

Chapter 1 *“The common cold of the male psyche is fear of commitment.”* – Richard Schickel

January 13, 1999.

The man staring from the formalwear shop's mirror at Adam Painter had journeyed thirty-three years, nine days to be bound into the white tux with sky blue lapels. Bow tie, cummerbund, studs and tails. Adam had seen prisonwear that looked more comfortable. In his mind lived the self_ image of a slim, young man with golden hair and sparky blue eyes, who snorkeled South Florida's reefs with manatees, occasionally rode leatherbacks above the seabed, broiled freshly_ caught lobster tails on a hibachi set just above the high water mark in the sand. When had he become the man in the mirror? Why hadn't he noticed? The young Adam would not have tolerated the wizened tailor fitting the tux, would have ripped the garment off rather than chafe at the neck or be strapped across the belly, swaddled in this archaic costume which had watched hundreds like him march to the altar.

As Adam fidgeted the old tailor took a pin from his mouth, placed it just so on the tux. Skip Converse, Adam's best man, stood by the mirror, making no attempt to conceal his amusement. “Listen, Adam, getting married's not that big a deal. I've done it three times. Though never in quite so stupid a monkey suit.” Skip owned a tux, so he didn't have to suffer this particular indignity.

Adam tugged on the hem of the jacket. “And divorced three times as of today,” he said. Earlier this morning Adam and his fiancée, Gloria, had gone to the Broward courthouse for their wedding license. Adam had stayed to serve as a residency witness for Skip. He'd been best man at all three of Skip's weddings and the witness at all three divorces. Adam brushed a wisp of hair off his forehead, sandy brown now and receding

ever so slightly. Five foot nine, 185 pounds, with love handles. Nose a tad too squat and broad, chin not square enough. He pushed his sunglasses atop his head. The Serengeti aviator-style shades were part of his persona. He'd be more likely to leave the house without his pants than without his Serengetis, a lonely link to his outdoorsy beach boy days.

“You can have me as a guest on your show,” Skip said. “An expert on Florida divorce proceedings, from the husband’s point of view. Divorce as a game show. Wife gets house and stock portfolio, husband gets temporary custody of bimbo as a consolation prize.”

Adam hosted a radio talk show from 8 P.M. to midnight Monday through Friday. He thought of his show as a lighthouse, casting its beam across rocky shoals, a beacon along a desolate shore, comforting those alone in the darkness. “I don’t think so,” Adam said. “You may fit my target demo, but I don’t think my listeners are quite ready for you.”

“Their loss. My divorce and your first wedding the same week,” Skip said. “Karmic.”

“My only wedding. I hate this stupid tux.”

“You picked a chick who gives a shit about such things,” Skip said. “Give me a quickie courthouse wedding any day. Save the money for the bachelor party.”

Gloria had insisted on a formal affair with all the trimmings: bridesmaids, ushers, organ music and flowers—more than a little expensive. And for whom? His only family was his mother in a nursing home; she hadn’t known Sunday from ice cream in five years. Gloria’s parents were long dead. This soiree for two hundred of Gloria’s most

intimate friends had wiped out his savings, with plenty of bills yet to pay. “I’ve never spent so much money,” Adam said. “But it’s what she wanted. And except for the ring, she’s paying half.” Adam had suggested that instead of buying a diamond they put a down payment on a new car, an engagement car. Gloria hadn’t liked that idea.

Adam sipped a Jolt cola, all the sugar and twice the caffeine. Sometimes he felt as if he were watching himself live life. Through the Serengetis he spied on the world, pretending to be calm and calculated, sardonic and sarcastic. Radio talk show hosts observed. Everything offered material and a detached part of Adam took notes. Especially at his own behavior, which after the fact sometimes seemed almost slapstick to him. He looked into his eyes in the mirror, the boyish spark gone.

Skip laughed. “Statistically, not only will Gloria be your wife in four days, but she’s your future ex-wife. You’re just pissing the money away on a short-term investment.”

Adam shook his head. “I’m not you, Skip. If I weren’t sure, I wouldn’t do it.”

As the tailor measured Adam, Skip walked behind them to the counter by the cash register, Adam watching over his shoulder in the mirror. Skip picked up a pack of cigarettes belonging to the tailor from the display case on which the register stood, shook three or four out of the packet and slipped them into his shirt pocket. Adam wished Skip wouldn’t always do that.

