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## Real Women

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## REAL WOMEN

**Robert Taylor**

I don't drink. Out with friends or clients I'll maybe have a couple, but I'm not a beer guy. I like Rum and Coke or a tasty mixed drink, and for me they go down like Kool-Aid. I could guzzle a bottle of Kahlua without cream, so I generally stay away from alcohol. I'm a human resources consultant, and I could get toasted constantly off big shot managers who take us to fancy local hangouts for dinner and drinks on an open company card, then tough out the daily hangover like my peers. But why be miserable? I eat their steak and lob, have a soda, a big slice of cheesecake, and sneak off early.

I live in Montana and work the Northwest so Seattle and Portland are about the extent of my big city experiences, but a while back we did our annual training in Memphis, a city with character. I didn't go out with the team after work at night and socialize like you do when you're out of town. One guy called me crazy because I was missing out on the ladies. But I'm tired of all that. I never get anywhere with real women. Drinking doesn't help there either. Things go bad for me when I drink around women. I ogle breasts, examine tattoos and armpits, blurt out random comments like, "You're beautiful," expecting them to jump all over me I guess. They don't. I'm in my thirties now so I don't look for things to change in that department, and I like doing things by myself anyway.

In big cities I investigate. Intriguing things go on you don't see in small towns. Drug deals, gang fights, prostitution. I don't condone illegal activity, I'm interested in all. I like to watch people who are not tuned in to my presence, a fly on the wall deal. I consider it research for something, or living on the edge.

The South has black women, few and far between in Montana, so they are exotic to me. That's why I stayed in Memphis an extra day, to take in the culture. Sometimes I think about what it would be like to have a black girlfriend, how we'd be together. I'm sure it's just a thing, like with Asians. I'm fond of Asian women too but I've slept with a few, at massage parlors in Seattle and Spokane, even for real once, and they aren't as big a deal for me anymore. The mystique fades.

I wanted to cruise Beale on Saturday night, so I hung out in my room at Springville Suites in my underwear most of the afternoon eating licorice and napping. I had made

a quick trip out that morning to the Lorraine Motel where Martin Luther King JR. was assassinated, to pay my respects. I didn't plan to stay out late that evening. My plane left at eleven-fifteen the next morning so I was going to walk Beale, have a good dinner, then rest up and get myself going early, maybe swing by Graceland before my flight.

I heard racket outside on the street and pulled back the curtain. An attractive black woman in a turquoise one-piece outfit with white stripes strutted down the sidewalk in high heels swinging a silver purse. Two homeless looking guys hollered at her. She wiggled her fingers at them, said something back, and kept walking. I opened the curtain at the far window to get another look but just caught her brown legs disappearing around the corner.

I ate more licorice and double-checked the phone book. I have this habit of going through motel phonebooks looking for all night massage parlors. Just to look. I've given up on those too, but I'm compulsively curious. Some motels are getting so they don't carry phonebooks anymore (which is sort of a relief because I'll stay anxious at a motel until I flip through those pages) but there used to be full-page ads showing twenty-four hour health spas with pictures of pretty Asian women promising relaxation, steam baths and body shampoos.

Sex at massage parlors made me hate myself. That's why I stopped going. I had to hide it, carry around this big secret, always feeling self-conscious. And it can get nasty, depending on where you go and who you wind up with. One time I pulled over on a frontage road afterward and scrubbed my cock with rubbing alcohol. There's an adventure. It's a waste anyway because you don't get a massage out of the deal. Hell no. The girl's job is to get you off as fast as she can so she can blow some other slob waiting his turn down the hall, so don't bother humiliating yourself by asking her to go slow or work out the kinks. Just one time, a pretty Korean girl shared a cigarette with me afterward.

After I rested and showered I took a muscle relaxer to loosen up then walked toward Beale Street, kept an eye out for a good place to eat. I still had over four hundred dollars mostly in fifties in my wallet and I'd be bringing most of it home. I'd be in bed at the

motel by nine, maybe stop and get a dirty magazine somewhere and bring it back with me since nobody knew me there.

