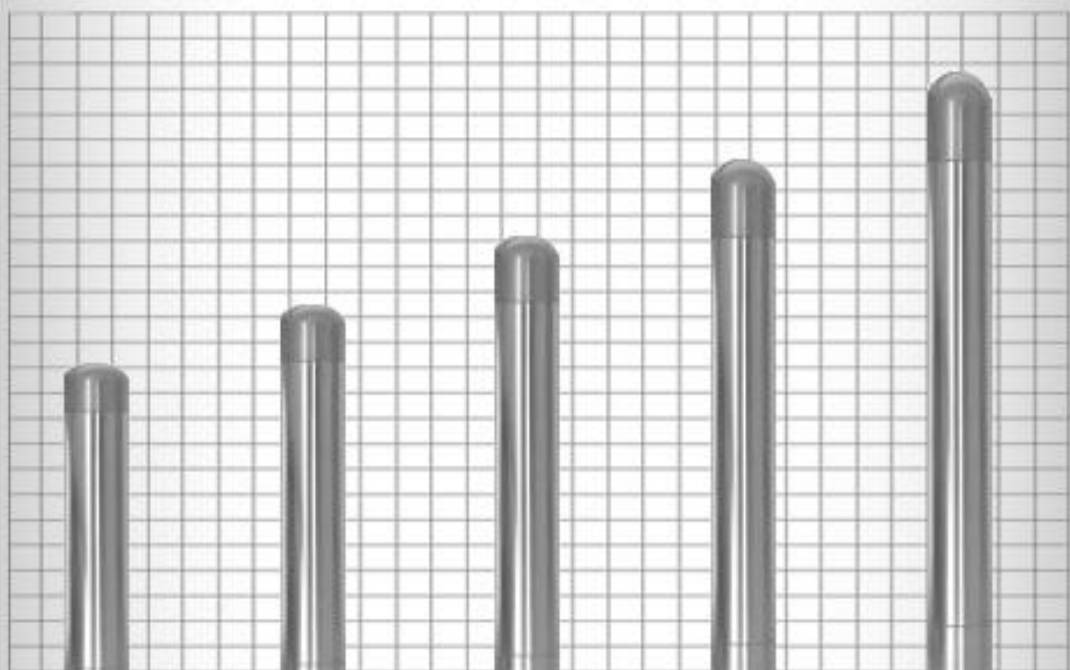


THE RISE OF THE MECH-PEENS



by
Tyler Knight

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With no greater grasp of what makes me sexually unique than I had on the day I discovered the virtues of Vaseline, I'm to have my manhood molded for mass production. . . Too late for seller's remorse . . . I signed the contract and the cashed checks are in a dozen different pockets now.

I'm staring out the passenger-side window of Stan Trial's SUV, paying as much attention to my self-absorbed fellow Angelenos as they pay attention to me. There is a sea of concrete, steel, and humanity playing hurry-up-and-wait on the freeway outside our rolling isolation booths.

Stan, the wunderkind director for the porn studio, DVD Gang, shoots porn like he's filming at a skate board spot swarming with security guards. Watching the sex scenes he's shot, I often wonder what the fuck I just saw. And I'm in them. He's been on the phone since we left the studio playing verbal grab-ass with a porn girl who is chic-this-week. That's fine by me. We snake our way through the West Valley freeway on the way to the Premiere Exotic Novelties, Inc. factory. They are the biggest manufacturer of sex toys in the world and I'd never heard of them until that meeting.

When DVD Gang's president pitched the idea of an exclusive performing contract with the studio and a signature deal with his friend's sex-toy company, PENI, I tried all I could do to keep the bubbly-swigging-gangsta-rapper inside of me tasered the fuck down while I pulled on the stoic mask. Calm on the outside, I worked out some reasonable concessions. Inside, I was a



ten-year-old stuck in a traffic jam with a full bladder; I couldn't stuff those crispy checks into my rib-exposed bank account fast enough.

* * *

I ride along the freeway the way a prisoner would savor his last spoon of ice-cream. Only now, a month after the deal has been inked, the consequences weigh on me. How do I feel about rubber facsimiles of my cock with a half-life of herpes? What would the world look like with ten thousand of my dick doppelgangers in it? Shit, the most thought I'd given to the still nebulous process of casting my cock was the mention of a Fluffer to keep me hard. My imagination speculates what this boner-bobbing beauty looks like. And who's providing the girl, can't remember — the studio or PENI?