Adam had known Skip since the fifth grade. They didn’t spend much time together, went as much a year without seeing each other. But you can’t make new old friends, Adam’s mother had always said. Other than Gloria and his college sweetheart

Christine, only his mother among all the women of the world had ever truly loved him.

And now most days she didn't even know him.

“So you're really sure?” Skip asked.

The tailor took the jacket into the back of the shop, said it would be ready shortly.

Adam hesitated. “Yeah, I'm sure.”

Skip shrugged. “If you say so. Check out these colors,” he said, pointing at the cummerbunds with matching studs and bow ties in the glass case: tartans, checkerboards and paisleys. “I like this one,” he said. “Pussy pink. Who the hell would wear a pussy pink tuxedo?”

“You think about pussy too much,” Adam said.

Skip laughed. “And you don't think about it enough.”

Adam thought about it often enough. Getting it was a different story.

The tailor brought out the tux in a plastic protective bag and Skip and Adam walked out of the shop into the afternoon Florida sunshine, yellow and strong. Downtown Hollywood had a funky feel, like South Beach before it turned into a mecca for the glitterati, and then for all the wannabes. Faux cobblestones, ersatz gaslights and frilly awnings lined the boulevard. Coffee bars, sidewalk poetry readings, Thai restaurants and tattered theaters, next to Mom and Pop pharmacies, photo studios, and pawn shops. The neighborhood and the trendy, artsy place met here. Adam liked it.

Two women in their mid-twenties walking out of the dry cleaners next to the tux shop almost bumped into them; one with blonde waist-length hair that glowed in the sunshine, the other a short-haired brunette, pretty enough, but nondescript in comparison.

As the women walked away, Skip stared. “Jesus,” he said. “Her legs stretch from the sidewalk to heaven. How’d you like to fuck her?”

Adam knew which one he meant. “I’m getting married Saturday, Skip.”

“You’re not dying. I’d happily make that one my future ex-wife for six months or so.”

“I’m never going to cheat on Gloria.”

Skip smiled. “Yeah, right. So two lawyers are walking down the street, and a hottie, like that one, approaches. One lawyer nudges the other and says how’d you like to fuck her? The other lawyer looks at the woman, looks back at his friend, puzzled, and says Fuck her out of what?” Skip guffawed at his own joke. Lawyers heard all the lawyer jokes, and Skip reveled in repeating them, as if self-deprecation separated him from other lawyers. He’d told Adam this one at least four times.

“I mean it,” Adam said. “That’s the whole point of getting married, isn’t it?”

Skip looked at Adam thoughtfully. “You think getting married’s about not cheating?”

“It’s about commitment.”

“Love and marriage aren’t about being with somebody you can live with, but being with someone you can’t live without. You’re thirty-three years old and you’re never going to fuck another woman except Gloria again till you die? Maybe forty, fifty years?”

It’s not like Adam had had very many. Just Christine and Gloria, and one stoned-out girl who’s name he’d never known, on a pool table at a drunken college bash. All these years later he still felt ashamed over that. “Being with one woman until you die

seems far better than being alone.” The women walked down the block. Adam stared after them. The blonde’s short-shorts looked spray-painted on. “She is beautiful.”

“Probably lives around here. Want me to find out? You’re not married till Saturday.”

“Don’t be such an asshole, Skip. I’m working tonight. Ceci’s got that stupid wedding shower for me at work tomorrow and we have the bachelor party Friday.”

“Who the hell ever heard of a shower for a guy?” Skip said. “She’s a wacko lesbo.”

“Give me a break,” Adam said, “I couldn’t run the show without Ceci, and the fact that she’s a lesbian has nothing to do with anything.”

“Wasted talent,” Skip said. “Whaddaya say, you want to find out where blondie lives?”

“I love Gloria.”

“Love is blind,” Skip said, “but marriage will sure open your eyes.” He turned to watch the two women climb into a red convertible. “Wait for me,” he said, and headed towards them.

“Jesus, Skip...”

Skip jogged down the block, belly bouncing. The car’s brake lights flashed. Skip arrived at the parking space just as the women pulled off. He ambled laconically back to Adam.

“Got her tag,” Skip said. “Can find out where she lives from DMV. We can pull her license, get her name. We lawyers know useful shit. That one has the potential to be my perfect woman.”

“Nobody’s perfect,” Adam said.

“Somewhere there is a chick as hot as that one who loves sports, is almost as smart as I am, drinks beer, can pay at least half the bills, is bi-sexual and will bring me home women, will tolerate my bullshit and gives a great blowjob. It would be nice if she could cook too, but it’s not necessary.”

