

DES ESSEINTES TAKES A DIPSO APPRENTICE IN THE PARKING LOT OF LIQUOR MART

by

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Even his car was candy colored. Like it? He got it just last month, on a lease plan. He couldn't decide between the cherry red and the sour apple green. The lemon yellow was nice, too, but it wasn't on the lot. The blue was brand new for the year, which was reason enough to get it. Des Esseintes remembered that particular shade of electric from the first time around, when he wasn't a rich kid and didn't have a car at all. It took 20 years from sweet 16, but now he had the wherewithal to be the coolest kid in town. The years didn't show. He sported that East Coast preppie look. Those boys looked like grandpas from the get-go. Premise being, he supposed, that if you started old, you never aged. It was all just catching up. Des Esseintes would betray his youth with this car. All the kids would want to get in it. It would be like being inside a giant blue gumball, a big hole in a sugar crunch.

When he parked it by the dorms, he left lures on the passenger's seat. **CD jewel boxes readily visible**, dashboard kitsch buried under trash ads for sweet drinking. Mardi Gras beads from the rearview mirror evoked that dipso Disneyland. Some cool kid owned this thing. Some kid who liked to party. Some kid who was getting served.

Des Esseintes probably had a good four months to park his new car by the high school before

Susan Francis figured out who owned it was and started calling the police. Maybe more. Every kid in school was getting a Bug this year. He had more trouble with the Jeep. She saw him through the slash in the ragtop the first time he pulled up and put out an APB. The Bug would be good for a while. He wondered about her sometimes, his AA antagonist. They used to have so much fun. She was really showing her age. He would like to suggest she get some work done.

Des Esseintes rolled down the windows and took another turn around the block. His favorite parking spot was by the keg-loading bay, three up from the end. Someone was there right now, which made sense. It was, after all, Welcome Week. Hot. Bare skin, blazing skies. Perfect for making children binge. Oh, glorious freshman Septembers! Oh, hedonistic entitlement! And how much more so at a rich kid party school! Des Esseintes reveled in that fresh and startling freedom every year. The predictability of that month of indulgence never really mitigated the first strike shock. It wasn't new for him, but every time, it was new for them, and there was nothing like watching that. It could be the 12-year-old miscreants or the 21-year-old Born Agains. When they got the buzz on, it all washed out. What a great equalizer was intoxication.

He kept driving, giving himself a good 10 or 15 minutes to kill before heading back. Might as well get the lay of the land. Many new cars with out-of-state plates. That was a good sign. He loved the out-of-state kids. They were the furthest away, where no one could keep track of them. They were the richest. And they were the least likely to stick around, cluttering up his scene. Des Esseintes liked the new blood. And there it was! He could tell by the way they roamed in clusters. All the instant dorm friends, all the instant friends of rush week. No point in taking time to get to get to know each other; college alliances were all about proximity. None of the kids on the street right now were chancing that. He loved their little conformities. The frat pledges, for example. The younger they were, the greater the variety in their little physiques. There were short ones who'd be due a growth spurt by the end of the

year. The skinny ones would discover the gym. The fat ones would discover the gym. They all still had hair, so that distinguished them. Otherwise, they took remarkable trouble to wear just the right, exactly the same clothes. The clothes were new and expensive, a sure mark of greenhorns. These would probably be the last new clothes they bought for five years. This was true across the board. It wasn't a matter of money.

The roving dorm packs kept their keg cups handy. Wasn't that cute? They looked like trick-or-treaters, the way they staggered from house to house, risking malevolence and receiving their goodies. He wondered casually how many of the girls just these last few days had suffered crippling sexual abuse, and how many boys had perpetrated it. He wondered how any of them managed to stand upright, even now, at three in the afternoon. Maybe this was just a break in the action. Maybe they still had some prohibition towards drinking during the day, waiting for the late night, curfews now a thing of the past. Maybe they weren't fool enough to ignore the beauty of their new alpine village, the nirvana playground that was here, in God's Country. That's what Christine called it when she moved from Chicago. That must be ten years ago now. "Fucking God's Country," she sneered when they passed out the rape whistles. "I come out to fucking God's Country and the first thing they give me is *this*?" But God's country it was. Look at the soaring sky and smell those pines and Jesus, could it be possible that those mountains just leaned in a little closer? That one was Christine's, too.

The traffic light stopped him on Broadway and a band of upperclassmen swaggered across the street, followed by a dorm pack. They were lead by Sean. Two years ago, he'd been scrawny and nervous. Now look at him, with his rasta bracelets and tattoos. He'd garnered some raw male experience in the interim, if the style was any indication. He stopped his Pied Piper promenade in the Broadway crosswalk when he saw Des Esseintes. "Dog!" he proclaimed as he stood face-on to Des Esseintes. "Look like my dog have a sweet new ride!" He walked over to the driver's side window and

shook hands. The light turned green and honking ensued. "What up, D," Sean stated. "Yo, you all, come on over here. I want you to meet my man D. Most important man on campus." The fresh and faceless hoard gathered, throwing Sean's new worldliness into relief. They memorized the bug. Sean didn't introduce any of them by name, and Des Esseintes gave them the cool dismissal they'd bought tickets for. "My dog here," Sean began, then stopped himself and affected to find just the right words. "My dog here really fucking loves to party. My man D totally believes in the God-given right of young people to get fucked up whenever and wherever the mood strikes them. This man - at no small risk to himself - will get you what you want, when you want it, no questions asked. You will need to know this man very well if you want to party in this town." A white Civic sped by and a girl screamed, "Sean, I'm having your baby." This happened regularly to Sean.

