



I WAS JUST BACK from lunch, a long lunch lubricated by several strong drinks, and frankly, I did not feel like working. I sat down at my desk and watched a small globular spider spin her modest symmetrical web around an axis of anchor cables stretched between my fountain pen in its upright inkstand, my reading glasses in their leather case, my appointment calendar on its plastic swivel stand and my telephone receiver in its gray cradle. Any move to begin my own labors would disturb at least one of these mooring points. Fixing upon this fact as an excuse, I did nothing, merely sat for an hour in my chair and watched her drag an endless silk strand outward from the fuzzy center of her web in a widening left-handed spiral. From time to time, I let loose a large bubble of alcohol fumes sent up by my suffering stomach. Loud were these belches, thoroughly vile, probably flammable, possibly poisonous. Poisonous? I waited until one rose in my throat, then leaned forward and

WHORES

fiction

By ROBERT CHATAIN

*it seemed as if they'd
come out of the woodwork
to take over the company*

barked it directly upon my small industrious friend. She did not shrivel, but her pace did falter somewhat, and when she resumed her work, the web contained an irregular oval gap through which much prey might eventually escape.

I doodled in pencil upon blank letterhead; I drummed my fingers on my green-felt blotter pad; I whistled half-remembered tunes; I spun coins across the varnished black oak. I had almost decided to reach for my coat and beat a retreat back downstairs to the bar when welcome diversion arrived in the form of one of Joyce's squeals, door-piercing. Relieved, I rose to investigate.

"Joyce says she just saw a 123

whore," remarked Foss as I passed his desk heaped with bound mimeographed mailing lists.

"A whore?"
 "A whore," he repeated.
 "A whore, in this office?"

"That's what she says." Unconcerned, Foss went back to his lists. Nothing upset Foss. Fiery volcanic cones could erupt beneath him, lava could flood into the office bay and still Foss would remain at his desk, addressing envelopes. It was nice to know that life in midtown did hold certain constants.

Joyce was standing next to her chair, as if she were afraid to sit down again. "I saw one, yes I did," she blurted, "right over there against the wall by the coat-rack."

"A whore?" I asked.
 "That's what I saw."

"But how do you know it was a whore?"

Joyce was insulted. "Don't I know a whore when I see one?"

"Where did she go?"
 "Back behind the coats, I guess."

I walked across the room and drew the coats aside. "There's no whore here," I said.

"Well, I saw one," Joyce insisted. "She could have slipped around the corner into the hall."

"I think you must be mistaken, Joyce," I said.

Gloria spoke up. "No, she's not mistaken, I saw another whore yesterday down by the mail room. I wasn't going to say anything. I thought, you know, just one whore, what harm could there be?"

"Whores don't come one at a time," put in Doris, quite distraught.

"Let's not everyone get all excited by this," I said. "I'll call Chambers and have him do something."

I went back to my desk and picked up my telephone receiver, destroying the incomplete web effortlessly and without a second thought. The small fat spider scuttled for cover. The switchboard connected me with personnel and Chambers answered.

"Chambers, we've got whores in the office," I said, phrasing it as dramatically as possible.

"Whores?" Chambers sputtered.
 "Whores?"

"Yes, whores. Joyce and Gloria have both seen them. I wouldn't be surprised to find whores running all over the place in a couple of days. You'd better find out what's going on."

"I will, of course, to be sure—whores, did you say?"

"That's right, whores. You think Joyce and Gloria don't know whores when they see them?"

I put down the receiver and simultaneously heard more shouts from the office bay. "There she goes!" someone called.

I rushed to the door and caught a quick glimpse of a fluttering orange-silk scarf, the hem of a short skirt, a pale thigh, a bare ankle and one yellow-vinyl high-heeled shoe.

I returned to the phone and called Chambers again. "Chambers, they're all over the place; you'd better get to work on this!" Before he could say a word, I hung up, delighted. Chambers, I knew, would quickly accelerate to maximum feverish inefficiency; the girls in the bay would fan one another's nerves into flaming chaos; my secretary would bring in strong black coffee, as she automatically did whenever a crisis was at hand; all this lively activity promised to spare me an afternoon of relative boredom.

As for the whores—two, three, what harm could there be?

I swept aside the remains of the web and picked up my reading glasses, prepared to settle back in my chair and await further interesting developments.

. . .

Hands in his lap, knees at right angles, back stiff, eyes jumping from side to side, Chambers explained everything. Whores, it seemed, had been flushed from an unoccupied floor several stories below ours. Remnants of the colony had fled in all directions through the building. Many had been caught by various snares (a storeroom baited with cot, sheets, blankets, sandwiches and a portable TV had worked best, although plain-clothesmen posing as drunken businessmen deceived their share), but the wilier of the whores escaped apprehension and spread out in an ever-thinning network increasingly difficult to detect. The whores in our office had been on the run for almost two weeks and by now were immune to all conventional efforts at capture; building officials had terminated methodical search operations and were awaiting reports such as ours. At word of our sightings, a team of specialists would move in quickly. We could expect to resume normal operations with minimum delay. All of this information was delivered by Chambers in one breathless sentence.

