

Underneath It All

By Andy Grieser

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“The word I hate most,” she said, “is ‘moist.’”

“Huh.” I sipped at my beer. “I thought you were going to say ‘panties.’”

“Why?”

Shrug. “Everybody I know hates the word ‘panties.’”

The door of the Brightside banged open and a blast of cold air pushed in The Fawn. No, I couldn't tell you where he got his nickname, and nobody ever would give me a straight answer. I tried to puzzle it out on my own a few times, but I was pretty sure a fawn was a deer, and The Fawn was tall and broad enough that nobody'd mistake him for a deer.

“Holy fuckin' fuck,” The Fawn gasped – nobody'd mistake him for a dear – and tried his best to swipe snow from his knit cap and shoulders before resorting to a full-body shake.

Kee squealed as some of the slush peppered her.

“All right, F?” Pete slid a Dewar's on the rocks across the bar; I've always admired the Brightside for having your drink ready before your ass can hit the stool.

“Fucking freezing.” Fawn leaned past Kee, prompting another squeal when more melting snow cascaded into her lap, and took a substantial sip before getting the hint and turning to hang his coat on a hook. Successful, he sat with a grunt.

“Final days, huh, Cary?” Fawn muttered past a mouthful of whisky. “There’s still time for us to make a run for it.”

Kee slapped at his arm, but the words were already out. I rolled my eyes. “Why does everyone say that? I’m not going to prison. I’m just giving up my man-slut ways.”

“You mean you’re giving up your manhood.” The Fawn chuckled, and clinked his glass against mine. Kee, always a romantic, tried and failed to deal out corporal punishment. Her arms just weren’t long enough to reach.

“You nervous?” she asked. I had to wonder why. Did people want me to say yes? Did they want to be there, to be the ones who saw the beginning of the end of the as-yet-unbegun marriage? I had to think it was one of those expressions of our voyeuristic society leaking through in a socially acceptable way.

Anyway, enough of me babbling like an asshole.

“I’m not nervous. It’s one of those stupid clichés, but I feel like all the rest of the bullshit in my life led up to this, you know?”

The Fawn made hooting noises and rolled his eyes.

“I’m serious, man. I’ve had my share of stupid shit. This time, everything will work out right.”

“That’s sweet.” Was Kee blushing? She was. “How’d you know?”

How do you sum up years in a few sentences? I settled for for a gulp of beer and a shrug.

“That’s a long, long story.”

Maybe I was too dismissive, or maybe it was just that kind of day, but the three of us said nothing at that. Instead, we stared at the swirls of snow writhing outside the Brightside’s windows. It was one of those bright Chicago winter days, so bright it almost seemed sunny if not for the snowstorm.

The Fawn broke the silence. “So, hey, you’re giving her the ring. You’re finally gonna get laid.”

“Har.”

“What *are* you gonna do?”

“Uh, well, Kee, I’ve sort of been making a list of ideas. Turns out there’s porn on the Internet, and I saw --”

“No, ass, I mean you’ve got to make it special somehow. You’re telling the woman you love how much you truly do. Not to sully that, but Fawn’s right: That’s a sure ticket to naked. You can plain old fuck anytime, but this is different.”

“I guess I hadn’t thought of that.” I hadn’t. “I just assumed...”

“Yeah, of course you hadn’t. It’s okay. Kee’s here. We’re tipsy, it’s snowing and we’re going to figure out how to make it the best night of your life.”

Fawn yawned. “Really? You really just fuckin’ said that?”

“Panties.” Kee brightened.

I snorted, then choked on the beer that’d traveled to my nasal cavity. “I guess you really don’t hate the word.”

“I don’t hate panties either.” The Fawn looked confused.

I waved one hand. “Earlier discussion.”

“About panties?”

“Don't you wish you'd been here?” Kee batted her eyelashes.

The Fawn grunted. “Nope. While you dorks were talking about panties, I was in 'em. Know what I mean?” He punched me playfully on the shoulder; I nearly fell from my stool.

Where Fawn is broad and bald and bearded and imposing, I am small and clean-cut... I don't know, *lithe*. Well, I suppose we have the lack of hair in common, though I've managed to disguise my receding hairline with what's practically a buzz cut. Point is, I spent a few moments spouting choice epithets and rubbing my arm before I could oh-so-wittily reply.

“It's impossible not to know what you mean.” Yeah, it was hardly a burn, but I was busy willing the pain in my shoulder to subside.

“So lemme see the ring,” he rumbled.

“Are you kidding me?”

“What?”

“You think I carry an expensive engagement ring around with me?”

The Fawn eyed me suspiciously. “That's not an answer. I've seen television; you have the ring on you. Let me see it.”

I sighed. “I don't have the ring on me. Sorry.”

“We should get your lovely lady some panties.” Kee bounced in her seat.

“Uh huh.” I downed the last of my beer and raised an eyebrow at Pete. He studiously ignored me. I frowned.

“Hey, can I get another?”

“No way, man.” Pete shook his head.

“What... why?”

“Because we're *doing* this!” Kee was giddy. She practically leapt from her stool and began untangling her coat from its legs. “How cool! She's gonna love this, don't worry. And besides, we never hang out.”

I spread my arms. “What do you call this?”

