

Jen Lam / FREAK STEW

LEMON CAKE

Mrs. Tam answered my knocks.

"Maxine! So good to see you. Come in, come in. I just finish making cake, lemon cake. You like? Of course you like. Sit down and visit. Tea?"

"No, I don't intend to stay. Actually, I just want to return this book to Jimmy."

"But it so long since you come. You don't visit anymore. You and Jimmy have fight? I sure he very, very sorry. He don't tell me there fight. My own son and he tell me nothing. Here, sit here." She removed a stack of newspapers from a chair. I sat down. I expected Jimmy to come stomping into the room. It was all too quiet. I watched Mrs. Tam waddle from one side of the kitchen to the other. She placed before me a cup of tea and a brick of yellow cake suffocating in white icing.

"Eat! Eat!"

"Really Mrs. Tam, I can't stay."

"You eat. You like ghost. Now, tell me why you not visit no more, hmm? Jimmy stay in his room for weeks. Do nothing. Even stop work. I ask, 'Jimmy, tell Ma why you this way, why you no work? You need work to be strong.' All he do is yell and call me ugly names. He think his Ma is dumb because English not as good. You think I stupid? Not know what ugly words mean!" She gave the table an indignant smack.

"No. You're not stupid." I placed my cold hand over her flour covered pudgy one. The harsh lines on her face softened.

"You good girl. You tell parents. But you don't eat enough. Jimmy say you eat no meat. No good, no good. You need to eat so you have many, many children." A deep laugh gushed from her tightly aproned

belly and bounced about the grim, green walls. She wiped away a tear and sighed.

"All I have is Jimmy. I want many, many children when young but Jimmy's baba say all he need is one son to carry his blood. Jimmy don't mean those ugly words. He hold all his baba in him. All yang. Not Jimmy say the word. Yang make him say them. He like his baba."

I could not listen to her any more. The words twisted me with frustration, anger and fear. Fear that one day I would be making excuses to the rest of the world for a jerk like Jimmy.

"Could you give this to him, please?" I held out the book. I wanted no reminder of Jimmy in my apartment. I could have thrown it away or burned it, but the book had done nothing wrong to me. The words, *The Sun Also Rises* in bold letters across the dog-eared cover, had been of some comfort to me the past few days. Mrs. Tam looked at the book then at me.

"You give to him. Nobody visit him. He lonely."

"I don't think that it would be a good idea."

"Jimmy want to see you. He do, really. I know. He miss you, that why he so sad. You talk to him and make him happy. Come, he upstairs. I make dinner, you stay and eat with us. No meat, just for you."

She pushed me towards the stairs. I climbed up and her wheezing 250-pound body followed right behind.

I stopped in front of his door. "He be very happy, you see." She smiled and her eyes disappeared behind her cheeks. I had never seen it closed, not from this side. I knocked softly. There was no answer. Then Mrs. Tam knocked.

"Jimmy. Jimmy." There was a groan of bedsprings from behind the door.

"What the fuck do you want?" With a smile plastered on her face, she opened the door. Jimmy was on the bed sucking on a beer bottle. There were several empties on the floor beside him. Nothing had changed. The blinds were still crooked, books in their usual chaotic non-system. "Maxine is here."

"Well, I ain't fuckin' blind."

"Don't say those ugly words." Her face tensed and ate away her smile. "Maxine come just to see you, don't be mean."

"I'll be any way I damn well please, bitch." He tossed the empty

bottle onto the floor. I stood as Mrs. Tam gathered the bottles and tried to straighten the blinds.

"Damn it! Leave my room alone, you fat cunt. Get out. I want to talk to Max." She shuffled past me, carrying away the empty bottles with a shame slapped face. Jimmy closed the door behind her.

"What the fuck do you want?" He reached into his shirt pocket for a pack of smokes. He took one and threw the pack at me. I caught it and threw it back.

"Can't remember you ever passing up a smoke." He lit his cigarette. "I do remember getting a phone call from you a few weeks ago. Something about it being over between us. But here you are." He stood up in front of me, took a drag, and exhaled into my face. "I say when it's over, not you, bitch."

