

Shimmering Thing

By William Scheinman

He tells me, "I want to thank you for helping me out in this situation, John." He pats my shoulder and looks worried, the way he usually does when the urge hits him. Then he clears his throat, looks slyly into the large hall where Mrs. Grear and the guests and the string quartet are partying it up, and his voice is lower this time, almost a whisper. "The, er---the bag---is in the limousine. I'll be at the place, waiting for you."

For a moment we just stare at each other. He looks real swank in his tuxedo and his gray hair, with the chandelier above him giving off sparks, and all the rich bastards in the next room listening to Mozart or somebody classical and eating little dainties smeared on tiny squares of bread and sipping champagne from glasses that look like flower vases, and somehow it all seems too strange to me, that he's in a tux in his mansion with all these elegant people around him and he's asking me to do what I'm about to do. It's just too damned strange.

"Don't worry," I say, "I'll get the job done." And I turn away from him and hurry out the door and try not to think about his eyes, about how scared they seem.

When I get outside a few drops of rain poke me in the face, and above the trees the sky is alive with mist. I go out to the car port and nod to Cribbins the gardener who's pruning one of those squat Japanese trees that look like they were stepped on by a giant's foot. I get into the limo and pull out onto Green Street.

I didn't even look to see that the bag was there. I know that he takes it from his

safe, a brown canvas bag, and puts it on the back seat of the limo every time he gets the urge. I don't like looking at it. I don't like knowing it's behind me when I drive.

I cruise down the street and take in all the uppity mansions, the brick walls with their cast-iron spikes, and somehow it doesn't seem that important to me anymore that I'm working in such classy surroundings. Mr. Gear is definitely the richest guy I've ever worked for. You can't believe how rich the bastard is. Actually I shouldn't call him a bastard. He's been real decent to me, there's plenty of paid vacation, and lodgings on the premises, and a Nautilus room and a swimming pool, and then there's the little thing I've got going with the French girl who takes care of the household in Mrs. Gear's absence. They travel a lot, the Grears, but they never look happy, especially Mrs. Gear. She's a real beauty, a beauty out of a magazine but not cold at all, she's really nice, she always smiles to the help, always has a kind word. I've driven her around lots of times and she's as polite as could be. But Mr. Gear never lays a hand on her, and the French girl tells me that they have separate bedrooms and never sleep with each other. Mrs. Gear told her that the Gear men have a long tradition of treating their wives like statues in a museum, like works of art that are too pretty to touch, how they never lay a finger on their wives, and how that whole side of the Gear men, the bedroom details, never gets expressed. Which is probably why Mrs. Gear spends so much time on the opera committee and why she flits about all over town to this function and that, usually without her husband. At first I couldn't understand why Mr. Gear wasn't interested in a beauty like his wife, but then, later on, I realized where he was coming from.

So no, I'm not that lucky to be a chauffeur for Mr. Gear. In fact, I've decided to

quit and go back to fleet work. As soon as I get my next paycheck, I'm out of here. Don't get me wrong, he's been really good to me, good as far as being an employer goes. But it's this other business I can't deal with. I don't like what happens at all. And I hate like hell having that brown bag on the back seat while I drive. Images start to come to me now, images of the immediate future, of what will happen in the next hour. . . .

I remember the first time it happened, how afterwards I was driving him back to the mansion and he said to me, "It's hard to get close to a woman, John. Intimate I mean. I'm sure you've noticed that in your life." I didn't say anything to him, I just let the anger sweep over me, because he was assuming something about me, and I thought of the French girl, about how we got along. We were close, weren't we? Yeah, we were close. Of course we were.

The rain starts in earnest now, and I put the wipers on slow. Van Ness Avenue is crowded, as usual, and I'm getting impatient, although I have all the time in the world really, Mr. Gear doesn't mind waiting a while, in fact I think he likes the anticipation of it all, it works him up.

I make a left on Turk Street and drive into the Tenderloin. I drive around for a while, circling blocks, cutting back, my wipers sliding silently across the slick glass, until I find a parking space for the limo. Actually, it's in a bus zone, but most cops don't give limos tickets lest the limo belongs to some big shot or some friend of the mayor's.

Now I'm out in the cold, walking the streets, looking for the right kind of girl for this very special experience Mr. Gear has a jones for. I rate the girls on each corner

as I pass them, the long bare legs, the shape of their boobs, the "facial composition" as Mr. Gear calls it, and while rejecting this one because she's too short or that one because her hair isn't right, I begin seeing the event as it will inevitably come down, as it has always come down, and either it's knowing that I'll be there, or else it's the cold rain, but I start to shiver and can't stop.

Then I see her leaning against a lamppost and she's beautiful, I can't believe my eyes, she's better than any of the others, she's right up Mr. Gear's alley. I go up to her.

"You need a date?" I say.

She looks me up and down. "You vice? A vice cop once dressed up as a chauffeur and came onto me. Sneaky little shit."

"No, I'm not a vice cop."

"Because if you was a vice cop---"

"No, no, baby, look at me," and I point to my outfit and my hat.

