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ON HER KNEES BY CHRISTY DIULUS

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The boots. The red, up-to-there, thigh high, lace-up with a four-inch heel boots. A real find at fifteen dollars. I heard the boots the first time through the door of Deja Vu. Laughing, giggling really. A seductive sound. I told myself that I went into the secondhand shop because they might have some cheap scented candles I could burn to freshen up the room and cover up the smell of Evy's tuna salad lunches, but that was a lie. I wanted to know where that sound was coming from; I wanted to know who could be so happy.

It was the type of store my mother would have hated. Patchouli, she told me, always reminded her of unwashed bodies. "Tawni," I could hear her as if she were kneeling in front of me, her hands red from the steaming water in her cracked bucket, the one she used at home. "I cleaned for one of those hippie couples once. You were just a baby, you wouldn't remember. Nice people, they let me bring you so I wouldn't have to spring for a sitter. But no matter how I scrubbed, nothing ever smelt clean. I don't care how much money they had. It stank. Such a nice house, and it stank."

Inside, I could hear them, no longer laughing, but chanting in a whisper. The thick musk of oiled leather swelled as I followed the sound to the back of the store. The boots sat beside a display of prom dresses on a table loaded with a jumble of footwear—old sneakers, kitten heels, clodhoppers and flip-flops. I looked around; sure this must be some kind of trick. A hidden microphone, maybe, tucked away. Or a strange echo. I stepped away and picked up a pair of black flats. I swear I could feel the boots behind me, warm as another body. At the end of the aisle, an antique mirror leaned against the wall under the lone, tiny window. In the mirror's milky reflection, I could see the boots behind me. Their tops canted over.

"One fine day, you'll look at me" they sang. Not loudly, but distinctly.

Those seven words pressed into me, into my hip, thigh and ankle bones, filling them with an exquisite ache. There was no microphone hidden nearby. The boots were singing. When I tried them on, they fit perfectly. I wore them up to the counter and paid for them with a crisp twenty my mother had sent me wrapped in a short note, "Here's a little mad money."

Before I found the boots, I spent thirty-six days going to class and coming back to long

afternoons and longer nights in an empty dorm room filled with stale cigarette smoke. Without Evy, the room seemed too large. Sometimes my mother called; sometimes I just imagined what she would say. "Are you studying?" "We got another bill, what are they feeding you there, caviar?" "Tawni, have you thought about nursing school, your cousin Stacy went and had a job lined up before she finished." My father never got on the phone. "Daddy's watching his program, but he sends his love."

I almost missed Evy's vile tuna concoctions. When Evy was around, everything was a joke. She would have spun a convoluted tale about cousin Stacy and her affair with a proctologist. Somehow, she would have worked in a "smell my finger" joke. Alone, I spent hours paging through Gray's Anatomy instead of doing my biology homework, tracing the fragile small bones of the foot and ankle with my finger. The pages became splotched and shiny from the oil on my fingers. I whispered *fibula* and *metatarsals* and *phalanges*, tonguing each long word as I flipped the thin pages. I thought, how could such substantial words be attached to such tiny bones? How could these fragile bits support the weight of a human being? In one of my texts, I read that the feet cushion up to one million pounds of pressure during a single hour of strenuous exercise.

So many amazing and useless facts.

I hardly saw Evy anymore. Ever since she and Ty started dating. No, ever since she and Ty started sleeping together. Same difference. She stopped by to pick up clothes after her first class, which she missed if Ty had to work late the night before. I spent the evenings chain-smoking, lying on Evy's bed and listening to music. Her pillow still held the fruity scent of her hairspray. In the dark, her lava lamp cast amorphous shadows on the walls. The imitation pine furniture that looked so ordinary during the day loomed and moved in the scattered light.

I met Evy because she was my roommate. Last year, the school stuck us in a double room based on our freshman cohabitation surveys. We were both from small towns. We both liked sleeping in and studying late. As luck would have it, we both lied about smoking, afraid our mothers would read our confidential responses. Evy made friends easily. She got me talking that first night. I admitted that I was still technically a virgin. I told her of the crush I had had for four years, and the two weeks he actually dated me. She even managed to get the part of the story that I never told anyone. That he was just trying to make his ex jealous. That he dumped me and went back to her a week before prom despite my enthusiastic, though unskilled, blowjobs. I was embarrassed to admit this after her detailed account of losing her virginity at 15, but she made it seem ok. She didn't talk about boyfriends; she talked about her lovers in intimate detail. Her laughter was gentle, and made me feel as if we were co-conspirators.

