

CHRISTOPHER JUNG

SKIN DEEP

JULIET JOHANSON WHOLEHEARTEDLY BELIEVED THAT A penny saved was a penny earned. But if asked to elaborate, she'd add: *until you have enough for a down payment.* Such was the case with the automobile she now piloted, a 1994 Lexus.

Juliet navigated her car carefully, though the action was futile in light of the advanced decay of the freeway. No amount of caution could adequately protect a car's suspension from the hazards of the Los Angeles freeway system. Temporary freeways in constant need of repair provided the wear-and-tear that was the lifeblood of the Mr. Goodwrenchs of America.

Her new car battled admirably. She passed an older Ford Escort obviously not equipped with the same computer controlled four-wheel independent suspension as her shiny new Lexus. The balding man driving looked as if he were being shaken about like a bug in a masochistic five year-old's jar. She tilted her head slightly to the right, just enough to afford him a glance. When their eyes met, his mouth fell open, and his car skittered off into the guardrail. Juliet Johanson caused many men to skitter off into guardrails. She was an *exceptionally beautiful* female.

"What time do we shoot?" Frederick Clarkson asked. He was damned nervous. Though he was a professional with more than fifty films to his credit, he had never worked with a star of Juliet Johanson's caliber.

"Lighten up Freddy, whenever she gets here," Doc Fanelli answered. He wasn't a real doctor in the M.D. sense. The crew had given him the moniker in light of his ability to *fix* things. Doc liked it because of its prestigious sound. Sometimes he called himself the *doctor of love*. "Just hang loose, buddy boy. Want a Valium?"



"I can't perform on drugs. You know that. I can't hit my peaks with junk rollin' around in my veins."

"Right ... right. That clean living Betty Ford Center crap," Doc said, lighting up a Camel.

Frederick took offence to his crack. Not just anyone could get into the Betty Ford Center. He was proud of the fact that he could both afford it, and had enough public visibility to be accepted. But even that achievement didn't waylay his fears of working with the infamous Juliet. "Call's at one. She'll get here early for makeup and a read through right?" he asked Doc.

Doc chuckled for a moment, rearranging sixty years of phlegm building up in his throat. "Juliet doesn't do makeup or rehearsals. When she gets here, we roll. Got it? Oh ... and remember, only one take."

"One take! How do you figure? What if something goes bad? I drop a line, miss a cue or something."

"I'll get Nicki to catch it in editing, or we'll dub it."

"Do we dub daily, or after we wrap the shoot?"

"Not *we* Freddy, *you*. Juliet doesn't do —"

"— dubbing," Frederick interrupted, finishing Doc's sentence.

"Don't get smart buck. There's a hundred other guys just an ad in Variety away that would give their left nut just to stand within twenty feet of her, let alone *perform* with her," Doc said, adopting a ravenous tone that made Frederick suddenly believe the stories he'd heard around town. "If you *really* want to go over your lines, I'm game. It's twelve now. We got an hour."

Frederick smiled and picked two copies of the script laying on a table. He tossed one to Doc. "Are you here alone?" he asked Doc.

"Yeah, I'm alone."

"Well I'm alone, and you're alone. Whadaya say we go to my place and not be so alone together."

Juliet maneuvered her automobile with the skill and precision of an Indy driver. She popped the latest Sidney Sheldon novel in the tape deck and listened intently. The voice of Ed Asner, in rich Bose sound, filled the car with the smooth coupling of adverbs. A good book before an important shoot was a necessity for placing herself in the proper mind-set. Jackie Collins, Danielle Steele or V.C. Andrews were all pretty damn good, but none could hold a verbal candle to the master of the game, Sidney Sheldon.

She removed her brassiere, slowly, methodically, and pulled him against her aching chest passionately, tenderly. The words soothed her mind. It was almost as if Ed wasn't the fat guy on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, but rather the soft, gentle, whispering Michael, of *Thirtysomething*.

The words lulled her into thoughts about the life she'd never have with her

fame. Being instantly recognizable, she'd given up hope of ever leading a *normal* life: a simple house, a loving husband, beautiful well-mannered children. And above all, making love with someone she actually cared about.