Two teen-agers, a boy and a girl, whizzed along the roadway on roller blades, laughing. A city worker stood on a ladder, taking down Christmas decorations from the streetlamps. A wrinkled couple sat on a bus bench held, the woman yakking away, the man staring into the distance. Adam had never thought about defining his perfect woman. Honest, dependable, strong—Gloria’s best features. Who cares if she doesn’t drink beer? Adam thought. Although oral sex once in a while would be nice. Early in their relationship Gloria had handed him a saltshaker and said, I want you to take this whole thing in your mouth, as far as it will go, then move your mouth up and down on it. You’re kidding, right? he’d said. No, I mean it, she said. He’d done as she asked, gagged on the first stroke. How much fun is that, Richard Adam Painter? she’d asked. That had pretty much been the end of blowjobs. “I love Gloria,” he said again. They moseyed towards Adam’s van.

“What is love, anyway?” Skip said. “And why are you marrying her? She hates my guts. That’s a bad sign right there.”

“Everybody who knows you hates your guts. She wants a commitment.”

They climbed into Adam’s dusty Plymouth Voyager.

Skip shrugged. “It’s better to be hated for who you are, than loved for who you’re not.” So that’s why she’s getting married. Why are you?”

“Because I had to marry her or lose her.”

Skip pulled out one of the tailor’s cigarettes and lit it up. “That’s an answer or a question?”

“How many times do I have to tell you I hate it when you smoke in my car?”

Skip inhaled deeply, blew a long plume of smoke. “As many as you want.”

“At least roll the damn window down.”

Adam drove Skip back to his car, then headed home to the 40's era coral rock home he and Gloria owned by Dumfoundling Bay in North Miami’s Eldorado neighborhood. Ancient live oaks and banyan trees canopied the serpentine back street, accented by towering royal palms. He’d been raised across the causeway on Miami Beach, and considered Biscayne Bay with its hidden coves and broken shards of island his backyard. How long since he’d kayaked in the Oleta River’s mangroves, sailed on the bay’s pale blue sand flats, snorkeled over turtle grass, camped on Elliot Key? Gloria didn’t get it about the outdoors. She refused to walk barefoot on grass for fear of stepping on a worm. To her roughing it meant staying at a hotel with no room service, though she’d reluctantly joined him on diving and fishing trips now and again.

He pulled into the driveway. Gloria always parked on the left, Adam on the right. She slept on the left, he on the right. When they ate Gloria sat on his left, he on her right. They used to spoon in bed, but nowadays they pecked each other on the cheek and rolled over, butts barely touching.

Adam and Gloria had started a life together here. Like his old jeans and sweatshirt, like their relationship, the house fit comfortably. Was he marrying Gloria because it was easier than not marrying her? She loved him—although he wasn’t exactly

sure why. At least he thought she loved him. Did he love Gloria? He thought so. Could he love anybody? What was love, anyway? He thought of the day just over a year ago they'd decided to marry, over Sunday brunch at Martha's Restaurant overlooking the mangroves of West Lake Park, how they'd come home that day and made love for hours, then lay in bed, cuddling, making plans for the future.

As Adam walked into the house, their two golden labs, Merry and Pippin, came bounding up to him. Adam squatted and scratched their bellies, as they licked his face. Gloria sat looking out through the sliding glass doors to the pool, a legal pad covered with neatly ordered, color-coded post-it notes in front of her, the cordless phone cradled in her neck. The view from the back of the house always entranced Adam—sea oats and sea grapes and black mangroves lined the grey deck of iron-hard Dade County pine and spilled over into the brown canal leading to the blue bay. Every once in a while a manatee, or even a dolphin, found its way to their dock.

Trim in a her jogging outfit, Gloria glowed, gloriously tanned; she had a 7:30 A.M. date every Friday at a local tanning salon, referred to herself as tanorexic. She obsessed over weight, always embracing diets. She looked fine, though not as good as the blonde in the red convertible or Christine. Gloria was the second love of his life—you only had one first love, his mother always said, and he had let his, Christine, slip away just after graduating University of Miami. How would his life be different if he had held onto her? Adam and Christine had had passion. Merry and Pippin curled up at Gloria's feet. Absentmindedly she reached over and scratched Pippin behind the ears.

