

A Practical Guide to Loving the Dead

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Debra Edgecombe, cynic, accountant, and necrophiliac,
couldn't believe her ears.

"You set me up on a what?"

"A blind date," repeated Debra's best friend, Kathy.

They sat in the office break room. Math puns branded the coffee mugs with slogans: *Working here is the first sine of madness. Geometry is for squares.*

"Is he breathing?" asked Debra.

"Yes."

"Any sign of terminal illness? Decay? Worms in the eyes?"

"No."

"Then he's not my type."

Kathy adjusted her copper-rimmed glasses. Quartz crystals hung at her neck and her fingers were decorated with Celtic rings. She wore one of the long, loose dresses she'd favored since officially giving up Episcopalianism last year. As far as atheistic Debra was concerned both theologies were equally silly, but since Kathy's conversion, some of their evangelical coworkers had started treating her as if she was seconds away from growing horns and filling out forms with repetitions of 666.

"Just meet him." Kathy pulled a business card out of her purse. "You've got reservations at an Italian restaurant, Butta La Pasta, on Saturday at eight. His number's on the back."

Debra didn't reach for the card. Kathy slid it across the table.

"His name's Eddie," Kathy added.

"Thanks for telling me," Debra muttered, but she called to confirm anyway.

Debra's long road to self-acceptance as a necrophiliac had been strewn with many obstacles. Unlike some, Debra fetished in her imagination only. She drew a strict line at breaking into tombs.

Which meant that if she was going to have any sex other than solo, she needed to date. During college, she'd hidden her preferences, submitting to a series of boring love affairs. Sometimes she'd felt her situation was similar to that of a lesbian dating men—decent company but no chemistry. After college, Debra experimented with confiding in her partners. Several left immediately. Worse, others stuck around for two or three more dates until they could politely squirm away. Debra got used to rabbit-eyed stares and hapless fidgeting.

Debra's last boyfriend, Walter, had seemed like an improvement. When she told him about her fetish, he got excited. "Maybe we could try some role play?" he suggested.

"Um ... sure," said Debra.

So she bought some candles, dressed her room in black curtains, and waited for Walter to ring the bell. When she answered the door, she discovered him standing on the front porch with a sheet over his head and his arms stretched out like a zombie's.

"Ouuuga ouuuga ouu," he declared, and Debra decided she was through with the living.

Butta La Pasta featured red-checked wallpaper and the overwhelming smell of garlic. The host led Debra to a table beside a gigantic, three-tiered fountain decorated with plaster cupids and fake roses.

What the hell was Kathy thinking? Debra asked herself. *What kind of guy would plan a date at a place like this?*

Debra got the answer to her question a moment later when Eddie approached. He had the kind of genial, broad-featured good looks that Debra associated with English boarding schools. He wore a white button-down shirt with neatly turned cuffs, black slacks, and Oxfords, and stood with the trained confidence of people who spend their free time reading books on body language. The only remarkable things about his appearance were his extremely large, deep-set eyes, so dark that the pupil and iris seemed to be the same hue. They stared out from beneath his blond brows, intense and unsettling.

Despite his poise, his voice wavered with anxiety. “Debra? Edgecombe? I’m Eddie, Kathy’s friend. You sounded nice on my answering machine. And you look nice, too. Did you get here okay? Have you ordered yet?”

Debra reached out to shake his hand on the theory that it might stem the flow of his conversation. “I waited for you. I asked for separate checks.”

Eddie slid into the vinyl chair and unfolded his menu. “This is a long one, isn’t it? That’s for the best, I guess. Lots of choices for everyone. What are you getting?”

“I settled on the linguini.”

“That sounds good. I’m sure it’ll be great.”

Debra watched Eddie’s mouth twitch with nervous energy. When he didn’t continue, she figured it was her turn to sift through The Date Questions. She settled on *What do you do?*

“I’m an allergist. It’s a natural career for me since I have problems with dust and dander. You’d think that would make me an outdoor person since I have a cat and high ceilings, but once you’re outside, there’s pollen, and that’s no better. What do you do?”

“I’m an accountant. It’s a natural career for me since I’m good with numbers and don’t like people very much.”

The waitress came by. Debra chose minestrone to go with her linguini. Eddie asked for just a salad, thank you.

“My father had a heart attack when he was thirty-six,” Eddie explained as the waitress collected their menus. “I have to watch my diet or my blood pressure skyrockets.” Without pausing, he switched subjects. “I like what you’re wearing. Your pantsuit, I mean. The color is, you know, very nice.”

The suit was black. “Thanks,” Debra said.

