

7. Violence, Sweet Violence

Willy Wanker, President Gilly Windfucker's Secretary of Cultural Impoverishment, had slipped his lobebag off and was idly stroking his sexlobe as he watched the video feed.

In this, he was no different from any other cabinet member around the conference table. Even the President's lobebag lay limp on the polished tabletop, his slim wooden hand chop-cutting the air below his left ear in a semblance of stroking.

His manufacturers had made him a majestic sexlobe. Its bold presence suggested great power, though the general public would only be privy to its *implied* heft when bagged. They had even stained it with cedar blush, though they must have known—the protocol long established and drooled over in the media—that prom night was the only time it came into view and then only for members of the cabinet and their staff.

Up until tonight.

Wanker kept his counsel.

Close to the chest was his nature, a mode of being accepted by the others. But it also helped him keep confidential his role on the Committee to Assassinate the President, which issued periodic updates, under strictest wraps and with the utmost anonymity, to the press.

Secretary Wanker had served on that committee in many past administrations, but this one posed a special challenge.

Would clipping Gilly Windfucker's strings and snapping his limbs for kindling, duly videotaped for the national archives of course, do the trick? Or would they need to murder Cholly Bork as well? Kill the brains or simply the brainless twit of a figurehead?

In committee, Wanker had argued long and with great gusto that it was their patriotic duty to do them *both* in, indeed that *failing* to do so would surely throw the government into a Constitutional crisis from which it might never emerge unscathed. And his arguments, lo these many months, had eaten their way toward persuasion.

As to *when* the assassination would occur, Wanker had been convincing on that front as well. This very private moment in a president's tenure, the annual viewing of a hand-picked high-school slaughter, would at last be made public.

By god, thought Wanker with a wicked grin, I'll go down in history.

This, in part, fueled his lobestrokes, as the roomful of suited men, and one pants-suited woman, watched Karn Fientrop sharpen her blade in the machine shop and sashay through dusty backways that had hosted scores of slashers before her.



When the lobebags dropped to the table and the slow rip of opening zippers circled about the conference room, generous holes had irised open in the table directly above their laps.

Busy indeed were the hands of the nation's caretakers, left ones above the tabletop stroking their sexlobes, right ones below.

Even the President's left arm clacked against the edge of the table as though he were grasping something stiff below. But no gens did Gilly Windfucker sport.

Onscreen, a school bell sounded.

The cameras tracked, as best they could, the doomed couple's walk to the science classroom. That bold black number 57 again came into view.

They seated themselves beneath it.

The girl's date had been a quarter off-camera as he took his place. But she tugged him over by the padded shoulder of his suit, a loving gesture which he shook off, then accepted.

"I'm a little nervous," he said, by way of apology, and she said, "I know."

Just above their heads was a metal plate that seemed to be screwed into the wall and painted in place. But earlier footage had shown the viewers how it would abruptly open, footage replayed in slo-mo. A stunning stand-in enacted the role of the slasher, her arm coming in with a wavy-bladed dagger against the throats of a pair of doped-up vagrants.

"Those two young people," said Cholly Bork, "make my bosom swell with patriotic zeal." Gasps edged the presidential voice, though Bork's hands were engaged in manipulating Gilly Windfucker's limbs and mouth only.

"My bosom too, Mister President," intoned those in attendance.

Willy Wanker, as usual, said nothing. But his eyes were trained on the kids, his hands on his swollen tiller, and his mind on the crew of thugs that would, at his nod, burst through the cabinet room door.

Their final check of the walkie-talkies was nearly complete.

The woman who led them had gone down the line from one black-clad conspirator to the next. Each voice spoke clearly through the equipment she held to her ear.

No betraying squawks.

Top-of-the-line contraband.

"Hold on," she said, looking at the last man. "I'm getting sine wave distortion."

Then she realized the sound was outside, not in the equipment. Spotlights splashed the window thick with opacity. The drone of a helicopter whirlygigged down from above.

An electronic bullhorn snapped on: "WE'VE GOT YOU SURROUNDED."

Terror flooded her. Her eyes darted about the basement.

Who was looking away?

Who wasn't surprised?

But the light was too dim to make such a judgment, and most of her soldiers were already pulling on ski masks and drawing knives.

Then the door burst open and a choke of armed men in helmets and padded gear swarmed in, ganging up to drag down her people, tearing off ski masks, yanking heads back by hanks of hair, opening wide red grins in exposed necks.

Blood gushed onto concrete. Black fountains glistened in the silver night, turning the close air foul.

Then they attacked her, one young thug's boot slipping in blood but at once recovering. A young hotheaded soldier wrenched her down from where she stood. His foul-mouthed companion tore her lobebag off. Then three men rushed in to grab at her clothing, wrenching it apart like savages, her skin slick with sweat as the black fabric took on hole after hole and stretched into nothing.

"Teach the bitch a lesson," someone snarled, and that lesson, and many others, began to be most vigorously taught.

Butch rose for his solo in "Gettin' Off."

Back arched, trumpet lofted, a lick of hair swept across his brow, he made that horn wail, a weave of cool crisp notes bolting out like cliff beneath the frantic paws of a coyote.

Odd how his mind shuttled among chords while his fingers flurried out melodies above them. Yet somehow it always sounded new, some fresh-whelped beast that burst, sharp-clawed and yowling, out of the brass bell on rolling sweeps of passion.

The solo was flawless.

This was Butch's farewell gig, his last time through most of the charts, and he had no slasher worries to cramp his playing. Notes ripped aside like calendar days in a convict's cell.

But when he sat down and the saxes took the melody from him, the applause was tepid.

He knew why.

Zinc, Butch's date and fellow trumpeter, was a tender who had chosen a white ball on the stage in assembly a week before. They had gone steady for two years, but that didn't matter.

Zinc had lucked out.

Therefore, Butch had lucked out.

His classmates hadn't.

It was that simple. In their heads they knew he was cool. But their hearts screamed wimp, and he would carry to his grave the disgrace of having escaped the risk of slaughter.

Worse than that: Butch himself felt no less resentful toward the *others* whose dates were exempt tenders. Toward Ig and Stan and Lida Sue, even these, his friends.

They would be herded, the saved ones, into the girls' gym while their classmates faced real terror.

Somehow, Butch vowed, he would endure the summer months, thinking only of Gryder College and his future there and beyond. There, before this night's shame caught up with him, he would stake out a brunt of friends, hoping they'd be steadfast under the communal pressure to shun him.

He pictured the trampoline in the girls' gym. When he had muttered something about trying it out tonight, the grown-ups standing nearby during the band's first break threw him looks of disapproval.

Fuck 'em, he thought. They had passed their test of courage centuries ago, the test he would be known forever to have weaseled out of.

Zinc leaned in to him at an eight-bar rest. "Super solo," he said.

Butch nodded.

(THREE-two-three-four)

Monday, his lover would be fair game for flogging again and Butch planned a glorious one to celebrate their escape. When Zinc had been among the tenders lotteried free of danger a week ago in assembly (kids called them promstiffers), Zinc's mom and dad had embarrassed them both with a grand feast in thanksgiving. Grown-ups, face it, were gross and alien. They had no clue nor were they like to get one any time soon.

(SEVEN-two-three-four)

Tonight, Zinc displayed what had proven to be his and Butch's salvation: that thin-wristed, thin-lobed, smooth-skinned look of the unrecently flogged, which diminished him, which shrank him inward, making him look simultaneously hoary and tabula-rastic.

(EIGHT-two-three) da-da-da DWEE!

And Butch's bitchin' countermelody soared above the 'bones.



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