Trust was a commodity that extremely beautiful people lived without. Juliet, being a member of that small sect, was caught between what men *wanted*, and what men *said* they wanted. The only truly satisfying relationship she'd ever had was with a man named Bob who had no penis. A tragic result of an overzealous pet Doberman. He was kind, caring, and intelligent. Far more intelligent than she, but never condescended toward her. He had a knack for observing what people took for granted, and extracting some sort of universal truth from it. Some idea that never would have dawned on her alone.

"Do you realize that there's an untapped market for air," he asked one day as they were walking in a park, eating frozen yogurt, and acting trendy. Juliet wore a shapeless sundress, a kerchief over her head, and sunglasses. "I mean think about it. It used to be the greatest things in life were free, but now you have to stand in line to go to the bathroom in public. Or at the very least pay a quarter. Being charged for moving your bowels for Christ's sake."

Juliet smiled, cluing in to his line of reasoning. "I buy bottled water and pay to park my car wherever I go," she said expectantly.

"I already pay to keep the air in my apartment cool in the summer. And when the smog gets really bad, we're told to stay indoors. I think I see a trend."

"I guess we'll have the D.W.P.O. soon. Department of water, power and oxygen," Juliet said. They smiled at each other.

"Even sex costs money. Condoms are dammed expensive I hear."

"Fortunately that's an expense you don't have to worry about, huh?"

They both laughed. Bob squeezed her hand playfully and pushed his yogurt cone into her face leaving a large circular stamp of vanilla on her cheek. She jumped away from him and held up her own cone in defense, as if it were a knife. "Ok, smart-guy, this means war. Prepare to be polka-dotted with pistachio."

"Take your best shot homegirl," Bob said, dancing like a boxer.

They circled each another, each one stabbing the other with their cone while other parkgoers watched and pointed.

She never grew tired of his intelligence. He never grew tired of her interest.

As happy as thoughts of the past made her, she was always faced with the unfortunate ending which could never be altered by way of her hindsight: Bob was dead. He had been so for six long months. But the lump in her throat paid no mind to the facts. She drove a little slower.

"It's 1:15! Where is she? I thought she was a professional," Frederick whined. Truth be told, with each passing minute he could more readily visualize him-

self the hell out of this studio, and on his way to his other call at six.

"Look Buck, you've been paid for four hours work. That means your ass is mine until five," Doc stated emphatically, "whether or not you work with *Juliet* isn't the issue. I've got two actresses on call if she doesn't show. Got it?"

The rest of the crew became was silent, watching, waiting to see if Doc would be challenged. To Frederick, Doc suddenly seemed much bigger than he had originally. "Yeah, I got it," Frederick whispered.

"That's more like it." Doc smiled the wide smile of victory and gestured to a tall man with a paper-thin mustache wearing an Armani suit. "Nico, get Wendy Crawford on the horn. Tell her she's got twenty minutes to get down here if she wants to be a star."

Nico moved as if he'd been given a hotfoot. Doc turned his attention to Frederick, who was now calm and cool. Wendy Crawford was no stranger. "You know Wendy?" Doc asked.

"Yeah."

"Good. She'll be here in twenty or my name's not Doc Fanelli."

Juliet had slowed down considerably. The analog speedometer on the Lexus' state-of-the-art instrumentation panel read 43 mph. She was reliving Bob's last moments in her head, and angering anxious motorist traveling in her wake.

She had been at Bob's last performance at *Medieval Times: Dinner and Tournament*. Bob was a one of the dueling knights that entertained diners who were both hungry, and longed for times-past filled with courage, chivalry, and the roguish spirit of castles and kings. And most importantly, were willing to shell out \$40 a throw for an incredible simulation. Juliet had finally acquiesced to Bob's pleading. She attended Saturday, June 4th's performance.

Bob was the Black Knight. Juliet sat in one of six sections that circled a large dirt-floored arena. Her section contained about forty other people all wearing complimentary black paper crowns, and waving complimentary black paper flags, indicating their allegiance to the Black Knight, to Bob.