"A team of specialists?" I asked. "What do you mean, a team of specialists?"

"Don't worry," said Chambers, "we'll have all the help we need. Police, security guards, maintenance men, lawyers, social workers, a complete—"

I was shaking my head slowly from side to side. "Chambers," I said, "you'll have to call those building officials back and tell them to forget the whole thing. We'll take care of this matter ourselves."

"But—"

"I don't want my office turned upside down by any team of specialists. Whores I can cope with. Whore removers are another matter."

"But—"

"The longer you stall, the more

annoyed they'll be to have to call off the specialists."

Chambers threw up his hands and hurried out of my office. In his place, my secretary appeared.

"You were listening to all that?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Well," I began, "I see it like this. If those whores have been on the run for two weeks, the ones who are left must be very smart whores."

"Very smart," she agreed.
 "Exceptional whores, in fact."

She agreed again.

"They've probably been in the office for some time, so one or two extra days won't make any difference."

She waited for me to come to the point.

"I, for one, have never met a whore."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Do you think it might be possible, let us say, to . . . flush one out? Bring her in here? Convince her I mean no harm? Might that be possible?"

"It might," she answered.

"What's on my calendar for this afternoon?"

"You have an appointment with those foundation people. They want to give you some kind of an award."

"Well, cancel it. I don't need an award. Tell them I'll send them another check if they keep their award." I pounded my fist upon my desk and broke into boisterous laughter. "Who cares about an award when we've got whores in the office?"

. . .

"How do you do?" I said to my first whore.

Entirely at ease, the whore had sprawled her bony body over the leather couch across the room from my desk. Her eyes were scanning the interior of my office deliberately, unhurriedly, as if from armored turrets. I had offered her a chair next to my desk, but she had dropped her body onto the couch, which lay closer to the door. As I examined her, I saw that her sprawl was not really so casual. Her weight was still centered above her feet. Her feet, in practical sandals, were flat upon the floor. Her narrow long-fingered hands were in continuous contact with the blue leather of the couch, where they could propel her instantly upright into a wary crouch. Tension ran the length of her lean arms and her wiry legs.

"I do all right, how about yourself?" said the whore, eyes raking over me like lighthouse beams.

"Fine, thank you," I answered.

"Big place," commented the whore.

"You mean my office?" I said.

She blinked. Her black hair was pulled straight back along both sides of her face. Across her flat dark-skinned forehead ran an inch-wide band of colorful beadwork.

(continued on page 128)

WHORES

(continued from page 124)

"Been here long?" she asked.

"Yes, I guess I have," I said.

"How come you don't fix the place up a little?"

I looked at the white walls with the low line of modern filing cabinets, the single potted spiny tree with its inedible dwarf fruit. "I like it the way it is," I said.

"My art department designed it for me."

"Yeah," said the whore. "Well, you ought to see my place. My place is fixed up."

"Where do you live?" I asked.

Completing one sweep of the office, her eyes passed over me again. "I move around," she said evasively.

"You live right here in the building, don't you?" I asked. "On this floor somewhere."

The whore yawned and stretched her body out like a cat's, languidly, even her fingers flaring and hooking inward like claws. Her denim skirt rode up on her thin legs, which were vaguely discolored in spots by old fading bruises. Her bare arms flexed in a sensuous, animal way; the fringe on her suede vest swung back and forth as she expelled her breath. Skinny, she was still not unattractive.

"What's on your mind, honey?" she asked me.

"Nothing in particular. I just wanted to meet you."

"Curious?"

"You might say that," I admitted. "I'll pay you for your time."

She sighed.

"I'll bet that doesn't happen to you very often," I said. "Getting paid just to talk to somebody, I mean."

Her laugh was scornful. "Another Earnest," she said aloud.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Listen, honey, you think nobody pays me to talk? I spend more time talking than I do humping. I get men who think I'm their momma. I get kids doing research papers. I get teachers doing research papers. I get folks doing government studies. I get reporters. You know I been on television twice? I talk sometimes into tape recorders, guys set them up and leave me alone with them and I talk away all by myself. And I get writers, too. They're the worst. They want you to make up all kinds of bull about your life. Earnests, we call you guys what just want to shoot the breeze. So many Earnests around these days, I've gone as much as a month between real Johns."

My expression must have shown her I was crestfallen.

"Never mind," she said. "You pay me, I tell you what you want to hear. 'It's so nice, a man care about me for myself.' 'Oh, you understand me, yes, you do.' 'I used to live in a big house, but the men came in the middle of the night and stole

me away.' 'Yes, my daddy beat me and then took me out back of the woodshed and had me on that old wet grass.'"

