

A
WRITING
JAM

a writing jam

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in the soul custody of
Bridget Adrian Cowles

scars publications

A NEW
PAIR OF
GLASSES

“Who’d ever think anyone would come to me for advice on relationships?” the man at the bus stop says to me. “Me, the man who’s been married to four women, all of whom are probably practicing voodoo on me to this day. I’ve been fired from three jobs, either for insubordination, or, that one time, for punching my manager in the mouth. I’ve always had a good sense of humor---so long as it was at someone else’s expense---but I used humor as a weapon.

“Up until six years ago, I was the biggest prick in the universe. I used to view driving as a sport. Just for fun, I’d cut people off on the freeway or aggressively tailgate them so they’d speed up or get over. Everybody hated me, and those that didn’t scared me because I figured they must be even bigger sons-abitches than I was.

“Getting shot was the best thing that ever happened to me. Nothing like a near-death experience to make you reevaluate your life. I didn’t see it that way at the time, of course. When I woke up in the ER, I was mad as hell, yelling at everyone, swearing up a storm, cursing God---not that I believed in him. When they moved me upstairs, I shared a room with a twenty-year-old kid who was a recovering alcoholic. Used to piss me off to no end that every day this group of six or eight people would come into our room to ‘bring him a meeting.’ I always kept the curtain drawn around my bed when they showed up with their annoying laughter and lighthearted banter, but even with the TV turned up, I could hear every word they said.

“I drank quite a bit back then, but I’d never seen it as a problem. I knew I couldn’t be an alcoholic, because there I was in the hospital without any Jack and soda and I was fine. Sure: I was just as big an asshole as ever.

“A couple weeks into my hospital stay, I started keeping the TV volume lower and listening in on their meetings. It wasn’t their talk about how they stayed sober that interested me; it was the stories they told about their improved relationships that drew me in. One guy always talked about getting a new pair of glasses, and I heard them advising each other to read page 449 or 551, all of which meant nothing to me. They’d talk about acceptance being the key to their happiness and how the only thing they could control in any situation was their own attitude, their own reaction. At first I thought they were wimps and losers. Then I started to see how I’d always pushed people away by being such a dick. Sixteen days and I hadn’t had one visitor. Besides the AA people and his family, the kid had nurses and doctors lingering at his bedside laughing with him. With me, they’d practically throw my meds at me and book out of there as quick as possible.

“One day I left the curtain open around my bed when the group came in. They asked if I wanted to join them, but I said no and pretended to read. Next day, then asked again and I said yes, but I refused to talk. I had no intention of introducing myself as an alcoholic. That was okay with them. Pissed me off that they were so nice, though, so I started closing my curtain again.

“The kid left the hospital a week before me. I pretended to be asleep when his family came to pick him up. He left a meeting schedule on my nightstand, and he’d written his phone number on the back. Took me another month, but I finally called him.

“And now,” the man says to me with a catch in his voice, “my daughter calls me up to ask about resolving conflicts with this woman she works with. And because I’m a different man today, I have tools to share with her.” A bus pulls up and he stands with great difficulty. For the first time, I notice he uses two aluminum crutches. He turns back to me from his precarious perch on the first step. “Bless you, honey, for talking to me,” he says and continues his climb. I haven’t said a word.

S O U L C U S T O D Y

When I divorced my parents, I gained full custody of my soul. I'm sure, like most parents, mine meant well, but seemed to have little concept of how their actions affected my young life.

Before I was born, my mother Velvet was a fan dancer in a San Francisco night club. Her costume consisted of a purple spangled g-string and pasties, and a pair of huge fans constructed of peacock feathers. She wasn't a common stripper, mind you. To hear her tell it, she was an exceptionally talented dancing professional. She performed three shows a night for an audience made up of some of the Bay Area's most successful and influential businessmen and politicians. She was, she loved to reminisce, even asked to entertain at the ultra-exclusive Bohemian Grove where she met a youngish Ronald Reagan and Henry Kissinger. That, somehow, was her proof that she was several notches above your standard exotic dancer.

In the tradition of her mother Cashmere, daughter of Taffeta, my mom named me Chenille, a name well suited to a career in the entertainment field or the fabric industry.

Hoping I'd follow in her footsteps, Velvet enrolled me in a dance class on my third birthday. Miss Kelly took exception to my mother's request to teach me to bump and grind and insisted that tap was a more appropriate start for a preschooler. As vigorously as I hopped and stomped, however, it soon became apparent I had little talent in the area of dance. Not to be dissuaded, my mother kept me in a twice-a-week dance class until I turned eighteen.