That same evening, while unpacking our clothes and moving the beds and desks around, I found that we shared a secret love of 60's girl groups. Songs like *Leader of the Pack*, *Going to the Chapel* and *Baby Love* sung by groups with names like The Chiffons and The Shangri-las. Girls with baby doll voices and bouffant hairdos. That night, she grabbed a hairbrush, jumped on her half-made bed and belted out. "My folks were always putting him down." She reached out her hand and pulled me up beside her. I sang backup "down, down." At the end of the song, our hair sticky with sweat, we collapsed on her bed giggling. It became our thing.

Then she met Ty.

Alone, I had to sing both parts. It sounded stilted, and I felt silly doing the choreography by myself. So, I sprawled on her bed and sang quietly, "gone, gone, gone."

Then, I found the boots. They weren't very good at conversation, but they sure could sing.

Under my weight, the heels sank precariously into the soft mattress of Evy's bed. With my fingers stacked with rings from Evy's jewelry box and her golden hoops brushing my neck, I did

all of the old routines, and revised a couple so they would work better for me. I thought of those tiny bones nestled inside the supple leather. The boots sang along “Shooby dooby dooby dooby do wop wop.” My sweat soaked in, and the cuff of the boot chafed my inner thigh. They loved to dance.

It was all Evy’s fault. I missed her, but instead of telling her that I just complained. Bitched, really. So, she promised we would do something on Thursday. I wanted to go to a party, like we used to do all the time, but Ty didn’t want Evy around those “fraternity assholes.” He wanted to go to a bar. So, I guess it’s really his fault. He’s the one that knew a place where they didn’t card.

Evy and I got ready together, just like we used to. She said I could raid her closet and I found the perfect dress—black with a tight bodice and a flounced, short skirt. A sliver of white thigh separated the top of the red boots and the hem of the skirt. The bodice held my breasts tight and high. I felt sexy, world weary and wise. I was ready to have a good time.

I sat on my bed and watched Evy put on her makeup. She opened her mouth and distorted her face so that she could maneuver the mascara wand as close as possible to the base of her eyelashes. I’d seen her do this a hundred times, but I caught myself staring.

“How’s Ty” I asked.

She concentrated on separating the lashes. When she was done, she said, “I asked him if I could leave some clothes at his place.”

“And.”

“He said he didn’t want to clutter the place up with girly shit.”

“What an asshole.” I said, secretly pleased. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, he is an asshole,” she said. “But he’s my asshole. Besides, I changed his mind.”

She turned away from the mirror to look at me. Her eyes were rimmed with thick, black liner and the lids were coated with a smoky blue. Her lips were lined, but without the lipstick that she applies after smoking her last cigarette, it looked like she had drawn a surprised O on her mouth.

“We talked about living together this summer,” she said.

“Living together?”

“Just for the summer. You’ll be going home. I’ve been thinking about staying here, and I told Ty we could split the cost of rent.”

“But your parents,” I said.

“My parents will flip shit,” she said, and smiled. “That’s half the reason.”

She crossed the room and sat at the foot of my bed.

“Can I bum one?” she said. “I quit. Quit buying at least,” she laughed. “Ty says it’s

disgusting.”

“Here.” I shook a cigarette partway out of my pack. It hung there, extended between us.

She took it and held it for a second before grabbing my lighter. “Thanks. Have you heard from mommy dearest lately?”

“Cousin Stacy got a job as a nurse.”

“How'd she... No I know, I can see it.” She closed her eyes, leaned her head back and took a deep drag from the cigarette. “A urologist. That's it. She met him at a special seminar on bedside manner. ‘Dealing with Impotency; Nursing with Care and Consistency.’ She's blonde, right.”

She opened her eyes and looked at me. I nodded.

“Perfect,” Evy said. “She stayed after to ask how to spell Viagra and ended up joining him for drinks at the local hotel. He drove her there in his BMW. And his plates read 2PCME.”

I cracked up; so did she. I could feel the boots, hugging my thighs. “My world is empty without you, babe,” they sang, “Without you, babe.” Evy didn't seem to notice.

