

PART TWO. Invitation to a Dance

"High school is closer to the core of the American experience than anything else I can think of."

—Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

"In skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson



3. A Delectable Frenzy

Whap-whap-whap, went the blades of the chopper, off-camera.

On a wall-sized screen at the far end of the Cabinet Room, toy houses on winding streets drifted past far below. Inset on the lower left, a woman with a mission waved to her husbands and drove off in a late-model car.

This year, a school in a suburb of Dallas had been chosen for the high mucky-mucks' delectation.

The designated slasher?

Karn Flentrop, a Home Ec teacher with killer gams, a clenched fist of breasts, taut and tantalizing lobes, and the perkier bloodlust in her every glance.

For the camera's benefit, Ms. Flentrop's threesome had lingered over a love-hug in their living room.

Hunched, head turned, glued to the tube as he had been for hours sat Willy Wanker, the Secretary of Cultural Impoverishment.

Wanker seldom spoke in meetings, nor did anyone interact with him. His preferred mode of communication consisted of an unending stream of pontifications e-mailed out to all and sundry.

The Secretary of War, a chubby boozier named Barnaby Sloper, he of the bullet head and outsized belly, cracked a joke and wangled his bulk into a chair. Cabinet appointees on either side of him gave polite chuckles.

Then the door opened and a White House lackey with a red face and a rumpled suitcoat bellowed, "President Hargill Windfucker."

All rose to acknowledge their commander in chief. As Cholly Bork tiptoed Windfucker through the door and across the carpet, the elected marionette's limbs lightly clacked like hanging beads parted by a sylph's hand. The Vice President and his entourage followed.

"Be seated, gentlemen. And lady," said the President in Bork's voice, his hands magnanimous, his back angled in a ceremonial bow.

They took seats.

A raised finger, a twist of the neck. "Brief us, Mr. Hix."

Chief of Staff Blathery Hix, a fat folder beneath one arm and a headset on his head, stood next to the President's chair. "Top right, Mister President, coming into view, is Choke Cherry High. Built in the forties. Nicely run down, not enough money, fuck the kids. They lobbied hard this year for the

privilege of a presidential viewing, hoping for funding in return. I gave them our usual empty promises."

"Never commit when you can waffle, Hix."

"Yes, sir. Activate tunnel cameras." The helicopter view vanished. The screen jumped to a slow infrared glide through the secret backways of Choke Cherry High.

Delia Gaskin rinsed off the whipped suds she had worked up. Then she towed dry and squeezed a dip of skin cream into her right hand. The cream went on smooth, circled along her cheekbones and sharpened back and forth over her nose with one flexing palm.

Delia wore her thirty-eight years well. As one approached forty, one's face tended to take on spots and blemishes. Nothing near as unsightly as the blotch-bursts of sexagenarians like Futzzy Buttweiler. But the vibrancy of youth inevitably faded. That hadn't yet happened to Delia, and for that she was grateful.

Skin care paid off.

Wigwag padded into the bathroom, gave a doleful double-*wumpf* in protest, and padded out, his message delivered.

The fur which rimmed the lop-ends of Wigwag's ears bore toothmarks. Delia reminded herself to brush them out before leaving for the prom. It wouldn't do to fuel, with the kindling of truth, student rumors of her peculiar ways.

In a distant room, a TV newscaster droned on unintelligibly.

Delia buried her face in a thick towel, not bothering to pull it off the rack. Before paper towels and blowers, restrooms had sported unending tugs of linen. The unrolling, eternally dreamy swatch of students passing through Corundum High reminded her of those endless linen strips. They passed along patterns of speech, class notes, cruelties, and rumors, one generation to the next.

Especially rumors.

But Delia wasn't simply a pet lover.

She had a much more interesting life than anyone might suspect. Brest Donner, the tenth grade biology teacher, had stolen a moment with her in the infirmary yesterday.

Brest was a sweet armful.

Her lips had sucked at Delia's friendship lobe, then brushed past her mouth to nuzzle and nip at the bagged left lobe, while Brest's own stylish lobebag swayed a tantalizing few inches away.

Brest's and Trilby's marriage to Bix Donner was crumbling, she had confided. She thought it conceivable that they might whisk Trilby's little girl away with them and go it alone.

If they were circumspect, a female threeway, despite its risk and illegality, might be in the offing.