It was a nice evening, about five o'clock, in the fifties. It had rained earlier so everything looked gray. You couldn't see the tops of buildings. I checked the buildings out, and said hi to folks I passed. People go slow in Memphis, stretch their legs out when they walk. They had fuzzy blue edges. I tried out the dip walk and felt cool.

Beale Street seemed quiet. I walked along rummy, purposeless. Two cop cars were parked on each end, corralling it. The officers directed traffic and socialized. You can carry a drink outside there like on Bourbon Street in New Orleans and I craved something so I could feel a part of it all. I wanted to relax like a Memphian, have a margarita maybe. I don't use drugs, but I thought a joint would be just about right, and wondered where I'd get one, to loosen my brain and set it back to right, a reset button for my head.

I wandered into a place called Wet Willy's. Behind the long bar, an endless variety of slushy drinks swirled inside ship-cabin windows in all sorts of colors—red, blue, watermelon—like big twirling gumballs, with one tall young black girl serving them up. Her eyes were round and pretty with long lashes. I ordered a White Russian. Nice girl. She asked whether I wanted a small or large cup and showed me where the straws were. “Is there a good fish joint around here?” I said. (Joint, since when do I say joint?) “Fish place.” She told me the name of a place but I couldn't make it out.

“It's just the next block,” she said.

I paid for my nine dollar drink, tipped her, and reached out my hand, “I'm Ben.”

Her palm was soft and I held it until she took it back. “Keyila,” she said.

I glanced at her perky small breasts, tried to peel back the fabric of her blouse with my eyes, she didn't say anything. I like the cute ones. I get hung up on a girl's nose or neck, ponytail, or a birthmark, and can't get enough. I stare, and sometimes wonder why they put up with it.

I sipped my slush while I walked around. It soothed my heartburn from the licorice. I poked my head into nightclubs, stopped at BB King's place and Jerry Lee Lewis's bar. The

clubs have live music and they were filling up, most of the seats and tables were taken. A fat black woman sang with BB King's band.

I wanted a nice seafood meal before I left town, so I walked a few blocks toward midtown, and bumped into a well-dressed lanky black man who asked what I needed and said his name was Darrell. I told him my name. He came up with a fish place right off, said he'd show me, he was headed that way. I've been conned before, and I sensed the con artist in him (you know, a little too interested in helping me out) so I played along and followed until I could break away. He said, "See what we do here, Ben is..." and a guy with his nose in a cellphone brushed into Darrell.

The man said, "Can you tell me where The Hightower is?"

"We're headed right by there," Darrell said. "This is Ben."

But I had already stopped. "I'm going to head on back," I said.

"Ben," Darrell said. And I noticed he had nice white teeth.

"I'm headed back."

On Beale, a cop told me where to find a good fish house. And it was. I ordered a margarita with my combination plate and they had to put it in two large glasses because they were out of fishbowls. Twenty bucks wasted there though, I couldn't get the fried oysters and shrimp past my heartburn. I managed to suck the drink down and left.

I went back to Wet Willy's and the sexy black girl asked if I'd found the fish place. "I went off route," I told her. "What do you recommend?"

"I like the strawberry," she said. "But I can make you something. Mudslides are my specialty."

"Maybe a Pina Colada this time, I guess." I tipped her another two bucks and hit the street. A large friendly homeless black man standing in the middle of the road flapped his arms and told me his name was Al. I dug into my wallet and Al looked in at my fifties. "Don't be looking in there Al," I said, and handed him a five. He said he could use a little more. I told him I'd be back.

On the far end of Beale I found a white female bartender at a club with a bar open to the sidewalk. "Seems slow out here," I said.

“Wait till the game gets out,” she said. She had a nice body. Not beautiful, but authentic, you know?

I said, “You from here?”

“West Memphis.”

“I’m from Montana,” I said. “I fly out tomorrow.”

She tilted her head, considering things. “That’s a shame.”

If I lived here, I thought, I could take her to lunch. And I could live in a place like this. She had dark hair, about mid-thirties. Laid back girl, didn’t seem anxious about anything at all.