We prowl down the freeway exit ramp, coasting to a stop at the signal. A wide hipped Mexican woman extends a leathery hand holding plastic baggies of produce at my window. The banana's browning skin tells me the meat inside has turned to mushy, black sugar. I crack the window open enough to slip a ten-spot through but not enough to let the med-fly-and-smog flavored fruit in. She snatches the cash and throws back rapid-fire grief. I've got a talent for insulting women without trying. In the side mirror cars behind us don't even acknowledge the fruit lady's existence. She can't give her product away.

Who the hell would buy these things anyway? Pretty girls can't have much use for a rubber penis. They always have dozens of real cocks on call. Unless they just want the dick without having to deal with the dick. Gay guys? Sure, I guess, although personally I'd rather think that one-in-a-thousand coeds will soon to be fucking me by proxy.



And what of the other uses for it, door stopper, a toilet snake to unplug a stubborn clog, mount it on a car antenna; when driving fast it undulates in the wind? Perhaps drill a hole in the base and mount it on a finger for the big game like one of those big foam # 1 hands. Maybe it'll be used for good, like a self-defense club, and a granny will beat off a mugger...okay, poor choice of words.

The deal memo said the dongs will be mechanized and battery powered. What if those robococks go Mary Shelley and all ten thousand veiny bastards vibrate themselves off the shelves and out of the drawers and go on a pilgrimage to seek me out, filling my front yard like - well - Woodstock? Would the mob have a leader, and if so, can it talk? What do I say to it in that awkward moment, how's it hanging? Knowing my luck they'll go Roy Baty on me and push my eyeballs into my skull when I don't have any answers for the questions I would ask if I was them. Imagine the TMZ van pulling up to my house to capture the moment of the pornstar bludgeoned to death by clones of his own cock, imagine.

We turn onto a major boulevard where the single-family ranch homes and the pink-stucco apartment buildings dissolve to warehouses and business parks.

"I dunno why they picked *you* for a sex toy." Stan looks like a Hollywood screenwriter that hasn't sold a script since *Chariots of Fire*. He's off the phone, scraping his Suburban between two parked compacts and still has coordination enough to toss a shrapnel-edged truth-grenade my way. "You ain't packin' like Ron Jeremy, Lexington steel or Shawn Michaels." He knows how to put a gimp in my swagger with the skill of an ex-wife.



He's right, this is insanity! I'm making a fool of myself! Unless Lex loans me a few links, I'm gonna make a run for it as soon as we stop. I don't. Instead, I stand in the parking lot evaluating the PENI complex. No sign to distinguish it from its neighboring office buildings and warehouses. Could be an auto-supply firm, could be a covert DARPA weapons test lab.

At the door, I close my eyes and hear the sound of passing traffic. My stoic mask on again, my hand grabs the handle. The door doesn't want to give with this level of tug so I increase my effort. Airlock breached, cool air whooshes past my ears.

I enter.

* * *

She's already waiting for us when we enter, standing square to face the door with her head arched back, eye's half-lidded and her mouth ajar. She stands there rigid, like something from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* receiving a message from her Divine Overlord. Her eyelids spasm, she raises an arm, points a finger at me. Her mouth opens wider and, "I'll be right with you." comes out. From an eyedropper in her other hand she squeezes off a double-tap to her eyes. "New contact lenses," she says.

I wait.

The reception area is a "welcoming" room the way a pornstar is an "actor." She recovers and the young executive takes a moment to regard Stan. Her beauty runs as deep as the love between black people and the LAPD. She and Stan are all googly-eyed smiles. The girl turns to me and flicks off the friendly in an instant.



She introduces herself, sort of. “I’m-Jen,” she hands us visitor’s badges, “this-way.”

I follow behind Jen and Stan. Her blood-engorged genitals stimulated by legs rubbing on each step. Stan has a hand in his pocket, a token of mutual masturbation. It’s a love story. Swell.

Through a corridor flanked by unmarked doors Stan is the teen-aged kid looking to score, I’m the drooling little brother dragged along on a kiddie leash. The only sign he hasn’t entirely forgotten about me is when he gives my harness the occasional tug. “Tyler, let’s go! We got a schedule.”

The conference room, there is a middle-aged, black woman wearing a suit that looks made by a master tailor sitting at the table. She stands as we enter. In the center of the table is a glass-encased dildo. Its latex skin is sliced open and pinned back to expose skeletonized robo-guts. Spread out in front of the executive are several stacks of documents.