Bix. Bothersome Bix. Two years before, he had hit on Delia at a faculty-staff retreat. Boorish lump. It never ceased to amaze one, the mates people chose.

The Donner family was slated to chaperone tonight. No doubt, beady-eyed Bix would laser-beam an unwanted glare of lust again and again across Delia's body. That would make things more difficult by half.

But if she cut the sucker down early, she could scoop out some breathing room. Enough, perhaps, that she might manage to set aside the trauma of her *own* prom, two decades past, and ease into the evening's festivities.

Delia dried her lobes vigorously, musing at how plain and unarousing lefties were when one was alone. Really, lefties weren't all that different from righties. Yet the world made such a big deal of covering them at puberty.

America did, anyway. Europe was, as usual, far more enlightened.

Bold upon the beaches.

Delia switched off the bathroom light and strode through her apartment. Her low-slung pup trotted after, a swinging hammock of dogflesh.

The TV voice grew louder: "Here on the eastern seaboard, it's ten to eight. High school doors are about to close. In the more westerly timezones, students and faculty prepare for the evening's events. DBC will provide comprehensive coverage throughout the night, as schools report in. Turnabouts, bizarre methods of slaughter, live updates from selected high schools—it's all here for you, all evening and on into the night, at News Central on DBC's Prom Night Special.

"Tuck Winter has news elsewhere. Tuck?"

Delia glanced at the set. Her body flexed as she walked, more buff than her school uniform led people to suspect.

Dewy-eyed Watt MacQuarrie, standing before a map of the nation, had just swiveled his head toward prankster Tuck Winter, a dumb weather jock whose smug mannerisms Delia hated.

Tuck Winter clearly had aspirations beyond weatherboy. Tonight, he wore a somber face. His left earlobe sported a staid lobebag, unlike the flamboyant ones fans of his weather report were forever sending in.

"Thanks, Watt," he began. "The RepellingCant primary took a nasty turn today, as Carty boosters released a videotape in which Bork Berenson kneels to—"

Delia tuned the sucker out. She left the bedroom door open, in case a sound-snippet lashed in to tantalize.

But as she shrugged into a dressy outfit, not her perennial school-nurse whites, she caught only snippets of the odd report. Plans for the next day's corporate picnics, where the deadwood would be picked off to make way for the previous night's grads. The uptick in stocks tied to mortuaries and crematoria. And some dull editorial on back-biting and finger-pointing among members of the Committee to Assassinate the President.

Commercial music blared.

Delia snugged a blue chiffon bag up about her left lobe. The bow that concealed its elastic tickled her lower helix.

She examined herself in the mirror above her dresser. Dark hair, short and styled. Skin pale and smooth.

A quick rummage through her gym bag. Yep, everything in its place.

The TV audio shifted into the languid unwinding of a saxophone melody.

Delia rushed out to watch.

Resentment toward the rules that dictated who could serve as a designated slasher routinely seethed in her head. Now, that resentment was augmented by the excitement these controversial new perfume ads produced in her.

The eye of the camera caressed the bare sleek cocoa back of a model. As her provocative voice pressed all sorts of sensual buttons, her delicate fingers toyed with a drawstring. The top of the model's lobebag loosened.

She coyly smiled.

Abruptly, the lobebag fell free, a daring stretch of skin coming into view. And as the uncovered tip threatened to hit the eye, the camera cut to a sea anemone provocatively waving its tentacles.

Killer.

Delia's mouth watered and her rage grew.

The fuckwits at the FCC had threatened to pull the plug on this daring ad campaign.

At Corundum High, an equally arbitrary and infuriating imposition of authority dictated that teachers alone—no staff, no principals, and never a school nurse—could off the prom couple.

As far as Delia was concerned, the airwaves belonged to everyone and should be entirely free. Lobesucking orgies on TV ought to be, if demand required, the order of the day.

And *all* adult employees of a high school ought to have an equal chance at being chosen.

Indeed, it was her opinion that passion and zeal should favor those who would put fire and fury into the kill. Delia had vast stores of rage in need of release, both from the student ridicule she had to endure each day and from the painful memories of a love dismembered.

Perhaps tonight would be different.

Things might work out for her.

Maybe Bix would bite it big-time. Brest and Trilby would love her. And she would see the nastiest students sprawled dead upon the Ice Ghoul's lap, ready for a well-deserved fluttering at midnight.

