated with a shinny sealant to keep it from rusting. Through it, glimpses of the grounds could be seen which included manicured lawns and, according to legend among the local children, an orchard, a pool, and a mini golf course. But Wilma herself had actually been through the gates and knew the truth of the rumors. There was actually a pool, and a very tiny group of fruit trees, if you counted crab apples as fruit. But the mini-golf course was completely fictitious. She had swum in the pool herself, its water touching every part of her, her head going under, sinking, sinking, the light above her far away and wavering, sweet darkness closing in.

But that was not where she was going today. She was driving her parents' old car with light brown fake leather seats and, also, no air-conditioning, towards down town, or at least what passed for a downtown for Carlo's Bend. At the furthest edge of the outskirts was a mostly boarded up building that was only missing a sign reading "saloon" to pass for a western movie set. Inside the dim and musty interior of this building lurked the local comic and trading card store. It was like another world, the extra large dust motes drifting lazily through the few slender shafts of sunlight that managed to slip through the boards on the windows. Below, the patrons crowded around tables, sticky with years of use, and heavily laden with candy wrappers, grease stained pizza plates, stale ash-trays, and half empty pop cans, the last two items frequently being one and the same. The clientele consisted in equal parts of gawky, pasty-faced teenagers, overweight college students and dropouts, and old men with huge shaggy beards and crooked teeth. Wilma was, or had been, used to being the only girl in the place. But, since Wilma dressed the same as the men and many of them had long hair too it didn't really matter.

She hadn't been in here since...well, before she left for college anyway. As she stepped through the door, the familiar smell of sweaty, unwashed bodies came rushing back over her like a birth language abandoned since childhood. A man, looking like a cross between an old hairy back-woods man and an overweight college dropout, glanced up from his card game to offer her assistance but she waved him aside. She was no longer here to waste money. A quick scan of the tables revealed several of the patrons she had known before, looking slightly older and more moth-eaten, but not the One she was looking for. He would be here, she knew, having heard through the rumor mill that he worked here now, officially worked here that is. In reality, the dividing line between employee and patron was rather blurry. Most of the regulars practically lived here so they knew where everything was, how much it cost, etc. and could easily answer any questions. It was not uncommon for them to ring themselves up when the "real" employee was engaged in an edge-of-the-seat card tournament, completely indistinguishable from the customers so occupied.

But He was not here, even though this was his "official shift." Maybe he was late, went out of lunch, or called in sick. So now to wait. Wilma tried to make herself look busy. She didn't want anyone to talk to her, just do her business and then leave. She made a great show of reading one of the new release comics. No one bothered her. You might think that every man in this den of enforced chastity would make a bee line for her. But she had learned a long time ago that things didn't work that way. They had, apparently, all been brainwashed into thinking the only women worth having were the ones who looked like the pictures in comics. Never mind that those were *drawings* and real proportions like that would create a health hazard.

She peeked cautiously around the edge of her reading material. Still no sign. Even the guy who had

spoken to her had gone back to playing his game. With his matted, greasy hair and beard reaching easily past his very large waist, he represented the inevitable destiny of those who remained too long in this place. Now he stood up again to ring up a pack of cards for a customer and Wilma felt ice in her stomach.

Was he working here? But there was never more than one paid employee on duty at a time, which meant the One she sought was not here. Emboldened by frustration, she stalked nearer, scowling venomously at the foiler of her plans—since being called in to fill someone’s shift was obviously entirely this guy’s fault. The skin on his hands was still firm and unwrinkled and, beneath the slimy film of grease she could see the rich chestnut brown of his hair. Despite the pink, rather scabby looking, bald patch, he must be young, quite young indeed to have reached this level of decay.