My father Bernard liked to introduce himself as Velvet's first and only husband. He was a drummer at a jazz club in Berkeley when they met. By the time I came along, he'd abandoned his musician's dreams and worked as the lunch manager at a restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf.

I guess I'm lucky they gave up their first choice careers for me. It was embarrassing enough when kids found out from their fathers what my mom did for a living before she became an Avon representative. It would have been unbearable for my high school classmates to have discovered the woman they knew as Mrs. Zamboni strutting across the stage of the club where they went with their fake IDs on Saturday night. As far as my father's career went, if he was still playing drums every night, I wouldn't have had the pleasure of him being my kindergarten teacher's aide, attending monthly PTA meetings, chairing the school carnival committee, and coaching my high school volleyball team.

Because they gave up their dreams for me, however, all their undivided attention was on making me into some amalgamated version of themselves.

Shortly after the advent of my futile dance lessons, I was enrolled in a preschool for the musically gifted. Unfortunately I wasn't. Gifted, I mean. Naturally, my father requested I be started out on drums. They tried my talents on bongos, congas, tom-toms, steel drums, snare drums, bass drums, even taiko drums. I couldn't keep a beat to save my soul. Next came the xylophone and glockenspiel. I was no better at those than I turned out to be on the clog box, cymbals, maracas, or castanets.

Even though her heart was set on my being a dancer, Velvet did her part to inspire my musical success. As I banged on whatever percussion instrument I was currently trying to master, she would shimmy, tango, and cancan her way across the living room on her way to the kitchen phone to call the Chinese restaurant to deliver our dinner. Unless, of course, it was our weekly pizza night.

Sure that I harbored hidden musical talent, my father took me to a private teacher. Mrs. Campanella was a wonderfully patient woman who, over a span of nine years, attempted to teach me to play anything remotely resembling a musical instrument. After suffering with me through the standard piano, violin, guitar, and cello, she agreed to let me try wind instruments. It was during this phase that for my twelfth birthday my father soundproofed the basement of our 19th Avenue Victorian and dubbed it Chenille's Practice Studio. I remember the clarinet and saxophone as being particularly painful for all of us.

My parents would periodically fight bitterly over whose fault it was that

I was so devoid of any shred of talent. Try as I might to please both Velvet and Bernard, I came to believe I was the only girl in the world with no valuable skills. My academic prowess clearly didn't count in the eyes of my parents, in spite of my being the undefeated state spelling bee champion for a full decade. Notwithstanding my science fair honors and 4.0 grade point average, I clearly didn't measure up to their expectations. At one time I considered running away to New York, but realizing that without musical or dancing ability I could never make a living on the sidewalks of Manhattan, I reconsidered and stayed to continue my endless daily routine of lessons and practice.

The disappointing wind instrument period came to a close with a dangerous oboe accident. Mrs. Campanella suggested at that point that my musical talent may be laying so illusively dormant as to mimic nonexistence. My father wouldn't hear it and called in a specialist. Clark was a young man who taught an exclusive musically challenged clientele---mostly the offspring of rock stars, who, like me, showed no talent in the area held so highly in esteem by their parents.

When I wasn't stumbling through yet another agonizing dance recital, I spent my teen years in the company of handsome young Clark, becoming ever more enraptured by the sloe-eyed musical hunk. Under his tutelage, I endeavored to cultivate the musical endowment my father was so certain I possessed. I labored through vain attempts at conquering the ocarina, lute, bassoon, ukulele, fipple flute, mandolin, calliope, sitar, flugelhorn, and, finally, the Japanese koto. Clark's theory was that everyone had musical ability, but some of us just resisted the mundane, so, he believed, the more exotic the instrument, the more likely it was to find the key to unlocking that talent.

My eighteenth birthday provided the solution I'd been seeking. Not to say that I could suddenly samba or play the bossa nova. Sadly, that is never to be. I did, however, open the envelope which contained news that I'd been granted a full four year scholarship to a prestigious East Coast university to study linguistics. In an unprecedented overture of generosity, the university offered to let me spend the summer in the dorms if I could be there in a week and would be willing to help repaint all the on-campus plaster statuary. Maybe, Velvet told me hopefully, being so close to Radio City Music Hall would somehow awaken my dancing genes and I could still pursue my dream of becoming a Rockette.