The woman has one of those infomercial host smiles. She pours a glass of water from a pitcher and slides it across the table to me. She could be my mother and the cynic in me thinks the selection of her as my handler is by design. I accept the glass with a “thank you” but I do not drink.

“Well, hello there, Tyler,” she says. “I’m Roberta! It is just such a joy to finally meet you?”

“Finally?” nobody at PENI knew I existed four weeks ago.

She’s elegant, with the polish of someone whose directive was to study protocol; she offers her (reptilian?) hand. I shake it. It’s dry but not too dry. She’s good.



Mindful of first impressions, I say something über charming like, “Hi.” I sit.

Roberta, in her over-the-top smarmy goodness, explains the reverse-engineered cock in front of me with great enthusiasm. I’m not listening as much as I’m letting on, an occasional phrase find its way into my ear.

“...like the next generation, teste-shaped motor housed in the scrotum!” She says. “The heart and soul of your signature vibrating phallus—”

Did she just use the word “teste” in a sentence?

“Because we want only the best, no expense will be spared for your product line, Tyler!”

The dildo’s endoskeleton consists of wire so it can be posed like a Gumbi doll. There’s an impulse to leap onto the table and peel her skin back to see if it’s a mask. Fear of what I may find stops me. Stan whips out his video camera and films the meeting. Jen slides a document and pen over to me, “if-you-sign-your-name-right-here-with-this-pen-you-can-have-your-next-check.” Since Jen laid eyes on me, she has been speaking at me in monosyllables as though she expects me to break out an English-to-Ebonic dictionary from my back pocket.

“Oh-Kay,” I say. Fucking with her, I hold the pen and ponder it with a grimace as if I’ve never seen one before.

Jen blows out her cheeks and sighs. “Please, Tyler,” she says.

I read and sign. Roberta snatches the document and thrusts a phat check my way.



Next, I watch them good cop bad cop me through an explanation of the toy making procedure. But I'm not listening. I stare at mechanized penis-as-centerpiece.

There is a glow, faint and red coming from the "teste" inside the robotic-dildo's surrogate scrotum. The Future is glowing, eardrum-bursting bangs of concussive bombs exploding in the distance quake the ground, the crunching of concrete crumbling underfoot. Closer still, mechanized servos whine. Crackling fire stoked with burning flesh, the nutty stench invades my nostrils. A tattered sleeve to my face filters the soot but not the misery. Gunfire; What! The! Fuck!

I look around the room to see if anyone else heard the same thing. If anyone did, they didn't show it. When I look back at the robo-sac, the light is gone. I snatch the glass of water and kill half of it in a single chug before the ice slaps against my upper lip. I slam the glass down, reach over to tap the dildo's head and say, "Is this thing...on?"

There's laughter all around the room. I'd be in rare form if my intent was comedic relief. Eh, fuck it, maybe there was a dying battery — or some kind of charge inside.

Jen says, "what-else-would-you-like-to-know?"

I dig my crumpled STD test out of my pocket and smooth it out onto the table with the enthusiasm of a kid showing a report card full of A's.

"Yeah", I say, "when do I get to meet my fluffer?"

Jen and Roberta glance at each other, passing information in the unspoken exchange.



“The what?” asks Roberta; and her demeanor shifts now, mirroring her coworker, Jen.

“Fluffer,” I say. “You know, the girl you guys are supplying to keep me going through the long molding and casting process?”

“There will be no fluffer.” Roberta says the word fluffer the way you would say “gonorrhea.”

More laughter, my jokes are killing tonight. I pour more water. Extra Ice. “Look,” I point to the dong. “I’m not a mechanized penis...”

Despite how sleazy it makes me feel to ask a woman who could be my mommy if a cock sucking consort can come out and play, I hold my ground.

“...you can’t possibly expect me to obtain, let alone maintain an erection surrounded by factory workers as you’ve described in the process.”

Stan joins in, offering his sage council. “You’re a professional. You should have no problem.” He zooms in on my face to capture my reaction to his poking.

Roberta steeples her fingers, “I’m sure we can get you some lube and a magazine to suit your tastes for the first molding. When we get to the body cast-”

I lean across the table nearly tipping the water pitcher. “Body what?”

“Yes,” she continues, “the body cast. You did bother to read the contract, right?” She punctuates her verbal bitch-slap by stabbing a finger at the stack of papers in front of her.