“I’m moving into my boyfriend’s place tomorrow,” she said. “I have to pack as soon as I get off tonight.” She climbed up onto the bar and sat with her legs dangling toward the street.

“Moving’s so much work, I don’t envy you that.” I wiggled her knee and told her she had loose kneecaps. She shrugged. “You look...nice,” I said.

“I’m thirty-five but people think I’m younger. I eat right and don’t drink. I stay away from meat, just have fish sometimes.”

“I eat licorice,” I said, and patted my stomach.

“I do smoke dope,” she said.

“That’s probably not a bad thing,” I said, imagining the possibilities. “A great stress release. I’d like to sometimes but they test me at work.”

“You can fake out those tests,” she said. “There are ways.”

“The music sounds good.”

“Rockabilly, they’re the best in town.”

I think her name was Sheila. I visited with her between trips to Wet Willie’s (back and forth). I bought a blue drink from her she said was like a Long Island Iced Tea but stronger. During break the band and a couple of barmaids came out. Sheila introduced me to them all. I checked out the college-age black barmaid. She perked up when she noticed. Good people, they included me (Montana boy) in their group and we were sort of all friends, just like that. The lead singer had reddish wavy hair and looked like a fifties

rock & roller, a young Jerry Lee, with a down-home hokey way about him.

I went in to use the bathroom after the band started back. They were playing Johnny Cash songs. The lead singer said, "I bet Ben knows this one," and they lit into Cocaine Blues. I can listen to that stuff all night, and before I knew it they were announcing last call. Sheila said I could hang out while she counted her tips. When they started turning off the lights I asked her what she thought I should do, I was open for anything. She said I better go because her boyfriend was in a motorcycle gang.

I have choppy memories of the rest of that night. I woke up the next morning in my motel room an hour and a half before my flight and I don't remember how I got there. In the shower I found blood on my forearm that wasn't mine. Over the course of weeks vague scenes came together and a sketchy story formed.

I flagged down two young black females, one with silver crosses for earrings, the other with a blue neck-broach, smoking. "Can I try that? I haven't smoked in years."

"You can keep it." The one with the crosses handed it to me and they kept walking. It had a loose plastic filter, I hoped it was pot but I'm not sure. I held it in and coughed like it was. I walked lighter after that, stood taller. Folks filled the street, I smiled at the glowing lights and bumped into people milling around like cattle. I said excuse me and nobody cared. It reminded me of Reno and I felt like a cowboy, thought about buying some snakeskin boots at a pawnshop somewhere.

Al found me again. "Now Ben, you said you were coming back..."

"Al," I said, "Maintain." On a side street by where the cop cars were parked a line of cabs waited. I climbed into the front seat of the first cab and told the driver, "Gentleman's club."

"The nearest one's twenty minutes away," the driver said. "That starts at thirty dollars."

"Okay," I said, and got back out. That's when I saw her, the woman with the turquoise dress and silver purse from the motel room window. She walked deliberately down the sidewalk talking on her cellphone, heels echoing off the concrete. I felt my pulse thump. I said, "You need a date?" She looked at me seriously but kept walking. "I mean, I could

use a date. I have a nice room six blocks away. I'll get us cab if you want." She listened but kept talking on the phone. I followed her inside someplace. "Would two hundred do it? I could go three, if you'll take a card."

My stutter echoed across the silent room. We had entered a café attached to the bar where Sheila worked and Rockabilly had played. My friends were all at a large table having breakfast, and they all stopped eating when we came in. I couldn't say anything. The whore went over by the counter for safety. I lowered my head and left. I thought about Sheila, about the good impression I'd made earlier. But I'd been found out. I'd let my friends down.

I staggered to an after-hours dance club, dropping fifties on the floor when I paid the cover. The bouncers helped me pick up the money and asked my name. A packed floor danced like they were one big couple—sexy women, arms overhead, with swirling silky butts. There were bench seats along a wall in the bar and I sat down next to some ladies who turned out to be my friends from the street with the cigarette. I said, "Hi, I remember your earrings."