The day after my eighteenth birthday was the occasion of my high school graduation. As the band played the school song before I was to make my Valedictorian address, I looked out across the sea of happy faces. My gaze stopped on the deep brown eyes of Clark, my most recently failed music teacher. I was suddenly aware that the spark of romantic fire we'd kept under wraps for the last five years had transformed from a slow smolder to a full blaze. My rapid pulse stopped, however, when I saw that behind Clark stood my parents. Stood is actually the wrong word: Velvet shook her shoulders and swayed her hips to the orchestrations of my school band. Bernard, for his part, pounded out the rhythm on the backs of other parents' and teachers' chairs, at one point slapping his palms on the bald head of the football coach. I decided it was beyond time for me to break free of my parents' restrictive expectations of me. That night, I packed my bags and went to Clark's house.

The week I spent with him was the best of my life. Not a discordant note did I play, nor a faltering, stumbling step did I dance. We laughed, talked, made love, ate in bed, and giggled like girlfriends. Six days later, Clark drove me to the airport and I've never gone back.

When I finished my Master's program in linguistics, I moved here to Micronesia to study the language of the indigenous peoples. I'm finally happy and fulfilled. Until recently, I used to feel guilty about suing Velvet and Bernard for custody of my soul, concerned that without me to push and pull and try to mold, they'd be without purpose. I don't worry anymore, however; I hear they've adopted a little Romanian boy that shows promise as a piccolo playing polonaise dancer.

T R A F F I C
J A M

Stuck in a traffic jam. Again. What was the worst that could happen? Spend some extra time alone with her own thoughts. Not a bad place to be. Or maybe she'd be late for her six o'clock shift at Safeway. Bummer. She'd agreed to cover half a shift for Stephanie only because she had nothing better to do.

Maritza turned the air conditioner down. Wouldn't do to overheat. The engine, that is. She was already heated up in that way she got mid-month when even the bagboys were a temptation.

Last night in bed she'd been reading her copy of *The Bad Girl's Guide to the Open Road*. The road didn't appear to be too open right now, but it seemed like a good time to put some of her badness to the test; maybe call in sick and have an adventure. Most of the commuters were probably on their way home after putting in a full day at their jobs; she really didn't feel like asking them, "Paper or plastic?" for the next four hours.

She'd have to think about ditching work, but first thing to do was change the music. Watching the cars around her inching along, Maritza opened her glove compartment and grabbed the handful of tapes that were crammed in there along with the miscellaneous junk that always seemed to breed. A Happy Meal toy from the most recent Disney creation fell to the floor along with a squished tampon in a tattered wrapper. No need to keep that.

Dividing her attention between the stack of cassettes in one hand and the slow creep of cars, she read the tape labels. James Taylor: good man, great singer, too pure and mellow for right now. Jewel: definitely not the time. Chris Isaak: hunky, beautiful voice, good sing-along music. Nah, not angry enough. Maybe later when she was alone in the bathtub. She dropped those three tapes into the passenger seat and held the other three up in front of the windshield so she could see the highway ahead of her better while she checked out the artists:

Sugar Ray, Smash Mouth, early Joan Jett and the Blackhearts. All good road tunes, but Joan Jett was definitely timeless Bad Girl music.

Unexpectedly, traffic went from a steady ten mile an hour crawl to a complete stop. She laid the tape cases in the seat next to the others and popped Joan Jett into the cassette deck. It started mid-verse and Maritza sang along: “You’re a loser / Scum bag, scum bag,” she and Joan both mumbled something unintelligible, then, “You’re the biggest fool that I’ve ever known.” Twenty years later, and the lyrics were still timely.

She looked around. They remained at a standstill. Behind her, a steel blue-haired lady peeked over the top of her steering wheel, catching Maritza’s eye in the rearview mirror. She must have stopped a matter of inches from the younger woman’s bumper; Maritza could see none of Blue Hair’s hood. To her left was an impatient buffoon in a huge pickup truck sporting empty gun racks in the back window. His hair was shaved to his skull, only strawberry blond fuzz obscuring the Oakland Raider’s tattoo above his ear. Repeatedly, he inched forward, hitting his brakes hard, until she thought he was going to drive right over the VW bug in front of him. To Maritza’s right were two cars. One had three teenage girls and a car seat with just the top of a baby’s head visible. She couldn’t make out the tune of the music they were playing, but the deep thump of the bass came through more than clearly enough. The girls were giggling and talking with a lot of gestures, bouncing around in their seats. Just behind the teenagers, a handsome professional-looking man sat calmly in his black Jaguar. He wore a dark suit, a fresh haircut, and no wedding ring. Considerate of him to keep his manicured hands in the 10 and 2 positions so she could clearly see the all-important left one. Hmm. Maybe time to try out some of the Open Road drive-by dating tricks to get his attention. Perhaps he’d be up for a quick game of Strip Driver for starters.