“Drinking. At the Brightside. Where I work, where you two come in to drink. Much time as we spend together, it's pretty much always here at the bar. I don't feel like I *know* you. Also, I need to buy some new undies.”

“Aaand there it is.” The Fawn laughed. “Well, good fuckin' luck, buddy. Remember not to lose her purse. Oh, and don't look directly at the other customers.”

“We are *not* going shopping for women's underwear.”

“We are.”

“No, seriously. Why the hell would I do that?”

“The Fawn's in. He was kidding, just now. He loves panties.”

“He's in?” I shot him a look of relief.

“Pass.”

Oh, hell no. The Fawn couldn't do this to me. “Come on, man. You've gotta help a brother out.”



“Okay, seriously, a guy buying women’s underwear is fuckin' creepy. And also, awkward.”

“Valid, it's creepy if you're alone. But I'll be there. Nobody's gonna look twice at you guys.”

“Plus,” I interrupted, desperately trying to keep The Fawn rolling on reasons not to go, “I've never heard of anyone giving underwear at, I don't know, an engagement. I always figured the ring was enough.”

“I wanna see it.”

“I know you want to see it, man. I don't have it on me.”

“The ring is amazing.” Kee nodded. “She'll love it. She'll call her family. For a couple hours, the world will only see her and the ring, and you'll just be the guy who put the two together. But get her some nice lingerie, and then the rest of the night can be about you.”

“Kee's seen the ring?”

“Of course she has, Fawn. And no. I don't have it with me.”

The Fawn grunted. “Marriage. Big mistake, you ask me.”

“We didn't.” Kee glared, then took my arm. “Come on. We're going.”

The Fawn held up his drink, looked through it at the snow falling outside, swirled gently and sipped. “Seriously, I'm not going back out into that.”

“We'll take a bus, you big fucking baby.”

One of Kee's more impressive attributes – and there are many – is her ability to make the people around her forget what she looks like. No, not like amnesia; rather, you and Kee can be sitting and drinking and even having a conversation about a topic as titillating as women's underwear like a couple of good ol' buddies, and in the blink of an eye she's a beautiful blonde stacked (naturally, another twist of the metaphorical knife, because so few of us hit the genetic jackpot) in all the right ways. It happens when she isn't otherwise getting what she wants, and we among her friends *know* she does it because she isn't otherwise getting what she wants, and still I've never seen it fail.

Kee stood very close to Fawn's chair. She didn't noticeably arch her back, but her breasts were somehow more prominent. One lock of honey-colored hair fell – I swear it was in slow motion – across her wide blue eyes. I could see individual beads of sweat push from the smooth skin of The Fawn's forehead. Then Kee bit her lower lip, ever so lightly.

When he slumped slightly, I knew all hope was lost.

That's how, after a good hour of bundling against the weather, kissing of cheeks (on Kee's part), un-bundling so The Fawn could pee, one more round on the house and then re-bundling, we found ourselves shivering at a bus stop for the 145 downtown, site of the enormous and daunting House of Estrogen known as Victoria's Secret.

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"House of Estrogen? Really?" Kee slapped my arm hard enough. I thanked the gods of winter for forcing Chicagoans to wear multiple and padded layers six months of every year.

"Seriously, I'm afraid to go in." The Fawn did look afraid. I once saw him take on four frat boys, drunk on cheap beer and a White Sox win, outside a bar on Southport. I once saw him stand in front of a CTA bus so an attractive woman could run a block and make it on board. I once saw... oh, you get the idea. He's got a pretty fair set of balls.

I had never seen him not just hesitate but look as if he was ready to turn and run.

"What the fuck, guys?"

I put an arm over Kee's shoulders. "Kee, have you ever known a straight man to not be a little uncomfortable at the prospect of going into a lingerie store?"

“Sure, I used to go shopping with this ex – ”

“Gay,” Fawn snapped, his eyes not leaving the posters of giant underwear-clad models on the store’s front windows.

“No he wasn’t,” I hurried before Kee could strike. “But think of it like this: You’re asking two man-children to walk into not just a stronghold of the feminine mystique but a stronghold of feminine *sexual* mystique.”

“I saw my mom in her underwear once.” The Fawn’s eyes still hadn’t moved. On the plus side, neither had his feet.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

I threw up my hands, only partially to defend myself from incoming blows. Kee was nothing if not physical. “I know, I know! Just imagine how confused we are. All that pink and lace and skin inside, but for all our lives we’ve been trained to avert our eyes. Have you ever seen a man try to stare at his feet and *not* imagine fucking the woman next to him when she’s buying see-through boy shorts?”

“Awww, poor babies. Having to control your sexual urges long enough to buy something that’ll get you laid. Do you think you can handle it?”

I should have been mad, but the wise man who said ridiculously attractive women are given a lot more leeway was completely right. I'm not proud to say that, and in fact it wounds a part of me that I consider my yellow-dog-Democrat, male feminist, equality-for-all side. I had hoped that side was stronger, but we're talking about someone whose looks routinely inspired double-takes.

What can I say? The male of the species has ever been weak. Besides, it was starting to snow.

"Come on, Fawn, I'm freezing my ass off." I tugged at his parka and got him moving through the doors.