Adam and Gloria had met at the Bass Art Museum. As he admired a painting of Ophelia dead in the water amidst flowers, Gloria just walked up to him and began

explaining that the pre-Raphaelite school the painting belonged to actually came after Rafael, but they adopted a style popular before Rafael. Adam had no clue what she was talking about, but he liked the picture and Gloria had been beautiful and witty, and he'd invited her to join him for lunch.

They often attended the theater together. He preferred musicals, she drama. He taught her the simple joy of Rogers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Lowe, Stephen Sondheim, Andrew Lloyd Weber; she turned him on to Beckett, Lanford Wilson, Ibsen, Arthur Miller. During season they browsed outdoor art festivals at Coconut Grove and Las Olas, Renaissance Fayre at Vizcaya, the ethnic bouillabaisse of the world's largest fiesta, Calle Ocho. There were also the cocktail parties, the endless whirl of business-related social events Gloria insisted her job required. Adam considered these penance for his venial sins.

"Six vegetarian plates, nine kosher," Gloria said into the phone.

Two hundred people. A hundred bucks a plate. Plus booze. Adam would have been happy with ten people, max. But Gloria belonged to a zillion business groups like Women in Health Care and Women's Health Executive Network. She'd made the wedding a networking event. Scores of people Adam hadn't even met were coming. It rather surprised Adam Gloria hadn't printed up resumes to send out with the invitations.

Gloria hung up the phone and Adam walked over to give her a kiss.

She held up her left hand. "Not now. I have to call the bridal shop." Her engagement ring glistened; one and a half carats, pear-shaped. More than six months' salary. Gloria pulled a pink post-it from her pad and stuck it on Adam's chest. "You have to renew your car tag," she said.

His birthday, January 4th, had been the week before. They'd spent it visiting his mother at the nursing home. "Right." He looked again at the ring. The rule of thumb was four months' salary, but a rock had been important to Gloria, so he'd sprung for it. There were a lot more bills yet to pay.

"I'll never fit into that damned dress."

Adam took her hand, squeezed it. "You had them make it too small."

"I had them make it a six. I'll fit into it by Saturday."

"You're an eight."

"I am not!" She picked up the phone, and dialed the bridal shop. "My fat clothes are an eight. My regular clothes are a six." She rubbed her hand across her stomach.

"And there's a four in my future again, like when we first met."

"You look fine just the way you are." Adam walked into the kitchen, took a box of Oreos out of the fridge, ate one, gulped some milk, took two cookies back into the living room.

"I'll pick it up tomorrow at four," Gloria said into the phone. She looked at the cookies in Adam's hand. "Are you eating Oreos again? Did you use a glass for the milk?" She grabbed the small bulge of his belly. "Look at you. You'll soon roll into the house instead of walking in."

She got up, took an Oreo from his hand, stuffed it in his mouth. "Eat that. Chew it good."

He did as she said.

"Now kiss me." Gloria took his face and brought his lips down to hers.

He felt her tongue probe his mouth, flicking around the insides, caressing his teeth and gums. He felt his crotch stir. Maybe they'd make love? In the afternoon? In the middle of the week? Sex had become a three-Saturday-a-month event. Adam rather hoped things would improve on the honeymoon. He pulled her into his arms, reached under her shirt, began to play with her nipple.

She pulled away, laughing. "God, that tasted WONDERFUL. I haven't eaten a sweet in five weeks." She licked her lips. "If I had one tiny bit less willpower I'd run into the kitchen and gobble down that whole damned box of cookies."

Three Saturdays a month. For the rest of his life. He had to say something. Now. "Gloria..."

She had already grasped the phone, "Shhh," she said waving him off. "I have to call about picking up the bridesmaids' gifts." Adam looked about the house. The books and science fiction videos were his. His fishing and dive gear in the garage, the kayak tied to the dock. Everything else said Gloria. Erté and Dalí lithos, aqua leather sectional sofa and matching Ottoman, pale oak tables, silk plants which never needed watering, cool, rose-flecked tile. She'd chosen it all. Six years they'd dated. Four years they'd lived in this house, a deal picked up through the president of the local real estate board who'd been a guest on one of Adam's shows. The house itself oozed Adam-ness: its location, the coral rock, the deck, the trees, the canal—but inside it bore only Gloria's mark.

The Top Ten reasons to get married, he thought. Number ten: the end of the dating game. Number nine: you know when you'll get laid. Number eight: you will get laid. Sex is like air, he thought—it only matters when you're not getting any. Number seven: to have kids. Scratch that, Gloria didn't want kids for a while. Adam fleetingly

thought of the two abortions Christine had. One had been a mistake. Two constituted stupidity. Number six: you don't have to do the shopping, cooking or laundry. They ate out four nights a week, ordered in one—okay so cooking wasn't a big deal. And the cleaning lady who came once a week did the laundry. Gloria hung up the phone, then immediately dialed again. The engine of her efficiency never ceased to impress Adam.