You call it charm, but I’m not / what you’re supposing I am. I am / all girl, a lady I’m not. / I like to fool around a lot. Joan Jett had been the perfect choice of music.

The Lincoln ahead of Maritza moved forward, cuing her to follow. She wondered how she could have failed to notice it before. It was an old one--- maybe a ‘68?---with suicide doors. She’d always been mildly, oddly intrigued by that model. They seemed both glamorous and dangerous, as if being designed as

the perfect car for both movie stars and gangsters. This one had a custom pearl white paint job and was being driven by a big haired blonde.

They were all whizzing along the highway now, almost hitting thirty miles an hour. Where had bachelor number one in the Jag gone to? Maritza checked her rearview mirror. Not back there. There he was, three cars ahead on the left. Somehow, he'd gotten into the fast lane and passed her. Must have been while she was ogling the pearly Lincoln.

Signaling, Maritza moved over to his lane. He was four cars ahead, but she could still see him. With traffic this heavy and slow, even driving his much faster car, at least he couldn't get too far away. She hoped to eventually overtake him. It was all in fun, but still she felt a bit like a stalker.

The car ahead of her suddenly slammed on its brakes. Stomping on her own brake pedal, Maritza narrowly missed rear-ending a minivan full of soccer girls. Shit. She'd better pay better attention or the adventure she had would involve the police and a visit to the hospital.

The cars in the middle lane started moving forward. The man in the Jag--she named him Daniel--slid between a Honda and a prehistoric yellow Pinto. She hadn't seen one of those since she was a little girl; thought they all went the way of Gremlins and Yugos. She scanned the line of cars on her right. Barely an open inch to get over. Not to worry. Her lane began to move ahead. Looked like she'd be catching up to him any minute. She did a quick check of her hair and teeth in the rearview mirror. Her hair was a little limp from lying in the sun all day, but not too bad. Her teeth looked extra white against her sun-touched skin. She was glad she hadn't put on her checker's smock yet. Not a sexy road sister look at all.

All lanes were rolling along at the same breakneck forty miles an hour now. Her car pulled abreast of the black Jag. She looked over, hoping to catch Daniel's eye, but he continued to stare forward. She fell back a little to allow some space to grow between her car and the one ahead, then sped up next to Daniel again. Still not even a glance. She wondered how they were supposed to play Strip Driver if he wouldn't pay attention to her. She couldn't even try to get him car dancing if he didn't look her way. He was so handsome. If only he knew how much fun they could have.

Let me tell you 'bout my baby. / No, he's not too shy. / He's got a way that makes me tremble. / He's got sexy eyes. / I said, come. / I'm talkin' 'bout my baby. / Wait. / He makes me sh-sh-shake.

This wasn't working. If she was going to have an adventure and ditch work, she'd have to get him interested. She pulled ahead of his car, put on her right turn signal to let him know she wanted to get in front of him, and looked back, flashing her most winning smile. Without changing expression, Daniel gave her an almost imperceptible nod and motioned by lifting one finger from the steering wheel that she could slide in.

Okay, now that she was in his direct line of sight, she'd do something enticing to heat him up. She clenched her thighs tightly together in anticipation. This Daniel was a challenge. He must have important things on his mind. He looked very intelligent and thoughtful. Sultry, too, with his dark hair and eyes, dark suit, dark car. Very sexy.

We're still together after all that we've been through. / They tried to tell you I was not the one for you. / They didn't like my hair, / the clothes I love to wear. / They didn't realize I was strong enough for two. / I love you, love / please love me true, love / I love you, love me, love.

What was he, an investment banker? No, that didn't sound like fun. He had the impeccably polished look of a dentist. He was very clean; clean was good. No, a surgeon. She'd heard surgeons were very talented with their hands. Okay, she'd make him a surgeon.

Even if things didn't pan out with Daniel, Maritza had already decided not to show up for work. She'd find an adventure somewhere on this highway.