I'm rollin down the street in a gold convertible Caddy, smokin Indo with Snoop. Our bass sets off car alarms as we creep on down the LBC. Me n' Snoop got on matching white track suits.

My jewel encrusted chalice clinks on my four finger ring when I take a sip of my gin.

Backseat's full of bitches and bubbly. Giggling shorties in bikinis throw fists full of money out of the cash-stuffed back seat-

"Bitches, is you crazy? "

Callin me out to live up to the zebra-skinned Dolomite hat I got low on my brow, I smack a ho.

Snoop turns up the radio, without missing a window-rattling beat we bust a rhyme.

"...So whatcha gonna do?

She-e-i-i-t, I gotta pocket full of rubbers and my homies do too"...

Bitches and money...

"Of course I read the entire document," I lie.

"Very well," she says. "As I was saying, when we get to the body cast portion of your commitment," she punches each syllable of the word commitment, "you will be provided with a fluffer. Is this acceptable?"

She's acting all indignant as if I asked her to personally toss my salad. What the fuck! I mean, we're sitting at a table in a sex toy company, not a prime table at Le Cirque. Her job is to make dicks. DICKS! Fuck these cocksuckers!



I say, “Fine.”

“Fine,” Roberta says. She gathers the papers, places them in an attaché case and heads for the door. As she walks, she hugs the wall away from me as if she thinks I’ll put my hand up her skirt and grab muff. She says, “Good day,” to no one in particular and leaves. This fluffer better make my toes curl.

Jen says, “Come-with-me.” She heads for the door. We leave for the production floor with Stan capturing it all on tape.

* * *

PENI’s factory floor sounds like a radio stuck between stations. The hollow expanse of air is flavored with the drone of machinery spritzed with Spanish, white noise of Southern California Industry. Workstations are islands of fluorescent light floating in a sea of blackness that stretch across the work floor and workers mill around the second-tier, wooden loggia bringing supplies down to the floor below.

Industry in this particular factory is sewing vinyl pubes on *Vanessa Velvet’s Vice-like Vagina*, rumpling rubber foreskins, and attaching *nubbed-for-your-pleasure anal-tract A to sphincter B; rotate 20° counterclockwise until-click.*

The Artisan’s workstation is situated on the periphery of the action, unique from the others in that it’s an island of shadow. A child-sized man is hunched over in deep concentration, his jeweler’s loupe tight in his squinting eye. He peers through the opening of the halo-lamp at his work. He paints his prize with the zest of a teen brushing a pinstripe on a model Corvette. Hands steady, he is a master craftsman putting on his finishing touches. Except in his case the car is a latex dildo and the stripe he is painting on a vein. The master finishes his task before setting his brush down and placing the loupe in its



worn leather case.

He stands. Eyes cast down, he moves toward us through the station as if remembering where he buried the land mines. He moves in labored steps, the fluorescent lights beat upon his narrow shoulders, seeming to diminish him before my eyes, like a cup of hot tea shrinking a chip of ice. He stops and scans from face to face until settling on mine, staring as if burning every detail to his retina. Jen introduces us, says she'll be back when it's time to do the body cast and leaves. Stan stays.

The sex-toy artisan hands me a magazine and some Vaseline and tells me to go behind a curtain hanging at the end of his station and to let him know when I'm ready. Stan looks like he's going to follow me but the murder in my eyes stops him cold.

It's a leg fetish magazine. Not my third choice but it gets the job done. When I emerge, I follow the man to the factory floor, not breaking stride as I stroke to keep the erection going.

I'm instructed to lie on the table, I do. The craftsman hands me a Plexiglas tube which I insert over my stiffy. He has a bucket of a gummy, viscous solution he's whisking with a painter's stir-stick. He then pours the material through the open end of the tube and onto my genitals. The sensation feels as though I'm being buried in cold, wet mud. He tells me it is extremely important to hold the tube still so that my penis does not move while the solution sets. As the mixture dries, I feel its weight. There is a tightening sensation around my dick, like a fist clenching deliberate and slow. The feeling is transitory, going from the periphery of perception to a very fleeting stage of "Hey, this shit ain't half bad", to the discomfort of a shoe a full size too small. Just as it starts to strangle the Artisan says it's set. He gives the tube a tug and my dick comes out with a hushed schtooop. Stan gets a close up of this.