After two or three light changes, the mass of boys finished crossing the street and continued on their way to the Teke house. Des Esseintes would be relieved when he would be able to extricate himself from the service of the Teke house. They had a reputation a couple years ago for a certain ingenuity in their celebrations. It was the only house on campus where hippies and burnouts would be welcome to party, adding a little glamour to the steady diet of Midwestern innocents. Des Esseintes learned later that this was wholly due to the influence of the pervert scion Stephen Vanderhorst III, a creature so wicked he made even Des Esseintes nervous. He graduated last year, prosecution notwithstanding, and Des Esseintes would never get over him. Now the best they could do was Sean. Teke house was finished. Des Esseintes would be getting out.

He was back under the radar at the high school, anyway. He thought he might do his thing there this year, and passed by just for practice. He expected a twinge of excitement, of inspiration, but he had to admit it wasn't coming as it had before. It was clear this was where he was needed most, but it just wasn't the same as his years advanced. If he had to pinpoint the shift, it would be that chance encounter

with Timmy Harrison's father at the check-out stand. That they looked exactly the same, father and son, and almost equally young, provoked an unwitting familiarity in Des Esseintes and he tipped his hand. The transference of the child from Jeep to minivan was just too real world unnerving. Better, then, the university neverland. Those parents just got in the way.

He turned into Liquor Mart after a decent interval. There was a spot. Too close to the door, but that would do for now. He turned off the engine, turned on the stereo, and waited.

Ode to the Sloe

*Oh, my red beauty
 My sloe plum, bittersweet
 Rich foam head, cough syrup bliss
 In Fizz or Screw
 The heavy, dripping drug of you
 Takes me out of myself
 Into myself
 You give me my gin, oh beguiling sloe plum
 You sweeten me
 And sweeten me
 Oh, sloe plum
 Grant me your drowsy red oblivion*

In the drawing room of Des Esseintes' dreams, licking lovelies would rhapsodize on the elixirs he poured. They would celebrate the powers of the potions, would articulate their majesty, would sing their love of these dizzy candies. For it was a mania, you see. It was worthy of the full thrill. That was what he was in it for. That thrill of discovery. He loved to see it surprise them. He loved to see them ease their way into it. He loved to seduce children into liquor's thrall. When it worked, it was the best of all thrills. They already knew how they loved candy on their tongues, all their sweets and their sour. He'd give them that, but he'd give them something else, too. He'd take them to this grown-up world. Who would have thought what derangement grown-ups would court? He saw the flushes when that hot

bright something else peeked out, glowing behind the known delights. He liked the sudden knowingness. It was like watching them discover sex, but better. This was socially sanctioned and to be performed in public, this journey of the fractious body. Nothing, Des Esseintes determined, was a more important skill to master than the skill of intoxication.

"Dude, I am, like, so wasted right now." Des Esseintes was disappointed, as he expected to be, with the new Tekes. When the hell was Sean's birthday? One night, some crush of his had bemoaned the sexual pathology inherent in his Scorpio birth sign. Scorpio was in the fall. Sean would be 21 soon and would get these little creeps off his hands. The real big brothers, the seniors, wouldn't even be bothered with the pledges and wannabes. He knew he was in no position to turn up his nose - he'd sought the children, after all - but please.

"Dude, I mean, I am really wasted," the gentleman continued. Sean had left these two pledges in the car with Des Esseintes after he'd scored some girls. Sean walked the girls back to their dorm and the boys were supposed to wait for him. It would be one of their more benign initiations. They would learn two important lessons. One was that they must not abandon their brothers. Two was that they must never give up the night.

"No, seriously, dude, I can't even, like, fucking talk right now," the one said. They seemed virtually identical to Des Esseintes. He couldn't tell when one stopped talking and the other started. "If I look down I'm going to fucking puke, no shit."

"Dude, I know what you're talking about, dog," the other said. "What was that shit we were drinking?"

This was Des Esseintes' cue, but he wanted a more deferent address before he deigned to respond. "Yo, man," the other said, leaning forward, his face a greasy slur under the security floodlight.

"What's that shit we were drinking?" Des Esseintes grabbed the empty bottle which, were he inclined

to breach etiquette, he would instruct these boys to deposit at a far point, never to see them again.

"You mean this shit?" Des Esseintes asked. They had chosen peppermint schnapps today. The bottle was as clear empty as it was full, a most unimaginative choice. When they vomited, as they inevitably would, at least it would smell toothpaste clean. "Boys need to start learning what you're drinking before you drink it. Good way to get into trouble."

The boys guffawed. They said, "Fawww." "I will drink fucking anything, dog," the other said. "If it will get me fucked up, I will drink it. You can just try me, dog. I'm saying a-ny-thing. Yo, let's get some more, yo. Let's get us something else. You try me. You see if I'll drink it. I'm so wasted I'll drink anything. Yo," he slapped his companion, "yo, man, you got any money? We got to get some more."

Des Esseintes checked the time. He knew he could buy until some time between 1:34 and 1:47. Though the law gave him until 2, after 1:47 they started sending cruisers under the auspice of traffic control. Sometimes, it was earlier. Des Esseintes would certainly dodge them today. He was not going to give up his hard work for these two. He quickly looked to see if either boy was wearing a watch. More precaution than he needed; he knew neither of them could successfully read one right now. They were still fumbling for money. The one was pulling out his ATM card.

"No, you know what?" Des Esseintes said. "It's call. It's too late. They won't sell it."

The boys said, "Dawwww!" "Why it got to be like that, blood?" a wounded white boy decried. "Who says I can buy at fucking three o'clock in the day but not three o'clock in the morning? Like, what's the fucking difference, know what I'm saying? Like, it's not like it's a whole fucking different...fucking different...planet or nothing. It's just fucking the middle of the night and I want a fucking drink!" He pounded the dashboard, which Des Esseintes wished they would never do. His compatriot, trapped in the backseat, pounded his friend's headrest in solidarity. This was just the

stimulus the front seat boy needed. Des Esseintes leaned over the hand break and opened the passenger's door just as the boy found his most convulsive wretch. His cab driver reflex was quick.