She laughed, and then so did I.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Jasmine," she answered. "That girl behind the furniture, she's Orchid."

I looked around quickly and saw another whore rise from in back of my row of filing cabinets. She was laughing, too, a deep throaty chuckle. She was fat, very fat. She wore a flimsy dress several sizes too small. She was chewing gum.

"How long have you been hiding there?" I demanded.

"Long enough," she answered, snapping her gum. "Since lunch."

"And," continued Jasmine, "the girl behind you is Lily."

I jumped as a hand touched my shoulder, turned in my chair and stared up at a tall, beautiful whore with fine bone structure, haunting, mocking blue eyes, long blonde hair on her head and traces of blonde hair on her arms and her upper lip, which stretched in a perfectly straight mirthless line across her face.

"Where did you come from?"

"Behind your drapes," she said, arranging a necklace of small shiny metal mirrors at her throat. "And I don't agree with Jasmine. Your office is very well done. You can be proud of it."

"But there's nothing going on in here, honey," said Jasmine. "He needs a little decor."

Orchid pulled the gum from her mouth and tossed it toward the wastebasket, missing. From a slit in her taut dress she pulled another stick of gum and began unwrapping it with blunt fingers. "Needs something," she stated. "Needs a bar. I thought all you big shots had bars in your offices."

I heard a knock on the door and my secretary entered, escorting a group of four more girls. "I think these are the last," she said and turned to go.

"Wait!" I called. "How did you know where to find them all?"

My secretary only smiled one of her secret smiles and slid out through the door without answering me. She got things done, my secretary did. I had to hand it to her.

The girls distributed themselves around my office, lounging in chairs, on the couch next to Jasmine, on the window ledge, on the wine-tinted carpet covering the floor. One by one, Jasmine introduced them.

I met Violet, pale and nervous and clutching a heavy purse with a canvas shoulder strap and a locked clasp, wearing ragged secondhand clothing and constantly patting a huge mound of elaborately styled silvery hair piled on top of her head perhaps months before.

I met Ivy, a short whore wearing a

low-cut dress shiny with grime and black flat-soled shoes ten years out of date, who had a pleasant face but nothing pleasant to say about any of the other whores and no teeth at all in her mouth, just a hollow cave ribboned with strands of saliva.

I met Rose, a striking whore dressed in what seemed to be an assortment of scarves and silk shawls in all colors of the rainbow held together with small steel clips, whose magnificent body moved constantly and provocatively beneath her loose assortment of cloth.

And I met Holly, a hostile whore in a flannel shirt and corduroy pants, whose metallic red hair was showing black at the roots, whose wrists and ankles tapered not at all from her forearms and calves and whose weak chin trembled as her narrow angry eyes flicked about the crowded room.

The assembled whores seemed to be waiting for me to speak. I hesitated. "Well," I said, "where do I begin?"

• • •

Word of the whores in my office spread quickly. I kept the door closed as long as I could, then reluctantly allowed visitors to enter. Chuck Oates and Jack Flamm and the rest of the sales force arrived, awkward, sophomoric, jostling one another and grinning and blushing. Ecks and Otto stopped by, both of them exaggerating their scientific detachment to the point of absurdity. Houseman appeared, openly skeptical but intensely inquisitive. Malik from the mail room came, his white teeth wicked. Angelo appeared to shake his head and put his disapproval on record. Henry appeared with a camera and took pictures of the whores. Walter Finder appeared pushing a three-wheeled cart loaded with cock-tails and hors d'oeuvres, and suddenly we were having a party.

Of the girls in the office, only my secretary and Gloria cared to join us. Gloria plunged into animated conversation with Jasmine; my secretary singled out Rose for her attention. Houseman put his arm around Ivy, who was careful not to smile too broadly and not to open her mouth when she laughed. Holly made taunting remarks to Angelo and provoked an exchange of heated insults. Ecks read off written questions to Lily, who spoke readily and at length of her past achievements, both positive and negative. In contrast, Violet's background remained among the contents of her locked purse; even kindly old Schwartz could get her to reveal nothing more than her name. Orchid just stood next to Walter Finder's cart, eating hors d'oeuvres with both hands while Walter passed out drinks.

The whores at first were nervous about Henry's camera, having been photographed before under less pleasant circumstances. "It's OK," Henry kept

(continued on page 229)

WHORES

(continued from page 128)

reassuring them. "It won't be used against you. It's just art." The whores relaxed. Some struck theatrical poses. Henry used up a great deal of film.

Malik made the rounds three or four times, obviously disappointed. "Skank," he observed aloud. I asked him what he meant. "Low-class," he elaborated. I asked him if he was referring to the whores. "Dogs," he said and slouched toward the door.