At that moment, he threw back his head in laughter at something the player next to him had said. The smile, the sound, the whole gesture was one that she would never have forgotten. Oh god, Oh god, no. So this is what had become of him. She might have guessed. She had seen it happen to enough others during her years here. But this...this creature, barely even human now, was what she had desired, what had haunted her dreams and fantasies. This was all that remained of the only man ever to wake the longing inside of her. Yes, thank you, god. Now no one would desire him again. She was free. No more imagining him in some woman’s arms. No more taunting herself that, if she got off her ass and tried, that woman might be her. It hadn’t been in high school. She only knew of one woman who had ever had that place, back in the years before she had met either of them, and that was Cindy.

Nothing left now but to play out the part she had come for. “Well, Esten, long time, no see.” She sauntered over, her hands deep in the pockets of her baggy jeans.

“Wilma. It’s been forever.” He looked pleased to see her. Was he scanning her face for an indication whether she was revolted by the change in him, or whether the desire was still there in spite of it. She hopped he would be terribly disappointed when it wasn’t. “You.” He pointed at one of the gangly school kids watching the game. “Take my spot. And no getting me killed. I expect to be winning when I come back.”

“Yes, Mr. Esten,” the boy mumbled, sliding into the chair as soon as Esten had heaved himself out of it.

“They call you Mr. Esten?” Wilma sneered as they made their way to the empty, unlighted, and especially dusty area in the back of the building, by the bathroom. In the past, Wilma had been thrilled by any conversation with him in this secluded area, though there had only been a few and most of those angry. She glanced towards the corner across from the bathroom. The partially broken book case, reeling drunkenly away from the wall and surrounded by heaps of debris and old packing crates, was still there. Wilma had had fantasies about being deflowered behind that book case.

“So, how are you?” he said pleasantly.

“I work, I make money, I have connection. You?”

“Well, you can see.” He gestured around the store.

“You live here now?”

“Not officially, but might as well.” Wilma ground her teeth. So here he was, a total loser, stuck in a dead end job, still living at home, and completely gone to seed and he was happy as a lark. “What brings you here?”

“I came to see you.” She thought she detected at least a tiny catch in his expression, but it was hard to tell under all that hair. Nevertheless, his voice remained friendly.

“What for?” he asked.

She didn’t give herself time to think or measure the plunge, forcing the words out in a rush, not pausing for breath. “Got a letter from Cindy. She lives in Wyoming, wants me to visit her. I have no car. Ah...road trip?”

Esten stared at her for a moment. “I do have a job,” he said a trifle stiffly.

“Oh, come on, you know no one would care if you took time off.”

“And what about your job?”

“I’m off for the next couple weeks.” Esten fidgeted uncomfortably. “Look, if you can’t stand the idea of being trapped in a car with me for that long, just say so.”

“Er...well...it isn't that exactly. We haven't talked in years and I've been out of touch with Cindy for even longer. It *would* be kind of awkward.”

“So, get to know me again. I feel bad that we've been so out of touch.” In reality this was because back in high school Wilma had decided she was disgusted with him and had withdrawn in to seclusion to sulk, but he didn't need to know that.

“And what about sleeping arrangements?”

“You've got money.”

“Not that kind of money. There's no way my parents would pay for space for two people. How much money do you have?”

“Not that much.”

“And, because you're a girl, you probably think I should have to sleep on the floor.”

“I don't think any such thing and I'm offended at you for suggesting it.”

“What do you suggest then?”

“We could flip a coin.”

“I guess, but I really don't know....”

“Come on. When was the last time you left town?”

He made a face at her but finally said, “I'll get back to you,” and Wilma had to be content with that. She had learned long ago that too much prodding would just make him surly and apt to refuse her just for the sheer perverse delight of it. So she shrugged her shoulders and shuffled back out into the blazing head for the trip home in the miniature portable greenhouse that passed for her car.