"Do you guys remember where Sean said he was going?" Des Esseintes said. He was not concerned for Sean. Sean would find his way home if he needed to, but chances were he would not need to. Chances were good that he would have tricked the little girls into performing a harmful pornographic scenario for him and then making them think it was all their idea. He slept where he fell, regardless. But Des Esseintes knew he was supposed to be teaching the morons to keep looking out, and he wanted them to determine for themselves how this event would end. Thus the hint about Sean, who would have provided the deus ex machina for this dreadful exercise in sociability. What to do without him?

"No, yo, he said to wait here for him," one or the other said. "We can't dump our boy, yo."

"But you see what's happening, don't you?" Des Esseintes persevered. "He's not going to come back. He's getting some, right? He totally scored. He's busy now."

The boys whooped at this very notion. It didn't seem to matter who was getting some, as long as they could imagine someone doing it. Knee-jerk juvenile sexuality. "That dark-haired one was really fucking pretty, dude," the boy in the back seat said. The boy in the front seat, it appeared, only got queasier. Still, he supported his bro. "Dude, maybe he'll put in a good word for you," he said earnestly.

"Nothing wrong with sloppy seconds. Know what I'm saying?"

Des Esseintes must assert himself more firmly. He had tried finesse and, failing that, now he was just going to leave them. "Where do you want me to leave you?" he asked.

"I mean, dude," front seat boy said, "Sean is the man. If you're going to get any poon around here, you'd better like sloppy seconds."

"Man gets more pussy than a toilet seat," back seat boy concurred.

Des Esseintes started the engine. The boys snapped to attention. "Dude, can't we wait just a little longer?" the back seat boy pleaded. Maybe then they'd start having fun? "He'll be back soon, and he will be pissed if he thinks we left him."

Des Esseintes would leave the joke on them. If they waited on cement parking blocks all night while their friend had an orgy, it would only serve them right. Maybe they'd enjoy it, who knew? He'd done his duty tonight. He'd helped corrupt some youth. "You're right," he told them. "He'd be so pissed if you left him. I've seen it. I gotta go. You guys wait here, though." The boys, minds now made up for them, made preliminary moves to exit the vehicle. "Watch the puke," Des Esseintes advised. The boy who puked sidestepped the puddle, and then, in a display of odd chivalry, guided his friend through the gap past the front seat. "Watch the puke, man," he said softly, even taking his friend's hand to steady him past the pool. Thus extricated, the two went around to the driver's side for a sloppy goodbye to Des Esseintes.

"Yo, man, good partying with you," one said, so mildly that Des Esseintes saw that his buzz must be totally killed. And that suddenly, too. Hm. The other approached and extended his hand. "Seriously, dude. Thanks for getting us that shit and letting us party in your ride. Sorry about the puke," he added. "Hope I didn't get any on your ride there."

"I think it's all right," Des Esseintes said, throwing the car in reverse. "Check you out later." Exercising all due caution with bodies nearby, Des Esseintes pulled out, stone sober, and retreated wearily to his lair.

It reminded Diona of an activist stunt her sister had seen in her own, more radical era. In that stunt, activists ate mashed potatoes, some colored with red food dye and some with blue, and vomited a semblance of the stars and stripes to protest CIA recruitment. At least there was some purpose to that.

Diona wondered what the purpose could be of these technicolor monstrosities. She didn't notice much until she started wearing the new boots. She got them when her mother took her to London for summer Shakespeare, and they were sublime. Red leather, not oxblood but really red, with angular toes and sculpted heels. None of these proles would have ever seen such a thing. Of course they were too much for everyday wear, but if not everyday, then when? And granted, she didn't really have the full wardrobe for them, but she'd shop again when she got a chance to go back, and for now, she had a couple pretty nice black skirts that did some justice. What did no justice were those bizarre puddles of clown vomit, dotting the campus, and really the whole town, with what looked like big regurgitant Skittles. She stepped in one of those puddles once, a green one, rather one with St. Patrick's green swirled through otherwise regular vomit, and she looked down ever since. There was a huge purple one by Willard Hall, and orange and blue by the stadium. Poor season for it, too. The summer rains had stopped, and it wouldn't snow for a month or so. The crusts remained for weeks, sometimes building in motley strata. Hoses unheard of here, apparently. So disgusting.

Diona found most of the campus, if not disgusting, then certainly degrading. She'd never lived a life so plain. All the people were plain. She had a glamorous boyfriend in the college town where she grew up. He was a graduate student, and actually married. A man, not a boy. He could truly appreciate her sophisticated wit and worldly tastes. He cooked, and they had lovely suppers *a deux* when his wife went away to conferences. They had a good deal of furtive sex that Diona took for passionate by the very fact of its existence. Diona took the Pill for this. Her boyfriend would often tell her how remarkable she was, of such dire intelligence and sexual skill. No wonder no one believed she was really 18. She neither looked nor acted a day under 30.

One thing that made the campus such a hell was the drinking. Gaston didn't drink any more. He was over it. He'd had problems before, and she would be a good helpmate to him. She was sensitive

and mature and would support his sobriety. She'd skipped many phases of her development. They should have skipped her through grades 2, 3, and 4, but they didn't. They left the skipping to her, and the skipping she intended to do was over youthful indiscretion. They were animals around here, and they frightened her a little. They were so blatant. They were so public. They just didn't care what they looked like. They indulged only their lowest instincts. They couldn't express half a thought after they got started. Her roommate was one of them. Becky didn't pledge, but she did go to the parties sometimes and she was starting to hang out solidly with others who did as well. It meant she was gone a lot, though, and that was good. That was what Diona wanted. A dorm room! A room mate! How infuriating and beneath her. She had rules to abide by in this place. She, herself. Next year, she'd move off campus, and she could probably afford her own apartment. She'd make an appeal to her estranged father, who never gave her anything before and might as well make up for it now. Until then, well. At least there was no fight when she imported a few touches of class in the place. Posters of '40's movies stars. Museum prints. Lots of candles. She played with the wax when she was bored. Spicy, expensive perfumes in stolen tester bottles. Designer only, if you please.