Number five: you always had someone to talk to. Better health insurance and lower auto insurance rates. You always had someone to scratch your back. To live without uncertainty. And the number one reason to get married? So you wouldn't have to be alone.

Merry put his head in Adam's lap. Gloria yakked on the phone to somebody in her wedding party. Adam didn't think much of Gloria's friends, all caught up in the rat race. Adam didn't have many friends, just Skip and Gloria and his co-workers at the station. Did you need ten reasons not to get married? The income tax marriage penalty. The expense and hassle. Gloria hated Skip, said he was a womanizing sleaze, who'd fuck anything with a shadow and then lie to it. Which was true, but irrelevant to Adam. Skip was as loyal as they came. Would Adam be first in Gloria's life or second to her work? Further down the list? Forty or fifty years. Did he love Gloria? Did she love him?

She hung up the phone.

Maybe the best reason not to marry was not having a good reason to marry. Someone you can't live without. Could he live without Gloria? He suspected she could live without him.

"Listen, Adam, I have to run down to..."

He took her hand, put his index finger tenderly to her lips. "We need to talk."

“Not now, Adam. I have too much to do.” She stood up.

“Now, Gloria.” He took her hand, gently rested his on her shoulder, and pushed her back into her chair. He pulled up a chair next to her. “Now.”

She leaned back in the chair and crossed her arms. “All right; make it snappy.”

“Why are we doing this?”

“Doing what? Talking? Because you said...”

“Why are we getting married?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Adam.”

“No, really. Why?”

She stood up. “I don’t have time for this. We’ll talk about it tonight.”

He took her hand. “Sometimes it’s like we’re two people living alone in the same house.”

“What has gotten into you?”

“I don’t think I’m ready to be married,” he said. Married to you, he meant. He feared a life where Gloria lived to get promoted, make money, bask in the minor celebrity of Adam’s career, and he lived for the attention he didn’t get from her.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Adam.”

“You said that already. I’m not being ridiculous. I want to be sure.”

“Everybody at work’s RSVPed...”

“So what? The wedding isn’t about them; it’s about us.”

She stalked to the kitchen. He followed her. She began washing her hands furiously.

“Please talk to me, Gloria.”

She looked at him. “What are you trying to say?”

“Maybe we should wait.”

“Wait? Wait? What do you mean wait? Live together a while longer and get married later? Decide later whether we want to marry?”

That was exactly what he wanted—to stay here with Gloria and the pups. “I’m not sure. I just don’t think we should get married right now.”

“We’re getting married Saturday, Adam. Now stop this. I have things to do.”

“No, Gloria. I don’t want to get married Saturday.”

She looked at him. He looked at her. Neither of them said anything for a few seconds. Merry whined for a treat. “You son of a bitch,” Gloria said softly. “You son of a bitch,” she said louder. “You goddamned son of a bitch,” she yelled. Then softly again, “Why?”

Adam felt a blush creep into his face. “I’m sorry, Gloria, it’s just that....” The conversation with Skip. The blonde in short-shorts. Never having sex with anybody else. That he couldn’t think of a good reason to marry. Living in a home that was Gloria’s, not his. “We don’t talk. We have sex on a schedule. We never make love. It’s like we’re marrying into aloneness, instead of away from it.”

“What does that mean, marrying into aloneness? What am I supposed to tell everybody?”

“Please, Gloria, that’s...”

“You’re paying for everything, Richard Adam Painter,” she said tautly. “Every dollar.”

“That’s not...”

“Everything!”

“Gloria...”

She breathed deeply, clenched and unclenched her fists. “Who is she?”

“Who is who?”

“The other woman.”

“Jesus, Gloria, there’s no other woman. It’s not about ...”

“Some damned bimbo you met through Skip. I should never have left Harvey for you.” Gloria had been dating Harvey when Adam met her. Harvey was younger than Gloria, drove a classic Alfa Romeo, lived on South Beach. She’d told Adam that Harvey was just about the sex.

“There is no bimbo. Can’t we just talk...”

“Talk? Talk? About what? Take your damn dive and fishing gear and get out of my house.”

“Why? I want...”

“I cannot for the life of me imagine why you think I’d care what you want.”