Or perhaps the night held greater wonders than Delia dared imagine.

Somewhere in America's heartland, deep in an urban pustule, a cadre of anti-slasher terrorists, clad in black, slinked along back alleys to gather in the basement of an abandoned elementary school building.

Their leader, lit by moonlight streaming through a caked window, peeled off her ski mask and tucked it into her belt.

Emboldened, her co-conspirators unmasked too.

Eyes flashed from face to face. Great fear dwelt in them. Pride and excitement. The black-clad crew numbered seven, a spinoff from an above-ground anti-slasher organization the government begrudgingly tolerated.

"Let's review the plan," she said. "You and you will detain Sheriff Boltz once he has locked down the school. Gag him, secure his arms, hurry him into the passageways, sedate him, then give me the word."

"What if he puts up a fight?"

She paused, then steeled herself. "Years of talk have gone nowhere. They've shrugged off our protests and petitions." She laughed. "Listen to me. You guys have it memorized."

Eyes on fire, she addressed the questioner: "Use any means necessary. That's why I chose the two of you for this mission. Minimize his pain, but don't hesitate to inflict it. If you have to, waste him. We cannot afford to raise an alarm. The syringe will make him docile but its effects are not instantaneous."

She glanced up into the moonlight, her face tense. Had she heard something?

No.

"You three take the east wing of the school. By now, each of us has burned into our brains a map of the backways. Me and my hubbies will handle the west wing. With luck, we'll be there before the slasher and catch him coming off the elevator from the underground garage. They've secured the garage with a punch code, alarms after the third wrong sequence, so that's out. Other questions?"

She scanned them, her jet-black mop of hair clinging to her scalp.

"I'm proud of you all. Our kids are at stake, their lives yes but also their minds. They will *not* be inured to violence; we and folks like us will see to that. With luck and the grace of a reasonable God, we will end this horror in our generation. There I go again!

"One last check of the walkie talkies."

They tugged them from their belts.

Dexter Poindexter's senses had never been more attuned to his surroundings.

The coupe's interior swirled with seeped-in aromas: cheeseburger wrappings, gym sweat, whiffs of adolescent horniness. Gleams of moonlight shot knife-sharp across the dashboard. The plastic steering wheel slid cool and stippled through his fingers.

A twelve-year stint of classes had come to an end, the last exam passed, the last cafeteria meal chowed down, the last homeroom roster called.

Tonight was the culmination of so many months of attending school that Dex's memory knew nothing else.

True, summer vacations had supplied breathers that, at their best, stretched to eternity—beaches and boat houses and waterskiing on upstate lakes.

But every September, new looseleaf notebooks were purchased, their pungent faux-leather smell beguiling the nose. Book covers were bought as well, Corundum High's colors, a fierce-eyed gray-and-green ram surrounded by ornate shields scrawled with latinate sayings.

Strange as it seemed, the terror Dex felt about school's not resuming in the fall seemed far more heart-stopping than tonight's slim chance at being hacked to death.

No matter whose life ended at the tip of the slasher's blade, he and Tweed would be touched by the killing. Worse if two of their best buds, or particularly bright-futured seniors, bought it.

But they had been steeled for that.

The victims' names, engraved in proud italic, would be added to the gold plaque in the display case at Corundum High's entranceway, their lives lauded in the newspaper and in local churches the morning after.

And life would go on.

Familiar streets peeled away, the same houses he passed whenever he drove to Tweed's place, rang her doorbell, and gave a "Hello, sir" to her dad, Mr. Megrim, Dex's eleventh-grade history teacher.

Tonight, house fronts glistened with street light. Clusters of people peered from windows or lingered on front porches, watching passing cars and wondering about who rode in them.

Moms and dads driving their kids to the prom? Spiffed-up promgoers possibly high on drugs? Or some over-curious night-cruisers?

Perhaps they relived their own memories of prom night, memories that fiercely glowed or gave off pale flares of longing for lost loved ones.

Dex released a sigh, not realizing how tight he had held his breath in. He checked his face in the rearview mirror, lobebag stylishly rakish, his skin zit-free from hairline to jaw.

He smoothed through a turn.

The headlights of an approaching car blinded him and passed by.

Dex checked his watch.

Time to spare.

In ten minutes, Tweed would float into his arms, her pink-sequined gown swaying as they went out the door and headed toward the prom and a new life together.



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