

# Propositions

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Hustling money takes more than a friendly smile. You must have an inviting body and a complicated, but necessary, façade.

Hands. White hands. They wipe my face, pulling my eyes like tears, reaching, clawing, gripping my skin, fingerprints sapping my breath. I am thrown down, thrown back, over thrown, hair splayed, marking the ground with sweat and salt. I want to whimper and laugh and explode. I am pressed down, held like a ball underwater, struggling, pushing up and out like a flower about to burst, spilling bloody petals on the ground. I turn my head. There is my apron and coat, my underwear, torn now amid the ashes, petals and faded paper dolls. All my pieces scattered. I am unraveling and undone, dying a little more with every breath, nerves surging, tingling, numb and dead, and then alive. So this is what it feels like to bleed.

1 a.m.

That sign "Welcome to Tony's! Please wait to be seated!" stands like a barrier between two selves. Inside, amid the conglomerate filth of bleach water, finger smears, and clumsy spills, you are the waitress, the server, the sweet smiling slave. You are "Sugar," "Peaches," "Hon," "Miss," "Sweet Thing," "Girl," and "Will there be anything else, sir?" Manners all aglow.

A snide remark about a glass of water "why can't you seem to find one? Meanwhile, you are remembering that table 22 and 24 both need refills, the little girl at 5 wants color crayons, no mushrooms in the omelette to 32, and could you please get the change for 25's \$20 bill? Simple glass of water? You're waiting 13 tables, remembering the details of 28 food orders and carrying seven plates in your two hands. But you want a lemon wedge with your water. "I'm sorry, sir, it will be just a moment." Smile. Your happiness is my only concern.

A snap of the fingers, the bang of a coffee cup, tight tug at the strings of your apron. Passed around like a million sirs' play thing. "Excuse me, miss. Excuse me, miss." And you smile, nod, acquiesce. It's what you have to do for that fifty tip that means you can still make this month's rent.

The slap on the ass ("Damn, ain't you still just a spring chicken"), the leering, the propositions ("And how much for you after my meal, Sugar?"), and you laugh coyly, feign a stolen naivety, pretend to be flattered. You're their sweet-assed, long-legged, firm-breasted meat for eight hours a day.

Behind the line you'll cringe at the crap-covered napkins that wiped their grease and snot and spit. You'll whisper all the curses and smart-assed comebacks that would get you fired out on the floor. You'll hate that unctuous bastard, pray for salmonella in his eggs, imagine burning his ass the next time he touches yours.

But right now, you smile and nod and acquiesce, because you have to. For these few moments, this is who you are. Under skin and smile and nod, you're their chosen play toy for a penny "their bartender, cook, their mother, maid and whore.

3 a.m.

The room inside Tony's diner was a world unto itself at three in the morning. The yellowed lights and cigarette smoke hovered stagnant, blending the bacon grease and coffee smells into a solitary haze. Reflections bounced off the windows, hollow shadows echoing between the walls.

I watched a lazy taxi pull away, hoisting off the last of the drunks. No doubt he was already regretting his omelette and French toast as he stumbled, nauseous, into the seat. Somewhere out there, in that void beyond those two double doors ("Welcome to Tony's!") his wife had long given up on waiting for him, sighed, and rolled over, cradled in the sheets. He waved luxuriously at the glass, trying to peer past the maze of reflections. From out there, his hopeful fingers could not reach through to bang his coffee cup with an obnoxious grunt and graze my ass as I walk by him. I flinched. Even now, restaurant empty except for the lingering coffee drinkers, I could still feel those sloppy blue eyes and white fingertips scratching at the windows and cracks under the door. They were always trying to get in.

"C'mere, brown shu-gar," smile curved up too far. "Can't drink 'n em' ty cup ya know."

4 a.m.

It was her fifth hour here and her 18th cup of coffee. Sheâ€™d come in dragging her stack of notebooks, pencils and charcoal, and plopped down at the counter. Her loose jeans barely clung to her hip bones, two inches above that waistline â€” damn â€” a worn Lakers t-shirt, tight to her chest, nipples sneaking through. Auburn curls splayed out and traced the nape of her neck â€” guilty. Behind my bronze the color rose to my cheeks.

Art student, definitely. With that carefree funk and darting eyes, cigarette smoking itself in the ashtray, small fingers handling the pencil roughly then caressing, teasing the paper. She sat amid the smoke in a world of curly cues and shadows. Her eyes were heavy on me, pinning me down, drawing me out. She looked up smiling warmer than the streaming caffeine, inviting me into her eyes of shape, form, and shadow. I swallowed slowly, even though I knew her white smile was not a request but a demand. Stare, desire, worship. I gasped, turned away, dripping errant drops on the table.

