

Ivory Soap

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SHE—blonde and thin as sticks, her hair dyed black—came free from Terminal Island penitentiary and went immediately to phone her husband Nick Winnoe. She believed him to be located somewhere in New England, where he had *not* been enduring the two years of her prison sentence but had surely continued the old games and deceptions, which she could imagine too well. Now, more interested in his money than his vain tricks, she wanted fare in order to transport herself and her friend Bip Rattray from Los Angeles to New York City so that they could make their scheduled rendezvous with Mungo Croquet, the man who had abetted Sylvia Winnoe's imprisonment in the first place, and who now needed the two women for other activities, Sylvia knew from his letter, activities which might well land them both in the joint yet again.

Sylvia had one hundred government dollars in a suede shoulder bag, and on her body she wore the clothing in which she had been busted on the first of February, 1968: an amber corduroy skirt and a worn but elegant workshirt. Her hair was fistful short, her complexion white as paper.

While Bip waited outside the phone booth in her boyfriend's car, a yellow Datsun station wagon with Texas plates, Sylvia called Decatur in San Francisco, hoping to learn Nick's latest phone number.

"Decatur!" she said into the telephone; her husky penitentiary voice.

"Who's that?"

"It's Sylvia."

"Oh yeah . . . like Sylvia you don't sound."

She sent a quick nasal snort over the wire, and pitching her voice higher, said, "I'm out today, Decatur, I'm free. Bip got out a month ago. Listen, I have to go to New York, both of us do. How can I get hold of Nick? He never wrote . . ."

"Shit," said Decatur.

"Hey, don't shit me, man, you owe me a favor." Her voice turned down again. "You know I'm still with artichoke," she said, using a code word Croquet had delivered to her in prison.

Decatur laughed like some fool of a stage villain. "There is no heart," he said, and the line clicked dead.

\$99 left.

She folded the booth doors and went to lean into the Datsun for a talk with Bip, who was black and ample, with a head of afro and an expression as detached as plastic.

"You get it?" Bip asked her.

"I got that crook in San Francisco." Sylvia sighed through her teeth. "But he wasn't about to give me a number. Nothin'."

Bip pointed a smooth peach-colored finger at Sylvia's nose. "Didn't I tell you? Most folks don't appreciate being rapped at by ex-cons over the phone." She cocked her head and brought up a big white smile. "No raps for the taps, Miz Indiscreet."

"Well I can't get Nick with just my brain, can I?"

Sylvia reached across and extracted an Alpine from the pocket over one of Bip's mountain boobs. After Bip applied the car's lighter, Sylvia blew a flat stream of smoke at her friend.

"Croquet knows where he is," she said, but she had no idea where *he* was either, only where he had written he would be two days hence.

S

When you're out come to NYC & I shall use you well. Everything else is yr own business. Find me at 11th St. on May Day, and bring the black one if you want. Anon.

MC

"Maybe he send you a message through the aether," Bip said, as if she didn't mean it particularly. "Come on, we're wasting time, sister. I got to get this car back to Stanley."

"Why doesn't Stanley spring for the money?" Sylvia asked, knowing what the answer would be.

Bip laughed and caused the car to start. "Shit, he'd kiss a pig before he would do such a thing. But get in here, there's an idea in my feeble head."

Sylvia shrugged and entered the automobile, fairly certain that Bip's scheme would involve some complication of sex and the legally dubious. They crept into the great swarm of traffic, as determined an interracial couple as you could find on the Santa Monica Freeway that particular day.

In Benedict Canyon, Beverly Hills, they ascended Stanley's drive, a way as convoluted as a marble shoot, as steep as a shed roof. Bip whooped them up the ramp and brought the Datsun's bumper to within two fingers of Stanley's weathered portal. Inside, across the bricked floor of the nearly empty living room, and

out onto the sundeck that overlooked the dips and whorls of the canyon, they discovered Stanley nude and asleep. Sylvia gazed with interest and a certain amusement at this specimen: wiry Stanley, a man of golden skin and red pubic hair—she saw—as vulnerable as a dozing whippet.

“Hey white boy,” Bip hissed, as if to lure him to some wicked assignation. Stanley cupped his bespeckled balls and sighed through his ajar mouth. Bip chuckled and looked at Sylvia with a pleased grimace. “If you’ve been dreaming about nekid men for two years this Stanley ought to about ruin them dreams . . . Hey boy, Sylvia’s here.”

“Don’t,” Sylvia said, “he’ll wake up soon enough.” She liked the way his penis fell loose against one thigh, thought it a decent way to re-acquaint herself with the things. “He’s pretty, a damn sight prettier than Nick.”

