

Tools of the Strong

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She figured she spotted him first from across the u-shaped bar. She stared at him until his eyes met hers. She smiled briefly and he returned a charmingly boyish grin. He looked away, at his watch, and then back to her. Her eyes never wavered from him. Now he watched as she stood confidently, tall and straight, and walked across the bar to the empty stool on his left. He noticed how flattering the pant suit looked on her body, more mature than his. They faced one another for several seconds looking over each others' faces and torsos. A line of any sort seemed unnecessary, and they both knew it. She raised her glass and they made a silent toast.

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The cacophony of music and loud voices and glasses clinking went unnoticed by the oddly matched couple who had recently moved from the bar to a hard, wooden booth. She in her business-like outfit and he in his jeans and t-shirt looked more like mother and son than potential paramours. They had progressed to a speaking stage—names, occupations, all the unimportant nonsense two people speak of when they have nothing truly of substance to say. The same conversation every new couple has; the conversation that works more as an experiment to see if two strangers are compatible in the least. A checklist. She reached out a hand to touch his knee beneath the table. Her eyes, now closed slightly from several drinks, tried to find his again as they had that first magical time from across the bar. He looked straight at her but there was no connection. They left the bar a short time later in separate cars, both heading for her house anyway.

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"Can I get you a drink?" She asked him this while disarming the alarm.

"No."

"Come in, please," she waved him into her home.

As he drove to this destination, his mind didn't wander. He was like an automaton performing a task with no care to the past or future. His thoughts did jump a bit as he followed her into an exclusive subdivision. His eyes opened wide as he walked in the front door. The room was vast with a twenty-foot vaulted ceiling. *This is just the foyer*, he thought, realizing his boyhood home would fit inside this one extravagant room. His boots made a clack on the black and white tiled floor. The room was painted bone. Three of the four walls held no ornamentation—only bone-colored curtains over windows.

There was no furniture on the floor and overhead track lighting illuminated the entire room unnecessarily. But the fourth wall...

She watched his eyes and his face as he soaked in the frivolously large room.

It seemed to be the high point of her days—seeing the various reactions to this useless and unused place. She noticed him look at the three empty walls and grinned in anticipation. *There you are*, she thought as his eyes began to creep to the fourth wall where the lights were subtly focused.

"Oh my," he said, his voice sounding faraway to him.

On that fourth wall were three life-sized pictures hanging in vacuum-sealed frames edged in brass and covered in quarter inch glass. They were invisibly mounted parallel to each other and seemed to float just off the bone wall.

Now her face glowed due to his reaction. She closed the door and turned back to him just in time to see him take the first of a score of steps toward the photographs.

I have to be dreaming this, he thought. The backgrounds of the pictures each shared the same grainy grey, accentuating the portraits' sharply focused subjects: each picture had a single female model captured in black and white. The left picture was of a young, very white woman; the middle one was of a young Asian woman; and on the right pictured was a young black woman. All three were nude and positioned the same: sideways—*Profile?* he thought—feet flat on the floor, bent so far at the waist that their long, straight hair collected on their feet, arms bent in such a way that hands grasped the backs of ankles, and their faces turned toward the beholder.

He stepped even closer to the slim bodies. He could see the ribs on the backs of the girls, the profile of a breast and nipple on each girl all seemed very erotic to him.

Now he began to notice the faces: expressionless except for wide eyes that held the only color within the pictures: identical green. He wondered what those girls were thinking and just how old they were when she interrupted his thoughts and fantasies.

"Do you like them?"

He put his awe away and said, "They're...interesting."

"The photographer used a line from a forgettable poem by a forgettable poet as inspiration. 'Green is a container for tools of the strong.' He said that he believed people—women, in particular—who had green eyes were special or gifted. The eyes are portals to their spirits."

He ripped his eyes from the silent sirens to look at the old woman. She stepped close to him and he held her from reflex. They eventually made it to her bedroom.

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He was unimpressed with her. The least she could have done was turn over the happy pictures of herself and her husband on the dresser. The rest of the upstairs didn't impress him as he toured it while she slept, somehow content with herself.

Her panties stuffed in her dresser didn't excite him. The marital aids didn't faze him. The binders and loose papers on her desk didn't interest him in the least. The spare bedrooms untouched by anyone but the maid, the bathrooms with shiny faucets and porcelain, the library with shelf after shelf of pretentious leather-bound books, or volumes, were nothing compared to the visions on the foyer wall.

He wandered back to the foyer, naked like the girls in the pictures. He turned the lights back on and finished what he had to fake upstairs with that woman.

Afterwards, with sweat beaded upon his forehead and the small of his back, another sweat—cold this time—came over him as he realized once he left this house he would never see the pictures again. He wanted to take one with him.

But which one?

Normally he would think to disregard the black one due to his inherent racism, but even she was uncannily sexual to him. The dark skin and jet black, straight hair almost hid the green eyes, but stars like those can't be extinguished.

What about the tiny Asian girl? She was the smallest with the cutest nipple, he thought. Green eyes in Asians were something of a myth. Her hair, blacker than the void of space, he imagined he could actually smell—disappear into. Jasmine. He could feel her near weightlessness on top of him, pushing down.

Or the near albino girl with white hair snaking at her feet. She had a bit of sweat glistening like snow in sunlight on her back. Her eyebrows were so slight.

He wanted them all.

How? he thought, still touching himself.

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Outside a car drove by snapping him out of his daze. He wondered how long he had been standing there looking at the three temptresses. It was still dark outside and he still needed to have a picture. But their size and framing presented a problem. Then he remembered what he tried to forget.

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She awoke feeling dirty and sore. Her eyes snapped open when she realized her arms were immobile. They were tied above her head to the wrought iron headboard, as her ankles were tied to the foot of the bed. She looked beyond her own naked body and there was the man she invited home after the bar sitting in a chair at the end of the bed. Naked, smiling.

Her eyes locked with his as they had that first time in the bar. Sexuality replaced by fear. "What are you doing?" She tried to not sound anything, just alive.

"Who is the photographer?"

She didn't understand and remained silent. He stood and padded to the side of the bed and sat down. His eyes, fierce; he repeated: "Who's the photographer?"

Finally it dawned on her: downstairs, her husband's pictures of the school girls. She wouldn't tell this maniac it was her husband that had gone out of his way and the state to find just the right "models" for his fetish, picked them up, secured them in a state of deep inebriation and photographed nudes of them before slipping a couple hundred dollars deep inside their pants with his bare hand and dropping them at a local mall.

"I need my own pictures." He was suddenly pleading.

She remained silent save her heavy, fearful breathing and watched as the same man who tied her up began to shake as if he were cold before breaking into heavy sobs.

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He simply left after calming down, dressing, and placing a knife in her hands. She cut herself loose, straightened up the bedroom, cleaned the mess in the foyer, and sat in the shower without any lights. That is how her husband found her an hour later. He asked for no explanation concerning the wife's outlandish behavior. He placed his luggage on their bed and took his rolls of film down to his darkroom.