Eavesdropping (the waitressâ€™s curse), I subtly browsed her portrait with every refill, assembling the details like a puzzle pieced together with graphite lines. It was a pixie or some other angelic fairy creature, skin shaded so darkly it shamed the black coffee sheâ€™d been drinking. The pixie splayed her limbs placidly on an altar, wings hanging limply, bare breasts only small mounds at this angle. Her face was twisted coyly as if on fire, either from fear or anticipation. I blushed as I caught myself staring a little too long at the eyes mirrored back. Pupils like the dying petals scattered loosely on the ground.

â€œCoffee?â€• I whispered. She jumped shyly at the shimmer in the quiet, hand instinctively covering the perfect V between the pixieâ€™s thighs.

5:55 a.m.

And then she was gone. She must have slipped out the door as I clocked out in the back. Sheâ€™d left a pile of change to cover her tab, but it didnâ€™t matter. Iâ€™d bought her meal hours ago under that enchanting gaze. With a tinge of regret that couldnâ€™t explain, I cleared the crumpled napkins and discarded sketches, flipping through the chaotic scribbles and pencil shavings.

I moved to throw these away and stopped, stared at the fiery black altar, limp wings and disheveled petals. I felt my face grow warm at the tiny points and curves â€” the petal eyes, the coy face on fire, the thighsâ€™ V were all my own, reflected back. I shivered at this charcoal mirror, skin tingling, breath short. I shuddered as if naked, tensed my hands into fists and then breathing in, grasped for calm. I stood for a moment, stilling the tremors and then folded the page and hid it in the pocket of my apron.

6 a.m.

Outside, I light a cigarette, roll my apron into a tight bundle and set off into the murky fog of dawn. Not enough tips to call a taxi today. Inside Tonyâ€™s, the fingers scratched and pounded at the glass â€” angry men trapped inside. Powerless. Iâ€™m their whore anymore. Iâ€™m me out here â€” the strong, beautiful, capable young woman my dad always told me Iâ€™d be. I laughed. Now, who the fuck is that?

I hear a car slow behind me. My breath catches; I hug my coat around me tighter, and do not turn my head. Please go on. Go away. Please leave me alone. My apron is off. Iâ€™m not your waitress, not your friend, not your lover. Please, sir, you cannot see me here â€” not past that sign, not through those windows. You cannot touch me here â€” there are people all around, sure to hear me scream. There are cars driving all along this road. Theyâ€™re sure to stop and help.

Sir, I told you. Donâ€™t. Donâ€™t slow your car and lower your window. Iâ€™m off the clock. Iâ€™m not yours any more. I was your whore. (â€œHow much for a side of you after my meal?â€•) You cannot see me. Iâ€™m not a woman, not a body at all. I have no legs, no ass, no breasts, no curves â€” see â€” look â€” Iâ€™m invisible, a shadow. You cannot touch me. I will slip through your fingers with my non-body. I will disappear unharmed, and you wonâ€™t be able to find me. Go away, sir, please. I am nobody. I am no body. I am no woman. I am... not.

I still couldn't say why I got in that car. Maybe it's because I could not escape into a shadow, could not lose this form, divorce this body and slip through their fingers. I am a body; I bleed. Deep in deep I am woman it's written all over my skin, curves and softness and moist salty petals. I am a woman. I do what I have to do. I nod. I smile. I acquiesce. And sometimes I have it my way.

Maybe I was crazy " too much smoke and coffee " and suddenly looking into the car I saw the most beautifully distorted creature God ever made. Maybe I wanted to be delirious for that face. Maybe God never made any of us. Maybe this seemed safer, easier, purer than all the others. Maybe this would feel okay. Maybe this would comfort. Maybe I could forget to breathe for just a moment.

Or maybe this was me, this was my life, this was my choice and lack of it. This was my body, my meat, my blood. And so this was my beauty, my chance, my lust. Maybe.

She rolled down the window and peering in cautiously, I hardly hesitated a moment " opened the door without a word, and sat breathless as she drove away with her white hands on the wheel, auburn curls screening her eyes.

•You left this. •

She smiled. I fell, breaking shadows into pieces, looking down in horror at all those parts of me laid bare. I wept silently, staring down in frightened disbelief, no hope of piecing this back together " not with all this shattered glass and ashes " my own urn, filled with the little blisters I never let them see. The pencil stubs and ash trays, the faded paper dolls and bloody petals, torn underwear and white face I couldn't see.

She pulled into the driveway. I followed her inside and tossing my apron and coat to the floor, felt the strength of her hand wiping my face, pulling my eyes like tears. I wanted to whimper and laugh and explode. She smiled. And it all fell away there, poured like blood down an altar, or scattered like little pixie petals on the ground.