Were she not so brilliant, this semester would have been challenging. She had tested out of many required classes, but she still had some left over, taunting her. Not many students could take one and a half times the maximum course load, but Diona was determined to get undergrad behind her as near to instantly as possible. She knew from Gaston that no one interesting showed up until grad school anyway. So the heavy course load was all she could do, though she had to admit the travel was cumbersome. First of all, classes were scheduled back to back, so she had to prepare for them five at a time when she left at 8. She had a collapsible wheeled cart for the laptop (with extra batteries,) piled on with those bricks of survey text. Those made a solid base on the handcart; but, on Mondays and Wednesdays, when she had rehearsal, she had to balance the viola somewhere in the bungees, and it

really did make maneuvering difficult, and limited her range. It barred her entrance to the darling teahouses and kept her with the rabble in the student union. The student union had disabled access.

It sure was ugly, though, and, Diona had to think, unnecessarily so. Why, when they were paying so much tuition money, were the students still subject to such environs, aesthetically bereft as they were? Why should they not be given more welcoming spaces? But of course, one look around and Diona could see that the majority of the student body could not be trusted with anything nice. Though it was only Wednesday, the place was already littered with flyers for some corporate sponsored piss-up. She liked that term, "piss-up." They used it in England. She preferred the English slang for "pissed," meaning drunk, to the American, meaning angry. She preferred not to get pissed in either sense. She would tell that to this gentleman before he gave her one of these flyers with which he was further littering this trashy little place.

"No, thank you," she told the man who skulked by her table, dropping the paper as though inconspicuous. "You can save your paper, sir."

The man kept walking and Diona picked up the flyer. It looked like a magazine ad in postcard form, a glossy corporate production, but with a space on the front to note a local venue, the name of which was handwritten with big black marker. Long Weekend Club party, right up there at the Bucket, their own local burger bar. Maybe he thought she was 21. The drink on the card was purple. Well, it didn't matter, because it might as well have been an invitation to Diona's own hell. She went after the guy.

"Wait," she said. "You can take this back, sir. Save the trees and all that." Her cart of stuff waited, vulnerably, at her table with her open textbook. She found the man strangely attractive. Maybe this was just because he looked older. Not a guy, but a man. That must have been why he targeted her. For his part, he looked stumped to see her. She advanced the flyer back toward him. "I don't need this."

He didn't take it, and she wondered if she might have the wrong man. He looked at the flyer as though he hadn't seen it before. She insisted. "Look," she said, "no."

The man looked at her, bemused. Then he brightened a little. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "Christian?"

Oh, was that the wrong thing to say. He knew it, too.

"What?" she demanded.

"Are you Mormon or something?" the man asked. "Don't drink?" He didn't care. He just couldn't deal with the sanctimonious types. This qualified.

"How dare you?" she said. "What I do or don't do is my business. How dare you insult me like that?"

"What?" he said. "Not Mormon? Recovering?" He really didn't care. He did get to bother her, though. That might be sport. "Or maybe you just haven't found your taste yet." She was still holding the flyer. He would have taken it back, but she seemed to need it. He gestured towards it. She might like purple. "Bet you'd like that stuff."

"Thank you, no. Sir."

"Next time, then," he said. He couldn't give a shit. "First one's on me."

"No, thank you, sir," she said. As he walked away, he was greeted by a pack of young men, who sang his praise in chorus. "Yo, yo, yo, what up, D?" Diona continued to watch his departure. The man was, as he had been, nonplussed. He was clearly comfortable with the recognition, but he collected the enthusiasm, rather than reciprocating it. He allowed himself to be engulfed into the pack, and next to the boys, Diona thought he looked not only older, but possibly much older, although he was dressed exactly like them. Their boisterousness quickly hushed, and as the older man directed them out of the

foot traffic, he looked back at Diona, who still clutched her party flyer. He saw that she did, and at that, he almost smiled. At least, he smirked.

And just because he was older; and because he was somber; and because he had an air of mysterious celebrity; and because he might have a sexual attraction for Diona; and because he chose her in any case; and because she had completed an excellent practice; and because she hadn't made any friends to speak of; Diona decided to attend the party. And because she hadn't made any friends to speak of, and because grown women don't have social fear, Diona went stag.

Another day, Diona would not be able to conquer her apprehension of the bestial hoards of boys, but though she could do that today, she would not risk the camaraderie of the girls. She took great care, and two hours, to build a personal facade that would segregate herself from the vapid skinny girls that the boys assaulted when drunk. She wore her long black mermaid skirt and her camel jacket with the nipped-in waist. Of course, her red boots. She would look adult and alluring, and she would also appear as a woman who could not be trivialized. She would only appeal to a man. A grown man could understand her. Gaston did.

Diona walked across campus with the flyer in her hand. It was early to be attending a party, but Diona could not wait in her room for just the right time. Becky would wonder and ask questions. Becky would wonder why Diona was the way she was. She didn't need that from those people, and she wouldn't be dissuaded in her quest.

She didn't want to be nervous; it didn't make sense. She didn't have anything to prove to these people, most of whom she knew she wouldn't want to see anyway. She could turn right around and leave if she didn't see the man who passed the flyers, and she fully expected to do so. She didn't know what she'd say if she saw him, but she expected some sort of spontaneous combustion because her

normal circumstances dictated drama. By the time she was half a block away, she could barely move. She strode in stuttering, conspicuous steps, her heart pounded wildly, and a frantic glower had affixed to her face. But she shored herself up and proceeded to the door, which she expected to enter freely because she lived in a free country.