When the Bob rode onto the field — the black section cheered. When Bob took his lance into his hands and prepared to joust — they roared. When he rode forward toward his opponent, the Yellow Knight — they screamed. And when the Yellow Knight (who had mistakenly picked up the wrong lance earlier) plunged nine feet of solid pine through the Black Knight's make-shift armor, killing him instantly in an exhibition of unbridled carnage — they absolutely howled with excitement.

Juliet pushed her way through the livid fans, making her way to the arena floor where the puzzled looking Yellow Knight knelt, over Bob's body, trying to figure where exactly to perform CPR on a chest that no longer existed. Juliet fell to her knees alongside them. She lifted Bob's faceplate and gingerly placed

both of her hands on his still warm cheeks. She ran them slowly, deliberately, over his rough acne-scared skin as if she were a blind woman trying to sculpt an unseen face in her mind. Tears quietly came as she closed his eyes with her thumbs. Putting her head to his chest, she got blood in her hair. The audience gave it a standing ovation.

In the six months that followed, Juliet worked. The work numbed her mind to the grief. And soon, Bob was forgotten, relegated to the back-forty of her brain. Warm coals of memory smoldering quietly, that her thoughts, when idle, fanned into a raging fire.

The blast of a truck's horn broke her meditative spell. She looked to her right. A tow truck trawling a heavily damaged red Ford Escort had slowed, and was keeping pace alongside her. A balding man riding in the cab of the truck gazed at her though the truck's dirty window, smiling. He held up his hand and waved with only his pinky. Juliet goosed the accelerator and shot down the freeway in a blur of Japanese design.

Wendy Crawford was Frederick's ex-girlfriend. They had met while shooting a picture called *Swingtime*. A year of living together later, she decided that the best way to climb a few rungs on the ladder of success was to sleep with directors, producers, and even an occasional grip. It had ended badly: screaming accusations, things being broken for effect. Frederick left their apartment, got into his car, and repeatedly bashed his head into the steering wheel, ultimately rendering himself unconscious. Still slumped over the wheel the next morning in his assigned parking place, Wendy got into her own car parked alongside, and drove away.

He hadn't seen her since that night two months ago, but not because he hadn't tried. Wendy would have nothing to do with him. She moved away, unlisted her phone number, and never frequented any of her *known* hangouts — at least that's what the private investigator he had hired told him. "For all *inten-sive* purposes buddy, she's gone," the P.I. said.

But blazing torches are difficult to extinguish, and Frederick Clarkson didn't even make an effort to try. Rather, he worked, convinced himself that Wendy had only left the planet temporarily, and kept on working. Working required concentration. And concentration paid no mind when thoughts of love-lost raised their bothersome heads.

With the mention of Wendy's name any semblance of concentration scattered like bandits from a burglar alarm. Now he would have the opportunity to confront her, start anew, patch it up and begin again. He began going over the one hundred-plus apologies he had been preparing for two months, rehearsing with mental images.

Nico walked onto the set and over to Doc, who was sitting in his director's

chair filing his nails. "Sorry Boss, Crawford's on another shoot. She said give her an hour."

"An hour," Doc said with an underlying torque that made Nico's bones quiver slightly. "And what do you suppose I should do with this hour she has so graciously granted me, watch the teamsters over there eat *more* sandwiches?"

Nico began to formulate an answer in the form of a shrug when, as if on cue, Juliet Johanson walked through the soundstage door.

II

Beauty is said to be in the eye of the beholder. When Frederick Clarkson was growing up, he thought this to be simply a defense in order to rationalize butt-ugly girlfriends or boyfriends. Maturity had reformulated the definition. He now knew the expression for what it was: *there are many ways to perceive beauty, and not everyone sees it in the same way.*

But judging by the slack-jawed expressions of the entire cast and crew occupying studio 26, on the *Expression Films* lot, these beholder's were all gazing at the image of Juliet Johanson through the same pair of eyes.

Frederick watched as Juliet strolled onto the set toward a dressing room bearing her name, marked with a star. He watched her calves flex tightly with each step of her bright red pumps. The swishing sound of leather on leather seemed to be the only sound in the studio as the rest of the crew, men and women alike, stared quietly until her leather clad form shut the dressing room door behind her.