"I came to return this." I shoved the Hemingway into his dirty under-shirted chest. He smacked the book out of my hand.

"Don't you be playing games with me. Not after the way you've treated me. Nobody walks out on me, especially a junkie tramp like you."

"Bye, Jimmy." I turned to leave. He slammed me against the door. His unwashed body shook against mine. Our breaths fell into sync. I felt his voice through his chest.

"I'm not finished."

"I don't care. I'm going."

He stepped away. "You have someone waiting for you? Some shit kissing loser? One of your artsy fag friends? You think you're too good for me, you slut? You're just another screwed up chink, just like the rest of them." He backed away and took another drag.

"I've got a life. That's better than being a fucked up asshole like you."

"Who the hell are you trying to fool? A life. What do you do now? Give head in limos instead of back alleys? Do you give the chauffeur a tip? Ha ... a life. You're probably fucking some rich old fart, just like your mother. Freud would've had a field day with you."

I imagined my fists pounding his face in.

"I'm a writer." The words didn't seem as powerful as I hoped they would be.

"You're a what?" He put out his cigarette and lit up another.

"I'm a writer." The words marched off my tongue this time.

"A writer? Exposing yourself on paper. That's what it all is, literary exhibitionism. You're one perverted bitch." He stumbled and waved his cigarette. The beer was taking its toll.

"You think that I'm a drunk? You're fucking wrong. I don't need you or any of your pity. I've got everything I want. Can get a skirt, just like that, got a phone book filled with 'em. Got a roof over my head and a pathetic cow who'll do anything I say. What do you have? A milquetoast loser who probably can't get it up. He ... he probably has to stick his dick in the freezer for a couple of hours just to get a hard-on." He chuckled. "Quite appropriate since he's fucking the Ice Queen." His boozy eyes searched my face for a reaction. He slapped me and fell back onto his bed, arms spread open as if the gods had bestowed him with immortal powers. My hands trembled and my jaws were clenched so tightly that my teeth began to hurt. It was all too familiar.

"I know why you came back, Max. You know too. If you beg a little I might give ya a little."

"A little is all you could give."

"You can't fight it, Max. You're dying for a real man."

There was an unopened bottle of beer on the dresser next to the door. I grabbed it, popped the cap, and drained half of it in one, long swallow.

"Fuck it, bitch. I ain't got all day."

I hurled the bottle at him. It smashed into the wall a few inches above his head. I left. A string of obscenities followed me out. Mrs. Tam was in the hall pretending to dust. I squeezed past her and ran down the stairs. She followed.

"Maxine, Maxine," she grabbed my arm. "Don't go. You have dinner here. Yes?"

"No." I tried to pry my arm free of her doughy grasp.

"Please, don't go, don't leave." Her whole body seemed to be pulling down at her eyes, making them sadder, more desperate. She began crying. "I ... don't know ... don't know what to ... d-do." Her sobs followed me into the kitchen.

"I can't help you."

"He just like his baba, too much yang. Other day, I make him

hamburger, good hamburger with lots of onions and mushroom. His favourite. He take hamburger and throw at me. Yell, 'This is crap! This is crap!' Then he pull my hair and take pan and hit me. Just like his father." Tears stopped and her eyes stared off into the far corner. "I very sad when Jimmy's baba die, but also very happy. I think that I now live without being scared. Jimmy good boy maybe if he not see us fight so much. He learn to hit and say ugly word from his baba. I let him see his baba that way."

"Bullshit." The word leapt out of my mouth. The ugliness didn't seem to affect her now.

"Please," she pleaded. "I do everything, but no good, not good enough for Jimmy or his baba."

The more she tried to make me understand the less I wanted to hear.

"Jimmy is me, my body, my blood. I not perfect, make Jimmy this way. I see Donahue, he call it ..."

"Screw Donahue! He ain't the one living in this hellhole! He don't give a damn about any of us!" I searched for something deeper to say, something that would kick Donahue's butt. She was waiting for the same words. I realized that I was no stronger than she was. I was fooling myself, believing I would be fine, that it would not take long before I forgot about him. It's amazing how a jerk like Jimmy could've sucked so much life out of the two of us. Furniture banged and breaking glass erupted above us. Her frantic eyes sank into mine.

