

A FULL GROWN MAN

ANITA STUBBS

Every Thursday evening Harrison's mother played Bridge, either in their own living room, or in the home of one of the other club members. Regardless, Harrison had time on his hands, free time for a few hours, time he could spend doing whatever pleased him. And time spent away from his widowed mother pleased him tremendously. It wasn't that he didn't love Lucy, but—being her only child—that weekly freedom from his mother's short leash was the best part of Harrison's life.

"My boy would never do anything wrong, or against my wishes," Lucy bragged to everyone." She had been saying that all his life, and he had no doubt she believed it, but Lucy was not the kind of woman who left anything to chance. Her life revolved around Harrison, fatherless since he was twelve, like a planet around the sun and she kept him under surveillance at all times. Except for Thursday evenings, six to ten.

Motivated always by his mother's pride in him, her high expectations, Harrison worked hard at his job managing the largest independent supermarket in the city. Painfully shy, the most difficult task related to the job had been getting hired. At the end of his senior year at the state university where he majored in business, a counselor there had encouraged him to apply for an assistant manager's position at the store. The counselor even called to set up the appointment for him.

Lucy laid out his clothes the morning of his interview with as much care and forethought as she would have had the black suit and tie been intended for his funeral. Before he left, she inspected him carefully, smoothing his hair, checking his shoes, and straightening the crisp white handkerchief neatly tucked into his left coat pocket. She watched him back her Buick carefully from the garage, and waved him off with a flourish.

Harrison's hands left sweaty prints all over the steering wheel as he drove the few miles to Harwell's Supermarket, which was located in the oldest area of east Dallas. Once the hub of commerce for private business, several family-owned clothing, hardware, repair shops, laundry mats, and dry cleaning establishments still thrived there. A few restaurants attracted customers from all over the city, and at the time of Harrison's interview, the movie theater still prospered.

Stopping at the light on the corner, he did a series of deep breathing exercises, and rehearsed his introductory speech for the last time. His heart palpitated, and he wanted to turn the car around and go home. He studied his face in the mirror, pushing the black-framed glasses against the bridge of his long thin nose, a nervous habit he could not break. Pulling at his tie, he noticed his Adam's apple seemed larger than usual, and coughing nervously, he watched in dismay as it bobbed up and down. His dark beard remained a shadow beneath his pale skin even though freshly shaven. A strand of his unruly brown hair managed to escape the heavy gel necessary to control it, and Harrison patted at it with long skeletal fingers. He was a tall angular man—everything about him, thin and pointy. His one redeeming feature, his smile, could transform his face instantly into a relatively handsome one, but this occurred rarely. His shyness prevented much social interaction, and his black framed hazel eyes retreated from every gaze.

A horn blast startled him into awareness, and he noticed the light had changed. He took a right turn, feeling nauseated, for Harwell's parking lot loomed ahead. He started to hyper-ventilate, and grabbed for the ever-handy paper bag in the glove compartment. Frantically, he inhaled and exhaled into the bag as he pulled into the store's already crowded parking lot. Soon, his breathing manageable, he turned off the ignition and prepared himself.

Ten years later, he managed the store from the confines of his own isolated office, having been promoted within six months after being hired. He avoided contact with customers, and dealt with his subordinates through his assistant manager, Mike. Under Harrison's careful management, however, the store's profits increased annually, and the owners compensated him well. His savings grew and his investments multiplied steadily. Harrison had become quite well off.

Lucy watched her son's finances as closely as her own. He spent nothing without discussing it first with her. Until last month, he had not done one thing in all his thirty-two years without Lucy's permission. He couldn't believe it himself when he purchased his new Cadillac Escalade without consulting her. That act of making his own decision, referred to by Lucy over Bridge as his wild-hair moment, upset his mother more than the money being wasted on such a "silly extravagance."

But behind the wheel of the Escalade, Harrison felt like somebody. He began waving at the neighbors when he drove away each morning. In traffic, he practiced making eye contact, and felt encouraged when he saw the respect on the faces of other drivers, enjoyed their nods at the stoplights. While sitting in traffic, he discovered, he had an opportunity to practice his response to the other drivers. Tipping his head ever so slightly at them at first, he soon felt connected in a way he never had before, and on occasion, he even smiled.

Recent changes had come to one block of Grand Avenue as well. Harrison noticed the old discount-clothing store was being converted into a nightclub, and a couple of liquor stores had opened. The building, which housed a pharmacy and a diner, was torn down for a parking lot. And the old hotel at the end of the block, once an upscale establishment, now offered rooms for rent by the hour, by the day, or by the week, and the red neon sign in the window always flashed Vacancy.