"ID?"

A man on a barstool sat outside the door, joking with a man smoking a cigarette. He would have no reason to be bothered by someone like Diona. She wasn't his type. She continued to enter.

"Hey! I need to see your ID or you can't go in." Diona still didn't stop. Why would she? She didn't go to bars. She didn't anticipate this ritual. She became educated by the man with the cigarette, who physically barred her path. He stood in front of her, crossed his arms, and glanced at the man on the stool. "No one gets in without ID," he said. "Driver's license," he added, not helpfully.

Diona knew that law, but she didn't respect it. How could the law tell her that she, as responsible and mature as she was, should be somehow unequipped to visit an establishment such as this? There weren't laws like this in England, she thought. The thought inspired a bluff.

"I'm ever so sorry," she said, in her best faux accent, which could have been so much better, "I'm afraid I don't understand what you're asking."

The men at the door made themselves explicit, as they had been trained to do any time they were going to refuse a client. "I need to see a government-issued photo ID with your birth date on it. Something that proves that you are at least 21 years of age. 21 is the legal age in this state for drinking alcoholic beverages. Do you have your driver's license with you." Not a question.

"I'm not allowed a driving license here." By now a group had approached the door, also holding flyers. They flashed their cards at the doorman, but he knew them and waved them inside. He then turned his attention back to Diona.

"Do you have a driver's license?"

"I just said I'm not allowed."

"Passport?"

"Well, not on me, no."

"Have a nice evening, Miss." The man reached around her and took another ID, scrutinized it quickly, and rubber stamped the owner's hand. Diona could sense the finality of the moment, but after all the courage it took to bring herself here, she preferred victory to defeat.

"Wot, that's it? I'm 25 bloody years old and you won't let me in without my passport? That's crap, that is!" She was becoming a scene, but she didn't mind. She figured she would be drawing attention not so much to herself as to the injustice of her plight. She was not right about that.

"What's going on out here?"

Diona flushed, mottled, and felt her viscera liquefy. Here she was, being interrogated, making a scene, faking an accent, and who should catch her in the act but the man she was here to chase. She never thought she'd have to speak to him. Oh! And now she saw that he wasn't very handsome at all, a little on the slight side when she was not, and that this would never work out. She had to stop and think if she was to make a graceful exit, and as she was doing so, the man conferred with the guards.

"No ID?" he asked, obviously. They nodded. He turned to Diona. "Did you forget it?"

The doorman said, "English. No DL." Diona thought she should really die. A flash of recognition came across the face of Des Esseintes, followed by the same smirk he'd given Diona in the student union.

"Is that right?" he asked her.

She couldn't give up now, so she put the accent back on. "Yes. Quite right."

Des Esseintes looked at her a minute, appraising her, then said, "Tell you what. I'll give you a

ride home so you can get it."

Diona felt her knees buckle. She was right, right, right! He did want her! Now, this was how it should happen. This was the correct course of her life. Her life was a drama in progress. Her life was not about shame and reticence and false starts. She must proceed accordingly.

"Yes, that's fine. Thank you." She fled with him, her body immediately loose, swinging her hips as a woman does when she walks with a lover. He gestured to a blue bug - "I'm over here" - but said nothing further on the walk. He opened her door like a gentleman, closed it for her, got in, and began to drive. If he wanted to take her home, he should have asked her where that was. As it was, he drove her around the block to a residential parking lot and stopped. He reached behind her and extracted something from the back seat.

"Why didn't you just tell me what you wanted?" he asked her, still turned away. He was making it too easy. He was making this encounter almost frighteningly fated. She didn't know what to say at first, but then, missing an unfortunate beat, said, "I guess I didn't have to." She forgot her English accent, as he must have known she would. She was glad she was on the Pill, but she assumed he'd also be prepared with a condom if he was going to do this sort of thing. She settled back into the seat, awaiting his move. When he turned towards her, he had a cup. He handed it to her. "And you said you didn't drink," he chided.

Diona thought she said, "What?" at least, and hoped it sounded like, "What the hell?" but she didn't say anything. The man held the red plastic cup out and she had no choice but to take it. It smelled like the medicine her mother used to force down her throat. It was purple, like Jonestown Kool-Aid. She told him she didn't drink, so why this? He kept looking at her, smirking, with no idea who she was, or why she was alone with him. He hadn't even asked her name yet. She shouldn't ingest anything this stranger gave her; but it was too late for caution now. And why was it she didn't drink, anyway?

"You'll like it," he prompted. "It's sweet. With a slight aftertaste of morbid decay."

Diona took and drank.

"Have I tried this one yet? I can't remember. Maybe I'd better have some more just to be sure."

"With cream?"

"A little. I usually take it black." Diona hoped this sounded suggestive. Des Esseintes reached into the makeshift bar he kept in a deep brown Liquor Mart bag. He bought one of each for her. He wanted her to meet them all. He withdrew Kahlua. He poured it into her cup, with just a drip of milk. He'd circled the block and parked by the creek for her.

"Did you have that one before?" he asked her. She took a slurp from the cup and rolled it in her mouth, canting her head back into her best impression of abandon. Then she smiled. "It's coffee," she said, "but it's not bitter. Do you know how old I was when I started drinking coffee?"

"How old?"

"Eight. I got it with ice cream at dinner parties. That's what this tastes like."

"What else do you taste?"

"It's heavy. It's thick, like honey from the jar. It's got that muddy coffee taste. Like dirt. The appeal of which, there's no explaining. It's nice with the milk. It's sweet but not in a sickly way. It feels smooth in my mouth. You don't even notice the kick, until the end. Then I just get warm. I get warm in my fingers and toes. My eyeballs. My earlobes. And you know where else. Good. I want something else, though. What's the next one?"

"Not so fast, you," Des Esseintes said. "You have to finish what you start before you start another."