The girl with the cross earrings went up to the bar. I pointed at the other girl's broach. "I like your broach," I said. She smiled shyly, touched it, and looked for her friend.

Miss earrings came back with a guy, a bartender I guess, and he sat down on the bench between me and the girl's. He said to me, "What's up."

I shook his hand and introduced myself. He wanted to know why I wasn't out dancing. "Are these ladies with you?" I asked. He nodded. I spoke up so I could be heard over the music, "I remembered her earrings."

"You should go out and dance," he said.

"I don't dance."

"What are you doing here then?"

"Enjoying the music," I said. I shook his hand again.

The bartender spoke with the women for a minute then went back to the bar. I smiled over at the girls but they didn't look at me. Rude, I thought. I slid off the bench and headed for the door. "See you Ben," the bouncers said.



I staggered around town. In an alley, I spotted a staircase with a yellow light at the top and a purple neon “Open 24 Hours” sign. I remember pulling myself up the stairs using the handrail. The waiting room smelled like strawberry lip gloss. The Asian woman who came out was older but she had smooth young thighs. She said, “You’re too drunk, I’m sorry.”

“I need a massage,” I said. “I’m sore.”

“Come back tomorrow,” she said, and pushed me out the door.

A block away I heard yelling so I went to check it out. A man was up in a crying woman’s face. “Cunt,” he said, “You’re holding out on me.” He slapped her on the head a couple times. “Give it up.”

I recognized the turquoise dress with white stripes, the beautiful black prostitute was crying. She screamed, “Fuck you! I gave you everything.”

“Wrong answer bitch,” the man said. Then he turned and saw me and I realized it was Darrell. “Ben,” he said. “Ben Ben.” His teeth were gleaming white. “You best move along now Ben. This isn’t your deal.”

I looked in the prostitute’s wet eyes and her eyes told me I was a chump who couldn’t do anything for her. I started to walk away but looked back in time to see Darrell punch her to the ground. I heard her squeal.

Have you ever sniffed gas? That’s the best way I can describe the rest of it. My head began to pound, and as blood pumped through me my motions became robotic. La... la... la was the feeling of my movements and the noise inside my head. The scene looked like someone had flipped the switch on a strobe light. It took an eternity for me to get to Darrell with the two by two I found, like jogging in place. When I swung the slat he turned around in time to catch it across those perfect white teeth.

The woman, dress torn, kneeled beside Darrell who kicked his feet on the pavement and moaned. She yelled at me. “You crazy fucker, he’ll kill me.” So I smacked him with the board again and he quit squirming as much.

Her large brown breast was exposed, nipple erect. I see it clearly. I dream about it sometimes when I’m in bed, and imagine her head on my shoulder. She sat down on the

curb. I went over and sat next to her. “I think he’ll be okay,” I said. “It wasn’t that big of a stick.” She snorted and I put my arm around her shoulders. She let me hug her.

I wiped the prostitute’s tears with the edge of my palm and held her head to my chest. She relaxed a little and let go of her breath. I felt her naked skin through a rip in the back of her dress and caressed her neck. Her nipple pushed against my shirt and I twitched from goose bumps. I was holding a real woman. But I couldn’t control my roaming hands. I fondled her dress with my fingers and stroked her hair. My hands drifted to her lap and found her dark mound through the fabric of her dress and I began rubbing her lightly there while my other hand touched her warm belly.

She held me back and looked at me, confused. I remember the look in her eyes when she pushed me away. Knowing me for what I was, better than I knew myself.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m drunk. I’ll take you to get those bruises looked at.”

“You get the hell away from me,” she said. “I’ll scream if you don’t.”

I couldn’t hold my head up on the flight back to Montana. A woman next to me offered four Ibuprofen Gel Caps which I took without water. I worried that maybe I had touched that young girl’s breast when I pointed to her broach at the bar the night before, and wondered about the blood on my arm.

The man on my other side said, “I know what it’s like, I drank all night too. But I had one in the bar before I got on the plane so I’m okay now.”

I hate big cities, and I will never go back to Memphis.