“It’s nice to see a woman who doesn’t go around nearly naked. It’s probably what they think men want. But some of us like a little mystery, you know? We don’t need to have everything on display. ‘Thirty-five percent off, today only! Get it while it lasts!’ Not that you would ... you know, sell yourself....”

Debra casted for a polite response. "You're very frank," she said.

The conversation lulled. Eventually, Eddie forced a laugh and said, "The Accountant and the Allergist. It has a ring. We could be a sitcom."

"Not one that could air on prime time."

Eddie's grin widened. He waggled his eyebrows suggestively. "Oh?"

"Not the way you're thinking," said Debra flatly.

The whole conversation was giving her a headache. But the silences were even worse.

"So, how do you cure dust allergies?" she asked.

"Medications can help," said Eddie. "In persistent cases, you can go in for a series of shots. But for really bad cases, like mine, a lot of patients go outside Western medicine. Homeopathy, acupuncture ... hypnosis can be very good...."

"What do you use?"

"I used to go in for shots. These days I, uh...."

"Yes?"

Color rushed into Eddie's cheeks. "Most people think hypnosis is all past life regression and repressed memories. But hypnosis can be very therapeutic. A good hypnotherapist can put you in touch with your subconscious."

"Your dust allergy is caused by your subconscious?"

"Well, no."

"Ah, well then. That makes perfect sense."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Debra had the sensation of having kicked a puppy.

"Listen," she said. "You've been blunt with me. It's only fair of me to do the same. Whatever Kathy told you, it's only part of the story. I appreciate your coming out here, but this isn't going to work."

Eddie's face fell. "Oh, er, well," he stammered. "Kathy warned me that you might not. Well. Most women don't.... Well. It's all right."

Debra felt another flash of guilt. "We can stay and eat."

“Well, we could, yes. It’s just that I ... well, it’s only a salad, isn’t it?” Eddie forced a smile. “Enjoy it with your linguini.”

Eddie tried to stand up, which took some time as he tried to figure out the complicated logistics of freeing his chair from the back corner without smacking into the fountain.

He really was nice looking, thought Debra. Too bad he wasn’t a few days into a good rot.

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings,” Debra said.

“It’s okay, really,” said Eddie, at which point the waitress arrived with a broom and distracted Debra long enough for Eddie to slip out the door.

The next day at work, Kathy didn’t show up in the break room.

Debra grabbed her *For a good prime call: 555.793.7319* mug and went to Kathy’s cubicle.

“I hope I didn’t upset your friend too much,” Debra said.

Kathy hammered numbers into her adding machine. “You went. You tried.”

“So I did upset him.”

“Eddie is easily disappointed. He has bad luck with women.”

“So you thought he’d be good for me?”

“I know he’d be good for you.”

“If I’d known his ego was so fragile, I would never have gone. It’s completely unfair of you to blame me.”

“I’m not blaming you.”

“It seems like you are.”

Kathy swiveled her chair around to face Debra. “Maybe I am, but trust me. I know what’s good for you.”

“A nervous New Age allergist? You don’t know me that well.”

“Some of us perceive things on a level you aren’t aware of.”

“Is that how you met him?” Debra pressed. “Through your New Age stuff?”

Kathy’s mouth tightened. “He runs an alternative medicine

group. I went with my acupuncturist. What does that have to do with anything?”

“It’s another thing we don’t have in common! ‘Hello, I’m a necrophiliac, and also I think everything you believe is hogwash.’ Don’t you think it’s complicated enough for me to date?”

“Look, no one knows you better than I do. He can give you what you want.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t ask for details, okay? I didn’t tell him your fantasies, and I won’t tell you his. If you want to know, you’ll have to pick up your phone and ask him.” Kathy pivoted back to her computer screen. “Or forget it. It’s up to you.”

Eddie suggested they meet in his apartment. He lived in the attic of a dilapidated Victorian with a dormer window that stared down at the street like a gigantic eye. Debra knocked once. Eddie whipped open the door before her knuckles could land a second time.

The parlor was crammed wall to wall with antique furniture: overfilled curio cabinets, high-backed chairs, fringed floor lamps. An orange tabby sat on the highest shelf of a mahogany bookcase, nestled beside a fully articulated sparrow skeleton, one marmalade paw draping over the side. Green eyes tracked Debra’s progress.

“Greetings,” said Eddie. He gestured for Debra to sit on a love seat upholstered in lime-colored velvet. His demeanor was more awkward than it had been the previous night, though that hardly seemed possible.

“Kathy says I should give this another shot,” said Debra. “Sorry I blew you off last night.”

