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from Girl in the

Flammable Skins

QUIET PLEASE

It is quiet in the rest of the library.

Inside the back room, the woman has crawled out from underneath the man. Now fuck me like a dog she tells him. She grips a pillow in her fists and he breathes behind her, hot air down her back which is starting to sweat and slip on his stomach. She doesn't want him to see her face because it is blowing up inside, red and furious, and she's grimacing at the pale white wall which is cool when she puts her hand on it to help her push back into him, get his dick to fill up her body until there's nothing left of her inside: just dick.

The woman is a librarian and today her father has died. She got a phone call from her weeping mother in the morning, threw up and then dressed for work. Sitting at her desk with her back very straight, she asks the young man very politely, the one who always comes into the library to check

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out bestsellers, asks him when it was he last got laid. He lets out a weird sound and she says shhh, this is a library. She has her hair back and the glasses on but everyone has a librarian fantasy, and she is truly a babe beneath.

I have a fantasy, he says, of a librarian.

She smiles at him but asks her original question again. She doesn't want someone brand new to the business but neither is she looking for a goddamn gigolo. This is an important fuck for her. He tells her it's been a few months and looks sheepish but honest and then hopeful. She says great and tells him there's a back room with a couch for people who get dizzy or sick in the library (which happens surprisingly often), and could he meet her there in five minutes? He nods, he's already telling his friends about this in a monologue in his head. He has green eyes and no wrinkles yet.

They meet in the back and she pulls the shade down on the little window. This is the sex that she wishes would split her open and murder her because she can't deal with a dead father; she's wished him dead so many times that now it's hard to tell the difference between fantasy and reality. Is it true? He's really gone? She didn't really want him to die, that is not what she meant when she faced him and imagined knives sticking into his body. This is not what she meant, for him to actually die. She wonders if she invented the phone call, but she remembers the way her mother's voice kept climbing up and up, and it's so real and true she can't bear it and wants to go fuck someone else. The man is tired now but grinning like he can't believe it. He's figuring when he can

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be there next, but she's sure she'll never want him again. Her hair is down and glasses off and clothes on the floor and she's the fucked librarian and he's looking at her with this look of adoration. She squeezes his wrist and then concentrates on putting herself back together. In ten minutes, she's at the front desk again, telling a youngster about a swell book on aisle ten, and unless you leaned forward to smell her, you'd never know.

There is a mural on the curved ceiling of the library of fairies dancing. Their arms are interwoven, hair loose from the wind. Since people look at the ceiling fairly often when they're at the library, it is a well-known mural. The librarian tilts her head back to take a deep breath. One of the fairies is missing a mouth. It has burned off from the glare of the sunlight, and she is staring at her fairy friends with a purple-eyed look of muteness. The librarian does not like to see this, and looks down to survey the population of her library instead.

She is amazed as she glances around to see how many attractive men there are that day. They are everywhere: leaning over the wood tables, straight-backed in the aisles, men flipping pages with nice hands. The librarian, on this day, the day of her father's death, is overwhelmed by an appetite she has never felt before and she waits for another one of them to approach her desk.

It takes five minutes.

This one is a businessman with a vest. He is asking her about a book on fishing when she propositions him. His face

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lights up, the young boy comes clean and clear through his eyes, that librarian he knew when he was seven. She had round calves and a low voice.

She has him back in the room; he makes one tentative step forward and then he's on her like Wall Street rain, his suit in a pile on the floor in a full bucket, her dress unbuttoned down, one by one until she's naked and the sweat is pooling in her back again. She obliterates herself and then buttons up. This man too wants to see her again, he might want to marry her, he's thinking, but she smiles without teeth and says, man, this is a one-shot deal. Thanks.

If she wanted to, she could do this forever, charge a lot of money and become rich. She has this wonderful body, with full heavy breasts and a curve to her back that makes her pliable like a toy. She wraps her legs around man number three, a long-haired artist type, and her hair shakes loose and he removes her glasses and she fucks him until he's shuddering and trying to moan, but she just keeps saying Sshhh, shhh and it's making him so happy, she keeps saying it even after he's shut up.