Diona blinked at him - her smug cat look - and took another sip. "Are you trying to get me

drunk?"

"Would that be a problem?" They'd said this before. It was their first shared joke. They burst out laughing, with the cumulative laughter of every time they'd said it.

"And you'll sleep with me when you get me drunk, right?"

"Darling, believe me. I'm the only man who wouldn't."

Des Esseintes would like to close the windows against the chill. Autumn would rush in soon. He could tell by the first whiff of wood smoke. Diona was overdressed in winter wool and didn't feel the chill. The creek was at its lowest ebb. The time was still dry. The night, beyond stillness, crooned the lullaby of sky, and Diona's bucket seat embraced her in a small, safe spin.

"I'm spinning," she said.

"A lot or a little?" he asked.

"I can't tell. It feels unusual to be spinning at all. I can't tell how much faster it would go if I let it. It still feels good, so I guess it isn't a lot. I guess it isn't too much. Or is it too much that makes it feel good? I like it. It feels good right now. What are you drinking?"

Des Esseintes was testing. He didn't know where to go from the Kahlua. He would have to stick with dark and rich, he supposed. Fruit flavors wouldn't do. Those were the best, unfortunately, the ones he liked to give them. They'd like it dark soon enough, and then they'd be grown and they'd stop playing. They'd be straight to scotch and bourbon. Like he drank. Des Esseintes wasn't ready to give Diona to the dark spirits yet. Maybe some nut flavor. Mint. Spice. Cinnamon might be nice.

"I'm trying to decide what to give you next."

"I can tell you what to give me."

"Do you want soft or sharp?"

"Oh, sharp. Of course."

Cinnamon.

"I have to study," she said.

"You can always study. You're having fun. You need that more."

"Are you having fun?" she asked. "You can't be having fun. Aren't you supposed to have 20 times more people around? You just have me."

She did it, at just that moment. The street lights and the moon and her makeup just so, her contrasts high - she wore her glamour. She looked like her vision of herself. Des Esseintes was glad to have her. She was beginning to approach his pantheon of greats, and he had just received her. She wasn't gone yet. They always left so soon. She was present and future. She sat with him, here, now, losing herself.

"Maybe you're better than 20 people, sweet," he said. "What man wouldn't want a gift like you?"

"What do you mean? A gift?" She was certain it was true. She was certain he loved her. She liked hearing why.

"You, darling, are that rarest of finds: a wise virgin. It's a delight to watch you." He gave her more cinnamon. Hot Damn! He saw her in movie effects. She was now in the light of darkness visible. Her screen was black and white, and when he flattered her, Des Esseintes thought he saw a watercolor flush across her cheeks.

"I wish you'd sleep with me," she said.

"I know."

"I wish I didn't have a test tomorrow."

"Pretend you don't. Have some more of this."

Halloween already? Well, soon enough, and Diona would celebrate with everything orange.

And if there was anything black? No. Anisette was licorice, and licorice was black, and though anisette wasn't black, it was good enough for thematic coherence. Diona sat in the passenger's seat and waited. She considered it her seat now. She had ordered peach schnapps, orange curacao, and anything else he wanted to get. It would be an orgy of orange. An orangey. He would laugh at anything these days. She was trying to think of more jokes for him when a body rolled across the hood of the car, stuntman style. Then another. And another. Soon they'd surrounded the car and had started rocking it back and forth. Diona screamed.

"Yo, D!" they all shouted. Diona felt like a dictator facing a coup. One started slapping the windows in a bongo rhythm and the others followed suit. Just like monkeys, Diona thought. Once they'd synchronized their rhythm they started chanting. "D! D! D! D! D! D!" they said, faster and faster, until they were slapping out a drumroll. When it hit its crescendo and still nothing happened, they started all over.

Diona locked the doors and imagined they'd go away, though they were pressing their faces to the windows. They saw her and taunted her. Who was this ho? She didn't look like anyone they knew. She looked like one of those freaky chicks from Women's Study classes, the ones with the librarian glasses. Not that she had the glasses, but she was the type. That type really needed to give up some tit! And who was to say it wasn't her car, and they were making a mistake? Who the fuck cared! They had a lot of guys together, and look what they could do with that car. They could pick it up and throw it in the street, if they wanted. Bounce it like a superball. That would be so crazy.

Just as suddenly, they abandoned the car en masse. When they cleared her window, Diona saw that they had spotted their man exiting the store and they ran to him. Most conspicuously, too, she feared. It could be so easy to forget that one was committing a crime. The boys were charging Des Esseintes and he was carrying her purchase. They drew attention to him, attention that might result in

repercussions. Certainly there was no way to prove that the purchase was for her. It was his car, and his custody, and no more need be said about it. He was taking a long time getting back. Getting past those boys seemed to be an ordeal. Finally, he walked back to the car, put the purchase in the trunk, and without a word to Diona, went back to the store. She feared the boys would come back and harass her some more, but they'd already scattered. Des Esseintes came back shortly, empty-handed, and got in the car.

"I wonder if you could take a walk, sweet," he said. "I'll pick you up back by the park in about half an hour."

"I'm sorry?" she said. What could this be?

"Soon is better, dear," he said. "I told the Tekes I'd get their kegs. The man will be coming out to help load them."

"What the fuck is this?" she demanded. He'd never heard her swear before. She'd always been such a lady. "You're blowing me off for the Tekes?"

"I'll pick you up by the park," he repeated. "Then, we'll have our party." He squeezed her hand, a false gesture. They never touched.