“He’s just Stanley, dreaming about himself. You want something?” Bip touched the stuff of Sylvia’s shirt. “I know, you want a shower, you want a shower all by yourself. That’s the first thing I did when I came out of that fuckin’ place. I said to Stanley, Stanley you just hold on to yourself for a bit while I go love that shower, just me’n that water and no *women* bespeakin’ my fat ass.”

Sylvia grinned and dropped her shoulder bag to the deck. “I could dig it,” she said.

Stanley scratched, snuffled deep in his throat and threw a forearm across his eyes.

“Come on then,” Bip said, “I’ll show you.”

They went across the cool bricks and into a bedroom that was furnished with a waterbed and a stack of open-front cubes full of clothing. Bip took from one cube a lavender towel, tossed it at Sylvia, and indicated the bathroom, where Sylvia could see a dark commode and a portion of the shower’s sliding glass doors.

“You want some other clothes?” Bip asked as Sylvia began to undo the ties of her skirt.

Sylvia laughed. “Now what of yours could I wear?”

Bip cuffed her cheek, words rising up from low in her throat. “Shee-it, you can have some of Stanley’s pants,” she grabbed a burgundy garment from another cube, “here . . . and this strappy top for your li’l titties.”

Sylvia dropped the skirt and used one foot to boot it up into Bip’s laughing face. “Don’t make fun of my breasts, momma,” she insisted, unbuttoning her shirt while Bip dropped Stanley’s clothes and whisked Sylvia’s skirt from her face. With her two hands Bip ripped the old corduroy in two as if it were newsprint. “Hey!” Sylvia cried.

“It’s a new era, baby sister. You don’t want these shit-for-rags.” Bip grabbed hold of the shirt even before Sylvia had shrugged it off her back, and with a jerk Bip spun her out of it. Before Sylvia could say another word, Bip had reduced the thing to tatters. “Now them drawers, and that bra-seer,” she ordered.

Sylvia backed off, toward the bathroom door. She liked the game well enough, loved Bip as much as anyone, and appreciated that their new freedom meant they could play without fear of the bull dyke halo that Bip, in prison, had found

funny enough to hate. Sylvia reached for the center of her own back, elbows extended like wing stubs, and undid her bra, which she hunched out of and dropped to the floor at the same time she began to retreat from Bip's approach. Ignoring the flimsy bit of government-issue white, Bip came on, motioning with a regal palm.

"Them drawers, jail-chick, I want 'em!"

Sylvia's back mashed against the door jamb. "You leave me be, Bip Rattray," she declared, "or I'll snatch you baldheaded and take up with that pretty Stanley, instead of your black self."

"Oh you think so, huh." Bip loomed over Sylvia, a Masai warrior, a princess in a tie-dyed cotton shift; she grinned so briefly that Sylvia might have missed it as she bent at the waist, charged forward and buried her head in Bip's pillow belly.

"Oomph," Bip said, but retreated not an inch. She reached down Sylvia's lowered back with both hands until her fingers slid gently beneath the weak elastic band of the underpants. In a motion as smooth as removing a child's bathing suit, Bip's hands went on over Sylvia's lean buttocks, emerged, and continued along her shanks until Bip, now bent over Sylvia's back, was able to get a grip on her calves and swiftly come erect. So that Sylvia found herself upended, dangling, and she could feel and hear the drawers rip asunder from the natural force of Bip's elbows.

Sylvia shrieked and knew a roaring of blood in her ears, then was briefly startled to apprehend that Bip was directing a cool stream of her own lungs' air over Sylvia's parched private parts.

"There you go, darlin', you free now. Free at last!" With this ejaculation Bip lowered her friend to the floor, stepping backward in order that Sylvia might gradually—from neck to ankles—become supine, and on the keen bricks as peacefully naked as ever she had been.

She looked down along the length of her body, past the brief nipples, and could see the upper end of the rufous scar which ran vertically from the arc of fair pubic hair to the tip of her sternum. In the middle distance Bip's dusky feet were planted between her own.

"I can't move," Sylvia said. "Why don't we stay here, both of us with Stanley. I don't want to go to New York, Bip, I don't want that life again."

"You're hooked, convict, or had you forgot?"

"I could change my name, go some place where they never heard of drugs or sabotage or magical anarchist bullshit."

Bip gazed down at her, at once gentle and harsh. "Lord, chile, that Mungo Croquet would find you if you turned up one of those Buddhist nuns in Katmandu."

"Then I wouldn't be a nun long, would I? . . . that heavenly bastard." She drummed her fingers on the scar as if she were playing a recorder—if Nick hadn't scared her off that bridge she'd still have a spleen, and an interrupted body for whoever cared to have it. "So you really think Stanley can put us next to some money."

Bip looked relieved at the change of subject. "He's clever awake, and he's a weavin' spider in his bizness, I told you."

"Okay, okay, I'll do whatever I have to do, but now, love, please put me in the shower, wash away my sins and crimes against the state."

"I'll put it on for you, then get Stanley to crack his ass."