Esten took his time getting back to Wilma but now she was much calmer about it. Having seen him and what he had become had lifted a weight oppressing her for years. Even a large part of her desire to see Cindy, she now realized, had come from the strange blend of awe and envy she had always felt towards her regarding her interactions with Esten and, now that the source of that feeling was gone, the feeling itself dulled considerably. She still felt listless and without a goal though. Actually, more than ever now that she no longer had her memories of pain to anchor her. Therefore, she wasn't sorry, though she was very surprised a week and a half later, when the now ancient wall phone next to her bed started ringing.

“Yea, I'll go.” Esten's voice crackled on the other end of the line. “I'll be ready in two days. Just warning you, I have *very* little money I can bring.”

“Isn't your family supposed to be wealthy. I mean you have that giant house, even if the golf course isn't real. You even had your own credit card in high school.”

“Well I don't now. My parents only give me cash...in small amounts. Better get that magic coin ready for dividing up the sleeping space.”

“Sure, I'll make lots of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches too and pick up some bulk apples and pop at the store.”

“I'll be there at eleven. It's a pain but I guess we should get on the road early.”

“No problem.” Wilma couldn't help feeling slightly weird about the fact that, even after all this time, he still remembered her address and phone number perfectly. After a moment, she shook her head. She was being stupid. For all she knew, he had looked the information up in a phone book.

The day after next, around eleven thirty, Esten pulled up outside her house and climbed out of his car which, thankfully *did* have air-conditioning, to help her carry out the food supplies Wilma had gathered. But suddenly Wilma's breath caught and she swayed dizzily, almost dropping the huge bag of apples and several two litter pop bottles she was carrying. He had shaved off his beard. Wilma felt her stomach turn over. Yes, he was still partially bald, greasy, and fat, but, now that she could see it clearly, the face was still Esten. Esten, Esten, Esten. She bit her lip and got the distinct feeling the trip was going to be much more awkward that she'd been anticipating.

She slid into the seat next to him and, suddenly, she was sixteen again, in that small enclosed space, breathing the same air as him but keenly aware of the gear shaft and emergency break between them. “So, what have you been doing all these years?” she asked stiltedly, looking down at her hands.

"You saw. I've been working at our local hang out."

"The whole time? But last I knew you were going to college out of state."

"Didn't suit me."

"I heard you were sent home because of your grades."

"Way to start out making things even more awkward by asking rude questions." They had left the boundaries of Carlo's Bend by now and were skimming along through the surrounding cornfields and orchards, the leaves and corn stalks bowing and rustling in the hot late July wind.

"Hey, my situation isn't exactly commendable either. I wanted to commiserate with someone."

"Well, you can't commiserate with me because I'm not miserable."

"Then why not tell me?"

"I lasted about a semester and a half, came back here, got my job, started going to community college. Lasted about two years there. You?"

"I took a degree in child psychology and now teach after school programs." Wilma shook her head as she said this. His situation was even worse than she had imagined and yet he was as peaceful as could be, no guilt or sense of failure that he wasn't "progressing" like he should. "How do you do it?" she asked, half admiring, half envious.

"Eh?" He raised an eyebrow at her.

"How are you able to just completely disregard the world's expectations?"

"I do what I like. What else matters?"

"Teach me, teach me how. Tell me your magical secret." Wilma's hands writhed on top of each other like mating lizards. She felt again the longing and disgust that had been such a part of her former relations with him: the starving envy of his careless content no matter how dire the situation, while she agonized over every social and academic set back, of which there were many, then grimly comforted herself with her apparent superiority in the fact that she was doing the "right" thing and on the road to "success." But now that that success had come (and to some extent gone by her own choosing) Wilma was still unhappy and Esten still at peace. It just wasn't *fair*. Quite possibly, her entire value structure and world view that she had held all her life had been wrong and backwards. So, what now? Wilma felt more alone and directionless than ever.

Esten shook his head and his knotted greasy locks rippled down his back. "There is no secret," he said. "You just don't think about the other stuff. That's your problem, Wilma, you think too much." She wanted to ask him how to stop thinking but, was so affronted by his statement that she clammed up and couldn't find the words to express her outrage. Instead, she turned, her face burning, and watched the fields of cows and hay bales go flying past.