“It’s okay. I’m not offended.”

Eddie’s gaze darted nervously toward Debra and then swung away like a pendulum. His eyes were on her hands, the brass oil lamp, the faux-marble end table, her hands again.

"Kathy says I should ask what you can do for me," Debra said.

"I can't answer that."

Debra started to stand. "Then I apologize for wasting your time. Again."

"No, it's not exactly—I mean, I don't know anything about you, so how can I know?"

"Know what?"

"It's just that if I know Kathy, then she's plotting something. But I can't figure out my part in the plot until you tell me yours. Do you have any idea what I'm talking about?"

Long ago, Debra had decided that necrophilia wasn't something to be ashamed of. Fetishes happened. They weren't anyone's fault. As long as she didn't break into mortuaries to assault the supine and embalmed, she shouldn't be any more embarrassed than, say, a man who fantasized about women in leather.

Debra believed this with about fifty percent of her being about fifty percent of the time. It was hard, if not impossible, to get rid of the feelings of disgust that had been buried in her psyche since adolescence. She covered her insecurities with layers of humor and sarcasm, but it was still all too easy for a stray comment to turn her back into that fourteen-year-old girl who had thought she should kill herself if dead people were what she wanted.

All that aside, she believed one hundred percent in her ability as a cynic to deliver anything with a flat gaze and a monotone. So, with a flat gaze and a monotone, she said, "I'm a necrophiliac."

Eddie's subsequent laughter was so loud that the startled orange cat leapt down from the bookshelf, glared at Eddie and Debra, and stalked out of the room.

Debra bristled at Eddie's amusement. "What? Do you own a mortuary or something?"

"It's kind of scary how Kathy puts things together. I offered to cure her fear of spiders once. She looked at me and said, 'Eddie, I had no idea you found me so attractive.'"

"I'm not afraid of spiders."

"Of course not, it's just ..." He leaned forward. "I have a hypnofetish. I mean, it's nothing immoral. You could trust me to cure a phobia for you, no problem. I just happen to really, well, like what I do. Which is part of the reason I do it as a hobby instead of professionally."

"So you're saying you can hypnotize me not to be a necrophiliac?"

"Well, maybe, but I think what Kathy meant was ... I could hypnotize you to think I'm dead."

Debra's laugh came out as a short, sharp bark. "Would that work?"

"If you can be hypnotized. Some people can't."

Eddie pulled a scalloped-backed chair into the center of the room. He gestured for Debra to sit.

Debra looked down at the chair. "I don't even know you," she said. After a moment's thought, she added, "I suppose I know you as well as any random dead person I might fall in lust with. You won't hypnotize me to think I'm a dog and follow you around on all fours?"

"Would Kathy have fixed us up if I did things like that?" Eddie asked. "You've probably heard people say that when you're under hypnosis you won't do anything that you're morally opposed to. That's true. I can't, for instance, hypnotize you to murder someone."

"Well, that would be one way to get me a corpse," Debra muttered.

She wasn't sure about this. Hell, she wasn't sure she should even still be in his apartment, but the moment had its own strange gravity.

Debra sat. Eddie moved to stand in front of her. In the dim light from the shaded Victorian lamps, his eyes seemed even larger and darker than they had before.

Eddie's nervous voice shifted lower until it sounded resonant and theatrical. "Now, I want you to relax," he said. "Are you relaxing? Good. Feel the blood slowing in your veins. Release the tension in your muscles, starting at your temples and moving down, down through your neck, your shoulders, your back. There you go. You look less tense

already. Let your eyes fall closed....”

Debra wouldn't have gone along with it if she'd believed in hypnosis. She'd always figured hypnosis was a dime-store magic trick, and that whatever happened, she could snap awake without any trouble.

Instead, she found herself relaxing. Her arms tingled as her circulation slowed. Her limbs sagged. Her breath entered and left her lungs in a deep, rhythmic flow.

The next thing Debra knew, she and Eddie were lying together on his four-poster bed. “This was only an experiment,” he protested. She placed her finger over his lips to silence him.

Eddie's skin felt like marble, cold and smooth and etched with stagnant veins. His flesh smelled of embalming fluid, with a rancid hint beneath. There was no blood. Debra knew that some necrophiliacs liked to watch blood well up in their lovers' mouths, but she had never been drawn by gore.

Eddie writhed as Debra examined his body. The hypnotic spell incorporated his movements into her fantasy. His throes became rigor mortis. His moans became the sound of air hissing through his lips.

