

again from the old bearded vendor with spectacles: "This is an exceptional plate", "You won't find anything like it", "It took me two years to find one", "Nope, I can't grant any rebate"... He knew his business impeccably.

But Steven took no notice for he was focused on two specific models: First, the mythic 'panier à salade' from Citroën painted black-and-white for French police-forces (i.e. Black Maria in England or 'paddy wagon' in the US), used for prisoners' transportation; Second, a TypeE Jaguar, all red, just like the one he'd noticed in an antiques shop-window. 'Twas in Baden-Baden, just before Helen Hampton's concert. In truth, he had found the colour quite garish, unlike the factory one – a darker and much-more-elegant ruby-red.

Solido toy-cars were must-haves at school in Steven's days and he remembered the crave for exchanges during breaks. Some models had doors that stretched out, and among the most-traded ones was the Shelby Cobra with its opening hood. Bygone age made alive again.

Still knelt-down and immersed in school-yard memories, our man however became distracted by a colour spot on his left. Through the forest of boots and padded trousers – all black leather – stood out a light-pink shape.

Shapes, rather. Two legs. And, as any man would, he just *couldn't* help looking upwards.

Which led him to discover a lovely pair of buttocks. Rounded and charming inside their light-fabric casing. Nowhere near the vulgar type (meaning overbulging cheeks in way too-tight jeans). Salmon-pink denim, slim-fit. All that he liked. In the distance, this desirable feminine entity shuffled around. But obviously, such a figure – he couldn't make out the face in the surrounding crowd – would only belong to a young woman. Younger than him, that was. At sixty-seven, his seventies were in sight. Which meant also – if one was pessimistic – ‘in the sights’. In the sights of, er... departure.

Well, that's how life went. But Steven was still very happy for the current sighting of this exquisite bottom. Sure no Dark Angel, rather an Angel in pink. He smiled privately, thinking that the woman's sweet buttocks underneath were maybe now both flushing pale-red with embarrassment... because he was watching them with such great care.

Looking at lovely women, be it the figure or the face, was any man's duty – and pleasure. Compulsive. Vital.

Following Lucie's patent stare, Tammy looked down. Shit! She had ruined it. Her left leg indeed showed a ladder running along just above the knee. Probably some dangling metal hook, or maybe a screw from the side of a visor or else... she said. And to think that she never damaged any while riding behind Burt!

— Life is *really* unfair, joked Steven.

But his joke fell flat because Tammy fast clarified:

— You know, I come from a tiny MidWest village called Grieving. So I'm *quite* familiar with unfairness and sad feelings.

In short, Tammy had been raised in a rural county, very religious and she was fed up with sermons and obligations.

— Which explains for Burt's presence, said Lucie. Tam' now fancies bad boys.

— Right, I'm in for novelty and fun.

Burt, a "bad" guy? He looked as docile as a lamb despite his thick shoulder-pads and ultra-shiny Harley badge. On the other hand, true to her biker's jacket embroidered *Tiger* in the back, it was Tammy who obviously wore the pants, thought Steven. He even wondered which colour the panty might be... but he was quickly drawn back to reality by this question: What sort of a collector was he? He played for time: some liked to collect coins, bikes; others had a fancy for vinyls, or stray cats or—

— Or girls?

VIII

TRANSPORTATION

Lucie was sitting so close that he'd never get the same opportunity again... Inside, Steven was boiling and torn between two courses of action: either compliment his sweetheart, or tease her. Since the first way had not been crowned with success, he decided to steer ship differently and rebound on her own words: because of a dead battery it was *her* who found herself stuck with him willy-nilly.

— You're being insulting, Steven, if only to yourself. 'Doesn't suit the man I remember.

However, Lucie had a question which, in her view, lay at the heart of the matter: Why was it that Steven Bates was so obsessed about praising her beauty? had she not other qualities? Cleverness maybe, or generosity, or courage, or moral strength, or whatever else he might grace her with. According to the saying, wasn't beauty "only skin-deep"? Besides, she furthered, women needed more soul than body.

hear any of that and told him to follow. They'd find "a constructive solution". Besides, didn't he need to gather his tools in the flat?

Well...

— Plus a big storm is on its way. Full moon, remember? We don't want to find you struck by lightning and all charred tomorrow morning.

Trudging up the stairs, Steven thought Why am I *always* presented with such unfavourable situations?

Because you are so hopelessly STUPID, shouted a devilish voice. Rather look up at that desirable pink behind all wiggling, and rejoice! Buttocks like that are a rarity, you dumb, and at your age you're not about to be presented with many more any soon.

The Demon insisted: And don't you start thinking you're "blocked for good" as in blocked for a long period, think PO-SI-TI-VE! As in "blocked for the best".

Discussion was resumed and Lucie went in headfirst: she *had* seen her guest paying close attention to Tammy's stocking.

Well, was there any reason to *not* look?

— Good start. You don't deny.

Of course not. Stockings were never to be ignored but only the woman inside mattered, not the container. And here Steven was clear: Tammy had neither Lucie's legs nor her eyes. Over and out.

— But you still looked...

— Okay, you win.

And now Lucie began on another subject: would Steven prefer that she wear contact lenses? Gee, what a strange query. It suddenly seemed that doubts about physical appearance were not only an issue for he male.

Glasses offered style. Those previous black frames or hers looked more severe but were they classy! They enabled her eyes to stand out better. Like sapphires, yes.

— You're mighty kind.

Not really. Glasses could be considered as a protection or as a dissimulation. It was often a mask but some brought such distinctive chic. In Lucie's case, glasses were absolutely not a problem, they made for her personality.

...

— So, Steven, what's your appraisal of our, hmm... current situation?