"Find a way out and go."



The Aztec was practically empty when we arrived. Neal was in the back booth waiting for us, as usual, hunched over a book, hidden under a haystack of hair. Denise slid in beside him and began reading over his shoulder.

"Screw off." He swatted her away.

"Burroughs. Never would have taken you for a Burroughs kinda guy," she teased.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She shrugged her bare shoulders and signalled to Todd to bring coffee. He placed a cup before me and one half full before Denise.

"Anything else?" He directed the question at Denise.

"You got any angel food cake?"

"What, for you? That would be considered blasphemy." He chuckled to himself all the way to the front of the coffee shop and repeated his witticism to the only other table of customers.

Neal tossed his book into his knapsack, and I noticed a bruise on his cheek.

"What happened to your face, pretty boy?"

"Nothing."

"Let's see." Denise twisted his face around so she could inspect it.

"Let go! It's nothing. Just got into a fight. Forget it."

"With Simon?" Denise stirred six packets of sugar into her coffee. Neal gave her a disgusted look.

"No, Simon wouldn't hit me."

"Not even if you hit him first?"

"I don't know. It doesn't even matter. It wasn't him."

"Then who was it?" She continued to stir while emptying creamer after creamer into her cup until she had it filled to the rim. I don't understand why she even bothered drinking coffee.

"My dad."

"Dan beat you up?"

"No." He looked at her, annoyed. "My real father. He showed up at our front door last night totally tanked and began wailing on my mom. The bastard trashed the front room and demanded money from her. She gave him twenty bucks and he went ballistic. Accused her of hiding money from him and continued beating her up. I heard her screaming as I drove up, ran inside and he tackled me as soon as he saw me. We didn't even notice my mom calling the cops. I swear, I'd never been so happy to hear police sirens."

"For sure. But why did he mess your mom up in the first place?"

"Don't know. Like I said he was wasted, probably high. But I got him back a few. He didn't exactly leave walking on his own two legs."

"So all this fighting is really about the two of you proving your masculinity. He's feeling inferior because Dan married his wife and

gave her and his only son a decent life. You're just plain paranoid that you're not as much of a man as Dan. Hey, that rhymes." Denise emptied her cup, leaving only a few granules of sugar and a bright magenta lip mark. "There's Alec." She waved to him. "Time to be devilishly beautiful and angelically stupid."

Neal glowered at her as she walked away. "Why does she do that?"

"Because she's broke and hungry." My voice came out louder than I expected.

"No. I mean, why is she always putting me down like that? She's always psychoanalysing me, and she never says anything remotely positive."

"She can't get at you any other way. She knows she'll never have a taste of that side of beef hanging between your legs. I suppose women hate and love gay men for the same reasons."

"Do you hate me?" He began rolling the empty sugar packets into little balls.

"Yeah. I have a voodoo doll that looks just like you. It even has a wiener stapled to its crotch. Every night I stick pins all over it and cook the wiener in the microwave until it explodes."

He laughed. I didn't.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Guess so." I gave a half-hearted smile. He got up and moved over to my side of the booth.

"You look as if you've been eating your own shit."

"I went over to Jimmy's to return his book."

"Why did you even bother?"

"I just didn't feel right keeping it or tossing it away."

"He beats the shit out of you and you don't feel right keeping one of his stinking books?"

"Lay off. I don't need anyone else trashing me."

"Did he hit you?"

"Slapped me. Once. I threw a beer bottle at him but I missed."

"Too bad."

"All the way home I kept telling myself that I was one lucky little bitch. His mom is pretty pathetic. It wasn't Jimmy who treated her like crap, it was all that fucking yang in him. None of that yang came when he needed to get it up."

"When I was a kid my mom expected men to hit her. If they didn't at first she'd start pushing their buttons until they did beat her up or just left. She was seriously fucked up. Still is, in a way. Expects people to treat her like trash and when they don't she makes a big deal out of it. Mrs. Walker came over last night just to gather some juicy gossip. She makes my mom a cup of tea to calm her down, and my mom sent over a fruit basket today. That fucked up or what?"