There was beauty in this. Debra had never been able to explain it. Lavishing pleasure on a corpse heightened her awareness of her own ephemeral physicality. Like the body that was numb to her caresses, she too had only a limited amount of time before she was called to her grave—

—and then the spell was over.

Debra's first reaction was to feel sad. The moment of ultimate transience had been made eternal. What should have been momentary could be repeated and repeated.

On the other hand, it could be repeated and repeated.

Eddie lay supine, his eyes sleepily half-lidded. He laid his hand gently on the small of Debra's back.

Debra began to feel embarrassed. “I hope that wasn't boring for you.”

“What man wouldn't want to lie back and let a woman do the

work? We're all fundamentally lazy."

Debra forced a laugh. The room was cold; goose bumps rose along her skin.

Eddie kept talking. "What I like is, well, knowing that you're under my control. And that was great. I mean, you're a really intense subject."

Debra pulled away from Eddie's touch. She got to her feet and took the bed sheet with her. She knew that it was ridiculous to worry about him seeing her naked now, but she clung to the sheet anyway as she put on her clothes.

"I have to go," she said.

"Hey, can I walk you out?"

Debra shook her head. "No need. I can take care of myself," she said, and fled out the door.

"It was a nice evening," Debra told Kathy in the morning. She had drunk three cups of coffee and was trying to work through her break while Kathy pestered her.

"Did you find out anything interesting?" Kathy pressed.

"We talked about it."

"And?"

"And we talked about it. I'm sorry, I can't chat right now. I have to get this done by three."

Kathy frowned. She rapped her nails on the cubicle wall. Her moonstone and garnet bracelets clacked against each other. "Well," she said, at last. "You take your own time, hon. I'll be here when you want to talk."

All day, Debra indulged in self-flagellation. She felt inadequate and trembling and exposed. She thought of Eddie and the goose bumps rose across her skin again, and she knew that part of the reason she felt so humiliated was that she was aroused. Sharing her arousal with someone else had brought back all her old insecurities about her sexuality. She felt disgusted by her own skin.

What are you embarrassed for? she chided herself. *Don't you remember last night? He's just another dead guy.*

No amount of cynical cajoling could dispel her bad humor.

She went home alone after work and tried to think about something else. She considered calling someone, but she'd become humorless and work-obsessed by her own description. Kathy was her only close friend and she didn't want to talk to Kathy. She could call her sister, but Nina would be having dinner with her husband and kids, and Debra didn't want to face another round of *wouldn't you be happier if you just settled down?*

Why had she let Kathy talk her into this date? She'd had a happy stasis. She liked her work. She liked her apartment. She enjoyed being alone. Her life had been a perfectly balanced equation, simple and perfect in the way that A and B added up to C. The last thing she'd needed was to add in an unknown variable D, which come to think of it stood for *date*, which was entirely the problem.

Around dusk, Debra heard knocking at her door. She felt a sense of relief as she went to let Kathy in. It would probably be better to talk all this out, even if it was embarrassing.

Instead, she found Eddie at her threshold. He held out a single rose.

"I hope this isn't presumptuous," he said.

"Um," said Debra, not moving to take the stem. "I don't know if presumptuous is the word. How did you find out where I live?"

Eddie shrugged. "Kathy."

"Kathy wouldn't give out my apartment number."

Eddie looked over Debra's shoulder into her dimly lit, undecorated apartment. He clearly wanted an invitation. Debra held her ground.

"I wanted to talk to you about last night," said Eddie.

Debra said, "I thought I was more comfortable with things than I am. It's not your fault. It's what I told you before. I'm not ready to be in a relationship. Last night made that clear."

"But I thought it went well." Eddie looked crushed. His brows

sagged miserably over his dark, enormous eyes. He extended the bloom again. “At least take the rose?”

Debra wanted Eddie to go away, but she didn’t want to hurt his feelings. She thought he might go more quickly and quietly if she did what he wanted. She reached out. “All right.”

Eddie’s fingers brushed Debra’s as she took the rose. He leaned in close, his breath warm on her face.

“You mesmerize me,” he said.

Debra blinked. She felt a little dizzy. She looked down at the rose in her hand and felt a strange tingle. She’d never been one for romantic gestures. When she’d done the accounting for her sister’s wedding, she’d set aside the floral bill specifically so that she could lecture Nina on how crazy it was to spend that much money on a bunch of bee attractors that would die in a day or two anyway. Yet for some strange, incomprehensible reason, this rose felt almost ... mesmerizing.

“Are you sure you won’t let me take you out?” asked Eddie.

Debra watched his huge, dark eyes. “I don’t know, I ... well, I suppose, why not?”