"Ok people, you know the system," Doc Fanelli instructed through a bullhorn, "set up the bar scene. And remember, this is a closed set, and I mean closed. Only camera, lighting and sound aboard. Got it?"

A few groans answered, but did as they were told.

"Freddy, why don't you get into wardrobe. I'll come get you when we're ready," Doc said, looking somewhat concerned over Frederick's pallid complexion. "You want makeup? Mike'll take care it. You look like death. Remember, we're selling life here."

Frederick nodded and plundered off into his dressing room, Mike the makeup man in tow. Once inside he collapsed onto the leather couch, making the identical noise Juliet did earlier. That particular Pavlov's Bell added a third dip to his ice cream cone of fear.

"What's up Fred. You look yellow as a Chinaman," Mike said, "Christ, I'm not sure even *I* can bring you back from the dead."

"I'm gonna die. Oh my God. Did you see her Mike?" Fred asked, not really expecting any sort of confirmation. Mike was a raging homosexual.

"Damn straight. Even I'd be tempted to go back in the closet, change, and come out for that."

Frederick's spine telescoped upon itself. He slumped deeper into the couch. His backbone wasn't the only part of his anatomy to go limp.

Juliet entered her dressing room and surveyed it quietly. It was more or less identical to the hundreds of other dressing rooms she had had at her disposal over the course of her career: a couch, a chair, and a dressing table.

Resting on the chair was her outfit for today's shoot: a black spandex mini-skirt, matching tube-top, and a black pair of pumps not unlike the ones she was wearing. She removed her clothes and stood naked in front of the full-length mirror mounted on the wall, admiring, for a moment, the bikini wax she'd had earlier in the day. During the time with Bob, she stopped having it done, and now was just growing accustomed to its precision.

"Why do you have that done all the time?" he had asked.

"It's in my contract. They want me to look good when I do nude scenes."

"They know how a women should look naked?"

"They know what the public wants. They do market research."

"Really? *Excuse me sir, just how important to you is neat and orderly pubic hair?* When was the last time you heard of a man having his body hair sculpted in the shape of a heart? It just seems silly."

She stopped having it done, and asked to have any future clauses in her contracts demanding it abolished. She lost no work over, what the producers called behind her back, the *bitch's kink*. This small pronouncement gave her an huge boost of confidence in her ability to guide her own life. But then Bob died. The salon called and asked why she hadn't been around lately. She found she couldn't remember why it was such a big deal after all. So she went.

Frederick was changing into costume when Doc Fanelli knocked on the door. "Come in," he said, buttoning the fly on his 501s. He did this cautiously, as not to awkwardly pinch his penis in the process. He wore no underwear.

"You ready? Sweet Mike said you were a little shaky," Doc asked, obviously enjoying Frederick's predicament.

"I was born ready," Frederick said, with a confidence entirely not his own.

"Ok Buck, take your mark. I'll get her ladyship."

Frederick walked onto the set and took his place at the ersatz bar once used, he had heard, on an episode of *T.J. Hooker*. Some of the other bar-going extras mingled with one another waiting for the shoot to begin. Frederick sat on a barstool, stealing occasional glances toward Juliet's dressing room, trying to look calm, cool and bored. *Because when you're cool*, Calvin told Hobbes in

last Sunday's comics, *the world bores you*.

Doc knocked, waited a couple of seconds, and walked into Juliet's dressing room. After a minute or two they both came out. Juliet strolled graceful as a gazelle. As she approached he remembered an article he'd read while waiting for the dentist to cap his teeth. It was in *Woman's Day* magazine. It was written by an ardent feminist named Sam Marshal. Frederick had to look twice at the writer's photo before realizing it was a woman at all, rather than an army drill sergeant. She had written that the much sought after "hour-glass figure," desired by men over the years was a myth. Frederick wished ol' Sam Marshal was alongside him now witnessing the exception to the rule sauntering toward him in *come-fuck-me* pumps.