The morning goes by like normal except she fucks three more men, sending them out periodically to check her desk, and it's all in the silence, while people shuffle across the wood floor and trade words on paper for more words on paper.

After lunch, the muscleman enters the library.

He is tan and attractive and his arms are busting out of his shirt like balloons. He is with the traveling circus where he lifts a desk with a chair with a person with a child with a dog

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with a bone. He lifts it up and never drops anything and people cheer.

He also likes to read.

He picks this library because it's the closest to the big top. It's been a tiring week at the circus because the lion tamer had a fit and quit, and so the lions keep roaring. They miss him, and no one else will pet them because they're lions. When the muscleman enters the library, he breathes in the quiet in relief. He notices the librarian right away, the way she is sitting at her desk with this little twist to her lips that only a very careful observer would notice. He approaches her, and she looks at him in surprise. The librarian at this point assumes everyone in the library knows what is going on, but the fact is, they don't. Most of the library people just think it's stuffer than usual and for some reason are having a hard time focusing on their books.

The librarian looks at the muscleman and wants him.

Five minutes, she says, tilting her head toward the back room.

The muscleman nods, but he doesn't know what she's talking about. He goes off to look at the classics, but after five minutes, follows his summons, curious.

The back room has a couch and beige walls. When he enters the room, he's struck by the thickness of the sex smell; it is so pervasive he almost falls over. The librarian is sitting on the couch in her dress which is gray and covers her whole body. Down the center, there is a row of mother-of-pearl buttons and one of them is unbuttoned by accident.

The thing is, the muscleman is not so sure of his librarian fantasies. He is more sure that he likes to lift whatever he can. So he walks over to her in the waddly way that men with big thighs have to walk, and picks her up, couch and all.

Hey, she says, put me down.

The muscleman loves how his shoulders feel, the weight of something important, a life, on his back.

Hey, she says again, this is a library, put me down.

He twirls her gently, to the absent audience and she ducks her head down so as not to collide with the light fixture.

He opens the door and walks out with the couch. He is thoughtful enough to bring it down when they get to the door frame so she doesn't bump her head. She wants to yell at him but they're in the library now.

Two of the men she has fucked are still there, in hopes for a second round. They are stunned and for some reason very jealous when they see her riding the couch like a float at a parade, through the aisles of books. The businessman in the vest holds up a book and after a moment, throws it at her.

You are not Cleopatra! he says, and she ducks and screams, then clamps her hand over her mouth. Her father's funeral is in one day. It is important that there is quiet in a library. The book flies over her head and hits a regular library man who is reading a magazine at a table.

He throws it back, enraged, and they're all over in a second, pages raining down, the dust slapping up into her face. They rustle as they fly and the librarian covers her face be-

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cause she can't stand to look down at the floor where the books are splayed open on their bindings as if they've been shot.

The muscleman doesn't seem to notice, even though the books are hitting him on his legs, his waist. He lifts her up, on his tiptoes, to the ceiling of the library.

Stand up, he says to her in a low voice, muffled from underneath the couch, stand up and I'll still balance you, I can do it even if you are standing.

She doesn't know what else to do and she can feel his push upward from beneath her. She presses down with her feet to stand, and puts a finger on the huge mural on the ceiling, the mural of the fairies dancing in summer. Right away, she sees the one fairy without the mouth again, and reaches into her bun to remove the pencil that is always kept there. Hair tumbles down. On her tiptoes, she is able to touch the curve of the ceiling where the fairy's mouth should be.

Hold still, she whispers to the muscleman who doesn't hear her, is in his own bliss of strength.

She grips the pencil and with one hand flat on the ceiling steadies herself enough to draw a mouth underneath the nose of the fairy. She tries to draw it as a big wide dancing smile, and darkens the pencil lining a few times. From where she stands, it looks nice, from where she is just inches underneath the painting which is warmed by the sunlight coming into the library.

She doesn't notice until the next day, when she comes to

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work to clean up the books an hour before her father is put into the ground, that the circle of fairies is altered now. That the laughing ones now pull along one fairy with purple eyes, who is clearly dancing against her will, dragged along with the circle, her mouth wide open and screaming.