Careful to keep her eyes on the road, she glanced in the rearview mirror. He had his finger in his nose. No way. His nose must just itch. Everyone rubs their nose. Sometimes it might look like you're picking it when really you're scratching. She checked traffic, then looked back at the mirror. Good God, his finger was jammed in there up to the first knuckle. She couldn't trust her eyes on this one. It was so incongruous; everything else about him looked so pristine, so high class. She checked him in her side mirror. From that angle it was even more obvious that he was indeed calmly, intently searching his nostril for some anticipated prize.

Maritza refocused on the road ahead of her. Maybe a bug---a gnat or something---had flown up there. It wouldn't be hygienic or medically safe to leave it, and it would distract him from driving. It obviously needed to be removed. He must not have had time to find a tissue. That was it. No way was her Daniel, her potential Bad Girl afternoon adventure, the man that was going to beg her to call in sick for work tonight and every night for the next week, no way was he a chronic public nose picker.

Relieved at her own explanation, Maritza gazed back into the mirror at her future beloved just in time to see his finger leave his nostril and move between his lips. She felt her late lunch rise in her throat. Revulsion quelled all fantasies of flirtation and passion.

It's not for you to say / we can still be friends, / but what I need the most / is never gonna be again. / Sure I always knew / we were worlds apart / but that don't help the sadness in my heart. / It's gonna take a long time / to get you off of my mind.

She moved back to the fast lane, hoping to be carried swiftly away from the nameless man in the expensive car. Hell, she might as well go to work. She wasn't likely to want sex again for months.

L O T U S
B L O S S O M

“Life sucks,” Dina said with no inflection. “Then I get over it, and everything’s fine again.” She took a drag off her Italian cigarette, getting satisfaction from the burn deep in her lungs. She supposed it was a little masochistic to enjoy lung pain, but wasn’t there some piece of being on the receiving end of a tattoo that was also a bit masochistic? She remembered the almost sexual thrill of her first tattoo. Even though she was an adult in a clean parlor with autoclaved needles, it had still felt naughty, like she was participating in a ritual so taboo that it should be illegal.

Dina and Matt were in her primo ‘68 Dodge Dart cruising down Main Street toward the only store in town where you could pay to get needles legally jammed into your skin---besides the old Chinese acupuncturist’s place, anyway. Gwen Stefani’s distinctive voice blasted from the car’s speakers.

“So, Din, you still going with an alligator?” Matt asked, sticking his head out the window like a happy beagle. “And do you have to smoke those foul things in the car?”

“Yes and yes,” she answered, crushing the cigarette into the ashtray. “I was thinking of something small and delicate, then I remembered who I am,” she said, surprised at the bitter note that crept into her voice. “I’m gonna have her write something under it that I saw on a tee-shirt once: ‘Life’s short---bite hard.’”

“Feeling a little hostile?” Matt pulled his head back in the window. “Think I should do my tongue?” He flipped down the visor to look in the mirror and opened his mouth. “My mom would freak.” He fingered the silver hoop in his eyebrow.

“Part of the fun,” Dina laughed. “And if I’m feeling a little hostile, it’s

only in reaction to feeling screwed over by everyone I've ever cared about. My new attitude is screw them before they get a chance to screw you. They either hurt you or leave."

"Hey," Matt interjected. "I have so not screwed you. And I'm not going anywhere. Or," he said archly, eyes wide in mock innocence, "are you saying you don't care about me?"

Dina pulled into the wide gravel parking lot of The Rose Tattoo and turned off the car.

"Course I do. You're like the little brother I woulda had if anyone had let me choose. Besides, you know better than to mess with me; I'd kick your ass." They both climbed out of the car. Dina tossed the car keys to Matt. "Here. Put these in your pocket, okay?"

Dina held the swinging glass door open for Matt and followed him into the stringently clean shop. The walls were covered in brightly colored flash, and on the counter lay a stack of photo albums. A picture of the tribal armband she'd had Zippo design last summer--his last tattoo before he totaled his Harley--was on the wall in a frame next to his obituary. She touched her arm in memory of the man who'd initiated her into the world of body art. He'd done her first four pieces and had become almost like a father to her over the years. A Bob Seger song pounded through the empty room.

"Where is everybody?" Matt asked Dina quietly.

"Must be out back having a smoke. Have you seen this?" she asked pulling a blue vinyl album across the counter toward them. She flipped through a few pages until she came to a close-up of a proudly smiling young man with magenta tips on his short bleached hair, a thick silver hoop in each ear and a small hoop in one eyebrow. "Maggie took that, remember? After she finally got your eyebrow to stop bleeding."