"Yo buck, wake up," Doc said, waving his hands in front of Frederick trying to break whatever spell Juliet had inadvertently cast.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm ok. I'm ready Freddy. Heh ... heh."

Juliet stood looking bored, making Frederick's earlier attempt at the same action pale miserably by comparison.

"Ok it's gonna go like this," Doc said, "Juliet didn't get the chance to read though the script, so were gonna *improvise*. Were dropping sound, so you sound guys can split." He gestured to the sound men who looked very disappointed over missing the shoot. "So if everybody's ready, we'll get this rollin' like an *O*." Looking around, he noted the thumbs-up's from the crew. He whispered to Juliet and Frederick, "Are you kids all set?"

Frederick nodded dully.

"Yes," Juliet said in a deep breathy whisper that seemed to drain all the oxygen from Frederick's lungs.

Doc picked up the bullhorn and gave his direction: "Roll camera ... and action. Okay kids, you've just met, and you really like each other. Now Freddy, take both her hands and lean forward and kiss her. SLOWLY, slowly. Yeah that's it. Keep kissing, deep tongue now ... deep tongue. Juliet, release his hands and put your arms around his neck. That it ... that's it. Freddy, reach down and lift her skirt ... SLOWLY DAMMIT, SLOWLY. Run your hands over her tush. Nice ... Nice. Pull her toward you. I want some pelvis action ... little circles. Okay, now faster. That's it. FREDDY, LOOSEN UP FOR GOD'S SAKE! Okay Freddy, reach up and run your hands through her hair. Now push her slowly to her knees. Right, right ... you got it. Unbutton the fly Juliet ... lower the jeans. Stroke him first Julie. Just like that ... just like that. Let's have some mouth action now. FREDERICK LOOK EXCITED, THIS IS NOT YOUR MOTHER HERE. Ok, keep it up ... keep it up. Come on Frederick, how long will this take? Juliet take off the tube top so he can see your tits ... all right get back at it ... do it faster for Christ's sake ... come on Freddy boy what's it take a *Hover canister vac*? FUCK. CUT, CUT, CUT!"

Juliet stood but made no effort to get dressed. Frederick smiled at her weakly and pulled up his jeans. He knew what was coming from Doc, and he decided he'd feel less vulnerable with his pants up.

"Do you want to explain what's going on here?" he asked, again adopting that menacing tone of industry folklore.

"I'm just a little nervous. I've never worked with her before."

"And you call yourself a professional," Doc said disgustedly. "Look, why don't the both of you take fifteen and get to know each other in my office, if you know what I mean. When you get back, I want some steam. You got me Buck?"

"Yeah," Frederick said quietly.

Juliet looked even more bored as they headed toward Doc's office. "Could you please put your clothes back on?" Frederick asked Juliet, shutting the door behind them.

"That sort of defeats the purpose now doesn't it?"

"Just for a sec, I promise."

Juliet dressed and slumped down on the single item of furniture in the room, a leopard print couch. "Are you gay?" she asked, "is that what it is?"

"I don't think so. Though I've never really been seriously propositioned," he said, "but if Johnny Depp walked through that door, I might give it some thought."

Juliet laughed — genuinely. "Seriously?"

"I don't know. He's pretty damn sexy though."

"That's amazing. Everyone I meet in this business is a homophobic cretin "I think I sort of like you."

"Thanks. So ... ah ... what's a nice girl like you doing in a business like this," Frederick said in as swarthy a tone as he could manage.

Juliet giggled. "It pays the bills. Heck, it pays a *lot* of bills. I just sort of got swept away in it. The money grabbed me and I could never really get loose."

"Once you get used to the *things* this kind of money can buy, it's hard to imagine life without them," he said.

They looked at each another. Frederick smiled. It was returned. And for the first time in a long time, the respective memories of Bob and Wendy dimmed, and were replaced with possibilities.

"Do you think you might ..." Frederick asked, "... maybe, or not, but ... want to ..."

But before he could finish, Doc flung open the door and stormed into the room. "Are — we — ready — yet?" he asked, deliberately syncopating each word for effect.

"I don't know Doc, I still feel a little ... well ... soft."