Diona got out and slammed the door behind her. Of all the nerve! She never expected to be deposed so abruptly. She didn't expect to be deposed at all. It made sense, of course, that she'd arouse suspicions if the Liquor Mart man saw her in the car. She reasoned this as she stormed around, zigzagging across streets, distracted. And if she never saw those Tekes again - was that what they were? - it would be too soon. And of course she'd seen him, she knew of his life before her. She just thought he'd abandoned it when she came. A month ago. No, it was more than a month. She didn't want to share him with those monsters. She would go to the park, and would be prepared to leave with grace when he failed to retrieve her. But as promised, he picked her up off the playground in exactly half an

hour. Diona wasn't sure that it didn't make her angrier. She decided it should. She confronted him in her greatest imperiousness.

"That was the rudest thing you've ever done," she said. "I think you owe me an explanation."

"I think I don't," he said, "but I do owe you an apology. I think that's fair. I'm sorry those guys scared you."

"Who says I was scared? I was disgusted. Vermin."

"You were petrified." He started the car and began to move. "And I'm sorry. But don't worry. We'll be avoiding the gentlemen in the future. You're too precious a project to risk like that."

And how was she supposed to take that? "I'm a project?" she asked, indignant.

"You're a project," he stated. "And you're precious." He took a left and headed north. They'd never gone this way before.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Where your lot never go," he said. "I'm taking you home with me."

His home fulfilled her vision of him, and of herself. His new and tacky car might have led her to picture him in a pasteboard cracker box, full of chrome and blonde wood. She knew him better, though, and was pleased to see that his home was old and stony, ensconced in evergreen, dark and hidden. It was so private for such a public person. Or, at least, as public a person as he was until he met Diona. A man's house for sure. No bikini postered dorm room, this. They entered from the backyard, on a cobblestone path. It was mid-afternoon, but Des Esseintes lit the lamps in the parlor against the darkness. It was done in brocade, with touches of gilt here and there. Strange color, though. It was red, sort of, but a little on the tomato side. Diona might have expected a cooler shade. This was almost orange. Not distasteful, exactly, but a little vibrant on the eyes. It resembled a English pub. Diona

wished she'd studied them more when she was there. She wished she'd listened to her mother, who was so charmed by the pubs. She surveyed the room, with its Victorian furniture, its cut-glass windows, and the small, warm glow of the wall sconce lanterns. When her eyes adjusted, she noticed, with astonished glee, that the entire north wall was consumed by a bar, complete with a back mirror with stained glass edging and red leather bar stools. Suspended on all four sides of the wooden overhang were bottles in a prism of colors. Everything she'd ever had, everything she'd never had, and all hanging in optics, with only white crossed spigots stanching the rainbow flood. Diona squealed and leapt and her eyes grew wide and she clapped her hands like a little girl. Des Esseintes held the bag with his orange liquors, long since forgotten. Diona threw herself onto the polished bar and writhed like a piano chanteuse. She rolled onto her back, flung her arms above her head, and opened her mouth wide. "Fill me up, Daddy."

"Oh, no, dear," he said, "you have to earn it." He approached the bar and she sat up, arched, arms behind her. She reached towards the bottles with her neck and opened mouth as though to grab.

"No, really," she said, "I can catch it. Look at me! Just pour. I'll catch it." She was lying under amaretto, and Des Esseintes wanted to see her try her trick. He took a teaspoon and depressed the spout.

An almond stream rained down, not into Diona's mouth, but onto her chin, into her hair, and onto the shoulder of her white silk blouse. "Goddamn it!" she yelled. "Fuck! Now it just looks like shit." Des Esseintes was laughing - he was playing her game, after all - but he stopped to investigate her outburst. She had begin wiping the amaretto with her hand, but succeeded only in spreading the stickiness. A lover might have offered to lick it off for her, but Des Esseintes was not her lover. Diona did not start laughing, and he eventually got her a towel. Then he poured a draught into a small crystal snifter, swirled it, and handed it to her. "Let's try this," he said as she handed back the towel, which he used to wipe the bar, in the process bumping her in the ass, inviting her descent to a bar stool. She took it,

scowling, but perked up a little when she sipped the deliciousness. She sipped, and sipped again, wincing and shuddering when the kick finally came.

He watched her for a while. Their silence was comfortable at first, the casual silence of constant companions; but it soon dragged with the portent of a new dependence. Diona felt this acutely. Here she was, allowed into the sanctuary, and what does she do? She makes a mess of the place and herself. What a dumb bitch she was. Out of her league. Would he please, please say something to make it all right again? She scrunched deeper into her chest. This was her apology, and he took it.

"Close your eyes," he said. "Tell me about that."

"OK," she said. "Warm, sweet, nice. Carmel candy."

"That's not right," he said.

Shock. It was subjective. How could it not be right? He was pushing her buttons today. "What do you mean, not right?"

"You can do better," he said. "You're just giving me the obvious. You're not giving me your original experience. I want you to show me the knowing, not just the learning. Have some more. Finish that and wait. Feel it through your mouth and down your throat. Feel its every movement. Do it now." He waited. "Keep your eyes closed. Now answer these questions. If that drink was a poem, who would have written it?"

Now he was going mojo. Diona tried to imagine Tekes playing this game with him, and as she couldn't, it struck her as absurd. Though certainly less so since she knew the answer. "Christina Rossetti."

Impressed, he continued, "And who would have painted it?"

"Carravagio," she said. Too easy.

Now would be his real test. "And who composed it?"

Of course she would know this. "Bach. It's a Bach sonata."

"You must play for me sometime."

"I don't play for alcoholics."

"No, no, dear," he clucked, hurt, soft and vulnerable now, newly infatuated by her sensibilities.

"There are no alcoholics here."

"Oh, come on," she said, bratty. She hated the sound of her bratty girl voice at times like this. Still. "All we do is drink. You're an alcoholic and you're trying to make me one, too. Not that I'm stopping you."

"No, dear. Alcoholics are a common breed. We are here to escape the alcoholics. We, my darling" he said, raising his glass, Glenfiddich neat, "are dipsomaniacs."