The place began filling up with people. We decided to leave. I threw a couple of loonies onto the table. Denise was in a booth in the front. Alec was seated beside her, his fifty-year-old hands caressing her shoulders and his eyes staring at her tits. We didn't bother saying goodbye.

Outside the moon was an angry rip in the thick, black sky.

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The grey sheet of sky threatened to storm. Denise scurried behind me in her slut high heels and leopard print mini.

"Don't walk so fast!"

"Ain't walking fast." I sped up my already brisk pace.

"Max!" I looked back. She took off her shoes and tugged at her skirt. Someone whistled.

"Come on, Denise, come on. I know you can do it." I joked, "I know you're used to walking on stilts but this is how normal, sane people walk."

"Well, then how did you ever learn to walk? Damn it! It's starting to rain!"

"Maybe if you didn't spend half of eternity saying good-bye to Ryan, we'd be home."

"Nag, nag, nag."

"Blah, blah, blah."

Denise ran ahead with her big tote bag over her even bigger hair.

"Come over, later. My brother's staying with me. I want you to meet him." She jetted around the corner.

I slowed my pace. The smell of wet cement mingled with the smell

of stale cigarette smoke from my sweater. By the time I reached the apartment it was, as Mrs. Durbins from down the hall would say, 'raining like a cow pissing sideways on a rock.'

My boots left dark footprints on the carpeted front entrance. The elevator door was closing.

"Hey! Hold the door." It shut before it re-opened. "Thanks."

"No problem. Man, you're wet."

"Nothing gets past you, does it?" I went to punch the button for my floor, but it was already lit. "You headed for three?"

"You're one for the obvious yourself."

He wore a rain splattered grey trench coat and was carrying a matching umbrella and suitcase. I wondered if his socks matched his underwear. The doors opened. I ran into my apartment to change my clothes and pull a comb through my hair. The phone rang as I was about to leave.

"Are you rewriting *War and Peace*, for Christ's sake?"

"I'm doing it for Mother Goose. See ya." She was waiting across the hall with the phone still in her hand.

"Why're you wearing that for?" I had on my 'Braineater' t-shirt, a yellow and purple chequered shirt and my blue cowboy boots.

"Just to piss you off. It clashes with your washroom."

"It clashes with everything."

"Nag, nag, nag."

"Blah, blah, blah." She gave me her the-things-I-have-to-put-up-with look and ushered me into her apartment.

"Max, that's my brother Carl." She pointed to a skinny kid half immersed in her fridge.

"Carl, what are you looking for?"

"Beer."

"When did you start drinking? You're only fifteen for fuck's sake."

"Man, don't get on my case. I swear you're turning into Mom. Anyway, you started drinking when you were my age so don't get preachy with me." He pulled out a couple of bottles and handed one to me. "Hi. You're Max?"

I nodded and took the beer.

"Yeah, let the kid get fucking smashed, puke his guts out, and wake up with a bitchin' hangover. It'll be a learning experience."

"Hey, I've drank before. Lots of times." He drained the whole bottle as if to prove it.

"Your brother's gonna be a real man."

Denise gave me a dirty look. "You're gonna be a great mother." She lit up a cigarette. Carl held his hand out.

"For fuck's sake." She threw the pack at him. "Does Mom know you smoke?"

"Hell no, she just thinks I have very strange b.o. Of course she knows. She follows me around, watching everything I do. She even knows when I fart. And when I don't fart the same time the next day she gets worried."

"Don't be a smart ass."

"Lay off of him. When you were fifteen, you were drunk and high every damn weekend."

"Yeah, well I was also living on my own." She marched angrily into her bedroom. Carl came and sat beside me on the couch. I got a good look at him. He was fifteen trying to look twenty five but wishing he were six. His eyes restlessly roamed around the room.

"What?" His eyes finally settled down. "Quit staring."

"You look like your father."

"Kinda. I guess. Better than looking like my mother. You've met my dad?"