“It’s our...”

“My house. And don’t take the dogs. I’m keeping them. And everything else.”

Merry and Pippin belonged to both Adam and Gloria—they shared the dogs, both loved them, perhaps more than they loved each other.

Adam felt like a car out of control, skidding broadside toward an embankment at a hundred miles an hour. “Gloria, I didn’t mean we should stop living together.”

“You meant you should live in this beautiful house with your beautiful woman to cook and clean and do your laundry and bring home money to pay the bills without any commitment at all.”

He figured he ought not mention she didn't actually do the laundry. “That's not...”

“That's not going to happen. Damned right.” She pulled a box of garbage bags from under the sink and threw them at him. “Pack your clothes and get out.” Merry and Pippin cowered in the kitchen corner, heads resting on their paws, eyes moving from Gloria to Adam and back again.

“I'm not leaving. We should stay here together. Nothing has to change.”

“Like hell,” Gloria said.

He'd found the house. No way would he leave. “If you feel that way, then you leave.”

She picked up her purse. “I'll be back in an hour. You'd better be gone.” She stalked from the kitchen towards the front door. “You're paying for everything,” Gloria shouted from the living room. “You're going to pay and pay and pay.”

The door slammed. Why should he be the one to leave? Merry and Pippin padded over and began to crawl up his legs. He scratched them both behind the ears. She couldn't be serious about the dogs, he thought. Not sure what else to do, he took the box of bags and headed to the bedroom.

#

Chapter 2 Wednesday night, January 13

“*Why are you crying, boy?*” – Wendy Darling to Peter Pan

“Armadillos have four babies at a time, always the same sex,” Dr. Alice Tiptree said.

Three foam eggcrate walls soundproofed Adam’s studio, the fourth wall Plexiglas separating it from the engineering booth where Cecilia Sangine, his board op, screened calls. In the booth banks of electronics climbed to the ceiling. Everything in radio was digital now, replacing the cartridges of Adam’s early days in the biz. “If they’re always the same sex, how do they make new armadillos?” Adam asked. Had to keep the conversation going. Dead air was the mortal sin of talk radio.

Eleven-thirty-two P.M. The night people were coming alive, the day people drifting off, lost nepenthe. This last hour of Adam Painter’s talk show on Miami’s WHOA-AM—*A Couple of Smart People Sitting Around Talking*—was always the loneliest. Day people didn’t understand night people. When you worked till midnight, it was Wednesday night until you went to bed, even though that was typically anywhere from three to six A.M. Thursday morning. Thursday didn’t start until you woke up. Adam didn’t feel like talking tonight. Just before the show he’d called Skip to tell him the wedding was off. Skip had congratulated him.

A round conference table and six chairs filled the small studio. On the table stood four table mikes for guests. A boom mike hung from the ceiling for Adam. A ten-line phone set for call-ins sat on the table. Adam had a half dozen regular callers; a couple called every night, the rest once or twice a week. He’d heard from them before Tiptree came on, and not a single phone line was lit.

“Oh, they have babies of both sexes,” Dr. Tiptree said, “just not at the same time.”

Tiptree, slight and delicate, in her mid-60s, wore a straw hat, blue-tinted wire-rimmed glasses, a khaki multi-pocketed safari jacket. Currently research chief at Miami-Dade County’s Metrozoo, she was a veteran of Yucatan, Malaysian and sub-Saharan jungles. She sat in the soft glow from a lamp behind Adam’s chair. He always turned off the glaring fluorescents in the studio ceiling. The pale yellow light was warm and inviting, the white fluorescent harsh and cold.

“That must make for some degree of domestic harmony,” Adam said.

Ceci, his producer/engineer/board operator had planned a shower for him at the station Thursday. It seemed kind of silly. It wasn’t like Adam and Gloria needed a blender or flatware. Ceci was a little strange, but kind. Adam had left a note on her desk telling her there would be no shower, no bachelor party, no wedding.

He blathered on, filling airtime. “Several science fiction writers have written of planets peopled only by women, and they tend to be more stable, less violent. One gender armadillo families could be much the same.” Science fiction stirred Adam. He thought it the literature of ideas, the sociology of the future, a transcendent transportation from here and now to there and then. If nuclear holocaust struck tomorrow he wouldn’t have to tell everybody that he’d decided not to marry. A fine post-apocalyptic scenario.