They went out for Chinese food and ended up at a late night showing of *Night of the Living Dead*.

“Does this do it for you?” Eddie asked.

Debra rolled her eyes. “No, that’s not what it’s about at all,” she said, but before she could explain about timelessness and repose and the exquisite beauty of the ephemeral, they were making out.

His fingers tangled in her hair. Her hands wandered down his back. Around his tongue, she managed to suggest, “Next time we’ll go see a movie with a hypnotist in it.”

“No, what we really need is to rent some old B horror,” Eddie said. “I bet we can find one with a hypnotist *and* a zombie.”

Debra broke away from the kiss. She grabbed Eddie’s hand. “Come on,” she said, even though the nearest person was several aisles away. “We should go. We don’t want to disturb anyone.”

They retired to Eddie's apartment. Eddie proposed being a reanimated corpse for the night, and even though Debra didn't think it would do anything for her, she agreed.

Despite Debra's expectations, it was amazing. She drove home humming "Monster Mash."

The next day at work, Kathy caught sight of Eddie's rose, which Debra had put into a mug reading *a good accountant is a debit to her profession*.

"Worked out how you feel?" Kathy asked.

Debra grinned. "Great would be one word for it."

"Pleased?" Kathy proposed.

"Elated."

"Satisfied?"

"Very." Debra clasped Kathy's fingers, and laid a kiss on one of her many rings. "Forgive me for doubting you."

Kathy waved it off airily. "I never refuse a penitent. Just don't let it happen again."

That night, there was another rose. Eddie and Debra skipped the trip out and stayed in Eddie's apartment. Eddie indulged what Debra guessed was one of his favorite pastimes, showing off his collection of rare books about hypnotism.

"What's that?" Debra asked, pointing to a woodcut of a woman in a bathtub. A man in eighteenth-century dress was rubbing an iron rod between her breasts to her evident delight.

"That's Mesmer, the father of hypnotism. He believed he could cure patients by using magnets." Eddie pointed to the girl in the tub. "He would have made her swallow iron before doing this. He was actually hypnotizing his patients, but he thought he was curing them with his animal magnetism. That's where we get the word *mesmerize*."

A thrill ran through Debra at the mention of being mesmerized. She eased the book out of Eddie's hand.

"Feel free to try your animal magnetism on me any time," she

said.

They experimented with time of death. Eddie hypnotized Debra to find him warm, cold, freshly deceased, embalmed, moldy, and worm-eaten. They decided to mix in some exotic settings. Mortuaries were an early favorite, quickly supplanted by Egyptian pyramids, church catacombs, medieval wakes, and even once the bathroom scene from *Clerks*.

That one prompted a question from Eddie. "I understand how male necrophiliacs do it, but what do women do with real corpses? They can't all die at attention."

"Skeletons have hands," she said.

The two of them interrupted their idyll only for brief forays into the outside world: trips to the store for cigarettes, coffee, and cheese-cake; meandering walks through the city streets; the inevitable hours at the office. Their longest time apart was when Debra took a trip to her apartment to pack enough clothes and necessities that she could stay with Eddie indefinitely.

That Thursday, Eddie kissed Debra's hand and presented her with the daily rose. "It's the last one," he said with a smile.

"You must have given me a dozen of these by now," Debra said. She put it in the ornate brass vase where she kept all the others except the one she'd taken to work.

"A baker's dozen," Eddie said. "The florist sells them in bunches of thirteen."

Debra examined the petals of the older roses for browning. "You bought them all at once? Didn't you give me the first one the day after we ... you know ... the first time?"

Eddie nodded. "Roses for my rose."

Debra plucked away a withering leaf. "Wasn't that a little fast? I might have sent you away and never spoken to you again."

Eddie came up behind her, and began to kiss her neck. "I thought it was worth the risk, my mesmerizing one."

At the word *mesmerize*, a pleasant shiver worked its way along

Debra's spine. Suddenly, she couldn't remember what she'd been thinking about the roses. She felt hot and muddled. She had the sense of grasping for something just beyond her reach, something she'd just figured out.

"I was thinking of going home tonight," she murmured, still confused. "I have a lot of work to do. I've been distracted lately at the office."

"Don't," said Eddie.

"I need to."

"I'm sure we can think of something more fun. You can be Lizzie Borden. I'll suffer the forty whacks."

"Lizzie killed her parents."

"Maybe she was planning to off her boyfriend, too."

"Thanks for the offer, but I think we need to save the axe for another time."

Eddie clasped Debra's waist. "Stay," he said.

She struggled. "No! I—"

"Let me find a way to mesmerize you."