"No. Seen pictures of him."

"My dad's real cool. He lets me do anything. Mom's the one that's a pain. She wants me to go to college after high school. Fuck the idea. I'm going to be a plumber just like my dad. They make tons of cash. Maybe meet a cute, young housewife and clean out some of her plumbing." He winked at me. I laughed.

"What's so funny?" His face reddened.

"Nothing. Is that what your dad does? Unclog a toilet and throw in a quikie?"

"Well, I don't know. He jokes about it but I guess it's all talk."

"It usually is."

"He got us a dog this Christmas. German shepherd. One of his buddies didn't want it no more and sold it to him. You should see its balls. Hell, they're so big they almost touch the floor." He put out his smoke. "But he's an idiot. Pisses all over the house and he doesn't do

any tricks. But man, those balls."

"I guess it makes up for the other males in that house." Denise emerged from her room with a toothy grin.

"Fuck you."

"Keep it up, you little snot, and I'll have you shipped back to Edmonton so fast."

"Fuck you."

"I mean it Carl. I don't need you shitfacing around here. You can treat Mom like crap but don't be throwing it on me."

"Fuck you."

"You little bastard." She slapped him so hard that she lost her balance and fell on top of him. I watched them claw and kick and bite and pull at each other. The only noise was the thumping of bodies against the floor. Neither of them spoke, let alone screamed. It was as if their parents were in the next room asleep and they were afraid of waking them. Afraid of being caught in battle. Afraid of punishment.

I finished my beer.

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I was about to hang up after the eighth ring when Neal answered.

"Hiya pretty boy."

"Eh."

"What's up?"

"Nothing."

"Wanna do something?"

"Sure."

"What do you wanna do?"

"I don't know. What do you wanna do?"

"I don't know. You hungry?"

"Are you?"

"Kinda."

"Yeah, so am I."

"Where you wanna go?"

"I don't know. Where do you wanna go?"

"Aw, for fuck's sake!"

"What?"

"Nothing. Ain't hungry no more."

"Yeah, neither am I."

"So?"

"What?"

"So what do you want to do?"

"I don't know. What do you want to do?"

Click.

PIZZA

"That'll be \$41.31."

"Here." I handed over a couple of crumpled bills.

"You have penny?"

"Yeah."

She waited with her hand held out, with the crumpled bills still in it, while I searched my pockets.

"So what you make? Special dinner pah-ty? Too much food for you to eat all. You get fat."

"Yeah. A special dinner party. Pizza. Special pizza."

"With whipped cream?"

"Well, Mrs. Chien. That's what makes it a special pizza."

"No, you lie. No dough here. You make own dough?"

"Yep, homemade dough and the whipped cream is for the dessert."

"What dessert? Pie? Cake? You know make cheesecake? My Suzie make good cheesecake. Learn in Montreal. You make cheesecake for special dinner pah-ty? Suzie make it all the time."

My pockets were empty of any change. I went through my backpack while Mrs. Chien, with my crumpled bills still in her outstretched hand, watched.

"Nah, no time for that. I'll just whip something together. Doesn't really matter as long as there is whipped cream on it. I usually go out to the garden and scoop some dirt into a nice crystal bowl, sprinkle some fertilizer and cover it up with whipped cream. Lots of vitamins and it's fat free. Well, except for the whipped cream. Deluxe dirt dessert. Does your daughter make that for you? I don't know if they have that in Montreal."

"*Chee sien!* You crazy talk. Dirt dessert. Your mother not teach you that. She make good dessert. Chinese dessert like *dahn tahk* and *gai mai bow*. Real, not crazy like dirt dessert."

"Deluxe dirt dessert."

"*Chee sien*. Tell your mother to teach you make *dahn tahk*. No bakery can make like her. They make too greasy and heavy. She make it so light."

No change was to be found in my backpack. I went back through my pockets.

"It's her secret ingredient."

"Secret? What secret?"

"She told me not to tell. It's an old family cooking secret."

"Oh, she no mind. Me and her good friends."

"Well, I guess. Just don't tell her I told you." I leaned over the counter and whispered, "It's Alka Seltzer."