Ty met us in front of the dorm. I felt heat billow off his body as he brushed by me. Before he said hello, he pushed Evy against the door and kissed her. She arched into him, looked like she would dissolve. I tried not to watch, surprised by my feelings. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to arch my back like that. I also wanted to kick him in the nuts, hard. His leather jacket was shiny, almost greasy. I felt my ankles flush and the boots quivering.

He said the bar wasn't far; we could walk there, and save our money for a cab ride home. It was harder to walk in the boots than I thought it would be. The angle of the heel tugged on my calves and my ankles felt stretched and vulnerable. I felt I could fall at any time, and there was no soft mattress to catch me. I had to concentrate on balancing. I named the bones I remembered--femur, patella, tibia, fibula, phalanges. My hips felt liquid, undulating with each stride. I heard a wild, thumping drumbeat. Everything smelled sharper and looked brighter.

Inside the bar, the floor was slightly tacky, and the boots delighted in the added friction. They shivered. I couldn't hear them over the music. Ty led us to a booth with high backs and deep cushions. The flouncy black skirt slid up my thighs as I sat down and I felt my skin catch on a crack in the cushion.

The interior of the bar was dim, and what light there was had a golden tone, as if strained through an amber liquid. Rum, or something darker. A thick and yeasty smell mingled with old fried food. I thought of the time Evy and I stayed up drinking late into the night, chain-smoking and discussing our parents. The next morning, empty cans of beer littered the room. A similar smell lingered in the bottom of each can, so strong that my mouth had watered. Evy had pretended to take a swig out of one of the cans and ended up spilling it down the front of her sleep shirt.

“I'll get us a pitcher.” Ty said.

The bar was across the room, and I watched Ty's legs as he walked away from us. He placed each heel firmly on the floor then rolled the length of his foot. His hips barely moved. There were long shelves full of bottles behind the bar, mounted in front of a mirror. I could see the

reflection of Ty's nose and mouth. His open mouth was moist and dark.

"He does have an amazing ass," Evy said.

"I wasn't-" I said, but realized it was a lie. Evy would know it was a lie.

"Maybe I was, but-" I didn't mention his image in the mirror. "Don't they say, you can look, just don't touch?"

"I thought they said you break it you bought it," she said.

We both cracked up. I offered her another cigarette. She looked toward Ty and shook her head.

"Maybe later, you know, when I'm really drunk. You go ahead though," she said.

Ty brought back the pitcher and a stack of plastic cups. The cups rattled against the table as he set each one down. They were thin, clear plastic and so insubstantial; I was hoping for the solid heft of an iced mug.

"I used to work here," he said.

"You never told me that," Evy said.

"I never told you a lot of things," he said, and winked at me.

Evy started to say something, but Ty swooped towards her. They kissed for a long time. I tried to concentrate on smoking my cigarette and not looking at them. The place seemed empty, but I could hear voices and the muffled clink of pool balls somewhere behind me. I turned to look, but could only see the black hallway that led towards the sound. There was a jukebox, dartboard, and an Elvira themed pinball machine near the door we had come through. The loud music paused, and I heard the clicks as the jukebox selected another disc. In the silence between clicks, I could hear their wet lips and tongues as they moved against each other. The boots were whispering against my thigh, "Sweeter than sugar, kisses like wine." Ty and Evy couldn't hear them. No one else could.

The music started again. Frank Sinatra, but much louder than my parents played him. Ty sat up and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"That's Vinnie for you," he said. He fanned his hand in front of his face to brush away the smoke from my cigarette.

I felt bad for bothering him, but also annoyed. We were in a bar.

"Who's Vinnie?" Evy asked.

"He loves Sinatra. He has the box set up to play old blue eyes until someone puts money in."

"Does it take dollars?" I asked.

"Should, but Vinnie'll give you change if you need." Ty said. He draped his arm over Evy's shoulders and tangled his fingers in her curly hair. I had to get away.

My thighs stuck and stuttered across the plastic seat. When I stood up, I was a little light-

headed. Nothing seemed to stay in one place, and the floor seemed to slope to the left. I shifted to the right to compensate, and stumbled. Neither Ty nor Evy noticed.