Debra's mouth went dry. She felt the volition drain from her muscles; she went slack, allowing Eddie to pull her into his embrace.

"All right," she said. "I'll stay."

The roses in the brass vase were bright crimson, the shade of newly shed blood. They weren't decaying yet, but they were approaching their zenith: the stage when the petals stretched to their fullest, as though taking a final bow before yielding to death.

"You and Eddie have been cloistering yourselves like a couple of nuns," Kathy said. She paused. "Horny nuns." She paused again. "Never mind. The point is: Greg and I are hosting a gathering for the fall equinox. We want you to come."

Debra grumbled. "Kathy, you know how I feel about your New Age friends."

"I thought Eddie might have helped you get over that."

“We’ll come,” said Debra. “If it works for Eddie.”

At first, Eddie reacted to the promise of interacting as a couple with excitement. He crowed about getting to show off his girl, which made Debra feel uncomfortably like a blue-ribbon racehorse. She considered saying so, but she didn’t want to snipe when Eddie meant to be sweet.

As the week wore toward Friday, Eddie became moody. He went to bed early while Debra reviewed last week’s figures, without bothering to say goodnight. In the morning, he made coffee for one and snarled at the orange cat (whose name was Pocket Watch) when she tried to settle on his lap. He became furious when Debra, who had finally finished her work, went to pull down one of his books on hypnosis.

“I have a system for organizing those!” he said, snatching the book away.

“What’s this really about?” she asked.

He gestured at her clothes. “You’re going to wear *that*? To a party?”

Debra looked down at her button-down shirt and slacks.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“They’re *men’s clothes*,” he said.

“Men’s clothes are cheaper.”

“People will be there. People I know. You’re going to embarrass me.”

“I thought you liked women who don’t go around nearly naked.”

“You can be modest without being a slob.”

That was enough. Debra crossed the room to grab her briefcase. Eddie moved to intersect her path.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“It’s time for work.”

“Do you know how much I do for you? How much I put up with to give you what you want?”

“Get out of my way, please.”

They stood, shoulder to shoulder, at a momentary impasse. Eddie reached out to brush Debra's cheek. Pocket Watch eyed them, the fur on her spine extended.

"Don't get mad," Eddie said. "Give me a smile before you go."

Debra lifted the corners of her mouth.

"There," said Eddie. He leaned in to kiss her. "All I want is for us to be a presentable couple. I want my friends to like you. That's not worth getting angry about, is it?"

Debra kept her smile in place as she took her briefcase and went out the door. It followed her down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk, the enormous eye of the dormer window watching as she walked to her car.

Eddie visited unexpectedly at work during lunch. Debra hardly remembered what he said, how she ended up back in his apartment, his voice rich, the trance deep, the sex desperate and fast. They pressed together a long time afterward, slick and spent.

He gave her a shoe box wrapped in brown paper. Inside there was a pair of scarlet pumps. She tried to tell him she didn't want them, but he said something, and then she didn't feel like protesting anymore. He slid the pumps onto her feet and knelt beside the bed, stroking the emphasized slope of her calf.

"Just beautiful," he said, and leaned her across the bed to kiss her, his hands caging her wrists, his tongue in her mouth, her feet in the pumps dangling over the side of the bed.

Debra wore the damn heels to the party.

"These things are torture devices," said Debra, tottering up the path to Kathy's craftsman. "They should have left them in the middle ages."

"Don't exaggerate," said Eddie.

Kathy greeted them at the door in a flutter of red gauze layered with heavy silver-and-gemstone necklaces. Her husband Greg stood nearby, eating chocolates and discussing criminal law with a blonde

in a cheongsam. Kathy frowned when she saw Debra. "I don't think I've ever seen you in a skirt before. Are those heels?"

Debra shrugged self-consciously. Eddie's smile grew wider. He put his hands on her shoulders as if he were presenting her at a debutante's ball. "Doesn't she look beautiful?"

"She looks nice," said Kathy. "She just doesn't look like my Debra."

Inside, there were cocktails. Someone had put together a tray of vegan appetizers in the shape of a penis and testicles, and several people were milling around the platter making jokes about what they would have been doing at a *real* autumn equinox. Candles glittered on every surface, brown and red and wheat gold. The scents of patchouli and sandalwood thickened the air.

Debra listened for a moment as a woman with a bleached buzz cut discussed her meditation routine with a man wearing camouflage and a nose ring.

"Oh for spit's sake," complained Debra. "Did he just say he's sending out mental vibrations to alien intelligences?"

Eddie glared at her.

Debra shuffled ashamedly. "It's not like I would have said anything to him," she muttered.