Chuck Oates and Jack Flamm never did muster the courage to approach any of the whores; they remained by themselves in one corner of the office, sipping their drinks and shadowboxing.

When the party began to break up, well after seven o'clock, it had been decided (no one knew how) that the whores would stay on with us for a while. We all pitched in to set up cots along one wall of the conference room. My secretary telephoned to have linens and blankets delivered from a midtown rental agency. Then all of us trooped downstairs to dinner at a lively restaurant where Chuck Oates and Jack Flamm claimed to be well known and promised they could secure tables on short notice, even for a large motley drunken group of businessmen and whores.

"They called again this afternoon," said Chambers. "They still want to know what we're doing about the whores," he whined.

"Stall them off," I said.

"But I can't stall them off," Chambers pleaded. "You know what they're saying about me? They're saying I'm uncooperative. Uncooperative!"

For Chambers, I knew, this was like being told he had leprosy.

"Ignore them," I advised.

"That's easy for you to say," said Chambers. "It's me they keep calling. What happens if they demand to make an inspection?"

"No inspection," I said.

"Suppose they come with a search warrant?"

"Then we'll hide the whores, of course."

"But suppose they don't give us time? Suppose they stage a raid?"

Chambers was making a mighty effort to ignore Jasmine, who had draped herself over the back of his chair and was running her finger tips lightly over his balding scalp. Sweat stood out on Chambers' forehead. I began to feel somewhat sorry for him.

"Chambers," I said, "you worry too much. This is only temporary. Go back to your office, now, and forget all about it. Let me handle everything. Don't answer your telephone. Lock the door to the outside corridor. I think there might be a bottle or two left over from last

night; have Walter Finder fix you a stiff drink. I'll tell you what: Take Jasmine back to personnel with you."

"Sure thing, honey," purred Jasmine.

Chambers looked horrified. "I have work to do!" he croaked and bolted.

Jasmine slumped down into the chair Chambers had vacated. "Who did you say that was?"

"Chambers," I answered. "Head of personnel. He keeps records on everyone in the office. If you have a problem, you take it to him."

"Who does he take his problems to?" she asked lazily.

"Me," I answered.

"Who do you take your problems to?" she asked, and she stretched her arms high over her head and grasped the back of her chair with both hands, her small breasts rising, their nipples hardening beneath her yellow leotard.

• • •

Lily established residence with Ecks, in the research department. Linda, Ecks's secretary, was jealous. Otto, his assistant, was indifferent. Ecks himself was flattered.

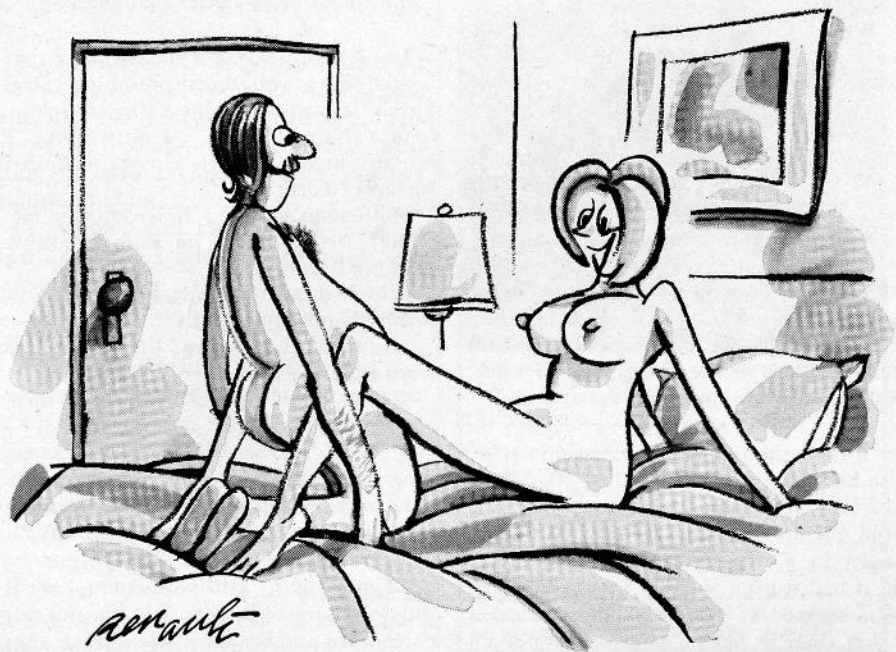
"She is an inspiration," Ecks confided to me. "Without understanding the first thing about what we are trying to do, she has such confidence we will succeed! I'll tell you this man to man, she makes me twenty years younger. Fresh from the classroom I was convinced that anything was possible. To her, anything is possible! She points out our skills, praises our equipment, compliments our proce-

dures and then asks us how we can fail. How can we fail? I tell you, there's no limit to what we can accomplish! She's what the department always needed! She believes in us!"