One evening driving home from a long day at the office, Harrison caught himself observing one of the young ladies standing beneath the street lamp on the corner at the traffic light. His eyes were first drawn to her shapely legs, for her extremely short skirt revealed most of them. The brisk autumn air whipped her long blonde hair away from her face, and before Harrison could take his eyes away, she flashed him a friendly smile. He nodded and smiled back, just as the light changed.

He began timing his drive home so that the light would always catch him, and most evenings his calculations worked. One evening, she had positioned herself much closer to the street, standing right on the curb. When he stopped, she tapped on the passenger window with a long red nail. When he lowered the window, she leaned in closer, revealing deep cleavage and full red lips. She spoke in a low sweet voice, and the heavy scent of perfume mixed with the new car smell of the Escalade. Harrison's Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed, and he tried to compose himself. The paper bag had not been needed in weeks, but a fit of hyperventilation threatened as he eyes feasted on the lush pair of breasts offered him.

"My name's Shirley," she said. "Call me sometime." With that, she tossed a business card on the seat as the light changed.

Harrison jerked his eyes away, easing the vehicle forward. Perspiration drenched his body, and his heart raced with excitement. Sensations much more intense than those stimulated by the Playboy he kept tucked between his mattress surged over him, and he looked back at her as he drove away. She waved.

Thrilled by the attention of such a beautiful woman, he made the drive home unaware of anything around him that evening. He endured his mother's routine probing questions and gossipy comments throughout dinner, while the business card burned against his heart in his shirt pocket. Finally, within the privacy of his own room, he relived the moment—the sight of her, the scent of her, the sweetness of her invitation. Harrison

knew without a doubt that for the first time in his life he had fallen in love. He fell asleep, her business card beneath his pillow, certain she would visit him in his dreams.

The thought of her consumed his thoughts the next day, and the anticipation of seeing her again confined him to his desk, where her physical affect on him would not be noticed. Unable to block the memory of her breasts, her mouth, he finally locked his door against any intrusion, and waited until he knew Mike had closed the store, sure that all the employees had gone, before he made his exit.

To his huge disappointment, she wasn't beneath the street lamp. Two other girls loitered there, but he only had eyes for Shirley. Her absence disappointed him beyond belief. He fought back tears, sitting there searching the area, thinking maybe she would appear. When the light changed, he pulled away with a heavy heart. That night again he retired early, and taking the card from his wallet, he dialed the number.

"Hello," she answered, her voice as sweet and sexy as he remembered.

"Uh," he stammered, cleared his throat, and tried again. "Uh, Shirley?"

"Yes."

"This is Harrison, you gave me your card yesterday evening."

"Yes?"

"I was wondering, uh," he groped for words and took a deep breath. "Uh, would you like to go out to dinner tomorrow night?"

"Dinner?" Harrison detected the surprise in her voice, and grew more confident. "Let me see," she said, obviously checking her calendar. "Thursday night? What time?"

"Six?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I can't make it til six-thirty."

"That's fine, six-thirty, then." In his eagerness, Harrison knew he sounded like a schoolboy and, with some difficulty, assumed a more sophisticated tone. "Where may I pick you up, Shirley?" The card offered no address, just the name Shirley, beneath Exclusive Escort Service and the phone number.

Harrison spent much too much time getting dressed Thursday morning. "You better step it up, Harrison," Lucy shouted through his bathroom door. "Today's inventory day, don't forget. You don't need to be late!" As if he had ever been late, and of course, he knew it was inventory day. He flushed the toilet to cover her voice.

At six-thirty that evening, Harrison pulled along the curb in front of her apartment, located in an old but respectable area. Shirley answered the door on the first ring, looking gorgeous in a red leather coat, and black patent leather boots. In the Escalade, her heavily lashed turquoise eyes caressed his face, as she scooted next to him. "Nice," she said, her hand caressing the leather seat.

His hands shook as he pulled into traffic, and he could hardly keep his eyes on the road. With more will power than he knew he possessed, he managed to control his excitement, and pleased himself with his effort to present a calm outward appearance.

"So, Harrison, do you mind if I call you Harry?"

The sound of her voice so close to him, and the scent of her perfume drove him crazy. No one had ever called him Harry, but the way she said it, he felt like Prince Harry!