The discs in the jukebox refracted the yellow light, the edges rimmed with subdued rainbows. I leaned close to read the song listings, which tended toward bands with big hair, loud guitars and tight leather pants. I selected a couple of songs I thought Ty wouldn't hate. Then the boots started to vibrate. "Look out, look out, look out, look out."

I felt him before I saw him. He leaned over me, putting his hand on the jukebox. I thought for a moment that Ty had come to supervise, but the hair on this arm was thick and blonde. The nails were cut short, straight across the top. There was dirt lodged under some of them. My mother's advice, "You can learn from the way a man keeps his nails," rang in my head. I couldn't remember what I was supposed to learn, though. Did dirt indicate a slob, or a hard worker? I couldn't think. His cologne mingled with a hint of sweat.

"See anything good?" he asked.

The boots almost knocked me down, twitching with excitement. His leg pressed against my hip, pulling my skirt up a little higher. That sliver of bare leg burned. I tilted my head back against his chest and let it rest there for a moment. My hair caught in his short beard.

I leaned forward, forcing him to step back, and moved away so I could look at him. The hair on his head was slightly darker than the hair on his arms. He looked younger than I expected and his beard was little more than a thick stubble.

"I'm Jim," he said.

He was still too close to offer his hand

"And you are?" he asked.

"Tawni," I said.

"Tawni." It sounded strange in his mouth, almost exotic. He put another dollar into the jukebox. "Play a few for me."

He watched as I flipped through the songs. I ran out of choices, and he offered a few suggestions. Everything I said seemed awkward, so I said as little as possible. He offered to buy me a drink. I looked back towards Evy and Ty, but they were pressed together, kissing again. I joined him at the bar and let him buy me a beer.

I perched on the stool, hooking the heels of the boots on the bottom rung. They were twitching again, but I ignored them. After the bartender brought us our bottles of beer, he swiveled to face me. He put his feet up on my stool, trapping my ankles between his. He wore brown work boots; ankle high. The soles were crusted with mud.

"Are you always this quiet?" he asked.

"Sorry," I said.

"Don't be."

"Did you know--" I could see Evy and Ty over his shoulder. They looked so comfortable

together. "Never mind." I took too big a drink from the bottle, and the beer bubbled up and out.

We both laughed. He grabbed a napkin from the bar and wiped the spilled beer off my skirt.

"Tell me," he said.

"Did you know that when you walk, your feet have to support one and a half times your body weight?"

He told me his weight. We borrowed a pen from the bartender and did some quick calculations on a damp napkin.

"Are you telling me," he said. "That every time I put my foot down, there's 270 pounds pushing on it?"

"Amazing, isn't it."

"It's a wonder they don't shatter."

He bought me another beer. Then another. I asked him if he was in school, and he told me about working for his dad's landscaping company. Something about various chemical concoctions and climbing trees to prune them. We both laughed when I told him Evy's version of cousin Stacy's nursing career. Then he asked if I wanted to play a game of pool.

I caught Evy's eye as we walked past the booth. She gave me the thumb's up sign. Later, I told Evy we made out in the men's room. I couldn't tell her the rest of the story. Nothing had really changed. I was still, technically, a virgin.

We never made it to the pool room. The boots had fallen silent while we chatted, and I had forgotten I was wearing them. In the dark hallway, he leaned against me, pressing my back against the wall. His stubble scraped my face when he kissed me. I thought of Evy, arched against the door, and understood how she must have felt. I can't say I didn't like it.

"I love how your heart beats," the boots sang, louder now.

He grabbed my wrist and pulled me into the tiny men's room. It stank. Two tottering steps and we were in the tiny stall. He pulled the metal door closed, and kissed me again.

His hands were ice sliding up under my skirt. The boots were trembling, and so was I. It was my fault, really. I couldn't stop what I had set in motion. No more than the fragile phalanges can stop the foot from coming down. And I enjoyed every pound of pressure. I slid down the length of his body, on my knees beside the toilet. His zipper was rough against my cheek. The boots were screaming. The tiny tiles imprinted a checkerboard pattern on my patellas. Something damp soaked into the leather. With my eyes closed, I saw my mother's knees, red and chapped and calloused from kneeling and scrubbing other people's floors. My knees throbbed, and the muscles in my thighs were tender, as if someone was gently, but insistently, pulling on them. His fingers twisted in my hair as he guided my head and my mouth. The boots were mewling.

And here I thought they wanted to dance.

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