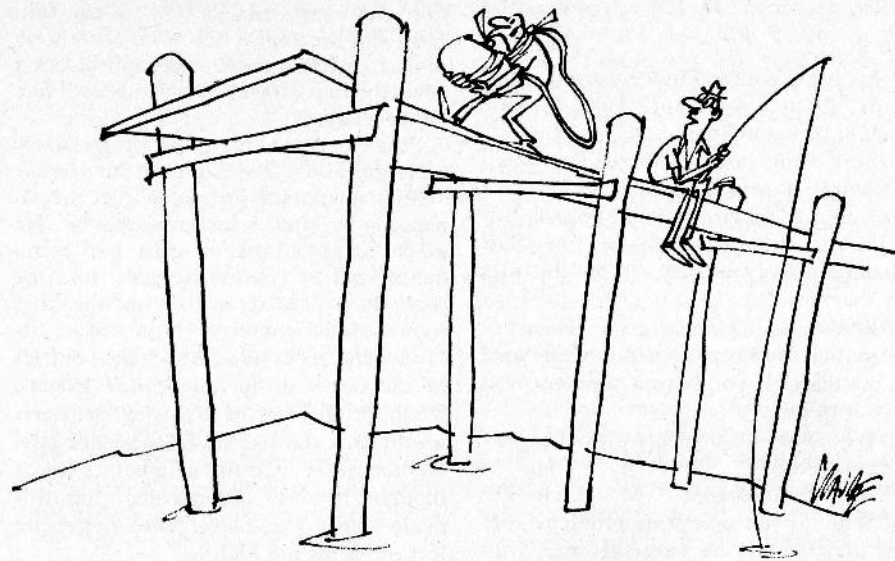
Ecks's experiments grew progressively more grandiose, but I did not interfere.

Still uncommunicative, Violet began hanging around Schwartz's cubicle. He made many efforts to gain her confidence, and at last my secretary told me that they seemed to be on speaking terms. Violet would perch on a stool behind Schwartz as he made his neat entries in the heavy dusty blue-spined ledgers. Then, at the end of each day, Schwartz would lock the ledgers in the office safe. He had never used this safe before, but I thought it over and decided that this made sense; the books were better off locked up for the night.

Rose lounged in the art department, where she claimed her talents would be most appreciated. In this she was correct; the artists entered a period of intense creative activity. John and Joanie, Waxworks, Lyons, Henry and even Eleanor Naso arrived early, worked through lunch, remained late. Stunning Rose wandered from one to another, loose scarves streaming. The temptation to touch her was irresistible; hands reached out for her full breasts, her bare limbs, the dark center of her body in its maze of colored cloth. Rose remained cool and fresh and energetic, no matter how roughly her skin was investigated; the six artists, however, grew haggard. Waxworks in particular suffered, his eyes sinking into his skull and his deft fingers beginning to shake. The clay and wood and



"Howie, you've had silicone treatments, too!"



"I must say, sir, that in this day and age, it's a rare privilege to bump into a man who knows where he's going."

plastic models on his workbench altered from their original designs into new shapes subtly grotesque and obsessive. Other department projects I saw were similarly affected by Rose's presence: Henry's photographs were overexposed, Lyons' mechanical drawings were askew, John and Joanie's layouts employed lurid colors and needlessly ornate type faces. Even Eleanor Naso's businesslike imagination intensified, altered its alignment with reality, produced twisted visions of cruelty and lust. When this affair with the whores was over, I vowed, I would close down the whole department and make the artists take monthlong vacations.

Walter Finder ballooned; this was the only term I could think of to describe what happened to him after Orchid staked out a territory in the marketing department. Oscar Whelan brought the change to my attention. "I'll discuss it with Rathbone," I promised him. "It's not proper for his heart to carry around so much weight. By the way," I added, "you're looking a little paunchy yourself. What happened? I thought you never gained a pound."

"Must be that stupid whore," said Oscar. "She's in the wrong line of work. She ought to be running a restaurant."

"I demand," demanded Angelo's wife, "to know the meaning of this."

I listened sympathetically while she told me how Angelo came home each night in a literal rage over arguments he'd had during the day with a new girl who seemed to have no office function other than to harass Angelo. "And then I find out," she continued in a haughty tone, "that this new girl, this Holly or

whatever her name is, actually amounts to no more than . . . is nothing but a . . . is no better than a . . ."

Obviously, the word was not going to make it out through her stiffened lips.

Jasmine yawned and stretched with feline grace. "She's a whore, ma'am. A good one, too. Not as good as me, but good enough."

Angelo's stocky wife rose from her chair. She pointed a stubby accusing finger at me. "I'm going to report you," she said. "Why, your whole office is nothing but a . . . is no better than a . . . is only a . . ."