The first few days they made rapid progress, eating from their food supply as they drove along and only stopping for a few minutes every three hours or so to switch drivers and quickly pee behind road side bushes, pressing on far into the night on their caffeine reserves. But the food Wilma had brought vanished much faster than she had anticipated, since she had forgotten what a bottomless pit Esten could be, and their progress slowed rapidly as they had to stop and look for places to eat. Then the rains came, and the tension of driving with no visibility and water fouling the breaks, shortened their endurance and their tempter. They became cranky and snappish with each other about the driving, the route, and...other things. Wilma, with her excellent memory for affront, would dig up incidents from the past, things they had fought about during school, and, in essence, demand a rematch. Esten absolutely refused to give her satisfaction on this. Instead, he told her she was emotional and obsessive to even remember those events, much less make the effort to bring them up...which was offensive to Wilma so, instead, they would fight about that.

After a particularly grueling day on the road, neither of them wanted to get back in the car to find a place to eat. So Wilma walked to the convenient store across the street and picked up a case of beer, a couple pounds of potato salad, and several boxes of frozen pizza rolls. When she came back, Esten was sprawled out on the bed and had changed his clothes, though all his clothes looked pretty much the same. She could only tell he had changed because now his shirt said "the cake is a lie" instead of "fatality." Not that she could really blame him. After all, she had always worn her horde symbol pendent since she had gotten it when she was only ten.

Popping the first box of rolls into the microwave, she made a face until he moved over to let her sit down. She sincerely hoped she would win the right to sleep in the bed tonight.

Fishing her Swiss-army knife out of the back pocket of her jeans, she took out the bottle opener and pried the cap off her beer, then passed the knife over to him. Their hands touched and she felt sick inside. Her body had forgotten nothing, that was plain.

“Man, the traffic sucked today,” she said, taking a heavy swallow of her beer.

“No kidding. Did you see that jam around Chicago? I thought we’d never get out of that.”

“You thought? You were napping in the back for most of it.” Her sentence was punctuated by the loud beep of the microwave.

“I needed the rest. I slept on the floor last night and those floors were *cold*. I kept waking up every five minutes.” He paused and looked at her expectantly. “Well, aren’t you going to turn the pizza rolls?”

Wilma drew herself up and eyed him distastefully. “No, why should I? I put them in.” She took another swallow of beer. “And speaking of sleeping on the floor, isn’t it about time we got the magic coin out again?”

“Oh, not yet, please.” Esten got up and shuffled over to the microwave. “How long should I put these in for?”

“How should I know? Look at the box. I put them in for five minutes.”

“Man, there isn’t even any outlet for my laptop. We’re going to be bored tonight.”

Wilma took another deep swallow. She was starting to feel loopy from the beer, drunk far too quickly on an empty stomach. “Well, since we can’t do guy things like we usually do, we can do girl things instead. About time I say, since we’ve never done them before.”

“Girl things?” he asked dubiously. “Like what?”

“Well, we can swap secrets.” He made a face. She guessed he probably would have refused out of hand if he hadn’t felt at least slightly tipsy as well. “You tell the other person something most people don’t know. It isn’t anything. I’ll go first. When I was in first grade, I broke the stature on my teacher’s desk. No one saw me so I wrapped it in paper towels and buried it in the trash. She never found out what happened to it.”

Esten shifted uncomfortably. His dull coppery hair fell across his face. “Okay, here goes. I used to shut my little brother in a suitcase when he was little.”

“Come on. That’s not a real secret. At least one other person knows and he’s probably told hundreds more.”

“Fine. Er...um...I have a birth mark on my butt.”

“That works, at least to begin with. My turn. In sixth grade, I camped out on the lawn of the guy I liked and, eventually, got run off by his mother.”