First mold done, I'm instructed to roll on my belly. More workers rush in with buckets and get to work while the Maestro barks orders. Cloth soaked in plaster of Paris is then layered on my back from my lower legs, across my ass and to mid-hamstring. It feels the same as wet washcloths. This takes considerably longer than the dick-in-a-tube mold to dry.

Bottom half done, the cast is removed and I'm rotated onto my back by the assistants with the efficiency of a NASCAR pit crew. There is no fucking way I could get and stay hard without help for the front part of the casting. I can't believe these people would even make this a point of contention. It's win-fucking-win if they get the best cast possible from me, right?

El Maestro tells me he is going to fetch Jen who will then get my fluffer.

She's here? That was fast. I'll bet they had her on the way the entire time. Christ, what the fuck was all the hemming and hawing about? I'm tired of these fucking mind games.

The crew starts plastering the non vitals and I'm counting my chicken-head ho's before they smoke crack. I do the running man in my head. Fluffer time!

Jen's head peeks in the station, goes out to the floor and shouts a command in Spanish. The factory workers stop, and through the shadows a woman-of-a-certain-age walks forward, wiping her hands on her apron.

Fuck my life.

Jen, heels clicking, trots over to a group of less battle-hardened factory girls, spreads her arms like a horse whisperer and corrals them into a tight group. The chicas look bewildered the way



cows get when they're in line and they can only hear the crackling sizzle but can't quite see the electric killing-lance around the corner. Jen isolates one girl and rustles her over.

The Girl, this black haired, sun-toasted chica can tell me in Spanish to stick my cabeza in an oven and my skull is a skillet. More ass than brain, the girl looks like she back-hand slapped some director named Rodrigo, walked off a Mexican soap opera set and didn't stop strutting her sweet ass until she got to America. Parchment-thin jeans are shrink-wrapped over her camel-toe, keeping it vacuum sealed for freshness. Her t-shirt, hanging there on pissed-off aspirin-hard nipples, is begging for a super soaker gun.

Hey, pervert. Yes, you there, all up in my brain. If you were to interpret my thought, "she can't possibly be legal" to mean, "she can't possibly be legal" or "she can't possibly be legal" The answer is: Yes.

The Woman, a low-to-the-ground, Wobble-Wobble shaped specimen with canteens half-filled with sand for tits and features sandblasted by many seasons of desert wind. She could have ridden with Pancho Villa.

There ought to be a law.

I say to Jen, "What the fuck, man! I asked for a fluffer and you give me a tapped-out migrant worker with skin-flaps-for-tits and some underage Sponge Brain, Tight Pants?"

"I speak English," says The Girl.

Oops.

"Sorry."



The more...seasoned ... of the two ladies, without any more comment than a Jack o' lantern smile, scoops a three fingered gob out of Vaseline from the container and smears it on my cock. The Girl does not seem to be experienced. She's resorted to interpretive dance which is supposed to pass for a slow tease mixed with cheer-leading the old woman in a dial-a-date voice. While I'm on a roll, I say something sensitive like:

“Stop talking, pull your pants down and show me your ass.”

I know I'm self absorbed but I still wonder if these women had any idea that this day would come when they filled out the application. I'm the only one that's hung up on the situation because both the women take to their duties of giving me, some strange dude, my jollies without complaint. Because some skinny bitch in a suit told them to. Just like that.

Another fulfilling day at work; you never know what adventures you face on the job working for the man the U.S of A, cleaning toilets or stroking phat-negro cock. But hey, God bless America, right?

Doesn't take much to get me hard again cuz that's just the kind of buck-toothed pervert I am. The women back away from the cock and the crew rushes in does their thing.

The crew is working and I cup a handful of young-girl ass and ask two questions?

“How old are you? Swell. After this is over, you want to go somewhere and fuck?”

Why the fuck not? She's already handled the package, right?



The crew has gone, taking the casts and my ipso-facto commitment to PENI with them. The Girl and The Woman stay.

Somebody forgot to tell The Woman the job is over and she pounces on the dick. The mastery of her hands is unsettling. Each twisting downward stroke sends sparks shooting through my shaft sending my jaw slack. She is stroking me way past the point of pleasure, the place where any normal man would have long since surrendered control and just released but I hang on where it's uncomfortable. I still have this hang up about what's going on in my head but in this moment, I am hers. No silly *nom de guerre* to hide behind. No on-screen alter-ego bravado bullshit. I'm just Eric and I've got nowhere to hide. The Woman double-fists, the slick, wet schlip of her hands dripping with Vaseline goo is warm with the friction. I'm in a place I have not been since I was half my height. Actually, stature isn't relevant because like now, I took my medicine lying down.

