

DEBBIE KORBEL

Venus

Francine looked at him with a thin veil of disinterest. She could always tell when someone was interested in her, and she did not want him to know she had noticed him—not yet anyway. She looked down and concentrated on stirring her Daquiri. When she glanced up, some effervescent blonde was crowning him with a very familiar hello. Figures. It was always the same sequence of events; she couldn't get cast as the leading lady even in her own story. The shower, the perfume, the painstakingly perfect eye-liner, for what, to sit alone in the darkness eating stale popcorn, hoping that romance was just around the next kernel?

Francine wished she hadn't come, that she was home wearing her mu-mu, instead of a denim girdle stamped Calvin Klein. The jeans were too tight when she bought them, but she had planned on the discomfort being the incentive for her to lose a few pounds. Fat chance. She decided that she was tired of feigning relaxation and contentment when she was actually feeling like a pariah, and started to put on her jacket when . . .

"Francine, what are you doing here?"

It was red-headed Ronnie Schulman: he worked at the gas station where she got her car serviced.

"Nothing. Uh, actually I was just leaving, have a nice evening." And on that cliché she escaped blood-curdling tales of cracked engine blocks and overextended credit cards.

Ronnie had already halfway seated himself at the table and now had to make a rather ungraceful contortion to stop himself. Francine pretended not to notice and threw her purse over her shoulder. She knew he wanted to talk to her, but she just wasn't in a charitable mood.

"See you," she said, as she began digging in the bottom of her purse for her keys. "Damn it! Where the hell . . .

ah, here they are." It was always a long walk to her car at night, and her heartbeat quickened as the sound of the music faded. She always walked with her keys projecting from her fist, to ward off any attackers. The way she felt tonight, she might offer them a lift.

The cold vinyl car seat only added to her misery, and she revved the engine like Mario Andretti: she'd get the heater going. Tomorrow was Saturday, and she promised her mother that she'd go shopping with her, and that meant fabricating a neat little lie about what she did tonight. If her mother knew that she spent the night alone in a bar, she'd start in with the "Where did I go wrong . . ." routine. Someday she was going to answer her mother, but not tomorrow, she was too depressed.

Francine walked quickly up the steps to her apartment and unlocked the door.

"Afie . . . Afie, there you are, did you miss your ugly mother? You did? Were you good? You were? How about a cookie, do you have to go outside? O.K., O.K. What a good boy!"

Afie was unaware of this evening's defeat, and having relieved himself outside, the terrier took his usual position at the end of the couch.

Francine made herself a cup of tea and settled in front of the T.V. It wasn't on, and she knew she wasn't going to turn it on. She was in one of those I hate everybody and everything except my fox terrier moods. She looked around the apartment at her belongings, her proof to the world that she existed, and was not convinced.

The ringing of her head, or the telephone, she wasn't sure which, cracked the morning silence like a fresh egg.

"Francine, are you awake?"

"Yeah Mom."

"Did you still want to go to Dregmans this morning?"

"Yeah, sure Mom. I'll be over to pick you up in half an hour."

"O.K. honey, bye bye."

Somehow her car, like a rented horse, found its way back to the stable, and she pulled into the driveway of her

parent's home. Her mother was waiting on the front porch.

"Hi dear."

"Hi Mom."

"They're having a sale there today, we should be able to find some nice things in your size. Oh, did you hear the big news? Ethel Fine's daughter is getting married."

"That's nice," said Francine.

"Did I tell you that Eddie Berman's son just had twins?"

"Yes, you told me, that's very nice."

"Well I'll tell you what I think is nice, if you'd like to know."

Francine didn't answer as she knew her mother would tell her, regardless of her response.

"I think it would be nice if you and Sam Schulman's boy went out. Ronald is a very nice boy. Religious."

"Oh, well that makes all the difference in the world, I didn't know he was religious. I'll call him up right now, do you have his number, or even better we can stop by there on the way to Dregmans, and I'll just say, Ronald, my mother says you're a nice boy, religious, in which case I'd like to have your baby. Would that be nice enough for you mother?"

Francine's mother started to cry.

"I'm sorry mother, really."

"You think I do this just to bother you? You think I don't see all of my friends' children getting married, having children of their own? I only want you should be happy. Does that make me so terrible? O.K., I'm terrible, I'm a terrible mother. Shoot me."

Don't tempt me mother, she thought.

"You're not a terrible mother, I'm just not ready to get married right now. Can we please drop the subject?"

"I won't say another word, you're an adult, you make your own decisions, I certainly can't live your life for you . . . you're going to have to learn from your own mistakes . . ."

"Mother . . . thank you."

After her mother was sure she possessed all the bargains at Dregmans, she finally allowed Francine to help her pile the polyester treasures on the counter. Her

mother started to talk to the saleswoman, Edith Kibinsky. This woman had been in the "Dregs" for as long as Francine could remember.

"Francine, say hello to Edith."

"Hello Edith", said Francine. She loved it when her mother treated her like she was five.

"She hasn't seen you in years. Step back, let her look at you."

Francine tugged at her blouse, trying to cover her midriff. Edith gave her the once over, twice.

"You've gained a little weight, haven't you Frannie? The boys don't like them too heavy these days you know." said Edith. Francine was so glad she came.

The drive home was pleasant; her mother fell asleep.

Francine closed the door of her apartment behind her, but not before loneliness walked in. She thought about killing herself. She fed Afie, combed her hair, grabbed her keys and headed to her car. She drove around for awhile and then decided to pull in at a Seven-Eleven. Minutes later she emerged with what she needed to do the job. Hostess cupcakes and a pack of Marlboros.