"I know it, I know it," she says, "those vice pigs come up with real good disguises---"

"No, no, baby, believe me," I say, thrusting my hand into my pocket, "here, I'll show you my chauffeur's license." She looks at it, then at me, and I open my wallet and pluck out three crisp bills and hand them to her and she looks at them and her head almost falls off and I say, "That's right, baby, and that's just a deposit. You'll get a grand later on, just for half an hour's work. My boss-man is richer than Ali Baba."

"What kind of a date? I don't do kinky stuff. And I won't take it up the ass, you understand?"

"No, no, baby, you don't understand, you don't have to take it up the ass. In fact, you don't have to take it anywhere. He's not even going to touch you, I promise. Now come on and walk with me to the limo."

So she starts walking with me and I hear her heels clicking briskly on the sparkling pavement, a strutting fantasy all complete.

"Your boss just likes to talk or something?"

"No, it's more complicated than that."

"I once had a date he paid me two hundred dollars just to talk to him on account of he was writing a novel about hookers. He said he needed to speak to me for research. I wonder if he ever got it published. I used to write poems. Do you like poetry?"

"Yeah, I love poetry. Here, step right in doll-face," and I open the door and she slides in and I shut the door and come around to the drivers' side and get in.

"Is your boss in the back seat? Doesn't he want to see me now?"

I pull away from the curb, stretching around to make sure I'm clear. "No, baby, you see, my boss isn't in the back seat. We're driving to another venue. Not far away, up near Twin Peaks, a very plush little house. Beautiful view of the city---"

So we get to the house---Mr. Gear's other mansion, the one he always keeps empty---and I tell her to go up the steps, that I just need to get something from the back seat, and she lingers on the concrete walk, looking doubtful, and I tell her, "No, baby, don't worry, just knock on the door and my boss will let you in," and I turn and reach for the bag on the back seat and I take it out and she's still on the walk looking at me, and she looks at the bag and says, "What's that?" and I tell her "It's just

something for my boss, don't worry, it's alright." She seems satisfied and turns to the door and rings the bell and Mr. Grear answers the door and lets us in.

Now is the worst part, the part I always hate to think about. Because we know exactly what's about to go down, the boss-man and I, but *she* doesn't, she has no idea, she couldn't even guess, not in her wildest. And it'll be the same as before, it'll happen like it always does, and I'll start to get sick but I'll maintain because it's my job and I can't blow it, and then it'll be over, and I'll drive her home and then I'll come back and pick up Mr. Grear and it will be like it never happened, because how could such a thing happen? and I'll say to myself, This is unreal, this didn't really happen tonight, such things can't happen, because that's what I'll need to think to get through the next few days. And then a week will go by, and I won't think about it at all, it'll be out of my mind, and I'll just be another chauffeur for a rich bastard in a fat mansion in a tree-lined street in San Francisco. And that's the worst part: knowing how easy it is to forget and pretend that things are normal. Yes sir, I'm giving my notice next payday. It'll be just before Christmas, but what the hell.

There isn't much furniture in the house, it was just an investment Mr. Grear told me, he even thought about selling it once, but then he found a use for the house, and that's why we're here now.

We're in what would be the living room, there's a couple of chairs around a low table, there's a wet bar against one wall. She sits down on a chair, crosses her long legs and slides her purse off her shoulder.

"John," he says to me, "would you be so kind as to make us a drink. What would you like, dear?"

"I'll have what you're having," she says, uncrossing and then recrossing her legs.

"Okay, John, two Camparis and vodka. Please."

I can tell that he likes her, he keeps looking her over, staring, like he's locked onto her, and I know it's going to be even more intense than usual for him tonight. I open the refrigerator and lift out the ice bucket and grab a couple of glasses from off a little shelf.

"What's your name, my dear?" he asks her. I pour in some Campari.

"Candy," she says, crossing her legs again and looking at me, making sure that I'm pouring the same stuff in both glasses.

"Well, Candy," he says to her, "I shall not require much from you tonight. And it won't take long, either. Before you know it, you'll be free to leave." He stands by her, puts a hand on her shoulder, squeezes gently, then slowly circles her chair, and her head turns to follow him.

"What do you want, anyway? Your man there said you didn't want to stick it in my box."

"That's right, Candy."

"You want to watch me jerk myself off?"

"No no, nothing like that."

"You just want me to talk to you? Are you a writer? I used to write poems."

"That's splendid, my dear, but all you have to do is stand in that room there for a few moments, that's all." And he nods his head to the room, and she looks that way, then turns back to him, then shoots me a look. You can tell she's getting nervous.

I bring the drinks over to them and they drink and I take the brown canvas bag

and bring it into the room and on my way out Mr. Grear meets me with this gleam in his eyes and he says, "You've done your job extraordinarily well tonight, John. Extraordinarily well."

Yeah, I did a great job tonight, and I know why he thinks it's a great job, but I'd never have the nerve to tell him it's because the girl looks just like Mrs. Grear. They have the same facial composition, I noticed it right away.

And so they finish their drinks and Mr. Grear says, "Let's go into the room then and get started" and we go into the room, Mr. Grear in front, the girl behind him and me bringing up the rear.