"Whorehouse, ma'am," said Jasmine. "Not the best, but better than some."

Houseman held up a small gadget that looked like a well-tooled plumbing valve. I took it from him and hefted it in my hand. "Nice," I said. "Lightweight." I ran my finger over its curved extruded surfaces. "Clean."

Houseman grabbed it back from me. "They were lucky," he said, bristling. "But we'll show them."

I looked at the gadget again. "You mean it's not one of ours?"

"It would have been, but those bastards stole our idea."

"How could they steal our idea, Houseman?" I asked.

"I don't know, but they did it somehow, damn them."

From a desk in one corner of the engineering department, Ivy spoke up. "We'll show them," she warned.

"That's right," said Houseman. "We'll show the sons of bitches. We can put out twice the number of these things that they can. Three times the number! We'll flood the whole damned market."

"But Houseman," I said, "if it's not our design, how can we go ahead and manufacture them?"

"Their design?" shouted Houseman. "It was our idea, wasn't it? Who cares about the design?"

"We'll show the bastards," said Ivy again from her desk, upon which lay the dismantled remains of a second gadget identical to the first.

It was certainly a high-level conference, I observed. From my office there were Chambers, Rathbone, my secretary and myself; arrayed against us were a lawyer, a social worker, a security guard and a spokesman for the building's management firm, who was speaking. Such high-level participants ought to have been sitting in the comfortable conference-room chairs instead of on folding chairs crowded into my office, but the conference room was filled with whores' cots.

"Understand that, with your cooperation, we can have this matter taken care of in no time at all," the spokesman finished. "We may, I take it, count on your cooperation?"

Chambers nearly fell off his chair with the force of nodding his head.

"Perhaps," I said, leaning back and folding my arms across my chest, "you might summarize again for me the nature of these complaints."

"I hardly think it worth our while to go over this same ground," said the lawyer.

I addressed a question to the security guard. "Have any building ordinances been broken?"

Everyone began talking at once. My secretary was taking it all down, so I let my mind wander. On my desk, the same spider was weaving a new web. I watched her go around and around, building in strict compliance to antediluvian specifications.

"The health hazards alone would be warrant enough, I should think," said the spokesman.

"Actually," put in Rathbone, "thorough physical examinations have yielded negative results."

"He means the whores are clean," I added.

"None of you seems to have given a thought to the *real* victims," said the earnest social worker.

Chambers, certain that he was one of the real victims, nodded his head more vehemently than before.

"If you'll excuse an interruption," said my secretary, "I think the whores can take care of themselves."

"Has anyone ever noticed," I said, "that a few spiders keep an office free from flies and mosquitoes?"

The lawyer held up his hand. "Spare us the entomological metaphors," he

said. "Are you going to cooperate in this effort or aren't you?"

"In a word," I said, "no."

"If some evidence of wrongdoing were to be presented," said Rathbone.

Chambers was wringing his hands. "If only a compromise might be reached—"

The spokesman stood up. "This is a dangerous game you're playing," he said to me. "By the time you call for our help, it may be too late."

They were all leaving their chairs now. "There are worse things in midtown than whores," I said from behind my desk, not rising, not showing them to the door. Solemnly they filed out. "Liars, for instance," I called after them. "Hypocrites!"

The call from Rathbone had forced me to pick up my telephone receiver, destroying again the patient spider's recently completed web. "He wants to speak to you," my secretary had told me. "He says it's urgent." So I had picked up the telephone receiver and watched the spider scamper back into hiding.

"I have Walter Finder here in my office," said Rathbone's voice. "An ambulance has been summoned. Should you care to speak with him yourself, he has regained consciousness."

"Ambulance? Regained consciousness? I'll be right down!"

On the examination table in Rathbone's office lay obese Walter Finder. An oxygen cylinder and mask stood next to the table. Rathbone sat holding Walter's wrist and staring at the second hand of his watch.

"Walter," I said softly. "Walter, are you all right?"

Walter Finder's eyes rolled away from me. His thick lips looked bluish against the unnatural whiteness of his face. Much of the fat on his cheeks was new, seemed pasted on, not really a part of his proper flesh.

Oscar Whelan took me aside and told me that Walter had complained of pains in his chest and his arm. On the way to the washroom, he had collapsed. It had taken Oscar, Rathbone and two of the office salesmen to carry Walter Finder into Rathbone's office, where oxygen had revived him.

"Was it a heart attack?" I whispered.

Oscar shrugged. "Rathbone says it's hard to tell. Maybe a little one. He'll have to stay in the hospital for some time, anyway. I've telephoned his family."

I went back to Walter. Orchid, the whore from marketing, stood across the examination table, impassive. She stared down upon Walter Finder's mountainous body. Idly she reached one hand into her pocket, pulled out a large chunk of caramel, stuffed it between his semi-conscious lips.