“Armadillos are much like humans,” Dr. Tiptree continued. “They are the only animals that can contract leprosy. Of course, then there are pigs. Pigs are probably the smartest animals. Not dogs or dolphins or horses as some people think. Horses are quite stupid actually. And they’re the only ones that can be sunburned. Pigs, I mean.”

“Pigs are the smartest?” He wished he’d get some callers to keep the show moving.

“Yes,” Tiptree said. “Pigs. Well, horses sunburn their noses, but not their bodies. Pigs. Very human-like. Soon scientists will clone pigs to use their hearts in humans.”

“Not monkeys or gorillas? Or dolphins? Pigs?” Being the voice in the dark, the sentinel against loneliness, defined Adam. Night radio was night radio, and you settled for what you could get in the way of guests. Most nights he had guests between eight and ten, then talked and took calls until the show ended. When there were calls. At times Adam carried the show alone into the end of the show. Tiptree slept only four hours a night, and so she had agreed to come on the air late. “Don’t whales have the largest brains?”

“It isn’t the size, it’s what you do with it. Pigs. Absolutely.” Tiptree said. “And pigs have orgasms which last up to thirty minutes.”

“In my next life I think I want to be a pig,” Adam said. He wondered who had figured this factoid out, and how and why.

“But for real human behavior you have to look to the higher primates,” Tiptree said.

“Higher primates?”

“Yes, the apes.” Dr. Tiptree said. “Especially the males.”

“Why the males?” Adam asked.

“Why is problematic,” Dr. Tiptree said. “But male gorillas murder infants fathered by other males, male orangutans rape females who reject their mating overtures,

bands of male chimpanzees engage in turf wars. Human behavior not found elsewhere in the animal kingdom.”

“But not the females?” Adam didn’t understand females. Or how males and females treated each other, and why.

“No. In fact among the bonobo–pygmy chimps–the females form lifetime friendships, and band together to put down aggressive behavior by the males. Among most apes, the highest ranking female is subordinate to the lowest male, but among the bonobo each individual has a relative rank regardless of gender.”

BREAK IN TWO, Ceci typed to him on the computer screen that connected them. She could speak directly into his headphones or type messages on the monitor. When off the air she could speak through the overhead speaker.

He waved acknowledgment to her, looked to the big clock on the wall, the second hand stutter-stepping toward the end of the show. “Lifetime friendships?” That’s what he wanted from a woman–a lifetime friendship, with weekday sex maybe. “And this civilizes the males?” Was cancelling the wedding civilized? Right? What he really wanted?

“So it would seem. It relates to diet and territory. But there’s no question that the female influence reduces the level of violence. Another thing about the bonobo–there are only two mammals besides humans where the females have sex for the sheer joy of it, when not ovulating. Pygmy chimps and dolphins. They engage in volitional sex. We humans tend to define ourselves in terms of animals, define animals in terms of ourselves,” Tiptree said.

“How do you mean?” Adam imagined a male dolphin coping with sex three Saturdays a month. Sex with Gloria had once been wonderful.

“Well, for example did you know that the Sanskrit word for ‘war’ means desire for more cows?” Dr. Tiptree said. “And then there’s what we call groups of animals.”

“Groups of animals?”

THIRTY SECONDS, Ceci typed.

“Yes. A group of frogs is an army, rhinos a crash, ravens a murder, kangaroos a mob, lions a pride, owls a parliament, larks an exaltation. A group of unicorns is called a blessing.”

“A blessing?” Fantasy beasts.

“A blessing. But the animal word that delights everyone at the zoo is dork.”

“Dork?”

“Yes. It’s a whale’s penis.”

Ceci piped in a few bars of the Righteous Brothers’ *You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling* to indicate it was time for commercial.

“I’m Adam Painter, and we’ll be back with Dr. Alice Tiptree from Metrozoo on WHOA’s *A Couple of Smart People Sitting Around Talking* after this message.” He gave the phone number, not that anybody was calling, and flashed Ceci the cut signal. The red light over the door winked out, and an ad for Levis Jeans for Women played through Adam’s headphones and the overhead speaker. What else for women? Adam thought. Why weren’t jeans just jeans? He was lucky to have the ad: national sponsors didn’t ask for his show, they all wanted drive-time. Sometimes the sales staff threw in late night spots as part of a package to lure business.