"What?" She laid the crumpled bills on the counter, stepped back and crossed her arms. I leaned over more.

"Really, it's Alka Seltzer. She adds about a half a cup of the stuff into the batter. It creates tiny air bubbles to lighten the batter. She won't tell anyone 'cause she's afraid people will think that she's *chee sien*. It also prevents upset stomachs."

"Ah, *gum syoi*. Make fun of old woman. The gods be mad with you."

"Maybe if I offer them a couple of Mum's *dahn tahks* they'll forgive me. They probably just have a case of heartburn."

I resumed my search for the penny.

"*Aiya*. Now she make fun of gods. You young people. Always make fun. You know when you little, your mother call you 'little *mah lo*.' You always running and screaming. Not like little girl. She don't stop you. Just sit there and say, 'that my baby, little *mah lo*.' Now you even look like *mah lo*. Hair short like big monkey, boy monkey. My Suzie have long, long hair. Shiny, black river down her back. She go to Montreal and come back with short hair. Not know who she is when she come home. Thought, '*Aiya*, have strange girl in house.'"

"Well, that's what Montreal is known for, you know, cheesecake baking schools and evil hairdressers. They had a story on that on the evening news last Wednesday."

I looked down at my backpack, wondering if I should search

through it again, and I saw a penny on the floor. I crouched down pretending to tie my shoelaces and grabbed the penny.

"Always make fun. Don't make too much fun tonight. Maybe burn special pizza."

"Then I'll just cover it up with whipped cream and serve it as dessert."

I placed the penny on top of the bills.

"*Aiya, fahn sai ngaw.* Here, take change. This old woman too tired to play. Close windows tonight. It going to rain. You catch cold so fast. Every time I talk to your mother she tell me you sick. You should make oxtail soup. I make every week for Suzie and she never sick."

"I don't eat meat."

"No meat, just bone."

"Don't eat bones either."

"No more argue. I tell your mother to make oxtail soup. Let her argue with you. I have own children to make me crazy. Bye-bye."

"See ya. And Mrs. Chien, make sure you grind the Alka Seltzer up real good or you'll end up with chunky dahn tahks. Then the gods will really get mad."

"*Chee sien.*"

"Ma!"

"In the kitchen — Yes, I know, Mrs. Chien. I'm sure she was joking ... Of course, of course ... You know how these young people are like ... no, I'm not saying that Suzie is like that ... Yes, I'll tell her ... oxtail ... Bye!"

"I bought you some dragon eyes."

"You know every time you go over to Mrs. Chien's store I get a phone call. Why must you bother her? She goes blabbing to her *mah johng* club about how I let you run wild. Why did you tell her I put Alka Seltzer in my *dahn tahk*?"

She stood there with her hands on her nonexistent hips.

"You're lucky I didn't tell her about the Roloids in your *jook*."

The lines around her mouth deepened. She looked up at me and removed a piece of lint in my hair.

"Very funny. I had planned to spend the afternoon quietly reading

but I end up getting lecture on parenting skills from Mrs. Chien."

"*Cosmo*. Interesting. Picking up tips on how to be a better lover?"

She had her place in the magazine marked with the phone bill.

"No. What's this word here?"

"Chartreuse. It's a shade of green. You remember that dress that Mrs. Mah wore to Cindy's wedding?"

"The one with the giant shoulder pads? Who could forget. She looked like an overcooked artichoke."

I took out a branch of dragon eyes.

"That's chartreuse."

She went into the kitchen and returned with a plate and a damp cloth.

"Put them here. How can a colour so ugly have such a fancy name? You know, that colour looks the way my piss smells after I eat asparagus."

"Ma. Here, eat some dragon eyes."

"What? You don't like your Mother talking about her piss? At least it's natural. Not like you telling Mrs. Chien about dirt dessert."

She carefully placed the pit on the edge of the plate so it didn't touch any of the uneaten fruit.

"It was a joke. I thought it was kinda funny."

"Well, she has a sense of humour like an octopus has feathers."

"You could always glue some on."

