

the
photogenic
nightmare

by sam deleo

"Her skin's so supple and pure," said Harrison. "It drives me crazy. I mean really crazy."

"She's something else," said Briggs, grabbing the photo Harrison had for a closer look and then giving it back to him.

Harrison had become restless sitting at home alone so he drove over to Briggs' house to see if he wanted to get a beer and some lunch before they went to a book signing later. So far they had done nothing but look at Harrison's photo since he arrived and they sat down on the couch.

"She says she's not sure she can keep up the pace anymore, that she needs some time to figure what she wants to do next."

"Everyone goes through that," replied Briggs, "she's no different. Just a little smarter and prettier than most."

Harrison got up and began pacing around the room. He was wearing a tight-fitting silk shirt and super-baggy Jenco pants, which had caused Briggs to yell, "My God, what's happened to your legs!" upon opening his door. Briggs was more sedate than Harrison in both dress and demeanor. Unlike Harrison, his desire to be more cultured was genuine. Like Harrison, he had no idea what "culture" meant. Harrison picked up the remote to Briggs' CD player and began skipping to different songs everytime he passed by the stereo — classical, jazz, loud rock, everything Briggs had loaded in the carousel — until Briggs told him to cut it out.

"It's kinda weird," said Harrison. "It feels like I'm in love and I don't want to be and I can't help it."

"Maybe you are. I'm thirsty," said Briggs, getting up. "You?"

"Look at her. I can't stop looking at her."

"A girl like her only comes around once every so often," yelled Briggs from the kitchen.

Harrison started up from the couch again, relaxed back in his seat and then jumped to his feet. "I have no idea what I'm gonna' do."

"Just say what feels right," said Briggs placatingly, returning with a couple of beers.

"She says she wants to have some kids eventually," said Harrison, circling the sofa with the photo. "But she has no idea when. She says her career has to come first now."

"She's still young."

"I know, but she's so smart. How can she be that uncertain at 26?"

"Hell, I didn't even finish college until I was 25."

"No?"

"Hell no," Briggs rejoined matter-of-factly.

"You're right. She's just young." Harrison looked at the photo more affectionately, speaking in baby talk. "You're just young. You need time to figure things out, don't you." Briggs was standing in front of the TV with his beer, clicking channels. They were both lost in their own momentary reveries, both in spaces far from where their bodies were.

"Ha-who am I kidding anyway," said Harrison. "I'm 32 and do I really know, I mean REALLY know, I'm ready for a family now? Ya' know what I mean?" But Briggs didn't know because he hadn't been married yet either and he was busy watching a man sanding an end table on a cable channel.

"She's just so damn beautiful... Hey!"

"Wha-yeah, yeah," said Briggs. "You got no argument from me there."

They agreed to get something quick to eat at a pub close to the bookstore. They ate in almost total silence because Briggs couldn't seem to interest Harrison in anything he said.

When they arrived at the bookstore they were told by a clerk that the Jennifer Beverly book signing was on the second floor but that "there were so many people who showed up and her schedule had become an issue so we had to start it early. It just ended. Sorry." Harrison ran up the stairs in a panic, with Briggs following close behind. One last person was getting a book signed by an exhausted-looking Jennifer Beverly.

Harrison took one step toward the desk and froze.

"What's the matter? Go ahead," encouraged Briggs.

"Shut up, I know. It's just butterflies." Harrison steeled himself and walked up a few feet from the desk. He produced the photo on the desk, which had the pink reminder of ketchup in one corner. He had insisted on leaving it out on the table in the pub.

Her face was even more beautiful to him in person. Her skin, which he could now almost touch, so supply fit her every sinew and cingulum that he was convinced it could not ever be creased.

"Do you mind? We're talking here," said the woman getting her book signed. Harrison moved off to a magazine shelf with his photoe, careful to remain in earshot.

"What do I do about my shins?" the woman asked.

"What seems to be the problem?" said Beverly.

"Well, look at them," said the woman pulling up her slacks. "They're gourds!" This exposing of her legs below the knees had the effect of making the woman both freer and more agitated at the same time. "Here, you want to see, too!" she called to Harrison, who instantly made himself appear to be fully engrossed in the July issue of Creative Gardening he quickly grabbed from a rack. "Why doesn't everybody have a look at them," she yelled to two clerks shelving books by the stairwell. "Come on, ev--"

"Here honey, why don't you have some water and I'll try and give you a few tips," said Bevery, touching the woman gently on the shoulders and filling her a cup from the pitcher on the desk. "You can firm up your shins and calves by simply pointing your toes down as far as you can and then bringing them back up as far as you can, repeatedly. But you really shouldn't get so upset about something like that, you're beautiful. It's much more important just to feel good about yourself. It's tough, I know. Everything seems to rush by us so quickly. We all spread ourselves too thin. So don't feel alone. Be good to yourself."

"I know," said the woman. "I'll try. You're talk was great tonight, by the way. Thanks again, Miss Bevery."

Caring and genuine, as well as beautiful, Harrison thought. He now felt a warm admiration for her rise from his chest. He'd waited for this moment for what felt like an eternity, but especially since he first read in the paper that she would be appearing in St. Louis to sign copies of her just-published book on beauty and fitness tips. He approached the desk and smiled.

"Miss Bevery?"

"You're late!" she said in a not-so-quiet whisper. "I've been just sitting here waiting." She brushed a blond bang off her forehead, grinned and said, "Just sitting waiting" once more.

"Uh- we're sorry to hear we missed your talk," mumbled Harrison. "Miss Bevery, I've seen all of your films, I read your book, I read this month's article about you in Profile and tore out this photo for you to sign. Would you sign it for me?"

"That article misquoted me. I said I've always wanted to have children, and that my career will only come first until then. And you know that, Bobby."

"I do?!" said Harrison, stunned by her knowledge of his first name. "How did you... What--"

"You're not going to tell me why you're late?" she queried coyly, and then hardened her tone. "You didn't have to work today."

Harrison felt droplets of sweat break beneath his new shirt. For the first time he noticed his legs were not in contact with any of the material of his pants and, for a split-second, thought he was naked.

"Did you think I'd be just fine talking to these idiots and then taking a taxi to the hotel alone?"

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Bobby. You had the whole damn day off! So the two of you drank beer while I sat here and signed these damn books?”

“We weren’t doing anything, I swear,” pleaded Harrison. He felt a disorienting headache rush, as if it were curded blood, to his frontal lobe.

“This is it,” she said getting up.

“This is what?”

“It’s over. You’re not the one for me. You weren’t for real, you didn’t care.” She quickly grabbed her things, stuffed them in her briefcase and pushed herself past him.

“Wait Jen- Miss Beverly.” She turned and violently snatched the photo from his hands.

“This is all you want, isn’t it,” she said, scratching her autograph so hard across the photo it punctured the paper, then flinging it in his face. “I thought you were different. But you’re just like everyone else.”

Harrison pursed his lips to utter “Wait” but failed, stopped by the conclusion that, somehow, some way, it was better things should end like this.

He watched the back-and-forth firming of her upper thighs and buttocks beneath her short skirt as she marched toward the steps. Briggs approached his friend to comfort him as best he could.

“There’ll be others, pal,” was all he could summons.