

DESOLATE STREETS

HE TOOK A
LUXURY PENTHOUSE
DOWNTOWN WHOSE
GRAND SCALE ROOMS
WERE FILLED WITH
ELEGANT FURNITURE.
FROM THE DECK OF HIS
PENTHOUSE HE WOULD
GAZE AT THE SUNSET
WHILE DINING ON
LOBSTER AND WARM
CHAMPAGNE.

Cross did not panic, he has a logical mind. Something had happened while he was asleep. Some evacuation, some sort of accident or disaster. He goes to his stereo and turns on the radio. Lights glow and the speakers hum but there is only the sibilant hiss of nothing.

To the telephone. Dial tone. 911. It rings and rings...and rings. Dial 0. No answer. Dial 411. Again no answer. He forces himself to carefully replace the receiver. Pacing back and forth between the open window and the telephone he pauses, returns to the phone, and quickly dials her number. This time he is greeted with the monotonous droning of a busy signal.

Amelia only read fat paperback novels with shiny covers. Books of love, death, strife, and tranquility, and a hot sex scene in the second chapter. Such books entertained her as she bravely manned the telephone at her shiny chrome desk. Only occasionally would she wrinkle her nose at the faintly nauseating scent of laquer and hairspray that is inevitable in a hair salon, even one of Milan's character.

The phone would ring. Novel down, gum quickly shifted to her cheek.

"Good afternoon, Milan's Hairstyling." She tapped her pencil.

"Yes, Anthony is free on Saturday. I can put you down for two? Is that just for a cut? Fine. Your name?"

Miss Celia Freedman goes neatly into the appropriate box on the time sheet.

"Goodbye, Miss Freedman." The receiver banged into its cradle. Nibbling her gum delicately, Amelia smiles. She makes \$7.75 an hour, her rent is reasonable, and she has lots of bright, fashionable clothing. Everything, she felt, was under control.

Cross walked in, wearing his best sweater and some well pressed slacks. He smiled at her and they kissed. The clock behind the desk said five o'clock.

"I'll get my coat," she said. While he waited Cross traced patterns on the chrome desk.

"Cross, who on earth did your hair! I hope the police have apprehended the man responsible," said Anthony with an extravagant giggle. His short and chubby body bounced down the stairs from the cutting salon. In his hands he held scissors and comb delicately, like one would hold a cutthroat razor.

"Next time you must let me take care of you. You deserve some real style." Anthony had to look up at Cross but he didn't seem disconcerted. "So where are you taking the little woman tonight Cross?" He fingered Cross's lapel critically. Cross leaned back slightly.

"We're just going to catch a movie, perhaps a drink. Nothing special..."

"Oh don't be so bourgeois John," said Amelia, returning in an emerald green raincoat that shone like polished metal. "What we're really going to do is go to my place and

make love till dawn. Now isn't that the truth John?"

"It is an idea I suppose," replied Cross with a smirk and a theatrical yawn. Amelia took him by the arm and pulled him out the door.

"Such a waste of a handsome boy," said Anthony to himself.

Driving through the city Cross finds himself stopping at red lights and staring across empty intersections. There is no movement save for scraps of paper stirring in the gutters. Soon his dull green Datsun is screaming down 87th street oblivious to speed limits, but Cross finds no exhilaration in the experience. His lips are drawn tight and his palms sweat on the wheel. Red lights flash overhead, ignored. Empty storefronts line the sidewalks.

Amelia curled closer to him and ran her hand up the side of his thigh. Cross was laying on his back, gently stroking her hair. He often felt the jet black colour should rub off. He imagined it running in the sweaty passion of fucking; flowing ink streaking across their bodies, leaving indecipherable messages upon the sheets.

The door to her apartment building is locked. Cross peers through the peeling lettering that forbids canvassing within the premises but sees only a small empty lobby. He tries every buzzer, especially hers, and pounds the door. Finally he takes a wrench from the trunk of his car and gingerly smashes his way in.