"*Aiya*. Is everything a joke to you? Are you going to be telling knock knock jokes at my funeral?"

"Ma."

"Don't 'Ma' me. People look at me and they don't see me with respect. They see me as a mother who has let her only child run wild. You think I enjoy walking through Chinatown and have people whispering behind me?"

She wiped her hands and the area around the plate.

"You probably have a piece of toilet paper stuck to your shoe."

"Max, can you hold a normal conversation without throwing in wisecracks? I'm tired of being held responsible for everything you do. People think I brought you up to do nothing but make fun of everything. You can't even take your job seriously."

She was now wiping down the table legs.

"Do you think I'm a failure? Is that it? Do you think I'm a useless piece of shit just because I don't kiss my boss' fat ass?"

"You don't have a boss. You don't have a damn job any more! You don't even have a decent education!"

She threw the cloth onto the plate of dragon eye pits and carried it into the kitchen. I followed.

"So now I'm an idiot. Am I so stupid because I don't need to be spoon fed information? Just because I don't have a fuckin' piece of paper to frame and hang on my wall doesn't make me stupid."

"Watch your language."

"What? You think I'm a fuck-up, I might as well talk like one. I'm so sorry that you're so fuckin' ashamed of me. Maybe if you had a daughter like good old Suzie you'd have something to be proud of. I'm sorry I ain't a perfect little Barbie doll think that you can show to all your friends."

"Get out of my house! I've had enough of you!" Her body shook as she washed the plate.

"What's the difference between the Energizer Bunny having sex and me having sex?"

"Get out!" The plate fell and shattered.

"The Energizer Bunny keeps going and going and going while I keep coming and coming and coming. Be proud of that!"

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"Shh. Here she comes."

I slid into the booth beside Neal.

"What?" I searched my pockets for my smokes. Simon offered me one of his. "Thanks. Now what's the big secret?"

"What secret?" Neal said and continued to chew on his thumbnail.

"Don't play with me. You'd better switch fingers before you reach bone."

"It's just gossip. You know. Neal's a sucker for stuff like that."

"Fuck you."

"Well he's a sucker for something. Fine. Don't tell me."

"It's about Jimmy," Neal said.

"What about him?" I signalled Todd for a coffee.

"Shut your mouth, Neal." Simon gave him a dirty look.

"She's gonna hear about it."

"You're always blabbing your mouth off. You just don't know when to fuckin' shut up."

"Fuck off."

"Excuse me. But can someone please tell me whatever I am or am not supposed to hear 'cause I have to go to pee really badly."

"Jimmy's dead."

Someone in a nearby booth was having a good laugh. I almost didn't hear Neal.

"Excuse me." I darted into the washroom.

I sat there on the toilet until Denise began pounding on the stall door.

"Max, you in there?"

"Yeah."

"Well get out. I've got to piss and the other stall is dirty."

I stood there amidst the graffiti and toilet paper. Denise emerged from the stall.

"I just heard about Jimmy. It was on the news. They didn't mention his name or nothing but, uh."

"Neal told me."

"I know, he and Simon were fighting about it when I got here."

She brushed her hair and squirted hairspray above her head. Then she tossed her head forward, gave her hair a couple of shakes, looked up and re-squirted above her head. She emptied her makeup bag onto the counter and began putting stuff onto her already painted face.

"For fuck's sake, Denise. Jimmy's dead and you're screwing around with makeup."

"Well, he's dead. I'm not."

"Don't you give a damn? He's dead! Fuckin' stone cold dead!"

I ran out of the washroom and out of the coffee shop. I heard Neal yelling for me. I ran faster. People moved to get out of my way. A few weren't fast enough. I finally got to my apartment building. My footsteps echoed up the sixteen flights of stairs and taunted my tired legs. With each flight of stairs, gravity doubled, or at least it seemed to. I was

barely inside my apartment before the phone started ringing.

"Yeah?" I assumed it was Denise and was ready to mouth off.

"Maxine?"

"Mrs. Tam?"

"Come over. I make cake. You like chocolate? Maybe pie? Come and we talk. O.K.?"

She hung up before I could decline her offer.