"Not at all," he responded, glancing sideways at her as she removed her coat. She wore a black turtleneck sweater, and a short black skirt. She crossed her legs, and the skirt slid up to mid-thigh. He swallowed, and gripped the steering wheel with both hands.

"Where are you taking me, Harry?" Her voice was musical.

"The Fifth Quarter, I hope you like it." When he had called for reservations, he had asked for a secluded table for two.

"Nice," she said, in the same way she had said it earlier when rubbing the leather seat, stretching the "i" til it sounded like n-eyes.

She twisted in her seat, and looked intently at him. He felt himself melting under her gaze, and was grateful for the dim interior for he knew his neck and face had reddened. He glanced shyly at her.

"You're a very good-looking man, Harry." She traced a line along the sleeve or his jacket with the red fingernail of her index finger. A large stone flashed on her ring finger, and she laughed softly, biting her bottom lip as her eyes flirted with him.

Soon, he turned into the parking lot, and a valet arrived instantly. Harrison, acting as debonair as he possibly could, tossed the young man the keys and went to open the door for Shirley. She draped the red leather coat across one arm, and slid seductively from the seat, hooking her left arm through Harrison's. Inside, they were promptly escorted to a candlelit table near a glowing fireplace. A bottle of wine cooled in a silver bucket, and the waiter made a grand display of uncorking it and filling their glasses.

Finally seated, they focused on each other, staring straight into the other's eyes. Harrison resisted an overpowering urge to push his glasses further up the bridge of his nose. She smiled prettily, and dimples danced around the corners of her lips. Her thick blonde hair waved seductively about her face. She reached across the table and covered his hand with hers. "Relax, Harry. I'm not gonna bite you."

The touch of her fingers drew tingles from all over his body as though their tips were magnetized. He took a deep breath, and smiled at her. "You should smile more often," she whispered. "You have no idea how that smile affects a girl like me."

"I think you are fully aware how a girl like you is affecting a guy like me," he said, his eyes locked onto hers. "It must be obvious how inexperienced I am." Shocking himself with the forthright ease of his statement, he continued. "In fact, this is my first date." As soon as the words were out, he could not believe he had actually spoken them. She surely would laugh at such an absurd statement from a man his age.

Instead, picking up his hand and clasping it in both of hers, she began to massage each of his fingers, slowly. "Relax, Harry, you are in good hands."

He felt himself responding and placed his other hand over hers, just as he felt her foot moving up and down between his legs under the table. Her skin felt like velvet, and he wanted to hold her, to touch all of her.

A waiter materialized. "You order for me, Harry," she said, releasing his hand, while continuing to massage his leg slowly with her boot. There was a small dance floor in the corner, and a three-piece combo played softly.

"Would you like to dance?" she asked when the waiter had gone.

"I don't know how," he said, reaching for her hand again.

"Come on." She stood up, tugging at him gently. "I'll teach you."

Reluctantly, he followed her onto the dance floor, and she moved into his arms, positioning each of his hands in the proper places. She began moving to the music while he just stood in one spot. She swayed against him sensually, to the rhythm of the bass player, and soon he felt his own body moving to the beat, in sync with hers. In the magic of that moment, Harrison understood the meaning of the old cliché, "and the earth stood still." For him it did. The only movement in the universe was their two bodies, swaying together in perfect motion. He felt her heart pounding against his, as she slipped her arms around his neck and pulled his face to hers. Her mouth was hot and soft, and tasted like the wine. Melded together, as if they were one, he wanted to dissolve into her. He could not stop kissing her. She pulled away, and whispered, "The band's taking a break."

Somehow they finished their dinner and back inside the Escalade, they headed for her apartment. Neither spoke, but the chemistry arced between them, rich with anticipation, with sexual tension. Inside her bedroom, she quickly undressed him, then herself, and took him to her bed. He feared his heart would stop, that he would die from the pure pleasure of her. He didn't want to leave her, longed to spend the night but, checking his watch, he saw that it was nine-thirty. He had no idea what her rate for an evening might be, but he left five hundred dollars on her dresser, not having a clue how he would explain the expense to his mother. Shirley kissed him softly at the door. "Thanks for a beautiful evening, Harry," she whispered against his mouth. "You sure know how to make a girl feel good."

Life for Harrison would never be the same again. He was like an addict, craving Shirley. He lived for those four hours on Thursday evening. And he knew that she felt the same way because she told him she had stopped seeing any other clients.