Just to complicate his life a little more, when Adam had come into work tonight the results from the fall rating book—covering October, November and December—had been on his desk, with a memo from Tommy Griffiths, the station’s Program Director. Adam’s share in his target demographic group of men aged 25-54 had dropped from 1.9 to 1.6. Not a crisis, but not good. Talk radio had become rage radio, with shock jocks, haters and proselytizers each trying to outdo the other in outrageousness. Adam had consciously elected not to walk down that road, and it hurt his numbers. Griffiths’ memo had said Adam needed to watch the trends reported by Arbitron—known as Arbitrends—carefully. Each rating period consisted of three trends, plus the final quarterly numbers. A few weeks into the book the first trend reported, then another trend every three weeks or so. Griffiths wanted to meet with Adam right after his honeymoon to discuss his numbers. Of course now there would be no honeymoon. Jesus, Adam thought, I have really screwed things up.

After the break he struggled through the rest of the show with Dr. Tiptree’s animal tales, invited her to come again, handed off to Bill Hall for the midnight news and traffic report, and left Ceci to see Tiptree out the door. Hall would pass off to an engineer who’d play the nightly hour-long infomercial: *Madame Jacqueline Roux’s Psychic Romance Connection*. Iron Man Jones picked up late night from 1:00 to 6:00 A.M., followed by the morning drive team of Zack and Jack. Adam had worked Iron Man’s shift for three years, before being switched to the 8-12. Gloria had hated it, and it had almost been the end of their relationship. Adam loved the night world and still stayed up into the wee hours; now that Gloria was gone he’d spend more time in the demi-monde.

Adam walked down the corridor to his cubicle, a caricature of a Dilbert cartoon, with a tiny fridge, desk and computer. Only drive-time hosts and management rated offices. He grabbed his shaving kit from amid the clutter of files, press releases and memos, and headed to the men's room. He stripped to the waist, stuck his head under the faucet and lathered his hair from a hotel-room shampoo bottle. He squeezed pink, almond-scented soap from the wall dispenser, rubbed it around in his hands, then slathered it on his armpits. They make cyanide from almonds, Adam thought. That might be a solution. He stuck his head under the faucet when Ceci exploded in, all four-foot-eleven of dynamo, a sheet of paper in her hand.

“What is this, Adam?”

Adam stood, banged his head on the faucet. “Shit. The sign on the door says ‘Men.’”

“What? Are you afraid somebody will see your peepee?”

Soap dripped into his left eye, stinging it and making it tear. “Cancel the shower. I’m taking Thursday and Friday off for personal leave; you cover the show then instead of next week during the honeymoon-that-isn’t-happening. I’ll be back on the air Monday night.” Adam should have cleared the scheduling with Tommy Griffiths. When it came to on-air matters the Program Director was like the Pope, between talent and the General Manager, interpreting the Word from on high. The GM was the face of corporate, the highest authority of all. Theoretically Adam could get spanked for re-arranging things on his own, but Griffiths tended to be lackadaisical about what went on at night. Top share for drive-time was a seven or eight. Good for Adam’s shift was a three. Advertisers, and therefore management, weren’t that interested when people weren’t in their cars.

“Great guests,” Ceci said derisively, looking at the note in her hand. “Some geek from Miami Mensa and the president of the South Florida Science Fiction Society. I was looking forward to what I had scheduled for next week.” As producer, it was Cecilia’s responsibility to book the guests, but Adam picked them. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

Adam shrugged. He rubbed his eye with the back of his wrist, but that only worsened the sting. “I don’t want to talk about it. Just please cover the next few shows.”

Ceci tossed her waist-length ponytail and hooked her thumbs into her bib overalls. “You’ll hate what I’ve booked for while you were supposed to be honeymooning. You didn’t answer me.”

“I’m calling the wedding off—there’s really nothing else to it.” His eye stung. “I just screwed up, okay? I screwed up by deciding to marry her and now I’ve screwed up and lost her, and screwed up and hurt her and I don’t freakin’ want to talk about it.” He bent to wash the soap from his eye.

“Adam...”

“Yes?”

“Why are you washing up in the sink?”

Tears streamed down his face. “I need to find a place to live.” Cold, sudsy water dripped down his neck and back.

“I’d let you stay with me but my wife doesn’t allow men in the house.”

Adam grimaced. “Thanks, I think. Now leave me be to wash this soap from my hair.”

Ceci shrugged and turned to leave. She stopped at the door, turned back and said.
“Next time don’t write me a fucking note, okay Adam? Friends don’t communicate by
memo.”

“I didn’t mean to be insensitive. I just didn’t think.”

Ceci shook her head. “You can be a real dork. But it doesn’t make you a bad
guy.”

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