After I enter the room, I close the door and slide the bolt shut.

She looks around, her eyes getting wider, her ribcage rising faster than before. "What's with the walls," she says, "why do you have them padded?"

"You'll need to undress," he says, ignoring her question, "and then it will all be over soon. John, if you please."

I go over to the little stool where I'd set the brown bag and just wait there while both of them get undressed.

"Now my dear," he says, "I just want you to stand over there, your hands at your sides, facing that wall, yes, just like that, and relax. Whatever you do, don't turn around. It will only take a few moments. John, we're ready."

Now I open the bag and reach inside and take out the glass jar. It's a round jar, about a foot in diameter, and if you looked inside it you'd probably think that what you were seeing was a strange cloud twisting around, a white cloud that gives off a trembling glow, a weird shimmering thing trapped in a jar. It's only if you keep

looking at it that you start to see other things, fleeting glimpses of little shapes moving, shapes becoming other shapes, constantly changing. . . .

Mr. Grear told me once that there's more than one of these things on earth. Certain men in power have them. Sultans have them, he says, and dictators and presidents and kings, and ultra-tycoons like Mr. Grear. He told me that the cloud-thing might have been something they brought back on one of the space flights, that maybe it was something that got retrieved from one of the satellites when they went up to fix it. They never really tell you the whole story about those space missions, it turns out, about what we send into space, and why. And of course they never talk about what they bring back.

Whatever it is doesn't do much until you open the jar.

I stand behind the naked girl and as I open the jar I notice her body trembling. She senses me. "What are you doing?" she says, but I'm not supposed to answer and I bend down and place the lid on the floor and then, standing again with the opened jar balanced on my left palm, I sort of pour the contents of the jar onto her back.

It comes out like liquid, it spills out onto her, but it isn't liquid, because once it hits her skin it stays on, billowing over her body like rolling fog. But it's more solid than that, it doesn't break up, it clings to her skin, an expanding patch of shiny cloud. If you look closely, you can see little claws or legs or something forming inside it.

As soon as it attaches itself to the naked girl Mr. Grear's whole body spasms and he gasps, his head jerking back. It's because the thing knows it's working for Mr. Grear, I don't understand how, it just does, it connects itself to Mr. Grear in some way having to do with the nerves, or with the mind, it has a kind of sympathy with

whoever wants to use it.

"What is it!" she yells, "what is that on me! WHAT IS IT! GET IT OFF!"

She starts to scream, unable to move because the thing paralyzes her, she's frozen in place, standing there screaming. The shimmering cloud spreads over the back of her body, and as it spreads her screams come more rapidly, like fast breaths, like a broken record: scream, scream, scream, scream, scream, scream, scream. . . .

Mr. Grear is shaking all over, his back against the wall, his fingers digging into the padding, his eyes focused crazily on the shimmering mist inching its way over the girl's flesh. As it covers more of her body his experience gets more intense, it starts to build, he becomes a wild man. I've never seen him like this. It must be because the girl looks so much like Mrs. Grear, and I have the strange thought that now his marriage is complete, that he's finally getting a taste of what it would be like with his wife, because the iceberg who won't touch his real wife is red hot with pleasure now, he's exploding with it, he's shouting it.

His face becomes beet red and twisted, his mouth starts dropping strings of drool. Then he lets out one final gasp, strikes oil, and falls to the floor. He curls up and starts to groan.

I get ready with the jar, because the moment Mr. Grear is through the cloud-thing starts to shrink, uncovering itself from the girl's skin until it's just a little patch again and, like it knows exactly what to do, drifts off her body and goes back into the jar, an obedient pet. I close the lid.

The girl collapses to the floor and starts to sob. Her skin is clean: no scars at all.

Mr. Grear collects his clothes and, without saying a word or even looking at me,

leaves the room.

I put the jar back into the brown bag, help the girl on with her things, and drive her back to the Tenderloin. On the way she doesn't say a thing, she just stares straight ahead, shell-shocked. When I pay her the rest of the money she takes it without even looking at it. Her eyes are lost and empty.

I drive Mr. Gear back to his mansion. "Thank you, John," he tells me, as I open the limo door for him, then, whispering, "I appreciated your services tonight. Very much so. Remember what I told you. Just name the time."

And he leaves me and goes inside. I enter through the garage. The party is still going on, the classical music is still playing, and when I go to the kitchen to grab a late snack one of the waiters enters by another door carrying a silver tray and I catch a peak of the hall, of all the men in their tuxedos, and the classy debs in their long gowns, and the political people, and Mr. Gear sitting next to his wife, neatly dressed again and cool as ice, like nothing happened.

I finish my snack and walk outside by the garden and smell the wet earth and feel the cool breeze on my face. The rain has stopped. I was going to quit my job. But now I don't know. After what I saw tonight, especially. Because the French girl and I, it's just a superficial thing, it doesn't really go deep, and on the drive back Mr. Gear told me to just name the time and I could try the shimmering thing for myself. Just as a little Christmas bonus, he said.

I don't know if I can resist.