Doc closed his eyes and mentally counted to three. "Would you like some

help? I'll send in a fluff girl, if you think it would help."

Frederick looked to Juliet who sighed, shrugged her shoulders, and left the office. "Fine, I'll try," he said.

Doc put his head outside the door and yelled, "NICO, SEND HER IN." He redirected his attention to Frederick, "you've got ten minutes. Then you better come out here waving that ivory wand of yours at full mast. Got it?" Without waiting for an answer, Doc turned on a dime and marched out. Within seconds his form was replaced by one very familiar. Wendy Crawford stood stoically in the doorway.

III

It is said that absence makes the heart grow fonder. Up until his conversation with Juliet, Frederick Clarkson believed this religiously. He believed it to be both true of himself, and of one Wendy Crawford. He entertained daily fantasies that, if they ever met again, she would be so filled with this fondness she would melt into his arms. The problems of yesterday falling away like so much flaky, sunburned skin. But upon Wendy's entrance his first thought was not of how her body would feel pressed up against his, but rather, what he would say to Juliet after the shoot.

"Hi," Frederick said.

"Hello Frederick," Wendy answered.

The familiarity of the voice was like slipping into a warm bath. He was sure she must feel the same way. "How've you been?" he asked.

"Away."

"Other than that."

"Why would you even care after the way I left you. Just lying there out-cold in your car?"

"Because I still care," he said, "for some reason I still care about you."

Wendy was quiet for a moment. She smiled sweetly and whispered, "you really do, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do."

Wendy walked over to Frederick. The air was electric with sexual excitement. And without touching, Frederick felt the familiar fire in the furnace down below. Blue steel was forged, so strong a diamond couldn't scratch it.

Sex was something that had always come easily for them. Neither compromised their particular style. What one desired, the other had offered genuinely. From kissing, to oral, to the peculiarities of body-english — they had fit together like spoons. It was flawless, and it would have been flawless again, if Doc Fanelli hadn't burst through the office door.

"Are we ready yet?" he asked.

Startled, Wendy jumped back. Doc was given a clear view of Frederick,

whom Doc now saw, was *more* than ready. "Get your butt outside Freddy, and you ..." he gestured to Wendy, "can pick up your check next Thursday. Beat it."

They left the office. Frederick watched Wendy's bottom sway as she walked away. He wondered how much more blood his body could direct from his brain to his groin before he passed out. He already felt light-headed as it was. He shifted his vision to the bar. Juliet stood against it in all her natural splendor. The crew and the extras were all gathered around her, also admiring that splendor. His head stopped swimming, and his thoughts became solid. Blood had once again been re-routed. He'd lost his erection.

Panicked, he looked back at Wendy walking toward the soundstage door. Almost instantly, he rose like a helium filled balloon. But as soon as he shifted his gaze, Juliet's sharp detail popped his manhood.

Doc and the crew watched Frederick's head swing back and forth between the two women. It was as if Frederick was watching a really good tennis match. There was more head movement down below. The action in his pants was startling. In less than a minute, Frederick's eyes rolled back into his head. His bones became mush, and he slumped to the floor. He passed out cold.

IV

Drink lots of liquid and get plenty of bed-rest, is commonly prescribed for treatment of a cold. It's the best advice anyone can offer because there is no cure for the common cold. Although he wasn't physically sick, this age-old remedy did provide Frederick Clarkson with a cure in the form of tranquility. When he came to, his mind was clear. He felt new.

Juliet sat alongside to him as he lay on the leopard skin couch. She held a wet washcloth to his forehead, and was gently running her hand through his hair. She smiled softly, and took his hand. "You okay?" she asked.

"I think so," he said weakly, "are we still shooting?"

"Everyone left hours ago."

"Was Doc mad?"

"He left, mumbling something about never working in this town again."

"Oh," Frederick said, not nearly as upset as he felt he should be.

"That girl Wendy is waiting outside for you."

Frederick's heart skipped like a stone on glassy water. But as soon as he looked at Juliet, he felt calm once again. "Do you think if we keep real quiet she'll go away?"

"I hope so."

"Me too."