Esten laughed his rich laugh, throwing back his head in the way that had always turned her innards to marshmallow. “I can totally imagine you doing that.” She looked at him expectantly. “Oh, right, my turn again. I cried when my hamster died.” He blushed as he said it. Wilma smiled sympathetically and gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder and although her body clenched with desire at the contact, she really did feel the sympathy she offered. She always found it touching when guys confessed love for their pets.

But now it was her turn again and it was time to get bolder. The secrets were supposed to get “juicier” as the game progressed and the confidences already revealed, as well as several more swallows of drink, had loosened her tongue...and her caution. “I use the faucet in the bathtub to get off,” she said almost smugly. Esten blinked and looked like he might want to question her more closely but instead turned away and was silent. “Well, go,” said Wilma a trifle snappishly. She had succeeded in embarrassing herself and his reaction wasn’t entirely reassuring. Esten muttered something so quietly that she could barely even hear the sound of his voice. “What was that?” she barked impatiently.

Esten’s repetition was only very slightly louder but, this time, she managed to catch the words. “I’m still a virgin,” he muttered, turning away to bury his face in the pillow.

Anger flamed up inside Wilma. As always, this game had made her feel vulnerable and, now, the fact that he should complain about this felt like a direct attack on her. “Well, if you don’t like it, just remember it’s

your own damn fault," she snapped.

"Excuse me?"

"So, here's my next secret. I've always had a huge fancy for you."

"Wilma, are you serious?"

"You can't honestly tell me you never knew. I was absolutely mad for you the whole time we were in high school."

"I never knew. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Oh." She tossed her head curtly. "Because it was perfectly obvious you had no care for me."

He looked down at the lint balls on the blanket and blushed more than ever. "That is not true. You see...well...I was a bit attracted to you once myself." The skin of Wilma's face went even whiter than normal. She felt her throat constrict as if it was choked with dust. "But I put the idea out of my mind because I knew it couldn't be."

Wilma bit her lip until blood showed at the corner of her mouth. "Why? Why couldn't it be?" she demanded savagely.

"Because I never believed you would have me."

"What? Not even at the end? Esten, you really are dumb," cried Wilma.

"I rest my case," he replied shortly. "And, yes, I knew what you were doing. But I thought you were trying to use me because I seemed like your best shot at the time. You were smart and proud and strong willed, so serious and majestic. You didn't need a guy at all, much less an ignorant clown like me."

"What makes you think I thought that?" It was true that she had, in fact, thought this and that, to tell the truth, it was one of the things that drew her. He had always been deliciously dangerous to her. It had felt so bad to pursue her total opposite like that, someone who seemed to scorn so much of what she valued. And still she felt it now. It seemed terribly daring to be road-tripping across the country, sleeping in cheap motels, with a guy who had, essentially, been unemployed for years, and showed no sign of being otherwise in the foreseeable future.

"You told me you thought so," said Esten, almost grimly. "Besides, it's how I saw myself."

"Again, like the being a virgin thing, if you didn't like it, why didn't you do something about it?"

For the first time since his revelation, Esten raised his head and looked at her. His eyes smoldered. Wilma gasped at how beautiful he looked. "Not everyone has your iron will, Wilma. Not everyone can live up to your standards. I knew this and that's why I gave you up."

Wilma took another swallow of beer. It burned all the way down. "How badly to do you want to stop being a virgin?" she asked before she could stop herself.

He looked at her coldly. "What do you mean?"

"Do you want it badly enough to sleep with me, now, tonight, even if I despise you, or are you still too proud for that?"

"Do you," he asked, "despise me?"

Reaching out, she closed her hand around his, felt the firmness and the skin like hot velvet. "Not anymore," she said. "You were right. I did in high school. But, I've learned that being smart, rich, and successful doesn't solve everything. It certainly didn't make me happy. If the way you live satisfies you, who am I to criticize? You have the right to make your own choices in life." She paused and frowned. "Well, except for one thing. You can only live the way you do by having others support you. Earn your own place to live and I will never criticize you again."