Rathbone and I both jumped to pull it out again. "What's the matter with you?" I hissed at the whore. Walter Finder's mouth reluctantly surrendered the chunk of caramel.

"It's the kind he likes," said Orchid.

"Get the hell out of here!" I ordered. "This is a sick man!"

She left, but not before handing another of the chunks of caramel to Oscar Whelan, who popped it into his mouth and chewed unthinkingly.

Jasmine was at my side as I surveyed the chaos of the art department. "You destroyed *everything*?" I asked again. "All the layouts, all the drawings, all the models, the photographs, everything?"

John barely looked up from his drafting table. Joanie crumpled one sketch and immediately began another. Henry was out taking more pictures. Eleanor Naso's youthful face was wrinkled in concentration. Only Waxworks took the trouble to answer me. "We were close," he croaked hoarsely. "Close, close. But not quite close enough."

Rose sat amid the litter, stuffing bales of old artwork into the bin of a paper shredder. She picked one sheet from the debris, held it at arm's length, scrutinized it, tossed it into the bin. "Flawed," she said. The paper shredder chewed and spit out two-dimensional spaghetti.

On the way back across the bay to my office, Jasmine took my hand. "Honey," she said, "those people in that department sure do work hard. I'm glad you don't work like that. They don't have time for *nothing* else."

The subpoena lay on my blotter.

"Damn it, Houseman," I complained. "I was afraid something like this might happen. Why the hell didn't we do our own design?"

An unrepentant Houseman launched into a tirade against unfair dishonest scheming midtown competition. His whore, Ivy, shadowed his speech with nods and encouraging murmurs from her toothless mouth.

"I suppose this means we'll have to hire lawyers," I said. "Damn it, I hate lawyers."

"Don't get upset, honey," purred Jasmine.

I walked out into the bay and approached Schwartz's cubicle. At the sound of my approaching steps, he slammed a ledger shut and leaned his elbow across it defensively. Violet stood up and put nervous hands upon Schwartz's shoulders.

"What's the matter?" I asked, puzzled.

"Nothing," said old Schwartz.

"Listen," I said, "bring your books into my office. We may be facing a lawsuit over patent infringements, and I want to find out how we stand."

Schwartz leaned both arms over the



for business or school casual or dress . . . this new look in tassels ranks #1.

crosby square

5519 W. Woolworth Ave.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53218



share with the one you love . . .

The luxury of SATIN SHEETS

Experience the intimate, inviting elegance of satin! **MACHINE WASHABLE!** 225 thread count with 150 denier thread. 7 sensuous colors: Black, Red, White, Gold, Royal Blue, Avocado Green, Plum Purple. Our prices include: 1 fitted bottom sheet, 1 straight top sheet, 2 pillowcases . . . others don't!

Twin Set	\$19.50	Queen Set	\$23.50
Full (dbl. bed)	\$20.50	King Set	\$27.50

Name _____
Address _____
City _____
State _____ zip _____
Charge to my:
 BankAmericard Mastercharge
 American Express
card no. _____
expiration date _____
signature _____
Send check or money order or use your credit card.
We pay postage. Retail Sales 10-4, Mon. thru Fri.

Royal Creations, Ltd.
Dept. P34 330 Fifth Ave., New York, N. Y. 10001

ledger. "You can't," he said.

"Schwartz, have you lost your mind? Come on, now, bring in those books. This may take all afternoon; there's no time to waste."

"I'm the bookkeeper," said Schwartz. "These are my books!"

"Schwartz, this is ridiculous," I said, reaching down and laying a hand on one corner of the ledger. Schwartz gripped it to his chest fiercely. I yanked and nearly pulled the old man out of his chair.

Strong arms grabbed me from behind and I was spun backward to face Angelo. "Who are you trying to push around?" Angelo snarled.

"Angelo," I said, "help me get this ledger away from Schwartz."

Angelo's hand reached out and prodded me in the stomach. "You think you're a big man?" he said. His fingers jabbed my shoulder. "You think you can push people around?" His thumb grazed my chin. "You want to start something?"

"Hit him!" shouted Holly. "Slug him! Knock him down!"

"Come on, honey," said Jasmine. "Let's go back to your office."

"You're all crazy!" I cried. I looked sideways and saw all of the secretaries and clerks in the bay staring at me while Angelo's belligerent fist shook in front of my face. "Crazy!" I repeated and let Jasmine hustle me back to my office, out of immediate danger.

"So that's what you're going to do?" said my secretary.

The two of us were sitting in the cafeteria at a table with an unobstructed view of the entrance, in case Jasmine were to come looking for me. A meeting in the cafeteria had been my own idea. It was one place where we could talk alone without arousing suspicion.

"Don't you think it will work?" I asked.

"No, I don't," she said. "If security guards and social workers and lawyers and building managers have so much trouble flushing whores, what makes you think you can do better?"

