

"Now what the hell was that for?" Tom asked, feeling he had just been got the better of.

"They're getting ready to go out tonight," Fred replied with the obvious.

Then the one in blue stood up, and did her best to scamper into the house. The blonde was left by herself. She looked up at us, gave us a dirty nose, and stuck out her tongue. Fred laughed.

"No manners at all," he said.

Pete looked around. "Where are our drinks?"

The third one had returned.

"Look what she's got!" Fred said aloud with amused surprise. "Wouldn't you know it? Wouldn't you know it?" hitting me square between the shoulder blades.

The truth still hadn't occurred to us.

The one in blue came out carrying a bowl full of pink plastic curlers.

"She's gonna do her hair," Tom said, "Won't this be . . ." letting his sentence drift off unfinished.

The one in blue was removing her robe. She had leaned down to put the bowl on her blanket. Still standing up, she started to take off her wool bath robe.

It was so sudden. For half a frozen second no one said a thing. We just gaped.

Over my shoulder I heard Fred speak in a low tone unlike a whisper, as if he were losing his voice. "Jesus Christ. Jesus Jesus. Three christless fags!"

I turned to look at Pete. He looked as if something inside him had snapped and everything had come apart.

Tom laughed briefly, falsetto. "I **knew** they were too ugly to be women. No woman can be that ugly. What woman has muscles like that, tell me."

Then I noticed the small child standing on the fence, looking intently at the three men, with great small child curiosity. Who'd want to raise a kid in a neighbourhood like this? I asked myself.

"Did I hear someone mention, **women?**" came a young voice from behind. Alfred had returned.

I was watching the man below putting his hair up in the pink curlers. He looked about twenty-two. They were actually all about



the same age.

"What's out there?" Alfred asked.

I glanced around, and saw John Hayward with him. John was big and muscular, a close friend of Alfred's in high school. He had visited the office several times and we had done quite a bit of talking. Mostly we talked about sports and how well he threw the shot put and made the broad jump, and that sort of thing. I had rarely seen anyone his age with such a powerhouse of a body.

"What is it, huh?" he asked with friendly interest.

I said to Alfred, "Three queers in our neighbourhood's back yard. Come have a look."

I should have realized.

Pete had left the window to sit down to his ginger ale, and Tom was joining him. Alfred had taken Tom's place, and was leaning well out the window.

"Don't fall out," I said. "Those fruits would just love to have you drop in on them." I was not thinking at all.

"Don't tell the innocent kid things like that," Fred who had slid in beside me, said.

All of a sudden John burst out with a prolonged, "God Damn!" and thundered out of the room.

Only then did it occur to me, and to Alfred, too.

"Oh no," I said with a heavy sinking feeling of despair. I looked at Alfred, blanched suddenly. "Run down and stop him. Hurry!"

Alfred after a hesitation, bolted out of the room, as fast as his legs would carry him.

I turned back to the window, possessed with growing panic. I jostled Fred, who withdrew in fright. I called down, "Get away you three! Get away! get away from there!"

"What's this?" Fred asked. Pete and Tom turned in bewilderment.

"What'd you say?"

"Get inside!" I screamed hoarsely at them. "Before the big guy gets down there." They just looked dumbly up for a moment, then regarded me with contempt. Could I believe those stories Alfred had told me about John? "I'm not fooling. Get away before the big guy gets down to you. he wants to beat you up!"

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