"But you live at home," he accused, but did not withdraw his hand.

"Yes, but I did stay in an apartment for a while after I graduated and I *could* afford to rent my own place, if I was stupid enough to want to."

Before she could stop herself, she placed her hands on around his head and threw herself forward to press her lips against his. She would never have dared to do this in high school and, even now, she felt sick at her own daring. Then, to her great wonder, his lips parted and his mouth locked with hers. He stank of beer and pizza grease. She could feel the bony surface of his bald area with one hand and the other was pricked by

the stubble that was already growing back, and none of that mattered. Esten was not refusing her. She clamped her mouth down tighter, as if she would never let him go, but he pushed back just as hard. Their lips were slimy with saliva and slid over each other like worms. Wilma was ecstatic. She felt his hands grab her arms and, inside, she sang as her flesh bruised.

After a moment, they broke apart and Esten stared at her rather foolishly. "So, was that your first kiss?" he said at last, going very red in the cheeks.

All Wilma's feelings of delight turned to rage and, with a cry of anger, she struck him across the face. "Unlike you, I'm not a virgin anymore. I don't appreciate you just assuming I'm as big a loser as you." She saw the question in his face and didn't wait to be asked. "It's not really relevant to the point but, if you must know, I pretended to be drunk at a frat party?"

"You *pretended* to be drunk?" He looked at her skeptically.

"Yes, it was all carefully planned. Every fall, pledges were expected to sleep with some absurdly high number of girls before being accepted so they would go after any girl who didn't look likely to resist, as in, was drunk. For those couple months each year, I would go to a different party almost every night."

"And didn't get any the rest of the year?"

"That's not the point. It was still a really rude question, especially because we both know fucking well that this wasn't your first." He looked at her blankly. "Umm...Cindy? Had you forgotten about that...or are you just shocked I know about it?"

Now he looked sullen. "In my head, I know it happened if I think about it, but, it was so long ago that it doesn't seem to matter any more."

"Well, it does to me. Why do you think I was so snotty to you? After Cindy, how could I be anything but stale?"

"You rejected me and denied yourself just because of Cindy?"

"Cindy is gorgeous or did you never notice?"

"Who cares? At this point, I barely remember what she looks like anyway."

"Well, you'll have ample opportunity to remember soon."

"In that case, better claim me now, while you still have the chance."

Wilma's mouth dropped open in shock. "You're bold," she gasped. "I can't believe you."

He punched her in the arm. "I'm up for taking a gamble. You've always been cautious."

"Bring it on. I can be just as reckless as you."

"All right. Let's go. Right now."

Wilma felt dizzy with daring and desire. "Sure. But there's just one problem."

"Oh yea, what?"

"Protection."

Esten had already opened his mouth to make another mocking comment but her answer pulled him up short and he went white and red. Wilma's practical concern had burst the bubble of his self confidence and sent him back to the real world. He turned his face away and stared at the ground. "Well, I guess I could go get something."

"Where?"

"The convenient store. They probably have condoms there." He flinched as he said the word.

"Is it still raining?" asked Wilma.

He pulled the dirty curtains aside and looked out. "Not very hard. Besides, a little water never hurt anyone."

"I don't want you to get sick."

"I'll be fine. No eating the pizza rolls while I'm gone."

About fifteen minutes later, Esten stepped back into the room looking embarrassed, his hands deep in the pockets of his jeans.

"So?" Wilma put down the book that she had been pretending to read. "Are we ready?"

"Er...well...no. The convenient store was closed."

“What? It’s only fucking 8:30. How could they possibly be closed?”

Esten flinched. “It’s not my fault,” he muttered.

“I never said it was but I’ve waited ten years for this night and now the damn store is closed.”

“There are other stores. I’m going to go look. I’ll search the whole town if I have to. But I needed to come back to get the car keys. Also...” He looked at the ground again and shuffled his feet.