"Line 'em up, Jeeves! Give me everything you got! Give me a Sloe Screw! Give me a Sloe Fizzy Screw! Give me a Sloe Screw Against the Wall! Give every Sloe Screw you got! Give me a Screaming motherfucking Orgasm!" Diona stumbled to the bar. She had started without him.

"Academic probation my sacred ass!"

Diona was wearing her freshman 15 on her face. She wasn't flattered by the shadows. Her eyes looked small and piggish. She had powdery white Christmas snow on her ass and her knees from falling repeatedly on her long walk in dress shoes. She weaved her way to the barstool. When she went to sit, the stool became too small and failed to contain her. She pulled the neighboring stools closer by hand and foot until she was able to steady herself. Then she waited. She wanted a green one. She wanted a blue one. She wanted a red one. She wanted chocolate. She wanted root beer. She wanted all of them washed thin with vodka. The strawberry wine she started with didn't count at all. She wanted to be served. She wanted him to serve her.

"Come on, baby," she said. "You know what I like." Des Esseintes had already begun to pour Sloe Gin and vodka into a highball glass. She watched him, and when he lifted the vodka bottle, she tipped it back. "I need a *Fuck You* drink, understand? Fuck them! Fuck them and their academic probation! They wouldn't know a genius if I bit them in the ass!" Des Esseintes gave the glass another splash, then poured in the orange juice, which floated at the top of the glass. He stirred and Diona snatched the glass away, draining almost half in the first draught. Des Esseintes sought to slow her down; thus, the withering shame.

"No symphonies this semester, sweet?" he asked her. "No further discussion of the finer points?"

"Oh, Christ Jesus. You've been pouring this shit down my throat for months and now that I really need it you want to play games? Do I have to be a dipsomaniac every day? Can't I just be slut alcoholic for a change? And maybe get fucked for a change?" When she stopped talking, she shut down. He should say something now. She couldn't have hurt his feelings, right? He couldn't have a thin skin, with his chosen company? She was just mad and getting drunk. If they were drinking, he shouldn't be surprised if she was getting drunk. She was allowed for today. She wanted to power through this whole degree thing and now they were slowing her down. Threatening to kick her out, even. This was not working out right. The only thing that she liked about this whole year was coming here. She liked getting this. "I'm sorry," she said. She indicated her empty glass. This was her sign of truce. "I'm just upset. I just don't want it to end. They're trying to kick me out. They want to make me leave." Why wasn't he filling her glass? "I'm sorry to be so rude. I'm just upset." He finally filled her glass. Another Sloe Screw, this time more Screw than Sloe. It was gorgeous, sticky and tingly. She would never leave this womb. She might just curl up after the next one. "Do you have a blanket?" She slithered off the stool into a heap, her glass perched precariously askance on the adjacent seat. She splayed across her own wet footprints, her arm reaching up the barstool for a moment, then dropped.

Des Esseintes checked her wrist for a pulse and found one easily. He got a black plastic trash bag from behind the bar, slid it under Diona's shoulders, and rolled her on her side. He poured himself another two fingers and got a book from the shelf.

She checked her watch when she got off the bus. She'd taken more time than she expected at customs, and suddenly, her outrageous four hour layover didn't seem long enough. She'd hoped to go to the house, but there'd be no chance of that now. It wouldn't have been right for her to show up unannounced, anyway. As it was, she didn't need to go that far. She was only two blocks from him.

How much she'd done on her interim! Things really did work out for the best. If she'd stayed, she wouldn't have had that adventure and seen what she saw. She'd envied the way Gaston could begin his endless anecdotes, Once, in Paris... or, I met a man in Rio.... Now she would do the same. She'd been everywhere. She'd filled her daypack with souvenirs, and this was her last stop before she'd start her new life somewhere else.

She wondered if he'd recognize her now, 25 pounds starved off, a giddy, stringy travelling girl. Gone the vintage tailoring and gone the luxuriant cosmetic mask. She had malnutrition, insomnia, and a thousand bummed cigarettes to give her age now. She'd recognize him, though. His looks would never change. And of course, she'd see that car from a mile away.

During the whole bus ride, she rehearsed what she'd say to him. She'd apologize for the bottle of genuine Greek Ouzo crashed between Lisbon and Seville. She'd apologize for the gorgeous Chartreuse decapitated at the Gare du Nord. But she still had the most important one, just for him.

Look what I brought you from Paris, she'd say. I met the Green Muse. In a café in Montmartre. What could be more perfect? It was much too easy. You may have to pass the strip clubs and the Arab boys blaring hip hop, but you can still get a bottle full of antique decadence. I drank it every night, in

your honor. I had a room with a window, and I could see the rooftops. I could see all. No one but you will understand that. It was all there, right in that liquid jewel, just like in the paintings. I wanted to bring it to you. I even brought you a spoon. For the sugar. Then she would open her daypack and brandish her treasure, her precious wormwood spirit. She didn't know what was supposed to happen next; the moment would speak for itself.

Her eyes trained on the odd flash of blue, expecting the Bug to be right where she left it by the keg loading bay. It should be so obvious, that brilliance against the gray of the sky, on this dull and in-between weekday. She didn't see it in the accustomed spot and she rounded the building to the front entrance. The glass bottle bounced heavily on her spine. In total, the parking lot held one rusting white Escort; one black Accord; one dark green minivan; and an abandoned Pontiac. No Bug. She looked in the windows of these, just in case, but all were empty. The loss was impossible, the moment so predestined. She went to the creek, more out of sentiment than expectation. Nothing, no one. She went by the high school and found Bugs of every color but blue.

She didn't have time to go to the house. If he wasn't here, he could be anywhere. She couldn't begin to imagine. She would have to catch the 2:20 bus, and she hurried down Arapahoe Street. As she passed, she failed to notice the maroon Cruiser, its hubcaps painted with fuzzy navel vomit as orange as a marshmallow circus peanut.