Her apartment is empty. Her clothes, furniture, and posters are there but, like everything else, they offer no explanation. There is the telephone though, which lies off the hook, gently buzzing.

"Are you awake?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. She rolled over in the

darkness.

"Hand me a cigarette will you?" He passed the pack to her. She struck a match and for a moment it lit the two of them, casting vague, shifting shadows across the twisted sheets. Then the darkness returned. It was very quiet.

"Who are you?" Her voice level and serious. His reply was a sleepy mumble.

"John Cross, BA, major in political science. Presently a cashier for Penguin All-Nite Gas. Social Insurance number 642 919 846." He yawned. "Who are you?"

Amelia stretched lazily and curled closer to him. The glowing tip of her cigarette floated above his tired, unfocused eyes, a drifting red star.

"Tonight," she answers, "I am the sexiest woman in the world and I have the sexiest lover. Who gives a fuck about social insurance numbers." Her cigarette discarded in the ashtray she embraced him and nestled her face beneath his chin. "And I do like you John. I like you very much." It was a whisper. He kissed her forehead softly.

"I love you," he said.

They lay still. The vague and indistinct light that precedes dawn was seeping into the room.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"That I won't ever leave you."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'll do everything I can to stay with you. You're important to me. I can't feel any other way about you. I can't leave you..."

"I don't want to hear this." She rolled away to face the wall.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"You overestimate yourself."

Cross picks up the buzzing receiver and lays it back on the hook. Then he begins a wandering circuit of the apartment, pausing at the dresser to look inside a jewellery box, checking the medicine cabinet in the

bathroom, leafing through back issues of Vogue.

The random wandering slowly evolves into a methodical search. Drawers are emptied and refilled, glossy paperbacks are fanned and reshelfed, dress pockets are turned out and then in again. There is no object to his search, no set goal, just a desire for a clue, a scrap of explanation.

After two hours he has worked his way to the kitchen. It is there, in a tin of flour, that he finds an envelope with his name on it. Inside is a scrap of a cigarette package. On it, in pencil, is written:

Goodbye John. How happy
you made me.

Love, A.

In the months to follow Cross set himself up in style. He took a luxury penthouse downtown whose grand scale rooms were filled with elegant lean furniture. The kitchen he stocked with canned food and bottled water. The closets were filled with expensive clothes. His cologne was bottled in crystal.

The city he treated as a vast amusement park. He would walk through jewellery shops and pocket diamonds as a boy might pocket pretty pebbles. He played video games until his hands ached and his initials topped ranks on every machine. From the deck of his penthouse he would gaze at a sunset while dining on lobster and warm champagne.

He went out less and less as time went on. For awhile he would go to her apartment and lie on her bed, reading. But more often he would stay in the penthouse and watch old movies or pornography on the videotape player. The suite itself was littered with toys, skin magazines, and paintings from the art gallery. He once spent an afternoon shooting out the windows of the building across the street with a high power rifle. The glass would fall a long time, glittering in the sunlight, before smashing onto the pavements.

The most difficult addition to the apartment was the diving board. It wouldn't fit into the elevator and therefore had to be hauled thirty stories up the side of the building. The work took three days and a great deal of rope.

Once installed, the board protruded from the living room window out over the street below. Late at night he liked to perch himself at the end and gaze at the city. The buildings below, lit only by shafts of moonlight that pierced an overcast sky, would whisper and sigh as the autumn winds twisted through the streets. Some nights he would stand at the edge and gently bounce. Below, the buildings, the whispering, the empty world.

If he were to fall forward and gracefully tumble into the darkness, then it would all cease to be. The world would gather its pale buildings, silent streets, and empty apartments together, wrap them with the cold moonlight and the autumn wind, and vanish. Left behind would be the sound of the springboard rattling hard against the windowsill.

THE MOST DIFFICULT
ADDITION TO THE
APARTMENT WAS THE
DIVING BOARD.

BY GEOFFREY JACKSON