“Yes?” Wilma sat up and turned toward him.

“I got you a present.” He dug his hand deep into his pocket and came out with a tightly clenched fist. Something inside Wilma coiled up tight like a spring. He had gotten her a gift. That was what guys did to impress girls. He wanted to please her. Her eyes leaped to his, shining. Her hands almost leaped as well to reach for the gift, but she held them back, so as not to pressure or embarrass him. Slowly, he came towards her and uncurled his fist. In the palm, lay a ring of tarnished silver metal set with a round black stone so dark and flawless it looked like a bead of ink.

“Where did you get this?” she gasped in surprise.

“I bought it outside the convenient store. Here.” He took her hand in his and his skin was cold and slightly damp as he slid it onto her finger.

“It’s beautiful,” Wilma whispered, watching the stone sparkle on her grease stained finger, just above her skinned knuckle and broken nail. “But bought? I thought you didn’t have any money.”

“It’s usually not polite to say how much you spent on a gift,” said Esten, looking down at their hands between them.

“I’m surprised you knew that.” Wilma raised her chin scornfully. “I didn’t think that would show up in your trading card games.”

He gave her a small pinch on her hand. “Well fine then, if you must know, I got it cheap. It costs less than our dinner tonight.”

“I love it,” she said, ruffling his hair with her hand and feeling a shiver up her spine as she did so. “But *how* did you get it?”

“There was a man in black suit and a pointy black goatee hanging around outside the store. He noticed me cursing when I saw it was closed and asked what was wrong. He said he had a gift that would sweeten the disappointment for you and offered me the ring.”

“A guy in a black suit?”

“Yea, a really nice one too.”

“Wonder what he was doing there.”

“When I saw him he was leaning up against the wall smoking.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Anyway, I gotta run, try to find another store that’s open. Enjoy the present.” He leaned in, hesitated for a moment, then gave her a quick awkward peck before grabbing the keys and sprinting for the door. She remained staring after him long after she had heard the car pull away, then slowly reached for her book again, but put it down without even opening it. She knew it would be useless to even try to focus on it. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed, fidgeting with her hands in her lap, then got up and restlessly paced the room.

Catching a movement out of the corner of her eye, she started in alarm and whirled around...to face her reflection in the mirror, its eyes large and frightened as her own. She looked at the pasty skin, the dull hair, both now very greasy after almost a week on the road. Slowly, she raised her bony arm and put a hand to her cheek, watching her fingers sink into the gooey flesh until they were almost buried. It was clammy, almost slimy to the touch. The stone of the ring, HIS gift, seemed to rest on the surface of the skin like a horrible black mole. She looked nothing like what a guy should find waiting in bed for him on his first night. There was nothing she could do about her insipid coloring or her figure's sad combination of pudge and sharp pointy stick. But, at least, she could get some of the filth off. If nothing else, she could take a shower for him.

Wilma slid open the door to the shower, then wrinkled her nose distastefully. Inside was a foul damp smell and some dark colored mold on the walls. The shampoo and soap were in the tiny travel bottles that were almost impossible to get anything out of and, even if you did, it would have the smell and consistency of glue.

It was hardly the thing to make her feel romantic or glamorous, something she had never cared about before. Wilma gazed wistfully down at the black stone on her hand. It may have been only her imagination but it seemed as if she felt the stone grow warmer for a second. She reached into the shower to turn on the water, then turned back over her shoulder to pick up her towel and came face to face with a woman with a blond ringlet behind her ear, dressed in a shining blue gown.

Wilma bit back a scream, then became angry. "Who are you and how did you get into my bathroom?"

The woman fluttered her long dark lashes and there was a hurt look in her wide, dark eyes. "But, Wilma, you invited me in. You want to be perfect for your lover."

"You even know my name? What are you, my fucking fairy godmother?"

"Fairy godmothers are always old women. Think of me as your magical beauty consultant, if you like. You may call me Ariel"