One Thursday, about a month into their relationship, Shirley asked him when she could meet his mother. Harrison had avoided discussing Lucy with Shirley, although he knew it was inevitable. All Shirley knew about Harrison's mother was that he lived with her, as she was a widow and needed him.

He took out a loan at the bank, to cover his Thursday nights with Shirley, and deposited the money into a new account. As far as his mother knew, each Thursday night was the same as usual. Harrison still took in a movie and occasionally had dinner with his assistant, Mike, the closest person to a friend Harrison had. His secret life was safe. But now, Shirley wanted to meet his mother.

"Soon. You can meet her soon."

"Are you afraid she won't approve?" Shirley straddled Harrison on the sofa in the living room. He'd requested a lap dance. "Of the kind of girl I used to be?"

"No, she'll love you," he lied. "But I'll need some time to get her used to the idea."

"Well, I just can't wait to meet her, she must be wonderful to have produced someone like you." She nuzzled his ear. Removing his glasses, she pulled his face into her naked breasts. "You really should get contacts, Harry," she murmured.

"Contacts, huh?" He made a mental note, as she began unbuttoning his shirt, to call his optometrist.

A few weeks later, on a Monday morning over breakfast, Lucy said, "Where are your glasses, Harrison? You know you can't read that paper without them."

"Don't need 'em any more, Mother," he said, his eyes glued on the section running Harwell's weekly ads.

"Have you lost your mind?" She moved the paper aside and peered into his exposed eyes.

"No, I got contacts." He glared directly into her bespectacled eyes.

"Why," she stammered, "I don't know what to think about you. What's gotten into you, Harrison? Where'd you ever get the idea to get contact lenses?" She poured herself another cup of coffee. "Here, let me look at you!" She took his pointy chin in her hand, and began turning his face from one side to the other, examining his eyes.

"Stop it, Mother. You stop it right now!" His chair scraped the floor as he scooted it abruptly away from the table. Seeing the surprised look on her face, and the tears forming in her eyes, he immediately regretted his outburst. "Look, Mother," he said, taking on a soothing tone, "I'm sorry, but you just have to quit treating me like a child."

She brushed a tear from her cheek, and busied herself with the dishes. At the sink, her back to him, she said, "Harrison, I don't know any other way to treat you."

He moved over to her and, draping his arm across her shoulders, he kissed the top of her head. "We'll talk about it tonight, Mother."

Harrison worried about it all day, how he would tell his mother about Shirley, but he knew the time had come for the revelation. He decided he should omit the part about Shirley's previous profession. Accepting that would be impossible for Lucy, he knew. What would be the point anyway? He decided to tell his mother that Shirley was in marketing, and that they had met at the store when she introduced a new line of ice cream from a company she represented.

He surprised Lucy a little early that afternoon, bringing home dinner from the store's deli. He waited for her on the front porch, in the swing. When she hesitated before turning the television off after the six o'clock news, he knew she was prolonging the inevitable. He understood how she felt, that she sensed the change coming to their lives. He sympathized with her, for he knew his mother was frightened. Finally, she sat down beside him, and waited.

"I've met a woman, Mother."

She gasped, and buried her face in her hands.

"We want to get married, start a family."

The only sound was the creaking of the old swing as they swung slowly back and forth.

"Yes," he continued, "she's a fine woman, Mother, you'll like her—"

"Where in the world did you meet her?" Lucy's voice trembled, and the way she tightly pressed her lips and raised her eye brows, Harrison realized how trivial the Escalade incident was in comparison to the selling of Shirley to his mother now.

"At the store, she's one of the sales reps for Dairy Velvet, and, uh—"

"When?"

"When did we meet?"

"When are you getting married?"

"We haven't set a date, yet. She wants to meet you, get to know you first."

"Humph, guess that explains the contact lenses." Lucy got up abruptly, leaving Harrison mid-swing. At the door she turned and said, "You might as well bring this, this," she shook her head in apparent disbelief, "woman, to dinner on Sunday, and we'll see what I think about her."

"Her name is Shirley, Mother." Harrison's voice sounded strangely familiar, more like his father's than his own, and he wondered if Lucy noticed. "And no," he said, with remarkable control and authority, "Shirley and I will take you out to dinner on Sunday."

Lucy slammed the door behind her, and immediately turned on Wheel of Fortune. A little later, Harrison knew she heard him leaving and he felt completely unfettered, truly himself for the first time in his life.



A full-grown man, Harry rang Shirley's doorbell on that monumental Monday evening.