"Isn't it worth a try?" I asked. "Those idiot building officials are so busy hiring experts and making surveys and writing reports and running around the halls with nets, it never occurs to them to be polite. I asked the whores to stay; now I'm going to ask them to leave. They can refuse, of course. If they do, I'll have to call the security guards, and we'll be back where we started. But why shouldn't they do as I ask? I'm giving them a chance to go quietly, with a little dignity."

My secretary drained her second cup of coffee. "Where do you expect them to go?" she asked.

"Another office, I suppose. They really ought to consider splitting up. Individually, they would be a lot less conspicuous."

"They plan to stick together," said my secretary.

"I know. Jasmine told me."

We rose to leave the cafeteria. On our way to the entrance, we were stopped by a waitress I knew vaguely by sight. "Say," she said to me, "aren't you the guy with all the trouble on your floor?"

"We've had problems lately," I admitted. "I don't think I'd use the word trouble."

"If you didn't use it before, mister, you'd better use it now. I heard there was an explosion up there."

"When?"

"About a half hour ago. I heard it happened in a laboratory. You got a laboratory on your floor?"

"Ecks," I said to my secretary. "One of those foolish transmutation experiments Lily talked him into."

"What goes on up there, anyway?" asked the waitress. "I heard you got whores on the payroll. You doing some kind of sexual research?"

But my secretary and I were hurrying out through the cafeteria entranceway, anxious to find out if anyone had been injured.

• • •

The whores spread themselves over the furniture in my office. They looked much the same as on that first afternoon I had met them all. Lily had some of her long hair singed by the explosion in Ecks's laboratory; Holly was slightly battered by the hands Angelo had laid upon her during the rages she had provoked; Rose wore several new scarves designed by the exhausted artists; Orchid seemed fatter; Violet seemed thinner; Ivy had not spoken a word to me since I agreed to settle the patent case out of court. Jasmine I had seen daily, so I could not say how she might have changed. She was more at ease, perhaps. Her yawns were wider than ever. She pleased my eye. It was going to be hard for me to learn to get along without her again.

The girls were sullen. They knew why I had called them into my office. I saw no reason to stall.

"I'll tell you, girls," I said, "I like you, but I can't afford you."

I studied their faces to see how they were taking it. I observed a few scornful sneers and a few resigned shrugs, but no outright defiance.

Jasmine was the first to say something. "You're giving us the boot?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so," I answered.

The whores exchanged glances, frowned, shifted position uneasily. Jasmine began to laugh, a low, lazy laugh.

"What are you laughing at, Jasmine?" I asked.

"I'm laughing at you, honey," she said. "You sure got a lot of nerve on you."

"I smiled meekly. "I'll miss you," I said to her.

"No lie," she said simply.

I realized now that all the whores were

going to leave, that they were leaving peacefully, that there would be no confrontation. I felt not relief but regret. "Jasmine," I said, "I don't guess you'd care to stay on here alone?" I had not wanted to let myself talk along this line, but the words were coming of their own accord and there was nothing I could do to stop them. "I'm certain I could find some position. . . . I'm sure Chambers would know where. . . . I'm sure in some capacity. . . ."

Jasmine made a face at the mention of Chambers. "And I could take my troubles to him?" she said.

"No, no, you'd be directly under me."

The whores snickered.

"Perhaps my secretary could use a little help," I went on.

"A little help in the kitchen, you mean?"

"No, I mean maybe you could take over her job from time to time. Would you consider that? My secretary's job, on a part-time basis?"

"You already got a secretary," said Jasmine. "What's she going to think about this?"

"You leave her to me," I said.

"I will," said Jasmine, "and be on my way."

"But—"

"Anyway, if you keep me, honey, you keep us all. You want all of us?"

"No," I said reluctantly. "No, I don't."

Jasmine leaned down and gave me a kiss on the lips, a kiss soft and mocking and hauled up from the bottom of a clear spring running through the thickest woods of her lazy soul, where all-white mushrooms lay in the shade on beds of lime-green spongy moss. Then the whores left my office in a group, chattering, arguing, waving their hands at department heads and clerks alike, leaving behind them a faint confused scent of various perfumes twining and braiding around one another like the individual weak fibers of a single strong hawser.

• • •

In the middle of giving my secretary page after page of dictation to make up for weeks of neglected correspondence, I stopped speaking and looked her directly in the eye. "There's something I have to confess to you," I said.

"Don't," said my secretary.

"I almost gave away your job," I went on. "Jasmine—"

"I don't want to hear about it," said my secretary stiffly.

"But I must tell you—"

The telephone rang. I hoped this would be the hospital calling with reports on the slow improvement of Walter Finder and the expected complete recovery of Ecks. I grabbed the telephone receiver. The spider web ripped silently to pieces. Its maker the spider ran off somewhere, her gait not without insolence.