* * *

Why is there a jar with Popsicle sticks in it but no Popsicles? I feel so hot. I really want a Popsicle now. That would be nice because my throat is so scratchy. My favorite popsicles are blue. Blue tastes the best. I can put it on my head because it's cold and my head is very, very hot.

That skeleton is kinda funny looking. Not scary like the ones in the hawnted house at Halloween time. Maybe it's a good skeleton and the nurse has him here to protect me 'til she gets back. I wish it could protect me from that fat Chris Burke. He's mean and he has a big belly. My belly hurts. Chris and the other kids are gonna make fun of me because I threw up in class. I hate him. I wish he- here's the nurse.

"Hi, Eric," she says.



“Hi.”

I sit in a chair. She stands in front of me. I look down.

“Mrs. Cutts tells me you’re not feeling well today. Is that right?”

Mrs. Cutts told on me to the nurse that I messed up the floor. I don’t want to get in more trouble so I better tell the truth. I didn’t mean to throw up on the floor. I hope I don’t get punish-mint.

“I’m sorry,” I say. I look at my shoes. They have some mud on them because I stepped in a puddil when Chris pushed me. But I didn’t fall down.

The nurse goes and gets a-buncha stuff from the desk and says, “There’s nothing to be sorry about. These things happen, Eric. When you don’t feel well you really should tell somebody. You can’t always be so quiet.”

When I speak up in class the other kids make fun of me when I don’t know the anser and they laugh and I wish I was in my bed.

“Eric?”

“Yea,”

“Your mother will be here to pick you up soon,” she says.

“Are you gonna tell my mom I threw up in class? She will be very mad at me,” I say.

“Yes, I just called your mother. Like I said, she’s coming to pick you up.”



“Can you tell her I’m sorry I messed up the floor, she will be mad that she hasta come and get me because she says work is very hard an’ her boss is very mean.”

She says, “Don’t worry. When your mommy was a little girl I’m sure she threw up in class too. Now take off your pants and hop up on the paper. I have to take your temperature.”

I take off my shoes and pants and hop up on the table like she told me too.

“Ok,” I say.

Why do I hafta take off my pants to take my tempacher?

“Can I stay ‘til after my dad gets home?” I ask.

“Here,” she says, “let me help you up on the table.” She helps me up. “Why?”

“Huh?”

“Why do you want to stay here until after your daddy gets home?”

I swing my feet. My socks have a big hole in the big toe. They don’t match. I say, “Because he’s always in a bad mood when he gets home from work.”

And he will get very mad at mommie because she left her job to get me and that will really make him yell because they always fight over money.

The nurse sits next to me. She is prity. Her hair is kinda yellow. I feel really sad.



And then he's gonna come and get me because my secret hiding place does not work because he always finds me.

She looks very sad to. "Eric, remember when you came in here after you fell down and I made you feel all better?"

"Yea, Chris pushed me down."

She puts her arm round me. "Remember what I told you?"

"Um - that we have the same birthday and that makes us friends."

"Yes," she says. "You can come to me about anything that's bothering you, remember?"

Her feet don't touch the floor also. My head hurts really badly and my belly hurts too.

"Yea,"

"We got Chris to stop picking on you too, right?"

"Yeah, sorta,"

I like nurse. She is really nice to me. And pritty like mom but she does not yell at me when I make mistakes. I like her yellow hair. Stacy Silvestry has yellow hair too. Stacy called me fuzzy bear because she said my hair looks funny and something about Velcro? I asked her what is Velcro but she didn't anser me. Nurse has a really big...um... chest. I better not look. She will get mad.

"Can you come home with me?"

"I'm sorry, honey." she says. "I have my own children at home waiting for their mommy." She smiles. "How about you stop by



my office to visit after school, okay?” She hops down. “Now lay on your belly, ok? I’m going to pull down your underwear.”

I lay on my belly.

Why is she rubbing Vaseline on the thumomiter? That skeleton looks like he’s smiling. He’s funny.

“My goodness, what are all these bruises on your bottom?”

“I forget.”