A woman in multi-layered, flowered skirts clasped Eddie's hands and pulled him aside to talk about past-life regression through hypnosis. Debra tried to listen, but she couldn't follow their conversation, and anyway she knew her contributions wouldn't be welcome.

She scanned the other guests. A man in a business suit was having a congenial discussion with a college-aged girl in jeans. "I really admire Kathy's visualization," said the girl, looking around the room. "This house is gorgeous."

Debra put on a friendly smile. "What kind of accountant would she be if she couldn't find a good shelter?"

It was the kind of joke that would have killed in the office. The man and girl turned to Debra, their body language clearly indicating they didn't appreciate her interjection.

"Shelter," repeated Debra. "Like a tax shelter."

"Funny," said the girl flatly.

The couple wandered off. Debra tottered back a step toward Eddie. She was beginning to wonder if she should ditch him and go find a drink when a large, bearded man caught her eye from a few steps away. He ambled over, sipping casually from a glass of white wine.

"Has anyone ever told you that you have an indigo aura?" he asked.

Debra hated those kinds of conversational sallies. They were inevitably hard to parry without giving offense. "I always assumed my aura was black," she said.

"Why?"

"I like black."

"Indigo is a good color. It means you're worldly and practical. I bet you don't believe in the paranormal."

Debra snorted. "What tipped you off?"

"Indigo is often associated with skeptics. Personally, I like skeptics. It signals an active mind."

Debra smiled despite herself. The man extended his hand.

"Bertrand Hurst," he said.

"Debra Edgecombe," she answered, shaking. "I work with Kathy."

"Accountant?"

"One of the few, the proud, the tedious."

"Come on. I doubt you're tedious."

Bertrand reached to touch Debra's cheek. His fingertips brushed her skin and she felt sudden, intense revulsion. She flinched, involuntarily.

Bertrand looked taken aback. "Sorry," he said. "Someone else has their mark on you. You didn't seem like the type."

Debra wiped at her face as if she could purge the sensation of his touch. She felt as though she'd been swarmed by maggots. She could hardly even look at him.

Eddie looked over from his conversation. His eyes hardened. He took Debra by the elbow. "What's going on?"

"I was only observing your girlfriend's striking indigo aura," said Bertrand. "No harm intended. Now if you'll excuse me, I believe Kathy wanted me to light a brown candle to success in the new year."

Bertrand inclined his head toward Debra and Eddie in succession, and then ambled into the crowd. Eddie's grip remained fastened on Debra's elbow. She looked up at his large, dark eyes, and felt afraid.

They left before dinner. Eddie's hands were stiff on the wheel as they drove back, his eyes focused coldly on the road. Debra twisted in her seat as they drove past the turn that would lead to her apartment.

"I thought I should go home tonight," she said.

"You embarrass me in front of everyone, and now you want to leave me alone?" asked Eddie. "What's wrong? Haven't you humiliated me enough?"

He parked beneath the dormer eye. Without speaking, he led her up the narrow stairway and into his apartment. Pocket Watch watched him throw home the bolt on the door once they were inside. She leapt from her perch on the bookshelf and sauntered out of the front room, as if deciding it would be a good night to hide.

"You have a problem with men," said Eddie. "Do you want all men to die, Debra?"

Debra began to protest. Eddie cut her off.

"No, I'm sure it isn't conscious. It's an ingrained problem. You're threatened by us, so you fantasize about us being dead because it makes us powerless. And now you're taking out your anxieties on me."

He shook his head. His expression showed hard-worn resentment.

"Night after night, I cater to your fantasies. I let you crawl over me and pretend ... what you pretend. And when I ask you to wear a pair of high heels, you can't even do that without complaining. And

then you hit on other men while I'm standing right there?"

Debra trembled with exhaustion. Eddie's face was flushed, flushed with anger she supposed, but his expression was the same as when they were having sex. He neared her, his body a little too close to her body, his face a little too close to her face.

"Don't worry, Debra. I know it's not your fault. It's something wrong in your head, that's all. I'll take care of you. I can get rid of the problem at its source." He brushed his fingers across her wrist. Her heart raced. "Let me cure your necrophilia."

Debra burned with confusion. The conversation felt strange and unreal. Eddie's words blurred into her head so that she seemed to feel them rather than hear them.

"Do this for me, Debra," he said. "Let me mesmerize you. Your necrophilia has damaged your psyche. It's damaged your life. Are you going to let it damage our relationship, too? Let me mesmerize you...."