Bip stepped over Sylvia and into the bathroom.

"What am I going to do for underwear, Bip-o, now you've destroyed mine? Stanley's?"

Bip answered in time with the rush of the shower water. "You won't need no underwear come the revolution, sweet honky."

"Yeah, babe, we'll all be dead. Excuse me, please, I'd like to be alone."

In the shower, the water—an almost solid cyclinder of it—fell against the back of her neck while she washed with a sliver of Ivory soap. Momentarily her mind flew back to the prison showers, where deliberately shaped bars of this same white soap often served as lathered dildoes, as public a matter as brushing your teeth in front of their floor's forty women, public rapture for any reactionary heteros that might remain among the group. Not for Sylvia, this particular activity. She bent forward, the water thumping her vertebrae, to cleanse her vagina, anus, thighs, calves, and all the crevices of her toes. She thought of Nick (toe-sucker, hairy goblin of cunnilingus) and wondered idly but with a twinge of anxiety for her yet-husband, where in hell he was. Was he still the public mechanic, the secret playwright (for Croquet?), in his someplace called New England? And did he even know she was out? Had Decatur maybe called his old friend a warning right after her aborted call to San Francisco? Told him his dope-smuggling wife ("You get caught, artichoke will back you front and center. No way you'll go to prison, Syl.") had been sprung eight months early for impeccable behavior? And did Nick now feel—after two years of reciprocal silence: "Why isn't your husband on the correspondent list, Mrs. Winnoe?"—any obligations to her at all? Money, responsibility, love. She doubted it. She was on her own, and elusive Croquet waited (or would arrive) in New York with instructions for her future: orders for the seventies.

\$99 left, plus some change, and not a stitch of clothing to call her own.

Later, in the afternoon twilight of Stanley's living room, Sylvia—dressed as Stanley—met Stanley, who continued nude, though now awake. He sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the door to the sundeck and seemed to be examining the follicles of his thighs, picking and flicking at imperfections, though Sylvia could see none. His face, no longer sleep-loose, was a model of regularity, almost a parody of male-model handsomeness, caused, she thought, by the thick head of outrageously *red* hair. Were he to dye it, say black, like Sylvia's own, he might put Warren Beatty to shame, but as he was he was only strikingly incongruous. She liked him: his slightness, and the way he concentrated on the details of his body, with no apparent notice of her as she stood in the bedroom door wearing his burgundy pants and the white cotton tanktop.

Off in the distance, behind a brick half-wall that separated the kitchen from

the main room, Bip seemed at work. Her ball of hair glowed dusty gray in the light from the copper hood over the stove. When she felt Sylvia's presence and discovered that Stanley was apparently unaware of Sylvia's entrance, she called out, "Stanley!"

He did not react immediately but then did raise his face full at Sylvia, and smiled whitely, perfectly. His eyes were gray-green, perhaps too exuberant. Sylvia wondered if he saw her, had a sense that he might be *seeing* what was not there, something gaudy and malevolent, certainly not her frail self.

"Hello there," she said.

Stanley raised one hand to the level of his head, palm forward, and continued the smile. He narrowed his eyes, then made them go wide, as if he were trying to provoke a child to laughter. Sylvia found herself mimicking the gesture, returning the signal, whatever it meant, excited by this first ritual with a non-official man in two years. She moved toward him and was surprised when he leapt to his feet and stood with the faint tremor of a released spring, smiling still.

Not a jot of embarrassment: face, skin, flaccid penis poking like a haloed thumb from his groin, she saw, though she continued to watch his eyes, not sure what he saw.

Bip hooted from the kitchen. Again, Stanley appeared not to hear, but the smile drew down, the teeth went away, and he looked only eagerly pleasant.

What the hell, Sylvia thought. She had listened to Bip talk about this fellow for a year and a half; he was no stranger, strange though he might be now. She stepped into his aura, put a white hand on either of his amber shoulders, and kissed him directly upon his lips.

Stanley sniffed. His lips were dry, taut, chapped, yet there was a taste of sweetness that Sylvia hadn't expected from a man who had been asleep in the sun: no sour grog of breath. His sniff seemed to dimple the flesh of her cheek, though she knew she had only *heard* it. She moved her head away from his but kept her hands affixed to him, measuring the thinness of his width, this man, his ribs. Naked before her. Smelling—she knew it in a rush—of cocaine and Ivory soap.

"Mrs. Winnie," he said, "I am you. Are you not me?"

The clothes, his clothes. She felt herself *behind* them, bagged like groceries in Stanley's fresh containers. And she was aroused, as Bip had told her would be the case with this little man. Her calves tingled under the trousers. She removed her hands from him. He failed of reacting; he failed of everything except a demeanor that in its cocked stillness gave her pleasure, and she knew for certain that men had not gone from her ken.