"I didn't know they put that picture in there." He bent down to look closely. "That was my birthday, huh? If I'd known you were going to bring me here that day, I'd of worn a better shirt. You know I always wear black in pictures."

“But then you wouldn’t have a white tee-shirt with a blood splotch on the shoulder,” Dina teased. “All the guys go wild for a man with war wounds.”

Matt grinned. “It is a good conversation starter at the bars. I’ve gotten several offers to kick someone’s ass for me from that stain. It seems to bring out the protective nature in some guys. Of course, others are repelled. Show me the other pictures of you.”

“Besides the one on the wall,” she pointed to Zippo’s framed obituary, “mine are in here.” She dragged a thick album from the end of the counter. Opening it to the first page, she showed Matt a series of snapshots of a young girl lying face downwards on the table, her pants pulled down to expose her right hip. A man with a grizzled gray beard is bent over her, outlining a tattoo too small to recognize from this distance. In the first picture, she’s grimacing, her hand over her eyes. The third shows her smiling broadly checking out the completed outline with a hand mirror. The final photo is a close-up of the finished product: a beautifully inked and shaded lotus blossom.

“There’s nothing like your first,” she said. The pictures always fill her with bittersweet memories: a mix of the sense of exhilaration and personal power she experienced that day six years ago on her eighteenth birthday, along with fond feelings and sadness for the loss of the man who died so suddenly last summer.

“Your hair was long then,” Matt said. “I’d forgotten.”

She flipped to the next pictures of her from two years later. Zippo was adding a golden koi swimming below the floating lotus blossom. Next visit a year later, she had him add a second koi, and fill in with stylized water.

The armband was a whim after a particularly bad break-up. He’d tried to talk her out of it, thinking she’d be happier sticking with the tranquil Japanese theme. Of course he’d been right, she thought, closing the picture album. So, here she was feeling hurt and bruised again, planning to get a frigging alligator on her back? Perhaps time to rethink this one.

“You’ve got the coolest tats, but everyone says they’re addicting. That’s why I haven’t gotten one,” Matt said, walking over to sit in one of the three chairs lined up in front of the window.

Dina laughed. “But you’re thinking of getting your tongue pierced. Aren’t you afraid someday you’ll look like this chick?” She pointed to a picture on the wall.

“Uck. That freaks me out to even look at it,” Matt said, turning his head away from the black and white photograph of a young girl so heavily pierced her face is almost completely obscured by the hoops and studs protruding through her skin.

“Okay, then, you big baby, check this out,” she said, opening the album to a life sized enlargement of the underside of a man’s penis and walking over to where Matt sat.

“What the hell is that?” he asked.

“Jacob’s ladder. Supposed to enhance the pleasure of one’s partner.”

“No guy better ever come near me with anything like that,” Matt said. “What’re you trying to do to me?”

“Why, nothing,” Dina answered with an ingenuous smile. “All right, here are the last two of me. Really.” She opened the photo album to a page that showed a close-up of the tribal arm band. The next picture was a view of her standing next to Zippo, each with their arms around the other’s waists. Although she missed him immensely, she was grateful for the opportunity she’d had to know and love him for five years. Much as it annoyed her to realize it, it wasn’t so different from this current situation that was pissing her off so much. Sometimes friendships ended, and she couldn’t make someone want to be close to her if they didn’t choose to. At least in this new case, no one had died.

“You okay?” Matt asked. He’d walked over to a small round mirror and stood looking at his tongue again.

“Yeah, why?” She closed the album and laid it on top of the stack. “Just thinking.”

Maggie walked through the beaded curtain that shut off the private area

in the back from the room that housed the padded table and two dentists' chairs. Her orange hair stood up in spikes, and she wore a rhinestone in the area of her third eye. She had no visible tattoos, but Dina had seen the dragon that covered her entire back. "Hey, Dina, Matt. How's it going?"

"Okay. Not much traffic in here today, huh?" Dina walked over and hugged Maggie.

"Been really slow. Gonna let me do some work on you?" Maggie asked.

"Nah, not today," Dina answered, in the same moment that she made the decision. Getting a pissed-off tattoo had to be a mistake. Besides, she realized she wasn't really pissed off anymore, anyway. "Just came in to say hi and take a look at some pictures. Come on, Matt, let's go get a coffee and check out the guys down at the cliffs." She put her arm around Matt's shoulder and steered him toward the door.

"Don't have to ask me twice," he said, waving at Maggie as the glass door swung shut behind them.

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WRITING
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Bridget Adrian Cowles

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ccandd96@aol.com

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