When I knocked over the lamp dad got for Christmas and it fell and broke and I tried to glue it back together before dad came home but I couldn’t get the peeses to fit. Then when I pressed I broke some peeses some more. Then dad was home and he asked me what happened and he told me if I tell the truth he would not get mad. I told him and he got mad. I said that’s not fair because he didn’t tell the truth but I had to. Then he really, really got mad. I asked mom to help me because she was their too but I don’t think she heard me.

“I see,” she says. “We’ll talk about this after we take your temperature. Now relax.” She sounds really sad.

Why is she putting the thumomiter in the wrong place? My mommie puts it in my mouth.

She says, “Eric, I need you to relax.”

“I’m trying.”

“It’s okay. I won’t hurt you. You’re safe with me.”

I feel funny. I feel like I hafta go to the bathroom. I hope I don't have an accident because she won't want to be my friend anymore. She's really prity and nice to me. I feel funny.

“Good boy.” She talks soft to me. Like she's gonna read me a story. She rubs my hair. I like it. “Just hold still for a minute.”

“Okay.”

“You're very captivating, Eric.” She laughs. She has a nice laugh. “Don't worry, that's good. It means you're interesting.”

“Thank you.”

I feel funny down there like when Stacy hugged me and then she kissed me on the bus.

She takes the thumomiter out and frowns. She says, “Well, you have a fever but don't worry, we'll make you all better. Let's get you off the table and put your clothes back on. I'll see if we can find you a lollypop, okay?”

Oh no! If I get up she will see that it is standing up too and she will get mad at me because she will think that I want to kiss her like Stacy kissed me!

* * *

La Maestra (The Woman) reads the conflict written all over my face. I'm running through my mind opening rooms in search of my stoic mask is but it's fruitless, she's behind every door I open.

“Shhhh, calmase,” she purrs. Her voice and the rhythm of her hands lulls.



And I feel...safe.

My body relaxes one muscle at a time, melting into her petroleum-jelly slicked hand. The tug-of-war for Oedipus's ghost is lost, I let go. She slays me. I empty into her hands with all the shame of eating meat on Lent.

La Maestra wipes her hands on her apron and rubs a hand through my hair. Her voice is soft. It's nice. So nice it takes me a moment to realize the girl has vanished. Like a freshly-turned-30 Hollywood ingénue, you don't notice she's faded off the lips of conversation until she's long gone.

I'm back in the Artisan's station. He's gone for the day. My clothes are folded on a table with a copy of the receipt I signed on top. Next to the table is a gift basket full of PENI merchandise. After I dress I root through the basket. A clear-pink stapler, a clear-pink tape roll, a penis pump, a box with a picture of a blonde with parted legs. The copy on the box says *The Mold of My Molten Muff Will Melt You*.

These copy editors are morons.

I'm digging the next item out from the bottom of the basket when someone kicks the back of my knee and I nearly dig a semicircle of snapped-off teeth in the concrete.

Stan says, "Ha ha, Dude! I can't believe you actually got hard for that old hag. She looked like that woman selling bananas on the side of the freeway."

In my vulnerable state, emotions and hormones still coursing through my veins, it takes borrowed strength to restrain myself from stamping his ass return-to-sender.



“Now is not a good time, Stan,” I say.

His tongue, day-glo orange, flicks the air like a snake to punch his point, lest I misunderstand his cleverness. He is close enough so that when he laughs I smell Cheetos vapors on his breath, “You got jerked off by fruit lady and liked it!”

“Stan!”

I close my eyes. Birds warbling, my hand in a rolling meadow picks a happy violet.

Kill. Don't-kill. Kill. Don't-kill. Kill...

I open my eyes in time to see his heel lifting up and vanishing around the station corner. I pick up the bag again.

A thought claws its way into my mind but I slam that door shut and prop a chair against the knob. The thought puts a shoulder into it, the door buckles and cracks. I run to my secret hiding place.

The last items in the gift basket are the rough latex casts of my penis and a t-shirt. I look at the t-shirt and then to my test clone, working the first half of the joke to go with the punch line in my hand—

--when the door I just shut in my mind explodes, sending splinters of wood across the room.

Through the horizontal slit of my hiding space I see them enter the room, straight to me. I'm dragged from my warren under the armoire without effort. My replicates, flimsy knock-offs of a cheap copy of a real man. My father: each generation doomed to losing a bit more more soul 'til there's no trace in the latest



translation.

Without words, I know the query. The very example of what life isn't poses the question: what's it like to be alive, to someone whom often wishes he wasn't.

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