Debra felt a strange sensation of splitting, as if she were becoming two people. One half knew that she should run down the rickety stairs and then change her locks and her phone number. The other knew that Eddie was right. Necrophilia *was* a sickness. How many psych papers had she read, hoping this would be the one that had discovered a cure for sexual fixation?

Eddie's fingers traced the line of her face. "You know I love you, Debra. I want to do what's best for you. My mesmerizing one."

Debra's hands shook. She could barely breathe. She tried to tell Eddie to stop, but he kept coming after her. His hands closed on her wrists. She broke his grip. He tried to force her onto the lime velvet love seat. She twisted away.

His expression was furious now. He barreled toward Debra, rushing her like an angry animal. She jumped aside. He crashed into a bookcase, books and bird skeletons and sepia-toned historical photographs clattering to the ground. He pulled himself up and started toward her again.

Debra grabbed something from the pile of fallen curios. She

didn't even think. Her arm swung in one clean, strong arc. Eddie fell to the floor, felled by an enormous, leather-bound copy of *The History of Mesmerism*.

For the first few moments that Eddie lay on the floor, unmoving, Debra wondered what it would be like to fuck his corpse for real.

In the end, she decided that she wouldn't fuck Eddie again if he were the last dead thing on earth. She attached a note explaining as much to the bouquet of wilting red roses she sent to his hospital room after the doctors announced that he would, unfortunately, recover.

Debra and Kathy discussed it over coffee in the break room, drinking from *Sweet as 3.14159* and *Don't drink and derive*.

"I don't understand," Kathy said. "I thought you couldn't do anything under hypnosis that you thought was wrong."

"There are a lot of things you don't really want to do but that you don't think are morally wrong. Eddie knew I was conflicted about my sexuality. He played on my ambivalence. It wasn't until he pushed me too fast and too hard that the trance finally broke." Debra sipped her coffee. "He implanted a number of commands during our first session. He tried to control me with a trigger word that would make me do whatever he wanted."

"What word?"

Debra grimaced. "*Mesmerize*," she said, with a little shudder.

"How did you figure all of it out?"

"I've been doing a little reading."

Kathy shook her head. "So he's going to recover?"

"One hundred percent, apparently. But it'll be a few painful months before then."

"Well, if we can't get him dead," said Kathy, "maybe we can screw him on the other inevitability."

"You want to mess up his taxes?"

Kathy grinned. "Guess which firm he hired to do them?"

Debra laughed briefly. "Go ahead if you want to, but I've got my own plans for revenge."

"Yeah?"

"Well, I say revenge, but it's more for me than for him...."

Corpses lined the catacomb walls like art pieces in a museum.

A monk's mummified body stood mounted at the fore of the chamber, hands clasped piously before him. The skeletal corpses of young men and women stood along the walls, lifting their faces toward heaven. A pair of dead children sat together on a wooden bench at the back, holding hands, their eye sockets hollow and dark.

A single fresh body lay alone on a bier, surrounded by candles. Debra knelt beside him. The abbess had assigned her the honor of praying over his remains even though she had only recently taken the veil, but she couldn't help lifting her eyes from her contemplation to watch his body. He'd been a man of extraordinary beauty. They said he'd been uncommonly virtuous, too—so pure that he'd never been sullied by a woman's touch.

Debra knew she shouldn't, but she reached up to touch his motionless form. His sculpted chest still held a hint of warmth as she slid her palm across his heart. His features remained as serene and immobile as if carved from marble.

"Mmm, that feels so good," Peter groaned as Debra slid down on him. Peter was a swimmer at the local community college who had a thing for older women.

"Shhh," Debra said. "Lie back."

Obediently, Peter closed his eyes and relaxed. Debra had to admit he was a good lover. He wasn't shy about saying that he found it really hot that Debra insisted on doing everything, but he kept forgetting to lie still. She forgave him for his flaws as she traced her fingers down his perfect abdominals.

The candles flickered, spattering drops of hot wax across the

bier. The catacomb's reek of decay clashed with the beauty of the young man's body. Debra leaned forward to kiss his mouth.

How sad it is that you can't feel this, she thought, pressing her cheek against his still, breathless chest.

"That is *so fucking good*," Peter groaned. He flailed, knocking a book off of Debra's nightstand. It made a *thunk* against the rug. "What was that?" Peter asked.

Debra reached over the side of the bed and retrieved the book. The title looped in bold red letters across the cover: *Erotic Pleasure through Self-Hypnosis*. She'd promised to teach Peter how to do it, but now was not the time.

"Nothing important." She traced her finger around the bud of his nipple. "Now hush," she said, and leaned in for another kiss.