SKINNESS

Renny's phone privileges were revoked when they discovered a swastika carved into his bed board. He had been at Ocean House for three days. The staff, arguing in the Off-Limits Room with their hands warmed by white Styrofoam coffee cups, took an hour before they decided on this as a punishment. Jill Cohen, the activities director, went into his room while Renny was playing pool with Damon, the one who'd stabbed himself in the thigh, and turned the swastika into four boxes and then put a roof and a chimney on top. She wanted to make smoke coming out of the chimney, but the fork did not carve curls well, so she left the hearth cold.

Jill drove forty-five minutes every other day to run the evening activities for the group of runaway teenagers living at Ocean House. This was her first job out of college, and she

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## SAY YES

THEY WERE DOING the dishes, his wife washing while he dried. He'd washed the night before. Unlike most men he knew, he really pitched in on the housework. A few months earlier he'd overheard a friend of his wife's congratulate her on having such a considerate husband, and he thought, *I try*. Helping out with the dishes was a way he had of showing how considerate he was.

They talked about different things and somehow got on the subject of whether white people should marry black people. He said that all things considered, he thought it was a bad idea.

"Why?" she asked.

Sometimes his wife got this look where she pinched her brows together and bit her lower lip and stared down at something. When he saw her like this he knew he should keep his mouth shut, but he never did. Actually it made him talk more. She had that look now.

"Why?" she asked again, and stood there with her hand inside a bowl, not washing it but just holding it above the water.

"Listen," he said, "I went to school with blacks, and I've worked with blacks and lived on the same street with blacks, and we've always gotten along just fine. I don't need you coming along now and implying that I'm a racist."

"I didn't imply anything," she said, and began washing the bowl again, turning it around in her hand as though she were shaping it. "I just don't see what's wrong with a white person marrying a black person, that's all."

"They don't come from the same culture as we do. Listen to them sometime — they even have their own language. That's okay with me, I *like* hearing them talk" — he did; for some reason it always made him feel happy — "but it's different. A person from their culture and a person from our culture could never really *know* each other."

"Like you know me?" his wife asked.

"Yes. Like I know you."

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"But if they love each other," she said. She was washing faster now, not looking at him.

Oh boy, he thought. He said, "Don't take my word for it. Look at the statistics. Most of those marriages break up."

"Statistics." She was piling dishes on the drainboard at a terrific rate, just swiping at them with the cloth. Many of them were greasy, and there were flecks of food between the tines of the forks. "All right," she said, "what about foreigners? I suppose you think the same thing about two foreigners getting married."

"Yes," he said, "as a matter of fact I do. How can you understand someone who comes from a completely different background?"

"Different," said his wife. "Not the same, like us."

"Yes, different," he snapped, angry with her for resorting to this trick of repeating his words so that they sounded crass, or hypocritical. "These are dirty," he said, and dumped all the silverware back into the sink.

The water had gone flat and gray. She stared down at it, her lips pressed tight together, then plunged her hands under the surface. "Oh!" she cried, and jumped back. She took her right hand by the wrist and held it up. Her thumb was bleeding.

"Ann, don't move," he said. "Stay right there." He ran upstairs to the bathroom and rummaged in the medicine chest for alcohol, cotton, and a Band-Aid. When he came back down she was leaning against the refrigerator with her eyes closed, still holding her hand. He took the hand and dabbed at her thumb with the cotton. The bleeding had stopped. He squeezed it to see how deep the wound was and a single drop of blood welled up, trembling and bright, and fell to the floor. Over the thumb she stared at him accusingly. "It's shallow," he said. "Tomorrow you won't even know it's there." He hoped that she appreciated how quickly he had come to her aid. He'd acted out of concern for her, with no thought of getting anything in return, but now the thought occurred to him that it would be a nice gesture on her part not to start up that conversation again, as he was tired of it. "I'll finish up here," he said. "You go and relax."

"That's okay," she said. "I'll dry."

He began to wash the silverware again, giving a lot of attention to the forks.

"So," she said, "you wouldn't have married me if I'd been black."

"For Christ's sake, Ann!"

"Well, that's what you said, didn't you?"